PART IV THE ARENA OF MISSION

We move round finally to the last corner of the triangle that I used in the introduction (p. 28) to describe the structure of the book. We have thought of "The God of Mission" (biblical monotheism and mission) in part two. Then we spent the six chapters of part three in the company of "The People of Mission" (Israel as the people whom God chose, redeemed and called into covenant relationship and ethical distinctiveness for the purpose of his mission to the nations, and the extension of that identity and role to all those in Christ). But the Lord God of Israel is also the God of all the earth and all nations, so now we need to widen our horizons again and consider that grand arena within which the Bible's grand narrative takes place. For the mission of God is as universal as the love of God, and as Psalm 145:13 reminds us:

> The LORD is faithful to all his promises
> and loving toward all he has made.

It is helpful to introduce our reflection with the apostle Paul, that great missional interpreter of the Old Testament.

Compare Paul's sermon in the Jewish synagogue in Pisidian Antioch in Acts 13:16-41 with his speech before the Areopagus in Athens in Acts 17:22-31. Both addresses have a common ultimate purpose—to introduce his listeners to Jesus. But the conceptual frameworks are very different. In the first, before a Jewish audience, Paul speaks of "the *God* of the people of *Israel*" and describes how God had overthrown the Canaanites and "gave their *land* to his people as their inheritance" (Acts 13:17, 19, emphasis added). In the second, before a Gentile audience, Paul speaks of "the *God* who made the *world* and everything in it," and describes how this God "made *every nation of men,* that they should inhabit the whole earth" (Acts 17:24, 26, emphasis added).

If you will pardon yet more geometry, we could portray these two frame-

works in the form of two interconnected triangles. On the one hand there is the triangle of God, Israel and their land (see fig. II.1).

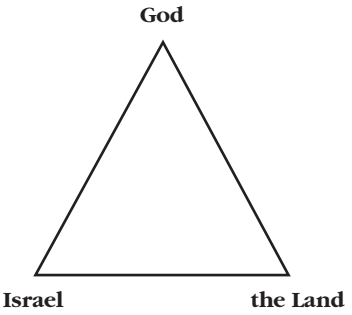

Figure II.1. Conceptual framework of Paul's sermon in Antioch

This is the conceptual framework of Paul's sermon in Antioch, and of course it represents the self-understanding of Old Testament Israel. Their God, YHWH, had chosen and called Israel as a people in covenant relationship with himself, and had redeemed them out of slavery in the land of Egypt, and given them the land of Canaan in which they were to live in covenant obedience to him and thereby under his blessing. This is the framework that underlies the chapters of part three of this book. Insofar as Israel in the Old Testament understood itself as a people with an identity and mission, this was the context of such thinking. The uniqueness of their election, redemption, covenant and ethic was grounded in this triangle of interconnected relationships. The mission of Israel was to live as God's people in God's land for God's glory. And the God in question was YHWH.

But, as I have been stressing throughout, this triangle of relationships did not exist for its own sake. It was part of a wider set of relationships that frame the mission of God for all nations and the whole earth. It is this outer triangle (God, humanity and the earth; see fig. II.2), that Paul has in mind when he speaks to the Gentile audience in Athens—a group of people to whom the inner triangle of God's dealings with Israel in their land would not have made sense as yet. So Paul presents to them what is in effect a scriptural (Old Testament) doctrine of creation, but without directly quoting Old Testament texts.[1]

That outer triangle, however, although it is still the basic platform of all God's

[1]I have developed this diagram as a framework for understanding the ethical worldview of Old Testament Israel in Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Leicester, U.K.: Inter-Varsity Press; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004).

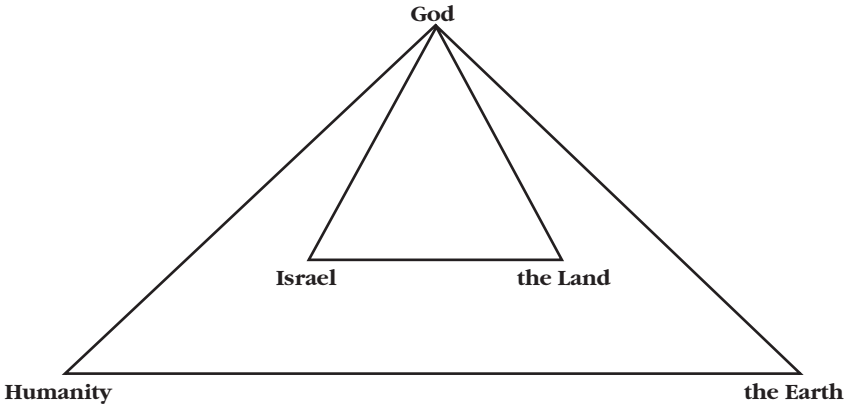

Figure II.2. Conceptual framework of Paul's sermon in Athens

dealings with humanity in history, has been twisted and fractured as a result of human rebellion and sin. All three primary relationships have been affected: human beings no longer love and obey God as they ought, and they live under his wrath; humanity is at odds with the earth; and the earth is subject to God's curse and to the frustration of not being able to glorify God as it ought until humanity is redeemed. Such are the grim realities of our fallen human condition that Paul expounds in Romans. We live as fallen humanity in a cursed earth.

But the outer triangle is also the platform or arena of God's mission. All that God did in, for and through *Israel* (the inner triangle) had as its ultimate goal the blessing of all nations of *humanity* and the final redemption of all *creation* (the outer triangle).

If we were to add into our framework the New Testament fulfillment of the Old Testament vision, we would see another triangle, including the new community of God's people (believing Jews and Gentiles in Christ) and the new creation (the new heavens and new earth in which God will dwell forever with his redeemed humanity).

So we need to pay attention to this wider triangle—the creational platform on which the mission of God traces its path through history. That is the focus of our reflection in part four.

We will look first at *the earth* as the sphere and indeed the object of God's mission activity, and therefore legitimately also the object of the mission to which we are called (chap. 12). Second (in chap. 13), we will look at *humanity* to see how some of the great affirmations of biblical faith about what it means to be human affect our understanding of mission. This must include the dignity

of being made in God's image as well as the depravity of our sinful rebellion and the invasion of evil. In that chapter we will also consider that part of the Old Testament Scriptures most closely associated with a creational worldview and an international perspective (but sadly often neglected in mission theology)—the Wisdom Literature—and reflect on its importance in the task of relating mission to different cultural contexts. Finally, we will turn to the world of nations and scan (in chap. 14) the breathtaking eschatological vision that Israel nurtured in relation to God's plan for the nations of humanity that, probably more than any other single theme in the Old Testament, informed and inspired the missionary expansion of the New Testament church (chap. 15).

12

Mission and God's Earth

> To the LORD your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it. (Deut 10:14)

This bold claim that YHWH, the God of Israel, owns the whole universe is echoed in the familiar assertion of Psalm 24:1: "To YHWH belongs the earth and its fullness" (author's translation), and in the less familiar claim that God himself makes to Job in the context of the grand recital of all his works of creation: "Everything under heaven belongs to me" (Job 41:11).[1]

The Earth Is the Lord's

The earth, then, belongs to God because God made it. At the very least this reminds us that if the earth is God's, it is not ours. We do not own this planet, even if our behavior tends to boast that we think we do. No, God is the earth's landlord and we are God's tenants. God has given the earth into our resident *possession* (Ps 115:16), but we do not hold the title deed of ultimate ownership. So, as in any landlord-tenant relationship, God holds us accountable to himself for how we treat his property. Several dimensions of this strong creation affirmation of the divine ownership of the earth may be mentioned as having significant ethical and missional implications.

The goodness of creation. That the creation is good is one of the most em-

[1]Parts of this section of the chapter are abbreviated from the much fuller account of Old Testament ecological ethics in Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Leicester, U.K.: Inter-Varsity Press; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004), chap. 4.

phatic points of Genesis 1—2, in view of its repetition.[2] Six times in the narrative God declares his work to be "good." Like a master chef bringing a multicourse banquet before admiring guests, God kisses his fingers with each new delicacy that he brings from his creative workshop, until, after the *piece de resistance,* in a seventh and final verdict on the whole achievement, God declares it all "very good." The whole wonderful meal has been a triumph of the chef's skill and art.[3]

Two things (among many) may be noted here as implications of this resoundingly simple affirmation.

A good creation can only be the work of a good God. This sets the Hebrew account of creation in contrast to other ancient Near Eastern accounts where powers and gods of the natural world are portrayed in various degrees of malevolence, and where some aspects of the natural order are explained as the outcome of that malevolence. In the Old Testament the natural order is fundamentally and in origin good, as the work of the single good God, YHWH. Part of the meaning of the goodness of creation in the Bible is that it testifies to the God who made it, reflecting something of his good character (e.g., Ps 19; 29; 50:6; 65; 104; 148; Job 12:7-9; Acts 14:17; 17:27; Rom 1:20). That being the case, we might suggest an analogy to the text "He who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker" (Prov 14:31; cf. Prov 17:5—because the poor person is also a human being made in the image of his or her Creator) along the lines of "He who destroys or degrades the earth spoils its reflection of its Maker" (because the earth is part of the creation that bears the mark of God's own goodness). Our treatment of the earth reflects our attitude to its Maker and the seriousness (or otherwise) with which we take what he has said about it.

Creation is intrinsically good. The goodness of creation is of the essence of creation itself. It is not contingent on our human presence within it and our ability to observe it. In the creation narratives, the affirmation "It is good" was not made by Adam and Eve but by God himself. So the goodness of creation (which includes its beauty) is theologically and chronologically prior to human observation. It is something that *God* saw and affirmed before humanity was around to see it. So the goodness of creation is not merely a human reflexive response to a pleasant view on a sunny day. Nor is it an instrumental goodness in the

[2]Ron Elsdon makes the theme of the goodness of creation the thread running through his survey of biblical material in both Testaments on this issue in his book *Green House Theology: Biblical Perspectives on Caring for Creation* (Tunbridge Wells, U.K.: Monarch, 1992).

[3]I owe the culinary metaphor to Huw Spanner, "Tyrants, Stewards—or Just Kings?" in *Animals on the Agenda: Questions About Animals for Theology and Ethics,* ed. Andrew Linzey and Dorothy Yamamoto (London: SCM Press, 1998), p. 218.

sense that the rest of creation is good simply because it exists for our benefit. Rather, this affirmation of the goodness of creation is the seal of *divine* approval on the whole universe. The declaration "it is good" is made at every phase of creation—from the initial creation of light (Gen 1:4) to the emergence of continents from the oceans (Gen 1:10), the growth of vegetation (Gen 1:13), the function of sun and moon to mark the days and season (Gen 1:18), the emergence of fish and birds (Gen 1:21), and of land animals (Gen 1:25). All of these created orders were present in all their divinely affirmed goodness before humanity arrived on the scene.

So the earth has *intrinsic* value—that is to say, it is valued by God, who is the source of all value. God values the earth because he made it and owns it. It is not enough merely to say that the earth is *valuable to us.* On the contrary, our own value as human beings begins from the fact that *we ourselves are part* of the whole creation that God already values and declares to be good. We will have more to say about human life in a moment, but the starting point is that we take our value from the creation of which we are part, not vice versa. The earth does not derive its value from us but from its Creator. Accordingly, we need to be careful to locate an ecological dimension of mission not primarily in the need-supplying value of the earth to us, but in the glory-giving value of the earth to God.

The Bible is careful to avoid the arrogant human assumption that earth exists solely for our use and enjoyment. On the contrary, Psalm 104 celebrates not only what the earth provides for humanity but all that God has provided within it for all other creatures who also owe their existence, survival and enjoyment of life to God's bountiful Spirit. Walter Harrelson, in a beautiful meditation on this psalm, notes how the poet's celebration goes way beyond the earth's provision for human needs (in vs. 14-15).

> God planted the cedars and other trees and waters them fully. Birds build nests in them. The stork is singled out in particular: God made fir trees for the storks to nest in, and he made storks to nest in the fir trees. He made high, inaccessible mountains for the wild goats to run and jump upon, and he made wild goats to do the jumping and cavorting. He created the vast expanse of rock-covered earth in eastern Jordan for rock badgers to live and play in, and he created rock badgers for the rocks. Storks and goats and badgers do not serve mankind. They do what is appropriate to them, and God provided a place that is itself fulfilling its function when it ministers to the needs of its special creatures. I know of no more direct word in the Bible about the independent significance of things and creatures on which man does not depend for life. The creative and powerful anthropocentrism of biblical religion is here beautifully qualified: God has interest in badgers and

> wild goats and storks for their own sakes. He has interest in trees and mountains and rock-cairns that simply serve non-human purposes.

So, adds Harrison, the psalm celebrates the value of human work within creation, but also affirms the value of all that other creatures do, by God's appointment. On verses 21-26 he observes:

> Man's work is significant, but so is lion's work. Ships doing commerce on the high seas are doing significant work, but so also is Leviathan, trailing behind the ships, blowing and cavorting.[4]

The sanctity (but not divinity) of creation. The Bible makes a clear distinction between God the Creator and all things created (see our discussion of this on pp. 142-44). Nothing in creation is in itself divine. This rules out *nature polytheism,* which was prevalent in the cultural and religious environment of Israel. The different forces of nature were regarded as divine beings (or under the control of distinct divine beings), and the function of many religious rituals was to placate or persuade these nature gods or goddesses into agriculturally beneficent action.

In the faith of Israel, however, the great realities of the natural world, whether forces, phenomena or objects, had no inherent *divine* existence. Such power as they had, which was undoubtedly great, was entirely the work of YHWH and under his command. Thus, on the one hand, the fertility cults of Canaan were rejected because Israel was taught that YHWH himself provided the abundance of nature for them (e.g., Hos 2:8-12). On the other hand, the immensely powerful and influential astral deities of Babylon were unmasked as nothing more than created objects under YHWH's authority (Is 40:26). In both cases, fertility and astrology, Israel's distinctive belief about creation brought them into severe cultural and political conflict with surrounding worldviews.

The Hebrew Bible, therefore, while it certainly teaches respect and care for the nonhuman creation, resists and reverses the human tendency to divinize or personalize the natural order, or to imbue it with any power independent of its personal Creator.

It is important to distinguish between *personalizing* and *personifying* nature. The Old Testament frequently personifies nature as a rhetorical device, a figure of speech, for greater effect. Personification is a literary device in which nature is spoken of *as if it were a person*. For example, the heavens and earth are summoned to bear witness to God's address to his people (e.g., Deut 30:19; 32:1; Is

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[4]Walter Harrelson, "On God's Care for the Earth: Psalm 104," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 2 (1975): 20-21.

1:2; Ps 50:1-6), they declare his glory (Ps 19), they rejoice at his judgment (Ps 96:11-13; 98:7-9). Most vividly, the land itself "vomited out" the previous inhabitants for their wickedness and did the same to the Israelites when they followed suit (Lev 18:25-28). These are all vivid figures of speech.

But the point of this literary and rhetorical personification of nature is either to underline the personal character of the God who created it and who is active in and through it, or to express the personal and moral nature of human beings' relation to God. Such literary usage is not ascribing real personhood or personal capacities to nature or natural forces in themselves. In fact, to personalize nature in that way (that is, to attribute actual personal status to nature itself) results in both depersonalizing God and demoralizing the relationship between humanity and God. To accord to creation the personal status and honor that is due only to God (or derivatively to humans who bear God's image) is a form of idolatry as ancient as the Fall itself (cf. Rom 1:21-25), though now given new characteristically twentieth-first-century dress in the New Age movements.

This countercultural thrust in the Old Testament has strong missional implications, for the gospel today still confronts (as it did in the New Testament) religious traditions that divinize nature, whether in some forms of primal religion, popular Hinduism or recent New Age borrowings from both.

Sometimes this aspect of Israel's faith has been called the "desacralizing" of nature, but that is not the best word to use. To suggest that Israel "descralized nature" implies that they had no sense of the sacredness of the created order and regarded the earth simply as an object to be harnessed for human benefit. This in turn is then claimed as biblical warrant for a scientific, technological and instrumental attitude to the nonhuman creation as a whole. The roots of this misunderstanding go back to the early to mid-twentieth century, when many scholars emphasized the historical nature of Israel's faith. This included the affirmation that Israel "demythologized" the widespread creation myths of the ancient Near East. Israel, it was argued, privileged history over nature; YHWH was the God of *history* in contrast to the surrounding gods of *nature*. However, it is now well-established that other ancient Near Eastern civilizations believed their gods were active to some extent in human history, and not all their gods could be adequately described as merely divinized natural forces. Conversely, YHWH is unquestionably the God of the created order as well as the God of Israel's history.

However, an unfortunate side effect of this common assertion in Old Testament scholarship was the popular view that the Bible "desacralized" nature. This view then rendered the natural order open to human exploration and exploitation, unfettered by religious fears or taboos. The sole purpose of the natural order, on such a view, is to meet our human needs. So whatever we do to it, we

need not fear that we are insulting some inherent divine force. Nature is ours to command. Such a secularized view of nature is not at all what is meant here by the dedivinizing of nature.[5]

There is a fundamental difference between treating creation as *sacred* and treating it as *divine* (just as there is a categorical difference between speaking of the sanctity of human life and regarding any human being as divine). The sacredness or sanctity of creation speaks of its essential relatedness to God, not of it being divine in and of itself.

The Old Testament constantly treats creation *in relation to God*. The created order obeys God, submits to God's commands, reveals God's glory, benefits from God's sustaining and providing, and serves God's purposes—including (but not confined to) the purpose of providing for human beings or functioning as the vehicle of God's judgment on them. So there is a sacredness about the nonhuman created order that we are called on to honor, as the laws, worship and prophecy of Israel undoubtedly did. But to *worship* nature in any of its manifestations is to exchange the Creator for the created. And that is a form of idolatry against which Israel was repeatedly warned (e.g., Deut 4:15-20; cf. Job 31:26-28), and which Paul links to the whole tragic litany of humanity's willful rebellion and social evil (Rom 1:25 and the surrounding context).

The radical monotheism of Israel that set itself against all the so-called gods of nature did not rob nature itself of its God-related sacredness and significance.

> From this perspective of radical monotheism in the doctrine of creation, there are no lesser divinities—not the sun and moon (against the worship of which Gen 1:14-18 was a reaction), not golden calves and other "graven images," not sacred groves or ancient trees, not mighty mountains or volcanoes, not fearsome beasts or demons, not caesars or pharaohs or heroes, and not even Gaia or Mother Earth. In this view, polytheism, animism, astrology, totemism and other forms of nature worship are not only idolatry but also, as the prophets regularly suggested, vanity and stupidity (cf. Isa. 40:12-28; 443:9-20; 46:1-11; Acts 14; 15). The Creator alone is worthy of worship. . . . Nevertheless, though only the Creator is worthy of worship, all God's creatures are worthy of moral consideration, as a sign of the worthiness imparted by God and, in fact, as an expression of the worship of God. The monotheistic doctrine of creation does not desacralize nature. Nature is still sacred by virtue of having been created by God, declared to be good, and placed under ultimate divine sovereignty.[6]

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[5]For a helpful discussion of the effects of this particular distortion in Old Testament theology, see Ronald A. Simkins, *Creator and Creation: Nature in the Worldview of Ancient Israel* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994), pp. 82-88.

[6]James A. Nash, *Loving Nature: Ecological Integrity and Christian Responsibility* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991), p. 96.

And if that is the case, are there not compelling ethical and missional implications for us who claim to worship this God as the world's Creator, for us who claim to know him also as the world's Redeemer? If the earth has a sanctity derived from its relation to the Creator, then our treatment of the earth will be a reflex and a measure of our own relationship with the creator.

What ecological and missiological challenges then emerge from the affirmation that the earth belongs to God? Summarizing our study so far, surely there are ecological implications to regarding the created order as good in itself because of the value it has to God. It is not neutral stuff that we can commodify and commercialize, use and abuse for our own ends. Furthermore, as part of the whole creation, we humans exist not only to praise and glorify God ourselves but also to facilitate the rest of creation in doing so. And if the greatest commandment is that we should love God, that surely implies that we should treat what belongs to God with honor, care and respect. This would be true in any human relationship. If you love someone, you care for what belongs to that person.

To love God (even to know God at all, Jeremiah would add [Jer 9:24]) means to value what God values. Conversely, therefore, to contribute to or collude in the abuse, pollution and destruction of the natural order is to trample on the goodness of God reflected in creation. It is to devalue what God values, to mute God's praise and to diminish God's glory.

The whole earth as the field of God's mission and ours. If God owns the universe, there is nowhere that does not belong to him. There is nowhere we can step off his property, either into the property of some other deity or into some autonomous sphere of our own private ownership.

Such claims were made in relation to YHWH in the Old Testament (e.g., in Ps 139, to the writer's great comfort). But in the New Testament the same claims are made in relation to Jesus Christ. Standing on a mountain with his disciples after his resurrection, Jesus paraphrases the affirmations of Deuteronomy about YHWH ("The LORD is God in heaven above and on the earth below. There is no other" [Deut 4:39]. "To the LORD your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it" [Deut 10:14]. "The LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords" [Deut 10:17]), and calmly applies them to himself: "All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me" (Mt 28:18). *The risen Jesus thus claims the same ownership and sovereignty over all creation as the Old Testament affirms for* YHWH.

The whole earth, then, belongs to Jesus. It belongs to him by right of creation, by right of redemption and by right of future inheritance—as Paul affirms in the magnificent cosmic declaration of Colossians 1:15-20. So wherever we go

in his name, we are walking on his property. There is not an inch of the planet that does not belong to Christ. Mission then is an authorized activity carried out by tenants on the instructions of the owner of the property.

Suppose you are a tenant resident in your house or apartment and you are challenged about your right to be installing a new kitchen and bathroom. Provided you can point to the written instruction of the owner of the property to attend to the matter on his behalf, your action is authorized. If the one to whom the property belongs entrusts to you his purpose of renovating his property while you live there, then your "mission" is an authorized cooperation with and implementation of his or her "mission." You become the agent of the owner's intentions for the property. You are legitimately carrying out what the owner wants to be done in his or her own property.

So our mission on God's earth is not only authorized by its true owner, it is also protected, nurtured and guaranteed by him. We go in his name. We act on his authority. There is therefore no place for fear, for wherever we tread belongs to him already. There is no place for dualism either. We know of course that the Bible also affirms that the evil one exercises a kind of lordship and power over the earth. But he does not own it. His claim to do so, and to have the right to give it to those who worship him was exposed as fraudulent by Jesus in his wrestling with temptation in the wilderness. Whatever authority Satan exercises is usurped and illegitimate, provisional and subject to the final limits set by the earth's true owner and Lord, the Lamb who reigns from the throne of God (Rev 4—7).

So the simple biblical affirmation "The earth is the LORD's" is a nonnegotiable platform for both ecological ethics and missional confidence.

God's glory as the goal of creation. "What is the chief end of man?" asks the opening question of the Shorter Catechism of the Westminster Confession, inquiring about the meaning and purpose of human existence. It then answers with glorious biblical simplicity: "The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever." It would be equally biblical to ask exactly the same question about the whole of creation and to give exactly the same answer. The creation exists for the praise and glory of its Creator God and for mutual enjoyment. We humans, being creatures ourselves, share in that reason for existence—our "chief end" is to bring glory to God, and in doing so to enjoy ourselves because we enjoy God. So that God-focused goal of human life (to glorify and enjoy him) is not something that sets us *apart* from the rest of creation. Rather it is something we *share* with the rest of creation. That is the chief end of all creation. The only difference is that of course we human beings must glorify our Creator in uniquely human ways, as befits our unique status as the

one creature that has been made in the image of God. So, as humans we praise God with hearts and hands and voices, with rationality as well as emotion, with language, art, music and craft—with all that reflects the God in whose image we were made.

But all the rest of creation already praises God and can be summoned (repeatedly) to do so (e.g., Ps 145:10, 21; 148; 150:6). There is a response of gratitude that befits not just human beneficiaries of God's generosity but is attributed to the nonhuman creatures as well (e.g., Ps 104:27-28). We may not be able to explain *how* it is that creation praises its Maker—since we know only the reality of our human personhood "from the inside," and what it means for *us* to praise him. But just because we cannot articulate the *how* of creation's inarticulate praise or indeed the *how* of God's receiving of it, we should not therefore deny *that* creation praises God—since it is affirmed throughout the Bible with overwhelming conviction.

> This response of gratitude is a fundamental feature of creaturely being that is shared by all the creatures of the earth, humans and animals, landscapes, seas and mountains, earth, wind, fire and rain. The Psalmist charges all things with the first moral duty of the creation, to worship and praise the creator. . . . In the Hebrew perspective humanity and the cosmos have moral significance, and both are required to make a moral response to the creator, a response to God which reflects his glory and offers the return of gratitude, praise and worship [Ps 150].[7]

Eventually, the whole of creation will join in the joy and thanksgiving that will accompany the Lord when he comes as king to put all things right (i.e., to judge the earth, e.g., Ps 96:10-13; 98:7-9).

Furthermore, as we consider the task of bringing glory to God, it is worth noting that several significant texts link the *glory of God* to the *fullness* of the earth—that is, the magnificently diverse abundance of the whole biosphere—land, sea and sky. The language of fullness is a feature of the creation narrative. From empty void, the story progresses through repeated fillings. So, once the water and the sky have been separated, the fifth day sees the water teeming with fish and the skies with birds, according to God's blessing and command (Gen 1:20-22). Likewise, on the sixth day, after the creation of the rest of the land animals, human beings are blessed and commanded to "fill the earth." Not surprisingly, then, Psalm 104:24 can affirm "the earth is full of your creatures." And Psalm 24:1 can describe this plenitude of creatures as simply "the earth's fullness" (author's translation). So does Psalm 50:12, after an illustrative list in-

[7]Michael S. Northcott, *The Environment and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 180-81.

cluding animals of the forest, the cattle on a thousand hills, mountain birds and creatures in the fields: "to me belongs the world and its fullness" (author's translation). Similarly, the phrase "the earth and its fullness" becomes a characteristic way of talking about the whole environment—sometimes local, sometimes universal (e.g., Deut 33:16; Ps 89:12; Is 34:1; Jer 47:2; Ezek 30:12; Mic 1:2).

This may give added meaning to the song of the seraphim in Isaiah's temple vision:

> Holy, holy, holy is Yahweh of hosts.
> The filling (or fullness) of all the earth [is] his glory. (Is 6:3, author's translation)[8]

"The fullness of the earth" is a way of talking about the whole rich abundance of the created order, especially the nonhuman creation (when humans are in view, they are often added as "and all who live in it" [e.g., Ps 24:1]). So the seraphim recognize and celebrate the glory of God *in* the fullness of the earth. That which manifests the glory of God is the teeming abundance of his creation. The earth is full of God's glory because what fills the earth constitutes (at least one dimension of) his glory. Similarly, Psalm 104:31 puts God's glory and God's works of creation in parallel: "May the glory of the LORD endure forever; / may the LORD rejoice in his works."

Of course, we would have to add that the glory of God also transcends the creation, precedes and surpasses it. As Psalm 8:1 reminds us, God has set his glory "*above* the heavens." But the creation not only *declares* the glory of God (Ps 19:1); creation's fullness is also an *essential part* of that glory.

Recognizing the link between the fullness of the earth (i.e., the totality of all created life on earth) and the glory of God means, as Paul reminds us, that human beings are confronted daily with the reality of God simply by inhabiting the planet (Rom 1:19-20). Here again we recognize a truth of missional relevance. For all human beings inhabit a glory-filled earth that reveals and declares something of its Creator and theirs. What we have done with that experience is another matter, of course. But this truth underlies not only the radical nature of Paul's exposure of universal sinfulness and idolatry but also the universal applicability and intelligibility of the gospel. Minds that have suppressed and exchanged this truth about the Creator can, by God's grace and the illumining

[8] I owe this suggested nuance in the meaning of Is 6:3 to a conversation with Hilary Marlowe. It is also offered as a translation by the NASB and discussed in relation to the concept of the whole earth constituting the cosmic temple of God in G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God,* New Studies in Biblical Theology, ed., D. A. Carson (Leicester, U.K.: Apollos; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004), p. 49.

power of the gospel, be brought from darkness to light, to know their Creator once more as their Redeemer through the message of the cross.

God's redemption of the whole creation. So far we have been considering how important it is to include the Bible's strong doctrine of creation in our thinking about the earth—what we do with it, how we live on it and what it was created for. But looking back to Genesis and affirming its great truths about our world is not enough. You cannot drive a car looking only in the rearview mirror. You have to look ahead toward your destination. Likewise, the Bible teaches us to value the earth, not only because of "where it came from" (or rather, because of who it came from) but also because of its ultimate destiny. We need, in other words, an eschatological as well as a creational foundation to our ecological ethics and mission.

One of the richest places in the Old Testament to find precisely such a foundation is the book of Isaiah, and much of what the New Testament says is simply an exposition of Isaiah's cosmic vision in the light of Jesus Christ. We might begin with the glorious composite vision of Isaiah 11:1-9, in which the just rule of the messianic king will issue in harmony and shalom within the created order. Similarly transforming expectations for the created order attend the return of the redeemed to Zion in Isaiah 35. However, the climax of Old Testament eschatological vision regarding creation is found in Isaiah 65—66. The words "Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth" (Is 65:17) introduce a wonderful section that has to be read in full.

> Behold, I will create
> new heavens and a new earth.
> The former things will not be remembered,
> nor will they come to mind.
> But be glad and rejoice forever
> in what I will create,
> for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight
> and its people a joy.
> I will rejoice over Jerusalem
> and take delight in my people;
> the sound of weeping and of crying
> will be heard in it no more.
> Never again will there be in it
> an infant who lives but a few days,
> or an old man who does not live out his years;
> he who dies at a hundred
> will be thought a mere youth;

he who fails to reach a hundred
will be considered accursed.

They will build houses and dwell in them;
they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit.
No longer will they build houses and others live in them,
or plant and others eat.
For as the days of a tree,
so will be the days of my people;
my chosen ones will long enjoy
the works of their hands.
They will not toil in vain
or bear children doomed to misfortune;
for they will be a people blessed by the LORD,
they and their descendants with them.
Before they call I will answer;
while they are still speaking I will hear.
The wolf and the lamb will feed together,
and the lion will eat straw like the ox,
but dust will be the serpent's food.
They will neither harm nor destroy
on all my holy mountain,
says the LORD. (Is 65:17-25)

This inspiring vision portrays God's new creation as a place that will be joyful, free from grief and tears, life-fulfilling, with guaranteed work satisfaction, free from the curses of frustrated labor, and environmentally safe! It is a vision that puts most New Age dreams in the shade.

This and related passages are the scriptural (Old Testament) foundation for the New Testament hope, which, far from rejecting or denying the earth as such or envisioning us floating off to some other place, looks forward likewise to a new, redeemed creation (Rom 8:18-21) in which righteousness will dwell (2 Pet 3:10-13) because God himself will dwell there with his people (Rev 21:1-4).

The burden of this eschatological vision for creation is overwhelmingly positive, and this must affect how we understand the equally biblical portrayal of final and fiery destruction that awaits the present world order. For example, 2 Peter 3:10 says: "The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare."

I prefer the textual reading of the final word in this verse that the earth "will be found" (which is adopted by the NIV, "will be laid bare"; NRSV, "will be disclosed"; REB, "will be brought to judgment") to the one reflected in some other

English translations (e.g., KJV and NASB, "will be burned up"). I also find Richard Bauckham's interpretation of this convincing, namely, that the earth and everything in it will be "found out," that is, exposed and laid bare before God's judgment so that the wicked and all their works will no longer be able to hide or find any protection.[9] In other words, the purpose of the conflagration described in these verses is not the *obliteration of the cosmos itself* but rather the *purging of the sinful world order we live in,* through the consuming destruction of all that is evil within creation, so as to establish the new creation. This fits with the previous picture of the judgment of the flood in 2 Peter 3:6-7, used explicitly as an historical precedent for the final judgment. "By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed. By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men."

A world of wickedness was wiped out in the flood, but the world as God's creation was preserved. Similarly, by analogy, the world of all evil and wickedness in creation will be wiped out in God's cataclysmic judgment, but the creation itself will be renewed as the dwelling place of God with redeemed humanity.

Paul makes a similar dual assertion when he compares the future of creation to the future of our bodies in Romans 8. There is a comparable continuity and discontinuity for creation as there is between our present bodily life and our future resurrection life—just as there was for Jesus, who in his resurrection body is the firstborn of the whole new creation. This present body of mine may rot in the soil or be burned to ashes. But the resurrection body, which of course is "a new creation" (and in that sense discontinuous) will be truly me, the person God created and redeemed (and in that sense continuous). Similarly, whatever the language of fiery judgment and destruction will actually mean in relation to our physical universe, God's purpose is not the eternal obliteration of the created order but its eternal restoration to his glorious purpose for it.

This gloriously earthy biblical hope adds an important dimension to our ecological ethics. It is not just a matter of looking back to the initial creation but of looking forward to the new creation. This means that our motivation has a double force—a kind of push-pull effect. There is a goal in sight. Granted it lies only in the power of God ultimately to achieve it, but, as is the case with other aspects of biblical eschatology, what we hope for from God affects how we are to live now and what our own objectives should be.

The role of apocalyptic and prophecy in the Bible is not just to predict the

[9]Richard J. Bauckham, *2 Peter and Jude,* Word Biblical Commentary 50 (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1983), pp. 316-22.

future but to encourage and to prove change and moral fulfillment in the present. The physical and ecological character of biblical visions of redemption offers hope that the restoration of ecological harmony does lie within the possibilities of a redeemed human history: this does not remove the need for social and moral effort in responding to the ecological crisis but rather affirms that human societies which seek to revere God and to mirror his justice, will also produce the fruits of justice and equity in human moral order and harmony in the natural world. According to Ezekiel, even the driest desert can spring to life again, and the dry bones will rise up again to praise their Creator.[10]

Isaiah and Ezekiel doubtless drew their own inspiring vision of the future in part from the language of Israel's worship—the Psalms. And there in the imagination of faith the whole of creation is not only summoned to praise its Creator but is drawn into a vision of God's future restoration of the whole creation to be the place of reliability, righteousness and rejoicing that he intended for it. The coming reign of YHWH will achieve this goal of justice and liberation for creation as well as for humanity. The theme is particularly seen in the psalms of YHWH's kingship (e.g., Ps 93; 96; 98). The new song that is to fill the mouths of people throughout the whole earth in Psalm 96, for example, also celebrates a new world order for the whole of creation.

> According to Psalm 96 the particular eschatological aspect of God's work that calls for special praise from the side of all creatures is the announcement that he comes to judge in righteousness and in truth (vv. 10, 13). We associate God's judgment with all manner of dread expectations. Yet his judgment does not consist only in calling his opponents to account. It may also be thought of with joyful anticipation, for everything that is now in disarray and disharmony, suffering from injustice and violence, shall be set right. This is the broader aspect of the judgment which Old Testament saints embraced and in which they rejoiced. God does not reign in a tyrannical way or through terror; his reign breathes tenderness and joy.
>
> In a very special way *nature* will rejoice in the restoration of all things, for God's coming will put an end to the violence nature had to suffer. The inauguration of Yahweh's new order manifest itself as much in the realm of nature as in that of history—as is evident in Isaiah 40-42 as well. In a glorious way Psalm 96 and its twin, Psalm 98, remind the believing community that God's purpose with creation is nothing less than a new heaven and a new earth in which justice will be at home.[11]

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[10]Northcott, *Environment and Christian Ethics,* p. 195.

[11]Jannie Du Preez, "Reading Three 'Enthronement Psalms' from an Ecological Perspective," *Missionalia* 19 (1991): 127.

As Francis Bridger points out, this eschatological orientation protects our ecological concern from becoming centered only on human needs and anxieties, and reminds us that ultimately the earth always has and always will belong to God in Christ. Our efforts therefore have a prophetic value in pointing toward the full cosmic realizing of that truth.

> The primary argument for ecological responsibility lies in the connection between old and new creation. . . . We are called to be stewards of the earth by virtue not simply of our orientation to the Edenic command of the Creator but also because of our orientation to the future. In acting to preserve and enhance the created order we are pointing to the coming rule of God in Christ. . . . Ecological ethics are not, therefore, anthropocentric: they testify to the vindicating acts of God in creation and redemption. . . . Paradoxically, the fact that it is God who will bring about a new order of creation at the End and that we are merely erecting signposts to that future need not act as a disincentive. Rather it frees us from the burden of ethical and technological autonomy and makes it clear that human claims to sovereignty are relative. The knowledge that it is God's world, that our efforts are not directed toward the construction of an ideal utopia but that we are, under God, building bridgeheads of the kingdom serves to humble us and to bring us to the place of ethical obedience.[12]

William Cowper's longing for the future restoration of creation is expressed in these lines from a poem more in the genre of the prophets and psalmists.

> The groans of Nature in this nether world,
> Which Heaven has heard for ages, have an end,
> Foretold by prophets, and by poets sung,
> Whose fire was kindled at the prophets' lamp.
> The time of rest, the promised Sabbath comes!
>
> Rivers of gladness water all the earth,
> And clothe all climes with beauty. The reproach
> Of barrenness is past. The fruitful field
> Laughs with abundance; and the land, once lean
> Or fertile only in its own disgrace,
> Exults to see its thistly curse repeal'd.
> The various seasons woven into one,
> And that one season an eternal spring,
> The garden fears no blight, and needs no fence,

[12]Francis Bridger, "Ecology and Eschatology: A Neglected Dimension," *Tyndale Bulletin* 41, no. 2 (1990): 301. This article was a response and addition to an earlier one by Donald A. Hay, "Christians in the Global Greenhouse," *Tyndale Bulletin* 41, no. 1 (1990): 109-27.

For there is none to covet, all are full.
The lion, and the libbard,[13] and the bear,
Graze with the fearless flocks.

One song employs all nations; and all cry,
"Worthy the Lamb, for He was slain for us!"
The dwellers in the vales and on the rocks
Shout to each other, and the mountain tops
From distant mountains catch the flying joy;
Till, nation after nation taught the strain,
Earth rolls the rapturous Hosanna round.[14]

Care of Creation and Christian Mission

Great would be the multitude, though perhaps not as great yet as it ought to be, of those Christians who care about creation and take their environmental responsibilities seriously. They choose sustainable forms of energy where possible. They switch off unneeded appliances. They buy food, goods and services as far as possible from companies with ethically sound environmental policies. They join conservation societies. They avoid overconsumption and unnecessary waste and recycle as much as possible. May their tribe increase.

Smaller, however, would be the number (and as yet far from any kind of multitude) of those who would include the care of creation within their biblical concept of mission.[15] Smaller still (though cheerfully growing) is the number of those who see active creation care as their own personal and specific mission calling. The explicitly Christian environmental and conservation agency A Rocha, founded in 1983 in Portugal but now at work internationally on every continent, certainly adopts a theology that affirms strongly that their work is not only biblically mandated but also a legitimate and essential dimension of Christian mission.[16]

Speaking personally, I share the conviction with which Jannie du Preez began an article in 1991: "I have, in recent years, increasingly become convinced that justice towards the earth (and for that matter, towards the whole cosmos)

[13]Probably meaning the leopard.

[14]William Cowper, "The Task," bk. 6, lines 729-733, 763-774, 791-797, in *The Complete Poetical Works of William Cowper, Esq.,* ed. H. Stebbing (New York: D. Appleton, 1856), pp. 344-45.

[15]Very few theologies of mission include creation care in their agenda. One exception is J. Andrew Kirk, *What Is Mission? Theological Explorations* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), pp. 164-83.

[16]For details of their vision, their work and the rich biblical theology on which the whole movement is founded, see their website <www.arocha.org>.

forms an integral part of the mission of the church."[17]

But does it? In addition to the detailed biblical theology of the preceding sections of this chapter, I would make just a few more points articulating how and why it seems to me that a biblical theology of mission that flows from the mission of God himself, as I have been seeking to articulate throughout this book, must include the ecological sphere within its scope and see practical environmental action as a legitimate part of Christian mission.

Creation care is an urgent issue in today's world. Does this need to be repeated? Only a willful blindness worse than any proverbial ostrich's head in the sand can ignore the facts of environmental destruction and its accelerating pace. The list is depressingly long:

- the pollution of the air, the sea, rivers, lakes and great aquifers
- the destruction of rainforests and many other habitats, with the terrible effect on dependent life forms
- desertification and soil loss
- the loss of species—animals, plants, birds, insects—and the huge reduction of essential bio-diversity on a planet that depends on it
- the hunting of some species to extinction
- the depletion of the ozone layer
- the increase of "greenhouse gases" and consequent global warming

All this is a vast and interrelated impending catastrophe of loss and destruction, affecting the whole planet and all its human and nonhuman inhabitants. To be unconcerned about it is to be either desperately ignorant or irresponsibly callous.

In the past, Christians have instinctively been concerned about great and urgent issues in every generation, and rightly included them in their overall concept of mission calling and practice. These have included the evils of disease, ignorance, slavery and many other forms of brutality and exploitation. Christians have taken up the cause of widows, orphans, refugees, prisoners, the insane, the hungry—and most recently they have swelled the numbers of those committed to "making poverty history."

Faced now with the horrific facts of the suffering of the earth itself, we must

[17]Du Preez, "Reading Three 'Enthronement Psalms,' " p. 122. The same issue of *Missionalia* (19, no. 2 [1991]) included other articles seeking to make an explicit link between mission and ecology: J. A. Loader, "Life, Wonder and Responsibility: Some Thoughts on Ecology and Christian Mission," *Missionalia* 19 (1991): 44-56; and J. J. Kritzinger, "Mission and the Liberation of Creation: A Critical Dialogue with M. L. Daneel," *Missionalia* 20 (1992): 99-115.

surely ask how God himself responds to such abuse of his creation and seek to align our mission objectives to include what matters to him. If, as Jesus tells us, God cares about his creation to the level of knowing when a sparrow falls to earth, what kind of care is required of us by the level of our own knowledge? Granted Jesus made that point in order to compare it with the even greater care God has for his own children. But it would be an utter distortion of Scripture to argue that because God cares for us *more than* for the sparrows, we need not care for sparrows *at all* or that because we are of greater value than they are, they have no value at all.

However, our care for creation should not be merely a negative, prudential or preventive reaction to a growing problem. A much more positive reason for it is that.

Creation care flows from love and obedience to God. "Love the LORD your God" is the first and greatest commandment. In human experience, to love someone means that you care for what belongs to them. Trashing someone else's property is incompatible with any claim to love that other person. We have seen how emphatically the Bible affirms that the earth is God's property, and more specifically that it belongs to Christ, who made it, redeemed it and is heir to it. Taking good care of the earth, for Christ's sake, is surely a fundamental dimension of the calling on all God's people to love him. It seems quite inexplicable to me that there are some Christians who claim to love and worship God, to be disciples of Jesus and yet have no concern for the earth that bears his stamp of ownership. They do not care about the abuse of the earth, and indeed by their wasteful and overconsumptive lifestyles they contribute to it.

"If you love me, keep my commandments" (Jn 14:15), said Jesus, echoing as he so often did the practical ethical devotion of Deuteronomy. And the Lord's commandments begin with the fundamental creation mandate to care for the earth. Obedience to that command is as much a part of our human mission and duty as any of the other duties and responsibilities built into creation—such as the task of filling the earth, engaging in the rhythm of productive work and rest, and marriage.

Being Christian does not release us from being human. Nor does a distinctively Christian mission negate our human mission, for God holds us accountable as much for our humanity as for our Christianity. As *Christian* human beings, therefore, we are doubly bound to see active care for creation as a fundamental part of what it means to love and obey God.

> The creation narrative *appoints* humans as the viceroys of creation with an *assignment* to care for God's property, the sphere with which his love takes shape for

> humans, regardless of what they think of him, for all the biotic and abiotic creation, regardless of whether it can think of him. This is much more than an invitation, it is a mission: Go to all of my creation and tend it, since it is the recipient of my love. I suggest that the first missionary commission is the *mandatum dominii terrae* [command to have dominion over the earth] in Genesis 1:28, the assignment to care for the world.[18]

Creation care exercises our priestly and kingly role in relation to the earth. Greg Beale argues persuasively that there are theological connections between the tabernacle/temple in the Old Testament and (1) the picture of Eden in the creation narrative, and (2) the picture of the whole cosmos restored through Christ to be the dwelling place of God. The temple is a microcosm, both of the primal creation reality and of the new creation reality. In both cases we see God dwelling in the earth as his temple, with human beings serving him and it as his appointed priesthood.[19]

The dual account of the mandate God gave to humanity in Genesis 1—2 uses the language of both kingship and priesthood. Humanity is to rule over the rest of creation, and Adam is put in the garden in Eden "to work it and take care of it." Ruling is the function of kingship; serving and keeping were major functions of the priests in relation to the tabernacle and temple.

So humankind is placed in a relationship to the earth that combines the function of king and priest: to rule and to serve. It is a quintessentially biblical combination that we find perfectly modeled in a rich range of meaning in Christ, as our perfect priest and king. But it is also the picture that we see of our restored role in the new creation. Revelation pointedly says that because of the redeeming work of the Lamb of God on the cross, human beings are not only saved but are restored to their kingly and priestly function on earth under God. "You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, / and they will reign on the earth" (Rev 5:10).

It follows then, from a creational and eschatological perspective, that ecological care and action is a dimension of our mission inasmuch as it is a dimension of restoring the proper status and responsibility of our humanity. It is to behave as we were originally created to and as we will one day be fully redeemed for. The earth awaits the full revealing of its appointed king and priest—redeemed humanity under the headship of Christ. Our action in the present anticipates and points prophetically toward that final goal.

Creation care tests our motivation for mission. Throughout this book

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[18]Loader, "Life, Wonder and Responsibility," p. 53.
[19]Beale, *Temple and Church's Mission*.

my argument has been that it will lead to an inadequate view of mission if we start out only from the perspective of what humans do or what humans need. And it will be doubly inadequate if we also end there only. This is not to deny the legitimacy of many different levels of motivation for mission that arise from human need.

One strong motivation is the *evangelistic* response to the reality of human sin. We know people stand under God's judgment, in the alienating darkness and lostness of sin. We are motivated to bring them the good news of what God has done for sinners through Christ, his cross and resurrection. Another strong motivation is the *compassionate* response to the reality of human need—all the physical, mental, emotional and social dimensions of our fractured human condition. So we are motivated to tackle the destructive effects of sin in all those areas too, through medical, social, educational and economic action. I argued in chapters eight and nine for such a holistic understanding of mission and the necessity of seeing the cross of Christ as central to all those dimensions. All of these are valid, biblical and Christ-imitating motivations for mission.

However, it has also been my argument throughout the book that our ultimate starting point and finishing point in our biblical theology of mission must be the mission of God himself. What is "the whole counsel of God"? What is the overarching mission to which God has committed himself and the whole outworking of history? It is not only the salvation of human beings but also the redemption of the whole creation. The eschatological section of this chapter (see pp. 407-12) made this clear. God is in the business of establishing a new creation through the transformation and renewal of creation in a manner analogous to the resurrection of his Son, and as a habitation for the resurrection bodies of his redeemed people.

Holistic mission, then, is not truly holistic if it includes only human beings (even if it includes them holistically!) and excludes the rest of the creation for whose reconciliation Christ shed his blood (Col 1:20). Those Christians who have responded to God's call to serve him through serving his nonhuman creatures in ecological projects are engaged in a specialized form of mission that has its rightful place within the broad framework of all that God's mission has as its goal. Their motivation flows from an awareness of God's own heart for his creation and a desire to respond to that. It is certainly not the case that Christians involved in creation care have no corresponding care for human needs. On the contrary, it often seems to my observation that Christian tenderness toward the nonhuman creation amplifies itself in concern for human needs.

Creation care is a prophetic opportunity for the church. Christians

sometimes feel anxious that "the world is setting the agenda," that is, that we simply respond to the flavor of the month in the changing fads of secular concerns. And it is certainly true that environmental concern is very high on the list of anxieties in our world today. Surveys of young people in the West often find that the very survival of planet Earth comes out top of the list of the things they worry about. However, the church surely must respond to the realities the world is facing and struggling with, in any era. The Old Testament prophets addressed the contemporary realities of their own generation. Jesus did the same. That is what made them unpopular—their scorching relevance.

If the church awakens to the urgent need to address the ecological crisis and does so within its biblical framework of resources and vision, then it will engage in missional conflict with at least two other ideologies (and doubtless many more).

1. Destructive global capitalism and the greed that fuels it. There is no doubt that a major contributor to contemporary environmental damage is global capitalism's insatiable demand for "more." It is not only in the private sphere that the biblical truth is relevant that covetousness is idolatry and the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil, including this one. There is greed for

- minerals and oil, at any cost
- land to graze cattle for meat
- exotic animals and birds, to meet obscene human fashions in clothes, toys, ornaments, and aphrodisiacs
- commercial or tourist exploitation of fragile and irreplaceable habitats
- market domination through practices that produce the goods at least cost to the exploiter and maximum cost to the country and people exploited

For the church to get involved with issues of environmental protection it must be prepared to tackle the forces of greed and economic power, to confront vested interests and political machination, to recognize that more is at stake than just being kind to animals and nice to people. It must do the scientific research to make its case credible. It must be willing for the long, hard road that the struggle for justice and compassion in a fallen world demands in this as in all other fields of mission.

2. Pantheistic, neo-pagan and New Age spiritualities. Strangely, we may often find that people for whom such pantheistic, neo-pagan and New Age philosophies have great attraction are passionate about the natural order, but from a very different perspective. The church in its mission must bear witness to the great biblical claim that the earth is the Lord's. The earth is not Gaia or

Mother Earth. It is not a self-sustaining sentient being. It does not have independent potency. It is not to be worshiped, feared or even loved in a way that usurps the sole deity of the one living and personal Creator God. So our environmental mission is never romantic or mystical. We are not called to "union with nature" but to care for the earth as an act of love and obedience to its Creator and Redeemer.

There is, then, surely a cutting-edge prophetic opportunity for the church, which we seem to be failing to grasp (with a few exceptions such as A Rocha). Christians are more likely to be *blamed* for the ecological crisis than seen as bearing any kind of good news in relation to it.

Creation care embodies a biblical balance of compassion and justice. Creation care embodies *compassion* because to care for God's creation is essentially an unselfish form of love, exercised for the sake of creatures who cannot thank or repay us. It is a form of truly biblical and godly altruism. In this respect it reflects the same quality in the love of God—not only in the sense that God loves human beings in spite of our unlovable enmity toward him but also in the wider sense that "the LORD has compassion / is loving toward *all that he has made*" (Ps 145:9, 13, 17, author's translation). Again, Jesus used God's loving care for birds and adornment of grasses and flowers as a model for his even greater love for his human children. If God cares with such minute compassion for his nonhuman creation, how much more should those who wish to emulate him? I have been particularly moved in witnessing the compassionate care that is unselfconsciously practiced by A Rocha staff as they handle every bird in their ringing program. It is a warm, caring and, in my opinion, genuinely Christlike attitude toward these tiny specimens of God's creation.

Creation care embodies *justice* because environmental action is a form of defending the weak against the strong, the defenseless against the powerful, the violated against the attacker, the voiceless against the stridency of the greedy. And these too are features of the character of God as expressed in his exercise of justice. Psalm 145 includes God's provision for all his creatures in its definition of his *righteousness* as well as his love (Ps 145:13-17). In fact, it places God's care for creation in precise parallel with his liberating and vindicating acts of justice for his people—thus bringing the creational and redemptive traditions of the Old Testament together in beautiful harmony.

So it is not surprising then that when the Old Testament comes to define the marks of a righteous *person,* it does not stop at his practical concern for poor and needy *humans* (though that is of course the dominant note). It is true that "the righteous care about justice for the poor" (Prov 29:7). But the sage also makes the

warm-hearted observation that "a righteous man cares for the needs of his *animal*" (Prov 12:10). Biblical mission is as holistic as biblical righteousness.

Conclusion

What then, to summarize, establishes ecological concern and specific environmental action as legitimate integral dimensions of biblical mission? I have suggested, with regard to these forms of action, that

- They are responding to an urgent global issue.
- They are expressions of our love and obedience toward God the Creator.
- They restore our proper priestly and kingly role in relation to the earth.
- They expose and expand our motivation for holistic mission.
- They constitute a contemporary prophetic opportunity for the church.
- They embody the core biblical values of compassion and justice.

All of these points are built on the *intrinsic* value of creation to God and the self-standing mandate of God that we should care for it as he does. They do not depend on any other utility or consequence of such action, such as human benefit or evangelistic fruitfulness. We are to care for the earth because it belongs to God and he told us to. That is enough in itself.

Nevertheless, because we are also part of that creation, there is no doubt that what benefits creation ultimately is also good for human beings in the long term (even though short-term human need often clashes with environmental good). Hence, environmental and development issues are often intertwined. And furthermore, since the suffering of creation is bound up with human wickedness, that which is good news for the earth is part of that which is good news for people. The gospel is indeed good news for the whole of creation.

It is not surprising then that those who take seriously, as Christians, our responsibility to embody God's love for creation find that their obedience in that sphere often leads to opportunities to articulate God's love for suffering and lost people also. The story of A Rocha has shown that while the movement's goals and actions in creation care have their own intrinsic biblical validity, God honors such obedience by blessing and building his church as well in the context of such activity.

Truly Christian environmental action is in fact also evangelistically fruitful, not because it is any kind of cover for "real mission" but simply because it declares in word and deed the Creator's limitless love for the whole of his creation (which of course includes his love for his human creatures) and makes no secret of the biblical story of the cost that the Creator paid to redeem both. Such action

is a missional embodiment of the biblical truths that the Lord is loving toward all that he has made, and that this same God so loved the world that he gave his only Son not only so that believers should not perish but ultimately so that *all things in heaven and earth* should be reconciled to God through the blood of the cross. For God was in Christ reconciling *the world* to himself.

13

Mission and God's Image

We turn now from the earth to the human creatures whom God placed within it. What aspects of the Bible's teaching about humanity as a whole are particularly relevant to our exploration of biblical mission?

Humanity in God's Image

Created in God's image. This is not the place to engage in a comprehensive survey of all the attempts that have been made to elucidate the full meaning of the biblical assertion that God created human beings in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26-27).

> Much theological ink has been spilled on trying to pin down exactly what it is about human beings that can be identified as the essence of the image of God in us. Is it our rationality, our moral consciousness, our capacity for relationship, our sense of responsibility to God? Even our upright posture and the expressiveness of the human face have been canvassed as the locus of the image of God in humankind. Since the Bible nowhere defines the term, it is probably futile to attempt to do so very precisely. In any case, we should not so much think of the image of God as an independent "thing" that we somehow possess. God did not *give* to human beings the image of God. Rather, it is a dimension of our very creation. The expression "in our image" is adverbial (that is, it describes the way God made us), not adjectival (that is, as if it simply described a quality we possess). The image of God is not so much something we *possess*, as *what we are. To be human is to be the image of God.* It is not an extra feature added on to our species; it is definitive of what it means to be human.[1]

From a missiological perspective the affirmation that human beings have

[1]Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Leicester, U.K.: Inter-Varsity Press; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004), p. 119.

been created in the image of God, along with the immediate context of the narratives of Genesis 1—3, implies at least four further significant truths about humanity, all of which are vital to biblical mission.

1. All human beings are addressable by God. Human beings are the creatures to whom God speaks. In the creation narrative God gives the different orders of subhuman creatures the basic instruction to go and multiply. They seem to need no further encouragement or communication in attending to that task. In the case of the human creature, however, we find God speaking not only words of blessing and fruitfulness but also of instruction, permission and prohibition, followed later by questions, judgments, and promises. The human is the creature who is aware of God through rational communication and address. And the Old Testament goes on to show that this applies to *all* human beings, with no regard for ethnicity or covenant status. God can speak to an Abimelech or a Balaam or a Nebuchadnezzar as easily as to an Abraham, a Moses, or a Daniel. To be human is to have the capacity of being addressed by the living Creator God.

There is therefore a fundamental God-awareness or God-openness that is common to all humanity, in comparison with which all other labels are secondary, including religious ones. Whatever the cultural environment in which a person lives, or whatever the religious worldview through which they see their life in this world, the most fundamental ground of their humanity is that they have been made in God's image. The living Creator God of all flesh needs no permission, no translation, no crosscultural contextualization when he chooses to communicate with any person whom he has made in his own image. To be human is to be addressable by one's Creator. Granted, of course, as Paul says, that in our sin and rebellion we have universally suppressed and perverted this awareness of God. Nevertheless, the word of the gospel has its life-giving potential precisely because even sinners and rebels are people made in God's image and capable of hearing God's voice.

2. All human beings are accountable to God. The other side of the coin of addressability is accountability. The man and woman in the creation narratives are the creatures who must give an answer when God addresses them. Even in hiding from God, they must answer God. This too is a universal phenomenon, independent of culture and religion.

> From heaven the LORD looks down
> and sees all mankind;
> from his dwelling place he watches
> all who live on earth—
> he who forms the hearts of all,
> who considers everything they do. (Ps 33:13-15)

This is an astonishing assertion. Every human being on the planet is known by God, considered and evaluated by God, called to account by God.

Herein lies the basis of universalizable biblical ethics. It is because of this assumption that all human beings are accountable to YHWH that Amos can address God's accusations and punishment to the noncovenant nations around Israel. The nations may not have been taught the laws of YHWH, as Israel had through the great unique revelation at Mount Sinai (Deut 4:32-35; Ps 147:19-20), but they do know the fundamentals of ethical responsibility to God and one another.

So there are common ethical bridges to people of all cultures. There is some universal sense of moral obligation that human beings share, which again is an important missiological foundation.

3. All human beings have dignity and equality. Being made in the image of God is simultaneously that which sets us apart from the rest of the animals and that which we humans all have in common. *No other animal* is created in the image of God, so this forms the basis of the unique dignity and sanctity of human life. *All other humans* are created in the image of God, so this forms the basis of the radical equality of all human beings, regardless of gender, ethnicity, religion or any form of social, economic, or political status.

In these affirmations the faith of Old Testament Israel was quite distinctive from surrounding ancient Near Eastern religions (and enduring religious traditions today, such as Hinduism), in which differences between human beings are not merely cultural or social, but ontological. The old Akkadian proverb "A man is the shadow of a god; and slave is the shadow of a man" found no endorsement in Israel. Israel had functional social gradations, but a slave in Israel did not have to fight for the right to be regarded as human. Speaking of his male and female slaves, Job asserted, fully in line with Israel's creation theology, "Did not he who made me in the womb make them? / Did not the same one form us both within our mothers?" (Job 31:15).

Christian mission must therefore treat all human beings with dignity, equality and respect. When we look at any other person, we do not see the label (Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, secular atheist, white, black, etc.) but the image of God. We see someone created by God, addressed by God, accountable to God, loved by God, valued and evaluated by God. So while we affirm the validity of reaching out in mission to all people everywhere, we must also think critically about the *methods, attitudes* and *assumptions* with which we do so. The validity of evangelism *in principle* does not legitimize any and every *method* of evangelism *in practice.* Our understanding of the dignity of all persons made in God's image necessitates careful attention to the ethics of mission. Anything that denies other human beings their dignity or fails to show respect, interest and informed un-

derstanding for all that they hold precious is actually a failure of love.

To love your neighbor as yourself is not just the second great commandment in the law; it is an essential implication of our common createdness and is as relevant in mission as in any other walk of life. Not that love means accepting everything your neighbor believes or does. Paul did not accept the religiosity of the Athenians, but he did seek to relate to them with polite respect, even while challenging their assumptions. And as we saw in chapter five, even Paul's pagan detractors acknowledged that he had not "blasphemed our goddess" (Acts 19:37). Likewise Peter, while encouraging Christians to be ready to defend their faith in conversation with unbelievers, urges them to "do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience" (1 Pet 3:15-16).

4. The biblical gospel fits all. The image of God is not, of course, the only thing we human beings universally have in common. We are also all sinners and rebels against our Creator God, as a result of which God's image in us, while not lost (for it is constitutive of our humanity), is spoiled and distorted. God's mission includes the restoration of people to that true image of God, of which his own Son, Jesus, is the perfect model. This means that just as our sin is a universal reality, which underlies the many cultural forms in which it manifests itself, so also the gospel is a universal remedy that addresses human need in any and all cultures.

This is not in any way to ignore the wonderful variety of ethnicity and culture that so enriches the human race. Nor is it to minimize the myriad ways in which the gospel takes root and is lived out in different cultural contexts. On the contrary, the true richness of the biblical gospel will only be fully seen in all its glory when it shines forth, like the many facets of a diamond, in all the redeemed cultures of the new creation. What this point is affirming is that the Bible reveals God's answer to the human problem—an answer and a problem that are both alike universal, not merely culturally relative.

Whatever the appearances or the caricatures have been, Christian mission is not a matter of inviting or compelling people to become Westerners or Koreans or Nigerians. It is inviting people to become more fully *human* through the transforming power of the gospel that fits all because it answers to the most basic need of all and restores the common glory of what it is to be truly human—a man or woman made in the image of God.

This is why the theological struggle that was fought and resolved in the New Testament was so important: conversion of the Gentiles to Christ did not mean conversion to being *Jews*. No, the Gentiles *as Gentiles* were welcomed into God's people on the same basis as the Jews themselves—repentance and faith in the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth. From that point of view, the gospel Paul pro-

claimed to Jews in Pisidian Antioch or to Gentiles in sophisticated pagan Athens was the same: "Here is Jesus: the fulfillment of Israel's hopes, the ultimate judge of all the world; trust in him alone for salvation and forgiveness from the living God." Though rooted in the particularity of the history, faith and culture of Old Testament Israel, the gospel of Christ was the power of God for salvation to *all* who believe, Jew or Gentile.

Created for a task. Humanity was put on the earth with a mission—to rule over, to keep and to care for the rest of creation. This enables us to see ecological concern and action as a valid part of biblical Christian mission. Here we look in a little more depth at the meaning of this mandate God gave us.[2]

God instructed the human species not only to fill the earth (an instruction also given to the other creatures) but also to subdue it and to rule over the rest of the creatures. The words *kābaš* and *rādâ* (Gen 1:28) are strong words, implying both exertion and effort, and the imposing of will upon another. However, they are not, as contemporary ecological mythology likes to caricature, terms that imply violence or abuse. The idea that these words could ever imply violent abuse and exploitation, and the implied accusation that Christianity is therefore an intrinsically eco-hostile religion is relatively recent.[3] By far the dominant interpretation of these words in both Jewish and Christian tradition down through the centuries has been that they entail benevolent care for the rest of creation as entrusted into human custodianship.[4]

On one level, the first term, *kābaš,* authorizes humans to do what every other species on earth does, which is to utilize its environment for life and survival. *All* species in some way or another "subdue the earth," to the varying degrees

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[2]What follows in the rest of this section is largely drawn from Wright, *Old Testament Ethics,* chap. 4.

[3]The source of this widespread idea that Christianity bears major responsibility for our ecological crisis because of its instrumentalist view of nature, allegedly rooted in Genesis 1:28, goes back to the frequently reproduced and much-quoted article by Lynn White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155 (1967): 1203-7, in 1967. It has been answered by many others since, and it has been shown to be based on a misunderstanding of the Hebrew text of Genesis. James Barr, e.g., in 1972, showed that "Man's 'dominion' contains no markedly exploitative aspect; it approximates to the well-known Oriental idea of the Shepherd King. . . . The Jewish-Christian doctrine of creation is therefore much less responsible for the ecological crisis than is suggested by arguments such as those of Lynn White. On the contrary, the biblical foundations of that doctrine would tend in the opposite direction, away from a licence to exploit and towards a duty to respect and to protect." James Barr, "Man and Nature—the Ecological Controversy and the Old Testament," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library of the University of Manchester* 55 (1972): 22, 30.

[4]For a thorough survey of representative expressions of this view down through Christian history, see James A. Nash, "The Ecological Complaint Against Christianity," in *Loving Nature: Ecological Integrity and Christian Responsibility* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991), pp. 68-92.

necessary for their own prospering. That is the very nature of life on earth. As applied to humans in this verse, it probably implies no more than the task of agriculture. That humans have developed tools and technology to pursue their own distinctive form of subduing the earth for human benefit is no different in principle from what other species do, though clearly vastly different in degree and impact on the total ecosphere.

The latter word, *rādâ,* is more distinctive. It certainly describes a role and function for human beings that is entrusted to no other species—the function of ruling or exercising dominion. It seems clear that what God is doing here is passing on to human hands a delegated form of God's own kingly authority over the whole of his creation. It is commonly pointed out that kings and emperors in ancient times (and even dictators in modern times) would set up an image of themselves in far-flung corners of their domains to signify their sovereignty over that territory and its people. The image represented the authority of the true king. Similarly God installs the human species as the image, within creation, of the authority that finally belongs to God, Creator and Owner of the earth.

Even apart from that analogy, Genesis describes God's work in regal terms, though without using the word *king.* God's creating work exudes wisdom in planning, power in execution and goodness in completion. Wisdom, power and goodness are the very qualities that Psalm 145 exalts in "my God the King," in relation to all his created works. There is a righteousness and benevolence inherent in God's kingly power that is exercised toward all that he has made. "These are, of course, royal qualities; without using the word, the author of Gen 1 celebrates the Creator as *King,* supreme in all the qualities which belong to the ideal of kingship, just as truly as Psalms 93 and 95-100 celebrate the divine King as Creator."[5]

So the natural assumption, then, is that a creature made in the image of this God will reflect these same qualities in carrying out the mandate of delegated dominion. Whatever way this *human* dominion is to be exercised, it must reflect the character and values of *God's* own kingship. "The 'image' is a kingly pattern, and the kind of rule which God entrusted to human kind is that proper to the ideals of kingship. *The ideals,* not the abuses or failures: not tyranny or arbitrary manipulation and exploitation of subjects, but a rule governed by justice, mercy and true concern for the welfare of all."[6]

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[5]Robert Murray, *The Cosmic Covenant: Biblical Themes of Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1992), p. 98.
[6]Ibid.

So, then, human dominion over the rest of creation is to be an exercise of kingship that reflects God's own kingship. The image of God is not a license for abuse based on arrogant supremacy but a pattern that commits us to humble reflection of the character of God.

> This understanding turns our supremacism upside down, for if we resemble God in that we have dominion, we must be called to be "imitators of God" (Eph 5:1) in the way we exercise it. Indeed, far from giving us a free hand on the earth, the *imago Dei* constrains us. We must be kings, not tyrants; if we become the latter we deny and even destroy the image in us. How then does God exercise dominion? Psalm 145 tells us that God is gracious, compassionate, good, faithful, loving, generous and protective, not to humankind only but to "all he has made." God's characteristic act is to bless, and it is God's constant care that ensures that the cattle, the lions, and even the birds are fed and watered (Ps 104; Mt 6:26).[7]

If this is how God acts, then how much more is it incumbent on us, made in his image and commanded to be like him, to exhibit the same solicitous care for the creation he has entrusted to our rule?

Created in relationship. Genesis 1 sets human male-female complementarity closely alongside the image of God.

> So God created man in his own image,
> in the image of God he created him;
> male and female he created them. (Gen 1:27)

The implication from the tight parallelism seems clearly to be that there is something about the wholeness of human gender complementarity and the mutual relationship it enables that reflects something true about the very nature of God. Not that God himself is sexually differentiated but that relationship is part of the very being of God, and therefore also part of the very being of humanity, created in his image. Human sexuality reflects within the created order something that is true about God within his divine, noncreated being.

Genesis 2, on the other hand, sets human gender complementarity in the context of the *human task*. The sudden admission of something that is "not good" in God's evaluation of the creation, which has been repeatedly described as "good" and "very good," is startling. What is not good is that the man (the "earth creature") should be alone (Gen 2:18). But in the immediate context, the problem of this aloneness is not merely that he would therefore be *lonely,* in an emotional

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[7]Huw Spanner, "Tyrants, Stewards—or Just Kings?" in *Animals on the Agenda: Questions About Animals for Theology and Ethics,* ed. Linzey Andrew and Dorothy Yamamoto (London: SCM Press, 1998), p. 222.

sense. God is addressing not merely a psychological problem but a creational one.

The problem is that God has given an immense task to this creature in Genesis 2:15. He has been put in the Garden "to work it and take care of it." When added to the task specified in the earlier creation account—to fill the earth, subdue it and rule over the rest of the animate creation (Gen 1:28)—the human task seems limitless. A man cannot tackle such a challenge alone. That is "not good." He needs help. So it is significant that the term used to describe the project God now embarks on is not to find a *companion* to stop him feeling lonely but to find a *helper* to stand alongside him in this huge task laid upon him as the servant, keeper, filler, subduer and ruler of creation. The man does not just need *company*. He needs *help*. Male and female are necessary not only for mutual relationship in which they will reflect God (though certainly for that) but also for *mutual help* in carrying out the creation mandate entrusted to humanity.[8]

Humanity, then, is created in relationship, for relationship, and for a task that requires relational cooperation—not only at the basic biological level that only a man and a woman can produce children in order to fill the earth but also at the wider societal level that both men and women have their roles of mutual assistance in the great task of ruling the creation on God's behalf.

God's creative intention for human life, right from the start and projected into the new creation, includes social relationship. Loving horizontal relationships between people, starting with marriage but extending to include all other social relationships, are part of God's desire for human life. And since the Fall devastated that relational dimension of human life, it is part of God's mission to restore healthy social relationships where they are broken through sin.

Accordingly, since social relationships, from the basic sexual bond to wider circles of human community, are included in God's own creative and redemptive action, they fall also within the range of our human mission agenda. This is another plank in the biblical foundation for a holistic theology of mission. Our missional objective is not limited to the vital and urgent evangelistic task of helping *individuals* come to a right relationship with God that will secure their individual eternal destiny. We also share God's passion for healthy human relationships here and now—between individuals, in families, in the workplace, throughout society and between nations.[9]

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[8]I owe this clarification to the fine discussion in Christopher Ash, *Marriage: Sex in the Service of God* (Leicester, U.K.: Inter-Varsity Press, 2003), esp. chap. 7.

[9]The work of the Relationships Foundation has developed this theme, both conceptually and practically, very strongly. The most thorough presentation of their work is Michael Schluter and John Ashcroft, ed., *Jubilee Manifesto: A Framework, Agenda & Strategy for Christian Social Reform* (Leicester, U.K.: Inter-Varsity Press, 2005).

Humanity in Rebellion

Genesis quickly moves on, however, to show that things did not continue as God intended. Sin entered human life through rebellion and disobedience. And just as our theology of mission must embrace a holistic understanding of creation and humanity, so it must work with a radical and comprehensive understanding of sin and evil. The profound simplicity of the narratives of Genesis 1—11 show us at least three things about sin that must be taken into account in biblical mission.

Sin affects every dimension of the human person. The portrait of the human being that we find in the early chapters of Genesis is of an integral, single person, but with different dimensions of life and relationship. Rather than speaking of a human being having "a body" and "a soul" and whatever other "parts" one may wish to add, it seems preferable to speak adjectivally of the human person as living with a fully integrated combination of different dimensions. At least four aspects of human life are seen in these early accounts. Human beings are *physical* (they are creatures in the created physical world), *spiritual* (they have a unique intimacy of relationship with God), *rational* (they have unique powers of communication, language, addressability, consciousness, memory, emotions and will), and *social* (their gender complementarity reflects the relational dimension of God and underlies all human relationships). All of these dimensions—physical, spiritual, rational and social—are combined in the integrated human person described in Genesis 2:7 as a "living being."[10]

What the following narrative in Genesis 3 goes on to show, however, is that every one of these four dimensions was involved in the entry of sin into human life, and every one of them is also affected by the consequences of that choice. The story of the temptation of Eve and the collusion of Adam involves all aspects of human nature.

- *Spiritually,* Eve was led to doubt the truth and goodness of God, thus undermining the prior relationship of trust and obedience.
- *Mentally*, she contemplated the fruit under discussion: her reflection was *rational* (it was good for food), *aesthetic* (it was pleasing to the eye) and *intellectual* (desirable for gaining wisdom). All of these capacities of the human intellect are good in themselves, commended as highly prized gifts of God. There was nothing wrong with Eve using her mind; the problem was she was now using all its powers in a direction that was forbidden by God. The prob-

[10]This fourfold perspective on the dimensions of the whole human person is also adopted as a framework for biblical holistic mission by Jean-Paul Heldt, "Revisiting the 'Whole Gospel': Toward a Biblical Model of Holistic Mission in the 21st Century," *Missiology* 32 (2004): 149-72.

lem lay not in rational reflection but in the disobedience being thereby rationalized.

- *Physically*, "she took some and ate it." These are simple verbs describing physical action in the physical world.
- *Socially*, she shared the fruit with Adam, "who was with her," and thus he acquiesced in the direction that whole conversation, reflection and action was taking. And so the sin that was already spiritual, mental and physical also became shared—it entered into the core of human relationship, giving birth immediately to mutual shame and subsequently to increasingly malevolent progeny.

Having thus gained its entry through every dimension of human personality, sin goes on to permanently corrupt all these same four dimensions in human life and experience.

- *Spiritually*, we are alienated from God, fearful of his presence, suspicious of his truth, hostile to his love.
- *Rationally*, we use our minds, like the first human couple, to rationalize sin, blame others and excuse ourselves. We have become darkened in our thinking.
- *Physically*, we are sentenced to death, as God decreed, and suffer its invasion through sickness and decay even in life itself, while our whole physical environment likewise groans in futility under God's curse.
- *Socially*, human life is fractured at every level, with anger, jealousy, violence and murder even between brothers in the story of Cain and Abel escalating into the horrendous social decay that the rest of the biblical narrative graphically portrays.

Romans 1—2 is Paul's incisive commentary on the universal reign of sin in human life and society. Reading his searing analysis there, we can see all of the same four dimensions of human personality involved in human sin and rebellion. There is no part of the human person that is unaffected by sin.

Sin affects human society and history. The individual effects of sin are glaringly apparent in the Genesis narrative. But the Bible goes on to a much deeper analysis. There is also what might be called the "prophetic perspective" on sin. In the Old Testament canon the prophets are not merely those whose books bear their name, from Isaiah to Malachi, but also include those who wrote the historical books: the former prophets. These history writers were prophetic because they observed society and history from God's point of view and sought to interpret both in the light of God's word and purposes. And from that per-

spective they saw that sin was far more than what went on in the hearts and behavior of individuals.

Sin spreads *horizontally within society* and sin propagates itself *vertically between generations*. It thus generates contexts and connections that are laden with collective sin. Sin becomes endemic, structural and embedded in history. Thus the Old Testament historians observe how whole societies become addicted to chaotic evil (as the book of Judges portrays with its slow crescendo of vile behavior). Isaiah attacks those who legalize injustice by passing laws that give structural legitimacy to oppression

> Woe to those who make unjust laws,
> to those who issue oppressive decrees,
> to deprive the poor of their rights
> and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people. (Is 10:1-2)

Jeremiah is shocked to discover that the whole of Jerusalem society is rotten from top to bottom (Jer 5). The historians comment that successive kings of Jerusalem (with very few exceptions, such as Hezekiah and Josiah) emulated and then surpassed the wickedness of their predecessors, so that the wickedness of the people accumulated through the generations until the weight of it became simply intolerable to God.

We need to be careful here, of course. Some people are very reluctant to speak of "structural sin," arguing that only *people* can sin. Sin is a personal choice made by free moral persons. Structures cannot sin in that sense. With that I agree. However, no human being is born into or makes his or her moral choices in the context of a clean sheet. We all live within social frameworks that we did not create. They were there before we arrived and will remain after we are gone, even if individually or as a whole generation we may engineer significant change in them. And those frameworks are the result of other people's choices and actions over time—all of them riddled with sin. So although structures may not sin in the personal sense, structures do embody myriad personal choices, many of them sinful, that we have come to accept within our cultural patterns.

By a "societal dimension" to sin, then, I am not personifying structures of society and accusing them of the same kind of personal sin that a human individual commits. But I do think the Bible allows us to speak of sin-laden or sin-generating structures of human community life. It is not that by living within such structures our sin becomes justifiable or inevitable. We are still responsible persons before God. It does mean that sinful ways of life become normalized, rationalized, rendered plausible and acceptable by reference to

the structures and conventions we have created.

By a "historical dimension" to sin I mean that we have to look deeper into the causes of sinful behavior, again, not to justify or excuse it but to understand its roots. If a community happens to be riddled with social ills, violence, corruption, fragmented and dysfunctional families, it will be an inadequate missional response merely to preach individual sin and repentance. Pursuing the question "Why?" in relation to the evils we witness in any given situation will inevitably uncover historical roots, sometimes going back a long way. Sometimes helping people to know and understand the historical roots and causes of their current circumstances is a significant (though obviously not adequate) factor in community restoration.

So if our mission is bringing *good news* into every area of human life, then it calls for some research and analysis as to what exactly constitutes the *bad news,* horizontally in the structures of a given society and vertically in its history. Many factors will be uncovered in the process. But only as they are uncovered can the cleansing, healing and reconciling power of the gospel undo their dismal effects.

Sin affects the whole environment of human life. When human beings chose to rebel against their Creator, their disobedience and Fall affected the whole of their physical environment. This is immediately clear from God's words to Adam: "Cursed is the ground because of you" (Gen 3:17). But in view of the connections between human beings and the rest of creation, it could not have been otherwise. Richard Bauckham expresses the inevitable effects well:

> How does the fall affect nature? Is it only in human history that God's creative work is disrupted, necessitating a redemptive work, whereas in the rest of nature creation continues unaffected by the fall? This cannot be the case, because humanity is part of the interdependent whole of nature, so that disruption in human history must disrupt nature, and since humanity is the dominant species on earth human sin is bound to have very widespread effects on nature as a whole. The fall disturbed humanity's harmonious relationship with nature, alienating us from nature, so that we now experience nature as hostile, and introducing elements of struggle and violence into our relationship with nature (Gn. 3:15, 17-19; 9:2).[11]

I do not enter here into the question of whether the Fall of humanity can be said to be responsible for all the phenomena in nature that are threatening to human life (earthquakes, floods, volcanoes, tsunamis, etc.) or morally disturbing to us (the universal fact of predation, that all life forms prey on other life forms,

[11]Richard Bauckham, "First Steps to a Theology of Nature," *Evangelical Quarterly* 58 (1986): 240.

but especially as it occurs among animals capable of feeling pain). There are very complex theological and scientific issues in those questions, which are hotly debated among equally Bible-believing Christians.[12] Whatever one's views on them, however, the Bible unequivocally states that the Fall radically distorted and strained our human relationship with the earth itself and also frustrated creation's primary function in relation to God (cf. Rom 8:20). We live in a cursed earth (since Adam) as well as in a covenanted earth (since Noah). Our mission theology needs to take full account of the radical realism of the former and the limitless hope of the latter.

The apparent simplicity then of the narratives of creation and Fall contain enormous depths of truth about the triangle of relationships between God, humanity and the whole created order. It is clear that the Bible offers us a very radical assessment of the effects of our willful rebellion and Fall into disobedience, self-centeredness and sin.

It is not just that every dimension of the human person is affected by sin. It is not just that every human person is a sinner. It is also the case that the totality of our social and economic relationships with each other, horizontally and historically, and of our ecological relationship to the earth itself have all been perverted and twisted.

Clearly, a fully biblical theology and practice of mission must take account of a fully biblical account of sin. Mission strategies that focus exclusively on individual human wrongdoing and applying the remedy of the gospel solely in that realm cannot, of course, be blamed for lack of biblical zeal in that one evangelistic field. However, they do fall short of a full biblical understanding of all that sin is and does, and inevitably therefore fall short likewise of a full biblical understanding of all that the gospel addresses and all that our mission must engage.

A Paradigm Evil? HIV/AIDS and the Church's Mission

Unquestionably the greatest emergency facing the human family today is the HIV/AIDS virus. It is devastating human life on a scale that can scarcely be grasped. Imagine twenty Boeing 747 airliners crashing to earth every day, killing all passengers. At least that many people (approximately 7,000-8,000) die every day from AIDS-related illness. The great majority of these are in sub-Saharan Africa (home to over 70 percent of all HIV/AIDS cases, deaths and new infections).

Scale is a difficult concept in itself. The world was horrified by the attack on

[12]A helpful survey of the range of perspectives on "natural" and "moral" evil is concisely offered by Nigel G. Wright, *A Theology of the Dark Side: Putting the Power of Evil in Its Place* (Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster, 2003).

the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York on September 11, 2001, in which some three thousand people died. *Africa suffers the equivalent of two 9/11s every day.*

The tsunami in the Indian Ocean in December 2004 carried off some 300,000 people in a single day. *HIV/AIDS inflicts the equivalent of a tsunami on Africa every month.*

Globally it is estimated that at least forty-six million people are infected; there are sixteen thousand new infections daily; twenty million have already died of AIDS; and at least sixty-five million will have died by 2020. And whereas past great pandemics in human history, such as outbreaks of plague and Black Death in Europe, tended to carry off mainly the weakest in society, the very young and very old, HIV/AIDS by contrast is most devastating among the young adult population (so that the surviving young and old suffer even more). It carries off the working, childbearing generation, leaving behind precisely the very young and the very old to cope without those who would normally care for them both. HIV/AIDS is hollowing out whole communities in Africa, throwing grandparents and very young children together in a struggle for survival, and creating vast numbers of the most vulnerable of all people, widows and orphans. A new AIDS orphan is created every fourteen seconds. Perhaps three more since you began reading this paragraph.[13]

I have been moved to reflect on the critical nature of HIV/AIDS in relation to mission by two things. One was an article by Kenneth R. Ross, "The HIV/AIDS Pandemic: What Is at Stake for Christian Mission?" in which he argues passionately that there is a redefining moment for the church and mission in this terrible phenomenon, and the stakes are high.[14] The other was the deeply moving gathering of the Mission Leaders Forum at the Overseas Ministry Study Center, New Haven, Connecticut, in December 2004, at which HIV/AIDS was the main topic and presentations were made by people deeply involved at considerable personal cost at the cutting edge of the problem in Africa and China.

It seems to me that HIV/AIDS sucks into its horrific vortex almost every dimension of evil that we face and that the Bible alerts us to and at the same time calls for every dimension of mission that the Bible portrays. But in using HIV/AIDS in this way as a kind of case study or paradigm of evil, *I want to make it*

[13]The statistics quoted here, of course, reflect what was available to me at the time of writing. The situation changes (mostly for the worse) constantly.

[14]Kenneth R. Ross, "The HIV/AIDS Pandemic: What Is at Stake for Christian Mission?" *Missiology* 32 (2004): 337-48. The subtitles of his article are "The Church at Stake—New Frontiers for Faith"; "Gender at Stake—Sexual Power and Politics"; "Mission at Stake—The Need to Practice Presence."

absolutely clear that I am not, unequivocally not, suggesting that HIV/AIDS sufferers themselves embody evil or sin in any way that is not common to the rest of the human race.

Nor do I accept the idea that HIV/AIDS is the specific judgment of God on its victims. Even if we acknowledge that sexual promiscuity is a major cause of infection, and so some people reap what they sow, there are just far too many people (especially women, children and even the unborn) who have become infected or affected by the disease through no fault or sin of their own for their suffering to be regarded in any sense as God's direct judgment on them. Indeed there are many who have become infected by doing what is pleasing to God—caring for the sick and tending their wounds, both medical workers and family caregivers. Many young children are tragically infected as a result of the loving and intimate care they give to dying parents. Sadly, the opinion that the disease is a direct judgment of God on the sufferer for their own sins, whether externally inflicted or internally accepted, is itself an added ingredient in their isolation and suffering.

Dimensions of evil present in the context of HIV/AIDS. It is hard to think of any dimension of evil that is not present in some form in relation to the terrible scourge of HIV/AIDS. Without attempting comprehensive or profound analysis, my own reading and listening leads me to list at least the following points where HIV/AIDS is a ghastly mask of evil and mirrors aspects of the Fall.

- It is mysterious, in origin and causation, like evil itself. Why should there be such an organism in God's good creation? Why did it make the jump to humans, apparently in 1934? Why is it so resistant to all the efforts of research to overcome it? And, like evil, it combines something that is "natural" or external to us, on one hand, with the human agency by which it gains entry and spreads, on the other.
- It invades life and delivers inevitable death. Of course, death, the wages of sin, awaits every human being since the Fall, but HIV/AIDS brings the sentence forward into the midst of life and destroys life's blessing, abundance and fulfillment—the very things that God created us for.
- It induces prolonged physical suffering, anxiety, pain and decay. "Slim" is its name in many parts of Africa, for it leaves its victims wasted, as if the very life force had been sucked out of them. It attacks and destroys the immune system that God built into our human bodies to resist all kinds of other diseases, rendering the sufferer defenseless against their onslaught. The Bible portrays evil also in this "life-sucking" language.
- It spreads in many ways, but a primary one is through human sexuality—

thus exploiting and corrupting the most intimate relationship God has blessed humanity with. More precisely, it thrives on the fallen male sex drive, the rampant masculine tendency toward promiscuous lust. It has been estimated that male sexual behavior underlies 80 percent of the AIDS epidemic. This includes both heterosexual as well as homosexual behavior, but the former is certainly responsible for a far higher proportion of infections.

- It thrives on the gender imbalance between dominant males and exploited females—something that we learn from Genesis 3 is a result of the Fall. In Southern Africa 60 percent of females have their first sexual experience in a context of coercion, and in 40 percent of cases it is with a man in a superior social, employment or familial position.
- It further preys disproportionately on women. In Africa, women and teenage girls are five to six times more likely to become infected than men, mainly because of their low economic and social status and lack of control over sexual practice.
- It is no respecter of innocence. A very high number of infected women have been faithful to their husbands but suffer from infection he has transmitted to them after promiscuity elsewhere. The reverse happens also, of course. Likewise many babies are found to be HIV positive from infection in the womb.
- It creates widows and orphans at a frightening pace. But cultural and economic practices, combined with religious prejudice and fear, often make the plight of these victims even worse. AIDS widows often have their husband's property seized back by his family, and they lose all inheritance rights. Compassion and justice perish too.
- It destroys the future and removes hope from individuals and communities. Young lives, with high expectations, are suddenly handed an imminent death sentence. Even the uninfected find their own life plans thrown into oblivion by the sudden demands of caring for family members who are diagnosed as infected. Whole villages and towns are left with no workers, teachers, doctors, civil servants or even sufficient parents. Fields cannot be cultivated, so hunger and destitution stalk the countryside.
- It generates massive psychological trauma: fear, denial, panic, guilt, self-hatred, anger, violent revenge, despair. And of course, like all evil, it raises acute spiritual questions as well about the goodness and fairness of God.
- It both causes and exploits poverty. "HIV/AIDS reveals the fracture, stresses and strains in society, exploiting disorder, inequality and poverty. The virus

seeks the weak, the poor, and the vulnerable. It destroys more quickly where nutrition is low, where health systems are weak and where governments do not govern effectively."[15]

- It also exposes the inequality in the world between rich and poor nations. If you contract HIV/AIDS in a Western country, the availability of antiretroviral drugs (ARVs) at affordable cost will mean that you can expect to live a relatively normal life for many more years, with not much more (according to one expert) than the dangers and inconvenience of a diabetes sufferer. In most Majority World countries, however, such ARVs as are available are priced beyond the dreams, let alone the means, of most sufferers. The battle to get shamefully reluctant pharmaceutical companies to address this injustice is one of the many tragic sagas of the disease. So there is a justice issue also.
- It induces reactions among others (both outside and within the church) that vary from denial to deceit, from condemnation of the victim to false representation of the ways of God.
- It gets locked into the corruption and pride of politics, where concealment, denial and power struggles over resources, foreign funds and so forth compound the problem and delay its remedy.
- It is "a disease that affects every facet of the human condition on earth—*labor, productivity, procreation, pleasure, faith, education, physical health, mental health*. A disease that crushes the very soul of the most innocent among us, leaving them orphaned, without the bare necessities, psychologically traumatized and potentially left to head a household on their own with an elderly grandmother or wander the streets of Kampala, Lusaka and Johannesburg—*children*. A disease that affects every generation of the population—*the unborn, the infant, the child, the youth, adults, grandparents*."[16]

In confronting such a comprehensively devastating phenomenon, it is surely no exaggeration to say that in HIV/AIDS we are looking into the distorted, devouring and diabolical face of an evil that tears at the very heart of human life on God's earth.

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[15]Quoted from "Holistic Mission," Lausanne Occasional Paper no. 33, ed. Evvy Hay Cambell, 2004, available at <www.lausanne.org>. This short but powerful statement lists the following aspects of the HIV/AIDS crisis. It is, they say, a biological issue, a behavioral issue, a child and youth issue, a gender issue, a poverty issue, a cultural issue, a *socioeconomic* issue, a justice issue, a deception issue, a compassion issue, a world evangelization issue.

[16]Angela M. Wakhweya, "Look After Orphans and Widows in their Distress: A Public Health Professional's Perspective on Mission in an Era of HIV/AIDS," a paper prepared for the Mission Leadership Forum (New Haven, Conn.: Overseas Ministry Study Center, 2004) (quoted with permission).

Dimensions of mission in response to HIV/AIDS. Such holistic evil demands a holistic response. Thankfully many Christians worldwide, both in governments and in nongovernmental organizations, take this matter very seriously indeed, even though one is saddened to hear of churches that ostracize the infected out of a false assumption of God's judgment on their alleged sin. The Lausanne statement on the matter makes the following crucial point:

> HIV/AIDS is a complex and multifaceted pandemic with a wide variety of interacting causes, sustaining factors and impacts. Therefore this pandemic demands a holistic mission response from the churches. We must make our contribution to fighting this disaster by drawing on a Christian worldview that seamlessly unites the material, psychosocial, social, cultural, political and spiritual aspects of life, a worldview that unites evangelism, discipleship, social action and the pursuit of justice.[17]

Such a holistic missional response to HIV/AIDS, it would seem to me, must include at least the following elements:

- Sheer compassionate care for the sick and dying. No disciple of Jesus should need to be persuaded of this.
- More extensive care for those whose lives are devastated in multiple ways by the effects of the disease in their country, whether personally infected or not: generating employment and caring for widows and orphans (one of the most prominent of all biblical commands, from Exodus to the letter of James).
- Education of the infected, the affected, the churches, pastors, local civic leaders and all who have a chance of influencing attitudes and behaviors—especially women.
- Tackling and condemning cultural and religious practices that make the suffering worse—such as stigmatizing and ostracism, gender prejudice and oppression.
- Engaging in the struggle to find the right balance in allocating resources to prevention of infection, on the one hand, and treatment (through ARVs) of the already infected, on the other. There are medical, political, economic, cultural and justice issues in that debate.
- Offering and providing training for psychological and spiritual counselling and support for people at every stage: from a positive test result to the moment of death and the support of the bereaved.
- Engagement in the economic and political dimensions of the issue, for those whose calling is into the political sphere.

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[17]Cambell, "Holistic Mission," available at <www.lausanne.org>.

- Sensitive evangelistic witness to the new and eternal life that can be ours in Christ, with the forgiveness of sin, the hope of resurrection, and the certainty that death will not have the final word.

From all that has been argued in this book so far, it should be clear that all of these (and doubtless many other) aspects of our missional response are integral parts of the holistic way in which we seek to embody the mission of God in his decisive conflict with evil. No single approach constitutes an adequate missional response in itself. HIV/AIDS, like the evil it embodies, is just too big for one-line answers. If God created and cares for every dimension of human life, then God's mission is the final eradication of everything that attacks every dimension of human life. And since HIV/AIDS attacks everything, it must be confronted on the broadest possible front. Only a holistic missional approach even begins to address the issue.

The ultimacy of evangelism and the nonultimacy of death. And within that biblical holism the necessity of sensitive evangelism is clear and nonnegotiable. I put it as the final item on the list, decidedly not because it is the last thing we need to do but because it is the ultimate thing, the thing that holds all the other imperative responses together within a truly Christian worldview in which death is *not* the ultimate thing.

The most unavoidable fact about AIDS is that it spells *inevitable death*. That is also its most damning fingerprint of evil, for death is *the* great evil, the last enemy to be destroyed. Of course, death faces us all, but AIDS accelerates the process and hurls our last enemy right up in our face. It raises acutely right here and now all the issues that people tend to postpone in life, simply because life is now to be cut tragically short. What is death? What lies beyond death? Is there hope in the face of death?

So while AIDS raises an exhausting list of temporal issues that must be addressed as part of our commitment to God's compassion and justice—medical, social, psychological, sexual, cultural, political, international—it also raises, for the Christian, the ultimacy of evangelism. For however devastating the effects on people's lives here and now, "there is also an eternity question."[18]

"I preach as though ne'er to preach again, *as a dying man to dying men,*" said Richard Baxter. Perhaps no sentence captures better the stark reality of the position in which the church finds itself in the midst of communities devastated by HIV/AIDS. This dread and inexplicable disease will rob a precious human being of their expected span of life and will wrench from them the normal bless-

[18]Doug McConnell, in an oral expansion of his written response to Wakhweya, "Look After Orphans and Widows in their Distress."

ings meant to be enjoyed on God's earth, all the blessings of productive work, rearing a family, tilling the earth, contributing to society, caring for the elderly. There is no other word for this than the most terrible life-robbing evil.

But when a person puts their faith and hope in the crucified and risen Savior, nothing can rob them of the new creation life of which Christ is the firstborn and first-fruits. Only the gospel offers the finality of that hope and the certainty of that future. Only the gospel offers and proclaims the promise of a new humanity to those whose present humanity has been shattered and shredded by this virus.

I say "only the gospel" with a double intention. First, because this essential gospel promise of eternal life for all who believe, founded on the cross and resurrection of Christ, is nonnegotiable and cannot be substituted for or sublimated into any of the other responses that we must make to HIV/AIDS, all of which have their own equally nonnegotiable validity and Christian imperative. But second, I say only the *Christian* gospel, as distinct from all other religions and their view of death. For actually, it is the stark fact of death that throws up and defines most clearly the chasmic divide between religions and between the myriad views of what *salvation* might mean.

One of the best pieces of writing on this subject I have ever read comes from the pen of Carl Braaten. Having pointed out the general vagueness that exists in interfaith dialogue when people talk about "salvation" without defining what they mean, or when they define it only in terms of a wide range of possible benefits in this life (which the Bible includes also, of course, in its rich vocabulary of salvation), Braaten turns to the distinctively Christian perspective, drawn from the New Testament and focused on the resurrection.

> On a theological level salvation is not whatever you want to call it, the fulfillment of every need or the compensation for every lack. . . . Salvation in the Bible is a promise that God offers the world on the horizon of our expectation of personal and universal death. The gospel is the power of God unto salvation because it promises to break open the vicious cycle of death. Death is the power that draws every living thing into its circle. . . . We can gain the partial salvation we are willing to pay for, but none of these techniques of salvation can succeed in buying off death.
>
> Salvation in the New Testament is what God has done to death in the resurrection of Jesus. Salvation is what happens to you and me and the whole world in spite of death. . . . The gospel is the announcement that in one person's history death is no longer the eschaton, but was only the second to last thing. It has now become past history. Death lies behind Jesus, qualifying him to lead the procession from death unto new life. Since death is what separates persons from God

> in the end, only that power which transcends death can liberate humans for eternal life with God. This is the meaning of salvation in the biblical Christian sense. It is eschatological salvation, because the God who raised Jesus from the dead has overcome death as the final eschaton of life. Our final salvation lies in the eschatological future when our own death will be put behind us. This does not mean that there is no salvation in the present, no realized aspect of salvation. It means that the salvation we enjoy now is like borrowing from the future, living now as though our future could already be practiced in the present, because of our union with the risen Christ through faith and hope.
>
> Theologians who speak of salvation in the non-Christian religions should tell us if it is the same salvation which God has promised the world by raising Jesus from the dead. . . . A Christology that is silent about the resurrection of Jesus from the dead is not worthy of the Christian name and should not be called a christology at all.[19]

And, I might add, a missiology that omits the only ultimate answer to death from its range of responses to those in the grip of death has no claim to a Christian name either.

Wisdom and Culture

So far then in chapter twelve and this one, we have scanned the broadest horizons of the great mission field of God—the earth itself and the human race. We have concluded that if our mission is to be true to God's mission, then it must embrace the wholeness of the earth and engage with the wholeness of human existence and need. We turn now to a section of the biblical canon that is often neglected in books about the biblical foundations for mission (as it often has been in books on biblical theology in general also): the Wisdom Literature. For here we find within the Scriptures of ancient Israel a broad tradition of faith and ethics built on a worldview that employs the wide-angle lens of precisely this whole-creation and whole-humanity perspective.

We will observe, first, how Wisdom thinkers and writers in Israel participated in a very international dialogue, with an openness to discern the wisdom of God in cultures other than their own. In this respect it models the kind of bridging dynamic that is part of the missional task of contextualization. Second, we will observe how Wisdom takes its predominant motivation for its ethic from the creation traditions, rather than the historical redemptive story of Israel—thus again setting up a more universalizing tendency. And finally we will listen to the more

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[19]Carl E. Braaten, "Who Do We Say That He Is? On the Uniqueness and Universality of Jesus Christ," *Missiology* 8 (1980): 25-27.

questioning, struggling voice of Wisdom, which urges us to be honest about the faith we seek to commend to others, for while we may be sure about many things, there are rough edges and mysteries in our world, and many more questions in life than we have answers for.[20]

An international bridge. "The wise" was the term given to a class of people known across the ancient Near Eastern world. These were people renowned for their knowledge, sought out for their advice and guidance. At a popular level, they seem to have been consulted rather like a Citizen's Advice Bureau. At the more elite level, they served in the courts of kings, functioning as administrators and government advisers. A great deal of literature from such groups survives from across the ancient Near East—especially from Egypt and Mesopotamia. There are manuals of instructions for civil servants, handy tips for success in public life, reflections on life in general, dialogues and poems offering a wide variety of practical moral and prudential advice. So the Wisdom Literature that we find in the Bible (mainly the books of Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes, along with some Psalms) is part of a class of literature that is common across a wide spectrum of ancient Near Eastern culture, stretching back at least a thousand years before the Israelites even left Egypt and settled in Canaan.

And the Israelites were well aware of this fact. Indeed, they admired the wisdom of other nations, even in the process of praising their own. So, for example, when the historian records that Solomon's wisdom surpassed that of various named wise men of other countries, it only makes sense as a compliment if the latter were justly renowned for their great wisdom. The point was not to vilify the wisdom of other nations but to acknowledge its great reputation in order to exalt Solomon's as even greater.

> Solomon's wisdom was greater than . . . the wisdom of Egypt. He was wiser than any other man, including Ethan the Ezrahite—wiser than Heman, Calcol and Darda, the sons of Mahol. And his fame spread to all the surrounding nations. (1 Kings 4:30-31)

Other nations that are acknowledged in the Old Testament for their class of wise men (both positively and negatively) include Babylon (Is 44:25; 47:10; Jer 50:35; 51:57; Dan 2:12-13), Edom (Jer 49:7; Obad 8), Tyre (Ezek 28; Zech 9:2), Assyria (Is 10:13), and Persia (Esther 1:13; 6:13). Clearly the two most famous were Egypt and Babylon, and this is also reflected in the extrabiblical wisdom texts that survive from those two locations. From Egypt we have texts containing

[20]Lucien Legrand includes a chapter on "Wisdom and Cultures" among other biblical reflections in *The Bible on Culture: Belonging or Dissenting* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2000), pp. 41-60.

the wisdom of Phah-hotep, Merikare, Amenemhet, Ani, Amenemope and Onksheshonqy. From Babylon come the Counsels of Wisdom, Man and his God, Ludlul, the Dialogue of Pessimism, the Babylonian Theodicy and Ahiqar. These texts can be read in translation.[21] And there are several fine and detailed comparisons of their teaching with Old Testament proverbial literature.[22]

When these comparisons are presented, it is clear that there was a lot of contact between Israel's wisdom thinkers and writers and those of surrounding nations.[23] The Wisdom literature is undoubtedly the most overtly international of all the materials in the Bible. This is so in two ways. On the one hand, it deals with many issues that are common in the wisdom texts of other nations. These include basic social and relational skills within society and especially in the corridors of power; concern for moral order and social stability; success, happiness and peace in personal, family and political life; reflections on the problems of divine justice in the world; the absurdities of life and how to cope with them; the challenge of suffering, especially when seemingly undeserved.

On the other hand, it is remarkably clear that Israel was quite prepared to make use of wisdom materials from those other nations, to evaluate and where necessary edit and purge them in the light of Israel's own faith and then calmly incorporate them into their own sacred Scriptures. The most obvious example is the inclusion of the sayings of Agur and of King Lemuel in the book of Proverbs, about whom we know absolutely nothing except that they were clearly not Israelites. And it is now generally accepted that Proverbs 22:17—24:22 has made extensive use of the Egyptian text, the Wisdom of Amenemope. Tremper Longman III, in his concise commentary on Proverbs, systematically lists a wide range of comparisons and similarities between the familiar wisdom contained in Proverbs 22:17—24:22 and texts found many of the ancient Near Eastern wisdom texts.[24]

As we recognize this very sizeable international commonality, however, we

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[21]See James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1955); D. Winton Thomas, ed., *Documents from Old Testament Times* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1958); Miriam Lichtheim, ed., *Ancient Egyptian Literature,* 3 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975, 1976, 1980).

[22]E.g., Roland E. Murphy, *Proverbs* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998); Tremper Longman III, "Proverbs," in *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, forthcoming).

[23]Just as there were in other aspects of Israel's life, e.g., in the language of worship. It is clear that Israel's psalms have in some places happily taken over Canaanite poetic meter, imagery and even aspects of their mythology and utilized it all in extolling the unique sovereign and providential power of YHWH. See, e.g., Donald Senior and Carroll Stuhlmueller, *The Biblical Foundations for Mission* (London: SCM Press, 1983), chap. 5.

[24]Longman, "Proverbs."

must be equally clear that the Israelite sages did not simply plagiarize the traditions of other nations. The distinctive faith of Israel, especially in those areas we have explored earlier in this book (their monotheistic assertion of the uniqueness of YHWH as God, and their covenantal affirmation of Israel's relationship with him) came into conflict with many of the underlying worldview assumptions to be found in the wisdom texts of other nations. So many things that are common in the latter are entirely absent from the Old Testament Wisdom literature. Most obviously absent are the many gods and goddesses of the polytheistic worldview of surrounding nations.

But it is not only that gods and idols of other nations are absent. There are warnings against them also. It is very likely that the personification of Lady Wisdom and Lady Folly in Proverbs 1—9 represents, respectively, YHWH himself, the source of all true wisdom, and other gods, who may be very seductive but whose ways lead ultimately to death, which is the end of the road of idolatry. The Wisdom literature, by this metaphorical literary method, is warning Israelites against the danger of idolatry as seriously as the law and the prophets.

Along with this absence of other gods, the very common assumption of the validity of all kinds of magical, divinatory and occult practices is also completely missing in the wisdom of Israel. Things forbidden in Israel's law were not advocated by Israel's sages.[25] Among the side effects of a polytheistic worldview are a potential cynicism about morality (it doesn't really matter what you do, some god will get you in the end) and fatalism about life in general (there's really not much you can do but resign yourself to the fact that some circumstances will always be beyond your control).

Both of these attitudes are aired in Ecclesiastes, but without abandoning a strong controlling monotheism ("the fear of the LORD"), on the one hand, and the conviction that however puzzlingly absurd life can get, the values of wisdom, uprightness and godly faith are still axiomatic, on the other. It is this strong monotheistic ethic that is most positively distinctive about Old Testament Wisdom. Its motto, "the fear of YHWH is the beginning of knowledge/wisdom" (Prov 1:7) is the key. "The beginning" does not mean a starting point one leaves behind but a first principle that governs everything else. So although the Wisdom literature makes no explicit reference to the historical traditions of Israel's redemption and covenant, it is that tradition, embodied in the name of YHWH himself, that under-

[25]For a very thorough comparison of the accepted religious practices of the surrounding nations and their exclusion from the worship of YHWH, see Glen A. Taylor, "Supernatural Power Ritual and Divination in Ancient Israelite Society: A Social-Scientific, Poetics and Comparative Analysis of Deuteronomy 18" (Ph.D. diss., University of Gloucestershire, 2005).

lies all the reflection, teaching and wrestling that goes on in these pages.

What missiological implications can be drawn from this dual aspect of the international ethos of Old Testament Wisdom literature? At least four suggest themselves.

Common human concerns. First, clearly Israel shared the same kinds of concerns about life—its meaning and how best to live it—that are common to all human cultures. The questions that Israel's wise men and women reflected on, the answers they came up with, the dilemmas they left without final solution, the advice and guidance they offered, all of these resonate with common human experience everywhere. For that reason some missiologists and crosscultural practitioners suggest that the Wisdom literature provides one of the best bridges for biblical faith to establish meaningful contact and engagement with widely different human cultures around the world.[26]

All human cultures are concerned with issues of family life, marriage, parenthood, friendship, working relationships, communication skills and dangers, integrity in the public arena, the control of anger and violence, the use and misuse of money (or its equivalent), the everyday frustrations of life, the tensions between what is and what we think ought to be, the deeper mysteries of sickness, suffering, and death. And all human cultures have traditional wisdom, oral or written, addressing these questions. Indeed it is usually in its collective proverbial wisdom that a whole culture's subconscious worldview can be discerned. So to engage people's own answers to life's questions and then introduce them to how the Bible handles them can be a friendly, nonthreatening way of gaining people's interest in the wider truth of the biblical revelation.[27]

Welcoming the wisdom of the nations. Second, the wise in Israel found it possible to affirm many values and teachings that they found in noncovenant nations. This is an important counterbalance to the more familiar rejection of the gods and religious practices of other nations that we find in the law and the prophets. Wisdom is remarkably open and affirming.

One reason for this must be the strong creational assumption that Israel made about the whole earth and all humanity. The wisdom of the Creator is to be found in all the earth, and all human beings are made in his image. While there

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[26]See, e.g., Michael Pocock, "Selected Perspectives on World Religions from Wisdom Literature," in *Christianity and the Religions: A Biblical Theology of World Religions,* ed. E. Rommen and H. A. Netland (Pasadena, Calif.: William Carey Library, 1995), pp. 45-55.

[27]An exploration of how this might look in one particular culture is Mark Pietroni, "Wisdom, Islam and Bangladesh: Can the Wisdom Literature Be Used as a Fruitful Starting Point for Communicating the Christian Faith to Muslims? (Master's diss., All Nations Christian College, 1997).

were unique dimensions to Israel's historical experience of God in revelation and redemption, Israel had no monopoly on all things wise and good and true. Neither, of course, have Christians. Nothing is to be gained from denying, and much missional benefit accrues from affirming, those aspects of any human cultural tradition that are compatible with biblical truth and moral standards.

But another reason for Israel's welcoming into its own storehouse the wealth of the wisdom of the nations may lie in the assumption that this was a subtle dimension of the nations offering their tribute and worship to the glory of YHWH. This is a major theme in Israel's theology of the nations, which we will explore in depth in chapter fourteen. But if one dimension of Israel's expectation was that the wealth and splendor of the nations would ultimately contribute to the glory of YHWH, not to the false gods to whom they currently attributed them, then one can see in this drawing in of the nations' wisdom a foretaste of the ingathering of the nations themselves in eschatological fullness. Just as the *wealth of the nations* will ultimately be brought to the temple and offered to YHWH in worship (a picture from Is 60—66 taken up in Rev 21:24-27 as the kingdoms of this world bring all their achievements, purged and redeemed, into the kingdom of God and his Christ), so *the wisdom of the nations* can be brought into the house of the wisdom of Israel, purged of its polytheism, and made to serve the honor and glory of YHWH alone. This is a vast and wonderfully encouraging prospect when one reflects for a moment on the enormous edifice of human cultural wisdom and imagines it, purged of the marks of sin and fingerprints of satan, enriching the life of all redeemed humanity in the new creation.

Critiquing the wisdom of the nations. Third, Israel's welcoming approach to the wisdom of other nations was far from an uncritical acceptance of whatever they found there. On the contrary, not only did they utterly exclude any hint of the involvement of other gods, they also adjusted sayings they adopted to fit into the theological and moral framework of their own faith. They approached the wisdom of other nations with the religious and moral disinfectant provided by Yahwistic monotheism.

Frank Eakin suggests that Israel may even have been conscious of an obligation to do so. God had given a measure of wisdom to all peoples, but he had uniquely given the Torah to Israel (Ps 147:19-20). He notes that Sirach 24:8-24 portrays YHWH as providing Wisdom with a tent to live in, namely, the law of Moses. So he goes on:

> For wisdom thought, what then was Israel's privilege? Like the traditional covenantal view, Israel's privilege was expressed in her unique possession of Torah. . . . Torah was understood as God's special bestowal of wisdom upon Israel. What then

> was Israel's responsibility? Since wisdom had both been disseminated upon all men in creation and been given to Israel in special portion, it was Israel's responsibility to evaluate the wisdom expressed by the nations. The Torah gave her the evaluative criterion for judging both the pagan search for and the pagan acquisition of wisdom.[28]

So while a missional approach to other cultures will seek to affirm whatever it can there, it will also discern the marks of sin, selfishness and idolatry that infect all cultures. Such discernment cannot be predetermined but comes from long engagement and profound understanding, otherwise we may reject too quickly and without sympathetic understanding that which is merely strange or exotic to ourselves. A constant missiological task, which is not a modern one but goes back to the Bible itself, is identifying the criteria that determine the fine lines between cultural relevance and theological syncretism. If Israel sought to do this through the revelation contained in the Torah, how much more is it incumbent on us to make use of the whole Bible in this missional task of cultural discernment and critique?

The wisdom bridge is not in itself redemptive. Fourth, while Wisdom may provide a bridge, it does not in itself contain the saving message of the whole biblical gospel. The Wisdom literature of the Old Testament has a built in self-critique that questions its own adequacy to solve the problems it addresses. This is part of the significance of the inclusion of Job and Ecclesiastes alongside Proverbs.

There are, according to Proverbs, general principles that lead to a good and successful life. But it does not always turn out according to these principles. The realities that stem from Genesis 3 are the stark background for the wrestlings of Job and Ecclesiastes: satanic malice, suffering, frustration, meaningless toil, unpredictable consequences, uncertain futures, the twistedness of life and the final mockery of death. Wisdom by itself cannot answer these questions, but it provides the clue that points to where the answer may be found—in the fear of the Lord God himself.

And the Lord, YHWH, of course, is the God whom Israel knew within their historical experience of election, redemption and covenant. That is where the gospel is to be found, the good news of YHWH's indomitable commitment to bless and to save first a nation for himself and then through them a people drawn from all nations. Wisdom then deals with the world of God's creation—

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[28]Frank E. Eakin, "Wisdom, Creation and Covenant," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 4 (1977): 237. Though Eaking does not mention it, the fact that "Torah was understood as God's special bestowal of wisdom upon Israel" is consistent with the affirmations of Deut 4:6-8.

both at the level of its magnificent beauty and order and the consistency of its natural processes and moral principles, *and* at the level of its ambiguities, dilemmas, and screaming absurdities. On the one hand, it is God's world because he made it. On the other hand, it is also a fallen world because we spoiled it. So it is a world that needs saving. And wisdom points us to YHWH, the God who is the only hope of that salvation and indirectly therefore to the story of YHWH's revealing and redeeming acts in which the world's salvation is to be found.[29]

A further clue to this perspective is the canonical location of the Wisdom tradition in connection with Solomon and the climax of the Davidic covenant. The texts in 1 Kings that celebrate God's gift of wisdom to Solomon, to the admiration of the nations round about, also include the building of the temple. And we recall that part of Solomon's prayer of dedication that asks God to bless the foreigners who come to pray to him there. So although the Wisdom literature itself does not mention the exodus, the covenant, the gift of the land or the building of the temple, the historical narrative binds Wisdom into that tradition through its association with Solomon. Any wisdom that is associated with Solomon must be connected with the Solomonic tradition that God should bless the nations in their interaction with Israel.

Missional engagement then may well build a bridge with other cultures through the common international quality of biblical Wisdom, but the bridge in itself is not salvific. Eventually something must cross the bridge. And that can only be the message of the biblical gospel, of the identity of YHWH and the full biblical story of his redemption of the world through Jesus Christ.

A creational ethic. When the enemies of Jeremiah quoted what was probably a common saying as an excuse for getting rid of him, they refer to three distinct professional roles within Israelite society:

"The teaching of the law by the *priest* will not be lost, nor will counsel from the *wise*, nor the word from the *prophets*" (Jer 18:18, emphasis added).

The priests were responsible for handling and teaching the Torah. The prophets were expected to bring the directly relevant word of God into given situations or in answer to specific questions. And the wise men and women had a distinct role yet again. So we find quite distinctive approaches and emphases in the Wisdom literature from those of the law and the prophets. This is not to deny the foundational coherence between all three at the level of Israel's faith convictions and moral worldview. But the differences repay careful observation.

For example, whereas the law is more bluntly prescriptive, wisdom is more

[29]This point is very helpfully discussed from both angles in John Goldingay, *Theological Diversity and the Authority of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), chap. 7.

expansively reflective. Compare the laws against adultery with the warnings against the same thing in Proverbs 5—6. The law commands and prohibits on the basis of divine authority. Wisdom advises, warns and persuades on the basis of experience, prudence and unpleasant consequences. In technical ethical terms, the deontological approach of the law is balanced by the consequentialist approach of wisdom. Or again, whereas the prophets tackle political corruption by direct denunciation of specific kings, wisdom states general principles and expectations of good government and points to pitfalls to be avoided.

But the most marked difference between the law and the prophets on the one hand and wisdom on the other lies in the *motivational appeal* that is characteristic of each. The former appeal predominantly to Israel's *redemptive* history, whereas the latter appeals predominantly to Israel's convictions about *creation*.

The best way to illustrate this difference is to take an issue close to the heart of biblical ethics as a whole—the matter of justice and compassion for the poor and needy. Begin by scanning through the following texts from the law and observe the theological and motivational basis that they give for their exhortations on this matter: Exodus 23:9; Leviticus 19:33-36; 25:39-43; Deuteronomy 15:12-15; 24:14-22.

You will notice, no doubt, that the emphasis in all cases is on the history of what God had done for Israel in redeeming them out of Egypt. In the light of and in response to that great demonstration of divine justice and compassion, Israel should do likewise. Redemptive history thus becomes a very powerful motive for practicing social justice. Ethical principles are concretized around emulating the known history of the actions of YHWH. This is part of what it means to "walk in the way of the LORD."

Now read the following Wisdom texts with the same question in mind: Proverbs 14:31; 17:5; 19:17; 22:2; 29:7, 13; Job 31:13-15.

The emphasis here is entirely on our common humanity, common because we all share the one Maker, God. So rich or poor, slave or free, oppressed or oppressor, we are all alike the work of God's hands. What we do to a fellow human being, therefore, we do to his or her Maker, a profound ethical principle that Jesus reconfigured in relation to himself.

What is also clearly absent from these Wisdom texts is any explicit reference to the great historical traditions of Israel's faith (exodus, Sinai, land), such as the prophets often appeal to. It cannot have been because the wise men and women of Israel did not *know* those traditions. They could hardly have lived in Israel and not known them! And of course the prominent use of the covenantal divine name YHWH would imply the story in which that name and character had been revealed. Nevertheless it is a striking fact that while the law and the prophets are

so solidly founded on the core history of Israel, the Wisdom literature draws its theology and ethics from a more universal, creation-based moral order.[30]

This too has its missiological implications. In approaching people of other cultures, faiths and worldviews, we nevertheless share a common humanity and (whether they acknowledge the fact or not) a common Creator God. Particularly where our missional engagement operates at a cultural and societal level, addressing issues of ethical, social, economic and political concern, we should not be surprised to find areas of common ground and common cause with people who would not identify with the biblical story of redemption. It is to that story that we hope ultimately to bring them (remembering what I referred to earlier as the "ultimacy of evangelism"), but it need not be the starting point of our engagement with them.

The biblical wisdom tradition shows us that there is a certain universality about biblical ethics simply because we live among people made in the image of God, we inhabit the earth of God's creation, and however distorted these truths become in fallen human cultures, they will yet find an echo in human hearts.[31]

An honest faith. The most challenging difference between Wisdom and the rest of the Old Testament tradition arises when some voices within the former express doubts about or question the universal applicability of some of the mainline affirmations in other parts of the Old Testament. And yet this may be precisely part of the purpose of the presence of this material in the canon of Scripture—to compel us toward an honest faith that is willing to acknowledge the existence of doubts we cannot entirely dismiss and questions we cannot satisfactorily answer within the limits of our experience or even the limits of the revelation God has chosen to give us.

One typical problematic area is the tension between, on the one hand, affirmations (such as abound in Deuteronomy and Psalms) that obedience to God is the road to blessing and success in every area of life whereas the wicked will suffer his anger and punishment, and, on the other hand, the simple observation

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[30]This is perhaps a more substantial reason for the reticence of the Wisdom writers to invoke the covenantal tradition than the one suggested by Brueggemann, which is that the hiddenness of God in the affairs of everyday life left them with only very modest claims to make about YHWH in contrast with the massive certainties of all the "active verbs" of the great historical tradition. Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), p. 335.

[31]The crosscultural missional significance of this aspect of Old Testament creation faith, as reflected in Wisdom, is used as the basis for some interesting analysis of intercultural ethics by Benno Van Den Toren, "God's Purpose for Creation as the Key to Understanding the Universality and Cultural Variety of Christian Ethics," *Missiology* 30 (2002): 215-33.

that this is often not true in our experience. We may warm to the words of Psalm 146, but things suddenly feel very different when we read Job 24:1-12—in which we see a scorchingly truthful depiction of the real world—and come to verse 12: "But God charges no one with wrongdoing." We then echo the baffled question of the opening verse: "Why does the Almighty not set times for judgment? / Why must those who know him look in vain for such days?" Likewise, we may approve the binary moral logic of Deuteronomy 30:15-20, but do we not also echo the honesty of Ecclesiastes 8:14—9:4 in its complaint about the moral inversion that subverts it?

It is hard to avoid the impression that sometimes the sages of Israel held up core Israelite beliefs ("YHWH loves the weak and the poor"; "the righteous will be blessed and live, while the wicked will be punished and die") and then throw out the challenge "How can this belief be squared with the real world we live in? Life often simply doesn't follow these rules."

And the sages are not the only ones to do this. The language of complaint, protest and baffled questioning is also prominent in the psalms—right at the heart of Israel's worship of YHWH. "How long, O LORD?" (e.g., Ps 6:3; 13:1-2; 62:3; 74:10); "Why . . . ?" (e.g., Ps 10:1; 22:1; 43:2; 44:23-24; 88:14); "Where . . . ?" (e.g., Ps 42:3; 79:10; 89:49).

Walter Brueggemann labels this whole strand of material in the Old Testament "Israel's Counter Testimony," that is, the cross-examination within the Old Testament itself of "Israel's core testimony," their foundational beliefs about God's sovereignty and faithfulness. It is part of the strength and convincing power of the biblical case that it contains *within itself* precisely this degree of internal debate and wrestling with the core affirmations of a worldview that was explicitly founded on God's revelation and redemption.

Furthermore, as Brueggemann adds, this was not merely an internal debate. For among the things Israel knew about itself, as we have repeatedly explored in this book, was that it held its own faith *in trust for the world.* Israel's very existence was for the sake of the nations. Israel's God was God of all the earth. Whatever was true for Israel was true for all. Whatever Israel struggled with would be a problem for all. There is then an implicit missiological dimension to this ruthless honesty in Israel's testimony.

> The core testimony of Israel . . . made a case that Yahweh is competently sovereign and utterly faithful. And on most days that conclusion is adequate. It is a welcome conclusion because it issues in a coherent narrative account of reality. Israel, to be sure, affirms that conclusion of a competent sovereignty and reliable fidelity. But Israel lives in the real world and notices what is going on around it. Israel is candid, refusing to deny what it notices. And so issues of competent sovereignty and reli-

> able fidelity will remain in the Old Testament as Israel's belief-ful, candid, unfinished business. We know, moreover, that these two issues are paramount for all those who live in the world, whether they engage in God-talk or not. Thus these two points of cross-examination are not a safe intramural exercise for Israel. They are rather issues with which Israel struggles for the sake of the world.[32]

For the sake of the world, then, we must take this tone of voice in the Wisdom literature seriously, with its awkward questions, its probing observations, its acceptance of the limitations of our finitude. It is part of our missional responsibility to do so. The presence of such texts in our Bible is a challenge to unthinking dogmatism that misapplies undoubted biblical principles in circumstances where they are not relevant (as did the friends of Job). Such biblical texts are also a rebuke to simplistic naivety that draws automatic and reversible direct lines between faith and material rewards or between sin and sickness. Mission that ignores the warnings of Wisdom ends up in the folly and lies of the so-called prosperity gospel, on the one hand, or in the problem-denying triumphalism of the worst kinds of arrogant fundamentalism on the other.

The fact is that the world poses some very hard questions for those who, in line with the whole Bible testimony, believe in one, good, personal, sovereign God. Wisdom provides a license to think, to wrestle, to struggle, to protest and to argue. All it asks is that we do so with the undergirding faith and humble commitment encapsulated in its own core testimony that "the fear of the LORD—that is wisdom, / and to shun evil is understanding" (Job 28:28).

It has been a broad vista indeed that we have surveyed together in this chapter and the last one. But then what else should we expect if we inquire about the arena of the mission of God? For he is the God of all the earth, the God of all who live on the earth, and the God of all wisdom. So we have explored some of the implications of those universal truths.

The whole of creation is God's mission field, and as a result there is an inescapable ecological dimension to the mission to which we are called.

All human beings are made in God's image, and as a result there are many implications for our mission arising from the common humanity that we share with all other inhabitants of our planet. And yet all people are also radically and comprehensively infected and affected by sin and evil. Our missional response must be as radical and comprehensive as the problem we address in the name of Christ and the power of the cross.

All human culture manifests the ambiguity of our humanness. The sages of

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[32]Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament,* p. 324. See also Walter Brueggemann, "A New Creation—After the Sigh," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 11 (1984): 83-100.

Israel acknowledged that which is good and true in the wisdom of other nations, but also evaluated it according to the revelation of God and rejected all that was idolatrous and morally inadequate. They also acknowledged the limitations of all human wisdom in grappling with the toughest questions and battles of life in this fallen world.

Such biblical wisdom calls loudly to us that our mission endeavor should be marked by

- critical openness to God's world
- respect for God's image in humanity
- humility before him and modesty in the claims and answers we offer to others

14

God and the Nations in Old Testament Vision

The nations of humanity preoccupy the biblical narrative from beginning to end. When they are not in the foreground, they are there in the background. When they are not the subject of great international events, they are the object of divine inspection or accusation. When they are not the direct focus of God's attention, they remain the surrounding context (for good or ill) of the life of God's people. The obvious reason for this is that the Bible is, of course, preoccupied with the relationship between God and humanity, and humanity exists in nations. And where the Bible focuses especially on the people of God, that people necessarily lives in history in the midst of the nations. "It is clear that 'Israel as a light to the nations' is no peripheral theme within the canonical process. The nations are the matrix of Israel's life, the raison d'être of her very existence."[1]

The nations first appear in the biblical grand narrative in the context of life after the flood—God's catastrophic judgment on human wickedness. By Genesis 11 the nations have been scattered in confusion. The conflict of nations mirrors the brokenness of humanity as a whole. With undoubtedly deliberate intent, the final book of the Bible comes to its climax with the picture of the nations purged of all sin, walking in the light of God, bringing their wealth and splendor into the city of God, contributing their redeemed glory and honor to the glory and honor of the Lamb of God (Rev 21:24-27). The brokenness of hu-

[1]Duane L. Christensen, "Nations," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary,* ed. David Noel Freedman et al. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 4:1037.

manity is healed at the river and tree of life (Rev 22:1-2). And between these two great scenes in Genesis and Revelation—the primal and the ultimate state of the nations—the Bible records the story of how such cosmic transformation will have been accomplished. It is, in short, the mission of God as we have been seeking to elucidate in the preceding chapters. God's mission is what fills the gap between the scattering of the nations in Genesis 11 and the healing of the nations in Revelation 22. It is God's mission in relation to the nations, arguably more than any other single theme, that provides the key that unlocks the biblical grand narrative.

In these final two chapters (14-15) we will survey that great sweep of biblical teaching and expectation, since it lies at the heart of a fully biblical understanding of mission. We will note how the nations were portrayed in the Old Testament as witness of all that God was doing in, for or to Israel. Then we will observe that the expectation of Israel's faith and worship (if not always the outcome of their practice) was that the nations would come to benefit from that history of salvation and give thanks for it. This means that the nations would eventually acknowledge and worship Israel's God, YHWH, with all the concomitant responsibilities and blessings of such worship. More remarkably yet, there were voices and visions within the Old Testament that looked for the day when nations would be included within Israel in such a way that the very word *Israel* would be radically extended and redefined. All of this constituted the horizon of mission to the nations in the New Testament and provided the strong scriptural justification for such mission for those who engaged in it.[2]

Before embarking on the survey just outlined, however, we need to begin by rehearsing some of the basic affirmations that the Old Testament makes about the nations in general in relation to God's creative intention and God's governance of history. For this is the platform or stage on which the historical outworking of God's redemptive mission to the nations takes place.

The Nations in Creation and Providence

Nations are part of created and redeemed humanity. Although we first meet the nations in the context of the fallenness and arrogance of humanity even after the flood, the Bible does not imply that ethnic or national diversity is in itself sinful or the product of the Fall—even if the deleterious effects of strife

[2]A helpful survey of some of the themes we will touch on here is provided in Walter Vogels, "The New Universal Covenant," in *God's Universal Covenant: A Biblical Study,* 2nd ed. (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1986), pp. 111-42.

among nations certainly are.[3] Rather, nations are simply "there" as a given part of the human race as God created it to be. God's rule over the nations, amply affirmed throughout the Old Testament, is simply a function of the fact that he created them in the first place. Speaking as a Jew to Gentiles in an evangelistic context, Paul takes for granted the diversity of nations within the unity of humanity and attributes it to the Creator and to his world-governing providence. "From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live" (Acts 17:26).

Although Paul goes on to quote from Greek writers, his language in this verse is drawn from the Old Testament, from the ancient song of Moses in Deuteronomy 32:

> When the Most High gave the nations their inheritance,
> when he divided all mankind,
> he set up boundaries for the peoples. (Deut 32:8)

National distinctives, then, are part of the kaleidoscopic diversity of creation at the human level, analogous to the wonderful prodigality of biodiversity at every other level of God's creation.

Furthermore, the eschatological vision of redeemed humanity in the new creation points to the same truth. The inhabitants of the new creation are not portrayed as a homogenized mass or as a single global culture. Rather they will display the continuing glorious diversity of the human race through history: People of every tribe and language and people and nation will bring their wealth and their praises into the city of God (Rev 7:9; 21:24-26). The image we might prefer for the Bible's portrait of the nations is not a melting pot (in which all differences are blended together into a single alloy) but a salad bowl (in which all ingredients preserve their distinctive color, texture and taste). The new creation will preserve the rich diversity of the original creation, but purged of the sin-laden effects of the Fall. Or, the mission of God is not merely the salvation of innumerable souls but specifically the healing of the nations.

The creational given of ethnic diversity and the eschatological vision of all races, languages and cultures being included in redeemed humanity both speak

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[3] I am using the term *nations* here in a broad sense, as it is used in the Old Testament, not in the more restricted sense of "nation state" that developed in post-Reformation Europe. For a good discussion of ancient Near Eastern and biblical concepts of nationhood in relation to ethnicity, territory, language, kingship and gods, see Daniel I. Block, "Nations/Nationality," in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis,* ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster, 1996), 4:966-72; and Daniel I. Block, *The Gods of the Nations: Studies in Ancient Near Eastern National Theology,* 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001).

volumes to the sin and scandal of racism. This is not an issue we can pursue here, but it is certainly a vital task of mission to challenge this particular dimension of our fallenness, for it is clear in the New Testament that the gospel radically undermines any racial or racist assumptions in relation to our standing before God.[4]

All nations stand under God's judgment. For those of us who have absorbed a predominantly individualistic way of thinking about life, faith and our relationship with God, one of the more difficult biblical concepts to get our minds around is the idea that God can and does deal with nations as wholes. Yet the Bible unquestionably affirms it, and not only affirms it but illustrates it in graphic detail over long stretches of history. From the book of Exodus onward, nations play their part in the biblical narrative, and the opening story becomes somewhat paradigmatic. The battle between YHWH and the Pharaoh is not just between God and one recalcitrant individual; the whole nation of Egypt is implicated in the sin of oppression and suffers in the process of God's liberating justice.

The narrative goes on to show how successive nations either set themselves against YHWH and his people out of their own malicious initiative (e.g., the Amalekites, Moabites, Amorites) or have become so incorrigibly wicked that they are to be destroyed in the execution of God's punishment (the Canaanite nations). Thus, while Israel is warned against arrogantly imagining that their victory over the Canaanites will be on account of their own righteousness, God confirms that it *will* be on account of the wickedness of those nations (Deut 9:4-6). God intended to use Israel as the agent of his historical judgment on the wickedness of Canaanite nations.

On this point I find Walter Brueggemann's otherwise excellent treatment of the theme of the nations in the Old Testament very inadequate. He regards the texts that speak of YHWH's judgment on the Canaanites as "a violent insistence that the nations do not count when Yahweh gives gifts to Israel." He speaks of "Israel's preferentiality," of "an exceedingly harsh presentation of the nations in the interests of Israel," which is "ideological," because "the sovereignty of Yahweh is drawn most blatantly and directly into the service of Israel's political agenda. . . . [The destruction of the nations] serves negatively to establish the legitimacy of Israel's claim to the land."[5]

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[4]A fine, thorough biblical study of the issue is provided by J. Daniel Hays, *From Every People and Nation: A Biblical Theology of Race,* New Studies in Biblical Theology (Leicester, U.K.: Inter-Varsity Press; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003). An equally perceptive but more practically applied analysis is Dewi Hughes, *Castrating Culture: A Christian Perspective on Ethnic Identity from the Margins* (Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster, 2001).

[5]Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), pp. 496-97.

But Deuteronomy 9 makes precisely the opposite case: Israel has no legitimate claim to the land at all. She has no greater righteousness than the nations. Indeed, the chapter stresses that if anybody deserved to be destroyed, it was Israel. Israel still existed only by God's forgiving grace. No, the destruction of the Canaanite nations is repeatedly portrayed not in ideological self-serving terms but in moral and theocentric terms. YHWH is acting in his divine justice against the signal and excessive wickedness of these nations. And he will do precisely the same to Israel if they follow the ways of the Canaanites. Far from being ideological and self-serving, these texts actually stand as an explicit counterargument to such assumptions, and are framed as severe warnings that Israel, like all other nations, must recognize their own wickedness that had already aroused the wrath of God and mend their ways before him.

The prophets in their oracles against the nations (though they do have remarkable words of hope and potential restoration) express the overwhelming conviction that the nations in general stand under the imminent judgment of God for a variety of reasons, which are mainly ethical. Isaiah portrays the grim reality in the searing words near the beginning of his so-called "little apocalypse":

> The earth is defiled by its people;
> they have disobeyed the laws,
> violated the statutes,
> and broken the everlasting covenant.
> Therefore a curse consumes the earth;
> its people must bear their guilt.
> Therefore earth's inhabitants are burned up,
> and very few are left. (Is 24:5-6)

> Universal human wickedness faces universal divine judgment. It is abundantly clear throughout the Bible that this is the default position that the human race is in, for nations as much as for individuals. As the story of the exodus is paradigmatic of YHWH acting in salvation, so the story of Sodom and Gomorrah is paradigmatic of God acting in judgment on human wickedness. It seems very likely that Paul endorses this broad tradition, painted in the colours and language of the Sodom episode, in his portrayal of universal human corruption and liability to the wrath of God.[6]

Against such a bleak background, God's mission to bless the nations and the mission of God's people as the vehicle of such blessing constitute very good news indeed.

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[6]Philip E. Esler, "The Sodom Tradition in Romans 1:18-32," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 34 (2004): 4-16.

Any nation can be the agent of God's judgment. In the case of Sodom and Gomorrah, God delivered his judgment unmediated. That is why the narrative acquires such proverbial force as a symbol of the naked wrath of God, which reaches its biblical climax, of course, in the book of Revelation. However, in the more normal course of history, God uses one nation or another as the instrument of his sovereign justice. The classic first instance of this in the Bible is the way the conquest of the Canaanites by the tribes of Israel is repeatedly interpreted as the outworking of YHWH's judgment on a society whose "iniquity was full" (a condition they had not yet reached when God predicted it to Abraham in Gen 15:16). The Israelites were severely warned not to interpret their victory over the nations of Canaan as attributable in any way to their own righteousness. But they could certainly infer correctly that it was on account of the nations' wickedness (Deut 9:4-6). In this instance God was using the Israelites as the agent of his judgment on the Canaanites.

The lesson Israel had to learn from this signal part of their own history, however, was far from comforting. The fact was that if God could use Israel as the agent of his judgment on wicked nations, he could readily apply the same principle in reverse to Israel itself. In short, if they adopted the wicked ways of the nations they had driven out, they would suffer the same fate at the hands of other nations. YHWH could use Israel as the agent of judgment on other nations; he could equally use other nations as the agent of judgment on Israel. Warnings to this effect abound in the Torah (e.g., Lev 18:24-28; 26:17; 25, 32-33; Deut 4:25-27; 28:25, 49-52; 29:25-28).

In the long history of Israel in the Old Testament period, it is the latter direction of God's judgment that predominates. Judges 2 describes the pattern set in the early generations after the settlement of the tribes of Israel in the land of Canaan. Time and again YHWH brought other nations as the tools of his anger against Israel's rebellion and apostasy (e.g., Amos 6:14; Hosea 10:10; Is 7:18; 9:11). In the later centuries of the monarchy even the great empires of the world were seen by the prophets as no more than a stick in the hand of YHWH, a rod to punish Israel.

> Woe to the Assyrian, the rod of my anger,
> in whose hand is the club of my wrath!
> I send him against a godless nation,
> I dispatch him against a people who anger me [i.e., Israel]. (Is 10:5-6)

Then Babylon becomes God's agent of judgment, not only on Israel but on other smaller states who are urged by Jeremiah to recognize the sovereignty of YHWH, God of Israel, and submit to "his servant" Nebuchadnezzar (Jer 25:9; 27:1-

11). Indeed, the principle that God can use any nation as his agent of judgment on any other nation applies not only to dealings with Israel. God's judgment on Egypt also will be carried out through Nebuchadnezzar, according to Ezekiel 30:10-11. Later, of course, Babylon itself falls under the prophetic word of judgment. Even though God had used it to punish Israel, its excesses put Babylon in turn into the blast path of God's wrath, which will be delivered this time through king Cyrus of the Medes and Persians (Is 13:17-19; 47:6-7).

So the overwhelming message is consistent. All nations are in the hands of YHWH, the living God. Their victories too are not to be attributed to their own gods but rather to the sovereignty of YHWH. And sometimes God may use a nation, any nation, as the agent of historical justice in the arena of international affairs. That in itself does not make the nation so used any more righteous than another (as Israel were categorically told). All it means is that God remains sovereign.

Any nation can be the recipient of God's mercy. The same universality by which all nations stand under the judgment of God for their wickedness and idolatry is also deployed in Old Testament thinking about the mercy of God. "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion," said YHWH, in the course of his remarkable self-revelation to Moses, and in definition of his goodness and his name (Ex 33:19; cf. 34:6-7). This is a principle that operated not only in or on behalf of Israel. Any nation could benefit from it.

The clearest articulation of this impartiality in God's dealings with the nations is given by Jeremiah, after visiting a potter at work. The lesson that Jeremiah draws from his observation of a potter who declared an initial intention but then changed his plans, and therefore the end result because of some "response" in the clay, is that God likewise responds to human response to his declared intentions. The focal point of the potter metaphor in Jeremiah 18 is not so much on the unquestionable sovereignty of the divine potter but on the potential that resides in the clay to cause the potter to change his intention. And that provides an opportunity that God extends, by way of general principle, to any nation at any time. If a nation repents in the face of God's declaration of impending judgment, they will be spared that doom. On the other hand, if a nation does evil in spite of God's declaration of blessing, then they will suffer his judgment (Jer 18:7-10). This point is established as general principle of God's dealings with all nations before it is applied in urgent specificity to Judah.

The book of Jonah could have been written as a case study of Jeremiah 18:7-8. Jonah proclaims the impending doom of Nineveh. From king to beggar, the city repents. So God also "repents" and withholds his judgment. But the amazing twist of the book is that this signal demonstration of the mercy of YHWH as God

in dealing with a foreign nation is an embarrassment to Jonah. Jonah knew the exodus character of YHWH perfectly well and quotes the key proof text (Jon 4:1-2; cf. Ex 34:6-7). But what should have been a matter of praise, or even merely grudging admiration (that YHWH should turn out to treat the other nations with the same amazing mercy that he lavished on Israel), becomes a matter of bitter complaint in the mouth of Jonah.

The book of Jonah has always featured in biblical studies of mission, sometimes as almost the only part of the Old Testament deemed to be of any relevance. Here at least is someone who has some semblance of being an actual missionary, sent to another country to preach the word of God. However, for all the fascination of the character and adventures of Jonah, the real missional challenge of the book undoubtedly and intentionally lies in its portrayal of God. If Jonah is intended to represent Israel, as seems likely, then the book issues a strong challenge to Israel regarding *their* attitude to the nations (even enemy nations that prophets placed under God's declared judgment), and regarding their understanding of *God's* attitude to the nations. The concluding open-ended question of the book is an enduring, haunting rebuke to our tendency to foist our own ethnocentric prejudices on to the Almighty.[7]

It is interesting to compare and contrast the response of Jonah to the word of divine judgment on a pagan nation with that of Abraham. Commissioned to proclaim Nineveh's doom, Jonah ran away and jumped in a boat, alleging later that he had done so precisely because he suspected that YHWH would revert to type and show compassion. Informed of God's intention to investigate the outcry from Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham jumps to intercession and finds YHWH prepared to be even more merciful than he initially bargained for.

Nathan MacDonald finds a thread running through texts such as Genesis 18, Exodus 32—34, Psalm 103:6-10 and Ezekiel 18. "The Judge of all the earth," who will unquestionably do what is right, is also the "gracious and compassionate God" who "takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked but rather that they turn from their ways and live." The character of YHWH is exercised in forgiveness and mercy, extended to all nations, not just to Israel.[8]

Jeremiah himself later held out to the nations around Judah the same offer

[7]A fine and perceptive recent missiological reading of Jonah is offered by Howard Peskett and Vinoth Ramachandra, *The Message of Mission,* The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, U.K.: Inter-Varsity Press; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003).

[8]Nathan MacDonald, "Listening to Abraham—Listening to YHWH: Divine Justice and Mercy in Genesis 18:16-33," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 66 (2004): 25-43. MacDonald suggests that part of the point of the encounter between God and Abraham in Genesis 18 is to teach the nature of true prophetic intercession and the forgiving nature of God on which it is based. See also the discussion of this passage in chap. 11 (pp. 358-69).

of divine forgiveness and restoration, if only they would turn and learn the ways of YHWH and his people (Jer 12:14-17). It was the same offer, in virtually the same language, as Jeremiah held out to Judah—and probably with as little hope of it being accepted. The point is, however, that there is no favoritism in God's dealings with Israel and the nations. All stand under YHWH's judgment. All can turn to YHWH and find his mercy.

This surely has to be one of the most foundational elements of the Old Testament contribution to our theology of mission.

- *If it were not the case that all nations stand under the impending judgment of God, there would be no need to proclaim the gospel.*
- *But if it were not for the fact that God deals in mercy and forgiveness with all who repent, there would be no gospel to proclaim.*

All nations' histories are under God's control. In previous chapters I have stressed the uniqueness of Israel's relationship with YHWH. Their understanding of election, redemption, covenant and holiness set them apart from the nations at a fundamental level. God had chosen and called Israel and no other nation (Deut 7: 7-11; Amos 3:2). God had redeemed Israel in a way he had done for no other nation (Deut 4:32-39). God had revealed his law to and entered into covenant relationship with Israel and no other nation (Ps 147:19-20). And this nation was called to embody and demonstrate all this uniqueness in practical, ethical distinctiveness from all other nations (Lev 18:1-5). In all these respects the relationship between God and historical Israel of the Old Testament period was unprecedented (he had done nothing like this before) and unparalleled (he had done nothing like this anywhere else).

Furthermore, we have explored the missiological implications of these great unique claims. All of them flow from God's own mission and Israel's identity and role within that mission. God's mission is to bless all the nations of the earth. But for that universal aim he chose the very particular means—the people of Israel. Their uniqueness was for the sake of God's universality. Thus, their unique standing as God's *chosen* people was in order that the rest of the nations would come to be *blessed* through Abraham. Their unique story of *redemption* was the paradigm of what God would ultimately accomplish (through Christ) for the deliverance of all from bondage. Their unique stewardship of God's *revelation* was so that ultimately the law of God could go forth from them to the nations and the ends of the earth. And their unique structure of social, economic and political *ethics* was designed to show what a redeemed community of humanity should (and eventually will) look like under the reign of God.

All these dimensions of Israel's Old Testament uniqueness, then, are central

to our biblical understanding of mission, and all of them have their counterparts in the New Testament teaching regarding the uniqueness of Christ and the identity and mission of the church.

However, it would be quite wrong to construe these affirmations of *Israel's* uniqueness as tantamount to an absence of involvement by YHWH in the affairs of *other* nations. On the contrary, it was part of the bold claim of Israel that YHWH, their God, was the supreme mover on the stage of international history. All the nations and their kings, wittingly or unwittingly, wove their stories under the master plan of Israel's God—not their own gods.

This makes the claim to uniqueness actually even more stark. It was not the case that Israel merely claimed that YHWH had uniquely chosen, saved and covenanted with them while remaining ignorant of or indifferent to all the other nations. That in itself would not really have been much different in principle from the way all nations see their own gods as uniquely interested in the nations that worship them. That is what gods are for in the polytheistic worldview. Let each nation have its own god or gods, and let that god look to its own interests and those of its own people.

"Uniqueness" in that reduced, generic, sense is not what Old Testament Israel claimed for YHWH. It was a much more exalted and universal claim—a claim that would be the grossest arrogance if not true. The claim was that YHWH was in fact the sovereign God of all the earth, ruling the histories and destinies of all nations. And in *that* context of universal involvement with *all nations*, YHWH had a unique relationship *with Israel*.[9]

Sometimes this affirmation that YHWH was sovereign over the history of other nations is made in quite unremarkable, almost parenthetical ways. Sometimes it is made in order to draw out implications that were decidedly shocking and unwelcome.

An example of the former comes in the warnings given to Israel in the wilderness not to attempt to take any land from Edom, Moab or Ammon on the grounds that YHWH had already given them their lands after driving out previous inhabitants—in precisely the same way that he was about to do for Israel in relation to Canaan (Deut 2:2-23). The way these affirmations are made, almost in passing, should not obscure their theological significance.

When Deuteronomy's prominent land theology in relation to Israel's possession of Canaan is taken into account, this direct statement that Yahweh had given other

[9]For a very informative survey of how the ancient Near Eastern nations viewed their gods and the relationships between gods and nations, and the distinctiveness of some of the claims that Israel made in relation to YHWH, see Block, *Gods of the Nations*.

lands to other peoples, supported by the parenthetical notes that follow, is quite remarkable. Three times this passage says that Yahweh had given land to Edom (Deut 2:5), to Moab (Deut 2:9), and to Ammon (Deut 2:19), using the same vocabulary as is characteristically used of his land gift to Israel. On top of this, the antiquarian footnotes (Deut 2:10-12, 20-23) inform us that the processes of migration and conquest that lay behind the then-current territorial map had also been under the control of YHWH. Not only is the same language used as for Israel's settlement, but the comparison is explicitly drawn: other nations had conquered and settled "just as Israel did in the land the LORD gave them as their possession" (Deut 2:12).

More theology is tucked into these obscure notes than the NIV's understandable use of parentheses might suggest—some of it explicit, some more latent. First, these notes unambiguously assert YHWH's multinational sovereignty. The same God who had declared to Pharaoh that the whole earth belonged to him (Ex 9:14, 16, 29) had been moving other nations around on the chessboard of history long before Israel's historic exodus and settlement. This universal sovereignty over the nations mattered a great deal to Israel in subsequent centuries as they themselves joined the ranks of the attacked and the dispossessed. Later prophetic understanding of Yahweh's "use" of the Assyrians, Babylonians and Persians as agents of Yahweh's purposes in history is in fact consistent with this deeper theme of God's ultimate, universal direction of the destiny of nations (cf. Deut 32:8; Jer 18:1-10; 27:1-7).

Second, these notes relativize Deuteronomy's land gift tradition itself, though not in the sense of questioning or undermining it. The affirmation of Yahweh's gift of land to Israel in fulfillment of his promise to Abraham is one of the fundamental pillars of Deuteronomy's whole worldview. However, it was in principle and at a purely historical level no different from what God had done in other nations. In the immediate context, Israel's defeat and territorial takeover of the lands of Sihon and Og was no different from other nations' earlier migrations and forceful settlements; all are attributed to the sovereign disposition of Yahweh.

> Because God had also given lands to other nations, Israel's uniqueness lay not in having merely received land from Yahweh, but in its covenant relationship with Yahweh. And that covenant was based on God's faithfulness to the promise to Abraham and God's historical act of redemption from Egypt. If that covenant were to be threatened by Israel's neglect, then the mere historical facts of exodus and settlement would count for nothing more in the face of God's judgment than the migrations of other nations.[10]

[10]Christopher J. H. Wright, *Deuteronomy,* New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrikson; Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster, 1996), p. 36.

And that last sentence is precisely the point that Amos makes, as an example of the more shocking use of this theological conviction. Yes, YHWH's covenantal knowledge of Israel was unique (Amos 3:2), but no, they were not the only nation that YHWH was related to in a wider sense, and certainly not the only nation with a history of exodus, migration and settlement.

> [7a] Is it not the case that, like the sons of Cush,
> so you [are] to me, sons of Israel? declares YHWH.
> [7b] For is it not also the case that I brought up Israel from Egypt,
> and the Philistines from Caphtor,
> the Arameans from Kir? (Amos 9:7, author's translation)[11]

It is clear that Amos is here undermining Israel's false confidence in the mere language of their covenant or the mere historical fact of their exodus. They could not claim "*we* belong to YHWH," as if *no other* nation mattered to God. They could not point to *their* history without observing that other nations had similar histories in which YHWH had been active. Instead of being God's priestly kingdom (Ex 19:6), they have become the sinful kingdom. They might still want to be called YHWH*'s people,* but it was now open to question whether *he* would want to be called *their God*. The uniqueness of their election, far from making them immune from judgment, actually exposes them all the more to God's punishment (Amos 3:2).

Alex Motyer's commentary at this point is helpful:

> There is . . . a sense in which there is no difference between Israel and any other nation . . . the Lord is alike the Agent in every national history, every racial migration. In this regard it is no more a privilege to be an Israelite than to be a Hottentot.

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[11]The lines of v. 7a are a literal rendering of the Hebrew word order. Most English versions render the construction as meaning "Are you Israelites not the same to me as the Cushites?" This turns the rhetorical question into a simple comparison in which any special status for Israel is undermined: "you are no different/better than even distant nations to me." However, the Hebrew expression "You to me" normally indicates the possessive relationship, i.e., "you belong to me; you are mine." It is the equivalent of one part of the covenant formula "You my people, I your God." Significantly, however, the latter affirmation is omitted, in view of the people's rebellious rejection of YHWH and his covenant (cf. v. 8 where they are described as "the sinful kingdom"). Walter Vogels therefore reads the text with this possessive sense of the phrase "you to me" and so takes the rhetorical question of v. 7a as affirming that other nations belong to YHWH just as much as Israel does: "Are you not mine, sons of Israel, as the Cushites (are mine)?" (Walter Vogels, *God's Universal Covenant,* p. 72). It is doubtful however if the word order of the Hebrew would give this as the primary sense, and the normal English translation is probably correct. However, Vogels is right to highlight the otherwise common covenantal possessive relationship expressed in the two words "you to me." However, Vogels denies that this text implies that the other nations had a covenant relationship with YHWH, for they do not know him as God.

> One Lord rules all, appointing the place they shall leave, the distance they shall move and the spot where they shall settle. . . .
>
> The exodus as a historical fact enshrines no more of God than does the coming of the Philistines from Caphtor or the Syrians from Kir and no more brings automatic benefit than do those other divinely engineered events. A historical act of God can by His will become a means of blessing but does not ever of itself convey the blessing. In this sense the Israel of the Exodus is level pegging with the Philistines who came from Caphtor or the Ethiopians who, for all Amos tells us, never went anywhere!
>
> One divine government rules all, and (8a) on moral providence observes all, and judges all. The Lord does not look on people in the light of their historical past but in the light of their moral present. Every nation is equally under this moral scrutiny.[12]

These sharp points, which are quite consistent with all Amos has said hitherto, are clear enough in relation to Israel. The disputed question, however, is, What does Amos 9:7 affirm about the other nations? Is Amos really saying that there is no difference between Israel and the Cushites, the Philistines and the Syrians? By using the language of belonging and the language of exodus, is Amos going so far as to affirm that these other nations stand on equal covenant ground with Israel in relation to YHWH?

Walter Vogels asks whether this text (along with others such as those from Deuteronomy) indicates that there were "parallel divine covenants with different nations."[13] His answer is negative. It is clear that the Old Testament does make some remarkable affirmations which show that

> Yahweh's relationship with the nations is very similar to his relationship with Israel. He intervenes directly in their history, and thereby they belong to him and are responsible before him. If the nations refuse to accept Yahweh's relationship, they will experience punishment like that of Israel [as evidenced in Amos 1—2], but there is always hope. But . . . we will notice one important difference: the nations' lack of knowledge of Yahweh's revelation. Therefore, in the strict sense, we can speak only of a covenant with Israel, but not of a covenant with other nations, since a covenant presupposes mutual knowledge.[14]

To put it simply, the covenant demands two sides: Israel belongs to YHWH, and YHWH belongs to Israel ("You my people; I your God"). But in the case of the nations we may say the nations belong to YHWH, but YHWH does not yet belong to the nations. He is not the God they acknowledge, "own" and wor-

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[12]J. A. Motyer, *The Message of Amos,* The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, U.K.: Inter-Varsity Press; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1974), pp. 196-97.
[13]Vogels, *God's Universal Covenant,* chap. 3.
[14]Ibid., pp. 71-72.

ship. There is no covenant reciprocity involved.

Nevertheless, though the covenant relationship with Israel is still sustained as unique, we need to give full weight (and perhaps more weight than is usually given) to this tradition in the Old Testament that all the nations of the earth stand in some relation to YHWH God, are held accountable by him and are governed by him in the course of their varied histories. For this is the platform on which God's historical engagement with Israel, as the means of pursuing his redemptive mission, took place.

The God who called Abraham in order to be a blessing to all nations is the God who governs the histories of all nations. The God who called Israel to be his treasured possession and priestly kingdom is the God who can say "the whole earth is mine."[15] We must resist all taming and reductionism by which YHWH is confined to the borders of Israel and give full attention to the universal claims that are made about him in the Old Testament.

If then, on the one hand, all nations on earth are under God's sovereign governance, and if, on the other hand, Israel has a status and a history that are in some ways unique, what is the relationship between the two spheres of God's activity? How do the nations in general "connect" with Israel in particular? The connection may be portrayed in four ways, which build on one another theologically:

- The nations are witnessing observers of what YHWH does in and to Israel.
- The nations can be beneficiaries of the blessing inherent in Israel's covenant.
- The nations will come to know and worship Israel's God.
- The nations will ultimately be included within the identity of Israel as God's people.

To these four perceptions we now give our attention.

The Nations as Witnesses of Israel's History

Israel did not live in vacuum-sealed isolation from the rest of the world. On the contrary, they could not have lived on a more crowded international stage. The land of Canaan, as the land bridge between three continents, was a veritable public concourse of the nations. Israel's presence there was therefore internationally visible. This being the case, the Old Testament envisions several ways

[15]See also Bernard Renaud, "Prophetic Criticism of Israel's Attitude to the Nations: A Few Landmarks," in *Truth and its Victims,* Concilium 20, ed. Wim Beuken et al. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988), pp. 35-43; Paul R. Raabe, "Look to the Holy One of Israel, All You Nations: The Oracles about the Nations Still Speak Today," *Concordia Journal* 30 (2004): 336-49.

in which the story of Israel was supposed to affect the nations. The nations were spectators or, better, witnesses of the great sweep of Old Testament history.

Witnesses of God's mighty acts of redemption.

> The nations will hear and tremble;
> anguish will grip the people of Philistia.
> The chiefs of Edom will be terrified,
> the leaders of Moab will be seized with trembling,
> the people of Canaan will melt away;
> terror and dread will fall upon them.
> By the power of your arm
> they will be as stone—
> until the people pass by, O LORD,
> until the people you bought pass by. (Ex 15:14-16)

With these words the Song of Moses envisions the effect on surrounding nations of the great deliverance that had just taken place at the Sea of Reeds. Such a manifest defeat of the most powerful empire in the region, the Pharaoh's Egypt, would doubtless engender fear among the many smaller nations in Israel's pathway. Even a generation later this anticipated effect on the nations proved accurate, as Joshua's spies heard from the mouth of Rahab (Josh 2:9-11).

Even before the crossing of the sea, however, the mighty acts of God in Egypt itself occur "in the eyes of" all the Egyptians. As Vogels points out, the expression "in the eyes of" frequently has the sense of "before witnesses," that is, something done in a publicly witnessed and therefore verifiable way.

> The formula "in the eyes of . . . ", when used in a juridical context, means an action done before legal witnesses [e.g., Jer 32:12]. In some texts those before whom something happens are not merely spectators, but witnesses, who are supposed to take a position as well (Dt. 31:7; Jer. 28:1, 5, 11).
>
> It is often said that Yahweh has bestowed his benefits in favor of Israel in the eyes of the nations. In other words, the nations are witnesses, but at the same time they are invited to take a personal stand.[16]

So the signs given by Moses and Aaron are done "in the eyes of Pharaoh and in the eyes of his servants," and the actual departure from Egypt happened "in the eyes of all the Egyptians," indeed, "in the eyes of the nations" (Ex 7:20; Num 33:3; Lev 26:45, author's translation). Thus the nations are called on to reflect on what they have witnessed and draw conclusions about the uniqueness and power of YHWH—just as Israel is when exactly the same expression is used of

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[16]Vogels, *God's Universal Covenant,* pp. 65-66.

them as witnesses of all that God did "in the eyes of all Israel" (Deut 34:12; cf. Deut 4:34-35).

Ezekiel holds the same understanding of the great acts of God in Israel's early history. Whereas God would have been fully justified in acting in judgment against Israel, in fact he had withheld his wrath repeatedly and continued instead to preserve and deliver them. And all of this was precisely in order to protect the reputation of his name among the nations, in whose sight he had brought the Israelites out of Egypt. "But for the sake of my name I did what would keep it from being profaned in the eyes of the nations they lived among and in whose sight I had revealed myself to the Israelites by bringing them out of Egypt" (Ezek 20:9; cf. Ezek 14:22).

Ezekiel had the nations in mind even more emphatically when he anticipates God's restoration of Israel after judgment. Then the nations will truly see and know who the true God is.

Witnesses of Israel's covenant obligations. Treaties and covenants in the ancient world, as today, had to have witnesses. In the case of the international treaties contemporary with Israel's Old Testament era, the witnesses were usually the different gods of the parties concerned or the deified natural order (heaven, earth, seas, mountains, etc.). In the case of Israel, of course, no other gods could by definition be called on to witness the covenant between Israel and YHWH, God of heaven and earth beside whom there is no other. So personified nature was summoned to the task. "I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you this day . . ." (Deut 4:26; cf. Deut 30:19; 31:28; 32:1; Is 1:2; Jer 2:12; Mic 6:1-2). But the earth is the habitation of the nations, and so by extension the nations also are portrayed as witnesses to the covenant between YHWH and Israel. Micah calls on both as he embarks on his great covenant lawsuit against Israel:

> Hear, O peoples, all of you;
> Listen, O earth and all who are in it,
> that the Sovereign LORD may witness against you [i.e., Samaria and Jerusalem (v. 1)],
> the Lord from his holy temple. (Mic 1:2)

The same summons to the nations as witnesses of God's covenant with Israel (or its breach) is found in Jeremiah 6:18-19 and Amos 3:9 (where the nations are actually specified as Assyria and Egypt, the two great world powers of the time).

But the nations are not just summoned to witness the making or breaking of the covenant. Ideally, they should be able to observe Israel living by it. In fact, such testimony to the nations of the wisdom of God's ways embodied in the

social life of God's people is presented as a major motivation for obedience to God's law. In a passage we have had occasion to notice before for its missiological implications, Deuteronomy 4:6-8 portrays the nations as interested and admiring spectators of Israel, in terms of both the nearness and effectiveness of the God they worship and pray to and of the justice of their social system embodied in the whole constitutional project that is Deuteronomy.

So the nations were in principle invited not only to watch all the wonderful things God did for Israel, they were also supposed to be able to see the responsive righteousness of Israel living within the terms of the covenant. In other words, Israel's visibility to the nations was meant to be not merely historically remarkable but radically and ethically challenging.

God's mission involves God's people living in God's way in the sight of the nations.[17]

Witnesses of God's judgment on Israel. Tragically, it did not turn out that way. Even before they left Sinai, Israel had fallen into the catastrophic rebellion and apostasy of the Golden Calf (Ex 32—34). God's declared intention to destroy them utterly was forestalled only by Moses' intercession. A significant element in that intercession (alongside reminding God of both the Abrahamic covenant and the new relationship established by the exodus) is Moses' warning to God of what the nations (and especially the Egyptians) will think of him if he does so. If YHWH had brought Israel out of Egypt "in the eyes of" all the Egyptians and other nations, let him not imagine that he could now simply wipe them out in the wilderness, as if nobody would notice. What had been so publicly done could not now be secretly undone.

If the nations were expected to draw conclusions from the mighty exodus about YHWH's great redeeming power, what conclusions might they now draw from such an astonishing *volte-face?* Wouldn't they infer that YHWH was either incompetent (he could not complete what he had begun) or even worse, malicious (he raised their hopes of deliverance only to dash them in destruction)? Was that the kind of reputation God wanted to be circulating around the Middle East? (See Ex 32:12; cf. Num14:13-16; Deut 9:28). The clear assumption underlying this bold intercession is that whatever God does to his people in his anger

[17]Walter Vogels makes the additional suggestive point that in ancient treaties, it was the witnesses to a treaty (i.e., the gods) who would be called on to execute its penalties on a defaulting partner. Similarly, in Israel's legislation, witnesses also took part in the execution of the one whose conviction their testimony had secured. "The hands of the witnesses must be the first in putting him to death" (Deut 17:7). "All this explains, then, why the nations who were the witnesses of the covenant between Yahweh and Israel are also the instruments in God's hand for the execution of curses and blessings. Israel is judged by the world." Vogels, *God's Universal Covenant,* p. 68.

will be as visible to the nations as all that he did for them in his compassion. And this is a point that echoes on in many places in the Old Testament.

The failure of Israel did not take God by surprise. It is an interesting fact that the book of Deuteronomy begins and ends with failure. Its opening chapter records the failure of the generation of the exodus to go on with God and capture the land of promise. It ends with the anticipated failure of the generations after Moses to stay loyal to the covenant with YHWH. And that future failure will eventually lead to such an outpouring of God's judgment that, yet again, the nations will watch with astonishment.

> All the nations will ask: "Why has the LORD done this to this land? Why this fierce burning anger?"
>
> And the answer will be: "It is because this people abandoned the covenant of the LORD, the God of their fathers." (Deut 29:24-25)

Ezekiel struggles with the public nature of God's dealings with his people, for of course he was of that very generation that experienced the full outpouring of God's wrath at the time of the exile. He recognizes and accepts that the punishment of Israel was a moral necessity and spent his first five years of ministry trying to persuade the first group of exiles of the point. The sin of Israel was so grotesque, scandalous and unremittingly unrepented that they left God no alternative but to fulfill the covenant threats and scatter them among the nations in the curse of exile that had been so prominent among his warning to them from the beginning.

> Son of man, when the people of Israel were living in their own land, they defiled it by their conduct and their actions. Their conduct was like a woman's monthly uncleanness in my sight. So I poured out my wrath on them because they had shed blood in the land and because they had defiled it with their idols. I dispersed them among the nations, and they were scattered through the countries; I judged them according to their conduct and their actions. (Ezek 36:17-19)

But the solution of one problem (God's moral anger against Israel's sin and the necessity of it being punished) led to another. Terrible damage was now being done to God's own reputation, that is, to his personal name, YHWH. It was being mocked among the nations because, clearly (as far as they could see in their interpretation of current events), YHWH was nothing more than one among many defeated gods of the little nations being swallowed up by the Babylonian war machine. This is what is meant by the expression Ezekiel uses to describe the effect of the exile: Israel profaned the name of YHWH. To profane, here, does not mean using bad language. It means treating as common or ordinary something that should be holy. So the name of YHWH, rather than being honored as

the name of the only, living God, the Holy One of Israel, was being dragged through the gutters of derision among the very nations whom Israel was supposed to draw into the sphere of YHWH's blessing.

> Wherever they went among the nations they profaned my holy name, for it was said of them, "These are the LORD's people, and yet they had to leave his land." I had concern for [lit. felt pity for] my holy name, which the house of Israel profaned among the nations where they had gone. (Ezek 36:20-21)

Witnesses of God's restoration of Israel. Ezekiel goes on to declare that the resolution of the dilemma God faces will be as much in the sight of the nations as the events that had caused it. That is, by punishing Israel God had vindicated his own moral justice but risked losing his reputation among the nations (as Moses had warned centuries before). So God decides to act in forgiveness and restoration.

But it must be made clear that this will be not merely so that Israel can be rescued from the black hole of exile. God has a wider (though not deeper) passion than his saving love for Israel, and that is the protection of his own name *among the nations,* and the vision of bringing them all ultimately to know and honor him, YHWH, as God. Accordingly, the nations will be witnesses of God's restoration of Israel, just as they were witnesses of the original redemptive act (the exodus). Just as they were witnesses of the covenant judgment (the exile), so also they will be witnesses of God's restorative deliverance (the return).

So the wonderful promises of Ezekiel 36:24-38, including ingathering, cleansing, new heart, new spirit, God's own Spirit, obedience, resettlement and covenant blessing are preceded by the reminder that the primary and ultimate purpose is the glory of God's name among the watching nations.

> It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am doing to do these things, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations where you have gone. I will show the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, the name you have profaned among them. Then the nations will know that I am the LORD, declares the Sovereign LORD, when I show myself holy through you before their eyes. (Ezek 36:22-23)

Before leaving Ezekiel, it is worth noting that his notorious eschatological depiction in chapters 38-39 of the attack on God's people by Gog, prince of Magog, and the host of nations with him, followed by their utter and total destruction, has as its core message that the nations will come to know YHWH as God in all his glory by this signal and ultimate demonstration of his protection of his people from all who seek their destruction. We can become so fascinated with Ezekiel's characteristic penchant for cartoon detail or with contemporary garish

and gory amplifications of it in end-times predictions that we overlook the repeated message found in Ezekiel 38:16, 23; 39:6-7, 21-23, 27-29. To the very end, the nations will see and know what God does for his people, and the conclusions to be drawn will finally be irresistible.

What is the relevance of this section (on the nations as witnesses of God's work in Israel) to the missional hermeneutic of Scripture we are seeking to develop throughout this book? I have been insisting throughout that our primary datum in biblical missiology must be the mission of God. And we have seen that the mission of God is strongly connected to God's will to be known by his whole creation. To that end he is at work on the whole stage of human history, not merely among the people he has chosen as the vehicle for his great redemptive agenda for the world. And even when we do focus, with the biblical texts themselves, on the story of God's dealings with his people, we must remember that God always acts among his own people with an eye on the watching nations. The nations are not just part of the incidental scenery of the narrative. They are the intended witnesses of the action. These things happen "before their eyes." A response is therefore expected to what they witness. As Walter Vogels expresses it:

> God has basically the same intention with the nations as he had with Israel because both "will know that I am Yahweh." Far from being pure spectators of something which concerns only Yahweh and Israel, the nations are witnesses, who are directly involved. The whole historical covenant between Yahweh and Israel had from the beginning a universal dimension. The nations are real witnesses. Yahweh's saving actions, the punishment, and the restoration which he imposed upon Israel, were at the same time a preaching to the nations.[18]

In my own discussion of this aspect of the oracles concerning the nations that we find in several of Israel's prophets, including Ezekiel, I have summarized the point in this way:

> The prophets were thus aware of two complementary truths. On the one hand, whatever Yahweh did among the nations was ultimately for the benefit of Israel, his covenant people. Yet on the other hand, what Yahweh did for Israel was ultimately for the benefit of the nations. This double reality is significant for it preserves the universality of God's sovereignty over all nations, while recognizing the particularity of his unique relationship with Israel. God's providential reign over the nations is related to his redemptive purpose for his people; but his redemptive work among his people is related to his missionary purpose among the nations. The two cannot be separated. . . .

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[18]Ibid., pp. 67-68.

> In the same way, assuming that the God of Isaiah and Ezekiel is still our God and is still on the throne of the universe, we need to look at the world of international affairs and seek to discern what God is doing that impinges upon the life and witness of his people, the church. At the same time, we need to be asking whether the church, in its life and witness, is truly engaging in its biblical mission of bringing the blessing of God to the nations. God runs the world for the sake of the church; God calls the church for the sake of the world. We need to fix our theology and our mission to both poles of this biblical dynamic.[19]

The Nations as Beneficiaries of Israel's Blessing

The Old Testament is not content to leave the nations in the passive role of spectators of all that God was doing in Israel. The nations will come to see that God's dealings with Israel were to be, for them, not just a matter of alternating admiration or horror. The whole story was *for their ultimate good.* Or, to pursue the metaphor of spectators, the whole drama was for the benefit of the audience. Two psalms will illustrate this angle of our exploration.

Psalm 47

> Clap your hands, all you nations;
> shout to God with cries of joy.
> How awesome is the LORD Most High,
> the great King over all the earth! (Ps 47:1-2)

With these words, some psalm writer in ancient Israel invited the nations to join in applause to YHWH, God of Israel. Clapping hands is fairly universally a collective sign of approval. Those who are clapping acknowledge something that has brought them pleasure or benefit. It speaks of appreciation and gratitude. It is a form of physical and audible thanksgiving that supplements or replaces words.

What then does our psalmist invite the nations of the world to give a round of applause to YHWH for? The answer at first sight seems perverse: "He [YHWH] subdued nations under us [Israel], / peoples under our feet" (Ps 47:3).

The nations are being asked to clap for YHWH because he is the God who defeated them through Israel. This is like asking the inhabitants of a defeated country to say thank you to the nation that invaded them. Is the psalm nothing more than imperial cynicism masquerading as worship? The only alternative to reading it in that way is to discern within it a deeper theological conviction about God's deal-

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[19]Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Message of Ezekiel: A New Heart and a New Spirit,* The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, U.K.: Inter-Varsity Press; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2001), p. 260. Regarding the statement that "God runs the world for the sake of the church," see Eph 1:21-22, speaking of the cosmic dominion of Christ exercised "for the church."

ings with Israel and the nations in the long sweep of his sovereignty in history.

The nations can be summoned to applaud YHWH because ultimately even the historical defeat of the Canaanites by Israel will be seen to be part of a history for which all of humanity will have ample cause to praise God. While the historical culture of Canaan that confronted the Israelites was degraded to the point of deserving divine judgment, the God who exercised that act of judgment was also the great King over all the earth (the repeated emphasis of the psalm), the justice of whose global reign would one day be acknowledged by all. The nations will be the eventual beneficiaries of that.

Psalm 67. Another Psalmist picks up the most pregnant text in Israel's rich vocabulary and liturgy of blessing, namely, the Aaronic blessing of Numbers 6:24-26. It was the priests' task to pronounce these words and thus "put the Name on the Israelites." It would be YHWH himself who would bless his people.

Blessing, of course, was an integral part of the covenant God had made with Abraham. His descendants would live within a relationship of declared and protected blessing. But they were also to be the medium through whom other nations would come into blessing. Accordingly, the author of Psalm 67 takes the Aaronic blessing, which he probably heard repeatedly in the context of worship at the sanctuary, and does two things.

On the one hand he turns its declarative form into prayer, as if to say, "Yes, may God indeed do what these words say; may God, our God bless us." But on the other hand he turns it inside out and prays that God's blessing may be the focus of praise not only in Israel but among all the peoples to the ends of the earth.

> May God be gracious to us and bless us
> and make his face to shine upon us,
> that your ways may be known on earth,
> your salvation among all nations.
> May the peoples praise you, O God;
> may all the peoples praise you. (Ps 67:1-3)

As in Psalm 47, the particular focus at the center of this psalm (v. 4) is the just rule of God that will be exercised over all nations. However, verse 6 adds a more economic factor to the political one—namely, God's blessing expressed through the harvest of the land.[20] So the final two verses bring the psalm to its climax in a

[20]It is characteristic, of course, that the same word, *'ereṣ,* is used for the land of Israel (which is doubtless the location of the harvest referred to in v. 6) and for the earth as a whole in vv. 2, 4, 7). This is a verbal commonplace that nevertheless embodies the theological truth: the land of Israel has a symbolic and eschatological reference point, the whole earth; just as the people of Israel has its significance within God's plan for the whole of humanity.

universality that embraces God, Israel and its land, the nations and the whole earth.

> Then the land will yield its harvest,
> and God, our God, will bless us.
> God will bless us,
> and all the ends of the earth will fear him. (Ps 67:6-7)

There are several other texts in which the phrase "the land will yield its harvest" is used, in virtually identical lexical terms to Psalm 67:6 (with minor grammatical differences). They help us grasp the full implications of the words in this psalm. These include Leviticus 25:19 (in the context of God's promise to provide food if Israel observed the jubilee year) and Leviticus 26:4 (as part of the general promise of God's continued blessing if Israel lives in obedience to his law). The psalmist may well have had such Torah promises in mind, given that he anticipates this particular blessing within the realm of God's sovereign rule, which implies an obedient people. Psalm 85:12 similarly locates the promise within the context of a penitent and obedient people. Two prophetic texts, however, also have close parallels.

Ezekiel 34:27 includes agricultural abundance, in these terms, as part of God's promise to Israel in the future restoration after the exile. And in that postexilic period, Zechariah 8:12-13 picks it up again as the sign of that restored covenantal relationship. Indeed Zechariah connects these words of promise to the Abrahamic covenant by saying that Israel will once again become "a blessing" among the nations, instead of an object of cursing.[21] There will be a new beginning for God's people, which Zechariah portrays thus:

> The seed will grow well, the vine will give its fruit, *the earth will give its harvest,* and the heavens will drop their dew. . . . As you have been a curse among the nations, house of Judah and house of Israel, so I will save you, so that you may be a blessing. (Zech 8:12-13, author's translation)[22]

It has been suggested that Psalm 67 and Zechariah 8 may even have been connected to the same historical context, namely, the harvests in the postexilic period that signaled God's fulfillment of his promise to protect and bless his people when they returned to the land. If this is so, it is clear that both texts

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[21]In this context the meaning of Zechariah's prophecy probably is that whereas nations have used the name of Israel as a curse (in view of its manifest "bad luck"), they will change to using it as a term of blessing (in view of God's manifest restoration of their fortunes).

[22]This translation of the last clause recognizes the common construction, in which one future statement followed by another makes the second the intended purpose of the first. God will save Israel and they will be a blessing. But "being a blessing" was God's intention for Israel from the start, so his new act of salvation will be to enable that intention to be fulfilled.

look well beyond this proof of God's renewed blessing on Israel alone and see in it *the firstfruits of God's wider harvest among all nations on earth.*

> It may well be, therefore, that we have in Psalm 67 an echo of this prophetic word: "The land has yielded its harvest," now may God bless us (cf. Zech. 8:13), and may it be visible to all the nations. . . .
>
> The land having yielded its harvest,
> may God, our God, bless us.
> May God bless us
> so that all ends of the earth may revere him. . . .
>
> A clear analogy to the text of Zechariah 8 is present. The new times, the time of renewal has begun, as is signalled by the fact that a new harvest has been given. May God now continue to bless his people, and may the nations see it and understand what is happening. . . .
>
> It is a sign that God's history goes on not exclusively with his own people. The function of this signally important harvest is to catch the attention of the nations and move them to recognize and praise God. The particular history of God and Israel is meant to become a blessing to all—as the prophecy of Zechariah 8 announces.[23]

Because of the universalizing thrust of Psalm 67 as a whole, Brueggemann thinks that the "us" of its final verse may well be spoken by the nations themselves, not just Israel, who are the clearly the speakers in verse 1. This may or may not be the psalmist's intention, but "either way, the psalm envisions a whole earth and all its peoples now gladly affirming Yahweh's sovereignty and gratefully receiving from Yahweh all the blessings of a rightly governed creation."[24]

Finally, Psalm 67 echoes the priestly prayer of Aaron, and may indeed have been composed by a priest. It distills the missional nature of Israel's own priestly role among the nations. Marvin Tate quotes "a remarkable summary of Ps 67 from I. Abrahams, *Annotations to the Hebrew Prayer Book, Pharisaism and the Gospels*":

> This Psalm is a prayer for salvation in the widest sense, and not for Israel only, but for the whole world. Israel's blessing is to be a blessing for all men. Here, in particular, the Psalmist does more than adopt the Priestly formula (Num 6:22-27); he claims for Israel the sacerdotal dignity. Israel is the world's high priest . . . if Israel has the light of God's face, the world cannot remain in darkness.[25]

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[23]Eep Talstra and Carl J. Bosma, "Psalm 67: Blessing, Harvest and History," *Calvin Theological Journal* 36 (2001): 308, 309, 313.
[24]Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology,* p. 501.
[25]Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51-100,* Word Biblical Commentary 20 (Dallas: Word, 1990), p. 159.

Thus Israel, who knew themselves to be the recipients of such great and abundant blessings that they could exclaim, "how blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD" (Ps 33:12), knew that the benefits of all God had given and done in their history would eventually be a matter of gratitude among the rest of the nations, for whose ultimate benefit Israel had been called into existence in the loins of Abraham. The nations will be the final (and intended) beneficiaries of the blessing experienced in Israel.

The Nations Will Worship Israel's God

The only proper response to blessings and benefits received at God's hand was worship and obedience. That was another core belief in Israel. But if that was true for them, then it must also be true of all nations because they too came within the sphere of God's blessing. Indeed, Israel's own praises for blessing received had a missional edge, in reaching out in proclamation to the nations.[26] And so there is a range of texts anticipating the praise of the nations, and a few that speak of their obedience as well.[27]

Here we have a theme that carries considerable missiological significance in our survey since the mission of God is to lead the whole creation and all nations to that universal worship that so fills the final vision of the canon of Scripture. *How* the nations will be brought to such worship and obedience to YHWH the God of Israel remains, within the Old Testament era, a mystery (as Paul acknowledged). But *that* the nations will one day bring all their worship to the only true and living God is left in no doubt. The sheer volume of texts that envision it is quite remarkable. Again these are typically a mixture of psalms and prophetic texts.

Psalms. The theme of the worship of the nations being offered to YHWH, God of Israel, occurs from beginning to end of the Psalter. So we can only point out the key texts without much exegetical comment. Some simple classification will help our grasp of the material.

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[26]Patrick D. Miller, " 'Enthroned on the Praises of Israel': The Praise of God in Old Testament Theology," *Interpretation* 39 (1985): 5-19. See also the quotation from this fine article on page 132.

[27]Scott Hahn argues passionately for what he calls "a liturgical hermeneutic," by which he means an approach to Scripture that sees its primary thrust as leading humanity back to the joyful and fulfilling worship of the Creator God. His lively and illuminating essay fits very effectively with the missiological hermeneutic I have developed in this book, since I have stressed the missional importance of God's will to be known and worshiped by his whole creation. See Scott W. Hahn, "Canon, Cult and Covenant: Towards a Liturgical Hermeneutic," in *Canon and Biblical Interpretation*, Craig Bartholomew et. al. (Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster; Grand Rapids: Zondervan**,** forthcoming).

The anticipated *praise of the nations* for YHWH is said to occur

- in response to his mighty acts in general
- in response to the justice of his sovereign cosmic rule in particular
- in response to his restoration of Zion (which will be for the nations' benefit)
- as part of the outpouring of the universal praise of all creation

The mighty acts of God. Quite a number of psalms celebrate the mighty acts of God in the history of Israel in particular or sometimes also in the wider world of creation, and then in that context they call on the nations also to join in praising him. Psalm 66 observes that the power of God will distinguish between his enemies, who will cringe (presumably prior to destruction), and those who willingly praise him.

> Say to God, "How awesome are your deeds!
> So great is your power
> that your enemies cringe before you.
> All the earth bows down to you;
> they sing praise to you,
> they sing praise to your name." . . .
> Praise our God, O peoples,
> Let the sound of his praise be heard. (Ps 66:3-4, 8)

Psalm 68, cataloging some of the mighty acts of YHWH, likewise distinguishes between wicked nations to be scattered, and those nations that will submit to God in worship.

> Scatter the nations who delight in war.
> Envoys will come from Egypt;
> Cush will submit herself to God.
> Sing to God, O kingdoms of the earth,
> sing praise to the Lord. (Ps 68:30-32)

Psalm 86 sets the worship of the nations in the context of the uniqueness of YHWH as demonstrated in his incomparable mighty acts:

> Among the gods there is none like you O Lord;
> no deeds can compare with yours.
> All the nations you have made
> will come and worship before you O Lord;
> they will bring glory to your name.
> For you alone are great and do marvelous deeds;
> you alone are God. (Ps 86:8-10)

Psalm 96 and Psalm 98 are very similar. Both celebrate the kingship of YHWH over all creation and call for the great works of God in salvation and creation to be the subject of a new song that will spread throughout the nations. The content of this new song is essentially a remix of the old songs of Israel—the name, the salvation, the glory and the mighty acts of YHWH. What makes it new is *where* it is to be sung (in all the earth) and *who* is going to be doing the singing (all peoples). What was an old song for Israel becomes a new song as it is taken up by new singers in ever expanding circles to the ends of the earth. Psalm 96 in particular recognizes the polemical or confrontational nature of such a universal vision, for it must inevitably transform the religious landscape. Other gods must be recognized for what they are, "nothings" (Ps 96:5), and the nations must instead ascribe all glory to YHWH alone and bring their offerings to him (Ps 96:7-9).

> Sing to the LORD a new song;
> sing to the LORD all the earth.
> Sing to the LORD, praise his name;
> proclaim his salvation day after day.
> Declare his glory among the nations,
> his marvelous deeds among all peoples. (Ps 96:1-3)

Psalm 97 and Psalm 99 are also a similar pair, launching their call to praise with the affirmation "The LORD reigns" and summoning the earth and the distant shores to rejoice (Ps 97), and the nations and the earth to tremble and shake (Ps 99). The greatness, justice, holiness and forgiveness of YHWH are the main reasons for anticipating such responses.

Psalm 138 sandwiches a remarkable prayer for the world in the midst of the psalmist's praise and prayer for his own relationship with God. Once again, the longed-for praise of the nations is directly related to great truths that they will perceive about YHWH as God. The praise of the nations is no empty acclamation. It is filled with solid biblical content: the nations will come to praise YHWH in relation to his *words,* his *ways* and his *glory*.

> May all the kings of the earth praise you, O LORD,
> when they hear the words of your mouth.
> May they sing of the ways of the LORD,
> for the glory of the LORD is great. (Ps 138:4-5)

God's sovereign rule. The expectation that all nations will come to worship YHWH is further drawn from the theological affirmation that he alone rules over the whole world. The eschatology is fed by the monotheistic thrust we explored in chapter three. The fact that YHWH's reign is one of justice, for which the na-

tions will have cause to bring their praise, has already been noted in relation to Psalm 67 (see pp. 475-76).

Psalm 22 puts the worship of the nations in a very universal frame: it will be offered by the poor and the rich (i.e., every segment of society [Ps 22:26, 29]), and it will be offered by generations who have already died and as yet unborn (Ps 22:29, 31). Whether vertically throughout human society or horizontally throughout human history, the praise of YHWH as sovereign ruler will be universally offered.

> All the ends of the earth
> will remember and turn to the LORD,
> and all the families of the nations
> will bow down before him,
> for dominion belongs to the LORD
> and he rules over the nations. (Ps 22:27-28)

Psalm 2 sees the rule of YHWH as a severe warning to the nations not to continue their rebellion against him but rather to take the wiser course of worshiping him in humility.

> Therefore, you kings, be wise;
> be warned, you rulers of the earth.
> Serve [worship] the LORD with fear
> and rejoice with trembling. (Ps 2:10-11)

The nations ought to adopt this stance toward YHWH because he has installed his anointed king on Zion. The reference to the historical Davidic king became increasingly hollow, of course, as the human incumbents of that throne became more rebellious themselves than even the other nations. Far from leading Israel in such a way that the nations would come to acknowledge YHWH, be blessed by him and worship him, it was precisely the kings of Israel whose wickedness precipitated the events that became such a scandal among the nations.[28]

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[28]It may be that this failure of the Davidic king provides a clue to the organization of the Psalter itself. In this chapter I adopt a primarily thematic approach to the Psalms in garnering their missional relevance. However, the growth of interest in a canonical reading of the book of Psalms as a whole may hold further missional significance. Ever since the seminal work of Gerald H. Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* (Chicago: Scholars Press, 1985), other scholars have explored the effect of reading the psalms against the narrative background of Old Testament history, and with particular attention to the psalms around the "seams" of the five books into which the Psalter has been edited. (For a survey see Gordon Wenham, "Towards a Canonical Reading of the Psalms," in *Canon and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Craig Bartholomew et al. (Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, forthcoming).

God's restoration of Zion. However, after all the lament for those events has been expressed, as it richly is in the later Psalter, the hope of the restoration of Zion emerges there, too, just as it does in the prophets. And this also will be a factor in the anticipated praise of YHWH among the nations. Even before Israel, it will be the nations who will marvel at the wonderful things God has done in restoring Israel from a hopeless situation of captivity (Ps 126:2-3).

Psalm 102 links together very beautifully a restored Zion and worshiping nations, in a text that seems to have had a strong influence on Jewish expectations within which the mission of Jesus himself and his followers emerged. The anticipated scenario was that once Zion was restored, then the nations would be gathered to the worship and praise of God, so that Jerusalem would resonate to the praises of Israel and the nations together. This sequence certainly influenced Paul's understanding of his own times and mission: the restoration of Israel, the ingathering of the nations, the combined rejoicing of both.

You will arise and have compassion on Zion,
    for it is time to show favor to her;
    the appointed time has come. . . .
The nations will fear the name of the LORD,
    all the kings of the earth will revere your glory.
For the LORD will rebuild Zion
    and appear in his glory. . . .
So the name of the LORD will be declared in Zion
    and his praise in Jerusalem

John Wigfield is exploring the links between Psalms and Deuteronomy in the light of Patrick Miller's "Deuteronomy and Psalms: Evoking a Biblical Conversation," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 118/1 (1999) with a view to a missiological reading of the Psalter as a whole. If the model Israelite of Psalm 1 represents the model king of Deuteronomy 17, who should be leading Israel in the ways of obedience to God's law, then, according to Deuteronomy 4:6-8, the nations should observe and be drawn to Israel. The question of Psalm 2 is therefore sharp and surprising: "Why do the nations conspire against the LORD?" Was it because Israel and their king had failed to come anywhere close to the ideals of Psalm 1? In spite of much encouragement to humble and faithful obedience in books 1 and 2, and in spite of the ideals set before the Davidic monarch in Psalm 72 (end of book 2), the reality is that from Solomon on the kings all abandoned God and his law, with the result that the nation ended up in the despairing apparent collapse of the Davidic covenant in Psalm 89 (end of book 3). From then on, the psalms turn more sustained emphasis toward the nations in general and to the kingship of YHWH over both Israel and the nations. The universalizing thrust of the whole collection thus gathers power and volume somewhat similarly to the growing eschatological universality of the prophets.

It is an interesting hypothesis that awaits clarification and demonstration. But it shows another part of the canon on which a missional hermeneutic can open up fresh angles of approach.

when the peoples and the kingdoms
assemble to worship the LORD. (Ps 102:13, 15-16, 21-22)

Universal praise. Finally, some psalms anticipate the praise of the nations for no other reason than that YHWH is worthy of the praise of the whole universe, so no nation can be excluded or excused from that duty. We have noted Psalm 47 in its assumption that YHWH is exalted as the great King (pp. 474-75), so all human kings must naturally join in the shouts of joy and praise. Psalm 100 summons all the earth to shout for joy, while the shortest psalm of all, Psalm 117, invites all nations and peoples to praise YHWH for his great love and enduring faithfulness—qualities known by experience in Israel, eventually to be the subject of universal praise among the nations.

Though the shortest of psalms, Psalm 117 exercised a theological influence on Paul out of all proportion to its length. It provides the vocabulary as well as the thematic content of Romans 15:8-11, emphasizing not only the faithfulness and mercy of God (in what he has accomplished for the nations through Christ) but also the summons to praise that goes forth now to the nations.[29]

The climax of the Psalter, with its outpouring of praise, rises to rhetorical peaks of universality.

Psalm 145 envisages the whole creation praising God, but the human part of it will do so because they have come to know the works and reign of God through the testimony of his people.

All you have made will praise you, O LORD;
your saints will extol you.
They will tell of the glory of your kingdom
and speak of your might,
so that all men may know of your mighty acts
and the glorious splendor of your kingdom. (Ps 145:10-12)

Psalm 148 is also a hymn of praise to YHWH from the whole created order, so not surprisingly it includes "kings of the earth and all nations, / you princes and all rulers on earth" (Ps 148:11).

I have dwelled at length on this material in Psalms on the anticipated praise of YHWH by all the nations because, although it is of such manifest missiological significance, it is easy to overlook. We read the psalms very much as songs of ancient Israel, and we may be inclined to pass over verses such as these as rhetorical flourishes without pausing to marvel at the vast horizons of expectation

[29]Jannie du Preez, "The Missionary Significance of Psalm 117 in the Book of Psalms and in the New Testament," *Missionalia* 27 (1999): 369-76.

and imagination contained in them. And we usually read the psalms one at a time, so we miss the opportunity to feel the overwhelming cumulative force of such a pervasive theme in Israel's amazing liturgical discourse.

Yet, within any biblical theology of mission or any missiological reading of Scripture, this is surely material of primary relevance. Their breadth of vision, their universal inclusiveness, their breathtaking eschatological hope—all these features of Psalms are essential components in articulating the scope of the mission of God in Scripture. Creighton Marlowe coins a highly appropriate name for the psalms. He calls them "the music of missions."

> Both Israel and the church have been commissioned or called to reflect and to report the light of revelation, the good news about the true nature of God as Savior, Judge, King, and Lord of the earth and all its inhabitants. The platform upon which God's people of any age earn the opportunity to be heard . . . may and will change dramatically over the centuries or millennia or may be as different as the individuals or institutions seeking to be a witness. But the main object always remains the same: visualizing and verbalizing the revelation of the one, true God . . . before the reachable world of nations. Old Testament psalms are sacred songs (Hebrew poetry set to music) that in part explicitly reinforce this divine purpose for Israel and thus, implicitly for the church. They celebrate the character of cross-cultural outreach. They are the music of missions.[30]

Prophets. The texts we have surveyed in Psalms might well qualify as prophetic, such is their grandeur of vision. However, among the prophets, it is the book of Isaiah that has the most sustained interest in the eschatological vision of the nations offering their worship to YHWH. It is found as early as Isaiah 2 and it forms part of the climax of the whole corpus in Isaiah 66:18-23.

There has been an intensive scholarly debate over the nature of the so-called universalism of Isaiah, especially chapters 40-55. On the one hand, there are those who regard these chapters as the pinnacle of Israel's "missionary" vision—extending the hope of God's salvation to all the nations on earth and generating a vision of centrifugal universalism. On the other hand, there are those who regard these chapters as simply the pinnacle of Israel's exclusivism—all the nations will have to submit to Israel and acknowledge that Israel's God is the only true one. On the latter view, these chapters are imbued more with the spirit of

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[30]W. Creighton Marlowe, "Music of Missions: Themes of Cross-Cultural Outreach in the Psalms," *Missiology* 26 (1998): 452. George Peters goes rhetorically further, counting "more than 175 references of a universalistic note relating to the nations of the world. Many of them bring hope of salvation to the nations. . . . Indeed, the Psalter is one of the greatest missionary books in the world, though seldom seen from that point of view." George W. Peters, *A Biblical Theology of Missions* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972), pp. 115-16.

centripetal nationalism than that of universalism.[31]

Excellent and balanced discussions of the debate have been provided by Anthony Gelston and Michael Grisanti. Both argue that to insist on either pole of the above dichotomy would be mistaken. It is worth quoting their conclusions, with which I agree, in full.

> The universalism that I submit is to be found in Second Isaiah consists of three strands. There is first the affirmation that YHWH is the only true God, sovereign over all creation, and therefore over all mankind. There is secondly the expectation that this truth will be recognized by the Gentile nations no less than by Israel, with the corollary that they will submit to him and acknowledge his universal rule. . . . There is a third strand, consisting of the universal offer of the experience of salvation. Nowhere, however, does the prophet affirm that all will avail themselves of this offer. On the contrary, there is a clear implication in 45:25 that some will not . . . to the detriment of those who persist in their idolatry.[32]

> Isaiah 40—55 contains passages that manifest both sides of this tension [between nationalism and universalism]. The customary terms "nationalism" and "universalism" do not sufficiently reveal the constitutive issues in this debate. . . . Assertions that the prophet is the "missionary prophet of the Old Testament" or that he is an ardent nationalist without any concern for the nations frame this debate. Between these two extremes, the prophet Isaiah neither depicts Israel as a nation of world-traversing missionaries, nor does he exclude the nations from participation in divine redemption. . . . [T]he prophet argues that God's special dealings with His chosen people not only benefit Israel, but also carry significance for all nations. Isaiah underscores Israel's role in providing a witness to the nations . . . in the sense of being a people of God whose life shall draw nations to inquire after Yahweh (cf. Isa. 2:1-4; 43:10-11). It is as God's chosen people that Israel can exercise a mediatorial role with regard to the nations. Isaiah's fervent desire for Israel is that they will respond to God's intervention on her behalf and carry out her role as God's servant nation before the world.[33]

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[31]A selection of the relevant literature in the debate includes Robert Davidson, "Universalism in Second Isaiah," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 16 (1963): 166-85; D. E. Hollenberg, "Nationalism and 'The Nations' in Isaiah XL-LV," *Vetus Testamentum* 19 (1969): 23-36; Harry Orlinsky, "Nationalism-Universalism and Internationalism in Ancient Israel," in *Translating and Understanding the Old Testament: Essays in Honor of Herbert Gordon May,* ed. H. T. Frank and W. L. Reid (Nashville: Abingdon; 1970), pp. 206-36; D. W. Van Winkle, "The Relationship of the Nations to Yahweh and to Israel in Isaiah XL-LV," *Vetus Testamentum* 35 (1985): 446-58; J. Blenkinsopp, "Second Isaiah—Prophet of Universalism," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 41 (1988): 83-103.

[32]Anthony Gelston, "Universalism in Second Isaiah," *Journal of Theological Studies* 43 (1992): 396.

[33]Michael A. Grisanti, "Israel's Mission to the Nations in Isaiah 40-55: An Update," *Master's Seminary Journal* 9 (1998): 61.

Returning then to the theme of the nations bringing their worship to YHWH, Christopher Begg has made an exhaustive study of all the texts in the book of Isaiah that exhibit this theme, dividing the book up into fairly standard sections.[34]

In Isaiah 1—12 the theme puts an envelope around the prophecies concerning Israel. In Isaiah 2:1-5 the eschatological expectation of the obedient, law-seeking, worship of the nations in the future is contrasted sharply with the contemporary rituals of rebellious Israel in chapter 1. This is echoed in chapter 12, where the abating of YHWH's anger against Israel is met by an outpouring of praise that will include the nations and all the world (Is 12:4-5).

In Isaiah 13—27, the section of oracles concerning the nations, the overwhelming burden is, of course, words of judgment against the contemporary nations in the world of the prophet. Nevertheless, "the expectation of some sort of participation by a nation or the nations as a whole in Yahweh's worship keeps being voiced."[35] The most remarkable of these voices is the prophecy concerning Egypt in Isaiah 19:16-25. But in addition to the hope there expressed for Egypt, we find anticipation of worship in the form of gifts and offerings being brought by the Ethiopians (Is 18:7), and by the people of Tyre (Is 23:17-18). The so-called Isaiah Apocalypse (chaps. 24-25) also contains portraits not only of God's judgment on all the earth but of the worship of the nations ultimately being directed to him. After the purging judgment there will be joyful and grateful worship among the survivors (Is 24:14-16). In Isaiah 25 it seems clear that the benefits of God's salvation, including ultimately the destruction of death itself, will be for both Israel and all nations, who will gather on the mountain of Zion for YHWH's rich banquet (v. 6), so that "they" in Isaiah 25:9 includes both:

> In that day they [Israelites and all nations] will say,
> "Surely this is our God;
> we trusted in him, and he saved us.
> This is the LORD, we trusted in him;
> let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation.

In Isaiah 40—55 the theme of the worship of the nations returns to even greater prominence. "All flesh" will see the glory of YHWH (Is 40:5), and his justice and law will be delivered to the nations who wait eagerly for them (Is 42:1-

[34]Christopher T. Begg, "The Peoples and the Worship of Yahweh in the Book of Isaiah," in *Worship and the Hebrew Bible,* ed. M. P. Graham, R. R. Marrs, and S. L. McKenzie (Sheffield, U.K.: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999).

[35]Ibid., p. 39. See also as a wider study of the theme of the nations in relation to the unity of the book of Isaiah as a whole, G. I. Davies, "The Destiny of the Nations in the Book of Isaiah," in *The Book of Isaiah: Le Livre d'Isaie,* ed. J. Vermeylen (Leuven University Press, 1989), pp. 93-120.

4). Accordingly all nations to the ends of the earth can be summoned to sing his praise (Is 42:10-12) and will indeed eventually do so in the wake of God's new redemptive work (Is 45:6, 14). Summons turns to appeal in the climax of Isaiah 45, as YHWH invites the remnant of the nations (like the remnant of Israel) to turn to him for salvation and thus to convert from their late lamented false worship to the exclusive worship of YHWH (Is 45:22-25). This appeal, mediated through a new David, will assuredly find willing and hasty response among nations hitherto unknown to Israel (Is 55:3-5).

In Isaiah 56—66 the early vision of chapter Isaiah 2:1-5 of the pilgrimage of the nations to Zion is expanded and enhanced in a rich kaleidoscope of anticipation. At an individual level, foreigners previously excluded will find their worship accepted right in the temple itself (Is 56:3-8). Back at the international level Isaiah 60, along with Isaiah 61:5-7, is a glorious evocation for all the senses of the worship of the nations being brought to YHWH, through the mediation of Israel now functioning, as intended, as God's priesthood for the nations. Just as Israelites brought their tithes and offerings to their priests, so the nations will bring their tribute to Israel as the priests of YHWH (Is 61:6). It isn't unlikely that Paul theologically viewed his financial collection from among the Gentile churches for the impoverished Jerusalem church as a token of the eschatological fulfillment of such prophetic visions.[36] Though there is rhetoric of submission to Israel, this is probably no more than figurative of the recognition that it is Israel's God who reigns supreme. "The chapter makes clear that their homage is ultimately meant for Yahweh himself" (cf. Is 60:6, 7, 9, 14, 16).[37]

Walter Brueggemann agrees and goes on to make a further point about the role of the Torah in this eschatological worship of the nations. They will worship as nations who have been taught the ways of YHWH (as Is 2:2-5; 42:4 also envision).

> Two matters are important in this vision. First, the nations come gladly, willingly, and expectantly. They are not coerced or compelled by the political force of the Davidic house, but have come in recognition that this is the only place where the way to peace and justice is available. Second, in the process of coming gladly, it is affirmed that the nations, like Israel, are subject to the Torah of Yahweh. That is, the Torah is as pertinent to the nations as it is to Israel. This makes clear that the nations must deal with Yahweh's sovereignty, but it also makes clear that the Torah, while seated in Jerusalem, is no exclusive Israelite property. It belongs to the nations as much as to Israel.[38]

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[36]This is argued by C. H. H. Scobie, "Israel and the Nations: An Essay in Biblical Theology," *Tyndale Bulletin* 43, no. 2 (1992): 283-305.

[37]Ibid., p. 50.

[38]Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology,* pp. 501-2.

Walter Vogels also observes the strong connection between Sinai and Zion in this vision for the nations. "What Israel celebrated at Sinai is celebrated by the nations at Zion. At Sinai, Yahweh gave his law to Israel through Moses. He now gives his revelation to the nations through Israel. At that time Israel was designated as Yahweh's people, but now all the nations are Yahweh's people."[39]

Finally, in Isaiah 66 the nations who have been the object of witness and summons, once they have been gathered to the worship of YHWH, themselves become the agents of witness and proclamation. This is the only unequivocally centrifugal articulation of mission in the Old Testament. Those who have been the recipients of Abrahamic blessing now become the agents of mediating it to others.

> And I, because of their actions and their imaginations, am about to come and gather all nations and tongues, and they will come and see my glory.
>
> I will set a sign among them and I will send some of those who survive to the nations . . . and to the distant islands that have not heard of my fame or seen my glory. They will proclaim my glory among the nations. (Is 66:18-19)

Christopher Begg's conclusion is worth quoting almost in full.

> The theme of the nations' involvement with the worship of Yahweh has indeed emerged as a significant one throughout the book of Isaiah, with increasing attention being devoted to it as one moves from chs. 1-39 to 40-66. To an overwhelming degree the texts speak in positive terms of the nations' relation to Yahweh's worship. . . .
>
> A number of texts as well envisage Israel as exercising a mediatorial role in the worship of the nations for whom it is to make intercession (45:14) or perform the sacrifices for which they supply the victims (60:7; 61:6). . . . [I]t is especially striking to observe how the texts foresee the nations as Yahweh's worshippers, entering fully and equally into the privileges of Israel. Thus titles used elsewhere of Israel ("my people," "the work of my hands," 19:25; "servant[s]," 56:6) will be predicated of them. They will function too as Yahweh's "missionaries" (66:19) and clergy (66:21). Non-Israelites are to have an altar of their own (19:20), will present acceptable sacrifices to the Lord (19:21; 56:7), participate in his feasts (56:6; 66:23) and have a part in his "covenant" (56:6). Yahweh for his part will "teach" the nations (2:3), feed them (25:6), abolish all that causes them grief (25:7-8) and make himself/his "glory" known to them (19:22; 66:18). *In sum, the nations' worship of Yahweh constitutes a key, insistently underscored component of the future hopes that occupy so large a part of the extant book of Isaiah.*[40]

Compared with Isaiah, the theme is much more rare in other prophetic

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[39]Vogels, *God's Universal Covenant,* p. 122.

[40]Begg, "The Peoples and the Worship of Yahweh," pp. 54-55 (emphasis added).

books, but certainly not entirely lacking. The following list of texts is well worth perusing: Jeremiah 3:17; Micah 4:1-5; Zephaniah 2:11; 3:9; Zechariah 8:20-22; 14:16; Malachi 1:11.

We can say then, with a broad range of textual support, that a significant part of Israel's eschatological hope in relation to the nations was that *ultimately they would bring their worship to* YHWH*, the one living God of all the earth*. And again we must add that such a vision constitutes a major strand within a biblical theology of mission, for it is the indefatigable mission of God—a mission in which he invites our participation—to bring such universal worship of the nations to joyful reality.

The Nations Will Be Included in Israel's Identity

"It is especially striking to observe," repeating Begg's point, "how the texts foresee the nations as Yahweh's worshippers, *entering fully and equally into the privileges of Israel.*"[41] Striking indeed. And so we must finally turn to this climactic point. For, to revisit my earlier metaphor, the Old Testament is not content merely to portray the nations as the spectators of the great drama being played out between YHWH and Israel, not even as clapping spectators who perceive that the drama is ultimately for their own benefit. The most radical part of the Old Testament vision is yet to come. For the divine director intends eventually to bring the spectators out of the stalls onto the stage, to join the original cast and then to continue the drama with a single, though infinitely enlarged, company. The nations will come to share the very identity of Israel itself. God's people will burst the boundaries of ethnicity and geography. The very name "Israel" will be extended and redefined.

These things were not the ex post facto theological rationalizations of the apostle Paul seeking to justify the inclusion of Gentiles in the church. These things are *unambiguously stated in the Old Testament itself as part of God's mission* in relation to the nations of the earth. As the following survey of texts, drawn again from Psalms and the Prophets, will demonstrate, when God accomplishes his great missional project for history and creation, the nations of the world will be found to have been

- registered in God's city
- blessed with God's salvation
- accepted in God's house
- called by God's name
- joined with God's people

[41]Ibid., p. 55.

No more comprehensive inclusion could be imagined.

Registered in God's city. Psalm 47 has already astonished us with its portrayal of the nations as applauding YHWH for what had happened in the history of Israel, even though it included the subjugation of the nations themselves in the history of the conquest. But it goes on to greater surprises. If YHWH is indeed the King of all the earth, then when the great assembly of nations gathers before him, we read:

> The nobles of the nations assemble
> [as] the people of the God of Abraham,
> for the kings of the earth belong to God;
> he is greatly exalted. (Ps 47:9)

As the brackets that I have added indicate, there is no preposition in the phrase in Hebrew. "The nobles of the nations" and "the people of the God of Abraham" are simply set in apposition, the one being identified with the other.[42] That God in this context should be specifically named as the God of Abraham is surely significant, in view of the universality of God's promise to Abraham. So the register of the nations will not set the other nations behind, beneath or even merely alongside Israel, but will actually include them *as* Israel, as part of the people of father Abraham.

> The innumerable princes and peoples are to become one *people,* and they will no longer be outsiders but within the covenant; this is implied in their being called *the people of the God of Abraham*. It is the abundant fulfillment of the promise of Genesis 12:3; it anticipates what Paul expounds of the inclusion of the Gentiles as Abraham's sons (Rom 4:11; Gal 3:7-9).[43]

Psalm 87 actually uses the imagery of a register of the nations (v. 6), and quite astonishingly holds the roll call in Zion itself. Many surrounding nations are listed as having been "born" there, and as being among those who "know me" (v. 4, language normally exclusively used of Israel within the covenant). The expectation clearly is that "Zion" will ultimately come to include not just native-born Israelites but people of other nations who will be adopted and enfranchised as citizens of the city, with as much right as the native born to be registered there by YHWH. Significantly, YHWH is here also named Elyon (v. 5),

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[42]Commentators speculate if the Hebrew *ʿim* (with) has dropped out through haplography with the consonantally identical *ʿam* (people) following. The LXX takes it thus. However, there is no textual evidence for a longer reading, and the Masoretic Text makes sense when taken as above.

[43]Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72,* Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1973), p. 178.

the original name of the God of Jerusalem, with strong connections to Abraham (Gen 14:18-20).

The list of nations to be counted and registered as citizens of Zion even includes the two great historical *enemy* empires, Egypt (Rahab) and Babylon, along with smaller neighboring enemies, the Philistines, trading partners (Tyre), and representatives of the more distant regions (Cush). When the roll is called up yonder, there will be some surprising names on the register.

Blessed with God's salvation. Personally, as I said in chapter seven (p. 236), I find Isaiah 19:16-25 one of the most breathtaking pronouncements of any prophet, and certainly one of the most missiologically significant texts in the Old Testament.

The chapter begins in a way that we have come to expect from the prophetic repertoire—an oracle of doom against Egypt in a sequence of such oracles against Babylon, Moab, Syria and Cush. In Isaiah 19:1-15 Egypt is comprehensively placed under God's coming historical judgment at every level of their religion, agriculture, fisheries, industry and politics. We have heard this kind of thing before.

But then, from verse 15 to verse 22, the more indefinite future ("in that day" is repeated six times) will see an astonishing transformation of Egypt's fortunes, in which they will experience for themselves all that God did for Israel when he rescued them from the Egyptian oppression. The prophet extends to a foreign nation the familiar principle by which predictions of Israel's own future restoration were made in terms drawn from Israel's past (a new exodus, new covenant, new wilderness protection and land entry, etc.). Here Israel's past is used to portray the future blessing promised to a foreign nation that turns to God.[44] They (the Egyptians), who had once refused to acknowledge YHWH, will cry out to him (not to their own gods). He will send them a Savior and Deliverer. They will then know YHWH and worship him (as Israel did through their exodus). They will even speak the language of Canaan (i.e., Hebrew, from an Israelite's perspective; this is in effect to say that the Egyptians will be de facto identified as Israelites). They will be struck by plagues, but YHWH will heal them. All this is Exodus revisited and turned inside out. It is Exodus reloaded, with the characters reversed.

The list of affirmations made about Egypt in this incredible piece of eschatological writing is more detailed than anything said about the nations anywhere else.

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[44]"The author of Is. 19:16-25 . . . chose images of the experience of his own people to depict the salvation offered to the nations. . . . He dared to apply to other nations what Israel believed to be her privilege." Vogels, *God's Universal Covenant,* p. 96.

> Isa. 19.16-25 goes beyond not only the rest of Isaiah, but the entire OT, in foreseeing other nations—and traditionally enemy ones at that—coming to participate in such a range of hitherto distinctively Israelite experiences and prerogatives . . . such that they will stand on a footing of full equality with Israel.[45]

As if what has been said about Egypt were not surprise enough, the prophet then brings Assyria into the equation and foretells that these two great nations would join hands (Is 19:23). Normally, that would have filled Israelite hearts with dread, for Egypt and Assyria were like giant nutcrackers, squeezing Israel at either end of their history and from opposite ends of the compass. But historical reality is totally inverted in the prediction that the purpose of their uniting will be, not that they will join forces to fight against YHWH and his people but rather that "they will worship together." This goes beyond the promise that *Israelites* who had been scattered in Assyria or Egypt would come together to worship God again, as in Isaiah 27:12-13. This is not just a prophecy of the ingathering of the exiles of *Israel* but about the ingathering of the *nations* among whom (and *by* whom in some cases) they had been exiled. The scattering oppressors become the ingathered worshipers. History is inverted in this eschatological transformation. The enemies of God and Israel will be at peace with Israel and with each other.[46]

Doubtless the prophet uses Egypt and Assyria here in this highly eschatological prophecy in a representational way; that is, they stand for a wider inclusion of other nations, not just the specifically named nations. In the same way, prophecies concerning Babylon (in both Testaments) move beyond predictions about the historical fate of the actual city and empire of Babylon into representational visions of the ultimate fate of the enemies of God. Egypt and Assyria never reached such unity with Israel in Isaiah's time or indeed in ours. But the vision and the task implied within it (or to put it another way, the mission of God and his people) embraces more than Middle Eastern geopolitics, ancient or modern.

> It therefore invites us to look forward and to pray for the coming of the day when nations such as Egypt (and we can then add our own nation) revere God, when its cities (and we can then add our own city) acknowledge Yahweh, when such nations have a salvation history parallel to Israel's, when the great powers are united in worship, and when the promise to Abraham indeed comes true.[47]

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[45]Begg, "The Peoples and the Worship of Yahweh," p. 42.

[46]"The day that Egypt and Assyria are at peace with one another and with Israel will be the day the whole world is at peace." Barry Webb, *The Message of Isaiah,* The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, U.K.: Inter-Varsity Press; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996), p. 96.

[47]John Goldingay, *Isaiah,* New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrikson; Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster, 2001), p. 121.

Then comes the final surprise:

> In that day Israel will be the third, along with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing on the earth. The LORD Almighty will bless them, saying, "Blessed be Egypt my people, Assyria my handiwork, and Israel my inheritance. (Is 19:24-25)

The identity of Israel will be *merged* with that of Egypt and Assyria. In case the implication of verse 24 was not clear enough, the prophet makes it unambiguous (not to mention scandalous) by applying to Egypt and Assyria descriptions that hitherto could only have been said about Israel. In fact, the word order in Hebrew is more emphatic and shocking than the NIV translation. It reads literally: "Blessed be my people, Egypt[!], and the work of my hands, Assyria[!], and my inheritance, Israel." The shock of reading "Egypt" immediately after "my people" (instead of the expected Israel) and of putting Israel third on the list is palpable. Yet there it is. The archenemies of Israel will be absorbed into the identity, titles and privileges of Israel and share in the Abrahamic blessing of the living God, YHWH.

Of course, they will not be absorbed into God's people in this way while they remain enemies. The transformation that is explicit about Egypt must also be assumed about Assyria. It is only as God's enemies cry out to him, acknowledge him, worship him and turn to him (vv. 20-22) that they enjoy rescue, healing, blessing, and inclusion. That was as true for rebellious Israel as for their traditional enemies. But that indeed is what the converting love and power of God will accomplish—for the nations as for Israel. That is God's mission. God is in the business of turning enemies into friends, as Saul of Tarsus knew better than most. It is very possible that his triple expression of the inclusion of the Gentiles within the identity and titles of Israel (as coheirs, a cobody and cosharers with Israel) in Ephesians 3:6 owes something to this verse in Isaiah.

Accepted in God's house. Isaiah 56:3-8 is unusual in being addressed not to nations as wholes but to individual foreigners, along with eunuchs, two groups of people who, in the community to which these words were addressed, feared exclusion from God's people. Their fears were well grounded, for laws such as Deuteronomy 23:1-8 show that castrated males and certain categories of foreigner were indeed denied access to the holy assembly of Israelites at worship.

Among the ancillary reasons for this exclusion may well have been the strong criterion for covenant membership in preexilic Israel of belonging within a landowning household. *Kinship* (belonging to the ethnic tribal structure of Israel) and *land* (sharing in the inheritance of YHWH's land) were key elements in one's

identity and inclusion within Israel.[48] The eunuch could have no family, for, as he bemoaned, "I am only a dry tree" (Is 56:3). And the foreigner could have no stake in the land since it was divided up exclusively among the tribes, clans and households of Israel.

These crippling deficiencies are here directly addressed by God. The eunuch will have "a memorial and a name" better than any family could give him. The foreigner will be brought to God's holy mountain—symbolic of having a rightful share in the land as a whole. They will, in short, fully belong to the citizenry of Israel.

And on what conditions are such promises made? Precisely the same conditions that applied to Israel's own continued enjoyment of the privilege of being the people of YHWH, namely, wholehearted covenant *loyalty* to YHWH, exclusive *worship* of him, and careful *obedience* to his laws (Is 56:4-6). As has been said, the definition of Israel here is subtly developing from a *chosen* people to a *choosing* people.

> These [foreigners] I will bring to my holy mountain
> and give them joy in my house of prayer.
> Their burnt offerings and sacrifices
> will be accepted on my altar;
> for my house of prayer will be called
> a house of prayer for all nations. (Is 56:7)

It is not difficult to imagine the growing sense of shock and scandal among the native inhabitants of Jerusalem as the divine invitation draws the foreigner ever closer to the very heart of Israel's exclusive holiness.

> Foreigners will be brought to the holy mountain.
> That's close enough surely?
> No, God will give them joy right in the temple.
> But in its outer courts, perhaps?
> No, they can bring their sacrifices right up to the altar.

Nothing that was available to *Israelite* worshipers will be denied to *foreigners* willing to commit themselves to Israel's God. If they accept the terms of covenant membership, they will be accepted at the heart of the covenant relationship. They will find joy in the house of the Lord—the joy of identity and inclusion.

Once again, it is very probable that Paul's mind is saturated with the dynamic

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[48]See further on this whole nexus of theology, economics and ethics: Christopher J. H. Wright, *God's People in God's Land: Family, Land and Property in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990).

of these verses as he wrote these words to the beneficiaries of their fulfillment:

> Remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who were once far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. (Eph 2:12-13)

And it is very hard to imagine that Luke did not have this text of Isaiah in mind, with some ironic sense of humor no doubt, when he recorded that the first believer in Jesus from outside the native Jewish community was indeed a *foreigner,* a *eunuch*, and was reading the scroll of Isaiah, just a few column inches from this passage. Luke is careful to point out, however, in line with his understanding of the fulfillment of all such promises in Christ, that the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8, though he had indeed been to Jerusalem to worship, found joy, not in the *temple* but when he heard about *Jesus,* trusted and was baptized, and went on his way rejoicing. Jesus is the one through whom people of all nations will be accepted in God's house of prayer for all nations. Mission means bringing the nations to find joy in the house of the Lord by bringing them to the one who embodies that house in his own person and the community of believers.

Called by God's name. Amos 9:11-12 brings the book of Amos to a startling close. After the fires of judgment, destruction and exile that have dominated the whole book so far, the final note is one of hope. Beyond judgment, there lie restoration and renewal in the plans of God. Since other preexilic prophets could combine oracles of judgment and hope, there seems no compelling reason to snip these verses out of Amos's prophecy and assign them elsewhere.

What is striking is that just as Amos began in the international arena, so he ends there. Amos 1—2 portrays the chaotic wickedness of the surrounding nations—of course, Israel is no better—and YHWH's thundering word of coming wrath. These final verses portray the restoration not only of the Davidic kingdom and temple (remembering Amos was from Judah, even though his prophetic ministry took place in the northern kingdom) but also of "the remnant of Edom and all the nations that bear my name."[49]

The great surprise here is the combination of a plural word *nations* with the concept "called by my name." Only one nation, surely, could be legitimately de-

[49]Regarding "Edom," the LXX reads "Adam" instead of "Edom" (the Heb. consonants are the same) and thus takes it as "remnant of humankind." This is an understandable and possibly correct reading, and would fit with the universal note of "all the nations." It is certainly the form of the text that is used by James in Acts 15:17.

scribed in that way. The expression "called by the name of" denotes ownership and intimate relationship. In ordinary use, it expressed the longing of anxious women to belong to a husband (Is 4:1), or the close, authenticating relationship of a prophet to his God (Jer 15:16).

But in significant theological usage "being called by YHWH's name" applied to the central focal points of Israel's unique relationship with YHWH. The ark of the covenant was called by his name (2 Sam 6:2). So was the temple itself on the day of its dedication, and Solomon prayed that "all the people of the earth" would come to know it (1 Kings 8:43). Jerusalem, worthily or not, was the city that was called by YHWH's name (Jer 25:29). Most significant of all, it was at the heart of God's covenant blessing on Israel that they would be the people who were called by his name.

> The LORD will establish you as his holy people, as he promised you on oath, if you keep the commands of the LORD your God and walk in his ways. Then all the peoples on earth will see that you are *called by the name* of the LORD, and they will fear you. (Deut 28:9-10, emphasis added)

Indeed, this was precisely one of the distinguishing marks of Israel, for the foreign nations of Israel's own day could be lumped together simply as those had *never* been called by YHWH's name (Is 63:19).

So what is Amos saying? Nothing less than that this great privilege, which the nations were supposed to recognize about the temple and about Israel, would actually be seen to be true of the nations themselves. This is an eschatological reversal of status.

As in the other texts we have already observed, this is also the language of inclusion and identity. To be called by the name of YHWH was the luggage tag on the ark, the dedication plaque on the temple, the map reference of Jerusalem and the lapel badge of every Israelite. It was the defining privilege of only one people on earth—Israel—to be known as "the nation called by the name of YHWH." Now, declares the prophet, this identity will be available to people of "all nations." How more included could you get?

The nations who stood under God's judgment with Israel in Amos 1—2 now stand under God's blessing with Israel in these closing verses. The very concept of "Israel" has been stretched to include them in the key designation: "called by my name."

Isaiah 44:1-5 is another unusual text in speaking of individuals rather than nations as wholes. The context is God's promise to Israel in exile that they will not wither and die out there. On the contrary, God has plans of future growth for his people, under the irrigating and fertilizing power of his Spirit. Within that

vision, the prophet describes individual conversions to YHWH.[50]

> One will say, "I belong to the LORD";
> another will call himself by the name of Jacob;
> still another will write on his hand, "The LORD's,"
> and will take the name Israel. (Is 44:5)

So the growth of Israel will not just be biological (as the predominant imagery evokes) but also by extension and conversion. Foreigners will join Israel by the double act of identifying themselves with YHWH and with YHWH's people—Israel. There is no belonging to one without the other, but membership is clearly open to those who choose it. Being called by God's name, then, is both an eschatological vision for the *nations* (as in Amos), but it is also a personal choice and action for the *individual.* A biblical theology of mission, of course, comfortably includes both.

Joined with God's people. Zechariah 2:10-11 comes in the midst of a vision of encouragement to the postexilic people of Jerusalem. In contrast to the program initiated by Nehemiah, this prophet says that the city will not need walls, partly because its influx of new inhabitants will be so many and partly because God himself will be a wall of fire around them (Zech 2:3-5). Their enemies who had plundered them will themselves be defeated and plundered (2:8-9). Then the King will come home to dwell once more among his people.

> "Shout and be glad O Daughter of Zion. For look, here I am coming, and I will reside in the midst of you," declares the LORD. "Many nations will join themselves to YHWH in that day. And they will be for me for a people. And I will reside in the midst of you." (Zech 2:10-11, author's translation)

So the prophet's message for the nations was not one of destructive judgment only but also, beyond that, of inclusion in God's people. And the prophet's message for Israel was not one of exclusive favoritism at the hand of God but of an expansion that would include not only their own returning exiles, but also people of "many nations."

The repeated line "I will reside in the midst of you" is important, both in content and position. It is the word *šākan,* strongly associated with God's taking up residence in the tabernacle and then the temple. The related noun is *šĕkînâ,* the

[50]Some take Is 44:5 as referring not to foreigners but to apostate Israelites returning to the fold in repentance and renewed allegiance. This is possible, but it seems to strain the text. Strictly speaking, no native-born Israelite needed to say what the speakers in this verse affirm. So it makes much more sense, in my view, to regard the words as being spoken by non-Israelites who chose to identify themselves with YHWH and his people through the use of these formulae.

tabernacling presence of God among his people. So the first use of the phrase in Zechariah 2:10 is a word of hope to the postexilic community, in line with the visions of Ezekiel, that God would return to Zion to take up residence once again in the city and temple he had so grievously left. But the second identical use comes after the prediction of the influx of the nations to join themselves to YHWH. And this repetition seals the affirmation of inclusion that has already been signalled in other ways.

First, the nations will join themselves to YHWH—not merely to Israel. In other words, they do not join merely as subordinates of Israel, in some second-class citizenship. They will belong to YHWH just as Israel does (as we saw in Ps 47).

Second, they will enjoy exactly the same covenantal relationship with YHWH that Israel does. The expression "they will be for me for a people" is precisely the language of the covenant, with its roots going back to Sinai, hitherto applied only to Israel. Significantly, although the nations are plural (as is the verb "they will be"), the predicate is singular, *"a people."* This is not "Israel plus the nations" but "the nations as Israel," one people belonging to God.

So, when the phrase "I will reside in the midst" is repeated after the predicted joining of the nations, it significantly does not change the final suffix to "in the midst of *them,*" but retains *"you"*—the second person feminine singular of the original reference to Zion. "You," Zion, remain the dwelling place of God, but "you" are no longer going to be merely a community of returned Jewish exiles. "You," Zion, will become a multinational community of people from many nations, all of whom will belong to YHWH, and therefore they will be rightly counted as belonging to Israel. God himself will dwell in the midst of "you," Zion of the nations (cf. Ps 87). The identity and membership of Israel have thus been radically redrawn by YHWH himself. It is no longer Zion *and* the nations but Zion inclusive of the nations.

Zechariah 9:7 shows the extent to which such a vision could be taken, within the contemporary international political scene of the day. Zechariah 9 begins with a whistle-stop tour of the map of west Asian countries, from north to south, beginning in the heights of Syria and ending in the Gaza strip (Zech 9:1-6). Everything under the flight path of the prophet's vision is placed under the searching eye and imminent judgment of YHWH.

But then, a sudden surprising word of hope intrudes in relation to the Philistines—*the Philistines*, of all people!

> I will take the blood from their mouths, the forbidden food from between their teeth. And the remnant, even it will belong to our God. And it will be like a clan in Judah, and Ekron will be like the Jebusites. (Zech 9:7, author's translation)

Again we find that judgment (in v. 6) is not God's final word for the nations, not even for a nation that had been such an inveterate enemy of Israel from time immemorial. Rather, they can be purged and cleansed of pagan practices. And, just like Israel itself after the purging fires of God's judgment, *a remnant will belong to "our God,"* that is, a remnant of the Philistines will belong to the God of Israel.

So the same hope is held out to the Philistines as to rebellious Israel, the hope of a faithful remnant. To this language of covenant inclusion ("belonging to our God") is added the language of economic inclusion in the land and social structure of Israel (remember the point in Is 56 that land and kinship were essential elements of Israelite identity and covenant inclusion in the Old Testament). The Philistines would become a clan of Judah(!), incorporated in the same way that the Jebusites, the original inhabitants of Canaanite Jerusalem, had been incorporated by David into his new kingdom.

Here is a remarkable word, then, showing the extent to which hope of the general inclusion of the nations within the identity of Israel could be dressed in the very particular garb of contemporary international politics—making it all the more sharply defined. If there is hope for the *Philistines,* there is hope for anybody. If God plans to include Philistines within Israel as part of a people "belonging to our God," who can be excluded?

We need to pause for breath. As we look back over the road we have trodden in this chapter, we must acknowledge the sheer scale of the vistas it has opened up for us. Admittedly, we have collated texts from a wide variety of canonical sources and have not sought to labor their historical, literary or social contexts. However, the scope and volume of the textual witness we have heard is surely impressive. The variety of date and canonical location also makes its own point. From early texts through to the postexilic period we find evidence of a settled conviction in Israel about the relationship between their God and the rest of the nations of the world. Here is an element in the core worldview that shaped the life and thought of this people as firmly embedded, if not as prominently paraded, as the other fundamental aspects of their understanding of themselves, their God and their world.

We have seen that the pillars of Israel's worldview included their *election* by YHWH in Abraham, their *redemption* at the exodus, the *covenant* relationship in which they stood with this God, and the *ethical* response of holiness in life and worship that this relationship demanded. All of these things they believed to be true of themselves in a unique way that did *not* apply to other nations. And yet, they also knew that their Redeemer God was also the Creator of the whole universe, *including* all other nations. So they articulated a theological perspective

on those nations that has robust coherence, blending historical realism (the current exclusion of the nations from the experience of Israel) with astonishing eschatological optimism (the ultimate inclusion of the nations in everything that Israel believed about themselves).

According to this broad viewpoint, all nations of the world were created by YHWH, stand under his government in their historical affairs, are accountable to him morally and especially for the doing of justice. Like Israel, however, all nations have fallen short of the glory of God and stand in the same default position: under God's judgment. That judgment will come as surely on the nations as it fell on Israel. But beyond judgment there is hope, for there is always hope with the God of Israel.

So just as the remnant of Israel experienced the miraculous and restorative grace of God in their own historical return from the grave of exile, so ultimately the remnant of the nations will turn to the only saving God, YHWH. Rejecting all false gods, they will join Israel in bringing their worship to YHWH alone. And as they do so, God himself will bind them into covenant relationship, such that the distinction between Israel and the nations will eventually be dissolved in a multinational community belonging to YHWH and living in a relationship of blessing with him, in fulfillment of the great covenantal initiative established through the promise to Abraham. The distinctiveness of Israel from the nations within their Old Testament history was essential to the mission of God. But the mission of God was that the distinction would ultimately be dissolved as the nations flowed into unity and identity with Israel. Only the New Testament gospel would show how that *could* happen. And only New Testament mission would show how it *did* and will continue to happen until their ingathering is complete.

15

God and the Nations in New Testament Mission

At the end of chapter fourteen I outlined the broad contours of Israel's understanding of the nations within their core worldview convictions about God and the world. This is the sturdy foundation of conviction on which Jesus and his earliest followers built an edifice that has come to be called the mission of the church. For, as they must have reasoned:

1. if the God of Israel is the God of the whole earth
2. if all the nations (including Israel) stood under his wrath and judgment
3. if it is nevertheless God's will that all nations on earth should come to know and worship him
4. if he had chosen Israel to be the means of bringing such blessing to all nations
5. if the Messiah is to be the one who would embody and fulfill that mission of Israel
6. if Jesus of Nazareth, crucified and risen, is that Messiah
7. then it is time for the nations to hear the good news

It was time for the repeated summons of Psalms that the news of YHWH's salvation should be proclaimed and sung among the nations, and for the vision of the prophets that YHWH's salvation should reach the ends of the earth, to move from the imagination of faith into the arena of historical fulfillment.

A Missions Mandate in the Old Testament?

The logic did not all just tumble together quite like that, however; certainly not at first. When the centrifugal dynamic of the early Christian missionary move-

ment finally got under way, it was indeed something remarkably new *in practice if not in concept.* There were precedents, of course, in the Jewish proselyte efforts. But the scale and theological rationale of the mission to the Gentile nations that takes place in the New Testament goes beyond anything achieved in the proselytizing activities of Second Temple Judaism.[1]

We need to step back just one moment and ask whether the logic ought to have generated mission to the nations much earlier, that is, within the history of Old Testament Israel itself. There are those who think that it was indeed God's intention that the Israelites should have engaged in evangelistic centrifugal mission to the nations.

Walter Kaiser builds a strong case for his passionate conviction that Israel had, and knew it had, a duty to take its message of YHWH's salvation to the nations, calling them to trust, as they were supposed to do, in God's promised Seed, the one who would come in fulfillment of God's promises to Adam and Eve, to Abraham, and to David. Kaiser takes the many texts we cataloged in chapter fourteen not merely as a conviction about something God intended to do through Israel but something that Israel had a mandate to do there and then.[2]

However, it seems to me that there is no clear mandate in God's revelation to Israel over the centuries for them to undertake "missions," in our sense of the word, to the nations. If it had been the case that God intended that Israelites should travel to other nations to challenge their worship of other gods, to call them to ethical and religious repentance, to tell the story of all that YHWH had done in and for Israel, and then to lead them to trust in the promised Seed of Abraham for their salvation—if all this had been God's intention for Israel, one might have expected to find certain other lines of evidence. For example, in the Torah, while we have observed the implications of the designation of Israel as God's priesthood among the nations, there is no clear and explicit command that Israelites should *go* to the nations and exercise that priestly function there. There is no shortage of laws for how Israel was to live in their land as YHWH's

[1]There is considerable dispute, however, over how much of this Jewish proselytizing activity there actually was. For a positive missiological evaluation of the Jewish diaspora and proselytizing efforts, see Richard R. De Ridder, *Discipling the Nations* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1975), pp. 58-127. For a wide-ranging discussion of all the sources and secondary literature, see Eckhard J Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission,* vol. 1, *Jesus and the Twelve* (Leicester, U.K.: InterVarsity Press; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004), pp. 92-172.

[2]Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Mission in the Old Testament: Israel as a Light to the Nations* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000). Kaiser addresses many of the same texts we have surveyed in this book, and at a fundamental level we are in agreement on the strong missional message of the Old Testament. I am not yet convinced, however, of his interpretation of these texts as implying a missionary mandate that ought to have resulted in Israel engaging in centrifugal missions to the nations.

covenant partner in the midst of the nations. So if YHWH's intention had been that they were to organize missions to the nations, instructions to that effect would surely have been framed. But we find none.

And if actual missions to the nations had been a known covenantal obligation (which Israelites were expected to deduce from their narrative traditions of God's promises and the universalizing thrust of their worship songs), we might have expected explicit condemnation in the prophets for Israel's manifest *failure* to undertake such missionary activity, especially if it were such a key and conscious element in Israel's understanding as Kaiser implies. The prophets found no shortage of things to condemn Israel for. Failure to *live* by the standards of their covenant with YHWH among the nations was certainly one of them. But failure to take the message of salvation to the nations by physically *going* to them is not one of them. This suggests that nobody at that point was under the impression that they were supposed to go, including those who stood closest to the mind and revelation of God.

Jonah, of course, is an exception to this principle, but to use him in support of an alleged missionary mandate in the Old Testament begs the hermeneutical question of the book's intention, which is notoriously controverted.[3] The book clearly teaches important lessons about the nature of God and his attitude to outside nations; that is the obvious thrust of the final chapter. It clearly challenges the kind of attitude that Jonah adopts in reaction to God's suspension of judgment on Nineveh. But whether it was written with the additional intention of persuading other Israelites to be foreign missionaries like Jonah, though perhaps with less recalcitrance and sulking anger at the mercies of God, is altogether more questionable.

What we find rather is the clear promise that it is *God's* intention to bring such blessing to the nations, that *God* will summon the nations to himself in the great pilgrimage to Zion. Mission to the nations, from an Old Testament perspective, is an eschatological act of God, not (yet) a missionary sending agenda for God's people. Only in Isaiah 66 is there explicit word of God sending messengers to the nations, and that is as a future expectation contingent on the ingathering of Israel first.

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[3]Jonah was not, however, the only prophet to go to a foreign nation. Elijah went to the region of Tyre and Sidon to stay with the widow of Zarephath, who subsequently became a believer in YHWH. Elisha, after his encounter with Naaman (who also became a believer after his healing in Israel), went for a while to Damascus, capital of Syria (2 Kings 8:7-15). What he was doing there we are not told, but the text gives no hint of anything resembling evangelism. These accounts certainly show the blessing of God being extended to foreigners (as Solomon had prayed and as Jesus pointedly reminded his audience in Nazareth), but they scarcely take the form of organized missions to them or constitute evidence that such activity was expected of ordinary Israelites. See also, Walter A. Maier III, "The Healing of Naaman in Missiological Perspective," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 61 (1997): 177-96.

What we also find, however, is that Israel definitely had a sense of mission, not in the sense of *going* somewhere but of *being* something. They were to be the holy people of the living God YHWH. They were to know him for who he is, to preserve the true and exclusive worship YHWH, and to live according to his ways and laws within loyal commitment to their covenant relationship with him. In all these respects they would *be* a light and a witness to the nations.

I agree, therefore, with the views of Eckhard Schnabel and Charles Scobie.

> [It is] difficult, if not impossible, to speak of a universal task, or commission of Israel. As I understand the OT, it seems quite clear that the "mission" that YHWH gave to Israel—to worship him and to do his will in thankful and joyous obedience to the covenant stipulations—was a *local* mission, that is a task carried out by the Israelites within the borders of Israel. What is *universal* are the consequences of Israel's obedience—in the future eschaton.[4]

Scobie, having surveyed some of the material we have explored in this chapter, concludes:

> Despite this remarkable set of passages the fact remains that there is no real indication of any active missionary outreach on the part of Israel in the Old Testament period. This is so for three important, interlocking reasons.
>
> Firstly, the ingathering of the nations *is an eschatological event*. It is something that will happen "in the latter days." . . . Thus the Gentiles will be fully accepted, but not in the present; this is an event which belongs to God's future.
>
> Secondly, the ingathering of the nations *is not the work of Israel*. Frequently it is the nations themselves who will take the initiative. In a number of significant passages it is God who gathers the nations. . . .
>
> Thirdly, these prophetic passages all envisage *the nations coming to Israel, not Israel going to the nations*. . . . This movement from the periphery to the centre has been appropriately labelled "centripetal."[5]

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[4]Eckhard J Schnabel, "Israel, the People of God, and the Nations," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 45 (2002): 40. Cf. also Schnabel's very thorough treatment of the Old Testament material and survey of relevant scholarship on it in the first part of his magisterial study, *Early Christian Mission,* 1:55-91.

[5]Charles H. H. Scobie, "Israel and the Nations: An Essay in Biblical Theology," *Tyndale Bulletin* 43, no. 2 (1992): 291-92. My only quarrel with Schnabel and Scobie in these quotes is that they downplay the element of Israel's conviction about the nations that is (over-)emphasized by Kaiser, namely, the prominent theme in the Psalms of proclamation among the nations of all the works of YHWH. This seems to me to envision more than "local" mission, in terms of the universal significance of the revelation entrusted to Israel, even though I continue to hold that such language belongs to the rhetoric of faith and hope rather than that the psalmists were offering themselves or calling on others to enlist as missionaries who would go and do that proclaiming among the nations.

When we turn the page from Malachi to Matthew, however, we have landed in a totally different world. We find the same understanding of God's ultimate mission to the nations that we have seen breathing so pervasively through the Old Testament. But we now also find that it has been transformed from what Schnabel calls a missionary *idea* into energetic missionary *praxis*.

> In the beginning was Jesus. Without the person of Jesus of Nazareth, the messianic Son of Man, there would be no Christians. Without the ministry of Jesus there would be no Christian missions. Without Christian missions there would have been no Christian Occident. The first Christian missionary was not Paul, but Peter, and Peter would not have preached a "missionary" sermon at Pentecost if he had not been a student of Jesus for three years.[6]

With these bold words Eckhard Schnabel begins his massive study of the mission of the early Christian church. He goes on to trace, in a few stokes, how rapidly the movement spread, from 120 people in A.D. 30 in Jerusalem to a community that was causing a stir in Rome nineteen years later, when the emperor Claudius expelled all Jews from the city, and that within thirty-four years was troublesome enough to attract the persecution of the emperor Nero.

We too, then, must begin with Jesus and the Gospels, then look briefly at Luke's account of the early church in Acts, and finally at the apostle Paul. In each case, our purpose is to see how their scriptural understanding of God and the nations affected the way they conceived their participation in the mission of God. We want to see how the New Testament picks up and brings to fruition all the theology and expectation of the Old Testament in relation to God and the nations.

Jesus and the Evangelists

What were the aims of Jesus?[7] What did he set out to do? How did he understand

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[6]Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission,* 1:3. By "Christian Occident," of course, Schnabel is referring to the historical reality of the broad conversion of Europe over the post-New Testament centuries, not to present global realities. The phenomenal growth of the church around the world in the past century has turned the (inappropriately so-called) Christian West into a marginal minority of global Christianity. More than 75 percent of all the world's Christians now live in the global south—or the Majority World of Africa, Latin America and some parts of Asia.

[7]What follows is very summary and focuses on themes we have followed hitherto in this book, especially in chap. 14. More detailed accounts of the distinctive missional message of each of the Gospels can be found in chap. 2, "Matthew: Mission as Disciple-Making," and chap. 3, "Luke-Acts: Practicing Forgiveness and Solidarity with the Poor," David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1991); chaps. 9, 10, 11, 12, on Mark, Matthew, Luke-Acts and the Johannine literature, respectively, in D. Senior and C. Stuhlmueller, *The Biblical Foundations for Mission* (London: SCM Press, 1983); Andreas J. Koestenberger and Peter T. O'Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Mission* (Leicester, U.K.: Apollos, 2001); chaps. 4, 5, 6, 8, on Mark, Matthew, Luke-Acts and

his own personal mission, and what did he envision happening after his death? These are massive questions on which oceans of scholarly ink have been spilled. Fortunately there are some very helpful surveys of the relevant scholarship, and we need not rehearse here what is abundantly available elsewhere.[8]

One of the simplest ways in framing a reasonably coherent answer to the questions above is to observe what immediately preceded and what immediately followed Jesus' earthly ministry.

All the records agree that the ministry of Jesus began out of the ministry of John the Baptist, and that John's ministry was aimed at calling Israel to repentance in preparation for the coming of the Lord himself. That is, it was fundamentally a prophetic ministry seeking the restoration of Israel. Jesus identified himself with John's message and used it as the foundation of his own.

Then, very soon after Jesus' death and resurrection, we find his first followers crossing the boundaries of Jewish separateness from the Gentiles in order to share the good news about Jesus, supported and authenticated in doing so by manifestations of the Holy Spirit. Within a few short years, those who named Jesus as Lord and Savior had grown beyond the original group of convinced Jewish believers to include Hellenized Jews, then Samaritans, then Greeks, then people of many ethnic groups in Asia Minor and eventually had taken root in the cosmopolitan city of Rome itself.

In other words, Jesus' earthly ministry was launched by a movement that aimed at the restoration of *Israel.* But he himself launched a movement that aimed at the ingathering of the *nations* to the new messianic people of God. The *initial impetus* for his ministry was to call Israel back to their God. The *subsequent impact* of his ministry was a new community that called the nations to faith in the God of Israel.

This double dimension of the mission of Jesus needs to be kept in mind as we read the New Testament. It is consistent not only with the Old Testament passages we have surveyed, in which the eschatological scenario often included this sequence: Israel would be restored and then the nations would be gathered. Or, as in Zechariah 2 and Zechariah 9, the King (i.e., YHWH) would return to Zion (thus restoring his kingdom in their midst), and then the nations would be

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John, respectively, in Andreas J. Koestenberger, *The Missions of Jesus and the Disciples According to the Fourth Gospel: With Implications for the Fourth Gospel's Purpose and the Mission of the Contemporary Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

[8]In addition to the magisterial works of N. T. Wright, see also R. T. France, *Jesus and the Old Testament: His Application of Old Testament Passages to Himself and His Mission* (London: Tyndale, 1971); Ben F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1979); Eckhard Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission,* vol. 1; Ben Witherington III, *The Christolology of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990).

joined to his people. It also reflects what is known of Jewish hopes in the intertestamental period. Among the huge variety of eschatological scenarios found in the post-Old Testament literature, the dominant note is that of the redemption/restoration of Israel, but a subordinate note is also that, after the purging fires of judgment on the enemies of God, the way would be open for the ingathering of the nations as foreseen in the great canonical prophets.

Jesus and Gentiles. The Gospels record that Jesus deliberately limited his itinerant ministry and that of his disciples for the most part to "the lost sheep of Israel" (Mt 10:6; 15:24). But they also show some significant engagements with Gentiles and an awareness that the arrival of the kingdom of God through Jesus must affect the Gentiles also. When the following incidents and sayings are compiled, they show that it is simply false to say that Jesus had no interest in the world beyond his own Jewish people.[9]

The Roman centurion's servant (Mt 8:5-13; Lk 7:1-10). Jesus responds with astonishment to the determined faith of the centurion, commenting that it is greater than anything he has found within Israel. It may be that what was significant about the centurion's faith was not merely that Jesus could work miracles of healing. Rather it was precisely that he, a Gentile, believed that the compassion and healing of Jesus could reach across the divide between Jew and Gentile and touch a Gentile's servant. This was something that Jesus' own townsfolk at Nazareth had found too much to stomach. Jesus therefore uses his Gentile faith as an opportunity to point to the eschatological hope of the ingathering of the nations to the messianic banquet in the kingdom of God. Jesus is

[9]A particularly fine and detailed discussion of the relationship between the way Jesus confined his own and his disciples' ministry to the boundaries of Israel in his lifetime, and then released them into mission to the nations after his death and resurrection, showing the scriptural roots for precisely such a "split" mission, is provided by Joachim Jeremias, *Jesus' Promise to the Nations,* Studies in Biblical Theology (London: SCM Press, 1958; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982).

A shorter, but thought-provoking article on the same subject is T. W. Manson, *Jesus and the Non-Jews* (London: Athlone Press, 1955). Manson rejects the idea of liberal Christianity that the mission of Jesus was merely the promulgation of religious ideals to Jews and Gentiles, but rather the creation of a new community altogether, and this was the concern of the early church also. "It was the incorporation of Gentiles into the Christian body, not the inculcation of Christian ideas into Gentile minds, that was the live issue in the middle of the first century" (ibid., p. 6). "[Jesus' aim was] building up within Israel a body of men and women who were set free from chauvinistic nationalism from the ambition to impose Israelite ideals of faith and conduct on the rest of the world by force of arms; men and women set free from spiritual pride with its condescending readiness to instruct lesser breeds in the elements of true religion and sound morality; men and women who had learned in apprenticeship to Jesus how to accept the rule of God for themselves, and how to extend it to their neighbors at home and abroad by serving them in love. I think that Jesus saw the immediate task as that of creating such a community within Israel, in the faith that it would transform the life of his own people, and that a transformed Israel would transform the world" (ibid., p. 18).

probably combining here texts that spoke of the return of the diaspora Jews from all points of the compass (cf. Ps 107:3; Is 49:12), with the theme of the pilgrimage and worship of the nations (cf. Is 59:19; Mal 1:11). Certainly it shows that while Jesus limited his earthly mission predominantly to Jewish people, the ultimate horizon of his vision was much wider.

The Gadarene demoniac and the deaf-mute in Decapolis (Mt 8:28-34; Mk 5:1-20; Lk 8:26-39; Mk 7:31-35). The decision to cross over the Sea of Galilee came from Jesus himself, though he knew well that the other side of the lake was Gentile territory. The situation that confronts him there reeks of triple uncleanness. A large herd of unclean pigs is nearby; the man he meets lives in the unclean world of the dead; and the man is possessed by a legion of unclean spirits. But Jesus, far from being personally contaminated himself through his contact with such Gentile pollution, transforms it by his presence and word.

Jesus then takes the very unusual step of telling the healed man to spread the word about the mighty deeds and mercy of the Lord—which he proceeded to do with enthusiasm. He is in fact the first Gentile missionary to Gentiles, commissioned by Christ himself. Clearly his testimony bore fruit in the region, for on Jesus' next visit to the Decapolis (from which, remember, he had been begged to depart), people brought the man who was both deaf and dumb for healing, and it is highly probable, from its position in the narrative, that the feeding of the crowd of four thousand also took place on the Decapolis side of the lake—thus mirroring for the benefit of the Gentiles one of the most significant miracles through which Jesus demonstrated his identity to the Jews.

The Syro-Phoenician woman (Mt 15:21-28; Mk 7:24-31). Like the Roman centurion, the Syro-Phoenician woman is another Gentile who astonishes Jesus with the tenacity of her faith, even in the face of Jesus' reminder of the gulf that separated Jews from Gentiles. The positioning of the story is also richly significant. Both Matthew and Mark record the event in the wake of the dispute between Jesus and the Pharisees, and teachers of the law regarding clean and unclean food. In a radical reinterpretation, Jesus declares that the distinction between clean and unclean must be understood now in moral terms, not in terms of food; in terms of what comes out of the heart, not what goes into the mouth. "In saying this," comments Mark, "Jesus declared all foods 'clean' " (Mk 7:19).

But the clean-unclean distinction in Israel was fundamentally symbolic of the distinction between Israel and the nations. Accordingly, if Jesus abolished the distinction in relation to food (the symbol), then he simultaneously abolished the distinction in relation to Jews and Gentiles (the reality that the symbol pointed to). This makes it all the more significant that both Matthew and Mark

follow the dispute with two miracles for Gentiles (the woman of Tyre and the man in Decapolis) and probably a third (if the feeding of the four thousand took place on the Decapolis side of the lake). By word and action Jesus is pointing to the nations as the wider horizon of the saving power of God.

The prophetic sign in the temple (Mt 21:12-13; Mk 11:15-17; Lk 19:45-46). It is now widely agreed that Jesus' action in the temple was much more than a "cleansing." Rather it was a prophetic sign that predicted the imminent destruction of the temple itself.[10] This was certainly the primary charge on which the Jewish authorities sought his execution.

However, Jesus linked his action to two Scriptures that clarified his action and spoke of its wider significance. His quotation from Jeremiah 7:11 about the temple as a "den of robbers" comes from the famous sermon of Jeremiah in the first temple, predicting its destruction by YHWH himself because of the unrepentant wickedness of those who still claimed to worship God there. His other quotation from Isaiah 56:7 about God's intention that his temple should be "a house of prayer for all nations" shows that what was in Jesus' mind was not merely judgment on the present temple system but also that wider prophetic vision of "the universal significance of the presence of Yahweh in Israel."[11] His action was "the announcement of the 'hour of judgment' of the temple and its leaders, and the announcement of 'the hour of salvation for the nations' who henceforth independently of the temple, will worship the God of Israel."[12]

The parable of the tenants of the vineyard (Mt 21:33-46; Mk 12:1-12; Lk 20:9-19). All three synoptic Gospels record the parable of the tenants as a climactic parable of Jesus, with such a pointed ending and such a clear target (the current leaders of the Jewish people) that it precipitated the plans to arrest and charge him. It is clearly the story of Israel (seen as YHWH's vine or vineyard, a well-known Old Testament metaphor [cf. Is 5:1-7; Ps 80:8-19]). But the twist in the tale was that whereas the story would usually have been told in such a way as to have God eventually vindicate Israel and destroy all those external enemies who threatened his vineyard (as in Ps 80), Jesus tells it so that the real enemies of God, the owner of the vineyard, are those he has entrusted to look after it, namely, the Jewish leaders themselves. And worse, he predicts that the owner will take the vineyard out of the hands of those original stewards and entrust it instead to "a people who will produce its fruit" (Mt 21:43).

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[10]For this understanding, see especially, N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996), pp. 405-28.
[11]Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission,* 1:341.
[12]Ibid., p. 342.

Two points are important here. On the one hand, Jesus clearly points to an ending of the monopoly of the Jewish people on God's vineyard; others will be called in to serve God in his kingdom. On the other hand, there is only one vineyard, and God's purpose is for it to bear fruit. That was the mission of Israel. God seeks a people who will bear the fruit of lives lived before him in reflection of his own character of justice, integrity and compassion. That was the fruit Israel had failed to bear (cf. Is 5:7), which God will now seek from a wider company of "tenants." So these "other tenants," pointing toward the Gentiles whom God will call, are not installed in some other vineyard of their own to the abandonment of the original vineyard per se. No, God's plan is for his one and only vineyard—his own people. What is happening is the *extension* of its stewardship beyond the original Jewish "tenants" to the wider world of Gentiles, who will achieve for God his original purpose—the fruit of the vineyard.

The parable of the wedding banquet (Mt 22:1-10; Lk 14:15-24). The figure changes from Israel as a vineyard to Israel as the covenant partner with YHWH in the great banquet. But because the original invitees refuse to come, the invitation goes out to all and sundry to come to the wedding feast, so that it should be filled. The contours of the Gentile mission are already being sketched in.

The parable of Jesus refers to the great eschatological banquet that would include Jews and Gentiles. But in the meantime, actual meals here on earth became significant symbols of that unified fellowship. The question of who would eat with whom in "table fellowship" was of huge importance in the ancient world. (It has not lost its potency in many modern societies as well.) For Jews there was the matter of clean and unclean food laws. For both Jews and Gentiles, social and class networks were built around inclusion or exclusion from the table. Thus, for the early Christians the importance of eating together as a sign of unity in Christ was highly visible and very significant. Such table fellowship within the early church cut right across both the Jew-Gentile divide and also the social divide of economic status. A fascinating study of this theme in Luke-Acts by Hisao Kayama links it to Luke's concept of mission in both volumes. He concludes:

> The meal motif appears very frequently and conveys an important theological message in Luke-Acts. It is our understanding that it integrally relates to Luke's universalism, i.e. his global missionary program beginning in Jerusalem and extending to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). Luke finds himself in this global Christianity in which the Gentile Christians are also invited to the table as Gentiles. . . . The readers of Luke-Acts are reminded that Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners (Lk. 5:27-32; 7:34; 15:2). Jesus' table fellowship with sinners provides for Luke and his community a theological basis for a Christian table fellowship of Jews and Gentiles.

> . . . Christianity as a form of table fellowship was to reach out beyond Rome, further into Asia, even to the Far East, and unto the ends of the earth, challenging and liberating people from indigenous and cultural taboos.[13]

Good news to be preached to the nations (Mt 24:14; Mk 13:10). In his warnings to his disciples about the trials that lay ahead and his cautions about what could truly be regarded as a sign of the end, Jesus portrays the whole period as "birth pangs." That is to say, events such as he describes are not in themselves the end, but like the onset of labor they point to an inevitable outcome—a new birth of a new age. In the meantime, says Jesus, the messengers of Jesus will face all kinds of opposition and suffering. In spite of all that, the task must be accomplished. The "gospel must first be preached to all nations" (Mk 13:10).

The "must" in Jesus' prophecy here refers to the great scriptural drive, the inexorable mission of God to make his salvation known to all nations. Jesus is not setting a timetable; he is simply stating an order of events that lies within the prophesied plan of God.

> The time before the end, with its tribulations, is the time of missionary activity among the Gentiles and thus the time of the fulfillment of the old prophecies that anticipated the conversion of the nations. The term δεῖ (*dei,* "must") refers to God's plan for salvation history, to God's purposes of the time of the "last days": the assignment of the disciples is and remains, as an assignment given by Jesus, the universal proclamation of the gospel, even in precarious times and in dangerous situations.[14]

James W. Thompson takes a similar view, comparing Mark's use of the expression *prōton dei* ("must first [happen]") in Mark 13:10, on the one hand with the same words in Mark 9:11 regarding the necessity of the coming of Elijah before the messianic age, and on the other hand with Paul's clear conviction that "the fullness of the Gentiles" must come in before the end. Mission is thus an eschatological necessity, not only for Paul but for Jesus and the earliest community of disciples also.

> This community, believing that the end time had begun through the work of Christ, understood the universal mission as an eschatological necessity. Mark 13:10 is thus not a peripheral text to the New Testament understanding of mission. When this text is compared to the understanding of mission in other New Testament texts, notably in Paul, it is to be observed that the world mission was understood com-

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[13]Hisao Kayama, "Christianity as Table Fellowship: Meals as a Symbol of the Universalism in Luke-Acts," in *From East to West: Essays in Honor of Donald G. Bloesch,* ed. Daniel J. Adams (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1997), p. 62.

[14]Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission,* 1:346.

monly in the New Testament as an eschatological necessity and a precondition for the end.[15]

The postresurrection commission to the disciples (Mt 28:18-20; Lk 24:46-49; Jn 20:21). In the wake of all these indications in the body of the Gospels, it is not surprising to find the risen Jesus making fully explicit the universal implications of his identity as Messiah and his mission to Israel and the nations.

The language of the Great Commission (especially in Matthew) is steeped in Old Testament covenant vocabulary and concepts.[16] Jesus adopts the posture of the cosmic Lord, YHWH, himself; he sets down the stipulations of his new covenant partners, discipling, baptizing and teaching the nations; and then he concludes with the great covenant promise—his personal presence to the very end.

The limitations of Jesus' earthly ministry and the early mission trips of the disciples to the borders of Israel are now utterly removed. The Messiah is risen; the nations must hear and be drawn into covenant faith and obedience (Matthew), through repentance and forgiveness (Luke).

The evangelists and the Gentiles. To these events and sayings within the ministry of Jesus, we should add some of the hints that the evangelists themselves give of their understanding of the universal significance of Jesus for the nations, not just for the Jews.

The Gentiles in Jesus' genealogy. Both Matthew and Luke record genealogies for Jesus (the reconciliation of which is not my concern here). Luke indicates the universality of the significance of Jesus by tracing him back to "Adam, the son of God." Matthew does the same through tracing Jesus back to Abraham, the one through whom God promised blessing for all nations.

Matthew goes further by including within his list of fathers only four mothers (Mt 1:3, 5, 6). But each of those four mothers is a Gentile—Tamar (Canaanite), Rahab (Canaanite), Ruth (Moabite) and Bathsheba (Hittite). Jesus, the Messiah of Israel had Gentile blood in his veins also.

The international aspects of Jesus' infancy. Matthew portrays the international significance of Jesus by recording first how Magi came from the east to worship him, and then how Joseph took Mary and Jesus west, to Egypt. Luke

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[15]James M. Thompson, "The Gentile Mission as an Eschatological Necessity," *Restoration Quarterly* 14 (1971): 27.

[16]For a very comprehensive study of the universal and missional thrust of Matthew's Gospel as a whole and its consistency with both Pauline and Old Testament theology, see James LaGrand, *The Earliest Christian Mission to "All Nations" in the Light of Matthew's Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995). A more popular but usefully comprehensive survey of the same thing can be found in Martin Goldsmith, *Matthew and Mission: The Gospel Through Jewish Eyes* (Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster, 2001).

sets the birth of Jesus within the context of the decree of Augustus that "all the world" *(oikoumenē)* should be censused (Lk 2:1 KJV). He emphasizes the promise to Abraham with its implicit universal thrust (Lk 1:55, 73) and puts the words of universality into the mouth of Simeon, who recognizes in Jesus, not only the "glory" of Israel but also the "light" to enlighten the Gentiles (Lk 2:30-32). Simeon also observes that the work of salvation now beginning through the infant in his arms will take place "in the sight of all people"—an Old Testament term for the witness of the nations. So when Luke moves on in his second volume to the story of the Gentile mission, "the mission to the nations in Acts is thus the continuation and fulfillment of Jesus' own divinely appointed destiny."[17]

The editorial summaries of the international extent of Jesus' influence. Though we might be tempted to dismiss these short notes by the Gospel writers as merely local color, it is more likely that they are intentional signals of the wider impact of Jesus. His ministry was not actually confined to the borders of Israel, even if that was what he primarily wanted. For his fame spread far and wide, and representatives of the nations came to know and to benefit from his ministry. These notes are found in Matthew 4:24-25, Mark 3:7-8 and Luke 6:17-18. The geographical spread of the regions listed is substantial.

The confession of the centurion at the cross (Mt 27:54; Mk 15:39). Finally, both Matthew and Mark probably intend some irony in their crucifixion accounts at the point where, as the leaders of the Jews refuse to recognize the identity of Jesus and are intent on doing away with him, a representative of the Gentiles exclaims that "this man was the Son of God." While we cannot of course read into his statement a sudden burst of trinitarian illumination, and while he probably meant the words in the same way as he would have described the emperor Caesar as "a son of a god," it is still significant that a Roman soldier who owed allegiance to Caesar should actually speak such words of the one he had just nailed to a cross a few hours earlier. A Gentile recognizes the truth about the crucified one while Jewish leaders reject it. John probably intends the same irony in his account of Pontius Pilate's interchange with Jesus and the words Pilate eventually wrote on the inscription above Jesus' head. Even in sarcasm, Gentiles affirmed what his crucifiers denied.

The quotation of Gentile-focused Scriptures. Matthew's use of scriptural quotation in relation to Jesus is pervasive. Two in particular, not surprisingly drawn from Isaiah, link Jesus to prophecies of the inclusion of the Gentile na-

[17]James M. Scott, "Acts 2:9-11 as an Anticipation of the Mission to the Nations," in *The Mission of the Early Church to Jews and Gentiles,* ed. J. Adna and H. Kvalbein (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), p. 88.

tions in the redemptive purpose of God now being fulfilled through the Messiah. Thus Matthew 4:15-16 quotes Isaiah 9:1-2 in relation to Jesus going to live in "Galilee of the Gentiles." While Matthew 12:18-21 quotes Isaiah 42:1-4 in relation the ministry of God's Servant, which would extend to the nations.

The Early Church in Acts

At the very beginning of this book we observed how Luke, at the end of his Gospel, portrays the risen Jesus insisting that his disciples must now read their Scriptures (the Old Testament), both *messianically* and *missiologically*. The same Scriptures that point inexorably to the Messiah also point to the good news going to the nations. Luke continues this angle in his second volume, again and again showing how the Gentile mission is nothing more nor less than a fulfillment of the Scriptures, and especially of the prophecies of Isaiah.[18]

Even the overall structure of Luke's two-volume work expresses this underlying theology. It begins in Jerusalem and ends in Rome; from the heart of the faith of Israel (the temple) to the heart of the world of all the nations. That is the great arch that constitutes both the geographical progress and the theological dynamic of Luke's account of "the things that have been fulfilled among us." And it reflects the whole scriptural understanding that I have been elucidating in the preceding sections. The things that happen in Luke's story, from John the Baptist to Paul, are not just an exciting narrative. They are "things that have been fulfilled." They bring the whole Old Testament story of Israel to its climax and destination, as the purpose for which God created Israel in the first place—the blessing of all nations—now becomes a reality through the mission of the church.[19]

It would require much more space than we can take here to elucidate all the texts in which Luke's perspective on the nations is expressed or implied.[20] Some highlights are all I can present.

Peter and Philip. *Pentecost and after.* The early preaching of Peter, even before his encounter with Cornelius, indicates an awareness of the wider significance of the events of Easter and Pentecost. Even the list of peoples whom he addressed on the day of Pentecost probably has universalizing intention. James

[18]Thomas Moore considers that Luke's mind was saturated with Isaiah, and that he drew his whole conception of salvation history, including his understanding of what had happened in Jesus and was now happening in the mission of the church, from that prophet: " 'To the End of the Earth': The Geographical and Ethnic Universalism of Acts 1:8 in Light of Isaianic Influence on Luke," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40 (1997): 389-99.

[19]Cf. Ben F. Meyer, *The Early Christians: Their World Mission and Self-Discovery* (Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1986).

[20]Unquestionably, in my view, the most exhaustive and satisfying account is provided in Eckhard Schnabel's monumental study *Early Christian Mission*.

Scott links it, along with the allusions to Babel in Acts 2:2-4, to the Table of Nations in Genesis 10, and argues that "the Diaspora Jews who gathered in Jerusalem represent 'every nation under heaven' (Acts 2:5) and point to the universalistic thrust of the Book of Acts."[21] Accordingly, Peter's appeal to the crowd for repentance and baptism affirms that the promise of forgiveness is for "all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call" (which has echoes of Is 44:3 and Joel 2:32).

Similarly, in his preaching after the healing of the cripple at the temple gate, Peter proclaims the fulfillment of the words of the prophets, not just in bringing messianic blessing to Israel itself (which the healing in the name of Jesus demonstrated) but also in fulfilling the promise to Abraham, specifically that all peoples on earth will be blessed (Acts 3:25). Thus for Peter (and Luke) the *universality and particularity* of the Abrahamic covenant are now both embodied in Jesus of Nazareth. For he is the one through whom salvation is now available to *all* nations; but he is the *only* one to fill that role—not just for Israel but for all, for "salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). The phrase *under heaven* echoes the roll call of nations at Pentecost and indicates the universal claim that is being made.

Cornelius. It took angels and visions, however, to move Peter beyond theological conviction to practical action. A worldview shaped by a lifetime lived within the rules of Jewish food laws and the paradigm of segregation they symbolized was not easily set aside. The story of Cornelius, the god-fearing Roman centurion, in Acts 10—11 has often been described as the conversion of Peter as much as of Cornelius. Cornelius, as a "god-fearer" was already, in a sense, converted to the God of Israel, but he did not yet know of Jesus and the fulfillment of Israel's hopes in him. Peter had long ago confessed Jesus as "the Christ, the Son of the living God" and understood something of the universal significance of that. But it was only through the encounter with Cornelius and his testimony that he was converted to the recognition that "God does not show favoritism but accepts people from every nation" (Acts 10:34-35).

The mere fact that Luke devotes two chapters to tell the story and then to repeat it indicates how pivotal it was in his narrative. The astonished comments, first of Peter's companions and then of the Jerusalem church, make clear the significance of the moment: "the gift of the Holy Spirit has been poured out even on the Gentiles"; "God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life" (Acts 10:45; 11:18). The outpouring of the Spirit and granting of repentance and for-

[21]Scott, "Acts 2:9-11," p. 122.

giveness were among the key signs of the eschatological reign of God in the messianic age. If God were now granting these things to the nations, then that era must have dawned, with all its universal implications for the nations.

The Ethiopian eunuch. Even before Peter, however, Philip had engaged in evangelism beyond the boundaries of the strictly Jewish community—first in the remarkable mass movement in Samaria, and then in individual witness to the Ethiopian eunuch, in Acts 8.

We cannot be certain whether the Ethiopian court official was simply a god-fearing Gentile, through contact with Jews in Ethiopia who had gone to Jerusalem to worship (perhaps in addition to diplomatic duties), or whether he was actually a full proselyte. It depends on whether the description "eunuch" is intended literally as a castrated male (certain royal servants underwent this procedure; e.g., those place in charge of the royal harem) or is simply a synonym for a court official (as it sometimes was). If he were physically a eunuch, then according to the exclusion rule of Deuteronomy 23:1, he probably could not have been a circumcised proselyte. If on the other hand he were merely a royal servant with that official title, then he may well have been a proselyte and therefore no longer truly a Gentile (from an official Jewish point of view). It may be, then, that Luke indicates the steady progression of the gospel, from Jerusalem Jews to Samaritans to a *proselyte* Gentile (the Ethiopian), then to a *god-fearer* Gentile (Cornelius) and finally to the real Gentile world of Greeks and other nationalities (Antioch).

Whatever the true status of the Ethiopian, Philip wastes no time in pointing him through the words of Isaiah to their fulfillment in the crucified and risen Jesus of Nazareth. Luke undoubtedly saw in this event a fulfillment of the promise of God to eunuchs and foreigners in Isaiah 56. And he probably also records the event for the significance of the fact that, with this man's conversion, the gospel reaches south into Africa, the land of Ham. It was already reaching the lands of Shem. And soon, under Paul, it would go north and west to the lands of Japheth.[22]

James and the Jerusalem Council. The combination of Peter's mission to Cornelius and the success of the mission of the Antioch church in Asia Minor and Cyprus, through Paul and Barnabas, created a major theological problem. The first council of Jerusalem was summoned in A.D. 48 to resolve the issue and the ac-

[22]The interesting suggestion has been made that Luke deliberately portrays the spread of the gospel across the "map of the world" implicit in the Jerusalem-centered Jewish division of the nations into the sons of Noah—Ham, Shem and Japheth. See James M. Scott, "Luke's Geographical Horizon," in *The Book of Acts in Its Graeco-Roman Setting,* ed. David W. J. Gill and Conrad Gempf (Exeter, U.K.: Paternoster, 1994), pp. 483-544.

count of this crucial event in the early Christian mission is to be found in Acts 15.

The first thing that has to be said is that the issue in dispute was not the *legitimacy* of the Gentile mission per se. The question was not *whether* it was right to take the gospel to the Gentiles but *on what conditions and criteria* converting Gentiles could be admitted into the new fellowship of God's people. It is important to stress this because there are those who argue against the authenticity of the Gospel records of the Great Commission on the grounds that it appears to be unknown at this council of Jerusalem.

That is, according to this view, if Jesus had in fact ever spoken the words attributed to him at the end of Matthew and Luke (namely, an explicit command to go to the Gentiles), then that would have been a clinching argument for James, Peter or Paul to appeal to against the more conservative Jewish Christians and their scruples.[23]

However, this misunderstands the situation in Acts 15. The news of the conversion of Gentiles was received with *joy* (v. 3), while the missionary apostles were also *welcomed* in Jerusalem (v. 4). The issue was not the legitimacy of seeking to bring the Gentiles to faith and conversion; it was whether converting Gentiles could be accepted into the church without circumcision and observance of the law (i.e., without becoming proper proselytes to Judaism). The conservative Jewish believers wanted to insist that this must be the case. The apostles (including Peter and James along with Paul) argued that the new reality inaugurated by the Messiah rendered proselyte requirements unnecessary.

This issue (the terms of conversion) would not have been resolved merely by an appeal to the command of Jesus to go to the Gentiles. Both sides in the debate would have accepted and agreed on that: the good news must go to the Gentiles and they must be brought into obedient discipleship. The question was, What did such discipleship entail, and what were the entry requirements? Did the Gentiles have to become Jews as well as believe in Jesus?

> We would surely be wrong if we blamed the Jewish Christians who demanded circumcision for Gentile believers for disregarding the promises to the Gentiles in the Holy Scriptures. They definitely acknowledged these promises, but . . . interpreted them as a call to become circumcised, Law-obeying proselytes.[24]

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[23]This is the line taken by Alan Le Grys, *Preaching to the Nations: The Origin of Mission in the Early Church* (London: SPCK, 1998). The negative skepticism and historically dubious reading of the New Testament offered in this book needs to be countered by the massive analysis of Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*.

[24]Jostein Adna, "James' Position at the Summit Meeting of the Apostles and Elders in Jerusalem (Acts 15)," in *The Mission of the Early Church to Jews and Gentiles,* ed. Jostein Adna and Hans Kvalbein (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), p. 148.

The second major point to note in this account is how carefully James puts together several prophetic texts in an exegetical argument of considerable skill and subtlety. The major text, of course, is Amos 9:11-12, but around this are echoes also of Hosea 3:5 ("after these things," referring to the eschatological return to the Lord and restoration of Davidic rule), Jeremiah 12:15 (the promise that other nations can be built in to live in the midst of God's people), and Isaiah 45:21 (that God had declared long ago his intention to bring in the Gentile nations). Within this framework James quotes Amos 9:11-12, which looks forward on the one hand to the restoration of the "David's fallen tent" (which almost certainly was understood to refer to the eschatological temple, namely, the messianic people of God), and on the other hand to the inclusion of Gentiles as those who now "bear [the LORD's] name"—that is, who are counted as belonging within Israel simply as Gentiles, not as having become proselyte Jews.

The fullest and most satisfying study of this complex text has been made by Richard Bauckham. His conclusions are clear and convincing. The early Christian community regarded itself as the eschatological temple that Jesus had said he would build. Unlike the physical temple, Gentiles could be admitted into this new messianic temple without the requirements of proselytism, and Scriptures could be adduced to prove the legitimacy, the antiquity even, of this interpretation.

> Acts 15:16-18 is not the only text that associates the inclusion of the Gentiles in the eschatological people of God with an interpretation of the eschatological Temple as the eschatological people of God. Eph. 2:11-22 and 1 Pet. 2:4-10 do the same. . . . It must have been a critically important association of ideas. The Temple was the heart of Israel. It was where God's people had access to God's presence, whereas Gentiles, allowed only into the outer court of the Second Temple, were banned, on pain of death, from the sacred precincts themselves. A people of God defined by and centred on this Temple as the place of God's dwelling with them could not include Gentiles unless they became Jews. But numerous prophecies portrayed the Temple of the messianic age as a place where the Gentiles would come into God's presence (Ps. 96:7-8; Isa. 2:2-3; 25:6; 56:6-7; 66:23; Jer. 3:17; Mic. 4:1-2; Zech. 14:16; 1 Enoch 90:33). If these were understood to refer to Gentiles *as Gentiles,* rather than to Gentiles as proselytes, the early church's self-understanding as itself the eschatological Temple, the place of God's presence, could accommodate the inclusion of Gentiles in the church, without their becoming Jews by circumcision and full observance of the Mosaic law. It is therefore entirely plausible that Amos 9:11-12, interpreted as a prophecy that God would build the eschatological Temple (the Christian community) so that Gentiles might seek his presence there, should have played a decisive role in the Jerusalem church's debate and decision about the status of Gentile Christians. . . .
>
> The significance of Amos 9:12, especially in the LXX, is very close to Zech. 2:11

> (Heb. 2:15): "Many nations shall join themselves . . . to YHWH on that day, and shall be my [LXX his] people." But whereas this verse might more readily be understood to mean that the Gentiles will join the people of God as proselytes, Amos 9:12 says that the nations *qua* Gentile nations belong to YHWH. It is not implied that they become Jews, but that precisely as "all the nations" they are included in the covenant relationship. It is doubtful whether any other Old Testament text could have been used to make this point so clearly.[25]

Paul's adoption of the Servant mission. That Paul saw himself as God's eschatological apostle, commissioned to be the one to bring about the ingathering of the nations as portrayed in so many Old Testament Scriptures, needs no argument. The evidence is abundant. But in the book of Acts, Luke recounts a significant moment in Paul's early missionary journeys, when Paul presents a particularly rich scriptural justification for the direction of his mission strategy. Consistent with his policy of "to the Jew first," Paul normally went first to Jewish synagogues of the Diaspora when he arrived in a new city. Luke records what happened when he did so in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:14-48).

On the first sabbath, Paul gives a long scriptural sermon that leads up to Jesus. The message, Paul says, is both for the children of Abraham and god-fearing Gentiles. And the message is that in the resurrection of Jesus, God has fulfilled what he promised the fathers (Acts 13:32) and through him offers forgiveness of sins. A mixture of Jews and proselytes accept the word and become believers (Acts 13:43). But the next sabbath some of the Jews cause trouble and turn against Paul. This draws from Paul and Barnabas the following decisive answer:

> We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles. For this is what the Lord has commanded us:
>
> > "I have made you a light for the Gentiles,
> > that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth." (Acts 13:46-47)

Paul here is quoting from Isaiah 49:6, words originally spoken by God to his Servant in the second of the so-called Servant Songs. And he is taking these words as a personal mandate for himself in his missionary task. It is a bold hermeneutical step.

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[25]Richard Bauckham, "James and the Gentiles (Acts 15:13-21)," in *History, Literature, and Society in the Book of Acts,* ed. Ben Witherington III (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 167, 169. Cf. also Adna, "James' Position at the Summit Meeting." For a discussion of the exegesis and interpretation of this text in connection with contemporary debate over dispensational and Reformed understandings of Jews and Gentiles, see also, Walter C. Kaiser Jr., "The Davidic Promise and the Inclusion of the Gentiles (Amos 9:9-15 and Acts 15:13-18)," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 20 (1977): 97-111.

The Servant in Isaiah. The Servant passages in Isaiah 40—55 are exceedingly rich and beyond full exposition here. As a merest sketch of the flow of thought I might summarize the theme as follows.

Israel was called to be the Servant of YHWH, as a dimension of their election in Abraham (Is 41:8-10). However, the historical reality was that in exile Israel was a failed servant, blind and deaf to the works and words of God, and effectively paralyzed in relation to their mission for God (Is 42:18-25).

In a mysterious unveiling, God introduces his own Servant, whose identity seems to oscillate between a corporate embodiment *of* Israel and its mission, on the one hand, and an individual figure who has a mission *to* Israel and beyond, on the other. This figure will have as his primary mission the establishment of God's justice among the nations by means of a ministry of compassion, enlightenment and liberation (Is 42:1-9). He will be both a covenant for the people (which probably implies Israel) and a light for the nations (v. 6).

This double mission is made even more explicit in Isaiah 49:1-6, where, in response to the Servant's complaint that his mission to Israel is getting nowhere, the Servant receives from God the explicit commission to be a light to the Gentiles to bring God's salvation to the ends of the earth. So his mission to the nations does not *replace* his mission to Israel but is an *extension* of it.

Later Servant passages show how the Servant will suffer rejection and contempt (Is 50:4-11), and eventually this will culminate in a violent and unjust execution (Is 53). However, it will then be recognized that his suffering and death were actually on behalf of those who rejected him. God will vindicate him through resurrection, and he will finally be exalted and glorified and recognized by the nations.

Jesus as the Servant. Now it is clear from the Gospels that Jesus strongly identified himself with the Isaianic Servant, both in having his primary mission directed to Israel and in his willingness to lay down his life as an offering and ransom (using the language of Is 53). And it is equally clear that the early church in Acts also made that identification.

What Paul has perceived is that the dual mission of the Servant has, in a sense, been split chronologically. Jesus, Paul affirms, was indeed the "servant of the Jews." But the purpose was "to confirm the promises made to the patriarchs so that the Gentiles may glorify God for his mercy" (Rom 15:8-9). In other words, the mission of the Servant Jesus was indeed primarily aimed at the restoration of Israel—and that was what he accomplished in anticipation through the resurrection. But the extended mission of the Servant to the nations "to the ends of the earth" had obviously not been accomplished by Jesus in his earthly lifetime. It was, rather, a task that he had now entrusted to his servant church.

Paul and the Servant mission. So, in a leap of hermeneutical logic, Paul can take words from Isaiah, spoken by God to his *Servant,* which he knew ultimately applied to *Christ,* and read them as addressed to *himself* as the embodiment at that moment of the mission of the *church* to the nations. He interprets his own mission firmly within the framework of biblical salvation history and prophecy. The Servant had come, had died and had risen again. In that sense the primary mission of the Servant has been accomplished once and for all. But yet the remaining mission of the Servant—to bring God's salvation to the ends of the earth—goes on.

In the book of Acts, then, Luke presents some of the key apostles of the early Christian movement: Peter, James and Paul. And he shows them united in these great biblical and missiological convictions. All that the Old Testament Scriptures had envisioned of God's plans for the future of the nations in the eschatological age of salvation must be fulfilled. Since Jesus, through his cross and resurrection, is to be proclaimed and worshiped as Lord and Christ, that new age has now dawned. The redemption of Israel has begun, though it is not yet complete. The kingdom of God is here, though not yet in its final fullness. The eschatological temple is being rebuilt in the new community of God's people. And the nations are being gathered in to that new community through the preaching of the gospel and power of the outpoured Spirit of God.[26]

For Luke, all of this flowed from his understanding of the history of Israel. In a sense Luke was not writing the early history of the church. He was writing the climax of the history of Israel. The past, as recounted in the Scriptures, already held the promise of the future, a future which was now Luke's present. And in that history alone lay the salvation not only of Israel but of the world. That is why Luke includes two detailed accounts of the story of Israel (chaps. 7, 13), in both cases showing how only their destination in Christ could make sense of the story. And from the Scriptures, Luke shows that the new centrifugal phenomenon of *mission to the nations,* to the ends of the earth, was not some unheard of innovation but simply (in the words of Jesus) "what is written" (Lk 24:46-47) and (in the words of Paul) "nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen" (Acts 26:22).[27]

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[26]Even the role of the outpoured Spirit has missiological significance for Luke in relation to the fulfillment of Old Testament promises about the restoration of Israel. See John Michael Penny, *The Missionary Emphasis of Lukan Pneumatology,* Journal of Pentecostal Theology Supplements 12 (Sheffield, U.K.: Sheffield Acadamic, 1997).

[27]Cf. Jacob Jervell, "The Future of the Past: Luke's Vision of Salvation History and Its Bearing on His Writing of History," in *History, Literature and Society in the Book of Acts,* ed. Ben Witherington III (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 104-26. Also Thomas J. Lane, *Luke and the Gentile Mission: Gospel Anticipates Acts* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996).

The Apostle Paul

There is no need to rehearse the pervasive evidence of Paul's sense of identity and calling as the apostle to the Gentiles. His theology is replete with his understanding of how the climactic work of God in the Messiah Jesus has now opened the way for people of all nations to come to "the obedience of faith" and into covenant righteousness before God.[28]

It would be interesting to observe how some of what Paul has to say about the nations/Gentiles matches the outline that we traced in chapter fourteen regarding Old Testament expectations for the nations. This is not to suggest that Paul had any such framework consciously in mind as he formulated his reflections. Rather it is simply to say that the whole pattern of Paul's thinking was so shaped by the pattern of the Scriptures that almost any scheme we might devise to map those Scriptures would be seen to be reflected in Paul.

The nations are seeing what God has done. The witness of the nations to all that God did in Israel was a significant Old Testament theme. Paul (like Peter before the Sanhedrin) makes much of the fact that the events of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus were not "done in a corner" but were a matter of public record and witness, even among the Roman community. This is a feature of his various testimonies and defenses in the second half of Acts (e.g., Acts 26:26).

When commending new churches for their faith and zeal, Paul sometimes comments on the way they have become very visible to the outside world (1 Thess 1:8). At times this becomes a kind of geographical hyperbole, in which Paul can claim that the gospel has been preached "all over the world" (Col 1:6) "to every creature under heaven" (Col 1:23). Doubtless Paul was aware that this was not literally true, but it expresses for him the same kind of universal visibility of the acts of God among his people that one finds in the Old Testament also.[29]

And just as the Israelites were called to live lives of distinctive ethical holiness

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[28]On Paul's theology and practice of mission in general, see W. Paul Bowers, "Mission," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters,* ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne et al. (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993), pp. 608-19; David Bosch, *Transforming Mission,* chap. 4; the superb collection of essays in Peter Bolt and Mark Thompson, ed., *The Gospel to the Nations: Perspectives on Paul's Mission* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press; Leicester, U.K.: Apollos, 2000); Koestenberger, *Ends of the Earth,* chap. 7; Peter T. O'Brien, *Gospel and Mission in the Writings of Paul: An Exegetical and Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993; Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster, 1995); and the magisterial Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission,* vol. 2, *Paul and the Early Church* (Leicester, U.K.: Inter-Varsity Press; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004).

[29]For a helpful discussion of the missiological significance of Paul's rhetorical hyperbole in these texts, see Richard Bauckham, *The Bible and Mission: Christian Mission in a Postmodern World* (Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster, 2003), pp. 21-26.

in the sight of the nations, so Paul urges Christians to remember that they are being watched and need to behave in ways that commend the gospel (Phil 2:15; Col 4:5-6; 1 Thess 4:11-12; Tit 2:9-10; cf. 1 Pet 2:12).

The nations are benefiting from what God has done. When the Gentiles heard Paul's words in Acts 13:48 that God was directing his good news to them, "they were glad and honored the word of the Lord." The blessing that God had brought to Israel is now spilling over to the nations. This, of course, was always the mission of God in any case, as we have seen since the call of Abraham (Gen 12:1-3). Accordingly, Paul particularly links the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham in Christ with the benefits that have now come to the Gentiles. "He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit" (Gal 3:14).

The richest passage listing the benefits that have accrued to the nations through the work of God in Christ is undoubtedly Ephesians 2:11-22. From the picture of utter alienation from all that Israel possessed (v. 12), the passage goes on to show how the Gentiles have been become citizens of God's country (no longer foreigners and aliens), members of God's family (the house of Israel), and the place of God's dwelling (being built into his temple). All the rich benefits of Israel now belong to the nations, through Christ. God's missional purpose in blessing Israel is now bearing fruit in the blessing of the nations.

The nations are bringing their worship to God. *Centripetal or centrifugal?* It is often said that the major difference between the Old Testament and the New Testament in their concepts of mission is that the Old Testament is basically centripetal (the nations will come to Israel/Zion/YHWH), whereas the New Testament is basically centrifugal (the disciples of Jesus are to go out to the nations). There is an obvious level of truth in this broad assertion, but it is not entirely adequate.

On the one hand, there are centrifugal elements in the Old Testament vision also. While the nations are portrayed gathering in to the center, there are things that also go out to the nations: the law goes forth to the islands who wait for it; the Servant will bring justice to the nations; God's salvation is to go to the ends of the earth; God will send emissaries to the nations to proclaim God's glory.

And in the New Testament, on the other hand, while it is certainly true that the centrifugal commission of Jesus to go to the nations is a radical new departure, consistent with the dawning of the new age of salvation, the purpose of that *going out* is so that the nations might be *gathered into* God's kingdom, in fulfillment of the scriptural vision.

> The central affirmation of the New Testament . . . is that with the Christ Event the New Order has already dawned. The Old Testament promises are in process of being fulfilled. Christians are living in an interim period which already belongs to the end, and yet still forms part of "this present age." If the final victory still lies in the future, nevertheless God's reign has already been inaugurated. *Thus the time for the ingathering of the Gentiles is now,* even though this may only be fully accomplished at the final consummation.[30]

So the centrifugal mission of the New Testament church had its centripetal theology also: the nations were indeed being gathered in—not to Jerusalem or to the physical temple or to national Israel—but *to Christ* as the center and *to the new temple* of God that he was building through Christ as a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. Thus Paul can use the language of distance and nearness in his classic description of the transformation that faith in Christ has made to the location of the Gentiles. From being far away, on the periphery, alienated from all that God had done and promised in Israel, the Gentiles have now been "brought near" through the blood of Christ (Eph 2:11-22). So as the gospel goes out to the nations (centrifugal), the nations are gathered in to Christ (centripetal).

The offering of the nations. It is very probable that Paul saw in the collection he organized among his Gentile churches to take to the poverty-stricken believers in Jerusalem (1 Cor 16:1-4; 2 Cor 8—9; Rom 15:23-29; Acts 24:17) a token or symbol of the tribute of the nations as prophesied in the Old Testament. He invested a lot of energy, both theologically and logistically, in this act, which doubtless had straightforward charitable objectives as its primary motivation.

Certainly Paul saw it as a potent sign of the unity between Gentile and Jewish believers that he so staunchly affirmed. It would, he believed, result in thanksgiving among the Jerusalem Christians that these Gentile believers were manifesting such a tangible proof of their obedience to the gospel (2 Cor 9:12-13), which was precisely what the Old Testament had foreseen: the nations responding in obedience to the living God manifested through bringing offerings to his people.

> As the various groups of Gentiles gathered money and made their way to Jerusalem Paul must have seen this at least in part as a symbolic enactment of the eschatological tribute of the nations. . . . Old Testament prophecy is once again given a new twist for while the tribute of the Gentiles is brought to Jerusalem, it is not brought to the Temple, but rather to "the saints," to the community which now constitutes the eschatological temple.[31]

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[30]C. H. H. Scobie, "Israel and the Nations: An Essay in Biblical Theology," *Tyndale Bulletin* 43, no. 2 (1992): 297 (emphasis added).
[31]Ibid., p. 303.

Another strand in Paul's thinking on this matter, however, may have been to regard the *nations themselves,* with the worship they now bring, as an offering to God. In Romans 15 he celebrates with a profusion of scriptural quotations the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham, now being realized in the way the nations are coming to glorify and worship God. He quotes from Psalm 18:49, Deuteronomy 32:43, Psalm 117 and Isaiah 11:10. All of these texts speak of the role of the nations in praising and worshiping the God of Israel. Isaiah 11:10 portrays the coming messianic son of David raising a banner to which the nations will rally—another centripetal image here picked up by Paul.

Paul's priestly ministry of evangelism. But Paul then goes on to reflect on his own role in this process using priestly imagery. He speaks of the grace God gave him

> to be a "temple servant" *[leitourgos]* of Christ Jesus to the nations, offering the gospel of God like a priestly sacrifice *[hierourgounta],* so that the offering of the nations *[prosphora tōn ethnōn]* might be acceptable, having been sanctified by the Holy Spirit. (Rom 15:16, author's translation)

This is a remarkable statement since it is the only place in the New Testament where anyone speaks of their own ministry in priestly terms.[32] Priesthood is either affirmed of Jesus, our great high priest, or of the whole Christian community collectively (1 Pet 2:9). Priestly imagery is never used of ministry *within* the church, but Paul here uses it of his *evangelistic* ministry to the nations.

It is hard to know exactly what Scriptures lie behind Paul's imagery, but it is not impossible that he sees himself, in his role of mediating God to the nations and bringing the nations to God, as embodying the priestly ministry of Israel itself, whom God had called to be a "kingdom of priests" in the midst of the nations, in Exodus 19:3-6.

Or it may be equally likely that he is influenced here by the vision of Isaiah 66:18-21. For there God promises that the emissaries to the nations will bring in both Jews and Gentiles as an offering to the Lord, and the language used is that

[32]It is in fact a crucially important statement by Paul in relation to his whole understanding of his ministry and the theology that undergirded it. Daniel Chae takes Romans 15:14-21 as "an interpretative key for the letter" and goes on to argue that Paul's understanding of his own apostleship to the Gentiles is bound up with his insistence on the equality of Jew and Gentile in sinfulness, in justification, in their new status in Christ, and in the plan of God as a whole. See Daniel Jong-Sang Chae, *Paul as Apostle to the Gentiles: His Apostolic Self-Awareness and Its Influence on the Soteriological Argument in Romans* (Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster, 1997). A shorter version of his argument is available in "Paul's Apostolic Self-Awareness and the Occasion and Purpose of Romans," in *Mission and Meaning: Essays Presented to Peter Cotterell,* ed. Anthony Billington, Tony Lane and Max Turner (Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster, 1995), pp. 116-37.

of priesthood and sacrifice. This would fit with Paul's probable echo of Isaiah 66 later in Romans 15 when he describes his own missionary intentions as going in a great arc from Jerusalem, through Asia Minor, via Macedonia and Illyricum, and onward to the farthest west. And it would also tie in closely with his immediately following reference to his collection among the Gentiles for the church in Jerusalem (Acts 15:25-35) and confirm the interpretation of it in the last paragraph. "This monetary collection for the earthly Jerusalem could also be understood as a material concretion of the fact that the apostle was bringing the Gentiles into the eschatological Jerusalem as an offering of the end time (Is 66:20)."[33]

It is also somewhat ambiguous whether his phrase "the offering of the nations" should be taken as a subjective or objective genitive. That is, is Paul thinking of "the offering made *by* the nations," the eschatological tribute of the nations in the form of the worship and praise that these Gentile believers now give to the living God instead of to their previous idols? Or does he mean "the offering *that consists of* the nations," seeing the nations themselves as the offering that *Paul* is making to God as the fruit of his evangelistic/priestly ministry? Whichever is the exact meaning, it is clear that Paul sees the whole Gentile mission as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies regarding the ingathering of the nations and the worship that will ascend to the God of Israel from the nations in the process.[34]

The obedience of the nations. The great visions of the Old Testament, however, envisioned the nations of the world not merely bringing their *worship and offerings* to YHWH, God of Israel, but also learning *obedience* to him. The nations too must come to understand and accept his covenant law, walk in his ways and do his justice (Is 2:3). The Old Testament hope is strongly ethical, as ethical as the whole election-redemption-covenant story on which its hope is founded.

And this too we find to be a powerful element in Paul's understanding of his mission. His task was not merely to bring the nations to worship the right God and find salvation through faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ. He aimed at ethical

[33]Cf. Rainer Riesner, *Paul's Early Period: Chronology, Mission Strategy, Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 250.

[34]For additional missional aspects of Rom 15 and Paul's extensive use of the Old Testament in it, see Steve Strauss, "Missions Theology in Romans 15:14-33," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 160 (2003): 457-74 (with perceptive further comments on the relevance of this passage for contemporary mission strategy). For further reflections on the geographical directions of the Pauline and Petrine missions, see Lucien Legrand, "Gal 2:9 and the Missionary Strategy of the Early Church," in *Bible, Hermeneutics, Mission: A Contribution to the Contextual Study of Holy Scripture,* ed. Tord Fornberg (Uppsala: Swedish Institute for Missionary Research, 1995), pp. 21-83; John Knox, "Romans 15:14-33 and Paul's Conception of His Apostolic Mission," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 83 (1964): 1-11; and for a discussion of the issue and further bibliography, Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission,* 2:1294-1300.

transformation as well—a massive challenge in the degraded world of Greco-Roman culture, as his epistles bear witness.

So it is significant that he begins and ends his great missionary exposition of the gospel (which he hopes to take to Spain and invites the church at Rome to support him in doing so) with a summary of his life's work as being aimed at achieving *"the obedience of faith among all the nations."* He uses this phrase in the significant sections of Romans 1:5 and Romans 16:26, and again at Romans 15:18. And when it occurs in the climax of the letter, it is rooted in the Old Testament Scriptures ("through the prophetic writings") and in the mission of God ("through the command of the eternal God").

Paul then clearly saw his own mission in the light of the mission of God and the Scriptures, and summarized it as bringing all nations to believing knowledge of and ethical obedience to the one living God whose glory is now revealed in Jesus Christ.

The nations are sharing the identity of Israel. The most breathtaking visions concerning the nations that we saw in the Old Testament are those that envision them eventually becoming one with Israel. Various prophets and psalms speak of the nations being registered as part of Zion, coming to be accepted by God at his altar, sharing the names and titles of Israel, being joined to the Lord, being called by his name, having him dwell in their midst—all the language of identification with Israel. The vision is not, ultimately, simply Israel *and* the nations but the nations *as* Israel.

The curse of Babel in the division of the nations (which preceded the existence and call of Israel) will be ended, so that people of all nations will do what Israel did—"call on the name of the LORD."

> Then I will purify the lips of the peoples,
> that all of them may call on the name of the LORD
> and serve him shoulder to shoulder. (Zeph 3:9)

The *Shema,* the great privilege of Israel's monotheistic confession, will be universalized throughout the whole earth. "The LORD will be king over the whole earth. On that day there will be one LORD, and his name the only name (Zech 14:9), and, by implication, there will be one people, from "the whole earth," worshiping that name.

Paul was captivated by this vision. Along with the other apostles at the council of Jerusalem he rejected any interpretation of such Scriptures that perpetuated the old system of the Jerusalem temple and all the requirements of proselytism. It was not that all the nations would become part of God's people merely by becoming Jews within the old covenant, as if the Messiah had not come and

inaugurated the new age of eschatological fulfillment. Rather, all must now be incorporated *into Christ* through faith—whether Jew or Gentile. There is no difference between Jews and Gentiles in their sin and rebellion; neither is there any difference between them in the way they will find salvation and inclusion in God's people. But once they are "in Christ," whether Jew or Gentile, they become "all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28), and thereby all one as Abraham's spiritual seed.

The classic exposition of this is Ephesians 2—3. By piling up all the metaphors drawn from the Old Testament, Paul emphasizes again and again the unity that now exists between Jew and Gentile in Christ as "one new humanity." Again, I have to emphasize that Paul's picture is decidedly not Jews *plus* Gentiles, remaining forever distinct with separate means of covenant membership and access to God, but rather that through the cross God has destroyed the barrier between the two and created a new entity, so that both together and both alike have access to God through the same Spirit. So Paul packs in the language of citizenship and family (Eph 2:19) and of the temple (Eph 2:21-22) to emphasize the total inclusion of Gentiles within the identity of the Israel of God. Then he goes further and even coins words to express this unity. "Through the gospel, the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus" (Eph 3:6).

In Romans 9—11 Paul labors with massive scriptural argumentation to demonstrate that the inclusion of the Gentiles, far from being a *denial* of the Scriptures or an *abandonment* by God of his promise to Israel is rather a *fulfillment* of both. It is precisely through the ingathering of the nations that God is keeping his promise to Israel.

There remains one olive tree. Nations are being grafted in, and Paul's expectation is that in the astonishing plan of God, the ingathering of the Gentiles will cause such jealousy among the currently unbelieving branches that even they will come to repentance, faith, and regrafting. "And so all Israel will be saved," adds Paul—not so much indicating a *time* frame as pointing out the *method* that God has chosen to reach that ultimate goal (Rom 11:25-26). The implication of the whole metaphor and its exposition is clear. There is ultimately only one people of God, and the only way to belong to it now, for Jews as much as for Gentiles, is through faith in the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth. The regrafting of Israel that Paul envisions cannot be on some other criterion, for he explicitly says "if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in" (Rom 11:23). Paul does not hold out any other way for Jews to be part of eschatological Israel other than the same way that Gentiles are now joining that community—only through faith in Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah.

For this reason, as I have strongly affirmed in other writings, I can see no biblical justification either for the so-called "two covenant" theory, which claims that Jews still have a valid covenantal relationship with God independently of Jesus, while Gentiles have their covenantal relationship through Jesus, or for its dismal result: that evangelism among Jewish people is unnecessary and offensive.

Paul is utterly adamant that

- the only proper fulfillment of the Old Testament Scriptures is to be found in the new messianic community of disciples of Jesus.
- this constitutes Israel, redefined and extended as the Old Testament foretold.
- there is one and only one new people of God, created as a new humanity in Christ, consisting of both Jews and Gentiles who trust in him.
- the gospel must therefore of necessity be preached to both Jews and Gentiles—indeed, "to the Jew first," for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God—Jew and Gentile alike. So all have urgent need of the good news of the cross and resurrection of the Messiah.

We need to remember that the word *Christian* was in origin a mere nickname, possibly even a term of abuse. So in calling Jewish people to faith in Jesus as Messiah, we are not pressing them to convert to Christianity (however much that is the popular misrepresentation of the facts and the motives in Jewish evangelism). Rather we are, like Paul and Jesus and John the Baptist before them, inviting Jews to enter the community of redeemed and restored Israel, constituted by Jesus, purchased through the blood of his perfect Passover, and launched in the new age of God's kingdom through his resurrection.

The idea that Christian mission from its earliest days was an abandonment of the Jews is demonstrably false. The Great Commission directs the disciples to "all the nations."

> It is as impossible to exclude the Jews from the order to make disciples of all nations as it is impossible to limit the power of the resurrected Lord to the whole world except Israel. The expansion of his mission to all nations cannot imply any exclusion of the Jews if we take his declaration of universal and unlimited royal power seriously.[35]

Such, then, is the gloriously comprehensive missional theology of the nations that Paul had quarried from profound engagement with the Scriptures. It is most unlikely that Paul lived to ever have had the opportunity to read the final great

[35]Hans Kvalbein, "Has Matthew Abandoned the Jews?" in *The Mission of the Early Church to Jews and Gentiles,* ed. Jostein Adna and Hans Kvalbein (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), pp. 45-62.

prophetic book of the biblical canon, the Revelation, but if he had it would have warmed his heart and had his full agreement. For it too is saturated with Old Testament images, visions and quotations, not least in the way it envisions the completion of God's mission for the nations and the fulfillment of all his covenant promises.

As we saw at the end of chapter ten (pp. 355-56), all the great covenantal figureheads are there.

Noah is there in the vision of a new creation, a new heavens and a new earth after judgment (Rev 21:1). Abraham is there in the ingathering and blessing of all nations from every tongue and language (Rev 7:9). Moses is there in the covenantal assertions that "they will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God," and "the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them" (Rev 21:3). David is there in the holy city, the new Jerusalem, and the expansion of the temple to include the whole of creation (Rev 21), and in the identity of Jesus as the Lion of Judah and Root of David (Rev 5:5). And the new covenant is there in the fact that all of this will be accomplished by the blood of the Lamb who was slain (Rev 5:12).

Purged by judgment and the destruction of all wickedness and evil, human and satanic, the nations of the world will join in the praise of God for his salvation (Rev 7: 9-10). They will bring all the wealth of their historical achievements into the city of God, as Isaiah had said they would (Rev 21:24, 26), the city that now embraces the full extent of the whole new creation. And the river and tree of life, from which humanity had been barred in the earliest chapters of the Bible's grand narrative, will, in its final chapter, provide the healing of the nations which the narrative has longed for ever since the scattering of Babel (Rev 22:2). The curse will be gone from the whole of creation (Rev 22:3). The earth will be filled with the glory of God and all the nations of humanity will walk in his light (Rev 21:24).

Such is the glorious climax of the Bible's grand narrative. Such is the triumph of the mission of God.

Epilogue

So what was the question?

In the introduction I said that the roots of this book go a long way back in my own thinking, but the trigger that launched the direction it has taken was the challenging question addressed to me by Anthony Billington after a lecture I gave in 1998. It was a question about the validity of using a missiological framework as a hermeneutical approach to reading the Bible. Is it possible, is it legitimate, is it helpful for Christians to read the whole Bible from the angle of mission? And what happens if they do?

The immediate challenge that bounced back in our attempt to answer that radical question was: it all depends on whose mission you mean. If by "mission" we are thinking of "missions," and the great and laudable efforts of crosscultural missionaries, then we would be struggling to defend an affirmative answer to the first question. While our human missionary endeavor can find ample justification and explicit textual imperative in the Bible, it would be a distorted and exaggerated hermeneutic, in my view, that tried to argue that the whole Bible was "about" mission in the narrowly defined sense of human missionary activities.

However, not merely because of that tactical consideration, but rather out of a profound theological conviction, I have argued that it is in any case misleading to take our missiological starting point and paradigm only from the human activities of mission—however necessary, biblically-mandated and Spirit-directed they may be. Rather, just as "salvation belongs to our God" (Rev 7:10), so does mission. The Bible renders and reveals to us the God whose creative and redemptive work is permeated from beginning to end with God's own great mission, his purposeful, sovereign intentionality. All mission or missions which we initiate, or into which we invest our own vocation, gifts and energies, flow from the prior and larger reality of the mission of God. *God* is on mission, and we,

in that wonderful phrase of Paul, are "co-workers with God" (1 Cor 3:9).

Having made that reorienting paradigm shift in our concept of the fundamental meaning of biblical mission, then indeed the whole Bible can (and I would argue, should), be read in the light of this overarching, governing perspective. The whole Bible delivers to us "the whole counsel of God"—the plan, purpose and mission of God for the whole creation, that it will be reconciled to God through Christ by the cross (Col 1:20).

From this launch pad, we then proceeded through the book to explore the trajectory of the mission of God as it unfolds in the great tapestry of the Scriptures (if one can pardon such mixed metaphors).

- In Part 2, we saw the driving will of the one true living God to be known throughout his whole creation for who he truly is, the LORD God, YHWH, the Holy One of Israel, incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth, crucified, risen, ascended and returning. And in contrast to this dynamic missional monotheism we saw the exposure, rejection and ultimate destruction of all false gods, whatever their origin, identity or power.
- In Part 3, we marvelled at the indefatigable self-commitment of God to bless all nations of humanity through the creation of a people as the vehicle of his goal of redemption. Through both testaments we travelled: taking in the paradox of the election of this particular people with their universal mission; grasping the comprehensive scope of the redemptive work of God in their history; hearing the accumulating assurances of the covenant relationship to which he called them; being challenged by the ethical demands the new life which they are to live in the sight of the nations for the sake of the nations. This is the people to whom we belong. This is the story of which we are part. This is the mission in which we are called to participate.
- In Part 4, we broadened our gaze further still as we contemplated God's involvement with his whole creation, with the earth itself, with humans made in his image, and with all cultures and nations. And we finished, as the Bible itself does, overwhelmed with the vision of God's ultimate eschatological goal that one day people of every tribe, people, nation and language will sing his praises in the new creation.

This, I have tried to argue, is something like what it means to engage in a missiological reading of the whole canon of Scripture.

But what happens when we read it in this way? This was our second question. Our first was whether the mission of God provides a valid hermeneutical framework, or a trustworthy map for the journey of biblical understanding, and I have presented a case which, I believe, justifies the conclusion that Christians

can and should read their whole Bibles within such an overarching framework. But what happens when they do?

I began the book with some reminiscence of personal experiences that influenced me long before writing this book. Perhaps I may conclude with reflection on some transformations of personal perspective that have accompanied the writing of it. For this book has indeed been a journey of discovery for its author. I genuinely took up the challenge of Anthony Billington's question not quite knowing where it might lead me.

When we grasp that the whole Bible constitutes the coherent revelation of the mission of God, when we see this as the key that unlocks the driving purposefulness of the whole grand narrative (to cite our subtitle), then we find our whole worldview impacted by this vision. As has been well documented, every human worldview is an outworking of *some* narrative. We live out of the story or stories we believe to be true, the story or stories that "tell it like it is," we think. So what does it mean to live out of *this* story? Here is *The Story*, the grand universal narrative that stretches from creation to new creation, and accounts for everything in between. This is The Story that tells us where we have come from, how we got to be here, who we are, why the world is in the mess it is, how it can be (and has been) changed, and where we are ultimately going. And the whole story is predicated on the reality of this God and the mission of this God. He is the originator of the story, the teller of the story, the prime actor in the story, the planner and guide of the story's plot, the meaning of the story and its ultimate completion. He is its beginning, end and center. It is the story of the mission of God, of this God and no other.

Now such an understanding of the mission of God as the very heartbeat of all reality, all creation, all history and all that yet lies ahead of us generates a distinctive worldview that is radically and transformingly God-centered. And my experience in wrestling with the massive contours of this Bible-sculpted, God-centered, mission-driven vision of reality, has been to find that it turns inside out and upside down some of the common ways in which we are accustomed to thinking about the Christian life and the kinds of questions we are inclined to ask. This worldview, constituted by putting the mission of God at the very center of all existence, is disturbingly subversive and it uncomfortably relativizes one's own place in the great scheme of things. It is certainly a very healthy corrective to the egocentric obsession of much Western culture —including, sadly, even Western Christian culture. It constantly forces us to open our eyes to the big picture, rather than shelter in the cosy narcissism of our own small worlds.

- We ask, "Where does God fit into the story of my life?" when the real question

is where does my little life fit into this great story of God's mission.

- We want to be driven by a purpose that has been tailored just right for our own individual lives (which is of course infinitely preferable to living aimlessly), when we should be seeing the purpose of all life, including our own, wrapped up in the great mission of God for the whole of creation.
- We talk about the problems of "applying the Bible to our lives," which often means modifying the Bible somewhat adjectivally to fit into the assumed "reality" of the life we live "in the real world." What would it mean to apply our lives to the Bible instead, assuming *the Bible* to be the reality—the real story —to which *we* are called to conform ourselves?
- We wrestle with the question of how we can "make the gospel relevant to the world" (again, at least that is clearly preferable to treating it as irrelevant). But in *this* Story, God is about the business of transforming the world to fit the shape of the gospel.
- We wonder whether and how the care of creation, for example, might fit into *our* concept and practice of mission, when *this* Story challenges us to ask whether our lives, lived on God's earth and under God's gaze, are aligned with, or horrendously misaligned with, God's mission that stretches from creation to cosmic transformation and the arrival of a new heaven and new earth.
- We argue about what can legitimately be included in the mission God expects from the church, when we should ask what kind of church God expects for his mission in all its comprehensive fullness.
- I may wonder what kind of mission God has for *me*, when I should ask what kind of me God wants for *his* mission.

The only concept of mission into which God fits is the one of which he is the beginning, the center and the end (to paraphrase what Lesslie Newbigin once said about the resurrection).[1] And the only access that we have to that mission of God is given to us in the Bible. This is the grand narrative that is unlocked when we turn the hermeneutical key of reading all the Scriptures in the light of the mission of God.

It was the risen Jesus, to return to where we began in the introduction to Part 1, who opened the eyes of the disciples to understand the Scriptures, by reading them in the double light of his own identity as the Messiah and of their ongoing

[1] "Indeed, the simple truth is that the resurrection cannot be accommodated in any way of understanding the world except one of which it is the starting point"; in *Truth to Tell: the Gospel as Public Truth* (London: SPCK 1991), p. 11.

mission to all nations in the power of the Spirit. "This is what is written, . . . and you will be my witnesses . . . to the ends of the earth," he said, in that richly missional account which spans the ending of Luke's Gospel and the beginning of Acts.

It is the risen Jesus who alone is worthy to open the scroll, signifying the meaning of all history. And his worthiness and authority to do so rests on the cross, which is redemptive, universal and victorious (Rev 5:9-10). Christ crucified and risen is the key to all history, for he is the one who accomplished the mission of God for all creation.

If, then, it is in Christ crucified and risen that we find the focal point of the whole Bible's grand narrative, and therein also the focal point of the whole mission of God, our response is surely clear. Before we set about the essential task of working out what it means in practice that Jesus said to his disciples, "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you" (Jn 20:21), in terms of our personal participation in God's mission in our own context and generation, we first of all need to kneel with Thomas before Christ and confess, "My Lord and my God" (Jn 20:28).

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* indicates a stem that has several possible endings.

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