

Word of God and Mission of God

Reading the Whole Bible for Mission

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A Short Personal Journey

I remember them so vividly from my childhood—the great banner texts around the walls of the missionary conventions in Northern Ireland where I would help my father at the stall of the Unevangelized Fields Mission, of which he was Irish Secretary after spending twenty years in Brazil. "Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature," they urged me, along with other similar imperatives in glowing Gothic calligraphy. By the age of twelve I could have quoted all the key ones: "Go ye therefore and make disciples . . ." "How shall they hear . . . ?" "You shall be my witnesses . . . to the ends of the earth." "Whom shall we send? . . . Here am I, send me." I knew my missionary Bible verses. I had responded to many a rousing sermon on most of them.

By the age of twenty-one I had a degree in theology from Cambridge, where the same texts had been curiously lacking. At least it is curious to me now. At the time there seemed to be little connection at all between theology and mission in the minds of the lecturers, or of myself, or, for all I knew, in the mind of God.

"Theology" was all about God—what God was like, what God had said and done, and what mostly dead people had speculated on such questions. "Mission" was about us, the living, and what we've been doing since Carey (who, of course, was the first missionary, we so erroneously thought). Or more precisely, mission is what we evangelicals do since we're the ones who know the Bible told us (or some of us, at least) to go and be missionaries. "The Bible" was somewhere in the middle—the object of critical study by theologians and the source of motivational texts for missionaries.

"Mission is what we do." That was the assumption—supported, of course, by clear biblical commands that were taken seriously by at least some people in the church. Mission was a task that some specially called folks got involved with. I had little concept at that time that mission should have been the very heartbeat of theology and the key to knowing how to interpret the Bible (hermeneutics).

Many years later, including years when I was teaching theology as a missionary in India, I found myself teaching a module called "The Biblical Basis of Mission" at All Nations Christian College, an international mission-training institution in England. The module title itself embodies the same assumption. Mission is the noun, the given reality. It is something we do, and we basically

know what it is. And the reason why we know we should be doing it—the basis, foundation, or grounds on which we justify it—must be found in the Bible.

As good evangelicals we need a biblical basis for everything we do. What, then, is the biblical basis for mission? Roll out the texts. Add some that nobody else has thought of. Do some joined-up theology. Add some motivational fervor. And the class is heartwarmingly appreciative. Now they have even more biblical support for what they already believed anyway, for these are All Nations students after all. They only came because they are committed to doing mission. There is the task (mission). Here are some folks who are going to do it (the missionaries). And here are the bits of the Bible that might encourage them (the missionary texts). That is what everybody seemed to mean by the biblical basis of mission.

This mild caricature is not in the least derogatory in intent. I believe passionately that mission is what we should be doing, and I believe the Bible endorses and mandates it. However, the more I taught that course, the more I used to introduce it by telling the students that I would like to change its name from "The Biblical Basis of Mission" to "The Missional Basis of the Bible." I wanted them to see not just that the Bible contains a number of texts which happen to provide a rationale for missionary endeavor, but that the whole Bible is itself a "missional" phenomenon.

The Bible as the Product of God's Mission

A missional understanding of the Bible begins with the Bible's very existence.[1] For those who affirm some relationship (however articulated) between these texts and the self-revelation of our creator God, the whole canon of Scripture is a missional phenomenon in the sense that it witnesses to the self-giving movement of this God toward his creation and toward us, human beings who have been made in God's own image but who are wayward and wanton.

The writings which now comprise our Bible are themselves the product of, and witness to, the ultimate mission of God. The very existence of the Bible is incontrovertible evidence of the God who refused to forsake his rebellious creation, who refused to give up, who was and is determined to redeem and restore fallen creation to his original design for it. . . . The very existence of such a collection of writings testifies to a God who breaks through to human beings, who disclosed himself to them, who will not leave them unilluminated in their darkness . . . who takes the initiative in re-establishing broken relationships with us.[2]

Furthermore, the processes by which these texts came to be written were often profoundly missional in nature. Many of the biblical texts emerged out of events, struggles, crises, or conflicts in which the people of God engaged with the constantly changing and challenging task of articulating and living out their understanding of God's revelation and redemptive action in the world. Sometimes these were struggles internal to the people of God themselves; sometimes they were highly argumentative (polemical) struggles with the competing religious claims and worldviews that surrounded them.

So a missional reading of such texts is definitely not a matter of first finding the "real" meaning by objective interpretation (exegesis), and then cranking up some "missiological implications" as a sermon (homiletic) supplement to the text itself. Rather, a missional reading will observe how a text often has its origin in some issue, need, controversy, or threat that the people of God needed to address in the context of their mission. The text in itself is a product of mission in action.

This is easily demonstrated in the case of the New Testament.[3] Most of Paul's letters were written in the heat of his missionary efforts: wrestling with the theological basis of the inclusion of the Gentiles, affirming the need for Jew and Gentile to accept one another in Christ and in the church, tackling the baffling range of new problems that assailed young churches as the gospel took root in the world of Greek polytheism, confronting incipient heresies with clear affirmations of the supremacy and sufficiency of Jesus Christ, and so on.

And why were the Gospels so called? Because they were written to explain the significance of the evangel—the good news about Jesus of Nazareth, especially his death and resurrection. Confidence in these things was essential to the missionary task of the expanding church. And the person to whom we owe the largest portion of the New Testament, Luke, shapes his two volumes in such a way that the missionary mandate to the disciples to be Christ's witnesses to the nations comes as the climax to volume one and the introduction to volume two.

But we can also see in the Old Testament that many texts emerged out of the engagement of the Israelites with the surrounding world in the light of the God they knew in their history and in covenantal relationship. People produced texts in relation to what they believed God had done, was doing, or would do in their world.

Genesis presents a theology of creation that stands in sharp contrast to the polytheistic creation myths of Mesopotamia. Exodus records the exodus as an act of Yahweh that comprehensively confronted and defeated the power of Pharaoh and all his rival claims to deity and allegiance. The historical narratives portray the long and sorrowful story of Israel's struggle with the culture and religion of Canaan. Texts from the time of the Babylonian exile of Israel, as well as postexilic texts, emerge out of the task that the small remnant community of Israel faced to define their continuing identity as a community of faith in successive empires of varying hostility or tolerance. Wisdom texts interact with international wisdom traditions in the surrounding cultures, but do so with staunch monotheistic disinfectant. And in worship and prophecy, Israelites reflect on the relationship between their God, Yahweh, and the rest of the nations—sometimes negatively, sometimes positively—and on the nature of their own role as Yahweh's elect priesthood in their midst.

All of these are themes and conflicts that are highly relevant to missional engagement between God's people and the world of nations.

The Bible, then, is a missional phenomenon in itself. The writings which now comprise our Bible are themselves the product of, and witness to, the ultimate mission of God. The individual texts within it often reflect the struggles of being a people with a mission in a world of competing

cultural and religious claims. And the canon eventually consolidates the recognition that it is through these texts that the people whom God has called to be his own (in both Testaments) have been shaped as a community of memory and hope, a community of mission, a community of failure and striving.

In short, a missional hermeneutic proceeds from the assumption that the whole Bible renders to us the story of God's mission through God's people in their engagement with God's world for the sake of God's purpose for the whole of God's creation. Mission is not just one of a list of things that the Bible happens to talk about, only a bit more urgently than some. Mission is, in that much-abused phrase, what it's all about.

Reading the Scriptures with the Risen Jesus and the Apostle Paul

The Risen Jesus

Now to say, "Mission is what the Bible is all about," is a bold claim. I would not expect to be able to turn any phrase that began, "The Biblical Basis of . . ." around the other way. There is, for example, a biblical basis for marriage; but there is not, I presume, "a marital basis for the Bible." There is a biblical basis for work, but work is not "what the Bible is all about."

However, I take some encouragement for my claim from an impeccable authority: it seems to me that Jesus comes very close to saying, "This is what the Bible is all about," when he gave his disciples their final lecture in Old Testament hermeneutics. "This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem" (Luke 24:46–47).

Now Jesus is not quoting a specific text here, though we would love to have been able to ask which Scriptures he particularly had in mind (doubtless the two from Emmaus could have filled in the gaps). The point is that he includes the whole of this sentence under the heading "This is what is written." Jesus seems to be saying that the whole of the Scripture (which we now know as the Old Testament) finds its focus and fulfillment both in the life, death, and resurrection of Israel's Messiah and in the mission to all nations which flows out from that event.

Luke tells us that with these words Jesus "opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures." Or, as we might put it, he was setting their interpretive (hermeneutical) orientation and agenda. The proper way for disciples of the crucified and risen Jesus to read their Scriptures is messianically and missiologically.

For Jesus, then, the Old Testament was as much about mission as it was about himself. Or rather, the two are inseparable parts of the same fundamental reality: the saving mission of God. If you know who Jesus is from the Scriptures (that he is the Messiah of Israel who embodied their identity and their mission); and if you know what Israel is from the Scriptures (called into existence to be a "light to the nations"); then to confess Jesus as Messiah is to

commit yourself to his mission to the nations. You can't have one without the other—not if you believe the Scriptures and read them as Jesus taught his disciples to. The necessity of mission is as rooted in the Bible as the identity of the Messiah.

The Apostle Paul

When we turn to Paul, we find the same integration of mission and the [Old Testament] Scriptures. As I said above, if we inquired about the biblical basis for Christian mission, traditionally we would be pointed to the familiar words of the Great Commission (Matthew 28:16–20) and related New Testament texts.

But for Paul the scriptural basis for mission went much further back. And of course, in any case, the "Great Commission" in its present form in the text of the canonical Gospels did not yet exist in the early decades of Paul's mission. Paul had to justify both his mission practice and his mission theology on the basis of the Scriptures we now call the Old Testament. But that was no problem, for throughout those Scriptures he found a rich and deep theology of the mission of God for the world and the nations, and he built his own mission theology on that foundation. Here are just a few examples:

- **Paul goes back to creation**—and sees the mission of God as bringing the whole of the created order to liberation along with the children of God (Romans 8:18–27). Thus Paul proclaims the resurrection of the Messiah as the firstfruits of that new creation, and can affirm that when any person is "in Christ" that new creation has already begun (2 Corinthians 5:17).
- **Paul goes back to Abraham**—and sees the mission of Israel as the people called into existence as the covenant people of God with the express purpose of being the agent of God blessing all nations (Galatians 3:6–8). So crucial is this foundation block of Paul's theology that he speaks of God announcing the gospel "in advance" to Abraham—that is, the good news that God intends to bless the nations (and always had, from the very call of Abraham).
- **Paul goes back to the prophets**—and sees God's purpose for the gathering in of the nations to become part of Israel and of Israel itself coming to renewed faith and restoration, so that by this means all Israel will be saved, as Torah, Prophets, and Psalms all declared (Romans 9–11).

So for Paul, then, the clear message of the whole of the Scriptures was the salvation of the nations and the renewal of creation through the mission of God through Israel and Israel's Messiah. His own personal mission as "apostle to the nations" was thus grounded in the Bible. For Paul, biblical theology was mission theology—the mission of God.

Though he was not present for Jesus' Old Testament hermeneutics lecture on the day of resurrection, Paul clearly had his own way of reading the Scriptures radically transformed with the same double focus. Testifying before Festus, he declared that he was saying "nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen—that the Messiah would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would bring the message of light to his own people and to the

Gentiles" (Acts 26:22–23, emphasis added). It was this dual understanding of the Scriptures that shaped Paul's life and work as the apostle of the Messiah, Jesus, to the Gentiles.

However, even if we accept that Jesus and Paul offer us a Messiah-focused and mission-generating hermeneutic of the Scriptures, we may still question the claim that somehow there is a missional hermeneutic of the whole Bible such that "mission is what it's all about." This uneasiness stems from the persistent, almost subconscious, paradigm that mission is fundamentally "something we do." This is especially so if we fall into the evangelical reductionist habit of using the word mission or missions as more or less synonymous with evangelism. Quite clearly, the whole Bible is not just "about evangelism," even though evangelism is certainly a fundamental part of biblical mission as entrusted to us.

The appropriateness of speaking of "a missional basis of the Bible" becomes apparent only when we shift our paradigm of mission from our human agency to the ultimate purposes of God himself. For clearly the Bible is, in some sense, "all about God." What, then, does it mean to talk of the mission of God?

Whose Mission Is It Anyway?

God with a Mission

The God revealed in the Scriptures is personal, purposeful, and goal-orientated. The opening account of creation portrays God working toward a goal, completing it with satisfaction, and resting—content with the result. And from the great promise of God to Abraham in Genesis 12:1–3 we know this God to be totally, covenantally, and eternally committed to the mission of blessing the nations through the agency of the people of Abraham. From that point on, the mission of God could be summed up in the words of the hymn, "God is working his purpose out as year succeeds to year," and as generations come and go.

The Bible presents itself to us fundamentally as a narrative—an historical narrative at one level but a grand, metanarrative at another. It begins with a God of purpose in creation. It moves on to the conflict and problem generated by human rebellion against that purpose. It spends most of its narrative journey in the story of God's redemptive purposes being worked out on the stage of human history. And it finishes beyond the horizon of its own history with the eschatological hope of a new creation. This has often been presented as a four-point narrative: creation, fall, redemption, and future hope.

This whole worldview is predicated on teleological monotheism—i.e., there is one God at work in the universe and in human history, and that God has a goal, a purpose, a mission, which will ultimately be accomplished by the power of his word and for the glory of his name. This is the mission of the biblical God.

To read the whole Bible in the light of this great overarching perspective of the mission of God is to read "with the grain" of this whole collection of Scriptures that constitute our canon. This

foundational point is a key assumption of a "missiological hermeneutic" of the Bible. It is nothing more than to accept that the biblical worldview locates us in the midst of a narrative of the universe behind which stands the mission of the living God. All creation will render "glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be." That is a missional perspective.

Humanity with a Mission

When we read in Genesis 1 that God made human beings in God's own image, the very least we could infer from that is that they will be like the God we have just been reading about in the same chapter. Humans will be purposeful creatures with a goal to accomplish.

But this is not left to inference alone. Human beings were given a very explicit mission: the mandate to fill the earth and subdue it and to rule over the rest of creation (Genesis 1:28). This delegated authority within the created order is moderated by the parallel commands in the complementary account: to work the Garden of Eden and take care of it (Genesis 2:15). The care and keeping of creation is our human mission. We are on the planet with a purpose that flows from the creative purpose of God himself.

Out of this teleological understanding of our humanity flows our ecological responsibility; our economic activity involving work, productivity, exchange, and trade; the ethic of social and economic justice; and the whole cultural mandate. To be human is to have a purposeful role in God's creation. This multidimensional mission flows not only from past reality (the fact of creation) but also from our future hope. The biblical (eschatological) vision assures us of a new creation, of which Christ is the heir and in which all our work in this creation will be purged and redeemed for the glory of God.

Israel with a Mission

Once again, let's be clear. I am not talking about the Israelites sending out foreign missionaries (or their failure to do so, with the rather ambiguous exception of Jonah). My point is not to see what bits of the Old Testament can support our agenda of sending missionaries, but rather what the Old Testament contributes to our understanding of the mission of God in history for the nations and for all creation. From that angle we can see enormous missiological implications in the four major pillars of Old Testament faith: monotheism, election, ethics, and eschatology.[4]

The uniqueness and universality of Yahweh. Old Testament monotheism means that Yahweh alone is God and there is no other (e.g., Deuteronomy 4:35,39). This ultimately means the radical displacement of all other rival gods and that Yahweh is God over the whole earth and all nations (e.g. Psalm 96; Jeremiah 10:1–16; Isaiah 43:9–13; 44:6–20). Thus the New Testament affirms the uniqueness and universality of Jesus (cf. Philippians 2:9–11, based on Isaiah 45:23; and 1 Corinthians 8:5–6, based on Deuteronomy 6:4). This uniqueness and universality of Jesus Christ stands at the front lines of a missiological response to global relativism and religious pluralism found at the heart of some forms of postmodernist philosophy.

Yahweh's election of Israel for the purpose of blessing the nations. After Genesis 10 and 11, what could God do about the scattered and rebellious world of nations? Genesis 12:1–3 gives the answer: God chose and called Abraham for the explicit purpose of bringing them blessing. So fundamental is this divine agenda that Paul describes the Genesis declaration as announcing "the gospel in advance" (Galatians 3:8). And the concluding vision of the whole Bible signifies the fulfilment of the Abrahamic promise, as people from every nation, tribe, people, and language (echoing the same words in Genesis 10) are gathered among the redeemed in the new creation (Revelation 7:9). The election of Israel is one of the most fundamental pillars of the biblical worldview and of Israel's historical sense of identity.[5] Israel's election did not result in a rejection of the nations, but was explicitly for their ultimate benefit. If we might paraphrase John, in a way he probably would have accepted, "God so loved the world that he chose Israel." Thus, rather than asking them to go somewhere, God's mission for them was to be something—a light—in the sight of the nations.

The ethical dimension of Israel's "visibility" among the nations. This raises the missiological dimension of Israel's holiness. Israel was called to be distinctive from the surrounding world in ways that were not merely religious but also ethical. This very purpose is expressed in Genesis 18:19. In the context of, and in stark contrast to, the world of Sodom and Gomorrah, Yahweh says of Abraham, "For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just, so that [emphasis added] the Lord will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him." This verse, in a remarkably tight syntax, binds together election, ethics, and mission as three interlocking aspects of God's purpose. His choice of Abraham is for the sake of his promise (to bless the nations), but the accomplishment of that demands the ethical obedience of his community—the fulcrum in the middle of the verse. A similar dynamic relationship between ethics and mission can be seen elsewhere (e.g., Exodus 19:4–6; Deuteronomy 4:6–8; Jeremiah 4:1–2).

Eschatological vision; ingathering of nations. Israel saw the nations as witnesses of all that God was doing in Israel and, eventually, as the beneficiaries of all that history. The nations could thus be invited to rejoice, applaud, and praise Yahweh, the God of Israel (Psalm 47; 1 Kings 8:41–43; Psalm 67). Beyond that was the eschatological vision that there would be those of the nations who would not merely be joined to Israel but would come to be identified as Israel, with the same names, privileges, and responsibilities before God (Psalm 47:9; Isaiah 19:19–25; 56:2–8; 66:19–21; Zechariah 2:10–11; Amos 9:11–12; Acts 15:16–18; Ephesians 2:11–3:6). This is the breathtaking dimension of Israel's prophetic heritage that most profoundly influenced the theological explanation of the Gentile mission in the New Testament. It certainly underlies James's interpretation of the Christ event and the success of the Gentile mission in Acts 15 (quoting Amos 9:12). And it likewise inspired Paul's efforts as a practitioner and theologian of mission (e.g., Romans 15:7–16).

Jesus with a Mission

Jesus did not just arrive. He had a very clear conviction that he was sent. But even before Jesus was old enough to have clear convictions about anything, his double significance for Israel and for the world was recognized by Simeon as he cradled the infant Jesus and spoke words rarely

recognized for the missiological significance of their double messianic claim: "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel" (Luke 2:29–32, emphasis added).

At his baptism Jesus received the affirmation of his true identity and mission. The voice of his Father combined the identity of the Servant figure in Isaiah (echoing the phraseology of Isaiah 42:1) and that of the Davidic messianic king (echoing the affirmation of Psalm 2:7). Both of these dimensions of his identity and role were energized with a sense of mission. The mission of the Servant was both to restore Israel to Yahweh and also to be the agent of God's salvation reaching to the ends of the earth (Isaiah 49:6). The mission of the Davidic messianic king was both to rule over a redeemed Israel according to the agenda of many prophetic texts and also to receive the nations and the ends of the earth as his inheritance (Psalm 2:8).

Jesus' sense of mission—the aims, motivation, and self-understanding behind his recorded words and actions—has been a matter of intense scholarly discussion. What seems very clear is that Jesus built his own agenda on what he perceived to be the agenda of his Father. His will was to do his Father's will. God's mission determined his mission. In the obedience of Jesus, even to death, the mission of God reached its climax. And, of course, in his resurrection glory he passed on that mission to his disciples, now mandated to replicate communities of obedient discipleship among all nations (Matthew 28:18–20).

The Church with a Mission

In Luke 24:45–48 Jesus entrusted to the church a mission rooted in his own identity, passion, and victory as the crucified and risen Messiah. "You are witnesses," he said—a mandate repeated in Acts 1:8: "You will be my witnesses."

It is almost certain that Luke intends us to hear in this an echo of the same words spoken by Yahweh to Israel in Isaiah 43:10–12. "You are my witnesses," declares the Lord, "and my servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. Before me no god was formed, nor will there be one after me. I, even I, am the Lord, and apart from me there is no savior. I have revealed and saved and proclaimed—I, and not some foreign god among you. You are my witnesses," declares the Lord, "that I am God."

The Israelites knew the identity of the true and living God; therefore they were entrusted with bearing witness to that in a world of nations and their gods. The disciples knew the true identity of the crucified and risen Jesus; therefore they were entrusted with bearing witness to that to the ends of the earth. Mission flows from the identity of God and his Christ.

Paul goes further and identifies the mission of his own small band of church planters with the international mission of the Servant, quoting Isaiah 49:6 in Acts 13:47 and saying quite bluntly, "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.'" This is a missiological hermeneutic of the Old

Testament if ever there was one. As the NIV footnote shows, Paul has no problem applying the singular "you"—which was spoken to the Servant—to the plural "us."

So again, the mission of the church flows from the mission of God and the fulfillment of his purposes and his Word. It is not so much, as someone has said, that God has a mission for his church in the world as that God has a church for his mission in the world. Mission is not just something we do, though it certainly includes that. Mission, from the point of view of our human endeavor, means the committed participation of God's people in the purposes of God for the redemption of the whole creation. Mission, like salvation, belongs to our God and to the Lamb. We are those who are called to share in its accomplishment.

Conclusion

Putting these perspectives together, a missiological hermeneutic of Scripture means that we seek to read any part of the Bible:

- In the light of God's purpose for his whole creation, including the redemption of humanity and the creation of the new heavens and new earth;
- In the light of God's purpose for human life in general on the planet and of all the Bible teaches about human culture, relationships, ethics, and behavior;
- In the light of God's historical election of Israel, its identity and role in relation to the nations, and the demands God made on the Israelites' worship, social ethics, and total value system;
- In the light of the centrality of Jesus of Nazareth, his messianic identity and mission in relation to Israel and the nations, his cross and resurrection;
- In the light of God's calling of the church, the community of believing Jews and Gentiles who constitute the extended people of the Abraham covenant, to be the agent of God's blessing to the nations in the name of, and for the glory of, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Such a commitment to reading the whole Word of God in the light of the whole mission of God opens up enormous vistas for theological, ethical, and missional reflection. It is the purpose of the rest of this book and the project it launches to explore these frontiers for all they are worth.

Discussion Points

- What does Wright mean when he says the Bible is usually "somewhere in the middle" between theology and mission?
- What does he mean by the "missional basis of the Bible"?
- How would a missional understanding of the Bible change who we are as disciples? How might it change who we are as the church?
- What else did you learn from this chapter that you want to remember and apply?

Further Reading

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