The Old Testament and Christian Mission

Introduction

For many Christians, Christian Mission begins with the Great Commission (Mt. 28) on the Mount of Ascension.

What were the disciples to do to fill in the time until Jesus returns? Is living on the earth just a waiting room for eternity? No! Jesus gave them the Great Commission.

Yet the message and the mission of Jesus Himself and the mission of the early church was shaped and programmed by the Old Testament. Books often refer to the Old Testament roots of mission but only treat this subject briefly. There is no comprehensive Old Testament theology of mission.

I would like to touch on 6 themes;

1. The Foundation of Mission – the Creation Worldview
2. The Manifesto of Mission – the Covenant with Abraham
3. The Agent of Mission – Israel as the People of God
4. The Scope of Mission – Exodus and Jubilee
5. The Conflict of Mission – gods and idols
6. The Goal of Mission from the old Testament – God and the future of the nations

1. The Foundation of Mission – the Platform of Creation

Paul is speaking by invitation in Athens to a philosophical and very sophisticated but polytheistic audience. With great skill he manages to preach a thoroughly Scripturally-based worldview without quoting the Old Testament! This is an amazing achievement! Clearly the audience was unfamiliar with the Old Testament and its authority would have carried no weight. In the Jewish synagogues apostolic preaching extensively used the Old Testament. But on Mars Hill Paul, with carefully chosen phrases and a few quotations from their own cultural heritage, lays down the Old Testament theology on which the Gospel is built and which is the basis of mission.

- Monotheism
- God as Creator
- God as non-material and distinct from Creation – transcendent
- God as Lord of human history
- God in relation to human life, ignorance and idolatry
- God as moral judge

A Biblical model of mission must begin with this foundation/platform because it provides the basic Biblical worldview of reality:

- God, the earth and humanity in reciprocal relation to each other
- The basic human obligation:
  - ✓ love and obedience towards God
  - ✓ care and keeping of the earth
  - ✓ mutual love and care for each other

These relationships and obligations can be seen and are expanded in the early chapters of Genesis. They are essential to an understanding of Christian mission.

Why? You can't explain what makes the Gospel 'good news' unless you convey what the 'bad news' is in relation to the way God intended human life on earth to be. The Biblical Gospel only makes sense in relation to a Biblical worldview which means an Old Testament view of creation. All evangelism, including Muslim evangelism, starts with Genesis.

Why is the New Testament always translated first and the Old Testament sometimes a decade later? This is bound to create weak churches.

1.1 The whole of humanity is earth with a "mission".

- We were made with a mission – a purpose.
- Our models of mission begin with being human not just being Christians.
- We were put on earth with a task and a goal.
- Our Christian identity doesn't replace this or rescind it.

There are two dimensions to this:

The Ecological Dimension

Gen. 1:27: ***"have dominion"*** over the rest of creation.

Gen. 2:15: ***"serve the earth and keep it."***

This sums up the role of humanity – dominion and servanthood. We are made in the image of God and in Jesus we have the perfect man.

The stewardship of creation is a vital part of humanity. It is also a legitimate part of Christian mission since being a Christian enhances our human obedience to the Creator. God will hold us accountable as much for our humanity as for our Christianity.

The Economic Dimension

The right and responsibility of work is part of the image of God in human life. God works – the 6 days of Creation. Human life on earth requires economic structures and relationships. Christian concern for economic justice should be included as a legitimate part of mission. This is a major concern in the Old Testament. [See Chris Wright, **God's people in God's land**, Paternoster 1990.]

These principles also provide some of the basis of 'tentmaking'. It isn't just in order to get a visa!

1.2 Humanity is created in God's image

Two fundamental truths that are crucial to mission are stated early in Genesis:

- All human beings are addressable by God. God can speak to them.
- All human beings are accountable to God.

There is a universal human awareness of God. Mission is not primarily to Hindus, Muslims etc. Religious labels are secondary. Mission is directed towards people made in God's image to whom God can speak and who stand before God in His judgement and mercy.

The Gospel is not to save people from Catholicism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism etc. It is to save people from sin. We must recognise the dignity and status of all human beings!

Why? Mission is so easily polluted by a superiority complex which is easily recognised and most definitely unwelcomed by people.

1.3 Humanity is made in and for relationships.

"Male and female He made them." (Gen. 1:27)

"It is not good that man should be alone." (Gen. 2:18)

God's creative intention for humanity includes social relationships. Part of mission is an active concern for just and loving relationships between people and between communities.

In Eph. 2:11-8:6 Paul says an essential element of the power of the Gospel (the Cross) is to bring about such relationships. The principalities and powers are trying to destroy these. (Gal. 3:28)

"Neither Jew nor Greek" – i.e. across cultures and languages

"Neither male nor female" – i.e. across sexes

"Neither bond nor free" – i.e. across economic structures

1.4 Humanity in rebellion

Christian mission works within the holistic framework of sin and evil. We live in a fallen world. It is profoundly important to have a Biblical view of suffering.

I would like to mention three aspects of this:

- **Sin affects every dimension of the human person.**

  Genesis 3 and the story of the Fall describes how every aspect has been penetrated by sin:

  - ✓ the spiritual dimension – distrust of God
  - ✓ the psychological dimension – Eve's use of her rational and aesthetic faculties leading her into disobedience
  - ✓ the physical dimension – she took and ate
  - ✓ the social dimension – she shared it with her husband "who was with her".

- **Sin affects human society and history.**

Genesis 1-11 is the story of the spread of sin from family to society down through the generations of nations. Sin is more than individual; it affects the conditions and structures of human life. It affects the historical context into which each generation is born.

Any Christian worker spends the first 5 to 10 years analysing the context and culture in which he/she is working. This gives an understanding of aspects of this sinfulness. An example would be the shame/honour society in the Middle East as opposed to a truth/error society. This has profound implications for the contextualisation of the Gospel into the Middle East. A Gospel presentation needs to cover more than personal sin. It should also include the structures of evil in society. We need to understand the causes as well as the symptoms.

- **Sin affects the whole physical environment.**

Christian mission happens in the awareness that we live on an earth that is under a curse – Gen. 3. This perspective will save our mission strategies from unrealistic and triumphalist idealism.

A balancing awareness is that we live on an earth under covenant – Gen. 8:20-9:17. This should save us from unbiblical despair! The earth is still the Lord's and everything in it. Its future lies in God's hands! These are some of the great foundations for the model of missions we find in Genesis.

2. The Manifesto of Mission – the Covenant with Abraham

In Acts 15 we see that the success of Paul's mission to the nations raised the issue of how a Gentile nation can be part of the People of God. Membership of the People of God was defined by circumcision, the Mosaic Covenant and keeping the Law. Paul had to justify his model of mission strategy! What was his answer? Consider Abraham – Gal. 3:6-8, 14, 26-29; Rom. 4:16-18.

Paul's argument:

Right from the very beginning it was God's purpose to bring the nations into a sphere of blessing as part of His People. This is the Gospel that was announced to Abraham! So mission to the nations is a **fulfilment** of Scripture not a contradiction.

2.1 The Context of the Abrahamic Covenant

The context is God's engagement with the nations in primal history. In Genesis 10 we have the post-flood table of the nations – 70 in number. And in Genesis 11 we have the story of the Tower of Babel.

So the call of Abraham in Genesis 12 is God's response to all the problems of humanity. We have the great privilege of reading the end of the story! God and the nations will be reconciled in the New Creation – Rev 21:1-3, 24-26; 22:2.

The bottom line is, ***"In you/through you all the nations of the earth will receive blessing"***.
[Gen. 12:3; 18:18; 26:4-5; 28:14; 35:11]

2.2 Three Missiological Implications

- **A universal purpose**

  - ✓ There was a universal purpose in God's election of Abraham and the People of God. They were called into existence only because of God's missionary purpose to bless the nations!

- ✓ God's commitment to Israel is based on His commitment to humanity as a whole. So the universality of the Bible's mission is not a New Testament "extra". It is integral from the very beginning of God's action in history:

  Ps. 22:27, ***"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."***

  Ps. 72:17, ***"May His name endure forever. May it continue as long as the sun. All nations will be blessed through Him and they will call Him blessed."***

  Jer. 4:1-2, ***" 'If you will return, O Israel, return to Me,' declares the Lord. 'If you put your detestable idols out of My sight and no longer go astray, and if, in a truthful, just and righteous way, you swear, "As surely as the Lord lives", then the nations will be blessed by Him and in Him they will glory.' "***

- **A unique particularity** – i.e. from the general ⟶ the particular

  The universal goal of blessing for all peoples would be achieved historically "through you". The uniqueness of Yahweh is connected with the uniqueness of His People down to the uniqueness of Christ – the Messiah. This is affirmed in Deut. 4:32 ff; Amos 3:2 and Ps. 147:19-20.

- **A missionary people**

  The primary agent of mission is the People of God in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. God's answer to human sin is not conversion and whisking off believers to heaven! You notice that this is not what happened! What are we here for? God's answer is in order to create a new community on earth who will be ***"a light to the nations"***. (Is. 49)

  Jesus said to His disciples, ***"You are my witnesses."*** (Acts 1:8) This is the same command God gave to the Old Testament People of God – that of telling the nations the identity of the One True God and the only source of salvation. (Is. 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. … I, even I, am the Lord and apart from Me there is no Saviour. I have revealed and saved and proclaimed …. You are My witnesses' declares the Lord, 'that I am God'."

  So mission is not just a task for missionaries! It is the whole raison d'être of the whole People of God. This was largely missed for about 17 centuries! The heart of theology is missiology. Ecclesiology is secondary!

3. The Agent of Mission: Israel the People of God

Two things stand out about the Old Testament People of God in their relation to mission:

- ➢ **The Uniqueness of their Covenant** Deut. 4:32-40
  - It was unique in the People of God's experience of that revelation at Mount Sinai.
  - It was unique in the People of God's experience of redemption through the Exodus. (v. 32-34, 36-38)

  No other 'people' in history has any parallel. This is unprecedented and unparalleled. But note: Yahweh is interested and involved in the history of **all** peoples, Deut. 2:9-12, 18-23.

  - The People of God's unique knowledge of God gave them a unique witness. v. 35
    - ✓ The purpose of the experience was, ***"that you might know… "*** the truth about the identity and the nature of God.
    - ✓ What other 'peoples' don't yet know, God's People know because Yahweh has demonstrated it to them in their history.
    - ✓ This is emphasised in Isaiah 40-55 where missionary implications are more clearly spelled out. The knowledge of the Living God was something God entrusted to His People so they could be ***"a light to the nations"***.

- ✓ The heart of this knowledge was: the God of the 'People of God' is unique! v. 35-39 Old Testament monotheism was not merely a matter of arithmetic (only one God exists), but of defining the personal and redemptive character of God. ***"Yahweh is God … and there is no other."***
- ✓ This has very important implications for the distinctiveness of Biblical Monotheism and of New Testament Christology which is integrated into it – see 1 Cor. 8:4-6.

➢ **The Distinctiveness of their Ethics**

There are two passages I would like to draw your attention to: Gen. 18:19 and Ex. 19:3-6. Both these passages forcefully illustrate an ethical challenge to God's people as they fulfil their mission to all nations.

Gen. 18:19: ***"For I have chosen him*** (Abraham) ***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 the Lord will bring about for Abraham what He has promised him."***

This is God's thought and it comes in the middle of chapters 18 and 19 which is the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. So in the midst of judgement God is reminding us of his universal promise of blessing to all nations and all peoples.

- ✓ **Sodom is a model of the fallen world of human evil and wickedness.**
  Its evil is proto-typical and proverbial. An outcry goes up to God because of the oppression and cruelty and the perverted, violent immorality (v. 20-21). Another outcry goes up over Jerusalem later concerning bloodshed, corruption and injustice (Is. 1:9 ff) as well as arrogance, affluence and callousness towards the needy. (Ezek. 16:49)
- ✓ **Abraham is a model of God's mission**.
  In the light of the coming judgement God reviews with us His ultimate purpose that through him (Abraham) all the nations of the earth will be blessed.

  God's promise of a son to Abraham in v. 10 is now seen in the light of God's ultimate intention of world mission. God reveals this even as He prepares judgement on Sodom to destroy an evil society. He reminds us that His ultimate purpose is the blessing of all nations and He has a plan to accomplish this.

  So a meal with this old couple – Abraham and Sarah – who are still childless shows that God's whole plan of redemption is invested in them. Perhaps it's not surprising that at least Sarah finds the idea of bearing a child at her age amusing!
- ✓ ***"The way of the Lord"*** **as a model for God's People**

  The world is going the way of Sodom. God wants His missionary people to be characterised by ***"the way of the Lord"***. This is a rich Old Testament expression that describes God's own characteristic behaviour and describes our imitation of Him – See Deut. 10:12-22

  It goes further and summarises Old Testament ethics and especially the ethics of mission: ***"doing what is right and just"***. So God's purpose in choosing Abraham was His means of fulfilling His promise to bless all nations. In these verses you have election, ethics and mission. The ethical quality of the life of the People of God is the vital link between their calling and their mission. There is no mission without ethics.

Exodus 19:3-6: after the Exodus the People of God arrived at Mount Sinai. These verses are a key statement by God of His programme. They define the identity and the agenda God has for his Old Testament People.

This incident stands after the Exodus and before the Covenant and Law giving. (Ex. 20-24)
It clearly states the "why" of their salvation as God's People.

v. 4: ***"You yourselves have seen what I did …."*** Their redemption was God's initiative. It was saving grace and it was a recent fact! It is important to note the priority of grace in the Old Testament theology of missions and ethics. Obedience to the Law was based on and a

response to God's saving grace in our redemption. In Exodus there are 18 chapters on redemption before a single chapter comes about the Law!

v. 5: ***"Out of all nations …. The whole earth is mine."*** Here we see God's universal concern. He has a very special place for His People – His treasured possession, but our identity and our task is always in the context of God's love for all the nations of the earth. So the ethical and mission agenda for the Old Testament People of God must be motivated by the same universal cosmic concern that God has.

In 1 Pet. 2:9-12 Peter uses this same argument for the identity and role of Christians.

In v. 6 we see the identity and the duty/role of the People of God. Our identity is to be a **Priestly Kingdom** and our role is to be a **Holy Nation**.

A Priestly Kingdom

To understand what this means in terms of the identity of the People of God in relation to all nations, we must understand what the duty of priests is in the Bible in relation to the rest of the people.

Priests had a twofold task:

i) **To teach the Law** – Lev. 10:11; Deut. 33:10; Jer. 18:18; Mal. 2:6 ff and Hos. 4:1-9.
It was through the priests that God's character and attributes would be known to the people.

ii) **Handling the sacrifices** – Lev. 1-7 etc.
Through the priests' work of atonement the people could come to God and be reconciled to God. So the priesthood was representational between God and the rest of the people.

It is very important to understand that God confers on the whole people the role of His priesthood in the midst of the nations. As the People of God their role and identity was to bring to the nations a knowledge of the true and living God and to bring the nations to be reconciled to God by the means of atonement.

So there was a dual role and movement:

- out to the nations with knowledge
- bringing the nations back in reconciliation

So the priesthood of the People of God is a missionary function.

In the New Testament Peter sees the priestly nature of the church as ***"declaring the praises"*** of our Exodus God to the nations and living among the nations in such a way that they experience Exodus and come to glorify God.

The only New Testament text that speaks of an individual's Christian ministry speaks of it in priestly terms – Romans 15. Paul describes his evangelistic mission to the Gentiles as his ***"priestly duty"*** (v. 16).

Sadly the church forgot that priesthood is what happens outside the church in mission to the world and imported it back into internal ministry. The New Testament never refers to it in this way!

A Holy Nation

For the People of God to fulfil their mission of being God's priesthood in the midst of the nations they must be holy! In the Old Testament holiness is not a 'religious' word. Its primary meaning is to be different – distinct. So the People of God were to be a nation among the nations, but to be recognisably, visibly and substantially different. Why was this necessary? It was because they uniquely belonged to God and because of this they were representing His character, His nature and His ways to the nations who didn't know Him.

Holiness is both a fact and a command.

It is a fact because it is something God does. (Lev. 20:8, 26; 21:8, 15, 23; 22:32)

It is a command because it is something we work out in life. (Lev. 18:3; 19:1; 20:7, 23, 26)

To the People of God, ***"You must be holy because your God is holy"*** basically meant, **"You must be a different kind of nation because your God is a different kind of God"**.

Leviticus 19 starts with this command and then goes on to give practical, down to earth content to holiness. The list of **ethical distinctives** for God's People includes:

- family and community respect (3, 32)
- loyalty to God (36, 4-8, 12, 26-31)
- economic relationships (9-10)
- workers' rights (13)
- social compassion (14)
- judicial integrity (15)
- neighbourly attitudes and conduct (11, 16-18)
- distinctiveness (19)
- sexual integrity (20-22, 29)
- exclusion of idolatry and the occult (4, 16-18)
- racial equality (33-34)
- commercial honesty (35-36)

If the People of God were to be God's priesthood in the midst of the nations, then the whole nation had to be different. In Biblical thinking there is an integral relationship between mission and ethics. The chief agent of God's mission to the nations is the People of God and the chief requirement of the People of God is that **they be what they are** and live out their identity as a Priestly Kingdom and the Holy Nation.

4. The Scope of Mission

Mission involves declaring the Gospel of God's redemption. There are many models of redemption, salvation and restoration in the Old Testament, in historical events in institutions and in people.

- **The Exodus Model of Redemption**

  "In Your unfailing love You will lead the people You have redeemed. In Your strength You will guide them to Your holy dwelling." (15:13)

  Here the Exodus is described as a model for mission. The model has many dimensions.

  - God as a Kinsman Redeemer – only understood in Middle Eastern culture – the necessity of a relative to help. This is a powerful obligation. God is the one who takes care of us. He has taken responsibility.
  - Redemption from political bondage (1:8-10) – The People of God are an immigrant ethnic minority. They are extremely vulnerable to unjust oppression instigated by fear!
  - Redemption from economic bondage (1:11-14) – The People of God were exploited by slave labour – a fate common to many ethnic minorities.
  - Redemption from social bondage (1:15 ff) – The People of God were suffering an intolerable violation of their human rights. They were suffering under state-sponsored genocide. (v. 22) This is the same fate as our Sudanese brothers and sisters in the Nuba Mountains.
  - Redemption from spiritual bondage (4:22) – The People of God were **God's chosen people**. They were called and chosen. It was absurd to be enslaved by Pharaoh and the gods of Egypt. They had to be released from spiritual bondage to serve. Their liberation led to the Covenant at Sinai.

  So the Exodus model of mission demonstrates the holistic nature of God's redemption and God liberating us from all bondage. It clearly demonstrates that redemption – the end product of mission – is larger than but also incorporates 'salvation of souls'. Today there is often a tendency to polarise: spiritual $\longrightarrow$ political (liberation theology).

- **The Jubilee Model of Mission/ Redemption – A Model of Restoration**

  The Purpose of the Jubilee (Lev. 25)

  It was an economic institution designed to assist poor families by providing release from the bondage of debt every 50 years – i.e. every second generation.

  If land or even family members were mortgaged or in bonded labour for debt reasons, these lands or family members were released and restored to the family. The basis of Jubilee was the **centrality of the family**. So the restoration was:

  - **Social:** it restored to the family **social freedom** to enable full participation in the social and economic welfare of the community.
  - **Economic:** originally the land was distributed fairly; (Josh. 13-19) Jubilee restored that fairness. It broke the injustice of inherited debt and the resulting vicious downward spiral of poverty. It gave productive resources to families who, for one reason or another, had suffered economic collapse.
  - **Spiritual:** it expressed God's sovereignty over all things including time. It expressed God's ability to provide (v. 20-22). It called into remembrance the historic redemption and provision of God (v. 38, 42, 55). It emphasised forgiveness. The Jubilee year began on the Day of Atonement (v. 9). It spoke clearly of a future hope!

    All these spiritual issues are at the heart of evangelism and mission! But we should never polarise the spiritual from the social and economic. God's salvation and redemption is comprehensive in its concern for all our needs.

    The model of Jubilee had a strong influence in the ministry of Jesus.

5. The Conflict of Mission – gods and idols

Deuteronomy 6:4-5 expresses the essence of Old Testament faith: **one God, one Lord, one love**.

Monotheism undergirds the Bible not as a philosophical abstraction, but as a key missionary conviction. In the Old Testament this immediately brings a conflict between the Living God and the gods and idols of men. This conflict is the heart of mission.

Three typical conflicts

- **Egypt:** there was state idolatry. Pharaoh was deified with the resultant politics of arrogance and oppression. Human authority was deified to the point of idolatry which always leads to injustice, oppression and abuse. So Egypt represents **the idolatry of power**.

  The story of the Exodus is a power encounter – a battle about who has ultimate authority. Ex. 5:2: ***"Who is Yahweh that I should obey Him and let Israel go? I do not know Yahweh. I will not let Israel go."*** The rest of the story is about Pharaoh learning who Yahweh is by a dramatic demonstration of Yahweh's power.

  Ex. 15: Yahweh is God and He is Sovereign Lord over all nations. Yahweh reigns – not Pharaoh! There is a cry of victory and joy as God confronts and destroys idolatrous, usurped and abusive use of power.

- **Canaan:** the cults of Baal promoted success, wealth etc. through fertility in crops, in herds and in women. This included ritual prostitution and child sacrifice. Canaanite idolatry promised life and success, but delivered death. Greed brought structural injustice and oppression to Canaanite society. So Canaan represented **idolatry of nature, life, success and fertility**.

  What was God's response?

  - Rejection and warning (Deut. 7)
  - A challenge to renunciation – Elijah (1 Kings 18)

- **Babylon:** this great imperial power used idolatry to control the Empire. In Mesopotamian religions there were astral deities (star gods) who controlled the future. So Babylonian religion included the idolatry of security and control of events.

- Is. 40-55 – the powerlessness of gods and their futility
- Is. 40:26 – the stars are made and controlled by Yahweh
- Is. 41:21-24 – 'gods' are powerless to speak or act
- 44:6-20 – idolatry is blindness and delusion
- 46:1-7 – 'gods' are helpless to save themselves
- Is. 47 – idolatry's attempts to control the future to give security are shattered.

  Only Yahweh controls history and He alone can give security.

So **our missiology** needs to give more attention to identifying the "idolatrous powers" of our day and destroying their influence.

6. The Goal of Mission from the Old Testament – God and the future of the nations

- **God deals with <u>all</u> nations with justice and mercy.**
  - Nations as a whole unit can be under God's judgement. (Is. 24)
  - They can be agents of God's judgement. (Is. 10:5-19)
  - They can be recipients of God's mercy. (Jer. 12:15 ff, 18:1-10; Jonah)

  So there is a collective dimension to the way God deals with nations.

- **The nations are portrayed as 'observers' of what God was doing with Israel.**

  God's actions in and through His People were at an open stage – visible to all the nations. They can ask questions and draw conclusions.

  [Ex. 15:14-16, 32:11 ff; Deut. 4:6-8, 29:22-28; Ezek. 36:16-23)

- **The nations would in some way 'benefit' from Israel's salvation history.**

  Because of this they can be summoned to praise and thanksgiving with joy. There are many examples where the nations are called to join in the praise of Yahweh with joy.

  [Ps. 47:1-4; 22:27-28, 67; 96:1-3; 98:1-3] How does this happen? Paul calls it 'a mystery'.

- **The nations would ultimately be included, along with Israel, as the People of God.**

  They are no longer observers – no longer applauding observers, but absorbed as equal partners into the People of God. (Ps. 47:9) Some passages are breath-taking!

  [Is. 19:19-25; 56:38; 66:18-21; Amos 9:11-12; Zech. 2:11]

- **Salvation will extend "to the ends of the earth" because of the work of "the Servant of Yahweh".**

  Jesus saw His role as primarily to restore Israel in line with the mission of the Servant. The vision of the gathering in of the nations was not fulfilled in His earthly ministry except in some symbolic words and acts. [Mt. 8:5-13; 28:189-20; Lk. 24:45-48; Acts 1:8]

Paul applied these 'servant' texts to himself and his mission to the nations.
[Acts 13:44-48; Rom. 1:1-5; 16:25-27; 15:16]

He saw the fruit (a Jewish/Gentile church) as a fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy.
[Eph. 2:11-3:6; Rom. 9-11; 15:8-12]

So the missionary nature of the Christian church fulfils the Old Testament goal of missions.