

The Role of the OT in Evangelism: Implications for Translation and Discipleship

by Don Pederson

The goal of all missionary endeavor is to see individuals come to faith in Christ and then grow into mature disciples. Most of the missionary force in recent times has come from the Western world and as such is very goal oriented and accustomed to seeing instant results. Since presenting the Gospel is the essential element in achieving the goal, we want to get to it as quickly as possible. We think, "Why spend a lot of time on peripheral issues? Let's get to the point and get some results."

The result of this mind-set is that in many cases we underestimate the foreignness of our message and the Gospel is presented before the necessary foundational background is understood. For instance, can animistic people understand their sinfulness before a holy God when their concept of divinity is inherently capricious and morally flawed? When the Gospel is presented to those who have a faulty understanding of God, man, sin, and Satan, some will respond by adopting the outward trappings of Christianity, but in reality the visible manifestations of Christianity will be built on a largely invisible foundation of animism (or Hinduism, Buddhism, etc.).

I had an experience some years ago in Venezuela which vividly illustrated this point. I was engaged in a dialect intelligibility study of the various dialects of the Yanomamo tribe. One night, encamped on the banks of the Mavaca River along with a co-worker, a Guajibo family pulled up in their canoe to spend the night. Since they spoke Spanish, we struck up a conversation and began visiting with them. When they learned that we were mis-

sionaries, the father said, "I used to be a Christian, but I'm not any more." We asked him to explain, so he continued: "Well, I used to go to the meetings, sing the hymns and pray, but I don't any more, I've started chewing tobacco and smoking again, so I'm not a believer any more." As we listened to his explanation we realized that this man had heard the Gospel, but had not correctly understood it because he had interpreted it in terms of his understanding of what God demanded, not in the terms declared in Scripture. He "knew" that the supernatural realm could be appeased only by doing certain things and by avoiding other things, therefore his focus was on his own efforts to conform to an approved standard of behavior. We were acquainted with the missionary who had shared the Gospel with this man and we knew the intended message was not what had been communicated. Unfortunately, good intentions are not enough to guarantee the desired results. Syncretism is often the normal result of missionary work unless the missionary is alert to possible misunderstanding. He/she therefore carefully needs to lay a foundation for the accurate understanding of the Gospel message.

How can we properly lay the necessary foundation for a clear and correct understanding of the Gospel? The experience of New Tribes Mission (NTM) missionaries has been that careful teaching of the Old Testament provides the necessary background for the correct understanding of the New Testament. All of the concepts crucial to a proper understanding of the Gospel are introduced and developed in the Old Testament. It is there that God beauti-

fully and progressively reveals Himself and the glory of His person. It is in the acts of God recorded in Scripture that He can be known. As Westerners, we are accustomed to systematizing and organizing knowledge, so we tend to teach others in the same Western way. However, most people, and this is especially true of tribal people, learn best from stories and storytelling. As our Creator, God knew this so He gave us a book that is made up mostly of stories—not a book on systematic theology.

Many missionaries have found that as the Old Testament is used to focus on God and His character as revealed in His interaction with mankind throughout history, the concept of God held by those being taught begins to shift. They begin to see God as holy, righteous, merciful, loving, and gracious. This happens not only because someone taught them a list of His attributes, but because they have seen, through a foundational study of God's Word, that He always manifests those characteristics in His dealings with mankind. This shift in thinking is accomplished by using the Old Testament narrative as an instructional device to communicate the concepts essential for understanding the Gospel of the New Testament.

Many NTM missionaries have seen clear evidence of a change in tribal people's understanding of God as they have taught the Old Testament. A few examples may suffice here.

The Ata Tribe of East New Britain Province in Papua New Guinea

The Ata people believe that the ancestral spirits cause the seeds in their gardens to germinate. Because of this, they stay in their homes and

keep quiet for several days after planting their gardens so they won't frighten the spirits away when they come to make the seeds grow. As NTM missionaries, Paul and Linda McIlwain, taught through the Old Testament, one of the things they emphasized was that God created all things, including the plants, and that it was He who made the plants grow. When the next planting season came, the Ata people followed their formal custom of staying inside after planting their gardens. As they sat in their houses they began to discuss the truths they had learned about God. They talked about the fact that it was God who made their gardens grow, not the spirits. As they discussed this they began to realize that by staying in their houses they were giving to the spirits the honor that rightly belonged to God, so they decided to leave their houses and go about their normal activities. The Ata were also beginning to see themselves as helpless sinners before a holy God. This was expressed through the dirges that they composed and sang spontaneously. At the point these things took place, the Ata had not yet been taught about Jesus. The missionaries had not yet shared the N.T. Gospel story. However, *the Ata worldview was being impacted in foundational ways that would prepare them to correctly understand the Gospel.*

The Pumé Tribe of Venezuela

As Merrill and Theresa Dyck did foundational Old Testament teaching, the Pumé people learned that Adam and Eve were separated from God due to disobedience. They clearly saw how God destroyed all but Noah and his family at the time of the flood. They learned that God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah because of their great wickedness. However, most importantly, they understood that as descendants of Adam and Eve, they too were under the curse of God and separated from Him. Their understanding of this was vividly demon-

strated when they began to refer to themselves as "the cut-off-from-God ones," "the bound-for-the-lake-of-fire ones," "the connected-to-Adam-ones," and other similar phrases. Their references to themselves in this way was a clear indication that they were beginning to appreciate the holiness of God and their own lostness and need for a Savior.

The Dulangan-Higaonon

In preparing the Dulangan-Higaonon for the teaching of God's Word, Paul and Debbie Howells told them that they had a wonderful message for them leaving the people in great anticipation of their "story." The Howells began their teaching in Genesis and emphasizing mankind's separation from God and that the only acceptable payment for sin is death. The people began to sense the seriousness of their condition and their utter inability to fulfill God's demands. One day as Paul was teaching, an old man articulated this in a dramatic way when he stopped Paul during a teaching session and said, "Paul, you told us before you began teaching us that you had good news. But so far everything you have told us is really bad news. I just want to ask you, 'Is there any good news coming?'" Paul responded, "Grandfather, the best possible news is coming, just continue listening to the teaching." Once again, the Old Testament Scriptures were preparing the hearts and minds of the people to understand and receive the Gospel.

The Seven Phase Chronological Teaching Program

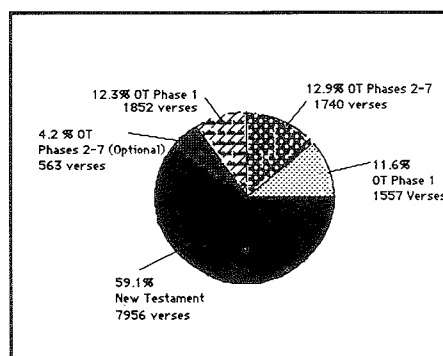
Over the course of the last 15 years, a seven phase approach to evangelism and church planting has been developed, primarily based on the work of Trevor McIlwain and a number of his NTM co-workers in the Philippines. Each phase of the teaching program has specific goals and covers specific por-

tions of scripture. On the following page is a very brief outline of the material that is developed in detail in the nine volume series *Building on Firm Foundations* by Trevor McIlwain.¹ Note the outline-chart of the seven phase Chronological Bible Teaching model on the following page.

Implication for Translation

Given the important role that the Old Testament plays both in evangelism and the development of the church in the seven phase teaching program, a significant amount of Old Testament Scripture must be translated. Since evangelism begins with Old Testament teaching, NTM missionaries begin their Scripture translation with Genesis to provide a vernacular Scripture base.

As the missionary team begins to plan for the evangelism phase of the teaching, they are also encouraged to consider what portions will be needed for teaching the later phases, and if possible translate all of it. This saves the translator from continually going back later to translate small portions that were omitted. In addition to the required passages, there are optional sections that are recommended to give a more complete context. The question that will immediately come to the mind of a trans-



lator or prospective translator is, "How much more translation will I have to do?" The following chart graphically depicts the amount of additional translation this approach entails.

While the Old Testament portions increases the translation task signifi-

Phase 1	
<p>Scripture Covered: Genesis through the Ascension of Christ Target audience: *Unsaved *Those not clear concerning their salvation *Believers untaught in the Old Testament *Believers wishing to reach others with the Gospel</p> <p>Emphasis in Phase 1 Salvation—Man's need of salvation and God's provision through Christ</p>	
Phase 2	
<p>Scripture Covered: Genesis through the Ascension of Christ Target audience: Believers—particularly new believers Emphasis in Phase 2 * The security of the believer in Christ * Constantly remind them that all God demanded from them as sinners has been provided by Christ</p>	
Phase 3	
<p>Scripture Covered: Acts (An Overview) Target audience: Believers—particularly new believers Purpose in Phase 3 *To continue the story following the Ascension of Christ *To provide historical and geographical background for the remainder of the N.T. *To use the infant Church in Acts as a model for the developing emerging church in the tribe</p>	
Phase 4	
<p>Scripture Covered: Overview of the rest of the New Testament (The Epistles) Target audience: Believers—primarily new believers Purpose in Phase 4 * Complete teaching of the overview of God's revelation which began in Genesis * Make believers aware of their position in Christ and to teach them how to appropriate Christ's life through the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit. * Emphasize God's holy standard for every part of the believer's life</p>	
Phase 5	
<p>Scripture Covered: Genesis through the Ascension of Christ Target audience: Maturing Believers Emphasis in Phase 5 * Sanctification in the life of the believer * In the Gospels emphasis on the spiritual training received by the disciples</p>	
Phase 6	
<p>Scripture Covered: Detailed study of Acts—Expositional teaching Target audience: Maturing Believers Emphasis in Phase 6 * Holy Spirit's guidance, training, and sanctifying work in the early church and the life of the apostle Paul</p>	
Phase 7	
<p>Scripture Covered: Detailed study of the Epistles—Expositional teachings Target audience: Maturing Believers Emphasis in Phase 6 * The church and the walk of the believer</p>	

cantly, it is not as overwhelming as one might think. All of the Old Testament portions, including the ones listed as optional, are equivalent to 70% of the New Testament. The bare minimum that is needed for the evangelistic phase is equal to 20% of the New Testament. Because Genesis and Exodus are such foundational books, a number of NTM workers have translated them in their entirety rather than just the portions. (Note: The Old Testament portions that are translated in support of the seven phase teaching program are available upon request.²)

Impact of the O.T. for Unbelievers

The response to the Gospel when it has been presented after foundational Old Testament teaching has been very positive. The testimonies of the believers have been most encouraging. They clearly express their understanding that they were helpless to do anything to save themselves from their sins, but that they are now trusting in Christ's acceptable sacrifice offered on their behalf. Significantly, missing from their testimony are references to what *they* are doing to earn their salvation; their focus is on what Christ did and His finished work.

Many individuals from the Ata tribe mentioned earlier trusted in Christ when the Gospel was presented. The dirges that had formerly expressed their hopeless condition were replaced by songs expressing their gratitude to God for sending Christ to be their acceptable and perfect sin bearer.

In a similar way, after trusting in Christ, the Pumé believers began to refer to themselves as "the held-close ones," "the connected-to-Christ ones," and "the twice-egged (born again) ones." They referred to Christ as "the on-our-behalf sin bearer," our substitute-dier," and "the in-our-place sufferer." These and similar terms they were using clearly expressed their under-

standing of the basis of their reconciliation to God.

In the video "EE-TAOW" the impact of the Old Testament teaching in the evangelization of the Mauk tribe of Papua New Guinea is dramatically portrayed. Mauk converts also give clear testimony that they are trusting in what Christ has done for them, not on anything they were doing or had done.

Impact in Lives of Believers

Beyond the importance of the Old Testament as an aid to effective evangelism is the fact that the Old Testament provides a rich source of truth that is a great blessing, challenge, and encouragement to tribal believers as they grow in their understanding of the Christian life. On one occasion, Mike Henderson, a NTM missionary to the Aziana tribe of the eastern highland Province of Papua New Guinea, was teaching from Numbers 13 on the ten spies of Israel who did not believe God, who had convinced the Israelites that they could not take the promised land from the Canaanites. As he taught he noticed that one of the teachers who had been active in teaching the program in other villages had tears in his eyes. When Mike asked him what was troubling him, the Aziana teacher told him that he had started teaching the Phase 1 lessons in a village that required travel through enemy territory. After he had made the trip several times, word came to him that the enemy group had let it be known that they would kill him if they caught him going through their territory again. Upon hearing this, the Aziana teacher out of fear stopped going to teach in the village. He told Mike, "I have been just like the unbelieving spies who didn't trust God. Now I'm going to be like Caleb and Joshua and believe that God is able to protect His own. I am going to continue teaching."

The teacher continued to go to the

village and taught through the Phase 1 lessons. Recently Mike heard that at the conclusion of the teaching, 95 people from the village gave clear testimony of their faith in Christ's death as the satisfactory payment for their sin.

Conclusion

When the Old Testament is included as an essential background for evangelistic preaching and teaching, it puts greater demands on the missionary, both in preparing to teach and in the amount of translation that must be done. However, the results are well worth it. A farmer would not think of planting his seed before carefully preparing the soil. Likewise, cross-cultural missionaries need to prepare the soil of the human heart to receive the Good Seed of the Gospel so that they can reap a bountiful harvest for God's glory!

End Notes

1. Trevor McIlwain, *Building on Firm Foundations*, Vols 1-9, New Tribes Mission, Sanford, Florida, 1987-1994.
2. This information was compiled by Carol Gutwein, International Translation Coordinator for NTM from the following sources: McIlwain, Trevor, *Key Old Testament Passages for Translation*, Outreach, No. 13, NTM Research and Planning, Sanford, FL, 1983. McIlwain, Trevor, *Key Old Testament Passages To Translate for Phases II-VII*, Outreach, No. 23, NTM Research and Planning, Sanford, FL, 1986. *Verses to be Used in Chronological Teaching*, Compiled by NTM Research and Planning,

Don Pederson is a missionary with New Tribes Mission. He works in the Research/Planning Department of the mission.