

The Great Commission in the Old Testament

World-wide missions in the Old Testament? Yes, and no faint glimmers nor only promises of better things to come in the New. Here is an article that will change your view of Scripture and will give you new zeal for God's purpose and plan of the ages.

by Walter C. Kaiser, Jr.

Most readers of Scripture will readily acknowledge that there is an unmistakable and clear evidence for asserting that the New Testament (N.T.) has a strong mission emphasis. This is especially the case in the classic Great Commission passage of our Lord in Matt. 28:19-20 followed through in the book of Acts. But few will accord the Old Testament (O.T.) anything even approaching such a mission emphasis or mission mandate.

However, the call for a mission mandate and emphasis in the O. T. cannot be overlooked, if readers are to do justice to the basic claims and message of the Old Testament (O.T.). Right from the beginning of the canon there is more than just a passing concern that all the nations of the earth should come to believe in the coming Man of Promise, the One who would appear through the Seed of the woman Eve, through the family of Shem, and then through the line of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and David.

The message of the O.T. was/is both universal in its scope and international in its range. This is clear right from the start in Genesis 1-11 with its universal audience. It also is very clear from the fact that when God first called Abraham to be his chosen instrument, the Living God gave the first great commission to him. For while others tried to make a "name" for themselves, as in the case of the sons of God marrying the daughters of men (Gen. 6:4), and the building of the tower of Babel (Gen. 11:4)—both cases involving the quest for a "name" or a reputation, God offered to give to Abraham a "name" as a gift from his grace.

But the gift of a name was not to be squandered on himself, but it was distinctly designed for the purpose of blessing others. Genesis 12:2-3 pointedly declared that Abraham's name, his blessing, and his being made into a great nation was for the purpose of being a blessing to all the peoples of the earth. Herein lies the heart of the mission mandate from its very inception!

That mission to and for the peoples of the earth was the focus can be attested from the representative Gentiles that are named in the O.T. text. One need only recall the names of Melchizedek, Jethro, the mixed multitude of Egyptians that went up out of Egypt with the Israelites, Balaam, Rahab, Ruth, the widow at Zarephath, and many others like them who responded through the preaching of prophets like Jonah or the major writing prophets, who addressed twenty-five chapters of their prophecies to the Gentile nations of their day (Isa. 13-23; Jer. 46-51; Ezek. 25-32). There are more verses dedicated to the foreign nations in those twenty-five chapters of the three major prophets alone than are found in all of the Pauline prison epistles in the N.T. There can be little doubt that God was more than mildly interested in winning the nations outside of Israel.

Rejection of Missions in the O.T.

Up until the present century, O.T. scholarship could be broadly characterized as accepting the proposition that Israel was called to respond to an active mission mandate to the peoples of the world. Sadly since that time, the idea of mission in that testament has been widely challenged with only a small number of writers defending the existence

and focus of world mission in the older canon.

The modern discussion on the rejection of missions in the O.T. is probably to be traced to Max Löhr.¹ Robert Martin-Achard summarized Löhr's position, and sets forth three theses: 1) the concept of mission was peripheral, not central, to the message and the work of Israel; 2) the concept of mission, to the degree that it is present at all in the O.T., can be attributed to the prophets; however, even then it did not come to maturity until the prophets were declining in importance; and 3) the mission to the Gentiles bore no tangible results since it collided with the particularism of the Law and the Jewish contempt for the heathen. In Löhr's view, the real father of Jewish missionary activity was someone dubbed "Deutero-Isaiah," allegedly someone who wrote Isaiah's chapters 40-66 in the post-exilic period, (sometime after 536 B.C.). Such a view undoubtedly qualifies as a minimalistic view, even if we do not comment on the unnecessary dividing up of the book of Isaiah and late dating of the same.

There were other voices that disagreed with Löhr. In the middle of the century, no voice was more active in defending the concept of Israel's mission to the nations than that of H. H. Rowley.² Rowley named Moses as the first missionary in that he evangelized the Israelites in Egypt to faith in Yahweh, (whom Rowley wrongly and unnecessarily went on to identify as a Kenite deity). Evangelized Israel was, in turn, called to mission by virtue of the fact that they had been the objects of God's election. They had been elected to be the people of God. This was not

merely an election for privilege, but it was an election for purpose: it was a particularistic call of one nation *in order* to reach the rest of the nations!

Rowley was not alone in his estimation of Israel's call to world-wide mission. Edmund Jacob likewise agreed that the concept of mission was a basic concept that could be found throughout the O.T. Jacob was especially enthusiastic about the importance of the book of Jonah for the missionary message.³ No less supportive were the voices of A. Gelin (Jonah is "the missionary manual *par excellence*") and Robert Dobbie (Jonah is "the best missionary tract ever written").⁴

Other scholars allowed Isaiah 40-66 to be included in what Johannes Lindblom called "the missionary revelations, dealing with the missionary charges (that were) incumbent upon Israel in relation to the Gentiles."⁵ In a similar fashion, Christopher R. North used that same section of the canon to show Israel's mission to humanity.⁶

But even this small amount of agreement was to experience significant opposition. Norman H. Snaith argues that Isaiah 40-66 did not support any concept of Israel's mission to the nations.⁷ He was followed by P. A. H. de Boer who also could find no exegetical grounds for such a position.⁸

The result of this drawing back of any missionary message in the O.T. text was to claim that Israel never had been given the role of being evangelists nor missionaries. Instead, their role was a passive one: they were just to be the people of God in the world. Martin-Achard concluded: "The Chosen People do not have to make propaganda in order to win mankind for its God. It is enough that, by its very existence, it should testify to the greatness of Yahweh."⁹

A Case for Missions in the O.T.

There are two outstanding missions texts in the Pentateuch, viz. Gen. 12:3 and Ex. 19:6. Both revolve around the

famous declaration that God's plan was to provide for the blessing of all the peoples in all the nations of the earth through the father of the chosen people and the nations that would be born from him.

The Abrahamic Covenant

The Greek translation of Gen. 12:3 (the Septuagint) rendered the verb in Gen. 12:3 in its passive form—"be blessed." No less decisive are the words of the apostle Paul in Rom 4:13 and Gal 3:8; in fact, even the intertestamental and apocryphal book of Ecclesiasticus (44:21) interpreted this promise as a passive and not as a reflexive—"bless themselves." However in spite of this, the reflexive interpretation is the one favored in some recent versions and commentaries of the Bible.

But looking at the text in context, clearly God intended to use Abraham in such a way that he would be a means of blessing to all the nations of the world. Clearly, he was to be the instrument in the redemption of the world. This would be God's solution to the curse that had been imparted as a result of the fall, (Gen. 3) and the curse imposed at the dispersion of the human race at the tower of Babel (Gen. 11:7ff).

In what way, we might ask, is this text a missionary text? If Abraham is to be no more than an intermediary of the divine blessing, was he not thereby absolved from taking any initiative in actively converting the nations to the Man of Promise who was to come?

However, there is no mistake that Abraham was to be more than just a foil for the gospel. Everything he was and did, as the current office-holder of the promise, would have both an "already" and a "not-yet" aspect to the message he spoke and the actions he set forth. The work of providing the Messianic Seed and the regenerating action of redemption were distinctively God's own unique actions. But the descendants of Abraham, knowing how wide the scope of their influence would be in decimating the blessing of

God, could not rest passively on their laurels and leave the work of missions to God or to a later generation. The patriarchs, and subsequently, the chosen people or nation who came from them, must actively call a waiting and watching world to repentance and to a belief in this Man of Promise who would come from their offspring.

Israel a Priestly Kingdom

The world mission purpose and focus is made even clearer in Ex. 19:6—Israel as a whole nation was to be "a priestly kingdom," "a royal priesthood." It was from this passage that I Pet 2:5 and Rev 1:6, along with the Reformers, announced the N. T. doctrine of the priesthood of all believers.

Prior to Israel's refusal and failure to act accordingly, it had been God's plan that every Israelite serve as a priest. Only after the nation's refusal to act did God appoint the tribe of Levi to assist them. But there can be no doubt about the fact that in God's plan, every Israelite was to be a ministering priest. And if it be asked, "For whom were all the Israelites to act as priests?" the answer is inescapable—they were to be priests for all the nations of the earth!

Did the call of the Levites change the missionary imperative for the whole nation? No! The only thing it changed was the directness of their access to God. Now the priests of Aaron's family would represent the people before God, but the nation was not rid of its obligation to be a witness to the nations. After all, that was the reason for their election. Election was never merely an election to privilege: foremost of all it was an election to service—and that service was a world mission service—to share the blessing (what Paul equated with the "good news" or "gospel" in Gal 3:8) with all the families of the earth (an expression in Gen. 12:3 that had just been used in the Gen. 10 listing of the (then-known) seventy nations of the world.

The Dynasty Of David

Without any question, the great missionary text located in the historical books is the one found in II Samuel 7:19. The context for this startling revelation was King David's declaration that he intended to build a house for God to replace the 400 year old curtains and accoutrements of the Tabernacle that Moses had built in the wilderness. God had a different plan! The prophet Nathan announced that God would make a house (i.e., a dynasty) out of David, rather than have David build a house for the Lord. Furthermore, God repeated to David most of the promises he had given beforehand to Abraham and the other patriarchs—they would now be fulfilled in David and his family!

David was so surprised by all of these "new" declarations that he went into the house of God in II Sam. 7:18ff and prayed: "Who am I, O Sovereign LORD, and what is my family, that you have brought me this far? And as if this were not enough in your sight, O Sovereign LORD, you have also spoken about the future of the house of your servant."

It is at this point where one of the most sensational texts of Scripture appears, but unfortunately it also happens to be one of the places where most translations go just plain haywire. Literally translated, David exclaims: "And this (which God had just declared about David's house and future) is (or will be) the charter for humanity, O LORD God!" David instinctively knew what many modern readers of the text have a great deal of difficulty seeing: the son born to David would be one that God personally would be a Father to (II Sam. 7:14) and that this son would be the means of blessing all the nations and families of the earth.

In many ways, this amazing expression of II Sam. 7:19, "law (or charter) for humanity" is very similar to the one that the prophet Isaiah will use two centuries later in Isa. 42 6, viz., "a covenant for the people." Isaiah saw

Israel's role as a missionary role and he used this expression "a covenant for the people" in direct parallelism with "a light for the Gentiles."

This son of David would have a dynasty, a throne and a kingdom that would last forever (II Sam. 7:16). It is this kingdom that would embrace all peoples, including all the Gentiles, if they would only call upon the name of that Man of Promise who was to come.

Even in his final words in II Sam. 23:5, king David showed an uncanny sense of clarity about what God was revealing to him. There he concluded, "Has not (God) made with me an everlasting covenant, arranged and secured in every part? Will he not cause to sprout (or "branch out") my salvation.?" The verb David chose became one of the key terms for the Messiah, "the Branch" (see Isa. 4:2; Jer. 23:5-6; Zech. 3:8; and 6:12). Accordingly, almost as if he wanted to make a pun on this word, he declared that the salvation that would come to him and to all Israel through this Seed, now located in his family, would "branch out" (or spread). Since there was/is no other God in all the universe, He too had to be the God of the Gentiles. This would be God's "charter for all of humanity"!

The Message of the Psalms

Repeatedly, the various psalmists will summon the nations to enter into the praise of the Lord God of Israel. These invitations both presume and build on the fact that the invitation to believe the gospel had been issued and responded to by the heathen peoples of the world.

The key Psalm is Ps. 67. God had blessed Israel and caused his face to shine upon them in a favorable way (an allusion to the Aaronic benediction of Num. 6:24-26) so that God's way might be known in all the earth and his salvation among all the nations (Psalms 67:2). This is very clear. Although one might quibble over Psalms 117 and debate whether in that Psalm we have a real example of missionary preaching, this

point cannot be debated in Psalms 67. In fact, this Psalms ends with the note that God had blessed Israel specifically so that "all the ends of the earth might fear Him" (Psalms 67:7).

No less impressive are the millennial or enthronement Psalms (Ps. 93-100). After alternating in successive Psalms with first an invitation to "Sing to the LORD a new song" with a declaration that "The LORD reigns" (e.g. Psalms 96, 98 compared with Psalms 97, 99), the whole series of Psalms climaxes in Psalms 100 with an invitation for all the nations of the earth to come to the Lord with singing and joyful service. Not only should the nations recognize their Creator, but they should acknowledge Him as their God and Lord and King over all.

The Servant Songs

As Johannes Blauw summarized the situation, almost all those who have been concerned with the question of the missionary message of the O.T. are agreed that the universal significance and calling of Israel is nowhere expressed more clearly than in Isaiah 40-55.¹⁰ Within this corpus, there are two Servant Songs that have been pointed to by most observers as being the most mission oriented that give to Israel a calling and a world-wide mission mandate and ministry: Isa. 42:1-7 and 49:1-7.

In these two marvelous texts, Israel is called to reveal God's "justice" to the nations (Isa. 42:1) and to serve as "a light to the Gentiles" (42:6 and 49:6) so that this salvation offered to Israel might reach to the ends of the earth (Isa. 49:6).

The only way to escape the obvious mission import of these clear declarations is to argue that "the Servant of the LORD" is an eschatological figure only, and not a figure that is to be equated with the nation of Israel. This interpretation, however, will not receive the endorsement of Isaiah's text. The identity of the Servant of the Lord is consistently a composite concept of both the nation (e.g., Isa. 41:8;

44:1) and the One who is to come who would minister to Israel (e.g., Isa. 53).

Blauw himself, while admitting to the strong universal intent and flavor of these passages with their call to world mission, distinguished between the “centripetal” and the “centrifugal” mission consciousness in the O.T.¹¹ In other words, according to Blauw the message had more of an inward and example-setting quality (centripetal force) rather than an outward and witness-bearing mandate to reach all the peoples of the earth (seen as a centrifugal N.T. dynamic).

But this issue could not be highlighted more dramatically than in the debate over the phrase in Isa. 42:6, “a covenant for the people.” Normally the word “people” (Hebrew *berît `am*) stands in the singular for Israel. Yet Isa. 42:5 and 40:7 uses the singular “people” to refer to the nations. Indeed, the parallel clause in Isa. 42:6 is a synonymous parallelism in which “a covenant for the people” is paralleled with “and a light for the Gentiles.” Surely “Gentiles” (Hebrew *gôyim*) makes it clear that the “people” intended here are not the Israelites, but the Gentile nations! It is true, of course, that this same “covenant for the people” (Hebrew *berît `am*) is used in Isa. 49:8 for the restoration of Israel to her land. But that is altogether in accord with the wide ranging nature of the promise plan of God that it would embrace within one and the same “covenant” an appeal for Israel to proclaim God’s salvation to all the nations while still embracing his promise to bring the nation of Israel back to their land.

However protests do sound: “Yes, but that word was directed to the ‘Servant of the Lord,’ not to the nation, or even to the believers of that nation.” However, it is precisely at this point where the reasoning has gone askew. Israel had been called to be “my son,” “God’s firstborn,” (Ex. 4:22); indeed, they were to be a “kingdom of priests,” “a holy nation” (Ex. 19:6). Israel was

also to be God’s “servant.”

Of course it is true that the “seed,” “my son,” “my firstborn,” the “Lord’s servant” had primary reference to the Messiah who was to come. But under the terms of corporate solidarity, which was/is so important to O.T. thinking, the One Christ represented the many, including the believers in Israel. It is not as if the writer indulged in double-talk or double meanings, or even that he meant one literal surface meaning and another hidden meaning that was left for N. T. writers to discover when the truth of world missions was enlarged. Rather, it was the fact that the writer saw as one collective whole both the one representing the group and the many as a single whole. It is much like in Western society where we exercise corporate solidarity thinking.

An example will suffice: If after repeated failure to win any proper redress of a newly purchased car, say from the General Motors Company, I finally take them to court to sue for relief, the court docket reads in its own legal fiction, “Walter Kaiser, Jr. vs. GMC.” For the purposes of law, GMC is regarded as a single person or entity, (thereby, I suppose, making this a fair contest). Actually, however, embraced in the single idea of GMC is the whole management team, all of the stockholders, the governing boards, and the employees. Yet they are treated as if they are one single person.

So it is with the concept of “Seed,” “My Son,” “My Firstborn,” “My Servant,” and others. It certainly does point to Christ in each case, but at the same time that same single idea points to all who believe in Christ as well, whether they look forward to His coming as in the O.T. era, or look backward to His first coming, as in the N.T. age. Little wonder, then, that Paul can claim in Galatians 3:16 that it did not say in the O.T. “seeds,” (i.e., plural “descendants”), but “seed,” which is one, i.e., Christ. The apostle Paul was not using trickery or Jewish midrashic

principles to make his point. No, he declared in the most vehement of terms possible that he understood this to be what the text itself taught. And having just made that point, he announces, without feeling any vacillation of any kind, that if we have believed in Christ, then we too are Abraham’s “seed” (Gal 3:29). Sadly to say, it is just this precise point that has been so badly missed in twentieth century exegesis, especially regarding a sound theology of missions in the O.T.

Therefore, the “servant” is to be identified with the righteous remnant in Israel. The servant has a task to perform which takes it far beyond its own nationalistic and provincial boundaries. That servant must be a “light to the Gentiles” (Isa. 49:6). That is precisely how missions came to be and must be seen as a central part of the vision of Isaiah.¹²

The Book of Jonah

The other landmark case of missions in the O.T., specifically in the prophets, is found in the book of Jonah. Without any doubt, Jonah is called to take a message from Yahweh to Israel’s most bitter and cruelest of enemies—the Assyrians in the capital of Nineveh. The sin of this Gentile nation had brought it to the brink of destruction. They must know this is the case, even if the impending doom is less than a five weeks away. But how ever we look at it, if ever there was a case of an intransigent and unwilling missionary this is just such a case.

Surprisingly enough to everyone, except to the prophet Jonah, the response to the message was overwhelming. The Gentiles in this capital city repented in a most dramatic way, giving enormous glory to God, but deep grief to a prophet who wished that so bitter an enemy would have had its just recompense for all the suffering they had imposed on Israel (along with a host of other peoples in the Near East).

It is clear that the sympathies of the author of the book of Jonah are with

those who favor extending the missionary message to others: *and it is centrifugal, not centripetal*. The only anti-missionary around is the prophet himself who had served reluctantly as God's missionary after he has had a "whale" of an experience and had been "down-in-the-mouth" for a period of time!

Conclusion

God had never elected Israel only to be engrossed in "navel-gazing"—only to receive the blessing for herself. She had been called and elected for service unto the nations of the earth. Certainly with Abraham, and then most decisively with Moses, the stage had been set for a whole nation to be involved in a ministry of being priests and witnesses to all the peoples of the earth.

The covenant that David received was not to be selfishly squandered on themselves, but it was to be "a charter for all humanity." That same point was affirmed by Isaiah as he again repeated this truth: it was to be "a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles." How much more clearly could the matter be put than that? In fact, if any doubt still existed, then what in heaven's name is Jonah doing off in the territory of their most wretched of all enemies calling for repentance? Certainly, he is not doing this in the name of one of the pagan deities of Assyria, but in the name of Yahweh, the only true God of the universe who wants to save!

World-wide missions are not a missing element, or a belated afterthought, nor even an added gloss appended to the O.T. Instead, world-wide missions forms the heartbeat of the message and purpose of the O.T. That is why Genesis begins in the first eleven chapters with a focus on all the families and nations of the earth much before one family is called to serve all the other families of the earth. Teaching or reading the O.T. without missions is like eating bread without butter: the two go together like love and marriage, like

horse and carriage! Rightly understood, the O.T. is a missions book *par excellence* because world missions to all the peoples of the earth is its central purpose. It also is the key that unlocks true understanding of its message as well as for the whole Bible.

End Notes

1. I am indebted for this reference (and much of the history of this discussion) to my former student, Donald E. Weaver, Jr., who did a Master of Arts thesis under my direction entitled, *Israel's Mission to the World* (Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1977). Max Löhr, *Der Missionsgedanke im Alten Testament. Ein Beitrag zur alttestamentlichen Religionsgeschichte*. Freiburg im Breisgau: Möhr, 1896). His views were most conveniently summarized by Robert Martin-Achard, *A Light to the Nations: A Study of the Old Testament Conception of Israel's Mission to the World*, transl. John P. Smith. London: Oliver and Boyd, 1962, pp. 5-6.
2. Among the numerous writings of H. H. Rowley on this subject are these: *The Missionary Message of the Old Testament* London: Carey Kingsgate Press, 1944; *ibid.*, *Israel's Mission to the World*. London: Student Christian Movement Press, 1939; *ibid.*, *The Biblical Doctrine of Election*. London: Lutterworth Press, 1950; and *ibid.*, *The Faith of Israel. Aspects of Old Testament Thought*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956.
3. Edmund Jacob. *Theology of the Old Testament* transl. Arthur W. Heathcote and Philip J. Allcock. New York: Harper and Row, 1958, p. 270, n.8.
3. Jacob, *Theology...*, p. 221.
4. A. Gelin. "L'Idée Missionnaire Dans la Bible," *Supplement to Union missionnaire du clergé de France*, No. 14, April 1956 as cited by Martin-Achard. *A Light to the Nations*. p. 50. Also Robert Dobbie. "The Biblical Foundation of the Mission of the Church," *International Review of Missions* 51 (1962): 197.
5. Johannes Lindblom, *The Servant Songs in Deutero-Isaiah. A New Attempt to Solve an Old Problem*. Lund: E.W.K. Gleerup, 1957, p. 57.
6. Christopher R. North. *The Suffering Servant in Deutero-Isaiah. An Historical and Critical Study*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956, p. 143.
7. Norman Snaith. "The Servant of the Lord in Deutero-Isaiah," in *Studies in Old Testament Prophecy. Presented to Professor Theodore H. Robinson*. ed H. H. Rowley. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1950, pp. 187-200.
8. P.A.H. de Boer. "Second Isaiah's Message," *Oudtestamentische Studien* 11 (1956):80-101. Another advocate of these same views was Antoon Schoors. *I Am God Your Saviour. A Form-Critical Study of the Main Genres in Isaiah XL-LX*. Supplements to *Vetus Testamentum*. 24 (1973): 302-303.
9. Martin-Achard. *A Light to the Nations*, p. 31.
10. Johannes Blauw, *The Missionary Nature of the Church: A Survey of the Biblical Theology of Mission* London: Lutterworth, 1962, p. 31.
11. *Ibid.* p. 34.
12. For an in-depth study on the two Servant Poems in Isa. 42:1-6 and Isa. 49:1-6 see my article "The Missionary Mandate of the O.T." that answers the question of *how* Israel was to serve the Lord as a light to the nations. God's heart for missions never dwindled or relaxed throughout the whole O.T. But nowhere did it receive as strong a theological explication as it did in these two Servant Poems. It would forever be known that Israel was to be a "light to the nation," a "covenant to the people (all the peoples)," and God's "salvation to the ends of the earth." For a copy of this article contact the *IJFM* editor.

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