

Seeing the Big Picture

When we speak of evangelizing the world, using popular phrases like “winning the world to Christ,” we do not think in detailed technical terms, nor consider the fundamental elements of exactly what it is we are doing. But are we “Seeing the Big Picture”?

by Ralph D. Winter

What we see 100 years ago, and again today, is only part of a lengthy pattern running back to Abraham, to the beginning of the Bible, and is best seen in that light. I think we can profit by tracing that whole series of events very briefly.

Genesis 1 to 11 tells us how God’s creatures were alienated from Him in the first place. Those few pages are like the introduction to the whole Bible, emphasizing three points: 1) we see the goodness of God’s original creation, 2) the entrance of a God-defying evil person—more than a force—who is still alive and menacing today, and 3) we see the hopelessness of man “only doing evil continually.”

More than “Getting Saved”

However, every commentator divides Genesis at chapter 12, because there is where we find the beginning of the one, long, sustained, dramatic account of the gradual redemption of this planet—the story of “The Kingdom Strikes Back,” something much more significant than a few individuals here and there “getting saved.”

That is, beginning in Genesis 12 we find that God has in His sovereignty chosen to “bless” a man named Abram, not just “save” him, but *bless* him. We note that this is also the key word when Isaac confers the “blessing” upon Jacob and not Esau.

Not a Raise in Salary!

It is not merely a word implying worldly blessings but one which speaks primarily of a new, family relationship, made possible only because Abram was able, as Jesus put it, “To see my day and be glad.” Yes, Abram in

faith depended upon the shed blood of Christ, the seed which one day would bruise the head of the serpent. (Gen. 3:15)

God changed Abram’s name to Abraham, father of peoples, in order to emphasize what was meant in Genesis 12 by his being the one through whom all of the peoples on earth would be brought into that same amazing blessing of sonship and inheritance.

The Mystery in Our Mission

The Bible does not talk as though God is just out to save us as individuals. God is not just out to save us from harm, and certainly not to save us to be independent of Himself. Yet, as evangelicals, our most important tenet of faith is that God wants to make us, individually, his children, with all the rights and privileges and responsibilities which come with that relationship. But God does not just want to “save us,” whatever that means to a new believer. He wants us to become *joint-heirs* with His only Son, whom He sent to die for us, so that through His shed blood we might be brought into the household of God, not as servants but as sons, and, as part of a family—His family.

All of this rich meaning is implied in the master term *blessing*, although it does not come through in English. That is, we don’t think of *being blessed* as gaining a new family relationship, something that normally includes others in that family, on earth and in heaven (Gal. 3:26-28). *The English word allows us to suppose that missions is all about helping people, to save people, when in fact missionaries are inviting people and their whole families into our same global and heavenly family.* To do that it is virtually

necessary to create the family-like fellowship of the church in mission church planting activity. Unless the church already has been planted among a given people, this is a necessary work of missionary effort.

But a dual meaning of this wonderful truth is the fact that from the beginning this blessing for us was intended for *all other peoples* as well. This gives us a breathtakingly broader mandate than to run throughout the world proclaiming the Gospel. How differently our evangelical terms sound when compared to what Paul summed up his work to be—“to bring about obedience of faith among all peoples for His Name’s sake.” The implication is that missions work for at least one obedient, evangelizing family tradition within every people or lineage on earth.

The Patriarchal Period

In this period of roughly 400 years we see many examples of both success and failure on the part of this man and his lineage, in regard to being the means of the blessing, or the inclusion as sons, of those of other nations, tribes, and tongues. Abraham’s own first journey down to Egypt was a disaster as a mission, in that his own personal security, elevated above even his wife’s well-being, brought him low rather than high in the eyes of the ruler of Egypt. What a missed opportunity! Abraham’s great grandson, Joseph, would be a much greater blessing in Egypt, although we do not know all that we someday will know about what transpired there.

The Period of the Captivity

Then, God moved this chosen family, this chosen race, this special people,

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right into Egypt for another 400 years. Again we do not know the details but we do know the purpose: they were to enable the Egyptians to come into that same blessing. Perhaps this happened in part. One of the pharaohs in a totally unique shift moved to monotheism, and in his tomb we see some of the phrases of the Psalms. But again we must wait until later to know more of the details. Egypt certainly ended up rejecting the will of the One who could have been their Father in heaven, and their revolt and its terrible consequences were acted out on a stage for all the world to see.

The Period of the Judges

In a third roughly-400-year period, called the Judges, we see the children of Abraham, specifically of Israel, reestablished in the strategic global location of Palestine, led out of Egypt by one of their own who had been an Egyptian, but who had been brought up by a mother who stood within the lineage of the blessing of God.

As the people leave Egypt, the purpose of the blessed nation is restated in reference to the original covenant with Abraham. It is said that this people is to function as a *nation of priests and a holy people*, in “all the earth” (Ex. 19:5,6). Meanwhile, however, the promised base of their global operations had become inhabited by a people whose fullness of evil has grown to the place where God must erase them from the record, a task in which God plans to use His own people. By that time His people have themselves degenerated to a level in which they are not useful for anything more refined than military exploits, a phenomenon reminiscent of another unspiritual leader (standing within a nation which had received the blessing) named Cortez, who with a tattered handful of men pushed over an evil empire called Aztec, which also had moved to a crescendo of human sacrifice.

Thus the period of the Judges is described as one in which a blessed nation survives, but does not reach out very effectively with that special blessing conferred upon them and entrusted to them, *a response characteristic of many other groups and periods later in human history*.

The Period of the Kings

In the next roughly-400-year period, called the Kings, God’s redemptive purpose is more clearly discovered and enacted, but limply and sporadically. First, God uses great strength against the northern kingdom, pushing them unwillingly into contact with other nations. Then He does the same with the southern kingdom when it, too, falls short of the relationship He intended, a relationship with Himself and with other nations. *God was in the mission business whether Israel was or not*.

The Period Following the Exile

In the final roughly-400-year period before Christ, the children of Israel straggle back from Babylon and in renewal rediscover more clearly than ever just what God wanted of them. They had glimpses of the fact that even their deportation had missionary purpose—God was not as interested in re-establishing them in their land as He was in their functioning as His Salvation (Blessing) to the ends of the earth (Isa 49:6).

About a hundred years before Christ, a devout and biblically focused group within this chosen nation (Pharisees) gained momentum, at the very time when the Jews had been relocated into many mission fields. By this point, the Jews had been scattered by divine forces both to the East (two-thirds of the Jews never made it back from Iran), to the North (where in every city Moses was preached), and to the Southwest, into Greek-speaking Egypt. In Egypt their concern for the Word of God produced the first (and by all odds the most

influential) missionary translation of all time, the *Septuagint*, which became the Bible of the early church, in Greek, and which provided the source of 80% of the quotations from the Old Testament in the New Testament.

The Jews, in their limited grasp of God’s purpose, were constantly anguished by distressingly foreign and cosmopolitan inroads into their precious land and into what they considered their sacred culture, but it is evident that *God was in the mission business whether they were or not*. Besieged by foreigners and foreign armies going back and forth over them as a door-mat was not what they had in mind, but was apparently significant to the purposes of God.

The Pharisees actually began sending missionary teams out in every direction, “traversing land and sea to make a single proselyte.” Such missionaries then and now will tend to be a resented threat to the cultural and social tradition of other nations, and do not carry a complete nor true understanding of the nature of the *blessing* to be mediated—which speaks of spiritual sonship more than external cultural transformation (proselytization).

The Midpoint of History

At this point the ultimate occurs. God’s purpose is uniquely breathed into the dramatic story by the entrance of His own Son, who was sent to fulfill, not to destroy, but whose destruction by His own people both identifies the degree of their own degradation and also God’s grace and unvanquishable purpose. In the face of Jesus Christ we have all beheld the glory of the eternal God. In His parables we see the purposes of God for *all the nations*. We see the special nature of the nation first chosen not only for sonship, but with an overriding purpose for *all peoples*—whose “blessing” even that chosen nation’s inadequacy would not be able to forestall.

The Roman Period and Beyond

Thus, in the first AD period of 400 years, we see the invasion of God's grace into one of the world's largest and most powerful empires, as the followers of a helpless babe born in a stable grew in wisdom and knowledge and in favor with God and man, the meek literally inheriting the earth, perplexing all secular scholars, moving from a stable in a tiny town to the palace of the emperors in just a few decades.

That's right, the emperor of Rome, moving his seat of empire East into Greek territory, turned over the keys to the Lateran Palace to the Christian leaders of Rome, the equivalent of today's White House being given over to Billy Melvin of the National Association of Evangelicals.

And all this in about 300 hundred years. This peaceful conquest of Rome ushered in a final, flourishing century of Bible translation into the language of the Western half of the empire, Latin, and the collation of the New Testament documents, but also introduced affluence and distraction from divine purpose, dissipation of energy in self defense, and the exclusion of missionary rationale. The weighty fact for us, however, is that *the Romans did not busy themselves extending the blessing that had been carried into their midst.*

In response to their missionary unfaithfulness, God sent the very peoples who threatened Rome's autonomy—the Gothic tribal peoples—into the heart of the civilization of Rome, to get what they were not sent, namely, the blessing of the Abrahamic Covenant. Oh, these tribal peoples had already been alerted to the Gospel, because Rome had continuously exiled its heretics into the barbarian domains beyond its borders. But the point is this: When the Romans did not *give away* their best, God forced them to *give it up*. Could that be true for us today?

In the second AD period (AD 400

to 800), the Gothic tribesmen and other middle European tribes, notably the Celtic peoples, had their turn at the Scriptures, gleaning the inner meanings at least partially, in a more amazing devotion to the pages of holy writ than has graced any period of history. (That is, the so-called illuminated manuscripts of the Bible—intended to impress the darkened hearts of tribal chieftains—represent the most detailed artwork known in the annals of humanity).

In the third post-biblical 400-year period, from 800 to 1200, we see drawn into blessing a cluster of peoples still further north, called the Vikings. *They too had to come after the blessing they had not been sent.* Their raids on middle Europe, spread out over 250 years, were as destructive as any force God ever brought against Israel, and the result was as missionary as any era—*God was in the mission business whether His people were or not.* The young women the Vikings loved to take as slaves and concubines, and at times as wives, were, in some cases—those who kept the faith—the main instrument that carried the blessing to these northern peoples.

The result of this unusual, although not very desirable missionary mechanism, was that the pitch darkness of these incredibly ruthless sea-going savages was, after two and a half centuries of turmoil and heartache, brought into contact with the light. As Churchill puts it in his *History of the English Speaking Peoples*, these northern peoples were “held and dazzled by the effulgence of the glory of the Gospel.” But not because very many missionaries were sent to them. They had to come after the blessing they were not sent—do we need to wonder why our country is being invaded from all sides by hundreds of nationalities?

In the next four centuries, ruthless pirates, now transformed, became Christian leaders of a sort, leading the Crusades against the Muslims in a pathetic

misunderstanding of the Great Commission. They also tried to glorify God in out-doing each other at one point in the building of astonishing buildings called cathedrals (all of which were begun within a single 50-year period). Much good was also accomplished. Remaining Bible study centers earlier established by Celtic missionaries, but mainly burned down by the Vikings, were renovated and now transformed into much larger centers of order and worship, underlying most of the major cities of Europe today, while scholarship, a virtual monopoly of the most committed Christians, emerged in the form of the early universities. Most important, the mechanisms of global mission were decisively hammered out by sheer determination and devotion, and the unrelenting efforts of strategists like Prince Henry the Navigator and Christopher Columbus, both of whom, once we remove our contemporary secular interpretations, were actuated by devotion to Christ and to global missionary endeavors.

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[Editor's note: The article here produced is Part I of “The Big Picture” with its main focuses on the Biblical story followed by subsequent post biblical periods of missions, up to AD 1600. Readers who would like to obtain Part II, covering the events of modern mission history since 1600 should contact the *IJFM* editor and ask for a copy.]