

NEW STUDIES IN BIBLICAL THEOLOGY 26

A gracious and compassionate God

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NEW STUDIES IN BIBLICAL THEOLOGY 26

Series editor: D. A. Carson

A gracious and compassionate God

MISSION, SALVATION AND
SPIRITUALITY IN THE BOOK OF JONAH

Daniel C. Timmer



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Author's preface

The present volume is the outgrowth of ongoing reflection on the biblical theme of mission, particularly on how the role of Israel in the OT relates to the roles of the church and of individual believers in the New Testament. Although my use of biblical theology has repeatedly confirmed the importance of the progressive revelation and accomplishment of redemption, and thus of salvation-historical epochs (as Geerhardus Vos might say), the complexity of the biblical data on mission resisted my efforts to categorize it neatly in chronological categories as one might other themes like divine presence or atonement. This study is thus an effort to appreciate the various kinds of unity that exist in Scripture. The New Testament focus of much prior study of mission (note especially the volume by Köstenberger and O'Brien in this series) also prompted me to focus my attention on the Old Testament.

I am grateful to a number of people who have contributed to this study, especially to those whose writing and teaching have faithfully probed God's Word with a view toward better understanding and practising the gospel. In that vein I remain thankful to my family, to Dr Jerry Bilkes of Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary (Grand Rapids) and to a number of professors at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School (Deerfield), including Drs Richard Averbeck, D. A. Carson, Willem VanGemen, Lawson Younger Jr. and Kevin Vanhoozer (now at Wheaton College). I am also thankful for the many excellent commentaries (plus a few monographs) on Jonah, particularly those by Sasson, Stuart, Magonet, Tribble, Wolff and Lux. The rest of my debt to those who have worked on Jonah before me will readily appear from the footnotes.

I also express my appreciation for the participation and feedback I enjoyed as a panelist (with S. V. Davidson, G. Eidevall and U. Kim, the designated respondent; chaired by Dr Mignon Jacobs) in the Society of Biblical Literature's 'Israelite Prophetic Literature' 2008 programme unit; to my students in OT 501 and OT 506 at

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I appreciate the permission granted by the *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* to adapt a section from my 2009 article 'The Intertextual Jonah *face à l'empire*: The Post-colonial Significance of the Book's Cotexts and Purported Neo-Assyrian Context' and by Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht to adapt a short section from my *Creation, Tabernacle, and Sabbath: The Sabbath Frame of Exodus 31:12-17; 35:1-3 in Exegetical and Theological Perspective*, FRLANT 227, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009.

Finally, I am grateful to Drs D. A. Carson and Philip Duce, series and publishing editors respectively, for their acceptance of the volume in a series that I have long appreciated and for their encouragement and guidance along the way. Whatever infelicities remain (and for which I alone am responsible), they have been instrumental in its improvement. It is my prayer that this volume will help the church to understand better the glorious theme of mission and, in the power of the Spirit, to follow in the footsteps of her Lord. *Soli Deo gloria!*

Daniel C. Timmer

Introduction

What is the book of Jonah?

The book of Jonah is full of surprises. This is no less true for readers of our day than it was for its original audience. How is it possible that a city like Nineveh, whose political stature depended on the success of the Assyrian empire's brutal military campaigns, would repent?¹ Why does Jonah seem so out of touch with the God who calls him to act as a prophet? And a very different surprise awaits readers as the book encourages them to adopt a critical attitude of Jonah, only to ask them at the end the same question that God poses to Jonah: to what extent is their character truly in accord with that of the God whom they claim to serve?

At the same time, Jonah centres on the grand theme of the Bible: the manifestation of God's unmerited grace to those who have sinned against him. Not only does the author develop this in all of the main characters as God's grace affects the lives of the sailors, of Jonah, and of the Ninevites, but the clearest description of God's character in the book appears in the application to Nineveh of Exodus 34:6–7, where God's great mercy toward rebellious Israel first comes gloriously into view.² This, as we will see, goes a long way toward explaining the prominence that the book gives to Gentiles and their various positive responses to what they learn of Israel's God. It also draws the reader into the progressive unfolding of God's intention to bless all nations through his chosen people, even raising the possibility that certain Israelites might not have wanted that to be the case.

Despite its short length and concentration on major biblical themes, however, interpretative challenges remain for readers of

¹ 'At any time from that of the historical Jonah onwards, [Nineveh] stood as the epitome of everything that was cruelly hostile to Israel and Judah' (Payne 1979: 7).

² Dorn (1991: 89) notes that Exod. 34 was always applied to Israel until its use in Jonah.

Jonah. In addition to the various unexpected twists of the plot, challenging theological questions regarding the nature of religious conversion and to what extent the sailors and Ninevites underwent conversion force the reader to consider what conversion looked like prior to the full revelation of Jesus Christ and the completion of his cross-work. The import of Jonah for mission is also a subject of continual debate: while all would agree that in the NT era the church is commanded to proclaim the Gospel worldwide, there is no widely accepted way of integrating Scripture's presentation of a Hebrew prophet's preaching repentance in Nineveh with OT Israel's largely passive role in mission. And that passive role itself seems to stand in tension with various OT passages that command Israelites to proclaim their God and his deeds to the nations (Ps. 96:3, 10). Finally, this little book suffers from no shortage of fascinating historical aspects. How might the Ninevites have perceived a foreign prophet who appeared with a message of imminent destruction? Do existing historical records mention anything that correlates with, or at least sheds light on, their repentance? And since the book was written in Hebrew, what was the author intending to accomplish in writing this brief account for his Israelite audience?³

Approaching the book of Jonah

All these questions, and more, require that the reader of Jonah come to the text with a certain base of knowledge, not to mention a certain disposition of heart. This book is intended to aid readers of Jonah on the first front in several ways: first, by putting in their hands the relevant data on the book's historical backgrounds (both in Israel and Assyria), and next by discussing the biblical text in detail. But it seeks to do more than that, since Jonah is part of a larger collection of books that, as Christian Scripture, is authoritative for men and women across the world who have come into a saving and transforming relationship with God through it. If all Scripture bears witness to Christ (Luke 24:36–52), the reader of Jonah surely has to respect that fundamental orientation while avoiding excesses (interpretations, and especially connections to Christ, that are not well grounded in the text and in theology) as well as deficits (oversimplifying the various theological facets of the book). This task of understanding Jonah's message in the context of the full self-revelation

³ See Payne 1979; Timmer 2008a: 19–22.

INTRODUCTION

of God in the Scriptures is even more challenging than a detailed discussion of its historical context, since it requires that Jonah's teaching on various topics be brought into relation with the rest of the Bible. This is especially the task of what is called 'biblical theology', not because other tasks and forms of theology are not biblical, but because this aspect of biblical interpretation tries to appreciate fully each biblical book's unique contribution (diversity) while showing how it enriches the full, Christ-centred picture that God paints across the history of God's actions on behalf of his people (unity).⁴ In approaching Jonah by means of biblical theology, we will pay special attention to the various stages of God's work (often referred to as redemptive history) with an eye to avoiding oversimplifications of dynamic themes that span the two Testaments. We will also strive to respect the vocabulary that the book uses so that its author's thought is not forced into moulds drawn from another biblical author or from later theologians.

As we will see, this kind of approach is helpful in making sense of the book of Jonah because of the ways that several of its prominent themes are developed across the whole Bible. We will explore the relationship between Israel and the nations (a subject that includes the question of mission), what religious conversion in the OT consisted of, and the nature of OT spirituality (also called piety, godliness or sanctification). Conversion and spirituality are closely related, but as will appear from the book of Jonah (and for other reasons as well), it is wise to distinguish them.

Lastly, this volume reflects on how the author of Jonah, precisely by writing what he did as he did, communicates material uniquely suited for creating in the reader certain beliefs, virtues and intentions that he holds dear. The ideal reader must of course understand the text first, but he understands in order to 'stand under' it in humility, with the prayer that its life-giving and life-transforming truth would be brought to bear on him by the Spirit of God himself, resulting in his sanctification and God's glory (2 Tim. 3:16; Jas 1:25; 1 Pet. 1:22–25). The book of Jonah, in other words, was written to facilitate spiritual change in its readers, and our study of the book is not complete until we have wrestled with it on those terms.

Neither standing nor understanding, however, is the final word in interpretation. The final word belongs to following.

⁴ See further Rosner 2000; Carson 2007.

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The church should be that community of humbly confident interpreter-believers whose consciences, seared and sealed by the Spirit, are captive to the Word, and whose commentaries and communities seek progressively to embody the meaning *and* significance of the text. ‘Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.’ (Vanhoozer 1998: 467)

Chapter One

The nations and mission in Jonah

Nearly every book or article written on Jonah will deal to some degree with the question of mission, and for good reason: almost everyone recognizes that the events described in the book have some relation to God's plan to bless the world through the seed of Abram (Gen. 12:1–3), a plan that runs like a thread through the OT. James Ware's statement is typical of most views of the OT's consistency on this point: 'the Hebrew Scriptures reveal a fundamental, widespread and intense interest in Gentiles and their conversion to the God of Israel' (Ware 2005: 90). But not everyone agrees on exactly *where* Jonah's teaching on mission fits into the line that runs at least from Abraham to the NT church and its global mission.¹

A key question that divides interpreters is whether the OT merely presents a universal horizon for God's future work of blessing the Gentiles savingly (i.e. universalism), or whether it also inculcates mission on Israel's part, which we can tentatively define as transmission of God's self-revelation to others with a view toward their conversion.² Another point of contention is how we ought to define the term 'mission' itself. Is the OT simply describing what God will do through Israel's behaviour, which is to exhibit God's character and serve as the focus of his actions (Deut. 4:6; 28:9–10), or is the OT also on occasion *prescribing* what Israelites are to do above and

¹ Ware, for example, goes on to deny *any* missionary significance to the book of Jonah (2005: 71). The line I mention should be seen as extending from Eden to the new heavens and new earth; cf. Beale 2004.

² Compare the broader definition of mission as the 'divine activity of sending intermediaries, whether supernatural or human, to speak or do God's will so that his purposes for judgment or redemption are furthered' (Larkin 1996: 534–535). Consequently he includes Moses, Samuel and the prophets etc. If God is the subject of the verb, the ultimate purpose of God's glorification in judgment and salvation is more immediately tied to the definition of mission (since it is his) than if a human is the subject of the activity. To be faithful to biblical idiom, however, the definition of mission must be closely connected to the proclamation of the gospel. Paul recognizes that some will not receive his gospel, but this does not obscure its saving purpose (2 Cor. 2:15–16; 4:3–6).

beyond their national existence, then and there, for the salvation of the nations around them (Ps. 9:11)? As we set out to follow Jonah's voyages and God's actions in and through them, we need to define mission as clearly as possible, recognizing that the word itself does not appear in Scripture, but that it refers to a concept that is there in a variety of ways. To do so, we will begin with the general question of Israel's relationship to the nations, and then narrow our focus to her responsibility toward them as God's representative.

Universalism

Here, at least, there is consensus: God's plan of redemption has, in his mercy, always been global in scope. God's first action after eliciting confessions of guilt from Adam and Eve after they had eaten from the forbidden tree was to promise his unsolicited aid in reconciling humankind to himself (Gen. 3:14–15). Addressed to the first human couple, this promise also presents in very brief scope God's plan to work through a portion of humanity in order to defeat the serpent, which embodied and symbolized evil and opposition to God and his will. The immediately preceding context of Genesis 3:15 makes clear that the root problem is that humanity is condemned to death because of its sin and consequent unrighteousness. Thus the problem that the seed is going to fix is clear and implies certain criteria for the one fixing the problem, without specifying who he is or how he will do so. The context is suggestive, however, in that as Adam has just sinned, another (sinless) Adam-figure is needed to provide renewed access to life and rest.

The perspective widens even further in the Noahic covenant, which establishes the global stage on which God's redemptive actions will be realized.³ When God's promise later focuses on Abram in Genesis 12, it still explicitly includes in its scope 'all the families of the earth' (Gen. 12:3).⁴ Likewise the Sinai covenant, though it continues the focus on ethnic Israel (now a newly constituted nation) that began with the covenant with Abram, also includes the nations in the fundamental calling of Israel to act as a 'kingdom of priests' in Exodus 19:4–6.

³ P. Miller 1995; Dell 2003.

⁴ Schnabel 2002: 35–36; C. J. H. Wright 2006: 191–264. All translations are my own.

A closer look at Exodus 19:4–6

This last passage is significant because of its programmatic nature, and so obliges a closer look.⁵ A number of studies have been devoted to the expressions used in 19:5–6 to describe Israel's status as God's 'special possession, a kingdom of priests, a holy nation'.⁶ In order to understand better this unique group of phrases, we need to take into account its literary context and the very similar expressions found in the covenant ratification ceremony in Exodus 24:1–11 and the priestly ordination in Exodus 29 (cf. also Lev. 8; 14).⁷ Following is the central portion of God's initial address to Israel:

Now, if you will truly listen to my voice, and keep my covenant, then you will be to me a treasured possession from among all the peoples, though all the earth is mine, and you will be a nation of priests and a holy nation. (Exod. 19:5–6a)

The context of Exodus 19:4–6 is the announcement of God's intention to establish a covenant with Israel. This unique relationship will be formalized, first, in establishing her status as Yahweh's 'special treasure'.⁸ Israel is to be unique with respect to 'all the other peoples' (19:5b) and to the world itself.⁹ This emphasis on Israel's distinctiveness is reinforced by the placement of a personal pronoun that is unnecessary in Hebrew syntax at the beginning of verse 6, so that the passage could be translated, 'you will be my special treasure from among all the peoples, though all the earth is mine. You, however, will be . . .'

Durham's extensive survey of the next phrase, 'nation of priests', shows the wide range of understandings advanced for it as of the

⁵ This section is adapted with permission from Timmer 2009b.

⁶ On 'kingdom of priests', see Barbiero 1989; Cheung 1986; J. A. Davies 2004; Schenker 1996; Steins 2001; J. B. Wells 2000. On 'holy nation', see Fuhs 1987; Mosis 1978. On the import of Exod. 19:5–6 as a whole, see Averbeck 1997; Balentine 1999: 79–176; Levenson 1985: 30–31.

⁷ As Averbeck (1997: 1002) suggests.

⁸ See Carpenter 1997; Durham 1987: 256; Greenberg 1951.

⁹ The frequent suggestion that the *kl* in Exod. 19:5 is causal (e.g. Köstenberger and O'Brien 2001: 33) is possible, but not demonstrably preferable to a concessive sense ('although'), since there it is difficult to prove that the semantics of the two phrases differ significantly (Follingstad 2001: 46). Given this ambiguity, it is preferable to adopt the sense that adds the least to the meaning of the verse, following the linguistic rationale of Joos 1972.

1980s, and since then still more have appeared.¹⁰ If the text is taken as is, with ‘nation’ as a noun in construct with ‘priests’, the general sense is clear: Israel is a kingdom that is priestly in nature. If she fulfils the terms of the covenant (note the ‘if’ at the beginning of 19:5), she will consequently become priestly in function. But what does ‘priestly’ mean in this context?

The best way to determine what Israel’s national priesthood might look like is to consider the Levitical priesthood, since it is the closest context that explains ‘priesthood’, and since the Levitical priesthood serves as a model for the nation (cf. Exod. 28 – 29; Lev. 8 – 9). Even though not every Israelite was a Levitical priest (cf. Num. 16), ‘the Levitical priesthood as portrayed in Exodus is seen not as diminishing or supplanting the collective royal priesthood, but as providing a visual model of that vocation, and secondly as facilitating it’ (J. A. Davies 2002: 158–159). R. K. Duke summarizes the Levitical priests’ responsibilities as custodians of the cult (including teaching Torah and interpreting cultic boundaries in the spheres of time, space and status), agents of divine blessing, holiness and purity (as purifiers of sin and uncleanness, spokespersons for God, judges and participants in warfare), and supervisors of cult objects (moving, guarding and administrating cultic paraphernalia and practices).¹¹ If one transfers those functions to the national level, it appears that although the vast majority of Israelites had no priestly function in the nation’s cult, they could convey to the nations around them through its operation the essence of their religion, especially Yahweh’s holy character and his gracious provision of atonement for sin.¹²

Israel could also demonstrate to the nations around her the goodness of life in covenant with God and the unparalleled excellence of his law (Deut. 4:6). This constitutes the last description of her calling, to be a ‘holy nation’. We can even see these two elements of her calling (priestly function and holiness) as interrelated. Israel’s relational holiness, in which she is set apart by and for Yahweh at Sinai (Exod. 19:4), serves as the basis for God’s call for her to obey

¹⁰ See J. A. Davies 2004; Steins 2001.

¹¹ Duke 2003. Their teaching of Torah was directed at Israelites who had already come into covenant with God, and so does not presage some form of evangelism.

¹² J. A. Davies (2004: 238) argues for a more restricted role that denotes ‘primarily how the nation is to relate to God, rather than how it is to relate to the other nations’. But Israel’s relationship with God was almost immediately entrusted to the Levitical priests, and since in the OT priests are routinely intermediaries, one should rather conclude that Israel was to the nations as the Levites were to Israel.

him by living in ethical holiness (Exod. 19:5), which is an indicative–imperative pair (what one is, and what one is to do in consequence of that identity) quite similar to that in the NT’s epistles. The ethical holiness that God required of Israel, in turn, was central and even necessary to her calling as a kingdom of priests, since the nations were to see God’s law and character in her behaviour.

Any attempt to define Israel’s relationship to the nations solely on the basis of Exodus 19:4–6 is bound to cause problems, however. Not only is the text quite brief, but major themes like Israel’s relationship to the other nations come to full expression only across the entirety of the OT. For the moment it is hard to be more precise than to say that Israel’s role as a nation of priests presupposed her ethical holiness, had a bearing on the nations around her and was bound up with God’s plan to bring redemption to all the nations through her. Further clarity must come from elsewhere.

The nations

Since an adequate understanding of Israel’s priestly role among the nations requires more content than Exodus 19 alone can provide, we have to adopt a wider perspective on the nature of her relationship with them. In doing so we will come to see that several aspects of the historical relationship between the people of God and non-Israelites in the OT are interrelated.¹³ The first, which is initially predominant in Israel’s history, is God’s conflict with the fallen world, symbolized especially by ‘the nations’ as distinct from, and indeed opposed to, Israel. Significantly, this conflict appears even before Israel exists, in the Garden of Eden, once humanity falls into sin. There the two conflicting parties are the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent, an opposition somewhat clarified when Cain kills Abel, and again when Seth is born as ‘another seed’ (Gen. 4:25) and his line continues through the flood in the family of Noah. Noah’s blessing of Shem once again narrows the focus of redemptive expectation (Gen. 9:26), and it is to Abram, a descendent of Shem, that God reveals in more detail his plan to re-establish his righteousness while demonstrating his grace in astounding ways, beginning in Genesis 12.¹⁴

¹³ By ‘historical’ I mean what actually occurred during Israel’s existence as opposed to what the OT might foretell would be the case at some point in the future (what I call ‘eschatological’). This distinction needs to be kept in mind lest we lose sight of the redemptive-historical dynamic inherent in the theme of mission.

¹⁴ The first use of a form of the primary Hebrew word ‘family’ for remnant, *šē’ar*,

God and the nations at odds

Once God singles out Abram and his seed, the enmity announced in Genesis 3 appears in Abram's interaction with foreign rulers (Gen. 14, 20) and becomes characteristic of Israel's life among the nations. From Egypt in Moses' day (Exod. 12:12), to the Canaanites some decades later, and to the Assyrians and Babylonians of the first millennium, only on rare occasions (and mainly during Solomon's reign) is national Israel at peace with the nations around her. Furthermore, in the context of the Davidic covenant this peace is legitimate only in so far as the nations submit to Yahweh's righteous king (Pss 2; 72; 110).

After Israel's united monarchy ends in 930 BC, it is not long before both kingdoms are violently subjugated by the great powers of their day, Israel by Assyria in 722 and Judah by Babylon in 587. For those actions and many more like them, Israel's prophets often write or speak about the judgment that awaits the nations, typically presenting them as Israel's enemies (among many such passages, see Ezek. 25 – 32; Amos 1 – 2; Hab. 2; Joel 3).¹⁵ While in the OT this polarity is not absolute, one can still conclude that in the history recounted in the OT the nations play a fairly consistent role as God's adversary in his conflict with evil.

God and his people at odds

One important point requires us to modify this pattern. While God is always the enemy of evil, and although that evil is often attached to the nations in the OT, he is no less its enemy when it appears in his own people. This divine commitment to exercise righteousness irrespective of the distinction between Israel and the Gentile nations is strikingly illustrated in the conquest of Canaan.¹⁶

The conquest is in the first place God's judgment on the sinful nations living there. God had promised to Abraham that his

appears in Gen. 7:23 (there as a niphil verb), near the middle of the flood narrative. On the narrowing of the line of promise to Shem, see Vos 1975: 56–65. Matthews (1996: 487–488) points out that the genealogies of Gen. 5 and Gen. 11 intentionally put Shem in the middle of the generations prior to the flood, a position that highlights his importance.

¹⁵ All the writing prophets except Hosea include 'oracles against the nations', and constitute 13.6% of that corpus (Raabe 1995: 236). The helpful survey of these oracles given by Robertson (2004: 168–173) notes that the nations' typical sins are pride, idolatry, violence and mistreatment of God's people.

¹⁶ For a recent treatment of the conquest that takes its historicity seriously, see Millard 2004.

descendants would leave Egypt and take possession of Canaan once the iniquity of the Amorites was full (Gen. 15:16), and he gives success to Israel's initial steps toward that goal (Josh. 24:12–13).¹⁷ In this way the conquest demonstrates God's might to 'all the peoples of the earth' (Josh. 4:24), and closely resembles the flood, even echoing in Joshua 10:40, 11:11, 14 its language that 'everything that breathed' died (cf. Gen. 7:22).¹⁸

But even though the conquest is the parade example of God's using Israel to punish the sin of the nations, the same account makes clear that while Israel is in a unique covenant relationship with Yahweh, he will treat her as he did the Canaanites if she is unfaithful to him (Josh. 24:20, Lev. 26:33–39 and Deut. 28:32–57 give the covenantal basis for this). This threat is realized as early as Joshua 7 (after just one Canaanite city had fallen to Israel), when Achan and his household, condemned for transgressing the ban by stealing what belonged to Yahweh, were condemned by God through Joshua and punished with death by God's direct order.

An important distinction

The national–individual distinction that appears in the punishment of Achan is also evident in Israel's relation to individual Gentiles (as opposed to Gentile nations), whom she is commanded to love and care for (e.g. Exod. 22:21; 23:9; Lev. 19:10, 33; 23:22; 24:22; 25:35; Deut. 10:19; 24:14, 17, 19–21).¹⁹ When Israel does not enjoy the basic necessities that enable her to accommodate foreigners, as in the post-exilic period when Jerusalem and its religious infrastructure were for some time incomplete and therefore vulnerable, Israel as a corporate body can properly take a more defensive posture. But the gracious and compassionate behaviour of individual Israelites toward individual Gentiles is never optional, and its violation entails a variety of punishments (Exod. 22:23; Deut. 14:29; 24:19). This individual–corporate distinction, which applies to both Israelites and Gentiles, appears consistently throughout the OT and eventually becomes

¹⁷ 'YHWH is the all-sufficient divine warrior who dispossesses the land for the chosen people' (Habel 1995: 60).

¹⁸ Dempster (2003: 127) points out Joshua's mention that the Anakim (descendants of the Nephilim) were then in the land of Canaan, as they were prominent before the flood (Num. 13:33; Josh. 11:21–22; Gen. 6:4), and the use of the words *kôl* (all) and *něšamâ* (breath) together in the context of destruction that appears in Gen. 7:22 and in Deut. 20:16; Josh. 10:40; 11:11, 14; 1 Kgs 15:29.

¹⁹ E. Nicole (1996) makes this point very well, and I am indebted to his argument in this paragraph.

part of the NT's elimination of the ethnically based corporate distinction between the two groups.

God at odds with Israel and the nations in the Old Testament

God's commitment to his people and his opposition to the nations, neither of which excludes his opposition to sinners within ethnic Israel, come together in a complex way over the course of Israel's history. Almost from the beginning, Israel's sin leads to her punishment by the nations, and over time her sin and its punishment become progressively worse. The initial possession of the land of Canaan is made difficult because of Israel's failure to obey Yahweh (Judg. 1:1 – 2:5), something the book of Judges underlines by repeating the cycle of sinful Israel's being punished by non-Israelites, her calling to God for help, being delivered and then enjoying temporary peace.²⁰ Later, Solomon anticipates the deportation or exile of Israelites in his dedicatory prayer for the first temple (1 Kgs 8:46–53), and the nations serve as gods to Israel throughout the book of Kings until both Israel and Judah are exiled and their existence as nations comes to an end.²¹ Israel's sin over these centuries progressively erodes her identity as God's people, until she is literally absorbed into the nations. This partial effacing of her identity makes the 'remnant' a very prominent concept in the prophets as they foresee a radically new future for the people of God.²²

This significant erosion of the distinction between the descendants of Abraham and the Gentiles as the result of Israel's sin indicates that ethnicity is not an absolute indicator of righteousness or religious privilege in the OT. While the fact that obviously wicked nations sometimes punished Israel and Judah led to consternation even on the part of the faithful (e.g. Habakkuk), it appears fre-

²⁰ Block (1999: 146–147) details this pattern, which is based on Judg. 2:11–23.

²¹ The nations are used to punish Israel under the monarchy as early as Solomon himself, 1 Kgs 11:14. See representative examples of this trend later in 1 Kgs 14:25 (Judah under Rehoboam); 1 Kgs 20 (Israel under Ahab); 2 Kgs 12:17–18 (Judah under Jehoash); 2 Kgs 15:17–22 (Israel under Menahem). By national existence I do not mean that Israel during or after the return from exile did not exist, but only that the usual criteria for *national* existence (land, sovereignty, self-government etc.) were lacking to one degree or another. While the Hasmoneans brought Israel to a brief enjoyment of nationhood from c. 143–63 BC, I hope that I follow the NT in seeing that as having limited importance for the future.

²² A remnant appears in the north as early as Elijah's ministry (1 Kgs 19), and the concept features largely in the writing prophets of the eighth–sixth centuries; it even appears in the post-exilic prophets, e.g. Mal. 3–4.

quently enough in the OT that it cannot be exceptional or inexplicable. Further, this inchoate redefinition of Israel across her history is complemented by various eschatological passages in the OT that foretell the completion of this redefinition in the resolution of God's conflict not with the nations per se (an ethnically determined category), but with the forces of unrighteousness that they represent (an anthropological or theological category). Depending on the context, this can mean either that not all of Israel is genuinely part of God's people (Hos. 1:9–10; 2:23), or that non-Israelites are (Jer. 48:47, 49:6, 39 for Moab, Ammon and Elam, respectively). It is especially powerful when both concepts appear together, as in Amos 9.

The anticipation in prophetic eschatology that *both* Israel *and* the nations will come under God's judgment, and that the nations will share in the salvation that comes to Israel, makes a simple opposition between the two categories increasingly difficult to maintain as the history of redemption unfolds. It is very clear in Amos, for example, that the relativizing of Israel's national election was already well underway by the time of the earliest writing prophets, and it remains prominent through the exilic and post-exilic periods.²³

The resolution of God's conflict with evil in the New Testament

In the NT this shift away from ethnic categories (i.e. a reconstitution of the people of God) comes to completion. For example, we see that the immediate benefits of Christ's cross-work explored in Romans 1 – 5 incontrovertibly establish the priority of the categories of non-righteous/righteous over Jew/Gentile in soteriology (things relating to salvation).²⁴ This redefinition of the people of God is paralleled by a similar redefinition of the nations in the NT: 'the advent of Christ has brought a change in the relationship between Satan and the nations', with Satan's reign over them ended and the gospel announced to them directly without requiring their conversion to Judaism or membership in Israel as proselytes (Acts 14:15; 17:30) (Hughes 1976: 109–112). This shift is not limited to the events of the first century, but becomes permanent and lasts throughout the NT era and into Christ's second coming. The depictions in the

²³ Robertson 2004: 433–444; Nisus 2009 (see 231–233 on Amos 9 in particular).

²⁴ One must allow some secondary import for ethnic Jewishness in Rom. 9 – 11, but Israel's status there is ultimately determined in terms of her coming to faith in the Messiah. Cf. Seifrid 2000; Holwerda 1995: 147–176.

book of Revelation of the ultimate results of redemption from sin, or condemnation because of it, carefully define God's people and the nations in supra-ethnic categories: the 'nations' that are punished, like those in Daniel 7, oppose not Israel but the 'saints of God'.²⁵

Israel between universalism and mission

Centripetal

Returning to the historical presentation of the OT, we are faced with the complicated picture of an increasingly sinful Israel failing to witness to the nations around her. At the same time, we are told with increasing clarity that God's eschatological judgment and salvation will redefine her and see the Gentiles grafted into her. And there is a further complication: even within Israel's history, her relation to the nations contains both centrifugal-active and centripetal-passive aspects.

It is nearly certain that in the Sinai covenant God's people corporately considered were called to maintain only an exemplary and attracting posture ('centripetal' mission) in regard to the nations around them (Exod. 19:5-6; Deut. 4:6; 28:9-10; 29:24). The biblical storyline bears out the very limited effectiveness of this centripetal approach, limited not simply because of the nations' antipathy for Israel's God but also because of Israel's failure to act in accord with the covenant (recall the 'if' of Exod. 19:5). One convert made by this means, Rahab, heard (probably in summary form) that Yahweh's exclusive claim to deity had been demonstrated in Israel's crossing of the Red Sea and the conquest of the Amorite kings (Josh. 2:9-11) and came to faith on the basis of that knowledge, as demonstrated by her sending the spies home another way (Jas 2:25).

More numerous are examples of a more general (non-saving) blessing coming to the Gentiles through Israel.²⁶ In the book of

²⁵ Beale notes that in Revelation John uses the phrase 'peoples, nations, tongues and many kings' 'of all who are redeemed (5:9; 7:9), but now [in 10:11] and hereafter he uses it of unbelievers, who will be judged because they identify with Babylon or the beast (so also 11:9; 13:7-8; 14:6ff.; 17:15)' (Beale 1999: 555). The term 'nations' by itself (Rev. 2:26; 12:5; 19:15 [all citing Ps. 2:9]; 11:2, 18; 14:8; 16:19; 18:23; 20:3, 8) is normally negative in Revelation, with the exceptions (15:3-4; 21:24, 26; 22:2) clearly identified as the redeemed in their contexts.

²⁶ Cases that may fit neither of these categories exactly include Jethro, Moses' Kenite father-in-law (Exod. 18:1-12), and Caleb, a Kenizzite (Num. 13:6; 32:12; cf.

Genesis we find ‘multiple examples of the families of the earth being blessed directly through the mediation of the patriarchs and their looking to them as embodiments of divine blessing and as pointers to God’.²⁷ Joseph is the vehicle for God’s blessing of Potiphar’s household (Gen. 39:5) and Jacob’s interview with the Pharaoh is framed by his surprisingly proactive blessing of him (Gen. 47:7–10). Moving forward in time, one notes the mixed crowd that left Egyptian slavery with Abraham’s descendants (Exod. 12:38), the widow of Zarephath in Sidon (1 Kgs 17; cf. Luke 4:26) and the generic foreigner mentioned in Solomon’s prayer at the temple dedication (1 Kgs 8:41–43).²⁸ These examples show that Abraham’s descendants were used by God to bring blessing to the Gentiles, even if the reception of this blessing did not result in their conversion (cf. Gal. 3:14).²⁹

A complementary aspect of this centripetal transmission, meaning national Israel’s passive rather than active role in transmitting her knowledge of God, is the nature of Israel’s religious structure itself. Not only was Israel’s behaviour intended in itself to attract the nations to Israel so that they could learn of her God, but the result of their conversion would normally be to remain in Israel. This was due to the connection between Israelite faith and the Jerusalem temple (and consequently between Israel and the land of Canaan), where Yahweh manifested his presence in a special way and where all Israelite males were to worship three times a year (Deut. 16:16).

Gen. 15:19; 36:11, 15, 42). Of them Martens says, ‘All these non-Jews are enfolded in the group known as “the people of God” because they believed God’ (Martens 2007: 234).

²⁷ Carroll R. 2000: 30. Martens (2007) lists as ‘examples of the blessing of Abraham devolving on others without intentional “missionizing” efforts’ Jethro, who acknowledges ‘the sovereignty of Yahweh (Exod. 18:10–11)’, and Nebuchadnezzar, who is inspired to ‘give allegiance to God (Dan. 3:28–30)’ (251). I am not convinced that Isaac indeed gave ‘wholesome witness to his Canaanite neighbor’ (252) when Isaac’s greeting of Abimelech and his men is less than cordial (26:27) and he remains silent regarding the theophany that makes direct reference to God’s promise to Abraham (26:24), and similar ambiguity characterizes Abraham’s interaction with an earlier Abimelech in Gen. 21.

²⁸ For a recent review of the existing evidence for Semites in Egypt during the New Kingdom period (Dynasties 18–20) and in all probability as early as the Middle Kingdom (Dynasties 11–12), see Hoffmeier 1996: 52–76. C. J. H. Wright (2006: 210–211) gives several more examples of Gentiles who experience blessing through Israel.

²⁹ The promise to bless the nations is therefore partially or typologically fulfilled in various ways, but Silva is correct to insist that ‘the life-giving principle of the Spirit . . . corresponds to the saving promise of Gal. 3:14’, which is ‘the fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise’ (2001: 177, 188).

While there are exceptions to this rule (Naaman being a notable one), the general trend in the OT sets Jerusalem up as ‘the gate of heaven for the whole world’.³⁰

This variety of messages, messengers and results prompts us to dig deeper into OT Israel’s role with respect to the nations. It is clear that she never corporately pursued what we would call missionary endeavours by sending messengers to other nations. In other words, while Israel’s centripetal role was corporate, there was no corresponding *corporate* responsibility to spread the good news of Yahweh among the nations (centrifugally and verbally). Yet we cannot ignore the historical instances in which Israel verbally conveys, or is commanded to convey, the news of Yahweh’s person and work to Gentiles. In what follows we will survey instances of written or oral transmission of Israel’s knowledge of Yahweh to Gentiles that are historical and so cannot be restricted to Israel’s eschatological future. Furthermore, given that they consist of communication, these speech acts cannot be described as passive, since in speaking or writing the speaker or author is *doing* something. Because the author intends to do something in communicating, the possibility of apprehending his meaning exists.³¹ Israel’s speech acts may, however, be centripetal if they are uttered within Israel (centripetal in performance) or if they call for the recipient to join Israel (centripetal in terms of the religious structure they propose; this corresponds roughly to the element of intention). In rare cases it is possible that Gentiles were themselves in Israelite or Judahite territory, and so would have heard more directly prophetic or other speech.³²

Centrifugal

Though it could have been introduced earlier, in the light of its development later in Scripture we will briefly look at God’s com-

³⁰ Goldsworthy 1996: 9. The nuance that the book of Kings shows in treating that theme is notable, however. McConville argues convincingly that ‘the book’s careful detachment from the historical institutions is strikingly illustrated by [Solomon’s] prayer’s insistence that God cannot be contained by heaven itself, much less by a building (1 Kgs 8:27). The true nature of Israel depends not on institutions, not even on possession of land, but on loyalty to Yahweh’ (McConville 2005: 632).

³¹ Cf. Vanhoozer 1998: 201–280, esp. 246–259. At the same time, however, one’s words can have unintended consequences, as Jonah’s surely did when he spoke of Yahweh to the sailors; Vanhoozer explores this briefly in 1998: 254–255.

³² Raabe (1995: 253, n. 34) notes, with reference to Bartlett 1989: 141–143, that there is archaeological evidence for Edomites in the Negev in the decades prior to Jerusalem’s fall.

mission of and promise to Abram in Genesis 12:1–3 as the basis for Israel’s proactive centrifugal (outward-moving) mission to the nations. This passage forms the foundation for the covenant with Abraham and his descendants that is later ratified in Genesis 15 and 17, but our interest in mission justifies a closer focus on this first promise.

Coming after the ‘Table of Nations’ in Genesis 10 and the dispersal of the sinfully autonomous human race in Genesis 11, the section entitled ‘the account of Terah’ (Gen. 11:27 – 25:11) introduces a number of positive elements that chart the rapid development of God’s commitment to deal with human sin in justice and mercy. The direction that these gracious divine overtures will follow is set by the opening episode of the account of Abraham, in which God makes a very detailed promise to the patriarch (Gen. 12:2–3):

I will make you a great nation,
And I will bless you,
And I will make your name great,
And you will be a blessing.
I will bless those who bless you,
But those who lightly esteem you I will curse.
So in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.

The strong emphasis on blessing in this short section is a reminder of God’s commitment to undo the effects of sin that had already entailed a curse, and here God reveals that this blessing is to come through Abram’s line.³³ How this is to happen is not immediately clear, since the verb that ends verse 2 is sometimes translated as an imperative (‘be a blessing’), other times as a simple future (‘you will be a blessing’), and the verb that ends 12:3 is sometimes translated as passive (‘will be blessed’), other times as reflexive (‘will bless themselves’). But these details are not so complex as to cloud the meaning of the passage. As C. J. H. Wright has noted (2006: 201), the difference in 12:2 between an imperative and a simple future is negligible in the light of the preceding divine commitments: Abram’s role as an instrument of blessing is the result of God’s actions first of all, so that the human element in the equation is decidedly secondary. Similarly, although the type of verb used in the closing element in

³³ ‘God’s intention to bless him, his seed and all peoples of the world is a reassertion of his original purpose for humankind’ (Köstenberger and O’Brien 2001: 30–31).

12:3 (niphāl) can be passive, reflexive or middle, the context's focus on divine agency again argues for blessing coming to the nations through the God who has revealed himself to Abram.³⁴ We have good reason to say, therefore, that this blessing will deal with sin's consequences and will be extended globally, affecting 'all the families of the earth' for good.

This passage is relevant both to the preceding discussion of Israel's centripetal or passive role and to her proactive, centrifugal calling among the nations. Subsequent to this foundational passage in Genesis 12, we begin to see Abraham's descendants verbalizing 'to others the reality of Yahweh that they have experienced in their lives', even if the reception of this message did not in every case result in their conversion.³⁵ Sometimes (though hardly always), this testimony is received in a general way by those to whom the patriarchs bear witness, including Laban (Gen. 24:31, 50; 31:50, 53) and an Egyptian Pharaoh (41:39; cf. 40:8; 41:25–33). Some centuries later, Ruth makes Yahweh her only God after hearing of him through Israelites who temporarily left the land due to a famine (Ruth 1:16–17; 2:11–12). Since in the ancient Near East 'nations tended to be identified with their own distinctive patron deity', Ruth's affirmation to the Israelite Naomi that 'Your people will be my people and your God my God' shows her abandoning her gods and putting her trust in Yahweh alone.³⁶ Still later, Naaman comes to revere Yahweh (2 Kgs 5:1–14; cf. Luke 4:27) through the testimony of a servant girl captured in Syrian raids and a subsequent prophetic miracle (2 Kgs 5:1–19). Though his non-observance of indigenous Aramean cults would probably be noticed unfavourably, Naaman twice commits to worshipping Yahweh exclusively (2 Kgs 5:15, 17) and probably takes Israelite soil with him in order to construct his own altar to Yahweh in Aram (cf. Exod. 20:24).³⁷ Given the distinct ethnic and national identity that Israel was to maintain, it is not surprising that in all the examples just given this communication took place outside Israelite territory. It is also notable that this knowledge about Yahweh was transmitted by individual Israelites.

³⁴ C. J. H. Wright (2006: 216–220) argues well for the 'middle' voice for the niphāl here.

³⁵ Carroll R. 2000: 29. He refers there to Gen. 30:30; 31:5–13, 42 (cf. 24:40–49, 56); 33:5, 10–11 (cf. 24:35); 39:9; 40:8; 41:12–16, 25–33, 50–52. On the historical plausibility of locating the patriarchs in this window, see Kitchen 2003: 313–372.

³⁶ Block 1997: 968.

³⁷ See further Meier 1997.

There appears to have been an element in Israel's theology that found this type of communication normal and necessary, as these isolated passages, and especially the book of Psalms, show. The psalter contains a surprising number of imperatives to make Yahweh and his deeds known among the nations.³⁸ There are also a smaller number of resolutions to do so (e.g. Ps. 57:10) and of wishes that it be so (e.g. Ps. 33:8). Additionally, several psalms address themselves to the nations (e.g. Ps. 66:1) or express the desire that the nations should hear of Yahweh's works, but stop short of inculcating the centrifugal transmission of that message.³⁹

While other passages in the OT that describe Israel's centrifugal missionary role are clearly eschatological (e.g. Isa. 56:3–8; 66:18–24), the presence in the psalter of obligation (in imperative verbs), desire (in jussive verbs) and intention (in future verbs) to communicate Yahweh's glory to the nations, as well as occasional outright address to the nations, prevent us from limiting the import of these passages by saying they are merely liturgical.⁴⁰ On the contrary, these passages describe Israelites 'in real time' and express existing realities, not eschatological anticipation. Thus in Psalm 18:49 // 2 Samuel 22:50, for example, David commits to giving thanks to God and singing praises to him among the Gentiles out of gratitude for God's giving him superiority over both the nations and his enemies in Israel, Saul in particular. Similarly, in Psalm 96 Israel is commanded

³⁸ Pss 9:11; 18:49; 33:8; 46:10; 49:1; 57:10; 66:1–4; 67:1–7; 72:8, 11, 17; 83:18; 96:3, 10 (//1 Chr. 16:24); 105:1; 108:3; 117:1; 119:46; 145:6, 12, 21. It is surprising that Köstenberger and O'Brien 2001 treat the entire psalter in a few pages, and deal with none of the passages listed here; it seems they have followed especially Munro on the Psalms to the exclusion of other viewpoints (G. Munro, 'The Place of the Nations in God's Plan According to the Book of Psalms', unpublished seminar paper, Moore College, 1996). Schnabel likewise is very brief on the import of the psalter, and essentially excludes it from his discussion of mission in the OT (2004: 75–76). See Blomberg 2007: 65 for a brief critique of his position, and Boda 2010 for convincing arguments for the psalter's centrifugal missiology.

³⁹ These categories are used by Marlowe (1998), who identifies Pss 33:8, 102:15, 106:8, 148:7–12, 150:6 as containing 'passive outreach terminology', and further notes that Pss 2, 33, 67, 96, 98, 117 and 145 deal in substantial measure with direct or indirect outreach in various ways. See further Landon 2002, Hogg 1988 and especially Boda 2010.

⁴⁰ Martin-Achard (1962: 58) suggests this liturgical hermeneutic for mission language in the psalter: 'The Canaanite antecedents of the cult of the "High God" call us to interpret the universalism of the psalms liturgically. The major preoccupation of the psalmists was not with propaganda for Yahweh directed to the heathen. Their psalms were designed to be used by the Jerusalemite community and concern Israel and not the nations. They voice the Chosen People's faith and, in so doing, they strengthen it.' He is followed to some degree by C. J. H. Wright (2006: 480, 504).

(with two imperatives, vv. 3, 10) to spread the news of God's work among the nations.⁴¹

Communication directed to non-Israelites also appears in the 'oracles against the nations', speeches in the prophetic books that address the sins of Gentile nations. Although at first glance it may seem odd to include oracles *against* the nations in a study of centrifugal mission in the OT, these oracles do more than announce the coming judgment of God on those ethnic groups who characteristically oppose him. Oracles against the nations also intend to persuade their audience that they 'cannot escape Yahweh's judgement by relying on their own resources' (Raabe 1995: 248). Jeremiah 18:7–8 makes clear that threats of judgment could have the effect of creating repentance, and even *after* punishment a nation might 'swear allegiance to Yahweh of Hosts' (Isa. 19:18).⁴² Oracles against non-Israelite nations that are not clearly unconditional do not simply pronounce their doom without exception and without hope – they can open the door to repentance and deliverance, though whether this deliverance comes before or after the announced judgment is another question (this paradoxical reality is possible thanks to the biblical pattern of salvation coming *through* judgment).⁴³ Only God's historical *acts* of judgment against the ungodly cannot be construed as having a salvific aspect, but their place in redemptive history is essentially not in, but after, the gospel, if we understand the flood, conquest and similar events typologically.⁴⁴

We should also notice that Jonah is not the only example of a prophet who actually speaks his message to a non-Israelite audience. Andersen and Freedman remind us that 'the prophets, from Elisha (2 Kgs 9) to Jeremiah (27:3 – which lists four of the six nations charged by Amos) delivered oracles *to*, not just *about*, other nations' (Andersen and Freedman 1989: 232). How this happened in every

⁴¹ While these imperatives (in the second-person plural) are addressed to all Israelites, this does not make this command a corporate national responsibility on the order of Exod. 19. Further, the increasing (rather than decreasing) prominence of the remnant concept prior to the exile is a theological argument against imposing a missionary task at the national level.

⁴² Notice also the inclusion of the 'nations called by Yahweh's name' in God's eschatological people in Amos 9:12, which follows the essentially comprehensive list of nations on which Amos pronounced judgment: Amos 1–2.

⁴³ This paragraph follows Raabe 1995: 251.

⁴⁴ Note especially Jesus' passing over the phrase 'and the day of the vengeance of our God' (and his addition of 'to set free those who are oppressed' from LXX Isa. 58:6) when he interprets Isa. 61 in the light of the ministry of his first coming in Luke 4:16–30; see J. A. Sanders 1993; Bock 1990 on that passage.

case is not clear, but there is biblical evidence that the nations or individual Gentiles occasionally heard first-hand, from Israelites, of God's person and work as it related to them. Raabe summarizes the relevant points by noting that Jeremiah 18:7–8 'logically implies the notion of a prior hearing of the prophetic oracle by the targeted nation'; that prophetic journeys beyond Israelite borders are biblically attested (2 Kgs 8:7–15); that Jeremiah transmitted the message he was given to the envoys from Edom, Ammon, Tyre and Sidon (Jer. 27:1–11), as did Isaiah to emissaries from Philistia (Isa. 14:32), Seir (Isa. 21:11–12) and perhaps Cush (Isa. 18:2); and that Nebuchadnezzar and his general Nebuzaradan knew of Jeremiah and his message (Jer. 39; 40).⁴⁵ These points demonstrate that alongside her centripetal role, Israel's centrifugal communication of God's self-revelation to the nations was important in her theology and experience at numerous points throughout her history.

Conclusions

The history of Israel's relationship to the nations as recorded in the OT resists our efforts to separate it into neatly separated redemptive-historical stages.⁴⁶ The fact that individual Israelites were commanded to transmit knowledge of God to Gentiles, and the historical attestation in Israel's Scriptures that they occasionally did so, make it impossible to insist that her role was only centripetal. The shifting identity of the term 'Israel' in the historical and prophetic books (e.g. Jer. 25:15–26, which lists Israel alongside the nations as the object of God's wrath) and the gradual disappearance of Israel's moral distinctiveness also complicate descriptions of Israel's mission in purely ethnic terms. Indeed, we will see that neither the centripetal–centrifugal polarity nor ethnic categories are sufficient to do justice to what the book of Jonah says about mission. As a result, a definition of mission suitable for use in the OT has to show a good deal of nuance and flexibility (Köstenberger and O'Brien 2001: 21–22). Because these questions derive from our desire to relate mission in the OT to something similar but not identical in the NT, the best way forward is to compare and contrast those two manifestations of the same concept.

⁴⁵ Raabe 1995: 252–253. On this last point, see also Thompson 1980: 652.

⁴⁶ Filbeck (1994) helpfully sketches how the OT's diverse mission theology is brought fully into view by the NT.

A definition of mission in the Old Testament

The key characteristics that differentiate mission in the OT from its NT counterpart are as follows:

1. Prior to Christ's coming, proactive transmission of testimony about the God of Israel's person and work was not a clearly corporate task (Ware 2005: 91).
2. The frequent role of the nations as the opponent of God and his people created an antipathy between them that rendered both transmission and reception of a message of salvation difficult.
3. Conversion of a Gentile ideally would involve her or his settling in Israel, since God's presence was manifest only at Jerusalem and the land of Israel was the designated place where those in covenant with God lived.⁴⁷
4. The revealed basis for the missional testimony was not complete in at least two ways. First, types and shadows persisted with regard to the resolution of sin and the identity of the Messiah (to mention but two points), so that the precise object of faith was not apparent.⁴⁸ Secondly, Israelites were without the full textual deposit of the OT itself until after the period of the exile, and even then did not benefit from its publication through copying and circulation, as was more characteristic of the NT documents.⁴⁹
5. Finally, the OT message could not produce conversions consistently attended by the richer, clearer distinguishing marks

⁴⁷ This point is explored by Goldsworthy (1996). A historical corollary of this biblical-theological reality is OT Israel's being a national, theocratic group, so that interaction with other nations was quite restrained (and regularly adversarial) by modern standards. Note especially the Pentateuch's concern (Deut. 12:30; 18:9) to preserve Israel from religious contamination through interaction with them, something that was (again) a pressing necessity in Nehemiah's day (Neh. 13:21–29). From a NT perspective, divine presence via the Spirit wherever believers are present (Matt. 28; Acts *passim*) is an inversion of the Jerusalem-temple paradigm, and this shift from a centripetal religious structure to one that is non-localized has ramifications for mission.

⁴⁸ Christ's own revelation of himself was necessary to enable his disciples to identify the proper fulfilment of the OT's promises; cf. Goldsworthy 2000: 78–79. See Fitzmyer 2007 for a survey of the various ways the OT's messianic content was understood in the Judaisms of the First and Second Temple periods.

⁴⁹ Scripture was relatively inaccessible to Israelites due to limited literacy (on which see the spectrum of opinion represented by Niditch [1996] and Lemaire [1990]), the relative inaccessibility of the biblical material in the temple and later in the synagogues, and the sporadic public reading of Scripture apart from temple and (later) synagogue liturgies. Books completed in the post-exilic period include Chronicles, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi and some parts of the psalter.

we know from the NT, in particular the indwelling of the Holy Spirit as the bond of union with Christ.⁵⁰

With these points in mind, a definition of mission that suits the OT will resemble the following: the transmission of testimony regarding God's person and works of salvation and judgment, usually for the intended purpose of producing faith in his promises of salvation and judgment and conformity to his character and will.⁵¹ This definition leaves open whether mission is initiated by the believer or the audience, whether it is more verbal or behavioral, whether an individual or a community is responsible for this transmission, whether access to God's presence and the means of maintaining one's relationship with him are accessible everywhere or are localized, how much of God's plan of salvation has been accomplished (hence the prominence of the element of promise), whether the witness is intentional on the part of the human participant, and how much the one testifying knows of God. While substantial, these qualifications bear out Köstenberger's contention (1997b: 359) that 'tracing of mission in the entire Bible requires flexibility concerning the definition of mission'.⁵²

⁵⁰ Turner (1998: 338) sees Acts 2:38–39 as paradigmatic for the linking of the Spirit with 'conversional repentance/faith'; he goes on to explore a number of OT contexts in which Israel's restoration is connected with the unprecedented outpouring of the Holy Spirit, something that the choice of topics and themes in Acts underlines. This topic has been well explored in Hamilton 2005; note also Carson 1991: 195–196. Fredericks (1988) and Grogan (1967), whom Fredericks follows in large part, seem to overlook especially the necessary dependence of the application of redemption upon its accomplishment, and so mute some of the dynamic elements of the Spirit's work across the history of redemption when they deny almost any difference between the experience of the Holy Spirit by believers before and after the Christ-event.

⁵¹ Compare Schnabel's similar (NT) definition (2004: 11): 'the activity of a community of faith that distinguishes itself from its environment in terms of both religious belief (theology) and social behavior (ethics), that is convinced of the truth claims of its faith, and that actively works to win other people to the content of faith and to the way of life of whose truth and necessity the members of that community are convinced.' The 'community' element makes it hard for such a definition to apply in the OT, as Blomberg notes (2007: 63), and the degree to which Israel 'actively worked to win other people' to her faith was immensely inferior to what we see in the NT after Pentecost. While the transmitter's intention is important, it is not essential to an OT definition of mission for the same reason that proactivity on Israel's part was not essential. Blomberg (2007: 65) similarly suggests that a definition of mission that allows for an implicit aspect is appropriate to the OT, as does Seitz (2001: 155) in the context of Isaiah.

⁵² See further on this point Martens 2007; Seitz 2001: 145–158.

Mission in Jonah?

Was Jonah a missionary?

We can hardly avoid wondering, in the light of the definition developed above, whether Jonah the prophet even qualifies as a missionary. Apart from the qualification about his intention, perhaps not – he surely did not imagine he would facilitate the conversion of the sailors when he spoke to them of Yahweh. And when he conveyed God’s message to Nineveh, he did so with the fear (not the hope) that Nineveh would repent. But the qualification regarding the speaker’s intention seems well justified (and in many cases we cannot establish it with certainty), and Jonah did intentionally transmit God’s message to the Ninevites even though he feared it would entail their deliverance. All this, of course, Jonah did only after fleeing his prophetic commission and being constrained by God himself to change course.

But the book of Jonah cannot for that reason be said to lack any missionary material, or to consist only of negative examples, mainly because it shows God’s fulfilling the role of missionary when no one else wants to, sending Jonah to Nineveh for the express purpose of seeing its beliefs and morals changed (ch. 3) and showing it mercy (4:11). While below I will argue for a clear distinction between divine and human mission, it is important to note that in Jonah’s case God’s actions spill over into the human sphere rather than vice versa. There is no theological difficulty with God’s acting in ways that can in biblical parlance be described as missionary activity, as when he reveals himself to Abraham apart from any intermediary (Gen. 12; 15; 17; 22). Indeed, the incarnation culminates the process (primarily verbal before) of God’s direct self-revelation for the purpose of salvation.

Generally speaking, however, while divine initiative is essential to the missionary enterprise, the latter typically does not involve God’s unmediated making of disciples (in addition to Christ’s own calling of his disciples, Paul’s conversion is a notable exception from the NT).⁵³ Distinction without separation is a useful way of seeing how legitimate human mission relates to God’s actions of the same sort. Thus, after Christ’s ascension, the mission that began as a divine initiative in the incarnation continues through the Lord’s chosen

⁵³ Packer correctly claims that ‘in the last analysis, there is only one *agent* of evangelism: namely, the Lord Jesus Christ’ (Packer 1991: 85). For reflection on how God uses human proclamation to save sinners, see DeVries 2009.

representatives and under the unprecedented guidance and motivation of the Spirit.⁵⁴

Did Jonah proclaim a missionary message?

While consideration of the message that Jonah brought to Nineveh must await treatment in a later chapter, at least one point should be made here. We can (and probably should) infer from the Ninevites' reaction that Jonah's message to the city consisted of more than the bare threat 'Forty days more and Nineveh will be overthrown' (a mere five words in Hebrew).⁵⁵ When these Assyrians respond with belief in God (Jon. 3:5), fasting (3:5, 7) and self-condemnation in the light of their violence (3:8), it is clear that a number of prominent blanks have been filled in, particularly regarding the character and will of Jonah's God. Whether Jonah said a good deal more of his own accord, or whether the fearful Assyrians interrogated him as to how they ought to respond (both are plausible), one is forced to conclude that the Ninevites gained a basic knowledge of God during Jonah's sojourn with them.

God's involvement in the Ninevites' deliverance (not to mention that of the sailors), and the partial revelation of his character and will to them through Jonah, corroborate my earlier conclusion that there is indeed mission in Jonah. God's message, like his transmission of it, is based on his holy, sovereign and gracious character, and calls Nineveh to obey his will. But in order for us to understand more completely Jonah's contribution to a biblical theology of mission, we need to sketch more fully some of the NT's teaching on the topic.

Mission from Pentecost onward

In the context of the NT we can dispense with the qualifications that accompanied the definition of OT mission developed above.

⁵⁴ Acts 1 presents all that is recorded in that book as a continuation *by Jesus*, through the Spirit and the instrumentality of the apostles, of what he had begun to 'do and to teach'. The mission-related language Luke uses in Acts, where God sends and testifies etc., is fairly complex. Bolt (1998: 214) summarizes the data as follows: 'The narrative [of Acts] does not provide the readers with a mission, in the sense of them being directly commissioned for a particular task, but instead it presents God's mission. . . . The risen Jesus has been sent to Israel and the nations through his chosen witnesses. . . . As they listen, there is a natural movement towards evangelizing the world (cf. 8:4; 11:19–21).'

⁵⁵ Joyce Baldwin thus calls 3:4 the 'theme' of Jonah's sermon (Baldwin 1993: 576–577).

The redemptive-historical turning point that permits this major change, Jesus' life, death and resurrection, followed naturally by the commission of his apostles, his ascension and their later empowerment by the Spirit at Pentecost, will be explored in the course of the discussion.

Evaluating contemporary approaches to mission

Ferdinando (2008) has identified four primary (and competing) definitions of mission that currently hold various degrees of sway among interpreters of the Bible: *missio Dei* (i.e. God's mission), cultural mandate, social action and making disciples of all nations. Given our interest in biblical theology and our goal of understanding the book of Jonah on its own terms, we will give priority to a concept of NT mission that is broad enough to include all that the Bible says about the church's proclamation of God's person and work in Jesus Christ to those who have not heard it for the purpose of facilitating their religious conversion and incorporation into the church, yet narrow enough to exclude things that the gospel produces *after* it has been believed.⁵⁶

God's mission

Although Ferdinando represents these various understandings of Christian mission as concentric circles, with the centre being the proclamation of God's word of grace and promise, some of the approaches to mission that he analyses move the centre elsewhere, as he observes. Take, for example, the broadest definition of mission, which includes 'all that God is doing in this world' (*missio Dei*). No believer would object to the relevance of God's will and plan for mission, but is it wise to define the term so broadly?⁵⁷ If one tries to do so, a number of thorny questions appear: does God use the same agents and means for the various tasks that constitute his mission? Apart from things that clearly lie beyond human capacity (providence etc.), does the Bible show that God's people are responsible and equipped in the same way for exercising dominion over the earth (Scripture's earliest divine ordinance, Gen. 1:26), suffering

⁵⁶ For this discussion I adopt Schnabel's definition (2004: 11).

⁵⁷ Squires (1998: 20, 37–39) correctly judges God's plan to be 'the broadest possible theological context', one in which (notably) the proclamation of the gospel by the early church fits without being identical to it.

persecution (Revelation, among many possible references) and for making disciples of all nations (Jesus' parting charge to his disciples)? Moreover, since God is active everywhere and providentially oversees all human existence, if human mission is identical to what he does through human beings, one cannot even restrict mission to the activities of believers: anything good (meaning, anything that God wanted to happen), even if performed by unbelievers, constitutes part of mission (e.g. the betrayal and crucifixion of Jesus, Acts 2:23). In the light of these problems, C. J. H. Wright carefully qualifies his definition of mission as God's mission by stating that human participation in it is 'at God's invitation and command', but this simply proves that human mission can be more narrowly defined.⁵⁸

Cultural mandate

The cultural mandate and social action definitions of mission narrow their scope to human activity (as C. J. H. Wright did with his qualifications), defining mission as gospel proclamation *and* various other imperatives that cover vast spheres of human action. Cultural mandate mission, in the words of M. Goheen and C. Bartholomew, 'is as wide as creation itself' (Goheen and Bartholomew 2008: 5–6). As Ferdinando observes, this understanding of mission moves in the right direction by restricting itself to human activity, specifically that of the church. But given the comprehensiveness of the NT's ethic, which covers the spheres of church, family, marriage and citizenship, this definition is not fully satisfying, since it does not separate the task of transmitting the gospel from the rest of the church's calling and so simply amounts to the idea of obedience to Christ in all things.

Social action

Similar levelling occurs when social action is put on a par with the proclamation of the gospel, and so John Stott (an advocate of social action on the part of Christians) has worked hard to integrate social action into missiology while respecting Scripture's emphases on

⁵⁸ Wright's view, which is difficult to classify, is most fully expressed in C. J. H. Wright 2006. It is not clear to me that Wright uses the term 'mission' consistently, since elsewhere he states 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 the whole of God's creation' (2006: 51).

these points.⁵⁹ As with the critique given in the preceding section, my attention to this issue should not be mistaken for a theoretical fascination with a nicely nuanced definition of mission, for excessive emphasis on the spheres that properly belong to the gospel's *effects* can have serious consequences that go beyond the theoretical to impact the church's behaviour and fidelity to the gospel.

As an example, it is possible that a too-inclusive definition of mission, in which the putting into practice of the gospel holds the same place as its proclamation, would obscure the primordial importance of one's relationship with God (meaning being estranged due to sin, and thus exposed to his judgment apart from salvation in Christ) precisely by putting it on a par with social, ecological or other concerns. To avoid this danger the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization's Covenant, published in 1974, affirms that 'evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty' (Article 5) but then explicitly subordinates 'Christian social responsibility' to evangelism (Article 6). This approach to the question accords admirably with the biblical data, which insist that properly motivated and well-directed action in all spheres of life (social, political etc.) flows naturally from the reception of the gospel but does not constitute the gospel itself (Ps. 103:6; Prov. 19:17; Jer. 9:24; Mic. 6:6–8; Matt. 5:43–47; Rom. 13:8–10; 15:2–4; Gal. 5:14; 1 Tim. 2:1–2). The gospel and its effects can and should be distinguished without being separated.

Mission and the priority of the gospel

These theoretical concerns, though tied to Scripture at various points, can be refined and clarified by our turning to explicit descriptions of what the apostles were to do, and did, in fulfilment of Jesus' command.⁶⁰ First in line are the post-resurrection commissions,

⁵⁹ See Moreau 2000: 637. Note Stott's speech entitled 'The Great Commission: Part 1', given at the 1966 World Conference on Evangelism held in Berlin, in which he paired 'identification' with 'proclamation' in mission as part of his exposition of John 20:19–23 (Stott 1967: 41). This line of thought appears, largely unchanged, in Stott 1992; note its critique in Köstenberger 1997a, esp. 199–220. For a recent effort that recognizes the connection between the two but still fails to distinguish proclamation from practice, see Thacker 2009; and contrast Bavinck's view as presented in Tuit 2009.

⁶⁰ While Jesus' own mission and those of his followers during his earthly ministry were largely focused on Israel (Matt. 15:25 // Mark 7:27), Matthew (for one) clearly assumes in 28:16–20 that the former is consistent with mission to the nations upon

recorded in Matthew 28:18–20; Luke 24:46–49; John 20:21; Acts 1:8.⁶¹ Schnabel contends that it is hardly incidental that the disciples met with the risen Christ, since this predicted the focus of their message: ‘the missionary message of the disciples focuses, not by accident, on the Risen One, who had been crucified but whom God had raised from the dead’ (Schnabel 2004: 381). The risen Christ makes this focus explicit when he commissions the disciples to be ‘my witnesses’ (Acts 1:8), a construction that (unconventionally in Greek) puts the adjective before the noun to underline further the Christological and soteriological content of their message (Schnabel 2004: 371). Luke records Jesus’ stating that ‘repentance and forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem’ (Luke 24:47), and Matthew joins the imperative to ‘make disciples’ with Christ’s kingly authority and unique prophetic standing (Matt. 28:18–20). The same is true of Paul, who, while seeing missionary significance in all that he did (1 Cor. 9:19–24), stopped short of equating his lifestyle with the witness that he was to bear to Christ (Gal. 1:15–16; 10:13–14; Acts 9:15; 22:14–15; 26:16–18).⁶² His self-understanding as an ‘envoy’ of Christ (1 Tim. 2:7; 2 Tim. 1:11) lays additional emphasis on the verbal nature of his commission and on his obligation to fulfil it.⁶³

The first three approaches to mission surveyed above (*missio Dei*, cultural mandate and social action) put on a par with this central concern elements that are all consequences, fruits or complements of it. This is unnecessary, however, because the Christ-event, central to biblical revelation by all counts, naturally and inevitably works itself out in believers by virtue of their Spirit-constituted union with the risen Christ in their progressive personal sanctification.⁶⁴ It is for this reason that the indicative-imperative structure of NT theology in particular is so pervasive. On the basis of what God has done in Jesus Christ, men and women are called to submit to his saving lordship and grow increasingly into his image through the work of

Christ’s ascension; cf. Marshall 2004: 101. In Luke’s work, Luke 24:49 and Acts 1:4 together establish the same transition.

⁶¹ See Schnabel 2004: 348–382 for a convenient survey of these data.

⁶² For a discussion of these and similar texts, see Schnabel 2004: 931–945; Köstenberger and O’Brien 2001: 101–106, 123–131, 221–222. D. Miller (1961) argues that God’s glory and the predicament of fallen human beings as exposed to his wrath are prominent motives for Paul’s mission.

⁶³ As Schnabel (2004: 1355) notes, with reference to Reck 1991: 169.

⁶⁴ Keller (2008: 1) speaks of the Christian life as ‘a process of renewing every dimension of our life’ that grows out of our reception of the gospel.

the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:18). This includes, of course, their interaction with the world around them, which they preserve as salt and benefit as light (Matt. 5:13–16). But it would be a mistake to suppose that the ‘cultural mandate’, as Kuyperian thought refers to Christians’ duty to ‘witness to Christ’s lordship in every area of human life and culture’, is of the same importance as personal salvation.⁶⁵

The issue here is once again the definition of mission and the centrality of the gospel in it.⁶⁶ The ultimate resolution of the problems that are ever inherent in fallen human culture, like those in human individuals, will come not through human activity (to which Scripture does not attach ‘redemption’ language anyway), but through God’s final intervention at the end of human history. Thus we must distinguish the gospel from its implications or fruits on a personal level, and between what God does and what his people are charged to do on a cultural and, indeed, cosmic level. Just as our salvation itself is not fully complete apart from Christ’s second coming (Rom. 5:9–10), so too God’s final punishment of sin and the establishment of perfect, divine righteousness on a cosmic scale are the only means by which the full expression of human nature (including culture) can be brought into conformity to his will (Rom. 5:21; Matt. 25:31–46; Rev. 20 – 22). Consequently, mission goes astray when it substitutes another centre or when it assigns to humanity activities what God reserves for himself.

⁶⁵ Notice the shifting meaning of ‘mission’ in Goheen and Bartholomew 2008: 5–6. After beginning with the church’s ‘mission . . . to make known the kingdom of God . . . throughout the world as Jesus has made it known in Israel’ (with reference to John 17:18; 20:21), they then infer that ‘since the gospel is about God’s rule over all of creation, all nations, and all of human life, the mission of Jesus’ followers is as wide as creation itself. They have been commissioned to witness to the gospel in all of public life . . . and every other corner of human experience.’ While Christians surely have a responsibility to ‘do all to the glory of God’ (1 Cor. 10:30), and while that has implications for the success of the church’s evangelistic efforts (1 Cor. 10:32 – 11:1), there remains a basic difference in content between what one communicates by one’s conduct and the historically particular and referential nature of the gospel.

⁶⁶ ‘One must distinguish between, on the one hand, the gospel as what God has done and what is the message to be announced and, on the other, what is demanded by God or effected by the gospel in assorted human responses’ (Carson 2009: 1).