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Encountering Mission in the Old Testament

Wright explains the Old Testament orientation toward mission:

First, it presents the mission and purpose of God with great power and clarity and with universal implications for all humanity. Second, the Old Testament shaped the very nature of the mission of the New Testament church, which, indeed, felt compelled to justify its mission practice from the Scriptures we now call the Old Testament. (Wright 2000)

Mission in the Old Testament is best encountered by exploring it as a divine drama in four acts: (1) the creation and the fall, (2) God's calling and setting apart a people for himself, (3) God's work in rescuing his people, and (4) God's work in sending his people into exile. The encounter with the New Testament presented in chapters 3 and 4 will introduce you to three more acts in this drama. We do not intend to support any theological structure by dividing the biblical story into seven acts, and, as an illustration, sidebar 2.1 gives different ways to structure the drama.

INTRODUCING WORLD MISSIONS Chapter 2

INTRODUCTION

Can a clear case for Christian mission be made from the Old Testament? Evangelical missiologists resoundingly answer yes—but then, they would be expected to give this answer since their livelihood depends on it! Are they being fair to the Old Testament? A commonly held view in popular culture in North America is that the God of the Old Testament is the God of anger and wrath, and only in the New Testament is the God of love found. Some Old Testament scholars argue that Israel had no responsibility toward the nations, and the New Testament should not be read into the Old (see, e.g., Dobbie 1962). If this is true, then one would not expect to find much on mission in the Old Testament.

Fortunately, it is not true. As we will show in this chapter, from the very opening words of the Bible important themes in mission appear that are expanded throughout the Old Testament. They lay the foundation for what is found more explicitly about mission in the New Testament. Old Testament scholar Christopher

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ACT 1: THE CREATION AND THE FALL

In the first statement in Genesis God is seen as the sovereign creator of the universe. What God creates is "very good" (Gen. 1:31); it is good because goodness finds its reference in the character of God himself, and whatever he creates will, by definition, be good.

God Creates

That God is the creator of the universe establishes his concern for the people he creates. That concern is not limited by racial, political, gender, economic, or religious boundaries. Wherever one goes in the world, God is already there. He is intimately interested in every person in the world right from the start, and that interest does not change over time. Because of this intense interest in every person, God is in the process of making himself known long before missionaries arrive on the scene. Mission is God's project, and he graciously allows Christians to take part in it. As we saw in chapter 1, this idea is captured by the term *missio Dei* (see McIntosh 2000). It indicates that although the church plays a central role in mission, it does not play the only role.

The fact that God created Adam and Eve put them (and us) in his debt—a debt that never can be fully repaid. All people owe their very existence to God. He does not ask for repayment, but he does ask for acknowledgment. God is the inventor of creation. To put it in today's terms, God owns the patent. Like all patent owners, he deserves the royalties for his inventive work. In this case, the royalties given to God are simply our glorification of him through delighting in him (Piper 1993) and in all that he made.

This is the foundation for mission and is implicit in the creation story.

From the beginning, Adam and Eve were set apart from the rest of creation. God made nothing else in his image (Gen. 1:26–27). Although the exact meaning of being made "in God's image" is debated in theological circles, at least three implications are clear. First, the image of God is linked to the command to have dominion over the rest of creation. God is the King of kings, but human beings are his vice-regents.

Second, every human being is significant in God's eyes simply because God made him or her. You are significant. It is natural that you want to experience that significance, and the history of our race shows the great creativity, as well as perversity, in our attempts to connect to the One whose image we all bear. The tragedy of the story is that, like flies returning to garbage, over and over again people connect to the idols made in their hearts rather than to the One who made them (Keyes 1992).

Third, being made in God's image and given subsequent responsibilities as a race, we have a purpose in living: we are to glorify God by delighting him as we exercise dominion over creation and are fruitful and multiply. This responsibility to exercise worshipful and respectful dominion over creation has been called the *cultural mandate* (Adrian 1967, 21). It comes before the fall and continues on in the midst of a broken world. Dyrness summarizes:

This then is the commission given to man and woman: to serve creation and one another in their daily work; to build a social world centering on the family. All these tasks, however humble, have their intrinsic value. All of this done with integrity glorifies God, or at least God cannot be



SIDEBAR 2.1 THE DIVINE DRAMA—HOW MANY ACTS?

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DRAMA IN FIVE ACTS

Act 1: Creation (Genesis 1–50)

Act 2: The Exodus (Exodus through preexilic history, writing, and prophets)

Act 3: The Exile (exile and postexilic history, writing, and prophets)

Act 4: Jesus Christ: The Coming of the Kingdom (Matthew through Jude)

Act 5: The Consummation (Revelation)

DRAMA IN SEVEN ACTS

Act 1: The Creation and

Act 2: Calling a People through preexilic history (Genesis 12–50)

Act 3: Rescuing and Separating the People through preexilic history (Exodus and the Minor prophets)

Act 4: Maintaining God's Kingdom through postexilic history (exile and postexilic prophets)

Act 5: Saving a People through postexilic history (Matthew through Revelation)

Act 6: Gathering a People through postexilic history (through Jude)

Act 7: Renewing All Creation through postexilic history (Consummation (Revelation))

REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What are other ways in which the story of God's work in the Bible is divided?
2. What factors help you decide how to separate one act from another in the story of God's work in the Bible?

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THE DIVINE DRAMA—HOW MANY ACTS?**

In *Let the Earth Rejoice! A Biblical Theology of Holistic Mission*, William Dyrness (1983) developed the idea of exploring mission in the Bible as a divine drama. He splits that drama into five acts, while we divide the story into seven acts. The following table shows the breakdown of the two approaches.

DRAMA IN FIVE ACTS	DRAMA IN SEVEN ACTS
ACT 1: Creation (Genesis 1-50)	ACT 1: The Creation and the Fall (Genesis 1-11)
ACT 2: The Exodus (Exodus through preexilic history, writing, and prophets)	ACT 2: Calling a People through Abraham (Genesis 12-50)
ACT 3: The Exile (exilic and postexilic history, writing, and prophets)	ACT 3: Rescuing and Separating a People: The Exodus and the Monarchy (Exodus through preexilic history, writing, and prophets)
ACT 4: Jesus Christ: The Coming of the Kingdom (Matthew through Jude)	ACT 4: Maintaining God's Holiness: The Exile (exilic and postexilic history, writing, and prophets)
ACT 5: The Consummation (Revelation)	ACT 5: Saving a People: Jesus the Messiah (Matthew through John)
	ACT 6: Gathering a People: The Church (Acts through Jude)
	ACT 7: Renewing All Creation: The Consummation (Revelation)

REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What are other ways in which the story of God's work in the Bible might be divided?
2. What factors help you decide how to separate one act from another in the scriptural story?
3. Might people of different cultures divide the story in ways that make sense to them?

glorified if all this is left undone. (Dyrness 1983, 36)

Our purpose as people made in God's image remains even after the fall and the flood, as God repeats the command to multiply and subdue the earth in Gen. 9:1-7. The covenant that God established with Noah and his sons encompasses all humankind (Gen. 9:8-19).

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Adam and Eve Fall: God Pursues

Being creatures with choice, Adam and Eve try to bypass God's plan for them by listening to the enticing ideas of the serpent. They fall. As a result of their blatant denial of respect for their creator, God judges them and the serpent.

In essence, the story of mission from that time on has been the story of God reaching out to humans, who are asked to choose sides. The conflict between God and the serpent, or Satan, is not a dualistic battle. Satan's defeat was provided for even in God's judgment against Adam and Eve. Eve will produce offspring who will fatally wound

There was no "mission" in the Garden of Eden and there will be no "mission" in the new heavens and the new earth (though the results of "mission" will be evident). From the first glimmer of the gospel in Genesis 3:15 to the end of this age, however, mission is necessitated by humanity's fall into sin and need for a Saviour, and is made possible only by the saving initiative of God in Christ.

Andreas Köstenberger
and Peter O'Brien (2001, 251)

the serpent (Gen. 3:15). This initial promise of salvation, known as the *protoevangelium* (Peters 1972, 83–86), is the promise that Jesus will come for all people. However, this does not come without a battle, as Dyrness notes:

Mission, if it is to succeed, must involve conquest; there will be battles and casualties. For the struggle of God in history is with the powers of evil, and his people

will become involved in this battle when they join themselves to him. (Dyrness 1983, 117)

Throughout the rest of this first act in the divine drama the consequences of the fall are evident. Brother murders brother (Gen. 4:1–16), and all of humankind rebels in wickedness so that God destroys all but a remnant (Gen. 6–9). At the same time, however, a veiled reminder of the initial promise given in Gen. 3:15 reappears after the flood in Gen. 9:27, when God promises to dwell in the tents of Shem (Kaiser 2000, 17). This is a hint that God's blessing to all people would come through a particular people (Dyrness 1983, 45), which will unfold in the following acts of the drama.

Ultimately, the nations themselves fall (Gen. 11:1–9). This last piece of the story clearly shows that the effect of the choice of our progenitors is not limited to individuals. [Entire societies are infected.] For example, people are divided by language and consequently culture. This splitting serves as a protection against the prospect of unchecked sin made possible by a common language ("Better division than collective apostasy" [Kidner 1967, 110]). Linguistic and cultural barriers remain today and are great obstacles to the missionary task.

After the fall, in their search to connect to the significance of being image bearers of their creator, people build idolatrous systems designed to create a name for themselves. The story of the tower of Babel exemplifies this orientation to life. As a people, we are so broken that we do not recognize that God longs to give us names he has chosen and to fill us with the sense that we belong to him so that we may properly delight in him.

In this act of the divine drama all of the main characters are introduced. God starts

it all. He pursues Adam and Eve after the fall and promises the solution to their (and our) brokenness. Adam and Eve choose a path opposite to God's clear instruction, and they suffer the consequences. They are broken in how they relate to God, each other, and even themselves. Satan tempts Adam and Eve to deny God, and as a result his doom is pronounced. Jesus also appears, although in shadow form, through the promise of a battle between Eve's offspring and those of the serpent. A hint appears that although God's intention is for all humankind, his method will focus on a particular people.

With the fall comes banishment from the garden and from intimate contact with the creator. Individuals have fallen, but so have whole societies. The curtain closes on this act with a world of people scattered and unable to communicate with each other. With people broken, separated from the creator, and successfully lured by a clever enemy, the stage is set for the story of redemption played out through the rest of the drama.

ACT 2: CALLING A PEOPLE THROUGH ABRAHAM

In the opening of the second act God calls Abraham in the first phase of the story of his reaching out to us. The call is found in Gen. 12:1–3:

The Lord had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

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God thus calls Abraham to leave his land and people to go to a land to be shown by God. There, God will make Abraham into a great nation and bless him. Three blessing promises are given by God, all with the same purpose in mind. First, God will make Abraham into a great nation, a promise tied to the land to which God calls him. Second, God will give Abraham a great name. The purpose of both blessings is that Abraham be a blessing to others. The third blessing and purpose clarify that although Abraham is the means, he is not the goal. It is through him that others will be blessed by blessing, but the purpose goes beyond Abraham: "all peoples on earth will be blessed" (emphasis ours). God's universal intent now is to be manifest through an individual and the people who come from that individual.

Paul echoes this in the New Testament. In Rom. 4:13 he identifies Abraham as "heir of the world." In Gal. 3:8 he argues that the promise in Gen. 12 foreshadows the gospel going to all nations.

In the first act of the drama the universal nature of God's love and concern is clearly seen. They establish that God's goal is not limited to any person or people. In this second act, however, the particular method that God will use to express universal concerns is in focus. Although God's method is to work through a particular person and the people who come from him, his intention remains universal, as Old Testament scholar Walter Kaiser notes:

The fact remains that the goal of the Old Testament was to see both Jews and Gentiles come to a saving knowledge of the Messiah who was to come. Anything less than this goal was a misunderstanding and an attenuation of the plan of God. God's eternal plan was to provide salvation for

all peoples; it was never intended to be reserved for one special group, such as the Jews, even as an initial offer! (Kaiser 2000, 10)

In Abraham, then, God manifests his reign. Through him the kingdom revealed in creation and rejected by Adam and Eve is restored and begins its advance. Abraham is blessed not only for his sake, but also for ours. God's missionary heart is evident as he begins the process of rolling back the kingdom of darkness and seeking his lost creation. No wonder Paul asserts that the Abrahamic covenant stands throughout the ups and downs of Israel's history as the proper foundation for God's ultimate salvation blessing in his Son (Gal. 3:14; Williams 1989, 70-76).

Kaiser maintains that this is the Old Testament version of the Great Commission (Kaiser 1996; 2000, 13). Abraham was chosen, and through him Israel was called to become the people of God. The initial choice of Abraham, however, was for the benefit of all peoples (Gen. 12:3; 22:18), as Kaiser argues,

The sweep of all the evidence makes it abundantly clear that God's gift of a blessing through the instrumentality of Abraham was to be experienced by nations, clans, tribes, people groups, and individuals. It would be for every size group, from the smallest people group to the greatest nation. (Kaiser 2000, 19)

The nations will not be blessed in some automatic fashion, however. John Stott explains, "Now we are Abraham's seed by faith, and the earth's families will be blessed only if we go to them with the Gospel. That is God's plain purpose" (Stott 1999, 9). God's call is not solely for our blessing, but is

also a call to service on behalf of humanity (Adrian 1967, 25).

The rest of Genesis works out God's call of Abraham, through the lives of Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, until the chosen people are in Egypt enjoying the blessings of God's protection as a result of Joseph's faith and wisdom.

At the end of the Genesis story, a further clarification of the promise made in the garden is given. The identity of the one fore-shadowed to come through Eve in Gen. 3:15 and hinted at in the line of Shem in Gen. 9:27 is now further narrowed to the line of Judah, fourth son of Jacob, Abraham's grandson (Gen. 49:9-12; see Kaiser 2000, 47).

ACT 3: RESCUING AND SEPARATING A PEOPLE: THE EXODUS AND THE MONARCHY

As the third act opens, God's people find themselves in Egypt rather than in the land promised to Abraham. God knows that they probably would remain content to live in Egypt forever, but the time has come for them to claim the heritage that Abraham had received by faith. It is time again for God to intervene. Now God will take his people out of Egypt and place them in the land from which they would serve as a blessing to the peoples of the world.

Through God's mighty hand, Israel is rescued from Egypt. It is in this process that a national identity is forged and the descendants of Abraham are forced to take sides. Even so, Exod. 12:38 refers to the whole group as a "mixed multitude" (NASB), indicating a group made up not just of Abraham's descendants but also others who wished to join them (Dymness 1983, 60). Thus, even in the forging of Israel's

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Psalm 67 has long been known for its "whole world" perspective. The psalmist extols God to the ends of the created order: offer God's community is called to prove his purposes in blessing the in that community has experienced God's grace and knows that people—if only the rest would come to know that same grace (rules in righteousness and guides all the earth—it is time for the acknowledge his just leading (vv. 4-5). Third, God has been go the nations need to see this and come to know his goodness as"

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May the nations be glad and sing for joy,
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May the peoples praise you, O God;
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Then the land will yield its harvest,
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1. As you meditate on the psalm, write out the implications for own words as a meditative prayer to God.
2. In addition to the land yielding its harvest, in what other ways bless his people if they praise him before the nations?

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- ⁵May the nations be glad and sing for joy, for you rule the peoples justly and guide the nations of the earth.
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- ⁷Then the land will yield its harvest, and God, our God, will bless us.
- ⁸God will bless us, and all the ends of the earth will fear him.

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Psalm 67 has long been known for its "whole world" perspective on God's blessing. The psalmist extols God to the ends of the created order, offering three reasons that God's community is called to prove his purposes in blessing them. First, everyone in that community has experienced God's grace and knows that God offers it to all people—if only the rest would come to know that same grace (vv. 1-3). Second, God rules in righteousness and guides all the earth—it is time for the whole earth to acknowledge his just leading (vv. 4-5). Third, God has been good to his community—the nations need to see this and come to know his goodness as well (vv. 6-7).

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Several decades later, with the rescue complete and the lessons of unbelief and a resulting forty-year wilderness detour behind them, Israel moves into the promised land. The people are sternly warned

by Moses of the consequences of intermingling with the nations they find inhabiting Canaan. The greatest danger lies in turning from God to worship false gods, and unfortunately, that possibility recurs as a reality throughout the monarchy that is established.

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ACT 3: RESCUING AND SEPARATING A PEOPLE: THE EXODUS AND THE MONARCHY

As the third act opens, God's people find themselves in Egypt rather than in the land promised to Abraham. God knows that they probably would remain content to live in Egypt forever, but the time has come for them to claim the heritage that Abraham had received by faith. It is time again for God to intervene. Now God will take his people out of Egypt and place them in the land from which they would serve as a blessing to the peoples of the world.

Through God's mighty hand, Israel is rescued from Egypt. It is in this process that a national identity is forged and the descendants of Abraham are forced to take sides. Even so, Exod. 12:38 refers to the whole group as a "mixed multitude" (NASB), indicating a group made up not just of Abraham's descendants but also others who wished to join them (Dyrness 1983, 60). Thus, even in the forging of Israel's

SIDEBAR 2.2 MISSION IN PSALM 67

Psalms 67 has long been known for its "whole world" perspective on God's blessing. The psalmist extols God to the ends of the created order, offering three reasons that God's community is called to prove his purposes in blessing them. First, everyone in that community has experienced God's grace and knows that God offers it to all people—if only the rest would come to know that same grace (vv. 1-3). Second, God rules in righteousness and guides all the earth—it is time for the whole earth to acknowledge his just leading (vv. 4-5). Third, God has been good to his community—the nations need to see this and come to know his goodness as well (vv. 6-7).

Psalms 67

- ¹May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face shine upon us,
- ²that your ways may be known on earth, your salvation among all nations.
- ³May the peoples praise you, O God, may all the peoples praise you.
- ⁴May the nations be glad and sing for joy, for you rule the peoples justly and guide the nations of the earth.
- ⁵May the peoples praise you, O God; may all the peoples praise you.
- ⁶Then the land will yield its harvest, and God, our God, will bless us.
- ⁷God will bless us, and all the ends of the earth will fear him.

REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. As you meditate on the psalm, write out the implications for the nations in your own words as a meditative prayer to God.
2. In addition to the land yielding its harvest, in what other ways will God bless his people if they praise him before the nations?

national identity the universal nature of God's concern is found.

Several decades later, with the rescue complete and the lessons of unbelief and a resulting forty-year wilderness detour behind them, Israel moves into the promised land. The people are sternly warned

by Moses of the consequences of intermingling with the nations they find inhabiting Canaan. The greatest danger lies in turning from God to worship false gods, and unfortunately, that possibility recurs as a reality throughout the monarchy that is established.

psalms

Again and again throughout the monarchical period, the time of the divided kingdom, and the subsequent exiles, the people turn their backs on God. He alternately disciplines and extends mercy to them. The discipline is a stark reminder of God's unwillingness to share the glory due him with any rival. God's acts of mercy demonstrate his love not only for those he has called, but also for every people he has created.

Several mission themes are interwoven in this act of the divine story. We will briefly explore three of them: (1) the universality of God's intent, (2) the purpose of God's people as light for the Gentiles, and (3) the narrowing of the means of deliverance from a people to a person.

God's Universal Intent

Although the story of rescue and separation involves one people in particular, the fact of God's universal intent through that one people remains clear. Just as God called one person (Abraham) to be a blessing for the whole world, so now he begins with one land (Israel) to renew the whole earth (Dyrness 1983, 79). Israel is only the starting point of a universal program of God.

This is seen in several ways. For example, strangers were allowed to enter in among the people of Israel, and they were to be loved as the Israelites loved themselves (Lev. 19:33-34). Foreigners were expected (and allowed) to come to the temple to worship (1 Kings 8:41-43). God's house was not confined to Israel alone; it was to be a house of prayer for all nations (Isa. 56:6-7). God was to uphold Israel so that all the people of the world would know that he is God (1 Kings 8:59-60).

The psalms, not often thought of as missionary in focus, clearly relate God's uni-

versal intent. As missiologist George Peters points out, a universal note can be found in more than 175 references in the psalms. He goes so far as to assert, "the Psalter is one of the greatest missionary books in the world" (Peters 1972, 116). Peters advises the reader to study Pss. 2, 33, 66, 72, 98, 117, and 145. To this list Kaiser adds Pss. 67, 96, and 100 (Kaiser 2000, 30). Missionary and Old Testament professor W. Creighton Marlowe discusses terminology of active outreach found in Pss. 46, 49, 57, 67, 96, 105, 108, 119, and 145 (Marlowe 1998, 447), and Kaiser notes,

Over and over again the psalmists called on all the peoples of all the lands and nations to praise the Lord (Pss. 47:1; 67:3, 5; 100:1; 117:1). Even more directly, these ancient singers of Israel urged their people to tell, proclaim, and make known the mighty deeds of Yahweh (Pss. 9:11; 105:1) and to join in singing praises to God from all the nations (Pss. 18:49; 96:2-3). The psalmists themselves offer to sing God's praises among the nations (Pss. 57:9; 108:3). The expected result would be that all the ends of the earth would turn to the Lord and all the families on earth would bow down in worship to him (Pss. 22:27; 66:4; 86:9). (Kaiser 2000, 37)

Psalms 67:1-7, for example, is a request that God bless Israel so that when the peoples of the world look at Israel, they will see God's hand and come to know God (see Kaiser 1999, 15-16).

The preexilic prophets add their voices in proclaiming a universal thrust for mission. Joel prophesies the outpouring of God's Spirit on all people (2:28) and God's coming judgment of all nations (3:11-12). Amos predicts that God's restoration will involve all the nations that bear his name

**SIDEBAR 2.3
"SENT" IN THE OLD TESTAMENT**

Since mission essentially means to send someone, an examinee are sent to do in the Bible will help clarify what the mission following are side-by-side summaries of two such studies (M 1998, 16-19).

MAY	MCDANIEL
1. It is God who sends; the initiative in sending or mission lies with God.	1. The Old Testament sovereign order to his will or
2. The purpose in sending is twofold: first, to deliver his people from their enemies, both spiritual and material; second, to bring back his people to himself.	2. God exiles a variety of wrongdoers.
3. Those whom God sends are always related to this twofold purpose: kings, judges, and leaders to deliver his people; prophets and afflictions to bring them back to himself.	3. God also salvation.
4. There is little or no suggestion that God's sending extends beyond his own people; it is to Israel that God sends judges, prophets, and afflictions, either to deliver or to bring back to himself. Nor is there any suggestion that Israel itself is sent by God to deliver the other nations and bring them to God, except perhaps in the famous Servant Songs of Isaiah.	4. God does most often a prophet held capt a savior a them.

REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

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MAY

1. It is God who sends; the initiative in sending or mission lies with God.
2. The purpose in sending is twofold: first, to deliver his people from their enemies, both spiritual and material; second, to bring back his people to himself.

MCDANIEL

1. The Old Testament presents a picture of God as the divine, sovereign Lord, who sends in order to convey and accomplish his will on earth.
2. God exiles sinners and sends a variety of agents to punish wrongdoers.
3. God also sends benefit and salvation.

4. There is little or no suggestion that God's sending extends beyond his own people; it is to Israel that God sends judges, prophets, and afflictions, either to deliver or to bring back to himself. Nor is there any suggestion that Israel itself is sent by God to deliver the other nations and bring them to God, except perhaps in the famous Servant Songs of Isaiah.

4. God does send people, and most often the person sent is a prophet who promises those held captive that God will send a savior and champion to free them.

REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What implications are there for mission in the way God sends in the Old Testament?
2. How might these insights be helpful in developing a theology of mission?

(9:11-12). Habakkuk declares that the whole earth will be filled with the knowledge of God, as waters cover the sea (2:14). Micah looks to the day when the nations will come to worship God (4:1-4). Jonah preaches, against his will, to the Assyrians; to God's delight and Jonah's chagrin, they repent. Zephaniah prophesies universal judgment (3:8) and restoration of God's people before the eyes of all nations (3:20).

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The most significant missionary message in the Old Testament prophets comes from Isaiah. He declares that God's servant will be a light for the Gentiles and that all the earth will see his salvation (42:6; 49:6) and be full of the knowledge of him (11:6-9). He also foretells the coming of the Servant of the Lord.

The Purpose of God's People: A Light for the Gentiles

Isaiah calls Israel a "light for the Gentiles" (Isa. 42:6; 49:6). God did not bring Israel out of Egypt without reason; God's people are to serve in a mediatorial role. They are God's priests out of the whole world (Exod. 19:5-6), which makes them the servants of God (see also Deut. 14:1-2).

In Exod. 19:4-6 God tells Moses to announce to Israel that because he himself brought Israel out of Egypt, they will be his special possession, his kingdom of priests, his holy nation. By designating them as his "special possession," God shows that he places a high value on people. As his "kingly priests," the whole nation was to function on behalf of the kingdom of God in a mediatorial role in relation to the nations" (Kaiser 1999, 13). As a "holy nation," they were wholly God's, set apart for his service, not for their own ends.

Israel (specifically Jerusalem) was to serve as the center to which other nations would come, a light to the nations. This truth led missiologists to speak of the centripetal (inward focused) nature of mission in the Old Testament (see Adrian 1967; Peters 1972, 21-25). This centripetal impetus, however, was not the only mission direction seen in the Old Testament. In fact, Kaiser argues that the Old Testament thrust was for Israel to go out and bring religious teaching

to the nations (Kaiser 2000, esp. 36-38; see also Marlowe 1998). God sends (see sidebar 2.3) Abraham to a new land, Moses to lead the people back to the land while exhibiting God's wonders to Egypt, and Jonah to preach repentance to the hated Assyrians in Nineveh. The fact that the Israelites fail to live up to God's expectations should not deter present-day readers from seeing that they had a responsibility to go and be a blessing in order to present God to any people who did not know him.

The Means of Deliverance: From a People to a Seed

The final theme in this act is that the promise first given in Gen. 3:15 is narrowed down from a particular people to a particular person who will redeem Israel and provide hope for the nations. Isaiah in particular, through the Servant Songs in chapters 40-55, describes God's Suffering Servant. An intermingled picture of corporate and individual identity, the Servant Songs portray a suffering one who will come to bring healing to the nations. Wright's summary is worth noting:

The mission of the Servant would be one of justice, gentleness, enlightenment, and liberation (Isa. 42:1-9). But it would also involve rejection and apparent failure (Isa. 49:4; 50:6-8) in the task of restoring Israel to God. In response to that, his mission would be extended to include the nations to the ends of the earth (Isa. 49:6). In that way, the mission of the Servant would be the fulfillment of the mission of Israel itself. (Wright 2000)

In the third act of the divine drama of mission the universal intent of God is developed through a particular people. In-

dividuals from among the people of Israel, especially the prophets, are sent by God to call the people to repentance and deliverance. Israel as a nation is to serve in the same capacity among the rest of the nations of the world. Unfortunately, Israel fails to live up to God's call, and as a result the next act in the divine drama is one of brokenness and scattering.

ACT 4: MAINTAINING GOD'S HOLINESS: THE EXILE

As Adam and Eve were expelled from the garden, so also Israel is expelled from the land. More than just a judgment, however, this is God's way of "clearing the deadwood" out so that his purposes will be accomplished. The prophets of the exile and later do not stop proclaiming God's provision through the coming messiah. They strongly declare the universal nature of God's continuing work. Jeremiah announces that all the nations will be gathered to Jerusalem and that they will not walk in the stubbornness of their hearts anymore (3:17). He also announces God's new covenant, when all God's people will know him (31:27-37). Ezekiel prophesies that the heathen will know that he is God (36:22-23). Zechariah looks ahead to a day when many nations would join God's people (2:11).

In the midst of the exile God continues to provide signs of hope. He is still interested in the peace of the nations. He wants them to repent and be spared from the judgment they deserve. Jerusalem, when it is rebuilt, will be a source of praise among the nations.

At the same time, a more solidified and hopeful picture now emerges of one coming who will fulfill God's promise and rescue

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to the nations (Kaiser 2000, esp. 36–38; see also Marlowe 1998). God sends (see sidebar 2.3) Abraham to a new land, Moses to lead the people back to the land while exhibiting God's wonders to Egypt, and Jonah to preach repentance to the hated Assyrians in Nineveh. The fact that the Israelites fail to live up to God's expectations should not deter present-day readers from seeing that they had a responsibility to go and be blessing in order to present God to any people who did not know him.

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At the same time, a more solidified and hopeful picture now emerges of one coming who will fulfill God's promise and rescue

Israel, a hope not lost during the centuries of the exile. His coming is the next act in the divine drama unfolded through Scripture.

CONCLUSION

The drama of mission in the Old Testament brings all of the main characters into the play. God, humanity, and a shadowy accuser engage in a conflict of cosmic proportions. The savior, who will crush the head of the accuser, has been promised.

Mission in the Old Testament involves the individual and the community of God's people cooperating with God in his work of reversing what took place as a result of the fall. They do this by participating in God's covenant of peace (*shalom*—wholeness, completeness, soundness [Isa. 54:10]), which is entered by faith in God (Gen. 15:6), including trusting in his power to totally deliver, and by living a life of obedience in the light of his word (Mic. 6:8), no matter what the cost (Gen. 22:1–18). The picture of the drama painted in the Old Testament becomes a backdrop for the continuation as God further unfolds his story for the nations in the New Testament.

The case study that concludes this chapter focuses not on the divine drama, but on the fact that the ability to communicate the biblical message clearly in a new culture depends on how well key terms that express the divine drama are interpreted. Perhaps the most important words to be chosen are those that translate into the new language the various Hebrew and Greek terms for *God* found in the Bible, and the case study illustrates some of the issues involved in the decision-making process.

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CASE STUDY: A WORD FOR GOD

Paul G. Hiebert

(Hiebert and Hiebert 1987, 155-57 [used with permission])

Ivan threw up his hands: "What is more important—" he asked his colleague, "that people think of God as 'ultimate reality,' or that they think of him as a 'person' with whom they can communicate? Each of these, by itself, is a half-truth. Yet somehow it seems to me that we must choose between two words that carry these two meanings when we translate the word God into Telugu. What shall we do?"

After joining the Union Bible Society, Ivan had been asked to assist in a new translation of the Bible into Telugu. After settling down in the city of Hyderabad, he began to work with Yesudas, a high-caste convert who was also assigned to the project. Together the two had worked out many of the difficult problems they faced in translating the Bible into this South Indian language. But the most stubborn one remained unsolved. What word would they use for "God"? The choice they made was critical for the nature of God lies at the very heart of the biblical message. To use the wrong term for "God" would seriously distort the Christian message. But although there are many Telugu terms for "god," none conveyed the biblical meaning.

At first Ivan suggested, "Let's use the term *deva*. That is the word

the people use when they speak of 'god' in general terms."

But Yesudas pointed out, "The *devas* are the highest form of personal beings, but they are not the ultimate reality. Like all things in the universe, they are *maya*, or passing phenomena. In the end, they, too, will be absorbed into the ultimate reality or Brahman. Moreover, they do both good and evil. They fight wars with each other and with the demons, commit adultery, and tell lies.

Finally, in Hinduism 'all life is one.' In other words, gods, humans, animals, and plants all have the same kind of life. Consequently, *devas* are not fundamentally different from humans. They are more powerful and live in the heavens. But they sin, and when they do, they are reborn as humans, or animals, or even ants." Yesudas added, "Hindus claim that *devas* often come to earth as *avatars* to help humans in need, but because there is no difference between them it is like kings helping their commoners or saints helping their disciples. We, therefore, can use neither *deva* nor *avatar*, for both destroy the biblical meaning of the 'incarnation.'"

"If that is the case, why not use the term *parameshwara*?" Ivan suggested. "That means 'highest of the deities.'"

Yesudas replied, "Yes, but this carries the same connotations as *deva*. In fact, all Telugu words for 'god' implicitly carry these Hindu beliefs! We have no word that means a supreme being who is the ultimate reality and the creator of the universe. Moreover, there is no concept of 'creation' as found in the Bible. The world itself is an illusion that does not really exist."

Ivan took another approach to the problem. "Why not use the concept of *brahman* itself? After all, *brahman* is ultimate reality—that which existed before all else and will exist when all else has ceased to be."

Yesudas objected. "*Brahman*," he said, "may be ultimate reality, but it is a force, not a person. True, some philosophers speak of *sarguna brahman*, or *brahman* in a personal form. But even he is only a manifestation of *nirguna brahman*, which is an insular, impersonal force. It makes no sense to say that *nirguna brahman* reveals itself to gods and humans, just as it makes no sense to say that a dreamer speaks as a real person in his dream. Similarly, humans have no way of knowing about or communicating with *nirguna brahman*. Moreover, nothing really exists outside of *brahman*. The heavens and earth are not creations that exist apart from it. They are projections of *brahman* in much the same way that a dream is a projection of the dreamer. So, in fact, we are all simply manifestations of

the same ultimate reality. This destroys the biblical idea of a creator and a real but contingent creation."

"What shall we do then?" asked Ivan. "Perhaps we could use the English word 'God' or the Greek word *Theos* and introduce it into the translation. In time the word would become familiar, and it would not carry within it the implicit Hindu theology found in Telugu words."

"How can we do that?" asked Yesudas. "When we preach in the villages, no one will understand

those foreign words. We words the people understand that what the early did when it took the Gre for 'god' and gave them Christian meanings?"

Ivan countered, "Even if I use *deva* or *brahman* and give them a Christian meaning they will still be given Hindu meanings by the Hindus since the Hindus make up percent of the population. A small Christian can maintain its own definition of these words when the li

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"How can we do that?" asked Yesudas. "When we preach in the villages, no one will understand

those foreign words. We must use words the people understand. Isn't that what the early church did when it took the Greek words for 'god' and gave them new Christian meanings?"

Ivan countered, "Even if we do use *deva* or *brahman* and try to give them a Christian meaning, they will still be given Hindu meanings by the Hindus. And since the Hindus make up ninety percent of the population, how can a small Christian community maintain its own definitions of these words when the linguistic

pressures for accepting the Hindu connotations are so great?" "Well," said Yesudas, "we're back to square one. Should we use *deva*, or *brahman*, or 'God'? We have to use one of these."

The two discussed the matter for a long time, for they knew that their choice would influence both the evangelistic outreach of the church and also the extent to which the church would understand and be faithful to the biblical concept of God in the next fifty or hundred years. Finally they decided to ...