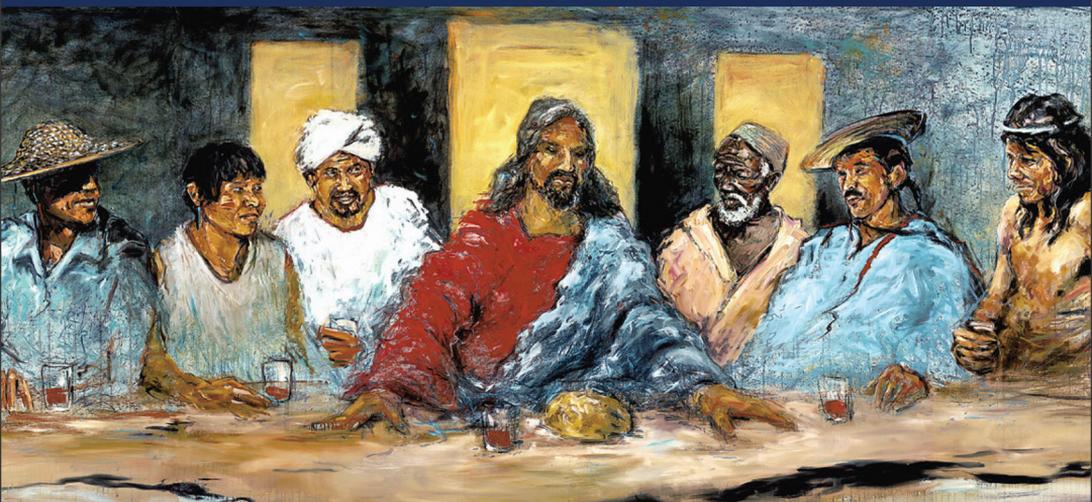


The Great Story and the Great Commission



PARTICIPATING
in the **BIBLICAL DRAMA** of **MISSION**

CHRISTOPHER J. H. WRIGHT

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Hyatt Moore, *The Last Supper with Twelve Tribes*, acrylic and oil on canvas, 20 ft. × 4 ft. 6 in., 2000. *From left to right*: Crow of Montana, Berber of North Africa, Masai of Kenya, China, Ecuador, Afghanistan, Jesus, Ethiopia, Tzeltal of Mexico, Canela of Brazil, Papua New Guinea, Salish of British Columbia, Mongolia.

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Preface

It is never easy to condense something that one has been thinking, reading, writing, and speaking about for many years into the space of three lectures. That, however, was the task I gladly undertook when Rev. Dr. Daniel H. Zacharias invited me to deliver the Hayward Lectures at Acadia Divinity College, Nova Scotia, Canada, in October 2020. I am grateful to Danny and Acadia for that opportunity to share with the physical and online audience some biblical reflections on the nature of mission, under the overall title “The Great Story and the Great Commission: How a Missional Hermeneutic of Scripture Shapes Our Mission of Building the Church, Serving Society, and Stewarding Creation.” I am similarly grateful to Baker Academic for the further opportunity of turning the lectures into this book, with considerable freedom to expand, explain, and annotate what had been so condensed in the lectures themselves, and to James Korsmo and his editorial team for many helpful suggestions and welcome improvements to the original script.

It has long been my conviction, as evidenced by some of the other books I have written on the Bible and mission, that, on the one hand, we need the whole Bible to inform our understanding of the mission of God and the mission of God’s people. On the other hand, when we do use the whole Bible in the form God has given to us, it invites us to participate in the purposes of God across a wide spectrum of human life and experience and with a large horizon of biblical

vision and hope. I hope this book, by sketching merely an outline of that vast breadth and depth, may enrich readers' appreciation of the great narrative drama of the Bible and help both individual believers and churches to integrate every dimension of our missional life and witness around the centrality of the biblical gospel—the good news of the kingdom of God under the lordship of Christ.

For the past two decades, it has been my great joy and privilege to belong, along with my wife, Liz, to All Souls Church, Langham Place, London, UK—ever since John Stott, rector emeritus of the church, invited me in 2001 to take on the leadership of the Langham Partnership, ministries which he had founded some thirty years earlier.¹ Having inherited the strong biblical legacy of John Stott's own ministry and teaching, All Souls maintains a theological and practical commitment to gospel-centered mission that explicitly embraces and integrates the “five marks of mission” that occupy some of the following chapters.

In appreciation of the life and fellowship of All Souls, I warmly dedicate this book to Charlie Skrine, whom we welcomed as our new rector (senior pastor) in April 2021 (which was appropriately the centenary of John Stott's birth). Early in his first year with us, Charlie preached through Paul's Letter to Titus, challenging us to see how the gospel has the power to bring about social change, provided it is taught as “the truth *that leads to godliness*” (Titus 1:1)² and provided that “godliness” takes the form of publicly visible good works done by Christians in all walks of life—as Paul repeatedly urges Titus to teach his people. The missional impact of the truth of the gospel, integrated with and adorned by the witness of the changed lives of those who believe and are saved by it, came across very powerfully in Charlie's preaching—and I am grateful that it has found its way into chapter 6 below.

Easter 2022

1. For more on these ministries, see www.langham.org.

2. Italics in biblical quotations have been added for emphasis, here and throughout the book.

Introduction

Mission is the theme of this book. And the Bible is our textbook, our source and authority.

Yet the word *mission* isn't even in the Bible! Mission is not one of those great biblical words like *faith*, for example, or *salvation* or *righteousness*. So what's the point of trying to find a *biblical* understanding of mission? But then, the word *trinity* isn't in the Bible either. And yet the Bible very clearly reveals to us the God we know as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We are perfectly right to talk about a biblical understanding of the Trinity, even if the word itself wasn't invented by any Bible writer.

Similarly, even if the word *mission* is not in the Bible, the Bible clearly reveals the God who drives the whole story of the universe forward with a sense of divine purpose and ultimate destiny, who also calls into existence a people who share in that divine mission, a people with an identity and role within the plan of God.¹

And that is how I am using the word *mission* in this book—and also why I continue to use the word at all. For the fact is that *mission* has become a controversial word. Of course, there are those

1. See Tim Carriker, "The Bible as Text for Mission," in *Bible in Mission*, ed. Pauline Hoggarth, Fergus Macdonald, Bill Mitchell, and Knud Jørgensen, Regnum Edinburgh Centenary Series 18 (Oxford: Regnum, 2013), 29–39. This symposium has a rich collection of articles and case studies on the relationship between the Bible and mission in multiple parts of the global church.

who detest Christianity entirely because of its “missionary zeal,” including aggressive proselytizing and converting people from other religions. But recently there have been some fully within the fold of evangelical Christian confession, like Michael W. Stroope,² who challenge the continued use of the term. This is on a variety of grounds, not merely that it is not itself a biblical word. The word was not used in the early centuries of the church, even though they were certainly *doing* what we would today call “mission,” in the sense of bearing witness to their faith, in word and deed, and spreading the good news of salvation through faith in Christ farther and farther among new peoples. And we have to admit that the word does have a lot of negative baggage from the dark side of Christian missionary efforts in later centuries,³ while in more recent times the adjective *missional* has come to be applied in so many ways as a kind of buzzword that it can be diluted almost to meaninglessness. With all those deficiencies fully recognized, I am still, however, an unrepentant advocate for the word *mission* (and its derivatives)—provided we do our best to explain clearly what it does and does not mean.

In general usage, the word *mission* can have both a broader and a narrower sense. It can refer to an overarching objective of some project or enterprise. For that reason many organizations have “mission statements,” in which they state what they regard as their reason for existence and singular driving goal. In London I see even restaurant chains posting mission statements, when one might have thought that a restaurant’s mission (its reason for existence) within the grand sweep of human endeavors was rather self-evident. But within that broader sense, there may also be many more specific “missions”—that is, limited goals and actions that contribute in various ways over time to achieving some overall mission.

2. Michael W. Stroope, *Transcending Mission: The Eclipse of a Modern Tradition* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017).

3. However, it is important to recognize that the missionary expansion of the Christian church from the earliest centuries has been a complex mixture, like all things human, of good and evil. A recent and most illuminating account of this ambiguous story is by John Dickson, *Bullies and Saints: An Honest Look at the Good and Evil of Christian History* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2021).

In the Second World War, for example, the Allies had an all-encompassing mission—their war aim—namely, the defeat of Nazi Germany and the liberation of the peoples that had been subjected to Nazi domination. But within that overall Allied mission, many thousands of “missions” were undertaken at multiple levels, by armed forces, secret services, espionage agents, and others, all of them aligned with and justified by the single overall mission: victory. The declared mission of the British government and their allies (to defeat Nazism) required the mobilization and participation of their people in multiple missions of many kinds.

The Bible, in this analogy, is a declaration of the single overall mission of God—to rid his whole creation of evil and create for himself a people redeemed from every tribe and nation of humanity as the population of the new creation. This declared mission of the God who governs the universe calls for the mobilization and participation of his people in multiple cultures and eras of history in manifold missions of all kinds. The mission and missions of God’s people flow from and participate in the mission of God. God’s plan and purpose govern ours. Or at least they should.

The Bible, then, renders to us a purposeful God and a purposeful people. And that, in essence, is what I mean by *mission* in this context. Or to put it more bluntly: In the light of the purposes of the God we meet in Scripture, what is *our* identity and mission? Who are *we* as God’s people, and what are we here for? Those are questions that I hope will be better answered by the end of our journey together in these chapters. So let me outline where we will be going in the following chapters.

We need to begin by considering, in chapter 1, what is meant by “a missional hermeneutic of Scripture.” This proposed way of reading the Bible has generated a lot of scholarly debate in recent years, but I will offer a survey of the main strands of biblical interpretation that go by that name.

In chapter 2 we shall explore one of those strands, the one to which I have personally devoted most attention, and that is the view that the Bible fundamentally renders to us the one overarching story of the plan and purpose of God, or what Paul calls “the whole counsel of God.” I will outline that story as if it were a drama in several

acts, slightly expanding the scheme proposed by Michael Goheen and Craig Bartholomew.⁴

In chapter 3 we shall explore what happens when we read the Bible in that way. And especially we shall ask: If that is God’s “big story,” what part in it is played by our “little stories,” here and now in our own small slice of it? What does it mean to realize that we are “in the Bible,” in the sense that we actually participate in the story it tells and the plan it unfolds, in the era between the resurrection and the return of Christ?

In chapter 4 we shall examine how such a “whole Bible” understanding of the mission of God gives deep scriptural (meaning Old Testament) resonance to the so-called Great Commission and enables us to integrate all dimensions of *our* mission as God’s people around the centrality of the gospel of the kingdom of God and the lordship of Christ. We shall take note of the so-called five marks of mission, simplifying them into the three broad tasks of building the *church*, serving *society*, and stewarding *creation*.

In chapters 5 and 6, we shall expand further on the first and second of those three broad areas of mission: building the church and serving society. Then, in chapters 7 and 8, we shall give careful attention to the third—namely, the godly use of and care for God’s creation, as a *biblical and missional issue*, not merely as an urgent contemporary one in the light of environmental and climate challenges.

Chapter 9 will draw some conclusions as to what this means for the church as a whole and for individual church members.

4. Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014).

1

A Missional Hermeneutic of Scripture

In recent years a growing interest in reading the whole Bible from the perspective of the mission of God and the mission of God’s people has generated an entire field of academic biblical studies called the “missional hermeneutics of Scripture.” There is even a dedicated forum that meets annually around that topic at the esteemed Society of Biblical Literature convention, from which articles and monographs have been emerging with gratifying frequency.¹

Broadly speaking, missional hermeneutics is a phrase that describes a method of reading and interpreting the Bible from three

1. A very helpful and informative survey of the work associated with this group and project is provided in the symposium *Reading the Bible Missionally*, ed. Michael W. Goheen, The Gospel and Our Culture Series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016). In addition to chapters on missional readings of the Old and New Testaments and some selected biblical books and a comprehensive bibliography, this book has a usefully definitive chapter by George Hunsberger, “Mapping the Missional Hermeneutics Conversation” (45–67). Hunsberger identifies four main streams of emphasis among those currently engaged in what is loosely described as missional hermeneutics: “The Missional Direction of the Story,” “The Missional Purpose of the Writings,” “The Missional Locatedness of the Readers,” and “The Missional Engagement with Cultures.” The brief outline offered below owes a lot to Hunsberger’s analysis and the stimulating reflection in the rest of the book.

major perspectives, which are complementary to one another. The Bible can be viewed as the record, the product, and the tool of God's own mission.

The Bible as the *Record* of God's Mission

This approach draws attention to *the missional framework and direction of the whole Bible story*. The way the Bible comes to us as a structured canon includes, of course, hundreds of smaller narratives, along with large quantities of text whose literary genre is not narrative at all (laws, poems, speeches, wise advice, worship songs, and so on). Nevertheless, the shape of that canon, by God's providence, starts "in the beginning" with the creation of heaven and earth in Genesis 1, and it ends with "a new heaven and a new earth" in Revelation 21–22—that is, with the renewed creation in which God will have made "all things new" and "all things in heaven and earth" will be restored and reconciled to God through the cross and resurrection of the Messiah Jesus, the towering central events of the whole story.

That grand narrative structure clearly expresses the mind and purpose of the God we meet in Scripture. Creation sprang initially from God's purposeful actions through his divine word. And the new creation will be the ultimate achievement of God's redeeming intention and action that flows through the story from beginning to end.² And in between, the Bible records a narrative that flows in broad chronological sequences, from the primal history of Genesis 1–11 with its gloomy portrayal of human rebellion and sin and their deathly consequences; through the ancestors of Israel and the fluctuating fortunes of the Israelites in the centuries before Christ; up to the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth and the subsequent few decades of his followers in the first century AD; and then anticipating a future that still lies ahead of us. And this great narrative, we are constantly assured, is proceeding according to the plan and purpose of its principal character, the

2. Indeed, theologically (as distinct from merely chronologically), the new creation has already been "achieved" in the death and resurrection of Christ. The risen Christ is the firstborn, the firstfruits, and we who have died and risen in and with him are already "new creation" (2 Cor. 5:14–17).

Lord God, the Mighty One of Israel, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Bible renders to us the story of God on mission, the mission of blessing all nations on earth and renewing the whole creation. It has become customary to present this vast narrative as consisting of four major structural segments: creation, fall, redemption, and future hope. In that shape it conforms to a very basic level of how human beings live within a “storied universe,” reflected in stories of every kind that move from a good beginning, into a threatening problem or conflict, through a lengthy process to overcome the problem and resolve the conflict, to an ultimately good ending. Such stories are echoes in miniature of the actual story of the universe—the true story that the Bible tells. As Scott Sunquist puts it:

The whole message of the Bible is the story of God’s love for and relationship with his creation. It is important—both for understanding mission theology and for the message of our own missionary work—to know the story of the Scripture and be able to tell it. The Bible is God’s story told through different authors, speaking different languages, in different times, using a variety of literary forms. But it is the single story of God: a public story or “open secret”; that is the story of God for all of his creation.³

More recently, this biblical framework has been portrayed not just as a narrative but as a drama. The Bible, argue Bartholomew and Goheen,⁴ is like a vast theatrical play in six major acts (in their telling), with multiple characters playing their part (including ourselves in our section of the drama) under the overall direction of the Author—the Lord God. With many others, I have found this a helpful analogy, and I develop it somewhat in chapter 2 below.

3. Scott W. Sunquist, *Understanding Christian Mission: Participation in Suffering and Glory* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 181. See also, for thorough and detailed exposition of this way of reading Scripture, Michael W. Goheen, *A Light to the Nations: The Missional Church and the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011).

4. Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014). They intentionally build on a metaphor suggested by N. T. Wright and developed by Richard Middleton and Brian Walsh.

A missional hermeneutic, then, affirms this great, divinely directed story as the interpretive context in which we must read all the Bible's constituent parts. The meaning of the Bible's story is to be found in the plan and purpose of the Bible's God. Or to put it the other way around, understanding "the mind of God" requires understanding the Bible as the record of God's driving objective through the eons of natural history and the millennia of human history. The Bible is God's autobiography, God's story,⁵ the record of God's mission. This was the growing conviction in my own theological journey that led to the writing of *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative*.⁶ It has also shaped the approach I have taken in the commentaries I have written.⁷

Starting in this way, with the primacy of the mission of God, necessarily has its impact on how we envisage the mission of God's people within the Bible's own historical span and in the centuries since the ending of the book of Acts. Our mission flows from God's mission.

At the heart of a missional hermeneutic is the recognition that God includes a *particular people* in his plan to accomplish his cosmic work of restoration. Both the words "particular" and "people" are important. He chooses a *people*. . . . This is what distinguishes a missional hermeneutic: a people chosen by God to play a role in his purpose.

The choice of a certain people assumes a historical *particularity*—a people at a certain time and place. The direction of the biblical story is from the particular to the universal that unfolds both historically and geographically. Historically, the biblical story moves through a

5. This is the explicit rationale behind the ongoing Zondervan commentary series *The Story of God Bible Commentary*, in which I have been privileged to contribute the volume on Exodus (see note 7 below).

6. Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006).

7. Christopher J. H. Wright, *Exodus*, *The Story of God Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2021); Wright, *Deuteronomy*, *New International Biblical Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996; reprinted in the *Understanding the Bible Commentary Series*, [Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2012]); Wright, *The Message of Jeremiah*, *The Bible Speaks Today* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014); Wright, *The Message of Lamentations*, *The Bible Speaks Today* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015); and Wright, *The Message of Ezekiel*, *The Bible Speaks Today* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2001).

particular means to accomplish a universal end, from one nation to all nations. Geographically, the narrative flow is from one place to every place, from a single center to many peripheries, from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth.⁸

The primary focus of most of the biblical story is particular. However, this particularized focus stands between two universal bookends: creation and consummation. The story begins with God's creation of the entire earth and the progenitors of all peoples. The story ends with the new creation and a people from all nations. The church finds its place within this movement of God's redemptive work from the particular to the universal.⁹

What then is the mission of the church? The answers to that question are legion and not without controversy. We will make our own attempt to answer it in the following chapters in a way that is, I hope, consistent with the Bible's own comprehensive scope.

The Bible as the *Product* of God's Mission

This approach draws attention to *the missional origin of the biblical documents*. The processes by which biblical texts came to be written were often profoundly missional in nature. Many of them emerged out of events or struggles or crises or conflicts in which the people of God engaged with the challenging and constantly changing task of articulating and living out their understanding of God's revelation and redemptive action in the world. Sometimes these were struggles internal to the people of God themselves; sometimes they were highly polemical struggles with competing religious claims and worldviews that surrounded them. Biblical texts often have their origin in some issue, need, controversy, or threat, which the people of God needed to address in the context of simply living as the people of God in the

8. Cf. Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Mission: Christian Witness in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 13–16; and Richard Bauckham, "Mission as Hermeneutic for Scriptural Interpretation," in Goheen, *Reading the Bible Missionally*, 28–44.

9. Michael W. Goheen and Christopher J. H. Wright, "Mission and Theological Interpretation," in *A Manifesto for Theological Interpretation*, ed. Craig G. Bartholomew and Heath A. Thomas (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 175–76.

world. Mission, then, is not an additional interpretive reflection that we “apply” after doing our “objective” exegesis, something added as an implication of the text. Mission is in the *origin* of the text, for the text in itself is a product of mission in action, in the sense of active engagement with the issues that emerged in multiple particular contexts of Old Testament Israel or the New Testament church.

This is easily seen in the New Testament. Most of Paul’s letters, for example, were written in the heat of his missionary efforts: wrestling with the scriptural and theological basis of the inclusion of the gentiles, affirming the need for Jew and gentile to accept one another in Christ and in the church as an essential outcome of the gospel itself, tackling the baffling range of new problems that assailed young churches as the gospel took root in the world of Greek polytheism and immorality and Roman imperial claims, confronting incipient heresies with clear affirmations of the supremacy and sufficiency of Jesus Christ, and so on. Similarly, the Gospels were written to explain the significance of the good news about Jesus of Nazareth, especially his death and resurrection. Confidence in these things was essential to the missionary task of the expanding church.

This missional nature of the New Testament documents, as a key to approaching the theology of the New Testament itself, is well stated by I. Howard Marshall. After making the obvious point that all the New Testament documents are concerned with Jesus of Nazareth and the repercussions of his activity, he goes on:

It may, however, be more helpful to recognize them more specifically as the documents of a mission. The subject matter is not, as it were, Jesus in himself or God in himself but Jesus in his role as Savior and Lord. New Testament theology is essentially missionary theology. By this I mean that the documents came into being as the result of a two-part mission, first, the mission of Jesus sent by God to inaugurate his kingdom with the blessings that it brings to people and to call people to respond to it, and then the mission of his followers called to continue his work by proclaiming him as Lord and Savior, and calling people to faith and ongoing commitment to him, as a result of which his church grows. The theology springs out of this movement and is shaped by it, and in turn the theology shapes the continuing mission of the church. The primary function of the documents is thus to testify to

the gospel that is proclaimed by Jesus and his followers. Their teaching can be seen as the fuller exposition of that gospel. They are also concerned with the spiritual growth of those who are converted to the Christian faith. *They show how the church should be shaped for its mission, and they deal with those problems that form obstacles to the advancement of the mission.*¹⁰

Can the same thing be said about the origin of Old Testament texts? Provided we do not limit our understanding of mission to “sending out cross-cultural missionaries,” I believe that it can. Many of these texts emerged out of Israel’s engagement with the surrounding world in the light of the God they knew in their history and in covenantal relationship. People produced texts in relation to what they believed Yahweh, the God of Israel, had done, was doing, or would do in their world. A few examples illustrate the point.

- The Torah presents a theology of creation that stands in sharp contrast to the polytheistic creation myths of Mesopotamia and generates a very different approach to the natural world around us.
- It also records the exodus as an act of redemptive justice carried out by Yahweh, which comprehensively confronted and defeated the power of Pharaoh and all his rival claims to deity and allegiance.
- The historical narratives portray the long, bleak story of Israel’s struggle with the depraved culture and idolatrous Baalism of Canaan, a struggle reflected also in the preexilic prophets. The mission of God through Israel for the world was most threatened when Israel itself succumbed to the idolatry of the nations.
- Exilic and postexilic texts emerge out of the task that the small remnant community of Israel faced as it struggled to define its continuing identity as a community of faith in the midst of successive empires of varying hostility or tolerance.

10. I. Howard Marshall, *New Testament Theology: Many Witnesses, One Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2004), 34–35 (italics added).

- Wisdom texts interact with international wisdom traditions in the surrounding cultures, but they do so with staunch monotheistic disinfectant.
- In worship and prophecy, Israelites reflect on the relationship between their God, Yahweh, and the rest of the nations—sometimes negatively, sometimes positively—and on the nature of their own role as Yahweh’s elect priesthood in their midst.

This awareness of the way so many biblical texts arose in contexts of missional engagement by God’s people with surrounding polytheistic cultures also embraces two of the other aspects of missional hermeneutics identified by Hunsberger—namely, *the missional locatedness of readers* and *missional engagement with cultures*.

When we read these texts as modern readers, we acknowledge that we ourselves have a particular sociocultural location and a specific missional responsibility as we wrestle with whatever challenges culture throws at us. But so did the original hearers and readers of these texts! For example, when reading the book of Jeremiah, we need to think, first of all, of the context of those who first heard *the man* Jeremiah preaching such words to them in Jerusalem in the torrid decades before 587 BC, as well as the response that they should have or could have or did or did not make to them. But we also need to think of the location and context of those who later read *the scroll* of Jeremiah as exiles in Babylon, upon whom God’s judgment had fallen in fulfillment of his word through Jeremiah. How should *they* now respond? Jeremiah’s letter in chapter 29 addresses precisely that question in the missional locatedness of exile and after. So a missional hermeneutic attends both to the locatedness of those in Jerusalem who *heard* the words of Jeremiah the man and to the locatedness of those in Babylon who *read* the words of Jeremiah the book—and necessarily also, of course, to the multiple sociocultural locations of those through the ages, including ourselves, who read and respond to the book in our own contexts.

In other words, the missional origin of biblical texts as, at least in part, the product of a missional engagement with surrounding cultures on behalf of God’s revelatory truth and redemptive intention

means that the whole task of so-called contextualization is not a new phenomenon, encountered by Western missionaries in foreign countries. It is intrinsic to the nature of the texts themselves. When we wrestle with what it means to bring the Word of God into missional engagement with culture, we are doing what the texts originally did and were meant to do.

The Bible as the *Tool* of God's Mission

This approach draws attention to *the missional aim of the biblical documents*, and it is closely related to the last point. Many of the documents in the Bible were *intended* to shape, challenge, or equip God's people for their missional task of living as God's people for the sake of God's mission in the world—a point made by I. Howard Marshall in the quotation above: “They show how the church should be shaped for its mission.”

Again, this is easy to see in the New Testament, as Darrell Guder and Michael Barram have helpfully explored.¹¹ Paul writes his letters to encourage the small communities of believers to understand their identity in Christ and to live in the midst of the surrounding paganism of the Greco-Roman culture in a way that is consistent with the story they now inhabit—namely, the story of the one, true living God and what he has promised and accomplished in the Messiah King Jesus, as well as the glorious destiny to which that story leads. That gospel (that is, the specific claims about God and Christ that were being announced as good news) could only become believable if those who had received and believed it lived it out in transformed lives and deeds. The gospel is, as Paul puts it so succinctly, “the truth that leads to godliness,” capable of transforming notorious dens of iniquity like the Crete of his times (Titus 1:1, 12).

And then the written Gospels are obvious tools of mission, for they provide the church with authentic, eyewitness accounts of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth and call people to

11. Darrell Guder, “Biblical Formation and Discipleship,” in *Treasure in Clay Jars: Patterns in Missional Faithfulness*, ed. Lois Y. Barrett, The Gospel and Our Culture Series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 59–73; and Michael Barram, *Mission and Moral Reflection in Paul*, Studies in Biblical Literature 75 (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2005).

repentance and faith in him and eternal life thereby (explicitly so in John’s case).

In the Old Testament era, Israel was not mandated for “centrifugal” mission—to go to the nations.¹² But they were certainly called to *live* in the midst of the nations as the people of Yahweh God, bearing witness to Yahweh’s reality and sovereignty as the one, true living God of the whole earth, as well as to his character as the God of compassion, justice, love, faithfulness, truth, and so on. And in order to be that “priestly” and “holy” people for God (Exod. 19:4–6), they needed the spoken and written word that would summon them to that task and explain what it necessarily involved. That is one of the functions of Scripture, as I have written elsewhere:

My own work on the purpose of the law in Old Testament Israel includes the observation that it was given in order to “shape” Israel into a community that would reflect the character of Yahweh, enabling them to be the public, visible exemplar of God’s intention for a redeemed community of people.¹³ So the legal texts can be interpreted with this sense of their “mission” within Israel’s society. The mission of Israel was to be a light and blessing to the nations. The “mission” of the law was to shape Israel for that task.

. . . Narratives . . . [also] functioned with powerful ethical impact, shaping the self-perception of Israel and their understanding of the norms and paradigms of what was “done” or “not done” in Israel.¹⁴ The prophets spoke to generations of Israelites that had gotten badly “out of shape” and needed to be called back to radical repentance and conformity with the covenant requirements. The wisdom literature is most explicitly didactic in this direction, while the poetry of worship inculcates the kind of behavior, attitudes, and relationships that fit with the claims and promises of the covenant. . . .

12. On this point I differ somewhat from Walter C. Kaiser Jr., who argues that God did intend that Israel should go tell the nations about its God and the coming Messiah. I am not convinced of that. Nevertheless, there is much excellent content with which I do agree in his book *Mission in the Old Testament: Israel as a Light to the Nations*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012).

13. Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2004), especially chaps. 2 and 9.

14. See, e.g., Waldemar Janzen, *Old Testament Ethics: A Paradigmatic Approach* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994); and Gordon J. Wenham, *Story as Torah: Reading the Old Testament Ethically* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000).

So a missional hermeneutic asks: How did this or that particular text function to equip and shape God’s people for their missional witness, and how does it continue to shape us today? The answer may include negative as well as positive dimensions, but the point is to see how Scripture, including Old Testament Scripture, functioned to enable the people of God to live out that identity and role in the midst of the world of surrounding nations.¹⁵

In short, then, a missional hermeneutic operates on the conviction 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 God’s purpose for the whole of God’s creation.

The significance of such a comprehensive missional hermeneutic, in relation to the theme of this book, is that it compels us to engage with the *whole* Bible from this perspective—to see the whole Bible as relevant to mission (God’s mission and ours), rather than basing our mission theology and practice solely upon a few “missionary texts” here and there. We can and should ask of *any* part of the Bible how and where it fits into God’s great missional agenda, as well as how and where it impacts us as God’s people, in whatever context in which we are called to engage in mission for God’s sake and the gospel’s.

15. Christopher J. H. Wright, “Mission and Old Testament Interpretation,” in *Hearing the Old Testament: Listening for God’s Address*, ed. Craig G. Bartholomew and David J. H. Beldman (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 185–86.