

CHAPTER III

THE OLD TESTAMENT FOUNDATION

In commencing our study of the biblical foundations of mission we find ourselves facing enormous new challenges. No longer can we afford to repeat handed down systematisations of theologies. We must come to the Bible with our new situation. Seeking a new theology should be no problem, for, if we truly believe the Bible has eternal relevance, it should speak afresh to our situation today. This is our task as we write a theology of mission.

To set our parameters for this study, we are dealing with a theology of mission. Hence from the start we are restricted to those theological considerations that have missiological implications. The task could be as challenging and fresh as we make it to be. Newer insights into biblical themes may emerge as we approach mission from the biblical perspective.

An explanation may be necessary. Seeking to write a new theology of mission does not imply a liberal attitude to the Bible. The Bible is the authoritative revelation of God. But we are concerned with interpretation of this word. It is a matter of hermeneutics. The passage that was relevant in one particular context has to be transposed into our present context, and we attempt to merge the two horizons in order to formulate a theology that will be biblical as well as contextual.

Moreover, we are attempting to lay a biblical foundation for missiology. This further restricts us to biblical insights, believing that the Bible has an authoritative character which presents to us a context in which the Word of God has been revealed and manifested at a particular time. But then it is our task to interpret that context into our context

today. The understanding that results from such an interaction—between the original context as recorded in the Bible and the present context we find ourselves in today—will provide a theology of mission that will be biblical as well as contextual. This is to theologise with missiological intentions.

Recent hermeneutical studies have attempted interpretations based on the mediation between the “then” and the “now”, as for instance the significant work of the German philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer. In his concept of the “two horizons,”¹ he first clearly distinguishes the two horizons—the past and the present. The past is a fixed horizon, whereas our present horizon, which is the interpreter’s position, is capable of movement. As the interpreter tries to relate the strange horizon of the past to the present a new horizon is formed. The new horizon has merged the two horizons into one single horizon.

This underlines the fact that there needs to be a more positive attitude to the past and hermeneutical study should in this sense enter into the past event, seeking to relate it to the present context. The past becomes part of the present. Gadamer emphasizes the need for a ‘prejudice’ or a ‘presupposition’ with which we enter into this process, and for our study this is the process of theologising for mission. Critical of the “prejudice against prejudice” that prevailed during the Enlightenment, Gadamer seeks to restore a positive attitude, showing that there can be no “presuppositionless” interpretation.

Following Gadamer, yet allowing for our own correctives, we approach our task of interpreting the biblical events in a far more positive manner. Rather than merely defending our spiritualised interpretations, we see mission to be the activity of a living God working in actual history. Hence, our theology of mission is no vague theologising. It is the actual historicity of the past event along with the authority of revelation that gives us the basis of our theological consideration for mission today.

In recent theologies of mission it has been heartening to note the emphasis going right back to the Old Testament. This is a valuable corrective to the narrow approaches that were restricted to the New Testament with just a few references to well worn passages in the Old Testament.

No theology of mission is complete without substantial reference to God’s eternal purposes as revealed right from the start. Jesus Christ did not come to abolish the Old Covenant but to culminate all the expectations of the people of God as recorded from Genesis to Malachi. Hence theologies of mission that only start with the New Testament lack the firm and full foundation of God’s mission as it has been gradually revealed right from creation.

However, there have been overemphases on the Old Testament to justify one sided theologies of mission. Rather than negatively criticising such treatments, we see the need to positively draw out a full and consistent foundation on which we can build a biblical theology of mission for today. We must build a holistic theological foundation which will compel us to span the breadth of the biblical narrative in order to appreciate the depth of God’s mission.

The presupposition on which we build our theology of mission asserts that God has a plan for his world with ultimate dimensions that relate to his kingdom. Although we have a limited view of this plan at present, the Bible heavily underlines the fact that God is working out his ultimate purposes, despite the contrary forces that are simultaneously at work.

Relating this to our earlier study, we are really confronted with three horizons. There is the horizon of the past, the revelation of God as recorded in the Bible, and this forms our foundational horizon. We are to faithfully extract from this horizon all that is relevant for our understanding today. But then, there is also the horizon of the future, the culmination of the history of God’s dealings with the world, the ultimate consummation of his kingdom. And in our

study of mission we must constantly keep before us this ultimate perspective, the horizon of the future.

It is the merging of these two horizons, that of the past and the future, with our own horizon of the present that will provide for us an understanding of God's mission for the world today. In the constant interaction between these horizons, we will find our present horizon continuously expanding. This is true with all forms of understanding. Understanding something within its context, for example in cultures, is a dynamic rather than static experience. Surprisingly we restricted God's word to fixed interpretations. There is a dynamism in the message of the Bible that works itself out in ever newer forms according to the situations confronted.

Creation

When we study God's mission right from creation, we are setting mission right from the very start of God's dealings with the world and humanity. A truly wholistic perspective, a total horizon of God's revelation must have some beginning. We have tended to start our theologies only with reference to the fall. We therefore consider some facts from creation that will be relevant to God's mission.

The biblical teaching of creation stands out in contrast to all primitive depictions of creation. It emphasises the *person* who is creating with a particular purpose to be fulfilled. Creation is primarily the personal will of God. God intends for us to live in an environment that he is responsible for creating, rather than an environment that is alien to his purposes. The negative attitude to the material world stemming from both Greek and Hindu backgrounds needs to be rejected. God himself qualifies his creation as "good." This is not merely reference to something right and proper, but to that which is meaningful, beautiful and purposeful. God wants the very best for man and woman, and so he prepares the best possible environment for them.

God's Total Mission

First, creation, even in its organic and material sense, is the vehicle through which God chooses to reveal his glory. This will help counteract tendencies to dissolve historicity within the cosmic concerns of religion. Salvation is considered to be escaping from the created material order rather than something experienced within it. Creation is only a hindrance to authentic spiritual reality. The Bible defines reality as an experience within creation and history. That is why God reveals himself through creation, which demonstrates God's intricate design for his ultimate glory.

In stressing God's revelation through his creation we do not take away the centrality of man and woman in God's creation. The Bible is clear in its stress on God's redemptive purposes for humankind. Humanity's fallenness is God's primary concern. The one-sided emphasis on reconciliation within humanity without an adequate stress on God's reconciliation towards us needs to be corrected. God mission is to first reconcile people to himself; all other aspects of reconciliation revolve around this fact.

A positive attitude to creation, serves to demonstrate that mission is an activity of God in a real world and not something in opposition to the material. To depict human beings as struggling to escape an evil creation is not only to disregard a good and purposeful creation but also an insult to God who is responsible for this creation. In fact, mission is God himself entering into our world seeking to restore all creation, humanity as well as its environment, to the glory that God initially intended.

However, even though the creation of Adam and Eve was the climax, they are only a part of God's total creation. And to underline this fact God reminded them—"dust you are and to dust you will return" (Ge. 3:19). The reference here is not merely to our temporality but an underlining of our link with the rest of creation. We are not independent of other created things. We are interdependent. Nothing that God makes is in isolation from the rest of his creation.

God's mission in its totality, is a concern for humankind as well as the rest of God's creation.

In a day when ecological concerns are strongly brought before us, a fresh look at the Bible will help to restore a positive attitude towards creation. We do not become subservient worshippers of creation as in some religious practices. A healthy respect for God's world will help us demonstrate a greater concern for the environment, knowing that God himself continues to care for it. We have placed too much emphasis on the fact that creation was made for us, and as a result we have exploited the world's resources. The Western Christian doctrine of creation is criticised for being the root of the ecological crisis.

We are beginning to underline the important fact that God's mission for humankind is not independent of God's mission for creation. A truly biblical belief in creation must be translated into a concern for God's total created order. The interdependence of humanity and its environment is only now being recognised, as the ecological devastation awakens us to deeper dimensions of stewardship.

We begin to see the restrictions we have imposed on ourselves by studying mission from a very restricted perspective. God's mission is not for men and women alone. Sin has affected the whole of creation, and hence all of creation must be the object of God's redemption. We are familiar with the concern for the "salvation of the souls of men." To be fair, one did not really mean that it was only the soul that was important. But, influenced heavily by the Platonic concept of the immortality of souls, it seemed natural for an emphasis to be placed on the soul. The Hindu devaluation of the material is similar. But because of such influences, our mission has avoided any material dimensions. The fullness of God's dealings is set within the fullness of his creation, and his ultimate plans envelop all of his handiwork.

When we get right back to creation, we are setting mission within its complete scope. We see that our history

commences with God's interest in people and not just as Hebrews. God is not restricted to one particular race. He chose a particular people in order to demonstrate his universal purposes for all of his creation. This is the universality of God's mission which we have conveniently ignored. The inhuman separation of people from people on grounds of caste, colour and even religion needs to be corrected in the light of a creator God who is Lord over all and whose mission extends to all, regardless of their background.

Setting our study from creation helps us deal with another vital aspect—the never ending debate on the relationship between *evangelism* and *social action*. Evangelicals have been on the defensive, arguing for the priority of evangelism while liberals have stressed social action. The solution will come when we approach the parts from the perspective of the whole, rather than the other way around. When we start with creation we are starting from God's concern for the whole. Seen from this fullest perspective, God's ultimate design for his total creation, we will not be able to restrict God's mission to one particular aspect.

There must be a total involvement in God's total plans. Standing in our relationship to Jesus Christ evangelism will undoubtedly have primacy. But this does not limit us. A theology set within creation will bring us face to face with all the horizons for a total involvement in all God's mission. Although God desires the salvation of humankind, the wider concerns for everything else in creation have not been abandoned.

Historicity and Culture

A deeper understanding of creation, while enabling us to affirm our historic grounding, helps correct negative views of history. Such views, which have led to correspondingly false views of spirituality, have robbed God's mission of its full impact within a concrete historic context. Any negative attitudes are not biblical and more

akin to the Hindu view of detachment from the world. The ultimate reality is something totally divorced from anything on earth. That is why, for instance the *Sanyasin*, considered to be the ideal human being

spends his days in contemplation, pondering over the mysteries of life . . . the free man of the spirit, who has broken through the narrow circles of clan and country. He has nothing to accomplish in this world or the next . . . and so the entire choir of heaven and furniture of the earth seem naught before his divine vision.²

The stress-filled world we live in has led to the popularity of the practice of *Yoga* and “transcendental” meditation, as they have provided a means of detachment from the world. The material world is said to be responsible for our problems and true and pure consciousness is only spiritual. Asia needs to be confronted with the biblical God of the material universe and a spirituality that recognises God within this world.

Closely linked with God’s concern for a material world is the issue of culture. The God of creation and history must ultimately be the God of culture of humankind. Very briefly, the complexity of culture is the sum total of visible and invisible characteristics that distinguishes men and women from beasts, and groups of people from one another. Men and women made in God’s image with the potential of creativity, and the freedom to express this creativity, will naturally tend to express themselves in concrete actions as well as abstract attitudes. God having created men and women as autonomous beings assumes the final responsibility for culture, although this does not imply that he fully endorses it as pure and holy.

Some Christians have equated spirituality to a distancing from local cultures. Art, dance, music etc. are all seen to be “worldly”. Such cultural expressions are a rich tribute to God’s creativity and very relevant within a particular milieu of actions, words, attitudes, customs, habits etc. There is undoubtedly sin and the fall which have marred even culture, leaving it prone to sinful manifestations. And

this cannot be overlooked, however good culture is made out to be.

Culture is the expression of the image of God in humankind seeking to be actualised in concrete and visible expressions that will materially identify and hold people together in God’s created world. God’s involvement in creation itself is the inauguration of culture. God wanted form and order, goodness and beauty, ultimately desiring that men and women reside in and create an attractive environment. A positive acceptance of culture is urgently required to correct wrong attitudes that have been a barrier to a truly incarnational mission.

There is the naive notion of a universal Christian culture which stands in opposition to local non-Christian cultures. Western missionaries have handed down such attitudes. Local culture was despised and Western culture was introduced. The ensuing problems were detrimental to the whole cause of mission. Even today, the church in its Western orientation has in many places hindered the witness of local Christians.

However, we also need to accept God’s judgment on culture. God’s responsibility for creation does not cease with creating men and women. It continues even after the fall; fallen humanity with a fallen culture will also be the concern of God. Further, with the fall came Satanic influences on culture, directly and indirectly. If we accept the reality of Satan and sin we must also accept that no culture is perfect and completely good. The cultures of this world are also part of God’s total redemptive concern as they are being shaped and moulded in accordance with the ultimate kingdom culture. The future horizon will include all of these redeemed cultures standing together within the harmony of God’s kingdom culture.

Humanity and its Environment

Added to God’s widest concern for humanity, we recognise God’s concern for our world. We restrict God’s purposes if we restrict God’s concern merely to humankind.

Having underlined the essential goodness of creation we must accept that God has purposefully created the appropriate environment for his people. We urgently need to capture a proper perspective of mankind within this God created environment to develop a positive attitude towards our environment.

Western Christians have been scathingly attacked for an “arrogance” towards creation, selfishly exploiting the material world.³ The ecological crisis, viewed as a theological problem will help us to look carefully at the biblical attitude towards creation. The Bible does not sanction exploitation. Our stewardship has been misinterpreted and has resulted in mismanagement. A healthy respect for creation will serve as a corrective to the desecration of nature. On the other hand, one must guard against the kind of respect that leads to a total worship of nature as is being advocated. A healthy respect for creation must point to the creator God responsible for the beauty and wonder of creation, who desiring the best for people planned a meaningful existence within a purposeful world, created for God’s glory.

The broadening out of the scope of mission is linked directly to our particular understanding of mission. Committed to the fact that God is ultimately Lord of all that he has created, we seek the broadest expression for this belief. But some restrict God’s mission to God’s interest in human salvation. In our attempts to define mission we have set before us God’s ultimate concern to establish his Kingdom. This view demands a total perspective of God’s creation—men and women within a God-made environment. And if God has created both humanity and the environment, this concern extends to both. Perhaps in this sense we are really talking about much more than God’s mission. It is God’s concern for all of his creation—a Kingdom concern.

Building God’s mission on creation establishes our mission on a foundation that not only links it with history and culture, but also sets people within the widest perspective of God’s creation. In the light of the widest concerns of God Himself, one will need to ascribe to God’s

mission the widest possible influence. It may help to note a scaling down of operations — from God’s perspective to the Church’s perspective, and then from the church to the individual’s perspective. At its highest, that is from God’s perspective, mission cannot be anything less than the totality of God’s concern.

Jesus Christ and Creation

Paul speaks of “creation being subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay” (Ro. 8. 20f). Christian mission, if it must develop in greater sensitivity to God’s total concern, must develop a truly ecological concern. The correlation of humankind and its environment will highlight the intensity of Paul’s imagery of even creation waiting in “eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed.” (Ro. 8.19) Rather than merely the redemption of men and women it is this interdependence that must be stressed. When this is done, we restore a more positive attitude to our God given environment and discover what redemption means within the context of this environment.

Creation is so important to God that alongside Jesus Christ’s authority over the church, his authority over creation is now re-emphasised. “For by him all things were created, things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible . . . all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things and in him all things hold together”. (Col. 1:16, 17). The New Testament underlines the centrality of Christ in God’s creation. Hence, to speak of Jesus’ mission to humanity without reference to Jesus’ concern for the whole of creation is a denial of the total scope God’s mission through his Son.

The Church must be concerned for exploring the totality of the Lordship of Christ within the widest framework for his redemptive mission. The Psalmist has this complete view of God’s redemptive purposes when he calls on us to “Sing to the Lord a new song” (Ps. 96). It is a song

that proclaims the purpose of creation, his salvation to all nations (vv. 2 & 3), reminding us that the “Lord reigns” (v. 10) and that the world is firmly established. All his creation is to rejoice (v. 11) for the Lord is to fulfil his purposes as “He comes to judge the earth” (v. 13) in righteousness and truth. This universal implication of mission does not infer universalism but rather emphasises the universal availability of salvation through Jesus Christ.

Interdependence and Autonomy

When we commence our study of the election and covenant of God we begin to see humankind and creation in interdependence. It is not enough to say that creation is for God’s glory. A thorough reading of the Old Testament would reveal an interrelation:

He has created it for the covenant, that is to say because of his plan of love and salvation for humanity by means of Israel. In creating the world God already had the covenant in view, and it is this motive which gave to the idea of creation its specific orientation.⁴

Dualistic conceptions that separate God from people and creation are challenged. There is an integral link that gives meaning and purpose. Yet creation and humankind enjoy autonomy. “This autonomy . . . makes possible a covenant”⁵. A covenant can only be made between two autonomous parties. This is indeed the highlight of the biblical account of God and creation. Creation and humanity are not pawns in God’s hands.

The mission of God can only be understood when this autonomy is accepted. God does not undermine his sovereignty in making a covenant with humankind. He has created with the ultimate horizon in view and all his dealings with man and woman will continue to lead towards this ultimate plan. However, being autonomous, it is to be expected that people do not automatically respond to God.

The fact of election and covenant infers an interdependence, and Jesus Christ highlights this

interdependence even more. The three horizons we referred to—the past, the present and the future are tightly held together in Jesus Christ, making him central to any understanding of mission. Further, in Jesus’ relationship to creation, God’s new creation assumes increased significance. Mission today must constantly bring to the world a glimpse of God’s ultimate plans. This ultimate horizon, while allowing human beings their God-given autonomy compels them to consider the overall plan of God who through Jesus Christ is “reconciling all things to himself.” (Col. 1:22)

Election

The negative view of the Church’s role in mission has been based on the fact that the Church as an institution has failed to carry out its responsibility. This, we have already mentioned, has resulted in mission portrayed in a God-World-Church perspective, arguing that the Church cannot any longer claim to be the channel of God’s mission to the world. Despite failure, one cannot dismiss its role without a fresh look at the Church as depicted in the Bible. The theme of election and God’s people in the Old Testament will bring a valuable corrective.

The universality of God’s concern is clearly established as we dealt with creation. However, moving further we come to the central event of the history of the people of God—their Election. God chooses a particular people in a particular context to be the vehicle through whom his purposes are to be accomplished. It is this particularity that is the key to understanding not only mission but the role of the people of God in this mission. If God’s universality is dealt with apart from his particularity we eliminate uniqueness from God’s mission. With the shift of the focus away from the Church and its role in God’s mission, and with the danger of identifying universality with universalism we need correction. This corrective is made possible when we hold together God’s universal concern alongside his particular plans for the people he has chosen.

Israel, the Vehicle of God's Blessings

The first sign of God wanting to work through a particular group is revealed in His choice of Abraham. Abraham, through whom his universal mission is to be accomplished, receives a glimpse of God's ultimate purposes. God declares that he is going to bless many through his descendants. God who is universal in his Lordship chooses a particular person to accomplish his universal purpose. But from that point God is making clear that his particularity is not to be confused with exclusivism. God's mission has always been accomplished through individuals and right through the history of his dealings with humankind this has been evident. He has always chosen one person so others through this one can receive God's blessings. This is no exclusive right to the riches of God, but the privilege of being the vehicle for blessings to be made available for many.

Israel's deepest struggle was to accept that God had intended it to be only a vehicle and not the sole possessor of his salvation. Jonah struggled later with the fact that God's particularity did not infer any exclusive claim. With our superficial attitude to the book of Jonah we have failed to see that the prophet is really a picture of Israel in her refusal to accept that God's purposes were ultimately even for the so-called heathen nations. Jonah had no problem accepting that judgment could be pronounced on Nineveh, but the offer of grace was another matter. Here is a graphic picture of Jewish exclusivism which hindered God's mission.

Israel must be reminded over and over again that God has chosen Israel only as the channel for his blessings for the world. God will reveal wider purposes eventually, but he must start from a particular point. Lesslie Newbigin states,

From the beginning of the Bible to its end we are presented with the story of a universal purpose carried out through a continuous series of particular choices. God, according to the Biblical picture, although he is creator, ruler, sustainer

and judge of all people, does not accomplish his purpose of blessing for all peoples by means of a revelation simultaneously and equally available to all. He chooses one to be the bearer of his blessing for the many.⁶

Placing the doctrine of election alongside the Hindu teaching of individuality helps to underline an important aspect of the biblical message. The Hindu teaching of individuality is that "the ultimate reality is identical with the true self . . . which is the eternal subject, pure consciousness, pure spirit"⁷, Newbigin points out the danger of seeing man as not requiring either other persons or a created world to achieve his true destiny. The Bible in contrast points to the human existing only in relationship with other persons and as part of the created world. "Interpersonal relatedness belongs to the very being of God."⁸

Newbigin goes on to affirm that there can be no salvation except in relatedness. This kind of stress counters both Western existentialism of the individual and the independent spirituality of the East. Neither can there be justification for exclusivism. God elects Israel so that through its privileged position all others can enter into an interrelatedness. An individual is chosen for a collective responsibility. The essential fact of election is that salvation purposed through the initiative of God in one people, is to be passed on to all other peoples. On the one hand it needs to be made available to all, yet, on the other hand, none can claim to receive salvation directly. It is important to see election in the context of human interrelatedness. On these grounds, any claims to the outworking of the Holy Spirit bringing salvation anonymously, or apart from the community of God is questionable.

Israel, a People on Mission

Returning to the basic concept of election we recognise that God was not compelled to choose any particular people. From a human point of view neither Abraham nor Israel could be fully commended as ideal choices. But God chose in his sovereignty.

Abraham is to “leave” and “go” (Ge. 12:1). With his ultimate purposes in mind God calls for the formation of a particular people, not restricting himself to this group but clearly declaring that all the peoples on earth will be blessed *through* him. This people was only to be a vehicle. From then on Israel will constantly be reminded that this privilege brings with it a greater responsibility, a responsibility for the salvation of nations (Ge. 26:4, 28:4, Isa. 42:6,7, 49:3,6). God uses this particularity so that his universality may be eventually unfolded.

Israel is a people on a mission, a “light to the nations”, a particular people with a universal purpose. God says of his servant, “I will put my spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations” (Isa. 42:1). This servant will act in “faithfulness” (v.3) and through his obedience “offspring” and “descendants” will also enjoy this blessing (44:3). Despite the unfaithfulness and the stubbornness of Israel, the Servant is chosen and through him the splendour of God’s salvation will be displayed (49:3). The “sharpened sword” and the “polished arrow” will bring the salvation of the Lord to the ends of the earth (49:6). Such is the extent of God’s universality.

All that the servant signifies is what God wanted Israel to be. But because Israel failed, his servant is chosen—the rejected, yet the one accepted by God, the suffering, yet the one who will be glorified, the lonely, yet the one through whom God’s salvation will be made available to many. Israel should have been the people faithfully fulfilling God’s mission to the world. They failed, but God chose his servant to fulfil this task. God’s purposes for humankind will ultimately be fulfilled despite the disobedience and the unworthiness of people, since the fulfilment of his mission is ultimately his responsibility.

Israel failed to recognise God’s wider purposes. They had even failed to recognise the significance of God’s love for them. They knew that the term used for election, *bachar*, implied an unmotivated choice among several possibilities with no restrictions. As creator God, the

whole world was at the disposal of Sovereign Lord but he chose to concentrate his love on a people through whom the world would receive the redemptive benefits of God’s mission to humanity.

The variety of images used to depict election bring out this richness of God’s redemptive purposes. The marriage union, for instance used by Hosea, Jeremiah (2:1-7, 3:11-22), Ezekiel (16 and 23), Isaiah (54:5-10, 62:4,5) emphasises that Israel has become a possession of God. There are ultimate purposes in mind. God prefers Israel not only for his pleasure but for final plans to be fulfilled. Sons and daughters are now going to follow to ensure the fruitfulness that is intended in marriage.

God’s mission is not stagnant and static but fruitful and dynamic. This fruitfulness is depicted even more clearly in Hosea (2:17) and Isaiah (5) in the use of the theme of the “vineyard”. As the owner of the vineyard has every right to expect his vine to bear fruit, so also God expects his people to be fruitful. Consequently, Israel, God’s possession, was often rebuked for failing to be faithful to God who had called them for a mission.

In relating his mission to Israel, Jesus Christ makes use of the symbol of the vine that is familiar to the Old Testament. He claims “I am the true vine.” (Jn. 15:1-10). The significance to God’s mission is clear. The failure of Israel to fulfil its God given mission compels God to act decisively. Jesus Christ now embodies that mission and through him his disciples, the Church, will carry out God’s ultimate purposes for his world. The Church stands today in Israel’s place in relationship to God’s mission. The Bible does not in any way indicate that this mission will be taken away from the Church because of its failure. The final phase of God’s plans is being accomplished by Jesus Christ, the true vine, through the Church which he has commissioned. Accepting this corrective, we must check the tendency to shift the channel of mission from the Church to the world. The concept of Israel’s election is a forceful factor in the argument.

This idea of God choosing a people becomes even more meaningful when we consider the term, *the servant—ebed*—particularly with reference to the passages in Isaiah (41:8,9, 42:19, 43:10, 44:1,2, 45:4). The term servant is also used frequently with reference to Moses and David, depicting God’s choice of certain people to carry out his tasks. A servant carries out the mission of his master. The missionary purposes of God are richly brought out in the Servant Songs in Isaiah, which when seen in relation to God’s mission becomes a significant area of study of God’s wider purposes. Interpreting the servant in the light of Jesus Christ offers yet another argument for the role of the followers of Jesus Christ as the ones through whom God will communicate his message to the world.

An Expression of God’s Love

Election is the fundamental event, but it has to be considered within the framework of God’s covenant with Israel. The conditions of this bond are made clear by means of the covenant. However, both election and the covenant cannot be interpreted apart from their roots in God’s love. Jeremiah stresses, “I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with an everlasting love” (31:3). Israel’s religion was fundamentally an expression of the fact that God had chosen her to be his own, to be fully committed to unfolding his purposes to the world around them. God chose Abraham, bringing him out from Ur into the promised land of Canaan. His promises concerned everlasting purposes, much beyond the narrow confines of a single clan. His role was to be a blessing to the whole earth.

Election, although not explicitly stated, is the underlying theme of the whole Old Testament. Yahweh is universal in his sovereignty and activity, yet particular in his choice of a people, primarily to fulfil his plan. Israel cannot take this for granted, as God will constantly remind her that she does not deserve this favour. Dt. 7:6ff; 9:4-6 reminds us that she was neither attractive, nor numerous nor righteous but weak, small, insignificant and unattractive. It is

wholly God’s love and will not forever be limited to Israel. Her limited privilege was to bring unlimited blessings to all nations. When Israel fails, God in his sovereignty, will even call upon a Cyrus to fulfil these purposes. And Cyrus too is called “his servant”. This privilege will eventually be given over to the people of God in the widest sense, the Church.

Election and its significant bearing on the people of God today is the key to establishing the centrality of the Church. The church is the people of God. God is not raising up a new people in a vacuum today without any regard for his actions in a real historical past. None can claim salvation outside of these revealed purposes of God through this people. Mission can only be justified on the God-Church-World sequence, underlining that the church continues to be the chosen vehicle for the accomplishing of God’s mission for the world today.

Covenant

In our holding together the horizons of the past and the present we see a more coherent unity of God’s mission for his people. The single theme from the Old Testament that provides that continuing, all inclusive horizon for God’s dealings with people is the covenant. All through the Old Testament there is the revelation of a covenant-making God. It is implied even in God’s promise to Adam in Ge. 3:15 from where commentators draw out reference to the redemption to be made available in Jesus Christ. Fallen as they are, and needing God’s grace, man and woman can anticipate the unfolding of God’s purposes, as implied in this promise of triumph over Satan and sin. This act which would one day be revealed in Jesus Christ, would have universal application to all of the offspring of Adam and Eve.

Universality and Timelessness

Explicit reference to the concept of the covenant first appears in God’s dealings with Noah. In Ge. 6:18 God says “I will establish my covenant with you,” the first of the

biblical covenants where the note of promise is prominent. Here is an aspect of God's mission we often neglect. Our mission today is not something that is newly made available without any reference to our history in the past. God in his intimate concern for us wants to fulfil purposes on the basis of an agreement he has already made.

A closer examination of the covenant with Noah reveals two other aspects relevant to mission: universality and timelessness. These are to be emphasised later in God's covenant with Abraham and David. Ge. 9:16 explicitly refers to the everlasting covenant between God and all flesh that is upon the earth.

Further, if we look closely at Ge. 9:11,12 as well as verse 16 we note the universal implications of this covenant. It is a covenant between God and 'the earth' (v. 13). The emphatic reference here to all creation in terms of God's redemptive purposes involving all of the created order is not merely a passing reference. We have often restricted ourselves to an individualised idea of salvation, but this is not wrong provided it is sustained in the context of God's covenantal concern for all of creation.

What we are attempting to explore in our biblical considerations is the extent of God's mission, and the more we study these passages the more we discover how restricted we have been. God's concern is as big as his kingdom.

Unfortunately, we have sacrificed the Hebrew understanding of "wholeness" in favour of a Greek or Hindu dualism. The dualism of the spiritual and the material, the body and the soul and other related issues has stifled our thinking and hence even mission today. There is no doubt that there is a distinction between the material and the spiritual, but to bring a division is to dichotomise what God has intended to be a *whole*. Even if we have accepted that humanity is a whole, we have tended to restrict God's interest to people alone. If God is truly Lord of all of the created order, his concern must extend to all creation as well. Creation has to be considered more positively, in its

interrelatedness to the covenant, and only then will we be able to develop a total understanding of God's mission.

When we come to Abraham, we clearly see the wide significance and the long range plans of God's mission. The covenant God made with Abraham in Ge. 15 and 17, does not stand in isolation from the rest of his dealings with humankind. Abraham is just as much a sinner as Adam, but is chosen so that God may demonstrate his purposes for the whole world. Abraham is to be God's vehicle through whom nations are going to be blessed. The ultimate concern of God is the redemption of a people he will form for himself, and it is through this people that he will accomplish his plans for all of his world. Abraham, in this sense, is to become the father of nations.

In the Davidic covenant, as we note from Psalm 2, God promises to David, "I will make the nations your inheritance", and the ends of the earth your possession (v. 8) Aspects from both the covenant to Adam as well as the covenant with Abraham are present here. Israel did enjoy some immediate fulfillment of these promises. However, when we consider the Messianic promise in Psalm 110, "You are a priest forever," we are able to see that any temporariness is given an eternal significance. God's mission to the world is timeless, and hence John can refer to Jesus Christ as the "Lamb slain before the foundation of the world." In this sense it is presumptuous to claim to explore the depths of God's mission! However, in relation to our horizon interacting with the biblical horizon all we can do is to accept that our horizons continually expand.

Salvation Universally Available

Concerned for the salvation of the world, God singled out a man through whom nations are going to be blessed. Paul pleads with the Jews to understand that God's blessings did not apply only to the direct descendants in the flesh, but that Gentiles would be included into the "family" of Abraham. Abraham was called not only to become a "great nation" but also to be a blessing to "all the

families of the earth". Abraham's fatherhood, synonymous with God's promises, extends to all who believe, even Gentile nations. By fulfilling these promises in Christ, God was to form one universal family. The heart of the promise to Abraham is the availability of salvation *for all*, and through his obedience this exciting prospect of God's mission is now made possible.

This thrilling fact causes the Psalmist to call people to sing to the Lord. "Declare his glory among the nations, his marvellous deeds among all people". (Ps. 96:3) Even families of nations are called to ascribe to the Lord glory due to his name.⁸ This same emphasis is also found in the prophets, particularly in Isaiah 40-55. If Israel had faithfully accepted the mission entrusted to it by God, it could have powerfully fulfilled divine purposes. However, in his sovereign plan God had foreordained fulfilment in Jesus Christ. Paul, excited about the Gospel, yet frustrated over Israel's failure, reasons—" . . . because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious. (Ro. 11:11). This envy he hopes will bring about their salvation.

The Covenant Fulfilment in Jesus Christ

The continuity of the Davidic covenant and its fulfilment in Jesus Christ gives to God's mission a total perspective. In the throne that will be established forever, God is looking ahead to the reign of Christ and the culmination of all the covenantal promises in him. These promises had already been partially fulfilled in the growth of Israel and the inheritance of Palestine, but its fullest significance is yet to come. David takes the older promise to Abraham even further—from the immediate fulfilment into a dimension that will extend to eternity. Older covenants are renewed and extended further to reveal God's final purposes for his people. In this sense, as we stand in the fulfilment of God's covenant in Jesus Christ, we stand in its fullest scope of God's mission.

The implication of this covenant, particularly the Messianic Psalms (2 and 110), are explicitly and implicitly

woven into the New Testament passages pointing to fulfilment in Jesus Christ. The Davidic covenant's significance for God's missionary purposes as unfolded in the Old Testament is further stressed in Is. 55:3ff "I will make an everlasting covenant with you, my faithful love promised to David." God in his faithfulness is going to fulfil the promises made to his people. In Isaiah we clearly see the widening of Israel's mission towards the universality of God's purposes. All nations are to be blessed through the revelation of God's eternal purposes for his chosen people Israel.

It is only when we fully grasp the significance of the covenant in the Old Testament that we see its relevance in the New Testament. The Greek word *diatheke*, a translation of the Hebrew *berit*, used mainly in the accounts of the Lord's supper, is central to the meaning of the cross and its redemptive significance in mission. All the elements in the reference to Jesus Christ are Old Testament covenant elements. For instance, Jesus as the paschal lamb in the covenant sacrifice, Jesus' reference to blood etc. are direct indications of the integral link between the two. Undoubtedly, the concept of the covenant is an important aspect for mission today.

Anchoring mission in the covenant of God adds to it wholeness as well as underlining its interrelatedness. The Church today is integrally linked with God's people in the past and is not a new phenomenon in history. There is a continuity and a connection that gives to mission completeness in terms of God's total purposes for the world. The emphasis is not on an individual nor on one elite group but on all of his creation, the people he has formed for his own glory (Isa. 41). Israel was continually to be reminded that her existence in the world as God's chosen people was not for herself but that through her all peoples should be blessed.

Israel would have received even greater blessings if the interrelatedness that God intended was recognised. The reminder to us is to see mission firmly rooted in God's

heart so that any false emphasis can be corrected from God's word. Denominationalism, isolationism and self-centred agendas disintegrate God's mission into many missions. There is a need for the total church to be involved in God's total mission for the whole world.

A grasp of the extent of God's covenant and his faithfulness will help us take the emphasis away from the church or individuals. Our narrow concepts of evangelism have placed the whole burden of salvation on the individual. While maintaining the need for individual responsibility, we must point to the faithfulness of the Covenant God himself. Amid the multitude of strategies and programmes in mission today we must recognise that God's mission is finally dependent on his promise firmly based on his covenant.

If Israel failed, it was to be expected; they were only human vehicles. Even the Church can fail today, and has failed, but God in his sovereignty continues to work out his Kingdom purposes. He can even use the unfaithfulness of people, and in doing so reemphasises his faithfulness and his covenant. Mission is ultimately God's prerogative, the unfolding of a divine plan. And it is God who will accomplish his sovereign purposes.

In Jesus Christ we find all the horizons of mission firmly held together. The Church has not yet received all that is intended in God's plan and awaits ultimate fulfillment. Through Christ the Kingdom horizon motivates the Church to towards this future, but recognises its calling to mission as his people today.

The ultimate purposes of God give to mission the overall horizon from which the church can appreciate the faithfulness of God who is building his people today for his Kingdom in the future. These horizons, tightly held together in Jesus Christ, actualise God's mission in a concrete world. It is God's mission and not any human strategy. The Church today stands in the same danger of Israel in the past unless it recognises that mission is purely God's

prerogative. The outworking of his future plans based on his covenant with the world must be actualised in his Church as she obediently submits to her Lord today.

Notes

1. Hans-Georg Gadamer has made a significant contribution in this area, particularly through his book *Wahrheit und Methode*, available in its English Translation *Truth and Method*, Sheed and Ward, London, 1975.

2. Ken Gnanakan, "God in Hinduism", in Bong Ro (ed.), *God in Asian Contexts*, Asia Theological Association, Taichung, 1984, p. 109.

3. Francis Schaeffer, *Pollution and the Death of Man - A Christian view of Ecology*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1970. Schaeffer's slim paperback quite convincingly handles the whole attitude of the Christian to ecological concerns. It also reproduces the devastating attack on Western Christianity by Lynn White Jr. in the influential article, "The Historical Roots of our Ecological crises."

4. Edmond Jacob, *The Theology of the Old Testament*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1958, p. 138. Although I only point out a few references, I have drawn some other ideas also from Jacob's book.

5. *Ibid.* p. 137.

6. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, SPCK, London, 1978, p. 75.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 76.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 78.