

Chris Wright's *The Mission of God* An Old Testament Scholar's Perspective



Author: Prof. Gordon McConville, Professor of Old Testament Studies, University of Gloucestershire.

This is a remarkable book, the latest and fullest fruit of Chris Wright's extensive work on understanding the Old Testament in the light of the church's obligation to mission. It takes mission to be the unifying theme of biblical theology, and most remarkably does so by taking the Old Testament as its primary text. This is by no means to the exclusion of the New Testament; on the contrary the two Testaments are interwoven in this story in such a way as to demonstrate their combined testimony to the 'mission of God', which is nothing less than to bring restoration to the creation. Yet the emphasis on the Old Testament is striking, because much Christian biblical theology operates with a dualistic approach to the Bible, in which the destiny of the Old Testament is simply to be superseded by the New; and also with a dualistic approach to salvation and spirituality, in which the national, political, military, social and economic aspects of the Old Testament story of Israel are puzzling and embarrassing. Wright's approach is a far cry from such dualisms. Rather, he grasps the challenge of the Old Testament, as absolutely necessary to an understanding of God's work in the world. In this way it is not so much a biblical theology of mission, as a biblical theology per se, in which mission is presented as the unifying factor.

The essential planks in the argument are these. The Bible is the united testimony to God's purpose to redeem the whole world. In a postmodern world of 'narratives' that seek to explain human existence, it is *the* narrative, or the metanarrative, that unlocks the meaning of human life and destiny. It does so by telling a story that spans the first 'good' creation, the corruption of the created order through human sin, the plan of redemption by means of the election of Israel and its 'missional' life, and the culmination of this mission of Israel in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The emphasis on the Old Testament is thus no mere function of the author's special knowledge of that area, but belongs profoundly to his understanding of the biblical message.

At the centre of it is the particularity of Israel. Particularity is sometimes conceived as problematical for a universally relevant theology. How can the experience of a single people long ago bear witness to the divine purpose in the modern world, especially when it is attended by manifestations in law and history that are alien and sometimes repugnant to modern people? Wright embraces particularity as a strength. The purpose of Israel's election is precisely to bring blessing ultimately to all nations. This theme is traced from the creation through the promise to and covenant with Abraham, and the covenants made with Moses and David, to the New Covenant. The comprehensiveness of Wright's use of the Bible is a crucial feature of the argument. In the elucidation of God's universal purpose, Deuteronomy figures prominently alongside Isaiah, no doubt surprisingly to readers who may be used to finding Deuteronomy pitted against the great prophetic book, and on the side of a narrow nationalism. But here Deuteronomy is rightly understood to portray the life and destiny of Israel as being played out under the eyes of the nations and as a witness to them (Deut. 4:6-8 is a key text, as is Deut. 27-34).

To understand why Deuteronomy can be a 'missional' book, it is necessary to consider how 'mission' is being conceived here. The term 'missional' itself is a clue, being in Wright's view a necessary addition to the vocabulary that includes 'missiology' and 'missionary', with certain connotations he finds unhelpful to his argument. Since the divine 'mission' is congruent with the ultimate restoration of all things, it is played out in all the affairs of nations in all times. Israel's conflicted history with other nations, as well as the Bible's own origins in polemic, is part of this mission. For the call of Israel entails its own cultural transformation, a vision for such transformation of its neighbours, and a reality of cultural confrontation. For

this reason its story is preoccupied with warnings about idolatry. The missional dynamic is also 'monotheizing' (p. 95). To worship other gods is the same as rejecting and corrupting the divine purpose for creation and, for Israel, abdicating its special responsibility of witness. Much of the Old Testament testifies to this cultural conflict. The creation accounts challenge those of Canaan and Babylon with their politico-religious systems. And the exodus from Egypt is the paramount model of redemption, pitting the kingdom of Yahweh against that of Pharaoh, and delivering from slavery into freedom.

This recognition that the 'mission' of God is revealed in cultural conflict not only explains the nature of many of the biblical writings, but also provides a model for contemporary appropriation. For modern mission is rightly seen to be inevitably involved with hermeneutics. In this connection Wright finds Newbigin's notion of 'two-way communication' instructive: the Gospel may be understood in new ways when brought into new contexts (pp. 46-47). Mission must meet the challenges of a postmodern world, but in fact such challenges belong intrinsically to its nature.

The product of Wright's readiness to embrace the particularity of Israel in his view of mission is a holistic Gospel. The exodus model shows that political freedom is part of God's purpose for humanity; similarly, the Jubilee (Leviticus 25) illustrates an economic aspect. Such facets of social existence are inseparable from the spiritual life, and the twin dangers of over-spiritualizing and over-politicizing the Gospel are well addressed (pp. 275-88). Mission ultimately embraces all dimensions of human life, including praise (p. 132), pastoral and ethical concerns (pp. 182-86), and environmental issues (pp. 397-420). And this vision informs evangelism, since 'the fundamental theology behind [the Jubilee] also lies behind our practice of evangelism' (p. 300). In these ways, the particularity of Israel is put to the cause of a universal proclamation. In God's purpose, Israel not only witnesses to the nations, but the nations are finally brought under covenant obedience along with Israel. Ultimately too, the divine mission overcomes death, for a biblical concept of salvation is distinguished from all others by its promise of the defeat of death itself (p. 440).

The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative is very strong in many ways. Chris Wright brings to it his wide knowledge of issues in Old Testament as well as New Testament interpretation, and his long experience of mission. Discussions are nuanced and well-informed, and the desire to allow the biblical message to address the modern church and world is evident everywhere (not least in his extended illustration of the devastating evil of HIV/AIDS, pp. 433-37). It is a powerful answer to detractors of the Old Testament as part of the two-testament witness to Christ. For some readers, the force of the felt otherness of the Old Testament will not be entirely allayed. Have the most difficult parts of the Old Testament been sufficiently addressed here? There is very little on Joshua, and though Deuteronomy is prominent there is scant if any attention to its call for the 'devotion to destruction' of the Canaanite nations (Deut. 7:1-5). The author has certainly addressed such problems elsewhere, and does so in the context of his analysis of cultural critique and transformation. Yet one might look for more help on this here. And other parts of the Old Testament are relatively difficult to win for the universal cause, notably Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther. Are there in reality two Old Testaments, one rather inward-looking, and the other the one that is presented here? I think Wright's case can be made against the full OT canvas, but readers may have to look to other parts of his extensive writings for more help on these questions.

Buy *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* from [St Andrew's Bookshop](#).

Author: Christopher J.H. Wright
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