

Jeremiah and mission in the public square

A response on behalf of Bible Society



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Bible Society has followed with interest the unfolding of the missional hermeneutic which Dr Wright is exploring. A warm reception was given to an earlier paper, 'Mission as a Matrix for Hermeneutics and Biblical Theology', presented to the Scripture and Hermeneutics Seminar in 2003. These Seminars were sponsored by Bible Society throughout almost ten years.

Bible Society has recognised the contribution to the contemporary missional task which the Bible can and should be making, as well as, of course the long association of the Bible with the mission of the church which was so evident in the nineteenth century, which coincided with the founding century of Bible Society. We are committed to this because we recognise that the Bible is a missionary text for a missionary people. We go even further and believe that the Bible itself can have a missional function. In the contemporary context in England and Wales we are seeking to support the mission of the churches by engaging four aspects of our culture particularly with the Bible. These are arts, education, media and politics. I will make some brief comments on the political arena as it relates to this paper.

In section 3, Dr Wright explores the significance of 'The missional locatedness of the readers'. Perhaps my observations are a further affirmation of this. Because I am aware of the importance of bringing the Bible back into politics and the 'public square', I was particularly alert to this aspect of the missional nature of Jeremiah. It is actually embedded in the title of the lecture and is appropriate as the book of Jeremiah indicates. The Bible functions missionally with respect to the public arena. As Dr Wright clearly indicated from Genesis 10-11 to Revelation 22 it is 'the nations' or 'the peoples' who feature within God's redemptive plans. Equally, Jeremiah as a 'Prophet to the nations' is an example of this; he was surely to be involved in the public square.

With respect to the other nations, other than the challenge to those in Exile to pray for the peace of those among whom they lived (in the critically important and pivotal chapter 29), it is not obvious how Jeremiah actually carried out his missional engagement with the leaders of the other nations. There is, of course, his call which indicates that God will be sending him to speak to them (see 1:6-10) and that he has enormous power over them, but there appears to be little record of his actual direct engagement with them. The 'Oracles against the Nations' (chapters 46-51) may be taken as strong indication of his prophetic attention towards them, but there is no suggestion that he actually went to Egypt or Ammon or Babylon to deliver them. This in contrast to the account of Jonah going to Nineveh and Daniel actually engaged with the foreign powers – both of which were referred to in the lecture.

Exploring how these oracles contributed to the missional task of Jeremiah should be an interesting line for Dr Wright. This, I suggest, is no mere academic pursuit either, for understanding how Jeremiah actually engaged the nations for God may give us clues as to how we are to fulfil the gospel mandate to take the Gospel into all the world, which surely includes the public world and the world of politics today. Is 'Prayer warfare' our equivalent of declaring oracles? Or do we need to confront as well as critique from a safe distance the political authorities? How is this missional component of the Bible to be understood and then applied in our day? Indeed do we need to re-evaluate how 'The word of the LORD' functions? Repeatedly when I ask people how they respond to various metaphors for this phrase they are warm towards 'light', 'seed' and 'food' but find the idea that the word of the LORD should be a hammer or a fire (Jeremiah 23:29) very strange. Yet these are the images which may indicate that declaring the truths of God actually accomplishes his purposes without the recipients themselves being aware of them.

While there is little account of Jeremiah engaging the politics of the nations there is plenty for his involvement with the political leaders of Judah (kings and others) and the institutions (the Temple and its priesthood, the prophetic guild and may be the 'scribal schools'; see Jeremiah 1:17-19) of his day. A fuller account of the missional nature of this book would certainly benefit from closer attention to this aspect of Jeremiah's own mission. Perhaps there is another MA dissertation about to be written!

Bible Society are very grateful to Dr Wright for his lecture and look forward to further developments which will help us understand more fully how the Bible is a missional Book - in the political context.

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