

Missional hermeneutics in a Malaysian context



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It gives me great pleasure to respond to Chris' paper, *'Prophet to the Nations': Missional Reflections on the Book of Jeremiah*. I will provide a response to each of his four main points.

Firstly, concerning the missional framework of the biblical narrative, Chris has rightly reminded us that what we read in the book of Jeremiah must be related to the 'great overarching framework of the biblical narrative' lest we only look at the trees but miss the whole forest. Israel was elected to be God's covenant partner and therefore to be a witness to all peoples. Christians in Malaysia are part of God's people living their lives as a constant witness to the peoples around. Malaysia is a multi-pluralistic, multi-cultural, and multi-religious nation where people of many different faiths live together. If the Christians in Malaysia fail to live up to God's expectations and standards, we will be like the people of God who fail in Jeremiah's time. Yet, thankfully, the story does not end there. Having 'exposed the reality of failure and judgment', God is able to demonstrate that there is the hope of a 'new covenant restoration'. Nations will also be offered the same promise for restoration as for Israel. In spite of our many failures at times to live up to God's high standard, the message of grace is the same message we proclaim to the people of other faiths today. They too can come to God and offer their worship to him one day.

Secondly, concerning the missional purpose of the texts, Jeremiah's preaching was against the idolatry of his day and a call to 'return to radical monotheism'. Living in a pluralistic society and constantly surrounded by people of other faiths, Christians in Malaysia are constantly tempted to pursue either syncretism or idolatry. Syncretism occurs when Christians begin to look for other gods for solutions to their problems but do not want to abandon their Christian faith. Idolatry occurs when Christians begin chasing the gods of materialism or other so-called 'gods' while neglecting their own. Jeremiah's preaching was to persuade God's people not to give up living waters in exchange for leaking cisterns. Is *Allahu akbar* (Allah is great) greater than *Yahweh malak* (Yahweh reigns)?

Thirdly, on the missional locatedness of the readers, we are reminded to read the book of Jeremiah with the original readers as well as contemporary modern readers in mind. In Jeremiah's time, some of God's people were deported to exile in Babylon and Jeremiah wrote an encouraging letter to them. The same words from Jeremiah speak powerfully today to the Malaysian Christians who find themselves as a pressured minority in a predominantly 'hostile' Muslim majority. As God's people struggling with issues like 'has God abandoned us or forsaken us?', we realize we are not alone. God's people of other times have similarly gone through hardships, trials, and even exile. They found a new hope and a new mission. So will God's people in Malaysia.

Finally, on the missional cost to the messenger, we are reminded that the 'cost of being the sent one was extremely high' as we see in the life and ministry of Jeremiah. Again, living as God's people in Malaysia, there is too a high cost to pay. There are continuous challenges to us from all sides including government circles. There have been many recent cases of people who did not succeed in trying to 'convert' out of Islam to Christianity (e.g., the Lina Joy case) or 'body snatching incidents' by the Islamic religious authorities when the deceased had purportedly converted to Islam without the knowledge of the rest of the family members. Christians in Malaysia are banned from using the word 'Allah' for God in their Malay translations and publications or in Christian worship. It is easy to lose heart and throw

in the towel but we are reminded that the path of discipleship is costly and demanding. If we are willing to walk this path, we will find that God will never abandon us.

Hopefully in the future, studies on this area of Bible and Mission will continue. It is important to see how the Bible continues to relate and speak powerfully to our contexts and cultures today.

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