

“Prophet to the Nations”

Missional Reflections on the Book of Jeremiah



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Introduction and background

One way or another we are really going to be concentrating on the book of Jeremiah this evening as a case study in what I want to call missional hermeneutics, or missional interpretation of the Bible. But I need to fill in just a little bit more of that personal background that Tim did hint at in his introduction to me, so that you can see a little bit of where I am coming from and how it is that I stand before you trying to talk about mission and the book of Jeremiah which don't seem to be the most obvious partners. As Tim said, I went to India in the 1980's and I was teaching on the faculty of the Union Biblical Seminary, teaching Old Testament, having done a degree in Old Testament ethics but teaching in a context in which many of the ethical challenges and mission realities of the church were very close to the surface, in a country where obviously there was a majority people of a different faith and where there are very great ethical challenges in the society. So I began to reflect, even then in my teaching, on the relevance of the Bible to issues of ethics and mission in a very directly relevant way, simply by living in the midst of a different culture, which is always a very good thing to do.

Then I came back in the 1980's to the UK and, as was also said, I ended up on the faculty of All Nations Christian College, very much a sister college of Redcliffe, committed to training people for cross-cultural mission. I inherited from Martin Goldsmith, whom some of you know, a course called the Biblical Basis of Mission, but for many years I told the students in the opening lecture “I really wish I could change the title of this course, but you don't get allowed to do those kind of things if you are only the Principal”. But I thought “I want this to be the Missional Basis of the Bible; what I want you to see is not just that mission is something the Bible talks about, but actually mission is what the Bible is all about, that we can see mission as a major hermeneutical key to understanding the Scriptures themselves.

So I then, as a kind of subversive campaign, began to encourage quite a number of students who came to do an MA in Missiology, to consider doing their dissertation with a missiological exploration of some part of the Bible. Of course, many of them wanted to do something on their own particular country, or some area of missionary work, but for those who hadn't got a specific practical issue I said “Why not look at Deuteronomy, or the Deuteronomistic history, or the Book of Proverbs, or the Book of the Twelve, or whatever and just ask “What would it mean to look at this part of the Christian Scriptures from the angle of mission?”. I said “I'd like you to do two questions. One, “What are the issues that this text raises for the theology and practice of mission?” In other words, taking questions out of the text to address our practice. Then secondly, “What questions does our practice of mission and the issues of mission address to this text?” So that you are looking at the thing from both angles.” A number of MA students did that and I found it quite fascinating to supervise their work and to see what they would come up with.

Then eventually, having written a couple of commentaries myself on Deuteronomy and Ezekiel and tried to build something of a missiological framework into that, eventually I sort of congealed all of that reflection into the book, *The Mission of God*, as an attempt to demonstrate what I was feeling after as a missiological hermeneutic. The prod that came for that really happened when I gave a lecture, not very dissimilar from the one I am about to give you now, but on the book of Ezekiel in the, what was then still called, London Bible College - now the London School of Theology. The person who was chairing the meeting

was Anthony Billington and after I had given the lecture, he had a sort of prepared response to it in which he said, "This is all very well and all very interesting, to think about Ezekiel in relation to a theology of mission, but is this a valid hermeneutic? Is this an appropriate, legitimate way of reading the Scriptures?" In my heart I would say, "Yes, it is" but in my head I was saying "I've got to prove it."

I was being challenged to think through why and how one can look at the Bible from a missiological hermeneutic and in the book I devoted really the whole of the first two chapters to defending what is meant by a missiological hermeneutic. Now, at the same time, though I wasn't aware of it until a little bit later, there was a group over in North America, both in Canada and the United States, who had started a group actually for a missiological hermeneutic of Scripture, Jeff Greenman up in Tyndale College in Toronto had invited a few people around in the context of the Society of Biblical Literature meetings to discuss what would it mean to interpret the Scriptures from the perspective of mission, and I got invited into that a little bit later. Then, last year, in 2008 one of the members of that group, a man called George Hunsberger, did a kind of summary of how he felt different people within that movement were using the phrase 'a missional hermeneutic of Scripture'. He came up with four definitions, of which I am going to use three in the course of this lecture and then add a fourth of my own.

So he said that some people are using the phrase 'a missional hermeneutic of Scripture' to mean the missional framework of the whole Bible story and that was very much my approach. He said, here is a way of handling the whole Bible as a narrative reflecting God's mission. But then secondly he said there are those within the group who are looking at a missional hermeneutic of Scripture to mean the missional purpose of the texts, that the actual texts of Scripture when they were first given, when they emerged, had the purpose of shaping God's people for mission. In other words they were missionary or missional in their intention, even as original writings and so that was another way of looking at it. Thirdly, he pointed out that there were some scholars who were speaking about a missional hermeneutic of Scripture more from the perspective of the readers of Scripture. That is, the missional locatedness of the readers because we are taking the Scripture and asking "In what way does our context within which we read the Scripture, shape our interpretation and drive our mission, in our sense of what our mission is?"

So those are three out of the four that George Hunsberger came up with and I have just added a fourth, which is 'the missional cost to the messenger' because it seems to me particularly relevant to the book of Jeremiah. So that seemed to me to be quite a helpful sort of addition to the way I was already myself thinking and to add some dimensions which I had not included in my own book on the mission of God, so I felt in coming here and sharing this and using Jeremiah as an illustrative text, that this might be a helpful way of looking at what we mean by a missional hermeneutic of Scripture.

1. The missional framework of the biblical narrative

This, as George Hunsburger said, has been very much the way I had been seeing the Scriptures. That the whole Bible renders to us the mission of God. That the Bible as a whole canon, from beginning to end, is a witness to God's mission, through God's people, in God's world, for God's purpose, which is ultimately the redemption of the whole of God's creation. And that great overarching narrative is what the apostle Paul would probably have meant when he spoke about the whole council of God, the whole will and plan and purpose of God, running from creation through to new creation, or more specifically, and more precisely, from the description in Genesis 10 and 11 of the world of nations which then is united in arrogance and then scattered at the Tower of Babel, right through to the point in the scriptural story when we see again a focus on the nations of the world, but this time in Revelation 21 and 22,

the nations are gathered in worship and united in the worship of the Lord Jesus Christ. So we move from the nations scattered in rebellion at the Tower of Babel to the nations gathered in worship after the destruction of Babel, Babylon, in the Book of Revelation. In a sense, the mission of God is what takes you from point A to point B, which gets you from the problems created by Genesis 11, right through to the solution which we have obviously reached in Revelation 21 and 22. That vision, of the unity and wholeness of the Scriptures seems to me in my simplicity to be a very helpful way, at one level, of holding the Old Testament and the New Testament together in continuity. We see a beginning, a movement, a story, a climax of course in the Lord Jesus Christ and then a conclusion and completion at the end of the whole story. Within that, right there in Genesis Chapter 12, God's election of Abraham and the creation of the people of Old Testament Israel becomes God's means ultimately of bringing about his plan of the blessing of the nations. That choice of Abraham then leads to the redemption in the Exodus, to the covenant at Sinai, to the gift of the land, to the coming of the kingdom and, ultimately, going right forward through the prophetic movement to the coming of Christ and the extension of that good news to the nations, which had always been God's plan in the first place.

So the whole plan is, therefore, the outworking of God's mission, God's agenda, which is to bring blessing to the nations. That, of course, is what the apostle Paul calls the gospel in Galatians 3:28, he says the Scriptures preached 'the gospel' to Abraham saying, "through you all the nations will be blessed." And in Galatians and Romans, of course, Paul does explain how that promise of God to Abraham and God's intention to do that has now been fulfilled ultimately through the Messiah of Israel.

So that's God's election of Israel. But then, of course, the story comes to the failure of Israel in the Old Testament, to a broken covenant which leads to judgement and the exile. Then, through that exile and beyond it, there comes the future hope, the eschatology of the prophets, of the restoration of Israel back to their land and then, beyond that, the hope of the ingathering of the nations to a restored Israel and the combination of Israel and the nations together in the covenant of God. And that then leads you to the fulfilment of that vision with Jesus of Nazareth.

So that, it seems to me, is this great overarching framework. So, where does Jeremiah fit into that? Does he? I want to suggest that he does in four ways. I would want to say, of course, that it is not quite so obvious in the book of Jeremiah, as it very clearly is in a book like Isaiah. In many ways it is much easier to preach a missional hermeneutic from the text of Isaiah, than from Jeremiah, but it is not at all missing, it is not absent from Jeremiah, it is just that it is not quite so much up front and central, as it very much is in the book of Isaiah.

Here are at least four ways. First of all that Jeremiah does see, he does perceive, the purpose of Israel's election and understands that it is ultimately for God's glory and that glory of God is to do with God's purposes for the nations. Secondly, Jeremiah ruthlessly exposes the reality of Israel's failure to live up to that plan and does so at the critical point when God's judgement is about to fall and then actually does fall. In other words, Jeremiah straddles the period of the decades up to the final destruction of Jerusalem and the immediate aftermath, but then thirdly, Jeremiah holds out hope for the restoration of Israel which, fourthly, is seen to have its impact on the nations. So what God originally purposed for Israel has not been destroyed by their failure, but leads on through their restoration to the ultimate fulfilment of that purpose in the in-gathering and blessing of the nations. So I think in those four ways, as we shall see now, Jeremiah does as it were, he has that place within the overarching flow of the biblical narrative and he has a very critical place, of course, precisely because of where he comes. He comes right at the cusp of the judgement, of exile and the prophecy of the return from exile.

a. Jeremiah sees the purpose of Israel's election and covenant

So first of all then, Jeremiah does perceive the purpose of Israel's election and covenant as being to bring glory to the LORD in the midst of the nations. Jeremiah, chapter 13, is one of those many acted prophecies of Jeremiah in which he did some really rather weird stuff, some of the time, in order to demonstrate his message. On this occasion God sent him shopping, as he several times did, once to buy a pot, but this time to buy a bit of clothing.

"And the LORD said to me, 'Go and buy a linen belt and it around your waste, but don't let it touch water.' So I bought a belt as the Lord directed and put it round my waist." Probably it wasn't a belt like we would wear, almost certainly the word means a sash, much more like a cummerbund, a nice big piece of freshly produced linen, perhaps bright white or something, that you would wear as it were either under your overcoat or around it in such a way that it would really look rather posh and splendid. And so Jeremiah does that and he is wandering around Jerusalem in nice new clothing, with everyone saying "Oh yeah - nice threads Jeremiah! That's a nice shirt you're wearing for a change - looking rather smart today!"

"And then the word of the LORD came to me a second time. 'Take that sash that you bought and are wearing around your waist and go now to Perath [it is uncertain exactly what that means, but it may mean a river - it is hardly the Euphrates, that was a rather long way to go] and hide it there in a crevice in the rocks' [in other words bury the thing in the soil] So I went and hid it at Perath as the LORD had told me. And many days later the LORD said to me, 'Go now to Perath and get the belt that I told you to hide there.' So I went to Perath and I dug up the belt and took it from the place where I had hidden it, but now it was ruined and completely useless.' Of course it was, if it has been buried in damp soil for any length of time it would have begun to perish and there would be holes and it would have been perhaps eaten by worms and all that kind of thing. "So then the word of the LORD came to me to say 'This is what the LORD says, "in the same way I will ruin the pride of Judah and the great pride of Jerusalem. These wicked people who refuse to listen to my words, who follow the stubbornness of their hearts and go after other gods to serve and worship. They will be like this belt - completely useless! For [and this is the important bit] as a belt is bound around a man's waist, so I bound the whole house of Israel to me and the whole house of Judah to me' declares the LORD, 'to be my people for my renown and praise and honour, but they have not listened.' Now that little triplet of words - my praise, honour and renown, is a group of words which is a repetition from Deuteronomy 26:19, where God had said that that was the very purpose that Israel would be - a praise, a name and an honour to God. Not just that they would have all the honour, but that they would be the source of honour for God. And so what Jeremiah is saying here is that, just like a bright new piece of clothing would be selected and then bought and then worn with pride as something that was beautiful in itself - but the whole point of wearing something beautiful is not so much to draw attention to the piece of cloth, but to beautify the wearer. I think we would agree with that, if my wife puts on a lovely new dress, I say to her "You are really looking beautiful today, that is a lovely dress". So it is a nice dress, but the point of the dress is to beautify her and so the compliments are for the wearer, not just for the piece of clothing. And so that is how God regarded Israel. God says, "I wanted to wear you," and it is a beautiful metaphor for a covenant actually, because God has said, "I want you to be as close to me as a piece of clothing is to the wearer." So election here is being expressed in the sense of somebody choosing a piece of cloth to wear, in which case the honour is not really so much for the piece of cloth, as for the wearer himself, to enhance the wearer. There is a privilege, an honour in being the chosen piece of clothing, but really that is not the point. The point is that the honour and the glory goes to God himself. He wanted to be exalted. To exalt his name among the nations, which are not specified here but the use of that language in Deuteronomy 26 and indeed later in Jeremiah 33, does bring in the context that it was for Yahweh to show himself off among the nations, through the people of Israel. So that's the first thing.

We're going to look at another echo of the Abrahamic covenant a little bit later in chapter 4, but I'll come to that later, but it is a very clear echo of the purpose of God through the choice of Abraham.

b. Jeremiah exposes the reality of failure and judgment

Secondly, Jeremiah then goes on to expose the reality of Israel's failure and judgement and, as I'm sure you are aware if you have studied the book at all, that is the predominant message really of the whole first half of Jeremiah's book and certainly of the bulk of his ministry. It is a constant stream of accusation and pleading with Israel to turn away from the wickedness and idolatry and sin that they have been committing. The book opens in Chapter 2, the message of Jeremiah is fundamentally that Israel have moved from a honeymoon to a divorce. That is the metaphoric language from Jeremiah 2:1-3:1 - the scent as it were from the nostalgic joy of a honeymoon period to the awful reality of a divorce and separation and the scandal that that had brought to God himself.

And so the purposes of God are being thwarted and that, I think, is also what underlies this image here in Jeremiah 13, the broken covenant of course is primarily there in chapter 11, but the point of chapter 13 is to say that far from the Israelites bringing God praise and honour and glory among the nations, they had brought him disgrace and contempt. He just could not wear them in the form of the parable. It's like he's holding them up like a piece of dirty, rotten linen and saying "How can I wear you when you look like this?" And so you can imagine Jeremiah doing this, his acted parable saying "This is what you are like in the sight of God, so how can God possibly wear you?" For that reason then, if God's purpose for the nations is to proceed, God will have to deal with Israel first. There has to be a future, but it will have to be through God's acts of judgement and, ultimately, of restoration on the Israelites themselves.

c. Jeremiah holds out the hope of new covenant restoration

Thirdly, of course, he does exactly that. God does hold out hope for a new covenant and restoration and the passage in Jeremiah chapter 33. The whole of chapters 31, 32 and 33 are sometimes called the Book of Consolation, words given by Jeremiah to the exiles in the context of their judgement and suffering. But listen to what Jeremiah says in chapter 33, verses 8 and 9 and you will hear the echoes of the passage I have just quoted from chapter 13, but here the nations are explicitly in view. From verse 6, "*Nevertheless I will bring health and healing to it [the city]; I will heal my people and will let them enjoy abundant peace and security. I will bring Judah and Israel back from captivity and will re-build them as they were before. I will cleanse them from all the sin they have committed against me and will forgive all their sins of rebellion against me.*" That is what God is going to do, that is his restoration, forgiving grace. But then verse 9 says, "*Then this city will bring me renown, joy, praise and honour before all nations on earth that hear of all the good things I do for it*". So it is the same language, God wants renown, fame and honour and praise, but it is put within that context of being before all the nations who will witness it and stand in awe of what God will have been doing for his people. That means, therefore, that God's purpose for Israel will continue, but it will also affect the nations.

d. Jeremiah envisages the resultant blessing of the nations

When you look at the book of Isaiah, you see that that is made even more explicit, especially in Isaiah 40 - 55, that whatever it is that God is going to do for Israel will very definitely affect God's relationship with the nations, who are called upon to turn round and come back to God and find salvation. That's the kind of explicit language of Isaiah. It is not quite so explicit here, but I think it is put in a context where we can see it happening and so Jeremiah does

envisage the resultant blessing of the nations through God's purposes for Israel. His vision, as it were, of God's mission extends beyond just the restoration of Israel to their land and sees a wider purpose for the nations. This happens in several ways which come through the texts listed.

i. The nations as witnesses

First of all, like other prophets, Jeremiah calls in the nations as witnesses to what God is doing, both witnesses to the original covenant that God had made and its breaking and then to its restoration and future healing. If you look briefly at chapter 6, verses 18 and 19, these are two texts in which God calls the nations to witness. *"Therefore hear, O nations; observe, O witnesses, what will happen to them. Hear, O earth: I am bringing disaster on this people, the fruit of their schemes, because they have not listened to my words and have rejected my law."* So God says the nations will witness the judgement of God on his people. But, similarly, just as Deuteronomy had foreseen, in the closing chapters, the nations will witness the restoration of Israel. So chapter 31, verse 10, *"Hear the word of the LORD, O nations; proclaim it in the distant coastlands: 'He who scattered Israel will gather them and will watch over his flock like a shepherd.' For the LORD will ransom Jacob and redeem them from the hands of those stronger than they."* So that sense that the nations will witness the judgement and the restoration. Whatever God does with Israel is on an open stage, it's visible to the world, not just a hidden kind of thing happening in a vacuum.

ii. Any nation can be the recipient of Yahweh's mercy, as well as judgement

The second way in which Jeremiah expresses this is in chapter 18, verses 1 - 10, not just of the nations, the witnesses of God's action with Israel, but any nation can be the recipient of God's mercy, just as much as of God's judgement. Now Jeremiah 18 is a familiar passage to many of us; it is the story of the potter. It is where God sent Jeremiah shopping yet again and says, *"This is the word of the Lord, 'Go down to the potter's house, and there I will give you my message.' So I went down to the potter's house, and I saw him working at the wheel."* Presumably, reading between the lines he says, "What are you doing?" as you do to a craftsman, "What are you making?" "Oh, I'm making a wine jar". *"But the pot that he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands; so the potter formed it into a different pot, shaping it as seemed best to him."* So Jeremiah presumably says, "Oh, what's happening now?" "Well something didn't quite work, so I'm making a teapot instead" or whatever it was. And so, Jeremiah observes a potter stating an intention in relation to what he is doing, but because of something that happens in the clay, he changes his intention and does something different from what he had originally said. That is the point of this passage and it's really quite an important distinct point from what we sometimes have from the potter as a symbol of just complete sovereignty, as it is in Isaiah and Romans and so on.

What does this mean? Well, God then explains it to Jeremiah and he explains it in terms of world politics and says, *"If at any time I announce that a nation or a kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and if that nation that I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned"* says God. And vice-versa in the following verses. God says, "I may make a declaration about a nation, but if it changes its ways, I can withhold my judgement and do something different from what I said." The trouble with our exegesis sometimes here with Jeremiah 18 is that we have got this picture of the potter and the clay and we instinctively interpret it through the lens of the once popular Christian hymn, "Thou art the potter have thine own way Lord, have thine own way. Thou art the potter, I am the clay. Make me and mould me after thy will... while I just sort of flop here, whatever it is ... yielded and still." Something like that. And so we take Jeremiah's imagery and we turn it into a picture of personal piety and submission to the will of God. It's not a bad idea to submit to the will of God, but it is not remotely what Jeremiah is talking about. He is

talking about God's international sovereignty and world history and he says that nations can be just as much under God's mercy, as under God's judgement. And the Old Testament, of course, illustrates both and perhaps the best illustration of Jeremiah 18 is the book of Jonah, which you know is almost precisely what happens. Jonah is sent by God, rather circuitously of course but he gets there in the end, to Nineveh to declare God's judgement. He says this is what God says, forty days from now this city will be turned upside down. And in the declaration of God's judgement, what happens is the people of Nineveh repent and God suspends his judgement and saves the city, much to Jonah's embarrassment who then starts quoting Scripture at God and saying, "There you are God, see I knew that's what you would do, cause you are that kind of God and you go round forgiving people. It's a bit embarrassing for prophets of judgement like me."

But the point of the book is that God can declare judgement and act in mercy. He is sovereign over both, depending on the response of the people.

iii. Yahweh offers to the nations the same promise of restoration

Thirdly then, Yahweh God offers to the nations the same promise of restoration as he had to Israel. There is a quite astonishing little passage in Jeremiah 12 - it was a research student who pointed it out to me because I had never really noticed it before - verse 14, "*This is what the LORD says, 'As for all my wicked neighbours who seize the inheritance I gave my people Israel [people like Edom and Moab and the Ammonites and all those sort of people], I will uproot them from their lands and I will uproot the house of Judah from among them. But after I uproot them, I will again have compassion and bring each of them back to his own inheritance and his own country. And if they learn well the ways of my people and swear by name, saying, 'As surely as the LORD lives' - even as they once taught my people to swear by Baal - then they will be established among my people.*" Now that is incredible, because that is almost exactly what God through Jeremiah said to the Israelites. If you repent I will restore you and you can be my people. Here God is saying that to Israel's neighbours. I don't know how we can put that into a sort of historical or literal context, but the principle I think is very clear, that the nations surrounding Israel are being treated by God in the same way. The very least that this it is saying is that there is no favouritism in God's dealings with Israel and the surrounding nations. All of them stand under God's judgement, as this text says, and all of them can turn to God for mercy, as Isaiah said.

That seems to me to be of the very essence of the gospel. In fact, it seems to me, to be very similar to what the apostle Paul says specifically in Romans 2 and 3, that God has no favourites, that whether you are Jew or Gentile, Israel or among the nations, God deals with you in justice. And it is at the heart of the gospel I think because if it were not the case that all nations by default as it were stand under the impending judgement of God, then there would be no need to proclaim a gospel. Equally, if it were not for the fact that God deals in mercy and forgiveness as well as in judgement and that God shows mercy to all who repent, from any nation, there would be no gospel to proclaim. So both sides of this truth I think already expressed here in this rather obscure language of Jeremiah are expressing truths which come to great clarity in the New Testament that God has no favourites and that ultimately his purpose of judgement and mercy is dependant upon our response to him, not on any kind of ethnic privilege.

iv. The nations will one day come to worship Yahweh

Finally then, Jeremiah clearly envisages the nations ultimately coming to worship the living God. That is chapter 3, verse 17. I have to say that this is really only a tiny whisper compared with the great symphony of this theme that you get in the Book of Psalms and in the Book of Isaiah, where the prospect that all the nations that God has made will one day come to worship him is very clear indeed. That's what it says, for example, in Psalm 22:27 - the psalm

quoted by Jesus on the cross - that all nations will turn to him, all families of the earth. Or Psalm 86:9, that *"All the nations you have made will come to worship you, O LORD"*. That is a remarkable promise. Well in Jeremiah 3:17, the prophet at least gives us a hint of it when he says, *"At that time [a sort of indefinite eschatological future] they will call Jerusalem The Throne of the LORD, and all nations will gather in Jerusalem to honour the name of the LORD."* A bit packed I suppose, but we are talking here about an eschatological, metaphorical vision similar to Isaiah's of the nations of the LORD coming to worship God where God was, which in that sense was Jerusalem. Of course the New Testament, in a sense, universalises this by recognising that Jesus himself is the centre-point of the faith of God's people and therefore that wherever Christ is, the nations can gather, which is of course everywhere. But there it is in 3:17, *"all nations will gather"*. It is not just Israel that will be restored, so there is a restoration of the worship of the nations. And that, of course, too is how the book of Romans ends. We have seen Romans from the beginning of God's chose of Abraham, chapters 3 and 4, but it comes to an end in chapter 15 when Paul celebrates the fact that the nations of the world will come to rejoice with God's people and says that that is God's purpose to fulfil his promise to Abraham and our fathers, that ultimately all nations will bring their worship to the LORD, Yahweh, the one living God of all the earth and that, of course, is the primary stand of biblical mission.

Jeremiah does have a theology which, even though it is not as clearly articulated in a nice systematic way that we might want, does fit with this concept that here is the God of Israel having chosen Israel to bring about his purpose for the salvation of the world, Israel has failed, they need to go through judgement, through that judgement there will come restoration and through that restoration will come the opening up of the worship of the Living God to the nations. Jeremiah, as it were, fits within that overarching narrative of God's mission.

Let's move on now to the second, third and fourth of our points and, as I said at the beginning, these will be shorter.

2. The missional purpose of the texts

The first way in which we can think about a missional hermeneutic of any part of the Bible is, Where does it fit within the missional understanding of the Bible as an overarching narrative of God's mission? That was point one.

The second way we could look at this is partly based on the work of a North American scholar called Darrell Guder. Mainly working on New Testament texts, he argued that the purpose of the written word that we have in the New Testament was the same as the purpose of the spoken word, the teaching and preaching of Jesus, or the apostles, which was for the formation of a missional community of disciples, committed to the mission of God in the world, and the texts themselves arose for the purpose of equipping God's people for that task of witness and carrying on God's mission in the world, to be and to live as God's people. That seems to me to make a very great deal of sense. And so a missional hermeneutic then asks of any part of the Bible, How did this text equip and shape the people of God for their missional witness as the people of God in their generation and how does it continue to shape us today?, so that we see the Bible as formative, formative in its own context and formative in the life of God's people ever since.

Well now, where and how can we see such a purpose in the text of the book of Jeremiah? We would have to ask of course then what was the purpose of Jeremiah's preaching and of those who chose to edit and pull his teachings and text together into the form that we now have it. The problem, of course, is that Israel - the people of God in the Old Testament - had got very badly out of shape by the time of Jeremiah. In other words, there had been century

after century of failure and disobedience and rebellion against God, in such a way that the final judgement of God, as it were, was very soon to fall on them. So Jeremiah is almost the last of the great line of pre-exilic prophets who bring to this people some message of repent or else and very soon the 'or else' becomes inevitable.

But it seems to me that Jeremiah calls Israel back in two basic directions. One is the rejection of idolatry and a return to radical monotheism, and the second is a return to an ethical change of life and then, based on both of those, there would be an impact on the nations. So, once again, one finds a missional thrust of both the theological and the ethical dimension of Jeremiah's call and challenge to the people.

a. Rejection of idolatry and return to radical monotheism

First of all, there is very clearly in the book of Jeremiah a rejection of the people's idolatry and a call for them to return to a radical monotheism, that Yahweh alone is the Living God. Now one could illustrate this, of course, from all over the book, but I will just particularly draw your attention to chapter two, because it seems quite programmatic for a lot of what follows in the rest of the first half of Jeremiah. It begins with the disappointment of the ending of a honeymoon period in the first three verses, God says, "I remember what you used to be like", and he is talking about the wilderness period for goodness sake and he says, "You loved me then," so what must they be like now if the wilderness is portrayed as a honeymoon? So there is ingratitude, disappointment, there is disloyalty. They are, even more than the nations around them, deserting their God and there is a shock value in that. Jeremiah says those nations' gods aren't even gods at all, but at least the nations are loyal to them. They are loyal to the gods they haven't got, as it were, whereas you people who know the Living God, have swapped him for something totally useless. There is also the message of the futility of all of that. The broken cisterns, "you have abandoned the living fountain of water and hewn out broken cisterns" and so idolatry is portrayed as a waste of time and, ultimately, futile. But they are living in denial, so in this chapter there is a great deal of delusion going on. They are saying, "What do you mean? We aren't sinning, we are not going after the Baals." And so Jeremiah has to shock them into seeing what they are doing and it will all end in tears, as it were, in the disaster that faces them.

So this chapter two is an exposure of the disappointment, the futility, the failure, the stupidity of idolatry and pointing that out to the people. And then, in stark contrast to that, you could read chapter 10, which is almost echoing the kind of language that you would expect in Isaiah 40 to 55. And so we read, *"Tell them this: 'These gods who did not make the heavens and the earth, will perish from under the earth and from under the heavens.'" But God made the earth by his power; he founded the world by his wisdom and stretched out the heavens by his understanding. ...Everyone is senseless and without knowledge; every goldsmith is shamed by his idols. His images are a fraud; they have no breath in them. They are worthless, the objects of mockery; when their judgement comes they will perish. But the one who is the portion of Jacob is not like these, for he is the maker of all things, including Israel, the tribe of his inheritance - the LORD Almighty is his name.*"

So there is this rejection of idolatry and this call back to a radical monotheism, that Yahweh alone is uniquely and universally God. Now, you might say what has that got to do with mission? Well, I really don't have time to tell you, except to say that I spent two whole chapters working on the missiological significance of Old Testament Monotheism in *The Mission of God*, because it does seem to me to be fundamentally important, partly because this one Living God, who is the God of all nations, not just Israel, wills to be known. He chooses to be known, *the world will know that Yahweh is God. Then you will know that the LORD is God and there is no other. You were shown these things that you might know that Yahweh is God and there is no other.* God says it to Pharaoh, he says it to Israel, he says it to the nations. There is this, as it were, driving determination that the Living God will be

known to the ends of the earth, to the whole of creation and to all the nations. And that, of course, is in a sense the driving force of God's mission, his choice to be known.

The other aspect of its missiological significance is that it is Old Testament Monotheism, or scriptural monotheism which underlies the uniqueness and universality of Jesus of Nazareth in the New Testament. Because all the same things that are said about Yahweh in the Old Testament, that he is a sovereign God, that he is saviour, that he is judge, that he is ruler, all those are aspects which are then applied to Jesus in a variety of texts and a variety of ways. Even with specific Old Testament texts, like the Shema being applied to Jesus in 1 Corinthians 8, or Yahweh's own talking about himself *"to me every knee will bow and every tongue confess that in the LORD alone is salvation and strength"* and it is picked up in Philippians 2, which says that *"at the name of Jesus every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father."*

So there is a huge missiological significance to Old Testament monotheism which Jeremiah participates in calling the people back to.

b. Challenge to ethical change

But secondly, if Israel is to return to the LORD, which is what Jeremiah's fundamental appeal is, that will not be merely a return to some kind of religious confession. In fact, Jeremiah says very clear that it is not just a matter of saying 'As the LORD lives'; you must return to the LORD's ways, to the ethical demands of the covenant. So, for example, in Jeremiah 7, the so-called Temple Sermon, God says *"This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: 'Reform your ways and your actions, and I will let you live in this place.'"* And then in verse 5, explaining that a little bit more deeply, *"If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly, if you do not oppress the alien, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods..."* In other words, you have got to change the way you live, not just come back to a change of belief. And so that call for radical, ethical repentance is urgent and repeated throughout these chapters. That is just one example of it, but of course there are many others.

c. The impact on the nations

If that were to happen, then what? And that is, of course, in a sense a hypothetical question because it didn't happen. Nevertheless, it is fascinating that God and Jeremiah do face the possibility of, What will be the case if it did? If Israel were to return to a wholehearted worship of the Living God and to a wholehearted radical, ethical change of life, what could be the result? And that is what we actually see in chapter 4:1-2, in a rather fascinating passage in which there is another echo of Abraham. God talks about their return; exegetically this is an interesting verse because you have to work out where the 'and' or the 'if' comes. God says, *"If you will return O Israel, return to me;" declares the LORD.* That is probably a reasonably good translation of what the Hebrew actually means. Then it goes on with a continuing 'if' - so it may already have been 'if you return' 'if it is to me that you return' and now it goes on, *"If you put your detestable idols out of my sight and no longer go astray [that's the monotheism thing, in other words get rid of all the idolatry, come back to the worship of the Living God], and if in truth, justice and righteousness [the NIV says 'in a truthful, just and righteous way' which is slightly weak; it is much more concrete nouns - in truth, in justice, in righteousness] you swear, 'As surely as the LORD lives.'"* Now that is not that they were suddenly going to take oaths and curse and swear around the place. The swearing 'As the LORD lives' was something which spoke in Israel not so much about anything that happened in the temple, as what happened in the public arena. Where did you swear 'as the LORD lives'? When you were making a business deal, you would say 'As the LORD lives, I will do this'. It would happen in the law courts, 'As the LORD lives, I am going to speak the truth'. It happened in the public arena and so it is talking about in the whole area of your social, political and

economic life when you take the LORD's name into your public life, but if you are going to do it you have to do it in truth and integrity and in justice.

So, if there is radical monotheism and return to social ethics, then what? And you might have expected that the LORD would say, "Well then I will spare you and I won't send you into exile, I'll let you go on living here and the judgement will be suspended", on the principle of chapter 18. And when you come to the second half of Jeremiah 4:2, it is almost as if Jeremiah, as it were, assumes that and jumps over it and says "Yes, of course that's true". If Israel repents, Israel will be spared; that is God's principle, that is what I've been telling them. So he, as it were, takes that for granted and goes on to the wider perspective and says, If you will do these things, *"then the nations will be blessed by him and in him they will glory."* Now that is quite remarkable I think and some commentators observe that this has a missional perspective, or at any rate something that affects the nations. Certainly J.A. Thompson has in his commentary and one or two others, but it seems to me remarkable that here is this very clear, unmistakable echo of the Abrahamic promise: all the nations will be blessed and in him (that is the LORD) they will glory. They will come to worship and praise the Living God, if Israel will repent.

So you see what Jeremiah is saying here is that there is a missional purpose to what he is trying to persuade the Israelites to do, which is what I have been saying about the point of these texts. When Israel returns to their mission, of being the people of God, worshipping the Living God and living according to God's covenant, then God can get on with his mission, which is to begin to bring the nations in, to ingather the nations as he had promised to Abraham.

Now there is something hypothetical about this, because it didn't happen, but nevertheless it shows the mind of God. It shows where God is driving, he wants a people who are shaped by his character, identity and ethic, so that he can then fulfil the promise that he made to Abraham in Genesis 18:19, where he said *"I have chosen you, so that you will teach your people after you to keep the way of the LORD, by doing righteousness and justice, so that I can bring about what I have promised you"*, which is to bless the nations. It seems to me that this underlies Paul's passion for the repentance and restoration of Israel in relation to the ingathering of the nations. You can see that passion of Paul for the Israelites. It is not just because he loves them and he is one of them and he wants them to come to salvation, but because he recognises that in a very great degree, it is the ethical quality of the people of God that enabled the mission of God to proceed. There is no biblical mission, without biblical ethics and this is one illustration of that.

3. The missional locatedness of the readers

The third element of a missional hermeneutic is what Michael Barram calls the missional locatedness of the readers. In other words, a missional reading emerges within a community of people who are rooted in a particular time and place and context and so they need to engage their context in line with God's own missional agenda. So they should be reading Scripture in a way that is not only faithful to its original context (that is, as it is sometimes called the world behind the text, the world that we see through the text into Jeremiah's world, the world of Israel at that time), but also faithful to its significance to our present context (the world in front of the text, the world where we are as we read the text). So that we are using the text, but also reading it in our own context.

a. Reading Jeremiah today

Of course we can do that, first of all, reading Jeremiah today. Jeremiah was called to be a 'Prophet to the nations' and in so many ways there are aspects of his time and the world in which he lived and the word that he brought into his world, which continue to have very real sharpness and relevance today. If this were another whole lecture, we could start talking about the missional relevance of Jeremiah to today's world. Just think of the following issues, every one of them could start off a discussion.

There is the whole *international scene*. In Jeremiah's day there was the collapse of an old world order and a great deal of fear about new international threats. In Jeremiah's day there was *religious confusion among God's people*, there was all the change of Josiah's reformation and yet there was continuing idolatry and misplaced nationalism, dressed up as patriotism and religious fervour, so there was a great deal of confusion in ordinary people. Thirdly, there was the *continuing social evils* that he talks about, inequality, cheating, injustice, immorality, fiddling expenses (well, he doesn't actually mention that, but I dare say he would have if he'd had a chance!). There is the *abuse of political power*, to stifle all dissent, including the murder of prophets like Uriah, the suffering of Jeremiah himself who gets beaten and thrown in prison and so on. There is the *abuse of religious power*, with false prophets and priests and corrupt religious power in collusion with all this evil and immorality actually happening in the temple, in the very source, in religion that has itself gone corrupt. And then, of course, there is the relevance of *God's sovereignty over all history*, including the contemporary events that they were living in and this tough task of seeing the hand of God at work, even within the realities of judgement and suffering, which Jeremiah did - and that is one of the reasons why he was so unpopular. There is what we see in a moment of his message that *the people of God, even in exile, have a continuing mission to perform* in that situation. And, of course, there is his message about *grace in the end*, to quote the title of Gordon McConville's book on Jeremiah, that even after judgement there is hope, the unquenchable, forward-looking Kingdom of God hope that the Bible always has.

b. Reading Jeremiah with the exiles

So there is plenty of scope I think for a missional reading of Jeremiah in our context for all those things. But Jeremiah also had to be read within its own context by the people on whom it had happened. I call that Reading Jeremiah with the exiles. It's fascinating that the book of Jeremiah begins and ends with the fact of the exile. Jeremiah 1:2-3 says that, "*The word of the LORD came to him in the thirteenth year of the reign of Josiah... through the reign of Johoiakim... down to the fifth month of the eleventh year of Zedekiah, son of Josiah king of Judah, when the people of Jerusalem went into exile.*" It's as if we are being told the end of the book before we have even started it, so there is a kind of irony going all the way through this book. Clearly, whoever edited this book and put it all together knows what the end is. This is a book, in a sense, which is constructed by and for those on whom this had happened. And that is also, of course, the way the book ends. At the end of chapter 52:27-34 you have the reference to that exile and the people of God going into judgement.

So when we read the book of Jeremiah, we have to engage in a kind of double-listening. On the one hand we need to listen through the ears of those who first heard the words of Jeremiah being preached to them, his contemporaries when he said these words first, when they failed to respond to what he was accusing them of. But then also we need to hear these words of Jeremiah through the ears of those who would have heard them again in circumstances that Jeremiah had been predicting for forty years which had now actually happened. So in that sense the words of Jeremiah are preaching to the exiles (to quote the title of another book by Ernest Nicholson, except that he used the phrase mainly to describe the prose passage of Jeremiah), whereas I would say it really describes the whole book of Jeremiah, that they were having to listen to these words again as it were, with Jeremiah

saying to them not so much “I told you so,” but saying, “I told you why. Now you understand what I was talking about. Now you understand why you are there. Now what are you going to be? What are you going to do?” And the question for the people in exile of course was this: Did they still have a missional location? Did they still have a mission? Did they still have a reason for existence, or was it curtains now for the people of God? Was it all over, completely finished?

That is what some of them thought. You read some of the Psalms, like Psalm 137 or the book of Lamentations and you realise that these were a people, certainly in the first generation of exile, many of whom thought that they had sinned themselves beyond the possibility of any kind of restoration, unless there was grace in the heart of God for them.

So there they are in exile. What does Jeremiah say to them? Not only in the whole book, but specifically in Jeremiah 29, you have this wonderful letter that he wrote to the exiles. This really is almost where I want to end because the last section is very brief. This letter to the exiles gives them first of all a very surprising new perspective on their situation. The narrator describes its recipients as people *“whom Nebuchadnezzar had carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.”* But when God speaks in the letter he says, Say this *“to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.”* So who did it? Was it Nebuchadnezzar or God? The answer of course is ‘both’. Nebuchadnezzar did it at the level of human history, but behind the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, Jeremiah discerns the hand of God and he says, You are there in exile because God has put you there. So, he says, stop being refugees and become residents. Get married, marry your children off, let them have children. You are going to be there not just for two years as the false prophet Hananiah had thought. You are going to be there for two generations, so settle down, get stuck into where you are, live there, build homes, be in Babylon. It is not your ultimate destination, but it is your present destination, so be there with God. That is the perspective. And then, while you are there, verse 7 says *“Also, seek the shalom of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.”*

I wouldn't have liked to have been the messenger who had to deliver that letter and read it out to the exiles because that is incredible stuff. Telling the exiles, these prisoners of war in Babylon, not seek the shalom of Jerusalem (yes of course they were praying for Jerusalem all the time, that is what Psalm 122 said), but Jeremiah says seek the shalom of Babylon, where you are, and pray to Yahweh for Babylon. That is incredible advice. In other words it is turning mourners into missionaries, it is saying you are not just to sit there singing Psalm 137, you are not just there to lament, you are there ultimately to be a blessing to the people that you live among. In fact, Jeremiah 29:7 is the Abrahamic mission directives no longer just to the nations in general, but to their enemies in particular. It is the closest you get to love your enemies in the Old Testament, pray for Babylon, seek the shalom of Babylon.

And then you have this surprising new hope in verses 10 to 14, where Jeremiah says to them the time will come for Babylon. It will eventually come down, as all empires do and in Babylon's case it will be after about 70 years, and then comes verse 11, *“For I know the plans that I have for you”, says the LORD, “Plans to give you a future and a hope, not to harm you”* and so on. A very famous verse; many of us have probably claimed it as a promise and stuck it up in our bathrooms or whatever, but we see it here in the context of judgement. This is God saying to these people that beyond your suffering under judgement, there lies a future for the people of God. So Jeremiah 29 is, I think, a very important chapter in this book, in which the people of God - even under judgement and in exile - find themselves in a missional location in which they still have an identity and a role and the Abrahamic mission goes on, even in exile.

4. The missional cost to the messenger

Finally, there is the missional cost to the messenger. This is perhaps the more familiar part of the book of Jeremiah for those who like to find missionary sermons in the Old Testament. You have the call of Jeremiah, like the call of Isaiah, the call of Moses or Jonah and so on. But certainly Jeremiah exposes more of himself to us as the sent one of God, because this element of mission is clearly in the prophet that God says *“To everyone to whom I send you, you must go; and whatever I tell you to say, you must say.”* And so the call of Jeremiah in chapter 1 is a very rich passage expressing the sovereignty of God in his choice, in his command, in his care, in his commission. Everything that God says to Jeremiah has a missionary dimension, that he is being sent to the people of Judah.

But the prophet as a missionary in that sense, as a sent one, has a ministry which goes on for forty years of pretty unrelieved suffering and so Jeremiah exposes to us, more than any other prophet, the cost to him - physical, emotional, relational - of what it costs to actually give the message of God:

- he suffered rejection and attack from his own family in chapter 11;
- he was unpopular with the whole nation, they were all cursing him in chapter 15;
- he was disillusioned and frustrated and wished he had never been born in chapter 15;
- he became suicidal, rejecting his very calling, in chapter 20;
- he pours out disappointment with God in chapters 15 and 20, accusing God of deceiving him and deserting him;
- he has aching grief such that he wishes his whole head was made of water so that he could cry enough tears;
- he had profound life-long loneliness, because God told him not to get married, or even attend weddings and funerals;
- he was treated as a traitor, when he was actually deeply in love with his people;
- he was beaten, imprisoned and mocked and his words were ignored for decades and burned and disobeyed and he ended up being dragged off against his will to Egypt, with his faithful servant Barrack.

So in so many ways, Jeremiah has this reality of a life of mission lived in suffering and it is no wonder that people of Jesus' day saw in Jesus something that echoed what they had thought of Jeremiah and, indeed, so did Paul and so have many generations of witnesses and martyrs and faithful missionaries of the gospel.

So, in other words, what I am saying here is that a missional reading of Jeremiah is not just at the level of theology. It has to also come down to the level of practice and faithfulness and the cost that it means to be a sent one of God.

That is something of what I hoped to bring to you of the ways in which we might take the book of Jeremiah and see it through the lens of perspective of a missional hermeneutic.

(Most Bible quotations from the NIV)

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