Salvation to the ends of the Earth

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Salvation to the ends of the earth

A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF MISSION

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Chapter One

Introduction

Between Eden and the eternal state, between Abraham and Armageddon, between Babel and the beast's confinement to the lake of fire, few biblical topics are as important as mission. This is because mission, while purposed by God prior even to sin, is inextricably linked to man's sinfulness and need for redemption and God's provision of salvation in the person and work of our Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. This 'good news' of salvation in Jesus, however, must be made known. Thus mission is the ingredient that both precedes Christian existence and constitutes a major motivation for Christian living: the saving mission of Jesus constitutes the foundation for Christian mission, and the Christian gospel is the message of mission, a mission that is not optional but mandatory.

A biblical-theological approach

Mission has thus far been one of the step-children of New Testament theology. Rarely has this significant biblical theme been given its due in the overall discipline. The present study, while also concerned to deal with larger missiological issues, represents a modest effort to help fill this gap. An attempt is made to explore mission comprehensively throughout the entire sweep of biblical history, including the Old Testament, the second-temple period and the New Testament. The approach followed is biblical-theological.

Previous treatments of the theme of mission have tended either (a) to be descriptive and to stress the diversity of the different portions of Scripture, or (b) to assume the pre-eminence of mission in a given book of Scripture at the outset, and

1 Note the representative survey by Kostenberger (1999a: 347-362).
then to find these assumptions confirmed in the study of the respective biblical writings. The present work seeks to follow a third path, combining a commitment to a biblical-theological method and a salvation-historical approach with an openness to examine the various portions of Scripture regarding their respective contributions to the biblical theme of 'mission'. This allows for the possibility that certain books may contribute little, or nothing, to the theme. It also makes room for discontinuity between mission in the two Testaments. The difficult question of whether or not second-temple Jews pursued mission likewise must be treated primarily as a historical rather than a dogmatic exercise. For biblical theology is first of all inductive, and thus must be open to diversity.

At the same time, the present study proceeds with the expectation that the message of the biblical writings regarding mission will turn out to be more than a conglomerate of disparate data. A biblical-theological approach may indeed reveal a certain amount of diversity in the scriptural teaching on mission. Since Scripture, however, is ultimately God's Word, we may legitimately expect to see an underlying logic and unity in the biblical message on this subject. For Scripture is united by one primary pervading purpose: the tracing of God's unfolding plan of redemption. It everywhere assumes that this God acts coherently and purposefully in history.

In claiming that our approach is biblical-theological we recognize that it is neither a systematic-theological nor a missiological examination. This is not to suggest that we have no interest in systematic-theological issues or missiological questions. Quite the reverse. It is hoped that any biblical-theological insights or conclusions may help both systematicians and missiologists in their own study of the issues related to this subject. But in the first instance, at least, we are not addressing the legitimate questions of these related disciplines.

We have conducted our research self-consciously as believers who are committed to the lordship of Christ, rather than as dispassionate, 'neutral' observers. Our interest in the subject at hand is not merely an academic one. Our driving motivation springs from a passion to see God's mission carried out in today's world.


5 Cf. esp. ch. 5 entitled 'The Interpreter' in Maier 1994, and here particularly the discussions under the headings 'Faith as Aid to Understanding', 'The Difference between the Regenerate and the Unregenerate Interpreter', and 'The Work of the Spirit on the Interpreter'.

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History, literature and theology

The study rests on three pillars: history, literature and theology. History is important, because biblical scholarship should practise the craft of every historian: painstaking historical research. Christianity is an historical religion, and if its historical moorings are uncertain, theological findings will necessarily be undermined. Literature has its place, because Scripture has come down to us as a collection of sixty-six books, in the form of literature rather than unmediated historical events. These writings convey history, but they do so by way of interpreted history, written by believers who put on their writings the stamp of their convictions as to the significance of the events they record. The best approach to uncover biblical teaching on a given theme, and the one followed in the present study, is therefore a narrative one, which traces the way in which teaching on a particular topic unfolds in a given corpus of Scripture.

Finally, theology must be given its due. Unlike history-of-religions treatments, which are largely descriptive and comparative in nature, the present study proceeds in the conviction that Scripture is first and foremost a divinely inspired book, setting forth authoritative teaching that provides a framework for Christians' beliefs as well as actions. Thus the primary purpose for the present work is a careful exploration of the biblical-theological interconnections between the different portions of Scripture. No abstract definition is postulated at the outset of this work, if for no other reason than that Scripture itself does not define 'mission' (Stott 1991: 1). We consider that an inductive exegesis leading to biblical theology should come first, after which an effort is made to relate the contributions of the different corpora, and even Testaments, to each other (Kostenberger 1995c).

This does not mean that any of us approaches Scripture on a given topic as a blank slate. We all have a synthetic approximation in mind when we set out to explore biblical teaching on a particular subject. At present our concern is simply to maintain maximum openness to the actual scriptural message on mission and flexibility throughout the entire process of exploration. On a general level, the criterion for inclusion of a given portion of Scripture for discussion in the present volume may simply be that it relates in a significant way to the proclamation of God's name and of his saving purposes in Christ to the

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unbelieving world (hence the title *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth*). These passages may ordinarily be accessed through a particular writer's terminology (e.g. 'sending'), and it is in any case important not to lose sight of the connection between biblical *words* and biblical *themes*. Nevertheless, any given scriptural theme is greater than strict verbal boundaries, so that attention to larger overarching concepts must balance terminological considerations.

Moreover, in our commitment to an inductive biblical-theological approach, we come to our task aware that considerable previous work has been done in this area. An acquaintance with the history of biblical scholarship is necessary, for it provides us with many questions that have, not without good reason, set the agenda for scholarly discussion. Was Old Testament Israel called to active missionary outreach similar to the New Testament church? Can second-temple Judaism be characterized as a missionary religion? Did Jesus limit his mission to Israel or did he extend it also to the Gentiles? Did Paul encourage believers to emulate his practice of evangelism and mission, or not? These are just some of the questions that any treatment of mission in Scripture needs to take up and seek to answer as precisely as possible. We recognize the need to be conversant with a wide range of literature, in the fields of biblical studies (Old Testament as well as New Testament) and missiology. Given the magnitude of the task (and space constraints no less), our goal has been to interact with major representative works rather than provide an exhaustive treatment of the whole.

The procedure followed in this work

The plan for this book, then, is as follows. The opening chapter is devoted to an exploration of mission in the Old Testament, focusing on the major theological strands (notably the Abrahamic promises) that lay a foundation for mission in later Scripture. This is followed by a chapter on mission in the second-temple period. Here the question dealt with is whether second-temple Judaism can be characterized as a missionary religion or not. Starting with chapter four, the various corpora of the New Testament will be treated. The three Synoptic Gospels provide the starting point, in the order Mark – Matthew – Luke, based on the tentative assumption of Markan priority. Jesus will not be dealt with in a separate chapter, since we have no unmediated

7 *Cf.* ch. 2 in Köstenberger 1998a which deals more fully with this subject.
knowledge of him and his mission apart from the Gospels (just as the early church will not be treated separately but in the chapter on the book of Acts). Issues of an integrative kind will be taken up in the concluding synthesis.

Luke's Gospel is treated jointly with the book of Acts, in keeping with the two-volume character of this work. This is immediately followed by the chapter on mission in Paul. Treating Luke and Paul's writings in close proximity to each other is particularly helpful in that both share many points of contact. The chapter on Paul is followed by a discussion of mission in John. In keeping with the profoundly theological orientation of John's Gospel, the investigation will constitute a thematic study along narrative lines. The final chapter discusses mission in the General Epistles and the book of Revelation. While grouped together under one heading, the treatment is not monolithic. Still, the circumstances of the church in the second half of the first century AD, in particular the mounting persecution, provided some significant common ground for mission in these writings. A concluding synthesis seeks to assess the way in which the contributions of the various biblical writers relate to each other in terms of diversity as well as underlying unity.

Conclusion

This study of mission in the Bible has been richly rewarding for us. As we have sought to trace the major contours of the scriptural message on this topic, we have come to a deeper understanding of God's gracious salvation in the Lord Jesus Christ for a needy and lost world. It is our earnest desire that this book may lead to 1. a greater appreciation of God's saving plan that moves from creation to new creation; 2. a deeper grasp of the significance of Jesus Christ's sending by the Father and his mission accomplished through the witness of his apostles; and 3. a commitment, as contemporary disciples who follow in the footsteps of the apostles and first witnesses, to the glorious gospel of our great God and Saviour.