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TIM DAKIN

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# An Appreciation of Chris Wright's *The Mission of God*

That there is a grand narrative in the Bible, that there are key biblical themes, and that both these can be related to Jesus were convictions I came to whilst studying 'A' level Religious Studies. The syllabus was primarily focused on the Old and New Testaments and I had the good fortune to be taught by someone who loved the Old Testament, and who kept returning to the larger story and key themes of the Bible as a whole. That this whole is best seen in the light of God's mission was something that only became clear to me later. It is this conviction that is central to *The Mission of God*.

Many will congratulate Chris Wright on this magisterial survey of God's mission, especially the way in which the Old Testament is shown to be the foundation for the Christian worldview. With its three main parts looking at the God of Mission, the People of Mission and the Arena of Mission, there is much here to resource a generation of Christians. People can throw their bucket into this well again and again: it's sunk deep, deep into the Old Testament and on into the New Testament. It's also accessible. So a keen 'A' level student might dip into it and discover how the larger part of the Bible, the Old Testament, relates to what became the Christian mission focused on Jesus. But *The Mission of God* will also require professors of Old and New Testaments to think again about how to interpret the Scriptures.

Perhaps more than the usual reviewer I'm a 'jack of all trades and master of none': I'm a mission executive! What follows is therefore written from the perspective of what has given me inspiration, after which I raise some friendly questions.

## A strong theology of mission

Part One of *The Mission of God* is where Wright sets out his hermeneutical approach. Here he states that the double objective of his book is to demonstrate not only 'that Christian mission is fully grounded in the Scripture' but also 'that a strong theology of the mission of God provides a fruitful hermeneutical framework within which to read the whole Bible' (26). So mission is not only found in the Bible, the Bible is a product of mission and mission is also what the Bible as a whole is all about.

In developing his missional hermeneutic Wright concludes by offering us a fivefold panoramic schema on how to read the Bible. We consider *first*, God's purpose for the whole of creation, in redemption and recreation; *second*, God's purpose for human life in general on the planet, including culture, relationships,

ethics and behaviour; *third*, God's election of Israel, their relationship with the nations and their national life; *fourth*, the centrality of Jesus' messianic and missional identity (focused on the cross and resurrection) in relation to Israel and the nations; *fifth*, God's calling to the church to be the community of Jews and Gentiles extending God's blessing to all. As Wright testifies,

The more I have attempted to use (or stimulate others to use) a missional map of the Bible, orientated fundamentally to the mission of God, the more it seems that not only do the major features of the landscape stand out clearly but also other less well-trodden paths and less scenic scholarly tourist attractions turn out to have surprising and fruitful connections with the main panorama (69).

During the year I did a survey reading of *The Mission of God*, diving into some chapters in more detail. Over the summer, however, I've read the volume again more slowly. I come away inspired anew by what Wright calls a *strong* theology of the mission of God. In the work I do I experience challenging mission contexts amidst a fast-moving scene of organisational change. I find I need to keep feeding the vision. I am often looking for resources that will inspire me with a strong theology of God's mission. *The Mission of God* is such a resource and, whilst the market for mission executives may be limited, its impact on that group could be significant. The biblical vision of God's mission in *The Mission of God* is strong enough for those who help lead others in the challenges and changes of mission.

### Confidence in the God of mission

So what are the strong bits? First, I like the confidence with which Wright sets out his material. There's always a bit of anxiety within Protestantism and I appreciate Wright's Catholic confidence. He has a strong conviction that the mission of God makes sense of the Bible, but his conviction in the *God of mission* is even stronger. However, to interpret the Bible from the perspective of the mission of God does not mean the Bible is just for missionaries, or that we must all become missionaries to understand the Bible better. Wright differentiates between *missionary* and *missional*, suggesting that the latter adjective helps free up the connections between mission, God and the Bible from associations confined to the activity of sending cross-cultural missionaries. The God of mission is the God whose mission is to the whole world and in which all are called to participate by becoming disciples and witnesses of Jesus.

To be missional is to express mission in all that you are and do. God and the Bible are like that. In *The Mission of God* it is the missional nature of the reality of God, of his people and of the world that Wright hopes to delineate. Interestingly, Wright also wants to say that a missiological reading of Scripture is also too confining, implying that missiology is more focused and a less holistic view (25) than a missional one (back to this later).

He states 'we could meaningfully talk of the missional basis of the Bible as the biblical basis of mission' (29). The focus is not just on the intentional actions of mission; Wright is also trying to draw people into the narrative of the Bible as a mission perspective on all of life. In other words, when Wright talks of 'missional'

he is talking about the mission character of God, the Bible, the people of God and the Christian life.

Perhaps surprisingly, this is a bit of a relief for someone like me involved in the focused work of intentional mission. *The Mission of God* provides the answer to the question: 'What is it that the mission societies remind us that the church is for?' Well the answer, clearly in *The Mission of God*, is the mission of God. Mission societies remind and maintain the intentional mission of the church so that the church can be better at being primarily missional, i.e. characterised and shaped by the mission of God.

### **Monotheistic mission**

Second (from Part Two), I enjoyed the way Wright insisted on the significance of Israel's monotheism in the mission of God. Again and again this theme emerges. Wright regularly returns to a substantial and seminal article by Richard Bauckham on 'Biblical Theology and the Problems of Monotheism'.<sup>1</sup> Wright thinks this article offers a 'very perceptive assessment of the topic' (73, n2) by bringing to focus the key issue: that in Yahweh the Jews did not just have one god among many other national gods; rather they believed in Yahweh as *the* God, a God of 'transcendent uniqueness'. This is strong stuff and goes to the heart of many a mission question in today's pluralistic world. The most sharply focused versions of this question are to do with the uniqueness and Lordship of Jesus. Wright argues for the greatest possible unity between what is said of Yahweh and what is said of Jesus: the New Testament presumes a monotheism of transcendent uniqueness in its exploration of the person and work of Jesus in his outworking of the mission of God.

The unique transcendence of the living Lord is shown through his loving relationship with Israel in history. The universal qualities of his uniqueness are revealed in relation to the heavens, the earth and all the nations: he is creator, owner, governor, saviour, guide etc for all. The relationship towards Israel is missional, but it is a relationship that has missional significance for the whole world. God has a missional love for Israel as revealed in his dealings with them in the Exodus and the Exile but God also seeks to show this same love for all nations with Israel as example and witness of this.

One of the challenges to monotheism, today as in the past, is idolatry. This is not just in the direct rejection of the ultimate significance of Jesus. It is evident also in the blind following after alternative forms of ultimate reality in consumerism, celebrity culture, and the ideology of globalisation. These gods are most destructive. They enter into the heart of our cultures and persuade people, by the use of everyday language and popular culture, that something less than God is worth living for. It is often only in trans-cultural mission, or in relating to Christians of other cultures, that such idolatries become obvious as people discover their prejudices and presuppositions.

To say that there is one God, the Lord, and that he should be loved above all things, with all of ourselves, is therefore counter-cultural, requiring a trans-cultural interpretation. This is because it is God's purpose to draw all things into a relationship with himself through Christ. As Bauckham concludes in his article,<sup>2</sup> it

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1 Bauckham 2004.

2 *Ibid.* 218-29.

is from the Shema that the New Testament writers draw in order to affirm God as: the one who is also the God of the Gentiles (Rom. 3:28); the one God, the Father, and one Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 8:6); and then, in Jesus' own words, that 'I and the Father are one' (Jn. 10:30).

To have a biblical monotheistic faith means understanding the Old Testament interpretation of monotheism rather than using the concept of monotheism itself. The church should seek consistency with the Old Testament monotheistic faith in interpreting what Jesus means for revising that tradition. Any attempt to introduce a post-modern pluralism into the Old Testament or even into an understanding of Trinity is thus dependent upon Enlightenment views of theism in terms of abstract concepts rather than a living and missional faith in the Lord. Full-blooded Christianity is not characterised by concepts but by a monotheistic missional God!

### Blessing the nations

Another strong feature of *The Mission of God* (from Part Three) is the emphasis on 'blessing all nations'. Wright is adamant that God's elect people are created, chosen and commissioned for the mission of God which is the blessing of others, in fact the blessing of all nations. Wright wants to root this perspective in the Abrahamic covenant. He places this above the Mosaic covenant or the covenant with David.

Arguably God's covenant with Abraham is the single most important biblical tradition within a biblical theology of mission and a missional hermeneutic of the Bible (189).

Wright makes this statement because he knows that the other covenants (even that with Noah) can lead to a short-circuiting of the ultimate significance of the Lord's unique transcendence: the covenant and its blessings could end up being confined to just one family, or one people or one kingdom. The Abrahamic covenant, however, makes it clear that this is meant as a blessing for all nations. Go and be a blessing summarises the strongest expression of the Abrahamic covenant as found in Genesis 22:16-18 (and indeed the Great Commission). Wright shows that this blessing is creational and relational, missional and historical, covenantal and ethical. From a Christian perspective it is therefore Christological and multinational.

Obviously, Wright is working backwards and forwards between the Testaments in exploring this theme. It is arguably because of the Christian mission that Abraham is seen as the paramount covenant figure. Nevertheless, Jesus and his followers could not have interpreted the tradition this way unless the tradition also had this trajectory itself.

Yet having acknowledged the fact that the covenant with Abraham opens up God's concern beyond Israel to the Gentiles, we may yet miss the emphasis on *blessing*. It is God's purpose, in reconciling all nations to himself, to *bless* them: to offer them a way beyond the curse that rests on creation. 'Death itself must be destroyed if the curse is to be removed and the way opened to the tree of life' (199). This is for the blessing of individuals and nations, humans and animals, the whole of creation (208-221).

Wright draws together around the theme of this Part (the People of God), a network of dimensions in God's relationship with creation in order to understand the nature of this blessing. Here is the gift of life, God's image in creation, God's judgment but saving actions to restore new possibilities, the establishment of Israel and the covenants, the Exile and Exodus. All of these are drawn into an interpretation of Jesus that puts him in the centre of a vast and huge, yet deeply relational, reconstruction of reality around his death and resurrection. This is not new, of course, but for it to be presented as a whole, with scholarship, in a gentle but corrective manner is most enriching. This is generous orthodoxy (in one of its traditions), providing an ample feast for the faithful.

### Exodus and jubilee

In developing the implications of this perspective on blessing, Wright explores what is a fourth strong theme, that of the Exodus and Jubilee: redemption and restoration. He continues to show that even in the particular dynamics of God's involvement in the history of Israel – in their election and the gift of the law – there is revealed something that goes beyond themselves and is for all nations. This 'beyond themselves' is important as it challenges a constant tendency in us all: the incurvature of self and a concern just for our own community. This was a problem even in the Reformation churches which failed to reach out beyond themselves into new regions in order to share the gospel, creating that yawning gap (as Barth calls it<sup>3</sup>) in their ecclesiology that would be filled only after further renewal and revival. The Mission Societies were one of the ways this gap was filled.

Whilst the Exodus and Jubilee are distinctive and definitive to the life of Israel, Wright shows how in the mission of God to all nations they also have greater significance, ultimately through the Lord Jesus Christ. It is therefore not surprising that Wright so quickly turns to Jesus in his chapter on the Exodus (chapter 8) as the model of Redemption, or that one of his most extensive sections on the significance of Jesus' cross is found in chapter 9 on Jubilee, the model of Restoration. Wright is working forwards and backwards in his interpretation of Scripture, showing that the God of mission is not confined: he is the God of yesterday, today and forever.

The biblical narrative requires that we have an exodus-shaped redemption that demands an exodus-shaped mission (275). God's redemption of humanity is like the Exodus, and mission which has this redemption at its centre will be exodus-shaped too. The victory of God over the enemies of Israel, and his rescue of the people, are the key aspects of the Exodus. Neither the victory nor the rescue should be spiritualised or politicised. The Exodus is holistic: God saves his people from their slavery, enables them to leave Egypt with new economic wealth, and wants to draw them into a new worshipping relationship with him and a way of life that matches the glory of God. This is both the shape and the motivation of God's mission.

Jesus' mission should be understood in this same way, particularly the cross: 'The cross, like the exodus, was the victory of God over his enemies, and through

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3 See Scott 1978:22f.

the cross God has rescued us from slavery to them' (278). Mission which is shaped by the cross will therefore be committed to the kind of evangelism and social action that reflects both the victory of God and the liberation of humanity, drawing people into a new relationship with God, reflecting a freedom of living for him in the whole of life. This is what the victory of God over evil and the liberation of humanity from sin means.

In exploring the model of restoration found in the Jubilee, Wright first outlines the importance of Jubilee for the life of Israel.

The jubilee was in essence an economic institution. It had two main points of concern: the family and the land. It was rooted, therefore, in the social structure of Israelite kinship and the economic system of land tenure that was based on it (290).

Fundamentally, the Jubilee was the practical outworking of a theology of God's people and of God's land. That the people were all God's people meant that all should be protected from poverty and exploitation. The readjustment of the Jubilee year, when property and people were returned to their original family or clan, ensured their survival and affirmed that all the land was God's. Through the Jubilee, God was therefore ensuring that all were restored to a better life.

The complete restoration of all things is how the gospel, and therefore God's mission, is to be interpreted. This is not just for Israel, but for the nations and the cosmos. The unavoidable cost of this mission is the cross of Jesus which is therefore the centre of a mission in which the whole church takes the whole gospel to the whole world.

Ultimately all that will be there in the new, redeemed creation will be there because of the cross. And conversely, all that will not be there (suffering, tears, sin, Satan, sickness, oppression, corruption, decay and death) will not be there because they will have been defeated and destroyed by the cross (315).

## Covenant and ethics

The fifth strong theme is found in another pair of chapters (chapters 10 and 11) where Wright explores the missional implications of covenant and ethics. These could not be more relevant to Anglicans at this time. Wright brings together, in these two chapters, covenant and the way of the Lord. Covenant, alongside election in Abraham and their exodus from Egypt, is the final great component in the foundations of Israel and walking in the way of the Lord is a summary of the Law.

The covenant with Noah is creation-wide, and the covenant with David is focused on God's reign in Israel. Between both, however, the most significant covenants are established with Abraham and through Moses at Sinai. Again Wright will not only read these from a missional perspective, he also says the mission of God is what covenant and walking in the way of the Lord are all about. 'The sequence of covenants is one way to make our way through the historical narrative and also provides a major clue to its significance and eventual outcome' (325). The covenants with Noah, Abraham, at Sinai, and then later with David are this strand



which forms the essential character of the narrative of God's mission. As we've seen, Wright gives paradigmatic significance to the Abrahamic Covenant yet in the outworking of God's covenantal relationship with Israel, as an expression of his mission, the Sinai Covenant is definitive.

Once again the detailed work that Wright does on the text in relation to the mission of God forces readers to ask 'Have I missed the main point here about God's mission?'. Without resorting to detailed explorations of biblical theologies, I think there are enough theologians who are within Wright's stream of scholarship for there to be a rethink about what we've missed in relation to the Old Testament and God's mission.

The covenants that God makes with Israel are missional in purpose: they are intended to reconcile the individual, the people, the nations, and the creation to himself. It is with the successive failures of these covenants that there emerges the hope for a new covenant. It is this new covenant that prophets foretold and which Jesus fulfilled. In this new covenant, it is God in relation to himself in, through and with humanity, who establishes the new covenant. This new covenant cannot be broken because it is the embodied expression of God's covenant with himself in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ.

When Christ gives the disciples the commission to take the good news to all nations there is therefore a covenantal shape to his command that echoes the Sinai covenant but also interprets the nature of that covenant in terms of mission. The following key elements of covenant are found: there is the element of who God is as the one who has all authority in heaven and earth; there is command and response and the need to teach in the manner that is of (and like that of) Christ; and there is the promise of blessing.

The great climatic vision of what this means in terms of God's ultimate purpose, his mission and his intention for creation, is found in Revelation. There we are given a vision of all peoples, nations and tongues surrounding God's throne and worshipping 'the Lamb'. This is, of course, the Lamb whose sacrifice reconstitutes the old covenant in a new covenant secured through his own blood. As Wright says, 'the mission of God is as integral to the sequence of the covenants as they are to the overarching grand narrative of the whole Bible'. He then explains this in relation to the Revelation vision:

Noah is there in the vision of the new creation, a new heavens and a new earth after judgement. Abraham is there in the ingathering and blessing of all nations from every tongue and language. Moses is there in the covenantal assertion that 'they will be his people and God himself will be with them and be their God' and 'the dwelling of God is with men and he will live with them'. David is there in the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, and in the identity of Jesus as the Lion of Judah and root of David. And the New Covenant is there in the fact that all of this will be accomplished by the blood of the Lamb who was slain (356).

Turning to ethics, Wright makes a unique contribution by exploring what he calls missional ethics, suggesting that the human response to God's mission includes the ethical dimension: 'to obey God's commands is to reflect God in human life'



(364). To walk in the way of the Lord is the ethical expression of God's mission. God's mission has been expressed in the Exodus and he has invited people to respond to him in covenant and to live his mission life among themselves for the blessing of others.

To walk in the way of the Lord, then, means (among other things) doing for others what God wishes done for them, or more particularly, doing for others what (in Israel's case) God has already done for you (in their experience of his deliverance from alien status in Egypt and provision of food and clothing in the wilderness) (365).

Israel has been elected by God to live God's life for the blessing of the nations. This is the logic of the biblical narrative. This logic of election, ethics and mission puts the requirements for holiness in the context of Abraham's calling. Leviticus makes sense when read as the outline of the kind of life God expects of the people whom he will use to bring a blessing to the nations. As God's agent of mission, God's people need to reflect the life of God. Deuteronomy makes clear the connections between what God has done, the covenant that God makes, and the implications for reflecting God's life. Wright provides detailed explorations of passages in Leviticus and Deuteronomy which illustrate these overarching perspectives. Once again, perspectives on these sections of the Bible are refreshed with the missional hermeneutic. Wright does the same with brief explorations of books in the New Testament. His conclusion to chapter eleven puts it well:

In short, as God's covenant people, Christians are meant to be:

- a people who are light to the world by their good lives (1 Pet)
- a people who are learning obedience and teaching it to the nations (Mt)
- a people who love one another in order to show who they belong to (Jn)

It would be hard to find a more concise articulation of the integration of Christian ethics and Christian mission (392).

## A question about wisdom in mission

In this final section, in exploring what Wright has to say in the fourth part of his book about the Arena of Mission, I want to put a question which I hope fits in with how Wright explores this topic with reference to the Wisdom strand of the Old Testament. He suggests that Wisdom literature helps to relate the specific story of Israel to the wider arena of the world through an interrogative analogy. Wisdom asks the question, 'If God relates to humanity and the earth in the way he does to Israel and to the Promised Land, then what about ...?'

Wisdom literature models how God's mission through Israel is now considered in the wider context. Wisdom in the Old Testament is like Wisdom in other cultures: it explores the best way to live. There are borrowings, overlaps and connections but for Wright the bridge between Israel's Wisdom literature and that of other cultures does not imply a common access to salvation. Only through Israel, and in the Lord Jesus Christ, has God acted to save. The bridge of Wisdom enables this revelation to be conveyed with meaning but also without compromise. Israel is unique in its election and Jesus is unique in his person. However, the reflective

tradition of Wisdom enables the sharing of these perspectives to take place in the context of creation and cultures.

Two examples, of 'What about?' are considered in some detail: environmental care and the Aids/HIV crisis. The shared reality here is that these are common concerns for the whole of humanity. The biblical view is that these common concerns need responses generated by the God of mission. Wright offers some very helpful reflections on both these issues yet I sense that it is here some of my questions about *The Mission of God* begin to emerge. From an 'architectural' point of view, it might have been helpful to have had something of the content and approach found in this fourth Part of the book included earlier. The logic of the book is helpful but the messy and visceral reality of mission could have been introduced earlier as a way of engaging with what the mission of God means today. Wright is aware of what Wisdom allows for, and he may have therefore wanted a more objective presentation of the rest of the Old Testament tradition first. As he says

The most challenging difference between Wisdom and the rest of the Old Testament tradition arises when some voices within the former express doubts about or question the universal applicability of some of the mainline affirmations in other parts of the Old Testament (450).

But, to put the question in more objective terms in the form of theological disciplines, it might have been good if the challenging difference between missiology and the rest of theological studies was given earlier voice. Something of the significance of Wright's exposition would then have become missiologically clear to readers. It's not that Wright is not engaged with mission questions, or has not himself been involved in the practice of mission. It is more that the mission questions could have been introduced earlier to provide the engagement with the perspective Wright is developing. Of course, what Wright is doing is showing that within biblical narrative around the key issues in the stories of Abraham and Israel, the mission of God is revealed. But might this intra-textual perspective have benefited from an inter-textual engagement from the start? This could have been kept within Wright's overall framework as he could have internalised, within the biblical narrative, the resulting inter-textual/contextual discussion through his use of Wisdom.

For example, the very important discussion of the monotheism of Israel could have been more deeply embedded in the current debates about the uniqueness of Christ within the contemporary context where people are increasingly aware of many faiths. Wright does not ignore this, and early on spends two pages (130-1) exploring some issues raised by these connections. He also refers to another book of his on the subject of the Uniqueness of Christ. However, the Wisdom-type questioning is not integral to the argument. I wanted less exposition of some of the details and more connection with the mission questions. There are further considerations of the uniqueness of Christ later in *The Mission of God*, but I hoped for something more to be driven home here.

As it is, I think Wright has another concern to which he returns again and again: that of the universal significance of the story of Israel and of Jesus. This seems

to be more important. The irony here, of course, is that an emphasis on the universal introduces the Wisdom viewpoint from the start. In other words, it is precisely because of Wright's insistence and default concern with the universal 'a blessing to all nations' interpretation of the mission of God that the Wisdom contribution emerges with such significance! Thus the growth of the global church puts the inter-cultural question at the heart of biblical interpretation. Put in simplistic terms, what would happen if Wright engaged with a post-colonial interpretation of Scripture as a kind of conversation partner from the start? This might make the book much longer, but just a footnoted dialogue might have opened up the universal emphasis he is promoting in an interesting way.

For example, there is a viewpoint in postcolonial studies that suggests it is knowledge, including biblical knowledge, which has been colonised and not just territory. Therefore, only as the voice of the southern continents, tri-continentalism, is introduced or forces its way into hermeneutics will true universal Wisdom be known. An engagement with South American, African and Asian biblical interpreters might have allowed Wright to explore what the Wisdom-significance of his missional perspective implies as a blessing for all nations. Could claiming the universal significance of the narrative without engaging in the inter-cultural and inter-faith discussion of the presumed uniqueness of the scriptural revelation therefore undermine the very claims being made?

Of course, in defence of Wright, he does not set out to do this. He wants to provide an accessible and pretty exhaustive outline of what a missional reading of the Bible looks like according to the logic of the scriptural narrative. However, what if the logic of mission engagement runs differently and is much more like Wright's own exploration of the place of Wisdom in Scripture? Wisdom begins with 'Why do the righteous suffer when God has promised them a good life?'. So, within a limited frame of reference of the inter-faith context of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, there could be a very interesting exploration of what a blessing to all nations might mean to these faiths who all count Abraham as their father and yet have remained distinct from each other and would claim some uniqueness and universality.<sup>4</sup> Exploring how these different faiths, with a universal perspective based on their scriptures, actually tackle the questions of life and therefore seek the Wisdom of God for living God's way would be an interesting exploration.

This is not to advocate for an apologetics approach over that of exegetical proclamation. It is, however, to ask whether, perhaps, this is how God himself has revealed the nature of his mission. God the Lord seeks us out and asks 'Where are you Adam?'. It is in our response that we also discover more of how he works with us to achieve a reconciliation that is accomplished through the process of relating to us.

Wright's book helps me better to respond to God in my commitment to his mission in the world. I am enormously grateful for this resource of true 'divinity'. I shall return to my underlinings of passages and discover, in new re-readings, more of the riches of Christ.

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4 The kind of model that might be promising is that of 'scriptural reasoning'. See Ford and Peckfold 2006.

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