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A response to Ross, McCoy, Dakin and Jensen on *The Mission of God*

I can begin in no other way than expressing my very warm thanks to you all – Cathy Ross, Michael Jensen, Tim Dakin and Mike McCoy. Thanks not only for persevering in reading my work so thoroughly but also for honouring it with such thoughtful, constructively critical reviews. It has been humbling, encouraging and instructive to listen to your comments, reflect upon them and learn from them. I did consider, Mike, framing my response as a letter, like your review (which was a nice touch, thanks!), but found it became too complicated addressing all four of you in person. So it's back to boring academic third person surnames, I'm afraid. I trust it will not diminish too much the personal gratitude of my response.

Metaphors and subtitles

Both Jensen and McCoy are troubled by the book's subtitle, 'Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative', though for slightly different reasons. McCoy suggests it gives the rather self-important impression that the book is going to unlock a secret of the Bible's true message that nobody else has done before. And, of course, I claim no such thing. Jensen finds it one of several troublesome metaphors from a hermeneutical angle, wondering if it means the Bible is a closed door or locked safe without such a key. A concern also raised by Ross. Again, I had no intention of pushing the metaphor of a single participle that far.

Perhaps I should regret the choice of sub-title, though I think both reviewers are reading too much into it. But then maybe so do other readers. The sub-title only emerged at a late stage of the book's passage through the publishing process, after several other attempts, such as 'surveying the Bible's message', or 'reading the whole Bible for mission'. It was felt that we needed a somewhat more active or dynamic verb connected with the sense of the Bible being in the form of a grand narrative. Eventually 'unlocking' was the winner in the email discussion! The fact that this metaphor arrived late is evident in the fact that I don't think I even refer to it until the last pages of the book, when, carried away by my own rhetoric and, having by then fixed the subtitle, I wrote, 'this is the grand narrative that is unlocked when we turn the hermeneutical key of reading all the Scriptures in the light of the mission of God' (534). I would agree that this may read as a pretentious flourish. But when you are that close to finishing a book at last, a certain excited euphoria colours the language.

Jensen is particularly observant when he notes that I start out in the book offering to explore a missional hermeneutic as a fruitful way of reading the whole Bible, without denying the existence or validity of other approaches, but by the

conclusion I am writing as if this has been demonstrated to be *the* (in the sense of 'the only') valid hermeneutic. Well, merely for the record, I wrote the opening chapters of Part One about four years before completing the book and crafting the Epilogue. And over that time I genuinely became more convinced of the case I was building, as I explored every area of Scripture in greater depth than I had ever managed in years of lecturing.

I suppose every author who seeks to make a sustained argument for a particular position runs the danger of seeming to exalt that position unduly above all others. So let me say that I don't think I say anywhere – not even in the Epilogue – that a missional hermeneutic surpasses, excludes, replaces or diminishes all other possible approaches to reading and understanding the Bible. That would be arrogant folly. Nevertheless, I stand by my convictions that it

- has been a neglected hermeneutical method of approach but is gaining increasing recognition as worth exploring;
- does open up a way of understanding the whole Bible and its message;
- is consistent with the central narrative drama of the whole library of biblical books;
- is illuminating and theologically fruitful in building connections between different parts of the canon and different major themes within the canon;
- enables us to give full value to God's revelation in the Old Testament scriptures while recognizing the normative centrality of Jesus Christ for Christian reading of the both Testaments.

Jensen, however, complains of a lack of conceptual precision at the level of philosophical hermeneutics (which would not necessarily surprise me since there is something more intuitive than philosophical about my approach). Again I think he presses my metaphors ('framework', 'overarching', 'map' etc) too hard. Metaphors are notoriously easy to mix. They are not necessarily meant to be mutually exclusive (as when Jensen says, '“frameworks” become “maps” – Well, which are they?' Try asking that about the Psalmists' metaphors for God, or Paul's for the church).

And is it redundant or tautologous to seek to articulate the coherence of the overarching message? I think it is possible (with any body of literature – including great scriptures of other religions), to agree that there is some overarching message, and yet disagree both as to what that is, and whether it is coherent. Let me say that I would welcome it if those who are trained in philosophical hermeneutics (such as Anthony Billington, whose initial question provided so much impetus for persevering with this book) could help at this point and refine or re-calibrate what I am trying to say. Metaphors seem unavoidable, whether we talk about reading the Bible 'from a certain angle', or 'in the light of this or that perspective', or 'in a certain direction', or 'with some framework of understanding', or 'through a particular lens'. All I can say is that reading the Bible as a library of books that communicates to me who the living God is, and what he is about in the world's history, and how he has accomplished (and will finally complete) his purpose for creation, and through whom he has done so (Jesus), and what the implications are

for the people whom he calls to participate in his mission – has proved enormously illuminating, integrating, and challenging.

Furthermore, I believe I do more than use the word ‘mission’ in a vacuous way to mean nothing more than that the Bible shows us God is purposive. All the way through the book, and very explicitly at the end, I am clear that I use the term ‘mission of God’ in a very ‘content-full’ way, to speak of ‘the whole counsel of God – the plan, purpose and mission of God for the whole creation, that it will be reconciled to God through Christ by the cross’ (532). This explicates the mission of God: its scope is the whole creation; it is redemptive (reconciliation); it is centred on the cross of Christ. Nor do I ‘remove its connection with “sending”’. All I say (on p 23) is that the biblical concept of mission cannot be *confined* to that dimension, though of course it includes it, and I stress ‘the *importance* of this theme within the Bible’.

Old and New Testaments

It is fascinating to see how the reviews complement each other, in that what is a problem for one is gratifying to others! McCoy and Dakin both appreciate the obvious emphasis in the book on the Old Testament. McCoy illustrates how important this was in the context of South Africa. Dakin observes that I often ‘work backwards and forward between the Testaments’ and, along with Ross, he appreciates the way I try to draw the exodus and jubilee (for example) into the light of full theological and missiological discussion – while reading both fully in the light of Christ and the New Testament.

Jensen, however, is troubled by a use of the Old Testament which he considers inadequately Christocentric (I think; though I have come to prefer the term ‘Christotelic’) or, at least, that the relationship that is presumed to exist between the Testaments is inadequately elucidated in my work. I think it is probable that Jensen and I will agree to differ over how we see that relationship, though we have never discussed it in depth. I would say that his review does not seem to take into account some of the more detailed work I have done on that matter, particularly my efforts at developing a paradigmatic approach to how we should handle things like Old Testament law (including the jubilee for example), in my other large book, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (IVP). I know Jensen is aware of this work since he refers to it in the running discussion of *The Mission of God* that he posted on his blog as he read the book in preparation for this review – which I found fascinating as it developed! But it seems he would probably not agree with the hermeneutical principles I develop in that book either. Fair enough. But at any rate, I would plead that book in resisting the charge that my application of Old Testament material is ‘arbitrarily drawn’. Jensen’s paragraph on ‘holy war’ seems to overlook the nuanced argument regarding God, Israel and the nations in chapter 14, in which clearly there is more to the mission of Israel in relation to the nations than merely their defeat at Israel’s hands (or the defeat of Israel at their hands).

I assure readers that I agree wholeheartedly with Jensen in the conviction that as Christians we must read our Old Testament in the light of Christ. I hoped that by organizing my book not in the traditional way (a few chapters on the Old

Testament and then a few on the New Testament), but rather by constantly bringing both together into combined witness around major themes common to both, I would make the centrality of Christ in the whole Bible all the more clear. Indeed, to the query of one other reviewer of my book who thought that the 'key' to 'unlocking' the Bible (that over-active subtitle metaphor again) should surely not be a principle or concept, but the *person* of Jesus Christ, I am glad to note that Ross picks out that I did indeed affirm exactly that, commenting on Luke 24:45,

Jesus himself provided the hermeneutical coherence within which all disciples must read these texts, that is, in the light of the story that leads *up to* Christ (messianic reading) and the story that leads *on from* Christ (missional reading) (41, italics original).

However, I would not quite put the matter in the way Jensen does – that we only read the Old Testament 'after Christ', in such a way that, for example, the Old Testament's missional significance only 'becomes apparent on a re-reading of this text after the fact of the encounter with the New Testament'. Yes and no. Yes, a *Christian* missional reading of Old Testament texts requires Christ. But no, the universalizing, international, missional dimension of the texts of the Old Testament seems unavoidable even read in their own context. What can have been in the minds of Psalmists and prophets when they sing and speak about God's purpose of blessing and salvation among the nations? I adduce dozens of texts (including narrative ones) where this element is present. Yahweh's sovereign purpose of both judgment and redemptive blessing for the nations is, in my view, an integral part of the faith of Old Testament Israel. I am not saying they could have anticipated a Christocentric missional expansion precisely as we see it in the New Testament. But, as Dakin comments, 'it is arguably because of the Christian mission that Abraham is seen as the paramount covenant figure. Yet Jesus and his followers could not have interpreted the tradition this way unless the tradition also had this trajectory itself.'

And where are we to start when we want to develop a fully biblical understanding of any major biblical theme? Jensen chides me for, at the beginning of chapter 8, on redemption, saying that we should not turn first to the New Testament. Rather, I argue, we begin at the beginning of the canon and trace the word itself, the actions of God, the theology, the Christological completion, the eschatological hope, all the way through. It seems to me that Jesus, Moses and Elijah were doing something like that when they conversed about the coming death of Jesus as 'the exodus he would accomplish' (Lk. 9:31). The meaning of the redemption Jesus would accomplish had been already anticipated by the action of God in the exodus. My intention is not in the least to draw people's attention away from Christ (any more than Jesus himself did, when he *began* with Moses and the prophets on the road to Emmaus), but to help contemporary disciples of Christ to pay more attention to the *whole* of the Scriptures that God has given us.

Audiences and controversies

Another interesting complementarity among the reviews emerges between McCoy and Jensen. McCoy feels that I overplay my arguments in some places (e.g. in

relation to holistic mission), and wonders if this is because I was writing with an evangelical target audience in view. I entirely agree with him that much of what I affirm in those sections has already 'long been aired and mostly settled in ecumenical and Catholic circles'. However, not only is it my experience that many contemporary evangelicals are quite ignorant of those resources, they are also ignorant of even something so intra-evangelical as the Lausanne Covenant and all the consultations, debates and documents that flowed from it. And so the fact that Jensen raises this matter of the relationship between evangelism and social action as problematic (in the way he expresses it), is symptomatic still of a recurring argument within evangelicalism. Some reviews of the book elsewhere similarly indicate that evangelicals are still trying to join together again what should never have been put asunder in the first place.

I understand Jensen's annoyance that I do not engage specific named writers in relation to the view that 'evangelism is the only real mission'. Possibly because it would be hard to justify from the Bible, it is rarely argued in print quite like that. But I have heard it over and over again from people who are getting it from somewhere. Australian medical missionary friends of mine were told by their church that they had been re-classified as 'secondary missionaries', because they were not doing evangelism and church-planting (though the evangelistic fruit of their labours was considerable). Student groups argue with me that Christians should not 'waste their time' on social concern, when proclamation has to be priority. I have listened to major conference speakers lecture on mission but refer to nothing other than evangelism. I encounter Christian groups in majority world contexts, established by missionaries and taught through franchised western materials, with strong aversion to any kind of social engagement, on the grounds that 'winning souls for Christ' is all that really matters. So I believe that my case for biblical holism is still necessary at the level of popular evangelicalism. Increasingly one is encouraged to hear the language of 'integral mission', which is possibly more helpful even than 'holistic mission'.

Jensen fairly summarizes my position at this point, even as he quibbles with some of its emphasis. I like his expression that our works of service are 'ordered to' the message of the Gospel, not the other way round, while insisting that both are integrally necessary to biblical mission. It made me think of another metaphor (a dangerous thing, seemingly): the front wheels of a bus are ordered to the steering wheel, inasmuch as the direction of the bus depends on the steering. But while the two are conceptually and actually different, if you are going to have a meaningful bus at all, there is no point arguing about which matters more. You have to have both or you have no bus capable of going where it is meant to go. So, yes, Christian works in the world are ordered to the truth of the gospel, in the sense that the gospel makes central affirmations about reality, partakes in the authority of the prime reality – God himself – and proclaims good news about what God has really done for the world. The gospel is the ultimately truthful worldview out of which the actions necessarily flow, within which alone they makes sense, to which they bear witness, of which they provide evidence, and for which they provide authentication.

Gaps and gaffes

The story is told about Mother Theresa (whether true or apocryphal I know not) that a visitor once suggested that instead of spending all her time on caring for the destitute, there was a need to engage the political authorities and campaign for justice. 'That's a wonderful idea,' she replied. 'Why don't *you* do that?' I had a similar feeling reading the reviewers observations about things they wish I had given more attention to. I put my hand up to acknowledge all these gaps, and wish that somebody else would fill them – including some of my able reviewers.

- Jensen sees a lack of engagement with many names of systematic theologians, dead and alive.
- McCoy misses sufficient reference to the resources of Anglican, Roman Catholic and ecumenical missiological reflection.
- Dakin would like a wider engagement with theologies from the majority world contexts, and with how the issues that biblical Wisdom wrestles with are addressed by other faiths.
- Ross would like more stories bringing the theology to life and reality.

To all of these I say: I agree, but some of them lie beyond the competence of one single author whose primary love and expertise is in biblical studies, and some of them I would warmly welcome at the hands of others who could explore my ideas in a wider field of reference.

And to have extended significantly in any of these directions would have produced a volume of even greater bulk, and drawn from Mike McCoy an 'Eish!' of exhaustion long before the end!

The one gap that I do confess as a sin of omission is mentioned by McCoy. I wish I had given more focused attention to the Kingdom of God in the teaching of Jesus especially. Originally I had envisaged a chapter devoted solely to New Testament key themes such as that one but, as the book grew to such large proportions, I dropped that plan. It is indeed a regrettable casualty.

Once again, my thanks to these good folks for their reviews, and to *Anvil* for hosting the conversation.

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