

# Mission Paradigms in the Old Testament

ROGER E. HEDLUND\*

## Introduction

If we follow David Bosch, there are no mission paradigms in the Old Testament because you do not find mission in the Old Testament. Everyone quotes Bosch these days, it seems, to support whatever theory they want—and it's safe to do since Bosch is dead. If Bosch were alive he would be surprised at the opposites he is supposed to have propounded. (Like Bonhoffer: "everyone has a different Bonhoffer," one German pastor and theologian confided—one for the secularists, another for the pietists...). From Bosch theologians seem to have discovered the word "paradigm" which Bosch borrowed and adapted from secular science. For the past 20 years, "contextualization" was the buz-word, and these days everyone feels obligated to talk about paradigms and paradigm *shifts*, with or without understanding the genesis and meaning of the term. (This is a big problem for people who have difficulty with a term like "missiology").

Bosch's work is important, and Bosch cites well-known Old Testament scholars to support the point that there is nothing of mission in the Old Testament. At the same time, however, this does not square with the other contemporary construction of mission as the *missio dei*. For *missio dei* is essentially Old Testament. Bosch (1991:390-392) is very aware of the *missio dei* concept which has been variously characterised as an American invasion, and an ecumenical Trojan horse. Bosch's point appears to revolve around the origins of the concept of mission as *sending* which is assumed to be New Testament and more specifically Johannine. If so, were there then no

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\*Dr. Roger E. Hedlund is the Managing Editor of *Dharma Deepika*.  
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such expressions in the Old Testament? Is the New Testament totally discontinuous without Old Testament continuity? Bosch himself suggests a continuum, when he argues that the first paradigm shift took place at the coming of Jesus. This, in itself, implies the prior existence of an Old Testament mission paradigm.

It may, however, be argued that *sending* is an Old Testament concept. DuBose (1983), whose quest for a fresh understanding of mission is an exposition of the Biblical meaning of *sending*, devotes an entire chapter to a survey of theological sending passages beginning with the Pentateuch, and including the historical and poetical books and the Old Testament prophets. There are more *sending* passages in the Old Testament than in the New. Moreover, the New Testament term *apostello* has Old Testament roots and is used some 700 times in the Septuagint (Rengstorf 1985:68).

To limit the concept of mission to the New Testament is to truncate the meaning of mission and to deprive mission of its theological roots. According to Kähler (cited by Bosch, p. 16, and Braaten, p.13), mission is the mother of theology. If so, what becomes of Old Testament theology if the Old Testament is devoid of mission? As Bosch himself affirms, the Old Testament is fundamental to our understanding of the New (1992:17). The popular assumption that mission derives purely from the New Testament is therefore a misconception.

Popular preaching not infrequently begins and ends its exposition of mission with a fragment of the Great Commission. This tendency fails to appropriate the riches of the Old Testament which forms the essential background for the giving of the Commission. Pioneers in the missionary movement were essentially *movers*. Mission was shaped by its active participants, not by philosophers, nor by its spectators and critics. Early missionaries included brilliant minds, but most of them were activists more than thinkers. Few have been "theologians of the road" (Bosch's phrase in an earlier book). Most would fail to qualify as "task theologians" (Glasser's expression to describe the Pauline model)

Bosch (along with Wright 1952) recognizes that the Old Testament centers upon *God* who acts, whereas the New Testament focuses upon the sending of the *people* of God as God's representatives to the nations. This, at least is, a part of the picture.

The newness of the New Testament centers in Jesus Christ. Jesus, however, is linked with the Old Testament and based his teaching upon the Law and Prophets. The Commission embodies this newness while retaining the heritage of the Old Testament teaching and practice. The Commission, especially the Matthew rendition, reflects an Old Testament precedence, particularly from Isaiah. The paradigm shift, therefore, takes place with the advent of Jesus in the New Testament.

We do not look for *shifts* in the Old Testament model of mission. Rather, we try to identify the concept (and practice if any). The starting point must be in God Himself. Bosch hints at an Old Testament notion of mission when he refers to the *action* of God in history. This activity is seen in *history*. It is the history of Israel, yes, but that history is set in the context of the nations. "The entire history of Israel unveils the continuation of God's involvement with the nations" (1992:18). Israel's position may be defined in terms of her missionary role as the agent of God—and the locus of the presence of God—among the nations. Yet, the primary focus is upon God who acts in the world of the nations.

### *Missio Dei*

The *Missio Dei* means that God Himself does missionary work. In the early chapters of Genesis, we see His work in creation. Creation expresses the personal will of God. The Bible shows not a personification of nature, but a Person creating a suitable world. The sea monsters, sun, moon and stars are not deified (Genesis 1:14, 15, 21), but exist at the command of God and under His Lordship. Creation is demythologized! exclaims Dyrness (1983:21, 22). Creation is good, the world, therefore, is a good world. The universe is real, not illusion. The created order is a vehicle for pronouncing the goodness of the Creator. God blesses what He has created (Gen. 1:22, 28; 2:3). God rests. Creation is to share in that rest

(Exodus 20:8-11). Here are implications for ecology. God, the Gardner, is concerned for the total creation. He is interested in all His creatures (Job 12): cattle (Jonah 4:11), sparrows (Matthew 10:29)....

The crowning event was the creation of man and woman (Gen. 1:26-31). The creative act establishes the unity of the human race (a common ancestor, Adam), human dignity (created in the image of God), race and gender equality (no hierarchy). Caste is heinous to the Biblical doctrine of creation. According to Genesis, God created all of humanity in His own image and for fellowship. There is no high and no low. All humans are equally high, reflecting the image of the Creator. All are equally low—and in need of redemption. Genesis also records the disruption which followed the intrusion and rebellion.

Alienation from God has societal ramifications. Humans were given responsibility to be brother-keepers as well as earth-keepers. Given dominion over the animals, humans are charged with ecological responsibility (Gen. 2:15). The Creator established the family relationship, humans have mutual obligations to serve the creation and each other. Human creativity—the likeness of the Creator, expressed, for instance, in the naming of the animals (Gen. 2:20)—implies moral responsibility. Obedience is required. Through disobedience innocence was lost: humanity became shameful and deceitful. Family relations were disrupted. The earth became cursed, barren (Deut. 28). Expelled from the Garden, Paradise is lost. An explosion of evil follows (Gen. 4&6).

The tragic results of disobedience make mission necessary. God intervened. God entered the Garden. He is a seeking God (Gen. 3:8-9), on His own initiative sent to seek and to save the lost. In the Garden He seeks and finds and restores. The Gospel in the Garden. Mission: God acts. God Himself is the missionary.

The *Missio Dei*, says Vicedom, is the work of God through which He offers the fullness of the Kingdom to humanity (1965:45). God's primary objective is to save mankind. Mission is soteriological and redemptive. The broad scope of the *Missio Dei* includes the social dimension. The Kingdom of God envisions a society of the redeemed.

God's mission is to the world. The first 11 chapters of the Bible embrace the entire world of the nations. God's covenant with Abraham (Gen. 12:3) is a covenant with the world. God's purpose is to bless the nations. God's grace is for all. God has the world and its peoples in His care. Ultimately, everything God does in Israel is for the good of the nations. Israel's "kingdom" points to the kingship of God. The Kingdom of God reaches beyond Israel to encompass the peoples of the world. All are the objects of His care.

There is much more: the exodus and the exile, God's dealings with Egypt and with the Assyrians, the Davidic Kingdom, the wisdom literature of the Bible and the wisdom of the nations, the remnant and the return—all these are major manifestations of God's missionary activity.

Around the time of the publication of Bosch's *opus magnum*, another book appeared, *The Biblical Foundations for Mission*, by Donald Senior and Carroll Stuhlmueller (1984). The first half of the book, by Stuhlmueller, is devoted to the Old Testament, the second half, by Senior, to the New. Stuhlmueller begins with Genesis and Exodus, and concludes with Israel's Prayer and Universal Mission, drawn from the Psalms and the Prophets. "The prayers of Israel reached outward to the nations principally in the hymns of praise" (1984:135). The authors conclude that the Old Testament, far from presenting a centripetal movement, shows an opposite centrifugal direction to the non-elect nations outside the Israelic covenant (1984:315). Essential elements, themes and issues crucial for mission are an integral part of the Old Testament record, even if a full-blown missionary engagement of the People of God awaits the New Testament (1984:318).

### *People of God in Mission?*

Stuhlmueller begins his study with the promise to the nations (Gen. 12:3) which is coupled with Israel's calling and election (Ex. 19:3-6). If one must speak of a paradigm shift in the Old Testament, it is perhaps here in the new focus upon the role of Abraham and Israel in the *Missio Dei*.

Part of our difficulty in grasping the missionary significance of the Old Testament has to do with the methodology of conquest and the politics of violence in Israel's history, e.g. in the conquest of Canaan. Destruction of the Canaanites appears to us a barbaric act—yet ordered by the God of Revelation, Love and Light. We are embarrassed because, in moments of her history the Church too has embraced with rhetoric and methodology of oppression and conquest. With shame we remember the Portuguese inquisition of Goa, the massacre of the Waldensians, the murder of the anabaptists, suppression of dissenters by the State Churches of Europe, etc. In our present world context, as we face the threat of Islamic *Jihad*, the question arises: Is violence justifiable in the pursuit of a just cause? God, in the Old Testament, sanctioned the use of violent means for accomplishing his just purposes (StuhlmueLLer 1984:43). Can we? But this shifts the focus to an issue beyond the scope of this paper. The question itself introduces a subtle direction change. What bearing has the climate of God-directed violence on the Old Testament meaning of mission? An earlier Liberationist theology—preceded by a theology of revolution—advocated the use of violence to obtain justice for the oppressed. It is true that violence, in many forms, is part of the long history of Israel in the Old Testament—from her pre-history (the patriarchal period) through the period of conquest, and into the exile and beyond the exile. This violence, states StuhlmueLLer, is beneficial and willed by God. "Violence ought to be considered a charism or gift put to the service of God's people and God's providential plan, just as truly as any other quality, like pacifism or prayer" (1984:43). Perhaps. But I think this does not justify our appropriating violent methods for accomplishing *our* "just" causes. God, one assumes—being all-wise and all-knowing and full of compassion—is vindicated in what He does. We dare not assume the same for our private wars and petty agendas.

The situation surrounding the conquest of Canaan was far more complex than what a superficial reading would suggest, as biblical scholars have pointed out (StuhlmueLLer (1984:44). The exodus event is hailed as liberative and salvific—the central redemptive act in the Old Testament. The

accompanying destruction of the Egyptian armies— instruments of violent oppression—may be viewed as an aspect of the judgmental action of God. The death of the first born is less easily reconciled to our image of a God of righteousness and a religion of love. The act must be set in its context as an expression of God's demand for truth and holiness. The destruction of the Canaanites is to be viewed from a similar perspective. God's act of judgement is not vindictive but prescriptive: "it was necessary if Israel was to survive in the new land of Canaan" (Stuhlmüller 1984:46).

Cultic (worship) aspects of Israel's existence also related to the preservation of the Faith which was intrinsic to Israel's existence as a missionary people. "Symbolically, the exodus motif demanded that the ark of the covenant must always move with the people" (1984:46)—and to counteract the sensuous Canaanite fertility cult ceremony. Later, this symbolic presence was enshrined in the Temple.

Mosaic legislative details concerned with worship—cult and sacrifice—carry the same essential concern. On one hand, cultural patterns including religious practices are absorbed from the surrounding peoples, but these must not compromise the revelation of Yahweh. Israel's mission consisted, at least in part, of her presence among the nations as a worshipping community. The careful regulation of Israel's worship was for this. Prophetic denunciations of idolatry and other irregularities aimed at a restoration of the worship and Faith of the People of God, and hence, a renewal of their (all too unconscious) missionary vocation.

Religious rituals were but one part of Mosaic legislation. A larger concern related to social obligations. Every aspect of life in the land would be regulated as befitting a model Kingdom of Yahweh in Canaan at the crossroads of the nations. A complete social system provided justice for the widows and orphans, relief for the poor and needy, safety for the accused, equality for the alien, liberty for the slaves, and renewal of the ecology through controlled use of land and protection of the environment and its endangered species including birds and trees. The model Kingdom would reflect the Creator and the Provider-God.

### Prophetic Pointers

Resolution of the violence contradiction is found ultimately in Isaiah's songs of the Suffering Servant. Salvation is extended to the world by a *suffering* Servant (Stuhlmüller 1984:107). Here, more than anywhere else, we see the missionary dimension of Israel's election. It is an election to service (Rowley 1952)—for the salvation of the world. Particularism is at the service of universalism. Biblical particularism is never a closed exclusion on nationalistic or ethnic grounds. Yahwistic Faith is saved from ethnocentric exclusivism by its missionary dimension. God, in the Old Testament, desires the obedience and ownership of the nations. To that end, He sends His prophets and His People, bringing salvation to the ends of the earth (Isaiah 49:6).

Contrary to the opposite conclusions of some scholars, an explicit missionary dimension is found in Isaiah. Is this the basis for Jesus' Commission to the Church in Matthew's Gospel? The Book of Jonah *does* have its missionary purpose, a rebuke to Jewish ethnocentrism which was the antithesis of mission. [It would be tempting at this point to indulge in a diatribe against caste in the churches as a similar negation of mission and perversion of the Gospel.]

The inherent missionary character of the Old Testament is important to us in India in the search for a theology, both indigenous and Biblical. In an article a few years ago, Victor Premasagar urged the Church in India to appraise their heritage in order to find continuity between pre-Christian deities and Biblical revelation "through a theology of the Gods of our fathers, and build a bridge between the Gods of the nations and the faith in Jesus Christ" (1992:146). Premasagar raises an important issue: what should converts do with their heritage? Was the God of the Old Testament also disclosed to our forefathers? Premasagar, no doubt, reflects the background of the syncretistic practices unearthed in the landmark study of Medak Diocese conducted by Luke and Carman in the 1950s (*Village Christians in India*) which revealed the continuation of the pre-Christian cult of the mother goddess in tandem with the churches. Converts had accepted Jesus, whom they worshipped as the God who forgives sin. But at harvest they



are drawn to the worship of the goddess—who was seen as benevolent to their ancestors. Functionally, Jesus became *one* among many deities.

The background of Israel in Canaan was not dissimilar. They worshipped Yahweh, but also turned to Canaanite fertility deities. According to Premasagar, Israel freely assimilated Canaanite ideas because there was no fear of syncretism on the part of Hebrew theologians (1992:142). Biblical scholars, however, may dispute that assumption. It can be shown that popular village practice was far from the norm and was never condoned by the Old Testament prophets. Cultural assimilation was accepted, but religious syncretism and attendant social evils were condemned, not tolerated. Biblical research (Hess 1991) has shed considerable light upon the Old Testament pluralistic religious context which reveals a tension between the exclusivistic Yahwism of the prophets and the Baal fertility cult during the time of Ahab. The former was the official, legitimate posture, the latter entailed a wholesale importation of a foreign cult and its imposition which was regarded as illegitimate in Israel. Other compromises included the toleration of the state deities of other nations and participation in their cult by Israel's rulers. At the popular level while Yahweh was recognized as the Supreme God and official deity, the people turned to local Canaanite deities in dealing with practical issues (Hess. 1991:7). Toleration does not, however, equate with legitimization in practice and theology. Nor do points of convergence, e.g. similarities between Yahweh and EI or Baal, imply valid alternatives. That is, though God accommodated His activities to Canaanite cultural forms and names, this does not endorse every aspect of Canaanite religion, as has been pointed out.

The purpose of God's particular action in the history of Israel is ultimately that God, as the saving and covenant God Yahweh, should be known fully and worshipped exclusively by those who as yet imperfectly know him as EI. The end result of what God began to do through Abraham was of significance for the Canaanites precisely because it critiqued and rejected Canaanite religion (Goldingay & Wright 1991:39).

Appropriation and adaptation from the diverse traditions of the Near East are part of the creative genius of the biblical authors, states Fr. Thomas Emprayil (1993:19). Inclusion of the Cain and Abel scandal is part of the Bible's inerrant testimony to the salvific plan of God (1993:23). The abominable child sacrifice is transformed into the substitutionary ram offering (1939:25). Seductive rites of Baalism were displaced by cultural adaptations and festivals linked to the Passover and Exodus (1993:29). The Old Testament writers not only contextualized, they reconceptualized their borrowed sources, so that the distinctive elements of Old Testament faith were preserved "in sharpest conflict with the larger religious environment in which the Old Testament literature emerged" (Glasser 1989:39). The role of the prophets throughout Israel's history was to call the people back to Covenant obedience. Israel was custodian of the Faith among the nations.

### Conclusions?

Rather than a series of paradigm shifts, mission in the Old Testament may better be perceived as a process of development or, as Fr. Joy Thomas (1993) puts it, stages in an evolution of the concept. A dawning awareness may be seen in the Covenant idea, which is relational with implications for mission. Joy Thomas suggests, however, that the mission was not so much active as passive, i.e. the faithful witness of the people by their life-style was an instrument to attract the nations to God (1993:40), but it is God Himself who is the missionary.

As with other aspects of Old Testament history and theology, mission awaits its full expression in the New Testament culmination of Old Testament experience in Jesus Christ and the New Testament Church.

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