

# Israel's Missionary Call

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**T**here is a rumor abroad that the Old Testament does not have a missionary message or vision. It is, so goes the popular adage, a book and a message dedicated solely to the Jews and their own nationalistic fortunes. But that rumor and view will not square with the claims that the Old Testament itself makes. Even if we limit our investigation to three key Old Testament texts, we will observe immediately that these three texts present three of the most powerful statements of a missionary call that can be given anywhere. We would have been more hesitant in our suspecting that the Old Testament has no missionary challenge had we paid close attention to how the Old Testament begins. Certainly the message and scope of the earliest chapters in Genesis, namely Genesis 1-11, are universal in their appeal and international in their audience. Did God not deal with "all the families of the earth" when He moved in saving grace at three specific junctures in Genesis 1-11? To be specific, was it not true that after the Fall of Man, the Flood of the Earth, and the Failure of the Tower of Babel, God gave the grand messages of salvation in Genesis 3:15, 9:27 and 12:1-3?

And should we doubt that the word to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3 was international and universal in its offer, scope and intention, then let us quickly remind ourselves that it was painted against the backdrop of the Table of the Seventy Nations of all the world in Genesis 10. The same "families of the earth" appear there and in Genesis 12:3.

## Old Testament Gentiles Came to Faith

The phenomenon of Gentiles coming to faith in the coming "seed" or "Man of Promise" was not unknown or without constant reminders in the Old Testament. Consider Melchizedek (in Gen 14), a priest-king over Salem (Jerusalem). This Gentile openly confessed his faith in Jehovah (Yahweh). Jethro, a Midianite and Moses' father-in-law, demonstrated his commitment to the same Lord espoused by Moses and Aaron by sitting down with them around a fellowship sacrificial meal in Exodus 18. No one could accuse Balaam of being pro-Jewish or chauvinistic in his attitude, for he badly wanted to oblige the king of Moab and curse the nation of Israel. Yet he was God's oracle of truth, even though he had a very rough start in which his donkey showed keener spiritual insight than he did. Nevertheless, Balaam gave us two fantastic chapters, including the

great (and only) star prophecy of the Messiah, in Numbers 23-24.

Time fails me to remind us of whole cities that at times repented at the preaching of one Jewish prophet—for example, Jonah and the Ninevites. Even though God's servant was more than reluctant and became very "down-in-the-mouth" and had a "whale-of-an-experience" (literally) before he finally preached to dirty Gentiles who massacred Jews, the city came to know the Lord in grand proportions because Jonah *did* preach. Even then, he hoped this was one sermon in which no one would come forward.

But some may still doubt that the Old Testament explicitly enjoined believers and messengers in the Old Testament to go to the *Gentiles*. Did God, they ask, ever *send* an Israelite or the whole nation with the Great Commission?

### Three Basic Texts

There are three basic texts that make it clear that God did do just that. These texts are: Genesis 12:1-3, Exodus 19:4-6, and Psalm 67. These three texts are so basic to our understanding of the missionary mandate that God had designed for the whole nation of Israel that it is impossible to view the Old Testament fairly without treating these texts in their missionary context. Israel had always, in the plan and purpose of God, been responsible for communicating the message of God's grace to the nations. Israel was meant to be a communicating nation.

Lest we think that these three Old Testament texts have no relevance to those of us who live in the Christian era and that their message is a B.C.-dated injunction, let it be plainly declared that they are also God's call to us. Put in outline form, their message is God's call to us:

- I. To Proclaim His Plan to Bless the Nations (Gen 12:3)
- II. To Participate in His Priesthood as Agents of That Blessing (Ex 19:4-6) and
- III. To Prove His Purpose to Bless all the Nations (Ps 67)

### Genesis 1-11

No one can say that the Old Testament begins in a chauvinistic way or that the God of that testament was so pro-Jewish that missionary outreach did not occur until the Time of the

Gentiles arrived. Genesis 1-11, as we have stated, clearly argues for the reverse. The scope of that text is worldwide in its offer of salvation for all who would believe. The counter theme in those same chapters is the nations questing for a "name" for themselves. Both in Genesis 6:4 and Genesis 11:4, the sole object of mankind was to make a "name" for themselves and to advance their own reputation—but at the expense of the "name" of God.

Thus the "sons of God" (whom I believe to be tyrannical and polygamous despots in the context of Gen 6) took to themselves this divine title along with its presumed prerogatives, and distorted the very instrument of the state that God had set up for justice and abused it for their own desires and lusts. This constituted the second great failure of the pre-patriarchal era of Genesis 1-11. It had been preceded by the Fall of Man in Genesis 3 and it climaxed in the third failure of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11.

### Genesis 12:1-3: Proclaim His Plan

Nevertheless, for each of these three failures, our Lord had a saying word of grace: Genesis 3:15; 9:27; and 12:1-3. It is this third gracious word that concerns us here, for it emphasizes God's word of grace over against the failures of men and their idolatrous questing for a "name" or reputation. Five times God said, "I will bless you," "I will bless you," "I will bless you," "I will bless those blessing you," and "In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed."

No doubt the key word here is *bless* or *blessing*. That same word had characterized this whole section, beginning with the word to Adam and Eve: "He blessed them saying, 'Be fruitful and multiply,'" just as He had also graciously promised to bless the animals.

And yet man continued to seek meaning on his own terms by questing for a "name." Over against the vacuum of that day (and ours), the vacuum of looking for human status, reputation and achievement devoid of God, Genesis 12:2 suddenly announces that God would give Abraham a "name" as a blessing from above, rather than as an achievement of works which left God out of the picture.

The significance of this grandest of all missionary texts cannot be fully appreciated un-

til we begin to realize that there are actually three promises of blessing in Genesis 12:2-3 in which God promises:

1. "I will make you a great nation,"
2. "I will bless you," and
3. "I will make your name great..."

But this is immediately followed by a purpose clause. It is "so that you may be a blessing." Not one of these three promises of blessing were to be for Abraham's self-aggrandizement. Indeed, he and his nation were to be blessed so that they might be a blessing. But to whom? How? For the answers to these questions, we must go on with two more promises.

There were to be two whole classes of people: the blessers of Abraham and the cursers of Abraham. The two additional promises were:

4. "I will bless those blessing you," and
5. "Those who curse you, I will curse."

Again, however, the writer of Genesis adds a purpose clause, while shifting the tense of the verb, so that a fuller statement of his purpose can be given. Now it was "so that in you all the families of the earth might be blessed."

That, then, explains why there was so much blessing. This man and his descendants were to be missionaries and channels of the truth from the very beginning. It is exceedingly important that we recognize that the Hebrew verb in this case must be translated as a passive verb ("be blessed") and not reflexively ("bless themselves"), since all the earlier Hebrew grammars, versions, and New Testament understandings insist on it. It is a matter of grace, not of works or copy-cutting!

The nations were to be blessed in this man's "seed." Indeed, the "seed" of the woman (Gen 3:15), the "seed" of Shem in whose tents God would come to "tabernacle" or "dwell" (Gen 9:27), and the "seed" of Abraham formed one collective whole which was epitomized through its succession of representatives who acted as downpayments and earnest until Christ himself should come in that same line and as a part of that succession and corporate entity.

The recipients of this blessing initially were listed as none other than the 70 nations listed as all "the families" of the earth in Genesis 10. This chapter topically precedes man's

third failure at Babel, which in turn leads in Genesis into the inbursting word of God's purpose and plan to bring all the nations of the world to Himself. The word to Abraham was meant to have a great impact on all the families on the face of the earth. This is indeed high and lofty missionary teaching.

Some may remain somewhat skeptical, saying that they cannot see any gospel or

good news in Genesis 12:2-3. Our answer is for those

unconvinced doubters to observe that Paul named Abraham in Romans 4:13 the heir of the whole world. That inheritance obviously must be spiritual in its nature. Moreover, Paul plainly stated in Galatians 3:8 that Abraham had the gospel preached to him ahead of time when he received Genesis 12:3: "in you shall all the nations be blessed." That was and still is the Good News of the gospel.

Israel was to be God's missionary to the world—and so are we by virtue of the same verses! The mission has not changed in our own day.

And if we today believe, then we are part of Abraham's "seed" (Gal 3:29). The object of faith and trust is still the same; the focal point for Israel and the nations of the earth is that Man of Promise who was to come in Abraham and David's "seed" and is now come in Jesus Christ.

The message and its content, in fact the whole purpose of God, was that He would make a nation, give them a "name," bless them so that they might be light to the nations and thereby be a blessing to all the nations. To shrink back would be evil on Israel's part. Israel was to be God's missionary to the world—and so are we by virtue of the same verses! The mission has not changed in our own day. Abraham and Israel were not intended to be passive transmitters of the "seed" any more than we are to be passive. They were to be a blessing so that they actually could communicate God's gift to the world.

The nations were viewed differently, but the way God dealt with them was always di-

rectly related to how they reacted to this Man of Promise who was to come through the nation God had made great, and to which He had given this calling to bless and be a blessing. Israel's calling was not the occasion or basis for rejecting any of the nations of the world, but instead the very means of blessing them all. The quest for a "name," for fame, for reputation still goes on today, when God would give His own "name." He will still give His special "name" to those who will believe in that same "seed." It is the only means by which they and all their kindred upon the face of the earth will be blessed and made part of the family of God.

Some may agree that the object of faith was indeed to be the coming seed from Abraham's stock, but they may not agree that God thereby expected or demanded of Abraham and his successors anything like our missionary mandate. Perhaps they were meant to be entirely passive while God was the whole actor in the Old Testament.

### **Exodus 19:4-6: Participate in His Priesthood**

Exodus 19:4-6, the second Old Testament text for our consideration, will not allow that interpretation. In Moses' famous "Eagle's Wings Speech," God reviews with Israel how he bore them along from Egypt like an eagle would transport her young learning how to fly. Since they were the recipients of this gift of deliverance, the text pointedly says, "Now therefore..." It implies a natural consequence ought to be forthcoming from God's miraculous aid in their escape from Egypt.

To begin reading Exodus 19:5 without the "now therefore," and to stress the "iffy-ness" of the words that follow, is to miss the emphasis of the text. This text, like Exodus 20:1, must begin in the environment of grace. "I am the Lord your God who brought you up from out of the land of Egypt." The "now therefore..." follows because of the previous blessing of God.

Exodus 19:5-6 goes on to say: "...if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my *special possession* among all peoples; for all the earth is mine, and you shall be my *kingdom of priests* and a *holy nation*

(*italics mine*)." These are the three ministries God specifies for Abraham's descendants.

In the first place, they were to be God's *special possession*, or as the older translations have it, "my peculiar people." The old English word "peculiar" came from the Latin word which meant valuables or any kind of movable goods which were not, in contrast to real estate, attached to the land, such as jewels, stocks, or bonds. The fact was that Israel was to be God's son, His people, His first-born (Ex 4:22), and now His special treasure. The emphasis here is on the *portability* of that message and the fact that God has placed such high value on *people*. This is exactly as Malachi 3:17 describes us: "jewels."

Another role Israel was to perform was that of being kings and priests for God. The genitive or construct form, "kingdom of priests," is better translated (based on six occurrences in prose texts) "kings and priests," "kingly priests," or "royal priests." It is here that Israel's missionary role became explicit, if any doubt had remained. The whole nation was to function on behalf of the kingdom of God in a mediatorial role in relation to the nations.

In fact, it was this passage that became the basis for our famous New Testament doctrine of the priesthood of believers (see 1 Pet 2:9; Rev 1:6-5:10). Unfortunately for Israel, they rejected this priesthood of all believers and urged Moses to go up to the mountain of Sinai on their behalf and as their representative. Nevertheless, even though God's original plan was for the moment frustrated and delayed until New Testament times, it was not defeated, substituted, or scrapped. It remained God's plan for believers. They were to have a mediatorial role!

Israel was to have a third function: a holy nation. Holiness in the Bible is not just a form of ether that invades audiences on Sunday mornings and makes them somewhat listless and passive, but holiness is wholeness. To be "holy" is to be "wholly" the Lord's.

It is a shame that we had to divide the English word into two words: the one religious (holy) and the other secular (wholly), but the root was the same in Anglo-Saxon history. The same is true for the Hebrew root. Israel was to be given wholly over to the Lord as a

nation. They were to be set apart not only in their lives, but also in their service. Their calling and election of God was for service and that service had been defined as early as the days of their ancestor Abraham.

As priests were to represent God and mediate his word to the nations, so Israel as a holy nation was to assume two relations: one side towards God, their King, and the other side towards the nations. They were to be a nation for all the times and for all the people—set apart. But instead, Israel began to act for herself, as we also often do, as a club of the pious, rather than remembering her call to be sharers of the blessings, truth, gifts and the “Seed” to the nations. In a sense, they carried a portfolio which read “Ambassadors of the Coming Man of Promise.”

Now I have not forgotten the distinction between Israel and the Church. It is possible to distinguish between these two institutions, just as one can distinguish between male and female. Yet that middle wall of partition which demanded death for any Gentile that transgressed and passed its boundaries in the temple complex has now been knocked down by Christ's death. Maleness, femaleness, Jewishness, Gentileness, slave status or whatever no longer matter. All who believe are one “people of God.” Indeed, that had been the continuity term to identify all who had belonged to the Savior in all ages. And Peter makes it explicit by calling the Gentile believers of his day “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people” (1 Pet 2:9). The use of Exodus 19 is very obvious and transparent. The point is, do we recognize the continuity in the purpose and plan of God?

Peter went on to make his point clear. God had called His people by these four titles “so that (they) might declare the wonderful deeds of Him who called (them) out of darkness into His marvelous light” (1 Pet 2:9). The reason why Israel, and now Gentile believers have been named a royal priesthood, a holy nation, the people of God, His chosen race, His special, movable possession, is that we might announce, declare and be His missionaries and witnesses.

None of these gifts were meant to be consumed on ourselves. They were not meant to be mere badges. They were for the purpose of

declaring His wonderful deeds and calling people to His marvelous light. Once, says Peter in that same context (borrowing from Hosea's symbolic names for his children), we were: “no people” (Lo-Ammi), “without mercy” (Lo-Ruhamah). But now we are the people of God and now we have received God's mercy and grace.

Peter is trying to show us that the people of God in all ages have been one. Even though we can identify within the one people of God several aspects, such as Israel and Church, and even though we can list several aspects to the single plan and purpose of God that all the nations of the earth might be blessed, nevertheless the unity of all believers and the continuity of that program between Old and New Testaments is a certainty. And in both testaments we were all intended by God to participate in that priesthood who would be agents of blessing to all the nations of the earth. Exodus 19 has shown us that this was God's plan.

### **Psalm 67: Prove His Purpose**

Our third and final text comes from Psalm 67. We have seen how God calls us all: 1) to *proclaim His plan* to the nations in Genesis 12, 2) to *participate in His priesthood* as agents of blessing to all the nations in Exodus 19, and now 3) to *prove His purpose* to bless all the nations in Psalm 67. This Psalm is derived from the Aaronic benediction found in Numbers 6:24-26:

“Now may the Lord bless you and keep you;

May the Lord make his face shine upon you, and be gracious to you;

May the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.”

This word is often heard at the close of most Christian services today.

But look what the Psalmist does here. Rather than saying Yahweh (LORD), Israel's covenantal and personal name for God, he substitutes Elohim (God), the name used when God's relationship to all men, nations and creation is needed. The Psalmist prayed: “May God be gracious to us and bless us.” Once more he changed the wording ever so

slightly, using the words "among us" (literally) instead of "upon us"... "And may he cause His face to shine among us."

It is significant that this missionary Psalm has applied what God gave through Aaron and the priests to all the peoples. The purpose for this enlarged blessing is given immediately in verse 2: "so that your way may be known upon the earth, your salvation among all the nations (or Gentiles)." That is why God had been gracious and blessed Israel and all who believed. This agrees, then, with Genesis 12:3.

The sentiment was: May God bless us, fellow Israelites. May He be pleased to benefit us. May our crops increase and may our flocks produce abundantly. May our families grow large and may

we prosper spiritually, so that the nations may look at us and say that what Aaron prayed for, by way of God's blessing, has indeed hap-

pened. The very bounty of God demonstrates that God has blessed us. Therefore, may the rest of His purpose come to pass also, that in blessing Israel all the nations of the earth might come to know Him as well.

This Psalm has been called the Old Testament *Pater Noster* ("Our Father"), or the Old Testament Lord's Prayer. It has three stanzas:

vv. 1-3

(ending with: "Let the people praise thee, O Lord, let all the people praise thee")

vv. 4-5

(ending with the same refrain)

vv. 6-7

This Psalm was probably sung at the Feast of Pentecost. It is all the more remarkable that that is the event where God was to pour out his Spirit on all the nations and an unusual ingathering was to take place—greater than at any previous feast. Deliberately, the Psalmist refers to the ingathering of the harvest as an earnest, a down-payment, and a symbol of the spiritual harvest from every tribe, tongue and nation. So

may the Lord indeed be gracious (full of grace) to us and bless us.

Three times this Psalm refers to the blessing from God: verse one, verse six and verse seven. The structure is almost an exact replica of Genesis 12:2-3. Bless us, bless us, bless us... *so that* all the nations might know the Lord.

The Psalmist calls us to prove and test God's purposes for three reasons. The reasons fit the structure we have already observed. The first is because God has been gracious to us (vv. 1-3). We have experienced the grace of God in His ways and manner of dealing with Israel. We have experienced that grace in the knowledge that His salvation has been extended to all nations. If only all the peoples of all the nations would personally come to

know that same grace for themselves!

A second reason is because God rules and guides all nations (vv. 4-5). He is not a judge in a judicial, condemn-

Israel was to be "a light to the nations," just as Abraham had been told, the writer of Exodus had exhorted, and Psalmist had sung.

ing or punishing sense in this context; instead, He is a royal ruler who judiciously rules in righteousness, as in Isaiah 11:3ff. He is a guide for the nations as the Great Shepherd of Psalm 23:3. Thus the refrain sounds again: Come on, all you peoples of the earth, let's hear it! It's about time you began praising the Lord.

Finally, a third reason is given: the very goodness of God (vv. 6-7). We ought to prove the purpose of God in blessing the nations because He has been so good to us. The land has yielded an abundant increase and our barns, grain bins, and silos are full to overflowing. Was this not an evidence that God answered the prayer of Aaron and the priests in Numbers 6:24-26? The power of God is evident in the very abundance of the harvest.

Now that same power and presence of God which brought the material increase is available for a spiritual increase. If this power were more evident in our lives and preaching, then the spiritual results abroad among the nations and in our own nation would be witnessed by everyone. The point is that the Psalmist did not mouth empty words and forms, but he gave the Psalm so that Israel

and we might experience a real change in our lives. The blessing of God comes so that all the ends of the earth might receive spiritual benefit. What has happened materially was only to be an earnest of a blessing with much longer dimensions.

Yes, "God has blessed us; let all the ends of the earth fear Him" (v. 7). The word "fear" here does not mean terror or fright. There are two different usages of the word "fear." Exodus 20:20 urges us: "Fear not, but rather, fear the Lord." Don't be scared, but rather trust and put your whole soul's commitment on Him.

Hence, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of everything: of understanding, of living, of personal holiness, as well as of a vital personal relationship to Him. Fear is one of the Old Testament words for trust and belief. The goodness of God to Israel was meant to be one of God's ways of bringing all the nations on planet earth to fear Him, i.e., to believe the coming Man of Promise, our Lord Jesus Christ. Israel was to be a witnessing, proclaiming, and evangelizing nation. The Gentiles had to be brought to the light.

This purpose for Israel is seen even more clearly in a passage which is not part of this

discussion; namely, the "Servant of the Lord" passages of Isaiah 42 and 49. Israel is that servant of the Lord even though the Messiah is the final representative of the whole group par excellence. As such, Israel was to be "a light to the nations," just as Abraham had been told, the writer of Exodus had exhorted, and Psalmist had sung.

The Psalmist longed and deeply desired that God, the King of Israel, might be acknowledged as Lord and Savior of all the families of the earth. Should we do less? Does God call us to anything less than also proving, along with Israel, His purpose in this passage of Psalm 67? God's challenge to Israel is also ours: we are to have a mediatorial role in proclaiming His name among the nations. That is still God's purpose. Is it happening in your life?

May the flame of the gospel, encapsulated in Genesis 12:2-3, and the call to be a holy nation and a royal priesthood fire us for proclaiming the gospel in the days that lie ahead. May we announce, not only to North America but to every single nation on the face of the earth, that Jesus is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

### Study Questions

1. Kaiser asserts that God gave a missionary mandate to the people of Israel in the Old Testament by stating a promise of purpose for Israel. How can a promise have mandate force according to Kaiser?
2. Why is it crucial to see that the phenomenon of blessing was not intended to be passive?
3. What is the function of a priesthood according to Kaiser? What does this function have to do with a missionary mandate?