

“All the Ends of the Earth May See the Salvation of our God”

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It is somewhat astonishing that the modern world missions movement was inaugurated by a sermon based on a text from the Old Testament prophets. One would think that such a manifesto would be based upon the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20; Mark 16:15; Acts 1:8) or the great “golden text” of the Bible: “For God so loved the world...” (John 3:16). But it was from a text in the writings of the prophet Isaiah that William Carey based his *Enquiry*.

Enlarge the place of your tent; stretch out the curtains of your dwellings, spare not; lengthen your cords, and strengthen your pegs. For you will spread abroad to the right and to the left. And your descendants will possess nations, and they will resettle the desolate cities (Isaiah 54:2-3).

The enlargement and stretching to which Carey spoke had as much to do with theological understanding (or misunderstanding) as it did with the world mission of the church. The first obstacle which Carey had to overcome was the Calvinistic theology that had effectively paralyzed Protestant Christian missions in the world. Further, the church of Carey’s day tended to think of itself in terms of “Christendom,” that is, “the area ruled by Christians or where Christianity has held cultural and social sway.”¹ The over emphasis on Calvinist theology along with the sociopolitical understanding of the kingdom of God of the day effectively limited the influence of the gospel throughout the world. All too often, it is this “theological captivity” that hinders the work of the kingdom of God. This should cause us to be very careful that we do not hold the gospel hostage to our theological traditions or misunderstandings.

This brings us back to the importance of Carey’s use of the words of Isaiah in his theology of world mission. That Carey’s theology of the world mission of the Christian church was birthed in the words of Isaiah is wholly appropriate, for it is in the prophets of the Old Testament that Yahweh is revealed to us as One who fills the earth with the glory of His presence (Isaiah 6:3). The prophets of ancient Israel were theologians par excellence and it is their theological foundation that is fulfilled in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

¹Gonzalez, Justo L. “Christendom.” *The Dictionary of Bible and Religion*, William H. Gentz, editor. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), 194.

As we have already noted, one's motivation for mission (or lack thereof) is grounded in one's theological understanding. This is just as true for those involved in Christian missions today as it was for William Carey two hundred years ago, or for the prophets of ancient Israel. Therefore, it is vitally important that our theology carefully reflects the character of God and his purposes for creation as revealed in the scriptures.

As we consider selected passages from the writings of the prophets, a trinitarian model will be used. These passages will be discussed in terms of Yahweh as God the Father; the messianic expectations of the prophets as speaking of God the Son; and the outpouring of Yahweh's Spirit as God the Holy Spirit. It is almost certain that the prophets would not have understood their writings in terms of this trinitarian model. However this model is useful in demonstrating how the prophets of the Old Testament understood Yahweh's election of Israel in relation to the nations of the earth and how the early Christians appropriated the prophetic writings as speaking to the election of the church as God's witness in the world.

The Universal Dominion of Yahweh

Yahweh is not a parochial deity whose dominion is limited to the geographical borders of national Israel or whose influence is limited to the cultic events of the Temple in the city of Jerusalem. Isaiah's throne vision of Yahweh (Isaiah 6:1ff) serves as the inauguration of his prophetic ministry and also as our introduction to the canonical prophets. In this vision, Yahweh is presented as the Sovereign King of the universe, whose glory fills the earth: "The whole earth is full of his glory" (Isaiah 6:3; also 40:5). The "glory" of Yahweh speaks of his presence, influence, and power. Walter Brueggemann comments, "The throne room of God is the policy room of world government."²

This vision of Yahweh's universal dominion is expressed throughout the prophets. Jeremiah refers to Yahweh as "King of the nations" (10:7); "the everlasting King" (10:10); and "the God of all flesh" (32:27). In the writings of Daniel "the Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind" (4:17) whose kingdom fills the whole earth (2:35) and His "dominion is an everlasting dominion" (7:14). Zechariah's vision of the reign of "Lord of the whole earth" (6:5) is that of the angels patrolling the earth on behalf of Yahweh (6:1ff). Further, he envisions the day when "the Lord will be king over all the earth; in that day the Lord will be the only one, and His name the only one" (14:9).

It is from His throne room that Yahweh directs the affairs of nations according to his decrees (Isaiah 2:4; 14:26f; Ezekiel 39:21; Daniel 4:17; Joel 3:2; Zephaniah 3:8; Haggai 2:7;). It is from his throne that Yahweh decrees that Assyria and Babylon shall be the instruments of

²Brueggemann, Walter. *Isaiah 1-39*. (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1998), 59f.

Israel's judgment (Isaiah 8:7; 39:6f; Jeremiah 20:4ff; Ezekiel 12:13), and Persia shall be Israel's salvation (Isaiah 45:1ff). The ultimate end of Yahweh's reign will be that his rule shall be extended throughout the earth (Isaiah 2:1-4; Micah 4:2f; Zechariah 14:9) and "all mankind will come to bow down before Me" (Isaiah 66:23).

Nowhere in the writings of the prophets is Israel understood to be the people of Yahweh to the exclusion of the nations of the world. Yahweh is not the exclusive property of Israel, but Israel is the exclusive property of Yahweh. Although Israel is not free to worship other gods, Yahweh is free to extend his salvation to the nations of the world! Brueggemann has written,

Yahweh's concern with the nations is not shaped or determined simply by the needs and propensities of Israel. Yahweh has Yahweh's own life to live, and it will not be monopolized by Israel. This recognition requires something of a rearticulation both of Israel who is not alone the partner of Yahweh, and of Yahweh who is not exclusively committed to Israel.³

Yahweh's Freedom to Love the World

The universal reign of Yahweh has as its purpose "that all the ends of the earth may see the salvation of our God" (Isaiah 52:10; also 51:4-6). This speaks to "the world wide revelation of the Lord in person and power."⁴ This theme of salvation to the nations is constant throughout the preaching of the prophets. Jeremiah proclaimed, "...the nations will bless themselves in Him, and in Him they will glory" (4:2). Habakkuk declared, "For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea" (2:14). In the writings of Malachi, Yahweh declared, "...My name will be great among the nations..." (1:11). In fact, this universal proclamation of the name of Yahweh is not new to the classical prophets. The theme of the Exodus event is "to show you My power, and in order to proclaim My name through all the earth" (Exodus 9:16).

Yahweh's concern for the nations of the world is an expression of his freedom in spite of His covenant with Israel.⁵ Yahweh's freedom can be expressed in a variety of ways, not the least of which is to demonstrate his saving grace to the nations of the world. In order to demonstrate that Yahweh's concern for the nations is a theme within the theology of the prophets we will briefly consider four significant passages of scripture.

Isaiah 19:19-25. This is a most remarkable utterance coming from the lips of a Hebrew prophet. Isaiah envisions a day in which Egypt and Assyria will be coequal covenant partners with

³Brueggemann, Walter. *Theology of the Old Testament*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 525.

⁴Motyer, J. Alec. *The Prophecy of Isaiah*. (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1993), 420.

⁵Brueggemann, Walter. *Theology of the Old Testament*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997). 522ff.

Israel.⁶ Egypt and Assyria are representative of the world powers, past and present, who have oppressed and threatened the people of Israel.⁷ It is astonishing that the prophet does not speak of the destruction of these nations, but to their healing and salvation. Egypt will “cry to the Lord because of oppressors.” Yahweh will “deliver them” and “make Himself known to Egypt.” The same redemptive language used to speak of Israel’s deliverance from Egypt is used to express Yahweh’s saving of Egypt! Note the following comparisons:

ISRAEL’S EXODUS

Exodus 2:23 “...the sons of Israel sighed because of the bondage, and they cried out; and their cry for help because of their bondage rose up to God.”

Exodus 3:8 “So I have come down to deliver them...”

Exodus 6:6 So say to the Israelites, “I am Yahweh. I shall free you from the forced labor of the Egyptians; I shall rescue you from their slavery and I shall redeem you with outstretched arm and mighty acts of judgment.” (*New Jerusalem Bible*).

EGYPT’S REDEMPTION

Isaiah 19:20a ...a witness to the Lord of hosts in the land of Egypt; for they will cry to the Lord because of oppressors,...

Isaiah 19:20b ...and He will send them a Savior and a Champion, and He will deliver them.

Isaiah 19:21 Yahweh will reveal himself to Egypt, and the Egyptians will acknowledge Yahweh that day and will offer sacrifices and cereal offerings, and will make vows to Yahweh and perform them. (*New Jerusalem Bible*).

Further, Isaiah makes Yahweh’s covenant with Egypt and Assyria complete with their renaming in which the former enemies of Israel become fellow members of the covenant.⁸ Names that once were the exclusive property of Israel are now shared with the nations of the world. “Blessed is Egypt My people, and Assyria the work of My hands, and Israel my inheritance” (Isaiah 19:25). As Brueggemann has written, “In this daring utterance we witness the process by which other peoples are redesignated to be Yahweh’s chosen peoples so that, taken paradigmatically, all peoples become Yahweh’s chosen peoples.”⁹

Amos 9:7. This text is taken from the prophecy of Amos and is addressed to the tribes of the northern kingdom, Israel. Apparently the people of Israel have rejected Amos’ oracle of judgment against them (Amos 9:10) because of their theological conviction that they are Yahweh’s

⁶Motyer, J. Alec. *The Prophecy of Isaiah*. (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1993), 169f.

⁷Oswalt, John N. *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1-39*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 381.

⁸Brueggemann, Walter. *Isaiah 1-39*. (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1998), 166.

⁹Brueggemann, Walter. *Theology of the Old Testament*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 522.

covenant people. Yahweh affirms Israel's status as His covenant people: "Have I not brought up Israel from the land of Egypt." But in the same utterance He denies their claims of privilege! "Are you not as the sons of Ethiopia to Me, O sons of Israel?" declares the Lord. "Have I not brought up Israel from the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir?" Yahweh declares that Israel is not the only nation who has received his concern. As Robert Martin-Achard has written, "The election of Israel does not imply that Yahweh is uninterested in the other nations; in fact, on the contrary, he set free Israel first (the Exodus) in order to guarantee the liberation of the whole of humanity (Genesis 12:1ff)."¹⁰

Just as Yahweh had decreed Israel's exodus from Egypt, so too, He has guided the migration of the Philistines and Arameans! In the eyes of Yahweh, who is the Lord of all the earth, Israelites and Ethiopians are one in the same! The utterances of Amos declare that God's sovereignty and care extend beyond the boundaries of Israel to peoples who are, in the eyes of Israel, distant and hostile.¹¹ In other words, Yahweh's purpose is that the nations of the earth be reconciled to Himself and to each other so that enemies will become covenant partners. David and Goliath will no longer be mortal enemies, but covenant brothers!

This particular text can be very useful in the current debate regarding the privileges of the modern nation of Israel. If one presumes that the modern nation of Israel has a divine right and claim to the lands of the middle east, it must also be acknowledged that Israel has a divine call as God's servant (Isaiah 42:1ff) to promote justice and peace throughout the nations, especially among its neighbors. Covenant with God does not mean the right to practice injustice toward the Palestinians. Just as God may be gathering the Jews to their homeland, God also is deeply concerned for the Arabs who have been displaced by Jewish immigration. In one were to apply these words from the lips of Amos to the political situation in the middle east, the paraphrase might read like this:

"Are you not as the sons of Mohammad to Me, O sons of Israel?" declares the Lord. "Have I not gathered Israel from nations of the earth, and the Palestinians from Jordan?"

Jonah 4:2. The prophet Jonah¹² was called to proclaim an oracle of judgment against the city of Nineveh. Nineveh was the capital city of the great Assyrian Empire which was a threat to Israel's national security. Nineveh was the last place in the world that Jonah desired to preach. But after some delay, Jonah arrived in Nineveh and declared the words of God. Whereas Israel often ignored the words of the prophets of Yahweh, "the people of Nineveh believed in God; and they

¹⁰Martin-Achard, R. and S. Paul Re'emi. *God's People in Crisis*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984), 65.

¹¹Hubbard, David Allan. *Joel and Amos: An Introduction and Commentary*. (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1989), 234.

¹²Jonah was not the only prophet called to preach to the nations. Jeremiah was appointed as "a prophet to the nations" (Jeremiah 1:5). This too demonstrates Yahweh's concern for the nations of the world.

called a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least of them” (Jonah 3:5). Because of their belief and acts of repentance “God relented concerning the calamity which He had declared...” (Jonah 3:10).

This entire series of events “greatly displeased” Jonah. As a loyal son of Israel who was in covenant with Yahweh, he did not seek Nineveh’s salvation, but its destruction. In an encounter with Yahweh, Jonah offers his explanation: “I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and One who relents concerning calamity” (Jonah 4:2). Jonah’s theological confession concerning the gracious character of Yahweh is based upon Israel’s covenant experience (Exodus 34:6). That the city of Nineveh has received the same consideration as did the people of Israel was a source of extreme bitterness for Jonah. Israel, as God’s covenant people, does not enjoy a monopoly on God’s compassion and grace.

Zechariah 2:11. Zechariah was a post-exilic prophet ministering to a disheartened remnant community. For the remnant returning to Jerusalem nothing was as they had hoped. Jerusalem was in ruins and the Temple that was being rebuilt was a source of disappointment (Haggai 2:3). Those who held to a covenant relationship with Yahweh were a minority within a minority, a remnant, a small group desperately holding to faith in their future. Their hope for a renewed Davidic covenant seemed to be a fading dream. However, Zechariah’s vision of a “new Jerusalem” looked to a day of salvation, a day in which “many nations will join themselves to the Lord... and will become My people...” The remnant of Israel will become one of many nations who will be called “My people.” There is no doubt that this is covenant language that speaks of a universal movement to include all nations of the world within the people of Yahweh.¹³

The Universal Reign of the Messiah

The universal dominion of Yahweh and His gracious concern for the nations of the earth is also demonstrated in the prophetic utterances of messianic expectation, or the renewal of the Davidic covenant. Again, in order to demonstrate this we will give brief consideration to a few select passages. These are texts which have been understood by the apostles to be fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

Isaiah 9:6-7. Probably no other text in the Old Testament is more associated with the messianic expectation than this. For our purposes here we will consider only the following words: “There will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace...” The immediate context of this prophecy reflects the tensions between Israel and the mighty Assyrians. Ahaz’s kingdom is lacking in authority and peace. These words look to a restored Davidic throne that will be inhabited by the “Prince of peace.” The rule and dominion of this “messiah” shall “increase and occupy

¹³Baldwin, Joyce G. *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi: An Introduction and Commentary*. (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1972). 111.

progressively all space until he rules over all.”¹⁴ This is not to be understood in terms of an Israelite Empire in which Israel has conquered and enslaved all her enemies, but as the universal reign of peace wherein “justice and righteousness” are administered for the benefit of all humanity.

Isaiah 11:1-11. This prophetic word is spoken in the midst of the failure of the Kings of Israel to govern as regents of Yahweh, particularly to the failure of Ahaz. In the words of Isaiah, the monarchy has been cut off and only a stump remains. But out of that stump God will bring forth new life, a new king who will judge the poor in righteousness and the afflicted of the earth with fairness. The reign of this charismatic king will be a radical reversal of the current state of affairs, so radical that even the nature of creation is “reordered and transformed”¹⁵ (11:6-9). The result of this king’s reign will be that “the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord” (11:9). This new birth is certainly not limited to the borders of national Israel, but is universal, even international in scope. This king is for the peoples and the nations of the world.

Isaiah 42:1-4. This is the first of the “servant songs” of Isaiah and as such it will serve as representative of this group of scriptures. Although scholars will disagree as to the identity of the servant, Christian tradition has appropriated the servant songs as relating to Jesus Christ. This charismatic servant of Yahweh will “bring forth justice to the nations.” Much of Isaiah is concerned with the growing tensions between the world powers and Yahweh’s dealings with the nations. Whereas world powers exercise their authority in the world by powerful speeches and military force, the servant of Yahweh will not “raise his voice” or “a bruised reed he will not break.” It is evident that this servant of Yahweh will wield power and influence far beyond Israel’s nationalistic concerns. He will establish “justice in the earth.” This assumes that Israel has been in violation of her covenant with Yahweh in that there is injustice within her borders, as well as in the nations of the earth.

Daniel 7:14. In Daniel’s vision of the coming of the “son of man” he speaks of a kingdom in which “all the peoples, nations, and men of every language might serve Him.” This vision is placed by the author during the Babylonian captivity of Judah, a time when the people of Israel are a minority community residing within the borders of a hostile world power, Babylon. Throughout the scriptures, the city of Babylon is an important theological motif that expresses humanity in opposition to the kingdom of God (Genesis 11:1ff; Isaiah 13:1-14:23; 21:9; Jeremiah 51:47-49; Revelation 14:8; 18:2). The Babylon in which Daniel is a captive is indeed a world power in which “all the peoples, nations and men of every language” serve the Babylonian gods. The captives of Judah are just one of many conquered peoples who have been displaced from their homeland.

¹⁴Motyer, J. Alec. *The Prophecy of Isaiah*. (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1993), 103.

¹⁵Motyer, J. Alec., 125.

The coming kingdom of the son of man represents a radical reversal in the fortunes of the people of God¹⁶ as well as a reversal in the order (or disorder) of the kingdoms of this world. Babylon will be displaced and the resulting kingdom of God will be a kingdom that is composed of the multitudes of oppressed and enslaved peoples throughout the world who are no longer displaced, but at home in the kingdom of God.

Zechariah 9:9-10. As has been mentioned before, Zechariah prophesied during the difficult days of the remnant's return from Babylonian captivity. The return to Jerusalem gave birth to messianic expectations, the renewal of the Davidic covenant. The most likely candidate was Zerubbabel (Haggai 2:20-23), but he disappeared into the shadows of history.

Zechariah spoke of a coming king who would "speak peace to the nations and his dominion will be from sea to sea... to the ends of the earth." In the tradition of the pre exilic words of Isaiah, Zechariah holds forth the hope of the end of international strife and warfare, which can only be accomplished by the arrival of the messianic king. The messianic expectation of Israel transcends nationalistic hopes. The coming king is not to be only the "king of the Jews," but the king of all humanity. As Joyce Baldwin has written, "...peace is to be declared to all nations, and ensured by the presence of the righteous king ruling over a world wide empire."¹⁷

"My Spirit on all Mankind"

When the apostles anxiously questioned Jesus about the restoration of the kingdom of Israel he answered, "...you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses ...to the remotest part of the earth" (Acts 1:8). That the coming of the Holy Spirit is essential in the world mission of the church is without question. Before Jesus and the apostles, the Hebrew prophets spoke often about the universal outpouring of the Spirit of Yahweh and that this outpouring would result in the coming of God's kingdom.

Isaiah speaks of the Spirit as the transformative agent of Yahweh which will transform the wilderness of this present age to the paradise of the kingdom of God (32:15-18). Isaiah also speaks of the promise of the Spirit "on your offspring" (44:3; Acts 2:39). Ezekiel speaks of the Spirit of Yahweh as he who will create a new heart within the people so that they may walk according to the covenant (36:26), and also that the indwelling of the Spirit will cause "you to come to life" (37:14). Zechariah spoke of the coming of the Spirit upon the "house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem" (12:10). It should be noted that each of these prophetic expectations look to the coming of the Spirit upon the people of Israel.

¹⁶Anderson, Robert A. *Signs and Wonders: A Commentary on the Book of Daniel*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984), 86.

¹⁷Baldwin, Joyce G. *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi: An Introduction and Commentary*. (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1972), 166.

However, one prophet did indeed speak of the universal outpouring of the Spirit and it is his words that are the basis for Peter's explanation of the advent of the Spirit on Pentecost and subsequent outpourings upon the Gentiles. Joel prophesied,

And it will come about after this that I will pour out My Spirit on all mankind; and your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. And even on the male and female servants I will pour out My Spirit in those days (Joel 2:28-29).

It must be recognized that some Old Testament scholars suggest that this promise is limited to the people of Judah. Larry McQueen has written that "limiting all flesh to the people of Judah focuses attention on the meaning of flesh in the Hebrew Bible... man in his infirmity."¹⁸

This view must be challenged for it is not the state of humanity that is the focus of Joel's words, but the redemptive (creative/transformational) acts of Yahweh. These words are spoken in the context of "the great and awesome day of the Lord" (2:31). For the Hebrew prophets, the day of the Lord referred to a time of cosmic upheaval when the present creation will be reordered. Therefore, the promise of the coming of the Spirit must be understood as an event with universal, cosmic, significance. The Spirit of Yahweh will be given to "all mankind." It is Yahweh as the "God of all flesh" (Jeremiah 32:27) who will reorder his creation. The coming of the Spirit is to be understood as a redemptive event that is universal in scope. "And it will come about that whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be delivered..." (Joel 2:32).

Yahweh's dominion is universal and His concern for the peoples of the world is without prejudice. The rule of His regent, the messianic king, extends throughout the world. Yahweh's Spirit is given to all mankind. It was indeed the expectation of the ancient prophets that all the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God!

The generation of William Carey had to overcome its incorrect theological assumptions in order to hear the great commission anew. Each generation of Christians must be careful that the gospel does not become captive to any nation's or people's self interest. Any theology that places the "shalom" of one nation or group of people above the "shalom" of others is a theology that is not in keeping with that of the ancient Hebrew prophets. This is true whether it is a fundamentalist Christian in America holding the Bible in one hand while waving "old glory" in the other; or an Israeli immigrant in Palestine holding a rifle while reciting the Shema.

¹⁸ McQueen, Larry R. *Joel and the Spirit: The Cry of a Prophetic Hermeneutic*. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 41.

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