

# לדעת בארץ בכל-גוים ישועתך

## The Mission Mindset of God's Old Testament People

By Steven A. Hahm

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There are some who would believe that the title of this essay, “The Mission Mindset of God’s Old Testament People,” is an oxymoron. They believe that God’s people did not acquire a mission mindset until Jesus spoke the words of the Great Commission: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations.”<sup>1</sup> Clearly, this was a defining moment in the history of the church. But it was not the first time that God’s people were given the responsibility of bringing the gospel message to all nations. Ever since the first speaking of the gospel promise in the book of Genesis, God’s people have served as witnesses to this word. In this essay, we will study the Scriptural basis for the mission of Old Testament Israel as well as the manner in which they carried out that mission.

### In the Beginning...

The first eleven chapters of Genesis tell the story of mankind from the creation of the world to the life of Abraham (approximately 2000 B.C.). This early history of mankind is highlighted by major crises and important promises from God. In these chapters, we see the groundwork being laid for the mission of God’s people to the nations. The first crisis is the fall of Adam and Eve into sin. The resulting promise was the first mention of God’s salvation plan for mankind. He would send an Offspring of the woman to crush the head of the Serpent. This beautiful message, however, soon faded from the memory of sinful mankind as wickedness and rebellion grew on the earth. This brought about the second major crisis—the worldwide flood. Only Noah and his family were spared from death. As God kept alive his servant Noah, he also kept alive the promise of the gospel. In Genesis 9, God makes a covenant with Noah that he would never again send a flood to destroy the earth. Of Noah’s three sons, Shem is singled out as receiving a special blessing from God. In chapter 11, the lineage of Shem is traced to a man named Abram. However, the other nations of the world are not lost from God’s sight. This is made clear in the following chapter—one of the most important chapters of the entire Old Testament.

In Genesis 12, we see God’s special promise of blessing to Abraham: “I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”<sup>2</sup> No study of Old Testament mission could be complete without highlighting this promise. Especially relevant are the final words: all peoples on earth will be blessed through you. Although God chose Abraham to play a special role in his salvation plan, the scope of God’s mission was not limited to Abraham’s descendants. All people—every nation, tribe, people and language—would be blessed through the coming Messiah. Luther underscored the importance of this promise when he wrote, “[It] should be written in golden letters and should be extolled in the languages of all people, for it offers eternal treasures.”<sup>3</sup>

Abraham took this promise of the LORD to heart. He shows his understanding of God’s great mission as he enters into the foreign land of Canaan. Immediately, he sets up an altar and calls on the name of the LORD. By his actions, Abraham both separates himself from the idol worshipping Canaanites and proclaims to them

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 28:19a

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 12:1-3

<sup>3</sup> Martin Luther. 1999, c1960. *Vol. 2: Luther's works, vol. 2 : Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 6-14* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed.). Luther's Works . Concordia Publishing House: Saint Louis

the name of the one and only true God. The words he spoke may have been completely foreign to the ears of his unbelieving neighbors. They were, however, words they needed to hear if they were to know of the wonderful blessing that was coming to the earth that would bring salvation for all people.

### **A Kingdom of Priests and a Holy Nation**

As God had promised, Abraham's family became a great nation. For four hundred years, the nation of Israel grew while under captivity in Egypt. At the right time, God called his servant Moses to lead his people out of Egypt. God had great plans for his chosen nation of Israel. God revealed his mission for the Israelites through his prophet Moses: "Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."<sup>4</sup> These words give an excellent description of the role that the nation of Israel was to play in God's plan of salvation.

As God's "treasured possession," the Israelites were unique from every other nation on earth. They were to be a "holy nation." The basic meaning of holy is "separate." The LORD said to Israel, "You are to be holy to me because I, the LORD, am holy, and I have set you apart from the nations to be my own."<sup>5</sup> It was easy to see what separated the Israelites from all other nations. The most obvious difference was that they worshipped only one God—the true God, maker of heaven and earth. But they were not only different in the God they worshipped. They were also different in the ritual they used to worship the true God. As can be seen in the book of Deuteronomy, the Israelites had a special set of laws that governed virtually every aspect of their daily living. These laws made for a visible division between Israel and all other nations.

Their unique call as a "holy nation," however, did not exclude all other nations from God's plan of salvation. In fact, the opposite is true. The Israelites were a "kingdom of priests." A priest is one who mediates between God and man. In the case of the Israelites, they mediated on behalf of all mankind. It was only in this unique nation that other tribes and people were able to come to a knowledge of the true God.

Whether [Israel] was an independent nation with a continual influx of foreigners or a landless people in exile, her unique 'mission' was to reflect the incomparable power and mercy of Yahweh. Ideally, others would come to acknowledge him through contact with, or at least awareness of, the nation of Israel. She was to be the lighthouse that guided the nations into the port of Yahweh.<sup>6</sup>

### **Israel as an Established Kingdom**

This holy nation of Israel was led out of captivity and into the promised land of Canaan. Along the way, the Lord granted success in many battles as they trampled the nations of Canaan underfoot. Even with this success, the Israelites still had a responsibility to be a beacon of God's love to the very nations they had defeated. Their understanding of this mission is displayed in many of their psalms, which were written during this period of history when Israel played a rather prominent role on the world stage.

The mission mindset of these Israelites is especially apparent in the so-called "royal psalms" (Pss. 47, 93, 95-100). The primary theme of these psalms is "God reigns over the nations."<sup>7</sup> The Israelites understood that there was only one God and the gods of the nations were merely idols. They rejoiced in the great power the LORD had shown over the idols of all the other nations. Their prayer was that the other nations would also acknowledge the sovereignty of the LORD. As they sing in Psalm 99:3: "Let [the nations] praise your great and awesome name."

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<sup>4</sup> Exodus 19:5-6

<sup>5</sup> Leviticus 20:26

<sup>6</sup> R. Bryan Widbin, "Salvation for People Outside Israel's Covenant?" in *Through No Fault of Their Own? The Fate of Those Who Have Never Heard*, Ed. W. V. Crockett J. G. Sigountos, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991, pp. 79-80.

<sup>7</sup> Psalm 47:8a

It is important to note that the Israelite mission was more than merely proclaiming the *sovereignty* of the Almighty God. They were also interested in telling all the nations of his amazing *grace*. Psalm 67 is an excellent example of this desire for all to know the graciousness of God. In this psalm, the author takes the Aaronic blessing that was given to the Israelites in Numbers 6 and places it in a mission context. He prays that the LORD would bless his people “that your ways may be known on earth, your salvation among all nations.”<sup>8</sup>

The phrase “your ways” is a translation of the Hebrew word דַּרְכְּךָ. This is the same word used when Moses asks the LORD to teach him “his ways” in Exodus 33:13. The LORD ultimately answers this request with the well-known gospel proclamation of Exodus 34:6-7:

The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation.

It is the prayer of the psalmist that all nations would come to know the ways of this God—the ways of his love and forgiveness. These are the words of a man with a heart for God’s mission and a love for all people.

### **Mission in the Age of the Prophets**

Sadly, throughout history Israel was not always faithful to her mission. At times, there was little difference between this “holy nation” and her idol worshipping neighbors. In order to call Israel to repentance and to remind her of her great mission as God’s chosen people, the LORD sent prophets to proclaim his Word among the Israelites. The message of the prophets ranges from the harshest of judgments to the sweetest of gospel invitations. Although the majority of prophetic writings focus on Israel and her own repentance, the surrounding nations are not completely forgotten. In fact, in these writings, we find some of the most direct calls for God’s people to witness and be a light to the nations.

Perhaps the most famous of the mission-minded prophets is the prophet Isaiah. Already in the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter we see a vision of all the nations streaming to the mountain of the LORD. They do not come without reason. They come because “the law will go out from Zion, the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.”<sup>9</sup> Isaiah preached during a period of great obduracy within Israel. But for the faithful remnant that dwelled within, his message was clear: “Be a light to the nations.” The most direct mission passages are found in the second half of Isaiah’s book. In Isaiah’s “servant songs”<sup>10</sup> we find phrases such as “bring justice to the nations,” “light to the Gentiles,” and “salvation to the ends of the earth.” In context this mission is ascribed to the Servant of the LORD. We know this Servant to be none other than Jesus Christ himself. This does not mean, however, that the mission of bringing the light to the Gentiles would not take place until Christ’s arrival. Certainly, God’s chosen people would see in the Servant’s mission their own mission mandate. As Professor Pieper writes in his commentary on Isaiah:

Israel is the spiritualized Jacob who prevailed over God and man (Gn 32:28); he is עַבְדִּי, My servant, the servant of the Lord who has a spiritual mission to carry out on earth in God’s name, namely, the same mission that the Servant of the Lord κατ’ ἐξοχήν (Christ Jesus) actually carries out (chapter 42): to bring the Gospel to the Gentile world.<sup>11</sup>

In the writings of the Minor Prophets, mission is not a central theme. Their primary focus is the present sin of God’s rebellious people. We are able to find, however, what author John Oswalt refers to as “tantalizing

<sup>8</sup> Psalm 67:2

<sup>9</sup> Isaiah 2:3

<sup>10</sup> 42:1-7; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12

<sup>11</sup> August Pieper, *Isaiah II*, Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1979, pp. 149-150.

single references to Israel's mission"<sup>12</sup> scattered throughout these books. The prophet Joel speaks of the great and dreadful day of the LORD, when "everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved."<sup>13</sup> Hosea speaks of a restored Israel as a splendid tree under whose shade people will find rest.<sup>14</sup> Zechariah gives us this thought-provoking description of Israel's mission: "In those days ten men from all languages and nations will take firm hold of one Jew by the hem of his robe and say, 'Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you.'"<sup>15</sup>

One prophet deserves special mention in an essay that is focusing on the theme of mission. This is the prophet Jonah. God sent Jonah with a special mission: to preach repentance to the great city of Nineveh. Of course, it took two miracles to get Jonah to that city; but the LORD's mission was ultimately accomplished. The result was that "the Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth."<sup>16</sup> This did not please the prophet Jonah. He did not believe that the foreign city of Nineveh was worthy of God's great love and mercy. In the end, the LORD rebuked his prophet for this attitude and affirmed his love for all nations. The souls in Assyrian Nineveh were just as precious to him as the souls of his chosen people Israel.

### Personal Witness in the Old Testament

We have seen that ever since the creation of the world, God's message of salvation has been for all nations. In the Old Testament, God chose the Israelite nation to bear witness to this message. What exactly did that look like in the individual lives of believers as they witnessed their faith to foreign peoples? We do not have many stories in the Old Testament of personal evangelism experiences. We do, however, have enough occurrences to give us an enlightening picture of how individual Israelites acted as lights to the nations.

In some instances, we see the results of their efforts but not the work itself. We read in Genesis 14 that Melchizedek, king of Salem, was a priest of the God Most High. He offered sacrifices to God, which were received by Abraham. Yet we do not know where, when and how this Gentile, in the midst of a pagan culture, became a believer in the true God. We can also see a Gentile believer in the person of Moses' father-in-law Jethro. He was instrumental in setting up the administration of the Israelite people as they left Egypt. Just how had this priest of Midian come to faith in the true God? Apparently it was through the witness of his son-in-law Moses. The details, however, are left up to our imagination.

Not every story of Gentile faith, however, is so scarce in details. One of the best-known Gentile believers in the Old Testament has the honor of having her own book: Ruth. Her story shows the great value of personal witness by a family member. Ruth's Jewish mother-in-law Naomi modeled the love of the LORD to her daughter-in-law very well. When Ruth faced the decision of whether to go back to her heathen gods or to worship the true God with Naomi, she replied, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God."<sup>17</sup>

Another success story of personal witness is found in the life of the prophet Daniel. Daniel had the unique position of being both a believer in the true God and a trusted statesman in the heathen nation of Babylon. When king Darius ordered that no one pray to a god other than the king, Daniel made a bold profession of his faith by praying openly to the true God. His punishment was the lions' den. When the heathen king saw how God protected Daniel in the lions' den, he proclaimed, "I issue a decree that in every part of my

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<sup>12</sup> John N. Oswalt, "The Mission of Israel to the Nations," in *Through No Fault of Their Own? The Fate of Those Who Have Never Heard*, Ed. W. V. Crockett J. G. Sigountos, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991, p. 87.

<sup>13</sup> Joel 2:32

<sup>14</sup> Hosea 14:6-7

<sup>15</sup> Zechariah 8:23

<sup>16</sup> Jonah 3:5

<sup>17</sup> Ruth 1:16

kingdom people must fear and reverence the God of Daniel.”<sup>18</sup> This proclamation from King Darius would have been unthinkable were it not for the personal witness of faithful Daniel.

Perhaps the most intriguing story of personal witness in the Old Testament is that of a young girl from Israel taken captive by bands from Aram. She became the servant of the wife of a man named Naaman. We don’t know much about Naaman except that he was a mighty commander in the army of Aram and that he had leprosy. Because of his condition, the little servant girl suggested that he seek healing from the prophet of the true God who lived in Samaria. Remarkably, Naaman followed her advice and was ultimately healed. Even greater than that, he became a believer in the true God—all because of the witness of a young girl from Israel.

### **Modeling Old Testament Mission in a New Testament World**

We begin the final section of this essay with a word of caution. When applying principles from the Old Testament to our lives today, we need to keep in mind God’s primary purpose for writing the Old Testament. Every page of the 66 inspired books is intended to lead us to Christ. We do them great injustice if we treat them as nothing more than an evangelism textbook. That is not the intent of these closing paragraphs. Rather, they are intended to further glorify Christ as we realize that the mission of his Old Testament believers remains, for a large part, unchanged in the New Testament era in which we live.

1. *The scope of God’s promise has not changed.* God told Abraham that all nations would be blessed through him. In Christ, we see the fulfillment of this promise. Salvation has been won and is freely offered to all people, regardless of nationality or race. God so loved the *world* that he sent his only Son. The privilege we have as evangelists is preaching peace to those who are far, and peace to those who are near. None are excluded. What a comfort and a blessing this truth holds.

2. *We, too, are a royal priesthood, a holy nation.* Peter writes in his first letter: “You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.”<sup>19</sup> As with God’s Old Testament believers, there is something that separates us Christians from the rest of the world. We do not follow the same rules and regulations that are found in Deuteronomy; yet there is something different about a Christian. The difference is the love of Christ that dwells in his heart. This love manifests itself in ways that seem odd to the unbelieving world: treating enemies with kindness, treating authority with respect, valuing God’s Word above all human reason. As with Israel, that which separates us from the world can also serve as a witness. When the peace of Christ dominates our life, unbelievers take notice because it is something they do not have. This is why Peter encourages us to “always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.”<sup>20</sup>

3. *Our prayer is that all would know God’s ways.* As the Israelites expressed in their psalms, we also sing and pray that the knowledge of salvation would go to the ends of the earth. It is good to be reminded of the value of bringing the mission of the church to the Lord in prayer. It might be a temptation for us to focus so much on the practice of evangelism that we forget about the prayer of evangelism. We have the opportunity to do this every Sunday as we pray together “Thy kingdom come.” These are not hollow words. God’s kingdom does come. He is the Great King above all gods. The prayer of his New Testament people is that all would acknowledge him as God and see his gracious way of dealing with sinners.

4. *There is no race or culture that is more or less deserving of God’s love.* As we saw in the message of the prophets, God’s love is for all. We need to avoid the trap that Jonah fell into—begrudging the gospel to an “unworthy” audience of Assyrians. Before that attitude would creep into our minds, we should remember exactly who we were before God brought us to faith—dead in sin, hostile to God. In light of this overwhelming grace, there is no reason for us to want to withhold the gospel from a single soul—black or white, Muslim or Jew.

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<sup>18</sup> Daniel 6:26

<sup>19</sup> I Peter 2:9

<sup>20</sup> I Peter 3:15

5. *God uses a variety of tools and circumstances to bring people into his kingdom.* Gentiles came to know the true God in the Old Testament in a variety of ways. Whether it was the mighty deeds of the conquering Israelite army or the words of a young servant girl, God accomplished his noble task of bringing souls into his kingdom. These stories provide encouragement for all God's people to use whatever gifts he has blessed them with and whatever circumstances they find themselves in to witness to the gospel. Who knows? If God could use a lowly servant girl to bring a mighty commander to the Lord, he might be able to use you as well.

### Conclusion

This list is not exhaustive. Nor should it be. As Christians, it gives us great joy to continually mine the depths of God's Word and find new ways to apply it to our lives of service. What is very clear is that the central message remains the same: Jesus Christ crucified for the sins of the whole world. May God continually bless the mission of his church as she labors in the same work as those who have gone before—to bring the gospel message to every nation, tribe, people and language.

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