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CHRIS WRIGHT

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# *The Mission of God*: An Introduction and Orientation to the Book<sup>1</sup>

Many others have produced fine and comprehensive works establishing a biblical foundation for Christian mission. My major concern has been to develop an approach to biblical hermeneutics that sees the mission of God (and the participation in it of God's people) as a framework within which we can read the whole Bible. To that extent I offer *The Mission of God* not only as a biblical reflection on mission, but also, I hope, as an exercise in biblical theology.

Books that offer a biblical theology of mission typically have an Old Testament section and then a (usually much larger) New Testament section. Then, in each section (and especially in the second), they tend to examine different parts of the canon, or to isolate the mission theology of particular authors, such as each Gospel writer, the Apostle Paul, etc. My approach has been rather different. I have tried to identify some of the underlying themes that are woven all through the Bible's grand narrative – themes which are the foundational pillars of the biblical worldview, and therefore also of biblical theology: monotheism, creation, humanity, election, redemption, covenant, ethics, future hope. In each case I have then tried to pay full attention to their Old Testament roots before moving through to see the New Testament development, fulfilment or extension in each case. Most of the chapters therefore include reflections drawn from both Testaments, sometimes moving backwards and forwards between them.

So in Chapter 1 there is a survey of some steps that have already been taken towards a missiological hermeneutic, but I argue that a more thorough effort is needed to go beyond them. Chapter 2 is a sketch of some contours of what I think a missiological hermeneutic of the Bible entails. If all hermeneutical frameworks are like maps of the territory of Scripture, then the only test of a map is how faithfully it interprets the territory for the traveller in terms of what he or she wants or needs to know to make sense of the journey. The rest of the book tests whether the map provided by approaching the whole Bible from the perspective of the mission of God fulfils the sub-title of the book, enabling us to grasp the driving dynamic of the Bible's grand narrative.

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<sup>1</sup> This material is adapted from the introduction and preface of Chris Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's grand narrative* (IVP, 2006).

The remaining three Parts of the book take up in turn three major focal points of the worldview of Israel in the Old Testament, which are also foundational to a Christian worldview when understood in relation to Christ:

- The living God (Part Two)
- God's people (Part Three)
- God's world (Part Four)

In Part Two we examine the missiological implications of biblical monotheism. The identity, uniqueness and universality of YHWH the God of Israel (Chapter 3), and the directly related claims that the New Testament makes for Jesus (Chapter 4) have enormous implications for mission. Indeed, Christian mission would have no foundation at all apart from these biblical affirmations about the one and only living God who wills to be known to the world, through Israel and through Christ. But we cannot do full justice to biblical monotheism without seeing it in conflict with the gods and idols of human construction that consume so much biblical rhetoric and ink. The conflict with idolatry is a somewhat neglected biblical theme that we subject to some analysis and missiological reflection in Chapter 5.

In Part Three we move on to consider the primary agent of the mission of God, namely the people of God. We shall follow the order of the biblical narrative as we walk first with Old Testament Israel. They were chosen in Abraham, redeemed out of Egypt, brought into covenant relationship at Sinai, and called to a life of ethical distinctiveness from the nations. Each of these great successive themes is rich in missional significance. Thus this part reflects on:

- Election and mission (in Chapters 6 and 7)
- Redemption and mission (in Chapters 8 and 9)
- Covenant and mission (in Chapter 10)
- Ethics and mission (in Chapter 11)

In Part Four we move to the wider canvas of the world itself – the earth, humanity, cultures and the nations. So here we explore first the missional implications of the goodness of creation and the connections between creation care and Christian mission (Chapter 12). The paradox of human dignity (because we are made in God's image) and human depravity (because we are mired in rebellion against God's authority) has profound implications for mission, explored in Chapter 13, along with reflections on the comprehensive response that gospel mission must make to the comprehensive onslaught of evil. The Wisdom tradition in the Old Testament is the most international of all biblical literature and provides a rich source for reflecting on a biblical theology and missiology of human cultures. The biblical world is a world full of nations, by God's creative intention. How do they figure in God's redemptive intentions? The Old Testament's eschatological vision for the nations surely provides some of the most exciting of all its trajectories of missional rhetoric, explored in Chapter 14, and then traced into the centrifugal horizons of New Testament mission theology and practice in Chapter 15.

It is my objective in the book not only to demonstrate (as many others have done) that Christian mission is fully grounded in the Scripture (though I deliberately

pay more attention to its Old Testament roots than most books on the subject do), but also to demonstrate that a strong theology of the mission of God provides a fruitful hermeneutical framework within which to read the whole Bible.

It is not just that the Bible contains a number of texts which happen to provide a rationale for missionary endeavour, but that *the whole Bible is itself a 'missional' phenomenon*. The writings which now comprise our Bible are themselves the product of, and witness to, the ultimate mission of God. The Bible renders to us the story of God's mission through God's people in their engagement with God's world for the sake of the whole of God's creation. The Bible is the drama of this God of purpose engaged in the mission of achieving that purpose universally, embracing past, present and future, Israel and the nations, 'life, the universe and everything', and with its centre, focus, climax and completion in Jesus Christ. Mission is not just one of a list of things that the Bible happens to talk about, only a bit more urgent than some. Mission is, in that much-abused phrase, 'what it's all about'.

### **Outline of Contents of *The Mission of God* (IVP, 2006).**

#### **PART ONE THE BIBLE AND MISSION**

Chapter 1            Searching for a missional hermeneutic

Chapter 2            Shaping a missional hermeneutic

#### **PART TWO THE GOD OF MISSION**

Chapter 3            The living God makes himself known in Israel

Chapter 4            The living God makes himself known in Jesus Christ

Chapter 5            The living God confronts idolatry

#### **PART THREE THE PEOPLE OF MISSION**

Chapter 6            God's elect people: chosen for blessing

Chapter 7            God's particular people : chosen for all

Chapter 8            God's model of redemption – the exodus

Chapter 9            God's model of restoration – the jubilee

Chapter 10          The span of God's missional covenant

Chapter 11          The life of God's missional people

#### **PART FOUR THE ARENA OF MISSION**

Chapter 12          Mission and God's Earth

Chapter 13          Mission and God's Image

Chapter 14          God and the nations in Old Testament vision

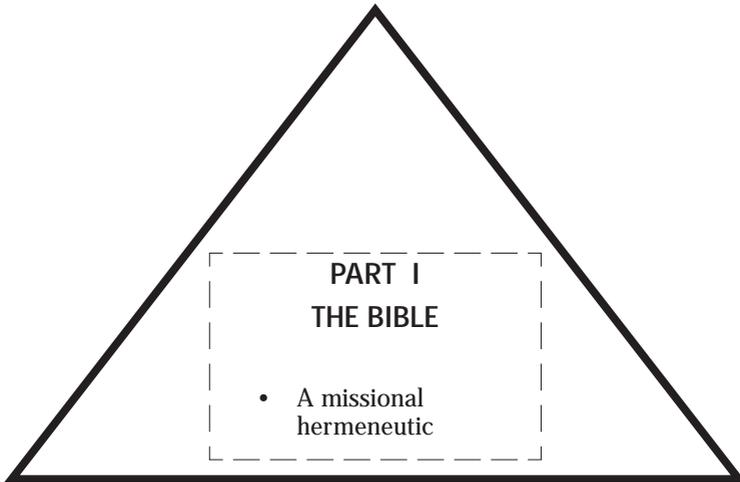
Chapter 15          God and the nations in New Testament mission

Epilogue

A diagrammatic outline of the book, then, might look something like this:

**PART II**  
**THE LIVING GOD**

- YHWH and monotheism
- Jesus as Lord
- Confronting idolatry



**PART III**  
**GOD'S PEOPLE**

- Election
- Redemption
- Covenant
- Ethics

**PART IV**  
**GOD'S WORLD**

- The earth
- Humanity, sin and evil
- Wisdom and culture
- The nations and the future

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