

From Creation to New Creation

The Mission of God in the Biblical Story

By Grant LeMarquand

The topic of mission and the Bible is vast.¹ I want to begin by asking a rather obvious question: where does one start such a discussion?

Encountering the Bible in Mission

One possible place to begin talking about Bible and mission is with the intersection between the biblical text and the reader who encounters this text in new ways in the context of missionary activity. The German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer spoke of all interpretation as having two horizons—the horizon of the text and the horizon of the reader. Meaning and understanding, he said, takes place at the intersection of these two realities. This came home to me a few years ago with some force when I realized that the traditional date of the Feast of the Transfiguration and the date of the bombing of Hiroshima were the same—August 6. From then on I have not been able to separate the two in my mind. The contrast between the blinding death light of the atomic bomb and the light of the glory of God in the face of Jesus is too strong a contrast for me to be able ever to dissociate the two.

Likewise I recall my first Christmas in Africa. It was 1987. My wife Wendy and our baby boy David had been in Kenya for about a year. Chara, our daughter, had been born in November. We were supposed to have gone to teach in a small theological College in Mundri, Sudan but the Anglican Church of Canada wisely discerned that the war in the Sudan was heating up and we were diverted to Kenya. A few months after we arrived in Kenya four of our would-be colleagues in Sudan were kidnapped by the Sudanese Peoples' Liberation Army and disappeared for almost two months in the Sudanese bush. After his release, one of the hostages, the Rev. Marc Nikkel, a mission partner of the Episcopal Church serving in the Sudan, returned to Africa. Unable to return to Sudan he taught with us in Kenya for almost a year. We had maintained a strong interest in things Sudanese, so it was joy to have Marc living next door. A few days before Christmas he gave me a report prepared by some Mennonites who had surveyed the situation in a particular area of Sudan around the town of Rumbek, an area of the Southern Sudan which had recently been devastated. The authors of the report detailed atrocities beyond description. One of the most striking details, however, was the fact that in a vast area of hundreds of square miles they had found no living children: they had been killed, succumbed to starvation, fled as refugees, or carried off as slaves. A few days after reading this report I opened my Bible to read the lesson for the daily office: it was December 28 and this was the lesson:

Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there till I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." And he rose and took the child and his mother by night, and departed to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, "Out of Egypt have I called my son." Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, was in a furious rage, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time which he had ascertained from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah: "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they were no more" (Mt 2:13–18)

As with the Transfiguration and Hiroshima, the stories of Sudan and the massacre of the innocents under Herod are now somehow fused in my mind. Sometimes reading the Bible in a new situation, or with new eyes, reading the Bible in a "mission" context, will confront the reader, perhaps even assault the reader, with its message. To speak of the Bible and mission may lead us to reflect on Scripture in ways that we had not previously dreamed. I went to Africa ostensibly to teach the Bible to theological college students—I ended up being taught the Bible in remarkable ways.

The task here is less to open up stories of my own existential engagement with biblical texts but rather to reflect on what the Bible says *about* mission. And surely this is a difficult enough task. I realize that every attempt to interpret the Bible is done from a particular context. No doubt my experiences and beliefs will colour my understanding of scripture, either illuminating or distorting the message. Since the Bible is such a foundational text for Christians, however, we are not at liberty to shy away from a task simply because it may be difficult.

Every thoughtful Christian who thinks about mission has some desire to root their theology of mission in Scripture. However, there appear at present to be two quite different starting places of biblical reflection on the theme of mission. I would like to examine briefly two sets biblical texts, which frequently come up in “Bible and mission” discussion, and notice what at first appear to be divergent themes that emerge from these texts. I would like then to examine the biblical story a bit more comprehensively, looking at the beginning and the end of Scripture, to see if the biblical story as a whole can help us to put these two apparently diverging texts and themes into a more fruitful canonical context.

The Great Commission² (Mt 28:16–20)

As a faculty member at a theological education institution that from time to time has spoken of its identity as “a great commission” seminary one might expect the Matthean version of Jesus’ command to his disciples to go out into the world (Mt 28: 16–20) to appear somewhere in this discussion. Of course the danger of beginning with this text is that such a starting point may tempt us to think of mission exclusively in terms of “evangelism” or “disciple-making.” I have no desire to downplay these crucial activities—far from it! Unfortunately, however, these words tend to be heard either individualistically (evangelism being popularly understood as being about “personal decision”) or ecclesially (making disciples being understood as being about “church growth” or “church planting”). Please do not misunderstand me: I believe that people everywhere should hear the message of God’s love in Christ, should be invited to make him their Savior, and encouraged to join the fellowship of the church for mutual edification and service. To put these themes in the central place in our theology of mission, however, may (and sometimes does) imply that mission is primarily about “us”: about our reaching out, about our growth, as individuals and as a church. But as we shall see, I hope, when the Bible talks about mission it is first of all talking about God.

Of course the Matthean version of Jesus’ mission command to his disciples is not the only text of its kind. Luke has two such commissions—one in the gospel and one in Acts. John also has a unique version of the great commission.³ We will look at each in turn, beginning with the two Lukan passages:

Then he said to them, “These are my words which I spoke to you, while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you; but stay in the city, until you are clothed with power from on high.” (Luke 24:44–49)

But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth. (Acts 1:8)

Notice the themes: the disciples are to proclaim forgiveness of sins to the nations; they are to do this in the name of Jesus and in the power of the Spirit. Although the message is given to them to proclaim, the foundation of the proclamation is the action of God—seen in the story of Israel and fulfilled in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The mission proclamation, according to Luke, does not have its origins with the disciples but in the action of God.

The gospel of John also has its own version of the “great commission”:

Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you.” And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If

you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” (Jn 20:21–23)

Although John’s witness is distinct (in so many ways), some similarities with other versions of the “great commission” are apparent: forgiveness of sins is central again; the power and presence of the Spirit is considered to be necessary for the mission to take place.

Most importantly, John tells us that mission does not begin with us, but with God: “As the Father has sent me, even so I send you.” Mission is not a programme of the church, or a great new idea thought up by Victorian Christians as the religious arm of colonialism (much as it is tempting to read nineteenth-century church history in this way). Neither is “mission” a way of getting new members into the “club” so that we can collect more “dues” (tithes) to maintain our building programs and salaries. Mission is not about our projects, but about God’s. To put it somewhat anachronistically, mission has its source in the life of the Trinity. The Father sends the Son, the Son sends the church, equipped in the power of the Spirit. Matthew’s most oft-quoted version of the “great commission” shares some of these themes, but presents these to us in a rather different way:

Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Mt 28:16–20)

Once again themes familiar to the Lukan and Johannine commissions are also found here: the disciples of Jesus are commissioned to bring a message to the nations, to the gentiles. Although forgiveness is not mentioned explicitly I believe that we can safely assume that the message of forgiveness is implicit in the mention of baptism in this passage.

It is crucial to focus our attention on God’s part in this process. Certainly, the Trinitarian theme, which we saw implicit in the Lukan and especially the Johannine texts, is made explicit here in the baptismal formula. Often missed in most explications of this text, however, is the end of the passage. I have often heard this passage read or quoted only up to the end of v.19 or only sometimes only to the halfway point of v.20. The end of the passage, however, is crucial: here we find the promise of Jesus’ continued presence with the church in the mission task. What is not often noticed is that this promise is the climax of a theme which Matthew began at the beginning of the gospel. In the first chapter of the gospel Matthew tells us (and only Matthew mentions this) that Jesus is to be called “Emmanuel: which means God with us” (Mt 1:23). The mention of Jesus as God’s presence in the world and the promise of Jesus’ continued presence in the church-in-mission, form an “inclusio” bracketing the whole gospel.

In the middle of the gospel we find another remarkable text:

“Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.” (Mt 18:19–20)

This text is remarkable not only because it echoes the beginning and the end of the gospel with the promise of Jesus’ presence, but because of the interesting Jewish context of this verse. When Israel found itself in exile in Babylon and estranged from the presence of God in the temple, a system of worship was formulated which placed the Torah in the central position. According to the Mishnaic tractate *Pirke Abot* (3.2),

R. Hananiah b. Teradion said: If two sit together and no words of the Law [are spoken] between them, there is the seat of the scornful, as it is written Nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful. [see Psalm 1] But if two sit together and the words of the Law [are spoken] between them, the Divine Presence [Shekinah] rests between them....

Just as the Jews in Babylon, bereft of God's presence in the temple and its rituals, replaced the temple with the Torah, so the early Christian community is promised that the physical absence of Jesus does not leave them comfortless. Jesus, the very divine presence, according to this passage, will be with us. And according to the end of Matthew's gospel, he will be with us especially as we participate in God's mission to "all nations."

Mission, we see from these texts, is about God: about God's love and forgiveness proclaimed, about God sending Jesus, about the promise of the spirit's presence as the task is continued by the church. Mission is not first and foremost about a human program or about human technique. Mission has its origins and its continuing and its fulfillment in the life of the Trinity. Evangelism, disciple making and church planting are necessary and vital aspects of our life, because they are a part of God's own reaching out to the nations.

Liberation from oppression (Exodus 3)

A second possible starting point, and one with which I also have great sympathy, is the Exodus story. Much so-called Third World theology begins in Exodus because here we have a story about slavery and oppression and about political deliverance. The Exodus story has in fact become somewhat paradigmatic for many theologians seeking to understand the vocation of the Christian and of the church in situations of institutionalized racism, systemic oppression, state-sponsored violence and unjust international structures. Theologians and biblical scholars from Latin America, from the African-American community, from South Africa, from Korea and from many other communities have turned to the book of Exodus and found a message that appears to stand against the evil realities of social injustice. Here are the people of Israel, who are suffering in slavery under the unfair yoke of an oppressive dictatorship, who find liberation, freedom from bondage and deliverance into a new land and a new way of life. The similarity between Israel's suffering under the taskmasters of Egypt and the suffering of so many around the world today is too obvious a parallel for most Third World theologians to ignore.

Most striking for me, once again, is what this narrative says about God:

Then the Lord said, "I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters; I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them...." (Ex 3:7-8)

In v. 10 God sends Moses to Pharaoh. God uses a human mediator in his work of liberation, but Moses is not the deliverer. It is God who is the missionary in this situation—"I have seen"; "I know"; "I have come down to deliver." God is the one who does the mission; God's servants simply share in the mission that belongs to God.

And notice that the goal of liberation is not the "self-determination" of the people of Israel. The destination of the Exodus is Mount Sinai. God tells Moses that when Israel is delivered from Pharaoh the result will be a doxological one:

[God said to Moses], "But I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought forth the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God upon this mountain." (Ex 3:12)

The mission of the Exodus is God's idea, the deliverance is carried out by God, and the purpose is the right ordering of Israelite society around the worship of God and the life of the covenant expressed in the Torah.

In short both of these texts—the so-called "great commission" and the great text of liberation in the book of Exodus⁴ are both about *God's mission* in the world. Certainly it is a mission into which human beings are recruited, but in the end it is not about us, but about God, about God's reaching out to the world in love.

It is strange how the churches of the Western world are so often divided between “great commission” people and “liberation” people as if these visions of mission are mutually exclusive. Perhaps paying more attention to the growing and dynamic churches of other parts of the world may help us to learn to heal this dualistic disease that has infected our church life. More importantly, I believe that we need to put these “mission texts” within the context of the biblical narrative as a whole. We have not been well served in the past by approaches, both scholarly and popular, which divide the Bible into bits but then never put it back together. Both naive proof-texting and erudite form-critical scholarship have (ironically) been guilty of the same thing: refusing to allow the Bible to be read as a story. I have no desire to iron out difficulties uncritically or to minimize differences between biblical texts. Clearly the various books of the Bible were written by a multitude of different authors, over several millennia, in three different languages in a variety of political, social and religious situations. As Christians, however, we are not given leave to throw up our hands and say it is all a mess of traditions and contradictions with no coherence or inner consistency. The canon does have a particular shape, a plot line, if you will, which is somehow *our* story.

Genesis 1–12

The first twelve chapters of Genesis set the stage for all that follows: in these short chapters we are presented with the first two and the beginning of the third act of what N.T. Wright has called a 5-act play,⁵ these acts being “creation,” the “fall,” and the beginning of the story of Israel.

The story begins, of course, with God making a “good” world. Here is where mission theology must begin—with a God who is not content (excuse the anthropomorphism) to remain alone in “godness,” but who reaches out and extends the privilege of existence to the universe. Mission is a part of the nature of God. We might say (as God later says of Adam) that it is not good for God “to be alone.” Within this good creation human beings are also given a task:

Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” So God created humankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” (Gen 1:26–28)

Of great importance for our purposes is the designation of human beings as God’s image. I take this to be not so much a statement about ontology, as if there was some dimension or aspect of human existence which could be designated as the *imago dei*, as it is a statement of our purpose, our task, our commission. I believe that the human side of mission theology begins here: it is not so much that we are “in” God’s image as that we are “to be” God’s image in the world. I spent many years being confused about the first two commandments of the Decalogue. They appeared to me to be redundant. It seems to me now that they are not. The first commandment instructs to have no other gods. The second commandment forbids graven images, or idols. The second commandment says this, it seems, because to have graven images robs human beings of the task, the mission which they were given at creation: you (plural) are to be God’s image in the world; do not abandon this representative mission to God’s creation. My assertion is that mission begins prior to the fall. The mission of God, the mission of humanity is not *primarily* about fixing things—it is first of all about representing the life of God in the world in all that we do.

But of course the world is in need of fixing. Genesis 3 is about a love story gone awry,⁶ about the dreadful consequences of human sin. The world is broken. Chapters 4–11 of Genesis recount the progression of human sin after the fall and expose the network of broken relationships resulting from human sin and evil.

Not to be lost in these chapters is the remarkable story of the tower of Babel. This story is usually read as if humans had somehow progressed to the point where they could actually challenge God with their technological achievements. God comes down and confuses their language in order to spoil the fun because the power and greatness of humanity threaten him. I think that the story should actually be read as a story about human empire (it is no coincidence that “Babel” is etymologically related to “Babylon”).

In Genesis 10 we read that there are already nations and languages and so in its canonical and literary context it is more likely that we should see the sin of Babel as the hubris of empire which represses differences and forces subjugated peoples to conform to the culture and language of the conqueror. This imperial task is in direct contradiction to the divine command at creation to “fill the earth” (Gen 1:28) and to the post-flood command to “spread abroad on the earth” (Gen 10:32). Read in this way, the story of Babel is a story of liberation, a story in which God “coming down” (Gen 11:5,7) to confuse the language of the peoples is an act of freeing the subjugated so that they can once again “spread abroad over the face of the whole earth (Gen 11:9). An empire speaking one language comes under judgment so that those who are freed after the fall of Babel’s tower can continue the God-given task of being fruitful, of multiplying, of creating the diversity of culture which God intended.⁷

The third act, after creation and the fall, is the story of Israel, which begins with the calling of Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 12.

Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse; and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves.” (Gen 12:1–3)

Interestingly, the patriarch and matriarch are promised things that they cannot achieve. For example, they are promised “a name” (in contrast to the people of Babel who had decided to make a name for themselves). Abraham and Sarah are promised a family—and this in spite of their great age. They are promised a land, although Adam and Eve and the family of Noah had been told to scatter over the face of the earth. In other words, the story of Abraham and Sarah is a story about grace. Things that had previously been commanded, or in the case of Babel “demanded,” have now been promised. What Abraham and Sarah cannot do for themselves because of the pervasive nature of the fall are now given as gifts.

Most importantly for our purposes, God promises that Abraham and Sarah’s family will be a blessing to the nations. The grace given is not given for them alone, but for the world. The story is not just the story of the beginning of the nation of Israel, it is the beginning of God doing a new thing for the whole world, the story of God creating a new people who would be a light to the nations (Isaiah 49:6). There is a Rabbinic saying in which God is made to say “I will make Adam, and if that doesn’t work I will make Abraham to set things right.” The good news is this: “God so loved the world that he sent Abraham.” Starting our investigation of “mission” in Genesis has the advantage of reminding us that mission is more than fixing things that are broken, since God seems to have a purpose and a mission before there are any problems to fix. God even commissions those made in his image before there is sin and evil in the world. Genesis also reminds us that Israel is not chosen by God simply to be blessed, but also to be a blessing to all nations. God does not abandon the world now broken in the fall. God comes and calls a people to himself for the sake of the world.

Revelation 4–5

I would like to focus now on the end of the story, on a text not usually considered a “mission” text: Revelation chapters 4 and 5.⁸

After this I looked, and lo, in heaven an open door! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, “Come up hither, and I will show you what must take place after this.” (Rev 4:1)

The reference to an “open door” in heaven signals to those familiar with this genre of literature that this is a typical apocalypse. It is now fairly widely accepted that apocalyptic literature may have an eschatological emphasis and focus on questions about the future, but the primary purpose of an apocalypse is to open heaven, to give a glimpse at the unknowable, the unseeable. For a period the seer has a vision of the world and of history from a God’s-eye view. Reading Revelation, therefore, is somewhat like reading the sign over the blacksmith’s shop: “all kinds of fancy twistings and turnings done

here.” In order to unlock the Revelation the reader must have not just “the key” but a whole fist full of keys: a sensitivity and knowledge of the symbolic world of the Greco-Roman period, some hunch about the social, religious and political contexts, and (most of all) a love for and appreciation of the Old Testament story.

At once I was in the Spirit, and lo, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne! (Rev 4:2)

For those who know the Old Testament the reference to the throne is perhaps the easiest hidden code to decipher—familiar texts like Isaiah 6 and Daniel 7 remind us that the throne is God’s place. What may be less obvious is that throne imagery seems to be used when there is some question about who is really in charge. In Isaiah 6, Uzziah’s long reign has just come to an end. Isaiah is confronted with a vision of the true king, the true Lord. In Daniel 7, the kings of the earth have defeated and oppressed God’s people—but there is an ancient of Days, and he has a throne. The probable political context of the book of Revelation is the reign of the madman Domitian, a megalomaniac who demanded complete submission and worship of his subjects; a man so hated that his own Roman citizens attempted to destroy every statue and every coin which bore his image after his death. John is comforted in being shown a vision of the true king, that there is still one who is truly on the throne.

And he who sat there appeared like an emerald. Round the throne were twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones were twenty-four elders, clad in white garments, with golden crowns upon their heads. From the throne issue flashes of lightning, and voices and peals of thunder, and before the throne burn seven torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God; and before the throne there is as it were a sea of glass, like crystal. (Rev 4:3–6a)

This vision is probably meant to be seen as a collage, the stones reminding us of great value and great beauty; the stones, the lightning, the fire, the crystal, somehow reminding us of both power and the purity of light.

The crystal sea is an important image, since the sea was actually a very troubling symbol for the people of Israel. The only book of the Old Testament that has a sea setting is Jonah—and there the sea is far from safe. Israelites were landlubbers who kept away from sea travel unless absolutely necessary. God delivers Israel *from* the Sea in Exodus. The ocean is a place of chaos and sea monsters. But here, before God’s throne, the sea is ordered, tame, in control.⁹

The 24 elders are another fairly obvious image to Christian readers of the Old Testament: 24 appears to be a composite number, the 12 tribes of Israel and the community of the 12 disciples put together. All of God’s people together reigning. This image of thrones and crowns for God’s people was an image that was difficult for me to grasp for a long time, but it is, I think, an important one. The picture of God’s people presented here is one of humanity restored to God’s original intention. As we have already seen, Genesis 1:28 speaks of humankind created in the image of God and commissioned to “rule” over the whole creation. I understand this concept of rule or “dominion” not as “domination” but as stewardship, as “taking care of” God’s world under God’s own loving Lordship. To be in God’s image is to “till the earth and to keep it” as the second creation account has it. (Genesis 2:15) Here in Revelation 4 we see humanity restore to a place of stewardship under the loving Lordship of the one on the throne.

And round the throne, on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with the face of a human being, and the fourth living creature like a flying eagle. And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all round and within, and day and night they never cease to sing...(Rev 4: 6b–8a)

Lest we forget that God hates nothing that he has made, lest we forget that God has a purpose for all of creation, the vision places not only people, but also the representatives of all of creatures around the throne of God. The zoology here is a bit Aristotelian: all living things are divided into four families: domestic animals, wild animals, birds, and human beings. Interestingly the description of the living

creatures is similar to the description of the angelic being of Isaiah 6 ("six wings"). And the creatures have a song: "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!" (Rev 4:8b).

In this first song on the hit parade of heaven, God is praised not for any action but simply because God "is": because God is holy, completely other, and separate. The three-fold "Holy" reflects the difficulty that the Hebrew language had in describing God in Isaiah 6. There is no Hebrew word for "very." The emphatic adjective is expressed by repeating the thing being emphasized: so if someone is "very good" the Hebrew speaker says she is "good good." God is beyond this: "good good good," "holy holy holy."

And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to him who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives for ever and ever; they cast their crowns before the throne, singing, "Worthy art thou, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for thou didst create all things, and by thy will they existed and were created." (Rev 4: 9–11)

The second song on heaven's pop charts praises God as the creator. Again we are asked to look back to the Genesis account of creation. Not only is God holy, but God has extended the privilege of being to others. I do not think that this implies any lack of self-sufficiency in God, or that God was somehow lonely, or needed us. Creation is an act of grace, of self-giving love. God's will was that the universe come into being. Here again we see God as a missionary God, extending beyond himself, calling the universe into being and therefore into a relationship with the One who made it. God, even if we conceive of God in Trinitarian terms, as being a community of love existing before the world was made (Jn 17:5), says in effect, "it is not good that I remain alone" (Gen 2:18). Just as Adam and Eve are given to one another in the second creation account, so God says "I will not be alone, I will reach beyond myself."

The word "whenever" adds a rather humorous touch to this verse. We are told that the four living creatures "never cease to sing...day and night" (4:8) and that "whenever" they do so the elders fall down and worship. We are to envision (somehow!) an eternal falling down, it seems, on the part of the elders, since they know their unworthiness. But on God's part we see an eternal bestowing of gifts of robes and thrones and crowns. "You take these gifts.... No we're not worthy....You take these." It's all rather like a heavenly tennis match.

And I saw in the right hand of him who was seated on the throne a scroll written within and on the back, sealed with seven seals; and I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, "Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?" And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it, and I wept much that no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it. Then one of the elders said to me, "Weep not; lo, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals." And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders, I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain, with seven horns and with seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth; and he went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who was seated on the throne. And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and with golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints; and they sang a new song, saying, "Worthy art thou to take the scroll and to open its seals, for thou wast slain and by thy blood didst ransom saints for God from every tribe and tongue and people and nation, and hast made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on earth." (Rev 5:1–10)

The third song (and perhaps the fourth and fifth are simply stanzas of this third song) worships God because God is the redeemer, because "when we had fallen into sin and become subject to evil and death, you in your mercy, sent Jesus Christ" (The Book of Common Prayer, 362). Unlike the deistic view that God is creator, but aloof, distant and uncaring, the biblical perspective is that God's mercy compels God to act, to save, to redeem. Here we see that mission does include fixing what is broken, saving what is lost. This paragraph conceives of Jesus, the Lamb of God, as the missionary *par excellence*. It is hard to read this passage without remembering John 3:16: "God loved the world so much that he sent his Son." The text is surprising enough in its Johannine context: throughout John's gospel the "world" is that

place which is in rebellion against God, that place which hates God and rejects God's Son. The Son, on the other hand, is in a relationship of love with the Father before the creation. The Father loves the Son so much that he gives all things into his hands. One would expect, therefore, that John 3:16 would say: "God loved the Son so much that he gave him the world." But no, God loves the world and out of this undeserved love God gave, God sent.¹⁰

But there is more to this story, since John 1 has already told us that Jesus is the Word made flesh, the incarnation of the unknowable God. God so loved the world that he did not remain aloof, but God himself came in the person of the Jesus. This is not God sending someone else to do an impossible mission "should you choose to accept it", God is the missionary, the one who crosses cultures, giving up all the privileges of Godhead and becoming a servant (Phil 2:5–11). Here in the Revelation it is not just the one who is seated on the throne who receives the worship of the creatures and the elders: the Lamb is worshipped.

Notice the scope of God's mission here. It is not merely that God has redeemed Israel, or some other worthy ethnic group. God's vision of the mission is universal: "every tribe and tongue and people and nation." The distinctions and particularities are not erased or homogenized. Our cultural and language differences remain. This is not gray colorless soup, a melting pot, but a mosaic, as a Canadian might say, or a rainbow people, as Desmond Tutu might say. At the end of the Revelation all the nations bring their distinctive treasures into the New Jerusalem (21:24). This is the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham: that through him all the nations of the earth would be blessed.

Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!" (Rev 5:11–12)

The song continues, but joined now by an innumerable crowd. The word "myriad" is the largest number the Greek language has a word for (like googolplex in English, my son tells me). And it is not just one myriad (10,000) but myriads of myriads. The writer is quickly running out of language here.

And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all therein, saying, "To the one who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might for ever and ever!" And the four living creatures said, "Amen!" and the elders fell down and worshiped. (Rev 5:13–14)

The Revelation reminds us that mission is about God's purpose to unite all things in Christ (Eph 1:10). The church does not have an option about whether or not it wants to be interested in mission. God is already doing the mission. The question is whether we will join in with the myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands.

Notes

¹Useful works on the Bible and mission include:

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Peter Bolt and Mark Thompson, eds. *The Gospel to the Nations: Perspectives on Paul's Mission* (Leicester: IVP, 2000).

David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991). See especially "Part 1: New Testament Models of Mission".

Paul W. Bowers, "Church and Mission in Paul," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 44 (1991): 89–111; idem. "Fulfilling the Gospel: The Scope of the Pauline Mission," *Journal of the Evangelical*

- Theological Society* 30 (1987): 185–98; idem. "Paul and Religious Propaganda in the First Century," *Novum Testamentum* 22 (1980): 316–23.
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- C.H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments* (N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1936).
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- Richard A. Horsley, and Neil Asher Silberman. *The Message and the Kingdom: How Jesus and Paul Ignited a Revolution and Transformed the Ancient World* (New York: Grosset and Putnam, 1997).
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- Herbert J. Kane, *Christian Missions in Biblical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976).
- Robert J. Karris, "Missionary Communities: A New Paradigm for the Study of Luke-Acts," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 41 (1979): 80–91.
- Andreas J. Köstenberger, "The Challenge of a Systematized Biblical Theology of Mission: Missiological Insights from the Gospel of John," *Missiology* 23 (1995): 445–464.
- Andreas J. Köstenberger, and Peter T. O'Brien. *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Mission*. (Downers Grove: IVP, 2001).
- William J. Larkin, Jr. & Joel F. Williams, eds. *Mission in the New Testament: An Evangelical Approach* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1999).

- James LaGrand, *The Earliest Christian Mission to "All Nations" in the Light of Matthew's Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).
- Lucien Legrand, *Unity and Plurality: Mission in the Bible* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1990 [1988]); idem. *The Bible on Culture: Belonging or Dissenting?* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2000).
- Pedrito U. Maynard-Reid, *Complete Evangelism: The Luke-Acts Model* (Scottsdale, PA / Waterloo, Ont.: Herald Press, 1997).
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- Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996).
- Dorothy Jean Weaver, *Matthew's Missionary Discourse: A Literary Critical Analysis*. (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990).
- ²The term "The Great Commission" is not found in Scripture. The earliest use of the expression that I can find is as the title of the first chapter of the three-volume *History of the Church Missionary Society* (London, 1844).

³It is possible that Mark may originally have had a word from the risen Jesus sending his disciples into the world in mission. The longer ending of Mark, which contains, among other things, the following words, is not original to the gospel:

Afterward he appeared to the eleven themselves as they sat at table; and he upbraided them for their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen. And he said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up serpents, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover" (16:14–18)

As it stands now, the gospel of Mark ends at 16:8. The original ending of Mark, if it ever extended past v.8, is now lost. See Bruce Metzger, et al, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (3rd ed.; London, N.Y.: UBS, 1971), 122–128, for the evidence.

⁴In Holy Scripture we must not think that the Exodus story is the only text of liberation. Throughout the Bible God is seen as a God who is concerned about the widow and the orphan, who judges the arrogant, the proud, the rich and lifts up the poor and the oppressed. See, for example, the book of Amos, the "Magnificat" (Luke 1:46–56); the first sermon of Jesus (Luke 4: 14–30). Examples could easily be multiplied.

⁵N.T. Wright. *The New Testament and the People of God. Christian Origins and the Question of God, Volume One* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 141–42.

⁶The phrase is Phyllis Trible's. See *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978).

⁷Cf. José Miguez-Bonino, "Genesis 11:1–9: A Latin American Perspective," in *Return to Babel: Global Perspectives on the Bible* (ed. John R. Pope-Levison and Priscilla Pope-Levison; Louisville: Westminster / John Knox Press, 1999), 13–16.

⁸I am grateful to Professor Larry Hurtado of the University of Edinburgh for a number of helpful insights on these chapters in Revelation.

⁹As a Canadian, I must point out the obvious fact that the "sea of glass, like crystal" could be taken as an allusion to an ice rink which must mean that there is hockey in heaven, a great comfort!

¹⁰See Andrew Lincoln "God So Loved the World," 38–46 in *The True & Living Word: Sermons from the Community of Wycliffe College* (ed. Chris Barrigar and Grant LeMarquand; Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 1998).

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