

UNLOCKING THE BIBLE'S GRAND NARRATIVE

The
MISSION
of
GOD

SECOND EDITION

CHRISTOPHER
J. H. WRIGHT



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PART ONE

The BIBLE and MISSION

MISSION IS WHAT THE BIBLE IS ALL ABOUT, I suggested earlier. We could as meaningfully talk of the missional basis of the Bible as of the biblical basis of mission. Now this is a bold claim. One would not expect to be able to turn the other way around any phrase that began “The biblical basis of . . .” There is, for example, a biblical basis for marriage, but there is not, obviously, a marital basis for the Bible. There is a biblical basis for work, but work is not what the Bible is all about. So isn’t my assertion rather exaggerated or even conceited? Indeed, in view of the enormous variety of the contents of the Bible and the huge scholarly literature devoted to exploring every highway and byway of genre, authorship, context, ideology, date, editing, and history of all these documents, does it make sense to speak of the Bible being “all about” anything?

I take some encouragement in persisting with my claim from the words of the risen Jesus as recorded in Luke 24.¹ First to the two on the road to Emmaus and then later to the rest of the disciples, Jesus made himself as Messiah the focus of the whole canon of the Hebrew Scriptures that we now call the Old Testament (Lk 24:27, 44). For that reason, we are accustomed to speaking of the christological focus or center of the Bible. For Christians, the whole Bible revolves around the person of Christ.

Jesus went on, however, beyond his *messianic* centering of the Old Testament Scriptures to their *missional* thrust as well.² “Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, “This is what is written: The Christ

¹This text was also taken as a starting point for a biblical theology of mission in 1971 by Henry C. Goerner, *Thus It Is Written* (Nashville: Broadman, 1971).

²The use of *missional* rather than *missiological* here seems appropriate in the light of the definitions in the introduction above, since Jesus was not only offering a fresh theological reflection on the Scriptures but also committing his disciples to the mission that such reflection must now mandate “must be preached,” “You are witnesses.”

will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem” (Lk 24:45-47). Jesus’ whole sentence comes under the rubric “this is what is written.” Luke does not present Jesus as quoting any specific verse from the Old Testament, but he claims that the mission of preaching repentance and forgiveness to all nations in his name is “what is written.” He seems to be saying that the whole of the Scripture (which we now know as the Old Testament) finds its focus and fulfillment *both* in the life and death and resurrection of Israel’s Messiah *and* in the mission to all nations, which flows out from that event.³ Luke tells us that with these words Jesus “opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures,” or, as we might put it, he was setting their hermeneutical orientation and agenda. The proper way for disciples of the crucified and risen Jesus to read their Scriptures is *messianically* and *missionally*.

Paul, though he was not present for the Old Testament hermeneutics lecture on the day of resurrection, clearly found that his encounter with the risen Jesus and his recognition of Jesus as Messiah and Lord radically transformed his (Paul’s) own way of reading his Scriptures. His hermeneutic now had the same double focus. Luke records Paul as testifying before Festus, “I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen—that the Messiah would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would proclaim light *to his own people and to the nations*” (Acts 26:22-23 NIV modified). This dual understanding of the Scriptures then shaped Paul’s whole résumé as the apostle of the Messiah Jesus to the Gentiles.

Down through the centuries it would probably be fair to say that Christians have been good at their messianic reading of the Old Testament but inadequate (and sometimes utterly blind) at their missional reading of it. We read the Old Testament messianically or christologically in the light of Jesus; that is, we find in it a whole messianic theology and eschatology that we see as fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth. In doing so we follow his own example, of course, and that of his first followers and the authors of the Gospels. But what we have so often failed to do is to go beyond the mere satisfaction of ticking off so-called messianic predictions that have “been fulfilled.” And we have failed to go further because we have not grasped the *missional* significance of the *Messiah*.

The Messiah refers to the one whom YHWH promised to send, who would embody in his own person the identity and mission of Israel as their representative, King, Leader, and Savior. Through the Messiah as his anointed agent, YHWH, the God of Israel, would bring about all he intended for and through his servant Israel.

³I use *Messiah* here as the conventional single-word indicator of the wide diversity of Old Testament terms used to describe the figure through whom YHWH would bring about his expected redemption and restoration of Israel, even though *messiah* as a term in Hebrew is not used in the Old Testament as a functional title of the coming redeemer (except probably in Dan 9:25).

But what was that mission of Israel? Nothing less than to be “a light to the nations,” the means of bringing the redemptive blessing of God to all the nations of the world, as originally promised in the title deeds of the covenant with Abraham. For the God of Israel is also the Creator God of all the world.

Through the Messiah, therefore, the God of Israel would also bring about all he intended for the nations. The eschatological redemption and restoration of Israel would issue in the ingathering of the nations.⁴ The full meaning of recognizing Jesus as Messiah, then, lies in recognizing also his role in relation to God’s mission for Israel and through Israel for the blessing of the nations. Hence, a messianic reading of the Old Testament has to flow on to a missional reading—which is precisely the connection Jesus makes in Luke 24.

The point is well made by Bruce Ashford and Heath Thomas.

This great missional imperative [sc. Matt. 28:18–20] is not some sort of ad hoc directive (“Oh wait! One more thing, I almost forgot . . .”) but the fulfillment of God’s mission for Israel and his mission through Jesus. Indeed . . . Matthew wrote his Gospel account in order to show that Christianity is the fulfillment of Old Testament faith, the flowering of God’s seminal work through Israel. . . . This is the context of the Great Commission. It is not an afterthought but a concise summary of the whole Christian mission, a compact rendering of the gospel’s implications for the Christian life.⁵

A useful comparison may help the point. We recognize that the *christological focus of the Bible* operates in many different ways—some direct and others much more indirect. To speak of the Bible being all about Christ does not (or certainly should not) mean that we try to find Jesus of Nazareth in every verse by some feat of imagination. Rather, I mean that the person and work of Jesus become the central hermeneutical key by which we, as Christians, articulate the overall significance of these texts in both Testaments. Christ provides the hermeneutical matrix for our reading of the whole Bible.

The same is true of *the missiological focus of the Bible*. To say that the Bible is all about mission does not mean that we try to find something relevant to evangelism in every verse. We are referring to something deeper and wider in relation to the Bible as a whole. In a missiological approach to the Bible we are thinking of

- the purpose for which the Bible exists
- the God the Bible renders to us

⁴The most thorough recent exploration of the expectation of the conversion of the Gentiles as a necessary sequel to, or accompaniment of, the restoration of Israel, in both the Old Testament and in Second Temple Judaism, is provided by James P. Ware, *Paul and the Mission of the Church: Philippians in Ancient Jewish Context* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011), 57–159.

⁵Bruce Riley Ashford and Heath A. Thomas, eds., *The Gospel of Our King: Bible, Worldview, and the Mission of Every Christian* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 189. It is important to stress, in advance of the further discussion in chap. 8, that to say “Christianity is the fulfillment of Old Testament faith” is not to say that the church has “replaced the Jews” or canceled the election of Israel.

- the people whose identity and mission the Bible invites us to share
- the story the Bible tells about this God and this people, and indeed about the whole world and its future

This is a story that encompasses past, present, and future, “life, the universe, and everything.” There is the closest connection between the biblical grand narrative and what is meant here by biblical mission. To attempt a missional hermeneutic, then, is to ask: Is it possible, is it valid, is it profitable, for Christians to read the Bible as a whole from a missional perspective, and what happens when they do? Can we take mission as a hermeneutical matrix for our understanding of the Bible as a whole?

Before outlining in chapter two some contours of an approach that would answer those questions affirmatively, we will look first in chapter one at several ways in which the Bible has been related to mission in recent decades—ways that have their own validity and significant contributions to make but do not seem quite adequate to what I have in mind as a comprehensively missional approach to biblical hermeneutics. Chapter one, then, outlines some steps in the search for a missional hermeneutic—but in each case I believe we need to go further.

SEARCHING *for a* MISSIONAL HERMENEUTIC

THERE ARE MORE THAN ENOUGH BOOKS offering biblical foundations for Christian mission.¹ Not all of them are of the same quality, however. Some are tracts to the already converted, providing justification for the task to which writer and readers are already committed. Some pay no attention to critical scholarship; others, perhaps, too much.² Too many, more culpably, pay scant attention to the bulk of the Bible itself—the Old Testament. What they all seek to do, however, is clear: to find appropriate biblical justification and authority for the mission of the Christian church to the nations. This may be in order to encourage those already engaged in such mission with the assurance that what they do is biblically grounded, or it may be to motivate those who are not yet engaged in it with the warning that they are living in disobedience to biblical imperatives. There is a rhetorical dimension to such writing, seeking to encourage the missionally persuaded, and to persuade the missionally unengaged, on the common basis that both camps respect the authority of Scripture.

¹The substance of this chapter, along with chap. 2, first appeared as Christopher J. H. Wright, “Mission as a Matrix for Hermeneutics and Biblical Theology,” in *Out of Egypt: Biblical Theology and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Craig Bartholomew et al. (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 102-43. This fine volume contains other papers from the Scripture and Hermeneutics Seminar that are relevant to the overall theme of this book.

Regarding books offering biblical foundations for Christian mission, see, e.g., as a short selection, Johannes Blauw, *The Missionary Nature of the Church* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1962); David Burnett, *God’s Mission, Healing the Nations*, rev. ed. (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1996); Roger Hedlund, *The Mission of the Church in the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1991); Andreas J. Köstenberger with T. Desmond Alexander, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Mission*, 2nd ed. (London: Apollos, 2020); Richard R. de Ridder, *Disciplining the Nations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1975); Donald Senior and Carroll Stuhlmueller, *The Biblical Foundations for Mission* (London: SCM Press, 1983); Ken Gnanakan, *Kingdom Concerns: A Biblical Theology of Mission Today* (Bangalore: Theological Book Trust, 1989); Stanley H. Skreslet, *Comprehending Mission: The Questions, Methods, Themes, Problems, and Prospects of Missiology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2012), 21-42.

²There is, of course, a proper place for the critical disciplines in our ground-laying work for biblical theology, but we also need to go beyond those foundations to the Bible’s missiological thrust. See David J. Bosch, “Hermeneutical Principles in the Biblical Foundation for Mission,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 17 (1993): 437-51; Charles Van Engen, “The Relation of Bible and Mission in Mission Theology,” in *The Good News of the Kingdom*, ed. Charles Van Engen, Dean S. Gilliland, and Paul Pierson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 34.

BEYOND “BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR MISSION”

Biblical apologetic for mission. Such work, which might be called “biblical apologetic for mission,” is of course pragmatically valuable. It would, after all, be a shattering thing if the church were to be suddenly seized by the conviction that all the missionary effort of two thousand years was grounded in no clear warrant of Scripture. From time to time, of course, there have been voices that have argued exactly that. Indeed, it was against such voices, arguing theologically and biblically (as they thought) that mission to the nations was not required of good Christian citizens, that William Carey developed his biblical case for “the conversion of the heathens,” becoming one of the first in the modern period to do so.³

The illustrious example of Carey, however, points to a shortcoming inherent in many “biblical foundations for mission” projects. Carey built the whole of the biblical section of his case on a single text, the so-called Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20, arguing that it was as valid in his own day as in the days of the apostles and that its imperative claim on the disciples of Christ had not lapsed with the first generation (as the opponents of foreign mission argued).⁴ While we would probably agree with his hermeneutical argument and indeed that his choice of text was admirable, it leaves the biblical case vulnerably thin. We might defend Carey with the consideration that it was an achievement in his context at the time to make a biblical case for mission at all, albeit from a single text. Less defensible has been the continuing practice in many missionary circles to go on and on building the massive edifice of Christian missionary agency on this one text, with varying degrees of exegetical ingenuity. If you put all your apologetic eggs in one textual basket, what happens if the handle breaks?

What happens, for example, if all the emphasis on the word *Go* in much mission rhetoric is undermined by the recognition that it is not an imperative at all in the text but a participle of attendant circumstances, an assumption—something taken for granted? Jesus did not primarily command his disciples to go; he commanded them to make disciples. But since he now commands them to make disciples of *all nations* (having previously restricted their mission to the borders of Israel

³There were, of course (contrary to popular mythology), Protestant missionaries long before William Carey, notably the Danish and Moravian missions. However, Carey was among the first to include a clearly argued biblical case for establishing a missionary society—in his use of Mt 28:18-20 as his key text in his justly famous *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians, to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens* (1792). David Bosch comments: “Protestants . . . have always prided themselves on the fact that they do what they do on the basis of what Scripture teaches. Still, in the case of the earliest Protestant missionaries, the Pietists and the Moravians, very little of a real biblical foundation for their missionary enterprises was in evidence. Wm. Carey was, in fact, one of the very first to have attempted to spell out such a foundation for the Church’s missionary mandate” (“Hermeneutical Principles,” 438).

⁴Carey did not actually invent the term “the Great Commission” for that text in Matthew, and it is not part of the biblical text itself (though it appears in subheadings). Carey did refer to the end of Matthew’s Gospel as “the commission given by our Lord.” The term “Great Commission” was popularized by Hudson Taylor in the late nineteenth century and then became a stock phrase across the range of Protestant mission agencies and movements ever since.

during his earthly lifetime), they will of course have to go to the nations as a necessary condition of obeying the primary command. So *Go* still has an implied imperative force as a participle preceding a command, even though it's not the major point.

What happens if one questions the common assumption that this text gives some kind of timetable for the return of Christ: he will come back just as soon as we have all the nations discipled? And is discipling a task that can ever be said to be completed (noting in passing that the text does say “disciple,” not evangelize)? Doesn't every fresh generation of long-evangelized nations (so-called reached) need fresh discipling? The Great Commission is an expanding and self-replicating task, not a ticking clock for the end times.⁵

What happens if, even more controversially, one heeds the voices of critical scholars who question whether Jesus ever actually uttered (in Aramaic, of course) the words recorded in Greek in Matthew 28:18-20?⁶ In response to such a challenge one might make several defensive moves:

- seek to defend the authenticity of Matthew's text against the skeptics, and there are good grounds for doing so;⁷
- argue that even if this text is not a transcribed recording of words from the mouth of Jesus, it does authentically express the inevitable implication of his identity and achievement as understood by the postresurrection church engaged in mission; and
- search for more texts to back up this one, to show that Matthew has indeed captured an essential element of the witness of Scripture and legitimately linked it with Jesus, who saw the mission of himself and his disciples as thoroughly grounded in the Scriptures.

The last option is the most common. Most books offering a biblical basis of mission see their task as assembling as many texts as possible—texts that can be said to mandate or, in more indirect ways, support the missionary enterprise. Now, this is important as far as it goes. Such biblical inducement to mission engagement is needed in churches that otherwise seem rather selective in their reading of the Bible.

There are many ordinary and worthy Christians whose personal piety relishes those Scriptures that speak to them of their own salvation and security, that

⁵We might also ask what happens if the so-called Great Commission is read only as a mandate for evangelism, to the exclusion of any other form of Christian activity that some may wish to include in their theology and practice of mission, or as justification for the primacy of evangelism among all other forms of mission. I will address this controversy in chap. 13.

⁶As, e.g., Alan Le Grys does in *Preaching to the Nations: The Origin of Mission in the Early Church* (London: SPCK, 1998).

⁷James LaGrand, *The Earliest Christian Mission to “All Nations” in the Light of Matthew’s Gospel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995).

encourage them in times of distress, that guide them in their efforts to walk before the Lord in ways that please him. They love their Bibles. But it comes as a surprise for them to be confronted with such an array of texts that challenge them in relation to God’s universal purpose for the world and the nations, the multicultural essence of the gospel, and the missional essence of the church. But they need to get over that surprise and hear the burden of the Bible.⁸

Equally, there are many theological scholars and students whose understanding of theology is bounded by the horizon of the classical shape of the Western academic theological curriculum, in which mission in any form seems remarkably absent (as was my own experience) or located only in the peripheral realms of “practical theology.” If it can be shown (as I believe it certainly can) that there is a surprisingly vast number of texts and themes in the Bible that relate to the mission of God and God’s people, then missiology may regain respectability in the theological academy (of which there are encouraging signs already). Otherwise, theology itself is deficient. John Flett makes the point with great force in his concluding challenge.

With few exceptions, mission is absent from the all-encompassing theological “system.” Mission, it would seem, is unessential when articulating the fundamentals of the Christian faith . . . an omission that is deleterious to the whole dogmatic task: many of the contemporary challenges with theology stem from the absence of mission as a theological category. . . . In short, the absence of mission has deleterious consequences for the doctrine of God. . . . The lack of reference to mission at every level of the teaching ministry of the church is a frightful abrogation of theological responsibility. If it is possible for a ministry candidate to progress through academic training—as much within a seminary as a secular university—without any dogmatic attention given to the purpose for which the Christian community exists, then this indicates the community’s own radical disorder. Jesus Christ’s call for the community to be his witnesses cannot be relegated to some derivative status. Because mission is located in the doctrine of the Trinity, it must again return to the theological curricula, must become central to the teaching ministry of the local congregation, and must inform liturgical practice.⁹

The danger of inadequate proof texting. However, whether one text or many, the danger that attends all proof texting is still present. We have already decided what we want to prove (that our missional practice is biblical), and our collection

⁸When invited to preach at “World Mission” Sundays or weekends in various churches, I nearly always preach from Old Testament texts, showing God’s plan for the blessing of all nations, the outworking of that plan in the gospel of Christ crucified and risen, and its implications for God’s people ever since—i.e., a whole-Bible approach within obvious time limits. Such preaching usually receives some combination of surprise, appreciation, and acceptance of the biblical challenge.

⁹John G. Flett, *The Witness of God: The Trinity, Missio Dei, Karl Barth, and the Nature of Christian Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 296-97. I have argued myself for the intrinsic relationship between mission and theological education in Christopher J. H. Wright, “The Missional Nature and Role of Theological Education,” in *Evangelical Scholarship, Retrospects and Prospects: Essays in Honor of Stanley N. Gundry*, ed. Dirk R. Buursma, Katya Covrett, and Verlyn D. Verbrugge (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), 225-54.

of texts simply ratifies our preconception. The Bible is turned into a mine from which we extract our gems—“missionary texts.” These texts may indeed sparkle, but simply laying out such gems on a string is not yet what one could call a mis-logical hermeneutic of the whole Bible itself. It does not even provide an adequate whole-Bible grounding for mission.

Commenting on this text-assembly approach, David Bosch observes:

I am not saying that these procedures are illegitimate. They undoubtedly have their value. But their contribution towards establishing the validity of the missionary mandate is minimal. This validity should not be deduced from isolated texts and detached incidents but only from the thrust of the central message of both Old and New Testaments. What is decisive for the Church today is not the formal agreement between what she is doing and what some isolated biblical texts seem to be saying but rather her relationship with the essence of the message of Scripture.¹⁰

Now, we may feel that Bosch makes a false contrast here between two things that are actually both necessary. There ought indeed to be formal agreement between what the church does and what biblical texts say. And texts with mission relevance are far from isolated. To accept, on the one hand, the inadequacy of proof-texting through shallow and hermeneutically spurious sprinkling of texts at a problem is not by any means, on the other hand, to reject the painstaking effort to prove one’s case through patient study of all relevant texts. Returning to Bosch’s quote: articulating what “the thrust of the central message,” or “the essence of the message of Scripture,” actually *is* constitutes precisely the issue we are wrestling with in these pages. To be able to say that the thrust or essence of the Bible is “the mission of God” requires a lot more than just compiling a list of helpfully benevolent texts. It requires careful attention to multiple texts in some kind of coherent connectedness and a consistent depth of significance and implication—which is a modest description of what I attempt in this book.

A final limitation of this list-of-texts approach is that it has a suspicion of circularity. The danger is that one comes to the Bible with a massive commitment to the task of mission already in place, with a heritage of hallowed history in the past, with methods and models in the present, and with strategies and goals for the future. We know what we mean by *mission*. And all this we have assumed to be biblically warranted. So in searching the Scriptures for a biblical foundation for mission, we are likely to find what we brought with us—our own conception of mission, now comfortably festooned with biblical luggage tags. This is a major part of Stroop’s critique of the very language of mission in distinction from the actual language of the Bible, and his critique is often justified empirically.

One can go further. While I would continue to claim that establishing a substantial biblical grounding for *mission* per se is legitimate and essential, to claim

¹⁰Bosch, “Hermeneutical Principles,” 439-40.

to find biblical grounding for *all our missionary practices and structures and so on* is much more questionable. Some would say it is impossible—even dangerous. Rather than finding biblical legitimation for *our* activities, we should be *submitting* all our missionary strategy, plans, and operations to *biblical* critique and evaluation. Marc Spindler (anticipating Stroope) articulates this point well:

If “mission” is understood as the sum total of all actual missionary activities in the modern period or as everything undertaken under the banner of “missions,” then an honest biblical scholar can only conclude that such a concept of mission does not occur in the Bible. It is therefore anachronistic and hence meaningless to attempt to base all modern “missionary” activities on the Bible, that is, to seek biblical precedents or literal biblical mandates for all modern missionary activities. Mission today must, rather, be seen as arising from something fundamental, from the basic movement of God’s people toward the world [i.e., with the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ]. The genuineness of our biblical grounding of mission stands or falls with the orientation of modern missions to this central thought. All “missionary” activities that have grown up in history must be reassessed from this perspective. Once again, a biblical grounding of mission by no means seeks to legitimate missionary activities that are actually being carried out. Its goal is, rather, evaluation of those activities in the light of the Bible.¹¹

But in order to do that evaluative task, we have to have a clearer understanding of that “something fundamental,” as Spindler calls it—mission in its biblical sense or, more precisely, a missiological framework of biblical theology, a missional hermeneutic of the whole canon of Scripture.

BEYOND MULTICULTURAL HERMENEUTICAL PERSPECTIVES

Global church, global hermeneutics. Slowly but inexorably, the world of Western academic theology is becoming aware of the rest of the world. Efforts such as the increasing output of theological writing by non-Western authors published by the Langham Partnership have brought to the attention of the theological community in the West the wealth of theological and hermeneutical perspectives that are, in some cases at least, the product of the success of mission over the past centuries.¹² The map of global Christianity has changed dramatically. Statistics of global religious demographics are necessarily rather imprecise. However, it is broadly agreed that from a situation at the beginning of the twentieth century when approximately 90 percent of all the world’s Christians lived in the West or North (i.e., predominantly Europe and North America), the first quarter of this twenty-first

¹¹Marc R. Spindler, “The Biblical Grounding and Orientation of Mission,” in *Missiology: An Ecumenical Introduction*, ed. A. Camps, L. A. Hoedemaker, and Marc R. Spindler (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 124–25.

¹²See Langham Publishing, <https://langhamliterature.org/>. The scale of the output from Langham Publishing of books by Majority World authors is remarkable and has happened only in the years after the first edition of this book was published. Some of those that are directly related to the theology and practice of mission are included among those asterisked in the bibliography.

century finds an estimated 75 percent of the world's Christians living in the continents of the South and East—Latin America, Africa, and parts of Asia and the Pacific. The whole center of gravity of world Christianity has moved south—a phenomenon described, not entirely felicitously, as “the next Christendom.”¹³ Others prefer terms such as “the Global South” or “the Majority World.”¹⁴

The challenge to biblical hermeneutics comes from the way other parts of the global body of Christ ask questions that do not even occur to the dominant Western church and academy. Andrew Walls puts the issue with characteristic vigor.

Africa is already revealing the limitations of theology as generally taught in the West. The truth is that Western models of theology are too small for Africa. Most of them reflect the worldview of the Enlightenment, and that is a small-scale worldview, one cut and shaved to fit a small-scale universe. Since most Africans live in a larger, more populated universe, with entities that are outside the Enlightenment worldview, such models of theology cannot cope with some of the most urgent pastoral needs. They have no answers for the most desolating aspects of life—because they have no questions. They have nothing useful to say on issues involving such things as witchcraft or sorcery, since these do not exist in the Enlightenment universe. Nor can Western theology usefully discuss ancestors, since the West does not have family structures that raise the questions. Western theology has difficulty coping with principalities and powers, whether in relation to their grip on the universe or to Christ's triumph over them on the cross. . . . Perhaps Africa, which knows so much about systemic evil and where the principalities and powers are not a strange concept, may open the way to a more developed theology of evil, as the issues already appearing in African pastoral practice are threshed out.¹⁵

We live, then, in an age of a multinational church and multidirectional mission. And appropriately, we now live with multicultural hermeneutics. People will insist on reading the Bible for themselves, you see. There is a great irony in the fact that the Western Protestant theological academy, which has its roots precisely in a hermeneutical revolution (the Reformation), led by people who claimed the right to read Scripture independently from the prevailing hegemony of medieval Catholic scholasticism, has been slow to give ear to those of other cultures who choose to read the Scriptures through their own eyes, though the situation is undoubtedly improving.¹⁶

¹³Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). See also Christopher Wright, “Future Trends in Mission,” in *The Futures of Evangelicalism: Issues and Prospects*, ed. Craig Bartholomew, Robin Parry, and Andrew West (Leicester, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 2003), 149–63, and bibliography there cited.

¹⁴A thorough, insightful, yet concise survey of globalization, post-Christendom, and postcolonialism realities is provided by Al Tizon, *Whole and Reconciled: Gospel, Church and Mission in a Fractured World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 5–55.

¹⁵Andrew Walls, “Globalization and the Study of Church History,” in *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity*, ed. Craig Ott and Harold Netland (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 70–82.

¹⁶Ignorance (whether innocent or willful) of major issues in non-Western Christianity that non-Western theology must grapple with was illustrated for me at a combined faculty meeting of several London theological

The phenomenon of hermeneutical variety goes right back to the Bible itself, of course. The New Testament was born out of a hermeneutical revolution in reading those Scriptures we now call the Old Testament. And within the early church itself there were different ways of handling those same Scriptures, depending on the context and need being addressed. Jewish and Greek forms of Christian identity, the product of the church's mission, felt themselves addressed and claimed in different ways by the demands of the Scriptures. Paul wrestles with these differences in Romans 14–15, for example. He makes his own position clear, but he insists that those who differ strongly on matters of interpretation and application of scriptural injunctions must accept one another without condemnation from one side or contempt from the other because of the prior claims of Christ and the gospel.

So a missional hermeneutic must include at least this recognition—the multiplicity of perspectives and located contexts from which and within which people read the biblical texts. Even when we affirm (as I certainly do) that the historical and salvation-historical context of biblical texts and their authors is of primary and objective importance in discerning their meaning and their significance, the plurality of perspectives from which readers *read* them is also a vital factor in the hermeneutical richness of the global church. What persons of one culture bring from that culture to their reading of a text may illuminate dimensions or implications of the text itself that persons of another culture may have not seen so clearly.¹⁷

Reflecting on such hermeneutical plurality, James Brownson argues that it is a *positive* thing with biblical roots and emerges out of the reality of missional engagement all over the world.

I call the model I am developing a *missional* hermeneutic because it springs from a basic observation about the New Testament: namely, the early Christian movement that produced and canonized the New Testament was a movement with specifically *missionary* character. One of the most obvious phenomena of early Christianity is the way in which the movement crossed cultural boundaries and planted itself in new places. More than half of the New Testament was in fact written by people engaged in and celebrating this sort of missionary enterprise in the early church. This tendency of early Christianity to cross cultural boundaries is a fertile starting point for developing a model of biblical interpretation. It is fertile, especially for our

colleges. A Ghanaian lecturer at All Nations Christian College said that, in his pastoral work in Ghana, at least 50 percent of his time went in helping believers, pastorally and theologically, in the area of dreams and visions and the spiritual world. A British lecturer from another college commented with ill-concealed disdain to me over lunch, “I rather thought we’d grown out of that kind of thing.”

¹⁷Western translators of the book of Genesis into Chadian Arabic told me how Chadian believers, reading the stories of Joseph for the first time in their own language, discerned in the narrative, and especially its climax in Gen 50, aspects of the relationship between Joseph and his brothers and the protracted process of reconciliation and the removal of shame (which was not completed till after Jacob's death), which made profound sense to them in their own culture. They found, e.g., as much reconciling power in Joseph's personal commitment to care for his brothers' children in Gen 50:21 (“That's what brothers do for their brothers in our culture!”) as in his theological insight in Gen 50:20.

purposes, because it places the question of the relationship between Christianity and diverse cultures at the very top of the interpretative agenda. This focus may be of great help to us in grappling with plurality in interpretation today. The missional hermeneutic I am advocating begins by affirming the reality and inevitability of plurality in interpretation.¹⁸

Mission as a focus of hermeneutical coherence. However, just as we saw in the last section that a missional hermeneutic has to be more than merely aggregating all the prooftexts for mission one can find in the Bible, it would be similarly inadequate to think that a missional hermeneutic of the Bible amounts only to aggregating all the possible ways of reading its texts, from all the multicolored church and mission contexts around the globe. That is, of course, a fascinating and enriching thing to do. It is the common witness of those, including myself, who have lived and worked in cultures other than their own that reading and studying the Bible through the eyes of others is a challenging, mind-blowing, and immensely instructive privilege.

But are we left with only glorious plurality? And if so, are we consigned to a pluralistic relativism that declines any evaluation or adjudication? Are there any boundaries as to readings of biblical texts that are right or wrong—or even just better or worse? And how are those boundaries or criteria to be defined? Are there criteria by which we could distinguish between a manifestation of cultural diversity that truly expresses the richness of the gospel and one that is deficient, distorted, or indeed subversive of the gospel, or a syncretistic admixture of gospel and the unredeemed features of a given culture? And where are such criteria (if they exist) to be found?

John Franke is a strong advocate of intercultural hermeneutics within a post-modern and nonfoundationalist epistemology. All human knowledge has a local and contextual character. This is in part motivated by a laudable resistance to both the arrogant epistemological universal certainties claimed for the exercise of autonomous human reason in the “modern” Enlightenment worldview, and to the dominant assumptions of Western theology that claim a kind of a priori or axiomatic normativity as over against any other contextual approaches. Franke says, “In non-foundationalist theology all beliefs are open to criticism and reconstruction.”¹⁹ So it’s not just a free-for-all in which any cultural hermeneutic is as valid as any other. There can be criticism and reconstruction.

¹⁸James V. Brownson, “Speaking the Truth in Love: Elements of a Missional Hermeneutic,” in *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*, ed. George R. Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 232-33. See also Christopher J. H. Wright, “Christ and the Mosaic of Pluralisms: Challenges to Evangelical Missiology in the 21st Century,” in *Global Missiology for the 21st Century: The Iguassu Dialogue*, ed. William Taylor (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000).

¹⁹John R. Franke, “Intercultural Hermeneutics and the Shape of Missional Theology,” in *Reading the Bible Missionally*, ed. Michael W. Goheen (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 98. See also his much more extensive application of postmodern, nonfoundational perspectives to this whole discipline in *Missional Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020), especially 97-138.

But I want to ask, on what basis or from what prior stance is such criticism and reconstruction of “all beliefs” to be made? And who validates that basis itself? Can nonfoundational theology itself be critiqued other than from some position that presumes to have a foundation of some kind? Surely you have to stand somewhere?²⁰ Indeed, is the position not victim to the same self-contradictory logic as absolute relativism? Namely, the affirmation that there are no foundations is itself a foundational statement. It seems hard to avoid a relativistic hermeneutical circularity. Franke acknowledges and responds to this danger with these words:

A missional theology beyond foundationalism seeks to respond positively and appropriately to the situatedness of all human thought and therefore to embrace a principled theological pluralism. It also attempts to affirm that the ultimate authority in the church is not a particular source, be it Scripture, tradition, or culture, but *only the living God revealed in Jesus Christ*.²¹

In a different book, while warmly appreciating much of Franke’s contribution, I offer this critique of that claim.

In “Intercultural Hermeneutics” he claims that “mission theology is beyond foundations.” But in (rightly) rejecting modern foundationalism based on the autonomous rational self as final authority, he seems to sail close to a radical postmodern relativism. He says that “nonfoundationalist theology does not eschew convictions,” but subjects them to critical scrutiny, revision, etc. But what then *are* the criteria for that critique? “The ultimate authority in the church,” he concludes, “is not a particular source, be it Scripture, tradition or culture, but only the living God revealed in Jesus Christ.” But how does he *know* that? Where, we must ask, is the authoritative source of our knowledge of the living God and his revelation in Jesus Christ, if not in the Scriptures? What other access do we have to the person of Christ and all he reveals of God the Father and the Holy Spirit, and the grand missional purpose of this triune God in creation and redemption?²²

“Principled theological pluralism” is the position Franke argues for even more substantially in his recent book coauthored with Michael Barram, *Liberating Scripture: An Invitation to Missional Hermeneutics*.²³ This is not the place for a full review, of which doubtless there will be many, but simply to say that the concerns I have expressed above remain for me. I could not have lived and worked in the Majority World, been involved for years with the global Lausanne Movement, and spent the past two decades serving the international ministries of Langham

²⁰Unless you are God, of course—a point that was brought home to me with some devastating epistemological insight by one of our grandchildren, aged five at the time, who, having been taught at school to sing and celebrate that God’s “got the whole wide world in his hands,” queried, “If God’s got the whole world in his hands, what’s he standing on?”

²¹Franke, “Intercultural Hermeneutics,” 98.

²²Christopher J. H. Wright, “Response to John R. Franke,” in *Four Views on the Church’s Mission*, ed. Jason S. Sexton (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), 144-45.

²³Michael Barram and John R. Franke, *Liberating Scripture: An Invitation to Missional Hermeneutics*, Studies in Missional Hermeneutics, Theology and Praxis (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2024).

Partnership without being just as committed as Barram and Franke are to the glorious, multiculturally rich plurality of the ways in which the biblical gospel is received and exercises its transformative power. I am equally as committed to the necessity for the global theological enterprise to include voices from every context and to shake off the assumption that “West is best” in all matters of hermeneutics and theology. All that is gratefully applauded.

However, while Barram and Franke rejoice (as I do) in the plurality of ways in which the gospel has been and goes on being articulated (historically and geographically), I miss any clarity on the “having-happened-ness” of the New Testament meaning of the word *gospel* itself—that is, announcing as good news the historical events in which the God of Israel, in faithfulness to his covenant promise, acted through Messiah Jesus of Nazareth, and specifically in his death and resurrection, for the salvation of humanity and reconciliation of creation. There is a sense in which pluralism ends at the hard, historically unique events of the cross and the empty tomb. But I could find no clear affirmation of either the cross or resurrection in their discussion of what the gospel means and has accomplished, even though I am sure that both Barram and Franke would affirm both as central (foundational, if they will allow the term!) to the gospel itself and to all missional motivation and practice that claims to be biblical (as I do in this book).

And while I affirm the contextual nature of all biblical *interpretation*, and the context-based origins of the biblical texts themselves, I fear there is some confusion between what (in my personal evangelical convictions) I would affirm as the *inspiration* of the biblical text in its origins by the Holy Spirit and the ongoing work of the Spirit in the *illumination* of its readers ever since. Liberating Scripture from the hegemonic claims of one single hermeneutical tradition, and being constantly open to critical evaluation of one’s own readings, are good intentions that I share. But that should not imply, in my view, abandoning the assumption that there is a coherent canonical authority, intended by the divine author, inherent in this collection of texts we receive as Scripture. Barram and Franke affirm that the Bible is “normative and paradigmatic,” yet their commitment to hermeneutical pluralism sometimes seems to raise questions as to what those words actually mean in practice in the handling of concrete texts.

The starting point for understanding the meaning of biblical texts, in my view, remains a careful application of grammatico-historical tools in seeking to determine as far as is possible their authors’ and editors’ intended meaning in the contexts they were spoken or written. But as we apply those tools and then move to appropriate the significance and implications of these texts in our own context, cultural diversity plays its part in the hearing and receiving of them. That is inevitable and good. But it is a diversity with methodological and theological limits and boundaries that arise from the givenness of the text itself and the presumption that it carries intentional and intelligible meaning.

In agreement with that, Brownson goes on from his discussion of a missional hermeneutic of *diversity* to argue for “a hermeneutic of *coherence*.” The plurality of interpretative stances requires that we speak and listen to one another with respect and love, affirming our common humanity and our common commitment to the same biblical texts. “Once we have affirmed plurality, however, we need also to grapple with how the Bible may provide a center, an orienting point in the midst of such diversity. What does it mean to speak *the truth* in love?”²⁴

The answer Brownson offers is the shape, the content, and the claim of *the biblical gospel itself*. He agrees with scholars who have found a core of nonnegotiable affirmations in the varied New Testament presentations of the gospel and insists that this must provide the hermeneutical framework or matrix for assessing all claimed readings of the texts.

An understanding of the hermeneutical function of the gospel is critical to a healthy approach to plurality and coherence in biblical interpretation. Interpretation will always emerge out of different contexts. There will always be different traditions brought to bear by various interpreters. In the midst of all this diversity, however, the gospel functions as a framework that lends a sense of coherence and commonality.²⁵

While agreeing wholeheartedly with this, I would go further and point out that the gospel (which Brownson discusses in exclusively New Testament terms) actually begins in Genesis (according to Paul in Gal 3:8). I would thus want to bring a *whole-Bible perspective* to the question of what Brownson calls “a hermeneutic of coherence.”

On this point I am in agreement with Kevin Vanhoozer, who writes:

It follows that the primary story from which Christians derive their sense of what the world is like and of who they are is the story of God in Christ reconciling the world to himself (2 Cor: 5:19). The once-for-allness of the canon is a function of the once-for-allness of the history of Jesus Christ himself. Of course, one cannot appreciate what God was doing in Jesus Christ without understanding what God was doing beforehand in creation and in the history of Israel: hence, the Old Testament is just as much a part of Jesus’ story as the New. Hence, the canonical text carries an authority that one’s contemporary cultural context does not. Our deepest, truest identity is thus discovered in biblical narrative, not the so-called foundation narratives of this or that culture or this or that nation.²⁶

This surely is also implied in Luke’s messianic and missional hermeneutic of the Hebrew canon in Luke 24. Luke, who had lived and worked with Paul and who wrote the turbulent story of the earliest theological controversies in the church in

²⁴Brownson, “Speaking the Truth in Love,” 239.

²⁵Brownson, “Speaking the Truth in Love,” 257-58.

²⁶Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “One Rule to Rule Them All? Theological Method in an Era of World Christianity,” in Ott and Netland, *Globalizing Theology*, 113.

Acts, knew perfectly well the diversity of interpretation of Old Testament texts even within the first generation of those who followed the Way of Jesus. Nevertheless, the words of Jesus “opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures” (Lk 24:45). In other words, *Jesus himself* provided the hermeneutical coherence within which all disciples must read these texts, that is, in the light of the story that leads *up to* Christ (messianic reading) and the story that leads *on from* Christ (missional reading). That is the story that flows from the mind and purpose of God in all the Scriptures for all the nations. That is a missional hermeneutic of the whole Bible.

BEYOND CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGIES AND ADVOCACY READINGS

Contexts and interests. The diversity of contextual approaches to reading the biblical texts includes those that are explicit in their interested stance—that is, readings done in the midst of and on behalf of, or in the interests of, particular groups of people. As against the rather blinkered view of theology that developed in the West since the Enlightenment (which liked to claim that it was scientific, objective, rational, and free from either confessional presuppositions or ideological interests), theologies have emerged that declare such disinterested objectivity to be a myth—and a dangerous one in that it conceals hegemonic claims. These theologies argue that contexts *do* matter, that in the act of reading and interpreting the Bible, questions such as who you are, where you are, and whom you live among as a reader all make a difference. The Bible is to be read precisely in and for the context in which its message must be heard and appropriated.

So these approaches to the Bible and theology came to be called contextual theologies within the Western academy. This term in itself betrayed the arrogant ethnocentricity of the West, for the assumption was that *other* places are “contexts,” and they *do their* theology for those contexts; whereas *we*, of course, have the *real* thing—objective, allegedly contextless theology. This assumption is being rightly challenged, and the West is seen for what it is—a particular context of human culture, not necessarily any better or any worse than any other context for reading the Bible and doing theology but a contextual theology nonetheless.²⁷

But the West does happen to be the context within which a certain mode of being Christian emerged and sustained itself for centuries and then came to have a dominant position in the world, largely through missionary activity and its sequel. It is the cultural context that culminated in the great tower of Babel that

²⁷I put it like this because there is no point, it seems to me, in swinging the pendulum from Western hermeneutical hegemony and ignorance of Majority World biblical scholarship to the fashionable adulation of anything and everything that comes from the rest of the world, and the rejection of established methods of grammatico-historical exegesis as if they were somehow intrinsically Western, colonial, or imperialistic, and suspect or dismissable for that reason.

we call Enlightenment modernity, which is now in the process of fragmenting, like its Genesis prototype, into the scattered diversity of postmodernity.

What many of these newer theologies have in common is their *advocacy* stance. That is, they arise from the conviction that it is fundamental to biblical faith to take a stand alongside the victims of injustice in any form. Thus the Bible is to be read with a *liberationist* hermeneutic—that is, with a concern to liberate people from oppression and exploitation. The earliest to make its impact on theological thinking in the West in the twentieth century was liberation theology from Latin America.²⁸ Theology was not to be done in the study and only then applied in the world. Rather, action for and on behalf of the poor and oppressed was to be undertaken as a first priority, and then out of that commitment and praxis, theological reflection would follow.²⁹ This presented a radical paradigm challenge to the standard Western way of doing theology. Other examples include Dalit theology from India, Minjung theology in Korea, and Black theology in Africa and among African Americans. Feminist movements have also generated a broad and influential hermeneutic and theology, which has probably been more influential in the West than any of the others. All these approaches to the text offer a hermeneutic that is intentionally “interested.” That is, they read *in the interests of* those they speak on behalf of—the poor, the outcastes, Black people, women, and so forth.

Exploding the missionary stereotype. So could a missional hermeneutic be presented as a “liberation theology for missionaries”? The idea is mooted only half in jest. Given that missionaries in popular mythology are seen as the compromised adjuncts of colonialism and almost synonymous with Western arrogance and cultural totalitarianism, it might be more natural to propose a liberation theology *from* missionaries.³⁰

However, the multinational nature of the global church has generated a new reality that is hardly yet acknowledged in many churches in the West, let alone in the popular culture and media there. And that is the fact that much more than half of all the Christian missionaries serving in the world today are not White

²⁸The contemporary time frame (twentieth century) is deliberate since earlier centuries have seen their own theological developments with liberationist orientation. The Anabaptist movements of the Radical Reformation, for example, developed a range of hermeneutical strategies in their struggle against the intense persecution they encountered from both Roman Catholic and mainline Protestant churches and states.

²⁹A good survey with bibliography is by John Corrie, “Evangelicals and Liberation Theology,” in *Mission in Context: Explorations Inspired by J. Andrew Kirk*, ed. John Corrie and Cathy Ross (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2012), 61-75. On the inadequacy of Western theological awareness of Latin American theologies, see Miguel G. Echevarria Jr., “Middleton and Wright Have We Loved, but Padilla and Escobar? North American Eschatologies and Neglected Latino Voices,” *Southeastern Theological Review* 11, no. 2 (2020): 47-62.

³⁰See, e.g., the foreword to Barram and Franke, *Liberating Scripture*, by Drew G. I. Hart, ix-xii. He makes what seems to me a somewhat shallow blanket allegation that most past missionary work has been imbued with oppressive colonial dominance (theologically as well as in sociocultural impact). Some of it certainly was, but it is unfair to tarnish all mission (or even all Western mission, which never was the only mission on the planet) with that colonial accusation.

and Western. It is the churches of the Majority World that are now sending the majority of people into all kinds of crosscultural mission work. One is as likely to meet an African missionary in Britain as a British one in Africa; the same is true for Brazilians in North Africa; Nigerians in parts of West Africa, where few White people now venture; and Koreans almost anywhere in the world.³¹ While it remains true that the United States still sends the highest number of missionaries to other parts of the world, the country that has the *second*-highest number of crosscultural missionaries is India.³² There are at least thirty times more Indian national missionaries than there are Westerners serving as missionaries within India.

What simply cannot be said of this new phenomenon of world mission is that all these Christian missionaries are agents of oppressive colonial powers or that they operate as a religious veneer to political or economic imperialism. On the contrary, for the most part Christian mission as carried out by the churches of the Majority World operates out of powerlessness and relative poverty, and often in situations of considerable opposition and persecution. Such missionaries may not qualify as an oppressed class on the scale of, say, the poor in Latin America or the Dalits in India (though many Indian missionaries are also Dalits). But they could certainly do with some liberation from the oppressive stereotypes and unjust caricatures that still surround their calling, as well as from the marginalization that mission commitment faces in many churches and that missiology still battles with in the strongholds of theological academia.

So, yes, a missional hermeneutic is “interested.” It reads the Bible and develops a biblical hermeneutic *in the interests of those who have committed their own personal life story into the biblical story of God’s purpose for the nations*. But it does so with the even stronger conviction that such commitment actually ought to be the normal stance for the whole church, for, on this reading of Scripture, a church that is governed by the Bible cannot evade the missional thrust of the God and the gospel revealed there.

Missional reading embraces liberation. However, a missional hermeneutic goes further. It is not content to take its place as just one of several liberationist, advocacy, or “interested” theologies on offer—though even as such, I contend, it has a right to exist, a right to put forward and defend its own validity.³³ Rather, a

³¹This phenomenon is sometimes called “reverse mission,” though that term in itself betrays the West-centric assumption that mission somehow started from the West and is now being reversed. The reality is that mission has been polycentric and multidirectional from the earliest centuries, as Vince Bantu demonstrates in *A Multitude of All Peoples: Engaging Ancient Christianity’s Global Identity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020). See also Israel Oluwole Olofinjana, ed., *African Voices: Towards African British Theologies* (Carlisle, UK: Langham Global Christian Library, 2017).

³²And there are recent estimates that suggest that the number of Protestant crosscultural missionaries within India may already have surpassed the total number sent around the world from the US.

³³For a penetrating reflection on the plurality of readings of the biblical texts in the postmodern academy and the impact that this has had on the traditional hegemony of Western theology, particularly in the field of Old

broadly missional reading of the whole Bible, such as I hope to outline in these pages, actually subsumes liberationist readings into itself.

After all, where else does the passion for justice and liberation that breathes in these various theologies come from if not from the biblical revelation of the God who purposefully battles with injustice, oppression, and bondage throughout history right to the eschaton? Where else but from the God who triumphed climactically over all such wickedness and evil (human, historical, and cosmic) in the cross and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ? Where else, in other words, but from the mission of God for the redemption of the world? Biblically, all true liberation, all truly human best interests flow from God—not just *any* god but only from the God revealed as YHWH in the Old Testament and incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth.

So inasmuch as the Bible narrates the passion and action (the mission) of *this* God for the liberation not only of humanity but of the whole creation, a missional hermeneutic of Scripture must have a liberationist dimension. Once again we are driven back to see how important it is to ground our theology of mission (and our practice of it) in the mission of God and in our worshiping response to all that God is and does. From that perspective, we are advocates for *God* before we are advocates for *others*. “This trinitarian grounding of mission should make clear that God and not the church is the primary subject and source of mission. Advocacy is what the church is about, being God’s advocate in the world. The church must therefore begin its mission with doxology, otherwise everything peters out into social activism and aimless programs.”³⁴

BEYOND POSTMODERN HERMENEUTICS

Plurality yes, relativism no. The rise of contextual theologies and then the recognition that all theology is in fact contextual, including the Western “standard” variety, has coincided with the arrival of postmodernism and its massive impact on hermeneutics (as on all the academic disciplines). The contemporary Western theological academy was largely built on an Enlightenment modernity worldview, which privileged objectivity and sought a singular, all-embracing theological construct. Naturally, then, it had difficulty with theologies that seemed so situated in local and historical contexts. But the postmodern shift, in deliberate contrast, welcomes and elevates precisely such locality and plurality.

Postmodernism, however, not only celebrates the local, the contextual, and the particular, but it goes on to affirm that this is all we’ve got. There is no grand

Testament studies, see Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 61–114. It seems to me that a missiological reading has as much right to set out its stall in the marketplace of contemporary hermeneutics as any other. See also my own comments in Wright, “Christ and the Mosaic of Pluralisms.”

³⁴Carl E. Braaten, “The Mission of the Gospel to the Nations,” *Dialog* 30 (1991): 127. See also the still relevant reminder of the trinitarian, God-centered priorities of mission from Lesslie Newbigin, *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today’s Mission* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1998).

narrative (or metanarrative) that explains everything. On the contrary, any claims that there is some “truth for all” that embraces the totality of life and meaning are rejected as oppressive power plays. Radically postmodern hermeneutics delights, therefore, in a multiplicity of readings and perspectives but rejects the possibility of any *single* truth or unitive coherence.³⁵ This postmodern rejection of metanarratives, as being intrinsically totalizing and oppressive, obviously then includes a rejection of Christian claims to “true truth” based on reading the whole Bible as a complex but coherent grand narrative with explanatory and redemptive power.

A counterargument seems to me to lie in the very complexity of the biblical narrative itself. For it is explicitly a narrative that includes, celebrates, critiques, and redeems the *multiple smaller narratives* of “all the kinships of the earth” (whom God promised to bless through Abraham) and “every nation, tribe, people and language” (whom John saw before the throne of God redeemed by the blood of Christ). The biblical metanarrative is not exclusive but radically inclusive, in the Messiah. It is not oppressive but radically liberating, in his death, resurrection, reign, and return. Ross Hastings makes this point well:

Postmodernism has expressed incredulity toward the notion of metanarratives, which are oppressive by drawing in and homogenizing individual narratives. Historically, the oppressive metanarratives have included Greek imperialism, Roman imperialism, medieval Christendom, Islam and post-Enlightenment rationality and progress.

But what if Christianity can offer a metanarrative that is not oppressive, and, significantly, one that is relational yet not collectivist, personal yet not atomistic, one that can absorb all the personal stories into one grand story without obliterating the identity of each story in doing so? Moreover, what if the significance of the particular narratives could be elucidated meaningfully by a universal narrative that was not only nonoppressive but in fact made sense of the whole of reality?³⁶

That is indeed the claim of the missional hermeneutic explored in this book.

The kind of plurality now so celebrated by postmodernism has been the reality, after all, for two thousand years of Christian existence, ever since the word *Christian* was invented (by others) in Gentile Antioch. Christians have wrestled with the problems of multiple cultural contexts ever since the book of Acts. And yet in the midst of them all the church has sustained the conviction that *there is an objective truth for all in the gospel of Christ* that addresses and claims people in

³⁵A major element in the challenge of postmodernity has come at the level of epistemology—*how and on what basis* do we actually know what we claim to know. This in turn has a significant impact on how we view mission, since Christian mission, if it is anything, is founded on what Christians claim to know about God and the world, about history and the future. Some of these epistemological problems for mission were tackled in the symposium J. Andrew Kirk and Kevin J. Vanhoozer, eds., *To Stake a Claim: Mission and the Western Crisis of Knowledge* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999).

³⁶Ross Hastings, *Missional God, Missional Church: Hope for Re-evangelizing the West* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 88–89.

any context, and that *the Bible tells the true story* of all humanity and of the earth itself.

I would go further and argue that Israel in the Old Testament also wrestled with a similar dynamic challenge, namely, the need to relate the singular faith of the one true living God, יהוה, to the many changing cultural and religious contexts through the millennium and more of Israel's history. And let us remember that it is that same singular, unique, and transcendent God of Israel who is the God we worship as the incarnate, crucified, risen, and ascended Jesus of Nazareth, to whom God has given the name that is above every name—his own.

Singularity of confessional faith amid a plurality of cultures is woven into the whole Bible narrative. The historical cultures and languages underlying the names in Hebrews 11 span millennia from the antediluvian Abel and Enoch to the Canaanite Rahab, but the writer insists they were united by faith in the same living God. Doubtless the Christ-following believers in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia differed culturally and ethnically in many ways from each other, and vastly so from the Israelites clustered at the foot of Mount Sinai three months after the exodus, yet Peter tells them that they have put their faith in the same God who addressed Israel back then, through his Son Jesus Christ (1 Pet 2:4-10).

Cultural plurality per se is nothing new for Christian mission, then. It is, rather, the very stuff of missional engagement and missiological reflection, the very essence of biblical history and faith. We may be challenged by swimming in the postmodern pool, but we need not feel out of our depth there.³⁷

In an interesting and complex article Martha Franks explores the way Christian theology of mission within the span of the twentieth century has moved from a fairly flat presentation of a single biblical message, through a more historically nuanced understanding (as in the theology of Gerhard von Rad, for example), to a recognition of the plurality within the Bible and within the contexts of mission (as in Donald Senior and Carroll Stuhlmueller). She observes how Lesslie Newbigin, for example, sensitively balances the *particularity* of election with the *plurality and universality* of the Bible's vision for all nations and cultures, and how Newbigin sees the fullness of the gospel brought into ever-increasing visible glory through the two-way task of crosscultural mission. She then goes on to link this to the concerns of postmodernism and claims that Christian mission has long *preceded* postmodernism in recognizing the validity of multiple contexts as home for the gospel.

Christian mission has long experience of postmodern challenges. Mission, Franks points out, has never been merely a matter of transferring an object from

³⁷Andrew Walls provides richly stimulating surveys of the way the Christian church throughout history has developed ever-growing pluriformity, taking root in culture after culture, while preserving the essential non-negotiable and transcultural objective core of the gospel. See Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996).

one subject to another. Rather, the living dynamic of the gospel has been such that, while it has an unchanging core because of its historical rootedness in the Scriptures and the Christ event, it has been received, understood, articulated, and lived out in myriad ways, both vertically through history and horizontally in all the cultures in which Christian faith has taken root.

Newbigin . . . argues that mission work in the world's plurality is "two-way." Hearing the new understandings of the gospel that arise when the message of Christ is brought to a new context is an important part of understanding the whole meaning of the Lordship of Jesus. This insight from mission work is sympathetic to the similar suggestion of postmodernism with regard to the meaning of texts—that communication between people, even when it is by book, is always "two-way." . . . Moreover, Newbigin's understanding of mission points to the fact that Christian missiology has long preceded the postmodern world in recognizing the possible problem of the fact that transplanting language and concepts from one context to another leads to wholly new ways of understanding them. Having centuries of experience with the very problem on which the postmoderns have tumbled, it is appropriate to respond to the challenge of postmodernism not with revulsion, but with counsel. We know about these questions. We have something to offer.³⁸

What we have to offer, I contend, is a missional hermeneutic of the Bible. The Bible got there before postmodernity was dreamed of—the Bible that glories in *diversity* and celebrates multiple human *cultures*, the Bible that builds its most elevated theological claims on utterly *particular* and sometimes very *local* events, the Bible that sees everything in *relational*, not abstract, terms, and the Bible that does the bulk of its work through the medium of *stories*.

All of these features of the Bible—cultural, local, relational, narrative—are welcome to the postmodern mind. Where a missional hermeneutic will part company with radical relativistic postmodernism, however, is in our insistence that *through and by means of* all this variety, locality, particularity, and diversity, the Bible is nevertheless actually *the true story*. This is the way it is. This is the grand narrative that constitutes truth for all. And within *this* story, as narrated or anticipated by the Bible, there is at work the God whose mission is evident from creation to new creation. This is the story of God's mission. It is a coherent story with a universal claim. But it is also a story that affirms humanity in all its particular cultural variety. This is the universal story that gives a place in the sun to all the little stories.³⁹

³⁸Martha Franks, "Election, Pluralism, and the Missiology of Scripture in a Postmodern Age," *Missiology* 26 (1998): 342.

³⁹Richard Bauckham explores the constant biblical oscillation between the particular and the universal, and its implications for a missiological hermeneutic, with special attention to its relevance to postmodernity, in *The Bible and Mission: Christian Mission in a Postmodern World* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 2003).

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