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The Biblical Foundation for Mission

IN ITS MISSIONARY ENDEAVORS, the church has given a central place to the Bible. The Bible has served as a stimulus both to evangelistic action and missiological reflection.¹ Indeed, Willem Visser 't Hooft once stated “the future of missions and the future of the ecumenical movement will in the last analysis depend on the solidity of their biblical foundations.”² David Bosch, like all missiologists, sought to ground his theology of mission in the witness of the Bible. In this chapter we shall consider Bosch's contribution to the biblical theology of mission by describing his critique of traditional approaches to the subject, and outlining the fundamental elements in his own approach. It also serves to inform later perspectives Bosch developed on this theme in the first section of *Transforming Mission*.

THE BIBLICAL FOUNDATION FOR MISSION: HERMENEUTICAL ISSUES

Why a “Biblical Foundation for Mission”?

Bosch noted it is customary, especially for Protestants, to begin their exposition of the theology of mission with a section on the biblical foundation. “As soon as this ‘biblical foundation’ has been firmly laid, one may move ahead to elucidate the practice of mission (the descriptive task) and evaluate it critically in light of the Bible (the normative task).”³ The theologian who attempts to develop biblical foundations for

1. For a fascinating historical survey of the place of the Bible in evangelism, see Chirgwin, *The Bible in World Evangelism*. This volume served as a contribution to the WCC's Evanston Assembly.

2. I have been unable to trace the origin of this quotation. It appears on the back cover of Harry Boer, *Pentecost and Mission*.

3. Bosch, *Witness*, 42. Cf. Bosch, “The Why and How,” 33. In another context Bosch elaborated on the justification for rooting one's theologizing in the Scriptures. Speaking to African theologians about

mission is not only interested in the historical questions of the way that the biblical authors understood “mission”; he or she seeks “to help the church discover a sound theological foundation for its missionary involvement in today’s world.”⁴ It is a study of the Bible *for* mission rather than simply mission *in* the Bible. The study of the Bible *for* mission seeks to understand “how the Bible becomes a source of meaning and motivation for us—how we . . . see the Bible as our charter or sending document undergirding our enterprise.”⁵

In practice, however, this task has often been neglected or relegated to a secondary place. Bosch acknowledged that the early Pietists and Moravians gave little serious study to the biblical foundation for mission.⁶ William Carey was one of the earliest Protestants to develop a real biblical foundation for the missionary enterprise with his famous *Enquiry*, but based his entire argument upon a single text of Scripture (Matt 28:16–20). Even the great fathers of modern missiology, Warneck and Schmidlin, manifested certain diffidence with regard to building a theology of mission exclusively upon a biblical base.⁷

In the mid-twentieth century, the need for a biblical foundation for mission had been served by Johannes Blauw’s work *The Missionary Nature of the Church*. It functioned as the standard introduction to the subject. Bosch acknowledged, however, that Blauw’s work had become outdated.⁸ The church in the final decades of the twentieth century understood its missionary obligation to the world in substantially different ways from that of the 1950s. Also, advances in biblical studies had thrown some of Blauw’s conclusions into question. The need to construct a theology of mission upon a biblical base was acknowledged by missiologists, but severe problems remained.

the nature of God, he admitted: “I can find no other point of reference or point of departure than God’s revelation to us all as it has been delivered to us in the pages of the Old and the New Testament. If we ever hope to encounter him, we must encounter him there and not in the pages of dogmatic treatises of white theologians. I cannot prove to you that my point of departure is correct. it is a claim based on faith, which is a certainty of realities we do not see (Heb 11:1). This my point of departure cannot be defended or rationalised, but only accepted or rejected. I can, however, offer no apology for it.” See his “God Through African Eyes, 12.

4. Bosch, “Mission in Biblical Perspective,” 532.

5. Schreiter, “The Bible and Mission,” 427. Bosch endorses Schreiter’s approach. See his “Mission in Biblical Perspective,” 532.

6. Bosch, “The Why and How,” 33–34.

7. See Bosch, *Witness*, 42; Bosch, *Theology* 201, 23–24. Ferdinand Hahn has made the same point. “In our day it is widely agreed that only a biblical foundation for mission is legitimate, and that nothing else can provide the theological basis of all missionary work. This is not so self-evident as it may sound, for the missionary theory of the nineteenth century took very different paths.” He notes how Gustav Warneck, in his *Evangelische Missionslehre*, tried to develop ecclesiastical, historical and ethnological foundations for mission, in addition to the biblical and theological foundations (Hahn, *Mission in the New Testament*, 167).

8. Bosch, “Mission in Biblical Perspective,” 531–32.

Problems with the Traditional Approach to the Biblical Foundation for Mission

Bosch made five criticisms of the ways in which theologians have traditionally approached the biblical foundation for mission. First, some persons approach the biblical record with a pre-critical, "proof-text" methodology, looking to justify what they already assume "mission" to be. "What happens all too frequently—when missiological publications open with a section on the biblical foundation—is that the author proceeds from the assumption that his readers already know what mission is (their definition tallies with his own!) and that his primary task now is to establish what the Bible has to say about mission, thus defined."⁹

In this approach, we come to the Scriptures with a pre-understanding of what mission is. We then turn to the Scriptures and seek what we are already predisposed to find. We find some isolated texts that justify our own viewpoint. Other biblical material that does not conform to our pre-understanding of mission is ignored, consciously or unconsciously. We thus find a justification for our own biases or current mission practices without ever seriously grappling with Scripture.

For example, one could assume that mission is activist, involving the crossing of remote geographical frontiers with God's word. With this preconceived idea of mission, the Old Testament and the ministry of Jesus have almost no missionary significance!¹⁰ Ultimately this approach begs the question of what mission is. We must allow our understanding of mission to emerge out of the whole Bible.

According to Bosch, another problem in the traditional approach to the biblical foundation for mission was the tendency to overlook the historical gap between the world of the Bible and the world of today. Between these two worlds there lies a chronological, cultural and historical chasm; there can never be a simple one-to-one correspondence between these two worlds. All too frequently, however, this is precisely what happens. Contemporary missionary practices are justified with a facile appeal to certain biblical teachings or examples, without ever dealing with the historical gap. According to Bosch, this approach is illegitimate, because "[t]he contemporary

9. Bosch, *Witness*, 45.

10. Bosch alludes to this danger in an early essay. "Maar nou moet ons baie versigtig wees om nie die Nieu-Testamentiese sendingbegrip ook in die Ou Testament is sending voorwaar iets anders as in die Nuwe Testament. Wanneer ons hierdie feit misken, sal ons ongetwyfeld in verleentheid raak met die Ou Testament" [We must be very careful to to go looking for the New Testament concept of mission in the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, mission is indeed something different from the New Testament. When we fail to appreciate this, we will undoubtedly get into trouble with the Old Testament] (Bosch, "Jeseja en die Sending," 35, hereafter cited as "Jeseja").

Bosch also criticizes Ferdinand Hahn and Adolf von Harnack on this account. "When theologians with preconceived ideas about mission . . . look at the Bible, it is obvious that they would judge that at least the Old Testament reveals a 'thoroughly passive character' as far as mission is concerned [Hahn]. The same verdict has often been made about the Jesus of the gospels; the idea of a mission to the pagan world lay entirely outside his horizon. Adolf von Harnack was one of the first scholars to have come to this conclusion, and since then many others have followed suit. I believe, however, that the definition of mission which underlies this interpretation is open to question" ("The Why and How," 36). See also Bosch, *Witness*, 47–48.

missionary enterprise in all its ramifications and with all its paraphernalia is so vastly different from what the New Testament calls 'mission' . . . that it is plainly dishonest to appeal directly to the latter as a justification for what we do today."¹¹

A related problem in the traditional approach to the biblical foundation for mission is the tendency to ignore the contextual shaping of one's own perspective. Bosch posited that one's theology of mission, indeed one's understanding of the Bible itself, is profoundly shaped by his or her particular vantage point. Although some persons believe that "we can without further ado know precisely what a biblical text meant in its original context," the situation is far more complicated than that.¹² Understanding a biblical text is affected by such factors as church tradition; culture; personal experience; understanding of religion; and social position (e.g., whether we are members of the privileged or underprivileged sector of society).¹³ There is no completely "neutral" ground for establishing the biblical foundation for mission. All persons involuntarily read the Bible from within a specific historical and social context that colors their understanding of the text.¹⁴

A fourth problem in the traditional approach to the biblical foundation for mission was the unresolved tension between biblical scholars and missiologists, with their differing approaches to the Bible. Bosch posed the problem as follows:

Biblical scholars, on the whole, tend to emphasize the diversity of the biblical message and the historical conditioning of each text. This makes them very reticent to draw a direct connection between the biblical text and today's missionary enterprise. The biblical text functions, at most, as a metaphor, model or paradigm for our own involvement, and there always remains a large range of alternative possibilities; we should, therefore, refrain from any single-option reductionism. In addition, biblical scholars tend to point out that the books of the bible were not written as guides for Christian mission (not even the Book of Acts) so they cannot become that twenty centuries later.¹⁵

11. Bosch, "Vision for Mission," 9. Walter Brueggeman has drawn similar conclusions, urging that "There are no simplistic or obvious moves [from the Bible] to contemporary missional practice, for the Bible does not function in such a direct way. Rather it can open a field of metaphors for a fresh perception of social reality and social possibility" (Brueggeman, "The Bible and Mission," 408).

12. Bosch, *Theology* 201, 24.

13. Ibid. Bosch goes on to give a practical example of this difficulty. Referring to Ernesto Cardenal's *The Gospel in Solentiname*, in which a group of Nicaraguan peasants reflect on the meaning of certain biblical passages in the context of the brutal Somoza regime, Bosch comments: "The average privileged, affluent white South African reader of these conversations cannot but wonder at times at what these impoverished Nicaraguans manage to find in the scriptural passages. It is not a matter of whether their exposition is legitimate (in fact, they could ask the same about the exposition of the privileged whites!), but that our own context colours—even determines—our interpretation of the Bible" (ibid.).

14. Bosch, *Witness*, 43.

15. Bosch, "Mission in Biblical Perspective," 532. He draws attention to this same tension in "Towards a Hermeneutic for 'Biblical Studies and Mission,'" 65–78.

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Although Bosch credited biblical scholars for helping in the essential task of understanding the biblical text in its original historical setting, he goes on to fault their approach. They “frequently fail to show whether, and if so, how, the Bible can be of significance to the church-in-mission and how, if at all, a connection between the biblical evidence and the contemporary missionary scene can be made.”¹⁶

On the other hand, Bosch was equally critical of much missiological writing on the biblical foundation for mission.

By contrast *missiologists* . . . tend to err in the opposite direction. Even where they are sufficiently sophisticated not to use the Bible as a handy reference file of quotations to justify their own group's actions, they do have a tendency to operate with a very large brush. On the one hand, they are inclined to overlook the rich diversity of the biblical record and therefore to reduce the biblical motivation for mission to one single idea or text (for instance the great commission or, more recently in liberation theology circles, Jesus' appeal to Isaiah in Luke 4); on the other hand, they tend far too easily to read back into the Bible aspects of the missionary enterprise in which they are involved today.¹⁷

Biblical scholars and missiologists approach and use the Bible in quite different ways. For Bosch, this dilemma created a significant gap that needed to be bridged if the church's missionary involvement is to have biblical integrity.

A final problematic factor in one's approach to the biblical foundation for mission is the debate over a proper theological methodology. Bosch discerned a hermeneutical conflict within the worldwide church concerning the proper method of interpreting the Bible. Broadly speaking, Bosch saw two different hermeneutical procedures operating: the “inductive” and “deductive” methods. What follows is an abbreviated sketch of this complex issue.

16. Bosch, “Mission in Biblical Perspective,” 532. Bosch cites French missiologist Marc Spindler's criticisms of much contemporary biblical scholarship, and notes: “I share Spindler's misgivings about the kind of biblical scholarship which perceives the New Testament writings primarily as the rendition of beliefs which belong to another era or as documents of a struggle between different Christian parties and theologians” [Fiorenza] . . . in the process missing the point that biblical theology (at least New Testament theology) has first and foremost to be regarded as missionary theology since it was the early church's missionary involvement that gave rise to its theological reflection” (Bosch, “Towards a Hermeneutic for ‘Biblical Studies and Mission,’” 71). Bosch favorably reviewed some works in biblical studies that attempted to bridge the gap between the biblical evidence and the praxis of mission today. See his “Mission in Biblical Perspective,” 535–37, where he reviewed, among others, Senior and Stuhlmüller, *The Biblical Foundations of Mission*; and Kertelge, *Mission im Neuen Testament*.

17. Bosch, “Mission in Biblical Perspective,” 532. In his review, Bosch criticized American missiologist F. DuBose's *God Who Sends*, as being reductionist and hermeneutically deficient. DuBose focuses on the term “send” and declares it to be *the* key verb in the Bible, and proceeds to construct an entire biblical theology of mission around it. Bosch attacked the idea that any one concept or word is absolutely central to the biblical theology of mission. This inevitably led to distortions of the text as other, equally valid words or concepts are ignored. “Sending” becomes an over-arching concept which DuBose finds everywhere in the Bible, thus threatening to swallow up everything in its path. See *ibid.*, 533–34.

In the *inductive method* one takes the situation in which one stands as the hermeneutical starting point. God's will is determined "from a specific situation rather than in it."¹⁸ The Bible is then read, interpreted and applied in light of the situation. The context, therefore, becomes "the hermeneutical key which makes possible [one's] 'correct' understanding of the Bible."¹⁹ This approach, according to Bosch, has been the method usually used in "ecumenical" circles. An example of this approach is the oft-quoted statement from the 1968 Uppsala Assembly: "The world provides the agenda."²⁰ Bosch was critical of this method because of its fundamental ambivalence. "Historical events and personal or group experience are too ambivalent to serve as [the] key for the interpretation of a biblical text."²¹ In the *deductive method* one takes Scripture as the point of departure. The interpretive task involves establishing precisely what Scripture teaches on a certain subject, and then deriving normative guidelines that the believer can apply to his present situation.²² Bosch linked this approach to the "evangelical" movement. The difficulty with this methodology is that it ignores the historical gap between our era and the biblical era, and downplays the impact of theological and historical traditions upon one's understanding of Scripture. Using the deductive method alone, we are "blinded by the presuppositions lurking behind our own interpretations."²³

Bosch concluded that both methods, practiced in isolation, betray a selective use of Scripture in which the reader refers only to "the biblical data which particularly appeal to him or provide the 'answers' he is looking for."²⁴ Bosch labeled this the "Bible as a 'mine' approach."²⁵ The interpreter comes to the Scriptures seeking to dig out missionary texts, searching for "nuggets" that conform to his or her pre-understanding of mission.

Bosch believed these five interrelated factors (uncritical proof-texting, the historical gap between the Bible and today's mission, ignorance of the contextual nature of one's theology, the polarization between biblical studies and missiology, and differing hermeneutical approaches) prevent the church in discovering a sound biblical foundation for her missionary task in the world.

18. Bosch, *Witness*, 38.

19. *Ibid.*, 45. For defenses of the "inductive" hermeneutical method and a critique of the "deductive" approach, see Casalis, *Correct Ideas Don't Fall From the Skies*; and Chikane, "Doing Theology in a Situation of Conflict," 98–102.

20. Bosch, *Witness*, 45.

21. *Ibid.*, 44. Cf. Bosch's critical review of G. Casalis' "inductive approach" in his "Contextual Missionary Theology from Orbis," 122–23.

22. Bosch, *Witness*, 43. For a clear example of this approach, see the work of Reformed theologian Louis Berkhof, esp. his *Introduction to Systematic Theology* and *Systematic Theology*.

23. Bosch, *Witness*, 44.

24. *Ibid.*, 45. Bosch attributes the ongoing evangelical/ecumenical debate largely to this factor, that both sides often use Scripture selectively. "As a result, it inevitably happens that a canon develops with the canon; what is not to the liking of a particular group is simply ignored" (*ibid.*).

25. *Ibid.*, 45–46.

Bosch's Hermeneutical Approach to the Biblical Foundation for Mission

Presuppositions

Bosch put forward a number of hermeneutical presuppositions that are essential to developing an adequate biblical foundation for mission.²⁶ First, a true biblical foundation for mission must be *historically informed*. It must seek to sympathetically yet critically analyze the church's historical missionary self-understanding. The missiologist should be aware of the ways that the church down through the centuries has understood the relationship between the Bible and the missionary task.²⁷ Only after looking closely at the different ways in which the church, down through the centuries, has interpreted an issue or biblical text, will we be able to break out of the tyranny of our own context and see the relativity of our own approach.²⁸

Second, a true biblical foundation for mission must be *grounded in the reconciling event of God in Christ*, not simply in an authoritative biblical commission. The person and ministry of Jesus was the catalyst that "triggered the missionary consciousness of the early church and shaped its basic message . . ." ²⁹ Although Matt 28:18–20 and other biblical pronouncements are significant, these texts are not the decisive point of the biblical witness. Rather, it is what God has done in Christ. Bosch echoed the sentiments of Martin Kähler that "[t]he content of the Biblical witness, viz. the message about Jesus Christ, urges the church to its universal mission."³⁰

Finally, a true biblical theology of mission must assert that *mission is at the heart of the church's being and nature*. To affirm that the church by its very nature is missionary is to acknowledge that the church's historical documents, including the Bible, must be seen in this light.³¹ It is to affirm, in the words of two Catholic biblical scholars, that "approaching the Bible from the vantage point of mission [leads] to the center of its message."³²

26. For an early attempt by Bosch at linking hermeneutics with mission, see his "Hermeneuse in 'n sendingsituasie," 220–40.

27. Bosch, "The Why and How," 33.

28. Ibid.

29. Senior and Stuhlmüller, *The Biblical Foundations for Mission*, 141, cited approvingly by Bosch in "Mission in Biblical Perspective," 536.

30. Bosch, "Systematic Theology and Mission: The Voice of an Early Pioneer," 171. Bosch refers the reader to Martin Kähler, *Schriften zu Christologie und Mission*, xxii–xxvi. For Kähler, mission is rooted in the atonement. "As an indispensable means, decreed by God, for the comprehensive evangelisation of the world, *mission is an aspect of the full implementation of the reconciliation of the world with God; therefore God's saving grace is its foundation and the encompassing of the whole of humanity is its purpose . . .*" Because the Christian has replaced his debt of sin with a debt of gratitude to God, he is compelled to witness. "Mission has its fundamental motivation in the necessity to witness . . . Witness is the fundamental moving force of the church of Christ" (ibid., as cited by Bosch in "Systematic Theology and Mission," 169).

31. Bosch, "Vision for Mission," 10.

32. Senior and Stuhlmüller, *The Biblical Foundations for Mission*, 4.

A Thematic, Integrative, Cooperative Approach

Beyond these theological preconditions, Bosch's approach to the Biblical foundation for mission can be summarized by four words: thematic, integrative, cooperative, and "postmodern." We shall simply take note of the first three concepts and then probe more deeply into the final one.

First, in approaching the Bible the central thrust of its message must be emphasized, not just certain biblical pronouncements and stories. "What is decisive for the Church today," Bosch emphasized, "is not 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."³³ The central themes of both the Old and New Testaments should be the building blocks upon which a biblical theology of mission is constructed.³⁴

Second, Bosch urged an *integrative* approach in addressing the tension between the inductive and deductive traditions of biblical interpretation. To pose the two methods in strictly antithetical terms is a false dichotomy. Bosch admitted there is no easy way out of the tension between the biblical word and the contemporary situation. "We can only, with full awareness of the limitations and relativity of 'deductive' and 'inductive' approaches, make use of both."³⁵

Third, Bosch called for a cooperative approach between biblical scholars, missiologists and other theologians in developing a biblical theology of mission. Speaking with reference to an ongoing research project on biblical studies and mission of the International Association of Mission Studies, Bosch urged "a concerted effort in which scholars from various disciplines, confessions and cultures cooperate," affirming that this approach would "help us uncover for our own time what has traditionally been referred to as the 'biblical foundations for mission.'"³⁶ Yet he admitted that this goal is elusive. Recent works in both missiology and biblical studies only show "how far removed we [are] from gaining clarity on this issue."³⁷

33. Bosch, "The Why and How," 35.

34. This does *not* imply a desire to uncritically harmonize the biblical material into a neat package, however. Bosch frequently states that the Bible is a varied collection of literature, with numerous and at times competing perspectives. See Bosch, *Witness*, 48.

35. Bosch, *Witness*, 44. Bosch approvingly cites French Protestant theologian Georges Casalis in this regard: "Theology, nurtured by the word of God, reflects on a historical situation in which we are wholly and responsibly involved . . . The situation is not God's word; God's word is not outside the situation; only a reference back to both the analysis (of the situation) and the word permits the discovery of all dimensions of the situation" (ibid.).

36. Bosch, "Toward a Hermeneutic for 'Biblical Studies and Mission,'" 65.

37. Ibid.

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A "Postmodern" Approach to Scripture

As a solution to this dilemma, Bosch affirmed the need for a "postmodern" approach to Scripture that would liberate the church from both the rationalistic excesses of the historical-critical method, and the pre-critical biblicism of many evangelicals and fundamentalists.

THE INADEQUACY OF THE HISTORICAL-CRITICAL METHOD

Bosch posed the problem as follows.³⁸ Ever since the advent of the modern historical-critical method in biblical research, it has been assumed that the goal of biblical scholarship was to find the original meaning of a text, the meaning being what the author intended for his first readers. A text had only one meaning, and the scholar's task was to rid himself of presuppositions and get to the original meaning of author. Although the primary loyalty of biblical scholars was supposedly to the text itself (and to the believing community), many surrendered their primary loyalty "to the guild of biblical scholars who in turn submitted to the dictates of the spirit of the Enlightenment."³⁹ The Enlightenment approach to Scripture, which emphasized the human origins of the Bible and an anti-supernaturalist bias, has "distanced" the biblical text from the ordinary modern reader.⁴⁰ While Bosch acknowledged the positive benefits of the historical-critical method, he declared that the positivism of the historical-critical method had gone too far in the opposite direction.⁴¹ Rather than assisting people of faith, critical biblical scholarship has frequently been perceived as *preventing* people from understanding and appropriating the biblical message. The biblical message, due to the uncertainties created by historical-critical method, has been seemingly deprived of its power.

A NEW "POSTMODERN" PARADIGM

In the midst of contemporary theological and hermeneutical confusion, Bosch saw signs of hope. He believed a new "postmodern" paradigm in theology and biblical studies was emerging that was striving to go beyond the sterile alternatives of pre-critical fundamentalism or historical-critical rationalism. It had emerged out of the revolution in twentieth century science, particularly physics. As a result of the massive

38. The argument that follows is found in *ibid.*, 71–72.

39. *Ibid.*, 71.

40. *Ibid.*, 72. Bosch elaborates on this point as follows: "The time-span between the text and the modern reader grew larger. Scripture was rendered 'into a strange object to be dissected and examined instead of acknowledging it to be the Word that must be heard and obeyed in the present moment'. The orientation was one-directional: *backwards* towards the past—an approach that encouraged a kind of 'spectator exegesis'" (*ibid.*).

41. *Ibid.*

changes in the way scientists perceive the nature of the physical universe, all other realms of knowledge, including theology and biblical studies, have been undergoing a similar shift. They are moving away from a mechanical, “critical” understanding of reality toward a holistic, “post-critical” worldview.⁴²

Bosch saw evidence of this shift in two realms. He discerns a postmodern approach in the realm of *systematic theology*. Theologians such as Hans Küng and David Tracy had begun to apply Thomas Kuhn’s work on “paradigm changes” to theology. Küng posited there have been five major “paradigm shifts” in the history of Christian theology.⁴³ With the advent of dialectical, existential and Third World theologies, the present “modern Enlightenment” paradigm has been fundamentally challenged, and now a new “post-modern” paradigm is emerging whose concrete shape is not yet clear.⁴⁴

Second, Bosch discerned a new “postmodern” approach emerging in *biblical studies* (although it is admittedly far too early to view this approach as a distinct “school” in current biblical scholarship). Bosch believed that this “postmodern” approach is exemplified in a new journal with which he was involved. Along with such theologians as C. K. Barrett, Horton Davies, Nicholas Lash, Howard Marshall, Ben Meyer, David Steinmetz, Peter Stuhlmacher, and Anthony Thistleton, Bosch served as an editorial consultant for Princeton Theological Seminary’s *Ex Auditu*, devoted to the theological interpretation of Scripture. “This annual,” declared Bosch, “heralds . . . a new era in biblical scholarship which can take us out of the impasse created by the historical critical school and its rationalistic approach.”⁴⁵ Bosch saw an interesting and significant convergence between Küng and Tracy’s work on the postmodern paradigm, and the work that the *Ex Auditu* project was doing.⁴⁶

THE POSTMODERN PARADIGM AND THEOLOGY

What are the essential tenets of this postmodern paradigm? At its heart, the post-modern paradigm in hermeneutics and biblical studies argues that a text must be understood not only in terms of its pre-history and *Sitz im Leben*, but also its

42. For a full explication of the radical implications of this approach in the realm of biblical studies, see Martin, “Towards a Post-Critical Paradigm,” 370–85; and Outler, “Toward a Postliberal Hermeneutic,” 281–91. In a broader sense, this has been the burden of Michael Polanyi in the philosophical realm, and T. F. Torrance in the theological realm. See, respectively, *Personal Knowledge: Toward a Post-critical Philosophy*; and *Transformation and Convergence in the Frame of Knowledge: Explorations in the Interrelationships of Scientific and Theological Enterprise*.

43. Bosch, “Vision for Mission,” 8. In their jointly edited *Theologie wohin? Auf dem Weg zu einem neuen Paradigma*, Küng and Tracy posit five paradigms, viz. the early Christian apocalyptic, the Hellenistic Byzantine, the medieval Roman Catholic, the modern Enlightenment, and the postmodern or contemporary paradigm.

44. Bosch, “Vision for Mission,” 8.

45. Bosch, “Some Random Thoughts on a Writing Project,” 1.

46. *Ibid.*, 3.

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“post-history.”⁴⁷ One can only understand what a text “originally meant” when we also seek to understand what it might mean today. Bosch cites the work of Gadamer in this regard. Gadamer speaks of how “the application (*Anwendung*) of a text is integral to the whole experience of understanding it.”⁴⁸ This insight has significant implications for doing theology.

The biblical scholar no longer has a monopoly on the meaning of the text, a meaning which he (grudgingly?) passes on to other theologians (*if* he does!). Rather, he is as dependent upon other theologians (including missiologists!) as they are upon him. There are, in fact, two poles in the interpretative process: the biblical text and the contemporary community of faith. These two poles are no threat to each other, but are interdependent, in mutually creative tension . . . The historical-critical method taught us that the biblical interpreter must escape from his or her own historical “horizon” and enter that of the biblical author. Gadamer tells us that to do . . . this is not only undesirable but, in fact, impossible if we truly wish to understand the text. Such an understanding can only occur when the horizon of a particular present meets the horizon of the past, namely that of the text.⁴⁹

Bosch went on to point out how Gadamer labeled this interpretative event as a *Horizontverschmelzung*, a “fusion of horizons.” At the *Horizontverschmelzung*, theologians of all stripes can meet and supplement one another.⁵⁰ We should not seek to *escape* our historical context, for only by standing *within* it can we understand the biblical word.

This “postmodern” approach to exegesis does *not* mean an end to the historical-critical method. Bosch affirms that the “pastness” of the text must still be taken seriously. There can be no return to a “pre-critical” world.⁵¹ But no longer is the biblical text the exclusive province of the historical-critical scholar, either. The Bible is “the book of the Church, of the community of faith.”⁵²

This means there must be a fundamental break with the Enlightenment principle of elevating doubt rather than faith as the first principle of knowledge. Among the numerous advocates of this new approach, Bosch proffered two prominent examples: missiologist Lesslie Newbigin and biblical scholar Peter Stuhlmacher. Newbigin (who had been profoundly influenced by the work of Michael Polanyi), claimed that “all knowledge of reality rests upon faith-commitments and that this is as true for the scientist as for the Christian believer.”⁵³ Doubt is an essential element in doing the-

47. Bosch, “Towards a Hermeneutic for ‘Biblical Studies and Mission,’” 72–75.

48. Bosch, “Vision for Mission,” 9.

49. Bosch, “Towards a Hermeneutic for ‘Biblical Studies and Mission,’” 74.

50. Ibid. Bosch cites Gadamer’s *Truth and Method*, 269–74.

51. Bosch, “Towards a Hermeneutic for ‘Biblical Studies and Mission,’” 74.

52. Ibid., 75.

53. See Newbigin’s *The Other Side of 1984* and *Foolishness to the Greeks; The Gospel and Western*

ology, but should play a secondary role. Faith is the essential, primary prerequisite. Stuhlmacher said much the same thing in his programmatic essay *Historical Criticism and the Theological Interpretation of Scripture*. Stuhlmacher urged the theological community to give primacy to a “hermeneutic of consent,” and relegate the “hermeneutic of suspicion” to a necessary but secondary role.⁵⁴

IMPLICATIONS OF THE POSTMODERN PARADIGM FOR THE BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF MISSION

Bosch saw at least two implications of the postmodern paradigm for the biblical theology of mission.⁵⁵ In order to understand the Bible correctly, Bosch argued, one must establish both what a text *means* today as well as what it *meant*. If this is true, then the guild of biblical scholars must be open to contributions from other fields, including missiology, in order to understand the Bible better. Missiologists, Bosch contended, “may be in a position to save [biblical scholars] from turning theology into religious archeology.”⁵⁶ On the other hand, biblical scholars can help missiologists remain faithful to the original intentions of the text as they develop their mission theologies and strategies. Biblical scholars can assist the missionary enterprise by asking if its praxis is consonant with the biblical message.

Another implication of the postmodern paradigm is that missiologists should not attempt to construct a biblical theology of mission that is exactly *identical* with the message of the Bible, but rather to construct a theology that is *consonant* with what the text meant.⁵⁷ This is a crucial distinction. Bosch claimed that any communicated message, in order to be properly understood in a different era or context, must be stated *differently* in order for it to make sense to the hearer. A simple repetition or literal, wooden translation of the message will probably mislead the hearer.⁵⁸ But a dynamic

Culture; and *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* for elaborations of his argument.

54. Bosch, “Towards a Hermeneutic for ‘Biblical Studies and Mission,’” 75, citing Stuhlmacher, *Historical Criticism and the Theological Interpretation of Scripture*, 84–85.

55. Bosch outlines the two implications in “Towards a Hermeneutic for ‘Biblical Studies and Mission,’” 75–78; and “Vision for Mission,” 8–10.

56. Bosch, “Towards a Hermeneutic for ‘Biblical Studies and Mission,’” 76.

57. Ibid. As far back as 1969, Bosch was arguing for an essentially similar approach. Noting the radical overuse of form-criticism, Bosch urged a basic reorientation in synoptic studies. Its goal should be “not so much to try to isolate authentic sayings of Jesus from the additions and transformations of the early Church and the theology of the evangelists, but rather to put the question in a new way: Is the evangelists’ handling of the gospel material a legitimate interpretation of the mind of Jesus or not?” (Bosch, “Jesus and the Gentiles,” 7).

58. Bosch relies here on the work of Hugo Echegaray. Echegaray points out the hermeneutical dangers of a simple transposition of the biblical material into our later era. It is necessary to “take account of the insurmountable historical distance separating us from [Jesus’] world. Between his time and ours irreversible qualitative changes have occurred. This fact forbids us to make mechanical transpositions from the one period to the other; to do so would be proof only of naiveté. If we unconsciously project our own situation into the past, we necessarily distort the past. If, conversely, we attempt a literal revival

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retelling of the message, taking into consideration the worldview and experiences of the intended audience, will more likely be a faithful theological interpretation of the message. For a proper biblical foundation for mission, therefore, more must be done than simply an accurate analysis of what individual texts meant; “theological consonancy” with the biblical text must be sought.⁵⁹

The above-mentioned approach is precisely the method of the Bible itself, and of the Christian church. Bosch illustrated this truth with three examples.

When the New Testament authors used the Old Testament, this was far more than mere citation of or allusion to Old Testament language or application of Old Testament prophecy in order to substantiate Jesus' claims. Rather, where they referred to the Old Testament this was a wholly creative handling that proceeded from a sure understanding of the Old Testament for those New Testament authors in their context . . . Similarly, when Martin Luther transformed Psalm 46 into his famous “Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott”—in this process letting it refer to the church's battle against Satan and also bringing Jesus Christ onto the stage—he was not distorting the original meaning of the psalm but creatively reinterpreting it in a way that was consonant with its original intention. The two horizons were fused. A similar process took place with reference to Jesus in the New Testament itself. The message of and about this Jesus was creatively reinterpreted within the circumstances of Christians in Jerusalem, Antioch, Rome and Corinth. Putting it differently: Jesus inspired his disciples to prolong the logic of his own ministry in an imaginative and creative way amid historical circumstances that were in many respects new and different. The traditions were retained carefully but they were also modified to meet new circumstances.⁶⁰

Thus the Biblical text is the point of departure, but understanding the text is a *creative process*. Different readers in different contexts may discern numerous, equally valid interpretations of a single text, so long as each interpretation is consonant with the intention of the text.⁶¹

Bosch used this hermeneutical approach in his previous writings to a limited degree, but *Transforming Mission* incorporated this approach much more explicitly. In an unpublished prospectus of the book, Bosch explained that his approach would “not be pre-critical, but, if anything, post-critical . . . I will not attempt to develop one, definitive ‘biblical theology of mission’ but, rather, try to show how different biblical

of the past in our own day, we shall be weakening its real power without realizing it.” See his *The Practice of Jesus*, 34.

59. Bosch, “Towards a Hermeneutic for ‘Biblical Studies and Mission,’” 76.

60. Ibid., 76. Bosch here develops the work of Echegaray. See Echegaray, *The Practice of Jesus*, xv–xvi.

61. Bosch, “Towards a Hermeneutic for ‘Biblical Studies and Mission,’” 76. This hermeneutical principle of “consonance” has been developed more fully in Bosch's exegetical analysis of the Lord's Prayer: *The Lord's Prayer: Paradigm for a Christian Lifestyle*, esp. 1–2.

perspectives, trailing from different authors and periods, can help us to arrive at different although mutually complementing 'biblical theologies of mission.'⁶²

There are risks to Bosch's "postmodern" methodology. He acknowledged that with this approach the interpreter might overemphasize his or her context, thereby "distorting or muting what the texts say." All too easily, Bosch noted, we can divorce ourselves from the text and the critical challenge it poses to us.⁶³ But this is a constant danger in all theological work. Even when the right hermeneutical methods are followed, there is still no guarantee that one has interpreted either the biblical word or the existential situation correctly.⁶⁴ Thus "the practice of theology remains a risk. We can engage in theology only haltingly."⁶⁵

The only safeguard we have from the risk of absolutizing our own interpretations is the Christian community, according to Bosch. The church is an "ecumenical, intercultural fellowship of brothers and sisters in the faith."⁶⁶ And only by working together in the ecumenical community of faith can we learn to humble ourselves, listen to one another, and begin to see the relativity of our own contexts.⁶⁷

ELEMENTS IN BOSCH'S BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF MISSION

We shall now outline the fundamental elements in Bosch's biblical theology of mission. Recalling his admonition to seek out the central thrust of the Bible rather than specifically "missionary" pronouncements,⁶⁸ we will examine six essential elements that, for Bosch, exemplify the missionary dimension of both the Old and New Testaments. They are: 1) history as the horizon for God's mission; 2) the relationship between God, Israel, and the nations; 3) the ministry and mission of Jesus; 4) the "Great Commission"; 5) the biblical model of mission as *martyria* (suffering/witness); and 6) *missio Dei*, the lordship of God himself in mission. Bosch admitted that there are undoubtedly other valid elements to a biblical foundation for mission that he did not highlight.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, these elements were the central tenets of Bosch's own biblical theology of mission.

62. Bosch, "Some Random Thoughts on a Proposed Writing Project," 1–2.

63. Bosch, "Towards a Hermeneutic for 'Biblical Studies and Mission,'" 78.

64. Bosch, *Witness*, 45.

65. *Ibid.*

66. Bosch, "Towards a Hermeneutic for 'Biblical Studies and Mission,'" 78–79.

67. *Ibid.* In another article, Bosch makes the same point and shows its striking relevance to the South African scene. See his "Racism and Revolution," 19–20.

68. "We want to employ a different method, namely, that of trying to establish the central thrust of the message of Scripture" (Bosch, *Witness*, 48). Cf. Verkuyl, *Contemporary Missiology*, 89–90.

69. Bosch, *Witness*, 45.

History as the Horizon for God's Mission

The first essential tenet of Bosch's biblical foundation for mission is an acknowledgement of the decisively *historical character* of the biblical religion. Although biblical "pre-history" in Genesis 1–11 is a universal description of human beginnings, from Genesis 12 onwards the biblical story concentrates on the offspring of Abraham, the people of Israel. History, by its very nature, is specific, localized, and particular.⁷⁰ This fact would appear to be a hindrance rather than a help to the missionary enterprise. If the Christian faith is to be a worldwide, universal phenomenon, should not the discussion begin with *universal and eternal truths* rather than the *historical particularities* of an obscure Semitic people? Bosch pointed out that many people see the historical, "particularistic" nature of the Bible as a stumbling block to the concept of a worldwide mission. They say, in effect: "We should so much have preferred the Bible to concern itself not only with Israel, but with all humanity . . ."⁷¹ According to Bosch, this impulse for a universalistic approach revealed a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of history and of revelation in the Bible.⁷² Biblical revelation happens in the midst of certain historical events and personalities, which implies particularity. God reveals himself to a *particular* person in a *particular* place. Yet this particularity is filled with universal, missionary significance.⁷³ It is this biblical particularism that Bosch recognized as the source of the missionary heart of the Bible. Without it, Bosch noted, Yahweh's salvation would have been ahistorical.⁷⁴

Building on the work of Mircea Eliade, Bosch elaborated on the *historical* character of the biblical religion by contrasting two essentially disparate concepts of religion: the "hierophantic" versus the "historical."⁷⁵ Both of these religious "types" have struggled with the meaning of history, and have emerged with opposing conclusions.

Hierophantic religions are those faith traditions that emphasize "ritual practices which were primarily related to problems experienced by a predominantly agrarian population, practices in which the king as earthly representative of the gods played an

70. Ibid., 58.

71. Ibid.

72. Bosch normally uses the terms "universalist" and "universalistic" *not* in the doctrinal sense, i.e., that all people will eventually be saved, but in the more general sense of being *universal or worldwide in scope*, i.e., that God's loving concern is global and comprehensive rather than limited and finite.

73. Bosch comments that: "A careful reading of the Old Testament . . . reveals the enormous missionary significance of Yahweh's dealings with Israel. This becomes apparent in the call of Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3). This event refers back to the Babel episode in Gen. 11. Man's attempt at obtaining salvation has failed miserably; now God begins with a new thing. What Babel lost, is promised and guaranteed in the history of Abraham's election. Genesis 12 follows Genesis 11. The entire history of Israel is nothing more than a continuation of God's dealings with the nations." See Bosch, "The Why and How," 39.

74. Ibid.

75. For more on the hierophantic religions and their contrast with the historical, see Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*.

important role.”⁷⁶ Reality is viewed in cyclical terms based upon seasonal and annual events. By ritually reenacting certain primordial events from the past (e.g., the world’s creation, the birth of the universe), the mythical time is made contemporaneous with the worshippers. In hierophantic religions, reality is essentially static. The emphasis is on continuity, repetition, remembrance, and the stability of the status quo. Consequently, there is a fundamental orientation to the past, with little concern for the possibilities of change, progress or development.⁷⁷

Historical religions, such as Judaism, challenge the hierophantic religions’ view of reality.⁷⁸ Yahweh is the God of history, of the Exodus, of cause and effect.⁷⁹ History is not cyclical but oriented toward the future. History is a creative, dynamic process, filled with meaning.⁸⁰

Bosch granted that the OT contains numerous elements of the hierophantic, cyclical religions of the ancient Near East. But the religion of Israel, with its prophetic, self-critical element, never allowed its faith in Yahweh to be completely identified with the static “nature cycles” of the hierophantic religions.⁸¹ Faith in Yahweh fundamentally challenged the seasonal “nature cycle” of birth, growth, decay, death, resurrection, new birth.⁸² Even where the Hebrews celebrated religious feasts associated with past events or seasonal festivals, their concern was not primarily the commemoration of the past but “a forward movement towards the future.”⁸³

Another significant tension between the hierophantic and historical religions is their understanding of the nature of truth. Is religion grounded in eternal truths or historical encounters? In the hierophantic religions, truth is seen as the correct formulation of eternally and universally valid principles or ideas. In the historical religions, however, truth is more a matter of personal encounter and personal relationship, grounded in a particular historical revelation of God.⁸⁴ The Bible rarely deals with questions abstractly or theoretically; persons know the truth as they encounter

76. Bosch, *Witness*, 58.

77. Bosch, *Theology* 201, 36. See also Bosch, *Witness*, 58–59.

78. In particular, the faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam challenge the hierophantic outlook.

79. Bosch commented that: “The biblical cult is an ‘exodus celebration’, ever again a new journey into the future. Its concern is not with festivals of remembrance or with a return of a one-time appearance of God in a mythical, primordial time (a hierophany), because man is not caught up in passive commemoration, directed to the past. The Bible speaks predominantly in terms of personal relationships . . . and hardly ever treats any question abstractly . . .” (Bosch, *Witness*, 59).

80. On this (essentially Hebraic/Christian) concept of history as a meaningful, creative process, see Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christ the Meaning of History*, esp. 17–56.

81. Bosch, *Witness*, 59.

82. *Ibid.*

83. Bosch, *Theology* 201, 36. Elsewhere, Bosch has noted that many African concepts of God, like the hierophantic religions, tend to stress God as a Creator who is uninvolved in present history. In biblical revelation, God is presented as Creator as well. “But his creative activity is always intimately bound up with his redemptive activity in history, and is of only secondary importance” (Bosch, “God in Africa: Implications for the Kerygma,” 19).

84. Bosch, *Theology* 201, 36–37. See also Bosch, *Witness*, 59.

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God and enter into vital relationship with him. This is particularly true in the New Testament, where Truth is a historical person, Jesus Christ (John 14:6).⁸⁵

Bosch illustrated the profound tension between these two differing understandings of the relationship of religion and history by citing an incident in the life of Bishop Lesslie Newbigin. When Newbigin told a learned master of the Ramakrishna Mission that he was prepared to stake his entire Christian faith on the essential reliability of the New Testament historical records about Jesus, the master was astonished. "To him it seemed axiomatic that such vital matters of religious truth could not be allowed to depend upon the accidents of history. If the truths which Jesus exemplified and taught are true, then they are true always and everywhere, whether a person called Jesus ever lived or not."⁸⁶

A final tension between the hierophantic and historical religions is the contrasting emphasis between the ceremonial and the ethical. The hierophantic faiths place a high emphasis on cultic ceremonies and rituals, based on the cyclical, commemorative nature of their worship. But in the Bible the accent is on ethics, the behavior of the community in the here and now.⁸⁷ This does not mean that the cultic and the ceremonial were dispensed with in either the Old or New Testaments. But Bosch maintained that they receive their significance only inasmuch as they foster an encounter of faith with God, a God who is calling them to journey with him into the future. The ceremonial is legitimate inasmuch as "it serves to improve the believer's conduct here and now." The cultic and the ceremonial "*strengthen* Christian faith, but they do not *embody* it."⁸⁸ Thus in three key areas (history as static versus dynamic; truth as eternal versus historical encounter; and religious devotion as ceremonial versus ethical), Bosch exposed the radical difference between biblical faith and the other faiths of the ancient world.

This concept of the *historical* character of biblical revelation is an essential aspect of a biblical theology of mission. Beginning with Abraham, the Bible portrays God as calling a particular people out of their cyclical existence and *into* history, *into* the world.⁸⁹ Abraham is called out of Ur for a journey into the

85. Bosch, *Witness*, 59. D. T. Niles has spoken of this contrast in his affirmation that the biblical revelation cannot be taught but only proclaimed. "The Christian evangelist announces that something has happened which is of both immediate and ultimate significance . . . The adherents of other religions . . . expound the teachings of their own religions as the true interpretation of the meaning and responsibilities of life." See Niles, *Upon the Earth*, 242–43, quoted in Bosch, *Witness*, 59.

86. Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 50, as quoted in Bosch, *Witness*, 59. This is, of course, essentially the same dilemma that G. E. Lessing has posed: How can the "accidental truths of history" ever become "the proof of the necessary truths of reason"? For both Lessing and the Ramakrishna master, historical events could not form the basis for authentic religious faith. It is only in the rational or metaphysical realm that the key to proper religious belief is found. See Heron, *A Century of Protestant Theology*, 18–21.

87. Bosch, *Theology* 201, 37. Bosch notes that "time and again this is the charge leveled against Israel by the prophets: that they observe the ceremonial rites meticulously but ignore the ethical . . . The same is true of Jesus' rebukes to the Pharisees . . ." (ibid.).

88. Ibid.

89. Bosch, "The Why and the How," 39.

unknown, with the promise that through his offspring, all the nations of the world would be blessed.⁹⁰ Israel is called out of Egypt for a journey through the wilderness into a promised land, in order to be a light to the nations. Most significantly, God descends from heaven to reveal and incarnate himself in the history of one particular man, Jesus, for the salvation of the world. And then early Church is called out from the world and then sent back into it as God's ambassadors, in the power of the resurrection and Pentecost. In each case, Scripture maintains that what was merely "historical" and "particular" became a vessel that God infused with cosmic, missionary significance. For Bosch, "only a historical religion can be truly missionary. If, on the other hand, we discover in the Bible nothing but 'eternal, immutable truths', the missionary dimensions will be quickly dissipated."⁹¹

God, Israel, and the Nations

It is significant that Bosch, in developing his biblical theology of mission, devoted major attention to the OT. Frequently this is neglected, at the risk of condensing and reducing the full biblical vision of what mission is.⁹² So far we have shown how Bosch emphasized the centrality of the *historical* character of revelation, and how this historical particularism is at the heart of the universal, missionary message of the OT. In biblical history, this tension between the particular and the universal was worked out by means of the election of Israel from among the nations (particularism), in order to actualize God's purposes of salvation for the nations (universalism). Israel lives by the grace of God with a distinct responsibility for the nations. For Bosch, this sense of *responsibility*, rooted in both the particularism of God's election of Israel and universalism of God's saving compassion for all the nations, was central to the OT concept of mission.⁹³ This section will trace how Bosch unfolded this complex relationship between God, Israel and the nations, and its missiological significance.

90. "With Abraham's call God embarks upon a history. The patriarch is snatched from the cyclical stranglehold of the Amorite and Sumerian religious world and called to journey into the unknown—an event that symbolizes that what follows in Abraham's life is truly 'history,' something new, where something different may happen at any time, a transcending of the predictability of the cyclic thought world" (Bosch, *Witness*, 61).

91. Bosch, "The Why and the How," 39. Bosch comments that the cultic, cyclical religions of the nations surrounding Israel constituted a permanent threat to believers. "In the early period this threat came especially from the Canaanite fertility cults as personified in the Baalim and the Asherim. In the New Testament period it usually assumed the form of the Greek mystery religions or Gnosticism, which agreed in at least one respect: their ahistorical understanding of reality" (Bosch, *Witness*, 59–60).

92. Bosch, "Sendingperspektief in die Ou Testament," 285–86, hereafter cited as "Sendingperspektief." Cf. Bosch, "Der Alttestamentliche Missionsgedanke," 174, hereafter cited as "Alttestamentliche." It is an irony that *Transforming Mission* neglected this rich theme, particularly since Bosch had reflected and written much on the subject.

93. Bosch, "Jeseja," 35, Bosch, "Sendingperspektief," 290–91.

The Universalist-Particularist Tension

In Genesis 1–11, we encounter a God who is involved with the whole world. The unity of humankind is unquestioned, and the genealogical lists in Genesis 10 give no hint that the forebears of Israel are set apart.⁹⁴ In Genesis 12, however, God zeros in on one man, Abraham, and immediately the Bible moves into the story of one nation and one people. The story of Abraham's calling contrasts sharply with the Babel story. And yet, as Bosch saw it, there is a crucial link. "In Babel man's attempt to procure salvation fails miserably. Thereafter God begins something new. What Babel has lost, is promised and guaranteed in the history of Abraham's election. Genesis 12 follows on Genesis 11—the history of Israel is a continuation of God's dealings with the nations. Precisely as the elect the patriarch, and with him Israel, is called into the world of nations."⁹⁵

Bosch goes on to point out how every one of the Abrahamic stories touches upon the relationship between Abraham (and thus Israel) and the nations. Throughout the rest of the OT, we see this truth emphasized again and again. God reigns over the whole earth. Although God has particularly chosen Israel to be his instrument, he has the salvation of the nations as his ultimate object. Salvation, in the biblical sense, must be historic and concrete; God is bound to begin with a particular person and a particular people. But this historical "boundedness" of salvation is not antithetical to God's desire for a universal salvation. In the world of the Bible, the latter can only emerge as a result of the former.⁹⁶

Bosch showed how this universalistic element emerges especially in the Psalms. God holds all the nations in his hands; he is the keeper of all creation (Pss 33:5; 104:27–28; 145:15–16; 147:8–9); he is the God who rules as king over all the earth (Pss 22:28; 47:3, 8; 59:14); he is the judge over all the nations (96:10, 13); even the pagan nations are urged to praise him, for he is their God as well (Pss 47:2; 66, 117).⁹⁷ God is truly the Lord of the nations as well as Israel. It is only from this vantage-point of God's universal concern that we may properly understand the significance of Israel's history.

Israel's Election and the Compassion of God

By the time of Israel's sojourn in Egypt, the descendants of Abraham had lost their earlier sense of destiny. They had become an oppressed and enslaved people. It is precisely here, at their point of deepest need, that God revealed himself as the one who has compassion on the poor, the afflicted, the weak, the oppressed, and the outcast.⁹⁸

94. Bosch, *Theology* 201, 39.

95. Bosch, *Witness*, 61–62.

96. Bosch, "Sendingperspektief," 295–97; Bosch, "Alttestamentliche," 183–85; and Bosch, *Jesus, die Lydende Messias, en ons Sendingmotief*, 25–28; subsequently referred to as *Lydende*.

97. Bosch, *Theology* 201, 43.

98. At the outset, we should note that Bosch contrasts "compassion" from mere "sympathy." "Compassion is not the same as sympathy, as we understand it today. But 'sympathy' has come to mean: having

Other ancient gods placed an emphasis upon order, harmony and the status quo; but Yahweh revealed himself as the God of change, the rescuer of the poor and needy.⁹⁹ Bosch cited Ezekiel's moving description of Israel's election by Yahweh. "Israel is portrayed as the child of an Amorite father and a Hittite mother, who, after birth, was discarded in the open field, unwashed and uncared for. Yahweh, however, had compassion on this foundling: 'Then I came by and saw you kicking helplessly in your own blood; I spoke to you, there in your blood, and bade you live.'"¹⁰⁰

This graphic description of Israel's helplessness and Yahweh's empathetic response exemplifies the nature of God's election of Israel: it is grounded solely in the compassionate, gracious love of God.¹⁰¹ It is no wonder, according to Bosch, that the Exodus event therefore became "the corner-stone of Israel's confession of faith. It is this *compassion for the unworthy* which distinguished Yahweh from the other gods . . ."¹⁰²

Who then, was Israel? She was simply a heathen nation like her neighbors, but as a result of God's loving election, she was a nation "set apart," obliged to live in tension with them. "The distinction [between Israel and the surrounding nations] does not come from ethnic differences but only from the fact that Israel is a 'heathen' nation whom God has called to salvation, whereas those outside of Israel are foreigners for whom this salvation is not yet valid . . . Israel is what she is on the basis of God's gracious covenant."¹⁰³

The Purpose of Election and Israel's Covenant Responsibilities

God revealed himself as a God of compassion, and elected Israel to be his covenant people. But this covenant also carried responsibilities and obligations. The God of

pity from a safe distance, in a condescending manner. True compassion is, however, a suffering with the other, sharing in His suffering, suffering on His behalf. And that is the amazing thing about sharing: if I share in His grief, that grief is halved" (Bosch, *TCAC*, 29).

99. Bosch comments: "Whereas the gods of the predominantly hierophantic religions stressed order, harmony, integration and the maintenance of the status quo, the violation of which would provoke fury, Yahweh revealed himself as the God of change, the God who comes to the rescue of the poor and needy" (Bosch, *Witness*, 50). Cf. Bosch, "The Why and How," 38; Bosch, *Theology* 201, 28.

100. Bosch, *Witness*, 50.

101. "Israel's election is to be attributed to this divine compassion, not to any good qualities Israel might have possessed . . . The basis for God's election of Israel was to be found throughout in his spontaneous and unmerited mercy . . ." Bosch cites Deut 7:6–8 in this regard: "For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession. The Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt" (ibid., 51).

102. Ibid., 50 (my emphasis). Here Bosch cites significant biblical evidence for this contention, including Exod 20:2; Ps 68:5–6; and Deut 4:32, 34–35.

103. Bosch, "Sendingperspektief," 287–88 (my translation).

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compassion elected a people to be set apart and holy.¹⁰⁴ What is significant for the missionary thought of the OT, however, is that *Israel was to live out her holiness by being like Yahweh*, namely by showing the same compassion upon others as Yahweh had shown upon her. Election was for service.¹⁰⁵

The responsibility that Israel bore as God's covenant partner has many aspects, but Bosch highlights two. First, Israel had a specific obligation to accept and help those strangers and aliens within her midst, especially the poor and oppressed, widows and orphans. Israel herself had been a stranger in Egypt, and so she was to have "compassion on the stranger in her midst. The constitutive element here was neither ethnic, nor the biological, nor the cultural; the stranger who lived in Israel had to be accepted completely and without reserve."¹⁰⁶

Second, Israel had a more general obligation to the nations. She was called to understand her national existence in a larger perspective. Through her election, God was laying hold of all the tribes and nations of the earth. She was thus a symbol of what God's plan was for *all* the nations.¹⁰⁷ "Israel was not to distance herself from other nations, but was made responsible for them. God's concern is with the whole world. Israel's special position is not grounded in anything other than the fact that she is called to be his instrument by which he can bless and witness to the nations."¹⁰⁸

Even in the making of the holy covenant between Yahweh and Israel (which was the very act that set her apart from the other nations), the role of the nations figured prominently.¹⁰⁹ In all her actions, both toward her own people and toward her neighbors, Israel was called to model the same compassion that her Lord had for her.¹¹⁰

104. Bosch, "Jeseja," 34. See Lev 11:44–45 for a link between God's holiness and Israel's obligation to be holy, rooted in the fact that he is *their* God, their liberator from Egypt.

105. "It was characteristic of Yahweh that he expected his elect to reveal the same compassion which he himself possessed. The purpose of election was service and where this service was withheld, election lost its meaning. Israel's besetting sin was precisely that she interpreted election as favoritism. However, election was not primarily privilege but rather responsibility" (Bosch, "The Why and How," 38). Cf. Bosch, "Sendingperspektief," 292; and Bosch, "Alttestamentliche," 180–81.

106. Bosch, *Witness*, 52. Cf. Bosch, "The Why and How," 38. Bosch cites Num 9:14; 15:14–16; and Josh 20:9 as examples of legal statutes in Israel designed to help the stranger.

107. Bosch, "Sendingperspektief," 292.

108. *Ibid.* (my translation).

109. In Bosch, *Theology 201*, 41–43, Bosch examines the missiological significance of "the nations" by expounding the arguments made by W. Vogels in his "Covenant and Universalism: Guide for a Missionary Reading of the Old Testament," 25–32. The article sees "the nations" as having a pivotal role in the covenant between God and Israel found in Exod 19.

110. Bosch repeatedly emphasizes the cardinal importance of the biblical theme of compassion. "There is an intimate link between God's compassion and mission" (Bosch, *Theology 201*, 27). "A religion in which compassion occupies so central a position, cannot but be a missionary religion" (Bosch, *Witness*, 57).