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Impulses to Global Mission in Isaiah

Elmer A. Martens

The impulse to share the gospel of Jesus Christ across cultures is rooted, in part, in the commission of Jesus to “go into all the world” (Matt. 28:19-20; cf. John 20:21). Moreover, the Holy Spirit, the second person of the Trinity, is an impulse for mission: “But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses . . . to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8 NRSV, *passim*). Limiting themselves largely to the New Testament, in the past many mission movements, including Mennonite Brethren, leaned for justification of missionary activity on these two New Testament texts.

*The Old Testament also, and not only the New Testament,
has something to say about the centrifugal (going out)
dimension of mission.*

More recently attention has been called to *missio Dei*, by which is meant that God, more specifically God as Father, is foundational for mission. God was the first missionary, for God from the beginning had a missional intention. God’s project is global and it is missional, for God intends all peoples to know him. From the beginning, it is claimed, God envisioned a community of his people which, while it included Israel, was not limited to Israel but included peoples outside that nation. So the basis for mission has shifted from an exclusive focus on the New Testament (NT) to include the Old Testament (OT).

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Within the OT the argument for global mission can especially be made from the book of Isaiah. Proof texts, such as “Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth!” (Isa. 45:22), can be enlisted (and will be in this essay). But to do no more is myopic and ultimately piecemeal. In laying out the case for mission from the book of Isaiah, this essay will first identify the larger ideological framework within which more explicit directives can be both understood and appreciated.¹

OVERTURES TO GLOBAL MISSION IN ISAIAH

Reading Isaiah is something like driving about in a city for some time, navigating its streets and avenues before heading out on the open freeway toward the mountains. The first half of Isaiah has largely to do with Israel as a sinful society, but also with neighbor nations: encroachments by Syria and Assyria (e.g., Isa. 7; 36-37), announcements to surrounding nations and to the rogue nation of Edom (Isa. 13-23; 34). As road signs within the city point to routes leading beyond it, so the material in Isaiah 1-39 is not unaware of a world that is larger than Israel. Beginning with Isaiah 40, the texture is no longer provincial, for now the reader is on the open road. The horizons are more distant, and the reader moves from one elevation to a yet higher elevation to see ever more clearly what God is about. God is anything but a tribal god. God’s project reaches toward the ends of the earth. Several observations prepare the reader for more explicit assertions about a mission to the nations.

God Is Sovereign Over the Nations

Other OT books sound the theme that God rules over nations (e.g., Daniel, Ezekiel), but Isaiah beats the drum on this point with unusual energy. The nations are like a drop in a bucket; they are “a drop from a bucket” and “as nothing before him” in the sense that he is not daunted by any (40:15, 17). God readily manages peoples, quite like a merchant handles commodities. God gives Egypt as a ransom for Israel, and Ethiopia and Seba “in exchange for you” (43:3). Like a company’s chief executive officer (CEO), God enlists Cyrus, the Persian empire builder, as his handyman to carry out his purpose (44:28; 45:13). No nation has veto power in God’s governance structure.

God Is the Sole Deity

To claim that God is powerful over nations and in control of them is not yet to say that God is the sole deity. But Isaiah is uncompromising in holding that there is no god but the LORD (Yahweh): “Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me. I, I am the LORD, and

besides me there is no savior" (43:10b-11). This claim that Yahweh is the exclusive deity is buttressed by the assertion that God is the Creator. Since he "created the heavens" and "formed the earth," it follows that he is "the LORD and there is no other" (45:18). That could be the end of the argument except that Isaiah returns to it repeatedly so that the force of the claim shall not be lost (44:24; 45:7, 12, 14; 48:13; 51:16). The theme of God as Creator sets the ideological context for Israel's global mission.

The claim that Yahweh is the exclusive deity is explicitly made against the rival claim of idols. Isaiah characterizes these, even sarcastically, as those who have no power and as "gods" who do not know: "Their eyes are shut" (44:18). Nor can they save. Nor can they know the future, a prerogative which belongs to God (45:21; cf. 44:7). God is incomparable. "I am God, and there is no other; I am God and there is no one like me" (46:9).

As speech-act theory asserts, language does not only have the function of offering information. Words do something. They can encourage, warn, correct, persuade, direct. So also these assertions are not to be understood merely as information. Rather these assertions about God's sovereignty and his unrivalled deity serve to prepare Israel (and the modern reader) for what this God intends: "My purpose shall stand, and I will fulfill my intention" (46:10). Considering who this God is, his purpose statement is to be respected. "Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other" (45:22).

God Is a God of Newness

If the first time reader is somewhat shocked in coming to the end of the book to learn that God intends to include eunuchs and foreigners among his people (Isa. 56:3-8), he or she is at least a little prepared for such an announcement by the earlier assertions that God is a God of newness: "Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" (43:18-19a). That "new thing," as explained in the context, is the new exodus for God's people, this time an exodus from Babylon. But in this statement God signals that he is a God who introduces the novel. So the reader ought not to be taken by total surprise when Isaiah later announces that the temple, so sacrosanct that access is severely restricted even to certain ones of Israel, is now to be a house of prayer for all nations (56:7).

Part of the newness that is envisioned is that God will (re)make the covenant with David, who will be a leader and commander for the peo-

ples (the word is plural). What this means is that “nations that do not know you shall run to you” (55:5; cf. 2:1-4). In the context of this promise of many peoples gathering themselves to Jerusalem (a euphemism for gathering themselves around Yahweh), one reads the well-known assertion, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts and my ways are not your ways, says the LORD” (55:8). This text is frequently used to address issues of theodicy, namely how to deal with evil and disappointments. But the context is missional. God’s thoughts are about nations. His horizon is bigger than the nation Israel. Israel should be prepared for something new.

The subsequent metaphor of rain and snow watering the earth, causing plant life to flourish—a metaphor pointing to the global dimensions—makes the point that God’s word, namely the word about nations coming to know God, will not return empty. He will yet fulfill his intention (55:11). God’s project with the nations, perhaps thought of as something “new,” will succeed. If readers then read elsewhere that God’s purpose includes for Israel to be an active agent in proclamation, they should remember that God presents himself as one who does new things.

God Is a Redeemer

Isaiah is fond of designating God as “Redeemer” (43:14; 44:6; 52:9). The promise of Israel’s return from exile is beautifully presented in Isaiah 54:5-8 in a chiasm. The announcement is prefaced by: “The Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer” (54:5); it concludes with “says the LORD, your Redeemer” (54:8). The redemption is political, but not only political. Redemption is needed for Israel’s feet have run to do evil, “the way of peace they do not know, and there is no justice in their paths” (59:7-8). With picturesque metaphor Isaiah continues: “Justice is turned back, and righteousness stands at a distance; for truth stumbles in the public square and uprightness cannot enter” (59:14). For Israel that state of affairs means punishment, but this is an intermediate step to something greater, namely spiritual wholeness and health. So Isaiah can announce that God “will come to Zion as Redeemer, to those in Jacob who turn from transgression” (60:20).

Given the strong emphasis that God is a Redeemer for Israel, the way is surely prepared for the announcement that his redemptive activity would reach beyond Israel to the nations. The divine passion for righteousness and the willingness to act as Redeemer is not to be limited to one ethnic segment of humanity. Rather, God’s intense involvement with Israel in redemption becomes a paradigm for God’s activity

with peoples other than Israel. "The Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations" (61:11). Especially compelling is this announcement of redemptive activity when it is remembered that in Isaiah, God's redeeming activity is set alongside God's creative activity. If his creative activity is on a world-wide scale, then it should not be surprising that his redemptive activity is equally as comprehensive.

God's global mission, which can now be brought to center stage, is predicated on (1) God's sovereignty over nations; (2) God's claim as the only true God; (3) God acting in new ways; and (4) God as Redeemer. With these considerations as background, the missional assignment for Israel, God's people, should be both intelligible and compelling.

EXPLICIT DIRECTIVES FOR GLOBAL MISSION

Isaiah pictures a God of the nations; he also mandates a ministry that extends to the nations. Overtures to mission are generously sprinkled in the book of Isaiah, it is true, but, lest there be fuzziness on the topic, explicit directives to be engaged in mission are also present.

God is mindful of nations; so also is Israel. And Israel is surrounded by neighbors. Isaiah first calls Israel to be conscious of its God, his justice, his sovereignty, his plan, his redemption. But Israel does not live in a world in which it relates only vertically to God, though that is decisive. This people has nations as neighbors on every side, and beyond those immediate neighbors there are neighbors that are more distant.

So, given the sheer proximity of other peoples, Israel cannot but relate to them in some way. Negatively Israel is not to copy the ways of the nations (Lev. 18:2-3). More positively there are at least two ways of relating to them: bearing witness by being God's people; moving as active agent to proclaim the good news. To speak in one's first breath of "outreach" in the sense of proselytizing is problematic; initially the image is that of a witness in the presence of others.

Witness by Being

Two texts represent God's call for Israel to be a "light to the nations," by which one is to understand "witness." Both texts about a "light to the nations" are embedded in servant songs, the first in v. 6 of Isaiah 42:1-9 and the second in v. 6 of 49:1-13.²

In the first servant song the servant is basically anonymous (42:1-4). Much as some readers may want to see in the servant the prediction of Jesus, and others one of the prophets such as Isaiah himself, or

Moses or Jeremiah, the text leaves the identity largely unspecified. This does not mean that the servant has no identity. To the contrary, the servant's profile is sketched with considerable clarity, but one cannot point to an individual or a group and pontificate: this person is in view as "the servant." Rather, the servant who is described is the ideal servant. True, that "ideal" is eventually mirrored in Jesus (Acts 8:29-35), but it is an escapist mechanism by the interpreter to jump to that conclusion as if that ends discussion about the servant. Quite to the contrary, the lack of naming the servant leads, for example, to the reader reflecting, "If I am called to be God's servant, do I indeed fit this profile?"

The profile of the servant is of one who is tough and tender; his function has to do with light (42:6). For Isaiah the image of light entails enlightenment, the teaching about God, specifically his justice: "for a teaching will go out from me, and my justice for a light to the peoples" (Isa. 51:4). Such a statement underscores that the witness is one of "honorable relationships"—a definition of justice—and so should not be restricted to verbal witness. The metaphor of casting light does not primarily suggest activity such as active evangelism, although it might. Light by its very nature is simply there; moreover, it is inviting. The metaphor is developed by our Lord himself when, he says of himself that he is the light of the world, and adds at once, "Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life" (John 8:12). That is, the light, much like a magnet, draws people to itself.

That same understanding of the way in which light is winsome is emphasized in our Lord's Sermon on the Mountain where he said to his disciples, "You are the light of the world" and calls for them to let their light shine, "so that they [others] may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven (Matt. 5:14, 16). Peter likewise highlights this ministry of "attraction": "Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that . . . they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God . . ." (1 Pet. 2:12). To paraphrase Peter: Christians are to be Exhibit A, a showpiece of God's transforming power. Spectators will be drawn to investigate. So the servant who serves God, whether Israel, the church, or the individual, will by character and conduct be a passive, though powerful, agent for God's truth in the world.

How this ministry of witness works itself out is outlined in a vision in which Isaiah depicts nations streaming to Mount Zion. In great numbers they press towards the mountain top where the temple is located to request instruction in God's ways. It is not that Israel is on the move to make contact with the nations. Rather, it is the nations that are on the move toward Israel (Isa. 2:1-4). It is the picture of a light set on a hill.

This movement from the margins to the center has sometimes been described as mission in the centripetal mode. Mission, the sharing of the gospel of God, happens, but it does not happen in this model through a strategy of mobilization of messengers sent out among the nations (the centrifugal mode). Mission proceeds via witness wherever the light is.

Both servant passages also refer to the LORD giving Israel as a covenant to the people (nations; 42:6; 49:8). What this precisely means is disputed. Is the phrase, especially in its first occurrence, to amplify the election of Israel so that Israel is a people of covenant in the sense of being set apart from other nations? Or might the meaning include the notion that it is a covenant of people more generally and not a covenant for Israel only? The word "people" (*'am*) is usually singular and refers to Israel, but not always (Isa. 40:7; 42:5). So quite possibly there is a hint here that Gentiles would be a part of a beyond-Israel covenant.

What is more, God has appointed (given) Israel to be a bonding instrument (covenant) to the nations. Israel has a mediating function. That role may be largely passive. It is a matter of "being" and not "doing." Yet the role could conceivably entail an activity of outreach. The parallel poetic line with its metaphor of light has been understood as leaving Israel in a passive position on the basis of statements like this: "Nations shall come to your light" (Isa 60:3). But the line that follows the light metaphor at least allows for the notion of moving out: "to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon" (42:7). Both the mention of "covenant" and the mention of "light" underline the importance of "being" more than "doing"; still they should not be restricted to mean an inactive role for Israel.

So while an argument can be made that the texts about being light to the nations present a form of passive witness, the figure of speech opens the door to a centrifugal understanding of mission, especially because the full text of Isaiah 49:6 reads, "I will give you [i.e., Israel, cf. 49:3] as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." Paul and Barnabas, rebuffed by the Jews at Antioch in Pisidia, make it a point to reach out to the Gentiles and do so on the basis of Isa. 49:6, which they quote (Acts 13:47). Still, the metaphor of light is suggestive of something stationary more than it is of movement.

Witness by Going/Speaking

God's mission is more than proclamation, for it includes a helping ministry to the marginalized. But God's mission, as exemplified by Jesus, is not without proclamation (Mark 1:14-15). The good news of God's work of transformation and the establishment of his kingdom is

to be announced: "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns'" (Isa. 52:7).

Missiologists use the term "centrifugal" to refer to that mode of mission (telling the good news) in which movement is from the center outward. In missionary literature the term "centrifugal" designates the "going" of believers into all the world. This dimension of mission is distinguished from the "coming" of peoples toward the center (as described above), a move designated as "centripetal."³ The claim is then made that the OT is centripetal in its approach to "mission," but the NT is centrifugal. However, such a claim polarizes the two testaments far too much. Already we have seen that the NT also shares in the imagery of "light" which is to draw persons. In what follows it will be shown that the OT also, and not only the NT, has something to say about the centrifugal (going out) dimension of mission.

Eckhart Schnabel has asserted that "Isaiah contains the only two statements in Israel's prophetic tradition that portray a 'centrifugal' movement from Israel to the nations."⁴ The claim is debatable, especially because he disallows Jonah as an exemplar of centrifugal mission. Nevertheless the two passages which Schnabel cites from Isaiah deserve attention.

The first passage, Isaiah 42:1-4, is focused on the "servant." This servant is introduced as one would introduce a close friend. God, who makes the introduction, speaks of the servant as the one "in whom my soul delights" (42:1). Following the formal presentation of the servant, his qualifications are noted. God's spirit has been put upon him, a phrase which is understood to mean that God has empowered him. So also the Spirit of God came on other "servants," especially the prophets. The Spirit of God rested on Elijah; Elisha asked for a double portion (1 Kings 2:9). Micah, another prophet, declared, "But as for me, I am filled with power, with the spirit of the Lord" (Micah 3:8). It is likely of a prophet that Isaiah says, "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me." To begin with, the servant is presented with credentials appropriate to his task.

That task is highlighted with a three-fold repetition: "He will bring forth justice" (42:1, 3b, 4). The word "justice" is highly significant here when it is remembered that "justice" in the Hebrew language has a meaning much broader than in the English. For English-speakers the word justice brings to mind at once the notion of "fairness." Consequently, when people hear the word "justice" they think of evil persons appropriately punished and the good appropriately rewarded. The

Hebrew term “justice” (*mišpāṭ*) contains these ideas as well, but incorporates the notion of honorable relationships. God is committed to justice, which includes setting matters right (Isa. 61:8). Moreover, God is committed to the establishment and maintenance of right relations in every segment of life. Jeremiah parallels “justice” (*mišpāṭ*) with the “way of the Lord” (Jer. 5:4).⁵

It is not going beyond the Isaiah text to assert that the “servant” is in the business of bringing about right relationships. Such an activity includes, but is not limited to, bringing about right relationships of persons with God. God’s servant is also exercised about putting things right between persons. Clearly, this task is one in which the “servant” as an active agent takes the initiative. While Isaiah 42:1-4 speaks to the style of service, namely a tough tenderness and a perseverance of purpose, the text throughout and near its end insists on the primary, even sole task: the servant is a justice-bringer.

The beyond-Israel dimension of this task is stated twice. After the servant’s qualifications are cited, his task is announced: “He will bring forth justice to the nations” (42:1c). The poem returns to this task when it concludes the “job description” segment with “until he has established justice in the earth” (42:4a). The centrifugal dimension of the servant’s ministry is unambiguous. The servant is to go beyond his own borders to the neighbor. The style of his mission will not be coercive, certainly not bombastic or arm-twisting as to manner (42:2-3). But his sphere of responsibility is clearly not limited to Israel. His superhuman task is to establish justice “in the earth” (42:4a).

Schnabel, who was quoted earlier, identifies a second text where the warrants for active missionizing are clear cut. God will send “survivors,” apparently Israelites, to the nations (66:19a). Once again these nations are nearby nations, such as Javan (Greece), but also distant nations such as Tarshish (Spain), Put and Lud (likely places in North Africa), and to “coastlands far away.” The “survivors” are to “declare [God’s] glory among the nations” (66:19b). From these “foreign” converts God will select those who will be his priests (66:21). Such a promise of inclusion of Gentiles is consistent with similar statements elsewhere. Foreigners will “join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him . . . to be his servants” (56:6; cf. vv. 1-8). Of Egypt it will be said, “Blessed be Egypt my people” (19:25).

CONCLUSION

So this text (Isa. 66:18-21) near the end of Isaiah gathers up the theme of nations which has surfaced repeatedly in the book. In a parting

shot, so to speak, not unlike the final words of Jesus about “going into all the world” (Matt. 28:19-20), the text clarifies the relationship envisioned between Israel and the nations. Israel is to be an active ambassador for God to the nations. Matthew in the NT, since he quotes Jesus, may be more compelling for mandating active evangelism. Nevertheless Jesus is in sync with Isaiah who envisions God’s message brought by human agents to nations.

Isaiah is not alone in the OT to sound the note of God’s global concern. The Psalms, according to one count, speak to a universalistic note 175 times, among them Psalms 67 and 96.⁵ Ezekiel refers often in the context of nations to a future time: “and they [other peoples] shall know the Lord” (e.g., Ezek. 35:15; 36:36; 37:28). A fuller account of God’s missionary intention would include the outworking of God’s promise through Abraham to bless all nations (Gen. 12:1-3) and Israel’s role as priest (Exod. 19:6) whose mediating role was to teach God’s ways (Mal. 2:5,7; cf. Rom. 15:16).

But among these voices of psalmists and prophets Isaiah has a prominent place. This visionary emphasizes that God’s salvific intention includes the nations, and what’s more, his servant—whether an individual or a group such as Israel, or God’s people, the church—is his agent to carry that message to others, their neighbors.⁷ ✨

NOTES

1. However, the missionary character of Isaiah has been debated, e.g., “Contrary to what earlier scholars have suggested, not even Second Isaiah is to be regarded as a book about mission” (David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991], 17).
2. As F. F. Bruce has explained, several of the servant songs have a core stanza followed by a connecting link, e.g., 42:1-4 (5-9); 46:1-6 (7-13) (*This Is That: The New Testament Development of Some Old Testament Themes* [Exeter: Paternoster, 1968], 84).
3. George W. Peters, *A Biblical Theology of Missions* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1972), 52.
4. Eckhart J. Schnabel, “Israel, the People of God, and the Nations,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 45 (March 2002), 41.
5. English translations render *mišpāṭ* variously in Jer. 5:4, e.g., *ordinance* (NASB), *requirements* (NIV), and *law* (NRSV).
6. Peters, 115-16.

7. Here are some additional resources for mission and the Old Testament: M. Daniel Carroll R., "Justice of God and Mission: Old Testament Prophets and Missions," in the *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, ed. A. Scott Moreau (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000); Ferris L. McDaniel, "Mission in the Old Testament," in *Mission in the New Testament: An Evangelical Approach*, ed. William J. Larkin Jr. and Joel F. Williams (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998), 11-20; Michael A. Grisanti, "Israel's Mission to the Nations in Isaiah 40-55: An Update," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 9 (spring 1998): 39-61; idem, "The Missing Mandate: Missions in the Old Testament," in *Issues in Missions: Essays in Honor of C. Raymond Buck* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, forthcoming); Titus F. Guenther, "Missionary Vision and Practice in the Old Testament" in *Reclaiming the Old Testament: Essays in Honour of Waldemar Janzen* (Winnipeg, MB: CMBC Publications, 2001), 146-64; Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Mission in the Old Testament: Israel as a Light to the Nations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000); Mary H. Schertz and Ivan Friesen, eds., *Beautiful upon the Mountains: Biblical Essays on Mission, Peace, and the Reign of God* (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2003); Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, vol. 1 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004); John Oswalt, "The Mission of Israel to the Nations," in *Through No Fault of Their Own?* ed. William V. Crockett and James G. Sigountos (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1991), 85-95 (who views Israel's role as witness but not proselytizer, 94-95); D. W. Van Winkle, "The Relationship of the Nations to Yahweh and to Israel in Isaiah 40-55," *Vetus Testamentum* 35 (1985): 446-58 (who interprets that the nations will submit to Israel); and Bernard Wodecki, "Heils-universalismus im Buch des Propheten Jesaja," in *Dein Wort Beachten: Alttestamentliche Aufsätze*, ed. Joseph Reindl and Georg Hentschel (Leipzig: St. Benno-Verlag, 1981), 76-101 (who believes that "the Spirit of universal salvation permeates the entire book of Isaiah," p. 99).