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A Blessing to All Nations: Examining Call Narratives in the Hebrew Bible

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A Blessing to All Nations:
Examining Call Narratives in The Hebrew Bible

An Honors College Project Thesis

Presented to

The College of Biblical Studies

Abilene Christian University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for

Honors Scholar

by

Brianna Rideout

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This Project Thesis, directed and approved by the candidate's committee,
has been accepted by the Honors College of Abilene Christian University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the distinction

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ABSTRACT

In the New Testament, Jesus tells his followers to go into the world and preach the good news of the kingdom of God. One aspect of this kingdom is God's love for all creation. However, the missional call in the Old Testament has been largely ignored. Some Old Testament scholars have argued in favor of a mission to the nations in the Hebrew Bible on the basis of Isaiah 40-55. Others have argued against it saying that the prophetic message here is for reform directed toward their own community. Still, the genre of the call narrative and its role in deciphering the Israelite mission to the nations has yet to be discussed in detail. This project will explore the missional nature of God by looking at the call narratives in the Hebrew Bible. It will argue that the call narratives found in the Hebrew Bible demonstrate that the people of Israel were called to be participants in the LORD's mission of reaching the nations and restoring creation. After defining *missio Dei* according to modern scholars as well as the place of the call narrative genre in the Hebrew Bible, it will examine the specific calls of Abram, Deutero-Isaiah, and Jonah. Through this discussion, it will argue that God does in fact use his chosen people of Israel to enact his mission for restoring creation. Finally, it will give some concluding insights on what these call stories can tell Christians for *missio Dei* in the modern world.

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Introduction

Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Matt 28:18-20 NIV)

Many people believe that the Great Commission Jesus gave to his disciples in Matthew 28:18-20 was a new commandment spurring the disciples to go into all the world and make disciples of “all nations.” The question is whether the commission is a new one or a reiteration of an older commission toward the people of Israel.

The implications of whether the Great Commission is a recommissioning or not impacts how we understand the Hebrew Bible.¹ If we take it as being a new commission, then there is no mission in the Hebrew Bible, not only making this paper useless but also generating questions about several stories in the scriptures that seem to have a missional undertone.² A second option is that Jesus is expanding on notions of mission as they are expressed in the Hebrew Bible. This option moves into the idea of there being some missional concepts in the Hebrew Bible (or at least the basis for future mission). However, if the Great Commission is taken as a recommissioning, then we can see that “God had never elected Israel only to be engrossed in ‘navel-gazing’—only to receive the

¹ For this paper, I will be using the term Hebrew Bible to refer to the Christian Old Testament.

² Some of these stories are about Rahab, Ruth, the widow at Zarephath, the people of Nineveh in the book of Jonah, and many others.

blessing for herself.”³ So, we see that Israel was chosen to be servants, or missionaries of sorts, to the nations. In fact, Kaiser states that “world-wide missions forms the heartbeat of the message and purpose of the O.T.”⁴

Throughout the Bible (both the New Testament and the Hebrew Bible), there is witness to what the LORD has done for all of creation. Christopher Wright says that the existence of the Bible is “the product of, and witness to the ultimate mission of God.”⁵ The accounts of the witnesses found throughout the Bible struggle with the theology of what mission is and why God calls people. They ask the question of how to engage the world around them as the chosen people of the LORD. The mission of the chosen people is to accept God’s invitation to be participants in redeeming a broken creation.⁶

When we look at the people of ancient Israel and their relationship with the LORD we see that they are called to be a “chosen people.” In several places in the Hebrew Bible the people of Israel are mentioned as “a holy people,” “a treasured possession,” and the LORD’s “chosen” nation.⁷ They are special among the nations and as such are given a specific task. They are called to be a “kingdom of priests” for the rest of the world.⁸ God has a plan for these people and calls them to this task.

³ Walter C. Kaiser, “The Great Commission in the Old Testament,” *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 13.1 (1996): 3-7.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Christopher J.H. Wright, “Word of God and Mission of God,” in *Discovering the Mission of God: Best Missional Practices for the 21st Century*, ed. Mike Barnett and Robin Martin (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 35.

¹ Ibid., 22-23.

⁷ For some references on Israel as God’s chosen people see: Deut 7:6-8; 14:2; 26:17-19; 2 Sam 7:23-24; 1 Kgs 8:53; 10:9; 1 Chr 17:20-21; Pss 105:8-15; 135:4; Isa 41:8; 43:1-3; 44:21; Jer 31:1-4; 31:9-11; 46:27-28; Ezek 36:24-28; 37:21-25; Joel 3:1-2; Amos 3:1-2.

⁸ See Exod 19:6.

The problem that I intend to look at in this paper is how the call narratives in the Hebrew Bible⁹ help us understand the missional nature of God. I believe that there are elements of God's mission of restoring creation, found in these call narratives. In this paper, I will argue that the calls of Abram, Deutero-Isaiah, and Jonah demonstrate that the LORD called the people of Israel to be participants in his mission of reaching the nations and restoring all of creation. In order to do this, I will first look at what *missio Dei* means. Then, I will define the call narrative genre. Next, I will explore the calls of Abram, Deutero-Isaiah, and Jonah, in order to see how God uses the people of Israel to enact his mission in the world. And finally, I will offer some insights into *missio Dei* from this discussion for the modern world.

Missio Dei

To understand God's plan for a call, first we need to understand who God is. He is a God who loves to commune with his creation even though it is rebellious. He chose the people of Israel and used them despite their continually turning away from him so that he could redeem that which he loves so dearly. His mission in the world is both centrifugal and centripetal. Centrifugal mission focuses on going out to the edges of society whereas centripetal focuses on being examples to those around them. Centripetal not only means ministering to those within the community, but being an example to other communities around one's community. Centripetal does not require leaving one's own community whereas centrifugal does.¹⁰ He wants his chosen people to remember those who are on

⁹ Call narratives are a particular type of biblical story.

¹⁰ C.f. Mortimer Arias, "Centripetal Mission or Evangelization by Hospitality." *Missiology* 10.1 (1982): 74-75. In this article, the author describes centripetal mission as being an example to those around them. Centrifugal mission is defined as the act of "going from the center to a periphery in the world" (74). The mission of God has both of these aspects.

the inside of the community (and simply be the people of the God) as well as to go out into the world and bring people into relationship with God.¹¹

In the modern terminology, what the LORD is doing in the world is considered *missio Dei*. In short, *missio Dei* can be defined as God's mission in the world to redeem the broken creation. However, it is also much more than that. The creation has been broken because of sin in the world and God works through people to show his love and bring others back to him. He also works through these people to restore order to the world. This mission comes down to God's love for humankind and his work within the world.¹²

God is the subject of the mission; it is not the individual who is important but what God has commissioned the individual to do. God is also the author of the mission and the individual plays a role in this grand plan. *Missio Dei* also requires the individual to give witness to the world about what God has done and will do.¹³

Overall, *missio Dei* involves a creation that God loves, even though it is in rebellion against him. His mission is to restore, to heal the flawed and broken creation through flawed and broken people. Ott et al. says that "God is a missionary God," that he himself is mission.¹⁴ It is the LORD's plan to redeem creation, so all mission must first start with God.

¹¹ David J. Bosch, *Witness to the World: The Christian Mission in Theological Perspective* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 77-78.

¹² *Ibid.*, 75.

¹³ Craig Ott, Stephen J. Strauss, and Timothy C. Tennent, *Encountering Theology of Mission: Biblical Foundations, Historical Developments, and Contemporary Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 62 and Bosch, *Witness to the World*, 75.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 62.

Missio Dei in the Hebrew Bible

When thinking about this plan of redemption in relation to the Hebrew Bible one of the questions that arises is whether Israel's calling can really be considered missional (and whether that mission is centripetal or centrifugal) or something else. Michael Goheen asserts that "the missional nature of the [Christian] church is rooted in the calling of Israel."¹⁵ This assumes that Israel was called to a type of conversional mission. Goheen goes on to discuss the different aspects that can be found as a basis for mission in the Hebrew Bible. These aspects are: universalism, inclusion of foreigners, and proselytizing of Gentiles.¹⁶

Along different lines, Robert Martin-Achard says that "monotheism leads naturally to universalism."¹⁷ This is the idea that since the LORD is the one and true God all people will come to know him. However, this notion does not give the chosen people any particular obligation to evangelize the nations around them. Inclusion of foreigners and proselytizing of Gentiles typically went hand in hand. Robert Martin-Achard points out that "the *ger* or foreigner settled in Israel often became a proselyte, a second-grade Israelite, not owing to any actual missionary work of Israel's."¹⁸ Additionally, Martin-

¹⁵ Michael W. Goheen, *A Light to the Nations: The Missional Church and the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 23.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁷ C.f. Robert Martin-Achard, *A Light to the Nations: A Study of the Old Testament Conception of Israel's Mission to the World* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1962), 9. Martin-Achard seems to be making this argument under a different definition of universalism. His argument leans more heavily on monotheism (that the LORD is the one and only God) rather than universalism. Additionally, his argument is based on the idea that the Hebrew Bible does not have any missional passages. He argues that there are a few such as Deutero-Isaiah and Jonah that have can be construed in modern scholarship to argue that God commanded the Hebrew people to be missional to the surrounding nations. I disagree with his argument that the Hebrew people were not called to do mission to the surrounding nations.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

Achard points out, universalism “does not propose that the Chosen People should take any particular action towards converting the nations to Him.”¹⁹ All of this boils down to the idea that mission and *missio Dei* were not central to the story of the Hebrew Bible, but that is not to say that it was completely absent.

Several stories throughout the Hebrew Bible carry an echo of a call to mission. Abram and his descendants are called to be blessings to all nations, Jonah is called to go to Nineveh (a major Assyrian city), Ruth was treated kindly by Boaz (despite being a Moabite woman), Elisha healed Naaman (even though he was a commander of the army of the king of Aram), the list goes on and on. I believe that these are examples of mission to the nations (or individuals from the nations) because all of these examples are focused on how God worked in the lives of people who were not a part of the chosen people of Israel. And, in every case, it was an individual from Israel through whom the LORD worked.

Along with these examples, there are places in the Hebrew texts that describe the nations in relation to Israel. In Zechariah the LORD says, “So many peoples and mighty nations will come to seek the LORD of hosts in Jerusalem and to entreat the favor of the LORD” (Zech 8:22). Psalm 67:2 says, “That Your way may be known on the earth, Your salvation among all nations.” Even in Isaiah, the LORD says, “I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.” (Isa 49:6). In the Hebrew Bible the LORD is not only concerned with Israel but all humanity as well. The LORD calls people through whom he can enact his plan for all humanity.

¹⁹ Ibid., 5.

Call Narratives

Scattered throughout the Hebrew Bible in are examples of what scholars term as “call narratives.”²⁰ Most of these narratives are found in the prophetic literature, but elements of this form of writing are found everywhere across the texts. But what exactly is a call narrative?

A call narrative is a genre found in the Hebrew texts that gives the account of a prophet’s commission by God to take up the prophetic role. The call narrative, like many other literary devices, follows a set pattern or form. Norman Habel offers a model to identify call narratives in the Hebrew Bible.²¹ The first element of the form is that there is some sort of crisis or need that has arisen or is on its way. This crisis prompts the LORD to summon the attention of one of his servants through a divine encounter or theophany. After this encounter, there is an introductory word where the LORD gives the reason for the call and the initial commission is given to the individual. The individual then gives an excuse or objection regarding why he is not qualified for this task. The LORD then reassures him, restating the commission. This reassurance is followed by some “sign of divine favor,” proving to the individual and those to whom he is called to speak that the LORD is with him.²² Fred Guyette offers that “this model only applies to the formal call

²⁰ D.N. Phinney, “Call/Commission Narratives,” *Dictionary of the Old Testament Prophets* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2012), 65.

²¹ Norman C. Habel, “The Form and Significance of the Call Narratives,” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 77.3 (1965).

²² *Ibid.*, 25.

narrative,” or the narratives found in the call narrative genre proper.²³ Elements of this model, on the other hand, are found throughout the Hebrew Bible.

These narratives are also often called commission narratives or vocation accounts by scholars of the Hebrew Bible. The call motif is scattered throughout the Hebrew Bible. A few examples include the call or commissioning of Abram, Moses, Joshua, and Samuel.²⁴ While these are apparent call narratives Phinney argues that these narratives of call cannot be considered part of the call narrative genre proper. His definition states that the only call narratives that truly appear in the Hebrew Bible occur “in the Major Prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel.”²⁵ So, according to his definition, other narratives that contain a call of an individual, while still containing elements of the call narrative, cannot be considered a part of the call narrative genre proper.²⁶

Issues the Call Narrative Presents

However, there are a few issues that the call narrative presents.²⁷ The first issue is that the human is not the one who will initiate this call sequence. The individual is not in charge of seeing the oncoming crisis and taking it upon themselves to do the commissioned work without God first calling them to do so. The LORD is always the one

²³ Fred Guyette, “The Genre of the Call Narrative: Beyond Habel’s Model,” *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 43.1 (2015): 55. See also: Habel, “The Form and Significance of the Call Narratives.”

²⁴ These specific calls can be found in: Genesis 12: 1-9, Exodus 3:1-4:17, Joshua 1:1-9, and 1 Samuel 1-14.

²⁵ Fred Guyette, “The Genre of the Call Narrative: Beyond Habel’s Model,” 55.

²⁶ C.f. Ibid. Jonah, Hosea, and Amos are more of a “call experience” rather than a call narrative. A call experience still contains the elements that Habel has laid out as the form of the call narrative. However, because these are not major prophets, they cannot be considered part of the call narrative genre proper. I will adhere to Phinney’s definition of the call narrative genre. I will address narratives in my discussion on specific call experiences as simply “calls.”

²⁷ C.f. Pemberton, *When God Calls*. Throughout his book, Pemberton examines different calls and what the messages from these calls are. I will mention some of these aspects as I continue in this section.

who initiates the call. Even when it seems like it would be difficult for the LORD to get through, God's call is always answered. For example, when God calls Samuel in 1 Samuel 3:1-14 Samuel does not realize that it is the LORD who is calling him. Instead, he believes that it is Eli. However, after Eli tells him that the next time he is called to say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening," God's call is finally answered and he tells Samuel what he wants of him. But, what if the person called does not want to be called?

This question presents the second issue with regard to the call narrative: the matter of what the call requires of the individual. The individual is not required to be perfect, nor is their cooperation required to be perfect. The call is not about the individual, but about what the LORD is about to do. The person called needs to be faithful to the call and ready to do what the LORD requires of them. This means that the individual must trust the LORD and follow through with what they are asked to do. There are some instances where the person called puts off their calling for a time but in the end, the call must be answered. Most often, the call succeeds despite the individual and their imperfections, including their desire to run from their call. For example, when Moses was called he was reluctant to do what God asked of him because he said that he was "slow of speech and tongue" (Ex. 4:10). But God still was able to use him to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt, despite this imperfection.

The final issue with a call is that sometimes the call is direct and other times it is indirect. There is not always a distinct theophany that is associated with calls.²⁸ In the

²⁸ C.f. Phinney, "Call/Commission Narratives," 65. According to the definition that Phinney gives us in his article, if a call does not follow every aspect of the pattern of a call narrative, it does not fall into the call narrative genre proper. Instead, it can be classified as a call experience.

account of Jeremiah's call in Jeremiah 1 there is no distinct theophany that occurs.

Instead, the text says:

The word of the LORD came to me, saying,
 "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
 before you were born I set you apart;
 I appointed you as a prophet to the nations." (Jer 1:4-5)

While we are told that the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah, we are not told how this event transpired. To us, this seems like more of an indirect call, but it is a call nonetheless.²⁹

Origin of the Call Narrative

In addition to the issues addressed above, one major question that seems to arise when looking at the call genre is how did this genre originate? One view that many have presented is that "the call narrative is *sui generis*," meaning that it is unique.³⁰ This view states that the form does not fit with any other Israelite literature, "but rather is intimately connected with the rise of prophetism."³¹

Habel suggests a different view. He suggests that the form comes from the practice of using court messengers in the ancient Near East. He gives the example of Genesis 24:35-48 as the normal practice for "ambassadors or messengers on a special mission."³² He suggests that the prophets copied this pattern at the beginning of their message to give their credentials as to why they are capable of prophesying in the name of the LORD.

²⁹ Pemberton, *When God Calls*, 141-142.

³⁰ Phinney, "Call/Commission Narratives," 69.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Habel, "The Form and Significance of the Call Narratives," 322.

Yet another view is touched on in the *Dictionary of the Old Testament Prophets*. This view takes a middle position. While there is a relationship between the Mosaic tradition and the prophets, that relationship is interwoven and complex. This relationship is complex because literary influence of later writing can sway that of earlier writing and vice versa.³³

One final view is given for the origin of the call narrative. This view comes from K. Baltzer who suggests that there is a “close form-critical cousin of the call narrative... found in narratives recounting the appointment of Egyptian viziers.”³⁴ This view is possible because the prophets are thought of as being part of the divine council. I agree with this position because the prophets were more than just messengers, they were the intermediary between the LORD and the people. Additionally, they had prophetic immunity, meaning that they had the authority to speak the words of the LORD to the monarchy, without threat of death, because they were speaking the words of God.³⁵

Function of the Call Narrative

In addition to the question of origin, another major question that arises when looking at call narratives is concerning their function.³⁶ Most Hebrew Bible scholars,

³³ C.f. Phinney, “Call/Commission Narratives,” 69. B. Childs offers this view with the assumption that the Mosaic tradition was copied and edited alongside the prophets and therefore the prophetic theme in both is due to this process. It is possible that one tradition borrowed from the other and vice versa.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 69-70.

³⁵ C.f. Victor H. Matthews, *The Hebrew Prophets and their Social World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 32. Matthews describes prophetic immunity as the idea that the prophet was “not supposed to be held liable for the message they spoke,” since the message was from God. However, this did not always happen. There were times where the prophet spoke the words that the LORD told them to speak and they were persecuted or killed. One example of this that Matthews gives is the story of Zechariah in 2 Chronicles 24:15-25, where the king ordered Zechariah to be killed because of his message. Other examples include when Jezebel ordered the execution of prophets of God in 1 Kings 18:4 and when Uriah son of Shemaiah was killed in Jeremiah 26:20-23.

³⁶ Phinney, “Call/ Commission Narratives,” 70.

until the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first century, thought that the call narrative was a way to legitimize prophets as the LORD's messenger. However, Hebrew Bible scholars of the twenty-first century believe that they function as a way to portray the prophet as an example of the obedience that the LORD asks of his people.³⁷ Call narratives function as a way to show the trust that the LORD asks his people to have in him. To answer a call is to first trust the LORD. Often what the LORD asks the individual to do is to go and do or proclaim something not only to the Israelites but to the nations as well. The people that the LORD asks to trust him are not just his chosen people, but those living among and around the chosen. Many times, the individual is called to go to the nations surrounding the chosen community. This call to go to the nations is a way of displaying the LORD's mission in the world.

The LORD's mission to the world began with its creation. At the beginning of Genesis, God created and he said that his creation was good (Gen 1:31). Yet something went wrong. Adam and Eve rebelled and were cast out of the garden, Cain killed Abel and started a tradition of violence among human beings and even after God rebooted the world with Noah and his family there was still sin in the world (Gen 3-11). The chasm brought about by the first sin remained. It was not a head or hands issues, but a heart issue. This statement means that it was not just something that human beings did or thought, but something that had been altered in the core of their being when Adam and Eve ate of the fruit.

³⁷ Ibid. I am hesitant to argue for one or the other. I believe that they are both to distinguish the prophet as a legitimate prophet of the LORD and to serve as an example of obedience to those reading the texts.

So how does the LORD try to redeem the broken remains of his creation? He chooses someone through whom he can work. He bridges the chasm left by sin and invites Abram to trust him. The LORD calls Abram out of the land of his fathers, promising land and descendants. However, the election of Abram does not mean that the LORD forsakes the rest of the nations and peoples of the earth. This election “was explicitly for their ultimate benefit.”³⁸ The LORD called for Abram and his descendants to be light “in the sight of the nations.”³⁹ We will look at this call in greater detail in the next section.

The Call of Abram

Upon first glance, the call of Abram found in Genesis 12:1-4 does not seem to fit into our definition of the call narrative genre.⁴⁰ There are elements of the call, such as the divine encounter and the commission; but there is little stress on the summons to attention (no surprise on Abram’s part), the LORD does not provide any introductory words of explanation to preface the commission (there seems to be no previous relationship between the LORD and Abram), Abram offers no objection (Abram simply goes as the LORD asked), and aside from the promise there is not truly a sign from God that Abram is chosen. However, the story continues from chapter twelve all the way to chapter twenty-two.⁴¹ This extended storyline gives insight into how the call plays out.

³⁸ Christopher Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006), 43.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Pemberton, *When God Calls*, 35.

⁴¹ Ibid.

Instead of simply giving us the call, we get to see how the relationship between the one who calls (God) and the one called (Abram) develops.

The Story and Form of Abram's Call

The call begins in chapter twelve with the crisis that has been developing for the first eleven chapters of Genesis. Scholar Rick Marris argues that “Genesis 12:1-3 provides the theological center for the book of Genesis (and perhaps the entire Pentateuch).”⁴² I would argue that this section may even be a theological center for much of the Hebrew Bible. The first eleven chapters of Genesis tell the story of the LORD's creation and the downward spiral of sin that Adam and Eve's sin caused. The result of that first sin was that from that point on all humans would sin. But the LORD had a plan. The call of Abram is set “against the backdrop of a humankind under divine judgement.”⁴³ It is “a ‘bridge passage’ between the two sections” of Genesis (primeval history 1-11, patriarchal history 12-50).⁴⁴ In Genesis 12 we are told:

The LORD had said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.
 “I will make you into a great nation,
 and I will bless you;
 I will make your name great,
 and you will be a blessing.
 I will bless those who bless you,
 and whoever curses you I will curse;
 and all peoples on earth
 will be blessed through you.”

⁴² Rick R. Marris, *Embracing the Call of God: Finding Ourselves in Genesis* (Webb City, MO: Covenant, 2003), 84. The Pentateuch is the term that is used in reference to the first 5 books of the Hebrew Bible (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy). It is also sometimes called the Five Books of Moses.

⁴³ Andreas J. Köstenberger and Peter O'Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Mission*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 11, ed. D.A. Carson (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 28.

⁴⁴ Goheen, *A Light to the Nations*, 27.

So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Harran. (Gen 12:1-4)

God is the one who initiates this call. Abram does not ask for the call, but “God takes the burden of resolving [the] crisis” of sin in the world by choosing a servant through whom to work.⁴⁵

Abram and his wife are called to a new life away from their family. They are told to leave the security that they have among their family and go to a new land where they have no assured security. However, it is not simply a call that Abram is asked to embrace but also the promise that the LORD gives him. The LORD promises that Abram will be the father of a great nation (despite him not having any children at the time of the call), that he will be given land, that his name will be great, and that he will be a blessing to all the nations. He and Sarai is asked to trust that the LORD will provide for them, that the LORD will uphold the promise he gives Abram in Genesis 12:2-3. Kaiser states, “The amazing thing is that Abram picked up all that he owned and left, going by faith and trusting in the fact that God would tell him what he was to do next.”⁴⁶

So, Abram and Sarai and their nephew Lot leave the security that they had among their family and settle in the land of Canaan, trusting the promises that God has called them into. However, these promises do not always seem evident. There is still crisis on the horizon for the family of the promise. After they have entered into the land they are forced to leave because of famine. They head to Egypt where Abram acquires “sheep and cattle, male and female donkeys, male and female servants, and camels” (Gen 12:16). But

⁴⁵ Pemberton, *When God Calls*, 36.

⁴⁶ Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Mission in the Old Testament: Israel as a Light to the Nations* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Books, 2000), 18.

a mishap occurs between Pharaoh and Abram. Instead of being a blessing to the Egyptian people that they encounter Abram has become a curse to them because he lied to Pharaoh, saying that Sarai was his sister. When Pharaoh's house is struck with disease because he has taken Sarai as his wife he learns that Abram has lied to him, causing Pharaoh to sin against God. So, Pharaoh orders Abram and his household to take all their possessions with them and back to the land of Canaan (Gen 12:17-20).

Once back in the land of Canaan a dispute breaks out among Abram's and Lot's herdsmen, forcing the two to part ways. After Abram watches his nephew leave—the only heir that Abram had at the time other than a servant—the LORD again promises Abram saying,

Look around from where you are, to the north and south, to the east and west. All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted. (Gen 13:14b-16)

Still Abram does not give an objection. It is not until Genesis 15 that Abram makes his objection to his calling. In Genesis 15, the LORD makes a covenant with Abram. In this covenant story we find the elements of the call narrative that were missing in chapter twelve. In the very first verse of chapter fifteen the LORD gives his introductory word to Abram. He tells him to not be afraid and that he is with him. It is then that Abram gives his first objection saying, "Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?" (Gen 15:2). He goes on to accuse God of not living up to his promise of giving him children.⁴⁷ However,

⁴⁷ This will not be the only time that Abram makes the accusation against God for not giving him children. He again makes this objection in Genesis 17:17-18.

the LORD reassures Abram that he will follow through on his promise of descendants (Gen 15:4-5).

The second objection that we see in this covenant story is Abram's questioning of how he knows that he will gain possession of the land of Canaan since there are people already living in the land. The LORD responds by commanding him to make ready a covenant ceremony. In this covenant ceremony there are no stipulations put on Abram (he does not have to do anything but make the animals ready). Gerhard Hasel suggests that "this animal-killing act as a rite of treaty ratification which symbolized the binding status or lasting tie of the covenanting parties in a treaty" was not uncommon in Near Eastern practices.⁴⁸

Yet even after this covenant it seems that Abram still has some doubt. He and Sarai take the issue of not having descendants into their own hands. Sarai gives her maidservant Hagar to Abram as a wife. Hagar becomes pregnant and has a son whom Abram names Ishmael (Gen 16). In Genesis 17, the LORD again makes a covenant with Abram. It is in this ceremony that the LORD changes Abram's name to Abraham and Sarai's name to Sarah. This name change is given to Abraham as a sign that he has been chosen by God.⁴⁹ Additionally we get the sign of the covenant, another sign of Abraham being a chosen one of God. Abraham is asked to keep the covenant by being given a sign of the covenant that he and his descendants must do (Gen 17). This sign is the sign of circumcision. Finally, in chapter twenty-one the promise of descendants through Sarah is

⁴⁸ Gerhard F. Hasel, "The Meaning of the Animal Rite in Genesis 15." *Journal for the Study of Old Testament* 6.19 (1981): 65.

⁴⁹ Kaiser, *Mission in the Old Testament*, 18.

fulfilled with the birth of Isaac. However, the promise of land and the promise to make Abraham a blessing to all nations are still not fulfilled.

While the promise of land is not truly fulfilled in the narrative arc of Abraham's call it does begin to be fulfilled in Genesis 23.⁵⁰ At the beginning of the chapter we are told that Sarah has died and Abraham asks to buy a burial plot from the Hittites. He asks for them to intercede for him with Ephron son of Zohar in order to purchase the cave of Machpelah. Ephron sells Abraham the cave along with the field for four hundred shekels of silver (Gen 23). This becomes the first piece of land that belongs to Abraham and his descendants.⁵¹

The promise to make Abraham a blessing is a little conspicuous. This is the one promise that Abraham does not bring up in his objections to the LORD. However, while Abraham does not bring up the promise the reader can see the problem. Throughout the narrative arc (Genesis 12-22) every place that Abraham and Sarah go they seem to leave chaos in their wake. In Genesis 12:17 Pharaoh's household is struck by diseases after he takes Sarai as a wife because Abraham lies and tells him that she is his sister. In Genesis 16:6 Hagar is mistreated by Sarai and flees, only to have God tell her to go back. In Genesis 21:8-14 Hagar and Ishmael are sent away by Abraham, almost dying before the LORD intervenes. And in Genesis 20:1-17 Abraham again chooses to emphasize that Sarah is his sister (not his wife) when confronting Abimelek. This prompts the LORD to

⁵⁰ Abraham does not own land yet at the end of chapter 22.

⁵¹ C.f. Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, The Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), 250. Von Rad believed that Abraham's acquisition of land in Genesis 23 was the beginning of the fulfillment of the LORD's promise of land.

send Abimelek a dream revealing the real identity of Sarah.⁵² If all of these chaotic occurrences happen because of Abraham, how is the promise to be a blessing playing out in this call narrative? To answer this question, we need to look at what the word for “bless” in Genesis 12:3 means.

What it Means to be a Blessing

The issue of how to translate the word for “bless” arises when trying to answer the above question. Because the Hebrew form of the word is in the Niphal stem⁵³ there is a question of whether the verb “to bless” should have a passive or a reflexive translation.⁵⁴ The suggestion that the verb has a reflexive translation tells us that the promise to be a blessing means that “Abram will become the *means* of blessing for all humankind.”⁵⁵ This means that Abraham and his descendants are not going out to reach the nations. Instead, the nations will look to Abraham as one who is blessed. They will recognize that the LORD is with him. This goes along with the promise to make Abraham’s name great. Abraham will become the ideal for how people should live and the nations will look back and mimic him “either in blessing themselves... or one another.”⁵⁶

⁵² This story is interesting because in verse 7, in a dream, the LORD tells Abimelek “Now return the man’s wife, for he is a prophet.” This seems to be the only reference to Abraham being a prophet in Genesis.

⁵³ C.f. Gary D. Pratico and Miles V. van Pelt, *Basics of Biblical Hebrew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 125. Pratico and van Pelt introduce the Niphal stem as being “used to express simple action with either a passive or reflexive voice” (125).

⁵⁴ E.A. Speiser, *Genesis*, Anchor Bible 1 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Garden, 1964), 86.

⁵⁵ C.f. Köstenberger and O’Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth*, 30. The emphasis in this quote is my own.

⁵⁶ Speiser, *Genesis*, 86.

However, Kaiser argues—and I agree with his argument—for a passive translation of the verb. This promise to bless comes alongside the promises that are found in the backdrop of a cursed world. The sin that Adam and Eve committed not only created a crisis where God and humans are now separated, but also brings the curse of death to humans. This promise to Abraham to be a blessing comes “from the hand of God (hence the passive form of the verb) [and] stands in opposition to the curse.”⁵⁷ While, a reflexive translation would indicate that the nations would gain blessing for themselves through looking at Abraham as an example, a passive would indicate that the nations “will be blessed” either by Abraham or by God through Abraham.

It is through this promise to Abraham, to make him a blessing to all nations, that God intends to reach all peoples. This blessing was not only reserved for larger people groups but “was intended to reach smaller people groups as well.”⁵⁸ God’s whole purpose was to use this one people (the descendants of Abraham) so that all nations might be blessed. In this way, Israel would become like missionaries. Abraham and his descendants were the first to be called to carry out *missio Dei*. This call of Abraham to be a blessing to all nations will be the father of following *missio Dei* in the call narratives that we will look at in this research.

The Call of Deutero-Isaiah

The second call experience that we will look at is Deutero-Isaiah. To understand the message of Deutero-Isaiah we first need to have an idea of who the prophet in the book is and where the story is located. Deutero-Isaiah is the name for the second section

⁵⁷ Kaiser, *Mission in the Old Testament*, 20.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

in Isaiah (Isa 40-55). In this section the anonymous prophetic voice, labeled as Deutero-Isaiah or just simply Isaiah,⁵⁹ is called by God without an introductory word.

Additionally, we are not told that this is a part of a specific theophany but it is evident that this is indeed a divine encounter since Isaiah 40 takes place within the divine assembly.⁶⁰ Habel suggests that lack of the specific theophany “may be directly related to the historical situation and theological thrust of this writer.”⁶¹ He goes on to make the argument that the summons to attention followed by the call to “cry aloud!” is what causes the prophet’s initial response.⁶² Before the prophet’s response there is an assembly of voices. This assembly takes the place of the introductory word and specific theophany. It is this assembly which sets the scene for the commission that the LORD gives to the prophet.

The command in the first section of Deutero-Isaiah is, “Comfort, comfort my people” (Isa 40:1a). This command is the foremost mission to which Deutero-Isaiah is called. But what does this mean and why was the prophet called to this mission? Deutero-

⁵⁹ Cf. Habel, “The Form and Significance of the Call Narratives;” Martin-Achard, *A Light to the Nations*; Charles C. Torrey, *The Second Isaiah: A New Interpretation* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1928); and John L. McKenzie, *Second Isaiah*, Anchor Bible 20 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968); Kaiser, *Mission in the Old Testament*; and Andrew T. Abernethy, *The Book of Isaiah and God’s Kingdom: A Thematic-Theological Approach*. *New Studies in Biblical Theology* 40, ed. D.A. Carson (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2016). Scholars such as Habel, Martin-Achard, Torrey, and McKenzie refer to the prophetic voice in Isaiah 40-55 as Deutero-Isaiah or Second Isaiah. However, Kaiser and Abernethy refer to the prophetic voice as simply Isaiah. I will refer to the prophetic voice as Deutero-Isaiah.

⁶⁰ C.f. Matthews, *The Hebrew Prophets and their Social World*, 18, 218. Matthews defines the divine assembly as “the divine company that serves Yahweh in the form of messengers” (218). It is the assembly that is gathered around the LORD’s throne.

⁶¹ Habel, “The Form and Significance of the Call Narratives,” 314.

⁶² *Ibid.* Habel states that “The divine confrontation comes in a crescendo of voices. The distant voice of God (v. 1-2) is followed by the summoning voice (v. 3-5) which is followed in turn by the urgent voice whose abrupt ‘Cry aloud!’ finally arouses the prophet’s response (v. 6). Ultimately the prophet is confronted by an unbelievable new message.”

Isaiah was written in the time of the Babylonian exile. The prophet most likely lived in Babylon among other Hebrew people who had been “deported” after Jerusalem fell in 587 B.C.⁶³ When looking at the text through this lens the need to prioritize the mission to comfort the people is obvious. The Judean people felt forsaken, that their sins were too much and so their future was unknown. The situation seemed hopeless and they felt that the LORD would not hear their cries. However, the call narrative does not end at these words. This command gives some of the background for why the commission is needed; it is the pronouncement of the crisis at hand.⁶⁴

The objection is found in Isaiah 40:6-7. The text says:

And I said, “What shall I cry?”
 “All people are like grass,
 and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field.
 The grass withers and the flowers fall,
 because the breath of the LORD blows on them.
 Surely the people are grass.” (Isa 40:6-7)

While at first glance these verses may not seem like an objection, Habel suggests that it is. He makes the argument that the prophet’s reaction “is a sharp cry of frustration.”⁶⁵ The prophet, who seems to have prior experience with God, exclaims “What shall I cry?” He knows that the people of the commission “cannot withstand the day of [the LORD’s] coming” and so he views his task as impossible.⁶⁶

Following the call narrative form, the prophet is given reassurance in verses eight through eleven. The reassurance begins with the argument that the LORD’s word “endures

⁶³ Martin-Achard, *A Light to the Nations*, 10.

⁶⁴ Habel, “The Form and Significance of the Call Narratives,” 314.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 315.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

forever” (Isa 40:8). Again, the LORD reassures the prophet that though the people are like sheep the LORD is like a shepherd and will guide them. There is power in this statement because it proves that though the people (and the prophet) are in exile and all hope seems lost the LORD still hears their cries and is working to rescue them. Habel says that this “response embraces both a direct answer” to the objection and gives “further elaboration of the commission.”⁶⁷

The Message of Deutero-Isaiah

The narrative of this divine encounter and commission is the preface to the message the prophet is called to proclaim. The first part of this message is reassurance to the Israelites that the LORD is with them even though they are in exile. While the people are concerned that the LORD is not with them because they are not in the land that was given to them, the message announces, “good news, and the good news is the coming of Yahweh.”⁶⁸ He tells them “Do not fear, for I am with you” (Isa 41:10). The comfort that the prophet is commissioned to give to the people is that the LORD has not forgotten them.

Additionally, God gives the prophet a message of challenge to the gods of the nations. The LORD does not issue this challenge toward the nations themselves but toward the false gods that reside within the nations.⁶⁹ In Isaiah 41: 2-4, the LORD says:

Who has stirred up one from the east,
calling him in righteousness to his service?
He hands nations over to him
and subdues kings before him.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ John L. McKenzie, *Second Isaiah*, 16.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 38.

He turns them to dust with his sword,
to windblown chaff with his bow.
He pursues them and moves on unscathed,
by a path his feet have not traveled before.
Who has done this and carried it through,
calling forth the generations from the beginning?
I, the LORD—with the first of them
and with the last—I am he. (Isa 41:2-4)

His challenge to the false gods in the nations comes in the form of asking these questions.

He makes the claim that it is he who has done all of these things, not the false gods that reside within the nations.

To the nations, God gives the prophet a message proclaiming that the LORD's Servant will "bring justice to the nations" (Isa 42:1). Additionally, in Isaiah 49:6 the message is that the Servant will be "a light for the Gentiles, that [God's] salvation may reach to the ends of the earth." We are told that this Servant's mission is to the nations, not just Israel. In fact, "a mission to Israel is not mentioned" in this section of the text.⁷⁰ Instead, the mission of God's Servant, and consequently of God himself, is for the Servant to be "a means of light and salvation to the nations."⁷¹ This proclamation is the basis for *missio Dei* in the Hebrew Bible. Israel has been called to be a mission-minded people (as can be seen from the story of Abraham's call). However, in Isaiah 40-55 it seems that Israel has failed in this mission. They have not been a blessing to the nations around them by being an example to them. In fact they have become like the nations, worshipping the false gods that reside within the nations.⁷² Therefore, God has appointed

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid., 105.

⁷² Some examples of Israel worshipping other gods can be found in: Exodus 32:2-10, Judges 2:12-13, 1 Kings 11:7, 2 Kings 17:5-17, 2 Kings 23:4-7, Isaiah 45-48, Hosea 1:2 and many others.

a Servant to take on “an international mission... of reconciling Israel and the nations to God through suffering.”⁷³ The completion of this mission will mean that God’s kingdom will no longer just be Israel but will consist of people from Israel and the nations.

Missional Reading or Non-Missional Reading of the Text?

One argument against this mission-minded reading of the text is that monotheism is only a part of the message that Deutero-Isaiah is bringing to the people, not the entire message. While this is an important aspect of the call it is not the heart of the message. The message is clear: the LORD’s chosen people, Israel, will be rescued and restored to the land they were forced to leave. The LORD will be the one who does this.

One of the leading scholars who argues against a missional reading is Robert Martin-Achard. He suggests that the prophet in Deutero-Isaiah is not so much concerned for the conversion of the nations but for the salvation of his people. The Jews were scattered among the nations and so the prophet’s concern is about the people of Israel returning to Jerusalem. That would mean that in this text the nations are simply tools that God will use in the world. He argues that this text is about how Israel is saved due to God’s faithfulness. The role of the nations is simply to exemplify God’s greatness and holiness to the nations as a way for them to see that God remembered and saved his chosen people, Israel.

This argument makes sense in the light of Isaiah 42:10-17 where the LORD tells the Servant that his job is to “make known the judgement pronounced by Yahweh on Israel’s behalf,” for the whole earth needs to know what God has done.⁷⁴ Additionally,

⁷³ Andrew T. Abernethy, *The Book of Isaiah and God’s Kingdom*, 137.

⁷⁴ Martin-Achard, *A Light to the Nations*, 26.

whatever happens to Israel will have consequences for the nations because depending on how Israel lives among the nations (meaning whether they trust in the LORD and stay true to the covenant or not) will impact how the nations see God. The missionary outlook for Israel in Deutero-Isaiah revolves around “the existence of Israel in the midst of the nations.”⁷⁵

There is another argument about the missionary view of the call to be a “light to the Gentiles.” The question arises in the translation of the term “Gentiles.” In some translations, the word used is “nations.” In the Hebrew, the word used means “people” or “nations.” Martin-Achard has suggested that this term is used to describe the Israelites who have strayed to other cults and turned away from the LORD. If we take this term to mean this distinct set of people, then the mission of the Servant to be a light to the “nations” is the call to bring back these Israelites who have strayed.⁷⁶ Martin-Achard argues that while the message is not necessarily missionary in nature there is still proselytizing that will occur due to the message. This argument is for a more centripetal message, meaning that the Israelites were not going out witnessing and trying to convert the nations. It was not the Israelites’ job to go out and bring the nations to the salvation of God. Their mission was to glorify God by accepting both blessing and judgment from him.⁷⁷

In response to Martin-Achard’s argument Walter Kaiser poses a counterargument, which I agree with. He states that, “Missions cannot be an afterthought in the Old

⁷⁵ Ibid., 31-32.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 17.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 32.

Testament.”⁷⁸ He goes on to say that mission is found at the core of God’s mission in the world and argues for a centrifugal interpretation of the text. This is due in large part to the translation of the Hebrew word *mišpāṭ*. Kaiser states that “only the missionary interpretation seems to solve all exegetical considerations in the best way.”⁷⁹ In short, the word *mišpāṭ* means “judgement.” However, Kaiser gives a slightly longer definition stating that it “is ‘instruction in judgement or the right.’”⁸⁰ He goes on to say that this is paralleled in the word for law (*tôrâ*).

The Call of Deutero-Isaiah and the Call of Abraham

Now that we have some understanding of Deutero-Isaiah, the question is, how does this call narrative compare to our archetype of the call of Abraham? Both this call narrative and the call of Abraham express the idea of being an example for the nations. In Abraham’s story the LORD told him that he would be a blessing. As we have seen, one possibility for how this promise plays out is that he becomes the ideal to strive for. Even into the Early Church and beyond Abraham is seen as one of the faithful. The author of Hebrews tells us

By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise (Heb 11:8).

It is obvious that by the time of the Early Church Abraham had become revered as the father of the promise (the one whose lineage would one day be the means of salvation). It

⁷⁸ Kaiser, *Mission in the Old Testament*, 38.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

is through Abraham's election that the promise of salvation will be fulfilled for all the earth. This means that "universalism is then the result of the Patriarch's election."⁸¹

The idea that there is only one God, leads to the universalism found in Deutero-Isaiah. This is because when the LORD is the only God, "He is LORD of all the nations and must be known by all."⁸² In Genesis 18:18, 22:1, and 26:4, the same Hebrew phrase (*kôl gôyê*) that is found in Isaiah 49:6 is used. It is this term that makes readers not able to construe the blessing "to all nations" as only being for the Israelite people.⁸³

In both the call of Abraham and the call of Deutero-Isaiah *missio Dei* contains some inclusion of the nations. Israel is called to be the LORD's chosen people and a light to those around them. Kaiser puts this message of inclusion beautifully when he says, "the radical centripetal does recognize a certain universality... which is viewed as foundational for the New Testament call to evangelize, the case laid out here sees more than a mere foundational basis in the Old Testament evangel and its call for Israel's involvement."⁸⁴ Israel is still at the center of this story but that does not mean that the nations, the foreigners, are not included in the story. God's mission is to be reconciled with the whole of his creation.

Additionally, the mission of the Servant in Deutero-Isaiah mimics that of Abraham to the nations. The Servant, found throughout Deutero-Isaiah, has a mission first for the redemption of Israel and Jerusalem, which consequently will be extended to

⁸¹ Martin-Achard, *A Light to the Nations*, 35.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 9.

⁸³ Kaiser, *Mission in the Old Testament*, 39-40.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 37.

the nations. Andreas Köstenberger and O'Brien say that the "sequence of his ministry... suggests not only a pattern similar to the Abrahamic promises but also a partial fulfilment to them."⁸⁵ The Servant will play a part in the enactment of the promises given to Abraham.

It is through Israel's redemption that the nations will be blessed. The nations alongside Israel are offered the gift of salvation and redemption in Deutero-Isaiah but it "unfolds gradually within the overall composition and is not present in every section of the book."⁸⁶ This gradual blessing to the nations is likely because the oracles found in Deutero-Isaiah were meant to be oracles of hope for the people of Israel. The LORD calls to Israel to turn back to him and as a result Israel will "call other nations to her, and they will come running."⁸⁷ In Isaiah 45 the text says

Turn to me and be saved,
 all you ends of the earth;
 for I am God, and there is no other.
 By myself I have sworn,
 my mouth has uttered in all integrity
 a word that will not be revoked:
 Before me every knee will bow;
 by me every tongue will swear.
 They will say of me, 'In the LORD alone
 are deliverance and strength.'
 All who have raged against him
 will come to him and be put to shame.
 But all the descendants of Israel
 will find deliverance in the LORD
 and will make their boast in him. (Isa 45:22-25)

⁸⁵ Köstenberger and O'Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth*, 46.

⁸⁶ Frederik Poulsen, *God, His Servant, and the Nations in Isaiah 42:1-9: Biblical Theological Reflections after Brevard S. Childs and Hans Hübner* (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 199.

⁸⁷ Köstenberger and O'Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth*, 48

It is Israel's job to turn back to the LORD and then call out to the other nations. It is only through this sequence of events that the commission given to Abraham, to be a blessing to all nations, will be fulfilled.

The Call of Jonah

In contrast to the prior two calls, what happens when the one who is called runs from their calling? When God tells someone to go but they do not listen or even do the exact opposite of what they are told? And what if they do go, but they do it begrudgingly? They do not want to go so much that their attitude is half-hearted. Is God still able to work through a person like this? To answer this question we will look at the call of Jonah.

The Story

From early childhood children are taught the story of Jonah. It is so familiar that there is even a Veggie Tales full-length movie of it.⁸⁸ The story begins with God commanding Jonah to go to Nineveh (Jonah 1:2). However, Jonah does not want to so he tries to go to Tarshish instead (Jonah 1:3). On the way, the boat gets caught in a storm and Jonah tells the sailors to throw him overboard (Jonah 1:4-15). Then Jonah gets swallowed by a fish and is in the belly of the fish for three days (Jonah 1:17). While in the belly of the fish Jonah prays and the LORD commands the fish to spit Jonah out (Jonah 2:1-10). After this, Jonah begrudgingly goes to Nineveh and proclaims the LORD's judgment on the city (Jonah 3:1-4). The whole city repents and Jonah gets angry with God (Jonah 3:5-4:9). With this general story in mind, we can begin to further examine the book of Jonah.

⁸⁸ Phil Vischer and Mike Nawrocki, *Jonah: A VeggieTales Movie* (USA: Big Idea Productions F.H.E. Pictures, 2002).

The Form and Historicity of the Book of Jonah

Jonah can be considered a *midrash*, meaning that it is “a didactic book written for a particular purpose.”⁸⁹ The purpose of this book could simply be to teach that one cannot run from God’s mission, that God will make a way for his message to be proclaimed. Or it could be a lesson in knowing God is merciful. However, Jonah could also be classified as many other forms of literature.⁹⁰ In relation to the form of call narratives, this story is considered to be a call experience, not a formal call narrative.⁹¹

However, a vast majority of twenty-first century scholars do not consider Jonah to be historical. This marks a major shift in scholarly research of the book. Up until the nineteenth century the book was considered to be historical. The main arguments for its historicity were that to consider it as an extended parable, allegory, or satire seems strange when there does not seem to be any other evidence for these sorts of literary works in the Hebrew Bible.⁹² Additionally, the argument for historicity is strengthened by the fact that Jesus used the story as if it were a historical narrative.⁹³

⁸⁹ Martin-Achard, *A Light to the Nations*, 50.

⁹⁰ C.f. Janet H. Gaines, *Forgiveness in a Wounded World: Jonah’s Dilemma*, (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 13. Gaines suggests that Jonah fits into the categories of “novella, poetry, prophecy, history, biography, midrash, wisdom literature, folk tale, fairy tale, myth, legend, allegory, parable, comedy, burlesque, parody, satire, tragedy, and tragicomedy.”

⁹¹ Phinney, “Call/Commission Narratives,” *Dictionary of the Old Testament Prophets*: 65.

⁹² C.f. Kaiser, *Mission in the Old Testament*, 66. In addition to the argument of no other evidence, Kaiser offers describing Jonah as being a parable or allegory seems wrong since it is too long and complex to be a parable or allegory. He also states that there is not extended evidence to support satire in any of the other Hebrew texts except for a few short phrases.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, This argument is important because it can help us determine the purpose behind the story. If it is historical then it shows a historical example of Israelite mission to the nations. However, if it is not considered historical it is just an ideal, allegorical story that demonstrates what Israelite mission should be rather than what it actually was.

The Message of the Book of Jonah

Whatever category we place the story in it has a distinct message. The story is not about how the sailors, who had been pagans before, feared the LORD during the storm when throwing Jonah overboard. Nor is it about Jonah being in the fish for three days (or how a fish can be big enough to swallow a human being). Nor is it about how Nineveh, a powerful city whose people are exceedingly wicked, repented at the announcement of Jonah's message. While all of these individual parts are important to the narrative they are not the main point. I agree with Pemberton when he describes the story as being about Jonah and his cooperation (or lack thereof) with God's call.⁹⁴

In Jonah 1 the LORD's word comes to Jonah and tells him to "go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before [the LORD]" (Jonah 1:2). There is no description of a specific theophany and no introductory word, just the command to "Go!" The crisis on the horizon is that the Ninevites' "wickedness" has come up against the LORD. Other than this statement no background for the crisis is given.

Immediately following this command we are told that Jonah ran. His response to his call is not objection, but outright rejection. Instead of making a verbal objection he simply gets on a boat going in the opposite direction. He refuses to cooperate with God's call to go to Nineveh, but at this point in the narrative we are not told why he refuses and runs away. One scholar has even stated that in this narrative the element of objection in

⁹⁴ Pemberton, *When God Calls*, 96.

the call narrative “has been elevated to flight.”⁹⁵ This exaggeration does not function to create humor in the story or shock at someone trying to run from God, rather it sets the context for the storm.⁹⁶

Jonah and His Call

Now that we have identified some of the elements of a call narrative in the story of Jonah, we will now identify who Jonah is. The name Jonah, son of Amittai, appears in at least one other Hebrew text. In 2 Kings 14:25 he is the prophet through whom the LORD spoke through to proclaim that Jeroboam II would be the one to restore the borders of Israel. So the historical Jonah has received other calls, such as the good news given to Israel in 2 Kings 14. If we take the book of Jonah as being historical, why did he run from this call? What makes this call different?

To put it simply, the difference between this message and the one in 2 Kings 14 is that in the 2 Kings passage, the proclamation is for and in favor of Israel. However, messages for Israel were not always good ones. Prophets such as Amos and Hosea condemned Israel for their idolatry and injustice. The difference between the messages of these prophets and Jonah’s message is that in Israel prophets of God were supposed to have prophetic immunity, meaning that they could not be killed for their messages because they were speaking the words of God.⁹⁷ While these prophets are called to step

⁹⁵ Tomas M. Bolin, *Freedom Beyond Forgiveness: The Book of Jonah Re-examined* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic, 1997), 77.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 75. Also, c.f. Matthews, *The Hebrew Prophets and their Social World*, 219. It is possible that this is the theophany; however, I am unconvinced that it is. According to Matthews a theophany is “the appearance of God to a human being” (219). Because we are not specifically told that the LORD appeared to Jonah, just that he “sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose,” I do not believe that this storm is the theophany. Additionally, the author of the book of Jonah seems to rush through the account of the call in order to get to the heart of the message of the book, that God is merciful to all.

⁹⁷ Matthews, *The Hebrew Prophets and their Social World*, 32.

out of their comfort zones, they still have the security that comes with being a prophet of God in Israel. However, in the book of Jonah God calls the prophet to step out of his bubble in Israel and go to a land that is known for its wickedness. Even worse, the land that he is called to go to is the capital city of Assyria, Israel's greatest enemy.

In the flight Jonah gets on a ship manned by pagans and heads toward Tarshish (Jonah 1:3). However, the LORD does not let Jonah off that easily. On the way to Tarshish the boat is caught in a storm and the sailors become terrified, yet Jonah is asleep (Jonah 1:4-5). The captain calls on Jonah to pray to his god, just as the sailors are praying to their gods (Jonah 1:6). In the end Jonah comes forward and tells the sailors that he is a Hebrew prophet and that if they cast him overboard then they will possibly be saved (Jonah 1:7-12). However, the sailors struggle with the idea of casting Jonah out of the boat and try instead to row the boat back to the shore (Jonah 1:13). They value Jonah's life and do not wish him death but are forced to come to terms with the fact that they have to listen to Jonah. Fearing that they will be punished because of what they must do the sailors call out saying, "Please, LORD, do not let us die for taking this man's life . Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, LORD, have done as you pleased" (Jonah 1:14b). This cry to the LORD and the events that follow the calming of the sea are evidence of the sailors' conversion. They obey what the LORD wants of them while Jonah still has not. However, Jonah does unintentionally bring these sailors to the LORD.⁹⁸

After Jonah is cast out of the boat the LORD commands a fish to swallow him (Jonah 1:17). In the belly of the fish Jonah cries out to the LORD in prayer saying,

When my life was ebbing away,

⁹⁸ Pemberton, *When God Calls*, 98-99.

I remembered you, LORD,
 and my prayer rose to you,
 to your holy temple.
 Those who cling to worthless idols
 turn away from God's love for them.
 But I, with shouts of grateful praise,
 will sacrifice to you.
 What I have vowed I will make good.
 I will say, "Salvation comes from the LORD." (Jonah 2:7-9)

This prayer is one of thanksgiving, not repentance. In his prayer Jonah gives thanks to God for hearing his cry and rescuing him by means of the great fish after he had been thrown overboard by the sailors. He does not seem remorseful about running away from his call but praises God for rescuing him (Jonah 2:7-9). Jonah does not repent from running from the LORD yet God hears him and commands the fish to spit him out on dry land. Again, something other than Jonah has managed to obey the LORD's command while Jonah still has not.

After being spit onto the dry land the LORD again gives Jonah his commission (Jonah 3:1). This time there is a specific message that the LORD tells him to proclaim. The message given to him to proclaim is that in forty days the city of Nineveh would be destroyed (Jonah 3:2, 4). Reluctantly, Jonah goes to Nineveh and begins to preach through the city for three days proclaiming this message and the Ninevites repent (Jonah 3:5-9). As a result, the LORD does not do what the message says that he will do (Jonah 3:10).

The final chapter tells the story of Jonah's anger at the LORD for relenting. It is in this chapter that Jonah tells us the reason for his flight from God (Jonah 4:1-3). He "spells out his anger" stating that he knew from the beginning that the LORD was

compassionate.⁹⁹ He says that he knew the LORD was merciful and would not carry out the judgment if Nineveh repented (Jonah 4:2). He knew God was merciful and compassionate because of the tradition found in Exodus 34:6-7.

In Exodus 34:6-7, Moses asked to see the glory of the LORD. When God passed by, he said,

The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generations. (Ex.34:6-7).

Because of this event the tradition of the LORD's mercy became a common theme in the Hebrew scriptures.

In Jonah's anger, he sits to the east of the city to see what would happen. The LORD provides for him a plant to shade him from the sun. However, the LORD also provides a worm to chew the plant and a scorching wind and sun to cause Jonah to become faint. Jonah cries out saying, "It would be better for me to die than to live" (Jonah 4:8b). He is so angry with God that he wishes that he were dead. The LORD confronts him about this and asks Jonah if it is right for him to be angry. He points out that Jonah is more concerned with the plant than a whole city of people.

In the book the LORD has the last word. However, Jonah does not simply give up. Jonah is not permitted by the author of the book "to formally concede, for concession is pointless."¹⁰⁰ On the contrary, Bolin suggests that Jonah's silence at the end of the book

⁹⁹ C.f. Jonathan Magonet, *Form and Meaning: Studies in Literary Techniques in the Book of Jonah* (Sheffield, England: The Almond Press, 1983), 91. Magonet goes on to say that there is a paradox in Jonah's response, since he says that he knew that the LORD was merciful and so he fled, so "some aspect of Jonah's own personal desires must be motivating him."

¹⁰⁰ Bolin, *Freedom Beyond Forgiveness*, 178.

gives him the appropriate response of submission. He has finally submitted to the LORD.¹⁰¹

Jonah and Missio Dei

With the story in mind, the questions that arise are how this narrative fits in the corpus of *missio Dei* in the Hebrew Bible. Modern scholars use the book of Jonah to argue for an Israelite call to mission to the surrounding nations. If seen in a missionary light the narrative gives an example of Israel's obligation to go to the nations. This obligation could be the founding basis for the command that Jesus gives to his disciples to "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation" (Mark 16:15b).¹⁰² The story of Jonah depicts how Israel has moved away from this obligation and has failed to understand the meaning of their election. It seems that "Israel had forgotten its missional identity and role in salvation history: to be a blessing to the nations."¹⁰³ All throughout their history (as the individual tribes, as an established nation, and as a scattered people) they continued to fail to be the holy people that they were called to be.

Additionally, the story shows the compassion of the LORD. When the Ninevites repent and the LORD shows them mercy the compassion that the LORD has "shows that his *hesed* ('covenant love') cannot be predicted or confined to Israel."¹⁰⁴ It is not only to his chosen people that the LORD shows kindness and mercy; his compassion is extended even to the foreigners. The salvation that comes from this kindness and covenant love

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Köstenberger and O'Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth*, 44. The commission is also found in Matt 26:18-20, Luke 14:23, and Acts 1:7-8

¹⁰³ Goheen, *A Light to the Nations*, 72.

¹⁰⁴ Köstenberger and O'Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth*, 45.

was intended to be for all the nations. This was the promise proclaimed to Abraham in his call and it is the promise that still resided with Israel in the time of Jonah.

However, there are arguments for and against the book having a missional purpose. There are many arguments for Jonah being a call for Israel to mission work. These state that the purpose of the book is to proclaim a missional message and call. There are also arguments that the purpose is not a call to missions but to give answer to why “oracles against the heathen” have not been fulfilled.¹⁰⁵ Therefore, the purpose of the book is not necessarily Jonah’s preaching and conversion of the Ninevites nor is it intended to be the example for Israel’s mission to the nations.

Jonah’s and Abraham’s Calls

This message is an expansion of Abraham’s call to be a blessing to all nations. However, in comparison to the call of Abraham, Jonah’s call is vastly different. I think that a big difference between Abraham’s and Jonah’s calls is the level of trust that the one called has in the LORD. Jonah does not trust God’s call but runs from it, whereas Abraham trusts the LORD and does what he is told to do. However, in the end Jonah is compelled to finally proclaim his message, just like in the end the promise to Abraham to make him a great nation is fulfilled. Additionally, Abraham is not called to proclaim a message. He is given a promise and called into a life of covenant with the LORD, whereas Jonah is given a message to preach against a people group. This difference is significant because it shows the array of different callings that people in the Hebrew Bible had. Also, Jonah is already in covenant with the LORD because he is an Israelite, yet Abraham is

¹⁰⁵ C.f. Martin-Achard, *A Light to the Nations*, 50-51. A few of the scholars who argue for a missional purpose of the book of Jonah are E. Jacob, A. Gelin, W. Bousset, A. Weiser, T.H. Robinson, A. Lods. Proponents against a missional purpose are Hans Schmidt, A. Feuillethe.

more faithful to the LORD even though he only enters into covenant with the LORD at a later point.

Jonah's and Deutero-Isaiah's Calls

We can also compare Jonah's and Deutero-Isaiah's messages. The message given to Isaiah to proclaim was one of comfort. He was told to tell the chosen people that the LORD was with them and would rescue them. Jonah's message on the other hand was one of Nineveh's destruction. Both the messages and the promises to Abraham and Isaiah are blessings to the nations. However, the way that Jonah brings the message to the people of Nineveh does not seem to carry a tone of future blessing but certain destruction. Jonah's message to the Ninevites carries a tone of hostility because of his intense nationalism for Israel. Jonah knows that God will be merciful if the people turn to him so he is reluctant to proclaim the message given to him because to him, God's mercy should be reserved only for Israel.¹⁰⁶ However, despite this hostility the LORD still works through the message. Jonah is an example of the message in Genesis 12 and Deutero-Isaiah not being forgotten. While many times throughout the Hebrew Bible it seems that the promise to be a blessing and the call to be a light to the nations may seem forgotten, in Jonah this message of Israel's obligation to centrifugal missions rings out.¹⁰⁷

The Message for Missions Today

Now that we have examined the calls, what insights do they give us toward *missio Dei* today? The first lesson that we can learn from these stories is that the LORD is concerned for the whole of his creation. In each of these calls the commission involves

¹⁰⁶ Kaiser, *Mission in the Old Testament*, 37-38.

¹⁰⁷ Martin-Achard, *A Light to the Nations*, 6.

work among the nations. These calls show that the LORD is not just concerned with the chosen people of Israel. His plan is to show his mercy and compassion to all who would turn to him. In order to instigate this plan, he chose Abraham and his descendants to be the bearers of the promise. The call stories in the Hebrew Bible show the love that God has for his entire creation. It is the story of God's universal love and his plan to enact that love. The LORD is a God who has not forgotten his creation. He had a purpose in creating and when sin entered into the world he had a plan for the redemption of the creation.¹⁰⁸

As we see in the call of Abraham, the LORD enacts his plan through the election of this one man. From among Abraham's descendants the LORD specifically anoints David as king of Israel; in the New Testament God becomes incarnate in the man Jesus. All of these things follow his plan to bless all the nations through one people.¹⁰⁹ The stories of Isaiah and Jonah give a precursor to the great commission found in Matthew 28. Additionally, these two stories (among others) show the fulfillment of the promise that the LORD gave to Abraham to make him a blessing to all nations.

The second insight we gain from these narratives is that God's call is a specific call. It is a call that is not necessarily or even typically in our comfort zone. We are called to leave the bubble that we have put around ourselves and step out in trust to the LORD, embracing the change and instability that we may encounter in this called life.¹¹⁰ And, it is a call that must be answered. The compulsion to answer God's call can be seen in the story of Jonah. Through this story we see that not only can we not run from the call of

¹⁰⁸ Ott, Strauss, and Tennent, *Encountering Theology of Mission*, 55-58.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 59.

¹¹⁰ Pemberton, *When God Calls*, 93.

God but we also cannot run from the LORD. Everywhere we go, the LORD is there. I think that Psalm 139 describes this best when it says:

Where can I go from your Spirit?
 Where can I flee from your presence?
 If I go up to the heavens, you are there;
 if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.
 If I rise on the wings of the dawn,
 if I settle on the far side of the sea,
 even there your hand will guide me,
 your right hand will hold me fast.
 If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me
 and the light become night around me,"
 even the darkness will not be dark to you;
 the night will shine like the day,
 for darkness is as light to you. (Ps 139:7-12)

Additionally, along with the prophetic compulsion¹¹¹ we learn that the LORD offers assurance alongside the call. In Isaiah after the prophet has made his frustrated outburst the LORD offers him reassurance. In the story of Abraham whenever he makes the statement that he is still waiting for the promises that the LORD gave him the LORD reiterates his promise. Abraham is also told that the LORD will be with him. This assurance is considered to be a sign "of the person being called."¹¹²

Another insight that we find from our analysis of these calls is that mission in the Hebrew Bible is both centripetal and centrifugal, not just one or the other. Abraham is called to be a blessing to all nations. The Servant in Isaiah is called to be a light to the nations. Jonah is called to go to Nineveh and proclaim the LORD's judgment. All three of

¹¹¹ C.f. Matthews, *The Hebrew Prophets and their Social World*, 26. Matthews defines prophetic compulsion as "a special compulsion... associated with the call to be a prophet." It is the need to go and do as the LORD asks (usually associated with the need to speak the words that God places in the prophet's mouth).

¹¹² Habel, "The Form and Significance of the Call Narratives," 319.

these narratives have a centrifugal calling. However, Israel is also called to centripetal mission.

Aside from the Servant's call to the redemption of Israel, many of the centripetal ideas for the mission of Israel can be found in the law. In Deuteronomy the Israelites are told to treat the outcasts in the society fairly. One example can be found in Deuteronomy 27:19 which says, "Cursed is anyone who withholds justice from the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow" (Deut 27:19). I would even offer that the centripetal mission reflects the centrifugal mission. The Israelites were supposed to treat the outcasts fairly because despite being outcast God still looked upon them as part of his chosen people. Much of the law was given to protect these people. In accordance with this idea the nations were to be treated fairly and brought to redemption because they were a part of God's creation.

Fred Guyette references Maimonides' work *Guide for the Perplexed*, stating that "the LORD calls us in *many* ways, not only in the form of a confrontation and commission."¹¹³ However, I believe that the LORD also calls us to the invitation to redemption. God's invitation into redemption (both to the Israelites and the nations) was "the invitation to become friends with God."¹¹⁴ However, this invitation does not have to be accepted. It is a gift given to creation, an offer that holds no obligation to the one to whom it is given.

¹¹³ Guyette, "The Genre of the Call Narrative: Beyond Habel's Model," 55. The emphasis in this quote is Guyette's.

¹¹⁴ Darrell L. Guder, *Called to Witness: Doing Missional Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 42.

Another insight is that the issue of being elected as the LORD's chosen people caused some problems. A view of nationalism and exclusivism developed because the people of Israel forgot their calling. Much like the chaos that followed Abraham when he left a place, causing him to be less than a blessing to the people, the promise was not really fulfilled in the Hebrew Bible. As we saw in Jonah, the prophet's attitude was one of exclusivism and nationalism. It effected the way that he interacted with the people of Nineveh and even made it where he did not want to follow his call to begin with. Jonathan Magonet suggests that "The danger of chosenness is the sense of exclusiveness, or particularism."¹¹⁵

In the Hebrew Bible God's call to redemption is not just meant for Israel. While it is in many places specific to the nation of Israel the nations surrounding were not immune to judgment or blessing. In Amos 1-2 the prophet pronounces the LORD's judgment on the surrounding nations in addition to judgment for Judah and Israel.¹¹⁶ However, in Jonah after the Ninevites repent the LORD blesses the people by not bringing his judgment upon them—he relents. The Hebrew Bible contains a universal message for all, yet "it is sometimes uncertain to what extent the writer has in mind the wider world and to what extent the chosen people."¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ C.f. Jonathan Magonet, *Form and Meaning: Studies in Literary Techniques in the Book of Jonah*, 94. Magonet illustrates the idea of chosenness in his discussion of Jonah by giving the possibility that the reason that Jonah was angry with God in Jonah 4 is because God showed compassion (once reserved exclusively for the Jews) to the Ninevites. Chosenness then can be defined as the belief that the Jewish people were specifically chosen by God to be his "chosen people" in a covenant relationship with him.

¹¹⁶ A similar technique is used in Isaiah 13-23 to pronounce judgment on the nations as well as judgment for Israel and Judah.

¹¹⁷ Charles C. Torrey, *The Second Isaiah*, 111.

The conclusion that we come to for this research is that God has a mission in the Hebrew Bible. We can identify this *missio Dei*. While it can be masked by the election of Israel as God's chosen people it is still there. One of the main ways that this mission comes out is through call stories. In these stories we can see that in every call God is the one who is to be glorified through the work of the chosen people. The mission is "about being a distinctive kind of people, a countercultural... community among the nations."¹¹⁸ It is this aspect of the call to which the LORD called Abraham and it is the aspect of the call to which Jesus called his disciples.¹¹⁹ It is not about who we are but who God is. And God is a God who loves his entire creation and has a plan for its redemption. He is a God who is desperately chasing after the world, calling it to return to him. He is a God who would give everything, even his own son, to bring his creation back to him.

¹¹⁸ Howard Peskett and Vinoth Ramachandra, *The Message of Mission* (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 123.

¹¹⁹ In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told his followers "“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (Matt 5:14-16).

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