

Missionary Enterprises in the Old Testament Literature

CHIBUZO IKECHI NWANGUMA

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ABSTRACT

The missionary mandate of God to humankind did not start with the apostles/disciples of Jesus Christ. The Old Testament reveals a myriad of passages from the Genesis account of creation, when God commanded humankind to multiply and refill the earth and have dominion over all creatures, to its final page in Malachi. Through descriptive analysis, selected Old Testament passages where God gave mandates to men who were required to extend and express God's grace and mercy at various times in the history of humankind to all nations, were examined. With the exception of Jonah who was studied in isolation, other characters were examined under groups, namely, the Patriarchs, the Psalmists and Prophets. It was established that while a few complied with God, several others, like Jonah were reluctant signifying the obvious selfishness inherent among the privileged few across ages.

Introduction

The question one may be tempted to ask is: "Were there people who were specifically called missionaries in the Old Testament (OT)?" In

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answering this question, it will be necessary to note that even in the New Testament (NT), the term "Missionary" or "Mission" was either not used or was unpopular.

In the OT missionaries could include the Patriarchs, the Psalmists, and the Prophets. While missionary tendencies of the prophets should always be obvious by the very nature of their career, that of the patriarchs, and especially, the Psalmists might be equivocal, because, mission has a very wide spectrum of meanings. Their careers were not missionary in essence, particularly, within the context of Christian Missionary as recorded in the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles (cf. Matt 10:1-16; 28:18-20; Mark 3:13-19; 16:14-16; Luke 10:1-7; 24:46-49; Acts 1:1-8; 13:2ff.). Besides, considering the word of Jesus before He gave His disciples His last instruction on missions in Luke 24:44; "that all the things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and the prophets, and in the Psalms," it is imperative that one examines the missionary implications among these categories in the course of this study.

Yahweh and Call to Missions

John R W Stott, a major contributor in *Perspectives On World Christian Movements*, in his article "The Living God is a Missionary God," asserts that God's missionary agenda is communicated or revealed to humankind in diverse manners. In the OT, God gave His missionary mandate to various people at different times.

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This affirmation is in agreement with our explanation above that there is a missionary mandate in Genesis 1:26 – 28 as God spoke with Adam and his wife. They were empowered to “be fertile”, “multiply” “fill the earth” and “subdue it”. As they increased in population, God intended them to educate their immediate generations on His ideals and values. This was implied in the subsequent instructions and communions to and with Adam and later generations.

Genesis 2:16-17, states that “The Lord God gave this order: You are free to eat from any of the trees of the garden except the tree of knowledge of good and bad. From the tree you shall not eat; the moment you eat from it, you are surely doomed to die”. Adam, in this passage, was not only instructed not to eat of the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil, but to teach his children the same in order to maintain godly character in all generations. For this purpose, Abraham, for instance, was brought to the knowledge of what God wanted to do:

And the Lord said, shall I hide from Abraham that thing which I do, seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? For I know him, that he will command his children and they shall keep the way of the LORD to do justice and judgment, that the LORD may bring upon Abraham that which he had spoken of him (Gen 18:17 – 19).

Moses, in the wilderness, had to instruct the generation that was to enter the promised land that they should commit the law he had taught them to heart and teach the same to their children that they might live according

to the will of God in the promised land (Deut 6:6-7). Thus, God, in His covenant statement with Abraham, declared that He would make him a blessing and that through him shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, a tradition passed on from the creation mandate to Adam.

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Just after the flood, God made a covenant with Noah. With that covenant, God started a new dispensation of His people on earth. He repeated similar statement He made to Adam in the first chapter of the book of Genesis. Part of the covenant's statement reads thus:

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According to Bergant, *et. al.*, God's "stress" in the first and ninth chapters of Genesis with respect to His relationship with humanity "is behaving as God would act"⁴ In the sixth verse of chapter nine, for instance, God emphasizes that anyone who killed a fellow human being would equally be killed by someone else, because man was made in the image of God. This instruction was not just given to Noah but also to his sons. In other words, it was meant for all ages and anywhere human beings are found. This instruction would have been necessary, especially, because of the previous events of the killings of men by men in chapter four (i.e. when Cain killed Abel his younger brother), and the violence which occasioned the flood. Stamps and his colleagues are of the view that:

In Noah's day the character of human sin was blatantly manifested in two primary ways: Sexual lust (v2) and violence (v11). Human depravity has not changed; it is still through lust and violence that evil finds

unrestrained expression. Today immorality, ungodliness, pornography, and violence dominate our societies (Matt 24:37-39; Rom 1:32)⁵.

But God has always intended that man made in His image to behave like Him and that life on earth has to be as it is in heaven as taught by Jesus in the paternoster (Matt. 6:9-15). Like Philo would say, "whatever was true in the philosophy of the Greeks had been said earlier by the Jewish scriptures."⁶ It is unequivocal that Socrates (450BC) would have based his philosophy on such passage as Genesis 9:6 when he was faced with the violence that characterized the politics of his day and declared: "We can know only one thing with certainty: man himself. We can know what we ought to be and what the purpose of life is. To know this is to have true knowledge. This knowledge can be gained by proper education; man has the power to make himself morally good."⁷

With this, Socrates tried to teach humanity the principles of violence-free life and peaceful co-existence in the society. Socrates' teaching formed the basis for development of academic teaching and learning materials in the field of humanities in institutions of higher learning. So, the missionary call of God to His people in the Pentateuch could not only just provide homiletics materials for later generations of God's people but for the academia and humanitarian workers and such fields of life's endeavour.

The Patriarchs

Attention, here, is drawn to the four people that have been traditionally called the Patriarchs. Included in the list are Abraham, Isaac, Jacob (later renamed Israel), and Joseph. One may, also be constrained by virtue of his contribution to the early development of Jewish literature, religion, and government, include Moses in this deliberation.

Abraham, the man with whom God started a new chapter in His dealings with humanity becomes obvious in the scheme of events in Genesis 12 as being called and commissioned by God that through him "shall all the families of the earth be blessed."

Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country

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According to Stamps and his colleagues, "the call of Abram as recorded in Genesis 12 (later Abraham see Gen 17:5) begins a new chapter in the Old Testament revelation of God's purpose to redeem and save humanity".⁸ In his *Israel's Missionary Call*, Kaiser Jr. notes that "The significance of this grandest of all missionary texts cannot be fully appreciated until we begin to realize that there are actually three promises of blessing in Genesis 12:2-3 in which God promised:"

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Further in their narrative, Hauer and Young write that Joseph was introduced to us “as a spoiled, arrogant and foolish seventeen – year – old” who was favoured by his father” and naturally “despised by his older brothers”, and that in his foolishness had to tell his brothers of his dream that they would “serve him”, who as a result hated him the more. And, “not surprisingly, when they had the chance, they plotted to get rid of him, first deciding to kill him, then (at Judah's urging) making promise from their crime by selling him into slavery.”¹⁶ But considering Joseph's words to his brothers on the day he revealed his identity to them in Egypt (cf. Gen 45:5) and the day his brothers faked their father's (Jacob's) request to him soon after their father's death (Gen 50:20), one would, however, be constrained to affirm that the so called “foolishness” of Joseph and the corresponding hatred of his brothers was God's orchestration in order to take Joseph to Egypt that humanity could be saved from the impending evil in the then world.

It is glaring that Joseph's role in the patriarchal era was that of an ambassador – a representation of God's covenant people in a foreign land through whom God delivered humanity from destructions and ravages of famine. He demonstrated integrity and faithfulness through his rejection of Potiphar's wife's offer of herself to him (Gen 39:7-12). He also demonstrated an excellent leadership quality by means of his gift of interpretation of dreams (Gen 41:39-44). Thus Joseph became Prime Minister in Egypt, governing the affairs of men in Egypt and the world over with the fear of God (Gen 45:7-8; 47: 13-26; 50: 19-20).

As noted in the introductory part of this article on the patriarchs, considering the contribution of Moses to the early development of the Jewish sacred literature which formed bases for subsequent religious inspirations, there is a constraint to conclude the narrative on the patriarchs with the story of Moses.

When He was about starting His public life, as the Lord of the new era of God's covenant people here on earth, Jesus made people understand the place of Moses and his work in God's programme with humanity (cf. Matt 5:17-19). In James' narrative with respect to the outcome of St. Paul's missionary style, he disclosed that “Moses of old time hath in every city that preached him, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath day” (Acts 15:21). In Paul's missionary letters, and

preaching's, he often quoted Moses and his works. Of what significance are Moses and his work to missions? To start with, it is a known truth that Moses wrote the first five books of the Bible. In Exodus, for instance, tells of his birth and early life (Ex 2:1-22), his call and career as Jews' great deliverer (3:1-40:38). In his *Going To The Nations*, Fuller summarizes the missionary implication of Exodus and other Pentateuch literatures thus:

At Mount Sinai God affirmed that the whole earth was His (Exodus 19:4-6) and the people of Israel were to be his priests. They were mediators between God and other nations. The law made provision for converts to Israel's faith from other nations Exodus 12:48; Numbers 9:14; 15:14-16; Deuteronomy 29:10-13; 31:12. Israel was not chosen because of any goodness of their own, but to fulfill God's purpose.¹⁷

Writing on Exodus, in particular, Hawthorne believes that "God did more for his name than Abraham's early worship". To him, "God went global in a big way at the Exodus. Since then He has never ceased to deal with people on earth according to the truths He revealed at that time."¹⁸The "key passage", he says, "is Exodus 9:13-16 in which Moses gives an ultimatum to Pharaoh, with a bold word about his purpose."¹⁹The purpose was to show Moses His power that he might proclaim His name through all the earth (v16).

Thus, Moses, like the patriarchs, was anointed by God that he should be His messenger to the nations of the earth. In Hawthorne's words, "God's purpose to be worshiped by the nations had to begin in a pure simplicity with one people".²⁰ By means of Moses God singled Himself out. He made an "everlasting name" for Himself at the Exodus (Isa 63:11-14 and Nehemiah 9:9-10). He wanted everyone in Egypt and beyond to know that there was no god like the living God. By this act, God wanted the world to watch a mob of slaves marching in procession to worship Him. The Exodus was to be a reference point to all subsequent revelation to the "world of His character, His holiness, and His power." It is the view of Davis that everyone of the plagues of Egypt was either

aimed against the false gods of Egypt or the oppressive power structure that were revered with fanatical zeal.²¹ Stamps and his colleagues for instance, explain that the plagues “demonstrated God's power over the gods of Egypt and all forces of evil on behalf of His people,” and that “they were judgment of God upon Egypt and her gods.”²²

God was executing judgment against all the gods of Egypt (Ex 12:12). He did not aim at destroying people, but devastating one of the most highly regarded bunch of false gods in all the earth. Through the medium of Moses, God revealed His purpose to mankind. He gave the law by which people shall know Him. He declared through Moses that all human beings are His regardless of the race or culture. But, in His wisdom, He decided to start with the Jews which became much clearer through Moses.

The Mosaic Law and Its Implication on Missions

In his farewell address before the leadership baton was passed on to Joshua, Moses commended the law he taught the Jews as incomparable to the laws of other nations in the following words:

"And what nation is there so great, that hath statutes and judgments so righteous as all this law which I set before you this day" (Deut 4:8).

The Law of Moses started with the “Decalogue which appears first in Exodus 20:1-17. Its fundamental significance is underlined by its being placed first and by its subsequent repetition in Deuteronomy 5:1-21. In these apodictic laws are found the essence of what it meant for ancient Israel to keep the covenant.” Further in this narrative by Hauer and Young, it is stated:

The first appearance of the Decalogue is followed immediately by a collection of casuistic laws, known as the Covenant Code or Book of Covenant (Ex 20:23-23:33). These laws seem to make more specific some of Ten Commandments. Exodus 20:23-26, for example,

specifies in what ways the LORD is to be worshiped if there are to be no grave images, and 21:15 and 17 indicate what should happen to those who do not respect their parents. They established the rights of slaves (21:1-11); specified how violence shall be controlled (21:12-32); states how property shall be respected (21:33-22:17)²³

Although all parts of the Covenant Code are, particularly, important to this study, the aspect of the Covenant Code found most relevant to this work is what one may call Moses' foreign policy and also mission to the weak as contained in Exodus 22:21-24; 23:9; and in Deuteronomy 10:17-19 and 24:14-22. By this, it is certain that Moses discussed things that have to do with those that are less privileged and foreigners in their land. In these passages, God's position towards peoples of other nations of the world is clear to the Jews. Peaceful co-existence with both citizens and aliens was emphasized. This is, perhaps, why Archer believes that the "Decalogue (Ex 19:3-8)" was a renewal of the covenant between God's descendants and "Abraham with his seed (Gen 12, 15, 17)" which Abraham's descendants should then carry on with "now that they had become a great nation".²⁴ Inherent in this covenant and the "Mosaic Book of Covenant" is mission or service to humanity.

It is the view of Hauer and Young that the Deuteronomy Code (Deut 12-26) is "usually considered a humanitarian law code". To them, the code "established a limited welfare state that benefitted aliens as well as citizens, limited royal prerogatives, and extended greater protection to women".²⁵ The moral code, social laws, and the foreign policies of Moses have missionary impetus. The Pharisees that are often met in the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles developed their proselytisation policies from them. The same formed bases for Paul's missionary approach.

The Psalmists

The book of Psalms is an anthology of various Jewish song writers. Gunkel, the Patriarch of form criticism and the one whose "name stands out above others as that of the pioneer of a new approach to the Psalms"