

## The Decalogue in Old Testament Missiology

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The Old Testament, indeed the whole Bible, is missiological<sup>1</sup>. Mission is not a sub-theme that only a few key texts address, but the theme of the whole Bible. The Bible is a product of God's mission in the world. It exists because God is working out his plan through history to redeem humanity and restore the cosmos. The Bible as a whole, therefore, should be read with a missional hermeneutic. That is, each part should be interpreted within the unfolding 'meta-narrative' of the redemptive history revealed progressively in the Scriptures.

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The promises to Abraham and the patriarchs are the foundation of Old Testament missiology and therefore crucial in shaping the hermeneutic with which we come to the Decalogue. Following the descent into disaster traced out in Genesis 3-11, ending with the scattering of the nations, hope re-emerges with God's calling of Abraham. Notice the dynamic of particularity and universality in Abraham's call. God chooses Abraham (and therefore his descendants, Israel), not any of the other nations. He is the recipient of special blessings from God. He enters into a uniquely privileged relationship with God. Yet the purpose of this particular election is universal in scope. The big picture is that through Abraham 'all peoples on earth will be blessed.' Abraham (and Israel's) election is for the purpose of mission. God's mission is to bless all nations (the gospel announced in advance, according to Paul in Galatians 3:8), but that universal goal has a particular historical method, namely God's work in the specific history of an individual (Abraham) and the nation that will come from him, culminating in the coming of the Seed through whom the blessing will be fulfilled. This dynamic of particularity and universality is important for interpreting the rest of the Old Testament.

On this basis, Old Testament missiology could perhaps be summarised as God at work in Israel for the sake of all peoples. Many times in the Old Testament this concern for the nations is explicit. At all times the promise to Abraham to bless the nations through him is the backdrop for God's work in the history of his people. With that perspective, we turn to the Decalogue, asking how it functions within God's mission for all peoples. As we do so, we need to be continually asking what is God doing with the people of Israel (the particular) and how does this function within God's worldwide mission? (the universal).

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<sup>1</sup> See C. J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God* (IVP, 2006), chapter 2. This paper has been heavily influenced by Wright, *The Mission of God*.

## The Sinai Covenant

The Decalogue forms part of a series of significant, seminal events in the book of Exodus whose purpose is to shape the identity of Israel as the people of God. The exodus itself establishes Israel's identity as a redeemed people, a people who only exist as an independent nation because God has graciously chosen to bring them out of slavery. Here, too, God's deliverance of Israel (the particular) serves a wider purpose (the universal): that Pharaoh may know the LORD and that God's name 'may be proclaimed in all the earth' (Exodus 9:16 cf. 7:17; 8:19,22-23; 9:14-16; 9:20; 9:29; 18:10-11 and so on).

On leaving Egypt, God did not take the people directly to the land of Canaan, but to the desert, the mountain of God and, most significantly, to himself (Exodus 19:4). At Sinai, God enters into a deeper covenant relationship with Israel. In a spectacular and terrifying encounter on the mountain, God speaks 'ten words' to the people. More detailed instructions are given as to how the people are to live (Exodus 21-23); the tabernacle is constructed, the priesthood is instituted and the sacrificial system set up.

Before coming to the Decalogue itself, it is worth making some remarks about the Sinai Covenant in general, starting with the 'prelude' to the covenant in Exodus 19:4-6:

'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all the nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.'

Notice the following points. Firstly, the covenant obligations given on Mount Sinai do not create the special relationship between God and Israel; that relationship already exists by virtue of the redemption from Egypt (Exodus 19:4) (and that, in turn, is founded on the promises to Abraham, Exodus 2.24). Secondly, the Sinai covenant that is about to be enacted sets the terms by which that relationship is to be maintained and developed. God's election and redemption of Israel was unconditional; their continuing relationship with God within the covenant is in some sense conditional. If they keep the covenant, they will remain in that special relationship: 'you will be my people and I will be your God.' Thirdly, notice the particular-universal dynamic at work here. God is in a special relationship with Israel. They will be God's treasured possession among all the nations. The whole earth is God's, but, uniquely, *they* will be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. What is to take place on Mount Sinai will shape the identity of the people of Israel in ways that will make them unique among the peoples of the world.

One might think that the unique privileging of Israel is the very opposite of God's mission to bless all the nations. Why only Israel? However, we have already suggested that God's special work in Israel is for the sake of the nations, and this dynamic is present here, hinted at in the key phrases of verse 6. Israel in covenant with God is to have the dual function of being 'a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' Israel's national life is to be distinctive (holy). They are to be different from the other nations. And they are to be seen to be different for the holiness of Israel is to function as a witness to the nations. And Israel is to play a mediatorial (priestly) role between God and the other nations.<sup>2</sup> As Wright argues,

It is ... richly significant that God confers on Israel as a whole people the role of being his priesthood in the midst of the nations. As the people of YHWH

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<sup>2</sup> See Wright, *Mission of God*, 329-333. This interpretation of 'kingdom of priests' is disputed. cf. J. A. Motyer, *The Message of Exodus* (IVP, 2005) who argues that it refers to the unique access that Israel has into the presence of God.

they would have the historical task of bringing the knowledge of God to the nations, and bringing the nations to the means of atonement with God. The Abrahamic task of being a blessing to the nations also put them in the role of priests in the midst of the nations ... The priesthood of the people of God is thus a missional function that stands in continuity with their Abrahamic election, and it affects the nations.<sup>3</sup>

The function of the Sinai covenant, then, from the perspective of Old Testament missiology, is to constitute Israel as distinctive from the other nations, and therefore a witness to, and instrument of blessing to, the other nations. That distinctiveness, as it is developed in detail through the rest of Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers, has a number of intertwining threads. There is to be single-mindedness in their devotion to God: they are not to worship the gods of the other nations (e.g. Exodus 20:3-6,22-23; 23:24,32-33). They are to be ethically distinctive and not follow the detestable practices of the other nations (e.g. Leviticus 18:3,24-28; 20:26).

Above all, it is the presence of God himself with his people that will make Israel distinctive:

The LORD replied, 'My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.' Then Moses said to him, 'If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?' (Exodus 33:14-16)

In fact, all the elements of the Sinai covenant can be understood as the terms by which God can and will be present with his people. They are the terms under which 'they will be my people and I will be their God'. The tabernacle, priesthood and sacrificial system are all instituted to 'protect' that relationship – they control the double danger whereby the people's sin would contaminate the holiness of God and the holiness of God would break out against the people's sin. Likewise both idolatry and wickedness are warned against so severely since they would gravely endanger that relationship, as, for example, the incidents of the Golden Calf (Exodus 32-33) and Baal Peor (Numbers 25) show.

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### **The Decalogue**

Within the whole Sinai Covenant, the Decalogue plays a pivotal role, as demonstrated by a number of textual features. Firstly, these are words spoken by God in the dramatic encounter on the mountain with its thunder, lightning, fire, and smoke (Exodus 19:4-20:21). Moreover, it is these words that are written (twice) by the finger of God on tablets of stone (Exodus 24:12; 31:18; 32:15-16, 19; 34:1,28; Deuteronomy 4:13; 5:22; 10:1-5). They are referred to as 'the Ten Commandments' in several of these texts, and therefore treated as a distinct 'thing' in itself. Finally, the Decalogue is referred to simply as 'the covenant' (Exodus 31.18; 32.15; 34.28; Deuteronomy 4.13) which suggests that while the Sinai covenant can be understood to include all that took place on that mountain: in another sense, it is the Decalogue that is the key covenantal document.

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<sup>3</sup> Wright, *Mission of God*, 331.

In the giving of the Decalogue, then, God sets out the foundational obligations that the people of Israel are to keep. It begins with a declaration that reminds us again that the identity of Israel has already been established by God's gracious deliverance out of Egypt. There then follow ten commands, four of which are primarily concerned with love for God, and six love for neighbour. Israel's distinctiveness is to look like this: single-minded devotion to God and right living. And the Decalogue is important in Old Testament missiology for these two reasons: the polemic against idolatry and the imperative to righteous living. These themes are of course found in many places in the Old Testament, but the Decalogue is foundational for those themes for a number of reasons. We have already seen the foundational function of the Decalogue within the Sinai covenant. Furthermore, many of the stipulations of the Decalogue are hinted at and anticipated before Sinai, but it is at this seminal event that they are formalised and emphasised so emphatically. In this way, subsequent appearances of those two themes can be seen as the exposition and application of the Decalogue to the people of Israel. Israel are continually being called back to the original Sinai covenant.

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### **Ethics and Old Testament Missiology**

Throughout the Old Testament these two themes of idolatry and ethics are repeatedly related to mission. In other words the polemic against idolatry and the ethical imperative, set out so seminally in the Decalogue, are applied in the Old Testament itself in the context of Israel's mission in the world. What follows is illustrative rather than exhaustive.

1. Israel's body of law is meant to display to the nations that they are a people with 'wisdom and understanding', that they are great in comparison to the other nations both because God is near them when they pray and also because of the righteousness of their laws (Deuteronomy 4:5-8).
2. Israel's obedience to the commands of God will establish them as God's holy people and 'all the peoples on earth' will recognise that they are 'called by the name of the LORD' (Deuteronomy 28:9-10).
3. Part of Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the temple describes the need for obedience to the commands of God as an integral factor in God's upholding of the cause of Israel. He describes how this is 'so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the LORD is God and that there is no other.' (1 Kings 8:56-61)
4. There are many texts in the prophets along the lines of 'if you, Israel, return to me, I will return to you.' Jeremiah 4:1-2 is remarkable in that, if Israel returns to the LORD – which includes the putting aside of idols and swearing 'in a true, just and righteous way' – then 'the nations will invoke blessings by him and in him they will boast.'

Leaving aside texts where the ethics-mission link is more explicit, the call for Israel to turn away from wickedness and live rightly is a constant

refrain throughout the Old Testament, especially in the prophets. More often than not, the distinctiveness of Israel as God's special people, in contrast to the other nations, is in view. But if we remember that God's particular election of Israel serves God's universal purposes for the nations, then we must conclude that whenever Israel is being called to turn back to God, God's concern for his reputation among the nations is implicit as well.

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### **Idolatry and Old Testament Missiology**

The polemic against idolatry is an aspect of the ethical imperative, for it is wicked not to worship exclusively the one true God. Nevertheless, idolatry is a distinct (though inter-connected) category, and, again, the constant warnings to Israel against idolatry, with their seminal formulation in the Decalogue, are highly significant for the theme of mission in the Old Testament.

Israel are to have 'no other gods' before the LORD; neither are they to make and worship any image. And that is not merely because the LORD is their God, but *the* God; that is, the God that Israel worships is the one true God. And the exclusivity of devotion demanded of Israel is to demonstrate both to Israel and to the nations that the LORD is God and there is no other (Deuteronomy 4:34, 39).

This is too vast a theme to treat in any detail in this paper. One example will suffice. In Isaiah 45:22-24 'all the ends of the earth' are called to turn to God and be saved because 'I am God, and there is no other.' This is a summons which is made in the context of a sustained polemic against idolatry and repeated declarations of the uniqueness of the LORD.

The polemic against idolatry is the consequence of the Bible's monotheism. And, as Wright argues, 'biblical monotheism is necessarily missional (because the one living God wills to be known and worshiped throughout the whole creation)' while 'biblical mission is necessarily monotheistic (because we are to call all people to join all creation in the praise of this one living God).'<sup>4</sup>

### **The Response of the Nations**

If Israel in its righteous living, and exclusive devotion to God was to be distinctive from the other nations, giving witness to the character of the one true God who had chosen to work in them in this special way, what kind of response was anticipated on behalf of the nations?

At one level, the nations were expected to come to 'know the LORD', at least in the sense of recognising the unique nature of Israel's God. Some of the texts mentioned earlier point to this. On the other hand, the Sinai covenant was probably not intended as a simple blueprint for the nations to copy: that would go against the unique relationship Israel had with God, and the unique role assigned to them (Romans 3:1-2; 9:4-5) and also the limited nature of the Sinai covenant in relation to the progression of redemption history (Galatians 3:15-22; Hebrews 10:1).

Nevertheless, there is hope in the Old Testament that the nations will do more than simply recognise from the outside that the LORD is God – they can be incorporated into the people of God, and in doing so will, in some sense, accept the law of God given to Israel. So Isaiah 2:3:

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<sup>4</sup> Wright, *Mission of God*, 136.

Many peoples will come and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths.' The law will go out from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.

But because of Israel's failure to be what God called it to be, and the provisional nature of the Sinai covenant itself, the turning of the nations to God is something that is only anticipated in the Old Testament. As in Isaiah 2, it is a future hope. And so, only once Christ, the seed through whom blessing would come, had come and done his work, would the way for the nations to be fully incorporated into the people of God, through faith and obedience be made open (Romans 1:5; 16:26).

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### **Northern Training Institute**

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