Perspectives

on the World Christian Movement™

A READER

FIFTH EDITION















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Perspectives on the World Christian Movement (5th edition): A Reader
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Published by William Carey Publishing
10 W. Dry Creek Cir
Littleton, CO 80120 | www.missionbooks.org

William Carey Publishing is a ministry of Frontier Ventures
Pasadena, CA | www.frontierventures.org

Cover and Interior Design: Luz Design (https://projectluz.com)

ISBNs:
978-1-64508-688-8 (paperback)
978-1-64508-690-1 (epub)

Printed Worldwide
30 29 28 27 26 1 2 3 4 5 OR300

Library of Congress Control Number: 2025946435

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CHAPTER 1

The Living God Is a Missionary God

John R. W. Stott

Millions of people in today's world are extremely hostile to the Christian missionary enterprise. They regard it as politically disruptive (because supposedly, it loosens the cement that binds the national culture) and religiously narrow-minded (because it makes exclusive claims for Jesus), while those who are involved in it are thought to suffer from an arrogant imperialism. And the attempt to convert people to Christ is rejected as an unpardonable interference in their private lives. "My religion is my own affair," they say. "Mind your own business, and leave me alone to mind mine."

It is essential, therefore, for Christians to understand the grounds on which the Christian mission rests. Only then shall we be able to persevere in the missionary task, with courage and humility, in spite of the world's misunderstanding and opposition. More precisely, biblical Christians need biblical incentives, for we believe the Bible to be the revelation of God and of his will. So we ask: Has he revealed in Scripture that "mission" is his will for his people? Only then shall we be satisfied. For then it becomes a matter of obeying God, whatever others may think or say. Here we shall focus on the Old Testament, though the entire Bible is rich in evidence for the missionary purpose of God.

The Call of Abraham

Our story begins about four thousand years ago with a man called Abraham, or more accurately, Abram, as he was called at that time. Here is the account of God's call to Abraham.

> Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse; and by you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." (Gen 12:1–3)

God made a promise (a composite promise, as we shall see) to Abraham. An understanding of that promise is indispensable to an understanding of the Bible and of the Christian mission. These are perhaps the most unifying verses in the Bible; the whole of God's purpose is encapsulated here.

By way of introduction we shall need to consider the setting of God's promise, the context in which it came to be given. Then we shall divide the rest of our study into two parts. First, *the promise* (exactly what it was that God said he would do) and second—at greater length—*its fulfillment* (how God has kept and will keep his promise). We start, however, with the setting.

The Setting of God's Promise

Genesis 12 begins: "Now the LORD said to Abram." It sounds abrupt for an opening of a new chapter. We are prompted to ask: "Who is this 'Lord' who spoke to Abraham?" and "Who is this 'Abraham' to whom he spoke?" They are not introduced into the text out of the blue. A great deal lies behind these words. They are a key that opens up the whole of Scripture. The previous eleven chapters lead up to them; the rest of the Bible follows and fulfills them.

What, then, is the background to this text? It is this. "The Lord" who chose and called Abraham is the same Lord who, in the beginning, created the heavens and the earth and who climaxed his creative work by making man and woman unique creatures in his own likeness. In other words, we should never allow ourselves to forget that the Bible begins with the universe, not with the planet Earth; then with the earth, not with Palestine; then with Adam the father of the human race, not with Abraham the father of the chosen race. Since, then, God is the Creator of the universe, the earth, and all humankind, we must never demote him to the status of a tribal deity or petty godling like Chemosh the god of the Moabites, or Milcom (or

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Molech) the god of the Ammonites, or Baal the male deity, or Ashtoreth the female deity of the Canaanites. Nor must we suppose that God chose Abraham and his descendants because he had lost interest in other peoples or given them up. Election is not a synonym for elitism. On the contrary, as we shall soon see, God chose one man and his family in order, through them, to bless all the families of the earth.

We are bound, therefore, to be deeply offended when Christianity is relegated to one chapter in a book on the world's religions as if it were one option among many, or when people speak of "the Christian God" as if there were others! No, there is only one living and true God, who has revealed himself fully and finally in his only Son Jesus Christ. Monotheism lies at the basis of mission. As Paul wrote to Timothy, "There is one God, and there is one mediator between God and people, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim 2:5).

God chose one man and his family in order, through them, to bless all the families of the earth.

The Genesis record moves on from the creation of all things by the one God and of human beings in his likeness, to our rebellion against our own Creator and to God's judgment upon his rebel creatures—a judgment which is relieved, however, by his first gospel promise that one day the woman's seed would "bruise," indeed "crush," the serpent's head (3:15).

The following eight chapters (Gen 4–11) describe the devastating results of the fall in terms of the progressive alienation of human beings from God and from our fellow human beings. This was the setting in which God's call and promise came to Abraham. All around was moral deterioration, darkness, and dispersal. Society was steadily disintegrating. Yet God the Creator did not abandon the human beings he had made in his own likeness (9:6). Out of the prevailing godlessness, he called one man and his family and promised to bless not only them but through them, the whole world. The scattering would not proceed unchecked; a grand process of ingathering would now begin.

THE COMPOSITE PROMISE

What then was the promise which God made to Abraham? It was a composite promise consisting of several parts. Each of these promises was elaborated in the chapters that follow Abraham's call.

The Promise of Land

God's call seems to have come to Abraham in two stages: first in Ur of the Chaldees while his father was still alive (11:31; 15:7) and then in Haran after his father had died (11:32; 12:1). Abraham was to leave his own land and, in return, God would show him another country.

After Abraham had generously allowed his nephew Lot to choose where he wanted to settle (he selected the fertile Jordan valley), God said to Abraham: "Lift up your eyes, and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward; for all the land which you see I will give to you and to your descendants forever" (13:14–15).

The Promise of Posterity

He was to go from his kindred and his father's house, and in exchange for the loss of his family God would make of him "a great nation." Later, in order to indicate this, God changed his name from Abram ("exalted father") to Abraham ("father of a multitude") because, he said to him, "I have made you the father of a multitude of nations" (17:5).

God gave Abraham another visual aid, telling him to look now not to the earth but to the sky. On a clear, dark night he took him outside his tent and said to him, "Look toward heaven and number the stars." What a ludicrous command! Perhaps Abraham started, "1, 2, 3, 5, 10, 20, 30 . . . ," but he must soon have given up. It was an impossible task. Then God said to him, "So shall your descendants be." And we read, "He believed the Lord." Although he was probably by now in his eighties and although he and Sarah were still childless, he yet believed God's promise, and God "reckoned it to him as righteousness." That is, because he trusted God, God accepted him as righteous in his sight (15:5–6).

The Promise of Blessing

The words *bless* and *blessing* occur five times in 12:2–3. The blessing God promised Abraham would come upon all humankind.

"I will bless you." Already God has accepted Abraham as righteous or (to borrow the New Testament expression) has "justified him by faith." No greater blessing is conceivable. It is the foundation blessing of the covenant of grace, which a few years later God went on to elaborate to Abraham: "I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you . . . for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you and I will be their God" (17:7–8). And he gave them circumcision as the outward and visible sign of his gracious covenant or pledge to be their God. It is the first time in Scripture that we hear the covenant formula which is repeated many times later: "I will be their God and they shall be my people."

THE PROGRESSIVE FULFILLMENT

A land, a posterity, a blessing—but what has all that to do with mission? For that, let us turn now from the promise to the fulfillment.

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The whole question of the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy is a difficult one in which there is often misunderstanding and much disagreement. Of particular importance is the principle that the New Testament writers themselves understood Old Testament prophecy to have not a *single* but usually a *triple* fulfillment—past, present, and future. The past fulfillment was an immediate or historical fulfillment in the life of the nation of Israel. The present is an intermediate or gospel fulfillment in Christ and his church. The future will be an ultimate or eschatological fulfillment in the new heaven and the new earth.

Immediate Historical Fulfillment

God's promise to Abraham received an immediate historical fulfillment in his physical descendants, the people of Israel.

Posterity

God's promise to Abraham of a numerous, indeed of an innumerable, posterity was confirmed to his son, Isaac (Gen 26:4, "as the stars of heaven"), and his grandson, Jacob (32:12, "as the sand of the sea"). Gradually the promise began to come literally true. Perhaps we could pick out some of the stages in this development.

The first stage concerns the years of slavery in Egypt, of which it is written, "The descendants of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong; so that the land was filled with them" (Exod 1:7; cf. Acts 7:17). The next stage I will mention came several hundred years later when King Solomon called Israel "a great people that cannot be numbered or counted for multitude" (1 Kgs 3:8). A third stage was some three hundred fifty years after Solomon; Jeremiah warned Israel of impending judgment and captivity and then added this divine promise of restoration: "As the host of heaven cannot be numbered and the sands of the sea cannot be measured so I will multiply the descendants of David my servant" (Jer 33:22).

Land

So much for Abraham's posterity; what about the land? Again we note with worship and gratitude God's faithfulness to his promise. For it was in remembrance of his promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that he first rescued his people from their Egyptian slavery and gave them the territory which came on that account to be called "the promised land" (Exod 2:24; 3:6; 32:13), and then restored them to it some seven hundred years later after their captivity in Babylon. Nevertheless, neither Abraham nor his physical descendants fully inherited the land. As Hebrews 11 puts it, they "died in faith not having received what was promised." Instead, as "strangers and exiles on the earth" they "looked forward to the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (vv. 8–16, 39–40).

Blessing

God kept his promises about the posterity and the land, at least in part. Now what about the blessing? At Sinai God confirmed and clarified his covenant with Abraham and pledged himself to be Israel's God (e.g., Exod 19:3–6). Throughout the rest of the Old Testament, God continued to bless the obedient while the disobedient fell under his judgment.

Perhaps the most dramatic example comes at the beginning of Hosea's prophecy, in which Hosea is told to give his three children names which describe God's awful and progressive judgment on Israel. His firstborn (a boy) he called "Jezreel," meaning "God will scatter." Next came a daughter "Lo-ruhamah," meaning "not pitied," for God said he would no longer pity or forgive his people. Lastly, he had another son "Lo-ammi," meaning "not my people," for God said they were not now his people. What terrible names for the chosen people of God! They sound like a devastating contradiction of God's eternal promise to Abraham.

But God does not stop there. For beyond the coming judgment, there would be a restoration, which is described in words that once more echo the promise to Abraham: "Yet the number of the people of Israel shall be like the sand of the sea, which can be neither measured nor numbered" (Hos 1:10). And then the judgments implicit in the names of Hosea's children would be reversed. There would be a gathering instead of a scattering ("Jezreel" is ambiguous and can imply either), "not pitied" would be pitied, and "not my people" would become "sons of the living God" (Hos 1:10–2:1).

The wonderful thing is that the apostles Paul and Peter both quote these verses from Hosea. They see their fulfillment not just in a further multiplication of Israel but in the inclusion of the gentiles in the community of Jesus: "Once you were no people but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy but now you have received mercy" (1 Pet 2:9–10; cf. Rom 9:25–26).

This New Testament perspective is essential as we read the Old Testament prophecies, for what we miss in the Old Testament is any clear explanation of just how God's promised blessing would overflow from Abraham and his descendants to "all families of the earth." Although Israel is described as "a light to lighten the nations" and has a mission to "bring forth justice to the nations" (Isa 42:1–6; 49:6), we do not actually see this happening. It is only in the Lord Jesus himself that these prophecies are fulfilled, for only in his day are the nations actually included in the redeemed community. To this, we now turn.

Intermediate Gospel Fulfillment

God's promise to Abraham receives an intermediate or gospel fulfillment in Christ and his church.

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Posterity

Almost the first word of the whole New Testament is the word *Abraham*. Matthew's Gospel begins, "The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Abraham was the father of Isaac." So it is right back to Abraham that Matthew traces the beginning not just of the genealogy but of the gospel of Jesus Christ. He knows that what he is recording is the fulfillment of God's ancient promises to Abraham made some two thousand years previously. (See also Luke 1:45–55, 67–75.)

Yet from the start Matthew recognizes that it isn't just *physical* descent from Abraham that qualifies people to inherit the promises, but a kind of *spiritual* descent, namely, repentance and faith in the coming Messiah. This was John the Baptist's message to crowds who flocked to hear him: "Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham" (Matt 3:9; Luke 3:8; cf. John 8:33–40). The implications of his words would have shocked his hearers since "it was the current belief that no descendant of Abraham could be lost."[1]

And God has raised up children to Abraham, if not from stones, then from an equally unlikely source—namely, the gentiles! So Matthew, although the most Jewish of all the four Gospel writers, later records Jesus as having said, "I tell you, many will come from east and west and sit at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness" (Matt 8:11–12; cf. Luke 13:28–29).

It is hard for us to grasp how shocking, how completely topsy-turvy, these words would have sounded to the Jewish hearers of John the Baptist and Jesus. *They* were the descendants of Abraham, so *they* had a title to the promises which God made to Abraham. Who then were these outsiders who were to share in the promises, even apparently usurp them, while they themselves would be disqualified? They were indignant. They had quite forgotten that part of God's covenant with Abraham promised an extension of blessing to *all* the nations. Now the Jews had to learn that it was in relation to Jesus the Messiah, who was himself Seed of Abraham, that all the nations would be blessed.

The Apostle Peter seems at least to have begun to grasp this in his second message, just after Pentecost. In it he addressed a Jewish crowd with the words: "You are the sons . . . of the covenant which God gave to your fathers, saying to Abraham, 'And in your posterity shall all the families of the earth be blessed.' God, having raised up his servant [Jesus], sent him to you first, to bless you in turning every one of you from your wickedness" (Acts 3:25–26). It is a very notable statement because he interprets the blessing in the moral terms of repentance and righteousness and because, if Jesus was sent "first" to the Jews, he was presumably sent next to the gentiles, whose "families of the earth" had been "far off" (cf. Acts 2:39), but were now to share in the blessing.

And God has raised up children to Abraham, if not from stones, then from an equally unlikely source—namely, the gentiles!

It was given to the Apostle Paul, however, to bring this wonderful theme to its full development. For he was called and appointed to be the apostle to the gentiles. To him was revealed God's eternal but hitherto secret purpose to make Jews and gentiles "fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel" (Eph 3:6). Paul declares with great boldness, "Not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his descendants" (Rom 9:6–7).

Who then are the true descendants of Abraham, the true beneficiaries of God's promises to him? Paul does not leave us in any doubt. They are believers in Christ of whatever race. In Romans 4 he points out that Abraham not only received justification by faith but also received this blessing *before he had been circumcised*. Therefore Abraham is the father of all those who, whether circumcised or uncircumcised (that is, Jews or gentiles), "follow the example of [his] faith" (Rom 4:9–12). If we "share the faith of Abraham," then "he is the father of us all, as it is written, 'I have made you the father of many nations'" (vv. 16–17). Thus neither physical descent from Abraham nor physical circumcision as a Jew makes a person a true child of Abraham, but rather faith. Abraham's real descendants are believers in Jesus Christ, whether they happen to be Jews or gentiles.

Land

What then is the "land" that Abraham's descendants inherit? The letter to the Hebrews refers to a "rest" which God's people enter now by faith (Heb 4:3), and in a most remarkable expression Paul refers to "the promise to Abraham and his descendants, that they should *inherit the world*" (Rom 4:13). One can only assume he means the same thing as when to the Corinthians he writes that in Christ "all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future, all are yours" (1 Cor 3:21–23). Christians, by God's wonderful grace, are joint heirs with Christ of the universe.

A somewhat similar teaching, both about the nature of the promised blessing and about its beneficiaries, is given by Paul in Galatians 3. He first repeats how Abraham was justified by faith and then continues: "So you see that it is

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men of faith who are the sons of Abraham" and who therefore "are blessed with Abraham who had faith" (vv. 6–9).

Blessing

What then is the blessing with which all the nations were to be blessed (Gal 3:8)? In a word, it is the blessing of salvation. We were under the curse of the law, but Christ has redeemed us from it by becoming a curse in our place, in order "that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith" (vv. 10–14). Christ bore our curse that we might inherit Abraham's blessing, the blessing of justification (v. 8) and of the indwelling Holy Spirit (v. 14). Paul sums it up in the last verse of the chapter (v. 29): "If you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise."

We have not quite finished yet. There is a third stage of fulfillment still to come.

Ultimate Fulfillment

God's promise to Abraham will receive an ultimate or eschatological fulfillment in the final destiny of all the redeemed.

Posterity, Land, and Blessing

In the book of Revelation there is one more reference to God's promise to Abraham (7:9ff.). John sees in a vision "a great multitude which no man could number." It is an international throng, drawn "from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues." They are "standing before the throne," the symbol of God's kingly reign. That is, his kingdom has finally come, and they are enjoying all the blessings of his gracious rule. He shelters them with his presence. Their wilderness days of hunger, thirst, and scorching heat are over. They have entered the promised land at last, described now not as "a land flowing with milk and honey," but as a land irrigated from "springs of living water" which never dry up. But how did they come to inherit these blessings? Partly because they have "come out of great tribulation," but mostly because "they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb;" that is, they have been cleansed from sin and clothed with righteousness through the merits of the death of Jesus Christ alone. "*Therefore* are they before the throne of God."

Speaking personally, I find it extremely moving to glimpse this final fulfillment in a future eternity of that ancient promise of God to Abraham. All the essential elements of the promise may be detected. For here are the spiritual descendants of Abraham, a "great multitude which no man could number," as countless as the sand on the seashore and as the stars in the night sky. Here too are "all the families of the earth" being blessed, for the numberless multitude is composed of people from every nation. Here also is the promised land, namely, all the rich blessings which flow from God's gracious rule. And here above all is Jesus Christ, the Seed of Abraham, who shed his blood for our redemption and who bestows his blessings on all those who call on him to be saved.

Conclusion

Let me try to summarize what we learn about God from his promise to Abraham and its fulfillment.

1. He is the God of history.

History is not a random flow of events, for God is working out in time a plan which he conceived in a past eternity and will consummate in a future eternity. In this historical process Jesus Christ, as the Seed of Abraham, is the key figure. Let's rejoice that if we are Christ's disciples, we are Abraham's descendants. We belong to his spiritual lineage. If we have received the blessings of justification by faith, acceptance with God, and the indwelling Spirit, then we are beneficiaries today of promises made to Abraham four thousand years ago.

2. He is the God of the covenant.

God is gracious enough to make promises, and he always keeps the promises he makes. He is a God of steadfast love and faithfulness. This is not to say that he always fulfills his promises immediately. Abraham and Sarah "died in faith *not* having received what was promised, but having seen it and greeted it from afar" (Heb 11:13). That is, although Isaac was born to them in fulfillment of the promise, their seed was not yet numerous, nor was the land given to them, nor were the nations blessed. All God's promises come true, but they are inherited "through faith *and patience*" (Heb 6:12). We have to be content to wait for God's time.

3. He is the God of blessing.

"I will bless you," he said to Abraham (Gen 12:2). "God . . . sent him [Jesus] to you first, to bless you," echoed Peter (Acts 3:26). God's attitude to his people is positive, constructive, and enriching. Judgment is his "strange work" (Isa 28:21). His principal and characteristic work is to bless people with salvation.

4. He is the God of mercy.

I have always derived much comfort from the statement of Revelation 7:9 that the company of the redeemed in heaven will be "a great multitude which no man could number." I do not profess to know how this can be, since Christians have always seemed to be a rather small minority, but Scripture states it for our comfort. Although no biblical Christian can be a universalist (believing that all mankind will ultimately be saved) since Scripture teaches the awful reality and eternity of hell, a biblical Christian can—even must—assert that the redeemed will somehow be an international throng

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