

## ***Missio Dei* in the Isaiah Memoir<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Introduction**

Mission is at the heart of Pentecostal theology and identity. From the early Pentecostals to the church today, active in reaching out to communities beyond their locality, mission has been a priority historically and generally remains a priority for the contemporary community.<sup>2</sup> In recent years, however, there have been some complicating elements in the discussion of mission within the broader Christian community and subsequently within Pentecostalism. That is, what is mission? The term has been used in multiple ways by the Christian and non-Christian community to refer to, among other things, the goals or corporate mission of an organisation or business (as in “mission statement”), social mission (that is, the contribution to the social or environmental betterment of a community), the mission of the local church (that is, the purpose and focus of the church in a local community), and overseas mission (that is, the sending of workers to cross-cultural communities). Clearly, “mission” is a slippery term. Added to this complication—for Christians who affirm the importance of Scripture for directing their theology and practice—is that the term “mission” is not explicitly developed in the biblical text. While numerous passages describe missionary activity, there is an absence of the term itself in the biblical text. Yet there is something within the breadth of Scripture that allows biblical scholars and missiologists such

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<sup>1</sup>This article is adapted from a lecture presented at the APTS Missions Conference (1-5 October 2018) and a paper presented at the European Pentecostal Theological Association Conference (Malvern, UK, 3-5 July 2017) entitled “Holiness and Incarnation in Isaiah 1-39: The Implications of Isaiah’s Mission for a Pentecostal Ecclesiology.”

<sup>2</sup>Allan Anderson defines Pentecostalism as essentially a missionary movement. See Allan H. Anderson, *To the Ends of the Earth: Pentecostalism and the Transformation of World Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 1-2.

as Christopher J. H. Wright to make the claim that “the whole Bible is itself a ‘missional’ phenomenon.”<sup>3</sup>

What is mission from a biblical perspective? And what does it mean for the Pentecostal community? To explore this question in its entirety would require much more time than we have available, so I will focus on a small section of Scripture from the Old Testament to consider its contribution to the study of this topic of missions in the biblical text. Under consideration in this study is the idea of mission in the section of Isaiah commonly identified as the “Isaiah memoir” or *denkschrift* (Isa 6:1-9:6).<sup>4</sup> This may initially seem an unusual choice; most of the oft-quoted passages on the theme of mission in Isaiah come from the later section of Isaiah 40 to 66 (particularly 60:1-3). However, because it is a neglected area of study, I would like to consider the contribution of the Isaiah memoir to the study of mission by first looking at a working definition of “mission.” Secondly, exploring how the idea of mission is linked to the requirement of holiness incarnated in God’s people as modelled by Isaiah and his children. Thirdly, considering briefly some implications of this study for the Pentecostal community in Asia.

### ***Missio Dei* in the Old Testament**

When it comes to exploring the idea of mission in the biblical text, the term arguably most adopted by biblical scholars and theologians alike is *missio Dei*. That is, the mission of God to reach out to the world. This emphasises that the starting point for mission is God’s intention and purpose as expressed through the biblical text. This also emphasises that, unfortunately, the activity of God’s people (Israel in the Old Testament and the church in the New Testament) does not always match God’s intention. Throughout the narrative of the biblical text, God’s people have been tasked with somehow representing God (Yahweh) to their

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<sup>3</sup>Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 22.

<sup>4</sup>While the exact section identified as the memoir is disputed, scholars have traditionally identified it as from Isaiah 6:1-9:6. Roberts identifies the memoir as a literary block that had previously circulated as an independent collection. J. J. M. Roberts, *First Isaiah*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 88; See also Alexander V. Prokhorov, *The Isaianic Denkschrift and a Socio-Cultural Crisis in Yehud: A Rereading of Isaiah 6:1–9:6[7]*, (Göttingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015); Matthijs J. de Jong, *Isaiah among the Ancient Near Eastern Prophets: A Comparative Study of the Earliest Stages of the Isaiah Tradition and the Neo-Assyrian Prophecies*, Supplements to the Vetus Testamentum 117 (Leiden: Brill, 2007); Csaba Balogh, “Isaiah’s Prophetic Instruction and the Disciples in Isaiah 8:16,” *Vetus Testamentum* 63 (2013): 2; Jacqueline Grey, “SPS Presidential Address: Embodiment and the Prophetic Message in Isaiah’s Memoir,” *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 39 (2017): 1-26.

surrounding cultures, yet they were not always faithful or deliberate to that task.

So what is the *missio Dei* and its connection to the Old Testament, specifically Isaiah? For scholars such as Moskala, Goheen, and Wright the *missio Dei* in the Old Testament is inextricably linked to the election of Israel.<sup>5</sup> Why does God elect Israel? For Michael W. Goheen, it points to God's universalistic intention; the community chosen is the first place of God's mission activity and then the channel to reach others.<sup>6</sup> Israel is chosen, transformed by their covenant relationship, and are, then, the channel by which God will reach others. It is not just for themselves that they are chosen, but for the sake of the other nations and creation. Using the language of missiology, the Old Testament community had both an inward focus (centripetal) as they communicated God's covenant to their own people, instilling in each generation a knowledge of God, and an outward focus (centrifugal) as they communicated God's covenant to people outside their ethnic community.<sup>7</sup> A significant aspect of this witness was being set apart and distinct from the other nations. They were to live a holy life to reflect the holy God they served and represented. Ancient Israel's community, as a reflection of the God they worshipped, was to be attractive to the other nations. This raises the question as to whether the mission of ancient Israel was not to take the initiative in reaching out to nations but, as Elmer Martens writes, to draw, like a magnet, the nations to itself.<sup>8</sup>

Some scholars, such as Schnabel and Bosch, suggest that the Old Testament community were passive witnesses and not active in crossing cultural boundaries to engage in mission.<sup>9</sup> These scholars see a distinct difference between the Old Testament concept of mission as passive, with the New Testament concept being more active, as exemplified by the Great Commission (Matt 28:19-20). This does not mean that these scholars see no value in the Old Testament—quite the opposite—however, they claim that the idea of being sent to another group to witness to God is not prevalent in the Old Testament text. David Bosch writes, “There is, in the Old Testament, no indication of the believers of

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<sup>5</sup>Jiri Moskala, “The Mission of God’s People in the Old Testament,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 19, no. 1-2 (2008): 40.

<sup>6</sup>Michael W. Goheen, *Introducing Christian Mission Today: Scripture, History and Issues* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 40.

<sup>7</sup>Moskala, “The Mission of God’s People,” 43.

<sup>8</sup>Elmer Martens, “Impulses to Mission in Isaiah: An Intertextual Exploration,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 17, no. 2 (2007): 218.

<sup>9</sup>Moskala writes, “Schnabel, for example, challenges Old Testament scholars, theologians, and missiologists by the claim that there is no commission in the Old Testament (in contrast to the New Testament) to go and ‘evangelize’ the world. Abraham, Israel, and others are only passive witnesses for God, ‘a light to the world,’ but not actually engaged in mission per se.” Moskala, “The Mission of God’s People,” 41.

the old covenant being sent by God to cross geographical, religious, and social frontiers in order to win others to faith in Yahweh.”<sup>10</sup>

A significant aspect of Bosch’s critique that is interesting for the Asian context is the linking of hermeneutics to colonialism. He posits that essentially mission has been understood as the geographic movement from the West to the non-West; this idea was then reinforced by a reading of key texts from the Old and New Testaments to fit a geographical-expansion understanding. Instead, Bosch advocates a reading based on the meta-narrative of the biblical story. This places the emphasis on a missional hermeneutic that attempts to understand the role of mission within the broader redemptive-historical movement of the biblical text. On this basis then Bosch provides a definition of mission: “Mission is quite simply, the participation of Christians in the liberating mission of Jesus wagering on a future that verifiable experience seems to belie. It is the good news of God’s love, incarnated in the witness of community, for the sake of the world.”<sup>11</sup> This is, or perhaps should be, especially true for Pentecostal readers. As Craig Keener asserts, “If the Spirit empowers us especially for mission, it should not surprise us if a Spirit-led reading of Scripture should highlight the theme of mission.”<sup>12</sup> So, then, for Pentecostal readers exploring the significance of the Isaiah memoir for understanding our mission, what does Isaiah contribute? To do this, we need to read the text in light of the meta-narrative of Scripture. In doing so, a twin theme emerges from the narrative of the Isaiah memoir—that of holiness and incarnation.

### **Holiness and Incarnation in the Isaiah Memoir**

As noted above, the *missio Dei* in the Old Testament is inextricably linked to the election of Israel. Notwithstanding the earlier covenants, Israel was chosen at the Exodus to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exod 19). Although the whole earth is God’s, they were to be God’s treasured possession. Goheen writes, “Israel is a nation set apart for God’s use in his redemptive work. They are to live holy lives in the

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<sup>10</sup> David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology and Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 17. Note that even Jonah is not considered as engaged in mission by Bosch as he is sent to announce judgement rather than good news.

<sup>11</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 519. An alternative definition from the Lausanne movement: mission can be defined as the whole church taking the whole gospel to the whole person in the whole world. A similar definition is offered by Christopher Wright: “Our committed participation as God’s people, at God’s invitation and command, in God’s own mission within the history of the world for the redemption of God’s creation.” Wright, *The Mission of God*, 22-23 (italics removed).

<sup>12</sup> Craig S. Keener, *Spirit Hermeneutics: Reading Scripture in Light of Pentecost* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2016), xxx.

midst of the nations.”<sup>13</sup> A significant aspect of their covenant life was the expectation to mirror their actions and motivations of their covenant God. Yahweh instructs them, “*Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy*” (19:2; Lev 11:44-45; 20:26). They were to be holiness incarnate; holiness made flesh. The *missio Dei*, then, is inextricably linked to the *imitatio Dei* (Imitation of God). That holiness comprised an ethical distinctiveness (Lev 11:44-45; 18:3; 18-19; Deut 14:1-3; Mic 6:6-8). Their lifestyle and corporate existence were to bring glory to God and attract people to Him.<sup>14</sup> Every aspect of their lives was to reflect the holiness of God, including their relationships, politics, legal system, community life, and in their attitudes to their neighbours and foreigners. This mirroring of the holiness of Yahweh was given concrete form in the law. Again, the law was not just given for their own well-being and self-governance, important as this was, but to also attract the attention and envy of the nations (Deut 4:5-8). They were to be holiness incarnate, because God was with them. In the words of Tom Wright, ancient Israel was to “function as a people who would show the rest of humanity what being human was all about.”<sup>15</sup>

As the meta-narrative continues within a canonical reading of Scripture, the people of ancient Israel were given the land in the conquest (albeit with ethical issues for today’s readers). What was particularly significant was the location of this land at the crossroads to major civilisations.<sup>16</sup> They were what Christopher Wright calls a “display people” on show and visible for the constant viewing of the nations.<sup>17</sup> Yet, this very opportunity of living among the nations was also a source of temptation to ancient Israel. Living within the ancient Near Eastern cultural context, their mission was to challenge the idolatry of that broader culture.<sup>18</sup> However, more often than not the narrative describes ancient Israel adopting the idolatry and idolatrous practices of the other nations they were meant to reject. As the meta-narrative continues,

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<sup>13</sup>Goheen, *Introducing Christian Mission Today*, 42. Goheen also writes in *A Light to the Nations*, “The missional calling of Israel described here in Exodus 19 in terms of a holy nation and a priestly kingdom is centripetal. Israel is to embody God’s creational intention for all humanity for the sake of the world, living in such a way as to draw the nations into covenant with God. Or, to use the later language of Isaiah, Israel is called to be a “light to the nations” (Isa. 42:6 NASB).” Michael W. Goheen, *A Light to the Nations: The Missional Church and the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 39.

<sup>14</sup>Moskala, “The Mission of God’s People,” 48.

<sup>15</sup>Tom Wright, *Bringing the Church to the World: Renewing the Church to Confront the Paganism Entrenched in Western Culture* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1992), 59.

<sup>16</sup>Goheen, *Introducing Christian Mission Today*, 45.

<sup>17</sup>Wright, *The Mission of God*, 467.

<sup>18</sup>Goheen, *A Light to the Nations*, 41.

through the unification and then the division of the kingdom, the prophets reminded the people of their covenant relationship and its call for holiness. The calling of the covenant people was unchanged; they were to be holy as God is holy. The prophets of the eighth century BCE were particularly concerned with issues of social justice and immorality. These issues were perceived as symptoms of covenant unfaithfulness. This brings us now to Isaiah of Jerusalem in the eighth century BCE, generally undisputed as the author of the Isaiah memoir. For Isaiah, the moral failings of his Judean community were exhibited in various aspects of their lives, but mostly in their hypocritical worship, the injustice in the legal system, and the resulting oppression of the poor (Isa 1:1-20). Their lives were a poor reflection of the holiness of God.

For the prophet Isaiah, the issue of holiness would not perhaps be as prevalent if not for the overriding vision of God that he experienced at his call to prophetic ministry, as described in his memoir (6:1-13). The concern for holiness and justice exhibited by Isaiah was perhaps partly the outcome of his profound religious experience and a privileged position as a prophet of being able to envision the true character and nature of Yahweh. Isaiah perceived God's character to be holy, good, and perfect. Having encountered the holy God, and been purified by him, Isaiah was commissioned as a prophet to live and speak the message of this encounter to his recalcitrant community. Isaiah, at the time of his call, encountered the thrice-holy God envisioned in the Temple. This encounter determined his whole preaching—the way he understood God and what the response of the people toward God should be. The revelation of God as the “Holy One of Israel” became so imprinted on Isaiah's theology that the prophet used this term continually throughout the book to refer to God.<sup>19</sup> This phrase, “the Holy One of Israel” became one of the standard ways in which God was identified by Isaiah in the book. The term implies that if God is holy then surely the people to whom God is connected (Israel) should be holy also.<sup>20</sup>

Isaiah placed before the people the standard of divine holiness. Therefore, the judgement that Isaiah later pronounced on Judah was a result of their inability to reflect the holiness of God—not only in their worship, but also in the political life of the nation and their international interactions. The purpose of this requirement of holiness and ethical purity is understood as part of the *missio Dei*; that Judah would embody God's holiness and thereby be a light to the nations. So the idea of mission is imbedded both in the life and message of Isaiah. Yet, the idea

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<sup>19</sup>It was used twenty-five times in the book in total, twelve times in chapters 1-39. See John N. Oswalt, *The Holy One of Israel: Studies in the Book of Isaiah* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014), 3.

<sup>20</sup>John Goldingay, *Isaiah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001), 15.

of mission was also embodied in the life of Isaiah; his life, and that of his children, became set apart as “display people” for Judah, as Judah was meant to be a “display people” to the nations.

The idea of mission as holiness was embodied in the life and narrative of the prophet Isaiah and his children. In his call narrative of chapter 6, Isaiah was set apart as a messenger. He identified himself as unclean in association with the people of his community, yet his lips were purified (signifying his future role as a spokesperson) and he was commissioned. He was instructed to speak a message on behalf of God to the people despite their rejection of the message. In this way, his commissioning paralleled that of ancient Israel at the Exodus; if Israel was to “function as a people who would show the rest of humanity what being human was all about,” then Isaiah was to function as a person to show the Judean community what being holy was all about.<sup>21</sup>

Most likely, Isaiah was attached to the royal court and functioned as a kind of court prophet. This was demonstrated by his easy access to King Ahaz in the midst of a political crisis (Isa 7:1-3). This role of court prophet was not unique to Judah but was a recognised position across the ancient Near East. So Isaiah was set apart (that is, made holy) to be the mouthpiece of God to the Judean kings, particularly Ahaz and Hezekiah, and to provide God’s perspective on their political and social situation. In this sense, Isaiah not only spoke the message of holiness but modelled it as he was set apart for service specifically to the kings to speak a message vital to the political situation they faced. Yet this idea of being set apart was not only exemplified by Isaiah in his vocation as a prophet, but also made incarnate (so to speak) in the children that functioned as signs in Isaiah’s memoir.

The narrative of the Isaiah memoir (Isa 6:1-9:6) can be dated to the period of the Syro-Ephraimite crisis (735-732 BCE). It was into this situation of political and military threat that Isaiah spoke as recorded in the narrative. The memoir refers to three children that functioned as a sign; they were set apart as an embodied sign to the community to reinforce the message of Isaiah. However, this study will just focus on the first child. The first child, Isaiah’s son Shear-Jashub (meaning “a remnant will return”), was introduced in chapter 7 when Isaiah was instructed to take his son to meet Ahaz (vv. 1-9). The king had been threatened by the Syro-Ephraimite coalition and was inspecting the water supply of the city in preparation for the impending siege.

It is noteworthy that Shear-Jashub attended the secret meeting of the prophet with the king. As Rickie Moore notes, “Isaiah knows the children are signs, he knows they are significant, and he knows his

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<sup>21</sup>Wright, *Bringing the Church to the World*, 59.

prophetic call is to be their mentor in the light of this revelation.”<sup>22</sup> While the actual name of Shear-Jashub is significant and suggests the hope of survival (albeit reduced), his bodily presence is also significant. In some sense, the son represents the message of holiness and the *missio Dei* incarnate (in the flesh)—as he stood next to his father Isaiah in quietness and trust, so Ahaz and the Judeans were to stand secure, trusting in God as their deliverer. As Isaiah is set apart for the proclamation of God’s message and justice and as his son is set apart as a visual reminder to trust in God, so Judah is set apart from the nations for the proclamation of God’s message and justice and to demonstrate trust in God. This is their witness—as represented by Shear-Jashub. Judah’s response to the threat of these nations was of vital importance; as the people of God they were to trust Yahweh’s ways and guidance so the nations would marvel “Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people. What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to him?” (Deut 4:6-7). In this way—by a positive response to the message of Isaiah in the midst of political threat—they were meant to showcase the wisdom of God. As Shear-Jashub modelled the message made incarnate, so Judah was meant to model being set apart by God as a witness to the nations. Unfortunately, Ahaz rejected the message of the prophet and his son, as the call of Isaiah anticipated (Isa 6:9-13). So, by reading the Isaiah memoir as part of the meta-narrative of Scripture, there is much more that it offers to the study of the *missio Dei* than just a few isolated verses.

### **Implications for the Pentecostal Community**

In conclusion, there are two implications of the *missio Dei* for the Pentecostal community that emerge from this study. These are the connections between experiencing God and holy living. For Isaiah, holiness was central to his theology and mission. Holiness was expected of the people to reflect the thrice holy God. Holiness was not just an abstract concept, but a lived reality that was meant to be reflected in all areas of their community, including the political life of the covenant community of Judah. Because they were a socio-political entity, their political and social life matched their theology. In our post-New Testament community, the church is not a socio-political entity but exists in all different people groups, nations, and cultural contexts. So holiness will look different to the Old Testament and vision of Isaiah. What should holiness look like for today’s Pentecostal community? This is for

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<sup>22</sup>Rickie D. Moore, “The Prophet as Mentor: A Crucial Facet of the Biblical Representation of Moses, Elijah and Isaiah,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 13, no. 2 (2007): 169.

each generation and context to discern. However, what Isaiah's memoir reminds us is that holiness is not just a theological concept, but that holiness and the *missio Dei* needs to be made incarnate in the community. It is not an abstract idea to which the community pays lip service, but holiness and mission is about being and living out holiness as a witness to the holy God.

The first implication for the Pentecostal community from Isaiah's memoir is that Isaiah's theology of holiness flowed from an encounter with God. His theology was in fact formed by his experience. The continual reference to God as the "Holy One of Israel" (as a term emerging from Isaiah's vision in chapter 6) reminds us that the concept of holiness that Isaiah preached was not disconnected from his encounter with the living God. Encounter and holiness were intertwined in the personal experience of the prophet. For Pentecostals, this should also be a priority—for holiness to not just be about outward appearances or mores but based in encounter with the living God.

The second implication from Isaiah's memoir for the Pentecostal community as they seek to live the *missio Dei* relates to incarnational living. Shear-Jashub is an important model of holiness and mission for the contemporary Pentecostal community in Asia because so often the community of God's people in the world faces situations of threat and hostility. Their response to situations of hostility is a witness. By not living under fear and capitulating to panic, but instead being a sign-post (like Shear-Jashub) standing in quietness and trust of God, then they are a witness to the non-believers around them. While this display may not be readily accepted by the communities in which we live, yet our calling is to live faithfully despite the rejection or acceptance of our witness. Through the example of Isaiah and his son, we can see a connection between holiness (being set apart by God) and being a witness to the nations as a display people.

Isaiah's memoir reminds us that holiness as mission needs to be modelled and "made flesh" to be visible to those outside the covenant community. While this may potentially lead to a focus on performance and outward appearance, connecting it to an experiential encounter with God noted above may assist in grounding the theology in relationship. Of course, the challenge within the Asian context is to discern what holiness looks like in each community and not simply adopt western mores and forms of holiness. While there will be some ways that holiness should be outworked that will be common to all Christian communities based on expectations of godly living drawn from the biblical text, there may be specific ways in which the local communities in Asia reflect the holiness of Yahweh that furthers the *missio Dei*. This is a legacy of Isaiah as we attempt to work out the *missio Dei* today.

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