

**AN INTRODUCTION  
TO THE  
STUDY OF CHRISTIAN MISSIONS**

by

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**CHAPTER FIVE**

**THE OLD TESTAMENT AND MISSIONS**

WHEN A MISSIONARY wants to give the people among whom he is laboring the Word of GOD in their own tongue, he begins by translating some part of the New Testament. This is perfectly proper, for it is in the New Testament that we have the message of JESUS CHRIST our Saviour. The culmination of GOD's revelation to man is JESUS CHRIST. And these are the books that tell us of Him and of the salvation that He wrought. So then, although they have translated some parts of the Bible into well over a thousand languages, most of these have only the New Testament or a part of it.

Now the missionaries do not mean by this that we should entirely neglect the Old Testament. Doubtless none of them would be willing to say that the Old Testament is any less the Word of GOD than the New. If it were possible to give the people the whole Bible, they would not withhold any bit of it. This is true even where the reading of the Old Testament might raise some questions difficult to explain.

There are few who would go as far as did Ulfilas, the great pioneer missionary to the Goths in southeastern Europe. You may remember that Ulfilas provided the first translation of the Bible into any Germanic tongue. But he refused to translate the Books of the Kings. His Goths were already too inclined to warlike deeds. He was not going to provide them with any further encouragement or excuse from the Bible if he could help it.

But most missionaries today do not shun to declare to the people "**all the counsel of God**" insofar as they are able. Polygamous Africans are even allowed to read the story of polygamy in the Old Testament. Still it is true that missionaries, as well as preachers here in the homeland, cannot avoid dwelling much in the pages of the New Testament, with their rich exposition of the life that is ours in CHRIST.

Even in choosing a text for a missionary message to the folks at home, a text which often serves only to give a sort of Biblical introduction to our story of life and Christian service in another land, we usually turn to such passages as Acts 1:8 or Romans 10:14 and 15. Only occasionally do we refer to some passage in the Old Testament. Is it that the Old Testament is lacking in missionary character? Not at all. It doesn't indeed have so many brief, to-the-point texts that can

readily be used to introduce a missionary talk. But its missionary character is readily apparent to those who become familiar with its message.

Now in studying the missionary character of the Old Testament, there is one thing we want to avoid so far as possible. It is the same as in our study of the New Testament. We don't want to choose certain proof-texts from here and there, pulling them out of their context and arbitrarily putting them together to prove our thesis. We want to seek honestly for the message that the Old Testament itself has to give us.

Three questions stand out for which we want answers. Let me state them briefly to begin with, and then come back to deal with each one in detail. First is the question, "Does the Old Testament have *a missionary message*?" That is, does the message of the Old Testament have prime significance not only for the Jewish people, and not only for the age in which it was written, but also for other peoples and for other ages? Does its message have a vital importance for us today? Does it concern peoples whose culture differs as widely as that of the Russians and the Japanese?

Our second question is this, "Does the Old Testament show *a missionary purpose*?" That is, does it show that it was GOD's intention to have its message known among other peoples besides the Jews? It is not always easy to show intent. GOD doesn't always reveal clearly just what His ultimate purpose in any case may be. But we shall see what revelations of His purpose we may be able to find in this regard.

And for the last question we would ask, "Does the Old Testament reveal any *missionary activity*?" That is, was there before the time of CHRIST any attempt to bring the blessings of the Old Testament revelation to others? We can readily understand that the Jewish nation as a whole might overlook its missionary responsibility. Hasn't the Christian Church done the same thing for long periods of its history? In fact, aren't there many Christians today, in spite of the clear injunctions in the New Testament, who say they don't believe in missions? But our question is, "Was there any comprehension of a missionary responsibility among those who had the Old Testament revelation? And was there any attempt to fulfill this responsibility, whether by direct evangelism or in some other way?"

Now let us return to our first question:

### **DOES THE OLD TESTAMENT HAVE A MISSIONARY MESSAGE?**

A missionary message, of course, is a message that one has and another needs. It is a message that ought to be propagated, spread abroad.

Just what is the message of the Old Testament? Clearly it is more than just history and law and poetry and prophecy. These are what we might call the "literary values" of the Old Testament. But its greatest value is the message it seeks to give us. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews is referring to the Old Testament when he says in his opening verse, "**God ... hath ... spoken.**" And about what has He spoken?

First of all, He has spoken about Himself, the beginning and the end.

And what is the Old Testament message about GOD? Here some unbelievers will say that there is more than one. They will object that the GOD of the prophets is not the same as the GOD of the law. They try to reconstruct the development of the idea of GOD in the Old Testament according to their own notions. Jehovah was at first a tribal deity of a wandering group of Bedouins. Then, as the Jewish nation emerged and grew, they needed a broader concept. So their crude, harsh and primitive ideas gave way to the more advanced views of a later day. Of course this is simply the old evolutionary hypothesis carried over from biology to religion.

But we are not going to follow these fanciful reconstructions. Rather we shall see in broad terms what the Book says.

Our first picture of GOD is that *of the CREATOR of the universe*. We ourselves are so familiar with this concept that we fail to grasp its significance for others. We think it rather trite.

Now it is true that many heathen do have a more or less vague idea of a CREATOR. But others do not. When Paul preached his famous sermon on Mars Hill in Athens, he saw fit to begin with, "**God that made the world and all things therein**" (Acts 17:24).

What a message this is to the millions who still fear the spirits of rivers and trees, mountains and lakes, animals, birds and other creatures! "There is an almighty GOD over all, a GOD who created all things!" "**The heavens declare the glory of GOD and the firmament sheweth his handiwork**" (Psalm 19:1). Is not this a missionary message?

Closely allied with this picture of GOD is that of *His oneness*. GOD is one. This uniqueness of GOD is the substratum of the whole Old Testament from the Law through the Prophets.

It is on the basis of this teaching that Mohammedan missionary work has been built and has had its great successes. "There is no God but God!" Man in his rebellion against GOD has invented a multiplicity of gods. But now he groans to be delivered from these demons of his own creation. What a missionary message, to be able to assure men that they do not need to try to placate a horde of capricious, evil-working spirits! There is one GOD, one only. It is the one who created all things.

Third, the Old Testament pictures *GOD as righteous*. Again there are some who think this is trite. "Of course GOD is righteous," they say, "otherwise He wouldn't be GOD." But this is only an indication of what effect the Bible has had on their thinking. Even those who profess unbelief are affected by its teachings. For where did they get the idea that GOD is righteous?

The heathen gods are not righteous. That is, they are not righteous in any moral sense. They can only be considered righteous if we admit that anything a god does is right simply because the god does it. The pagan gods are deceitful, immoral, licentious creatures whose only law is their own caprice.

Many speak of the stern justice of the GOD of the Old Testament as if it were unattractive and unbecoming; They do not realize how even this would be a great relief to the followers of pagan gods. The pagan gods are like Oriental despots; their very whims are laws, and what is right

today may be altogether wrong tomorrow. "How can you know?" their followers ask. "How can you be sure what the god wants?" What a relief to worship a GOD whose demands are always right and just!

But in the fourth place GOD is also *merciful and compassionate*. All through the Old Testament His justice is balanced with mercy and compassion. We see it even in close association with His judgment. We see it in the covenant He made with Noah and all mankind right after the flood (Genesis 9:15-17). We see it in the Law, "**shewing mercy unto thousands**" (Exodus 20:6). We see it in the Psalms and in the Prophets (Psalms 119:64; Micah 7:18). How the world needs this mercy and compassion!

Finally, the Old Testament shows us a GOD who is *sincerely interested in His creatures, especially in man*. There is nothing farther from the Old Testament view than the picture of a GOD who created the world, established its laws, "set it going, and then went fishing."

It is not only in such New Testament passages as John 3:16 that we find GOD's concern expressed for mankind. It is found throughout the Old Testament. Even in the special covenant He made with Abraham (Genesis 12:3; 18:18; 22:18) and repeated later to Jacob (Genesis 28:14) He did not fail to mention the blessing it would bring to all the world.

Second, GOD has spoken about man.

The Greek philosopher who urged, "Know thyself," expressed a deep truth. We don't know ourselves, but we need to. We need to know our capabilities and our weaknesses. We need to know wherein we are like others and wherein we differ. We need to know what can be expected of man - what forces move him.

The first thing the Old Testament tells us about man is that *he was made in GOD's image* (Genesis 1:26,27). There are some unbelievers who scoff at this. They laughingly say instead that "man made GOD in his own image." But false as their statement is, it is still not so ridiculous as you might think. For if man had to invent a GOD he couldn't do better than make him in the image of man. After all, what higher nature has he ever known? With all his weaknesses and his failures, man is still the crown of creation. He is the only creature who has been able to bring much of the rest of creation under some measure of personal control. No wonder the Psalmist wrote, "**Ye are gods; and all of you are children of the most High**" (Psalms 82:6).

Now it is not easy for us who look on the outward appearance to see GOD's image in man. Sometimes we find it particularly hard. There are some in whom it seems to be disfigured more than usual. We ourselves fall far short of GOD's perfection, yet we tend to despise those others who seem to be a little farther away from it than we. We magnify their inferiority to us, forgetting the old adage of "the pot calling the kettle black."

We talk about racial superiority. We used to speak of "the white man's burden." We agree with the Latin American, who looks down on the Indian as an inferior creature and proudly speaks of himself as a *racional*, a "rational being." We even talk sometimes about the uselessness of missionary work among backward peoples. And all because we refuse to believe the truth we

find at the beginning of the Old Testament: that man, as man, was made in GOD's image.

Closely related to this first teaching is the Old Testament doctrine of *the unity of the human race*.

The Old Testament does at times distinguish between families and tribes and nations. But our modern racial discrimination is completely foreign to it. It is true that there are some who try to justify their racial attitudes by an appeal to the Old Testament. There are a few who still call attention to the curse that Noah pronounced against Canaan, the son of Ham (Genesis 9:25). They say that because of that curse all Negroes must forever be servants.

But such teachings don't come from a study of the Old Testament. Instead, they are born of our prejudices. And because we want to believe them, we try to find some basis for them in Holy Writ. In all honesty we ought to call them rationalizations.

What the Old Testament does clearly teach is the unity of the human race. We all have a common ancestor. In him we all were made in GOD's image. By descent from him we all are brethren. Each has followed his own willful way, and some have prospered more than others, but in nature we are one - one even in our sins.

Men always have resisted this idea of the unity of mankind. Partly it is because of pride, the sort of pride that makes a prosperous man deny his poor relations. But even more it is because it means responsibility. If all mankind is one, then every ruler is responsible to his people, the noble to the commoner, the privileged to the less privileged. They are all of the same stuff. Then, too, those in foreign lands who don't have the blessings that we enjoy in CHRIST do have a just claim on us. It doesn't matter that their race and culture are different from ours. They are still of the same blood.

But the Old Testament is also a message about man's sin.

Like a great mirror, the Old Testament reveals to us our hearts. And what we see is not altogether pleasant. It is not a cause for pride. Even the best of us are guilty. Sin has corrupted all of mankind.

The heathen gods are nearly always arbitrary and capricious. Their commands are seldom based on what is of itself right and good. As a result, sin among the heathen comes to be not much more than ceremonial defilement. It is not impurity of heart but of body; not violation of conscience but of rules.

But in the Old Testament sin is revealed as *moral iniquity*. Before ever the Law was given, in the days before the flood, "**the imagination of man's heart**" was evil, and GOD condemned him. Sin existed apart from the Law. It was not the Law that made it sinful. The Law merely pointed it out and condemned it.

Now the Law did establish for the Israelites certain forms and ceremonies. But they were never intended to be an end in themselves. Isaiah 1:11-17 shows how useless GOD held them to be by themselves. "**To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto me saith the LORD. . Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease**

**to do evil; learn to do well. . ."**

Not only among the heathen but in all the world today this message is needed. Even in Roman days it had a great attraction for pagan idolators. The Old Testament told of a standard of righteousness that was unchangeable, a righteousness that was in the very nature of things. So numerous Romans and Greeks became converts to Judaism. They felt the need for such a message.

Besides this, the Old Testament pictures sin as universal among men. No one is free from its contamination. All are sinners and need to be redeemed from sin. How strangely this contrasts to the idea that many hold today - the notion that primitive peoples lead a happy, childlike existence, unaware of sin until the missionary comes. Not only is this far from the Old Testament teaching, it is the most absurd sort of fiction. Only overromantic Americans, ignorant of the realities of heathenism, could imagine such things. For however perverted his ideas of sin, the heathen is always conscious of its presence.

And the Old Testament also reveals sin as that which separates men from GOD (Psalms 14:2-3). That is the burden of its message: *sin separating man from the source of life; GOD seeking to reconcile man to Himself that he may live again*. This indeed is a message that is needed - a missionary message.

But again, the Old Testament message is also *a message of salvation and hope*. From the entrance of sin, in Genesis 3, to such wonderful prophetic utterances as Isaiah 1:18, this message is repeated in innumerable ways. "**Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.**"

Who could keep such a message to himself? Who could believe the reality of such a hope and not make it known to others?

We could go on and show other details of the Old Testament message that are missionary. We find, for example, that the Old Testament is concerned with the fundamental problems of all mankind, and not just those of one group. Its appeal is so universal that people everywhere forget that its leading characters were Jewish. They think of them in terms of their own race and nation. This universality of appeal makes it a missionary Book.

Then, too, there is no question about the missionary character of its prophetic message. The prophets often forgot national boundaries as they carried out their ministry. It was too big, too vital to be limited to one people, even the "chosen people."

But we don't believe it is necessary to go farther. The message of the Old Testament clearly has a missionary character.

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