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ABSTRACT

GOD'S MISSION TO THE "NATIONS" AND HINDUS:  
THREE OLD TESTAMENT NARRATIVE MODELS

by

Andrew J. Tompkins

Adviser: Bruce L. Bauer

## ABSTRACT OF GRADUATE STUDENT RESEARCH

Thesis

Andrews University

Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

Title: GOD'S MISSION TO THE "NATIONS" AND HINDUS: THREE OLD  
NARRATIVE MODELS

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Date completed: October 2012

### Background to the Problem

The world's religions outside of Christianity have still hardly been touched by the gospel. This is especially true of Hindus, which make up the third largest religious group in the world. The time for new understandings and approaches is long overdue.

### Problem

The challenge of understanding how to present the God of the Bible to Hindus in a meaningful and lasting way continues to perplex the mission-minded person. For centuries this challenge has been present, and yet the gap between Christians and Hindus in many ways appears to be increasing. This study looks at God's mission in the Old

Testament with a focus on the encounters between God and His people with people from the surrounding “nations” in order to develop a more biblical approach to the challenge. Three relevant narratives are analyzed in detail in order to gain working theologies that can be applied missiologically to the Hindu context.

The first chapter gives an overview of God’s mission in the Old Testament and compares the “nations” with Hindus of today. The next three chapters are divided into three narratives that include cross-religious encounters: Naomi and Ruth, Elijah and the widow of Zarephath, Elisha and Naaman. These three narratives each highlight specific elements of God’s mission to the nations: Naomi’s attitude of *hesed* that leads to Ruth transforming her worldview to follow Yahweh; the widow of Zarephath’s experience of God’s power that leads her to a clearer understanding of who God is; and Elisha’s encouragement of Naaman to “go in peace” despite Naaman not having a fully accurate understanding of God.

These three narratives provide a foundation for better missiological approaches to Hindus. At the same time they are an example of the potential that Old Testament narrative holds for missiology in general.

Andrews University  
Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

GOD'S MISSION TO THE "NATIONS" AND HINDUS:  
THREE OLD TESTAMENT NARRATIVE MODELS

A Thesis  
Presented in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

by  
Andrew J. Tompkins

2012

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Background to the Problem**

In 1991, David J. Bosch in his comprehensive work *Transforming Mission* quoted Karl Hartenstein as saying, “We have not theology with which we could even begin to take up the challenge presented to Christianity by Buddhism and Hinduism.”<sup>1</sup>

This was written more than twenty years ago, yet it would seem there has been little change in regard to Buddhism and Hinduism. In the introduction to the book *Christianity Encountering World Religions*, a similar picture is painted. The fact is that the world’s major religions outside of Christianity have hardly been touched by the message of the Bible. After presenting the stark realities, the authors make the following statement: “But perhaps we should consider other ways to present the gospel to Buddhist peoples—and to Hindu peoples and Muslim peoples—that may have a better chance of numerical success.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>David Jacobus Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 477.

<sup>2</sup>Terry C. Muck and Frances S. Adeney, *Christianity Encountering World Religions: The Practice of Mission in the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 10. My own experience has reinforced this point. Having worked among Hindus for a period of time I found it challenging to present the gospel in a meaningful way. This thesis is part of the answer that I, along with others, have come to understand.

## Statement of the Problem

It is in the shadow of these stark realities that the research and conclusions of this thesis have been carried out. Hinduism is a major world religion, with the third largest number of adherents on the planet. Throughout history Christians have found it extremely difficult to present the gospel to Hindus.<sup>3</sup> Plamthodathil S. Jacob writes that “the chasm between Hindu and Christian communities is widening day-by-day.”<sup>4</sup> H. L. Richard is also acutely aware of the need for more to be done among Hindus. He says: “The Hindu world consists of thousands of distinct caste/cultural people groups that remain largely without any witness to the reality and power of Christ.”<sup>5</sup> This thesis hopes to move towards a more biblical approach in understanding God’s mission as it relates specifically to Hindus.

## Scope and Limitations

This thesis will attempt to gain a sample understanding of what God’s mission in the Old Testament looked like both in overview and through three specific narrative examples.<sup>6</sup> Space does not allow for the analysis of every instance where God interacts

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<sup>3</sup>For a good survey of Christian views and approaches to Hindus as seen in the great church councils of the 20<sup>th</sup> century see S. Wesley Ariarajah, *Hindus and Christians: A Century of Protestant Ecumenical Thought* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991).

<sup>4</sup>Plamthodathil S. Jacob, "Walking the Bridge between Hinduism and Christianity," in *The Indian Church in Context: Her Emergence, Growth, and Mission*, ed. Mark T. B. Laing (Delhi, India: CMS/ISPCK, 2002), 190.

<sup>5</sup>H. L. Richard, *Hinduism: A Brief Look at the Theology, Scriptures, and Social System, with Comments on the Gospel in India* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2007), 42.

<sup>6</sup>It should be noted here that this is not the first work which takes Old Testament narrative and applies it missiologically. See Adrinna Denise Beltré, “Queen and Deliverer: An Exploration of the Missiological Implications in the Book of Esther” (M.A. thesis, Andrews University, 2007). See also Sung Ik Kim, “Proclamation in Cross-Cultural Context: Missiological Implications of the Book of Daniel” (Ph.D. dissertation, Andrews University, 2005).

with adherents to other religions, and so as a result three relevant narratives have been chosen to get a better understanding of some of the ways God dealt with the “nations.”<sup>7</sup> These narratives, as will be shown, deal specifically with encounters between believers in God and adherents to other gods. Beyond this they are encounters in which the adherents to other gods move towards being believers in the true God.

Second, it must be kept in mind that Hinduism is a broad and complex religion. It is not possible to cover all aspects of Hinduism; therefore, this thesis will be limited to dealing with what has been termed “popular Hinduism.”<sup>8</sup> This will help the thesis to be focused and relevant.

### **Methodology**

Three sample narratives have been chosen from the Old Testament in order to address the issue. These were chosen for their relevancy, but also as a sampling to show the possibilities of exploring OT narratives that contain interreligious encounters. There are examples of God and His followers interacting with people who for all practical purposes are adherents to religions that have other gods. Out of each of these narratives a working theology will be developed that attempts to address a modern-day missiological issue. In order to do this, several disciplines of study will be utilized.

Beyond the biblical text itself there are a number of other sources used, which include literature in the area of biblical studies, missiology, and anthropology. I also

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<sup>7</sup>See p. 18 of chapter 2 for a list of other narratives found in the Old Testament.

<sup>8</sup>C. J. Fuller, *The Camphor Flame: Popular Hinduism and Society in India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

engaged in ethnographic research in the field that is relevant to the problem addressed in this work.

## CHAPTER 2

### GOD'S MISSION TO THE "NATIONS" AND HINDUS

In order to lessen the chasm that Jacob claims is increasing it would seem that there needs to be a fresh look at God's mission as portrayed in the Bible, specifically in the Old Testament. It is the attempt of this chapter to motivate the reader to look carefully at who the "nations" of the OT were and what God's relation and mission to them was. By doing this it is then possible to find some similarities with God's mission to the "nations" as compared to God's mission to Hindus today.

#### **God's Mission from the Beginning**

The title of this chapter starts with "God's mission." Before developing a human understanding of mission, it is imperative that mission be recognized as God's. God's mission is an attempt by God to restore the lost relationship between God and humanity (Gen 3). It is done through His initiative, through His kindness, through His power, through His encouragement, and through His love. All true mission starts and ends with God. We must recognize that this has not always been properly acknowledged or highlighted throughout the history of missions. It has been articulated in more recent times as the *missio dei*. This term has come to mean many things to different people, and



so over the years it has lost some of its original meaning and intent.<sup>1</sup> However, it still seems to be the most appropriate terminology for what is being conveyed here.<sup>2</sup>

So what is God's mission?<sup>3</sup> There is a vast amount of literature that deals with this question, far more than is necessary to review for the discussion here. God's mission is often described as His desire to bless humanity through His work of salvation/redemption. In order to better understand what God's mission entails we must ask another question.

When did God's mission get under way? Timothy Tennent in his book *Invitation to World Missions* makes the valid point that mission does not begin with the resurrection or even the "Great Commission."<sup>4</sup> The starting point of God's mission has been debated by many scholars and missiologists alike. While it would seem most scholars agree that the plan of salvation was at least hinted at in Gen 3:15, they often separate this from the call to mission, which is often linked with God's calling of Abraham in Gen 12, where there is a specific promise of blessing for the "nations." However, Roger E. Hedlund

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<sup>1</sup>Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 389-393.

<sup>2</sup>I am very much in debt to Christopher J. H. Wright's book for this concept of God's mission, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006). In his book however he uses slightly different terminology than I have here which is "the mission of God." It would seem the terminology "mission of God" and God's mission and the *mission dei* are basically interchangeable. Interestingly enough David J. Bosch uses the terminology "God's mission" in his section of *Transforming Mission* entitled "Mission as *Missio Dei*." See the first sentence of this section in Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 389.

<sup>3</sup>Wright makes the point that he is "dissatisfied with popular use of the word *mission* solely in relation to human endeavors of various kinds." Wright, *The Mission of God*, 22, 23. I am in complete agreement with Wright in this respect, in fact I feel that it may be time that a new term be developed to express what God has been doing, is doing, and will do in order to reveal Himself to His creation. With that said I am going to continue to use the word "mission" hoping that the reader understands it in a new light.

<sup>4</sup>Timothy C. Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2010), 77. Tennent writes later in the book in his chapter entitled "A Trinitarian, 'New Creation' Theology of Culture" that all the basic elements of culture are present in the creation account in Gen 2. *Ibid.*, 176.

makes the excellent point that God showed Himself to be a missionary when He came searching for Adam and Eve after they had sinned.<sup>5</sup> In *Encountering Theology of Mission*, Gen 3:9 is also pointed to as a key moment when God starts the process of restoring His relationship with humanity, and therefore must be included in any conversation about the mission of God.<sup>6</sup>

As a result of Adam and Eve's sin there was a terrible disconnect between God and humanity. Hedlund states: "The Old Testament reveals the heart of God who yearns after those made in his image."<sup>7</sup> From that point forward God's mission takes on a redemptive character, which is universal in scope; the message of the Old Testament is a message for the whole world.<sup>8</sup>

David Filbeck lays a good foundation for God's mission through a discourse on God, sin, and the "nations" found in Gen 1-11. He writes, "As the human race became alienated from God as recorded throughout Gen. 1-11, so reconciliation is seen as beginning from Abraham in Genesis 12."<sup>9</sup> In a similar strain, Walter C. Kaiser Jr. states

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<sup>5</sup>Roger E. Hedlund, *God and the Nations: A Biblical Theology of Mission in the Asian Context* (Delhi, India: ISPCK, 1997), 10.

<sup>6</sup>Craig Ott, Stephen J. Strauss, and Timothy C. Tennent, *Encountering Theology of Mission: Biblical Foundations, Historical Developments, and Contemporary Issues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 6. Kenneth Cracknell goes so far as to say, "What is set out now is a biblical salvation history that sees creation as God's first act in redemption. Unlike *Heilsgeschichte* it starts way back before the call of Abraham, and so to speak, long before the disobedience of Adam and Eve and the curse that befell them as a result. Therefore it offers a much broader theological perspective within which to see the redemption of all the peoples of the world." Kenneth Cracknell, *In Good and Generous Faith: Christian Responses to Religious Pluralism* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2006), 7. There may be some value in exploring this idea more, although if this statement is true then a redefinition of "mission" would be required.

<sup>7</sup>Hedlund, *God and the Nations*, 2.

<sup>8</sup>Johannes Blauw, quoted in David Filbeck, *Yes, God of the Gentiles, Too: The Missionary Message of the Old Testament* (Wheaton, IL: Billy Graham Center, Wheaton College, 1994), 46.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 45. For the whole discourse see pp. 46-56.

in his work *Mission in the Old Testament* that “even though God had revealed his grace all during the millennia of Genesis 1-11, now in Genesis 12:1-3 he would give the most succinct statement of his promise-plan for the ages to come.”<sup>10</sup> I propose that God’s mission, like Filbeck and Kaiser stated, is present in Gen 1-11.

Genesis 12:3 is deemed by many as the most important mission text in the Old Testament. It is in light of the “nations” that we must read God’s call to Abram in Gen 12:3. Abram is called to be a blessing to the “nations.” C. J. Wright has summed up this passage well when he says, “*Blessing for the nations is the bottom line, textually and theologically, of God’s promise to Abraham* [emphasis in original].”<sup>11</sup>

### **The Nations**

So who are these “nations” and what is their relation to God? In Gen 10 there is recorded a genealogical list of Noah and his sons’ offspring. It is in this chapter that the “nations” are first mentioned, as Noah’s sons disperse and multiply throughout the earth and separate themselves based on language, family, and “*nation*” (Gen 10:5, 32). A detailed account of this dispersion and why it occurred is found in Gen 11, and in the story of the Tower of Babel.

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<sup>10</sup>Walter C. Kaiser, *Mission in the Old Testament: Israel as a Light to the Nations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 17.

<sup>11</sup>See the following for more on Gen 12:3 as it relates to mission. Wright, *The Mission of God*, 194-221; Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions*, 106-113; Ott, Strauss, and Tennent, *Encountering Theology of Mission*, 7; Filbeck, *Yes, God of the Gentiles, Too*, 60-63; Kaiser, *Mission in the Old Testament*, 17-21; Hedlund, *God of the Nations*, 18-19; Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 53-57; Michael W. Goheen, *A Light to the Nations: The Missional Church and the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 27-32; Ralph D. Winter and others, *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2009), 3-9; Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Mission: Christian Witness in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 28-36.

Up to this time God's mission could not have been to the "nations" because there were no "nations." It is not that God did not have a mission, rather God's mission was to all the earth's inhabitants who had not yet been divided into separate "nations." Once the population of earth grew and dispersed, based on language and family, then God's mission to the "nations" as emphasized in Gen 12:3 began.

The "nations" in this case are not to be compared with what is today known as a nation. These were not countries with political boundaries, although eventually they often became that as well. In Hebrew the word used in Gen 10:32 means something more like "a body or group of people bound together by such common identities as language, religious belief, and geographical location."<sup>12</sup> This is much more akin to what some would call a "people group."<sup>13</sup> From the above definition one specific trait should be highlighted and that is, *religious belief*. An important item to keep in mind here is that biblical Hebrew "lacks a word for 'religion,'"<sup>14</sup> therefore we can assume that "nations" describes more than just a group of people, but also the religious beliefs of those people.

Daniel I. Block makes the observation that Near Eastern nations (during the time of the Old Testament) had a "three-dimensional nature." He uses a triangle to illustrate his point, with each apex representing one of the three dimensions. The apexes are as follows: deity, land, and people. He then goes on to say, "Consequently . . . it is impossible to examine the relationship of a god and his/her subjects in isolation from the

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<sup>12</sup>Filbeck, *Yes, God of the Gentiles, Too*, 53.

<sup>13</sup>Hedlund, *God of the Nations*; Wright, *The Mission of God*, 200, fn. 17.

<sup>14</sup>Daniel I. Block, "Other Religions in Old Testament Theology," in *Biblical Faith and Other Religions: An Evangelical Assessment*, ed. David W. Baker (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic & Professional, 2004), 44.

ties of both deity and population to the land. Furthermore, a people's ties to its homeland cannot be understood without reference to some measure of divine involvement.”<sup>15</sup>

### **The Choices of the “Nations”**

There is another important distinction that the Bible makes in regard to these nations. After the “Tower of Babel” dispersion, it would seem many of the “nations” chose to follow new paths of belief. Romans 1:20-23 (NKJV) gives insight into the paths the “nations” chose to follow:

For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man—and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things.

Many of the “nations” went this route, choosing to develop and worship their own gods and goddesses from the created order, rather than the true Creator God.

They rejected the living God who had created them and given them their very existence, and replaced Him with created replicas. Wright puts it well when he says, “Idolatry dethrones God and enthrones creation. . . . A great reversal happens: God who should be worshipped becomes an object to be used; creation, which is for our use and blessing, becomes the object of our worship.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Daniel Isaac Block, *The Gods of the Nations: Studies in Near Eastern Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000), 18-20.

<sup>16</sup>Wright, *The Mission of God*, 164-165.

In fact, God called Abram out of such a nation.<sup>17</sup> The Bible indicates that Abram's family background included idol worshipers (Josh 24:2, 14). For whatever reason Abram had decided to follow the one true God and God called him out to be the father of many "nations." The reality was that most "nations" had either forgotten the true God or had deliberately chosen to follow other gods.

Throughout the Old Testament there is a great struggle surrounding humanity's choice of whom to worship. Even Israel, the very nation God chose to be a blessing to the other nations, struggled with this same choice. Deuteronomy 4:19 tells us that God was concerned about the nation of Israel falling prey to what other nations had already fallen for, namely, the worship of the celestial stars, planets, and the sun. Wright points out that what the nations were worshiping was real—the sun, the stars, all those things are real—the problem being that they are part of the created order and not the Creator.<sup>18</sup>

Wright goes on to explain that there are really three ways of categorizing idol worship: "Idols and gods may be (1) objects within the physical creation, (2) demons, or (3) the product of human hands."<sup>19</sup> It would seem that the second option is always working behind the scenes or somewhere nearby. While it is true that often an "idol worshiper" is not willfully worshipping Satan, demons are happy whenever a human worships something apart from God.

There are biblical examples of all three of these categories of idol worship. Israel worshiped the created order, imitating the nations around them, despite God's warning

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<sup>17</sup>M. Daniel Carroll R., "Blessing the Nations: Toward a Biblical Theology of Mission from Genesis," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 10, no. 1 (2000): 21.

<sup>18</sup>Wright, *The Mission of God*, 141.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 142.

not to (Deut 4:19). This occurred most likely through the influence of the “nations” surrounding Israel (2 Kgs 17:16; 21:3).<sup>20</sup> As an example of this, one is reminded of the Egyptians who held their sun god Atum in very high esteem; in fact, almost all the major nations around Israel viewed the celestial order as divine.<sup>21</sup> At times even humans were elevated to the level of deity. An example of this is the King of Tyre as portrayed in Ezekiel. It was common for emperors and kings to claim divine status in the ancient world.<sup>22</sup> The second option is described in Deut 32:17 where it states that sacrificing to other gods can be classified as sacrificing to demons. The third option is found in the idols that were often man-made objects, and as a result were mocked as powerless images by both Isaiah and Jeremiah (Isa 44:12-13; Jer 10:3-5).

Wright points out that one of the problems with much of the idol worship of the nations was that it failed to differentiate between humans and other living things and often struggled to define any dividing line between good and evil.<sup>23</sup> As a result it became a real challenge for the people adhering to such beliefs to develop a solid moral and social code.

Wright observes that one problem with polytheistic worship is that the worshiper is often left in fear and doubt as to whether or not the deities were pleased. He points out that Godly fear remedies this by emphasizing that there is only one God to “fear”

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<sup>20</sup>Block, *The Gods of the Nations*, 65.

<sup>21</sup>John H. Walton, ed., *Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 201, 447.

<sup>22</sup>John H. Walton, ed., *Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 465.

<sup>23</sup>Wright, *The Mission of God*, 165.

therefore you need not stress about all the others.<sup>24</sup> The nations were living in constant fear, attempting to appease their gods with all sorts of rituals, lest they be subjected to the wrath of the deities (Lev 18:21; 19:26-28; 1 Kgs 18:26-28).

There is much more that could be written on the topic of worship directed away from God. Suffice it to say that the nations outside of Israel, more often than not, were guilty of directing their worship away from the God of heaven, and as a result their very behavior and actions were affected in a negative way. The goal here is not to point out all the negative aspects of the “nations” in order to condemn them, but rather to simply show the reality as described in the Bible. So what is God’s relationship to the “nations” in light of the above description?

### **God’s Relationship and Mission to the “Nations”**

#### God as Sovereign over the “Nations”

God’s relationship and ultimately His mission to the “nations” rested on His sovereignty over all the “nations” regardless of whether or not the “nations” recognized Him as such. The fact is that all the “nations” of the entire earth were nothing more than “a drop in a bucket” to God (Isa 40:15). Job makes the point that it is God who is behind all that the “nations” do or accomplish (Job 12:23). The psalmist tells us that God’s eye is on the “nations,” and they are under His power (Pss 47:8; 66:7). Tennent recognizes that God’s sovereignty over the “nations” is an essential part of His mission to the

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<sup>24</sup>Wright, *The Mission of God*, 168-169.



“nations.”<sup>25</sup> As has already been shown it was God who created the “nations” in the first place.

Through His very act of creation God must be recognized as Sovereign. Even the nations had life because of God. The Bible seems to imply that, while Israel was chosen in a way different from other nations, the other nations were still under the surveillance of God. This can be seen in Amos 9:7 where even the Ethiopians, Philistines, and Syrians fall into a similar category as that of Israel. An even more striking passage can be found in Isa 19:18-25 which ends with these words, “Blessed is Egypt My people, and Assyria the work of My hands, and Israel My inheritance.” Clearly God desired all the nations to recognize that He was Sovereign over them.

#### God’s Desire to Bless the “Nations”

God not only wanted to be recognized as Sovereign over the nations but He also wanted to bless the nations. As has already been noted of above, God’s desire to bless the nations is first articulated in Abraham’s call.<sup>26</sup> Michael W. Goheen summarizes the thrust of this call: “God will pursue his purposes for all creation through Israel, first making Abraham into a great nation and then blessing *all* nations and all creation through that nation. The nation that comes from Abraham is to live as a contrast people in the midst of pagan idolatry, embodying God’s creational intentions as a sign of where redemptive

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<sup>25</sup>Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions*, 113, 114.

<sup>26</sup> Carroll says, “Ultimately, Yahweh is the bestower of blessing upon Abram and the rest of humankind alike.” See Carroll R., “Blessing the Nations,” 23.

history is going.”<sup>27</sup> Abraham was just the first in a long line of individuals who God would attempt to use as participants in His mission.

God’s mission to the “nations” was His primary goal in calling Abram and eventually establishing His covenant with the nation of Israel. “God chose Abraham and Israel for priestly service among the nations.”<sup>28</sup> Many authors prefer the term “election” in connection with God’s choosing of Israel as a nation that would serve Him, and glorify His name in view of the nations.<sup>29</sup> While this term “election” makes sense and is useful, the phrase as found in *Encountering Theology of Mission* seems more appropriate by using the heading “The Creation of a Kingdom People.”<sup>30</sup> This seems to capture God’s mission in the OT more accurately.

#### The Blessing Is Salvation

Most importantly God’s mission to the “nations” was a mission of redemption and salvation; this is the blessing promised to Abraham. Genesis 12 is the “launch of God’s *redemptive* mission.”<sup>31</sup> This concept is affirmed in Gen 22:18: “In your seed all the *nations* of the earth shall be blessed” (emphasis supplied). This promise comes in the context of Abraham and Isaac on Mt. Moriah, where the salvific sacrifice of the ram so clearly pointed to Christ. Here again, like in Gen 12:3, Abraham is told that all the

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<sup>27</sup> Goheen, *A Light to the Nations*, 49.

<sup>28</sup> Hedlund, *God of the Nations*, 24.

<sup>29</sup> Filbeck, *Yes, God of the Gentiles, Too*, 59-67; Kaiser, *Mission in the Old Testament*, 22; Hedlund, *God of the Nations*, 24-33.

<sup>30</sup> Ott, Strauss, and Tennent, *Encountering Theology of Mission*, 7.

<sup>31</sup> Wright, *The Mission of God*, 212.

nations will be blessed. The difference is the direct connection made between the blessing that the nations receive and the salvific work of God on behalf of all humanity.

It must be remembered that the redemption of the OT looks forward to the death and resurrection of Jesus, the supreme act of God's mission. Wright makes a bold statement when he pronounces, "The New Testament unquestionably affirms that Jesus of Nazareth shares the identity and character of YHWH and ultimately accomplishes what only YHWH could."<sup>32</sup> Therefore Jesus is very much present in the OT and working on behalf of the "nations" long before His death and resurrection.

God's desire was that all the nations would come to a knowledge of Him and worship Him as the one and only God, and that the relationship that had been lost would be restored (Pss 22:27-28; 86:8-10; Isa 2:2; 61:11; 66:18-24; Mic 4:2; Zech 2:11; 8:22-23; Mal 3:12). Solomon vocalized this very idea in his dedicatory prayer for the temple:

Moreover, concerning a foreigner, who *is* not of Your people Israel, but has come from a far country for Your name's sake (for they will hear of Your great name and Your strong hand and Your outstretched arm), when he comes and prays toward this temple, hear in heaven Your dwelling place, and do according to all for which the foreigner calls to You, that all peoples of the earth may know Your name and fear You, as *do* Your people Israel, and that they may know that this temple which I have built is called by Your name. (1 Kgs 8:41-43)

This prayer is clear that it was a desire of God and His true followers that all people, even those outside of Israel, would rely on Him for all their needs. God's mission was to show people who He is with the hoped-for result that all who come to know Him will desire a

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<sup>32</sup>Wright, *The Mission of God*, 57.

relationship with Him.<sup>33</sup> Paul R. House makes the following observation regarding Solomon's prayer: "Regardless of his personal motivation, Solomon knows that all nations need to know the Lord and that Israel must mediate this knowledge. Indeed, God envisioned this role for Israel when promising Abraham that all nations would be blessed through him."<sup>34</sup>

### **God's Call for Participation in His Mission**

This leads into the last portion of this survey of God's mission to the nations in the OT. Solomon mentioned in his prayer that he wanted the nations to know God as Israel knew God. It has already been seen that God called Abraham to be a blessing and that this continued on as a responsibility of Abraham's offspring—the nation of Israel. If it is truly God's mission, then why this calling of a man and a nation? What is their role in this mission?

The definition of mission found in the book *The Mission of God* will help to answer these questions. "Fundamentally, our mission [Abraham's, Israel's] (if it is biblically informed and validated) means our committed participation as God's people, at God's invitation and command, in God's own mission within the history of God's world for the redemption of God's creation. . . . Our mission flows from and participates in the mission of God."<sup>35</sup> This is why God called Abraham and Israel, because He is a God who

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<sup>33</sup>For more on this prayer see Goheen, *A Light to the Nations*, 56; Hedlund, *God of the Nations*, 74; Kaiser, *Mission in the Old Testament*, 24; Ott, Strauss, and Tennent, *Encountering Theology of Mission*, 11; Wright, *The Mission of God*, 386.

<sup>34</sup>Paul R. House, *1, 2 Kings*, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 146.

<sup>35</sup>Wright, *The Mission of God*, 23.

desires participation in His mission.

Throughout the OT, God used individuals and corporate groups as participants in His mission. It would be instructive to review the stories of Abraham in Canaan, Moses in Midian and Egypt, the two spies and Rahab in Jericho, Naomi and Ruth, David among the Philistines, Solomon's interaction with Hiram king of Tyre and the Queen of Sheba, Elijah and the widow of Zarephath and his encounter with the priests of Baal and Ashtoreth on Mt. Carmel, Elisha's interaction with Naaman and later the Syrian army, Jonah's mission trip to Nineveh, Daniel as a foreigner among the Babylonians and Medo-Persians, Esther in the court of Xerxes, as well as others.<sup>36</sup> A number of examples have often been ignored in discourses on missions. As has been shown God's mission to the "nations" is a prominent theme of the OT, and one that should inform us in our attempt to understand God's mission to the "nations" of today. Although this thesis will be limited to analyzing three narratives, there are many more that deserve just as careful an analysis.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup>The corresponding texts for the examples in this paragraph are as follows: Gen 12-25; Exod 2:11-13; Josh 2, 6:22-23; Ruth; 1 Sam 27-28:2; 29; 1 Kgs 5, 9:10-14 [2 Chr 2:1-18]; 1 Kgs 10:1-13 [2 Chr 9:1-28]; 1 Kgs 17:8-24; 18:20-40; 2 Kgs 5:1-19; 6:8-23; Jonah; Dan 1-6; Esther. In *Christianity Encountering the World Religions* it says "The Bible records at least 239 occasions when the people of God . . . come in contact with people of other religious traditions." An appendix is included which lists all of these instances, 178 which are found in the OT. See Muck and Adeney, *Christianity Encountering World Religions*, 33, 379-385.

<sup>37</sup>See the following two examples of the use of Old Testament narratives as missiological models. Adrinna Denise Beltré, "Queen and Deliverer" (M.A. thesis, Andrews University, 2007); Sung Ik Kim, "Proclamation in Cross-Cultural Context" (Ph.D. dissertation, Andrews University, 2005).

## God's Mission to the "Nations" of Today<sup>38</sup>

The second half of this chapter will attempt to draw parallels between God's mission to the nations in the OT and God's mission to the world religions of today, looking specifically at Hinduism. In order to do this, several steps must be taken. First, it must be established that Hindus are comparable to the non-Israelite "nations" of the OT. Next, it must be established that God's relation to Hindus is similar to that of His relation to the non-Israelite nations. Once these have been established it is possible to move towards a more biblical approach to Hindus.

### The Reality of Plurality

"Religious diversity in the world is ancient."<sup>39</sup> It can be traced back to Genesis, where there was already a variety of different religious expressions. We find ourselves in a world today that is also extremely diverse in religious character.<sup>40</sup>

Filbeck, in the final chapter of his book *Yes, God of the Gentiles, Too*, entitled "The Twenty-First Century," makes a similar comparison. He states that "from Genesis we . . . learn that the proclamation of God's salvation is to take place within the context of the nations."<sup>41</sup> From this Filbeck draws a connection to the fact that the world of today is a pluralistic society, with a variety of different religious groups. Rather than "decry"

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<sup>38</sup>For an example of an author using the terms *nations* and *world religions* interchangeably, see J. Y. Tan, "Rethinking the Relationship between Christianity and World Religions, and Exploring Its Implications for Doing Christian Mission in Asia," *Missiology* 39, no. 4 (2011): 497-509.

<sup>39</sup>Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions*, 191.

<sup>40</sup>See Paul Varo Martinson, *Families of Faith: An Introduction to World Religions for Christians* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999).

<sup>41</sup>Filbeck, *Yes, God of the Gentiles, Too*, 208.

this, he believes we must accept the fact that there are other religions and use the example of the Bible to help us interact with them.<sup>42</sup>

Earlier it was established that a “nation” as found in the OT is intricately tied to religious beliefs. There were no “nations” that were religiously neutral, and most, while perhaps sharing some similarities, held different beliefs. If one compares the Egyptian pantheon with the Babylonian pantheon, one soon realizes that while there may have been some similarities, there were also vast differences. We live in a similar world today, where there is a plurality of religions, some of which share certain traits, but none of which are exactly the same.

While it has become popular today for certain scholars to argue that all religions lead to the same place, along with other ideas of a religious pluralism, this work moves away from that type of thinking.<sup>43</sup> Stephen Prothero, a best-selling author, writes the following in his book *God Is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions That Run the World*:

No one argues that different economic systems or political regimes are one and the same. Capitalism and socialism are so obviously at odds that their differences hardly bear mentioning. The same goes for democracy and monarchy. Yet scholars continue to claim that religious rivals such as Hinduism and Islam, Judaism and Christianity are, by some miracle of the imagination, essentially the same, and this view resounds in the echo chamber of popular culture.<sup>44</sup>

This paper assumes, in harmony with Prothero’s assessment, that the various

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<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 208-209.

<sup>43</sup>Martinson, *Families of Faith*, 23-31.

<sup>44</sup>Stephen R. Prothero, *God Is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions That Run the World--and Why Their Differences Matter* (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 1. Stephen Prothero is a professor of religions at Boston University and does not claim adherence to any particular religion.

religions are not different paths going up one mountain and ending at the same summit.<sup>45</sup>

### **Hinduism and the “Nations”**

The world’s religions, especially Hinduism, are comparable with the “nations” found in the OT. In order to make this clear, it must be understood what is meant by Hinduism, keeping in mind that this is not an in-depth study of Hinduism.

First of all, the word Hinduism is a fairly modern term referring to the “predominant religious tradition in India.”<sup>46</sup> The following definition will help the reader to understand the challenge one faces when attempting to study and understand

Hinduism:

The religion now known as Hinduism encompasses a vast range of practices and beliefs. It has no one founder and no centralized organization. Hindus throughout history have expressed multiple perspectives on the nature of divinity or ultimate reality: monotheism, polytheism, monism, even henotheism (belief in one god without denying the existence of others). The richness and diversity of Hinduism mean that we cannot expect to find one list of specific beliefs or practices that would necessarily apply to all Hindus, nor one text that defines all of Hinduism. Generally, Hindus have tended to see diverse views as complementary rather than contradictory.

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<sup>45</sup>Huston Smith, *The World's Religions: Our Great Wisdom Traditions* (New York: HarperOne, 1998), 73. Smith is an often-quoted philosopher on the oneness of all religions. This book is also a widely used textbook in college courses on world religions.

<sup>46</sup>Robin Rinehart, ed., *Contemporary Hinduism: Ritual, Culture, and Practice* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2004), 1. The amount of literature that deals with this term is extremely vast and if cited here would go on for pages. However I would like to point the reader to a couple of sources that may be helpful in understanding the evolution of this term, which was made popular by sources outside of India, namely Europeans and Americans. See Gavin Flood, ed., *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2003), 1-17. This chapter written by Flood attempts to explain what Hinduism is. Julius Lipner, "On Hinduism and Hinduisms: The Way of the Banyan," in *The Hindu World*, ed. Sushil Mittal and Gene R. Thursby (New York: Routledge, 2004), 9-12. This massive book has a good opening chapter written by Julius Lipner, a respected scholar of religion. In the first three pages he describes the modern origins of the term Hinduism, pointing out that it came into use within the last three centuries and that before that time was not used by Indians to describe their own religious beliefs. Nirad C. Chaudhuri, *The Hinduism Omnibus* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), xi-xvi. This is another massive volume dealing with Hinduism. The introduction has a very good section on the word Hindu and its origins, pointing out that the word itself has undergone some changes over the years. It points out the fact that the word was used at one point to help outsiders differentiate between the religion of Muslims from that of the majority of other Indians.



. . . Different aspects of Hinduism may seem to be connected or even contradictory, but many Hindus assert that there is an underlying unity amidst the diversity.<sup>47</sup>

As one can see from this definition, Hinduism is quite complex and not easily defined or understood. Because of this it is imperative that our study be narrowed even more to avoid dealing with too broad a subject.

Much of the literature concerning Hinduism deals specifically with the philosophical side of the religion. There is no doubt that the philosophies developed by countless Hindus over the centuries are important in order to help one understand Hinduism. However, a majority of Hindus fall into a less philosophical category that has been labeled “popular Hinduism.” Because most Hindus fall into this category, this study will focus more on “popular Hinduism.”

C. J. Fuller, an anthropologist who has spent many years observing Hindu traditions in India, has put together a book that deals specifically with “popular Hinduism.” Fuller defines it this way: “By ‘popular Hinduism,’ I [Fuller] conventionally refer to the beliefs and practices that constitute the living, ‘practical’ religion of ordinary Hindus.”<sup>48</sup> It is this form of Hinduism that seems to be the most comparable to the “nations” of the OT.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup>Rinehart, *Contemporary Hinduism*, 1-2. For an even more detailed analysis with similar conclusions see Mittal and Thursby, *The Hindu World*, 24-25. To prove the point that Hinduism is extremely diverse Klaus Klostermaier entitles one of the chapters in his book “Talk about God.” In this chapter the author, a Christian, dialogues with four Hindu adherents and one Sikh, each of whom are in total disagreement with the others on their views about who God is. Klaus Klostermaier, *Hindu and Christian in Vrindaban* (London: SCM Press, 1969), 27-37.

<sup>48</sup>Fuller, *The Camphor Flame*, 5. Lawrence A. Babb, who is an often-quoted anthropologist in the realm of Hinduism, says the following in connection to his own findings in an Indian village: “Religion is a thing done, not a thing ‘believed,’ and as a result any effort to uncover the assumptions and principles underlying this religious system must seek them in ritual activity.” Lawrence A. Babb, *The Divine Hierarchy: Popular Hinduism in Central India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975), 31. See also Lawrence A. Babb, *Redemptive Encounters: Three Modern Styles in the Hindu Tradition* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986). As well, Paul G. Hiebert, *Konduru: Structure and Integration in a*

## The Similarities

In order to compare Hinduism with the “nations” as portrayed in the first section of this chapter, a few questions must be asked. Can it be said that Hinduism has followed the “nations” in worshiping the created order instead of the creator? If so, then is God’s relation and mission to Hindus the same as it was towards the “nations” of the OT?

To attempt to describe the various ways and means that Hindus worship is far beyond the purpose of this paper. It is important that this question be approached with humility. Because we are coming as outsiders to the religion, caution must be used, avoiding overly dogmatic statements about Hindus or Hinduism.

## Three Examples

There are three specific areas of Hindu devotion and worship that deserve to be touched on here. First, many Hindus “believe that every aspect of creation has an individual spirit,”<sup>50</sup> so aspects of nature are important and often viewed as divine by Hindus. Second, there is a prevalent use of images which are man-made, but worshiped with the belief that the divine has inhabited the image. Third, there are the god-men who

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*South Indian Village* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1971), 132-158. From this point onward whenever the term Hinduism is used, it will refer to “popular Hinduism” as defined above, unless otherwise noted.

<sup>49</sup>There is no precise date or time that Hinduism can be traced back to its beginning; however, the *R̥gVeda* which is the oldest known sacred writing within Hinduism has been dated to have been written between 1500 B.C.E and 1000 B.C.E. See Michael Witzel, “Vedas and Upaniṣads,” in Flood, *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*, 68; Laurie L. Patton, “Veda and Upaniṣad,” in Mittal and Thursby, *The Hindu World*, 37; Chaudhuri, *The Hinduism Omnibus*, xviii. Listen to this interesting fact, “The *R̥gVeda* must have been more or less contemporary with the Mitanni texts of northern Syria/Iraq (1450-1350 B.C.E); these mention certain Vedic gods (Varuna, Mitra, Indra, Nasatya) and some forms of early Sanskrit.” Flood *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*, 68. Not only does this date Hinduism possibly to the time of Moses, but based on the above quote it may tie Hinduism directly to some of the “nations” we read about in the OT.

<sup>50</sup>Stephen P. Huyler, *Meeting God: Elements of Hindu Devotion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 74.

are human beings that have been elevated for various reasons to the level of deity. Each one of these categories falls under the overall category of worshipping created things, even to Hindus, and are therefore relevant to our discussion.

## Nature

To start with there are three specific aspects of nature that are often viewed as sacred by many Hindus: the sun, rivers, and trees.<sup>51</sup> A brief description of the worship and deification of each of these follows.

The sun god is better known as *Surya*, and is worshiped throughout India. There is a festival of the sun held twice a year known as *Chhattha*, at which time the sun is especially worshipped for his believed “omniscient clarity and his healing power.”<sup>52</sup>

Rivers are also considered to be extremely sacred to most Hindus. This is especially true of the river Gaṅgā (also known as the Ganges), which is considered to be a goddess.<sup>53</sup> Daily, thousands of Hindus can be found bathing in this river, which they believe can wash away their impurities. George James writes this about the rivers of India: “Indian religious traditions regard all rivers as sacred, and on the banks of such

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<sup>51</sup>Diana L. Eck, *Darsan: Seeing the Divine Image in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 36. Eck, when specifically commenting on aspects of nature that are divine, mentions these three. There are many other aspects of nature considered sacred to Hindus beyond the three mentioned in this paper. My goal here is not to be comprehensive but rather to take a few examples that apply to the main point of this section of the paper.

<sup>52</sup>Huyler, *Meeting God*, 190-191.

<sup>53</sup>Eck, *Darsan*, 65-66. Surinder M. Bhardwaj and James G. Lochtefeld, "Tīrtha," in Mittal and Thursby, *The Hindu World*, 492. These authors say the following: “The Gaṅgā is thus not merely water but a goddess with whom they [pilgrims] can have direct contact.” Huyler puts it this way, “Together they sing and pray to the Goddess Ganga, who is also the river.” Huyler, *Meeting God*, 22-24.

rivers we still find ancient temples in which a deep piety toward the river is expressed.”<sup>54</sup>

Trees are often also made into sacred shrines and worshipped as divine. Stephen P. Huyler, in his book on Hindu devotion, dedicates a section of his book to photographs and a lengthy description of a particular village that has no temple, but instead uses an ancient tree as its center of worship.<sup>55</sup> While this is a particular example, the *tulasi* tree (a type of basil tree) is an example of a plant/tree being worshipped as the goddess *Lakshmi* throughout India and the Hindu diaspora.<sup>56</sup> I have witnessed, on numerous occasions, the early morning rituals of many Hindus that combine the worship of all three of these aspects of nature.<sup>57</sup>

## Images

The amount of literature dealing with images and iconography within Hinduism is massive and overwhelming.<sup>58</sup> However, for the purposes of this work, a few remarks about images as objects of worship are important. The following sentence sums it up well: “While the image of the deity may be made of earthly material, Hindus from many traditions believe that this is the real body of the deity.”<sup>59</sup> Images take on a variety of forms, such as the *linga* of Shiva, or the life-like statues of many gods and goddesses

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<sup>54</sup>George James, "The Environment and Environmental Movements," in Rinehart, *Contemporary Hinduism*, 346.

<sup>55</sup>Huyler, *Meeting God*, 103, 104, 107-110.

<sup>56</sup>Babb, *The Divine Hierarchy*, 107, 165; Huyler, *Meeting God*, 86.

<sup>57</sup>Huyler, *Meeting God*, 22-28.

<sup>58</sup>For a good history of the development of iconography in Hinduism, see Jitendra Nath Banerjea, *The Development of Hindu Iconography* (Calcutta, India: University of Calcutta, 1956).

<sup>59</sup>Vasudha Narayanan, "Alaya," in Mittal and Thursby, *The Hindu World*, 458. See also Eck, *Darsan*, 52.

available in roadside shops. Even pictures of the deities are considered to be endowed with the power of the deity and can be used as a way to connect with the divine.<sup>60</sup>

## **Human Beings**

Beyond the aspects of nature and the many images one can also find many holy persons throughout the history of Hinduism who have been deified as well. There are far more than can even be known that would fall into this category. An example of this phenomenon is a Hindu man who recently passed away, known as Sathya Sai Baba. He had a following that spanned the globe, and included people from all levels of society. He “was believed to be god incarnate on earth by his devotees and worshiped as such. Much about his life is a secret but one thing is clear, he had been elevated to the level of deity, not simply by his own recognition, but by the recognition of millions of devout followers who believed he was deserving of their worship.”<sup>61</sup>

There are some very interesting similarities between the nations of the OT who also elevated the created order with modern-day popular Hinduism. If the two are alike in practice, then it would seem natural to assume that the results of the nation’s choice to worship the created rather than the Creator would also be similar. In the festival for the local village goddess *Yellamma* (which I witnessed in India), several goats were sacrificed in an attempt to placate the goddess, lest she become angry. This is done in countless villages throughout India to this day.<sup>62</sup> And even though most Hindus may not

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<sup>60</sup>Eck, *Darsan*, 38, 43-44, 48.

<sup>61</sup>For an in-depth analysis of Sathya Sai Baba see Babb, *Redemptive Encounters*, 159-204. See also Fuller, *The Camphor Flame*, 178-179; J. E. Llewellyn, "Gurus and Groups," in Rinehart, *Contemporary Hinduism*, 224-225.

<sup>62</sup> Fuller, *The Camphor Flame*, 85; Babb, *The Divine Hierarchy*, 223.

participate in such sacrifices, there are other aspects of their lives that exhibit a fear of the divine. For instance, even certain days or months can be considered auspicious, therefore it is of the utmost importance that a Vedic almanac or priest be consulted before choosing the dates of important events such as a wedding.<sup>63</sup>

As was noted earlier in the chapter, God does not seem to directly confront the nations on the issue of idol worship. God does confront them on the things that were characteristic with the nations of the OT. Therefore, it can be assumed that God's relation to Hindus must be similar to His relation to the nations in the OT.

### **God's Mission to Hindus**

#### God as Sovereign

If the above thesis is accurate then what does that mean concerning God's relationship with Hindus? First of all, it means that just as God was clearly the Sovereign Lord over the nations of the OT even though they often did not recognize Him as such, He is also the Sovereign Lord over all Hindus. Lesslie Newbigin underscores this very point in his discourse on the gospel and world religions when he writes, "We know that as the ascended Lord, at the right hand of the Father he reigns over all and there is no limit to the reach of his gracious work."<sup>64</sup>

Wesley Ariarajah asks the questions, "If God is the creator of the whole universe, and its provider, what does it say about those of other faiths? If God has indeed made a universal covenant with the whole creation (in Noah), does God then go back on that

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<sup>63</sup>A. Whitney Sanford, "The Hindu Ritual Calendar," in Rinehart, *Contemporary Hinduism*, 125.

<sup>64</sup>Lesslie Newbigin and Paul Weston, *Lesslie Newbigin: Missionary Theologian* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 2006), 179.

covenant?”<sup>65</sup> He goes on to point out that the logical answer to the above questions must be that God is Creator of all, including Hindus.<sup>66</sup> My point here is simply to recognize that even though Hindus have chosen to worship contrary to God’s ideal, this does not mean they are beyond His Sovereign rule as Creator. Just as God desired the nations of Egypt and Assyria (Isa 19:18-25) to come to recognize Him as Sovereign Lord, so He desires for Hindus today to recognize Him as their Sovereign God.

### God’s Desire to Bless Hindus

But like the nations of old there is more to it than just recognition that God is Sovereign. God wanted to bless the nations (Gen 12:3), and He wants to bless Hindus today. Tennent does an excellent job of connecting God’s mission to the “nations” of the OT with what God is doing today. He points out that “God is on a mission to redeem and bless all nations.” A few lines later he refers back to Abraham’s call to bless the nations, as part of the “unfolding drama of God’s redemptive plan.”<sup>67</sup> God’s call to Abraham is still being fulfilled, and will continue to be as long as people are on this earth.

Hindus desire a blessing from their deities. In fact, that is the main reason a Hindu will go to the temple. A Hindu has *darshana*, which is defined as an “exchange of vision” between the deity and the worshiper, in order to gain a blessing from the deity.<sup>68</sup> When this occurs, for a moment it is believed that the deity and the worshiper have become one.

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<sup>65</sup>S. Wesley Ariarajah, *The Bible and People of Other Faiths* (Geneva, Switzerland: World Council of Churches, 1985), 9.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid.

<sup>67</sup>Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions*, 224-225.

<sup>68</sup>Fuller, *The Camphor Flame*, 59-60. For a book-length explanation of *darsan/darshana* see Eck, *Darsan*.

Once the *puja* has finished, which are all the various acts of worship, then the worshiper receives the *prasada*, which is usually food that has been offered to the deity and is now returned to bless the worshiper when eaten.<sup>69</sup> It is believed that in order to retain the blessing one must repeat these acts of *puja* regularly, even daily if possible.<sup>70</sup>

While God's call was to a particular person (Abram), theologically it was universal in application. God called Abram, and out of his "seed" the nation of Israel was born, which was to continue the mission to bless all nations.<sup>71</sup> This is a universal calling, and is not limited to the OT as can be seen when reading Paul's letter to the Galatians (Gal 3:8). Therefore, God's call to bless the nations is applicable for today. Since it has been established that Hinduism looks very much like the "nations," then would not the call to bless the nations refer to Hindus as well?

#### God's Desire That Hindus Hear of His Salvation

Clearly, Hindu worshipers desire a blessing and clearly God desires to bless them. It has been recognized that God desired that all nations would come to a knowledge of His saving ability. God wants to be in relationship with Hindus just as much as He did the nations of the OT. God wants to bless Hindus by providing them with a knowledge of His salvation. A better understanding of God's relationship to Hindus is needed, with the underlying foundation being God's desire and mission to save all humanity regardless of

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<sup>69</sup>*Prasada* can include other items besides food, although food offerings are the most common type of *prasada*. See Fuller, *The Camphor Flame*, 74.

<sup>70</sup>*Ibid.*, 74-75.

<sup>71</sup>Hedlund, *God of the Nations*, 19, 48, 62.



one's religious background. Once this has been done, it becomes much easier to be open to interaction with Hindus.

God can reveal Himself to Hindus in a variety of ways. He may give Hindus dreams and visions of Himself in a way that they can understand. There may be other supernatural means God can and will use to reveal Himself to Hindus. But His primary means of revealing Himself is through willing human participants. We saw in the introduction, through Bosch's challenge and the stark reality of our world today, that there has been very little in the way of intentional sharing by Bible-believing people with adherents of the world's major religions, including Hindus.

### **Towards a More Biblical Approach**

Much has been written on how to reach out to the adherents of various world religions. *Christianity Encountering World Religions* reserves six chapters under the heading "Method: How Do We Do It?" all of which deal with various aspects of approaching the world's religions. They include learning about the religions, understanding one's own past, putting personal convictions on hold, learning from the religions, appraising them as a Christian, and then reshaping your own views and practices. These are all very good, and should be followed.<sup>72</sup> However, I think there is room for even more research and study that ties the biblical view of God's mission as it pertained to the "nations" long ago to God's mission of today. It seems that the biblical examples of cross-religious encounters have been greatly neglected. This is especially true of the encounters found in the OT.

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<sup>72</sup>Muck and Adeney, *Christianity Encountering World Religions*, 221-299.

This chapter has attempted to connect the nations of the OT with modern-day “popular Hinduism.” Goheen makes the point that

few books on the missional church spend much time in the Old Testament. Yet there is remarkable continuity between the people of God in the Old Testament and those in the New. The fundamental relationship established in the Old Testament story between the people of God and the nations remains operative for the church. . . . We too are chosen for the sake of the world.<sup>73</sup>

This thesis attempts to move towards a view of God’s mission in the OT as being connected with His mission of today. It has been shown that the Bible teaches God is Sovereign over all nations including Hindus. But more than that, He desires to bless the Hindu, just as He commissioned Abram so long ago. He desires that all people, including all Hindus, come to know about His salvation and redemption.

We have all too often overlooked the biblical examples found in the OT. It would be wise of us to take those examples, study them more closely, and learn from them. The next step is to take the principles gleaned and see if they are applicable to the modern-day challenge of Hinduism, thus moving towards a biblical approach to modern day Hinduism.

The rest of this thesis will attempt to do that, by looking at three specific instances where God, through His own actions and through human agents, plays out His mission to the “nations.”

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<sup>73</sup>Goheen, *A Light to the Nations*, 192.

## CHAPTER 3

### GOD'S MISSION THROUGH RELATIONSHIPS: AN ATTITUDE OF *HESED* AS THE FOUNDATION

God's mission through relationships is of the utmost importance because, as was noted in the previous chapter, it is the aim of God to renew the relationship that was broken between Him and humankind. This renewal is accomplished through God's own actions and is then reciprocated through the actions of individuals towards others. This chapter focuses on the biblical narrative of Ruth, which features relationships throughout the book.

The story of Naomi and Ruth is more than just a story about relationships, however. It is a story about a relationship between a believer in Yahweh, the God of Israel, and a Moabitess who was from a land that worshipped Chemosh, the patron deity of Moab. Therefore, this narrative is an ideal narrative to gain insights on what relationships between a believer in the God of the Bible and a Hindu should look like.

#### **The Book of Ruth: Theme and Purpose**

The purpose of this section is not to provide an in-depth analysis of Ruth and its theme and purpose. There has been much good scholarship that should be consulted to gain such an understanding. However, it is imperative to at least touch on the theme and

purpose of Ruth to lay the foundation for the theological concept that will be highlighted in this study.

Attempting to decipher the theme and purpose of Ruth has challenged scholars for decades, and there is still a lack of consensus on the issue.<sup>1</sup> While few scholars have been able to distinguish one overarching theme, there are several sub-themes that are repeatedly pointed out. Rather than attempt to comment on all these themes, this section will focus on the relevant themes for this study.

### *Hesed*<sup>2</sup>

While many have argued that genealogy and the need of an heir is the main theme of interest to the narrator of Ruth,<sup>3</sup> others have said that “*hesed*, is justifiably hailed by interpreters as one of the book’s most important themes.”<sup>4</sup> The Hebrew term *hesed* is a “word that no one English word can begin to convey accurately,”<sup>5</sup> and that would seem to be best understood as encompassing all of the following: “loyalty, generosity, traditional family duties, and *openness to foreigners* [emphasis added].”<sup>6</sup> Daniel Block

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<sup>1</sup>Frederic William Bush, *Ruth, Esther* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1996), 48.

<sup>2</sup>For a more in depth definition see *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, s.v. "Love"; and Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, *The Meaning of Hesed in the Hebrew Bible* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press for the Harvard Semitic Museum, 1978).

<sup>3</sup>See Kirsten Nielsen, *Ruth: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 21-28; John R. Wilch, *Ruth* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Pub. House, 2006).

<sup>4</sup>J. Gordon Harris, Cheryl Anne Brown, and Michael S. Moore, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers; Paternoster Press, 2000), 303. See the following as examples of scholars highlighting the importance of *hesed* in Ruth: Robert L. Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 65-66.; Daniel Isaac Block, *Judges, Ruth* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 605, 611-613; K. Lawson Younger, *Judges and Ruth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 393-396.

<sup>5</sup>Younger, *Judges and Ruth*, 393.

<sup>6</sup>Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, 38.

elaborates extensively on this concept as it is found in the book of Ruth. He says that it is a “strong relational term” and that it encompasses “all the positive attributes of God.”<sup>7</sup> The term itself is found only three times in the book (1:8; 2:20; 3:10), but the concept is found throughout the narrative.

For Block, *hesed* is more than just words of kindness, but is primarily expressed in action.<sup>8</sup> Between the four main characters of the narrative (God, Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz) there is a constant flow of *hesed*, in both word and deed.<sup>9</sup> What is even more remarkable is that Ruth is a foreigner, in a land that worshipped a god other than Yahweh, and yet she is the receiver of *hesed*. It is just as worthy to note that she is a giver of *hesed* just as much as she is a receiver.

If *hesed* is clearly a major theme of Ruth then what is the purpose of this theme? While commentators have various views, it would seem the underlying purpose of *hesed* lies in the normalcy of the narrative. In other words, the narrative found in Ruth is strangely void of any sort of supernatural display of God’s power.<sup>10</sup> This is highly unusual among OT narratives; rarely is there a story told that does not somehow connect a supernatural occurrence with the sequential events. Yet this narrative, while clearly involving God, does so in a unique way.

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<sup>7</sup>Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 605.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 606.

<sup>9</sup>A survey of the book of Ruth reveals that the following texts express the concept of *hesed* in one form or another; 1:6; 1:8-9; 1:10; 1:14b; 1:16-17; 2:4; 2:8-9; 2:11-12; 2:14; 2:15-16; 2:19-21; 3:1; 3:10-13; 3:15; 4:1-13; 4:14-15. The book has only four chapters and, as can be seen, the concept of *hesed* is found throughout the narrative.

<sup>10</sup>Block points out that not only does God not act in a supernatural way in this narrative, but that the characters never even request Him to do so. See Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 612.

God is behind the events of the narrative; clearly He is recognized as Sovereign, and yet the main actions of the narrative are played out by human beings involved in the work of everyday life struggles.<sup>11</sup> It would seem this is precisely the point of the narrator, and one of the reasons this book is in the Canon. It is a rare example of the positive outflow of a life lived for God and others aside from any sort of supernatural exhibition. Frederic Bush comments that the main characters of the narrative are “the virtual enfleshment of *hesed*, that quality of kindness, graciousness, and loyalty that goes beyond the call of duty.”<sup>12</sup>

For Bush this is the main theme of Ruth, and the purpose is that the *hesed* displayed in this narrative, by normal everyday people, is meant to be “imitable.”<sup>13</sup> In other words the kindness, graciousness, and loyalty the narrator is so careful to point out, is meant to be an example for the reader to follow. Block notes that “it is striking that no one in the book prays for a resolution of his own crisis. In each case a person prays that Yahweh would bless someone else.”<sup>14</sup> This is key to understanding the Naomi/Ruth relationship, and is an example that can be followed by Bible-believing men and women as they interact with adherents of other religions, including Hindus. Hubbard goes so far

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<sup>11</sup>Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, 2, 66-67.

<sup>12</sup>Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 52. Block uses less dramatic language but basically has the same understanding when he writes, “They [main characters in the book of Ruth] are presented as authentic people of faith.” Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 611.

<sup>13</sup>Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 52.

<sup>14</sup>Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 612-613.

as to say that the acceptance of foreigners, who “live out the ideal of *hesed* toward Yahweh and toward Israel,” by Israelites is one of the purposes of the book.<sup>15</sup>

### Naomi and Ruth

Naomi and Ruth are the most prominent characters in the narrative. Before analyzing the interaction between Naomi and Ruth, a brief synopsis of these two characters is required. Based on this synopsis it will then be possible to evaluate their interaction and gain a working theology that can be applied missiologically.

#### Naomi

Some scholars claim that Naomi, not Ruth, is the main character of the story.<sup>16</sup> There is no doubt that her role is prominent and vital to the narrative. She is the only character that is found at the very beginning of the narrative and at the very end, highlighting her prominence (Ruth 1:2; 4:16).

Keeping within the theme of *hesed*, note that Naomi is a constant exemplar of this noble trait (1:8; 1:11-13; 2:20; 2:22; 3:1-4; 3:18; 4:16).<sup>17</sup> This is even more incredible when viewed in light of Naomi’s life situation. She was a widow who had lost her sons, who was too old to marry again, and who felt that God had embittered her life (1:21).<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, 41-42, 64.

<sup>16</sup>Bush states this in no uncertain terms when he says, “Unquestionably the most important character in the book is Naomi.” He then goes on to explain that every “level” of the narrative involves Naomi. Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 49.

<sup>17</sup>Block gives a detailed list of the ways Naomi exemplifies *hesed*. Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 613.

<sup>18</sup>For more insights into the plight of widows in the Ancient Near East see Dale W. Manor, “Ruth,” in *Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 & 2 Samuel*, ed. John H. Walton (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 247.

Yet in the face of all this she still finds it within her heart to constantly put others above herself, seeking their needs over her own.

The dialogue in the narrative also sheds light on Naomi's worldview and theology.<sup>19</sup> Naomi explicitly recognizes the God of Israel as Sovereign over the land of Israel (1:6) by crediting Him with visiting His people and giving them food. But she also recognizes God as Sovereign beyond the territory of Israel when she asks God to bless her two daughters-in-law in Moab (1:7).<sup>20</sup> This was often not the common view of the time period when god(s) were thought to be relegated to their own territory.<sup>21</sup> Beyond this, while Naomi does blame God for causing her suffering she also would appear to understand that God is a God of lovingkindness. This is mainly understood through her actions which cannot be explained outside of her profound faith in the God of Israel. "Kindness is something that grows out of faith in the promises of Yahweh, the God of Naomi's ancestors."<sup>22</sup> When connecting this with the overall mission of God as explained in chapter 2 of this thesis, it is clear that Naomi was aware of God's sovereignty and, at the same time, was aware of His love towards her, which was then reciprocated in her love towards others. Whether purposely or not, Naomi's actions bless a person who was part of the "nations," thus in a way fulfilling God's promise to Abraham in Gen 12:3.

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<sup>19</sup>Dialogue in the book of Ruth is the means by which the narrator communicates information about the characters. More than half the book is dialogue; for more on this see Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 71.

<sup>20</sup>Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, 68, 103.

<sup>21</sup>Holly M. Blackwelder Carpenter, "A Comprehensive Narrative Analysis of the Book of Ruth" (M.A. thesis, Andrews University, 2005), 26, 30.

<sup>22</sup>Harris, Brown, and Moore, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth*, 305.



## Ruth

The book is named after Ruth, and with good cause. While Naomi is arguably the narrative's main character, Ruth is no doubt of extreme importance. While the beginning and end of the narrative feature Naomi, the center debatably features Ruth.

Again, like Naomi, Ruth is an exemplar of *hesed* throughout the narrative (1:10; 1:14; 1:16-18; 2:2-3; 2:10; 2:18; 3:5-15). Again this is incredible when one understands Ruth's life situation. She was a widowed foreigner from Moab who chose to leave her land and religion to live with a widow, leaving her little hope of a better life. She gleaned in the fields all day in order for her and her mother-in-law to survive. Yet in spite of her hardships she was constantly worrying about the well-being of her mother-in-law over against her own happiness.

As stated above, Ruth was from Moab, a neighboring nation of Israel, east of the Jordan River. Moab is mentioned several times in Scripture, rarely positively. In fact the roots of Moab are found in Gen 19:37 where Lot's own daughters get him drunk and sleep with him in order to become pregnant. It was out of this despicable situation that the nation of Moab was conceived. The Bible says that Moab did not serve Yahweh, but rather had its own patron deity known as Chemosh (Num 21:9), as well as other deities (Judg 10:6).<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>Gerald L. Mattingly, "Moabite Religion and the Mesha' Inscription," in *Studies in the Mesha Inscription and Moab*, ed. Andrew J. Dearman (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1989), 216-227. Mattingly proposes that Moabites may have practiced henotheism with Chemosh being the primary god among other deities that were also worshiped. For an older study done on Moab, including its religion, see A. H. Van Zyl, *The Moabites* (Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1960).

Outside of the book of Ruth there is very little positive written about Moab or Moabites.<sup>24</sup> During the wilderness sojourn Moab led Israel into sins of sexual immorality (Num 25); during the time of the judges they oppressed Israel (Judg 3); both Saul and David fought against them during their times as king (1 Sam 14:47; 2 Sam 8:2); Solomon married a Moabite woman who worshiped Chemosh, which led to many being influenced to worship Chemosh in Israel (1 Kgs 11); after Ahab's death, Moab "rebelled" against Israel (2 Kgs 1:1; 3); and Moab fought against Jehoshaphat (2 Chr 20:22). Deuteronomy 23:3 even goes so far as to ban Moabites from the "assembly of the LORD" all the way up through the tenth generation. All this highlights the importance of Ruth and her inconceivable decision to follow Yahweh.

While there is limited knowledge of Chemosh the god of Moab,<sup>25</sup> the Bible does shed some light on this deity. Solomon built a high place in honor of Chemosh, implying that the worship of Chemosh involved image worship of some kind (1 Kgs 11:7). Chemosh is also referred to as the "abomination of Moab" in 2 Kgs 23:3. Beyond this the Bible has little to say about Chemosh or the other deities of Moab; however, it is clear that the biblical view of Chemosh was not positive. This was most likely the deity Ruth

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<sup>24</sup>A possible exception can be found in 1 Sam 22:3-4 where David takes his father and mother and leaves them in the care of the king of Moab in order to keep them safe from Saul. It is also interesting to note that two of the mighty men of David found listed in 1 Chr 11:46, 47 are Moabites, implying that there were other Moabites besides Ruth who were integrated into the ranks of Israel. Hamlin attempts to paint a positive picture of Moab but struggles to make a strong case. See E. John Hamlin, *Surely There Is a Future: A Commentary on the Book of Ruth* (Grand Rapid, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 9.

<sup>25</sup>Compared to other nations of the Ancient Near East, a limited number of studies have been done on Moab. This is partly due to the lack of primary sources available to researchers. See Mattingly, "Moabite Religion and the Mesha' Inscription."

had grown up not only seeing worshipped, but worshipping herself. Her worldview was no doubt influenced by the worship of Chemosh and all that entailed.<sup>26</sup>

### Worldview Change

Naomi and Ruth came from different religious backgrounds. This is often not emphasized. Naomi and Ruth's interaction must be viewed with an understanding that they did not, at least originally, view the world through the same religious filter.

Based on the text, Naomi and Ruth were together about ten years prior to the main portion of the narrative (1:4). It is sometime after this period that Naomi decides to return to her native country and town. Her daughters-in-law go with her up to a certain point, at which time Naomi attempts to persuade them to turn back and remain in Moab (1:7-13). Orpah, Ruth's sister-in-law, listens to Naomi and returns to Moab. But Ruth "clings"<sup>27</sup> to Naomi and refuses to leave her. It is at this point that Ruth expresses her desire to stay by Naomi's side in one of the most courageous and unique speeches in Scripture (1:16-17). Ruth not only refuses to return but verbally commits to leaving her god and culture behind in favor of following Naomi's God and becoming a part of her culture.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>Arthur Ernest Cundall and Leon Morris, *Judges and Ruth* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1968), 260.

<sup>27</sup>The Hebrew word here expresses "firm loyalty and deep affection" proving that a close bond had developed between these two women. Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, 115.

<sup>28</sup>For an alternative reading which claims Ruth was not shifting allegiance but talking about the same god that Orpah returned to, see Alastair Hunter, "How Many Gods Had Ruth?" *Scottish Journal of Theology* 34, no. 5 (1981): 427-436. The arguments given in this article break down when read in light of the various ways of rendering *elohim* in the Old Testament context.

Several commentators have taken note of the unfathomable amount of courage and devotion this decision took.<sup>29</sup> Ruth must have known that there was a high chance she would not even be accepted by the people she had chosen to join.<sup>30</sup> More recent studies on worldview have helped make it clear that one's worldview is not changed easily.<sup>31</sup> In fact, it has been argued by some that one can never fully change their worldview.<sup>32</sup> While it may be true that the cultural layout of Moab and Israel shared some similarities, it is equally true that they had major differences as well, mainly in the area of religion. Ruth made a major decision, and she made it without any real earthly benefit to prompt it.

#### Reason for Worldview Change

The question is, why would Ruth make such a life-altering decision? At first the answer may appear elusive; there is no information about Ruth prior to this decision. Therefore, it would seem there are scant data to give insight into Ruth's decision. This, however, overlooks the evidence found later in the book of Ruth. While little is known

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<sup>29</sup>See Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 87; Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, *Ruth* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1999), 31.

<sup>30</sup>Sakenfeld, *Ruth*, 32.

<sup>31</sup>For a very detailed look at worldview in connection to witnessing and worldview change see Charles H. Kraft, *Worldview for Christian Witness* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2008). In this book Kraft not only details the history and meaning of worldview, but also attempts, in the process of several chapters, to explain how worldviews can change. The strength of this volume lies in its clear and concise understanding of the anthropological and sociological concepts of worldview; its weakness lies in its lack of scriptural examples. See also Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008). The difference between these two studies is minimal; however, Kraft does refer to "power encounters" and the role they play in worldview change far more often than does Hiebert.

<sup>32</sup>Kraft puts it this way: "I am skeptical about the possibility of exchanging one whole worldview for another." Kraft, *Worldview for Christian Witness*, 353.

about Naomi and Ruth's relationship prior to this point, it is possible to develop an understanding of what it looked like based on their relationship after this point.

It is the theme of *hesed* that gives clues as to why Ruth made this decision. Naomi was an exemplar of *hesed*; no doubt this was true even during her sojourn in Moab. It was this kindness, loyalty, and extreme caring attitude that had so impressed Ruth through the years. Now that the time had come to make a decision to leave land and culture, Ruth chooses to leave. Not because of any monetary or material gain, but because she had seen something in the lifestyle of Naomi that she did not want to be separated from. This included Naomi's acts of *hesed* which cannot be viewed separately from her religious beliefs.

It must be made clear that nowhere does the text imply that Naomi had the conversion of Ruth and Orpah as a goal.<sup>33</sup> In fact, she seems to be oblivious to this type of thinking, as demonstrated in her attempts to persuade them both to return not only to Moab, but to their god(s) (1:15). Ruth chose to follow Naomi, out of her love for Naomi and what she stood for.<sup>34</sup> Naomi had lived a life of *hesed* not to convert others, but simply as an outpouring of her faith in God. One could even say that she was fulfilling the promise given through Abram that the nations would be blessed.

### **Theological Implications**

In a book where God is seemingly relegated to the sidelines is found this account

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<sup>33</sup>Some have argued that one of the possible purposes behind the book of Ruth was to foster better relations between Israel and her neighbors and even to foster a "zeal" to work towards converting those neighbors. See Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, 37, 41, 64. See also Sakenfeld, *Ruth*, 4. Others, while recognizing this as a possibility, argue against it; see Cundall and Morris, *Judges and Ruth*, 239-240.

<sup>34</sup>Hubbard describes the decision of Ruth as "voluntarily" abandoning her "past ties" and adopting Yahweh as her God and Israel as her new home. Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, 36, 118.

of a non-Israelite becoming a follower of God. At first glance this appears odd and unlikely. With closer examination, however, it makes sense.

*Hesed*, as noted above, encompasses all “the positive attributes of God.”

Therefore any act of *hesed* cannot be viewed outside of the influence of God.<sup>35</sup> While the narrative of Ruth focuses primarily on human actions and relationships, it ultimately is about the God who influences those actions and relationships. This is made clear in Boaz’s words to Ruth (2:12), “May the LORD reward your work, and your wages be full from the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to seek refuge.”<sup>36</sup> Boaz gives God all the glory for taking care of Ruth, even though the narrative is oddly silent about God’s direct role. Clearly God is working through these individuals. As a result Ruth is willing to leave her home and religion, and beyond that exemplifies the very *hesed* she has been shown.<sup>37</sup> The narrator leaves the reader with the feeling that “God is one who cares for people of all nations.”<sup>38</sup>

A theology of *hesed* cannot be separated from the purposes of God’s mission. God is Sovereign and He desires to bless humanity. One of the means for doing this is through acts of *hesed* both from God to humanity and from humanity to each other.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup>Edward F. Campbell, *Ruth* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), 29.

<sup>36</sup>Morris believes this is the key verse to understanding the book. For him the Sovereignty of God is the theme of the book. See Cundall and Morris, *Judges and Ruth*, 242.

<sup>37</sup>Scholars almost unanimously agree that the narrative portrays God as being behind the events of the story in a very prominent way, guiding the outcomes of the characters in His Sovereignty. See Nielsen, *Ruth: A Commentary*, 30-31; Campbell, *Ruth*, 29; Hamlin, *Surely There Is a Future*, 17; Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, 63; Sakenfeld, *Ruth*, 14.

<sup>38</sup>Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, 67.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, 69. See also Michael S. Moore, "Ruth the Moabite and the Blessing of Foreigners," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 60, no. 2 (1998): 203-217.

## Missiological Implications

It seems odd that the book of Ruth, which features an encounter between a believer in Yahweh and an adherent of another religion, is so rarely mentioned in missiological literature.<sup>40</sup> This section of the chapter will attempt to begin the discussion of Ruth as it pertains to missiology in hopes that the discussion can grow and be enlarged and deepened. The discussion that follows will primarily use the Ruth narrative as a framework for relationships between believers in the God of the Bible and Hindus; however, it should be made clear that this narrative has implications that could be applied beyond the Hindu context to any other religious entity that does not claim the God of the Bible as their deity of worship.

### Understanding the Context

In order to better understand the importance of *hesed* as it relates to Hindus, the context of mission to Hindus must be understood. In other words, up until now there have been numerous methodologies expounded on and various attempts to bring Hindus to Christ. The fact remains that few of these approaches have been successful, and more importantly have often proved harmful and instrumental in breaking down relationships between believers in the God of the Bible and Hindus.

A theology of *hesed* as it is exemplified in the narrative of Ruth appears to be a more appropriate approach to Hindus than many of the past methodologies. The missiological implications of *hesed* as found in Ruth deserve a thesis of their own, but the

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<sup>40</sup>See Moore, "Ruth the Moabite and the Blessing of Foreigners." This article does deal with the cross-religious aspects of Ruth to a certain extent; it does not however attempt to apply the lessons of Ruth to the present world. Glasser does mention Ruth briefly, but it is only in passing. Arthur F. Glasser and

purpose of this study is to draw attention to the richness that Old Testament narratives contain for missiological issues today. In order to shorten the study, two key concepts drawn from applying a theology of *hesed* to modern-day relationships will be detailed.

First, the narrative of Ruth focuses on relationships, even between believers of different religions, as being built on the foundation of *hesed*. This is not a means to an end. Naomi does not live a life of *hesed* in order to convert Ruth and Orpah, but rather she lives a life of faith representing the God who exemplifies *hesed*. This however does not negate the need for the intentional going out in mission and leads to the second concept.

Naomi is genuine in her faith; she believes in God and does not conceal her faith. Ruth knew who Naomi believed in and that Naomi's actions were a result of her belief. From these two points it will become clearer that a theology of *hesed* fits into the overall mission of God and is applicable in the present context.

#### *Hesed* as the Foundation for Cross-Religious Relationships

The dawn of the modern missionary era was built on the foundation that there was a world being lost, and the only way it could be saved was through gospel propagation. This was the rallying cry across Europe and America which led to the great missionary movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>41</sup> Oftentimes these efforts were combined and confused with imperialism. This was especially true in India where large

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Charles Edward van Engen, *Announcing the Kingdom: The Story of God's Mission in the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003).

<sup>41</sup>For a dated but still useful overview of this in the Hindu context see Sushil Madhava Pathak, *American Missionaries and Hinduism: A Study of Their Contacts from 1813 to 1910* (Delhi, India: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1967).



numbers of missionaries went.<sup>42</sup> There is no doubt that the desire for converts often stemmed from a belief that Western civilization was superior and therefore its religion must also be superior.

### **Historical Realities**

All religions outside of Christianity were often thoughtlessly grouped into one large category called pagan/heathen. There was little room for developing relationships with adherents of another world religion. Adherents of the world religions were first to come out of their religion, cutting themselves off from it, joining a new community, and leaving behind their old relationships. Missionaries who maintained close relationships with Hindus, Muslims, or any other non-Christian outside of attempts to convert them had their sincerity questioned.<sup>43</sup>

While using the terms pagan/heathen has been struck from mission vocabulary, the concepts often remain. It is still common to read and hear about the necessity to develop methods that will convert non-believers in the God of the Bible into believers.<sup>44</sup>

Public evangelism among Hindus often reiterates this by its impersonal call to

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<sup>42</sup>Plamthodathil S. Jacob, "Hindu and Christian: Conversions and Transformations," in *Conversion in a Pluralistic Context: Perspectives and Perceptions*, ed. Krickwin C. Marak and Plamthodathil S. Jacob (Delhi, India: CMS/ISPCK, 2000), 93.

<sup>43</sup>For the most exhaustive volume on the history of Christianity in India see Robert Eric Frykenberg, *Christianity in India: From Beginnings to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). For other more specific works dealing with the history of Christianity in India see D. Dennis Hudson, *Protestant Origins in India: Tamil Evangelical Christians, 1706-1835* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000); Robert Eric Frykenberg, ed., *Christians and Missionaries in India: Cross-Cultural Communication since 1500* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003); Richard Fox Young, *India and the Indianness of Christianity: Essays on Understanding, Historical, Theological, and Bibliographical* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009).

<sup>44</sup>See H. L. Richard's chapter entitled "Evangelical Approaches to Hindus," in *Rethinking Hindu Ministry*, ed. H. L. Richard (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2011), 27-40.

conversion.<sup>45</sup> The massive spread of literature also appears to have had little effect and shows a lack of genuine desire for friendship with Hindus.<sup>46</sup> As a result, Hebert E. Hofer has deduced that “reading of Christian tracts, literature, and even the Bible seem to have little significant impact on Hindus and Muslims. . . . Personal experience is what reaches the heart. Thus our Christian literature must be considered with the mass media as more superficial method [*sic*] of outreach.”<sup>47</sup>

### **Present Realities**

Hofer in his groundbreaking study,<sup>48</sup> conducted in Chennai, India, among Non-Baptized Believers in Christ (NBBC), discovered that genuine relationships were repeatedly affirmed as being most important for NBBCs. On the questionnaire that was handed out there was a section which asked the participant to choose which listed option had given them the best opportunity to learn about Jesus. The option with the highest

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<sup>45</sup>Hofer makes this comment about public evangelism, “The meetings are not really evangelistic opportunities as much as nurture opportunities, for the vast majority of those in attendance are people of faith already.” Herbert E. Hofer, *Churchless Christianity* (Pasadena, CA: W. Carey Library, 2001), 119. Dayanand Bharati, a Hindu follower of Christ, makes some poignant remarks about public evangelism and literature distribution: “Generally the regular programme in a mission field is – Go out – meet lots of people – distribute a lot of literature – conduct night meetings – share what you know (not what they need) – then send reports and be *satisfied* (emphasis in original).” Dayanand Bharati, *Living Water and Indian Bowl: An Analysis of Christian Failings in Communicating Christ to Hindus* (Delhi, India: ISPCK, 2001), 26.

<sup>46</sup>See Hofer, *Churchless Christianity*; P. Kannan and S. Kannan, "A Survey of Disciples of Christ from Non-Dalit Hindu Homes," in Richard, *Rethinking Hindu Ministry*, 87. In this survey of 53 Hindu converts, only one became acquainted with Christ through literature.

<sup>47</sup>Hofer, *Churchless Christianity*, 79.

<sup>48</sup>This study consisted of 84 “personal interviews” and statistical surveys of Chennai/Madras, India. Those interviewed were Hindu believers in Christ who, for various reasons, had decided not to be baptized. These reasons are identified and detailed in the book that was published as a result of this study. As a result of the study it was estimated that in the city of Chennai alone there were 200,000 Non-Baptized Believers in Christ. Ibid.

percentage was through “individual Christians.”<sup>49</sup> This led Hofer to write: “Clearly it is the personal, intimate, real-life contacts, which have the deepest impact on people’s minds and hearts.”<sup>50</sup> Repeatedly the study affirms that Hindus desire to meet and talk with believers in God.<sup>51</sup>

It has been noted that one of the main reasons more Hindus have not openly expressed their faith is because they fear ostracism from their community of relations.<sup>52</sup> George David observes that “Hindus are very sensitive to sense the difference between communication that is personal, genuine and spontaneous, and that which has the ring of religious propaganda.”<sup>53</sup> A working theology of *hesed* could help in eliminating some of this fear, and instead help to develop strong faith-based relationships with Hindus inside their culture.<sup>54</sup>

Naomi was not out to convert Moabites to become Yahweh followers. This is easily seen by Naomi’s attempt to persuade Ruth and Orpah not to follow her back to Israel. And when Orpah chooses to follow Naomi’s advice, there is no negativity between them. To Naomi, Orpah had been just as much a daughter as Ruth. This helps to show

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<sup>49</sup>The other nine options listed by highest percentage to lowest were: Christian family, movies, radio programmes, Church worship, Christian school, Christian weddings, TV programs, tracts, street preaching. See *ibid.*, 78.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>51</sup>See *ibid.*, 78,79, 94.

<sup>52</sup>See *ibid.*, 51; Richard, *Rethinking Hindu Ministry*, 35.

<sup>53</sup>George David, quoted in Dasan Jeyaraj, "Facilitating Genuine Conversion," in Marak and Jacob, *Conversion in a Pluralistic Context*, 29.

<sup>54</sup>There was another more recent survey and study conducted on a smaller scale in the city of Pune, India. It came to many of the same conclusions as the study carried out by Hofer in Chennai. In fact, it was found that often Hindus preferred Christian neighbors because of their kindness and hospitality. See Atul Y. Aghamkar, *Insights into Openness: Encouraging Urban Mission* (Bangalore, India: SAIACS Press, 2000).

that she does not befriend Ruth as a means to an end.<sup>55</sup> Ruth chooses to switch her allegiance to the God of Israel, not out of force but out of a genuine positive reaction to the *hesed* seen in Naomi's lifestyle. *Hesed* is the foundation for Naomi's relationship to Ruth, not simply a desire to get Ruth to convert.

Some have made a move away from the term "conversion" as it is commonly understood today.<sup>56</sup> There is a need for a better understanding of conversion, what it means, and how it is accomplished. There is a fine balance that needs to be maintained when it comes to conversion. "Much of what Christian missiologists attempt is to maintain the integrity of conversion as something that the Holy Spirit, not we, accomplish."<sup>57</sup> The fact that missiologists are writing on this theme seems to indicate that there is still an attitude that says, "We must convert the world."

### Genuine *Hesed* Stemming from Genuine Faith

As missionaries began to have more interaction with adherents of non-Bible-believing peoples, there began a shift in thinking. Many were not the devil worshipers they had been portrayed as. In fact, many of their religious traditions were recognized as

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<sup>55</sup>This basic principle has been applied by the Devon Avenue Christian Community Center in Chicago, which is a Christian organization that reaches out to the local immigrant community, mainly Southern Asians who are primarily either Hindu or Muslim. One of their leaders said the following: "Our underlying message is that we respect each other, and we are not forcing anything on anybody. We are just sharing with people what we believe. If the person responds, that is up to them." Paul David Numrich, *The Faith Next Door: American Christians and Their New Religious Neighbors* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 37.

<sup>56</sup>See Pradip Ayer, "Conversion or Regeneration: A Brief Discussion," in Richard, *Rethinking Hindu Ministry*, 97-102. Ayer does a good job of pointing out some of the weaknesses in the present understanding of conversion in India; however, he is unable to really delineate what the difference between "conversion" and "regeneration" is.

<sup>57</sup>Muck and Adeney, *Christianity Encountering World Religions*, 29.

being ancient and rich in ideas and philosophy. This was especially true of Hinduism, and as a result there was a shift in thinking. This shift has gradually taken the stance that it is no longer tenable for believers in the God of the Bible to view these religious people as simple pagans/heathens. In fact, a large body of literature can now be found which argues against any type of evangelism and propagation.

But such a stance is primarily a reaction against the historical reality of mission in the colonial era. While often this is a welcome alternative to the superficial evangelism of the previous decades, it is often an over-reaction. It moves towards “dialogue” between religions and other such concepts that often are relegated to the academic world and rarely affect the average Hindu or Christian.<sup>58</sup> Meanwhile the average adherents are left to decide on their own what they feel is the best approach to the religious pluralism of today. Often this leads to two extremes, either extreme isolationism—“you don’t bother me and I won’t bother you”—or extreme tolerance, not allowing for any type of genuine faith expression for fear of offending people of other faiths.

The Ruth narrative is an example that lies somewhere in between the two extremes. Naomi is not overly cautious in revealing the God she worships and believes in. She is genuine in her faith, living it out both in word and deed. The relationship between Naomi and Ruth is not a simple dialogue in which Naomi recognizes all the good in Moabite religion and in which Ruth does the same for the Israelite religion. On

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<sup>58</sup>D. Alphonse says, “Attempts in the past at dialogue between Christians and Hindus have met with little success. The reasons for their failure are not far to seek. The absence in Hinduism of a centralized leadership in parallel to that of the Christian Churches and the lingering doubts in the minds of even many Hindus’ good will that dialogue is only camouflage for conversion work and a survival strategy are the reasons all too easily evident.” D. Alphonse, foreword to *Beyond Boundaries: Hindu-Christian Relationship and Basic Christian Communities*, by Maria A. David (Delhi, India: Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2009), xiv. For a sample history of dialogue between Hindus and

the contrary it is an example of an individual being true to the God she believes in, and this trueness results in another individual desiring to follow that God. A theology of *hesed*, if understood as shown in the narrative of Ruth, can be a foundation for interreligious relationships that are deep and meaningful.

Various attempts have been made to move mission in this direction among Hindus. H. L. Richard has promoted “friendship evangelism” among Hindus as a more viable way of connecting with them.<sup>59</sup> He lists twelve points that he feels should help in bridging the gap between the two extremes listed above. Several points on the list advise against triumphalistic language which immediately puts the Hindu on the defensive. At the same time, point eleven specifically highlights the need for a genuine witness on the part of the believer in God. Richards puts it this way: “To take these ideas merely as a strategy in evangelism but ignore them in the rest of our life and thinking would be a sin against God and could lead to nothing good.”<sup>60</sup>

There is no doubt that a tension exists in the relationship between genuine friendship as understood in the secular world, and a genuine friendship lived out in the context of faith. Especially in the Western world there has been a tendency to separate the sacred and secular. But this is not the call of the Bible, and as the Ruth narrative points out it is possible to live out one’s genuine faith, while at the same time developing a

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Christians see Harold G. Coward, *Hindu-Christian Dialogue: Perspectives and Encounters* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989).

<sup>59</sup>For another practical guide on the subject see Ram Gidoomal and Margaret Wardell, *Chapatis for Tea: Reaching Your Hindu Neighbour* (Guildford, U.K.: Highland, 1994). This book is primarily meant to guide a church group who is interested in understanding and witnessing to their Hindu neighbors. There is some good practical advice along the lines of “friendship evangelism,” but the problem is they have not laid the biblical foundation for their approach.

<sup>60</sup>Richard, *Rethinking Hindu Ministry*, 126.

deep, loving, and loyal relationship with someone who does not have the same belief system.<sup>61</sup> Hindus are not guilty of separating the two; for them, religion and daily life are inseparably linked. As a result, Hindus are often open and respectful of the religious views of others. They also find it strange when a person is not honest about their religious faith and understanding of God.

### **The Workplace and Neighborhood/Village**

The normalcy of the story of Ruth is also important to keep in mind at this juncture. Most of the interreligious connections being made today are not in the academic realm, nor in churches or other religious centers. The workplace and the neighborhood/village are the primary meeting grounds, where ordinary people are those meeting each other. D. Alphonse understands this when he writes, “It is ordinary people who have been the most active agents in bringing about a positive change in the Hindu-Christian relations.”<sup>62</sup> A genuine faith lived out in the workplace and/or neighborhood/village fits the example of Naomi and Ruth. It is there that most relationships are born and nurtured.<sup>63</sup>

While the concept of kindness and loyalty to those of other faith traditions has been promoted, there seems to be a stronger biblical foundation for it than has often been

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<sup>61</sup>For a deeper description of the tension between living out faith in a secular world see Michael W. Goheen and Craig G. Bartholomew, *Living at the Crossroads: An Introduction to Christian Worldview* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008). See especially the chapter entitled “Living at the Crossroads: A Faithful, Relevant Witness.”

<sup>62</sup>D. Alphonse, foreword to *Beyond Boundaries*, xv.

<sup>63</sup>Muck and Adeney, *Christianity Encountering World Religions*, 25. Under a heading entitled “Neighborhood Ethics” the authors point out that much of the positive relationships in the world today between adherents of different religions is in the local neighborhood. For a book-length study see Numrich, *The Faith Next Door*.

cited. There is no doubt that Jesus taught this concept repeatedly throughout His ministry on earth. We get glimpses of it in the parable of the “Good Samaritan” and in Jesus’ discourse with the lady at the well (John 4). However, the Ruth narrative has an added dimension that even the Gospels are missing. Jesus rarely interacted in a developed relationship directly with non-Jews.<sup>64</sup> While He laid down the principles, it was not until after His ascension that the early Church really began encountering other religions. But the Ruth narrative gives an in-depth understanding of the principle of *hesed* at work beyond the borders of Israel, between a believer in Yahweh and a Moabitess, something that is basically absent in the Gospels.

### Conclusion

The narrative of Ruth as an example of positive interaction between a believer in Yahweh and a non-believer needs to be studied and understood in even more depth. While many have attempted to develop a theological and missiological approach similar to what is exemplified in this narrative, few have recognized that this narrative gives a strong biblical foundation for their approach.

*Hesed* as understood from this narrative flows from God to humans who are then expected to reciprocate it in their relationship with others, regardless of religious background and faith. The goal is to bring people to a knowledge of the God from whom *hesed* stems. This is accomplished only through genuine, intentional relationships. As Charles Kraft has put it, “God wants witness, we can assume that the reason for His

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<sup>64</sup>There are several instances where He does engage non-Jews, but they are usually fairly short encounters.



wanting witness flows from His concern that His prize creatures experience the relationship with Him that He created us for.”<sup>65</sup>

Bharati sums it up well: “Man is basically a person, a human being and not merely a thing. So in all our efforts to communicate the gospel to our neighbor we must approach him as a person.”<sup>66</sup> This becomes even more meaningful when built on a strong foundation laid in the *hesed* of God. The next chapter will add to this understanding by expanding on God’s mission to include His mission of power.

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<sup>65</sup>Kraft, *Worldview for Christian Witness*, 328.

<sup>66</sup>Bharati, *Living Water and Indian Bowl*, 74.

## CHAPTER 4

### GOD’S MISSION THROUGH REDEMPTIVE POWER: THE WIDOW OF ZAREPHATH’S TESTIMONY

The last chapter set the foundation for cross-religious mission; this chapter simply explores another avenue of God’s mission, which should be understood in light of the previous chapter, not in place of. All mission, and especially cross-religious mission, should be done with an attitude of *hesed*. This chapter, however, explores an aspect of God’s mission that is more specific—God’s mission through power.

#### **1 Kings 17:8-24**

First Kings 17:8-24 records two narratives that are relevant to the concept of God’s mission through power. Each story contains the same characters: the prophet Elijah, a widow living in Zarephath, and her son. In order to understand the relevancy of this narrative to the study, an understanding of the contextual background is necessary.

Elijah announced to Ahab king of Israel that there will be no “rain or dew” for three years. He then hides in a mountain ravine next to a small brook where God provides for his sustenance miraculously by having food brought to him in the mouths of ravens. The brook, however, dries up due to the drought and so God tells Elijah to leave the mountain ravine and go to Zarephath.

Zarephath was a village that lay between the cities of Tyre and Sidon in Phoenicia. This village was not within the borders of Israel. In fact, it was in the very nation that Jezebel, the daughter of a priest of Baal, Ahab's wife, was from.<sup>1</sup> This was the "very heartland of the worship of Baal."<sup>2</sup> "In sending Elijah there, God was teaching his people that his power was not confined to the borders of Israel—that he was not just a god of the hills or plains (1 Kgs 20:23), restricted to his home turf."<sup>3</sup> In other words this was an opportunity for God to "prove" His Sovereignty through an act of power on the "turf" of another "god."

Elijah was sent to a widow who resided with her son in Zarephath. The Bible does not record her religious beliefs in detail. However, it can be assumed that she was surrounded by Baal worshipers, and was probably one herself. The text does imply that she was aware of the God of Israel as her reply to Elijah's request for bread reveals (17:12). Interestingly, she refers to this God as the God of Elijah, not her God.<sup>4</sup> This

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<sup>1</sup>For more on the significance of this location to the narrative see Mordechai Cogan, *I Kings*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 432.

<sup>2</sup>Iain W. Provan, *1 and 2 Kings*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995), 133.

<sup>3</sup>Raymond B. Dillard, *Faith in the Face of Apostasy: The Gospel According to Elijah & Elisha* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Pub., 1999), 23.

<sup>4</sup>For support in favor of arguing that the widow was not a follower of Yahweh see Dale Ralph Davis, *The Wisdom and the Folly: An Exposition of the Book of First Kings* (Fearn, UK: Christian Focus, 2002), 213 fn. 12. Davis actually refers to the widow as one of "Baal's subjects." Hauser and Gregory point out that even though the widow was aware of Yahweh, she clearly had no faith in Him. This is proven by her statement which comes soon after her recognition of Yahweh, in which she states the fatal hopelessness of survival for her and her son. Alan J. Hauser and Russell Gregory, *From Carmel to Horeb* (Sheffield, UK: Almond, 1990), 17. See also Roger Ellsworth, *From Glory to Ruin: 1 Kings Simply Explained* (Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 2000), 177. Other authors feel that the words of the widow reveal a belief in Yahweh. For an example of this see Marvin Alan Sweeney, *I & II Kings: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 213; Russell H. Dillard, *1, 2 Kings*, The Communicator's Commentary (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 204. The evidence of the text, however, seems to imply that she was not by any means a firm believer in Yahweh. In consideration of the geographical context, and then her final words in v. 24 it seems safe to deduce that she was not an adherent

implies that she was not an adherent of the God of Israel. These narratives are then records of encounters between the prophet of the God of Israel with an adherent of another god/religion. This can be classified as a cross-religious encounter.

The encounter is divided into two separate narratives. The first is found in 17:8-16 and the second in 17:17-24. Each encounter will be analyzed in sequence, the first being closely tied to the second.

These two narratives contain miraculous events that cannot be understood outside of the power encounter dynamic. It must be recognized that there was more going on in these narratives than simply God maintaining sustenance for His prophet. If that was all that was needed God could have easily sent Elijah to a widow in Israel; the very fact that God sent Elijah to foreign territory where another god was the patron deity is fundamental to understanding the miracles.

Baal was the god of storms and fertility. It was Baal who was believed to control the rain and dew. He was also considered the highest ranking god below El in the Canaanite pantheon.<sup>5</sup> It was into the heart of Baal-worshiping territory that Elijah was sent, surrounded by adherents and devotees to Baal. Scholars are almost unanimous in recognizing that these narratives highlight God's sovereignty over the whole earth including Baal's "territory." This was more than a cross-religious encounter between two humans; it was a power encounter between God and Baal, on Baal's home ground.

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of Yahweh before Elijah came. Another author puts it this way: "The widow's words begin with an oath taken in the name of Elijah's god. This is not surprising in a polytheistic culture; the widow is simply acknowledging that Elijah is a devotee of Yahweh rather than of one of the deities of Sidon." He goes on to state that this in no way means she was a follower of Yahweh, and was actually probably not. Jerome T. Walsh, *1 Kings*, Berit Olam (Collegetown, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), 229.

<sup>5</sup>For more on Baal see *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, s.v. "Baal"; *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2005 ed., s.v. "Baal"; Peter Johannes Van Zijl, *Baal: A Study of Texts in Connexion with Baal in the Ugaritic Epics* (Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker, 1972).

When Elijah arrived at the gate to Zarephath he found the widow God told him would be there. He finds her in dire straits, gathering sticks to build a fire in order to bake the last of her flour into bread (17:10-12). After that she expects that both she and her son will die (17:12). The drought in Israel had affected Zarephath as well, which is significant in light of the fact that Baal supposedly controlled the climate in this territory.<sup>6</sup> The widow is oblivious, at this point in the narrative, to the cosmic power display, which has caused the drought in the first place.

Elijah makes what at first appears to be an unexplainable request that the widow first bake him a small loaf of bread before she bakes bread for herself and her son. This request is accompanied by the promise that she should not fear because God (the God of Israel) will provide for her by making sure her flour bowl is not exhausted and the jar of oil will not be empty until the Lord sends rain. Amazingly, the widow, who is not an adherent of the God of Israel, follows the prophet's request. As a result, just as Elijah had promised, miraculously her flour and oil do not run out. The Bible does not record the reaction of the widow or her son to this miracle.

The second narrative picks up sometime after the first; the text does not say exactly how much later. All that is revealed is that Elijah had been given the upper room of the house as a place to stay (17:19), which reveals that at the very least the widow was willing to show kindness to this foreign man who believed in a different God. At this

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<sup>6</sup>Provan, *1 and 2 Kings*, 133.

point the text is unclear as to the widow's understanding or feelings about the God of Israel.<sup>7</sup>

The narrative then records that the widow's son dies, not from lack of nutrition, but rather he succumbs to some other disease or affliction. The cause is unknown, but the result is clear: The son has died. The widow blames Elijah partly and herself partly. She feels that her own sins have caused the death of her son, and that this man of God being in her house has brought God and her sins into close contact, thus killing her son.<sup>8</sup> Elijah also seems to blame and question God in regard to the death of the boy. This does not stop him from taking the boy up to his room and pleading with God to restore the life of this poor widow's son (17:20). He then proceeds to stretch the boy out, lays down on the boy three times, crying out to God as he does this, after which God restores the boy to life at which time Elijah with the boy returns downstairs to the mother (17:21-23).

The final verse of the narrative is vital to understand the purpose of the miracles found in these two narratives. The widow states to Elijah: "Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the LORD in your mouth is truth" (1 Kgs 17:24 NASB). After this second miracle of divine intervention, in which the dead son is brought back to life, the widow acknowledges without any doubts that the God of Elijah is a God of truth. "The climactic note in the chapter lies not in the restoration of the boy as much as in the testimony of the woman."<sup>9</sup> It was this act of resurrection that contrasted the God of Israel

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<sup>7</sup>Cogan, *1 Kings*. Cogan, in contrasting the reaction of the widow to the final miracle when her son is raised to life with the miracle of sustenance, says that the widow is depicted as "unresponsive to the miracle." *Ibid.*, 430.

<sup>8</sup>Richard D. Nelson, *First and Second Kings*, Interpretation (Atlanta, GA: Knox, 1987), 111.

<sup>9</sup>Terence E. Fretheim, *First and Second Kings*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 99. Walsh comments on these words of the widow: "We would

with Baal, rendering Baal impotent.<sup>10</sup> Now the widow understands that the God of Israel is the true God.

These narratives are an example of God using His supernatural power to reveal Himself to an adherent of a world religion outside of Israel. For this widow miraculous and powerful events were necessary for her to be able to accept and believe in the God of Israel as the only God. God used His power to reveal that He was sovereign. Beyond that He used His power to bless the widow, her son, and Elijah, even revealing His ability to save the dead from death, revealing His salvific power.<sup>11</sup> “The power of God is ultimately on the side of life.”<sup>12</sup> These narratives are a prime example of God in mission accomplishing His missional goals as presented in chapter 2.

### **The Missiological Implications**

There has been a growth in missiological literature over the last few decades dealing with “power encounters” and their implications for mission. Often these are found in the context of various tribal societies or other groups who put a high value on the power of “spirits” or other supernatural entities. Often the biblical foundation for the discussions comes out of the four Gospels or the book of Acts, which record a number of healing and/or other miraculous events.

Like the narrative of Ruth, the narratives involving Elijah and the widow are

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expect profuse expressions of gratitude; instead we hear a profound profession of faith.” Walsh, *1 Kings*, 232.

<sup>10</sup>Hauser and Gregory, *From Carmel to Horeb*, 12.

<sup>11</sup>“His desire [is] to send life rather than death.” Ibid., 20. See also Gina Hens-Piazza, *1-2 Kings*, Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006), 170.

<sup>12</sup>Nelson, *First and Second Kings*, 113.

rarely cited in missiological literature. This is bewildering considering the nature of the encounter and its possible implications for cross-religious encounters. It is assumed in this study that the widow of Zarephath is comparable with a Hindu who may have knowledge of the God of the Bible but has not chosen to follow that God, nor to believe that He is the one and only God.

### **Power Encounters in Missiological Literature**

Names such as John Wimber, C. Peter Wagner, and Charles H. Kraft are often cited in connection to this topic. Other studies have also contributed to the discussion as well. Only a sampling will be analyzed in this study to gain a better understanding of what a “power encounter” is and its general purpose.

In the early 1980s a course entitled “Signs, Wonders and Church Growth” was offered at Fuller Theological Seminary. It became a very popular and controversial class. It dealt primarily with the idea that signs and wonders were legitimate, biblical ways of reaching out to people in need.<sup>13</sup> It was out of this course, through students and faculty who sat in on the course, that much of the present discussion on power encounters stems.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>One of the main reasons the course was so controversial was the demonstration, through healing, of God’s power in the class itself.

<sup>14</sup>For more on the background and history of this course see C. Peter Wagner, *Signs and Wonders Today* (Wheaton, IL: Christian Life Magazine, 1983); Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity with Power: Your Worldview and Your Experience of the Supernatural* (Ann Arbor, MI: Vine Books, 1989); C. Peter Wagner, "Missiology and Spiritual Power," in *Paradigm Shifts in Christian Witness: Insights from Anthropology, Communication, and Spiritual Power*, ed. Charles Edward van Engen, Darrell L. Whiteman, and John Dudley Woodberry (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008).



There are various understandings on the purpose of power encounters. Some have tied it directly to conversion and people movements.<sup>15</sup> John Wimber, one of the main lecturers of the Fuller course, expressed it this way: “When unbelievers either have a power encounter or witness one, they are moved to a new level of awareness in making a decision for Christ.”<sup>16</sup> Alan R. Tippett—who coined the term “power encounter”—drew his illustrations of power encounters from his time spent observing the national people of the Solomon Islands. In his observation he noticed that in order for the people to have a real experience with God they required some sort of powerful manifestation from God to prove that He was more powerful than the local spirits. Only then were larger groups of people willing to follow the true God.<sup>17</sup> Wimber, on the other hand, was the pastor of a North American evangelical church in which healing ministries were made prominent. His experiences were drawn mainly from successful healing campaigns in the United States.<sup>18</sup> Neither of these men dealt with adherents of the world’s major religions outside of Christianity and tribal religions.

Charles H. Kraft has probably contributed more than any other single individual to the ongoing conversation about power encounters. His experience is a combination of the above two people in many respects. He lived and worked in Nigeria, where he

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<sup>15</sup>Alan R. Tippett, *Introduction to Missiology* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1987), chap. 25.

<sup>16</sup>John Wimber, "Power Evangelism: Definitions and Directions," in *Wrestling with Dark Angels: Toward a Deeper Understanding of the Supernatural Forces in Spiritual Warfare*, ed. C. Peter Wagner and Fredrick Douglas Pennoyer (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1990), 31.

<sup>17</sup>See Tippett, *Introduction to Missiology*.

<sup>18</sup>Wimber, "Power Evangelism," in Wagner and Pennoyer, *Wrestling with Dark Angels*, chapter 1.

witnessed the importance of power in the religious lives of Nigerians. He was also a professor at Fuller during the early eighties and sat in the course mentioned above. After sitting through the course twice, Kraft claims that he was transformed into a non-skeptic and eventually an all-out participant in healing ministries. Since that time he has written much on power encounters.<sup>19</sup>

Kraft developed a model of three different types of encounters. These were “truth encounters, commitment encounters, and power encounters.” For Kraft all three are necessary and none should be understood aside from the others. For him the power encounter is the spiritual warfare side of the non-believer’s encounter with God.<sup>20</sup> Kraft often emphasized the power encounter, not because he felt it was more important, but because he felt it was more neglected.

For Kraft, the power encounter is more than simply a power display. In his book *Christianity with Power*, Kraft is clear that there is a danger in getting “sidetracked into focusing on spiritual power.”<sup>21</sup> There is much more to the power encounter: “God’s purpose in ministering in power is always to show love.”<sup>22</sup> It should come in the context

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<sup>19</sup>For a brief biographical sketch of Charles H. Kraft see Paul E. Pierson, "Sketching the Life of Charles H. Kraft," in Engen, Whiteman, and Woodberry, *Paradigm Shifts in Christian Witness*. For Kraft’s most focused work on the subject, see Kraft, *Christianity With Power*.

<sup>20</sup>Charles H. Kraft, "What Kind of Encounters Do We Need in Our Christian Witness," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 27, no. 3 (1991): 258-265. In Kraft’s more recent work on worldview he retitles these as three crucial dimensions’: “1) Allegiance leading to a saving relationship with Jesus, 2) Knowledge of Truth leading to a meaningful understanding of God, and 3) Spiritual Power leading to spiritual and relational freedom.” Kraft, *Worldview for Christian Witness*, 328.

<sup>21</sup>Kraft, *Christianity with Power*, 138.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

of ministering to the “whole person.”<sup>23</sup> Kraft views the power encounters as only one aspect of the overall encounter between God and those being ministered to.

Oddly enough Kraft does not refer to the story of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath as a biblical example supporting his understanding of power encounters. Understandably he uses the example of Jesus’ ministry as his prime foundation. However, it would seem that the 1 Kgs 17 narratives are also good examples of a power encounter in which God displays His power, with the goal of showing His love and concern for the widow, her son, and even Elijah. Beyond that, it is a clear example of a power encounter between Yahweh and Baal, leading to a new understanding of God for the widow.

### **Hindus and Power**

While it would be incorrect to lump all Hindus’ understanding of power into one group, it is appropriate to state that power is of vital interest to many Hindus. This section is primarily concerned with “popular Hinduism’s” view of power, as it relates to their religious beliefs and understandings.

There is no doubt that many Hindus turn to their deities for power. This is done in a variety of ways and through a variety of rituals. This section will not be comprehensive, but instead will isolate a few examples that demonstrate the connection between some Hindus and power through their religious beliefs. First, a broad look at Hindus’ belief in supernatural power is undertaken, and then, secondly, a more specific look at Hindus and healing.

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<sup>23</sup>Kraft, *Christianity With Power*, 137.

## Where Hindus Find Power

Temples are often a place where a Hindu will go in order to gain access to the god/goddess, at which time they can then beseech the god/goddess for power on their behalf. As mentioned in chapter 2, one of the main purposes Hindus go to temples is to perform *darshana*, seeing and being seen by the god/goddess. As noted, this is done to receive a blessing. It also provides a chance to partake of the deities' power. Fuller describes this encounter:

Shiva in particular is often represented with a third eye in the center of his forehead, from which his fiery *power* flows out, but on all divine images (as well as on men and women) the mark above the bridge of the nose symbolizes the third eye, the point from which *power* emanates. Thus when devotees look at images they are also standing in the field of the deities' *power* and absorbing it like light through their own eyes [emphasis added].<sup>24</sup>

This observation gives insight into the devotees' understanding of where they believe true power lies. It is found in the deity, but can be accessed through *darshana*.

Goddesses are especially powerful and often feared as a result of their uncontrollable *Shakti* or power. *Lakshmi*, the goddess of wealth and prosperity, is often worshipped in the home of devotees. In the book *Invoking Lakshmi* it is noted that

the underlying purpose of performing a *pūjā* to any of the Hindu deities is to generate power of auspiciousness. . . . The Lakshmi *pūjā* is performed to arouse the power of *śri*—a richness of being that enlivens health, wealth, beauty, prosperity, longevity, happiness, harmony, well-being, balance, glory, majesty, splendor, and luxurious bounty.<sup>25</sup>

The goddess can also be accessed in her temples, although often home worship is

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<sup>24</sup>Fuller, *The Camphor Flame*, 59-60.

<sup>25</sup>Constantina Eleni Rhodes, *Invoking Lakshmi: The Goddess of Wealth in Song and Ceremony* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2010), 93-94.

preferable. These are just two examples of deities being connected to power—a power that the Hindu believes is accessible. However, in order to access that power, there are a number of set rituals and procedures that one must do in order to even have any chance of obtaining any power from the deity.<sup>26</sup> Hindus believe that as a result of their diligent performance of *puja* that “miracles can and do occur frequently.”<sup>27</sup>

Many of the Hindu festivals celebrated each year celebrate great acts of power, performed by either a god or goddess. One example is *Navaratri*, a nine-day festival that marks the terrible battle between the demon Mahishasura and the gods. Mahishasura had become indestructible and defeated the gods. Finally, the goddess/shakti came to save the day and after nine days of battle killed the demon. The goddesses Durga, Lakshmi, and Saraswati are worshipped during this festival as the goddesses of immense power and strength.<sup>28</sup>

This is only a sampling of the variety of connections that can be made between Hindus, their deities and festivals, and power. There is no doubt that Hindus have a strong belief that there are supernatural powers that interact with the beings on this earth. They often fear these powers, and also wish to obtain some of the power through various means as mentioned above.

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<sup>26</sup>To get an idea of what a normal *pūjā* performed towards Lakshmi requires, see Rhodes, *Invoking Lakshmi*, 95. It includes “gold coins, ripe, sweet fruits, fresh flowers, sanctified water, fragrant substances, and delectable confections of honey, sugar, and milk-based ingredients.” These are only some of the items, not to mention the elaborate way in which each item is to be used and placed in connection to the image of Lakshmi that must be present.

<sup>27</sup>Huyler, *Meeting God*, 36.

<sup>28</sup>For more on this festival and the rituals connected to it, see Jagannathan Maithily, *South Indian Hindu Festivals and Traditions* (New Delhi, India: Abhinav Publications, 2006), 111-116.

## Healing Power<sup>29</sup>

In a more specific way Hindus often turn to the deities for healing power. This is done, again, in a variety of fashions. As in all cultures and religions there is often an elaborate system set in place to deal with ill-health, sickness, and disease. Whether this is done in a secular manner or a more religious manner does not change the fact that humans desire to be healed. It is no different with Hindus who face ill-health; they desire to be freed from it.

The practice of *ayurvedic* medicine is an ancient practice, tracing its origins to the *Vedas*, an ancient Hindu text. It has become a popular form of healthcare far beyond the borders of India. It is not unusual to find practitioners of *ayurvedic* medicine throughout the world, many non-Indians included. David M. Knipe in his research on *ayurveda* medicine has made some pertinent observations. The patients who come to the *ayurvedic* doctor often have a variety of different ailments. Everything from “sexual impotence,” to “loss of teeth” can be treated. While the practitioner often does prescribe different forms of natural medicine they often also go beyond this. It is not uncommon for the practitioner to read *mantras* from various ancient religious texts in the hope that these may bring healing. This is often accompanied by exorcisms of some kind, because often ill-health is attributed to evil spirits or malevolent deities.<sup>30</sup> While not all practitioners use the same methods—some avoid any type of connection to the supernatural—many others

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<sup>29</sup>For an excellent chapter and accompanying photographs dealing with healing in the Hindu tradition see Huyler, “Healing, Sacred Vows, and Possession,” in *Meeting God*.

<sup>30</sup>David M. Knipe, “Hinduism and the Tradition of *Āyurveda*,” in *Healing and Restoring: Health and Medicine in the World's Religious Traditions*, ed. Lawrence Eugene Sullivan (New York: Macmillan Collier Macmillan, 1989).

practice a type of healing that requires a power beyond themselves or natural medicines.

It is also quite common to find the sick and ailing being taken to the local temple, before or sometimes in place of seeing a medical doctor. For centuries, local village goddesses have been believed to be the cause of major sicknesses, like smallpox. As a result, when someone is sick that person must perform some sort of appeasing act for the goddess in the hope that this will lead to healing. This often has included animal sacrifices, which can be seen to this day in some Indian villages.<sup>31</sup>

Often any type of misfortune is attributed to malevolent spirits or deities. There are diviners and exorcists who are called upon for dealing with these spirits. Yet, as Fuller describes:

None of these ways of coping with malevolent ghostly spirits is reckoned to be foolproof, and there is widespread doubt about the competence of diviners and exorcists, as well as about the efficacy of either relocating and enshrining spirits, or abandoning and confusing them. Spirits have an uncanny ability to repossess their victims and, because none of them can ever be exterminated, even by powerful deities, the risk of attack from old or new predators is always present.<sup>32</sup>

This paragraph highlights the desire, but often helplessness, of Hindus in gaining power to rid themselves of malevolent spirits.

To be fair, there are also many times when Hindus visit the deity at the temple or a diviner and then the sick person gets well. This obviously is then accredited to the deity/diviner as healer. An example is given in *Meeting God* where a grandmother takes her granddaughter, who is suffering from cholera, and puts her before an image of the goddess Parvati. “Within seconds her fever has abated and she is entirely healed of the

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<sup>31</sup>Linda L. Barnes and Inés Talamantez, eds., *Teaching Religion and Healing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 65.

<sup>32</sup>Fuller, *The Camphor Flame*, 233.

disease.”<sup>33</sup> There are many more stories like this one told by people of all ages throughout India.

This section has emphasized that many Hindus are believers in power beyond the human realm. They adhere to a belief that this power can be accessed and even at times can be attained for healing purposes. There is an understanding that the deities, whether good or malevolent, play a role in the well-being of all people, and that this power is dangerous but also useful.

### **The Hindu Context Understood in Light of the Narratives**

With the understanding that many Hindus respect supernatural power as a relevant source of power it is then possible to apply the principles from the narrative to the present Hindu context. This final section addresses the possibilities as well as some of the dangers of power encounters as they pertain to Hindus.

Research has shown that many NBBCs have decided to follow Jesus because they believe that they have received some sort of healing in response to prayers to Him. Hoefler makes these observations: “They [NBBC’s] choose Him among the plethora of gods and goddesses because they think He may have the compassion and power to heal them now as He helped the sick and the lame of His day.”<sup>34</sup> He goes on to point out some key characteristics of these healing situations. “People often experienced this effective love of Christ through the prayers of his ministers.”<sup>35</sup> In other words, these moments of

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<sup>33</sup>Huyler, *Meeting God*, 214.

<sup>34</sup>Hoefler, *Churchless Christianity*, 58.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, 59.



healing came in the presence of a believer in God.

The narrative of Elijah and the widow can provide a helpful framework for understanding how a power encounter(s) can lead to a more complete understanding and faith in God. In this particular narrative a few things can be observed that are significant. First of all, these miracles take place in the presence of a believer in Yahweh. While the narrative is clear, both miracles are a result of God, they still happen in a context where a believer in God is present. It would seem that in order for the widow to really be able to understand and give credit to the God who deserved the credit, these power encounter(s) had to occur in this type of context. If Elijah had not been present, these miracles could potentially lose their meaning. The widow could just have easily credited Baal with causing her flour and oil to sustain her family and for bringing her son back to life if Elijah had not been there and been vocal about the fact that it was Yahweh doing these things. This seems to fit with the experience of Hindus as noted above.

Second, it took two miracles, and the second was an even greater display of power than the first. It would seem that God used two displays of power to make it clear to the widow who He was, partly because one was not enough. These also were miracles that clearly portrayed Yahweh as a God who cares, even for those whose station in life appears lowly and insignificant. The miracles affirmed God as a God who is sovereign and who desires to bless.

In the context of an adherent of another religion, it was His caring, miraculous power in the face of great suffering that mattered most. It also proved that Baal was incomparable to this God, and therefore not worthy of worship. This seems to fit Hoefler's own observations in regard to Hindus experiencing God's power.

These people *experienced the love and power* of Christ in their personal lives. . . . They face the real threat of ‘principalities and powers in high places’ in their lives, so they need to know that Jesus is able and willing to care for them. A god may have the power, but he may not have love. Another god may have love but not power. A third god may have both but not care about me. All three are needed: God’s love God’s power, and for me [emphasis in original].<sup>36</sup>

Witnessing to Hindus may include similar types of power displays. Many in the West have been reluctant to deal with the power they find in other belief systems. But for a Hindu, power is important, and displays of power by the deity reinforce the value of that particular deity. As the biblical narrative has shown, God is willing to display His power in a meaningful and caring way towards adherents of religions outside the Bible. But it must be remembered that these miracles took place in the presence of a believer in Yahweh. Therefore, it would seem that even today in order for a power encounter to bring the Hindu into a greater knowledge of God, it would have to take place in a situation where the Hindu is aware that it is God doing this on their behalf. This will most likely occur in the presence of a believer in God. At times, simply a lifestyle of *hesed* may not be enough to help the Hindu understand who God is. But when they come into contact with His power in a meaningful and caring way, this may be what is needed for them to grow in faith.

Prayer must not be forgotten in this situation. Elijah prays fervently for the widow’s son when he dies. In answer to this prayer, God resurrects the son. Applying this means that anyone in a relationship with a Hindu must take their life challenges seriously. When they are struggling, the believer, like Elijah, should genuinely take their concerns to God. God does listen as the narrative portrays, and in this type of case, where the very

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<sup>36</sup>Hoefler, *Churchless Christianity*, 59.

faith of the widow is at stake God answered the prayer in such a way as to not only bring her son to life but also to strengthen her faith in Him. It may be that one of the ways for Hindus to come into a more meaningful relationship with God is through similar power encounters.

God's mission is a mission of relationship and power; however, even with these two elements, often God's mission is not accomplished right away or in the way one might expect. The next narrative analyzed will have a combination of the two above chapters, while at the same time showing that God is a God of patience, encouraging people to follow Him one step at a time.

## CHAPTER 5

### GOD'S MISSION THROUGH PATIENT ENCOURAGEMENT: ANOTHER LOOK AT SYNCRETISM IN LIGHT OF THE NAAMAN NARRATIVE

The previous two chapters explored narratives that had significant missiological implications. This chapter will explore one more narrative that in many ways contains elements of the first two narratives. Second Kings 5:1-19 is a well-known story that is often taught even to children at an early age. It contains elements of genuine kindness and caring as well as a power encounter scenario, which ties it to the previous chapters.<sup>1</sup> But most relevantly it contains practical guidance for the missionary who is interacting with Hindus. For these reasons this narrative has been chosen as the final OT example to demonstrate another aspect of God's mission.

#### **Unusual Narrative**

Second Kings 5:1-19 is a unique and unusual narrative in many respects. It has been said that it is “complex on the literary plane, it leads the reader into deep levels of theological reflection in a variety of directions.”<sup>2</sup> There is no doubt that this narrative is somewhat complex and has often perplexed exegetes. One thing is for certain, this “is yet

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<sup>1</sup>Nelson actually compares this narrative with the Ruth narrative; however, he does this in a much different way than this thesis has. He looks at both narratives as examples of denunciation against “racism and nationalism” in Israel. Nelson, *First and Second Kings*, 183.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 176.

another narrative that picks up themes from the Elijah story; the LORD is seen to be God, not only of Israelites, but also of foreigners (1 Kgs 17:17-24) and is acknowledged as the only real God (1 Kgs 18:20-40).<sup>3</sup> Naaman is a Syrian, and Syrians at this time worshipped Rimmon, not Yahweh.

Beyond this there are other unique and peculiar events in the narrative. A slave girl serves as the main connection between a powerful army commander and the prophet of Israel.<sup>4</sup> The other servants in the story play key roles as well. Finally, after the healing of Naaman takes place, he makes two peculiar requests, which Elisha answers in an odd and, to some, shocking manner.

Rather than give a verse-by-verse analysis of the narrative, the focus will be on certain portions of the narrative that are particularly applicable in the context of a Hindu coming to faith in the God of the Bible. Verses 15-19 are especially significant for understanding God's mission as it relates to non-believers in Him, therefore these particular verses will be the main focus of this chapter. And from these verses a working theology that can be applied missiologically will appear.

## **Two Requests**

Naaman makes two interesting and controversial requests of Elisha after he has been healed. These are presented as dilemmas concerning his worship once he returns to

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<sup>3</sup>Provan, *1 and 2 Kings*, 191.

<sup>4</sup>While this chapter focuses on other aspects of this narrative, the missiological lessons to be learned from this slave girl's witness are also of great value. It could be that while Naaman leaves Elisha with a worldview that has not undergone complete transformation that he continued to grow under the influence of this slave girl. That however is conjecture and thus will not be a part of this chapter's analysis. For a good contemporary view of this encounter, see August H. Konkel, *1 & 2 Kings* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 436.

his land.<sup>5</sup> First, Naaman requests that he be allowed to carry back to Syria two mule loads of soil (2 Kgs 5:17). Second, he asks for a pardon from Elisha (2 Kgs 5:18). Why? Because he knows that when he returns to his country the king is going to ask him to enter the temple of Rimmon to worship. He will bow with the king but in his heart he will worship the God of Israel. To these two requests Elisha simply answers “go in peace.” Each request deserves its own analysis.

### Two Mules Loads of Soil

This request of Naaman must be understood in its context. Many scholars have debated the real meaning behind this odd request, but there are some basic points of consensus among scholars. It is recognized that this request is made in light of Naaman’s statement that he will no longer make sacrifices to any other god.<sup>6</sup> This leads many interpreters to conclude that the soil requested is in some way connected to sacrifices or an altar to perform sacrifices on.<sup>7</sup> This alone however still leaves some doubt as to the motives of Naaman for taking Israelite soil.

Some scholars are reluctant to find much meaning in this request. They pass it off as Naaman attempting to maintain a liturgical connection with the land where he has first encountered Yahweh, but they refuse to see any sort of syncretism or dual allegiance in

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<sup>5</sup>Hens-Piazza, *1-2 Kings*, 262.

<sup>6</sup>Emmanuel O. Nwaoru, "The Story of Naaman (2 Kings 5:1-19): Implications for Mission Today," *Swedish Missiological Themes* 96, no. 1 (2008): 37.

<sup>7</sup>See Hens-Piazza, *1-2 Kings*; T. R. Hobbs, *2 Kings*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1985), 66. Hobbs claims that the request was sentimental and not “superstition.” This does not seem to adequately explain the situation however.

his request.<sup>8</sup> Others have found his request as showing a total lack of true understanding of who God is. They tie this request to the common tradition that deities were overseers of particular land, and that once you passed out of their territory you were in the domain of a different deity.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, it is deduced that Naaman was of the mind-set that Syria was beyond the territory of Yahweh, so in order to maintain contact with this powerful and true God he must have some of the soil from Israel.<sup>10</sup>

Based on the historical context and the textual context, there may be some truth in both of these positions. It does appear that Naaman makes a pretty strong statement in a belief that there is only one God, and that God is the God of Israel. At the same time he is clearly still influenced by his Syrian worldview, which was that gods were territorial. This appears to be a major reason behind his request for soil. Block states that “sensing some special mystical relationship between the deity and the land in which he was revered, Naaman desired to take two loads of Israelite soil with him back to Damascus.”<sup>11</sup> If this is the case, then Naaman did not have a complete understanding of God as sovereign over all the earth, even though he may have begun to understand that there was

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<sup>8</sup>House goes so far as to compare Naaman’s desire for soil with “the modern tendency to take home significant personal souvenirs from the Holy Land.” This is clearly a poor analogy and is not supported by the historical context. It is odd that he makes this comparison right after giving a brief explanation of the “ancient custom” to take soil from one place to another. House, *1, 2 Kings*, 273.

<sup>9</sup>See Walter A. Maier III, "The Healing of Naaman in Missiological Perspective," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (1997): 187; Block, *The Gods of the Nations: Studies in Near Eastern Theology*; Nelson, *First and Second Kings*, 179.

<sup>10</sup>Some choose a kind of “soft” answer that lies somewhere in the middle. Fretheim attempts to argue that Naaman’s speech clearly shows he has a remarkable understanding of Yahweh as the only God and that his request for soil does not mean that he “localizes” Yahweh to Israel. For Fretheim the soil is simply a way for Naaman to maintain a link with the community where his faith comes from. Fretheim, *First and Second Kings*, 155. This is however an insufficient answer in light of the historical context.

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<sup>11</sup>Block, *The Gods of the Nations*, 86.



no God like Yahweh and that his own previous god(s) were not really god(s) at all.

If the above is true, which the text seems to support, than Elisha's answer "go in peace" may be problematic for some. Here is the prophet of God allowing a new convert to leave his presence with a faulty view of God, and he does nothing to admonish or correct him. If this were the only problem it may not be so bad, but Naaman's second request is in many ways more shocking.

### Bowing to an Idol

After Naaman's first request, he goes on to make an even bolder one. Naaman has clearly thought about what his newfound faith may mean when he returns to his home country, which religiously is very different from Israel. He recognizes that when he returns, the king of Syria, who has shown much kindness to him in the past, will want him to come and worship at the temple of Rimmon with him. This is not a question of whether it will happen, but rather what to do when it happens. Naaman knows for a fact that he will be asked to go to the temple with the king.

In Naaman's mind, he must go. There does not appear room for another option at this point in Naaman's thinking. He is not asking Elisha if it is okay to go, but rather, can he be pardoned for going, and even bowing down. It is also clear that at least at first Naaman is not planning on telling the king about his newfound faith. This is made clear when Naaman makes the point that in his heart, not openly, he will worship Yahweh and not Rimmon. In short Naaman is requesting that he be pardoned for what will appear to those all around him to be continued worship of Rimmon, who is a false god and idol. Can idol worship ever be overlooked? Even "fake" idol worship? Elisha's answer "go in peace" implies in this situation that Naaman's request for pardon is granted.

As with the first request Elisha has no rebuke or admonishment for Naaman.<sup>12</sup> He does not explain to him that he must speak boldly of his new faith even if it means being cut off from his community or possibly death. It is interesting that Naaman is “admitted into the community of worshippers of YHWH without the requirements of rite of conversion.”<sup>13</sup> Is there theological significance to these two requests and Elisha’s answer?

### **Is Naaman Being Syncretistic?<sup>14</sup>**

Some argue that Naaman’s questions reveal a weak understanding of God. Some will go so far as to accuse him of “syncretism,” mixing his false, pagan worldview of God with his newfound faith in God. What are the implications of Naaman’s questions and Elisha’s answer of “go in peace?” If this is a form of syncretism, can this narrative be a valid example of a positive worldview transformation? The answers to these questions inform the missiological outcome of this narrative.

### Syncretism

Over that last several decades, the term syncretism as become a key term heavily used in missiology especially in connection with contextualization and how far

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<sup>12</sup>Hens-Piazza goes so far as to say, “Elisha perceives his [Naaman’s] disquiet and grants him relief from the unrest, bidding him leave ‘in peace.’” Hens-Piazza, *1-2 Kings*, 262.

<sup>13</sup>Mordechai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor, *2 Kings*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1988), 67. Block makes an interesting connection between the two loads of soil and this request to bow to the idol. “His [Naaman’s] expectation was that even if, out of duty to his master, he would need to attend the worship of Rimmon, Yahweh would pardon him because of the connection provided by the soil in his possession (2 Kings 5:15-17).” Block, *The Gods of the Nations*, 86.

<sup>14</sup>House asks a similar question except that he is asking if Elisha has given in to “accommodationism.” House is more concerned about Elisha’s simple answer than the requests themselves. See House, *1, 2 Kings*, 274.

contextualization should go. Defining syncretism, however, has not been easy for many, and continues to be a fluid task. There are a variety of definitions extant, some which basically call all non-biblical practices syncretistic; others look at it as a turning away from clear biblical teaching back to a culturally unacceptable alternative; some have associated it with a lack of critical thinking on the part of the one telling the gospel; while others would blame the recipient.<sup>15</sup> Because of this “there is a growing recognition that syncretism is not a simple process of conscious oil-and-water compromise.”<sup>16</sup> If the definition is so ambiguous, it is difficult to be able to take the Naaman narrative and check it for syncretism. What this narrative may be able to do is highlight the futility of the syncretism arguments that continue to surround missiology.

### **The Soil**

There is no doubt that Naaman, by asking for soil from Israel, was still thinking that God was territorial. The historical context leaves little room for any other interpretation. The question is: Does this qualify as syncretism? Or does it fall into a different, less defined category?

Naaman is not turning away from a clear biblical understanding of God. He simply does not have a mature understanding of God, which is to be expected since it has been such a short time that he has known anything about Yahweh. While he has made a major decision and recognized that Yahweh is special and the only one deserving of his

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<sup>15</sup>Gailyn Van Rheenen, "Syncretism and Contextualization: The Church on a Journey Defining Itself," in *Contextualization and Syncretism: Navigating Cultural Currents* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2006), 7-8. See also *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, s.v. "Syncretism."

<sup>16</sup>Harvie M. Conn, *Eternal Word and Changing Worlds: Theology, Anthropology, and Mission in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), 184.

worship, he has not fully understood who Yahweh really is. Maier appears correct when he says: “his new Yahwism with an old pagan notion.”<sup>17</sup> To many this would qualify as a form of syncretism.

If syncretism is defined as “the blending of Christian beliefs and practices with those of the dominant culture so that Christianity loses it[s] distinctiveness,”<sup>18</sup> then Naaman’s request and follow-up action could be classified as syncretism. But the question deserves to be asked, Is Naaman expected to have a complete understanding of God after such a short time? Few would expect that of him, and it would seem even Elisha felt that this was not the appropriate time to give Naaman a lesson on God’s complete sovereignty, therefore deeming the soil unnecessary. Worldview transformation is no simple task accomplished overnight. It takes time and considerable knowledge for a person to move from one view of the world into an entirely different view. It may even take “multiple generations” before a solid biblical foundation is accomplished.<sup>19</sup> This would mean that a definition of syncretism like the one starting this paragraph doesn’t seem to take into account the overwhelming challenge of worldview change.

### **The Bowing to an Idol**

The second request is in many ways similar to the first. But there are some key differences that deserve comment. This second request could also be considered syncretism by some. Naaman is willing to continue a false practice in order to avoid

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<sup>17</sup>Maier, "The Healing of Naaman in Missiological Perspective," 187.

<sup>18</sup>Van Rheenen, "Syncretism and Contextualization," 8.

<sup>19</sup>Konkel, *1 & 2 Kings*, 438.

certain repercussions. While it is true Naaman was not actually worshipping the idol in his mind, no one around him would have known that. It would not be so bad if it were a simpler issue, but idol worship, something God is so clearly against, seems a bit beyond the acceptable. Yet Elisha's response is for both of these requests, not just the first one.

The context again can help shed light on this seemingly syncretistic request. It is important to note that the king was very close to Naaman, and had even written a letter to his enemy on behalf of Naaman. Therefore Naaman has no doubt that when he returns the king will ask him to worship in the temple of Rimmon. Would it be appropriate for Naaman to refuse this honest request by the king? The king would not have been aware of Naaman's experience at that time, and for whatever reason Naaman feels that this would not be an appropriate time to fill him in on his newfound faith. Fretheim is clear when he says: "This is not a lapse into syncretism, but a recognition that the life of faith must be lived out in ambiguous situations and away from the community of faith."<sup>20</sup>

Notice also that Naaman's attitude is one of humbleness. He recognizes that this is not the ideal by seeking pardon for his future actions beforehand.<sup>21</sup> He seems to understand that ideally he should not be bowing to idols at any time, but that in this case he sees no way around it. Again it is important to understand that Naaman has very recently gained a new way of looking at the world, and has made an "astounding confession of monotheism."<sup>22</sup> To ask him to break all ties for his faith, and even possibly

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<sup>20</sup>Fretheim, *First and Second Kings*, 153. Notice Fretheim uses the term "lapse" here, which implies that his definition of syncretism requires that one turn back to a previous belief after leaving it behind.

<sup>21</sup>Burke O. Long, *2 Kings* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 73.

<sup>22</sup>Nelson, *First and Second Kings*, 178. Brueggemann may be correct when he says, "Naaman's acclamation of Yahweh (5:15) is not a studied affirmation of theoretical monotheism; it is rather, an

lose his life does not seem appropriate to Elisha at this time. It is enough that he recognizes that worshiping the idol is wrong, the social consequences of which he must work out himself in his time. Konkel puts it this way:

Elisha's assurance of peace to Naaman when he should go the house of Rimmon in the service of his master is a reminder that believers must be given freedom to choose how they can best give witness to their faith. The question is not whether believers should be faithful, but how they most effectively give testimony to their faith. Believers in hostile circumstances must make decisions about what constitutes a situation where they must be faithful to death.<sup>23</sup>

By responding "go in peace" Elisha is not necessarily condoning these two requests.<sup>24</sup> Elisha understands the challenge that Naaman has to face and therefore "lays no more guilt on Naaman."<sup>25</sup> He either felt that this was not the appropriate time to illuminate Naaman on these topics or that Naaman had a good enough grasp on the issue to make his own decision. Alongside this "Elisha does not expect Naaman to abandon the world or withdraw into a ghetto where he can escape moral dilemmas and difficulties."<sup>26</sup> Elisha would seem to be putting Naaman into Yahweh's care, allowing God to lead him

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exuberant doxology of gratitude that moves easily and freely beyond the conventional theological categories of his previous faith." Walter Brueggemann, *1 & 2 Kings* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2000), 335. This should be kept in mind before putting too much weight on Naaman's "acclamation" of monotheism. Maier on the other hand goes so far as to conclude that Naaman must have somehow come to a knowledge of the Messiah in this whole encounter; he does qualify this by saying there is no way of knowing how he came to this knowledge. Maier, "The Healing of Naaman in Missiological Perspective," 185. Allan L. Effa, who also writes from a missiological perspective, cannot agree with Maier's conclusion. Allan Effa, "Prophet, Kings, Servants, and Lepers: A Missiological Reading of an Ancient Drama," *Missiology* 35, no. 3 (2007): 469.

<sup>23</sup>Konkel, *1 & 2 Kings*, 441. Others have answered in a similar vein. Nelson uses a rhetorical question to answer: "Does his new faith automatically mean his death?" Nelson, *First and Second Kings*, 183.

<sup>24</sup>"The narrative advances no rigorist or purist solution, only Elisha's non-committal, but non-judgmental, 'shalom' (v. 19a) giving tacit approval to Naaman's practical compromise." Nelson, *First and Second Kings*, 180, 183.

<sup>25</sup>House, *1, 2 Kings*, 274.

<sup>26</sup>Peter J. Leithart, *1 & 2 Kings* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006), 195.

forward from this point onwards.<sup>27</sup> Most important, though, is that Naaman left the presence of Elisha encouraged rather than discouraged. This is the key missiological point to the encounter.

### Syncretism?

Syncretism deserves to be more well defined before it can be used to describe specific situations. This narrative proves this point very clearly. If syncretism is simply the mixing of cultural beliefs with the new religious ones, then clearly Naaman was syncretistic. Normally syncretism is a pejorative term, therefore if Naaman was syncretistic, then Naaman was most likely in the wrong. It would seem to be more accurate to categorize syncretism as something that occurs among longer term believers, who have had more time to understand better the faith they are a part of, yet still choose to incorporate non-biblical practices that can be harmful. This would, however, create many questions, since almost all groups of believers have some sort of non-biblical practices evident in their faith experience.

Perhaps the term syncretism needs to be laid aside for a time, and concepts developed which can help answer the ambiguity that is currently surrounding the term. This has already been done, although not intentionally, by some. This narrative can be a test case for some of the extant theories in connection with syncretism and its antidote.

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<sup>27</sup>See Effa, "Prophets, Kings, Servants, and Lepers," 471; Maier, "The Healing of Naaman in Missiological Perspective," 192. Effa says, "Elisha responds graciously, without offering concrete advice. He does not tell him to abandon his post and to withdraw from his society or to refuse to have anything to do with idol worship. He is not willing to lay such a heavy burden on the shoulders of a tender new believer. At the same time, we should not assume that Elisha is condoning Naaman's proposal, which he has already recognized as wrong and in need of God's forgiveness. Elisha leaves issues of casuistry for Naaman to work out himself and wishes him well by granting him the blessing of God's peace." Effa, "Prophets, Kings, Servants, and Lepers," 471.

## Time

First there has been some literature which has attempted to show that the process of conversion is slower than many would hope it to be. It has been recognized that sincere commitment and genuineness can be accompanied with doubts, misunderstandings, and the slow process of incorporating new beliefs into a host culture. This being the case, then what often may appear to be a type of syncretism or dual allegiance may actually be stages in the conversion process.<sup>28</sup>

Anthropology has helped to uncover the depths of what it means to change a belief system and the complexity and slowness of the processes involved. In fact, it would seem that syncretism as stated above is actually unavoidable to a large extent, and that religious change and growth will be accompanied by some aspects of syncretism. Luzbetak seems to find this understanding valid and even states: "God does not reject those in the process of purification just because they are not yet pure."<sup>29</sup> The first step of recognizing that God is unique as a savior, whether from sin or disease, in this case, is a sign that the seeds of the Word have been planted, but it should be expected that those seeds will take time to bear fruit.<sup>30</sup>

The narrative of Naaman appears to support this thesis. Naaman has just recently become a believer in Yahweh. The requests he makes indicate that he has not come to a

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<sup>28</sup>See Robert J. Schreier, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985), 158. While I do not agree with all that Schreier has to say on syncretism, he has done a good job of articulating the point that conversion is a process and that what has often been termed syncretism may actually be part of the process.

<sup>29</sup>Louis J. Luzbetak, *The Church and Cultures: New Perspectives in Missiological Anthropology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 369.

<sup>30</sup>Maier, "The Healing of Naaman in Missiological Perspective," 194.



complete understanding of God. “Elisha's enigmatic response may at least suggest that God is patient with those who have just turned to him and gives them time to discover what it means to worship him in ways that do not require an immediate separation from their culture.”<sup>31</sup> Looking back at the Ruth narrative we do not find Ruth making her declaration on the side of God until she has been with Naomi for ten years, corroborating that in these two narratives there is an understanding that religious change takes time.

### **Direction**

Another key issue that is pertinent to this discussion is the issue of direction. In other words, where is the faith of the person directed. Are they moving closer to the biblical ideal or moving away from it. Paul Hiebert in his work on different types of “categories” or “sets” dealt with this concept.

These categories/sets have been well defined by Hiebert already, therefore the focus will be on a particular “set.”<sup>32</sup> The centered set is “created by defining a center or reference point and the relationship of the thing to that center.”<sup>33</sup> In centered sets, things that move towards the center are considered “members” while those moving in the opposite direction are not. Hiebert compares this type of set with “bounded sets,” which have strictly delineated boundaries. Either you are in or out of the bounded set, direction is irrelevant. The centered set on the other hand has a well-defined center and develops

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<sup>31</sup>Effa, "Prophets, Kings, Servants, and Lepers," 471.

<sup>32</sup>Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1994), 122. For a detailed explanation of these various “sets” see pp. 110-136.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

well-defined boundaries based on the relationship one has to the center. Centered sets are more concerned about the relationship or direction rather than the boundary itself.<sup>34</sup>

In the realm of religion and Christianity, Hiebert applies this concept by defining the center as a belief in Jesus and the Bible. Based on my evaluation in chapter 2 that emphasized a biblical understanding of God as sovereign and as the Savior who desires to bless all people, growth towards understanding these traits can be used to define the center in this thesis. Applying Hiebert's concept further would mean that those who are beginning to understand this view of God are moving in the right direction, towards the center. This also allows for recognition of the issue of time discussed above. As Hiebert put it, "some are close to Christ in their knowledge and maturity, others are immature and need to grow to attain adequate understanding."<sup>35</sup>

Hiebert lists a number of positive outcomes if this view is adopted as a model for the church and Christianity in general. These include a move towards better discipleship, recognizing that the first act of conversion is only the beginning of the journey and not the final goal. He also concludes that a "centered-set approach avoids the dilemma between offering cheap grace that allows new believers to become Christians but leads to shallow church or costly grace that preserves the purity of the church but keeps them out of the kingdom."<sup>36</sup>

Based on the above paragraphs, syncretism as currently defined cannot possibly describe Naaman's situation, nor the situation of any number of current people who are in

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 124.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 126.

<sup>36</sup>Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*, 127.

the midst of transforming their worldview. It is appropriate here to define a new term or terminology that can better describe the Naaman situation. Rather than coin an entirely new term, it may be appropriate to borrow and expand terminology already in use in the field of hermeneutics.

William J. Webb has come up with what he calls “redemptive-movement hermeneutic.” He defines this terminology in the following manner: it is “the need to engage the redemptive spirit of the text in a way that moves the contemporary appropriation of the text beyond its original-application framing.”<sup>37</sup> While this is clearly dealing with hermeneutics it lends itself very nicely to the Naaman situation when slightly altered. Perhaps we can use the term “redemptive-movement encounters” to explain the encounter that occurs between Naaman and Yahweh, through Elisha. This encounter leads Naaman to pledge allegiance to a new God and move in a new direction, but it is just the beginning stage of his “redemptive movement,” not the final moments.

Elisha very well may have had this type of idea in his mind when he encourages Naaman as he leaves, rather than scolding him.<sup>38</sup> Hiebert, commenting on centered sets, said that this “emphasis . . . would be on exhorting people to follow Christ, rather than on excluding others to preserve the purity of the set. Salvation is open to everyone, no matter who they are, what they know, or what baggage they bring with them.”<sup>39</sup> The concept of

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<sup>37</sup>William J. Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 30.

<sup>38</sup>Hiebert actually defends the idea that the “Hebrew worldview of the prophets and of Christ was essentially extrinsic and well-formed in character.” Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*, 124-125.

<sup>39</sup>Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*, 125-126.

redemptive-movement encounters encompasses this type of emphasis and fits perfectly with the mission of God as explained in chapter 2.

With this understanding, Hiebert defined syncretism as “moving in the wrong direction, away from a fuller knowledge of the Gospel.”<sup>40</sup> This definition of syncretism is more defined and logical. It leaves room for new believers to have less “maturity” in their understanding of who God is and what He requires without calling them syncretistic. It also defines how one does become syncretistic, namely when a choice is made to become involved in thinking or practices that are known to be contrary to the gospel. Elisha’s response to the requests of Naaman begin to make better sense when understood in this paradigm. Naaman had begun to move in the right direction, while still not fully understanding the center. Elisha’s response creates an atmosphere of encouragement that will help Naaman continue to move towards the center rather than away from it.

### **Present Application**

This narrative can be instrumental in providing a biblical example of the required patience and encouragement one should have and give when studying with and interacting with someone who has a very different religious worldview such as a Hindu. Practically speaking, how does this narrative inform the present challenge of sharing the God of the Bible with Hindus?

Hindus may not grasp fully what it means to believe in only one God; or that idol worship is an inappropriate way of worshipping God when they first encounter the God of the Bible. For some time Hindus may continue with certain rituals that appear

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<sup>40</sup>Hiebert, "Syncretism and Social Paradigms," in Van Rhee, *Contextualization and Syncretism*, 44.

unbiblical in nature. But at the same time they may be very clear that they no longer are following their former Hindu deities, but have replaced them with the God of the Bible. What should be done in such a situation? It may be that there are times when allowing them to continue, with words to encourage them in the right direction, that are more valuable than a rebuke. This does not mean that they are left with an incomplete view of God. Rather this encourages them to continue the journey, rather than discourage them at a crucial juncture.

In the same strain it may be better to avoid forcing Hindus to abandon home and community in order to avoid the household *puja* or other worship ceremonies. Like Naaman, they too will most likely recognize the futility of such worship, but in order to maintain good relations with their family members it may be appropriate to hold off on telling their family of their changing perspective. This is especially true of many Hindu women who have come to know Jesus but live in a household where the husband is still a practicing Hindu. They often have to read their Bibles in private when the husband is away and pray secretly.<sup>41</sup> This does not mean that a time may come when they will have to choose to be more open, but in the end they need to make this decision; others cannot make it for them. Ultimately the goal should be to continue growing in the biblical truth of God. However, it would also seem advantageous to remain in the community as best one can so as to keep the line of witness open. “In this regard, individual missionaries are

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<sup>41</sup>Hoefer, *Churchless Christianity*, 23, 50, 198. Hoefer gives examples of NBBCs who actually continue to attend temples with their families and participate in religious ceremonies in order to maintain the tie with family. While this may not be the best practice, the Naaman narrative teaches that patience in these situations is probably, at least at first, the most appropriate response. Some have decided to participate in festivals and ceremonies except in the purely religious aspects of those events. This is done respectfully and in a way that a positive connection is maintained with the community.

to be trained in inculturational principles to enable them to address thorny issues relating to divine worship and the culture of the people.”<sup>42</sup>

Bharati calls for more patience and less pressure when working with Hindus. “Allow them to make their own decisions. They may go wrong initially, but if they do make mistakes we can correct them gently by pointing it out under the light of Scripture.”<sup>43</sup> He goes on to say that it is true that people need the whole gospel, but that no one can understand the whole gospel in one sitting. He encourages the development of good “rapport” and spending time discussing the needs and challenges that the Hindu is facing. As in Naaman’s case, he advises dealing with the present needs rather than delving into the deep things of the gospel to start with.<sup>44</sup>

In dealing with Hindus there will no doubt be times when aspects of the new believers’ understanding and practice are not in complete harmony with the Word of God. But an attitude of encouragement that works with the Hindu in patience is needed, rather than a spirit of critical correction. Hiebert has shown that it is the direction one is headed that is of most importance. It is possible to speak of new believers and even more mature believers as being on a journey, each one at a different stage. Lutzbetak points out that all humans struggle with sin, and that true syncretism is a result of sin; therefore, as a group of believers we should struggle onward together with encouragement holding onto

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<sup>42</sup>Nwaoru, "The Story of Naaman (2 Kings 5:1-19)," 39.

<sup>43</sup>Bharati, *Living Water and Indian Bowl: An Analysis of Christian Failings in Communicating Christ to Hindus*, 23.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 34.

the promise that “he who has begun a good work . . . will carry it through to completion, right up to the day of Christ Jesus” (Phil 1:6).<sup>45</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The narrative found in 1 Kgs 5 is not easy to understand or explain. The two unorthodox requests are especially troubling in light of Elisha’s reply. While there is no doubt that there are unusual aspects to the narrative, it is also a very useful narrative to guide those who are sincerely working with Hindus. It can encourage better understanding of certain principles that help in encouraging new believers in their new-found journey of faith.

All those engaging their Hindu friends should be given some “flexibility” as they navigate the many challenges that a change of faith entails. Special prayers for wisdom need to be constant throughout the process of change.<sup>46</sup> The focus is on encouraging the new believer to continue in the direction that they have started in, moving toward the center, which is an understanding of the Sovereign, saving God who desires to continue to bless them.

Patient encouragement, allowing for the believer’s faith and understanding to develop over time, is vital. Effa finishes his article on this narrative with the following paragraph:

Finally, the community of believers needs to exercise patience in allowing Gentile converts to discover the implications of faith in Yahweh, while remaining contributing citizens within their respective cultures. When a genuine turning to God has taken place, it may be best to refrain from imposing the full burden of what the believing community understands to be implicit in worshipping and serving God.

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<sup>45</sup>Luzbetak, *The Church and Cultures*, 371.

<sup>46</sup>Maier, "The Healing of Naaman in Missiological Perspective," 193, 195.

Instead, one should trust God to continue to lead that convert into greater truth about God and the details of what it means to be a follower. The faith journey is a process laden with tension, and the struggle to integrate one's faith with every aspect of life may take an entire lifetime.<sup>47</sup>

While Elisha's answer "go in peace" may be troubling to some, it is actually much more encouraging than troubling. It is important to recognize that Jesus used Naaman as an example of faith in Luke 4:27, thereby strengthening the argument that Elisha's answer was the correct one. This narrative gives a key to understanding the importance of maintaining an attitude of patient encouragement even when the new believer does not understand fully while taking the first faltering steps to the God of the Bible and what following Him requires.

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<sup>47</sup>Effa, "Prophets, Kings, Servants, and Lepers," 472.



## CHAPTER 6

### SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### **Summary**

This thesis started with an overview of God’s mission to the “nations” as shown in the Old Testament. This mission works primarily towards reconciling the relationship that has been severed between humanity and God. In order to do this, God has been at work attempting to help humanity understand that He is Sovereign, that in His Sovereignty He desires to bless all of humanity, and this blessing is primarily encapsulated in God’s salvation. The Old Testament provides a witness to this mission as a revelation of God’s interaction with humanity, including people outside of the specially chosen nation of Israel.

God has decided to include willing people in His mission as servants to bless the “nations,” which is brought out succinctly in His call of Abram in Gen 12 and 22. A number of narrative examples of God working with and through human agents to reveal His Sovereignty and desire to bless all nations are recorded in the Old Testament. Many of these narrative examples have been discussed in chapter 2 and will not be repeated here. However, as was noted in chapter 2, these narratives have often been overlooked in the study of missiology in particular and in the wider realm of biblical studies as possible case studies and/or models on appropriate ways of interacting with adherents of the world’s religions of today.

In order to argue that a comparison of the “nations” of the Old Testament with the modern-day religion of “popular Hinduism” is a valid comparison, several corollaries were drawn between the two. Several examples of Hindu worship and understanding of God were highlighted in comparison to the “nations” in the Old Testament. From there it was then possible to move to particular case studies to test the theory more specifically.

Three particular narratives were chosen as relevant examples in which working theologies could be drawn out of the text. This was done by primarily interpreting the relevant portions of the narratives of Naomi and Ruth, Elijah and the widow of Zarephath, and Elisha and Naaman. The interpretation yielded working theologies that could then be applied missiologically to the modern cross-religious encounter between a believer in the God of the Bible and a Hindu.

### **Conclusions**

As was stated at the beginning, there is a real need for a better understanding of biblical principles in connection to cross-religious encounters. While there have been various attempts at this over more recent decades, many of those attempts have not availed themselves of the rich possibilities that Old Testament narratives involving cross-religious encounters contain. In the case of Hinduism, it was noted in the second chapter that the gap between Christianity and Hinduism is widening.

The interpretation of the three narratives in this thesis has accomplished two tasks. First, they have given three separate but intertwined theologies that can be instrumental in creating better mission and better cross-religious encounters. Second, they have shown the possibility that Old Testament cross-religious narratives have for informing better, more biblical mission.

Through the narrative of Ruth an understanding of the foundational concept of *hesed*, as so prominently seen in the interaction between Naomi and Ruth, is vital to move towards a more authentic and genuine building of relationships between a believer in the God of the Bible and a Hindu. It was this foundation that moved Ruth to follow Naomi and Naomi's God despite the consequences that such a decision may incur. This is a prime example of God's mission through steadfast relationships.

Elijah's encounter with the widow of Zarephath highlighted the use of power that God utilized in order to bring the widow to a better understanding of who He is. Redemptive power is also a form of mission that God can use to help Hindus gain a greater understanding of who He is.

Lastly, Elisha's statement "Go in peace" to Naaman, even when Naaman had not fully understood who God is, shows from the Bible that God is more concerned with the direction the new believer is headed in than He is with a full understanding of who He is. God's mission of patient encouragement as understood in this narrative can inform a present-day patience and encouragement with Hindus who are willing to follow God but may not fully recognize what that means at first.

For the most part, Old Testament narratives have been overlooked in connection to cross-religious encounters and mission. By demonstrating, in the context of mission to Hindus, that these narratives are relevant it has been shown that the Old Testament narratives deserved to be reread with the intent to understand their potential to inform God's mission to all "nations."

## Recommendations

There are two main recommendations that can be proposed. First, there is a great need for the narratives of the Old Testament that contain elements of cross-religious encounter to be read with an eye for interpreting working theologies that can be applied missiologically. Second, Old Testament narratives that contain principles that appear applicable to cross-religious situations should, once understood, be tested in the field.

In relation to the first recommendation, it should be recognized that this thesis was only the beginning of a very promising field of biblical research. It by no means pretends to be comprehensive in its analysis of cross-religious encounters as seen in Old Testament biblical narratives, but rather is an example of the possibilities. It should also be recognized that there have been a few other attempts to address this issue in dissertation and thesis form. Adrinna Denis Beltré wrote an M.A. thesis entitled “Queen and Deliverer: An Exploration of the Missiological Implications in the Book of Esther,”<sup>1</sup> and Sung Ik Kim wrote a Ph.D. dissertation entitled “Proclamation in Cross-Cultural Context: Missiological Implications of the Book of Daniel.”<sup>2</sup> Both of these are precursors to the work that has been done in this thesis; they both use Old Testament narratives to inform current missiology. It is recommended that this type of work continue.

On the second recommendation it should be noted that by “tested” the following is meant. If, as found in the narrative of Ruth, a lifestyle of genuine kindness, loyalty, and generosity as understood by the Hebrew term *hesed* is foundational to cross-religious

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<sup>1</sup>Adrinna Denise Beltré, “Queen and Deliverer: An Exploration of the Missiological Implications in the Book of Esther” (M.A. thesis, Andrews University, 2007).

<sup>2</sup>Sung Ik Kim, “Proclamation in Cross-Cultural Context: Missiological Implications of the Book of Daniel” (Ph.D. dissertation, Andrews University, 2005).

relationships, then this lifestyle should be exemplified in all believers in the God of the Bible. If God can use His power through acts of healing, then it is the duty of believers in Him to pray for an outpouring of that power especially on those who do not have an understanding of who God is, like the widow of Zarephath. And, finally, if Elisha was able to allow for some misunderstanding of God to remain in the life of Naaman in order to encourage him in the right direction, then believers in the God of the Bible should be more patient as they work with adherents of other religions, always doing all it takes to encourage people in the right direction. This is a call to follow the principles as outlined in the narratives explored in this thesis as well as a call to follow other principles that may be understood through further study of Old Testament narratives.

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