Centripetal and “Centrifugal” Mission: Solomon and Jesus

By Doug Matacio

The purpose of this article is to further develop “centripetal and centrifugal mission,” an analogy conceived by mission theologians—for two reasons: (1) my new understanding of the meaning of centripetal, “seeking the center,” and centrifugal, “fleeing the center,” and (2) my twofold thesis that Solomon’s kingdom is the best exemplar of Israel’s centripetal mission and Jesus’ mission best demonstrates the New Testament ideal of balance between the centripetal essence of God’s biblical mission and the centrifugal necessity of going out to search for the lost. While I am not planning a new strategy for contemporary Christian mission, I encourage certain church action trends that go with the article’s conceptual framework.

Centripetal comes from the Latin, centripetus, which means “center seeking” (“Centripetal” 1985:221). So, a centripetal force attracts objects inwardly toward the center. It is like your hand holding a string that is attached to a ball. You can twirl the ball around, but as long as it is attached to the string in your hand, it cannot sail off, but remains in orbit around the central force, your hand. Physics teachers explain: “Without this [centripetal] force, an object will simply continue moving in straight line motion” (“Centripetal Force—the Real Force” 2008:1). It is no longer seeking the center, so it goes off on its own. Unlike centripetal the Latin term, centrifuges, means “center fleeing.” Centrifugal in English (“Centrifugal” 1985:221). Physicists call “centrifugal force” a fictional force (Bloomfield 1997:115) because it is simply “a lack of centripetal force” (“Centrifugal Force—the False Force” 2008:1).
Understanding the analogy between centripetal/centrifugal force and the mission of God requires noting the importance of orbiting; e.g., planets orbit around the sun, a centripetal force. Here, orbiting refers to a person’s or group’s decision to focus around God even as separate individuality is maintained. One does not merge into God, losing one’s own identity, but remains in orbit around God. God becomes the center of life and worship; from that time on one’s orbit is guided by the Holy Spirit. Being “in orbit around Christ” and special messengers (e.g., Joseph, Jonah, Daniel, and Esther) were called to witness in foreign countries, “Israel was not mandated by God to send missionaries to the nations” (Wright 2006:24). But it was God’s plan, prophesied in Isa 66:19-21, to eventually send “survivors” among his people in a “centrifugal” mission to the nations that would “show them his glory.” How, then, is it possible for Christian witnesses to “flee the center” in “centrifugal” mission while continuing to “seek the center” in attraction to God? Does the analogy still hold, or does it break down at this point?

The answer is the key to understanding centripetal and “centrifugal” mission in the New Testament. Essentially, the analogy continues to hold. After Pentecost the Spirit of God dwells within Christ’s disciples, making it possible for the presence of God to remain with them whether they go to New York or New Guinea. God now dwells in the new temple, the members of his church, through his Spirit (1 Cor 6:19). Jesus’ centripetal
mission continues (“I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” [John 12:32 NRSV]), even as worldwide “centrifugal” mission is implemented (Matt 28:19).

I put *centrifugal* in quotation marks because missionaries are not actually fleeing the center, but in fact taking the center (the indwelling Holy Spirit) with them. They are seeking the lost, who are fleeing the center, but they themselves are not fleeing from God, so, technically, they are not centrifugal missionaries. Since they are going out to the nations, however, I illustrate their going by putting *centrifugal* in quotation marks. As they go out “centrifugally,” they attract the nations centripetally by lifting up the cross through (1) self denial and (2) verbal witness, the preaching of “repentance and forgiveness of sins” (Luke 24:47). So, it is still useful to distinguish between centripetal and “centrifugal” mission.

In this article I briefly note selected contributions to centripetal/centrifugal mission. Then I apply the theme to the kingdom of Solomon and the mission of Jesus. I point out that Solomon, during the early years of his reign, brought Israel to the zenith of its centripetal mission through his willingness to enter into a covenant relationship with Yahweh. Jesus, Son of David, demonstrated both centripetal and “centrifugal” force in his mission, and he established new covenant and new temple sources for mission. Both the kingdom of Solomon and the mission of Jesus have implications for the church today when considered from the perspective of the centripetal and centrifugal facets of God’s mission.

### The Centripetal and Centrifugal Theme in Mission Theology

My purpose in this section is not a formal review, but it helps to provide a sense of where other scholars have gone. Bengt Sundkler (1936:462-499) introduced the idea of centripetal and centrifugal mission to solve the problem of why Jesus initially sent his disciples only to the lost sheep of Israel (Matt 10:5b-6) (cited by Blauw 1962:146). Sundkler commented:

Centrifugal universalism is actualized by a messenger who crosses frontiers and passes on his news to those who are afar off; centripetal by a magnetic force, drawing distant peoples in to the place of the person who stands at the center (1965:14-15).

Here Sundkler makes a useful distinction between two kinds of mission, but does not attempt to show how they could be brought together.

Johannes Blauw applies the centripetal sense of the mission of Israel—where the nations would stream to Zion (Isa 2:2-4)—as “an eschatological expectation which will be fulfilled only at the end of days” (1962:41). Blauw could not ac-
cept the idea that Israel’s centripetal mission was “deliberate missionary activity” (1962:34). (Though Solomon mentioned “the foreigner” specifically in his temple dedicatory prayer.) Neither, he writes, is there any “thought of mission in the Old Testament in the centrifugal sense in which it comes to the fore in the New Testament” (1962:35). Walter C. Kaiser Jr. by contrast sees the centripetal role as “passive witnessing” and the centrifugal role as “active witnessing” (2000:9). Kaiser can be commended for focusing on the people’s responsibility to share the knowledge of Yahweh with their neighbors. However, he misses the significance of a theology of centripetal mission that goes deeper than passive witnessing. Missionaries who “go” to the nations centrifugally need a centripetal force to attract the nations after they arrive.

Christopher Wright makes two noteworthy points on the centripetal/centrifugal theme. First, he agrees that centrifugal mission was not God’s agenda for Old Testament Israel. On Kaiser’s book (2000), he concludes, “I am not yet convinced, however, of his interpretation of these [Old Testament] texts [on mission], as implying a missionary mandate that ought to have resulted in Israel engaging in centrifugal missions to the nations” (2006:502). Yet he adds that Israel had a sense of mission, though not of “going somewhere,” but of “being something,” namely, a light and witness to the nations through covenant faithfulness (2006:504). Second, Wright’s conclusion is that the purpose of the new centrifugal “going out” is for the nations to be centripetally “gathered into” God’s kingdom (2006:524).

Seventh-day Adventist scholarship has made a significant contribution to the theme of this article, although without using the terms, centripetal or centrifugal. Tucked away in the Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary, volume 4—is Raymond R. Cottrell’s article which deals at length with “God’s plan” for Israel as his chosen nation and his advantageous covenant (1955:25-33). He suggests God’s plan was to reveal his character to the nations by placing Israel in the crossroads of the ancient world and providing them “with every facility for becoming the greatest nation on the face of the earth” (27; cited from White, 1900:288). Israel’s success would attract the nations, many of whom would be incorporated into God’s covenant. Cottrell points out Israel’s success would have been based on seven factors: (1) holiness of character (Lev 19:2); (2) health (Exod 15:26); (3) superior intellect; (4) skill in agriculture and animal husbandry (Deut 7:13; 28:2-8); (5) superior craftsmanship (Exod 31:2-6; 35:33-35); (6) unparalleled prosperity (Deut 8:17-18; 28:11-13); and
I would not characterize the debate over how the centripetal/centrifugal motif fits mission studies as being sharp. Sundkler was the first to see the possibilities of using these terms. Blauw initiated the line of thinking that Israel’s mission was completely centripetal, while Kaiser challenged that notion with his emphasis on the Israelites’ responsibility to actively share the promise of the Messiah with their neighbors. While Wright cannot use the term, “centrifugal,” to describe Israel’s mission, he holds that both dimensions are included in the New Testament missionary mandate of the church.

Centripetal Mission in the Kingdom of Solomon

In the biblical section of this article I focus on Solomon not merely because he has been largely ignored in the biblical history of mission, but because the data reveals that Israel’s centripetal mission reached the zenith of its success during Solomon’s reign; his keeping of the covenant, his temple building, and his political and economic achievements resulted in inquiring visits of kings and queens. Second, the comparison between Solomon son of David, prince of peace—and Jesus, Son of David, Prince of Peace is full of significance. It shows how Jesus’ centripetal mission paralleled and fulfilled the promise of Solomon’s mission. Third, the mission of Jesus shows us the New Testament balance between centripetal and centrifugal mission. My study suggests the cross is the most significant factor in attracting the nations to Christ as his disciples go out. New Testament missionaries, filled with the Holy Spirit, could now seek the lost in centrifugal mission without “fleeing the center” in the process.

King David established a strong kingdom, defeated Israel’s enemies, and made plans for a temple. He and other psalmists left inspiring notions of Israel’s centripetal mission: “May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face shine upon us, that your ways may be known on earth, your
salvation among all nations” (Ps 67:1-2). A census taken shortly after David’s reign ended found 153,600 aliens living in Israel (2 Chr 2:17); certainly many of them had become acquainted with “the ways” of Israel’s God. David’s prayer for Solomon’s reign is found in Psalm 72, where he anticipated distant kings bringing him gifts and serving him (10-11), that “all nations would be blessed through Solomon and call him blessed” (17b). After David’s death Solomon concentrated on the covenant source of the centripetal force that would cause nations to wonder at the greatness of Israel and its God.

Solomon established both a personal and a national relationship with God. The personal covenant relationship began at his birth, when Yahweh named him Jedidiah (“loved by the Lord”) (2 Sam 12:24b-25). The young king “loved the Lord” (1 Kgs 3:3), and God responded to Solomon’s request for wisdom and knowledge—by promising wealth and honor as well (2 Chr 1:10-12). Near the beginning of his reign Solomon was full of repentance and gratitude, and led the entire nation in a consecration service at Gibeon (2 Chr 1:5-6). By renewing the covenant relationship with Yahweh, Solomon and his people were spiritually empowering themselves to attract the nations as Moses had promised (Deut 4:5-8).

God’s mandate for Solomon was for him to be a builder rather than a warrior like his father. Solomon means “peace,” and he was to be a “prince of peace” free to devote his time to the building of the temple (1 Chr 22:9). The temple and its services were designed not only for the Israelites, but to attract foreigners as well (2 Chr 6:32). Gold-covered cherubim wings and four hundred bronze pomegranates would draw people to its visual beauty (2 Chr 3-4), while lyres, harps, cymbals, and trumpets provided music (1 Chr 25). Solomon’s rationale for building such an aesthetic temple was theocentric: “The temple I am going to build will be great, because our God is greater than all other gods” (2 Chr 2:5). God was to be glorified in this temple because he was the center of Solomon’s life.

Solomon, in his temple dedicatory prayer, petitioned Yahweh to reconfirm the covenant, hear prayer, and forgive sin. In the midst of these petitions we discover evidence that Solomon was overtly conscious of and concerned about the centripetal mission of God:

As for the foreigner who does not belong to your people Israel but has come from a distant land because of your great name and your mighty hand and your outstretched arm—when he comes and prays toward this temple, then hear from heaven, your dwelling place, and do whatever the foreigner asks of you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your
own people Israel, and may know that this house I have built bears your name (2 Chr 6:32-33).

Here Solomon focuses on the many foreigners in attendance. He recognizes that foreigners would come to Israel because of the news of Israel’s greatness. He sees that foreigners, who come to inquire about that greatness, will eventually find themselves praying toward the temple along with the Israelites. So, he asks that God will answer their prayers, that the people of the whole world will eventually worship Yahweh. When Solomon finishes his prayer, fire comes down from heaven and the glory of the Lord fills the temple. This presence would make Israel great and could attract the nations to worship Yahweh.

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The results of centripetal mission in Solomon’s kingdom were positive as long as he maintained his covenant relationship with Yahweh. His gift of wisdom brought ambassadors from “all the kings of the world” (1 Kgs 4:34) to hear him. His knowledge of natural history (1 Kgs 4:33) gave him opportunities to speak of the creator of all plants and animals. The Queen of Sheba discovered the source of Solomon’s wisdom:

The report I heard in my own country about your achievements and your wisdom is true. But I did not believe what they said until I came and saw with my own eyes. Indeed, not even half the greatness of your wisdom was told me; you have far exceeded the report I heard. . . . Praise be to the Lord your God, who has delighted in you and placed you on his throne as king to rule for the Lord your God. Because of the love of your God for Israel and his desire to uphold them forever, he has made you king over them, to maintain justice and righteousness (2 Chr 9:5-6, 8).

This testimony is an eyewitness account of the success of the centripetal mission of God during the reign of Solomon. It shows how the monarch of a nation south of Egypt was attracted to Israel because of reports of its greatness. She was attracted by Solomon’s wisdom, but she saw that it was the result of the blessings of Yahweh and she praises him.

Solomon’s potential for centripetal mission achievement was never realized because of his failure in the later years of his reign to keep the covenant relationship with Yahweh.
and commandments of Yahweh (1 Kgs 11:11). But all was not lost. Another Son of David would take over when his brother slipped. The wisest earthly king would be succeeded by “a shoot” growing from the stump of Jesse, on whom the spirit of wisdom and understanding would rest (Isa 11:1-2). Solomon would be replaced by another Prince of Peace (Isa 9:6-7), and Yahweh’s centripetal mission through the royal line of David and Solomon would continue until all nations flowed to Zion (Isa 2:2-5).

Centripetal and Centrifugal Themes in the Mission of Jesus

Jesus was aware as “son of David” (Matt 1:1) that there were similarities between Solomon’s mission and his own. “The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon’s wisdom, and now one greater than Solomon is here” (Matt 12:42). Jesus compared himself to Solomon here, but calls himself “greater than Solomon.” Jesus is greater than Solomon first because he never apostatized, and second because he ratified the covenant and fulfilled the temple sacrifices by a self-sacrificing death that contrasts with Solomon’s self-indulgent later life. Third, Jesus added a new dimension by his followers out to the nations on a “centrifugal” mission made possible by the cross, resurrection, and pentecostal outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus announced the necessity of “centrifugal” mission in light of these three new gospel realities by proclaiming, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you” (John 20:21 RSV). “Centrifugal” mission would require that Jesus’ disciples be at peace with one another. It would be based on the sending of Jesus to the world and would involve a mandate to chase after those who were “fleeing the center,” and invite them to get into orbit around God. New Testament mission includes both centrifugal and centripetal dimensions: missionaries going and searching for the lost, and missionaries attracting them to Christ once they find them by using the centripetal missionary methods of Solomon and Jesus.

When I compare the centripetal mission history of Solomon and Jesus, I find remarkable similarities. First, at Jesus’ birth the magi were attracted by “his star” and came from the east to worship him. They gave the baby Jesus the same gifts that the Queen of Sheba gave Solomon—gold and precious spices. Second, at Jesus’ baptism and at Solomon’s birth God announced his special love for each by calling him “beloved” (Matt 3:17; 2 Sam 12:25). A third line of magnetism that attracted people to Jesus was his healing minis-
try (Matt 15:30-31). Although not mentioned in the time of Solomon, God had intended to attract the nations to his people Israel because they had “none of these diseases” (Exod 15:25). Fourth, like Solomon’s attraction of royalty, Jesus attracted people by his wise teaching. He was “filled with wisdom” (Luke 2:40), and he “grew in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and men” (Luke 2:52).

After Jesus’ triumphal entry the Pharisees commented, “You see we are not succeeding at all! Look, the whole world is following him” (John 12:19; TEV)! This evidence of success in Jesus’ centripetal mission was immediately demonstrated by some Greeks, who came to Philip and said, ”We would like to see Jesus” (John 12:21b). In this context Jesus made the statement that I would suggest is the key to understanding centripetal mission in the New Testament. “But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself. He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die” (John 12:32-33). Jesus is speaking of the new era of centrifugal mission because he mentions all human beings, not just the Jews.

Yet there is a connection between this centripetal theme of “drawing” people to Jesus and the centrifugal theme. In physics, entities go their own way when the centripetal force is removed. People choosing to remove God from their lives are “center fleeing,” going their own way of selfishness rather than acknowledging God. We can call this “center fleeing” the “centrifugal force” of sin. When men and women flee from God, he lovingly seeks them out. Francis Thompson described both “centrifugal” sin and “centrifugal” mission in the first fifteen lines of a poem, “The Hound of Heaven” (1979:1732). The poem speaks of

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promise of the indwelling Spirit. How then do the two dimensions (centrifugal and centripetal) fit together? Jesus sometimes referred to both dimensions in one passage: “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him” (John 6:44). F. L. Godet comments, “The God who sends Jesus for souls, on the other hand, draws souls to Jesus” (1886:590). So, both dimensions are vital.

Like Solomon, Jesus relied on the covenant and the temple as sources for mission accomplishment. In the upper room Jesus took the cup and said, “Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the [new] covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matt 26:27b-28). This new covenant experience based on the cleansing blood of Christ is the source of a magnetic force in the life of the believer, drawing the unsaved to God’s kingdom. As for the temple, when Jesus was asked about driving out the money changers, he replied, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days” (John 2:19). The presence of God in the temple of Christ’s resurrected body was to attract both Jew and Gentile. Jesus was to replace the Shekinah glory as the dwelling place of God on earth (John 1:14). But, when Jesus ascended, Spirit-filled Christian witnesses replaced him. The church becomes the new temple, the new “body of Christ” (Eph 1:22-23) attracting the nations to this powerful presence of God.

**Contemporary Practical Applications**

I would like to encourage some mission trends that naturally accompany the insights of this article. Let me suggest four applications; the first three focus on centripetal mission and the last one on centrifugal efforts. First, since people are attracted to the presence of God, we need to focus on God-derived spirituality in the life of the missionary. Biblical spirituality is based on the idea of dying to self with Jesus on his cross, being filled with the Spirit, and living unselfishly for others. Post-modern secular people are especially interested in seeing evidence of God’s presence in the life. It means that spiritual formation will loom large not only in missionary training programs, but in the church’s entire educational endeavor. A good resource is “Prayer, Study, and the Practice of Faith,” chapter 9 in Jon Paulien’s book, *Everlasting gospel ever-changing world* (2008).

Second, Solomon teaches us that people are attracted to excellence. Whether it is excellence in art, music, literature, architecture, archaeology, business management, house construction, culinary achievement, congregational worship services, or healthy longevity—people are attracted to it. Another form of excellence, the really well-lived life, is a centripetal mission tip mentioned by Peter: “Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you...
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example, Jon Paulien counsels us to “begin with personal experience” when presenting the gospel to postmoderns. “If the truths that you are seeking to express have not changed your life, don’t expect postmoderns to be excited about them,” he says (2008:62). Contextualization means we are open to incorporating new methods such as “talk show evangelism” (Paulien 2008:145). But there is a gap between writing about it and actually doing it that needs to be bridged. The church is called to decide how contextualization is going to be implemented. Administrators “goes” well, that too may attract the nations!

Conclusion
Though Solomon began to accomplish Israel’s centripetal mission, Jesus chose self-denial over self-indulgence, the point of Solomon’s downfall. He in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Col 2:3) “humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil 2:8 NRSV). So, self-denial is combined with excellence in service and proclamation of the gospel; witness is magnetized by daily
communion with God. The “centrifugal” force of going—without the centripetal force of God’s indwelling—will be as futile as the proselytizing efforts of the Pharisees (Matt 23:15). Ever since the thief beside Jesus and the Roman centurion below him proclaimed their faith, the centripetal force of that cross in the lives and redemptive message of “centrifugal” missionaries continue to draw many a Jew and Gentile into orbit around God.

The theme of centripetal and centrifugal mission is vital for missionaries today, whether they are crossing salt water, reaching out cross-culturally within their own country, doing evangelism within their own ethnic group, or simply seeking to reach their own children at home or church.

Works Cited

Bible texts are from the New International Version, unless otherwise noted.


