In theological and missionary circles there is a growing tendency to look for a valid justification of mission. The Bible is searched and most scholars identify several passages in the New Testament as “missions” for mission. However, mission seems to be present in the Old Testament, too, but scholars do not seem to find an equivalent command to go to the ends of the world. Charles Scobie expresses this widespread belief emphasizing “the almost total absence from the Old Testament of any concern that the people of Israel should actively go out and share their knowledge of the one true God with the other nations of mankind” (1992:286). For a long time scholars agreed that “there is a Christian mission in the true sense of the word only after the resurrection of Jesus. . . In the Old Testament there is no mission in the real sense” (Hahn 1965:9, 20). David Bosch in his magnum opus, Transforming Mission, dedicates only four pages to mission in the Old Testament. For him mission is the main difference between the Old and the New Testament. He admits that mission is present in the Old Testament but states that “mission is undefinable” in order to avoid challenging the general understanding and recognize the problem of defining mission (1991:9).

In order to explain this lack of outgoing missionary concern, missiologists and theologians have used a physics model that combines the forces that push and attract an object that moves. They described mission in the Old Testament as centripetal, with people coming from many places to Jerusalem to worship and be blessed. On the other hand, they labeled New Testament mission as being centrifug-
gal, with missionaries going out to many places, beginning from Jerusalem. This model seems to be inadequate because its conclusions leave certain books and passages of the Old Testament out of the assigned picture (Gen 12:1, 4; 13:14-17; Exod 5:1; Ps 67; the books of Daniel, Joel, Amos; and, evidently, the book of Jonah), and questions the unity of the Scripture. Dispensationalist theologies, based on such views, even assume the dualistic nature of Scripture, the Old Testament being considered creation-centered (physical) while the New Testament centers on the cross (salvific, spiritual).

In more recent research, trying to find an explanation for passages that follow the New Testament type of mission, modern scholars have suggested that centrifugal mission, not always explicit, is interwoven in the structure of the Old Testament. Although a step forward in recapturing the balance of the Scripture, the acceptance of centrifugal mission in the Old Testament does not conclude the debate on mission in the Bible. This article looks at the assumptions behind the different approaches and proposes a new paradigm that includes all forms of mission under its umbrella.

Hermeneutical Considerations

The difficulty in reading the Old Testament in its own right is seen in theological works even today. Religious and confessional traditions play a huge role in the way the Old Testament is approached. Lucien Legrand’s advice is timely: “We must begin at the beginning. We must take account of the Old Testament, in spite of its apparently limited missionary perspectives. We may actually discover new perspectives there” (1990:1).

The end of the last century saw a new interest in the Old Testament. Different hermeneutical approaches were used to identify the kind of mission found there. From a backward reading of the Old Testament with a New Testament hermeneutic, to an evolutionary reading of the same Testament, all assume certain presuppositions that inform each hermeneutical approach. The general agreement seems to be that *missio Dei* is the root of all mission in Scripture. However, there is no unified understanding of what *missio Dei* is or implies. As J. Andrew Kirk has observed, “Legitimately and illegitimately the *missio Dei* has been used to advance all kinds of missiological agendas” (2000:25).

Francis DuBose points to the fact that missionary concepts are often not supported by clear interpretation principles. Browsing through different approaches, from the idea of “sending” and “universalism,” to salvation, evangelism, service, dialogue with those of other faiths, and even the liberation movements, he notices that local contexts define mis-
mission, although the Scriptures are used extensively. “The approach has been essentially proof texting without a clear, consistent hermeneutic” (1983:16).

Justifying his own hermeneutical approach, James Chukwuma Okoye recognizes that “Divergent faith perspectives may be a factor in the divergence of interpretations” (2006:16). This aspect is commonly forgotten in studies on justifying mission. Recent authors go beyond merely looking for a rationale for mission and emphasize the need for a missional hermeneutic or missional reading of the whole Bible (Kaiser 2000; Goldingay 2003, 2006; Wright, 2006; Okoye, 2006). Although the step is in the right direction, the hermeneutic proposed is unfortunately loaded with presuppositions.

The main problem is that missiologists tend to look at the Old Testament with the same lenses used when looking at the New Testament. (Kaiser 2000; Goldingay 2003, 2006; Wright, 2006; Okoye, 2006). Although the step is in the right direction, the hermeneutic proposed is unfortunately loaded with presuppositions.

The main problem is that missiologists tend to look at the Old Testament with the same lenses used when looking at the New Testament, trying to find New Testament themes and patterns in the Old. Using the centrifugal-centripetal dualism, they conclude there is little evidence of centrifugal mission in the Old Testament, and almost a priori that the New Testament is superior to the Old. Wright admits he cannot read the Old Testament without bringing in his Christian view, reading it “in submission to Christ.”

However, a careful reading of the New Testament reveals that Paul and the disciples understand their mission based on Old Testament passages and prophecies (Acts 13:46-48; 15:13-21; 24:14; 28:23-28; Rom 15:8-12). “The apostle [Paul] never viewed his mission to be something that was brand-new and unattached to what God has been doing in
the past or what he wanted to continue to do in the present” (Kaiser 2000:75). Even Jesus introduces his mission with Old Testament passages (Luke 4:16-30). “The Jews of Jesus’ day would have linked his action and sending with the OT word” (McDaniel 2003:12).

Another trend in the scholarly community has been to look for an overarching or underlying theme or a key word that would explain the missionary endeavors in the Bible. The idea of blessing is seen by some as the basis for mission; others consider the promise and fulfillment as the key structure, while others see the covenant as an overarching theme that motivates God’s and Israel’s mission. However, each solution presents its own problems. For example, the Bible contains many covenants, in particular the Old and the New Covenant which are interpreted today to be opposite in nature or assigned to the two Testaments. The blessing as a key concept is based on God’s covenant with Abraham in Gen 12, but that leaves the first eleven chapters in Genesis as problematic, with some scholars going so far as concluding that God failed in his mission during the primeval period. This approach also leaves certain actions commissioned by God outside the umbrella of blessing. While the idea of a sound hermeneutical approach is excellent, the solutions proposed are less than satisfactory.

The main problem seems to come from a different understanding of the term *mission*. For those who understand it in the “Great Commission” sense the term “missionary” is loaded with a centrifugal meaning. From such a hermeneutical perspective, the Old Testament does not contain a Great Commission identical to Matt 28:18-20. Israel’s history *per se* shows very little in terms of missionary encounters with the nations. Geoffrey Harris notices that for some mission means attracting by a ministry of presence while others understand it in a more evangelistic, active sense. He recognizes that “this is not so much a difference between ‘active’ and ‘passive’ modes of mission: it is the difference between two alternative theologies of mission” (2004:30-31).

Based on an active definition of mission there is no voluntary going out to the nations in the Old Testament. Israel is to expect other nations to come to Jerusalem to learn about God. When the definition of mission is informed by the New Testament, Israel is no longer considered a missionary nation but only has a missionary role. The conclusion comes as no surprise: “Israel was not mandated by God to send missionaries to the nations” (Wright 2006:24). Without a centrifugal aspect there is no “real” mission in the Old Testament. Wright even prefers the term “missional” because it allows the reader to pour his/her own meaning into whatever “mis-
sional” is. The justification for using a different term is based on a common presupposition—an old and a new covenant, and an Old Testament type of mission versus a New Testament type.

It is also very informative to analyze the assumptions people read the New Testament with. James Brownson assumes that his hermeneutic is missional because he argues the early church was a movement with a “specifically missionary character” (1996:232). However, he overlooks the historical fact that the early Christian church left Jerusalem only when it was forced out by persecution and had for a long time serious problems accepting gentiles among Jewish believers. Brownson moves on and develops a missional hermeneutic based on his particular understanding of the New Testament. He does not mention anything about the Old Testament as though mission was born after Jesus went to his Father. Such a lens applied to the Old Testament is inappropriate and will not produce valid conclusions. Developing a model of biblical interpretation based on unbalanced assumptions raises more doubts and questions than solid answers. Another fact that is frequently overlooked is that the New Testament contains many passages that talk of centripetal mission. Presenting mission in the New Testament as overwhelmingly centrifugal clearly misses the balance of the text. The encouragement to hospitality and a pure life that attracts unbelievers are equally present in both Testaments.

In spite of such generalized and unbalanced understandings, one can find more balanced approaches. Donald Senior and Carroll Stuhlmueller admit they started with the assumption that the movement of Israel’s history and its Scriptures appears to be centripetal, or inward. But a careful analysis of biblical tradition uncovers powerful currents that swirl in the opposite direction. Even though Israel treasured its identity as God’s elect people, at its best moments it recognized other signs of deep solidarity with the nonelect nations and with the dynamics of secular history outside the annals of its covenant. . . . Thus a scan of Jewish history in the Old Testament reveals a dialectic between centripetal and centrifugal forces, between flight

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from the secular and absorption of the secular, between a concern for self-identity and responsible interaction with one’s environment, between elect status as God’s chosen people and humble awareness of one’s solidarity with the entire human family (1983:315-316).

Writing about the message of mission in the Bible, Walter Kaiser notices that the concern for the nations is present both in Genesis and Revelation, the first and last books of the Bible. As a result he concludes that “this theme of a mission to the whole world forms one giant envelope (a figure of speech called an inclusio) framing the whole Bible” (2000:7). Such a perspective comes out of the text and also informs the text.

DuBose focuses instead on the meaning of mission emphasizing the sending concept. He points to the fact that mission in its sending form is both explicit and implicit in the Scripture. This may explain the lack of an explicit “Great Commission” in the Old Testament. In verbal form, the concept of sending is widespread in the Old Testament and has a special theological significance so should be seen as a technical term similar to covenant, kingdom, grace, faith, salvation, and judgment. For DuBose “the concept of the sending is inherent in the biblical understanding of knowledge” (1983:55, 72).

Addressing the unity and continuity of the two Testaments, Arthur Glasser emphasizes the need for hermeneutical coherence. Although the Old Testament is the Word of God primarily to Israel, its value does not lie in the way it anticipates the New Testament’s announcement of the Messiah of Israel and the Savior of the world. It is in fact revelation in the same sense as the New Testament, for it reveals the mighty acts and gracious purposes of God on behalf of his people and the world he created for them. Both testaments are organically related in a dynamic and interactive relationship (2003:17).

This survey of literature reveals that the hermeneutical approach plays a very important role in discovering the missionary model of the Old Testament. The assumptions of a centrifugal-only definition of mission might help identify Israel’s role, but might also distort the text and findings. Imposing a certain framework on the text would control it without allowing the text to speak for itself. “So in searching the Scriptures for a biblical foundation for mission, we are likely to find what we brought with us—our own conception of mission, now festooned with biblical luggage tags” (Wright 2006:37).

Can we read the Bible missionologically, without distorting its meaning? Can we actually let the text itself define God’s and our mission? Why not allow the text to speak for itself? “A study on mission in the Bible must not be an attempt to justify a personal approach or the positions of Vatican II or liberation theology or any other theology. It must be listening” (Legrand 1990:xiii). In this article I propose that an
understanding of mission should come out of the Bible and not mold the Bible according to pre-conceived ideas. This article will also present a paradigm that includes all forms of mission under its umbrella.

**A Missionary God**

Most scholars agree that human mission flows out of *missio Dei*, or God’s mission. However, there is no uniform understanding of God’s mission among scholars. This is a natural result of different understandings of God. “What we think of God will determine what we think of everything else” (Peskett and Ramachandra 2003:27). Influenced by humanistic ideas, some believe God is only love, and his mission is simply to bless and save. There is no place in such a view for passages like Gen 19 where messengers are sent to Sodom and Gomorrah in order to destroy the cities. The same applies to other passages like Exod 32:25-29; Num 25:16-18; 31:7; Josh 11:11-15, 20; 1 Sam 15:1-3 where Israel is sent to wipe out whole nations from the face of the earth. There is no justification for Elijah killing the Astarte’s priests in 1 Kgs 18:40. All these actions can hardly be reconciled with the picture of a loving and blessing God. However, these passages indicate God’s commissioning and qualify as God’s mission.

The story of God’s commissioning of Abraham fits the humanistic picture because it speaks of blessings. The text, however, cites curses also. Later in time, Moses gives Joshua and Israel instructions that contain blessings, but also curses. The same combination of blessings and curses are repeated and remembered in many passages in the book of Deuteronomy. The psalmists and the prophets refer equally to both blessings and curses. In fact, the first references to blessings in Genesis are joined by curses (1:28, 29; 2:16, 17; 3:14-24). God is already on a mission, working toward a goal, being satisfied and resting content with the result. He demonstrates he is totally committed to his mission when choosing Abraham as his agent. Shortly after being commissioned and entering the covenant with God, Abraham is sent to sacrifice Isaac on Mount

### In verbal form, the concept of sending is widespread in the Old Testament and has a special theological significance.

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Moriah. This can hardly be classified as blessing, although it is clearly God’s commissioning. An analysis of such passages is necessary because “it shows why it is justified to employ otherwise extravagant concepts about God” (Kirk 2000:26).

A widespread belief affirms that God’s first mission grew out of the fall of the first humans. However, the Bible reveals that sin entered the universe earlier. Isa 14:12-14 describes the moment when Lucifer became Satan by coveting God’s glory. Because God is just and merciful at the same time, he had to allow his created beings to choose whom they wanted to follow and obey. Although it may seem strange, God had to allow humans to be tempted in the Garden of Eden in order to respect their power of choice and to prove to Satan, the accuser, that the triune God is just and fair at the same time. As a result of humans’ fall, God had to add a new dimension to his mission on top of his creating activities: rescuing and restoring beings affected by sin. God’s mission reflected his character from the beginning. And since humans were created in God’s image, he had to restore that image. This is the essence of the promise in Gen 3:15. As DuBose points out, “the method behind the recovery of the
imago Dei is the missio Dei—the incipient sending of Genesis and the ultimate sending of the New Covenant” (1983:80).

The theological language of God’s sending in the Bible, and particularly in the Old Testament, is expressed in three forms: God’s creative-providential, judgmental, and saving work, with some references combining the providential and salvific meanings in the context of events describing the larger redemptive purposes of God. Although there is no clear language indicating mission in Gen 3, DuBose recognizes the idea and the pattern of mission.

God was on a mission to Adam. He had no other man to send, so he sent himself (later he would send himself as a man to bring the ultimate message of redemption). The Genesis mission, which paves the way for each subsequent mission, is the “incipient sending.” God is the “source” and “medium” (agent), and his first redemptive promise to man is the “purpose.” The proto-missio (the “original mission”) precedes the proto-evangelium (the “original gospel”) of Gen 3:15. What flowers ultimately in all Scripture has its roots in this primal mission and the purpose behind it (1983:57).

Wright concurs that the key assumption of a missional hermeneutic of the Bible is “to accept that the biblical worldview locates us in the midst of a narrative of the universe behind which stands the mission of the living God” (2006:64).

Israel was created and chosen in order to become an instrument in God’s threefold mission. Israel’s only reason for existence was mission. God’s ultimate goal was to reach all nations. When Jesus came into this world, he
made it clear that his agenda was his Father’s agenda (Luke 2:49, 52). God’s mission and will determined his mission. By implication, it becomes only natural that our mission is a reflection of God’s character as shown in Jesus. “When you know who God is, when you know who Jesus is, witnessing mission is the unavoidable outcome” (Wright 2006:66). We may plan our actions, or may think it is our own initiative, but the Bible makes it very clear that mission belongs to God. We are just invited to join in. When God is the source of mission, every missionary activity originates in him. This reality affects the relationship between}

continues his mission, he is on a permanent mission. God’s character, expressed by love and justice, is mirrored in his mission: creation, judgment, and salvation. He blesses, corrects, and redeems.

By creating and providing, he is voluntarily involved in the lives of his creation. It is part of his character. The Old Testament (the prophets in particular) infers frequently that God’s judgmental decrees and acts are proceeding from him. But God does not only send out his word and judgments, he also acts and his actions are redemptive. Incarnation is one example. The word of God always attends the acts of

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church and mission. As Wright expresses it, “It is not so much the case that God has a mission for his church in the world but that God has a church for his mission in the world. Mission was not made for the church; the church was made for mission—God’s mission” (2006:62).

Since God’s glory is the ultimate purpose of mission, it is only natural that his character is reflected in his mission. God’s transcendence indicates that his involvement in the biblical story happens from the outside. His immanence shows that he God without which it remains a simple abstraction. His ultimate sending is his salvific sending.

**Israel and the Nations**

Humanity is God’s object of love. Because sin has affected his relationship with humans, his desire is to restore it. In order to accomplish his goal he either sends himself or chooses a messenger or an instrument to carry out his word or his actions. Abraham is chosen to become God’s representative in a world corrupted by sin. Israel is the messenger sent to bring the blessings
to all other peoples around them. Finally, God sends “his only begotten son” to accomplish the desired redemption of humanity. All his chosen ones are sent in the midst of the nations, in the real world. However, anytime Israel forgot the reason for election, the redemptive mission was in danger. Instead of keeping the centrifugal-centripetal balance, they focused on themselves and forgot that God’s blessings need to be taken to the nations. By doing so, Israel misrepresented God. The perfectly balanced picture of God’s character in the Old Testament was perverted. He sends and attracts. The movement is both centrifugal and centripetal. When Israel forgets one of them, the imbalance prompts God to speak and act, both in a judgmental and salvific way.

Combining his judgmental and redemptive purposes, God sent Israel into exile so they could fulfill their forgotten mission. Instead of a wake-up call, Israel interpreted this sending as a judgment and considered that God has turned his face from them. In a foreign land, where people asked them to sing Zion’s songs, they could only hang up their harps and wail (Ps 137). The Israelites completely missed their calling. They thought God elected and blessed them for who they were. However, God reminded them this was not the case. He indicated they were a priestly nation, mediators of redemption to the nations. God also showed very clearly that Israel is not the only people loved by God. He even sent the prophet Elijah to anoint the king of a nation that Israel saw as their enemy (1 Kgs 19:15). In times of trouble, during the Babylonian exile, God used Cyrus as his messiah to restore the nation of Israel. The Old Testament presents the nations as God’s children, Israel among them. God wanted Israel to be involved in service to the nations; Israel saw itself as the favorite among nations.

God chose Israel to be his partner in covenant, partner in character action towards both disadvantaged categories of people inside the nation, and other nations. The two parallel doxologies in Deut 10:14-19 indicate that what God is doing for Israel is the same as he is doing for aliens and all marginalized people. “YHWH is the God who loves to love, and especially to love the needy and the alien” (Wright 2006:80).

YHWH intervenes in the life and fortunes of pagan nations and he is able to do it without Israel’s help. But he wants his people to go and bless other nations so they will recognize it is YHWH who appoints kings and deposes them. Israel’s mission is to go and make God known by helping them understand God’s role in their history. The very fact that Israel, a small and defeated nation, can speak about the power of their God is not only due to their monotheistic worldview but also to the fact that YHWH has warned them what
will happen if they do not fulfill the expectations of the covenant. They are living proof that it is not other gods, but YHWH who sent them into exile. The exile was a punishment because the name of YHWH was profaned among the nations.

God can use other nations as his instruments, too. The foreign nations that took Israel into exile were simply instruments of God. It was God’s victory not theirs. By a paradoxical twist, God has become Israel’s enemy in this case. YHWH demonstrates he is the ruler of all the earth, of all nations, and has no favorites.

The covenant with Abraham and Israel was not a sign of favoritism (Amos 3:2; 9:7; Deut 10:17). In his mercy, God’s people, even under judgment, remained God’s people for God’s mission. They would prosper in exile and increase in number. They had to seek the welfare of the city and pray for God’s blessing on it. They were supposed to be not only the recipients of Abraham’s promise, but the agents of that blessing to their captor nations. Later the same approach is found in Jesus’ words where his followers are told to pray for their enemies.

In Ps 96 there is a call to spread the knowledge of the true mission is motivated by love. To fight idolatry means to go into idol territory, not just wait at home. This is clearly illustrated by Daniel at Babylon, Esther at Susa, or by Paul who deals with idolatry in Lystra, Athens, and Ephesus, all locations outside Israel’s borders.

Jeremiah is told to act a prophecy against idolatry in Jer 13. The belt kept in hiding leads to decay. But God wants to “wear” his people so the nations can see Israel and bring glory to God. This implies that this “piece of clothing” has to be worn outside the house, so the nations can see it. What honor
does a “pure,” clean, beautiful, even restored cloth bring to its owner if it is not taken out for people to see? In Wright’s words: “The scorching severity of the warnings against idolatry, then, are not just for the benefit of God’s own people but ultimately, through them, for the benefit of the nations. That is their missional relevance” (2006:187). The warnings were only good if they went out to the nations.

There is a widespread belief that the nations were supposed to come to Jerusalem. While it is true that some foreigners visited Jerusalem and even took with them dust from Canaan back to their countries, there is no evidence that a radical religious reform took place outside the territory of Israel as a result of such centripetal mission. Some believe that “the ingathering of the nations was the very thing Israel existed for in the purpose of God; it was the fulfillment of the bottom line of God’s promise to Abraham” (Wright 2006:194). But such gathering was not necessarily a positive sign in itself. When history begins only from Abraham important lessons are missed.

Although the people who left the land of Shinar did not see it as a blessing but as punishment, the results prove to be a blessing in disguise, a grace on God’s part. It was an involuntary going, as later experienced by Israel in exile. Abraham’s call took place against this background.

A New Paradigm
Taking Abraham’s call as the starting point for mission is to miss an important part of the whole picture. Although commentators focus on Israel’s relation to the nations as key to understanding mission in

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the Old Testament, there are elements that indicate mission (and a need for it) existed before Abraham.

A careful reading of the first chapters in Genesis shows that the environment in which humans began their existence on planet earth was not ideal. The Bible begins with the image of a cosmic conflict even if the reader is not immediately aware of it. The territory was disputed and the authority challenged. Although such an understanding comes from other biblical passages, there are hints even in Gen 1 and 2. “The earth was created in a ‘frontier’ state” (Okoye 2006:33). When God expressed his desire to create beings in his image, he already ascribed a mission to them: humans will have to have dominion over the rest of creation (Gen 1:26, 28). They were supposed to take care of the garden and preserve their dominion (Gen 2:15). God instructed Adam and Eve to stay away from the tree of knowledge under the consequence of death. In the classical “blessing” paradigm only the first aspect of this mission is taken into consideration.

The book of Job offers additional information about who contested earth’s dominion and what his plan was. The book of Revelation, which closes the Scriptures, gives additional insight about what happened before the earth was created. The issue in the cosmic conflict was God’s character. Satan accused God of being a tyrant and a despot. As a response, God created in order to prove that his character is love and justice. Every creation day witnessed an evaluation of that part of the creation process being declared good. This evaluative process was necessary for the heavenly beings looking at the creation dynamic. There was no need to say that creation was good if there was no accusation of wrong or weakness. God also showed his justice by allowing Satan to tempt humans and allowing his creatures to decide against their Creator.

The battle between the forces of good and evil left an indelible mark on the history of this planet. Paul even speaks of a plan made ages before the earth came into existence, a plan which detailed God’s mission and the decision to send Jesus to rescue humanity. This cosmic conflict was already in full swing by the time Adam and Eve walked in the garden. The same cosmic conflict required humans to protect the garden as a sign of God’s dominion over creation. The free choice given to humans was only a natural ingredient of the battle.

When God confronted his creatures in Gen 3, he had to show them through a parable the need for sacrifice in order to restore dominion and order in the universe. The glory that surrounded humans as a reflection of God’s glory disappeared. So God had to sacrifice an animal in order to provide them with
clothing and at the same time teach them the cruel reality of sin and death. The earth was now part of the cosmic war. Satan claimed dominion over the planet and God’s rescue plan had to be activated. In sending Adam and Eve out of Eden, God demonstrated his judgment and mercy. He again demonstrated his compassionate care by providing safety measures for relationships affected by sin (Gen 3:14-24). Interestingly, this is the first time the open language of sending appears in Scripture (DuBose 1983:41).

This background not only makes sense for all the stories in the Bible but provides the key for a correct missional reading of it. God’s restoring mission starts before the earth is created and ends only when sin is eradicated from the universe. Against this background, all the covenants become just contextualized limited phases in the larger covenant between God the Father and the Son. Although the scholarly world places a heavy emphasis on God’s covenant with Abraham, a better place to begin is back in time at the covenant between God and humans in Gen 3. This reflects the Master missionary plan, and portrays the role of Jesus’ sacrifice. The whole universe depends on its outcome, so all its citizens are interested in the developing story of humanity.

The God of the Jewish Scriptures is both the God who made heaven and earth and the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; both the God whose loving purpose is at work in all the nations and the God who chose Israel alone and chose to identify himself actually to the other nations as the God of Israel; both the God who fills heaven and earth and the God who dwells in the midst of his own people (Bauckham 2003:9).

Using this hermeneutical key, Adam, Noah, Abraham, Israel, and the Church become only chapters in the larger story of mission. Gen 3 presents us with the restoration promise of Jesus, which also reflects his mission: to crush the serpent’s head. From this perspective all nations were in God’s sight, without discrimination. Abraham’s choice by God was not an afterthought or a solution to the crisis of sin as some suggest. The covenants with Adam and Noah already pointed to their descendents and all nations (Gen 3:15; 9:9, 12).
From this perspective the hermeneutical arch that covers the missional reading of the Bible starts before time and ends after time. The first eleven chapters in Genesis are no longer a problem. It becomes clear that humans, as well as the citizens of the universe, needed time to see the effects of sin. Gen 3-9 no longer presents a failing God, but details why sin has to be blotted out from creation. Abraham is no longer the solution; God is.

The covenant with Abraham becomes only a step in this great missionary plan. It was an answer to a particular issue that God needed to address in the context of a greater mission. Since God is a missionary God by nature, it is difficult to see how his intentions with Abraham and his descendants were focused only on centripetal mission in the Old Testament. A balanced reflection of God’s character includes both centrifugal and centripetal mission.

Many other stories and events in the Bible make sense when placed against the background of a cosmic battle. The mission of angels sent to Sodom and Gomorrah reveal both judgment and salvation (Gen 19:13, 29). Abraham’s mission, which is often interpreted to bring blessing, involves curses. In the cosmic conflict paradigm these curses make perfect sense. Since Abraham is God’s representative, when people curse Abraham they actually curse God, so the curse is returned on them.

Another difficult passage to interpret in the classic “blessing” paradigm is Gen 22. Isaac’s sacrifice is clearly God’s command, and a necessary part of Abraham’s experience. He has to prove his allegiance and show his commitment to God’s mission. It was part of his mission to give all glory to God. The heavenly voice in Gen 22:12 confirmed that Abraham succeeded in his mission and passed the test. Joseph experiences a heart-wrenching separation from his family. Sold as a slave by his own brothers, Joseph could hardly think that God had any mission for him. But later in the story, he remembers the childhood dreams, receives confirmation, and becomes convinced that God had a plan for him. After the emotional reunion with his family, Joseph declares that God sent him before his brothers to save their lives (Gen 45:5, 7-8). Even the cruelest actions could be turned in favor of God’s saving mission.

This passage is profound in its covenantal and salvific implications. There is more than providence here. Joseph’s words reach both back to the Abrahamic covenant and forward to the Exodus deliverance. The Hebrew people later corroborated Joseph’s conviction that God sent him to Egypt and it is not surprising that Hebrew hymnody repeated the sending language in the celebration of God’s redemptive leadership in Joseph’s life. The sending of Joseph was seen as a prelude to the sending of Moses and Aaron (Ps 105:17, 26) and, therefore, of the Exodus (Wright 1983:41-42).
The sending of Moses and Aaron to Pharaoh represents a special episode in the Master mission plan. They are to convey God’s request to let the Hebrew people leave Egypt to bring glory to God by worshipping him. The message contains a choice offered to Pharaoh but also the announcement of the plagues. God’s character is again reflected in Moses’ mission: grace and judgment. The intended liberation is to become a foretaste of the final liberation of creation from the dominion of Satan. The plagues and the final destruction of Pharaoh’s army are paralleled in the last chapters of the book of Revelation. God’s mission is going to be fulfilled and all glory finally returned to the rightful owner.

In its later journey, Israel is sometimes sent to erase a certain nation from the earth’s surface by killing its entire people. Such a mission is not welcome in any of the classical hermeneutical paradigms of mission, but perfectly explainable in the cosmic conflict approach. God sent them, so the same pattern for centrifugal mission is present, although with a judgment purpose. When entering the Promised Land, Israel was told to kill the Canaanites so they will not become a temptation toward idolatry and rob God of his glory. However, Israel decided it was easier to just let them live in their midst and hoped a centripetal mission would win them for good. Laziness was justified by mercy. God wanted them to act centrifugally, but they thought centripetally was better.

The Sanctuary and its services occupy a large segment of the Old Testament. The attention to details sometimes seems exaggerated. But everything makes sense when looked at from the cosmic conflict perspective. All the furniture pieces, the utensils, even the structure of the Sanctuary were designed to teach Israel about God’s mission to eradicate sin from the universe. The entire missionary plan, the heavenly strategy, was clearly exposed during the events that took place at the tabernacle. All sacrifices symbolized Jesus’ future death on the cross on behalf of the sinner. All symbols that Jesus later on compared himself with were present. The Light of the World, the Bread of Life, the Lamb of God, the mediatorial role of the priest, all illustrated the reality that was to come. The Day of Atonement pointed to the final day of judgment and cleansing of the universe from the effects of sin. Everything in the Sanctuary was designed to teach about the cosmic conflict.

This whole world, with the sign of the Sabbath over it, is meant to be a sanctuary, a place of ‘rest’ for God, a place where God’s sovereignty is acclaimed and where God may dwell with God’s creation. Tabernacle and temple are truly the world in microcosm (Okoye 2006:32).

The Sanctuary was supposed to be mobile, so Israel could take
it with them during their journeys. Special instructions were given so God’s character would be correctly presented in a balanced way. As an instructional device it could be taken to the nations so the nations would be able to learn about and see God’s glory. But Israel thought otherwise, and decided to become like all the other nations around them. They requested a king, and the king decided to build a Temple like the temples the surrounding nations possessed. However, this Temple fulfilled only partially its missionary role, since only a few from the nations had the chance to see God’s glory.

The Temple fit just one side of its mission, the centripetal one. The symbols remained the same, but its mobility disappeared. The intended pedagogical role was reduced to only impact Israel. Even Israel realized their mistake later on and built a court for the nations around the Temple. Unfortunately, it became just a reflection of a centripetal, inward-looking nation. At the peak of its glory, during Solomon’s time, people came to hear the wise king’s words.

Solomon was supposed to expand the borders of Israel by making God’s glory known. Unfortunately he stayed home and others came to him to hear his wisdom. The unbalanced centripetal-only mission soon showed its results. When Solomon no longer gave glory to God by his example and life, mission was completely forgotten in Israel. His wives’ idols were worshiped instead of God, and
Israel apostatized. The same lack of centrifugal activity brought down both David and Solomon. The cosmic conflict paradigm presupposes both centripetal and centrifugal aspects in order to correctly represent God’s character and missionary strategy.

When Israel no longer brought glory to God and centrifugal mission became non-existent, God had to use other nations to remind Israel of its duty. The curses spoken on Mount Ebal (Deut 11:29) had to be enforced and God’s justice acted as an instrument of mercy. The two cannot be separated. The exile in the cosmic conflict paradigm is not only a punishment but a corrective instrument. When Israel became so engrossed in selfish navel-gazing, God reminded them of their centrifugal mission.

God’s monotheistic character is of vital importance for the understanding of his mission. He is blessing, but also cursing, he is just but also loving. His mission is not only to bless and save, but also to eradicate sin from the universe together with those that cling to it. Personal choice becomes very important in this context.

Indeed, it is this missionary dimension, so often neglected in modern theological interpretation, that unifies both Old and New Testaments and coordinates their various themes into a single motif. It is the logical connection between the Testaments that many modern theologians unfortunately seem to despair of ever finding. . . . The dimension of missions in the interpretation of the Scriptures gives structure to the whole Bible. Any theological study of the Scriptures, therefore, must be formulated with the view of maintaining this structure (Filbeck 1994:10).

**Conclusion**

This article began by looking for a missional hermeneutic for reading the Bible. The idea of a missional hermeneutic is excellent, but in order to find the correct one, the assumptions behind it should be evaluated. Several important questions should be asked: Does it preserve the unity of the Scripture? Does it include all the events described in it? Does it correctly reflect God’s character and missionary strategy? Does it bring glory to God? Mission should be the natural outcome of the biblical text, which should not be molded according to preconceived ideas about mission.
The centrifugal-centripetal hermeneutical model is useful as long as the big picture is not lost sight of. Israel’s mistakes should not be interpreted as God’s model for mission in the Old Testament. Nor should it become the definition for mission. Wright argues for separating the God of mission from the Bible, as a solution to the mission definition conundrum (2006:28). Such a separation might be useful in Israel’s case because it supports the difference between what happens in the story and God’s initial intentions. Focusing on the concept of sending, DuBose shows that it not only reflects the nature of God and reveals the purposes of God but also demonstrates the method of God.

The dichotomized interpretation of mission in the Bible by a distinction between “centrifugal” (the going “out from the center,” the church, for witness in the New Testament) and “centripetal” (the going “in to the center,” Israel, for witness in the Old Testament) may have some value. However, it misses the vast and rich world of the sending in the Old Testament and fails fundamentally in understanding the essential oneness of the purpose and method of God in both Testaments, as revealed by the concept of sending (1983:150).

Mission is the very work of God, and by implication it is our work, too. God has called us and his commission is the corollary of the call. “To be called is to be sent (Ex 3:10-15; Is 6:8; Jer 1:7; Eze 2:3; Matt 10:1, 5; Luke 10:1)” (DuBose 1983:103). Mission flows from the reality of the biblical God. This reality requires a range of responses: worship, ethical living, creativity, justice for the poor, concern for the immigrant, centrifugal cross-cultural mission—a reflection of God’s own character. When these things are present in our lives, our stories become part of the grand story of God’s purpose in the universe and we understand the justification and best methods for our mission.

The cosmic conflict represents the best paradigm to understand the Bible and God’s mission. It comes from the Scriptures and is faithful to its unity. It includes all other previous hermeneutical models. When the Bible is allowed to speak, we understand how justice and mercy form the basis of God’s character and mission. We also understand Satan’s attempts to distort God’s image in us and misrepresent his character. Mission is also part of his target, and the Old Testament in particular testifies to it in Israel’s history. By presenting a one-sided mission, the arch-enemy tries to make our efforts inefficient. When the concept of sending is lost, the death of mission is not far away.

The concept of the sending helps us to see that behind all we mean by mission is a life-transforming dynamic: an impulse and an identity, a passion and a purpose. Mission is more than a doctrine. It is event as well as idea, process as
well as content, medium as well as message, mood as well as method, mystery as well as meaning (DuBose 1983:160).

**Works Cited**


