

*MISSIO DEI FOR ANCIENT ISRAEL*  
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The central proclamation of God’s mission for ancient Israel appears as the introduction to the revelation at Mount Sinai. Walter Brueggemann calls God’s speech in Exodus 19:3-6 “likely the most programmatic for Israelite faith that we have in the entire tradition of Moses.”<sup>1</sup>

Then Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain and said, “This is what you are to say to the descendants of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: ‘You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites.” (Exod 19:3-6 NIV11)

*Kingdom of Priests*

God’s mission for ancient Israel is expressed in the call to “be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exod 19:6 NIV11). Nahum Sarna explains that “the priest’s place and function within society must serve as the ideal model for Israel’s self-understanding of its role among the nations. The priest is set apart by a distinctive way of life consecrated to the service of God and dedicated to ministering to the needs of the people.”<sup>2</sup> The resulting analogy suggests that as priests minister to the people, so the kingdom of Israel shall minister to the nations. The image of the entire kingdom of Israel made up of priests prompts the question: who makes up the congregation? The evident response must be the nations. Some translators configure the end of verse 5 as the first clause of the sentence in verse 6: “Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (vv. 5-6 NIV11, see also NRSV). This identifies Israel as a kingdom of priests in the midst of the nations, all of whom belong to God. Israel’s election, as God’s “treasured possession” distinct from all the nations, is specified in terms of service to the nations. Israel’s election does not identify the children of Jacob as more valuable or worthy to God than other nations (cf. Deut 9:6-14). Israel was called as God’s instrument to minister God’s presence throughout the world as a priestly “servant nation instead of a ruling nation.”<sup>3</sup> God chose Israel for the purpose of drawing near to God and doing service for all the world.<sup>4</sup>

The greatest service Israel could render to the nations was to model obedience to God’s law. God’s condition for Israel’s election and becoming a priestly kingdom and holy nation was, “if you obey me fully and keep my covenant” (Exod 19:5 NIV11). Keeping God’s covenant and prospering as God’s people required obedience to the commandments, which made up the law of God (Deut 12:28; 15:5; 26:16-19; 27:9-10). It has been commonly recognized that the

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Book of Exodus*, NIB 1 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 834.

<sup>2</sup> Nahum Sarna, *Exodus*, JPS Torah (Philadelphia: JPS, 1991), 104.

<sup>3</sup> John I. Durham, *Exodus*, WBC 3 (Waco: Word Books, 1987), 263.

<sup>4</sup> Martin Noth, *Exodus*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), 157.

foundational Ten Commandments fall into two categories: 1) those reflecting love for God (commands 1-4), and 2) those promoting love for others/neighbor (commands 6-10). With regard to all the other commandments in the law, Jesus was asked which was the greatest. Christ responded by citing two laws: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind” (Matt 22:37; Deut 6:5), and “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt 22:39; Lev 19:18). Most striking, however, was Christ’s next statement regarding these two stipulations: “On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Matt 22:40 NRSV). Those two bedrock commandments call for loving God and loving neighbor. Christ infers that focusing on loving God and loving neighbor will keep one aligned with the intent of all the law and the proclamations of the prophets. Israel’s mission as a kingdom of priests was to model a loving relationship with God and a loving relationship with neighbor before all the nations. That mission is central to God’s work, culminating in Christ, of reconciling the world to God (2 Cor 5:19).

Israel’s mission was previously foreshadowed in God’s call to Abraham in whom God claims, “all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen 12:3 NRSV; see also 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14). Through Abraham and his descendants, all people “were to be taught the existence of the Most High God, and the love of righteousness, thereby opening for themselves the same treasury of blessings which he enjoyed.”<sup>5</sup> This suggests that God’s election of Israel and God’s covenant promises, beginning with Abraham, passed on to Isaac and Jacob (Israel), and culminating with the children of Israel, were intended to position Israel to become a kingdom of priests for service to the nations.

### *Servant of the Lord*

The servant of the Lord in the book of Isaiah further embodies the purpose of Israel’s election and Israel’s mission. The ambiguous servant, who is identified as Israel at one point (Isa 49:3) yet distinguished from Israel in the next (Isa 49:5-6), is an ideal or model to which Israel might aspire. The chosen servant of God was called to be a “light to the nations” for the purpose of extending God’s salvation “to the end of the earth” (Isa 49:6 NRSV). This view of Israel’s election stands in stark contrast to the notion that election signifies that God loves Israel and hates the rest of the world; a notion promulgated far too often in both ancient and contemporary times. God did not choose Israel for the sake of saving Israel while condemning the rest of the world; rather, God chose Israel as an instrument for reaching all the world with love and salvation.

The servant of the Lord was given by God as a “covenant of a people” (Isa 42:6; 49:8) and as a “light to the nations” (Isa 42:6; 49:6). The construct phrase, “covenant of a people,” is unusual, and its meaning is unclear. Its parallel use with “light to the nations” in Isaiah 42:6 and 49:6-8 suggests a meaning reflecting Israel’s call to serve the nations. John McKenzie asserts that the phrase should be taken to mean a “people-covenant,” suggesting that the servant becomes a unifying bond mediating between God and peoples (the nations).<sup>6</sup> Identifying the servant as a covenant creates an uncommon metaphor. As an expression of Israel’s mission,

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<sup>5</sup> J.H. Hertz, ed., *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Soncino Press, 1960), 45.

<sup>6</sup> John L. McKenzie, *Second Isaiah*, AB (New York: Doubleday, 1968), 39-40.

Israel is called to serve as the contract/agreement of loving and saving relationships between God and the peoples of the world. “The servant is a means of light and salvation to the nations.”<sup>7</sup> A. S. Herbert speaks of Isaiah 42:6-8 as an “oracle describing the universal mission of the Servant Israel,” in which God has designated the servant to be “the instrument of the covenant he will make with all mankind.”<sup>8</sup> As a guide reflecting Israel’s mission, the servant of the Lord instructs Israel to live life before God with a concern to draw the nations into relationship with the Lord. A picture of the realization of Israel’s mission is reflected in the apocalyptic expressions of Isaiah in which the nations stream to the house of the Lord to glorify God, learn God’s ways, serve the Lord, and live in peace (Isa 2:2-4; 19:18-25; 25:6-9; 56:1-7; 66:18-23). Most striking is the indication that the Lord will choose priests and Levites from among the nations who return the dispersed of Israel (Isa 66:21). Thus, Isaiah pictures priesthood being extended even to Gentiles.<sup>9</sup> The mission of God is intended to spread into the nations so that right relationships with God multiply around the world. Claus Westermann’s comment on Isaiah 66:19 depicts the movement intended to be the result of Israel’s mission: “One is amazed at it: here, just as the Old Testament is coming to its end, God’s way is already seen as leading from the narrow confines of the chosen people out into the wide, whole world.”<sup>10</sup>

Israel’s mission in the Hebrew Bible does not reflect the evangelistic fervor of proclaiming the good news, which we see among believers in the New Testament. Heralding good news (*basar*) of God’s salvation/deliverance was announced *to Jerusalem and Judah* (Nah 2:1 [Eng. 1:15]; Isa 40:9; 41:27; 52:7; 60:6; 61:1), and the Psalmist proclaimed good news of deliverance before the congregation *of Israel* (Ps 40:10 [Eng. 40:9]), but it is rare to find the declaration of the good news (*basar*) of God’s salvation and marvelous works before *the nations* (Ps 96:2-3; 1 Chron 16:23). The principal means by which Israel was called to reach the nations was through a life and witness of holy living.

### *Holy Nation*

While Israel’s life of holiness was intended to be a model to draw the nations to God, ironically, holiness also meant separation and distinction from the nations. Separation and distinction from the nations normally created distance and isolation between Israel and the nations, rather than drawing the nations into relationship with God. A tension was created between Israel’s need to separate themselves from the ways of the nations in order to avoid idolatry and abhorrent practices (Lev 18:3, 24-30; 20:23-26; Deut 7:1-6; 12:29-32), and Israel’s call to minister to the nations as a kingdom of priests. The concern for separation was not aimed at rejecting the people of other nations themselves; it was meant to restrict Israel from being influenced by their sinful practices. The archetype of abomination was the practice of burning one’s sons and daughters in fire to one’s gods (Deut 12:31; see Lev 18:21; 20:2-3; 2 Kgs 23:10; Jer 7:31; 19:5; 32:35), a sinful act which eventually corrupted one of Judah’s own Kings (2 Kgs 16:2-3). The children of Israel were told to separate, not only from the nations, but even from

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<sup>7</sup> McKenzie, *Second Isaiah*, 105.

<sup>8</sup> A.S. Herbert, *The Book of the Prophet Isaiah 40-66*, CBC (Cambridge: University Press, 1975), 42-43.

<sup>9</sup> William H. C. Propp, *Exodus 19-40*, AB (New York: Doubleday, 2006), 159.

<sup>10</sup> Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), 425.

their own kindred who may lead them into idolatry or wrongful practices (Deut 13:6-18). The call to holiness created a dichotomy demanding strict abstinence from the ways of the nations, while simultaneously seeking to draw the nations into right relationship with God.

This tension was evident during the post-exilic restoration period when Ezra and Nehemiah sent away the foreign wives whom the Judeans had married (Ezra 9—10; Neh 13:23-27). The rationale given was that the peoples of the lands (whom they married) practiced abominations “like those of the Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians and Amorites” (Ezra 9:1 NIV11). In addition, Nehemiah reminded the exiles of when King Solomon’s foreign wives led him to sin (Neh 13:26). The list of the early inhabitants of Canaan in Ezra 9:1 echoes the intermarriage prohibition in Deuteronomy 7:1-4. The demand to abstain from the abominations of Egypt and the land of Canaan is further expressed in Leviticus 18:3, 24-30. In the context of restoring the community of Judah, following the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple and following exile to a foreign land, all as a result of previous sins and abominations, it is understandable that Ezra and Nehemiah may have been extra zealous about protecting the community from being drawn back into iniquity so quickly upon return from exile. In contrast to the rejection of intermarriage in Ezra and Nehemiah, the book of Ruth presents the story of a Moabite woman who was not only accepted into Israelite society, having married an upright Israelite, but she was even revered as the great-grandmother of King David (Ruth 4:13-17). She was even listed as one of only four women included in the lineage of the Christ child (Matt 1:5). Some have argued that the book of Ruth may have been written as a polemic against the harsh measures taken by Ezra and Nehemiah.<sup>11</sup> Ancient Israel’s call to holiness created a tension that should be understood in terms of Israel’s need to “separate” from idolatry and abominable practices, while recognizing that foreign nations remained the focus of Israel’s mission as a kingdom of priests modeling the love of God and neighbor. “Israel as a ‘holy people’ then represents a third dimension of what it means to be committed in faith to Yahweh: they are to be a people set apart, different from all other people by what they are and are becoming—a display-people, a showcase to the world of how being in covenant with Yahweh changes a people.”<sup>12</sup> Ideally, Israel’s display of holy living was intended to change, not only the people of Israel, but all the peoples of the world.

### *Holiness and the Law*

Israel’s call to be “a holy nation” (Exod 19:6) is repeated numerous times in Leviticus 18-26 (the Holiness Code). The primary exhortation is, “Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy” (Lev 19:2 NIV11; see Lev 20:26). This appeal is echoed by means of an abbreviated form of the primary exhortation, that is, “I am the Lord your God” and the even shorter phrase “I am the Lord,” which practically serve as signatures to laws throughout the Holiness Code (Lev 18:2, 4, 5, 6, 21, 30; 19:3, 4, 10, 12, 14, 16, 18, 25, 28, 30, 31, 32, 34, 36, 37; 20:7, 8, 24; 21:12, 15, 23; 22:2, 3, 8, 9, 16, 30, 31, 32, 33; 23:22, 43; 24:22; 25:17, 38, 55; 26:1, 2, 13, 45). “The striving for holiness in the life of the people is to be the hallmark of Israel’s existence.”<sup>13</sup> The intimidating demand of God’s exhortation to ancient Israel is evident in the comparative

<sup>11</sup> See John J. Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 533.

<sup>12</sup> Durham, *Exodus*, 263.

<sup>13</sup> Sarna, *Exodus*, 104.

justification for the command, “because I, the Lord your God, am holy.” While the Lord certainly did not expect Israel to become divine, God did call them to a high standard of righteousness. “Holiness is to be achieved by human imitation of God’s attributes.”<sup>14</sup>

Israel’s holiness was to be grounded in observance of the law of God, as evident by numerous exhortations throughout the Old Testament calling for obedience, beginning with the initial call to the covenant/mission itself (“if you obey my voice and keep my covenant,” Exod 19:5). An important aspect of the law was its dynamic character. This is evidenced by adjustments made to the law in relation to changing times and circumstances. For example, the law of the second-month Passover reflects the law’s flexibility as God made an additional ruling regarding the observance of Passover in order to accommodate those who could not keep the festival during the first month as originally stipulated (Num 9:1-14). Another example is evident with the second (supplemental) set of instructions for keeping the festival of Tabernacles (Lev 23:39-43). The renewed instructions constituted a response to the later crisis of the exilic period and provided an opportunity for Judeans to observe Tabernacles and exercise their faith during a time devoid of the temple and sacrificial ritual.<sup>15</sup> This dynamic quality of the law contributes to the recognition that the key to interpreting and applying the law throughout time lies in identifying the *intent* of the law.

Modern believers have often struggled with the law in the Old Testament because it seems so archaic, irrelevant, and inapplicable. For example, what should present-day readers make of the regulation, “You shall not boil a kid in its mother’s milk” (Exod 23:19; 34:26; Deut 14:21)? Clearly, a direct and literal application of this stipulation makes little sense for the majority of the world today. Nevertheless, the intent of the ordinance can certainly serve to direct contemporary treatment of animals. H. Louis Ginsburg suggests that the practice of boiling a kid in its mother’s milk was a way of disposing of surplus male goats at the time of the Festival of Ingathering. It did not pay to raise a male goat to maturity because it did not give wool and did not yield palatable meat.<sup>16</sup> The connection with the Festival of Ingathering is supported by two of the three occurrences of the stipulation in the Bible. It appears at the end of instructions regarding the pilgrimage festivals, the last of which is the Festival of Ingathering (Exod 23:14-19; 34:22-26) The Festival of Ingathering corresponds to the final regulation added to the instructions for the festivals (Exod 23:19b; 34:26b). Sarna adds further explanation based on the comments of medieval rabbis who suggest a humanitarian concern underlying this legislation. Goats often give birth to more than one offspring and yield much milk. In biblical times, goats were more abundant than sheep and were the main source of milk. It may have been a custom to dispose of the surplus young by cooking them in their mother’s milk. Since a young goat is more tender and delicate in taste than a lamb, the dish may have been considered a delicacy. The earliest litter would arrive around the time of Tabernacles (Ingathering). Thus, this regulation would apply to the activities surrounding the Festival of Ingathering. The prohibition became law

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<sup>14</sup> Sarna, *Exodus*, 104.

<sup>15</sup> Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 23-27*, AB 3B (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 2049-53, 2055-56; see Thomas J. King, *Leviticus*, NBBC (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2013), 242-43.

<sup>16</sup> H. Louis Ginsberg, *The Israelian Heritage of Judaism* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1982), 53.

because the act was seen as insensitive to the young goats.<sup>17</sup> The final occurrence of the regulation appears at the end of the dietary restrictions in the book of Deuteronomy. Milgrom has persuasively argued that the purpose of the dietary system in the Bible was to teach Israel reverence for life.<sup>18</sup> Prohibiting the inhumane practice of boiling a kid in its mother's milk explains why the regulation was added to the dietary restrictions in Deuteronomy and certainly contributes to the intent of the dietary regulations that all life be revered. This example of the intent behind the prohibition of boiling a kid in its mother's milk, along with the purpose of the broader dietary restrictions themselves, provides a guide for recognizing the enduring function of the Old Testament laws. With regard to this example, an application for the contemporary Church is to discover ways to practice reverence for life in the midst of the current cultural environment.

Christ further exemplified the importance of discovering the intent of the law over merely imposing the letter of the law. In response to the accusation that he allowed his disciples to break the Sabbath law by picking grain on the Sabbath, Jesus pointed to a time when David broke the law by eating bread, which was only lawful for the priests to eat (Mark 2:23-26). At first glance, Jesus' reply insinuates that David's violation of the law permits one greater than David to also break the law. However, Christ's additional comment reveals that something more significant than a literal enforcement of the letter of the law is at stake here. Jesus stated, "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath" (Mark 2:27 NRSV). With this statement, Jesus points to the intent of the Sabbath law. It was composed for the sake of humanity, for the purpose of enriching human relationship with God. Humanity was not created for the purpose of providing some creature for the observance of Sabbath law.

The principle of discovering the intent of the law is best illustrated by Christ's response to the expert in the Mosaic law who asked which is the greatest of the commandments (Matt 22:34-36). Jesus responded by pointing to two laws stipulating love of God and love of neighbor (Matt 22:37-39; see Deut 6:5; Lev 19:18). Most striking, however, is Christ's next statement, "on these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (Matt 22:40 NRSV). Jesus suggests here that the main intent of the entire law and its explication by the prophets is to love God and love one's neighbor. The Ten Commandments, along with the numerous stipulations in the Old Testament, the observance of which is intended to guide Israel into holiness, are all fulfilled by focusing on ways to love God and love neighbor through daily life. Jesus proposes that one might fulfill the law of God by diligently practicing ways to love God and love one's neighbor. Ancient Israel's call to be a holy nation, by means of obedience to the law of God, was to find its fulfillment through loving God and loving others, as a witness to the nations.

### *Prophetic Realignment*

The prophetic critique of the sacrificial system provides another illustration of the focus on the intent of the law over a legalistic view of the letter of the law. The prophets did not oppose the sacrificial system, as some have argued. Rather, the prophets condemned the hypocritical abuse of ritual in ancient Israel. The intent of the sacrificial system for ancient Israel

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<sup>17</sup> Sarna, *Exodus*, 147.

<sup>18</sup> Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, AB 3 (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 735.

(as part of God’s law) was to enrich right relationships with God and neighbor. The voluntary offerings (whole-burnt, grain, and well-being; Lev 1–3) serve to invoke the presence of God, express devotion to the Lord, and celebrate significant events with joy and thanksgiving in fellowship with God.<sup>19</sup> The required sacrifices (purification, and guilt; Lev 4:1–6:7 [Heb. 4:1–5:26]) represent cleansing from sin and impurity for the purpose of renewing right relationships with God and neighbor. The purification offering depicts the removal of the defilement of sin, which interferes with relationships. The instructions regarding the guilt offering include required acts of reparation for the purpose of restoring broken relationships.<sup>20</sup> The act of presenting animal blood before the Lord is intended, not to signify the animal’s death or punishment in place of the offerer, but to signify the offerer’s presentation of his or her own life to God in daily commitment to righteous living.<sup>21</sup>

The sacrificial system’s intent to accommodate and promote ethical and right relationships is exactly what the prophets sought to revive. Israel’s performance of sacrificial ritual while continuing to participate in acts of sin and apostasy depicted the hypocrisy which the prophets condemned. For the prophets, such behavior negated the meaning of the sacrificial system and completely revoked its intended function. This concern is expressed as early as the former prophets, in Samuel’s speech rebuking King Saul, “Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obedience to the voice of the Lord? Surely, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams” (1 Sam 22 NRSV). It is most clearly expressed by the eighth-century prophets:

What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the Lord; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats. When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand? Trample my courts no more; bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation—I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity. Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them. When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. *Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.* (Isa 1:11-17 NRSV, emphasis added)

For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings. (Hos 6:6 NRSV)

I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. *But let justice*

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<sup>19</sup> King, *Leviticus*, 62-64.

<sup>20</sup> King, *Leviticus*, 81-83

<sup>21</sup> King, *Leviticus*, 67-68, 73, 83.

*roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.* (Amos 5:21-24 NRSV, emphasis added)

“With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to *do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?* (Mic 6:6-8 NRSV, emphasis added)

The prophetic critique of the abuse of the sacrificial system proclaims that the intent of sacrificial ritual is a life offered to God, evidenced by the cessation of evil, learning good, caring for the needy, steadfast love, knowledge of God, righteousness, doing justice, loving kindness, and walking with God. The sacrificial system, as part of the law, directs Israel to accomplish its mission by means of life offered to God in righteousness and holiness. As a holy nation, Israel was called to model a right relationship with God and neighbor in order to spread holiness to all the nations of the world.