

## Book Reviews

Scott Cunningham

***'Through Many Tribulations':  
The Theology of Persecution in Luke-Acts***

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Sheffield UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997, 376 pgs. Hb.

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The author of this important study, Scott Cunningham, is well known throughout the African continent because of his years as a lecturer in theological education in Nigeria, and his faithful labours on behalf of ACTEA, the association working to strengthen evangelical theological education in Africa. This publication represents an updated and slightly revised version of his PhD dissertation at Dallas Theological Seminary. Although dissertations are often difficult to wade through and thus appeal only to specialists, Cunningham's revision has provided a very accessible study, with clearly written prose and good organization.

As a New Testament theologian, I am delighted to see a solidly evangelical and responsibly academic study published by Sheffield Academic Press. As a Christian who has lived in Africa for more than three decades, I rejoice to discover a study that touches an issue Western theologians often ignore, namely, suffering persecution as part of Christian discipleship. Twice the author indicates that his book is no ivory-tower investigation of a Lukan theme. Rather, he has in view the reality experienced by many Christians outside the Western world: proclaiming one's faith in Jesus Christ often leads to persecution. This study provides hope for the Church, hope as underlined in the two-volume work of Luke-Acts.

Cunningham has considered Luke's work as a whole, rather than merely concentrating on the Acts of the Apostles. The reasons for such a procedure are well stated, and the study demonstrates that the theme runs through both volumes of Luke's work, and that the Gospel prepares the reader for understanding the theme in Acts. This linking of the two books with regard to the theme of persecution has made an important contribution to New Testament studies.

Apart from the Introduction and Conclusion, the book is divided into five unequal chapters. The first chapter (19 pp.) reviews previous literature and approaches to the question, and then indicates that the study will proceed by

taking seriously the literary and narrative characteristics of Luke's work (though occasional redactional elements appear throughout the study of the Gospel). The second chapter (144 pp.) and the third chapter (109 pp.) are the heart of the study, examining respectively the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles with regard to the passages relevant to the theme of persecution. A summary of the findings is then presented in Chapter 4 (33 pp.), usefully combining the results of Chapters 2 and 3, and demonstrating how the theme of persecution runs across both the Gospel and Acts. The final chapter, Chapter 5 (9 pp.), attempts to show that the people of Luke's church (those whom Luke has in mind when writing) were themselves persecuted. Cunningham then indicates how he sees the persecution theme fitting with Luke's other concerns. The title for this final chapter, "The Theology of Persecution and the Purpose of Luke-Acts", may be somewhat more ambitious than this chapter itself, in light of the ongoing scholarly discussions of the purpose of Luke's work.

Cunningham arrives at six basic conclusions concerning the persecution theme in Luke-Acts, summarized in his conclusion:

1. Persecution is part of the plan of God.
2. Persecution is the rejection of God's agents by those who are supposedly God's people.
3. The persecuted people of God stand in continuity with God's prophets.
4. Persecution is an integral consequence of following Jesus.
5. Persecution is the occasion of the Christian's perseverance.
6. Persecution is the occasion of divine triumph.

The bibliography has a good selection of modern authors, though I would suggest Dupont's book on the Miletus discourse as useful to the discussion. Surprisingly, one finds a notable lack of non-Western authors here. The bibliography would have been strengthened also by more reference as to how the Church Fathers understood and used some of these key Lukan texts. Any publication of this length is bound to have a few editorial and typographical flaws, but very few of either show up in this book. With regard to what Cunningham terms the "bloody sweat" passage of Luke 22.43-44, only those who accept the Majority Text reading are likely to find the point convincing. For the rest, the passage remains problematic from the perspective of textual criticism, and Cunningham's nuance indicates his awareness of this difficulty.

The strength of the dissertation lies in its consistent reliance on the biblical text and dependable, defensible exegesis of the passages in question. The link between the two volumes of Luke-Acts is underscored with respect to the theme of persecution. The abundance of the material Cunningham assembles in this regard is striking.

The noted missiologist Paul Hiebert has pointed out that in the book of Acts, miracles (power encounters) as a testimony to Jesus Christ often led not to great conversions but to great persecution. Cunningham has come at the same idea more generally and as a biblical scholar, showing that persecution

may indeed result from witnessing. Paul and Barnabas proclaimed: "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14.21, NIV). Yet this study also shows that God's purposes will triumph and that the persecution itself can be seen as a validation of the believer's position as a true disciple of Jesus Christ, undergoing the same treatment as his Master (and the prophets of the Old Testament). The Lord himself allows the Christian to persevere to the end.

I personally hope that Cunningham - or someone inspired by his work - will now take what he has identified as biblical principles and demonstrate how to apply them in different contexts. For example, in relation to Luke 21:12-19, the author lists several observations:

1. There is an expectation of violent opposition directed against the disciples.
2. Persecution comes because of the disciples' association with Jesus ... .
3. Persecution provides the opportunity for further witness.
4. Aid is promised in the midst of persecution.
5. Persecution comes from both legal [or public] and personal [or private] sources.
6. The disciples can expect to triumph in the midst of persecution.

How, then, can these principles be applied in Africa in a Muslim context, an African Traditional Religions context, and in a secular or university context? How can these truths be effectively communicated to the believers who need them? Scott Cunningham has done all of us a great service in providing an evangelical and biblical framework for understanding the relationship between Christian testimony and persecution. It remains for the Church to continue the discussion by disseminating the principles and finding applications.

Though the issue is important, the cost of this volume seriously limits its usefulness in Africa. Major institutions working at the graduate level in Africa would find it very useful. NT scholars in these institutions should consider the ebook version, if that is available in their area.

#### Approximate Prices:

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Christopher J.H. Wright

***The Mission of God:  
Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative***

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ISBN 978-0-830-82571-4 \$24.36 US

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Christopher Wright's, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative*, proposes a new framework for reading the Bible. The question he wrestles with is about the validity of using a missiological framework as a hermeneutical approach to reading the Bible. His major concern is to "develop an approach to biblical hermeneutics that sees the mission of God (and the participation in it of God's people) as a framework within which we can read the whole Bible." (p. 17) In other words, Wright seeks to demonstrate that Christian mission is rooted in the scriptures and that a theology of the mission of God gives a hermeneutical framework for reading the Bible.

He defines the essential terms: mission, missionary, missional and missiological. Mission is a commitment to participate as God's people, at God's invitation and command, in God's mission within the history of God's world for the redemption of God's creation. A missionary is someone involved in mission in a culture other than their own. Missional, as an adjective, describes something related to mission. Finally, he uses missiological with reference to theological or reflective aspects of mission.

In order to articulate his argument, Wright divides his work into four parts. In part one, which he entitles 'The Bible and Mission,' he unpacks what a missiological hermeneutic of scripture means, and whether or not such a framework is faithful to the biblical text. Basing his argument on Luke 24:45-47, Wright states that the proper way to read the scriptures is messianically and missionally. Thus Christ crucified and risen forms the bedrock for the hermeneutical coherence of the whole Bible. Among the points he makes include the fact that such a hermeneutic shows interest in the lives of God's people and that it espouses liberation. Furthermore, a missional hermeneutic operates on the basic assumption that the whole Bible is about the mission of God through his people in their participation with God's world on behalf of God's creation. The Bible provides the authority for such mission. This authority, given in the form of the Great Commission, is to be understood holistically, taking into account its indicatives and implied imperatives. Wright ends part one with a note that a missional hermeneutic embraces the biblical theocentric perspective that recognizes the mission of God as unfolded in the grand story.

In part two, Wright addresses the fundamental issue of the missiological implications of biblical monotheism. He discusses how Israel acknowledged the uniqueness of YHWH through his redemptive works as seen in the exodus, judgment, and the return from exile. God revealed himself to Israel in acts that showed them that there is no other god like YHWH. Israel in turn was a steward of this knowledge, since God's people encompassed all nations.

Wright also shows how the NT enriches our knowledge of God through the identity of Jesus as both Christ and Lord. He elaborates how Jesus shares the identity of YHWH and how certain major functions of YHWH are linked to Jesus in the NT. He also investigates the missional significance of the combination of identity and function between YHWH and Jesus. He tackles the question of the missiological significance of full, biblical, christocentric monotheism. Among the points he makes is that just like YHWH in the OT, the NT presents Jesus as Creator, Ruler, Judge and Savior.

The final chapter in this part is devoted to a discussion on the conflict with gods and idols. Wright shows the paradox regarding the gods and idols, that although they are *something* in the world, they are *nothing* in comparison to the living God. Moreover, idols and gods are the work of human hands and may have demonic associations. Consequently, idolatry clouds the distinction between the Creator and the creation and distorts the glory of God. A missional approach will therefore seek to understand different forms of idolatry, and confront them so that the creation may be restored to its original purpose of bringing glory to God.

In part three, the author focuses on the people of God as the agents of the mission of God. He begins by concentrating on God's election of Abraham and his descendants as the channel of blessing to the other nations. He views the call of Abraham as the beginning of God's answer to the evil of human hearts, the strife of nations and the groaning brokenness of his whole creation. He also stresses that God's intention to bless the nations is combined with humanity's obedience to him. It is also this obedience and commitment to the ethical demands of the covenant that make God's people a blessing to the nations. Wright thus sees the Abrahamic covenant as a moral agenda for God's people as well as a mission statement by God.

From here Wright moves to the paradoxical duality of the covenant. He states that the covenant is universal since it is for the blessing of all nations, and it is also particular since it is by means of one nation. It follows then that the mission of God has a universal horizon as well as a particular historical method. Wright surveys various Old Testament texts from which he observes that the thrust toward universality is mostly a feature of the faith, worship, and expectation of Israel. When he comes to the New Testament, Wright shows that like the Old Testament, the New Testament presents the universal view of God with a universal mission which he announced to Abraham, accomplished in anticipation by Christ, and which is to be completed in the new creation. He

concludes this section by discussing the election of Israel as part of the logic of God's commitment to history, and as fundamentally missional and soteriological.

Wright then comes to the exodus story, which he views as God's model of redemption, providing one of the keys to understanding the meaning of the cross of Christ. He explains that the exodus was holistic in that God responded to all the dimensions of Israel's need - political, economic, social, and spiritual. As a model of redemption and mission, the exodus challenges the people of mission to be committed to the totality of concern for human need. This calls for applying the holistic exodus message and meaning to the church's engagement in mission. Thus, both evangelism and social action have to be kept in focus.

The author then moves on to a discussion of the jubilee as God's model of restoration. He argues that the jubilee, which is also holistic, is concerned with the whole range of a person's social and economic need, without neglecting the theological and spiritual principles that are integral to it. Wright also shows the economic, ethical, evangelistic and eschatological implications of the jubilee. For the people of the mission to apply the jubilee model they have to "obey the sovereignty of God, trust the providence of God, know the story of the redeeming action of God, experience personally the sacrificial atonement provided by God, practice God's justice, and put their hope in God's promise for the future." (p. 299)

The next topic is God's missional covenant. The question he asks is, how can we read the covenant tradition in the biblical text missiologically? As he attempts to answer this question, he gives a detailed survey that runs from Noah to Christ. In the end, he affirms the centrality of the mission of God to the sequence of the covenants.

The final chapter in this part talks about the life of God's missional people. Wright states that a people who have entered a covenant relationship with God are called to live a distinctive, holy, ethical life in the presence of God and in the sight of the nations. The primary Old Testament texts that he examines are Genesis 18, Exodus 19, and Deuteronomy 4. From all these texts, he concludes that there is no biblical mission without biblical ethics. When he comes to the New Testament he states that God's covenant people are to be a light to the world, a model of obedience, and a people showing love for one another. Thus, Christian ethics and Christian mission have to be integrated.

In the last part, Wright explores the arena of mission in terms of the earth, humanity, cultures and nations. He first concentrates on the missional implications of the goodness of creation and the connections between creation care and Christian mission. Wright sees ecological concern as a facet of the Christian mission that not only expresses our love and obedience toward the Creator, but also constitutes a contemporary prophetic opportunity for the

church. The author then turns to a discussion on humanity whereby he seeks to articulate the implications for Christian mission of what it means to be human. He touches on the image of God in man and the depravity of the human race. In addition, based on the biblical wisdom, he points out that our mission endeavor should be marked by openness to and careful discernment of God's word, respect for God's image in humanity, humility before God and modesty before men.

In chapter fourteen, the author focuses on God and the nations in the Old Testament vision. His main point here is that YHWH created all nations of the world; consequently, they are under his government in their historical affairs, and are accountable to him. Because of the fall, all nations have fallen short of God's glory and are under his judgment. However, there is hope as the remnants of the nations turn to YHWH for salvation.

Finally, Wright ends his book by examining what the New Testament says about God and the nations. He surveys Jesus and the Gospels, Luke's account of the early church, and the apostle Paul. God is leading all nations to a glorious end when Christ will triumph over all rebellion and wickedness. This is the mission of God about which he is the beginning, the center and the end. Wright asserts that a missional hermeneutical reading of the scriptures enables us to have a better perspective of God's mission.

There are many beneficial theological and methodological insights in Wright's book. First, Wright's holistic view of mission is commendable. He rightly points out that God's mission encompasses all facets of life - social, political, economic, and spiritual. Consequently, the evangelistic endeavors of the church should be redemptive and restorative, focused on social concerns and injustices in the land. God's mission unfolded in the grand narrative is concerned with every area of human existence.

Second, the author's argument regarding the christological focus of the Bible is outstanding. Throughout his writing, he seeks to demonstrate that God's mission is ultimately accomplished in and through Christ. He sees the Bible to be both missiological and messianic. When he notes that the Bible is all about Christ, Wright correctly clarifies that this does not mean finding Christ in every line of the scriptures. Instead, it entails reading the Bible through the lens of the person and work of Christ. Thus, Christ provides the hermeneutical key for reading the whole Bible.

Third, Wright provides an excellent discussion of the integration of divine and human synergy in mission. He observes that God is the initiator of mission and that he leads it to a climactic triumph. Yet God enters a covenant relationship with his elect humanity, and thereby invites them to participate in his mission. Human involvement means the conscious and committed participation of God's people in the purposes of God for the redemption of the whole creation. Ultimately, God is the initiator, center, and end of this mission.

Fourth, Wright has a balanced view of mission and worship. He quotes John Piper who observes that, "Missions is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Missions exists because worship doesn't." Wright agrees because in mission we are seeking those who are not yet worshipping God. On the other hand, Wright notes that it can equally be argued that mission exists because praise or worship does. This is because worship energizes, motivates and re-awakens the passion for mission. Such a balanced approach ensures that there is no subordination of worship to mission and vice versa.

Fifth, the author has a high view of the cross of Christ as the core of biblical faith, the center of any theology of mission. As he observes, it is at the cross that sin is punished and sinners forgiven, that evil is defeated and humanity liberated, and that creation is restored and reconciled to its creator. The cross of Christ is central to any missional hermeneutic and activity.

Apart from its strengths and insights, there are a few points where the book gives inadequate coverage. While Wright has a passion for a holistic view of the Bible (not showing preference to a few texts), when he talks about God's elect, especially from the NT, he concentrates on Paul's writings. This gives a narrow picture of how God's people are chosen to be a blessing to the nations. Rather than solely focusing on Paul's theology of election, Wright could have surveyed every major section of the NT to give better coverage.

This problem of selective handling of texts is also evident when the author writes about the span of God's missional covenant. As he develops his argument concerning the New Covenant centrality of Christ, the author fails to point out what the Gospels say about Christ fulfilling the covenant demands. Furthermore, Wright fails to connect his discussion to Hebrews, an epistle significant to the covenant theme. As much as he discourages selective reading of the Bible at the onset of his writing, he is himself entangled by the strings of selectivity.

Last, when the author talks about God's elect people, he sees the story of redemption as commencing with Abraham in Genesis 12. He argues that believers should be challenged at the level of their deeper worldview by coming to know God in and through the story that is launched by Abraham. While it is true that Abraham is an important figure in the grand narrative, the story of redemption and God's mission can be traced back from Genesis 1. Genesis 3 where we see the fall of man and the promise of salvation is key to understanding God's mission. Moreover, without the first eleven chapters of Genesis, chapter 12 would have little meaning for us. It is therefore inaccurate for Wright to argue that salvation story is launched by Abraham. We must start from Genesis 1 if we desire to have a complete view of the redemptive story.

In conclusion, Wright's call for a missional hermeneutic is remarkable. It demonstrates a quest for and commitment to participation in the mission of God as it encourages reading the Bible both missionally and messianically.