

BOOK REVIEWS

Johannes Nissen: *New Testament and Mission – Historical and Hermeneutical Perspectives*. Frankfurt am Main, Berlin, Bern, Bruxelles, New York, Wien: Peter Lang, 1999. 198 pages.

The author is a biblical scholar. The book is an abridged version of the Danish original published in 1996. The task Nissen set for himself in this small but interesting book is to experiment on a serious conversation between biblical scholars and missiologists. It is an attempt to get beyond the high profile practice among biblical scholars of putting together original linguistic and historical meanings of texts without bias and leaving the task of application to the contemporary world to others like systematic theologians. *New Testament and Mission* turns out to be an experiment in a conversation between text and experience, tradition and situation with all the vigilance demanded by rigorous scholarship so that one does not simply read back into the Bible what one wants the text to say or what one has proposed to do. The temptation of looking for proof-texts is certainly very high among missiologists. However, biblical scholars realise that there is no privileged place of neutrality from which to read the Bible: “It is from within our life-worlds, that we engage in the reading task” [p.15]. Nissen suggests at the outset that instead of looking for proof texts we should rather look for clue texts to interpret contemporary experience, as was the practice of the early Christian community. He brings together as it were the two partners in the dialogue in each biblical book he analysed – presenting first the historical meaning and then the hermeneutical or situational interpretation. In order to carry along the two publics [missiologists and biblical scholars] Nissen consulted a significant cross-section of experts in both fields and, it is to his credit that a good number of theological works from the third world influenced his interpretation. His up-to-date bibliography at the end of the book covers 16 pages.

What one finds refreshing in reading the book is the clear sound of diverse voices of the New Testament on mission. Even though Nissen privileges four aspects of mission in the NT [mission as “being sent out”, “making disciples”, “deliverance and emancipatory action”, and “witness”], he insists that missiologists should be open to the diversity characteristic of the New Testament. He criticises the renowned missiologist David Bosch who, despite the merits of his book

Transforming Mission, fell into the trap of privileging three NT traditions, Matthew, Luke and Paul. The summation of Nissen's deference to diversity and its challenge to hermeneutics is found in the concluding chapter of his book in the statement, "If there are biblical forms of mission that fail to correspond to our own idea of mission, then this is precisely where we should pause." [p. 161].

The style and orientation of the author are clear in the first book he analysed, the Gospel of Matthew, which contains the famous Great Commission to "Go", and "make disciples". His analysis favours "make disciples" instead of the more familiar "Go". The espoused pattern of making disciples is sharpened by Nissen's focus on the author of the mission, the risen Jesus, to whom all authority belongs [Matt 28]. Jesus clearly rejected the type of authority proposed by Satan during the temptation [Matt 4], and showed a preference for mission in weakness as opposed to triumphalism. In Nissen's graphic terms [borrowed from Kosuke Koyama] instead of the crusader's "one-way-traffic-religion" Jesus adopted a two-way-traffic with his people, and "in this two-way-traffic situation with his people, Jesus gave up his right of way". In other words in all mission evangelism power must be subordinate to love. The logic derived from this Matthean theology of mission reappears at the concluding chapter where the author assembles all the key themes of mission found in the NT. Facing critical issues of mission like plurality, cultures, and dialogue, the author stresses that the specificity of the Christian message is located in God's love for the world to the very end [John]. The incarnation of the Son of God is only the beginning of a mission which is brought to completion by this love to the end.

Other books Nissen found interesting for projecting the diverse views of mission theology in the NT are the Gospel of Mark, Luke and Acts, John, the Pauline tradition including Ephesians and Colossians. Interestingly Nissen includes in his analysis 1 Peter and Revelation which prove the author's statement that there are opposing theological views on mission in the NT. At issue in the two books is the pattern of Christian engagement in the secular realm. The Book of Revelation prefers resistance without compromise to regimes that are oppressive. It is a type of liberation theology which is non-violent and ready for martyrdom. On the other hand 1 Peter projects the witness of a minority group of Christians who take their distance from society and yet cooperate with the secular realm to bear witness as holy people or the household of God.

A brief summary of what is said in the analysis of each book may help to portray Nissen's competence and contribution to the study of Bible and Mission in our world today.

Mark's theology emphasises mission as discipleship of the cross. But instead of interpreting the infidelity of the disciples or the failure of the women to announce the resurrection as a reprimand, Nissen draws attention to a possible interest of the evangelist on the self-implicatory mission for the readers – a didactic instead of a polemical interest. The reader is challenged to become involved and to carry forward the mission from that point on. One interesting aspect of the Marcan proclamation of the kingdom unto death is crossing the frontiers – sociological and religious rather than geographical frontiers. From an African American perspective this has been interpreted as going beyond sociological frontiers among Blacks and missioning to other racial groups within America.

Luke's two volumes – the Gospel and Acts of the Apostles – show that the time of Jesus and the time of the church are united by the Spirit present and active in both books. The rereading of the Scriptures is shown to be source of mission. Jesus' announcement of the jubilee in Luke as good news to the poor has the project of holistic forgiveness: forgiveness of sin and remission of debts. Mission as forgiveness of sins and solidarity with the poor satisfies both ecumenists and evangelicals. In dealing with the debt burden of the third world the author highlighted the Swede Lutheran Bishops' position that relationship between poor and rich should be seen from the perspective of the poor. The boundary-breaking role of the Holy Spirit in Acts is seen in Peter's meeting with Cornelius and Paul's venture into Athens. Paul's experiment in Athens is far from being a failure, but rather a demonstration of the need for a terrain of equality for genuine dialogue in order to fully listen to the other, not the one-way direction of coming over to us. In this dialogue with cultures and religions the Gospel goes beyond the expectations of the prophets of Israel to be thrust into a cosmological and metaphysical search.

The distinction between *missio Dei* and *missiones ecclesiae* is best illustrated in the Gospel of John where a Trinitarian concept of mission emerges. The basic ground and model of the mission of Jesus deriving from the Father's love is the same model and ground for Jesus' sending of the church. Themes of incarnation and dialogue are tapped fully in the Johannine mission texts. It is interesting that Nissen calls the great Priestly Prayer in chapter 17 of John the great mission prayer. The full

use of logos in John's Christology and his response to many audiences is an attractive model for mission as dialogue in the diversified world of cultures and thoughts of today; one should however not miss the Johannine exclusivism encountered in the 'I am' sayings. One is tickled by Nissen's analysis of the discussion with the Samaritan woman [John 4]. Nissen outlines two characteristics of dialogue that emerge from this conversation – confrontation and change. He continued, "The partners change each other and only the end of their confrontation shows where their dialogue has led" [p.90]. This statement makes the question of inclusivism/exclusivism, and the specificity of the Christian message in dialogue with religions and cultures quite interesting. However, Nissen cannot be accused of excessive radicalism [or liberalism] because the 'I am.' sayings and the folly/scandal of the cross [Paul] cannot be given up in any type of dialogue.

Nissen stresses that Pauline theology and mission are inseparable; Paul's theology is missionary theology. What is inescapable in this missionary theology apart from the overarching emphasis on faith and justification is flexibility as missionary strategy. For Paul, however, one may not compromise the scandal/folly of the cross. This is illustrated in the debate over Christian attitude to pagan sacrificial meat: whether one is weak or strong the Christian's final stand must be in favour of people for whom Christ died. Refreshing for mission today is the attention Nissen draws to the collection for the Jerusalem Church which constituted one of the preoccupations of Pauline mission. While the point today is how to mobilise Christians to contribute money for the poor, Paul's worry was rather how to present the collection without arousing resentment, so that the Jerusalem church may accept it without losing face.

Colossians and Ephesians are not only pastoral texts but also contain mission imperatives. There is first of all the emphasis on cosmic Christology and then the witness of Christian life as life of reconciliation between Jews and gentiles – the mission of the Body of Christ. Nissen's pacifist attitude towards the struggle against "principalities and powers" interpreted as 'systems' is suspect. According to the author Christians are invited not to be seduced by these systems but they are advised not take them head on; Christ has already fought them to a finish. It seems to me that a pattern of mission that is more confrontational towards oppressive systems [through denunciation, advocacy, and plot for the destruction of such oppressive systems – the practice of Africa Faith and Justice

Network, or the radical option of Dietrich Bonhoeffer] would be defensible from the perspective of Ephesians 6:10-20.

In his concluding chapter Nissen assembles various principal trends of mission that are present in the NT characterised by diversity – all of which are a testimony of how God acts in different historical situations. The themes of incarnation, contextualisation and dialogue are important for biblical scholars and missiologists.

This book may upset those who are used to a narrow theology of mission or who prefer one exclusive trend to others. But the book is a welcome contribution to the on-going dialogue and collaborative work between biblical scholars and missiologists. In his search for clues in the Bible [the New Testament] which help the interpretation of the contextual issues on mission, Nissen presents undeniable fresh openings. This book is good for missiologists and biblical scholars.

In a subsequent edition of this book I suggest more rigorous proofreading to eliminate obvious errors in the book. For example, in chapter 6 I note the following errors:

- p. 108, line 13 from the bottom – one should read “successful prosecution” instead of “successful persecution”;
- p. 113, line 16 from the top – one should read, “take advantage of” instead of “take advance of”.
- p. 116, line 11 from the top – one should read, “not a matter of” instead of “not at matter of”
- p. 116, line 13 from the bottom – one should read, “how others react” instead of “how others reacts”
- p. 119, line 7 from the bottom – one should read, “rural people” instead of “rual people”
- p. 124, line 7 from the top – one should read, “On the one hand” instead of “On the hand”
- p. 124, line 10 from the top – one should read, “the acceptance of” instead of “the accept of”.

Apart from these minor errors I believe that this is a book missionaries, pastors, scholars and theology students should have on their shelves.

Elochukwu E. Uzukwu, c.s.sp.