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# ETERNAL BUT FORGOTTEN MISSION

Paul Z. Gregor

Andrews University, Michigan, USA

SUMMARY:

## **Eternal But Forgotten Mission**

It is evident that Jesus clearly outlined the mission for his followers and the first Christian community to proclaim the good news throughout the world. However, this mission seems to be totally absent in the Old Testament, at least on surface. This research will show that God's mission for the entire humanity was set as early as the time before sin came to this world. Principle of servitude and preservation of His image was God's primary concern and goal for human race. Research will show that this mission was never abandoned but present through entire Old Testament time. Furthermore, life and teaching of Christ were based on the same mission portrayed in the Old Testament, which was also inherited by the Christian Church. Unfortunately, through ages the Church lost this mission which was the reason for their existence in the first place.

**Key words:** *Jesus' mission; mission in the Old testament; mission in the Christian Church*

## Introduction

Ever since the Fall in the Garden of Eden, God has longed to bring His children back to being a part of His family again. This burning passion to save the fallen human race infused the entire universe, and all the unfallen beings were employed in the desire to bring lost humanity back to their Creator. Jesus would indicate this burning passion four millennia after the Creation: "There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents..." (Luke 15:7). Obviously, "God's joy at restoration is like that of the owner of the sheep, since he too is preoccupied with the one who is lost."<sup>1</sup> Desire to share this joy was not limited to the realm of heaven only, but the loving God in His grace desires to implement this eternal joy in all those who claim to be His children. "To participate on earth in the rejoicing evoked by seeing sinners repent is to image the joy of heaven."<sup>2</sup> Indeed, all those who already experienced such joy could testify that there is nothing more delightful and fulfilling than witnessing the salvation and return of the lost.

It seems that the disciples well understood their mission since they were eager to proclaim the Gospel throughout their world. They ventured outside the border of Israel to bring salvation to those who had never heard about Jesus and His saving power. Ever since that time, the Christian Church has followed the same principles in sending missionaries outside their existing environments, and certainly this is true for the modern times as well. Institutions were created with established centers to train missionaries who would go out to mission fields.

One might ask, however, how come something like this did not exist during the Old Testament times. It appears that the establishment of mission fields was not the focal point for God at that time, neither did He advocate the need for reaching the Gentile world. Apart from the isolated case of the prophet Jonah who was sent to bring the message of a coming disaster to Nineveh, on the surface it seems that His priorities for four millennia lay elsewhere. Understanding the core of God's nature and desire to save the lost, this is far from the truth. By looking at the Old Testament, it is evident that God's plan for the fallen human race or principles of His mission did not change. Most certainly His desire to save the lost was and is His main concern to which Scriptures testify.

## The Core of God's Mission in the Old Testament

It is true that the Old Testament does not record any institution with the specific goal of sending missionaries to bring the news about their God to other nations. However, it seems that there was some kind of an institution during the time of the prophet Elisha (2 Kgs 6:1-7). But its nature and exact function are not clear. The text does not specify who these "sons of the prophets" were but it is obvious that it was some kind of training facility. Even during the time of Elijah, the phrase "sons of the prophets" was common but no additional information is provided (1 Kgs 20:35; 2 Kgs 2:3). Whether the participants in this school were trained for any kind of mission or not is impossible to discern, even though its missionary implications should not be totally discarded.

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1 J. Nolland, *Luke 9:21-18:34, Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas: Word Books, Publisher, 1993), 774.

2 Ibid., 773.

The most prominent text that supports a mission concept is found in Deut 4:6-8 where Moses spelled out the core of Israel's purpose. In fact, it was God's salvific passion which motivated God to elect them as a nation to be His people in the first place.<sup>3</sup> Most certainly, their number did not impress God (Deut 7:7), nor did their wisdom, since understanding and wisdom would come as a product of their obedience to the law and their relationship with God<sup>4</sup> who provided those laws (Deut 4:6).<sup>5</sup> "I have taught you statutes and ordinances...keep them and do them for that will be your wisdom and understanding." (Deut 4:5, 6). The phrase "statutes and ordinances" encompassed the entirety of God's law which includes the Decalogue, sacrificial laws, health laws, civil laws, and even festivals.

Sacrifices were not unknown to God's followers before the establishment of Israel as His chosen nation. Since the beginning of humanity, sacrifices were part of every day ceremonies, worship, and rituals. Even though the Scripture does not provide explicit evidence that people sacrificed before the Flood (apart from Gen 4), it is generally understood that sacrifices were common and a part of the pre-Flood worship by individuals (Enoch, Methuselah, and certainly Noah). After the Flood, the text seems to dedicate more space to sacrifices especially during the patriarchal times when Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were God's chosen champions. However, the text does not indicate that they were completely aware of the fuller meaning of the sacrificial system apart from it being a part of every day worship, thanksgiving, and adoration of God. Exception to this might be one occasion mentioned in Gen 15, when God made a covenant with Abraham.

Abraham was asked to prepare animals in a very unusual way. All animals were to be split in halves which were separated in such a way that a person could pass between those halves. This principle was later attested in ancient treaties and was also known as Suzerain treaties. Ratification of the treaty between two parties was finalized by a simple act of a vassal king who was asked to walk between split animals indicating before witnesses that if he broke the treaty he accepted his fate of being executed like the split animals.<sup>6</sup> If the vassal king refused this act, the treaty could not be formally ratified and therefore was not existent.

In Abraham's case it was he who needed to pass between the animals since he represented humankind as a vassal king. However, Abraham was nowhere to perform this final act of covenant ratification. In fact, he was in a deep sleep (Gen 15:12), and there was the danger that the covenant would not be established. To salvage the situation, God Himself walked between the split parts showing that He would pay the price of a broken covenant. With this act, God indicated a higher meaning to the sacrificial system which could be fully implemented and established with a nation not just scattered individuals.

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3 E. H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1994), 116, 117.

4 G. Braulik, "Weisheit, Gottesnahe und Gesetz: zum Kerygma von Deuteronomium 4:5-8," in *Studien zum Pentateuch* (Vienna: Herder, 1977), 165-195.

5 P. C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 131; D. L. Christensen, *Deuteronomy 1-11*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word Books Publisher, 1982), 80.

6 For more information on ancient treaties and their procedures see, D. J. McCarthy, *Treaties and Covenant* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1981).

## The Mission of the Nation of Israel

When the nation of Israel came into existence (descended from Abraham), the full implementation of God's laws would come into full effect. All His laws, the Decalogue, sacrificial law, health law, civil law, and even festivals,<sup>7</sup> were given in order to reveal the character and nature of a God whose eternal love for the human race would bring the lost back to His family again. In fact, God's laws ensured the steady flow of blessings upon the obedient who would finally be in a position to fulfill His mission for the fallen human race. It seems that what God asked was not that difficult. All they needed to do was to trust their God, to follow His instructions, to keep the laws and ordinances which in return would indicate God's presence in their midst.<sup>8</sup> Thus, their obedience would enhance prosperity and God's blessings in their everyday lives.<sup>9</sup> This evidence of His blessings and happiness which comes through obedience should have provoked interest among other nations,<sup>10</sup> thus they would come and inquire about God. Therefore, there was nothing that God's people needed to do apart from keeping His laws. They did not need to go to the mission fields around them near or far, but it seems that God's desire was that the mission field would come to the land of Israel.

To carry out this mission, God intentionally brought Abraham from Mesopotamia and settled him and his descendants in Canaan which would later receive the name "Promised Land." It was because of Abraham's desire to follow God that he left his father's land and settled in Canaan. The fact that he left Ur and later Haran indicates his willingness to obey God since both regions were friendlier and more fertile for agriculture as well as for sheep and goat herding than Canaan.<sup>11</sup>

The Promised Land was later recognized as "the land flowing with milk and honey." This phrase became an indicator and formula for the good and fertile land which God prepared for His people. It appears in the text for the first time during God's conversation with Moses

7 All Jewish festivals, which were established at the very beginning of their history as a nation, were anti-types representative of a reality to come in the future. This projected reality would see fulfillment in New Testament times even to the Second Coming of Christ. Passover was the first festival, and it reminded all Israelites that there would one day be a perfect Substitute, Messiah Jesus Christ. Shortly after the Passover, the Feast of First Fruits came which was fulfilled at the time of Christ's resurrection when a number of individuals resurrected with him were presented before the Father as the first fruits of the final harvest. The next festival was Pentecost which was also fulfilled when His disciples received the Holy Spirit at the time of Pentecost. The third festival was the Day of Atonement with its fulfillment during the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (1844) when Jesus started His final phase of service for humankind in the Most Holies in Heaven. After the Day of Atonement there was a final festival, the Feast of Tabernacles. This is the only festival which did not receive its fulfillment, because it will come after the Day of Atonement. The Day of Atonement will end with the return of Jesus Christ to take His people back to His Father. This will be the time when this final festival will be fulfilled, and it will remind the saved of their journey through the wilderness of sin and suffering while looking toward the promised land the same as it reminded the Israelites of their journey and the promised land waiting for them.

8 C. Weiner, "Valeur inestimable de la Loi du Seigneur (Dt 4, 1-2, 6-8)," *Assyriological Studies* 53 (1970): 34-38.

9 G. H. Hall, *Deuteronomy, The College Press NIV Commentary* (Joplin: College Press Publishing Company, 2000), 95

10 Wiener, 34-38.

11 W. H. C. Propp, *Exodus 1-18*, The Anchor Bible (Doubleday: The Anchor Bible, 1998), 202.

on Mt. Sinai. Actually, in this case, God referred to the land of Canaan as the land of “milk and honey” twice (Exod 3:8, 17). The same phrase was used in every book of the Pentateuch (Lev 20:24; Num 14:8; Deut 6:3) apart from the book of Genesis. Later, Joshua referred to Canaan with the same phrase only once (Josh 5:6) in his speech shortly before the destruction of Jericho. The same expression is also used in two prophetic books (Jer 11:5; 32:22; Ezek 20:6, 15) as a remembrance of what God did for the people in the past as part of His covenant fulfillment.

Obviously, the phrase was mainly used during the wilderness experience, and therefore, it usually refers to an abundance of harvests, crops, and flocks,<sup>12</sup> with an abundance of honey bees.<sup>13</sup> However, Canaan’s geographical position might suggest other abundance in addition to agricultural and horticultural goods. It appears that God had a higher purpose when he selected Canaan to be the future home for Abraham and his descendants. This narrow stretch of land pressed by the Mediterranean Sea on the west and the Arabian desert on the east attracted people from the earliest days of civilization to settle in Canaan. Its attraction was not due to its fertility as much as to its location since all merchant caravans, traveling from Mesopotamia to Egypt, and the other way around, had to pass through this narrow strip of land known as Canaan. This way it became center of the nations as indicated in Ezekiel 5: 5. Having in mind His mission for the people of Israel, God purposely placed them there so that other nations could observe their prosperity which would come as a result of their obedience to God and His laws.<sup>14</sup> In this light, it is obvious that the phrase “milk and honey” might not be restricted to physical abundance only, but could also be applied to spiritual blessings as well.<sup>15</sup> The visit of the Queen of Sheba and her impression of what she saw at the court of King Solomon was just a foretaste of what the entire nation of Israel would have achieved if they only had followed God’s laws.

### **The Original Mission**

The keeping of God’s laws and following His instructions was an important component of the Israelites’ mission which did not originate with birth of the nation of Israel. This concept “to keep” goes back to the very beginning of humankind when God placed the first couple in the of Garden of Eden. In this perfect environment, God charted a mission statement for the future human race, and this mission did not change. The humans had but one task in the Garden of Eden, “to till it and to keep it” (Gen 2:15). In spite of the fact that the phrase might refer to

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12 Ibid.

13 D. K. Stuart, *Exodus*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2006), 117 (footnote 36).

14 Passing through these parts, the traders would have firsthand access to learn about the meaning and importance of the Passover, and the Day of Atonement. They would be able to hear and learn about the true God, His desire to save all humanity, and in turn they would go to their destination bringing the good news everywhere they went. In a sense they would serve as missionaries not even knowing the meaning of this concept.

15 R. D. Cole, *Numbers*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2000), 227.

physical work in the Garden, the Hebrew words for “to till” (עבד) <sup>16</sup> in fact mean “to serve” and “to keep” (שמר),<sup>17</sup> “to preserve.”<sup>18</sup>

The mission of the first humans was twofold. They were suppose to serve in the Garden of Eden, serve each other, serve all the creatures, serve the entire content of the Garden, and also to preserve its innocence, perfection, and beauty for many generations to come. In addition, they were asked to preserve the image of God within themselves in their everyday lives which would strengthen their relationship with their Creator. Unfortunately, they lost the Garden of Eden. But in spite of this loss, their mission did not cease. They were suppose to continue in their service to each other and to the future generations. Constant care for animals and nature did not discontinue. The preservation of the image of God, His goodness, and character should have come into even fuller effect after the Fall.

The first fifteen chapters of the book of Genesis clearly indicate the struggle to maintain this mission. God tried to bring lost humanity back to Himself by raising up individuals (Seth, Enoch, Methuselah, Noah, and many more unnamed heroes). Their lives were portrayed in the Bible as individuals who fulfilled God’s mission as set forth at creation. They served their fellow man, and they certainly tried to preserve God’s image and character in their lives. Unfortunately, God’s plan was forgotten, and He had no choice but to destroy the world with a Flood and start all over again with just one chosen family. Since the hardness and corruption of the human heart again increased, God selected again only one man (Abraham) who would be the forefather of an entire nation in order to fulfill His mission.

Many altars scattered throughout the landscape of Canaan were witnesses to Abraham’s willingness to fulfill God’s mission. God claimed “... and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves” (Gen 12:3). This statement is a part of God’s blessings and promise that a great nation will come from Abraham (v.2). Here, the entire purpose of selecting one nation is spelled out. They were elected for one reason only, to be a blessing to an entire world (Gen 18:18; 22:18; 26:4) by their faithfulness and obedience to God.

“Keep them and do them,” (Deut 4:6; referring to God’s laws and ordinances) was a mission that was given to the chosen people. Here, the same Hebrew word (שמר) is employed implying the same preservation as used in the Garden of Eden. Also the word “to do” (עשה) is an active verb indicating immediate and constant action and in such a function may be equivalent to (עבד) “to serve.” By observing God’s statues and ordinances, they were in a position to preserve

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16 For a more detailed study in respect to the meanings and applications of this Hebrew verb, see C. Westermann, “עבד,” in *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1997), 2:820, 821; and also H. Ringgren, “עבד,” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 10:381–387.

17 For a more detailed study in respect to the meanings and applications of this Hebrew verb, see L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994), 1581–1582; Garcia Lopez, “שמר,” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 15:279–283; K. N. Schoville, “שמר,” in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 4:182; C. J. Mullo Weir, *Lexicon of Accadian Prayers* (London: Oxford University Press, 1934), 323.

18 For a more detailed discussion on these terms and their implications as to “serve” and “preserve,” see P. Gregor, “Reflections on Genesis 1–3 in the Pentateuch and Other Ancient Creation Accounts,” paper read, The Faith and Science Council Annual Meeting, Loma Linda, California, 14/15 April 2010.

and demonstrate the image and character of God so that other nations would be attracted to come and acquire in order to learn about the God of Israel.

But it is evident that throughout the Old Testament the people of Israel struggled to maintain and focus on their mission, thus failing to provide a platform for other nations to understand and accept the only true God. On the contrary, they were attracted to the gods of the other nations and thus, they abandoned their own. Through the centuries God raised up prophets to awaken in them the sense of their lost mission by warning them of the great calamity into which they were heading by their failure to fulfill God's mission. They did not preserve the law and certainly their service took a wrong turn when they started to exploit each other (Amos 2:6, 7). Finally, they had to be taken into exile from which they arose as a different people. Unfortunately, they understood that the reason for their exile was that they had mingled too much with other nations, and consequently they decided that nothing foreign could ever be a part of God's chosen people. This separation lasted for four centuries, and it became deeply rooted in Jewish thought. Thus, Jesus had a very hard time unlocking God's desire in their human hearts to have compassion and love for other nations.

### **Post Old Testament Times and Mission Continuance**

Every day of His service, Christ tried to resurrect the core (serving and preserving) of His mission for the fallen human race as set forth in the Garden of Eden. Therefore, the Bible indicates that Jesus fulfilled His mission as depicted in Isaiah 53 as a Servant. He served others, even those who were rejected by the society; and in this service, He brought God's character to light again. He went about this earth doing good to others so that through His life others could see His Father.

After Jesus ascended to Heaven, His followers continued with the same mission. Apart from proclaiming the Gospel to their fellow Jews, and later to Gentile nations, their lives were filled with servitude and a burning desire to preserve the image of their Savior and Master for the generations to come. During the first several centuries, the followers of Christ tried hard to follow their mission amidst difficulties and persecution but remained pure and faithful as depicted in apocalyptic literature (Rev 2:1-7). In spite of the persecution, the community of faithful was increasing continuously. They never lost their mission and burning desire to save the lost. This unquenchable passion resulted in the conversion of thousands including the emperor of Rome, after which persecution ceased and Christianity became a state religion. Now, God's twofold mission, originated in the Garden of Eden, would have no obstacle in achieving its major goal where His followers would serve and preserve the image and character of God.

Unfortunately, it seems that after Christianity became a state religion most of the followers of Jesus along with the leaders of the Church forgot their mission which was the main reason for their existence. Since Christianity covered the entire Roman Empire, it had to be managed from various centers (Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem, Constantinople, Rome) and bishops in these centers became metropolitan bishops. The role of a metropolitan bishop was "to resolve disputes between bishops, or between a bishop and his clergy, or his congregation."<sup>19</sup>

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19 R. Van Dam, "Bishops and Society," in *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, ed. Augustine Casidy and Frederick W. Norris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 2: 350.

Priorities were shifted from the original twofold mission which was the driving force for Jesus and His followers and was replaced with competition for influence and power. Replacing the old capital city (Rome) with a new one (Constantinople) did not bring any relief or change. During the following few centuries, several metropolitan bishops emerged and became dominant based on their location. Thus Cyril, bishop of Alexandria, took charge of the entire Egypt and tried to maintain his control through distribution of over a thousand pounds of gold to members of the court at Constantinople at the time of the Council of Ephesus in 431. Furthermore, the bishop of Antioch extended his authority over the entire Syria-Palestine, while the bishop of Constantinople became dominant in Greece and Asia Minor. However, at the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> century the bishop of Constantinople "... limited the authority of the bishops of Alexandria and Antioch."<sup>20</sup>

During these years the Church enjoyed freedom guaranteed by the state. As such, it is to be expected that it would have influenced secular administration to some degree. However, its influence was very limited while the state interfered in church's affairs regularly. Emperor Justinian was one who decided the number of appointed priests, clerics, deacons, and subdeacons at Constantinople. Occasionally state officials were bribed by bishops to act for their benefit. Furthermore, secular administrators were even expected to approve the distribution of the priesthood under their jurisdiction.<sup>21</sup>

The Church in western Europe with its metropolitan bishop in Rome remained unopposed and unchallenged in their activities. This was based upon the tradition that Peter and Paul had established the church in Rome. It is true that the Scriptural evidence does exist to support the claim concerning Paul's presence in Rome, but there is no evidence, however, that Peter ever visited Rome in spite of the fact that he is listed as the first bishop of the church in Rome.<sup>22</sup> This fact did not discourage Rome's bishops but encouraged them to seek supremacy even over the bishops of Constantinople. As such the metropolitan bishops of Rome claimed supreme authority over the entire Western European Christian Church but not without opposition even as late as the 5<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>23</sup>

The Church started well by carrying out God's mission and spreading the good News throughout the ancient world, by serving each other and preserving the image of God. Unfortunately, when persecution faded away and the Church leaders grasped for power, the mission was entirely lost. Greed for power blinded and deterred the leaders from their original mission. As Daniel predicted many centuries ago, the followers of the Lamb became drunk with political power and influence. Those who suffered from unbearable persecution, hiding in the catacombs of Rome, now became the persecutors, blinded with religious hatred. As result entire nations perished, and it was all done in the name of Jesus. The crystal clean Church in Europe, which was blameless during the first few centuries after Jesus' resurrection and ascension,

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20 Ibid., 354, 355.

21 Ibid., 352-356.

22 R. M. Grant, *Augustus to Constantine* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1970), 313-315; M. M. Mitchell and F. M. Young, *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, vol 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), xxii.

23 Van Dam, 356, 357.



became the image of a fallen Christianity and also known as “the Little Horn” in the book of Daniel (chaps 7 and 8). The servitude set by the Creator in the Garden of Eden and confirmed by the example of Jesus seemed to have been lost and forgotten just like it was forgotten by the Israelites in the Old Testament (Amos 2:6, 7). Dark dungeons of the middle ages were filled with innocent victims who longed to serve their Savior according to their conscience.

Therefore, Reformation had to come to liberate parts of Europe from the grip of fallen Christianity. Freedom of conscience and worship became available, and God’s mission “to serve” and “to keep,” as set forth in ancient times, became alive again. Ever since the Reformation, various denominations have sensed the urgency of reviving this mission and completing the task God designed for the human race. But the warning is still there showing clearly what individuals and groups will become if the mission and purpose for their existence is lost.

## Conclusion

God chose one nation for the sake of His mission and because of their failure He had to reject them as a nation. His Church was then elected to continue with this mission but became corrupt and was rejected by God, too (Dan 7 and 8). It appears that many who God elected tended to quickly forget the purpose for their existence.

The mission statement cannot be changed because God Himself does not change (Mal 3:6; Num 23:19). This mission “to serve” and “to keep/preserve” is evident and present throughout biblical history. Furthermore, it was affirmed by the life and sacrifice of Jesus Christ Himself, and it will be the only force capable of motivating His children to fulfill this mission. This is the main reason for their existence. In fact, when a church loses this mission, there is no reason for its existence.

This mission “to serve” and “to keep/preserve” the character and image of God must be reflected in the everyday activities of His followers. This in turn will result in attracting and bringing to God the lost members of His family. Jesus testified, “You are the light of the world... Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matt 5:14, 16). The same mission will even continue in the New Earth since those who are saved are portrayed as His servants (Rev 22:3). Their servitude should not be understood only as their service to God but to each other as well.

The mission that God set up in the Garden of Eden does not change. Since it was established and presented to the human race before the Fall, it became God’s blueprint for eternity. Humans are designed for this mission of serving each other and in this service they reflect the image, goodness, and character of the Creator. This servitude will continue through endless time.

SAŽETAK:

**Vječna, ali zaboravljena misija**

Isus je jasno opisao svojim sljedbenicima misiju objavljivanja Radosne vijesti cijelome svijetu. Međutim, čini se da je ovakav misijski nalog izostavljen u Starome zavjetu, bar na prvi pogled. Ovo će istraživanje pokazati da je Božja misija za sav svijet zacrtana prije nego se grijeh pojavio na ovom svijetu. Načelo služenja i očuvanje svojega lika je bilo Božje primarno nastojanje i cilj za ljudski rod. Istraživanje će opisati ovu misiju koja nije nikad napuštena, već je bila prisutna kroz cijelo starozavjetno doba. Štoviše, Isusov život i učenje su bili utemeljeni na istoj misiji koju nalazimo u Starom zavjetu, a koju je naslijedila kršćanska Crkva. Šteta što je vremenom Crkva gubila fokus ove misije, koja je uvijek i glavni razlog za njeno postojanje.

**Ključne riječi:** *Isusova misija; misija u Starom zavjetu; misija u kršćanskoj crkvi*