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Book Review: A Light to the Nations: The Missional Church and the Biblical Story by Michael W. Goheen

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Casino: Book Review: A Light to the Nations: The Missional Church and the are large in both annual income and numbers of personnel compared to most BAM companies. As the authors state, most missionary-run businesses never move beyond the “mom and pop” phase and do not become financially self-sustaining (9). Because of such examples, many readers will have a difficult time relating to this section of the work.

The authors have done an exceptional job defending and explaining the BAM model and have provided a book that combines the best of the technical side of business with the missional heartbeat of Great Commission Christians. The authors help the reader think through issues unique to BAM and provide countless practical examples and insights from a diversity of global settings. The inclusion of company profiles and personal biographies of their founders give real-life context to the technical issues discussed in the first section of the book. In summary, *Great Commission Companies* is a must read for churches supporting BAM, investors with a Great Commission desire, mission agencies, and current and potential BAM entrepreneurs.

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Michael W. Goheen, *A Light to the Nations: The Missional Church and the Biblical Story*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011, 256 pp., \$22.99.

Reviewed by Tereso C. Casiño. Casiño is Professor of Missiology and Intercultural Studies, School of Divinity, Gardner-Webb University, Boiling Springs, North Carolina.

At a time when many congregations in the Global North still view *mission* in terms of location (overseas) and cultures (non-western), Michael Goheen’s book, *A Light to the Nations: The Missional Church and the Biblical Story*, is a suitable read. Goheen is a minister of preaching at New West Christian Reformed Church. He is also Geneva professor of worldview and religious studies at Trinity Western University and teaching fellow in mission and world Christianity at Regent College, both located in British Columbia, Canada.

The book, *A Light to the Nations*, presents an interface between ecclesiology and missiology that unfolds the church’s “missional identity.” Goheen laments the lack of biblical-theological and exegetical work on “missional ecclesiology.” In nine chapters, the author weaves together selected passages of both Old and New Testaments in an attempt to unpack the meaning of a “missional church,” using the framework long established by Leslie Newbigin.

This book contends that the biblical narrative is a record of the *Missio Dei* and the church’s participation in it. “It is an attempt,” as the author states, “to describe ‘mission’ as the role and identity of the church in the context of the biblical story”

(4). Relying heavily on “missional hermeneutic,” Goheen unlocks the essence and identity of the church (chapter 1) through the lens of the Old Testament narratives (chapters 2–3). In Goheen’s logic, missional identity shapes ecclesiology, which anchors in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. Ecclesiology, the author asserts, is “first about identity and self understanding, and only after these are established should the church consider what it is to do and how it is to organize itself to work out that calling” (6). Goheen devotes the second and third chapters to trace this vocation to the call of Abraham and the formation of Israel. Agreeing with Johannes Blauw, Goheen understands Exodus 19 as paradigmatic for *centripetal mission* in the Old Testament: “Thus Israel as a priestly kingdom lives for the sake of the nations; Israel is to be totally devoted to God’s service and to model in its corporate life allegiance to the true God and the life of blessing that God meant for all” (39). However, as Goheen observes, Israel’s calling as a light to the nations is one of failure.

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The book breaks no new ground in its discussion on the motif of “blessing” in Abraham’s call and the “identity of contrast” applied to Israel as a “holy nation” and a “royal priesthood.” Goheen simply echoes previous books on the same theme, foremost of which is Christopher Wright’s *The Mission of the People of God* (2006). However, readers may find the inclusion of the intertestamental period insightful, a period that eclipsed Israel’s missional vision (68–72). Goheen laments that Israel simply looks forward to a gathering of its community *alone* with the *absence of the nations* (72).

In order to rectify Israel’s failure, Christ gathers a community that restores the mission to the nations (chapter 4). Members of this new spiritual community accepted Christ’s message (i.e., His death and resurrection) in repentance and faith and received power, life, and spiritual gifts to take up their vocation. Goheen contends that the fulfillment of the true destiny of Israel was being fulfilled with the announcement of the kingdom of God, which is crucial to viewing Jesus’ life and ministry.

Christ’s death and resurrection are considered the *central* and *climactic* moments in the biblical story (chapter 5). Accordingly, “At the cross the old age dominated by sin, satanic power, and evil is decisively vanquished. At the resurrection, the age to come—characterized by *shalom*, justice, and salvation and destined to fill the whole earth—commences” (119). Goheen sees in the book of Acts the continuation of the story of God’s mission after the resurrection and the resumption of Israel’s mission as light to the nations by the community that Jesus gathered and commissioned (chapter 6).

Readers will find the author’s rejection of the idea of mission as a

Casino: Book Review: A Light to the Nations: The Missional Church and the “geographical expansion” thought provoking. When properly understood, asserts Goheen, mission “is the role of God’s chosen to live as a contrast people and thus to draw the surrounding nations into covenant with God” (122). In a word, today’s mission is simply a continuation of what has already begun in the life of Israel. The historical incarnation of Jesus assures this continuity; the dynamic presence of the Holy Spirit guarantees its sustainability. Goheen’s missional ecclesiology is clear: Jesus carries on the mission in the Old Testament and gathers Israel as an *eschatological* and *messianic* community in order to embrace all nations. Likewise, the “role and identity of the church in redemptive history is defined by its extension of Jesus’ mission,” which should be done according to the way of Jesus (124).

The section on metaphors of the missional church (chapter 7) seems exegetically stretched. Goheen seeks to establish convergence in the missional identity and calling between Israel and the eschatological-messianic community that Jesus formed based on the images of “people of God,” “new creation,” “body of Christ,” “temple of the Holy Spirit,” and “diaspora.” It is the diaspora metaphor (180–189), however, that caught my attention. Readers may find this image refreshing and interesting.

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Goheen is aware of the creative tension between continuity and discontinuity in the shared vocation of Israel and the church. For a church to be considered “missional” today, the author offers the following criteria: participation in God’s mission; continuation of Israel’s mission in the Old Testament; continuing the kingdom mission of Jesus; and continuing the witness of the early church (191–199). “The mission remains constant,” Goheen asserts, “but the means of carrying it out are changed forever by the death and resurrection of Jesus and the coming of his Spirit at Pentecost” (196).

Overall, this book offers much promise. For one thing, Goheen’s focus on ecclesiology as foundational to understanding mission today makes sense biblically and theologically. Many books on mission in the last decade or two tended to overemphasize the practical; however, this book brings the doctrine of the church back to the discussion table.

For another, the book’s exposition on diaspora resonates with current missiological scholarship. Goheen devotes almost eight pages (180–189) to this emerging theme; he sees diaspora as a lens through which *Missio Dei* could be interpreted and employed. The author reinforces what emerging diasporalogsists (e.g., Enoch Wan, Joy Sadiri Tira, J. D. Payne, Narry Santos) have been saying about diaspora imagery as “missional.”

Also, the thirteen-point indicators (201–226) of a missional church could be a

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great bonus to readers who are looking for a “formula” for success in world
missions. Goheen draws from his experience as a pastor, and his biblical,
exegetical, and theological acumen lends credence to the quality of this book.

Moreover, the author’s scholarship is decisively all-embracing. Goheen draws
ideas from a broad spectrum of scholars (e.g., Roman Catholic, ecumenical, and
evangelical). Although steeped in the Reformed tradition, the author manages to
engage scholars from different theological persuasions.

I observed three limitations in the book. First, the author fails to engage
scholars from the Global South, which restricts the universal appeal of this
fascinating book. The last two decades have witnessed the rise of scholars and
thinkers from “younger churches” whose voices are important to any missiological
equation. Secondly, the use of Abraham and Israel *only* as paradigmatic of essence
of the *Missio Dei* is limited. This book has not come far enough in constructing a
comprehensive and coherent theology of mission *before* Abraham’s time. In the
biblical story, the mission of God to redeem fallen humanity is pre-Abrahamic and
pre-Israel (Eph. 1:4–5).

Third, I found the author’s definition and corresponding features of a
missional church inconsistent. Early in the book, Goheen writes, “At its best,
‘missional’ describes not a specific *activity* of the church but the very *essence and
identity* of the church as it takes up its role in God’s story in the context of its
culture and participates in God’s mission to the world” (4). By the time Goheen
concludes his work (chapter 9), some of the descriptions of a missional church
offer *specific activities* like worship, preaching, prayer, and evangelizing (201–226).

Differentiating “mission” from “missionary” or “missional” may overwhelm
some readers, but many will find *A Light to the Nations* as a fascinating scholarly
work that speaks to the current concerns of today’s missional church. In simple
and contemporary fashion, Goheen succeeds in making God’s redemptive plan
accessible even to readers with no prior theological training.

Carl Medearis, *Muslims, Christians, and Jesus: Gaining Understanding and Building
Relationships*. Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2008, 191 pp., \$13.99.

Reviewed by Warren F. Larson. Larson is Associate Professor of Muslim Studies and former
Director of the Zwemer Center at Columbia International University.

Medearis begins this book by stating that during the Cold War many
Americans viewed Communism as the enemy. Since the fall of the Soviet Union,