

Missio Dei towards the Kingdom of God: From Σωτηρία to βασιλεία

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In the last decades since the Willingen Conference of 1952, the concept of *missio Dei* has been extensively studied in the field of theology, especially by missiologists. Such commendably extensive scholarship, however, seems to have taken great pains not to unequivocally identify salvation (Σωτηρία) as signifying a transitional phase in attaining the Kingdom of God (βασιλεία) as the definitive objective of the *missio Dei*. This paper finds it somewhat concerning that literature on *missio Dei* seem uninterested in distinguishing salvation as a mechanism by which the definitive objective of *missio Dei* (the all-embracing kingdom of God) is to be attained. Consequently, based on a literature review, it is argued here that the history of salvation in its entirety is to be regarded as the decisive key to enable entry into the kingdom of God as the definitive objective of the *missio Dei*. In other words, it addresses what appears to be a lack of emphasis that underscores salvation as not an end in itself, but a means to an end. While the limited scope of this paper is to distinguish between salvation as a precursor and the kingdom of God as the ultimate goal of *missio Dei*, it warrants future research that will expand and test the novelty of their claims.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: The scope of this paper extends theological anthropology as it addresses human participation in the attainment of the primary ends of God's mission, or *missio Dei*, as it were.

Keywords: *missio Dei*; salvation; mission; definitive objective; kingdom of God.

Introduction

In the last few decades, since the Willingen Conference of the International Missionary Council in 1952, the *missio Dei* has been extensively studied by theologians in general and particularly missiologists. As a theological framework, *missio Dei* equates the sending function with the indwelling essence of the triune God. In other words, it articulates the fundamental belief that mission springs from the nature of God. Consequently, *missio Dei* is about the missionary triune God at work saving or securing salvation of his entire creation. Yet, although salvation is an important phase in the ministry of the *missio Dei*, it remains the means by which the Triune God is to bring all creation back under his divine dominion, the kingdom of God, so to speak. While most scholars have rightly and commendably devoted their energies to exploring the implications of salvation in relation to the mandate of the *missio Dei*, such exploration has long failed to emphasise the significance of the kingdom of God as the definitive objective of the *missio Dei*. Subsequently, some missiologists such as Brown (2011), Das (2016) and Verkuyl (1979) are perhaps among the few scholars who have attempted to roughly identify the attainment of the kingdom of God as the definitive objective of the *missio Dei*. To such end, Brown underscored that the entire Bible, consisting of both the Old and New Testaments, means a missionary book centred on the coming kingdom of God (Brown 2011:49–55). Similarly, in his excellent book entitled, 'Compassion and the mission of God: Revealing the invisible Kingdom', Das (2016) dealt with the *missio Dei* from the perspective of God's compassion arguing that the grand narrative of God's redemptive work as recorded in both the Old and New Testaments is designed to reveal or demonstrate the kingdom of God in the real world (Das 2016:133–185). Perhaps Verkuyl (1979) is an exception among such missiologists, as his work entitled, 'The kingdom of God as the goal of the *missio Dei*' unequivocally points to the kingdom of God as constituting the definitive objective of the *missio Dei*. First and foremost, his work generally underscores that the *missio Dei* is pursuant to the kingdom of God as the new order of things that will prevail throughout the world. After reflecting on biblical images and symbols relating to God's salvific intentions, he concludes that the kingdom of God remains the clearest definitive objective of the *missio Dei* (Verkuyl 1979:168–176).

Although, as indicated above, there has been extensive research that firstly examines salvation as the primary objective of the *missio Dei*, and secondly, little that attempts to emphasise the

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centrality of the kingdom of God as the definitive objective of the *missio Dei*, there is still a need for research that connects salvation as a preliminary stage with the kingdom of God as the definitive objective of the *missio Dei*. Consequently, this work fills that vacuum by offering a comprehensive assessment aimed firstly at introducing salvation as a necessary means and secondly at underscoring the kingdom of God as the definitive objective of the *missio Dei*. To achieve this definitive objective, this work is roughly divided into two parts, preceded by the introduction of the *missio Dei* from the point of view of the Willingen Conference. The first part uncovers the position of salvation in the context of the *missio Dei* from an Old Testament, New Testament, and contemporary perspective. The second part will similarly discuss the centrality of the kingdom of God from Old Testament, New Testament, and contemporary perspectives. Finally, a good overview of the salvific position and centrality of the kingdom in the work of the *missio Dei* is given.

To the extent that the interaction or correlation between headings and sub-headings of this manuscript may not be clear, it is important to present this coherence consciously to avoid confusion. First and foremost, the *missio Dei* is about God's self-sending (*missio*) to ensure complete redemption or salvation (Σωτηρία) and the realisation of his Kingdom or kingdom of God (βασιλεία). In other words, God's mission is about the work of redemption that leads to, or is directed toward, the attainment of his kingdom. In this regard, the *missio Dei* chains the central salvific activities as a primary goal with the inspiring vision of the kingdom of God as a secondary but equally important goal. Consequently, or at least this paper attempts to do so, the understanding of the *missio Dei* resonates with the discourse of redemption and the realisation of the kingdom of God.

Missio Dei

Missio Dei is a subject of central importance in the broad field of theology and passionately among missiologists. The origin and development of this topic has been rigorously and thoroughly studied in the literature and therefore cannot be further elaborated within the limited scope of this paper. It is important to note, however, that the 1952 International Missionary Council (IMC) conference in Willingen became a turning point in the history of this concept, as it revised the early 20th-century church-centric and anthropocentric theology of mission. Although not without serious opposition, this conference succeeded in accentuating the theocentric nature of mission which correctly repositioned the Triune God as the source of mission (Engelsviken 2003:481–497; Laing 2009:89–99). In other words, in contrast to pre-Willingen missionary theology, which lacked theocentric character and consequently displaced the triune God from the centre of salvation history, the IMC conference emphasised that mission proceeds from the very nature of the triune God. As decorously repeated in Flett (2009), such an expression is accurately captured by Bosch (1991), where he stated:

'mission is not primarily an activity of the church, but an attribute of God. God is a missionary God' (Bosch 1991:390; Flett 2009:5). The triune God, and not the church nor human means, is responsible for the all-encompassing mission that encompasses the history of salvation and thus the impending installation of the heavenly kingdom in the world. Although most scholars have laudably explored the implications, significance and intricacies of the *missio Dei*, their work fell short of delineate the transition from salvation history to the inauguration of the kingdom of God as the *missio Dei*'s definitive objective. This was similarly acknowledged by Scherer (1999), who said:

[O]ne of the crucial missiological problems of the second half of the twentieth century has been how to accomplish a successful transition from an earlier church-centered theology of mission to a kingdom-oriented one without loss of missionary vision or betrayal of biblical content. (p. 82)

To this end, the following sections focus on the salvation phase and attainment of the kingdom of God as related but distinct phases of the *missio Dei*. The intention is to describe salvation as the functional and decisive stage leading to the attainment of the kingdom of God as the definitive objective of the *missio Dei*.

Salvation

The term soteriology consists of two Greek terms, namely, *sōtēria*, meaning salvation, and *logos*, meaning study and originates from the Greek term σωτήριον – *sōtērion* (from *sōtēr* saviour) which means to save, bring salvation or deliverance and generally refers to the doctrine or study of theological salvation. The concept of salvation in the general sense denotes a kind of liberation from any serious danger, harm, ruin, manifesting through war, disease or other causes. Described from a religious perspective, salvation involves spiritual liberation that cannot be attained through human effort (McCleary 2007:51). In Christian teaching, the idea of salvation points to redemption or liberation from the slavery of sin or its consequences, and the attainment of complete security through the saving power of Jesus Christ (Dulles 1973:71). McCleary (2007) puts it: 'in Christianity, the believer is saved by a mediator-Jesus Christ – who remains a distinct entity, a personal God' (McCleary 2007:56).

The theme of salvation is central to both the Old and New Testaments, as they both deal with the narrative of how God attempted to obtain salvation for his creation in its entirety. In other words, the term salvation, from the Greek word *soteria*, derived from the word *soter* meaning saviour, encompasses the entire work of God manifesting his grace as he is attempting to redeem his creation from the corruption caused by sin. Correspondingly, the next two sections will endeavour to summarise what is meant by salvation in relation to the *missio Dei* from the perspective of both the Old and New Testaments. The idea here is not to repeat the extensive literature discourse on salvation and its meaning from the perspective of these two respective books, but the idea is to describe salvation as a means by which God

attempts to bring about the definitive objective (kingdom). Selected biblical events such as the calling of Noah, the Exodus in the Old Testament, and the incarnation of Christ leading to the establishment of the Church in the New Testament each designate a specific historical event in the history of God's salvific purposes.

Salvation in the Old Testament

Although the idea of salvation is presented in the Old Testament as somewhat incomplete particularly when read from a New Testament perspective of the coming Messiah, it is nonetheless widespread, being centrally present in all accounts that focus on God's divine interactions with his creation. The Old Testament consistently presents a version of salvation that focusses on how God has attempted to use humans at various times to direct the project of salvation for his chosen ones while the rest of creation is engulfed in the effects of sin. Subsequently, scholars such as Preuss (1996) attempted to compare God to a farmer who allows the farmyard to be destroyed while saving what is important (Preuss 1996:274). In other words, the desire to save amid destruction is in the nature of the divine, which is why in the Old Testament his unique character is revealed through or encompassed by acts of salvation. But while the divine work of salvation is reflected in several places in the Old Testament, this article emphasises it only through select Old Testament accounts that present salvation as the crucial stage in entering God's kingdom. Typical of such accounts are the account in which God used Noah to save his creation from destruction, the exodus of the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt, several accounts detailing how God called several prophets to bring about salvation of selected individuals and communities.

Salvation through Noah

The history of salvation arguably finds its relevant context in the initial entry of sin, introduced as resulting from Adam and Eve's rebellion against God. This is followed by incidents of future generations committing other forms of sin, corrupting creation even further, causing God to regret creating humankind in the first place and even decide to end everything he created. Such judgement, however, is interrupted by the grace of God, since he sees Noah as the only righteous man and consequently instructs him to build an ark of salvation. According to Wilson (2014), Noah is favoured by the Lord or as Genesis 6:8 puts it, 'found favour in the eyes of the Lord' due to his pleasing faith, like Abel, who had made a pleasant sacrifice that pleased God (Wilson 2014:5). It is true that Noah's righteousness or impeccability to some extent was or became the primary reason for his election to be excepted from divine judgement (Hamilton 1990:262). Accordingly, once satisfied or delighted with Noah's righteousness, God first warned Noah of the impending cataclysmic judgement and made a covenant with him, promising to save him along with his family. However, for such a promise to be fulfilled, Noah's obedience is put to the test by the instruction to build an ark. Consequently, it can be

said that Noah was saved along with his family firstly, because of his righteousness and secondly, because of his obedience to the word of God as he built the ark to its completion. As Wilson (2014) points out, the fact that Noah was obedient enough to build such a large boat despite the ridicule of friends and neighbours shows a tremendous act of faith in the Lord (Wilson 2014:6). In this way he participated in the work of salvation by being righteous and obedient to the word of God through the act of building the ark.

Consequently, several scholars have rightly referred to this ark as the ark of salvation as it signifies an instrument used by God to save his creation represented by Noah, his family and selected creatures (Goh 2014:208–231; Mast 2013:12–19). Some scholars reading the flood story from a New Testament perspective believe that the flood represented the final judgement while the ark was the indication of salvation (Tsai 2015:58). Therefore, the ark became an instrument of salvation as it was used to save all living beings on board. In the words of Wilson (2014): 'Those inside the boat were saved, while those outside drowned' (Wilson 2014:6). Much like the teachings of the *missio Dei*, in which God is the initiator of salvation, in the story of Noah, the ark of salvation, is the idea of God to which he invited Noah's participation. While Noah participates by building the ark, such participation cannot result in him claiming authority over the plan of salvation, but merely implementing the idea of God in saving the rest of his own creation. As the correct understanding of the *missio Dei* indicates, God remains the only actor in salvation history, while people like Noah partake in this mission by invitation. As if to emphasise this in the light of God's active mediation throughout the flood, Preuss (1996) said: 'As is the case with the Yahwistic testimony to the primeval flood, it is YHWH himself who changes and therefore makes salvation possible' (Preuss 1996:274). After the flood, once everything is done and dusted off, God intended to draw a new creation out of Noah, his family, and other creatures so that he would establish a nation that would live under his righteous rule. In the words of Hamilton (1990), all species on the ark found salvation so that: 'God will repopulate his world not from nothing, but from all flesh, two of each' (Hamilton 1990:268). Thus, in this understanding, salvation is merely an important stage through which God intends to restore his kingdom. In other words, salvation thus becomes a means by which the kingdom of God is restored. However, because humankind is inherently sinful, such a nature will continue to interrupt or postpone the kingdom of God. Subsequent generations after Noah, like the generations before the flood, would show an inability to live in accordance with God's will, resulting in the perpetual absence of the kingdom of God.

Salvation through Hebrew people

As indicated above, God destroyed the world with a deluge and attempted to restore his kingdom through the microcosm of Noah's Ark. However, the descendants of Noah fell into the trap of sin and opposed God's plan of salvation, beginning with attempts to build a tower to heaven (Gn 11:1–9).

This cycle of failure and God's attempts to redeem the world continues among the Hebrew people under the leadership of Abraham and Moses, who are the direct descendants of Noah. As recorded in Genesis 12, God called Abraham and told him that through him a great nation or a special nation of people would inherit the kingdom of God (Gn 12:1-7). Consequently, the narrative of the exodus of the Hebrew people from Egypt, with Moses in the midst, embraces the great experience of redemption. According to the Book of Exodus, Moses was born in a time when his people, the Israelites or the Hebrew people were enslaved in Egypt. In response, God sent Moses to Egypt to demand the deliverance of the Israelites from slavery, who ultimately led the Israelites' exodus from Egypt across the Red Sea.

Almost similar to how God made an effort to redeem and restore his kingdom through the microcosm of Noah's ark, in this case God used the Hebrew people to participate in the salvation history that will save other nations and ultimately lead to the restoration of his desired kingdom. In other words, similar to the case of Noah where one family is used to save other creatures with the intention of restoring the kingdom, God uses the Hebrew nation to save other nations with whom he will eventually restore his kingdom (Moskala 2011:7). This is exactly what Bosch (1991) meant by arguing that:

[I]f there is a missionary in the Old Testament, it is God Himself who will, as his eschatological deed par excellence, bring the nations to Jerusalem to worship him there together with his covenant. (p. 1719)

In the words of Crowe and Hopkins (2018):

God set Israel before the nations to bring forth the Light of the world, for the world... The nation of Israel is called upon to repent, rise up and take her place as a beacon of light, yet also encouraged prophetically of a coming light that will one day draw all nations to her. (p. 8)

In this respect, the Hebrew people, like Noah and his family, can be seen as the embodiment of righteousness, which qualifies them as mere participants in the *missio Dei* (Whitworth 2012:42).

Understood from the above perspective, it seems arguably obvious that the historical salvation of the Hebrew people was aimed or directed towards reaching a state where God will extend his sovereign dominion over the entire human kingdom. In other words, God did not save the Hebrew people in vain, but used them as a nation through which he could ultimately save his creation in its entirety and inaugurate his much-desired kingdom.

Salvation in the New Testament

Apparent promises of salvation through the coming saviour already appear in the book of Genesis and several other books. In fact, the Old Testament is littered with hundreds of promises pointing to the Messiah that would come to save humankind from the bondage of sin. In the face of such promises,

it becomes plausible to see the New Testament as a fulfilment of such promises. This is evidenced by the fact that most of the Old Testament promises' accounts (Dever 2005), including the reference to Noah's story of salvation (Wilson 2014:1), are repeated several times throughout the New Testament (Vorster 1981:62-72). In this way, Jesus Christ, as the promised Redeemer, becomes the only source of salvation, or the only Person through whom nations are to be saved. Jesus Christ describing himself or his ministry in salvific terms and unequivocally proclaiming that he came to save that which was lost (Lk 19:10). In other words, while the Old Testament presents several mediating beings such as Noah, the Israelites, and the prophets as human instruments used by God to bestow salvation upon his creation, in the New Testament, Jesus Christ becomes the sole embodiment, source, or divine entity, through which salvation is given to humankind.

Salvation through Jesus

It is plausible to argue that almost all of Jesus Christ's teachings from the beginning of his ministry to his crucifixion were concerned not only with salvation but with the kingdom of God as the definitive vision. The veracity of this claim becomes apparent when considered in light of the redeeming call articulated in the early phase of his mortal ministry: 'repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand' (Mt 4:17). As if to emphasise the need for obedience and to make it clear that salvation is the necessary key to entering the kingdom of God, Jesus Christ is recorded saying: 'Unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven' (Mt 18:3). Speaking of the coming kingdom of God from the resurrection perspective, Preuss (1996) wrote:

Resurrection was understood not as the dying and coming back to life of the dead in the world but rather as a solution to the problem of theodicy and as the participation of humanity in the salvation of the coming kingdom of God. (p. 151)

This means that the earthly ministry of Christ cannot be separated from the historical divine mission of salvation. The person, nature, and role of Christ are designed to ensure the consummation of salvation throughout the world. Migliore (2014) conclusively state that, 'The real point of Christology, therefore, it is to affirm that in this Jesus, God is decisively present and graciously active for the salvation of the world'. In this way salvation is obtained by those who are truly repentant and consequently ready to enjoy the kingdom of God. While the next section gives the impression that the church is the way of salvation, the intent is to use it merely as the embodiment of Christ through whom salvation is accomplished. In other words, the Church alone does not provide salvation, but Christ, by extension or through his Church, is the one who saves.

Salvation through the church

Replacement theology, also called supersessionism, which presents the church as a replacement for Israel in the context of God's plan of salvation, has given rise to theological

discourse and disagreement in Christian theology (Ladd 1964:206–213; Vlach 2009:57–69). According to Scharlemann (1978), the failed task of ancient Israel to glorify the name of God and make it known to all peoples is now being taken over by the church as the new, better Israel (Scharlemann 1978:48–52). On the other hand, other scholars contend that it is important to maintain the qualitative difference between Israel as God's chosen nation and the Church as the body of Christ in different stories of salvation (Sendriks 2017:12). However, without advocate for either side, this paper consciously perceives the Church as the continuity of Old Testament Israel coupled with an understanding of salvation as an ongoing activity through Jesus Christ as the new Moses who represented the perfect mediator (Smith 1990:111–118; Theophilos 2013). This makes it conditionally justifiable to place the mission of salvation, which ideally would lead to the desired and proclaimed kingdom of God, at the centre of Christ's work and consequently of the church office (Cornwall 1993: 175–199; Tavad 1992). In the words of Migliore (2014): 'A soteriological dimension is present in every layer of New Testament tradition and in all the classical Christological affirmation of the church' (Migliore 2014:167). In this way salvation becomes the reality of the present world, while the kingdom of God is presented as the result of salvation. In other words, the experience of salvation through the presence of the church foreshadows the coming kingdom of God. Unlike ancient Israel, which rejected the Messiah who would enable them to see the kingdom of God (Rm 9–12), the Church is emerging as the new nation with the potential to produce the fruits that will lead to the realisation of God's kingdom (Mt 21:43). However as stated above, it is Christ and not the church per se who can save God's creation. The church exists only as a body of believers striving to further salvific interests, which include attainment of the kingdom of God as directed by its Master, Jesus Christ.

Salvation in the *missio Dei*

There is very little consensus among scholars as to the optimal definition of salvation. However, most if not all of them define salvation as an ongoing process rather than a one-off event. It is an all-encompassing process that includes election, rebirth, healing, atonement, forgiveness of sins, and other themes that underscore God's continued intervention designed to prepare his creation for his eternal kingdom. In the words of Bosch (2011): 'Whatever salvation is, then, in every specific context, it includes the total transformation of human life, forgiveness of sin, healing from infirmities, and release from any kind of bondage' (Bosch 2011:108). Therefore, to define salvation as a process that involves God's restorative acts is to identify it as God's mission to restore his creation. In fact, the history of salvation as a whole has revolved around and described the mission with God as the initiator and only channel of salvation for humankind in the world. In other words, *missio Dei* has always been about God's action in history to bring salvation to the whole world. Engelsviken (2003) recited Geog F. Vicedom words when arguing: 'The mission

can be nothing else than the continuation of the saving activity of God through the publication of the deeds of salvation' (Engelsviken 2003:483).

Speaking of salvation as symbolic of a window of opportunity, Laing (2009) says: 'The central issue is the particularity of God's actions to bring about a universal opportunity for salvation' (Laing 2009:97). In this way, salvation does not become an end in itself, but a way of facilitating a situation that transcends the confines of its frame. This parallels the concern of Guder (2009) who, along with Bosch (2001), acknowledged the false dichotomy in the joy of personal salvation, or the attempt to make it central to the gospel, while ignoring the centrality of the kingdom. Bosch says: 'Not that the enjoyment of salvation is wrong, unimportant, or unbiblical; even so, it is almost incidental and secondary' (Bosch 1991:572; Guder 2009:70). This is also underscored in salvation-historical eschatology, or what Hunter (1973) correctly calls inaugurated eschatology, which holds that the kingdom of God, though bound up with the first coming or the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ, still awaits its fulfilment to come with the consummation of the salvific phase (Hunter 1973:94). Jesus Christ himself commenced his mortal ministry with a simple invitation that unwrapped salvation as the necessary herald of God's kingdom, urging: 'Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand' (Mt 4:17). Perhaps as if to inaugurate salvation as a condition of the kingdom of God, he then declared: 'Unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven' (Mt 18:3). This is further elaborated by the apostle Paul, who also saw salvation as a necessary step before entering the kingdom of God, emphasising: 'Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God' (1 Cor 15:50). Speaking of repentance as one of dominant themes accompanying the idea of salvation, Bosch (2011) refers to Jews, Gentiles, the prodigal son, Zacchaeus, all who first had to repent before being included in salvation history and considered righteous enough to hold a place of honour at the banquet in the kingdom of God (Bosch 2011:106–109). In this context, the banquet in the kingdom of God in a certain way points to the guaranteed Holy year of jubilee, marked by joyful celebrations of all-inclusive and eternal liberation from the bondage. This Holy Year is to be celebrated by all who, like the prodigal son and Zacchaeus, have gone through the process of repentance that brings about a moral transformation. As if equating Israel to the prodigal son, Barry (2011) speaks of the freed slave returning to God from slavery in the Jubilee year (Barry 2011:867). As if to alert the prophet Isaiah to the fact that his mission is an ongoing activity, God said: 'See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and stream in the wasteland' (Is 43:19). Therefore, the mission of salvation, as embodied in the broader *missio Dei*, must be understood as embodying the important preliminary stage, which includes acts of restoration, deliverance, moral renewal, and all the changes that must be accomplished before entering the kingdom of God, the Exodus to the promised land. Harmoniously, the next

sections are devoted to the exploration of the kingdom of God, which marks the definitive objective and stage of the *missio Dei*.

The kingdom of God

In theological discourse, the use of the word kingdom derives from the Greek word *Βασιλεία*, which primarily denotes the rulership of God. The idea of kingdom of God – *Βασιλεία τοῦ Θεοῦ* – (*Basileia tou Theou*) occurs throughout the Bible, but more clearly in the New Testament as an element of the teachings of Jesus Christ than in pre-Christian Jewish literature. Selman (1989) pointed out that although the exact term kingdom of God does not appear at all in the Old Testament, the kingdom of Yahweh appears about 15 times (Selman 1989:162). Although some Old Testament scholars openly question the importance of the theme of the kingdom of God in the Old Testament compared to its importance in the New Testament, they seem to agree or acknowledge that it involves observance of the rulership of God throughout redemption history as recorded in the Bible (Selman 1989:162). In the words of Helberg and Krüger (1995) as correctly recited in Peels (2001): ‘The Kingdom of God entails God’s dominion in connection with creation, fall, and redemption’ (Helberg & Krüger 1995:7; Peels 2001:174). Thus, both Old and New Testament scholars to some extent recognise the importance of the theme of the kingdom of God as central and fundamental to the teachings of the entire Bible. Against this background, the next sections will only attempt to underscore the abstract centrality of the kingdom of God in the Old Testament and its explicit centrality in the New Testament. Once the centrality of the kingdom of God is established on the basis of or in line with the biblical teachings, it is appropriately transplanted into the context of the *missio Dei*.

Baselia in the Old Testament

Unlike in the case of the New Testament where there are often clear or direct expressions such as *βασιλεία των οὐρανῶν* or *του θεου* signifying God’s kingship or the Kingdom, the Hebrew Bible (*Tanakh*) or the Old Testament as it were, seldom assign broad or general terms such as *מַלְכוּת* – *malkut* or *malkuth* possibly related to the Aramaic term *malkut* to God to express the idea of the kingdom of God (Peels 2001:175). Consequently, it is the observation of most Old Testament scholars that the Old Testament implicitly gives theological importance or special interest to the theme of the kingdom of God or the royal rule of YHWH, particularly in relation to the discourse of salvation history of post-exilic context expressed in books such as Psalms, Chronicles, and Daniel (Gordon 1909:102–106; Lynch 2015:169–188). This fact is observed by Henry (1992) that although the Old Testament does not use the kingdom of God directly as an expression, its entire historical reality sees God as the only royal ruler (Henry 1992:39). For example, Preuss (1996) refers to the imagery encompassing the mission of salvation alluded to in Daniel 7, where the Son of Man is presented as the protector of Israel and representative of the coming kingdom of God

against the four animal kingdoms (Preuss 1996:37). Tracing the origin of this theme from the Old Testament, Burrows (1987) wrote:

This kingdom was foretold and rooted in the Old Testament, where ideas associated with the earthly kingdoms of men were applied and extended to an eternal kingdom that God was building. (p. 7)

Similarly, Peels (2001) emphasised the importance of this theme (the kingdom of God) not only in relation to the Old Testament but also in its continuation in the light of the New Testament, stating: ‘in this case, the theme is very broadly defined and encompasses the totality of God’s rule in the past, present, and future’. Indeed, as observed by Henry (1992), after a successful mission to be delivered from Egypt through the Red Sea, generations that came before the Hebrews acknowledged God as the Eternal Ruler in Exodus 15:18, saying: ‘the Lord is King for ever and ever’ (Henry 1992:39). Furthermore, as if attempting to make the theme of God’s kingdom the unifying factor in all of salvation history as recorded in both the Old and New Testaments, he went on to write that, ‘Sometime the entire history of revelation is subsumed under the heading of the Kingdom of God, as the centre of the unifying theme of the entire Bible’ (Peels 2001:174).

Baselia in the New Testament

As already indicated above, unlike in the case of the Old Testament where there is little explicit mentions of the Kingdom of God, the New Testament has direct expressions such as *βασιλεία των οὐρανῶν/του θεου* signifying God’s kingship or the Kingdom. Henry (1992) outlines that the Old Testament make use of expressions such as the great king, king of the ages, the eternal king, king of kings and Lord of Lords to signifying the kingship of God both in heaven and earth (Henry 1992:39). The infancy narrative in Matthew is immediately followed by the proclamation of the kingdom of God, or the kingdom of heaven as preached by John the Baptist. Although Matthew sometimes uses the phrase *Βασιλεία τῶν Ουρανῶν* (kingdom of heaven) interchangeably with the *Βασιλεία τοῦ Θεοῦ* (kingdom of God), it is the observation of some New Testament scholars that other gospels consistently refer to the kingdom of God. However, some scholars argue that this formulation of Matthew points to the transcendental character of the kingdom and should consequently be explained with its less earthly implications alluded to by Jesus Christ and the apostles (Arndt 1950:8). Nevertheless, the expression of the kingdom of God in the New Testament points to the eternal dominion of God or divine authority in the entire universe. One encounters this directly in the well-known words of John the Baptist, who proclaimed the coming kingdom of God saying: ‘Repent, for the Kingdom of heavens has come near’ (Mt 3:2). Jesus Christ himself conveyed a sense of the immediacy of the kingdom of God or as the destination for the righteous in the end of days (Mk 1:14,15; Lk 4:4), leading to situations like Luke 17:20 where the Pharisees questioned him about the ever-coming kingdom of God. In fact, in the very first account in which he sent his disciples to preach the

message, he instructed them to speak of the nearness of the kingdom of God (Mt 10:7). This can be interpreted to mean that at the time of this proclamation, the kingdom of God was not yet practically realised but was looming on the horizon as a much anticipated divinely inspired reality or circumstance. Consequently, scholars like Arndt (1950) spoke of the kingdom of God as the abstract reign of God that is yet to be realised when humankind has submitted in totality to God's will. (Arndt 1950:9). As recited in Henry (1992), the present and forthcoming character of the kingdom is better explained by Karl Barth when he says:

The *basileia* is here, and yet it is not here; it is revealed, yet it is also hidden; it is present, but always future; it is at hand, indeed in the very midst, yet it is constantly expected. (p. 40)

Scholars such as Burrows (1987:8-9) give the impression that the kingdom of God is withheld or awaits to benefit of the future redeemed. He writes that, 'the phrase kingdom of God speaks of God's royal rule for the benefit of His redeemed people with all the complexity of grace and glory which that rule displays' (Burrows 1987:8-9). In fact, this binary character is made clear by Jesus Christ when he speaks to Nicodemus about being born again, saying: 'Truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God' (Jn 3:5). In other words, the kingdom of God is enjoyed by those who would have submitted to God's salvific acts. This explains why New Testament scholars such as Arndt (1950) were able to state unequivocally that the context of salvation is directed towards the abolition of sin from the present world, the consummation of which is to be symbolised by the manifestation of the kingdom of God (Arndt 1950:13). Correspondingly, the next section endeavours to conclusively ascertain that the attainment of the kingdom of God is the definitive objective of the *missio Dei*.

Baselia in the *missio Dei*

The importance of the Willingen Conference of 1952 lies above all in the establishment of Triune God-centred mission, in which mission is understood solely as the work of the missionary God, in contrast to the historical church-centred mission, which restricted salvific action to the ecclesiastical limits (Jung 2012:41). In many ways, this reinforced the fact that the Triune God is in his mission to establish the Kingdom throughout his creation and not just within the confines of a nation, faith community, or church (McPhee 2003:8). This fact is expressed by Reimer (2017) when he states: 'Missio Dei is concerned with establishing God's kingdom in the world' (Reimer 2017:36). Jung (2012) emphasised that missiologists such as Hoekendijk, Hartenstein, Freytag, and some who took an active part in the Willingen deliberations, despite some opposition to their position, largely agreed that the church remains the foretaste of the kingdom of God, for which the full establishment is the definitive objective of *missio Dei* (Jung 2012:41). Similarly, Brown (2011) stated:

Not surprisingly, the mission of God is often described as the establishment of his Kingdom, which was inaugurated with

God's incarnation as Jesus the King, is continuing with the spread of his Kingdom to every ethnic group. (p. 5)

In other words, the centrality of the Kingdom of God in the context of *missio Dei* is affirmed by the continued spread of the gospel and its expected realisation will follow the completed process of salvation, which includes evangelisation, among other things. Perhaps no missiologist has ever answered the question involving the centrality of the Kingdom of God in the context of the *missio Dei* more accurately like Verkuyl (1979:168) stating, 'In both the Old Testament and the New, God by both his words and deeds claims that he is intent on bringing the kingdom of God to expression and restoring his liberating domain of authority'. Consequently, it can be concluded without a doubt that while the task of the *missio Dei* involves several phases, such as salvation, their definitive objective is none other than the manifestation of the kingdom of God.

Conclusion

This paper drew on the literature review to uncover helpful sources to first identify total salvation as the preliminary facet leading to the inauguration of the kingdom of God as the definitive objective of *missio Dei*. It found it somewhat concerning that the available literature on the *missio Dei* appears to have no interest in clearly distinguishing or pointing to salvation as a mechanism through which the ultimate goal of the *missio Dei* (the Kingdom of God) is to be achieved. It consequently argued that salvation history as a whole, as recorded both in the Old and New Testaments, should be seen as encompassing or characterising the crucial key to enable entry into the eternal kingdom of God as the definitive objective of the *missio Dei*. The most important conclusion from this paper, although it must be interpreted with caution, is that the *missio Dei* is about divine, self-executed salvific activities (mission) to create the conditions for the realisation of his kingdom (vision). Therefore, divinely inspired salvific activities (*missio Dei*) are justified by the pursuit of the attainment of the kingdom of God (God's Kingdom), meaning the end (vision), so to speak, justifies the means (mission). Although the limited scope of this paper was merely to distinguish between salvation as an anticipatory aspect and the kingdom of God as the definitive objective of *missio Dei*, consideration of its claims warrants future research to test its novelty.

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