Is Jesus the Son of Allah?

Graham Kings

Kneeling alone on the soft carpet of a Mombasa mosque, chandeliers above, galleries around, stereo system stacked high in the corner, the quiet question came to me—Is Jesus the Son of Allah?

The question is not about Jesus, but Allah: the Arabic for God is more than a name but is He the same as our God and Father?

In Southern Sudan, a Christian will answer, militantly, "No":

In Pakistan, a Christian may answer, philosophically, "Yes":

In Saudi Arabia, a Muslim will answer, immediately, "No":

So does it depend where we stand—or kneel?

El Shaddai of Abraham is revealed as Yahweh to Moses, but not as Ba’al to Elijah: what of Almighty Allah?

The crucial clue may lead us to a Muslim now submitting to the Ultimate Submitter, Jesus the Messiah. He does not change his God, for God is One, but discovers in the Son that God is strangely, inconceivably great, because He became so conceivably small; that God, in the end, is mercifully just since He has absorbed the evil of all.

We may, perhaps, then whisper that Jesus is the Son of Allah: but in this naked act of naming, the active Word transforms the Name.

Prostrate upon the carpet of a Mombasa mosque, softly to Jesus, Son of Allah, I prayed; then rose again to slip outside and join my wife and daughters, who were waiting in the shade.

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Three Models for Christian Mission

James M. Phillips

Missiology has often felt uncertain about the nature and definition of models for Christian mission. It is sometimes assumed that there is only one appropriate model, which, despite defects, is the dominant model throughout the biblical period and the history of the Christian church. At the same time, mission literature employs a number of conflicting models of mission, without necessarily making clear how these models should operate, how they relate to one another, what kinds of leadership they require, or how their results are to be evaluated. This article presents three major models for Christian mission and traces their origins in the Old Testament period, their modification in New Testament times, and their development in church history.

The methodology that will be used here is that of discerning "ideal types." This is not unlike the methodology Max Weber used to relate "the Protestant ethic" to "the spirit of capitalism," or Ernst Troeltsch employed to differentiate "churches" and "sects," and H. Richard Niebuhr developed to discern relationships between "Christ" and "culture." The "ideal types" to which these writers referred rarely existed in the real world in a pure state, but were almost always found in combinations with different types. Such a warning pertains here, as well. The three models for mission are not the only models that have been used, but they represent to some extent the combination of numerous models found in the history of missions. Those readers who conclude that the following analysis is overly simplified have the writer’s complete understanding. He only asks their indulgence of his use of broad brush strokes in order to make these models of mission a bit clearer.

The three models are Sinai, with its recollection of the people of God gathered at Mount Sinai with Moses the lawgiver as their leader; Zion, with its concept of Israel centered on Mount Zion in Jerusalem under its kings and priests; and Judgment, with its promise of the coming Lord who will intervene with finality in human history, both for condemnation and salvation. These three models originate in the Old Testament, and it is with their appearances there, in approximately chronological order, that we begin.

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The Models in the Old Testament

The first model of mission is here designated as Sinai, recalling the gathering of the Hebrew people at Mt. Sinai, the mountain of God, under the leadership of Moses the lawgiver (Exod. 19:16-25). It is not the mountain itself that is the crucial feature but rather the history of liberation from slavery in Egypt that has led up to it, the covenant and laws that were enacted upon it, and the unending results that have flowed from it.

Sinai is where the Hebrew people were given an identity as those who had escaped from slavery in Egypt and now knew themselves as the people of God, living in covenant obedience to Torah as a nation of priests (Exod. 19:3-6). This in time will have implications not only for the Hebrews themselves, but for all peoples on earth (Deut. 7:6). God's people will take their covenant life under Torah with them, not only into the land of Canaan, which they are shortly to enter, but eventually into all the lands where they will go (Josh. 1:7-9). This is what makes Sinai the first model of mission in our sense, although it would be designated as "the one of Sinai," but the one "who dwells on Mount Zion" (Isa. 8:18).

The consequences of these changes are profound. In addition to the covenant of Sinai, there is now a new covenant with the house of David, saying that it shall always rule and the worship of the Lord will always take place in the Temple (2 Kings 8:19). Zion is a cosmic mountain. It is where God dwells; where heaven and earth meet at the center of the world; where "effective decrees are issued"; the moral and physical capital of the universe, of crucial importance for all nations. The time of the Sinai-type charismatic leader has passed, and now, to use Max Weber's categories, leadership in both political and religious realms becomes bureaucratized, and both are situated on Zion. Both Isaiah and Micah declared that it was to Zion that all nations would come and from there the word of the Lord would go out to all the world (Isa. 2:2-4; Mic. 4:1-2).

Zion, then, is a model of mission for people who have established themselves in their own promised land. They possess their own religious shrine and governmental center, as well as a society with social hierarchies led by specialized leaders. They see themselves at the center of a sacramental universe, that is to be increasingly blessed by God's grace emanating from their holy land.

This Zion-type vision was brought to a shocking end, however, with the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians in 487 B.C.E. The kingship was ended; the Temple on Mount Zion was destroyed; and the people of Judah were forced into exile in Babylon. But even in captivity by the waters of Babylon, when the exiles were taunted by their captors to sing one of the songs of Zion, the Hebrews could never forget their beloved city (Ps. 137:1-5).

Out of the exile and its aftermath there came the third model of mission, that of Judgment. It is very hard to find a proper name for this model, for here are joined a number of different motifs from varied experiences of the people. The prophet Amos spoke about the Day of the Lord, and in time the prophets referred to the Day of Judgment (Amos 5:18-20; Isa. 3:13-15; Hos. 5:1, 2; Mic. 6:1, 2). These would indeed be end times, in which many eschatological promises would be fulfilled (Isa. 14:24-27; Zech. 36:26, 27). There would be appearances of the Lord (Parousia), with profound results (Ps. 102:16; Isa. 66:5). A Messiah would come
to lead a remnant of the people and to judge between the righteous and the evildoers (Mic. 5:2-5; Isa. 7:10-17, 11:1-9; Jer. 23:5, 6; Zech. 9:9, 10). In the servant songs of Isaiah, the Messiah was pictured not as a conquering hero but as a suffering servant of the Lord (Isa. 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12). There would be a restoration of the law through the proclamation of Jubilee for the emancipation of slaves, the cancellation of debts, and the restoration of property to its rightful owners (Lev. 24). In the apocalyptic literature, there would be a cosmic dualism between the present age and the age to come, which was anticipated in striking visions granted to the seers (Isa. 24-27; Dan. 7).

Even though these differing images were drawn from very diverse backgrounds, and are by no means completely consistent with one another, there came to be considerable mutual borrowing and cross-fertilization. Different aspects of the many varied facets of Judgment would be brought to bear on particular situations in the light of special needs. For instance, the Judgment model could affirm that in the latter days God himself will intervene through his deputies on behalf of his people, both in condemnation of their disloyalty and wickedness and in affirmation of their salvation and restoration (Joel 3:12; Isa. 3:13-16, 51:5; Hosea 4:1). This Day of the Lord will be a day of doom, but also of mercy, and it will be carried out by God’s Messiah (Mic. 5:2-5; Isa. 11:1-10, 66:16, 18, 19). Humans may cooperate with God’s mission or not, but the mission will be liberating, empowering, overturning, restoring, and ultimately triumphant.

It is evident that this third model of mission operates in quite different ways from the first two. Under Judgment, the Lord acts both for demolition of what has gone wrong and for restoration of the ways of righteousness. Leadership again becomes more participatory, democratic, and charismatic, but with the totally new criteria that Judgment brings to bear.

Furthermore, all three models hold that holiness ultimately belongs to God and the people. But the Sinai model finds holiness primarily in law and its covenants, the Zion model sees it in sacred places and institutions, and the Judgment model tends to relate it to time. Indeed, the Sabbath itself is a model for God’s judgment and restoration of the entire cosmos (Isa. 56:1-8).

The very circumstances under which the model of Judgment most often arises—extreme crisis and despair over the status quo and the pitch of excitement that the judging process generates—mean that this model by its very nature is generally unstable. For as soon as times of crisis are past, the feverish pace of eschatology subsides and the changes wrought by the divine inquest begin to unravel. The mood of the end-times gradually gets back to business as usual. Hence the model of Judgment in its contexts of crisis tends not to last but reverts to the other two models. Yet this does not mean a mere restoration of the status quo ante. Things are never the same after the blinding flash of Judgment has had its day.

The Models in the New Testament

In the New Testament, all three models originating in the Old Testament are transmuted by the ministry and mission of Jesus. Indeed, Jesus’ ministry—as portrayed in the various portraits of the four Gospels and other New Testament writings—represents a fulfillment of all three models, in greater ways than was true either before or after.

Jesus’ mission is generally described in the synoptic Gospels in terms of the Sinai model. Matthew portrays Jesus as a lawgiver presenting his Sermon on the Mount as from a new Sinai and emphasizing that nothing would “pass from the law until all is accomplished” (Matt. 5:1, 2, 17,18). The Gospels frequently stress that the events of Jesus’ life were the fulfillment of scriptural promises.

Jesus also carried out his ministry in the Zion model. He purposely limited his work and that of his disciples to the Jewish people. When he sent the twelve out on their mission, they were to avoid the Samaritans and the Gentiles, and to “go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt. 10:5, 6). Johannes Blauw, Ferdinand Hahn, and Donald Senior and Carroll Stuhlmueller have emphasized that the earthly ministry of Jesus was purposely limited by him to Israel. Jesus condemned the Pharisees’ methods of proselytization (Matt. 23:15). Jesus did indeed recognize the depth of faith among certain Gentiles—the centurion (Matt. 8:5-13), the Canaanite woman (Matt. 15:21-28), the Greeks who sought him at the Feast of the Passover (John 12:20-23)—but he emphasized that his ministry was primarily among the Jews.

The Judgment motif also appears prominently throughout the Gospels. Luke portrays Jesus’ understanding of his mission in the synagogue in Nazareth in terms of the fulfillment of the Jubilee (Lk. 4:18, 19). John Howard Yoder and Mortimer Arias have emphasized the centrality of the Jubilee motif to Jesus’ mission. With the coming of Jesus, the day of Jubilee and its promised emancipation were already at hand. The judgment of the Son of Man on all nations is also clearly seen in the coming of Jesus (Matt. 25:31-46).

Limiting these three models to the Jewish people is abolished, however, by the death and resurrection of Jesus. Johannes Blauw points out: “It is a striking peculiarity that both the synoptic Gospels and the Gospel of John culminate in the pronouncement of the resurrection and the call to mission emerging from it.” The great commissions that Jesus gave to universal mission are all presented in postresurrection contexts (Matt. 28:16-20; Mark 16:14-20; Luke 24:47; Acts 1:8; John 20:21). The word of Sinai is now to be taught to and shared with all nations. Now the many nations of the earth can potentially become Zions, holy lands. Both the wrath and the blessings of Judgment are now poured out on the Gentiles as well as upon the Jews.

The apostle Paul, like all pioneer missionaries, primarily used Sinai models, but he was willing to employ Zion models when needed: “To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews” (1 Cor. 9:20). He also made use of Judgment models (Rom. 2:1-11). Paul contended for his ministry to the Gentiles with Peter,
James, and the others in Jerusalem who wanted to retain the Zion model (Acts 15). Brown and Meier hold that the early church's decisions on the Gentile mission may have owed more to Peter's position than has often been seen to be the case. But the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 removed the Zion option for the early Christians, at least in its original form.

A new version of the Zion model appears in the Johannine writings. The apostle declared that “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth,” and emphasized the rather sharp contrast to the law at Sinai that “was given through Moses” (John 1:14, 17). Jesus’ very existence as the incarnate Logos makes Him a living Zion, where God dwells (John 8:12, 13; 10:7, 11, 30). The motifs of Judgment are also present in the Johannine writings, but in a different context than in the synoptic Gospels (Matt. 25:31-46; John 16:7-11; 1 John 4:17). The church came to rely on only one or two of these models, to the virtual exclusion of the third.

Book of Revelation fuses both Sinai and Zion into the overpowering motif of Judgment, providing a compendium of apocalyptic images from the Old Testament onward (Rev. 6:1-17; 14:1; 17:1, 2; 21, 22). There is also brief mention of “a thousand years,” which would give rise to a vast millennial literature (Rev. 20:4-10).

Even though Jesus in his own ministry and mission represented an integrated fulfillment of all three models of mission, such a balance could not be maintained in the eras that followed. The church came to rely on one or two of these models, to the virtual exclusion of the third, even though lip service continued to be paid to all three. But the choice of which model was to be predominant kept changing throughout the history of the church.

The Models in Church History

The early Christian church claimed to be the heir of the promises that had been made about Zion, as it witnessed to the Roman Empire with the Sinai teachings and awaited the return of the Lord in Judgment. The persecutions to which Christians were subjected reinforced their convictions that the day of Judgment for the entire cosmos might indeed be at hand.

The conversion of the Emperor Constantine to Christianity in 312 and the efforts that he and subsequent emperors made on behalf of Christianity changed everything. The theology, legal structures, church orders, and even church architecture in the new “Christian” empire suggested that the emperors had established a new Zion on earth. Subsequently, when the crowds flooding into the Christian churches brought all kinds of new worldliness, devout spirits like St. Anthony and St. Pachomius fled as monastics to the desert, there to be a new “kingdom of priests” in their solitariness or in their monasteries, where they re-established the law of Sinai and awaited God’s Judgment anew.

In time, the monastic groups reached out in missionary movements to the tribes of Europe, which were to become the new nations of the European continent. As pioneer missionaries, they began with the model of Sinai lawgiving, but their mission work soon led to the establishment of new nations that saw themselves as new Zions, or holy lands. It would take much more space than is available here to indicate how this process came to fruition in such places as Greece, Russia, Germany, France, Ireland, Bulgaria, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Poland, and England. Some of the missionaries made their contacts with the leading classes of the new nations by using the Sinai and Zion models, while others worked with the poor and common people and held forth hopes of Judgment. On many a western wall of medieval churches, or in sculptures on the west portals, would be found scenes of Judgment Day, with their promises of Christ’s final vindication of the righteous and the punishment of the wicked.

Then came the Crusades, in which Christians and Muslims fought each other for possession of Mount Zion, which symbolized the traditions of Israel. Although the Crusades were to end as military failures for the west, they forged new patterns of colony building and new measures of canon law that were useful for European colonial expansion in the next historical era.

In the period of the Reformation, the Protestant reformers did not practice mission at first, but contested with Catholics in their claims to be the true Zions. Both Lutheran and Calvinist apologists adopted their own versions of Sinai lawgiving as bases for the new Zions they were establishing in Germany, Holland, Switzerland, and Great Britain. The radical reformers,perse-
cuted by both Catholics and Protestants, stressed their own apocalyptic visions of Judgment in their earlier phases, but as they became established, they embraced their own combinations of Sinai and Zion. Many new communitarian experiments tried to be new Zions where God’s laws were truly upheld, while other radical groups continued to stress millennial Judgment.18

Meanwhile, Catholic missionary orders to the new worlds sought out new nations for Christianity to take the place of those lands and peoples that had been lost to Protestantism.19 These missionary efforts in the service of the Spanish and Portuguese monarchs carried Sinai legislation to the peoples of their new colonies. Throughout Latin America, the Philippines, and the coastlands of Africa and Asia, Catholic missions led to the enthusiastic embrace of the new faith by native peoples, who in time came to look upon their lands as new Zions, with appearances of the Virgin Mary and the saints to confirm their sanctity. Occasionally, there were voices of protest against the exploitation of oppressed peoples by their colonial masters in the messages of Judgment by courageous missionaries such as Fr. Batholome de las Casas. There were also a few Protestant missions, functioning as part of the colonial policies of Protestant powers, that saw the colonies as extensions of Danish, British, or Dutch Zions at home.

Under the influence of Pietism, Protestant missionary work began in earnest as Zion-type colonial enclaves gradually gave way to Sinai-type outreach to new lands. Some visionaries saw the new missions as the fulfillment of eschatological hopes and foretastes of the Judgment that was soon to come. Thus, the thirteen British colonies in America that were to become the United States developed into a center for Protestant Sinai-type foreign missions, even as the American homeland developed its own Zion-type orientation, which was sometimes seen as the outworking of God’s millennial Judgment.20

The emphasis that Protestant missions gave to translation of the Scriptures into the local languages and the building of a local clergy meant that the newly converted Christians gained access to the wealth of scriptural resources for understanding themselves and their worlds, through their own indigenous leaders. New Protestant Zions began to flourish in these new lands after the initial stage of Sinai mission efforts had led to strong indigenous churches. In India, Burma, China, Japan, Korea, Chile, Brazil, and throughout Africa, there came to be Protestant Zions that celebrated the mighty works that God was accomplishing in their own lands.21 But often the threat or the fact of persecution or warfare reminded these Christians that their situation was similar to that of the early Christians, who put their trust not in human decisions but in the Judgment of God.

In similar ways, Roman Catholics in the nineteenth century began new mission work in keeping with their long mission traditions. For instance, groups such as Missions Étrangères de Paris (M.E.P.) inherited the work of former Spanish and Portuguese Catholic missions, while missionaries from Ireland fanned out across the English-speaking world, Belgians went to French-speaking areas, and German Catholics took up work in many lands. Coordination of foreign mission work was promoted by the Vatican’s Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, founded in 1622. Papal policies prepared the way for a shift from a Zion understanding of the homelands of western Christendom to a renewed understanding of the place of Sinai models, often tempered with the notes of Judgment brought by persecution of Christians.

As Latourette indicated, the nineteenth century was indeed the Great Century for Protestant mission work.22 The three models of mission kept appearing in many different combinations, with Sinai generally taking the lead in pioneer missions, followed by Zion in more established areas, and Judgment emerging from crisis periods. The World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh (1910) launched an ecumenical movement that attempted to coordinate the Sinai and Zion models of the Great Century. Nevertheless, the disruptions that followed with World War I and World War II led to many forms of Judgment models.23

Since 1945, mainline Protestant and Catholic missions, which had begun with Sinai models, increasingly developed Zion-type “interchurch relations.” “Three-self movements” in Two-Thirds World churches enabled these younger churches to think of themselves as new Zions, often with greater justification than had been the case of “older churches” in the west. When mainline churches were going this road, conservative evangelical

JUDGMENT: Albrecht Dürer’s celebrated woodcut of the “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse” (1498) shows how the Lord’s Judgment by the four horsemen (Rev. 6:1–8) will sweep away clergy, nobility, and commoners alike. (The Granger Collection, New York)
The Models in Interaction

It has been seen that throughout the biblical period and the history of the church, the three models of mission have rarely existed in pure forms but have continually influenced one another as missions in actual practice have mixed these models. I have been greatly helped by responses in study programs on these models at the Overseas Ministries Study Center in 1985 and 1986, where participants commented on the interrelationships of these models from their own experiences in many parts of the world. Let us consider, therefore, some brief observations on how these models have related to one another, and may continue to do so.

It is very difficult, apart from the ministry and mission of Jesus Christ himself, to find an example of Christian mission making equal use of all three of these models.

First, while it is true that almost all Christian groups make use of terminology and metaphors from all three models of mission as described here, most of them on closer inspection may be found to be based primarily on one of these forms, with significant help from a second model and only rhetorical gestures toward the third. It is difficult, apart from the ministry and mission of Jesus Christ himself, to point to an example of Christian mission that has made equal use of all three models.

Second, it will be obvious from the analyses above that each of these models has been developed in ways that have produced great benefits. At the same time, each has been abused to bring untold harm. As instruments in the hands of fallible human beings, these models can and have been used in both positive and negative ways, just as have all of God’s great gifts.

Third, it is significant that these models for Christian mission were developed during Old Testament times, even though they did not lead to widespread missionary activity in that period. The practice of mission that came in New Testament times was based on these Old Testament models, understood in new ways with the coming of Jesus Christ. This should remind Christians of the inescapable continuities between the Old and New Covenants.

Finally, these models are only useful for Christian mission if they enable Christians to understand better what they have been doing or might do in the future. For all their similarities, the models do operate with differing presuppositions, different biblical bases, varied types of leadership, under widely separate social and political environments, and with radically divergent hopes for results. If Christians are enabled to use these models to gain a clearer idea of what they are doing in mission, they might be strengthened to better face the mission challenges of today and tomorrow.

Notes

5. Ibid., pp. 111, 118.
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