

Foreign Environments: Training Grounds for Strategic Ministry

Michael Dunne

Often neglected as potential ministers to unreached peoples are the many international students seeking degrees outside of their countries, as well as other international visitors who are assigned to a foreign country by their businesses. Examples abound, such as the Chinese scientist studying for an advanced degree in Melbourne, or the Hindu businessman stationed at the company branch office in Los Angeles. As Michael Dunne points out, time spent in a foreign environment is often a crucial period of receptivity to the Gospel. In addition, Dunne shows that in Old Testament history God used the crucible of foreign environments to prepare His servants for future ministry. Is it not time for Christians today to take better advantage of such situations and seek to disciple foreign visitors, many of whom will then be able to return home and proclaim Christ among the unreached peoples they represent?



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At mission conference after mission conference the call is given for Christians to go throughout the entire world with the Good News. Conference speakers remind their audiences that it is their responsibility and privilege to bring the Gospel to distant lands and unreached peoples. As a result, each year hundreds of eager believers set out to fulfill their part in the Great Commission only to come up against the challenges associated with preparations for overseas or "foreign missions" service, such as the need to raise sufficient financial support and the acquisition of visas.

In view of the urgency of the task of world evangelization, coupled with the practical difficulties experienced by many

seeking to reach the unreached, the question must be asked whether there are additional, complementary ways in which Christians can responsibly fulfill the Great Commission. One such avenue is involvement in the lives of the thousands of international visitors who have left their own countries for a short time to study or work in a foreign setting.

Virtually every country in the world is host to foreign visitors. In the United States alone there are some five million temporary residents from over 170 nations, the majority of whom "are destined in the next 25 years to occupy one-fourth to one-half of the world's top positions of leadership—politically, militarily, economically, scientifically, academically, and socially" (Hanna 1976). We must take advantage of the opportunity to proclaim Christ to these visitors while they are in foreign environments, disciple them, and send them back to their native lands with an enthusiasm for reaching their own people and other peoples with the Gospel.

The use of foreign environments is not exclusively a twentieth-century phenomenon. In fact, throughout history God has taken many men and women into foreign environments, where He has enlarged their perspective of His character and purposes, nurtured them, and commissioned them to bless others. The Old Testament, in particular, is full of examples of this use of foreign environments.

FOREIGN ENVIRONMENTS: GOD'S TRAINING GROUNDS

Abraham received a call from God to leave his home and to go to a land God would show him (Gen. 12:1-3). It was in this "foreign land" that God worked on the character of Abraham and profoundly altered his worldview and belief system. Abraham's growth in faith was evidenced by the contrast between his duplicity and self-sufficiency in Egypt (Gen. 12:10-20) and his later willingness to fully trust and obey God when God told him to sacrifice Isaac (Gen. 22:1-19). The foreign environment was the stage from which Abraham became a blessing to all peoples (Gen. 12:3).

Another powerful example of how God can use a foreign environment is found in the life of Jacob. Jacob was crafty

(Gen. 25:31-33) and deceptive (Gen. 27:18-29), and he reaped the harvest of his sin in his youth (Gen. 27:42,43). He fled to the household of his mother's brother Laban in Paddan Aram (Gen. 28:2-31:55), a foreign environment for Jacob. But Laban was Jacob's equal in the art of self-seeking manipulation, giving Jacob a rude awakening after years of accustomed protection by Rebekah (Gen. 27:5-10). The trials and tribulations God permitted significantly changed Jacob's character. He became religious (Gen. 28:10,20,21), affectionate (Gen. 29:18), industrious (Gen. 31:40) and prayerful (Gen. 32:9-12, 24-30). After several years in this foreign environment God commanded Jacob to return to Canaan with his family and belongings (Gen. 31:13). God appeared to Jacob on the journey home, renamed him Israel, and reaffirmed the Abrahamic covenant to him (Gen. 35:9-13). God had indicated before the birth of Jacob that He intended to work through Jacob rather than Esau in the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant (Gen. 25:21-26), but it took 20 years in Paddan Aram to mold Jacob into the man God wanted him to be.

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The lives of Joseph and Moses were also refined by experiences in foreign environments. God took Joseph into Egypt, and into prison, to prepare him to be the chief overseer of Egypt and to prepare the way for the migration of the entire family of Israel into Egypt. God first placed Moses in an influential position in Pharaoh's court and then subjected him to the rigors of the desert for forty years; both sets of experiences prepared Moses for leadership during the Exodus and the wilderness years which followed.

God commanded Elijah to enter the wilderness in preparation for the mission God had in store for him (1 Kings 17:2-6). God's provision of Elijah's needs in the wilderness and in Zarephath (1 Kings 17:8-14) set the stage for Elijah's confrontation with King Ahab and the false prophets on Mt. Carmel (1 Kings 18:20-24). Elijah came to understand the importance of communion with God, and he became mighty in prayer (1 Kings 17:20-22). Later God again allowed Elijah to go into the wilderness (this time to flee from Queen Jezebel), where he became discouraged and exhausted (1 Kings 19:15-17). Once again, it was in this foreign environment that God

ministered to Elijah, restored his health, and gave him a new and better revelation of God's character and methods (1 Kings 19:9-13).

ISRAEL AS A FOREIGN ENVIRONMENT

It was God's intention for Israel, while remaining separate from the Gentile nations surrounding her, to be a "light to the nations" (Is. 42:6) and a blessing to all the earth's peoples (Gen. 12:3). Part of God's plan was to use Israel as a foreign environment to which God would bring Gentiles in order to show them their need for a relationship with Him. As Mark Hanna observes, "The Lord impressed upon Israel the importance of exhibiting the righteousness and love of the true and living God to the foreigners who sojourned among them (Deut. 10:18, 31:12)" (1976). The following commands were given by God to ensure that foreigners or aliens in Israel were given legal protection, economic provision, and spiritual opportunity:

- *Aliens were to observe the Sabbath (Ex. 20:10).
- *Aliens were not to be mistreated or oppressed (Ex. 22:21).
- *Aliens were permitted to offer sacrifices, and they faced the same penalty as the Israelites for not correctly carrying out the sacrifices (Lev. 17:8).
- *Aliens were to receive generous treatment from the Israelites (Lev. 19:9-10).
- *Aliens were to be treated as native-born Israelites (Lev. 19:34).
- *Aliens were to be helped in time of need (Lev. 25:35).
- *Aliens were permitted to celebrate the Passover in the same manner as the Israelites (Num. 9:14).
- *Aliens were to receive justice (Deut. 27:19).
- *Aliens were to assemble with the Israelites to listen to the reading of the Law *so as to learn to fear God* (Deut. 31:12).

One scholar has observed that "accepting foreigners into the Israelite community can rightly be considered to be the first

stage, or rather a stage, leading up to the Jewish mission" (Blauw 1962:56).

God's determination to use Israel as a foreign environment is clearly seen in Solomon's prayer of dedication of the Temple:

"As for the foreigner who does not belong to your people Israel but has come from a distant land because of your great name and your mighty hand and your outstretched arm—when he comes and prays toward this temple, then hear from heaven, your dwelling place, and do whatever the foreigner asks of you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your own people Israel..." (2 Chron. 6:32-33).

In Isaiah we read a similar expression of God's intent:

"And foreigners who bind themselves to the LORD to serve him, to love the name of the LORD, and to worship him, all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it and who hold fast to my covenant—these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations." The Sovereign LORD declares—he who gathers the exiles of Israel: "I will gather still others to them besides those already gathered" (Is. 56:6-8).

During Solomon's reign 153,600 "aliens" were hired to build the Temple (2 Chron. 2:17). These aliens and other sojourners were permitted to enter the congregation of Israel and were given considerable favor. In addition, "men of all nations came to listen to Solomon's wisdom, sent by all the kings of the world, who had heard of his wisdom" (1 Kings 4:34). One such visitor was the Queen of Sheba, who traveled to Israel to see for herself the splendor of Jerusalem. During her stay in Solomon's court she was overwhelmed by what she saw and experienced (2 Chron. 9:1-4). Her praise for Solomon and for the God who had placed Solomon on "His throne as king to rule for the Lord your God" (2 Chron. 9:8) is evidence of her respect for the God of Israel.

It was God's intention for Israel to "... witness to his name. God not only revealed his character (name) to Israel; he

not only exalted His name by mighty deeds before the nations as an attraction to Himself; but he also provided Israel ample opportunity to proclaim His name among the nations" (Hawthorne 1982:2-3). Part of this opportunity was in utilizing the nation of Israel as a foreign environment.

Likewise, through the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20) Jesus Christ has given the people of God today both the obligation and the opportunity to reveal the heart of God to the nations. The question is, in light of the urgency of world evangelization, will we acknowledge and employ this Biblical principle of using "foreign environments" to reach the unreached with the Good News?

CONCLUSION

*Will we
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Certainly today there is great opportunity to use foreign environments for purposes of evangelism and discipleship. Christians in all parts of the world need to take the initiative to befriend international visitors—potential Abrahams, Josephs, and Elijahs. In the power of the Holy Spirit Christians can win these internationals to a faith in Jesus Christ, disciple them, and see them return home to tell members of their own people group what "God has done" for them (Lk. 8:39). These internationals generally want to become friends with their hosts. For many of these special people, their stay in foreign environments is the only time in their lives when they will be able to seriously consider the claims of Christ outside of their national, cultural, and family situations. Many of them are open to learning about Jesus, and they are potentially much more effective communicators of the Gospel among their respective people groups than any foreign missionary could ever hope to be.

The time has come for the Church to send forth laborers into this neglected harvest field.

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