

Guest Editorial
“Time and Revival”

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This issue of *Global Missiology* invites a reflection on one of the dynamics of revival: time. How we come to view time determines what we think revival ought to be, when it ought to come, and who we think is the agent of revival.

Take the case of John the Baptist. He comes to the scene in the style of one of the Old Testament prophets. His people have been waiting for God’s visitation for a long time. Bible scholars tell us that for 400 years there had not been a word from the Lord. That is a long time. That is just about the equivalence of the time that the children of Israel were sojourners in Egypt, enslaved for a significant part of that time. During their time of slavery in Egypt, “The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out, and their cry for help because of their slavery went to God. God heard their groaning and remembered... his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, with Jacob. God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them....” The ESV puts it this way: “God heard... God remembered... God saw... God knew” (Exodus 2:23-25). God then sent Moses to forcefully compel Pharaoh to release the children of Israel. What a confrontation it turns out to be before the Hebrews can experience freedom and renewal as God’s covenant people on their way to the Promised Land. The plagues, the Passover, escape through a dried-up sea, 40 years flight and sojourn through the wilderness, all the way to the Promised Land: all these are part of a package in time, *chronos* time.

The period of the Judges also lasted about 400 years. Israel, already settled in the Promised Land, went through cycles of decline, conquest, repentance, renewal. In the book of Judges, we find the pattern known as the “Judges Cycle” that went something like this: At first, Joshua settled Israel in the land. While Joshua lived the people served the Lord, but then a new generation emerged “Who did not know the Lord and what he had done for Israel.” They began to sin through idolatry. So, the Lord allowed their enemies to defeat them (Judges 2:6-10). However, every time Israel was defeated and ruled by enemies they would cry out to God. God would raise up “a judge,” essentially a charismatically gifted warrior. God would “anoint” or pour out his Spirit on this person—contrary to their own imagination about their capacities to lead a contingent of disassembled tribes—to fight their enemies and turn back them back to God-consciousness and away from idolatrous associations with their neighbors. For a time, such a leader would help re-establish the people’s relationship with God. Even in such circumstances, the writer of Judges says the nations oppressed Israel “For the testing of Israel, to know whether Israel would obey the commandments of the Lord, which he commanded their fathers by the hand of Moses” (Judges 3:4). When the judges/charismatic leaders followed the Lord and led the people, the land was said to enjoy rest. From a revival perspective, we might see this condition as spiritual renewal, and flourishing of God’s people. Othniel, Ehud, Gideon, Deborah, Samson, Jephthah.... These are some of the names of the leaders, themselves quite problematic in character and makers of dubious decisions (except for the female leader, Deborah). What we note about the cycles is how they unfolded: the people would enter into idolatrous relationships with their neighbors and abandon God; God would get angry and allow their enemies to defeat them; the people would cry out to God for deliverance; then God would raise a judge to deliver them, and the people would turn back

to God under the tenure of that judge. To be sure, the book of Judges is designed to anticipate the uniting of the tribes of Israel under a monarchy, particularly under the most prominent king that Israel ever had, David. That framework points to the recurring renewals' ultimate focus—as well as the focus of revivals in general—on the ultimate King, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Finally, there was the 400-year “intertestamental gap” between the last Old Testament prophet, Malachi, and the appearance of John the Baptist as the messenger who prepared the way of the Lord. The biblical canon does not include material on this period, but we know from various sources that during the intertestamental period Palestine, the land of the Jews, was progressively occupied and ruled by Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians and Medes, Greeks, and finally the Romans, with varying degrees of oppression for the people. The Jews who had returned from exile in Babylon had rebuilt the temple under Zerubbabel's leadership, yet its glory could not be restored to the glory of the Solomon's temple. Jews had gradually learned to worship in local assemblies known as synagogues, where we frequently meet Jesus, and later Paul, participating in spiritual life. Zerubbabel's temple had been desecrated and destroyed, and Herod had rebuilt a temple. Israel's religious life was centered in the temple. But by the time of Jesus the temple was no more than a “a den of robbers.” At least that is how Jesus saw it when he drove the money changers out, as recorded in Luke 19: 46: “‘It is written’, he said to them, “‘My house will be a house of prayer’ but you have made it ‘a den of robbers’.” In the intertestamental period, the centuries before the Baptist, religious life had codified into crusty forms, formalized around the class statuses of the temple operatives, the Sadducees, teachers of religious law, the Pharisees, and the spiritual rebels, the Essenes. Yet missiologist historians have come to see this long *chronos* time as the period that prepared the world to experience the explosive spread of the gospel once Jesus and the movement he began came onto the scene. *Koine* Greek spread as the lingua franca of that part of the world. Pax Romana created roads and highways and trade routes and port cities that would later welcome evangelists like Paul, Philip, Barnabas, and others.

To return, then, to where this editorial began, the entry of John the Baptist captures our attention against this schema of 400 years: 400 years of Egyptian servitude; 400 years of a cycle of sin, oppression, crying out, repentance and redemption; 400 years of occupation by foreign powers amidst God's silence to his people; 400 years of anticipation for the coming of the Messiah. And when he arrives, he is nothing like what people expect. First of all, he is preceded by a prophet figure, the Baptist, who does not endear himself to anybody. He is a man of the wild, a man who eats honey and locusts and dresses in animal skins, with zero sense of finesse. He is no caricature either. He insults the most powerful. “You brood of vipers!”, he calls the crowds that come to him. He spews out the threat of a fiery judgement upon the puppet king, Herod, for his adulterous relationship with his brother's wife. But he carries forth a profoundly humbling message: “Repent!” The crowds ask, “What shall we do?” “Whoever has two shirts, share with the one who has not.” Tax collectors ask, “Teacher, what should we do?” “Don't collect more than you are required to.” Soldiers ask, “And what should we do?” “Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely—be content with your pay.” Then strangely, this John is locked up in prison and eventually dies a gory death at the hands of a conniving woman, her daughter, and that cowardly King Herod. The incongruity of the revivalist preaching of John and the crowds that follow him, and his anticlimactic, tragic death, should not be missed by those of us who ache after prophetic revivals. When Jesus comes onto the scene, he is no John the Baptist, either. He comes quietly. He eschews public applause till the very last week of his earthly ministry. He will eventually have crowds follow him, but he goes about quietly preaching, teaching, healing, proclaiming, essentially, that

in *him* the kingdom of God had arrived, and was growing like leaven, like the mustard seed, like a hidden pearl. And he calls the few who consistently follow him to do the same—to go about healing, teaching, becoming salt and light in a world that sorely needs seasoning and lighting.

In contemplating revivals and renewal periods, I am inclined to find the paradox reflected in the extensive biblical time periods instructive. Some readers may have been making comparisons with the 400-year periods in Ralph Winter's "Ten Epochs of Redemptive History," discussed in *Global Missiology* a few years ago (Jennings, 2021); that comparison is not what I am referring to here. Rather, modern humans, Christians not exempted, have come to place emphasis on the autonomous subject who adulates quick gratification, revels in a sense of being in control of history, and is uncomfortable with this notion of long stretches of *chronos* time—clock time—by any stretch of the imagination, when there seems to be little that God is doing. Yet, the long stretch of historical chronological time is filled—pregnant, some might say—with God's action. God is at work, all the time, whether we see an in-breaking manifestation of revival taking place or not. We ought to pray to discern his presence in the midst of what seems like apparent absence. God is the God of time, of space, of history. "He formed the earth; he fashioned it, he did not create it to be empty, but formed it to be inhabited. I am the Lord, and there is no other" (Isaiah 45:18). God is the God of those times when there does not seem to be an overwhelming presence of his Spirit in our midst. He has a different sense of time than we do, writes the Psalmist: "For a thousand years in his sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night" (Psalm 90: 4). So in the times when we have no fires of His Spirit blazing, God has not forgotten the world he created: "He knows how we are formed; he remembers that we are dust; the life of mortals is like grass, they flourish as the flowers of the field, the wind blows over it and it is gone, its place remembers it no more, but from everlasting to everlasting, the Lord's love is with those who fear him, his righteousness with this children's children..." (Psalm 103:14-17).

Hope should not only be predicated on the in-breaking of the Spirit—though when the breakthrough happens, we should be ready for it. Rather, hope should be centered on the leavening impact of God's faithful, covenantal presence in the midst of the world he made, the world he inhabits with us, working quietly, silently in the course of regular *chronos*. To borrow a lesson from Israel in Egypt, Israelite tribes in the Promised Land during the time of Judges, the crowds thronging the Baptist's preaching by the Jordan: circumstances of oppression, struggle, suffering, and alienation always give us good reason to long for God's intervening-in-breaking in some extraordinary way. And cry we must, whether that cry is expressed as prayer or groaning. We might even be the leader in the position of the Baptist, spiritually clued in to the fact that something unusual is about to happen. A series of events have converged. Clouds have appeared on the horizon. Yet, we still can't bring in God's in-breaking by sheer willpower. When Jesus is baptized, comes on the scene, and goes about quietly doing his thing, the Baptist is baffled. The Baptist sends his disciples to ask why Jesus isn't causing a scene: "Are you the one or should we expect another?" (Luke 7:20). Why aren't you raining judgement? Jesus's answer is instructive: "That very hour Jesus healed many people of their diseases, afflictions, and evil spirits, and He gave sight to many who were blind. So he replies, 'Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the one who does not fall away on account of Me'." Jesus acts in *chronos time*. An in-breaking, sure enough, but not on a timetable, and certainly not for show.

I think a re-acquaintance with time as the *chronos* dimension invites us to a re-acquaintance with time in general. Philosopher-theologians have invited us to remember several senses of time. One is to live well in physical time, that is, to attend to all matters physical while we wait for the King and his kingdom. Ecclesiastes 3:1-14: “There is a time for everything under the sun.” Do what you are meant to do at the right time. John the Baptist did not tell the soldiers to stop being soldiers, or tax collectors to stop being tax collectors. He charged them to do right by their profession, despite the expectation that God was about to break through into time. Second, as believers who are aware that we are in a privileged relationship with God in a world that is not yet enfolded into that privilege, we are called to be aware that we occupy “covenantal time,” or “kingdom time,” or what others call “liturgical time.” One of the implications of living with such a kingdom-time awareness is the transformation of suffering, pain, and struggle that makes us long so deeply for in-breaking of revival into redemptive possibility, for us and for the world around us. In Egypt, the redemptive possibility takes the form of breakout from the status quo of life under Pharaoh. Israel will first have to suffer a little while longer while Pharaoh stubbornly digs in. Even in that situation, “God heard... God remembered... God saw... God knew.” In Judges, redemptive possibilities take the form of mobilization of unwilling or disordered fighters. During that time, while everyone is doing what is right in their own eyes, “God heard... God remembered... God saw... God knew.”

In John’s time, redemptive possibilities look like the futility of life amid a colonial occupation by a heartless Roman system. In other words, conditions of life are not necessarily ameliorated by the possibility that God is breaking through. Still, “God heard... God remembered... God saw... God knew.” Living with a kingdom-time sensibility means we are aware that God sees, God remembers, God knows. That awareness is a profoundly hope-renewing encouragement within the context of *chronos* time. God’s silent action in the long-time stretches is what prepares us to enter into what theologians call *kairos* moments, that is, the in-breaking or breakthrough of winds that come at unplanned and unprecedented times, and which serve to catalyze new eras of *chronos*. A *kairos* opportunity comes when we least expect it, but how prepared we are depends on how well we occupy *chronos* time. God hears, God remembers, God sees, God knows. And God still acts.

References

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