

# Old Testament Spirituality

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Christian spirituality is grounded firmly in the Bible. Holy Scripture provides the objective revelation which prevents spirituality from deteriorating into a private and subjective discipline.<sup>1</sup> This objectivity is especially important today when a wide variety of experiences are defined as "spiritual." Everyone from Henri Nouwen to Shirley MacLaine seems to be writing and speaking about "the spiritual life." Spirituality as a human phenomenon is "in," yet it seems that commitment to a spiritual life which is rooted in Scripture is not so popular.

Ironically, this is sometimes true of Christians as well as the general public. Those of us who are committed to classical Christianity must examine ourselves at this point. It is easy to let historic traditions of the spiritual life serve as our focal point, and/or to have a particular tradition define our understanding and practice of the spiritual life. While we thank God for the light which tradition provides, it should not become the basis of our spirituality.

Furthermore, it is not unusual to hear people say, "I'm a *New Testament* Christian." This phrase is supposed to bear witness to, and guarantee, a purity of doctrine and experience. But it is a phrase that even Jesus himself would not understand.<sup>2</sup> In terms of a proper view of revelation, it is an unfortunate bifurcation. Omitting the Old Testament from any theological view is a serious mistake. This is particularly true of spirituality.

Certainly the focus of Christianity is Christ. But Jesus was a Jew and the Christian faith had its origins in Judaism. It is impossible to separate the New Testament from the Old without violating the message of both. In this article, I hope to show that the Old Testament is an essential and enriching source for the development of a Christian concept of spiritual formation.

It is impossible, however, to provide a complete picture of Old Testament spirituality in one short article. This presentation will be selective, but I also hope it will be representative. At the outset, it is necessary to make two major decisions which will determine the direction and development of the rest of the article.

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The first decision relates to the issue of the Old Testament canon itself. It is important to remember that there is no Old Testament spirituality, technically speaking. Because the books were composed over a period of approximately a thousand years, what we really have is a series of Old Testament *spiritualities*.<sup>3</sup> This recognition of a plurality of spiritualities must not be ignored in an in-depth study of the subject.

For this article, I will continue to speak of *an* Old Testament spirituality. The Wesleyan view of canon maintains belief in a certain “connectedness” among the books of the Old Testament. Without this, we could not legitimately speak of *one* testament. There is a real and necessary sense in which the revelatory process occurred in such a way that a larger unity was produced in the midst of plurality. This is not only true within the Old Testament, but also within the New Testament, and between the testaments themselves. Without this belief in a fundamental unity, it makes no sense to talk of *a* Bible.

Secondly, a decision must be made regarding the kind of spirituality described in the Old Testament. It is possible to write this article speaking of “the spirituality of Old Testament times.” This approach would emphasize the historical dimension, and would focus upon the faith and practices of ancient Israel. On the other hand, it is possible to write about “the spirituality which is informed and nourished by the Old Testament.” In this case, the emphasis would be on the contemporary, and the focus would be on the Old Testament’s contribution to a sound spirituality today.<sup>4</sup>

I have chosen the second route. My primary concern is to examine the Old Testament in such a way that our indebtedness to it will be made clear. This is not a license for playing fast and loose with history, but it does mean that a detailed description of the history of Israel will not be the thrust of what is presented. Resources are available to assist us in that kind of approach.<sup>5</sup> Rather, I will take certain historical data and attempt to present it in a way that reveals its significance for contemporary spiritual formation.

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There have not been many works written on Old Testament spirituality per se. Two reasons probably account for this. First, the term “spirituality” itself is not a word commonly used by Jews; nor is it a concept given extensive treatment in their religious literature.<sup>6</sup> This is due to their belief that spirituality is too encompassing to ever be properly captured in a word or idea. For the Jew, it is more important to affirm that spirituality *is* than to attempt to describe it. It is a concept whose comprehensiveness and mystery are too great to be analyzed or studied.

I mention this because I generally agree with that belief. Western theology tends to minimize mystery and maximize analysis. If we are not careful, we lose the sense of the sacred which must always attend the

theological task. The Jewish perspective is a good one, and it serves as a reminder that we are not writing about something which can be fully captured in words. We are dealing with a mystery too large for our minds or our pens. The preservation of a sense of holiness and reverence about all this is something we dare not lose. To do so would be to turn spirituality into something more akin to an element than an encounter. Having said this, I nevertheless recognize that the task of writing is to attempt as accurate a description as possible.

A second reason for the lack of specific materials on the subject is related to the fact that most of the major aspects of Old Testament spirituality are dealt with extensively under other headings. The task of exploring Old Testament spirituality becomes much easier when specific facets of it are singled out for study. This article is a case study in that approach. It is only when the subject is considered as a whole that a scarcity of materials is noted. This will frustrate anyone who wants to *survey* the subject, but it is not a major obstacle for those who wish to examine the topic in some depth. There is, however, room in the discipline of Old Testament studies for reputable scholars to serve the discipline of spiritual formation by providing more general works. As one who teaches in spiritual formation, but who is not a trained Old Testament scholar, I would welcome an increase of materials in this regard.<sup>7</sup>

Let me describe the approach I will take in the rest of this article. First, I will write with a perception of Old Testament spirituality that is roughly analogous to a body's skeleton or a building's superstructure. The topic of Old Testament spirituality will be viewed as present, essential, and describable within the larger flow of revelation, but as a characteristic which does not generally call attention to itself. Second, I will write about Old Testament spirituality under selected categories. I recognize that this approach does some violence to the dynamism of the subject, but I believe it is necessary in an article of this nature. Therefore, I will limit our examination to the following areas: Creation, Covenant, Community and Challenge.

I hope that this article will serve to provide further conviction of the essential role of the Old Testament in the development of a proper spirituality. If it does, it can save us from a truncated view which occurs when we limit our study to the New Testament or to the post-New Testament history of Christian spirituality. We will then have a stronger foundation for discerning truth from error in a time when counterfeit spiritualities abound, and we will have a much richer source from which to draw our own formation.

## CREATION

It is important that a theology of creation initiates one's reading of the Old Testament. A spirituality rooted in creation is essential. Thus, before

we have ventured far into the text of the Old Testament, we encounter some important facts.

First, we learn that the world is from God, and that the world is “good.” Against all notions of chance and mindless accident, the Old Testament declares that God is the source of all that is. And against all notions of dualism, it declares that every facet of creation is good and purposeful. The Hebrew word *tôb*, good, is found seven times in chapter one.

For Christian spiritual formation, this means that the first word in spirituality is “sacred.” Whatever else can be said about creation, the starting point is the rightness, goodness, and holiness of it all. Even after the Fall, it is possible to say, “the heavens declare the glory of God and the skies proclaim the work of his hands” (Ps 19:1, NIV). No matter what we do or where we go, we cannot escape or alter the basic “goodness” and God-ness of the creation (cf. Ps 139:7-12).

Another important fact discovered in creation is that even if we could escape God’s goodness, we would be foolish to do so. For at the heart of creation is Love. The original perfection of creation, its teleology, its majesty and its unity all testify to the goodness of God.<sup>8</sup> In fact, it is this Love which makes it possible to understand other important Old Testament themes such as covenant, prophecy, wisdom, and even eschatology (see especially Deut 7:7-8). The Creator God is so in love with the creation that nothing can cause a cessation of that love or curb its redemptive aspects. Spiritual formation maintains that if we look at the world through the perspective of the Old Testament, we will conclude that God is Love.

This revelation of God forms the foundation for the Old Testament call to worship Yahweh.<sup>9</sup> The biblical account of creation does not fully develop the character of God, or even the concept of monotheism. However, it is worth noting that in the growing religious consciousness of Israel there is no need to abandon the creation’s theology of God in order to understand God as the Father of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God is personal both in and through nature, as well as in and through human relations.

The creation story tells us that we are loved by a God who is Love. Human beings are the supreme objects of God’s love because of the fact that they are created in the image of God. And again, the *imago dei* is a foundational concept on the anthropology of spiritual formation (cf. Gen 1:26-27 and 2:7). For the purposes of this article we will focus on the human dimensions of creation. And when we do, we discover a number of important things about the spiritual life.

First, we see that life is sacred. God is holy, and the fact that we are made in the image of God means that we have a holiness through creation. This is why the murder of Abel by Cain is cited as a serious violation of the order of creation. This comes in time to be further enforced through the Ten Commandments’ prohibition against murder. When one human

being violates, abuses, or takes the life of another human being, there is a loss of the sacred which God intends (Gen 9:6).

But it goes even deeper than that. Even when physical violence is absent, there is an equal concern for the sanctity of life when a person does violence to another as in adultery or the seemingly lesser evil of a falsification of weights and measures. All this finds its source in a theology of creation which declares that every person, thing and activity is somehow infused with the divine. Only a lifestyle that maintains integrity with this sacredness is acceptable to God.

When we set contemporary perspectives alongside this view of the sacred, we see how we have deteriorated in our acknowledgement of and commitment to holiness. Life has been secularized in large and small ways. A general cheapening of human life characterizes personal and corporate living. The Old Testament plays a valuable role in the formation of Christian spirituality by never allowing us to forget or minimize the sacredness of life.

Second, we learn from creation that our life is specific. There is a general distinctiveness and individuality in the creation of the various species. But this individuality and specificity is amplified and given special attention in the creation of Adam and Eve. The expression of the *imago dei* in sexually distinctive expressions of humanity highlights what Eichrodt calls the creation of "an independent, spiritual I."<sup>10</sup> The value of life is heightened as we see that no person is a duplicate of anyone else. The process of naming further amplifies this fact. Whereas animals may well have been named by order (e.g. giraffe), each human being is given a name which differentiates it from every other human being. Even down to the etchings of our fingerprints, the work of creation bears witness to the uniqueness of each human being.

The uniqueness of self and the preciousness of personality are indispensable elements of Old Testament spirituality. This view of life forms the basis for contrasts between the Israelites and pagan cultures (e.g. infanticide). It stands behind the ethical-behavioral allowances and prohibitions of the Law. It is the foundation of the prophetic call to justice and mercy for even the "least" persons in a society.<sup>11</sup>

Before we leave this idea of specificity as an element in Old Testament spirituality, we need to say more about it as it relates to sexuality. In a society like ours today, we have all but lost knowledge of and appreciation for the relationship between sexuality and spirituality which is presented in the Bible, beginning in and through the creation story.

The sexual differential of human beings into males and females is mystery of the highest order. On a purely logical basis, there is no reason why God had to order creation this way. Even scientifically speaking, such an ordering was not necessary to perpetuate life. Yet, this distinctiveness stands out in creation as a principle of divine significance. Clearly, each man and each woman are made in the image of God. There

is no notion of each one having a sort of “half *imago dei*.” Much less, is there any notion of one having more of the *imago dei* than any other. Even after the differentiation, it is still possible to speak of a kind of completeness within maleness and femaleness.

At the same time, sexual differentiation provides an element in the human order which reflects something God wanted to maintain in the whole of creation, and that is a sense of dependence. We easily see and affirm that God wanted creation to recognize its continual sense of dependence on Him. But we see less easily that this sense of dependency is made visible in the dependence which is set up through the creation of maleness and femaleness. It takes both males and females to describe the full essence of the *imago dei*.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, there is a holy co-creatorship established between human beings and God, as intercourse between a male and female results in the continuation of creation in history. Further still, there is a dynamic of attraction, love, and relationship which would not be present if human beings were asexual or monosexual—or if each man and woman were absolutely and totally complete in themselves.<sup>13</sup> We end as we began, with mystery, but it is a mystery which embraces sexual differentiation and sexual life as part of the holiness of creation.

The specificity of the “spiritual I” also forms the basis for intimacy of relationship. Because we have been made “like God” we are equipped for relationship with God. In the act of creation, God demonstrated a desire for relationship beyond and outside of the Godhead. By creating human beings with the *imago dei*, God made possible both the desire and ability for every person to relate beyond himself/herself—to others, to every other part of creation, and ultimately to God.<sup>14</sup>

This aspect of relationship is essential if human life is to flourish, even as it was essential if divine life was to flourish. God allows human beings to come close, and God desires to come close to human beings. Yet, this intimacy does not violate the mystery of God or the autonomy of humans.<sup>15</sup> Rather, it calls God and humanity into a sacred partnership which maintains God’s sovereignty, but which mandates human dominion (cf. Gen 1:28).

Because we are made in the image of God, we can experience intimacy in interpersonal relationships. That intimacy is characterized by respect, service, and love. People are intended to live in peace with one another, and indeed with the rest of creation. Whatever dominion may mean, it does not mean domination or exploitation. The Old Testament is filled with passages that condemn the oppression of people by other people. Morality, fairness, concern, are the standards of interpersonal relations.

Finally, our being made in the image of God has implications for the rest of creation. We are to “have dominion” over creation in the sense of stewardship. The Hebrew concept is that of the faithful discharge of duty. Adam and Eve, and their descendants, are God’s representatives on the

earth to order and care for it so that it can reflect its own glory. This unity between humanity and the rest of creation is seen in general by the way the creation narratives flow from one stage to another. In a more specific sense, the unity is seen through two specific acts: (1) that the “creeping things” and Adam are both created on the sixth day, and (2) that Adam is given the duty of naming all the animals.<sup>16</sup>

To be made in the image of God means that we are not merely passive receptors of divine destiny. Rather, we are active participators in shaping that destiny. The creation story reveals that God sets forth information about allowances and limits for Adam and Eve, the allowance for authentic choice, and the execution of judgment after failure (judgment only makes sense if responsibility is a reality). The fact that we are created in the image of God means that we are “response-able.”

Those in the Wesleyan tradition will immediately see a theology of “natural conscience” as well as a reflection of prevenient grace. Old Testament spirituality as revealed in creation is that amazing and awesome mixture of allowance and accountability, liberty and limitation, freedom and fidelity. Thus our very creation becomes a major element of our spirituality. Such a spirituality saves us from any notions of dualism. Such a spirituality clearly reveals the value and sacredness of life. Through what we might call a spirituality of creation, we see our interconnectedness, mutual dependency, and moral responsibility. And we recognize that true life is not being swept along by some kind of cosmic energy, but rather is being sustained by an intimate relationship with a personal God.

## COVENANT

The personal God who creates persons who share in the *imago dei* cannot be satisfied with a generalized relationship. Through the introduction of covenant, the Old Testament reveals an intensification and a particularization of the divine-human relationship. And through the covenant, we learn important things about the spiritual life.

First, the covenant reveals a bonding between God and those who accept the covenant. “I will be their God, and they shall be my people (e.g. Exod 6:6-7; Lev 26:12). This bonding through covenant begins as early as Gen 9:16 in the covenant between God and Noah. It continues through the patriarchs, climaxing in the national covenant with Israel. Through the covenant, the ideas of closeness and intimacy are amplified. Images of this covenantal bonding run through the Old Testament: sexual intimacy as a symbol of God’s intimacy with Israel, a child nursing at a mother’s breast, a husband who cannot abandon a whoring wife, a deliverer who releases captives from bondage, etc. One can only conclude that the covenant is God’s invitation to “come closer.”

This invitation is initiated by God. The shekinah is God’s glorious presence with the people. This glory fills the heavens and the earth in a general sense, but comes to reside specifically in the Holy of Holies in the

Tabernacle and later in the Temple. It is important to note that this presence is "located" in that place where the worship of God is conducted, where the Law is read and interpreted, and where the people offer their sacrifices and make their responses.<sup>17</sup> But here, as in creation, God maintains intimacy without destroying reverential distance—so that the Creator-creature distinction is preserved. God is not reduced in majesty, and humanity is not absorbed into divinity.<sup>18</sup>

This reverential distance is preserved in two primary ways. First, the "vision of God" which affects and enriches the nation is something reserved for a relatively few people. The experience of Moses is an example. Moses is a reminder of the nearness of God, but Moses is not presented as a model of spirituality available for any and every Jew. Such a universalizing of intimacy, from the Old Testament perspective, must await "the Day of the Lord" (e.g. Joel 2:28-32). And second, Israel's closeness to God is never seen as automatic and guaranteed. Individuals (e.g. Samson) and the nation as a whole experience the *absence* of God.<sup>19</sup> Thus, the bond between God and Israel cannot be assumed or presumed upon. It must be reverently received and conscientiously maintained.

The idea of boundary is related to this. In creation we are given a picture of God's relationship with the world. But in the covenant, there is something of a narrowing of relationship. This is both frustrating and revealing. It is frustrating because we are left to wonder about the precise nature of the relationship between God and other peoples and nations. Once Israel becomes the focus (and even more the New Israel in the New Testament), the Bible never again answers all the questions of God's general relationship with the rest of the world.

Nevertheless, this has some important implications from a spiritual formation perspective. First, it implies that there is some sort of *qualitative* difference between Israel's knowledge of God and that of other people and nations. The idea of covenant implies the enrichment of the divine-human relationship, and enhancement of any less particularized, more cosmological awareness of God.

There is mystery here. It is a mystery which does not allow us to conclude on the one hand that one religion is as good as another, but neither does it allow us to take the other extreme position that Christians are the only ones who have any legitimate light regarding God. In the depths of this mystery, we must allow God to be God in relation to those peoples and nations which are not the focus of the Bible's revelation and natural conscience, both of which do not fully answer our questions.

A second implication of the idea of boundary is that within the Judeo-Christian tradition there is sufficient faith content and experience to render unnecessary any movement toward another religion. Therefore, the task which should consume our time and energy is the cultivation of our relationship with God through Christ to its maximum potential. Dr. Harvey Seifert puts this in perspective by saying, "Going to other world



religions for decisively different insights is like carrying a lantern to a neighbor's house to borrow a match. We already have the essential fire in our own keeping."<sup>20</sup>

However, it would be wrong to conclude that living within the covenant is some kind of "end" or goal. To live as God's covenant people is to be engaged in mission and evangelism. In fact, it can be argued that one of the reasons God had to set the New Covenant in motion through the Christian Church was that the Jews did not actualize the missional implications of the Old Covenant. At their best, both Judaism and Christianity have realized that God wants every human being to have a saving relationship with Him. So, the Jews have proselytized and the Christians have catechized. The goal has been to incorporate as many as possible into the covenant community. Thus, to be in covenant is to be reaching out.

For Israel, the idea of boundary was conveyed geographically and legislatively. For the Jews, land and law were two primary means to remind themselves that God did not intend for people to live as they please. Through the land, Israel received a place to cultivate its spiritual life.<sup>21</sup> Through the law, Israel received the information and the perspective to live its life before God.<sup>22</sup> Presence in or absence from the land and obedience or disobedience to the law become two concrete means of assessing the nation's vitality, and the two are interrelated.

The idea of boundary is not an easy one to describe. But it is an observable dimension when the covenant is studied. From a spiritual formation perspective, this element of covenant deserves much further study. The validity and vitality of "the spiritual life" must necessarily have some dimension of boundary to it. This aspect is all the more important as New Age spirituality attracts the attention of more and more people in our society.

Finally, we see in the covenant the motif of blessing, with its flip side of cursing. I state it this way because it seems clear to me that the primary intent of the covenant was to insure the beatitude of Israel. The message of God's judgment more technically belongs to life lived outside the covenant than life lived within it. The covenant itself is a medium of blessing. And it is important to emphasize that even in the Old Testament, the note of "blessedness" is contained and valued.

Traditional Christian spirituality has seen such blessedness clearly in the Beatitudes. The same can be said of the Wesleyan tradition.<sup>23</sup> It is helpful to see that the Old Testament idea of covenant provides the necessary ingredients of substance and accountability as it relates to the blessed life. Again, in our overly-subjectivistic age, we are quick to think of "beatitude" as an essentially private enterprise with a minimal sense (if any) of community or accountability. The Old Testament notion of covenant helps us a great deal in seeing the blessed life in a more proper perspective.

Fundamentally, the idea of covenant blessing is a communal idea. The cultus became the primary medium for describing and interpreting such blessedness.<sup>24</sup> Thus, the blessed life is a life of obedience to and participation in the community of faith, especially in such things as worship, sacrifice and prayer. The idea of blessing was made tangible through the existence of sacred sites, objects, seasons and leaders.

The idea of curse is therefore more nearly the result of disobedience than it is an expression of any type of negative emotion in God. God's wrath and judgment *follow* Israel's breaking of the covenant. In other words, something sacred must be broken or violated if cursing is to result. To be sure, original sin creates a primal rupture in the divine-human relationship which only grace can restore. But here again, the covenant as blessing offers sinful humanity a place to be reconciled. And when that offer is accepted and lived out, blessing is the norm.<sup>25</sup>

I have spent quite a bit of space interpreting the significance of Creation and Covenant in an Old Testament spirituality. I have done so because these are the two elements which have been emphasized most in the history of Christian spirituality. And as we have seen, they have tremendous consequences for the shaping of an authentic spirituality in our time. However, they are not the only notes to be sounded. Therefore, in the remaining pages of this article, I will highlight two more important aspects which are closely related to creation and covenant.

## COMMUNITY

The ideas of Creation and Covenant lead into a discussion of Community, for both speak to us far more of the plural than the singular. And I confess that I have selected community for examination intentionally and in light of our society's fearful drift into unhealthy individualism.

The Old Testament knows nothing of authentic spirituality apart from community, and several Old Testament theologies make "community" the central concern of the OT.<sup>26</sup> Maturity and mission are conceived of only in relation to the community of faith.<sup>27</sup> Here again, we note a significant contrast with contemporary culture and aberrant spiritualities.<sup>28</sup> The Old Testament helps us to set true spirituality in its proper perspective.

Both the law and the prophets are instructions for the people. Spiritual leaders are those who have the nation in their hearts. Private spiritual advancement is not even a minor theme in the Old Testament.<sup>29</sup> The patriarchs, matriarchs, seers, judges, priests, prophets and kings are all people for others. Stepping outside the community to embrace a private experience or a "foreign" entity is anathema. So also is living within the community in ways that violate its ethos. No matter where you are, you are a Jew. Nothing can change that. There is no understanding of faith and life or authentic existence apart from this community perspective.

An examination of the Old Testament shows that Israel had to contend with tribalism and sectarianism. But when the nation was at its best, the

tribes and sects saw themselves as part of something far bigger—part of a fellowship and a community. As Jews, they were grounded in the revelation of God as Yahweh (one God), the law (one standard), and the nation (one people). There might be any number of threads, but only one fabric—many colors, but one coat.

In this emphasis on community, we see several important aspects of spirituality. First, we see the formation of identity. Such identity is fueled by a strong sense of national consciousness, which is itself integrally related to sacred actions, sites, objects and seasons.<sup>30</sup> It is an identity which begins in the family and moves outward to embrace the entire nation—and in time, even those in dispersion who live outside the boundaries of the nation. This identity is maintained as the people remember the mighty acts of God, and the certainty of such past acts becomes the grounds for hope.

Second, we see the existence of interdependence. The Old Testament reveals close connections between the king, the priests, prophets and people. A breakdown anywhere along the line causes the whole nation to suffer. And there are times (e.g. Hos 5-7) when nothing short of national repentance will bring healing to the sickness. The theme that “righteousness exalts a nation” is sounded time and again; it is a righteousness which can only be achieved by mutual faithfulness. Holiness exists only where all segments of the nation live properly before God and each other. This helps to explain why immorality, injustice and oppression cannot be tolerated in the community.<sup>31</sup>

Third, the community is sustained and challenged by a divine intuition—a discernment of the word and will of God that comes frequently through the message of Israel’s prophets. This word is by no means limited to the prophets. All of Israel’s leaders are to be those who walk close to God. And so at various times we see judges, priests and kings expressing the word of God to the people. But when they are not obedient, God raises up prophets so that the people are not without the truth of God in their midst. There can be no genuine community without a sensitivity to God’s will and a determination to carry it out. Without this, community is destroyed.<sup>32</sup>

In contemporary spiritual formation, we learn the necessity of community through the witness of the Old Testament. Even by itself, the Old Testament supplies us with all the evidence we need to stand over against the erosion of community in our society. When this biblical revelation is coupled with the witness of the New Testament and the ensuing Christian tradition, we are left with no room to erect any notion of the spiritual life which omits or minimizes community. Community is an essential ingredient for every Christian, regardless of status, maturity, or experience. It is at one and the same time a provider of an essential element in spirituality, and a protector against excesses and pitfalls.

## CHALLENGE

All of this culminates in a grand challenge. Old Testament spirituality is never finished. On the one hand, it is a challenge to bring each new generation into the experience of God. And on the other hand, it is a challenge to hold the present generation in a faithful relationship to God. And finally, the spirituality of the Old Testament is one which ultimately looks beyond itself to the coming of the Messiah and the flowering of the People of God.

This means that yesterday's experiences, while valuable, can never become the verifier of present realities. The past cannot sustain the present or guarantee the future. So, the Old Testament has a tone of expectation—a forward look. This tone of challenge is an invitation. Israel is invited to embrace the world as God's creation, themselves as being made in God's image, the covenant as God's bond of love, the leaders as God's appointed servants. The comprehensiveness of the invitation is startling. It is as if God is everywhere declaring His presence, influence and desire to relate intimately with all people.

The essence of the challenge is an increasing closeness and intimacy between God and Israel. Nowhere is this seen any better in the Old Testament than in the Song of Songs. Scholars have given this book a number of different interpretations, but one thing is common—the lover is inviting the beloved, and the beloved is responding to the lover. The result is increasing intimacy. In the process, the Old Testament celebrates such things as spontaneity, longing, fidelity, union, joy and the beauty of nature. In fact, this book has been considered by some to capture the major themes of Old Testament spirituality.<sup>33</sup>

The problem is that the people do not always respond as they are intended. The glorious invitation to intimacy is ignored and/or rejected. And so we see the repeated cycle of repentance/reconciliation. As far back as Adam and Eve, we see the breaking of relationship with God and the need to restore fellowship. God often asks in one way or another, "How long must I bear with you, O Israel?" The law, with its elaborate system of worship and sacrifice, is one means of restoring the nation to God. The prophets are another way through which God seeks to heal the brokenness. The Old Testament does not shield us from a picture of God's ideal intention for all creation, but "Plan B" is usually in operation, thereby keeping God engaged in a perpetual reclamation project.<sup>34</sup>

And once again, at the center of the challenge to intimacy (even in the face of brokenness) is God's inestimable love. The God we meet in the Old Testament has made an indestructible commitment to keep faith with Israel. Nothing can cause God to pull out of that relationship. God's absolute faithfulness is the foundation for everything in the Old Testament. The psalter focuses upon it.<sup>35</sup>

The forward look of this challenge produces a history in which consummation can be celebrated. Israel's history is not meaningless nor

haphazard. Looking back, it is possible to trace the activity of God in the midst of the people. Looking forward, it is possible to believe that the future will be directed by God as well. The note of challenge is not only one of experienced intimacy, but also one of anticipated increase.

Interestingly, the present and the future converge to provide a vision of authentic spirituality. Like the two lenses of one's glasses, the present and future each supply a part of the essential clarity. One lens (the future) keeps certainty and ultimacy in view, while the other lens (the present) focuses upon the current tasks of mercy, ministry and mission. We conclude our examination of Old Testament spirituality on a high note of moral and ethical responsibility. The challenge is to live intimately with God in such a way that the future is secure and the present is served.

These major categories of Old Testament theology provide us with numerous insights regarding the nature of spirituality. In creation we are invited to the richness of the cosmos and the sacredness of life made in the image of God. Through the covenant we are encouraged to bond ourselves to the living God, which necessarily calls us into community with all other persons who have done the same. Thus formed, we are challenged to deepen our intimacy with God and to direct our energies toward the service of others.

To be sure, there are many other aspects of Old Testament spirituality which could have been included, and they would have increased our appreciation for the importance of the Old Testament in shaping a biblical spirituality. But these four will serve as irrefutable evidence that a truly spiritual life is informed and formed through the revelation of God as found in the Old Testament. They serve as a reminder that we have not done ourselves or others a service by omitting or minimizing this part of the Story from our theology and experience of the spiritual life.

## Notes

1. Bernard McGinn and John Meyendorff, eds., *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century* (New York: Crossroads, 1985), p. 23. The objectivity of Judeo-Christian spirituality is rooted in historicity, and this is a notable contrast from contemporary "New Age" spiritualities which are cosmological rather than historical in their nature.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 7-9. McGinn and Meyendorff provide a brief, but helpful review of the early church's reliance upon the Old Testament in the shaping of Christian spirituality.
3. John F. Craghan, *Love and Thunder: A Spirituality of the Old Testament* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1983), p. ix.
4. Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainright and Edward Yarnold, eds., *The Study of Spirituality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 48.
5. Examples of such resources are cited in the endnotes of this article.

6. Lionel Blue, "Judaism" in *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed. by Gordon Wakefield (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983), p. 226. Arthur Green makes the same point in his work, *Jewish Spirituality: From the Bible through the Middle Ages* (New York: Crossroads, 1986), p. 7. He writes, "Where a modern employs the term 'spirituality,' an ancient Israelite employs 'yir'at YHWH', (fear of Yahweh), or 'avôdat YHWH' (service of Yahweh)."
7. B. S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970), notes that the most difficult, but necessary, task of biblical theology is to "rediscover the Bible as devotional literature" (p. 147).
8. Walter Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, vol. II, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967), pp. 107-113.
9. Green, *Jewish Spirituality*, p. 13.
10. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, vol. II, p. 121. Interestingly, this idea is dealt with and confirmed in a work devoted to an examination of human religious experience from a natural science perspective. In *The Spiritual Nature of Man* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), Sir Alister Hardy, emeritus professor of zoology of Exeter and Merton Colleges at the University of Oxford, describes the *imago dei* by saying, "I believe that the nature of God is essentially one of personal qualities, and that man's relationship to this presence must be a devotional, personal I-Thou feeling."
11. This view of sacredness makes it impossible to speak of a hierarchy of value in creation. Differences in role and function are inevitable, but an assessment of value based on an attempted hierarchy is unacceptable. There is no attempt to define relative sacredness in relationship to race, sex, or role. Here is at least one reason why the Old Testament sounds a note of *compassion* for the poor and the oppressed. These people are not the sole objects of sacredness, but rather they are a societal test of how complete a view of human sacredness is in operation.
12. Some today attempt to argue that the genderlessness of God (that is, that God contains the fullness of maleness and femaleness) is a case for genderlessness in contemporary society. However, such an argument fails to deal seriously with a theology of creation in which God chose, for whatever reasons, to make the gender differentiation—and called it "good." Christian spiritual formation enables people to accept, celebrate and utilize their sexual specificity as males and females.
13. Craghan, *Love and Thunder*, pp. 213-222.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 21-25.
15. Jones, et al., *The Study of Spirituality*, pp. 56-57.
16. Craghan, *Love and Thunder*, pp. 24-25.
17. Urban T. Holmes, *A History of Christian Spirituality* (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), pp. 14-15.
18. Blue, p. 227.
19. Jones, et al., *The Study of Spirituality*, pp. 51-52.
20. Harvey Seifert, *Explorations in Meditation and Contemplation* (Nashville: The Upper Room, 1981), p. 16.
21. Chauncey Holmes, *Christian Spirituality in Geologic Perspective* (Philadelphia: Dourance & Company, 1975). This entire work seeks to show that

possession and exile are expressions of the “rhythm” of Israel’s spirituality. This has to do both with presence and absence, and also with righteousness and sinfulness. Palestine becomes a stage on which this rhythmic drama is played out.

22. Eichrodt spends hundreds of pages detailing the role of the Law for Israel. See *Theology of the Old Testament*, especially vol. I, pp. 70-178 and vol. II, pp. 231-496.
23. Dr. Jerry Mercer has recently written an excellent book on the Beatitudes, *Cry Joy!* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1987). John Wesley’s estimate of the Beatitudes can be found in his *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament* (Naperville, IL: Alec R. Allenson, 1966), pp. 28-29, and in *Forty Four Sermons*, Sermons XVI-XVIII, (London: Epworth Press, 1967), pp. 185-234.
24. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, vol. I, pp. 98-177. Note especially pp. 173-174.
25. Blue, “Judaism,” pp. 226-227.
26. For example, T. C. Vriezen, *An Outline of Old Testament Theology*, 2nd rev. English ed. (Newton, Mass.: C. T. Branford, 1970). Dr. Gene Carpenter, associate professor of Old Testament at Asbury Theological Seminary, defines the central concern of the Old Testament as, “God’s creation of a people in His image, in relationship to Him and to one another, in an appropriate environment.”
27. Craghan, *Love and Thunder*, p. x.
28. William Willimon, “Answering Pilate: Truth and the Postliberal Church” in *The Christian Century*, 28 Jan. 1987, 83. Willimon challenges the highly individualistic character of American Christianity and the society’s emphasis on self-fulfillment.
29. Jones, et al., *The Study of Spirituality*, pp. 48-49.
30. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, vol. I, pp. 101-176.
31. Craghan, *Love and Thunder*, pp. 113-114.
32. The importance of prophecy for Israel is developed in Walter Brueggemann’s *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), Martin Buber’s *The Prophetic Faith* (New York: Mamillan, 1949), and Abraham Heschel’s *The Prophets* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962).
33. Craghan, *Love and Thunder*, pp. 215-220.
34. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, vol. II, pp. 457-471.
35. Claus Westermann, *The Praise of God in the Psalms* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1965), pp. 81-116. Also, Bernard W. Anderson, *Out of the Depths: The Psalms Speak for Us Today* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1974).