

# The Old Testament in Christian spirituality: Perspectives on the undervaluation of the Old Testament in Christian spirituality<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*Christian spirituality draws strongly on the Bible. Yet, it is the New Testament that almost without exception features most prominently. Ten possible reasons are offered why the Old Testament takes on such a disproportionately diminutive role in the practice and study of spirituality: Textual complexity/critical scholarship/theological education; Modern popular pieties; The cultural gaps between the Old Testament worlds and our worlds; Theological difficulties/Christian sensibilities; Fear of “boundary-less” interpretations; The reference to Scripture by writers on spirituality; The notion of progressive revelation; Theological diversity within the Old Testament; OT : NT = law : grace; The long and the short of textual units.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION: FAITH AS LIFE AND THE BOOK OF LIFE

Spirituality is like dancing; play; sex and pleasure (cf Kourie 2001:4); taste and touch and the other senses (Gorringe 2001:1-27), beauty (so too Thijs 1990:57-67), breath and the wind (McGrath 1999:1-2) in *this* sense: it is better experienced than described. Words do not succeed, here as in many other spheres of life (Lombaard 2001a:60-61; Kagan 2002), in portraying adequately

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the dimensions of these primary states of being, these “sensations” of being human. Hence the variety of expressions and definitions employed to explain what is meant by the term “spirituality”, and consequently also the varied domains of religion or faith which is described with this term (see Waaijman 1993:5-57; Marmion 1998:3-40; Downey 1997:5-29; Smit 1989:85-92; Oostenbrink 1999:367-383; Kourie 2001:3-7).

From an existentialist perspective<sup>2</sup>, it could be said that faith *is* life. *Credo ergo sum*. For believers, life without faith is non-life<sup>3</sup>, both in this world (psychologically, at least) and in the next. “Christian spirituality is not just one dimension of the Christian life; it *is* the Christian life” (Downey 1997:71; cf Berkhof 1990:1-2). For the faithful, faith is a “*way of life*” (Cunningham & Egan 1996:9; McGrath 1999:3); faith *is* life<sup>4</sup>.

The Old Testament, on its part, has often been described as the “Book of life”. Against the (perceived) centeredness on Christ and faith alone in the New Testament, the Old Testament is experienced as of a more “earthy” order: what

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<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, referring very positively to Rossouw (1963), Jonker (1989:292) too indicates the strongly existentialist character of the spirituality of the Reformation.

<sup>3</sup> This is the sort of idea that underlies the thinking of e.g. Taylor (1986:17-34), though there in an unnecessarily alarmist way. Evangelical and missiological inclinations of an alarmist kind is probably counter-productive in our time – see Lombaard (2000:614).

<sup>4</sup> From this perspective, “religion” is the broader category and “spirituality” is the way in which one expresses one’s faith, for our purposes here, one’s Christian faith. Often in both popular and academic circles, this order is reversed, e.g. Nel (2001:10): “... spirituality should be seen as the most basic human principle of ultimate meaning-seeking and ... religion should be seen as the most prominent parameter”. In order for our purposes here to clear up somewhat this confusion of a phenomenological or a humanities approach and what might be termed a confessional or a Christian theological approach to spirituality/religion/faith, I would suggest a categorisation from the broadest to the most personal category as: existential quest(ion)s / “the *depth dimension* of all human existence” (Downey 1997:14; italics added) → religions and philosophies → expressions of commitments (in various social spheres of differing size and importance) within each of the former → personal experiences and expressions of faith. The latter is not an isolated and insular piety; “holistic spirituality” (Marmion 1998:2; Kretzschmar 1995a:31-44 & 1995b:45-54; cf Downey 1997:24-25; Cunningham & Egan 1996:18-21; Du Toit 1993:39-40) includes the dimensions of society, politics and church – see e.g. Lombaard (2001b:85-86); Smit (1989:85); Hulley (2000:55-65); Nolan (1982:7-11) – be it directly or indirectly. My references to spirituality in the rest of this paper refer to the last two of these four “levels” or “spheres” in interaction. The academic study of spirituality, though of course related to all four these levels and hence not “objective” in any positivistic sense, takes “a step away” in order to analyse, compare and theorise these phenomena, and to consider meta-issues. Refer to Addendum 1 at the end of this article for a graphic presentation of the “levels” or “spheres” of spirituality.

are considered the “normal aspects” of life is to a greater extent encountered in the first two thirds of the Bible. This includes the birth and death of ordinary people; their customs, laws and rituals; the animals, plants, seasons and other aspects of nature they encounter; friendship, love and even erotica (cf Loader 2001:98-111); violence and murder; politics and family matters; rural and urban contexts; epic journeys of survival; God’s words – bearing both good news and bad – and human responses to those words – both positive and negative ... (cf the subtitles to Preuß’s 1991 and 1992 double volume of Old Testament theology: respectively *JHWHs erwählendes und verpflichtendes Handeln* and *Israels Weg mit JHWH*).

On the face of it, then, it would seem that “faith as life” and the “Book of life” would be an easy match. Not so, though. The Old Testament is only infrequently drawn from for spiritual exercises, and continues to play a much less substantial role in the Church than its proportions in the Bible would suggest. Even when the Old Testament is referred to, it is often only done in a more or less metaphorical sense, rather than exegetically or theologically, and then all too briefly too, with the Old Testament references enclosed by ample references to New Testament texts (e g Cunningham & Egan 1996:9-14; cf Snyman 1997:376-377)<sup>5</sup>. This should be of concern particularly to church traditions, such as Calvinism (cf Jonker 1989:294-295), which stress the equal inspiration and value of all parts of Scripture (cf Potgieter 1990:25-26). In Roman Catholicism too, though, which offers us the deepest roots of the modern interest in and practice and study of spirituality, there is the strong sense that all modern spiritualities go

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<sup>5</sup> This is the case in general; there are of course exceptions, e g Cunningham & Egan (1996:144-148). The thematic approach of McGrath (1999:35-81, 88-108) goes about employing the Bible in a different way; here too though the New Testament features more prominently. The two studies which have come to my attention that give the most promising direction for the use of the Old Testament within Spirituality, are by the New Testament scholar Du Toit (1993:28-46), who takes the *praesentia Dei* as central moment, and the Old Testament scholar Snyman (1997:375-387), who takes life *coram Deo* as central moment (cf also Barr 2000:55-56). Nolan (1982:29-41) employs “justice” as the central spiritual theme of the Old Testament, and “love” as that of the the New, which leads him to “Kingdom Spirituality” (Nolan 1982:43-58) – concepts which were very fruitful for his anti-apartheid theology (cf Nolan 1988), yet too narrow to do justice to the diversity of theologies, ethics and spiritualities within the Bible (cf Lombaard 2001b:81-86).

back to the four Gospels' and the Pauline spiritualities (cf Marmion 1998:25)<sup>6</sup>. The emphasis remains on the New Testament (see, in addition, the registers in Smit 1988:184-185; 1989:93-94, and the relative length of the discussion in the adjoining chapters in Jones, Wainwright & Yarnold 2000; Barr 2000:47-57; Jones 2000:58-89).

The purpose of this paper is to outline some of the reasons for the existing difficult fit of "faith as life" and the "Book of life", that is, of spirituality and the Old Testament.

## **2. TEN POSSIBLE REASONS**

I propose ten possible reasons for the less than ideal reference the Old Testament finds within the theory and practice of Christian spirituality. These ten reasons are given as an overview, and does not purport to be an exhaustive historical overview, or for that matter as a full digest of current developments and trends<sup>7</sup>. Like most writing on spirituality, the ten reasons suggested here are based on a personal sense informed by various forms of individual experiences, academic readings, and intellectual reflection guided by a range of influences. Taken together, though, the ten reasons offered here seek to elucidate the undervaluation of the Old Testament in the practice and study of Christian spirituality.

### **2.1 *Textual complexity/critical scholarship/theological education***<sup>8</sup>)

The text of the Old Testament is not a simple text<sup>9</sup>. The long history of its development which historical critical scholarship has indicated, yet on which

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<sup>6</sup> An interpretation that relays spirituality to Scripture only, would be too superficial: expressions of spirituality naturally draw from the Bible, but do so within certain ecclesial, social and political circumstances, reacting upon these too, as acknowledged by Marmion (1998:26), (see also Downey 1997:46-48; Smit 1988:191-192; Smit 1989:91).

<sup>7</sup> For a historical and modern international overview of spirituality, see the essays collected in Jones, Wainwright & Yarnold (2000).

<sup>8</sup> On the latter, see Peterson (1997:54-60).

<sup>9</sup> For a historical overview of what is meant philosophically by the "text" of Scripture within circles concerned with spirituality, see Pacini (1991:174-210).

there seems to be no consensus<sup>10</sup> makes the Hebrew Bible a book that is often ignored for the purposes of spiritual enrichment. The concomitant repetitions, contradictions and inconsistencies found in the texts of the Old Testament has not helped to endear this part of the Scriptures to the Bible reading public. Important here is to note, though, that the historical scholarship of the Old Testament does not in essence stand at odds with Spirituality scholarship<sup>11</sup>, since the latter is to a great extent historically oriented (see e g Downey 1997:54-72, 126-127; McGrath 1999:135-172; Cunningham & Egan 1996:7; Casey 1994:12-30; Holmes 1981:14-157). This shared focus on the past, along with the implied, yet still unexplored, shared interests in the philosophy of history, hermeneutics etc, should make these two disciplines if not twins, then at least siblings who share a special bond. The place at which to start such interdisciplinary interaction, is already during the education of clergy and others interested in religion, at tertiary education institutions. The breach between the disciplines of Old Testament Science and Spirituality with which most of us grew up theologically, would thus in time be closed in both the theory and practice of Spirituality.

## **2.2 Modern popular pieties**

To a great extent the modern Christian church is characterised by pieties, which may be described as “Jesus only” or, particularly in more charismatic expressions, “Spirit centeredness” (on the latter, see e g Runia 1988:181-185; Jonker 1989:293, 298). Spirituality traditionally draws on Christ, the Spirit and the Church (Marmion 1998:26). Though the importance of neither Jesus nor the Holy Spirit in Christian theology is to be diminished, the role of the First Person in the Trinity deserves greater attentiveness in the Church (so too Kourie 2000:17-18; 2001:7), hence opening the door to the Old Testament to a greater extent.

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<sup>10</sup> The Pentateuch theories are a case in point: see Wellhausen (1963<sup>4</sup>) *versus* Blum (1990) *versus* van Seters (1994) *versus* Braulik (1991) *versus* Otto (2000), to name some of the main players. Regarding the New Testament, Jones (2000:60) mentions the parallel problems historical critical scholarship has created too.

<sup>11</sup> On the relationship between Spirituality and Theology in general, see e g Sheldrake (1998:33-34, 183-195); Marmion (1998:29-39); McGrath (1999:27-33); interestingly, Greshake (2000:21-32) places Spirituality as the primary category over theology.

My call is thus for a more clearly Theocentric, that is Trinitarian (Sheldrake 1998:47-62, 75-83; cf Fee 2000:24-32), sensitivity in the Church. Interestingly, even when others (e.g. Downey 1997:44-45, 79-80) stress the Trinity and the Bible, the resulting references are in no greater extent to the Old Testament. This stands, to some degree at least, in the tradition of systematic theologians too, who employ the New Testament substantially more than the Old, and better, in considering the central tenets of the Christian faith, to which the doctrine of the Trinity belongs.

### **2.3 The cultural gaps between the Old Testament worlds and our worlds**

It takes only a brief encounter with the Old Testament for us to experience the practices and traditions we encounter there as “strange”. This holds true for readers from both primarily Western and primarily traditional African backgrounds (on the former, see Barr 2000:48-49; on the latter, see Kudadjie 1996:66-78). From whichever cultural matrix one encounters the Old Testament, one could easily misunderstand matters that seem familiar and reject matters that seem outlandish. In order to aid the bridging of such divergence, the study of the greater context of the Ancient Near East and its implications for our understanding of the Old Testament and the spiritualities one finds reflected there, should not be underestimated. Such study may indeed open some doors to appropriating aspects of these ancient spiritualities we encounter to spiritualities<sup>12</sup> in our times (Nel 2001:3-5). The cultural gaps between the Old Testament worlds and our worlds need not be only estranging, but may also be enriching.

### **2.4 Theological difficulties/Christian sensibilities**

Throughout the Christian centuries, the sensitivity of the faithful to the violence, sanctioned by God, that we encounter in the Old Testament, has often rendered this part of the Bible to the margins of active Christian literature. How could a

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<sup>12</sup> The plural “spiritualities” is used advisedly – see e.g. Cunningham & Egan (1996:15-16); McGrath (1999:8-24); Du Toit (1993:29).

loving God be so cruel and violent? Features such as the attribution of such acts to God by writers centuries after the recounted events would have occurred, in order to make a theological or political point, long realised by Old Testament scholars, do not make much popular impact, because they do not fit well with popular notions of Scriptural inspiration. However, the Humanistic legacy of Reformation figures such as Desiderius Erasmus includes that the Bible can at once be treated as wholly human literature and as holy, that is divinely inspired Scriptures (Tracy 1989:255-258). The Bible critically studied and the Bible spiritually nourishing are not two notions at odds (Schneiders 1989:19). Education of lay believers on both inspiration theory and the less direct (i.e. non-applicationary) ways in which aspects of the Old Testament world unacceptable to modern sensibilities should be seen, is a prerequisite for the Book of Life finding adequate expression in the spiritual life of believers.

## **2.5 Fear of “boundary-less” interpretations**

Particularly the clergy and the *doctores* of the modern Church have developed an aversion to ways of reading the Bible that are unscientific, that is, without a thoroughly scientific method – be it historical criticism, structuralist methodologies or literary analyses (cf e.g. Kraus 1982; Richter 1971; Alter 1981, respectively). The earlier traditions of biblical interpretation, such as allegorical readings, are now severely frowned upon, for the reason that they could be so free as to allow almost any exposition. Biblical interpreters in our time who employ these techniques soon find themselves outside the main streams of interpretation, not only because of the uncontrolled exegesis, but also because of the theological implications such methods have for the view of Scripture. The Old Testament with its at times violent contents – to name again this one among the many difficulties people often raise – tended for these very reasons to fall prey more easily to interpretative techniques such as allegory (cf Rossouw 1963:48-87). Reading the Bible with a view to spiritual enrichment creates the impression for many that it comes just too close for comfort to these unacceptable interpretative techniques (cf Holmes 1981:12; Houlden 1983:48; Schneiders 1989:8-19). A

“higher” or “deeper” meaning, an “eternal truth”, a spiritually and at times emotionally moving result from such readings seem to leave the door ajar for uncontrolled, even plainly wild interpretations to become acceptable. The fact that, for instance, classic historical critical readings from the Old Testament can be employed fruitfully in spiritual reflections (Schneiders 1989:19), since both are contextually oriented (Nolan 1982:22-27), lies outside the field of experience of many, and thus remains largely unknown.

## **2.6 The reference to Scripture by writers on spirituality**

Writers on spirituality habitually insist on the importance of the Bible (e.g. Holt 1993:28; Kourie 2000:14), to the point that Houlden (1983:48) could formulate: “what else is the Bible if not spirituality?”. Scripture is one of the “constitutive disciplines” of Spirituality as an academic discipline, as Schneiders (1998:43), among others, indicates. She continues to point out that: “The scholar of Christian spirituality, therefore, needs a ... deep familiarity with the content and dynamics of this literature and a methodological competence that will allow her or him to handle biblical material responsibly” (Schneiders 1998:43). But then follows the by now unexpected statement: that no specialist knowledge is required; one merely “must be shaped by the great biblical motifs” (Schneiders 1998:43). This stands at odds with the demands made by the complexity of particularly the literature of the Old Testament referred to above. What is more, living from Scripture becomes thus, in a sense, only at a distance, not close-up, with the minutiae of biblical literature providing the unexpected riches that would feed both the exercise and the academic discipline of Spirituality. In the history of Christian spirituality, there has in general been given “no attention to the variety of background, historical period and authorship” (Houlden 1983:48) of the biblical texts. Hence, for the most part, spirituality scholars will study other’s use of Scripture (e.g. Casey 1994:12-30) or propose hermeneutical approaches (e.g. Waaijman 1995:5-39), but tend not to engage in exegesis primarily. Old Testament science is the poorer for this (cf. Fee 2000:3-15; Schneiders 1989:19).



## **2.7 The notion of progressive revelation**

Both in academic theology and in popular faith the notion of a progressive, that is, a continuing, “ever better” divine revelation in the Bible is quite common. This concept inevitably accords greater stature to the New Testament than to the Old. Even when the Bible as source for Spirituality is discussed in a sensitive, well-informed and careful manner (e.g. Cunningham & Egan 1996:35-41), one cannot escape the nagging sense that the Old Testament is read as though through New Testament spectacles. At times the idea that the New Testament is more advanced than the Old, is quite pronounced (Nolan 1982:61); hence the New Testament is referred to much more frequently than the Old Testament is (Nolan 1982:43-72). The idea of progressive revelation is, however, difficult to relate to the conviction, in some Christian churches at least, of the equal authority all parts of Scripture (cf Potgieter 1990:25-26). In addition, reversing the idea of progressive revelation while employing its terminology, Loader (1985:14-15 particularly) has indicated a way in which the Old Testament provides a “corrective” to the New. Lastly, neither the Old Testament nor the New can properly be interpreted other than in the others’ light (Schneiders 1989:4). On the basis of these three points, my petition here is for bifocals: for us to accord both Testaments full integrity in encountering us equally as Word of God. Hence the Old Testament could come into its own in its relationship with Spirituality.

## **2.8 Theological diversity within the Old Testament**

The theological diversity within the Old Testament relates not only to the different theologies found in the Old Testament (which is examined in the sub-discipline within Old Testament Science of Old Testament Theology; cf e.g. Preuß 1991:1-27 for an overview), but also to the different “group religions” within Israel (cf e.g. Albertz 1992:40-43) that could at the same time support different theological traditions which may or may not have been mutually exclusive (cf Weippert 1990:150-160, Albertz 1992:40-43, Van der Toorn 1996:181-205, Zevit 2001:643-646). This diversity of theologies in the Old Testament is not as clearly separated as are the different theologies in the New Testament. Hence, for

instance, the different expressions of Yahwism in the Old Testament is more difficult to identify and to come to terms with than are the different representations of Jesus we find in the New Testament (in Matthean, Markan, Lukan, Johannine, Pauline and Petrine theology – cf Du Toit 1993:29), in the Church (e.g. in Roman Catholic, Anglican, Orthodox, Reformation, Charismatic/Pentacostal and Third World Institutionalised churches – see e.g., respectively, Maruca 1983:336-339; Cull 2000:100-124; Lash 1983:283-285; Rice 1991; Russel-Boulton 2000:125-137; Tshelane 2000:138-156) and across churches (e.g. in “liberation spirituality” – cf Marmion 1998:336-346; Sobrino 1988 – and “feminist spirituality” – cf Marmion 1998:346-357, King 1989; Dreyer 1999:360-379; Rakoczy 2000:69-91). Yet, if the theological diversity within the Old Testament were mastered to a greater extent, these would both enrich the different spiritualities prominent in our time and, because of a greater sense of shared heritage and identity, enhance the possibilities of communication between these contemporary traditions.

## **2.9 OT : NT = law : grace**

Often still in the churches and among their members the relationship between the Old Testament and the New is seen as one of law in opposition to grace (alternatively, as promise *versus* fulfilment – see e.g. Achtemeier & Achtemeier 1962). A strong tendency thus remains to equate the Old Testament with “law”, as opposed to the New Testament containing “grace” that, in Pauline language, frees us from the law (cf Jonker 1989:298). The implied deduction is left that we are thus “freed” from the Old Testament, returning to it only to see how we were enslaved to/by law, or – always somewhat awkwardly – to find ways of now expressing gratitude to God for receiving grace. In this way, for instance, Nolan (1982:29-41) employs “justice” as the central spiritual theme of the Old Testament and “love” as that of the New. This creates a false sense with many that the “Old” in “Old Testament” refers to that which no longer applies, since something better has come along (Zenger 1998:12-18). A “false sense”, since as Holt (1993:31), among others, points out, God as a God of wrath and mercy is

found in both Testaments of the Bible. Neither law nor grace, neither promise nor fulfilment is restricted to the Hebrew or Greek sections of the Bible. More radically: read closely, the laws in the Old Testament *are* expressions of grace. The “law” against which Paul reacts and which often informs the recurring aversion among some Christians to the Hebrew Bible, is not the Old Testament as a book, but the practice of some of his contemporaries (which they on their part had related to certain interpretations of certain parts of the Hebrew Bible). To apply such exegetically inaccurate and theologically unsound categories as these to the Old Testament, and on those grounds then dismiss two thirds of the Bible as unworthy of our spiritual consideration, stands no one in good stead.

### **2.10 The long and the short of textual units**

In practice, Christians find it easier to read small sections from the New Testament - mere verses often – to “take something from it”, than is the case with sections from the Old Testament. A parable, a bare sentence from the Sermon on the Mount, or a single Pauline injunction seems more manageable than the Joseph novella, an Isaian prophecy or even a Psalm or Proverb which can at times turn out to be treacherously taxing just before bed time. This, though popular, is of course a false perception: reading a single verse from the New Testament leaves one as vulnerable to misinterpretation as does reading a single verse from the Old Testament. Yet, the perception persists, so that except for a courageous few, the New Testament is preferred for a “quick read”. This leaves the Old Testament, or at least the greatest part of it, under-utilised in the spiritual life of the Church as a whole and in that of the individual believer.

The case here is not that the Old Testament finds no place at all within Spirituality. However, these ten reasons offer some explanations for the tradition within the Christian churches that the New Testament nourishes us spirituality, while the Old Testament remains in the spiritual shadows, so to speak. Even when the Old Testament is employed, only two *loci* from it figure with any given frequency: most beloved, the Psalms (Holt 1993:29; Houlden 1983:48-49; Wakefield 1983:322-323; cf Sklar-Chik 2000:195-208), and second, the concept

of *imago Dei* (Gen 1:27). In both cases, better readings are often required<sup>13</sup>, though with some shining exceptions which take historical-critical exegesis seriously (Brueggeman 2002; Stuhlmüller 2002). By and large, then, the Old Testament plays a much smaller role in spirituality than its proportions in the Christian Scriptures would suggest. This is the case within churches, for individual believers, and where the Bible is a source for instruction.

### **3. CONCLUSION**

Investigating the relationship between the Old Testament and Spirituality is no one-sided quest for relevance on the part of the former, though no doubt being relevant to church, society and individual believers is incumbent upon us (cf Nel 2001:2-3). The Bible remains, first of all, a book of faith, but then always with its *immediate* implications for the broader contexts in which believers find themselves (Lombaard 2001b:85-86). To change somewhat the imagery of Gorringer (2001:106), this is like the tango dance, which consists of two steps. If one takes one step only, you fall over. The second step follows automatically and very rapidly on the first. This too is part of the interactive essence of Christian spirituality: that the Bible will be one step of the dance of life, and Christian practice the other – with neither step taken in half measure.

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<sup>13</sup> E.g., Sklar-Chik (2000:204-207) reads Psalm 57 as Davidic, and the idea of humanity created in God's image is often so loaded with modern meanings that one can hardly refer to such interpretations as exegesis – cf Lombaard (2001b:78-80).

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ADDENDUM 1: “LEVELS”/“SPHERES” OF SPIRITUALITY

