

The Costly Loss of Old Testament Spirituality

(1) Faith, Love, and Hope

Two bishops once met in a bar (I expect it wasn't actually a bar but it makes for a better story). It was in the second century. The bishops were called Polycarp and Marcion. When Marcion asked Polycarp if he knew who he was, Polycarp replied, "I know you, the firstborn of Satan!"

We know about their meeting from the writings of another bishop, Irenaeus, who was also originally from Turkey. Marcion held some beliefs rather different from those of "orthodox" bishops such as Irenaeus and Polycarp. Among other things, he believed that the teachings of Jesus clashed irreconcilably with the picture of God conveyed by the Jewish Scriptures—what we call "the Old Testament," but that title hadn't yet come into use (neither was there yet a "New Testament").

When Polycarp calls Marcion the firstborn of Satan, someone like me who is passionate about the Old Testament may be forgiven for a high five. Indeed, I am tempted to sympathize with the views of Cerinthus, another Turkish theologian. Cerinthus was too enthusiastic about the Torah; he taught that believers in Jesus were obliged to keep the law. Polycarp describes how John, the disciple of the Lord, was one day going to bathe at Ephesus. John saw Cerinthus there and rushed out of the bath-house without bathing, exclaiming, "Let's fly, lest even the bath-house fall down, because Cerinthus, the enemy of the truth, is within."

Many Christians are sensitive to the issue Marcion raises, the question whether the teachings of Jesus clash with the Jewish Scriptures. For the final class in each course I teach, I invite students to tell me the major questions they still have. They regularly ask about fitting together differences between the two Testaments, things such as:

Loving your enemies over against killing your enemies

Jesus acting in love over against God acting in wrath

Worshiping without outward rites over against worship that emphasizes sacrifice

A relationship with God based on grace over against one based on law

Today and tomorrow I'll talk about some of this kind of question, but I also aim to reverse the direction of the questioning and consider some of the ways in which the Old Testament interrogates us.

People commonly operate with the working hypothesis that Jesus brought a revelation from God that went significantly beyond the revelation in the Old Testament. There are two basic comments I want to make about that assumption. One is that the chief significance of Jesus does not lie in a revelation that he brought. It lies in who he was, what he did and what happened to him, and what he will do.

The other basic comment is that he didn't reveal new truths about what it means to be God except the fact that God is more complicated than people would previously have thought ("three persons and one God"). People's reaction to Jesus was not, "Wow, we never knew that."

What Jesus did was bring a concrete embodiment of who God had already told Israel that he was and had shown Israel that he was. And Jesus thereby provoked Jews and Gentiles to an ultimate rejection of God. It was a rejection that God turned into the ultimate means whereby his relationship with his people could be affirmed, healed, and restored, which also fits the way he had related to Israel in the Old Testament. But further, he thus opened the way for the news about what he had done to be shared with the Gentile world as something that could bring it the same blessing, which was again in keeping with God's original intention as expounded in the Old Testament. And he established his own authority to be the person who would ultimately judge the world as whole.

Jesus doesn't teach anything that's very new. The New Testament thus doesn't bring much significant change to the dynamics of spirituality. When Jesus was tempted by Satan in the wilderness, it was from the Old Testament that he took his clues for evaluating Satan's suggestions. When he went on to teach people about the blessings that God wanted to give them, he took his raw material from the Old Testament—every one of his Beatitudes involves recycling something from the Old Testament, mostly from Isaiah or Psalms. When he then

teaches people about God's ethical expectations, he describes himself as filling out the Torah. So if we ignore Old Testament spirituality, we are in danger of costly loss.

Tomorrow I'll talk about some aspects of worship and prayer. Today I want to talk about some aspects of a relationship with God that count as spirituality in a broad sense, about faith, and love, and hope. I won't try to speak comprehensively about these topics but to take up one or two aspects of each.

To begin with, faith. Four observations. First, one of the popular myths about the Old Testament is that it bases life with God on works or law rather than grace and faith. It is indeed a myth. It's one of the ways in which people let themselves be misled by the New Testament. It's not that the New Testament actually says that this is the Old Testament's own teaching, but people read the New Testament that way. Ironically, the New Testament's concern is with Christians who insist that Christians have to keep the Torah, and particularly that Gentile Christians have to. That insistence compromises the nature of the gospel. In opposing that insistence, Paul knows that he has to show that his gospel fits with the Old Testament, in other words that it is scriptural. With further irony, whereas our concern is with whether the Old Testament is consistent with the gospel, in the New Testament the question is whether the gospel is consistent with the Old Testament, because writers such as Paul know that if they can't show that it is, they're in trouble.

The second observation is that in the Old Testament, faith is a matter of trust. Here's another irony. Jewish theologian Martin Buber drew a contrast between faith in Judaism and faith in Christianity. Christian faith, he said, is about believing that certain things are true. It's believing certain doctrines. Jewish faith is about trusting in a person. Now I imagine we'd all want to say that Christian faith is about trusting in a person, but apparently we can give that other impression. And of course believing that and believing in are both important. So Old Testament faith means believing that Yahweh is the only God., but it also means trusting in that God.

The third observation links with that one. Over the past decade or two, Christians in the United States have got very concerned about violence and about violence in the Bible. I imagine

we are concerned about violence because we are a nation whose life is founded on violence, in several senses. Now it's been noted that books such as Isaiah and Psalms link with modern convictions about non-violence, but it's worth observing how they do so. Most of the time, Israel as a people and individual Israelites could do little about the oppressive violence shown towards them, and a prophet such as Isaiah urges Judah not to try to do anything about it and not to go to war. But the reason for this stance and the undergirding of it is not a conviction that violence is wrong—neither Old Testament nor New Testament suggests that violence is wrong. Rather the point in Isaiah and in Psalms is that the foundation of life for the people of God is faith or trust. Let God look after the violence.

I shall spend longer on the fourth observation. It's about the link between faith and memory. Remembering is a key imperative in the Old Testament. For instance, we need to take account of the importance for spirituality of remembering the story on which our faith is based. The first indicator that remembering is an important theme in the Bible is the fact that Scripture is dominated by the story of what God did with Israel over the centuries and what God did in Jesus and in the early church. But there's something important about the way the Scriptures do that. They tell the story on which the faith is based in such a way as to write into it the story's significance for the people who tell the story and the people who listen to it.

A while ago, my wife and I went to hear two singer-songwriters who were Christians but who were playing in an ordinary Hollywood club. One had made a song out of the story of Jesus' stilling the storm, but the song simply paraphrased the story, without making any point of contact with twenty-first century California. The other sang a song about hope that she introduced by telling us that her aim in her singing was to give people hope, but she made no reference to the fact that Jesus is the reason for our hope. It seemed to us that expressing the gospel in song required something that combines the strength of retelling with the strength of contemporary linkage – not just retelling and not just contemporary application, but the two combined.

Often the study of theology drives you into the first of those – it is just the investigation of something that happened historically. You may then live your life on a wholly other basis, on the basis of the natural instincts of someone in the United States in 2015. Which means you

end up in the same place as that other singer-songwriter, who was more obviously conforming to her culture. It's easy for spirituality to conform to our culture. We need the application of our memory to the story on which our faith is based to rescue us from the concerns that we have because of the context in which we live. Remember the story on which your faith is based.

Remember the way God has related to you before. The psalms do that. They often talk about being under attack. Psalm 3, for instance, starts by talking about the way people are saying to one another, "God's not going to rescue *him*." And part of the trouble with listening to people saying that is it's exactly what you're thinking. So you have to get into an argument with yourself about that statement. And one way the psalm gets into the argument with the self is by talking about how things have been in the past, in the person's own experience. It gets you to recall how you've known in the past what it is like to call out to God and to have God respond. The psalmist has known what it's like to go to bed not knowing whether you may get killed in the night, but then to wake up in the morning alive and well. He goes on to remember how he has not had to smash his enemies on the jaw; he has been able to watch God do so. He can turn the other cheek. He can pray for God's deliverance with confidence.

It has been said that no biblical command is as persistent as the command to "remember." It's an overstatement, though it is not much of an overstatement. But you do have to remember the right things. Memory is selective. We have to train our memories to be selective in a wholesome way. An alcoholic told me that alcoholics are inclined to remember the good things about drinking, and they have to be trained to remember the bad things about drinking.

Remember the obligations that the past places upon you. Remembering is of key importance to living a good life, a holy life. While the Old Testament sometimes urges people to forget the sufferings of the past, it also recognizes that there's something to be said for remembering the sufferings of the past. Israelites are urged to remember their oppression in Egypt, so as to be able to take this experience into account in the way they treat needy people.

So it is with the shame of the past. Isaiah 54 promises Israel that they can now forget all their time of unfaithfulness and chastisement and humiliation. It's not going to be like that anymore. But Ezekiel also recognizes that there's something to be said for remembering one's

sin and one's shame. There are one or two sins in my life that I still especially remember and am ashamed of, even though I know they are forgiven, but the memory holds me back from committing those sins again.

Remember that God remembers. The Bible's first explicit references to memory refer to God's remembering. "God remembered Noah," and then God promised, "I will remember my covenant between me and you." The story of Hannah, one of my absolute favorite stories in the entire Bible, shows how prayer involves appealing to God's capacity to remember. When we human beings make commitments, it's easy for us to put them out of mind later, and we may think we are right to do so. The classic example is that of marriage, when half the people in our culture who make a lifelong commitment to someone else realize that they can't keep it, that they have to go back on it. One of the problems about being God is that you can't act in that way. God remembers. God cannot finally forget Israel. God is still committed to the Jewish people and still committed to the church and still committed to you and me despite the way we fail to keep our side of the commitment.

Therefore Israel can pray in Isaiah 64, "Don't remember waywardness forever." And part of God's response is to say in Isaiah 65 that the former troubles will have been put out of mind; they will have been hidden from my eyes. Because here I am, creating a new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered; they will not come to mind. God has forgotten the sins that led to the exile and the trouble that these sins led to. God's own memory is selective. God's mind is now all on the future. God will forget the nasty aspects of the past and give people a new future.

Maybe the fact that God remembers is the most important aspect of the link between spirituality and faith and memory. Yes, it's important that we remember the story on which the faith is based. It is important that we remember the way God has related to us ourselves in the past. It is important that we remember the obligations that the past places on us. But it is most important that God remembers, which is in small ways a solemn fact, but in big ways an encouraging fact.

Second, Love. Near the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus notes that the people of old were told not to murder or commit adultery, and to love their neighbors but hate their enemies; I tell you, he says, that we should avoid the inner attitude that finds expression in murder or adultery, and should love our enemies. Western Christians often take his words as an indication that his ethical ideals are higher than the Old Testament's.

But actually, the Old Testament already recognized the importance of inner attitude as well as outward act. Job's account of his life in Job 31 is a systematic exposition of this awareness. Joseph embodies the Sermon on the Mount in his forgiveness of his brothers; turning the other cheek was not a new idea in the New Testament. Likewise, Jesus' blessing on peace-makers doesn't contrast with the Torah and the Prophets: it evokes the way Israel does its best to negotiate a friendly passage through Edomite territory on its way to the promised land. When Israel receives a militaristic response from Edom, it withdraws in order to go another way. Being peace-makers rather than war-makers was not a new idea in the New Testament.

Jesus tells people not to hate their enemies, but there's no Old Testament exhortation to hate one's enemies. Indeed, Jesus himself is the only person in Scripture to tell anyone to hate anyone else. For that matter, there's no exhortation to hate one's enemies in any Jewish writings from Jesus' time that we know. Jesus' reference to being encouraged to hate one's enemies is thus a puzzle.

The context in which Leviticus urges people to love their neighbor indicates that the neighbor whom they are to love is the neighbor who is their enemy. Leviticus's own point is that loving one's neighbor implies loving one's enemy (actually, people hardly need to be exhorted to love the neighbors with whom they get on). In his exhortation to love one's enemy Jesus is bringing out the Torah's own implications, not setting forth expectations that contrast with the Torah's. Which is not surprising, Jesus declares that he has come to fulfill the Torah and the Prophets, not to annul them.

Fulfilling means filling out. In Matthew 5 Jesus is bringing out the meaning of the Torah and the Prophets. Leviticus 19:18 implies loving one's enemy; Jesus makes the implication explicit. To anyone who knew the Scriptures, there was nothing revolutionary or shocking in his

expectation that one should love one's enemies, though some people would no doubt find it offensive, as they do today. Of course while there is love of enemies in the Old Testament, there is also hatred of enemies. But in the New Testament, too, there is hatred of enemies, such as the attitude Paul expresses in 2 Thessalonians 1.

Jesus makes a related point in responding to the classic Jewish question about the most important command in the Torah. His answer combines commands from the Torah about love for God and love for one's neighbor; he adds that the entirety of the Torah and the Prophets hangs on these two imperatives (Mt 22:34-40). Jesus thus offers an alternative to the postmodern instinct to ask whose interest is served by commands in the Torah and elsewhere. The interpretive question he suggests is rather, how does any given command express love for God or love for one's neighbor?

Alongside his words about fulfillment and about the twofold principle that underlies the entire Torah, a third comment by Jesus on the interpretation of the Torah offers a further insight. He is again responding to a question, concerning divorce. The idea that a man may initiate a divorce doesn't fit Genesis 1—2, he says. How then does he understand that regulation about giving a woman a divorce certificate? "It was because of your stubbornness that Moses permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not like this."

So here, too, Jesus is not introducing a new and higher standard than that of the Torah but analyzing the diversity of levels within the Torah itself. The regulation about divorce certificates stands in tension with Genesis, because it makes allowance for human stubbornness, but in keeping with Jesus' other comment about love, the regulation about divorce is also an expression of love, because it gives a woman some means of establishing her status; she can't simply be thrown out by a husband who is tired of her.

Jesus challenges his disciples to show a righteousness exceeding that of the Pharisees and scholars. The discussion of divorce suggests what might be involved. It means not taking advantage of regulations in the Torah that make it possible to evade the Torah's highest demands. The problem of "whose interest is being served" is not a problem within the text but a problem within interpreters. The text needs to be interpreted not in my own interests but as an expression of love. Augustine's principle that the test of interpretation is whether it tends to

build up the twofold love of God and neighbor is not merely a principle for the application of the text but a principle for its exegesis.

So Jesus calls people to the highest, the most visionary, standards within the Torah. Yet he is not rigorous in the stance he takes; he recognizes that not everyone can accept it. He himself does not seek to implement a standard that matches how things were at the beginning. While there are positive aspects to his attitude to women, he includes no women among his Twelve Disciples, and the Gospels do not describe him calling any women to follow him. He does not take the egalitarian approach that is implicit in Genesis 1—2.

His attitude to the Torah thus suggests a way of handling some troubling data within the New Testament. The “household codes” point to areas of life where the New Testament has lower standards than the Old Testament. There is no expectation in the Old Testament that wives should be silent when people gather for worship, and only the New Testament says that wives should obey their husbands. There was apparently reason for allowing such exhortations to have a place in the New Testament. They illustrate the way the New Testament, like the Old Testament, makes allowance for the hardness of human hearts. What such data in the New Testament suggest is that we should not assume that the teaching of the Old Testament is outdated by that of the New. Both Testaments are resources for the community’s understanding of God’s expectations.

Third, hope. In the course of telling Jesus’ story and working out its implications, the New Testament does make some affirmations that supplement what people could know from the Old Testament. The main one is the fact that Sheol is not the end for humanity. At the end, all humanity is going to be raised from death in order to enjoy resurrection life or to go to Hell.

Those beliefs don’t come in the Old Testament, though they were already Jewish beliefs in Jesus’ day. So they test but they don’t disprove the claim that Jesus didn’t say anything about God or about human destiny that people could reasonably have rejected on the basis that it was novel.

Alongside this truth about resurrection and Hell is the way the New Testament assumes the existence of Satan. While the Old Testament presupposes the existence of an embodiment of resistance to God, the New Testament puts more emphasis on this motif.

It's appropriate that the truths about resurrection, Hell, and Satan should be associated with the story of Jesus' dying and rising. It was Jesus' dying and rising that made resurrection possible. It was these events that brought to a climax the conflict between God and the power that resists God. And it was these events that made Hell necessary for people who turn their back on what God did in Jesus and who insist on maintaining their resistant stance.

The Old Testament is generally content with the idea that this life is all we have. But why did God not let the Israelites know about resurrection life? Bonhoeffer comments that once people know about eternal life, they often stop taking this life really seriously. The history of Christian attitudes provides evidence for this speculation. We need the New Testament to give us a basis for hope about resurrection life, but we need the Old Testament to remind us of the importance of this life, and to give us hope for this life.

The Old Testament invites us to live in hope. And not all its hopes were fulfilled in Jesus. Paul comments that "Whatever promises of God there are, in Jesus there is a 'Yes'" (2 Cor 1:20). He doesn't say that all God's promises are *fulfilled* in Christ. He says they are all *confirmed* in Christ. The fact that Jesus came, healed people, expelled demons, stilled the storm, submitted to rejection and execution, rose to new life, and overwhelmed people with God's Spirit is evidence for seeing him as the confirmation of God's promises. It's evidence for continuing to believe God's promises and basing your life on them.

The Old Testament invites us to live in hope. Between David's day and Jesus' day a thousand years passed. Since Jesus' day, twice as much time has passed. And it's the Old Testament that provides us with material for living in the time when God's promises are not yet fulfilled. It's been said that Christians believe that "the narrative of history, and of our lives in history" is "moving toward the Kingdom of God." John Yoder asserted that "the common Christian calling is a project: i.e., a goal-oriented movement through time.... Renewed recourse to the New Testament... enables authentic progress."

There is no basis in Scripture for the conviction that the narrative of history is moving towards the kingdom of God or that history will see progress. Nor does a consideration of the narrative of history over the past two thousand years offer any pointers in that direction. There has been no progress. That's not surprising; Jesus rather speaks of wars and rumors of wars and the New Testament envisages that later times will see apostasy and heresy (1 Tim 4:1-2). There's no talk in the New Testament of us extending God's kingdom or bringing in God's kingdom or working for God's kingdom or furthering God's kingdom. My colleague Marianne Meye Thompson likes to point out that more or less the only verb of which the kingdom is the object in the New Testament is "enter." Bringing in the kingdom of God is fortunately God's business.

Different parts of the Scriptures hint at a grand narrative that embraces God's purpose in history. The word "narrative" has come to be used to denote a worldview, but I use it here in the old sense of a story. Out of the Scriptures one can construct a grand narrative, an overarching story of history as a whole.

Now there is a common version of this grand narrative that leap straight from creation to Jesus; it's the one in the creeds do. There is another version that comprises only creation, fall, redemption in Christ, and the second coming. These versions of a grand narrative involve gross oversimplification. The grand narrative the Scriptures imply embraces creation, Abraham, Moses, Joshua, David; it embraces Assyria, Babylon, Medo-Persia, and Greece; it embraces Rome and Jesus' birth, ministry, death, and resurrection; it embraces the outpouring of God's Spirit, the proclamation of the gospel as far as Rome, the fall of Jerusalem, and the end still to come.

One can construct such a grand narrative from the Scriptures. But what the Scriptures themselves present us with is not a grand narrative of this kind but a series of smaller scale narratives, what I like to call middle narratives, expositions of part of God's story, which are not so different from what Lyotard calls "little narratives" or "local narratives."

Considering the grand narrative when two thousand years have passed since Jesus gives us a strangely new relationship with the middle narratives in both Testaments. If we had been living twenty or thirty years after Jesus, like Mark, then we might have thought that not much

significance attaches to the earlier middle narratives, the ones in the Old Testament, but the passing of two thousand years gives them more significance. In the West, at least, the church lives in a context more like the one Chronicles-Ezra-Nehemiah addresses and describes than the context of a Christian community in New Testament times. Our context is one in which God's promises have been partially fulfilled but in which nothing much seems now to be happening. We might even see ourselves as living in a situation like that of Judah in the exile. In some parts of the world and/or during some periods of history, the church finds itself living in a context more like the one addressed in Daniel's visions. The church in (say) Kenya in the 1950s might well find great encouragement in the middle narrative that pictures the rule of superpowers as not destined to go on forever.

While we would be unwise to live in light of one of those earlier middle narratives as if the events related in the later ones had not happened, the church's greater danger is to live as if it makes no difference that we are living two thousand years after the events that read as if they are bringing the scriptural grand narrative to its climax. To put the point more sharply, Isaiah 52 declares that God's reign has arrived, but the world did not change as much as you might have expected. Jesus said that God's reign has arrived, but the world did not change as much as you might have expected. And the reaction that therefore it's our job to bring in the kingdom is an unwise one. Prayer would be a better idea.

The costly loss of Old Testament spirituality. The Old Testament invites us to live by faith, and thus to live by remembering and to live in light of the fact that God remembers. It invites us to live in love, and Jesus invites us to see its teaching as an exposition of what love looks like. It invites us to live in hope, and to rejoice in the fact that the future does not depend on us. It depends on God.