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The Role of the Old Testament in Training Students for Christian Ministry

RICK R. MARRS

The place and function of the Old Testament in the training of students for Christian ministry has had a checkered history in Churches of Christ. In our schools, the study of scripture has always been paramount and has received primary attention; however, that attention has been directed principally toward the New Testament. The Old Testament has had a presence in the curriculum, but our students have historically gravitated toward the study of the New Testament. As one trained in Old Testament studies, I have great concern about the lack of interest in and attention to these materials.

In our congregational life, the Old Testament has suffered serious neglect—perhaps a reflection of our periodic (episodic) view of history, which sees the Christian era as having eclipsed and rendered irrelevant, if not obsolete, everything that preceded it. On the other hand, when it has been used in our congregations, the Old Testament has often suffered abuse, functioning as a foil for the gospel. Simply put, the Old Testament has been presented as a repository of how not to relate to God (i.e., law = legalism), while the New Testament has been presented as the correction of that distorted relationship in the gospel.

The Old Testament, as scripture, provides a foundational resource for Christian reflection on the essence of our relationship with the divine and with our fellow humans. It remains the primary backdrop against which the Christ-event may be understood and fully appreciated. Within this context, I would like to suggest two areas in which a proper understanding and appreciation of the Old Testament might inform and enrich our congregational life. First, the Old Testament has tremendous potential for helping us create contemporary communities of faith. For communities that are struggling to capture the essence of what it means to live in faithful relationship with God and with each other, the Old Testament concept of covenant has significant implications. Second, the Old Testament is a rich resource for creating and nourishing a biblical culture of worship. In an era that accords extraordinary attention to corporate worship, these ancient materials provide not only worship resources but also a theology of worship that has often seemed sadly absent from our discussions.

CREATING A COMMUNITY OF FAITH—THE COVENANT

Our congregations long for and struggle to achieve dynamic communities that nurture and nourish their members. They long for ministers who will cast a vision and help them implement a community that is rooted in the word of God and faithful to his claim and call. However, the temptation to import secular models into our contemporary congregational life is great. Unspoken fears abound that the biblical materials (especially the Old Testament materials) are not only antiquated but also largely irrelevant. The result is often tragic. Community models and programs often reflect more the wisdom of the age than the genius of scripture. In this context, the Old Testament concept of covenant remains largely unknown and untried. I would suggest that the covenant (and its attendant terms—steadfast love, justice, righteousness, knowledge of God, et al.) have significant potential for the creation of vibrant and meaningful communities of faith. Old

Testament passages in which the covenant is central can provide a theological rationale for community and help us see the implications of community life in a larger environment that is given to secularism and atheological life.

Exodus 19 offers us a powerful glimpse into the essence of community life in relation to God. The people of God, having recently experienced the heady liberation from Egypt and the toppling of the mighty Egyptian Empire, now begin to experience the anxious moments of life in the desert. Gathered at Sinai, they await Moses' return and a message from their delivering Lord. On Sinai, Moses hears:

Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. (Exod 19:3b–6a)¹

The theology of covenant could not be more clear. The covenant relationship between God and his people begins with what God has done (“You have seen . . .”), not with what the people must do. Israel's identity is fundamentally rooted in God's saving action, strikingly characterized as the parental concern of a mother eagle for her young. Because of that prior action, this beneficent God calls his people to respond in loyalty and faithfulness (“Now, if . . .”). Israel, to this point the passive beneficiary of God's redemptive acts, now hears the call to respond in reciprocal fashion. Her acceptance or rejection of this prior act of grace on her behalf will essentially determine her identity. The language is significant—it speaks more of personal commitment than of commandment. Faithful response results in a powerful identity (“You will be my treasured possession”). The language could not be more engaging; the Creator and Owner of the universe designates this people his most cherished and prized possession! Such an acknowledgment is heady stuff.

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However, a surprise awaits the people. Cherished possessions serve a purpose beyond mere ornamentation. This treasured possession of Yahweh will have a most unique function (“priestly kingdom . . . holy nation”). In the juxtaposition of two terms at odds with each other (i.e., kingdoms are for rulers; priests are for service), Israel's uniqueness is apparent. In a world given to power and rule, Israel stands to serve. She finds her uniqueness (“holiness”) rooted squarely in Yahweh's uniqueness (“holiness”).

This passage provides us with a powerful theology of community and with incredible potential for developing contemporary communities of faith. Well-

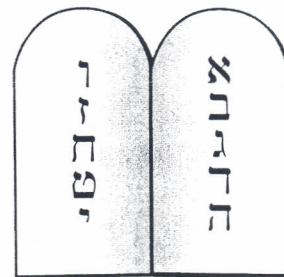
traveled (but possibly lost) terms such as holiness and election receive new exposition. As a holy community, we are set apart not only from something but also for something. However, we constantly remind ourselves that our uniqueness is rooted in God's uniqueness. We have been chosen, but our choice is rooted first and foremost in who God is, not in who we are. In a world that is searching for meaningful community, the church stands uniquely equipped to offer an alternative to self-service and self-absorption.

Perhaps no Old Testament book better articulates the theological dimensions of the covenant relationship than Deuteronomy. Initially addressed to a people living between promise and fulfillment, Deuteronomy compellingly answers the question, How then should we live? Its sermon-like exhortations grapple with the perennial issue of living faithfully in a culturally alluring environment. The covenant relationship speaks powerfully to such a situation. Although Deuteronomy at one level can be read as response literature, the

larger theology of covenant never disappears. The response of Deuteronomy is always rooted theologically in the prior action and nature of God. Theologically, God in Deuteronomy is not simply Creator; he is also (and perhaps more importantly) Sustainer. As Lord of the universe, he constantly sustains his universe. Not surprisingly, a primary focus of his sustenance concerns provision for his people. As sustainer, God is fundamentally a giver of gifts. In Deuteronomy, two gifts stand paramount—the gift of the land and the gift of the law. These gifts clearly signal God’s “choice” of Israel. Like Exodus 19, Deuteronomy clearly articulates that God’s choice of Israel is rooted in himself and his nature, not in the people (Deut 7:7–8; 9:4–7). God has chosen Israel because he is a promise keeper (keeping his promise to Abraham) and because he is a faithful lover (desiring relationship).

Against this backdrop, Deuteronomy unfolds the implications of God’s gift of the law to his people. As a caring parent, God provides his people with Torah (“instruction, guidance”). God’s “law” (torah) does not generate life; rather, it sustains the life previously given in the exodus. Since Israel knows God as creator and sustainer, she can live by every word that proceeds from the life-giving God (Deut 8:3). Radically (and centrally for Deuteronomy), the law stands as a supreme manifestation of God’s saving grace.

Further, the law is principally an ethical reflection (mirror) of the acts of Israel’s covenant Lord. Needless to say, such a theological vision has powerful implications for contemporary congregational life. In discussions of the meaning of God’s statutes and requirements, Deuteronomy eloquently reminds us where we must begin the story (Deut 6:20–25). Our faithful obedience is first and foremost a response of gratitude to a delivering Lord. To a society obsessed with possessions and convinced that our ability and right to “have” is almost solely rooted in ourselves, Deuteronomy offers a compelling rebuttal. For Deuteronomy, we have what we have as children of God because we are undeserving (but grateful) recipients of the gracious largesse of a giving God (Deut 8:11–19). Deuteronomy reminds us of the power of story to shape our lives and behavior and of the importance of memory to shape our communities in faithful ways. The theology of Deuteronomy is captured quintessentially in the Shema:



Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deut 6:4–9)

Upon her entrance into and settlement in the land of Canaan, Israel finds herself confronted with the lure of Canaanite Baalism. As a recently freed band of slaves, she now faces the perilous task of choosing a lifestyle appropriate to her newfound relationship with the covenant God. In two pivotal statements, Deuteronomy 6 captures the fundamental truth of life (Yahweh *alone* is God) and the fundamentally appropriate response to this truth (you shall love this God *unconditionally*). These affirmations carry primary importance not only for ancient Israel but for contemporary churches as well. Deuteronomy 6, enmeshed in law, presents gospel. This first “heard” word delivers neither instruction nor command, but declaration—Yahweh alone is our God. This message is gospel, a declaration that the God of Israel is singular in his purpose toward Israel and single-minded in his devotion to his people. In contrast to the fickle gods of the Canaanites, Yahweh stands consistently loyal in his compassion toward and commitment to Israel. The unity between his intent for and his action toward his people captures his oneness.

This fundamental truth about God centers and generates the call to Israel for exclusive allegiance.

Steadfast love (*hesed*), the term that captures most clearly the essence of the covenant relationship, embodies not only God's acts toward his people but God's call to his people. Steadfast love entails neither emotion nor feeling; rather, it defines a stance one takes toward God. At root, it involves responding to God in kind. Israel is called to manifest the same single-minded devotion toward God that he has exhibited toward her. Such a perspective has significant implications for the training of students for ministry and for congregational

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life. Strikingly, the "gospel" surfaces powerfully in the midst of that document most singularly devoted to explicating the theological dimensions of the law (torah). Reciting the Shema with Israel reminds us that God's kingdom begins at the Red Sea, not at Sinai. Sinai neither initiates nor establishes the relationship; rather, it articulates the appropriate response to the call to relationship. The "flag" that flies over the kingdom of God is not "You shall love the LORD your God with all your might," but "Yahweh is our God, Yahweh alone." As faithful subjects in that kingdom, we "pledge allegiance" daily to that flag.

Deuteronomy articulates various community practices and activities that keep that pledge of allegiance a daily reality. Hearing Deuteronomy 6 in our contemporary communities of faith enables us to reconsider the fundamental truth of our lives as children of God, and the appropriate (i.e., faithful) response God calls us to make to this fundamental truth. Like Israel, we are called to be communities that affirm and acknowledge only one ultimate and absolute truth. We unashamedly affirm that the God we worship, who undergirds all reality, is faithful, not capricious; is single-minded in purpose, not divided; and is limited only by the self-imposed limitation to remain constantly faithful and loyal to his promises and to his gospel. As loyal subjects to this God, we affirm that we can have only one absolute allegiance in our lives. For us, all earthly claims are relativized by the ultimate claim that Yahweh in Jesus Christ makes upon our lives.² Surely, ministry students who are armed with a deep understanding of covenant will bring health and depth to congregational life and community relationships.

CREATING A BIBLICAL CULTURE OF WORSHIP—THE PSALMS

The Old Testament may also speak powerfully to a second area—the current "worship wars." As congregations argue the purpose and nature of worship, our students, equipped with a biblical understanding of worship, may educate our congregations and lead them in meaningful worship. In this context, the Psalter serves most effectively. Although the psalms function largely as a resource for private devotion for many of our congregants, they were originally composed for corporate worship experiences. I have selected three psalms that illustrate the value of the Old Testament for our students and their lives in ministry. James Mays suggests three reasons for bringing the Psalter back into the center of our worship.³ First, the psalms articulate and lead us into doxology. They are theological—their *logos* is none other than the Lord God. Since God is the central focus of praise, the psalms bring us into service of God.⁴ Second, the psalms as praise are confessional. Praise as doxology declares *that* God is; praise as confession (profession) declares *who* God is. A central feature of worship must be affirmation. As humans who live in a polytheistic world, we must make clear in our worship the God we have chosen (or better, the God who has chosen us).⁵ Finally, worship in the psalms has an evangelical function. The hymns of Israel invite all nations and peoples of the earth to affirm that the Lord (and the Lord alone) reigns. Praise in the psalms never allows Yahweh to be simply "our God," or one god among many. Rather, Israel calls the peoples of the earth to change their worldview ("repent") and trust their present and future to the reign of God. Psalm 100, paradigmatic as a call to worship, captures these themes well.

Make a joyful noise to Lord, all the earth.
 Worship the Lord with gladness;
 come into his presence with singing.
 Know that the Lord is God.
 It is he that made us, and we are his;
 we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.
 Enter his gates with thanksgiving,
 and his courts with praise.
 Give thanks to him, bless his name.
 For the Lord is good;
 his steadfast love endures forever,
 and his faithfulness to all generations.

As an entrance psalm, Psalm 100 not only initiates worship; it sets forth a theology of worship. In the call to rejoice, this psalm proclaims an identity both for God and for his people. This psalm opens God's gracious gates into his holy presence and invites those whom the Lord has brought into existence (i.e., those over whom he has "creator rights") to enter. The worshipers stand before the majestic Lord of the universe.

Perhaps most importantly, Psalm 100 implicitly notes the theo-political nature of worship. Regal language and imagery permeate the psalm. The actions cited denote activity appropriate for approach to a king. The call is to "serve" (worship).⁶ In contrast to popular contemporary notions of worship, Psalm 100 affirms that worship entails a most significant social act—it involves opting for one power structure to the exclusion of all others. Psalm 100 calls a community to orient its life around the sovereign lordship of God. Such a theological vision desperately needs articulation in our congregations. During a time when "lordship" language slides glibly from our tongues, this psalm helps remind us of the social and political implications of such language.⁷

Psalm 100 reminds us of the confessional nature of worship. Since humans seem intrinsically polytheistic, Psalm 100 unashamedly calls for the whole earth to recognize and acknowledge the God of Israel as King and Lord of all people. The call is not without rationale. This God before whom Israel comes in worship is not only present; he is present as shepherd. As present shepherd, he is "good" (*hesed*'*emûnâ*).⁸ It is for this reason that the worship this psalm initiates is joyful. Praise dominates the psalm, keeping constant attention upon the one being praised.⁹ This psalm powerfully reminds us that our identity is integrally rooted in God's identity. Such an awareness in worship transforms our lives. Paul's declaration is most appropriate:

Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body. (1 Cor 6:19–20)

Our students need a theology of worship that will empower congregations to transcend the trivial and peripheral in discussions of worship.

Equally relevant in contemporary discussions of worship is the lifestyle of the worshipers who come before the Lord. Psalms 15 and 24 provide helpful exposition on the importance of personal self-reflection and introspection for corporate worship. Psalm 15 (perhaps intoned as worshipers ascended the temple mount) presents fitting questions for entering worshipers.

Psalm 100 calls a community to orient its life around the sovereign lordship of God. Such a theological vision desperately needs articulation in our congregations.

O Lord, who may abide in your tent?
 Who may dwell on your holy hill?
 Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right,
 and speak truth from their heart;
 who do not slander with their tongue,
 and do no evil to their friends,
 nor take up a reproach against their neighbors;
 in whose eyes the wicked are despised,
 but who honor those who fear the Lord;
 who stand by their oath even to their hurt;
 who do not lend money at interest,
 and do not take a bribe against the innocent.
 Those who do these things shall never be moved.

At the outset, we must remember that this material is liturgical, not legal. Israel is always to remember that the Exodus preceded Sinai, that is, that gospel (deliverance) precedes law (requirements). As liturgy, Psalm 15 (and Psalm 24) raises fundamental questions: Who are we, and what should we be, as we come into God's presence?

The mere posing of the question (v. 1) is significant. Worship can never be severed from daily life. Since worship is essentially the offering of our lives to God ("sacrifice"), the quality of our lives matters deeply. This psalm presents for us the kind of person God delights to find in worship. However, in worship we are constantly reminded of our need for atonement and reconciliation—our lives fail to reflect the holiness that God seeks from us. This psalm (and Psalm 24) functions not for exclusionary purposes (otherwise, those most in need of God's atonement and reconciliation would be denied access); rather, it functions to remind

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worshiping entrants of the kind of person the presence of God desires. Standing in the powerful presence of a holy God who calls, commands, judges, and redeems transforms the worshiper.¹⁰

Like Psalm 100, Psalm 15 employs imagery that is pertinent to contemporary congregations. The opening question, "Who may abide (sojourn)?" brings us into the ancient Near Eastern world of hospitality and the resident alien. If the temple is the house of God, then the one seeking admission is by analogy an outsider (stranger). In the ancient Near Eastern world, the

stranger is always presumed to be dangerous (i.e., an enemy) until received by the host; however, once the host welcomes the outsider, the host assumes the responsibility of protection! By analogy, the worshiper becomes a guest of God, going from enmity with God to enjoying divine protection! Strikingly, this psalm offers us a theology of reconciliation.¹¹

Psalm 15 helps us avoid two extremes in contemporary worship: (1) stressing the holiness of God to such an extent that worshipers feel it is impossible to approach God in worship and prayer, and (2) emphasizing the open access to God to such an extent that admission into God's presence becomes a thoughtless and casual matter. God openly and joyfully invites his worshipers into his presence; however, entrance must occur with proper preparation and reverence.¹²

Psalm 24 rings similar to Psalm 15; the primary difference involves the apparent presence of the ark of the covenant in the entrance procession. Psalm 24 divides into three distinct parts, all of which speak of God's sovereign rule. God, as creator of the world, retains exclusive ownership of his creation (vv. 1–2). Ethical implications and expectations for entrance into the presence of this holy creator God appear next (vv.

3–6). The psalm concludes with a call to the temple gates to admit the “king of glory” (vv. 7–10). Identity is a central theme—two questions concern the identity of humans; two questions concern the identity of God. In verses 1–2, God is identified in the psalms as “owner” of the world. The declaration is simple yet profound—the Lord owns the world because it is his work. He reigns as supreme sovereign. In contrast, humans have possession of the world, but not ownership. The pivotal question for humans is not, Who can enter God’s gates? but, Who can live under his reign? Those who gather to worship this sovereign Lord are members of the kingdom. As kingdom subjects, they pledge allegiance to the moral principles and directives of the monarch. In a real sense, Psalm 24 sets forth a theology for congregational life and worship. God’s subjects enter the sanctuary seeking God’s blessing and righteousness. God’s blessing encompasses his gracious provisions that sustain life; God’s righteousness intends the divine gift of acceptance and renewal of the relationship with God that enables and empowers righteous living in the human arena. This psalm presents the central elements of faith, life, and worship. Life lived in faithfulness acknowledges God as creator and owner of the world we inhabit. This psalm announces that in worship we reaffirm the reality that this sovereign Lord of the universe not only allows us to enter into his presence but, in our worship, comes to us. Just as our existence depends on his creation, so our blessing and righteousness depend on his coming. Hauerwas and Willimon state it well in their response to the question, How does the world really look?

We would like a church that again asserts that God, not nations, rules the world, that the boundaries of God’s kingdom transcend those of Caesar’s, and that the main political task of the church is the formation of a people who see clearly the cost of discipleship and are willing to pay the price.¹³

Many other psalms could be cited, but these suffice to demonstrate that the Psalter provides a rich resource for congregational discussions of worship. The Psalter needs once again to capture a place of centrality, not only liturgically but also theologically, in our discussions of contemporary worship. Theologically, they provide a rich resource for articulating a theology of creation, of the sovereign Lord of creation, and of the subjects of the creator God. Worship, rather than functioning as an exercise in self-absorption and narcissism, can become again a medium through which our lives are captured and remolded in accordance to the will and ways of the King of the universe.

CONCLUSION

Numerous other features of the Old Testament could be utilized in our discussion of its contemporary relevance for the training of ministers and for congregational life; for purposes of space, however, these two should suffice.¹⁴ As many of our congregations move toward a more holistic view of scripture, the Old Testament can provide a spiritually rich and inviting resource in discussions of congregational life and renewal and in our search to be communities of faith that constantly seek to align ourselves to the will and way of our Sovereign Lord.

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NOTES

- 1 Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).
- 2 The rabbis called the Shema the “yoke of the kingdom.” To recite the Shema meant to accept the yoke (i.e., to fulfill one’s duties to the king). Such a view is suggestive for congregational life. Questions that address issues of allegiance (reflected in daily decisions regarding time, energy, and resources) are perennially relevant matters for communities of faith.
- 3 James L. Mays, *The Lord Reigns: A Theological Handbook to the Psalms* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994), 63–71.

- 4 Ibid., 64. Mays cites the rabbinic legend that tells how God actually finished creation in five days, but when he asked his angels their opinion of his creation, they responded that it lacked one thing to make it “more perfect”—speech to praise its perfection! In response, God created humans.
- 5 Gardner Taylor states: “[W]orship is bringing the gods we make before the God who made us.” Cited in Mays, *The Lord Reigns*, 67.
- 6 The importance of this term has often been noted. In the book of Exodus, the people are called to serve Yahweh rather than the Pharaoh; in Deuteronomy, they are called to serve Yahweh rather than other gods.
- 7 The early church knew clearly the stakes in declaring, “Jesus is Lord.” In a world where Caesar reigned supreme as Lord, such language was not only countercultural; it was implicitly treasonous. Ironically, Americans have two primary “experiences” with monarchy. At the heart of our history is the incredibly patriotic narrative of our revolt against a monarchy; today, monarchy is perhaps best associated with the quaint picture of a British queen who, while regal, certainly functions only as a figurehead.
- 8 Affirming that the Lord is “good” designates Yahweh as one who confirms, sustains, and fulfills our existence. “From the vantage of worship one cannot see the detailed what of the future, but the congregation can behold who waits there.” Mays, *The Lord Reigns*, 82.
- 9 It is helpful to remind congregations that Hebrew has no word for thanks; rather, its dominant word is praise. To thank someone always runs the danger of focusing attention upon the one doing the thanks (I) rather than the one being thanked (God).
- 10 “To be in the place of the presence [of God] means to be at the point where the purpose and power of God come to bear on a person’s identity and formation.” James L. Mays, *Psalms* (Interpretation; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994), 86.
- 11 Nahum Sarna states: “In addition, the one who comes to the Temple is, in some measure, estranged from God, and looks to dispel this feeling of alienation by the act of worship that will impart a heightened sense of fellowship and intimacy with Him.” Nahum M. Sarna, *On the Book of Psalms: Exploring the Prayers of Ancient Israel* (New York: Schocken, 1995), 110.
- 12 Peter Craigie states it well: “What transforms the psalms from a barrier to a gateway is the realization that the preparation for worship illuminates also the necessity for worship. On the one hand, we must live in such a way that we may prepare for worship with integrity, without hypocrisy; on the other hand, the introspection involved, prior to worship, clarifies beyond any doubt the need for forgiveness. Failing to have fulfilled the ten conditions, we require forgiveness before we can enter the divine presence. Only then do we realize that the privilege may never be casually exploited and also that the Holy God is not inaccessible.” Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, (Word Biblical Commentary; Waco: Word, 1983), 153.
- 13 Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990).
- 14 In an earlier draft, I included a discussion of the place of the OT in the proclamation of the Word. In that discussion, the OT prophets feature prominently not only as models for the rhetorical dynamics of proclamation (e.g., Amos) but also as valuable models for the integration of pastoral care and theology in the service of proclamation (e.g., Micah).