

# THE BIBLE

Without the Old Testament  
we don't properly understand God.



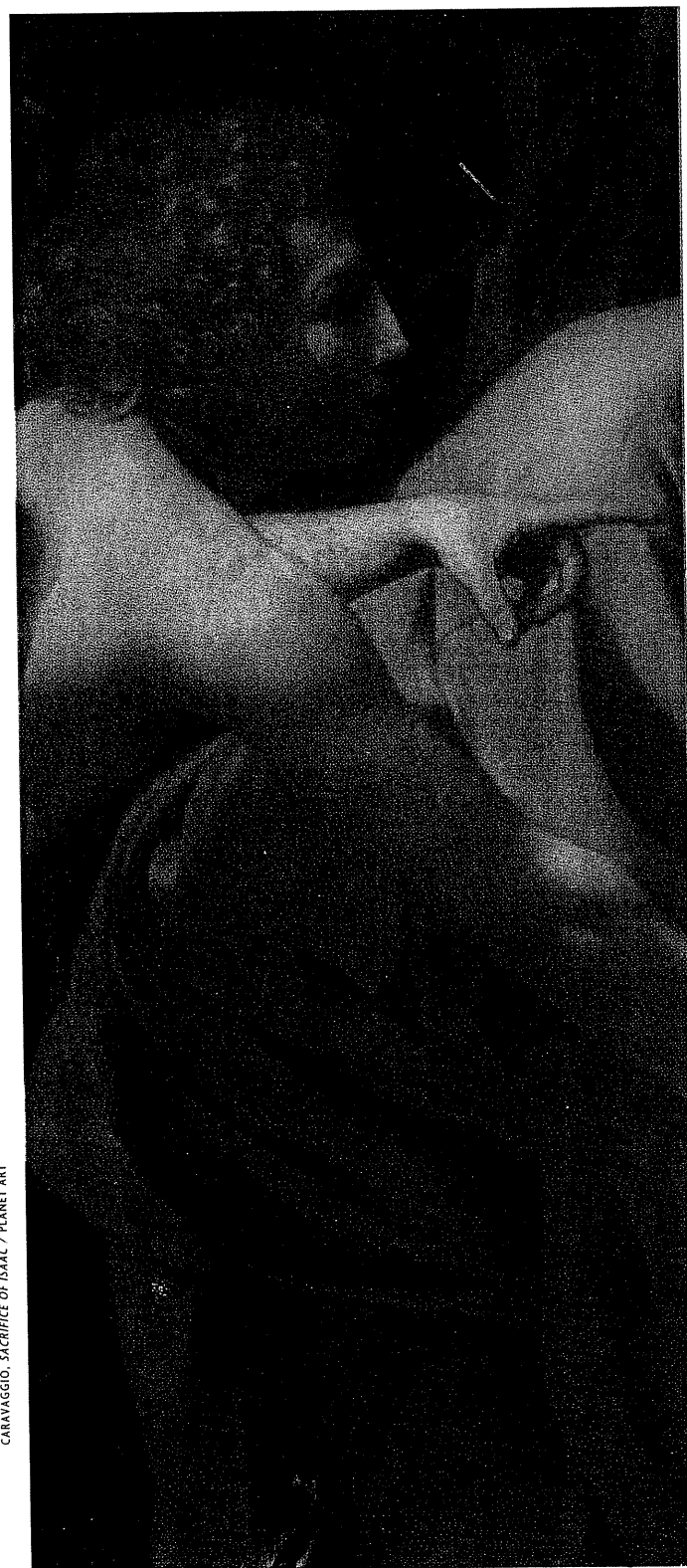
PHILIP YANCEY

**M**y brother, who attended a Bible college during a very smart-alecky phase in his life, enjoyed shocking groups of believers by sharing his “life verse.” After listening to others quote pious phrases from Proverbs, Romans, or Ephesians, he would stand and with a perfectly straight face recite very rapidly this verse from 1 Chronicles 26:18: “At Parbar westward, four at the causeway, and two at Parbar.”

Other students would screw up their faces and wonder what deep spiritual insight they were missing. Perhaps he was speaking another language?

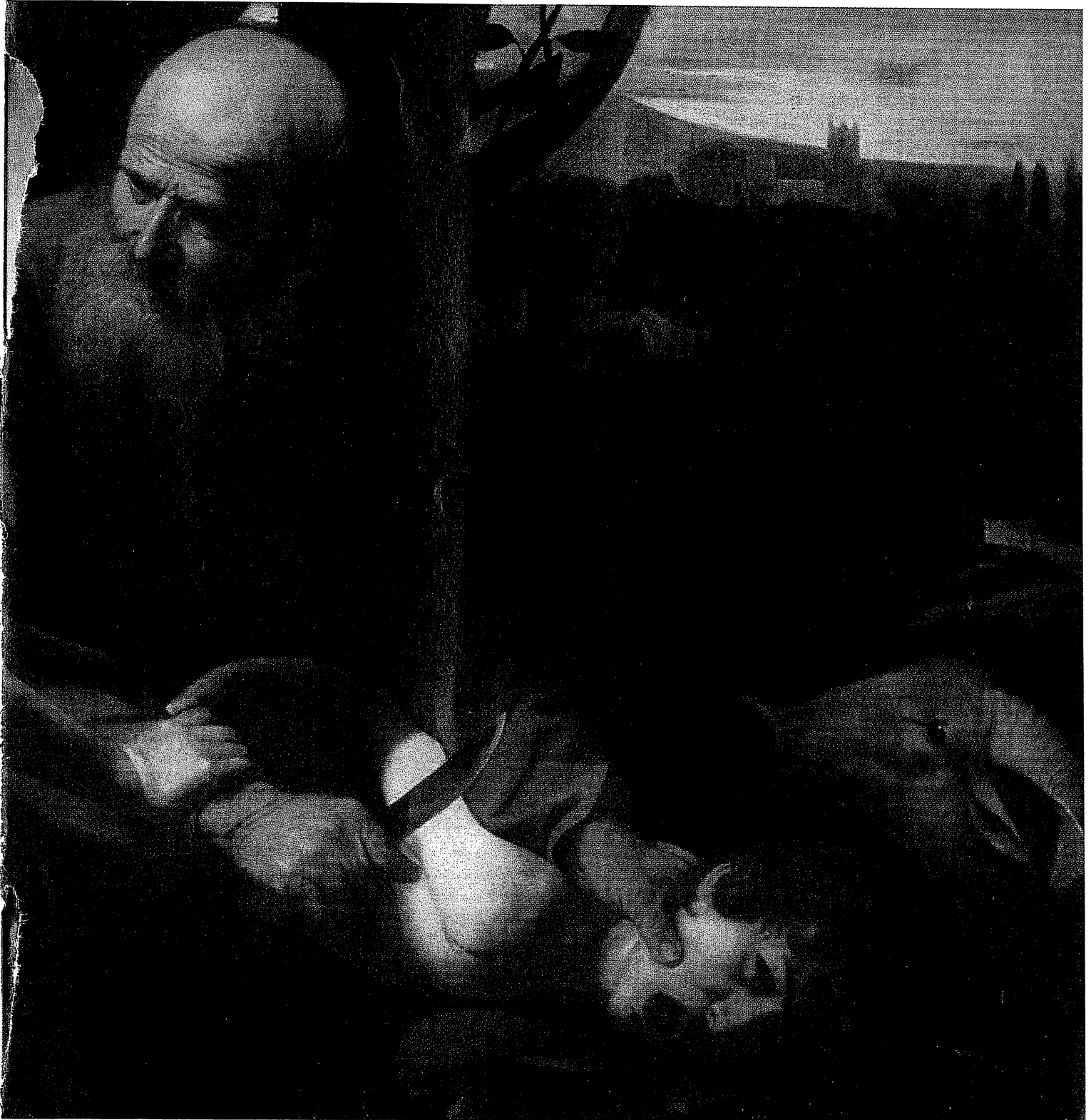
If my brother felt in a particularly ornery mood, he would quote an alternative verse: “Happy shall he be, that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the stones” (Ps. 137:9).

In his sassiness my brother had, quite ingeniously, identified the two main barriers to reading the Old Testament: It doesn't always make sense, and what sense it does make can offend modern ears. Why, we wonder, does the Bible spend so much time on temples, priests, and rules governing sacrifices that no longer even exist? Why does God care about defective sacrificial animals—limping lambs and bent-winged doves—or about a young goat cooked in its mother's milk, and yet apparently not about people like the Amalekites? Jesus we identify with, the apostle Paul we think we understand; but what of those barbaric



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# JESUS READ



people living in the Middle East several thousand years ago?

Because of this, most people simply avoid the Old Testament entirely, leaving three-fourths of the Bible unread, while others extract nuggets of truth from it like plucking diamonds from a vein of coal. That technique can backfire, however—remember my brother's life verses.

### Like reading Shakespeare

For a long time I also avoided the Old Testament. Only gradually, once I started reading it in earnest, did I learn to love it. I confess that I began with ignoble motives: I read the Old Testament because I was paid to, as part of my editorial assignment to produce the Student Bible. But long after the Student Bible had been published and stocked on bookstore shelves, I kept returning to the Old Testament on my own.

My reading experience parallels one I had with William Shakespeare. In a moment of idealism, I made a New Year's resolution to read all 38 of Shakespeare's plays in one year. To my surprise, fulfilling the task (though I had to extend the deadline) seemed far more like entertainment than work. At first I would have to look up archaic words, concentrate on keeping the characters straight, and adjust to the sheer awkwardness of reading plays. I found, though, that as I kept at it and got accustomed to the rhythm and language, these distractions faded and I felt myself being swept up in the play. Without fail I looked forward to the designated Shakespeare evenings.

I expected to learn about Shakespeare's world and the people who inhabited it. I found, though, that Shakespeare mainly taught me about *my* world. He endures as a playwright because of his genius in probing the hidden recesses of humanity, a skill that gives him appeal in places as varied as the United States, Japan, and Peru several centuries after his death. We find ourselves in his plays.

I went through precisely that same process in encountering the Old Testament. From initial resistance, I moved to a reluctant sense that I *ought* to read the neglected three-quarters of the Bible. As I worked past some of the barriers, I came to feel a *need* to read, because of what it was teaching me. Eventually, I found myself *wanting* to read it. Those 39 books satisfied in me some hunger that nothing else had—not even, I must say, the New Testament. They taught me about life with God: not how it is supposed to work, but how it actually does work.

The rewards offered by the Old Testament do not come easily, I admit. Learning to feel at home in its pages will take time and effort. All achievements—climbing mountains, mastering the guitar, competing in a triathlon—require a similar process of hard work; we persevere because we believe rewards will come.

A reader of the Old Testament confronts obstacles not present in other books. For example, I was put off at first by its disarray. The Old Testament does not read like a cohesive novel; it consists of poetry, history, sermons, and short stories written by various authors and mixed up together. In its time, of course, no one conceived of the Old Testament as one book. Each book had its own scroll, and a long book like Jeremiah would occupy a scroll 20 or 30 feet long. A Jewish person entering a synagogue would see stacks of scrolls, not a single book, and, aware of their differences, would choose accordingly.

Yet I find it remarkable that this diverse collection of manuscripts written over a period of a millennium by several dozen authors possesses as much unity as it does. To appreciate this feat, imagine a book begun 500 years before Columbus and just now completed. The Bible's striking unity is one strong

sign that God directed its composition. By using a variety of authors and cultural situations, God developed a complete record of what he wants us to know; amazingly, the parts fit together in such a way that a single story does emerge.

The more I persevered, the more passages I came to understand. And the more I understood, the more I found myself in those passages. Even in a culture as secular as the United States, bestsellers such as *The Care of the Soul*, by Thomas Moore, and *The Cloister Walk*, by Kathleen Norris, reveal a deep spiritual hunger. The Old Testament speaks to that hunger like no other book. It does not give us a lesson in theology, with abstract concepts neatly arranged in logical order. Quite the opposite: it gives an advanced course in Life with God, expressed in a style at once personal and passionate.

### Neither testament is enough

Christians of all stripes hold one thing in common: We believe the Old Testament is not enough. Jesus the Messiah came to introduce a "New Covenant," or New Testament, and following the apostle Paul we look back on the Old Testament period as a time of preparation. Without question, I agree. Yet I am increasingly convinced that neither is the New Testament enough. On its own, it proves insufficient for understanding God or our world.

When Thomas Cahill wrote the book *The Gifts of the Jews*, he chose as the subtitle "How a Tribe of Desert Nomads Changed the Way Everyone Thinks and Feels." He is surely right. Western civilization builds so directly on foundations laid in the Old Testament era that it would not otherwise make sense. As Cahill points out, the Jewish belief in monotheism gave us a Great Whole, a unified universe that can, as a product of one Creator, be studied and manipulated scientifically. Ironically, our technological modern world traces back to that tribe of desert nomads.

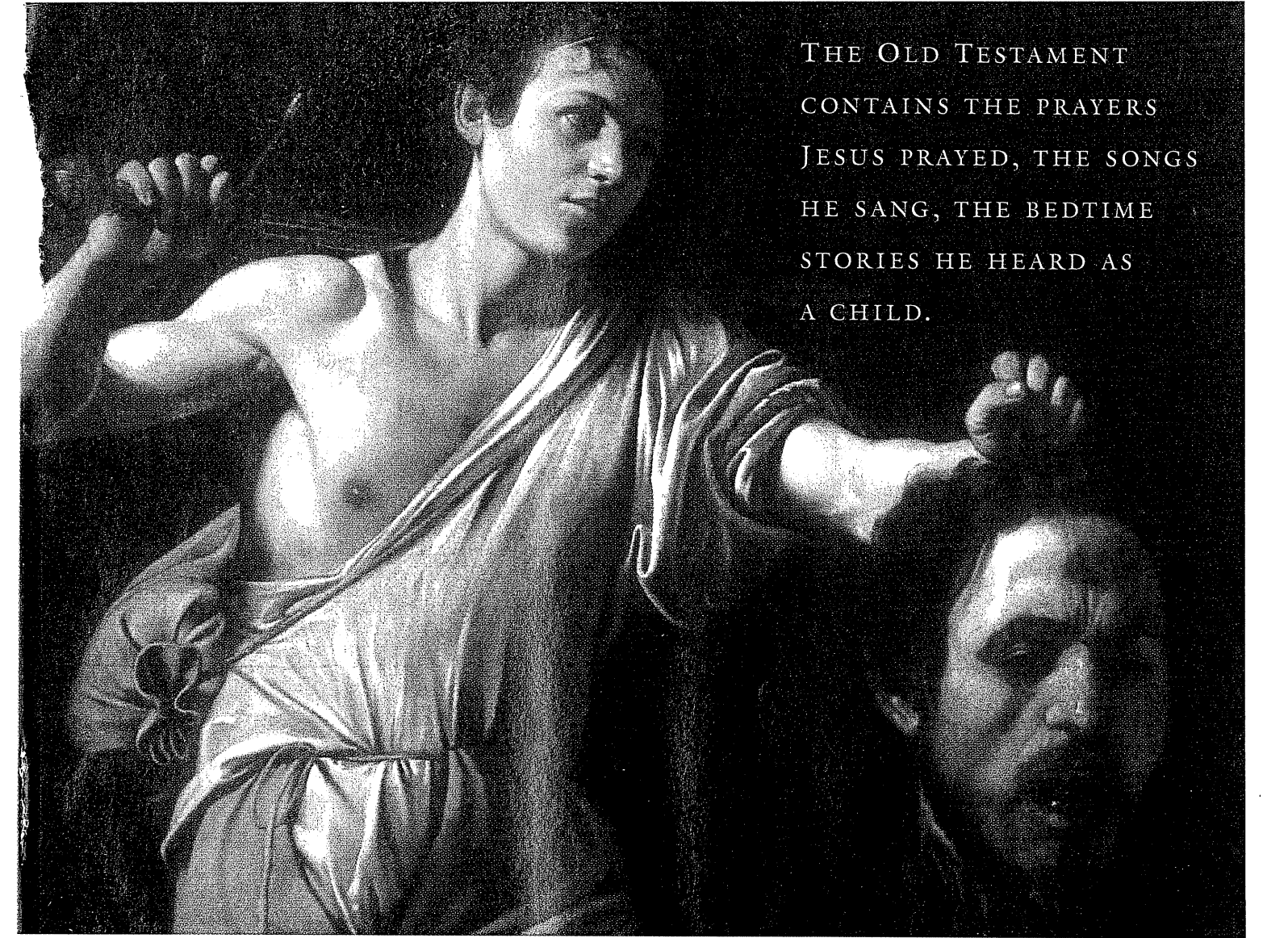
The Jews also gave us what Cahill calls the Conscience of the West, the belief that God expresses himself not primarily through outward show but rather through the "still, small voice" of conscience. A God of love and compassion, he cares about all of his creatures, especially human beings created "in his own image," and he asks us to do the same. Every person on earth has inherent human dignity. By following that God, the Jews gave us a pattern for the great liberation movements of modern history and for just laws to protect the weak and minorities and the oppressed.

According to Cahill, without the Jews,

we would never have known the abolitionist movement, the prison-reform movement, the antiwar movement, the labor movement, the civil rights movement, the movements of indigenous and dispossessed peoples for their human rights, the antiapartheid movement in South Africa, the Solidarity movement in Poland, the free-speech and pro-democracy movements in such Far Eastern countries as South Korea, the Philippines, and even China.

So many of the concepts and words we use daily — *new, individual, person, history, freedom, spirit, justice, time, faith, pilgrimage, revolution*—derive from the Old Testament that we can hardly imagine the world and our place in it without relying on the Jewish heritage. Our roots go so deep in Old Testament thinking that in many ways—human rights, government, the treatment of neighbors, our understanding of God—we are already speaking and thinking Old Testament.

Most assuredly we cannot understand the New Testament apart from the Old. The proof is simple: try reading Hebrews,



THE OLD TESTAMENT  
CONTAINS THE PRAYERS  
JESUS PRAYED, THE SONGS  
HE SANG, THE BEDTIME  
STORIES HE HEARD AS  
A CHILD.

Jude, or Revelation without any reference to Old Testament allusions or concepts. It cannot be done (which may explain why many modern Christians avoid those books, too). The Gospels can be read as stand-alone stories, but a reader unacquainted with the Old Testament will miss many layers of richness in them. Paul constantly appealed to the Old Testament. Without exception, every New Testament author wrote about the new work of God on earth while looking through the prism of the earlier or “old” work.

A Chinese philosopher insisted on riding his mule backwards so that he would not be distracted by where he was going and could instead reflect on where he had been. The Bible works in somewhat the same way. The Epistles shed light backward on the events of the Gospels, so that we understand them in a new way. Epistles and Gospels both shed light backward on the Old Testament.

For centuries, the phrase “As predicted by the prophets” was one of the most powerful influences on people coming to faith. Justin the Martyr credited his conversion to the impression made on him by the Old Testament’s predictive accuracy. The brilliant French mathematician Blaise Pascal also cites fulfilled prophecies as one of the most important factors in his faith. Nowadays, few Christians read the prophets except in search of Ouija-boardlike clues into the future. We have lost the Reformers’ profound sense of unity between the two testaments.

### Reading what Jesus read

Understanding our civilization and understanding the Bible may be important reasons for reading the Old Testament, but perhaps the most important reason is this: it is the Bible Jesus read. He traced in its passages every important fact about himself and his mission. He quoted from it to settle controversies with opponents such as the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Satan himself. The images—Lamb of God, shepherd, sign of Jonah, stone which the builders rejected—that Jesus used to define himself came straight from the pages of the Old Testament.

Once, a government tried to amputate the Old Testament from Christian Scriptures. The Nazis in Germany forbade study of this “Jewish book,” and Old Testament scholarship disappeared from German seminaries and journals. In 1940, at the height of Nazi power, Dietrich Bonhoeffer defiantly published a book on the Psalms and got slapped with a fine. In letters of appeal, he argued convincingly that he was explicating the prayer book of Jesus Christ himself. Jesus quoted often from the Old Testament, Bonhoeffer noted, and never from any other book. Besides, much of the Old Testament explicitly or implicitly points to Jesus.

The Old Testament contains the prayers Jesus prayed, the poems he memorized, the songs he sang, the bedtime stories he heard as a child, the prophecies he pondered. He revered every “jot and tittle” of the Hebrew Scriptures. The more we comprehend the Old Testament, the more we comprehend Jesus. Said

Martin Luther, “the Old Testament is a testamental letter of Christ, which he caused to be opened after his death and read and proclaimed everywhere through the Gospel.”

In a poignant passage from his gospel, Luke tells of Jesus spontaneously appearing by the side of two disciples on the road to Emmaus. Even though rumors of his resurrection were spreading like wildfire, clearly these two did not yet believe, as Jesus could tell by looking into their downcast eyes. In a kind of practical joke, Jesus got them to repeat all that had happened to this man Jesus—they had not yet recognized him—over the past few days. Then he gave them a rebuke:

“How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. (Luke 24:25–27, NIV)

Today we need an “Emmaus road” experience in reverse. The disciples knew Moses and the Prophets but could not conceive

tion, a different answer than we might get from the New Testament alone. Although Jesus is the “image of the invisible God,” he emptied himself of many of the prerogatives of God in order to become a man. The late professor Langdon Gilkey used to say that if evangelical Christianity has a heresy, it is the neglect of God the Father, the Creator, Preserver, and Ruler of all human history and every human community in favor of Jesus the Son, who relates to individual souls and their destinies.

If we had only the Gospels, we would envision a God who seems confined, all-too-human, and rather weak—after all, Jesus ended up hanging on a cross. His fellow Jews objected so strongly to Jesus because, despite his audacious claims, he did not match their conception of what God is like; they rejected him for not measuring up. The Book of Revelation gives a different glimpse of Jesus—blazing light, stunning in glory, unlimited in power—and the Old Testament likewise fills in a different portrayal of God. Like Jesus’ original disciples, we need that background picture in order to appreciate how much *love* was involved in the Incarnation—how much God gave up on our behalf.

Apart from the Old Testament we will always have an

impoverished view of God. God is not a philosophical construct, but a Person who acts in history: the one who created Adam, who gave a promise to Noah, who called Abraham, and introduced himself by name to Moses,

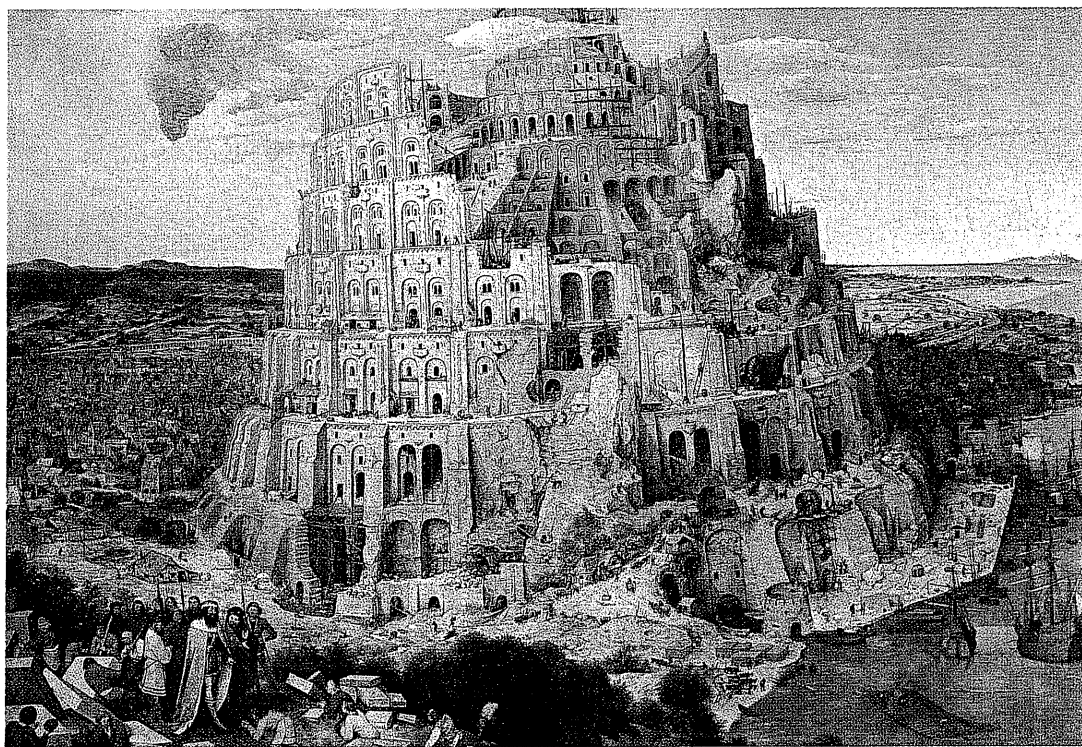
IN HIS OWN HISTORY,  
POWER OR WEALTH.  
WHO EMERGE ARE HE

who dignified to live in a wilderness “tent” in order to live close to his people.

I admit that the Old Testament introduces some problems I would rather avoid. “Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God,” wrote Paul to the

Christians in Rome. I would rather consider only the kindness of God, but by doing so I would construct my own image of God instead of relying on God’s self-revelation. I dare not speak for God without listening to God speak for himself. The Old Testament portrays God as a stern father but also a kind one, a lion but also a lamb, an eagle but also a mother hen, a king but also a servant, a judge but also a shepherd. Just when we think we have God pinned down, the Old Testament introduces a whole new picture of him: as a whistler, a barber, a vineyard keeper.

I remember hearing a chapel message at Wheaton College during the 1970s, when the Death of God movement had reached its peak. Prof. Robert Webber chose to speak on the third commandment, “Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain.”



how they might relate to Jesus the Christ. The modern church knows Jesus the Christ, but it is fast losing any grasp of Moses and the Prophets. Without the foundation of the Old Testament, we are like the foolish man who built his house on the sand. The house fell with a great crash.

### “Quick, what is God like?”

According to Elaine Storkey, that question, “Quick, what is God like?” was asked by a five-year-old girl who rushed up to her newborn brother in his hospital room. The young girl shrewdly figured that, having just come from heaven, he might have some inside information. Alas, he merely made a gurgling sound and rolled his eyes.

The Old Testament provides an answer to the little girl’s ques-

ERICH LESSING/ART RESOURCE: THE TOWER OF BABEL (1530-1569)

We usually interpret that commandment in a narrow sense of prohibiting swearing, said Webber, who then proceeded to expand its meaning to, "Never live as though God does not exist." Or, stated positively, "Always live in awareness of God's existence." The more I study the commandment in its Old Testament environment, the more I agree with Webber. Any key to living in such awareness must be found in the great Jewish legacy of the Old Testament.

I do not propose that we return to earlocks, phylacteries, and a diet that excludes pork and lobster—reminders to the Jewish people that this world revolves around God, not us. Nevertheless, I do believe we have much to learn from a people whose daily lives centered on God. When we look back on the covenant between God and the ancient Hebrews, what stands out to us is its strictness, the seeming arbitrariness of some of its laws. I see no such reaction among the Hebrews themselves. Few of them pleaded with God to loosen the dietary restrictions or eliminate some of their religious obligations. They seem, rather, *relieved* that their God, unlike the pagan gods around them, had agreed to define a relationship with them.

As the Puritan scholar Perry Miller has said: When you have a covenant with God, you no longer have an ineffable, remote, unapproachable Deity; you have a God you can count on. The Hebrews and God had entered into a kind of story together, and everything about their lives sent back echoes of that story. The story was a love story, from the very beginning. God chose the Hebrews not because they were larger and stronger than other tribes—quite the contrary. Nor did he choose them for their moral superiority. He chose them because he loved them.

human failures that call the entire creation project into question. As a remedy to those failures, God declares a plan in Genesis 12: to deal with the general problem of humanity by establishing one particular family, a tribe later known as the Hebrews. Through them, the womb for the Incarnation, God will bring about restoration of the entire earth, back to its original design.

That plan declared, God proceeds in a most mysterious manner. To found his tribe, God chooses a pagan from the region that is now Iraq, and puts him through a series of tests, many of which he fails. In Egypt, for example, Abraham demonstrates a morality inferior to that of the sun worshippers.

After promising to bring about a people numerous as the stars in the sky and the sand on the seashore, God then proceeds to conduct a clinic in infertility. Abraham and Sarah wait into their nineties to see their first child; their daughter-in-law, Rebekah, proves barren for a time; her son Jacob must wait 14 years for the wife of his dreams, only to discover her barren as well. Three straight generations of infertile women hardly seems an efficient way to populate a great nation.

After making similar promises to bring about possession of a great land (Abraham himself possessed only a gravesite in Canaan), God arranges a detour for the Israelites into Egypt, where they live for "four centuries" until Moses arrives to lead them out of slavery to the Promised Land—a wretched journey that takes 40 years instead of the expected two weeks. Clearly, God operates on a different timetable than that used by impatient human beings.

The surprises continue on into New Testament times, for none of the vaunted Jewish scholars recognizes Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah trumpeted in the Psalms and Prophets. In fact, they continue today as self-appointed prophets confidently identify a succession of tyrants and world figures as the Antichrist, only to see Hitler, Stalin, and Kissinger fade from view.

Christians living today face many unfulfilled promises. World poverty and population continue to soar, and as a percentage of population, Christianity barely holds its own. The planet lurches toward self-destruction. We wait, and keep on waiting, for the glory days promised in the Prophets and in Revelation. From Abraham and Joseph and Moses and David we gain at least the knowledge that God moves in ways we would not predict or even desire. At times God's history seems to operate on an entirely different plane from ours.

The Old Testament gives clues into the kind of history God is writing. Exodus identifies by name the two Hebrew midwives who helped save Moses' life but does not bother to record the name of the Pharaoh ruling Egypt (an omission that has baffled scholars ever since). First Kings grants a total of eight verses to King Omri, even though secular historians regard him as one of Israel's most powerful kings. In his own history, God does not seem impressed by size or power or wealth. Faith is what he wants, and the heroes who emerge are heroes of faith, not strength or wealth.

God's history thus focuses on those who hold faithful to him, regardless of how things turn out. When Nebuchadnezzar, one of many tyrants who persecute the Jews, threatens three young men with torture by fire, they respond: "If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up" (Dan. 3:17-18, NIV).

## GOD DOES NOT SEEM IMPRESSED BY SIZE OR FAITH IS WHAT HE WANTS, AND THE HEROES OF FAITH, NOT STRENGTH OR WEALTH.

Like any starstruck lover, God yearned for a response. All the commands given the Hebrews flowed out of the very first commandment, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." The Hebrews failed to keep that command, we know, but the reason Christians now call three-fourths of the Bible the "Old" Testament is that not even that terrible failure could cancel out God's love. God found a new way—a new covenant, or testament, of his love.

### Is God really good?

For thousands of years, the Jews have prayed this prayer: "Give thanks to the Lord Almighty, for the Lord is good; his love endures forever." It makes a good prayer to reflect on, because we doubt precisely those two things today. Is the Lord good? Does his love endure forever? A glance at history, or any day's headlines, and any reasonable person begins to wonder about those bold assertions. For this reason, too, the Old Testament merits our attention, for the Jews loudly doubted the very prayer they prayed. As befitting an intimate relationship, they took those doubts to the other party, to God himself, and got a direct response.

We learn from the Old Testament how God works, which is not at all as we might expect. God moves slowly, unpredictably, paradoxically. The first 11 chapters of Genesis describe a series of

Empires rise and fall, powerful leaders soar to power then topple from it. The same Nebuchadnezzar who tossed these three into a fiery furnace goes crazy, grazing on grass in the field like a cow. The succession of empires that follow his—Persia, Greece, Rome—so mighty in their day, join the dustbin of history even as God's people the Jews survive murderous pogroms. Slowly, painstakingly, God writes his history on earth through the deeds of his faithful followers, one by one.

### The beseeching Lover


Out of their tortured history, the Jews demonstrate the most surprising lesson of all: You cannot go wrong personalizing God. God is not a blurry power living somewhere in the sky, not an abstraction like the Greeks proposed, not a sensual superhuman like the Romans worshiped, and definitely not the absentee Watchmaker of the Deists. God is "personal." He enters into people's lives, messes with families, shows up in unexpected places, chooses unlikely leaders, calls people to account. Most of all, God loves.

As the great Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel put it,

To the prophet, God does not reveal Himself in an abstract absoluteness, but in a personal and intimate relation to the world. He does not simply command and expect obedience; He is also moved and affected by what happens in the world, and reacts accordingly. Events and human actions arouse in Him joy or sorrow, pleasure or wrath . . . man's deeps may move Him, affect Him, grieve Him or, on the other hand, gladden and please Him. . . .

[T]he God of Israel is a God Who loves, a God Who is known to, and concerned with, man. He not only rules the world in the majesty of His might and wisdom, but reacts intimately to the events of history.

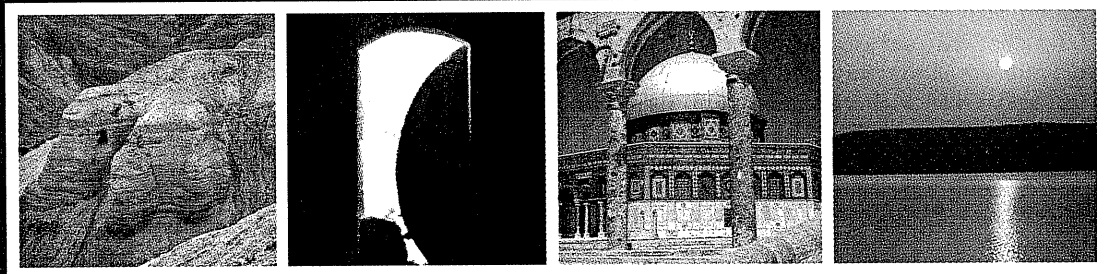
More than any other word pictures, God chooses "children" and "lovers" to describe our relationship with him as being intimate and personal. The Old Testament abounds with husband-bride imagery. God woos his people and dotes on them like a lover doting on his beloved. When they ignore him, he feels hurt, spurned, like a jilted lover. Shifting metaphors, it also announces that we are God's children. In other words, the closest we can come to understanding how God looks upon us is by thinking about the people who mean most to us: our own child, our lover.

Think of a doting parent with a video camera, coaxing his year-old daughter to let go of the living room coffee table and take three steps toward him. "Come on, sweetie, you can do it! Just let go. Daddy's here. Come on." Think of a love-struck teenager with her phone permanently attached to her ear, reviewing every second of her day with a boy who is himself infatuated enough to be interested. Think of those two scenes, and then imagine God on one end and you on the other. That is the message of the Old Testament. 

*From a forthcoming book, The Bible Jesus Read, by Philip Yancey, to be published by Zondervan Publishing House (Grand Rapids, Mich.) in August 1999.*

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