

Models of Spirituality in the Bible: Abraham, David, Job and Peter

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RÉSUMÉ

La spiritualité évangélique se doit d'être fondée sur la Bible. Pour stimuler la spiritualité aujourd'hui, l'auteur considère plusieurs personnages bibliques. Abraham n'était de loin pas irréprochable, mais il a exprimé à Dieu ce qu'il avait sur le cœur et Dieu a accueilli sa franchise. Le roi David a lui aussi fait preuve de bien des défaillances, mais il a su attendre patiemment la réalisation des plans de Dieu. Contrairement à Saül, il a obéi aux ordres explicites de Dieu et a écouté ses prophètes. Il a su s'humilier lorsque cela était nécessaire, au même titre que n'importe qui d'autre. Parce que Job avait su reconnaître

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SUMMARY

Evangelical spirituality should be Bible-based. To inspire contemporary spirituality, several biblical characters are studied. Abraham was far from blameless but he spoke his heart out to God and God accepted that frankness. King David likewise was a man with shortcomings, but he patiently waited for God's plans to be fulfilled. Unlike Saul, he obeyed explicit orders of God and listened to his prophets. He knew when to humiliate himself and to be like everybody else. Because Job had attributed

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Evangelikale Spiritualität sollte auf der Bibel basieren. Um eine gegenwärtige Spiritualität zu inspirieren, werden hier mehrere biblische Charaktere untersucht. Abraham war alles andere als unbescholten, aber er schüttete Gott sein Herz aus und Gott akzeptierte diese Offenheit. Auch König David war ein Mann mit Defiziten, aber er wartete geduldig auf die Erfüllung der Pläne Gottes. Im Gegensatz zu Saul gehorchte er ausdrücklichen Anweisungen Gottes und hörte auf seine Propheten. Er wusste, wann er sich demütigen und wie jeder andere sein musste. Weil

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sa prospérité comme un don de Dieu et l'avait loué pour cela, il a pu encore louer Dieu lorsqu'il a tout perdu. Dieu a accueilli ses questions difficiles, sans toutefois accepter d'être accusé par lui d'injustice. L'attitude de Job, protestant avec véhémence, a néanmoins été plus agréable à Dieu que celle de ses amis qui défendaient un système théologique étroit. On peut glaner des enseignements sur la spiritualité de Pierre à partir des évangiles, des Actes et de ses épîtres. Il a reçu l'approbation de Jésus pour son caractère passionné, mais a dû aussi apprendre la patience. Dans le cas de ces quatre personnages, la prière a joué un rôle très important et l'humilité apparaît comme une vertu essentielle.

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his prosperity to God and praised God for it, he could even praise him when he lost everything. God accepted Job's sharp questions but not his accusation that God was unjust. Yet Job's strident attitude pleased God more than that of his friends who upheld a fixed theological system. For Peter's spirituality we can draw on the gospels, Acts and his own letters. The apostle stands out for his fiery passion, which Jesus approved of, but had also to learn patience. In all four model characters, prayer plays a large role and humility is praised as an important virtue.

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Hiob seinen Reichtum Gott zugeschrieben und ihn dafür gepriesen hatte, konnte er ihn selbst dann noch preisen, als er alles verlor. Gott akzeptierte Hiobs glasklare Fragen, aber nicht seine Anschuldigung, dass Gott ungerecht sei. Doch Hiobs vehemente Haltung gefiel Gott mehr als die Haltung seiner Freunde, die ein festgefügtes theologisches System aufrecht hielten. Aus den Evangelien erfahren wir etwas über die Spiritualität von Petrus. Der Apostel tat sich mit seiner feurigen Leidenschaft hervor, die Jesus guthieß, aber er hatte auch Geduld zu lernen. Bei allen vier Charakteren spielt das Gebet eine große Rolle und die Demut wird als eine wichtige Tugend gepriesen.

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1. Introduction

Spirituality can be worthy of the name “evangelical” only if it takes the lessons of the Holy Spirit in the written Word of God to heart. Therefore, if one wants to develop evangelical perspectives on spirituality, it is absolutely necessary to explore what the Bible teaches about these matters. In this article, a number of elements from the Bible that relate to spirituality will be analysed. In order to find the biblical data that are relevant to the subject, a working definition of spirituality is needed. As a Christian biblical scholar working within the context of reformed theology, I define “spirituality” as *what a believer does so as to practise their relationship with God*. More particularly, for me spirituality relates to “exercises” such as Bible reading, meditation and prayer.¹

The focus on practising the relationship with God by means of such exercises distinguishes spirituality from ethics, which concentrates on other aspects of daily life. Moreover, spirituality differs from liturgy in that it focuses on the individual believer and their personal experiences and inner feelings instead of public worship. These characteristics of spirituality have guided me in studying the biblical data presented in this article. However, given the nature of the biblical data, some overlap with ethics and liturgy was unavoidable. If all aspects related to ethics and liturgy were excluded, a proper presentation of the biblical models of spirituality discussed in this article would have been impossible.

The term “models” in the title of this article refers to persons in the Bible who may inspire us in shaping our own spirituality. Of course, other elements in the Bible, such as the psalms or the Lord’s Prayer, might also be considered models for the spiritual life of Christians, but these will not be discussed here. Three models selected for discussion are from the Old Testament, namely Abraham, David and Job. Peter is taken as a model from the New Testament. It goes without saying that several other models could have been chosen. The main reason why I have chosen the three Old Testament characters just mentioned is that I have studied several texts relating to them in the last years. The choice of Peter will be accounted for at the beginning of section 5.

2. Abraham

In the New Testament, Abraham² is mentioned

more than once as an example for those who believe in Jesus Christ. In Romans 4:11-12, 16, the apostle Paul presents Abraham as the father of all Christians. In this context, he emphasises that Abraham’s faith did not get weaker when he saw that he and his wife Sarah were too old to have a son, as God had promised them (4:19). “He did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God” (4:20).³ Similarly, Hebrews 11 refers to Abraham as one of the witnesses who may inspire believers from New Testament times to live by faith. He could even be considered the most prominent among them, as the chapter devotes more verses to him than to any other “witness” from the Old Testament. It seems fully justified, then, to study Abraham’s story as set forth in Genesis in order to get a clear picture of the way in which he may serve as a biblical model of spirituality.

How did Abraham practise his relationship with God? Right at the beginning of Abraham’s story in Genesis, the reader is struck by the patriarch’s prompt obedience to God’s order to leave his country and his people and to move to Canaan (Gen 12:4). Abraham likewise obeyed God’s orders when he circumcised every male in his household (17:23) and when he sent Hagar and Ishmael away (21:12-14). The climax of his obedience was reached when he listened to God’s order to sacrifice Isaac as a burnt offering (see esp. Gen 22:16, 18).

When Abraham had arrived in Canaan and travelled through the land as far as Shechem, the LORD appeared to him and promised him to give the land to his descendants. Abraham reacted by building an altar to the LORD (12:7). Apart from the altar in the story of Isaac’s sacrifice (22:9), Abraham also built altars between Bethel and Ai (12:8) and in Hebron (13:18). Furthermore, Genesis tells that at the altar between Bethel and Ai Abraham called on the name of the LORD (12:8; 13:4). He did the same in Beersheba, where he did not build an altar but planted a tamarisk (21:33; cf. 26:25).

Genesis does not specify what Abraham meant to do by building altars and calling on the name of the LORD. Yet some aspects of his spirituality can safely be inferred from the record of these acts. Building an altar is a visible act and calling on the LORD’s name is audible. By performing these acts, Abraham made a public confession that the LORD was his God, that he wanted to serve him and that he expected help from him. He may have expressed a similar public confession by giving a tenth of all the goods he had recovered from Kedorlaomer and

his allies to Melchizedek, who had just blessed him in the name of God Most High (14:18-20).

Apart from the texts referring to Abraham calling on the name of the LORD, Genesis mentions only two prayers of the patriarch, namely in Genesis 18:23-32 and 20:17. Both prayers are intercessions on behalf of others. The latter, on behalf of Abimelech king of Gerar and his wife and slave girls, is linked by God himself to Abraham's status as a prophet (20:7). The former, on behalf of the righteous in Sodom, stands out by the frankness displayed by Abraham in his intercession. He reminds the LORD that for him as the Judge of all the earth it would be unjust to sweep the righteous away with the wicked (18:25). Although Abraham realises that he is "but dust and ashes" (18:27), he dares to pursue his intervention until the LORD had promised him not to destroy the city if only ten righteous persons could be found in it (18:32).

Abraham, then, followed the orders of his God and knew the power of prayer. Yet Genesis never says that he consulted the LORD in prayer or otherwise when taking decisions. Of course, he may well have called on the name of the LORD before he went in pursuit of Kedorlaomer (Gen 14), before he made a treaty with Abimelech king of Gerar (21:22-31), before he went out to buy the cave of Machpelah (Gen 23) or before he married Keturah (25:1), but Genesis does not tell so. Instead, it leaves us with the impression that in all these cases he acted by his own initiative.

Apparently, Abraham also acted by his own initiative when he went to Egypt because of a famine in Canaan (12:10). In spite of the LORD's promise to protect him (12:3), he took his own measures when he instructed Sarah to say that she was his sister. He did so, not only because he feared for his life, but also because he hoped to be treated well (יָשַׁב Qal) for Sarah's sake (12:13). Genesis 12:16 points out that this hope was fulfilled, as Pharaoh treated him well (יָשַׁב Hiphil) for Sarah's sake by giving him sheep and cattle, donkeys, servants and camels. He even got so much that back in Canaan, he and Lot could no longer live together.

When reading this story, it strikes us that the LORD did not call Abraham to account for sacrificing his wife's honour for the sake of his own protection and welfare. The story clearly suggests Abraham's moral inferiority vis-à-vis Pharaoh, as he apparently could not say anything to Pharaoh's reproaches (12:18-19). The LORD, however, inflicted serious diseases on Pharaoh and his household only (12:17). Genesis does not inform

us about any corrective action of God towards Abraham at that time.

Maybe this outcome of Abraham's behaviour in Egypt can account for the puzzling fact that several years later he resorted to the same policy, when he moved to the territory of Abimelech king of Gerar (Gen 20). Incidentally, if this assumption is correct, it is unnecessary to take Genesis 20 as a mere doublet of 12:10-20, as is usually done in historical-critical research. In Gerar Abraham was as successful as in Egypt, for Abimelech also gave him sheep, cattle and slaves (20:14). And just as in Genesis 12, God did not call Abraham to account. He addressed and threatened Abimelech only (20:3-7). Furthermore, Genesis 20 also suggests that Abraham was morally inferior vis-à-vis the king. In this case, Abraham gave an answer to the king's critical questions, but his reply was poor and weak. Contrary to what Abraham asserted, Abimelech clearly showed that he feared God, so that Abraham had nothing to worry about (20:9-13).

Both stories (Gen 12:10-20 and 20) highlight how God favoured and protected Abraham (cf. also Ps 105:12-15). As for the father of all believers himself, they clearly show that when he acted by his own initiative, he did not behave in the way that the average Christian would expect from a "saint".

Yet, in spite of his shortcomings Abraham may have been a strong believer. Was he indeed a man who never doubted God's promises? To be honest, that is not the way in which he is depicted in Genesis 15 and 17. In Genesis 15:1 the LORD promises Abraham a very great reward. Abraham replies by pointing out that this does not make sense, since the LORD has given him no children, so that he must leave everything to his servant Eliezer (15:2-3). Apparently, he does not expect any more that the LORD will fulfil his promise by giving him a son. The LORD reacts by pointing out that yet a son coming from Abraham's own body shall be his heir and that his offspring shall be as numerous as the stars (15:4-5). In this way the LORD overcomes Abraham's scepticism, for the text continues with: "Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness" (15:6).⁴ Nevertheless, when in the next verse the LORD reminds Abraham of his promise that he will possess the land of Canaan, Abraham's faith does not restrain him from asking: "How can I know that I shall gain possession of it?" (15:7-8).

In Genesis 17:16 God tells Abraham that he

will give him a son by Sarah and that she will be the mother of nations. Abraham reacts by falling face down, laughing and asking some questions (17:17-18). By falling face down, just as in 17:3, Abraham evidently humbles himself before God and surrenders to him.⁵ As for his laughter, this cannot be separated from what Genesis 18 tells about Sarah. When she hears God's promise that she will have a son in the next year (18:10), she laughs and wonders whether the words of the LORD can really be fulfilled (18:12), just like Abraham in 17:17. In Genesis 18 the LORD calls Sarah to account and reminds her of the fact that nothing is too hard for him. Sarah then unsuccessfully tries to make amends by denying that she had laughed, thus clearly demonstrating that her laughter was wrong (18:13-15).

This parallel suggests that Abraham's laughter and his questions in Genesis 17:17 also testify to doubts with respect to God's promise. This impression is further confirmed by 17:18, where Abraham recommends an alternative solution to the LORD, namely, that he might bless Ishmael. This proposal shows that Abraham did not reckon with a positive answer to his questions in verse 17: "Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?" In his reaction, the LORD affirms that he will certainly bless Ishmael, but he rejects Abraham's proposal that he might do so instead of giving a son by Sarah. As for Abraham's doubts, God counters them by repeating that Sarah herself will bear a son, to which he adds that this son must be called Isaac (17:19-21).

After that, God leaves Abraham and the story concludes by relating how Abraham obeyed God's orders by circumcising every male in his household (17:22-27). It does not explicitly affirm that Abraham accepted God's promises in faith, but in view of Abraham's ready obedience there is no reason to call this into question.⁶

After Genesis 17, the theme of Abraham's trust in the LORD recurs only in Genesis 22:8 and 24:7. In the former text, Abraham replies to Isaac's question "where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" (22:7) by saying that the LORD himself will provide the lamb. This answer may contain an evasive element. However, it may also show Abraham's confidence that God would somehow offer a way out of the deadlock created by his order to sacrifice Isaac (cf. Heb 11:19). In Genesis 24:7, Abraham expresses his conviction that God will send an angel before his servant, so as to help him in find-

ing a wife for Isaac in Aram Naharaim. Both texts are about the later phases of Abraham's life, which could suggest that by that time he had grown in faith and trust. The fulfilment of God's promise in the birth of Isaac in Genesis 21:1-7 may well have contributed to that growth.

The results of the above discussion can be summarised as follows:

1. When Abraham got orders from his God, he always readily obeyed.
2. If he had doubts about what God was about to do or about what God had said, he expressed them frankly.
3. His God did not blame him for expressing his doubts, but allowed him time to grow in faith and trust.
4. Apparently, for Paul and the author of Hebrews this sufficed to justify their assertions that Abraham believed and trusted without wavering – unless one would prefer to assume that these New Testament writers misread the Book of Genesis, which would be strange for an evangelical.

3. David

In his address to the Jews in the synagogue of Antioch in Pisidia, the apostle Paul summarises God's testimony about David found in a number of texts in the Old Testament as follows: "I have found David son of Jesse a man after my own heart; he will do everything I want him to do" (Acts 13:22; cf. 1 Sam 13:14; Ps 89:21 [EV 89:20]). In Hebrews 11:32-34 David is mentioned next to Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, Samuel and the prophets as one of the witnesses from the Old Testament who lived, acted and triumphed by faith. Unlike Abraham, however, whose faith is described at length in 11:8-18, David is mentioned only in passing in this chapter. In the rest of the New Testament, David is mainly referred to as a prophet in the service of the Spirit of God, who spoke through his mouth in the psalms.⁷

The above outline shows that the New Testament does not present David as a model of spirituality to the same degree as Abraham. He certainly figures as such a model in the Book of Psalms. The words לְדָוִד ("of David") in the titles of many psalms should most probably be interpreted as suggesting Davidic authorship. But even if another view is preferred, these words evidently invite those who use the psalms to read them from

a Davidic perspective. In this way, David functions as an example worth of imitation for everybody who wants to pray to God and praise him.

Those parts of 1 Chronicles that have no parallels in the Books of Samuel and Kings describe David as the man who made preparations for the building of the temple (1 Chron 22; 28) and organised cultic worship (1 Chron 23-26). He made considerable donations for the temple's construction and urged the leaders of the people to follow his example. He confessed that in doing so, he and his people only gave to God what had come from God's own hand (29:1-19). Furthermore, he instructed his son Solomon to serve the LORD wholeheartedly and to keep his commandments (22:12-13; 28:8-9).

Admittedly, the definition of spirituality used in this article does not cover all these elements. Yet they clearly reveal what was in David's heart and how he practised his relationship with God. However, the rest of this section will not focus on Psalms and Chronicles, but on what the Books of Samuel tell about David's spiritual life. The motive behind this choice is that the Books of Samuel report much more about David's shortcomings and sins.⁸ Therefore, these books are more challenging to a discussion of David as a model of spirituality than the others.

In 1 Samuel 13:14 Samuel says to Saul: "the LORD has sought out a man after his own heart and appointed him leader of his people, because you have not kept the LORD's command." In 1 Samuel 15:28 Samuel tells Saul that the LORD has given his kingdom "to one of your neighbours – to one better than you." Evidently, these testimonies point to David. He was a man after God's own heart and better than Saul. Moreover, 1 Samuel 13:14 suggests that unlike Saul, David will keep the LORD's command.

Several elements in the description of David's actions and attitudes in the subsequent chapters of Samuel confirm this testimony. It troubles David that Goliath dares to defy the armies of the living God. He is sure that when he comes against Goliath in the name of the LORD, his God will hand over Goliath to him because of this rudeness (1 Sam 17:26,36-37,45-47). When he flees from Saul, David persistently refuses to take advantage from opportunities to kill his enemy because Saul is the anointed of the LORD. He leaves judgment and revenge to God, and patiently waits for the day when God will deliver him and make him king (1 Sam 24; 26:8-11, 23-24; 2 Sam 1; cf. also 2 Sam 3:39; 16:10-12).

The fact that people drive him from his share in the LORD's inheritance and incite him to serve other gods disgusts David so much that he curses them (1 Sam 26:19). When, after Ziklag has been sacked, his men are talking of stoning him, he finds strength in the LORD his God (1 Sam 30:6; cf. also 23:16). In line with this conviction as to the source of his strength, he praises the LORD for his saving acts and favours (2 Sam 4:9; 5:20; 7:22-29; 22; cf. also 8:11-12).

Several times David first enquires of the LORD before he proceeds to action. When he has received an answer from the LORD, he accepts God's counsels and orders and carries them out willingly.⁹ On several other occasions, however, the Books of Samuel do not mention that David enquires of the LORD before taking decisions.¹⁰ Of course, he still may have done so in some of these cases, but in others he most certainly did not. When Nabal refuses to give David and his men a share in the food of the banquet he has organised at sheep-shearing time, David obviously does not enquire of the LORD before he sets out to kill Nabal and all his men. He would surely have avenged himself on Nabal if Abigail had not intervened (1 Sam 25:12-13, 21-22, 32-34). Similarly, it seems very improbable that God had advised David to go to Achish king of Gath, as he did according to 1 Samuel 21:10 and 27:1-2.¹¹

When David acts in accordance with his own views, without consulting the LORD, he often employs lies, deception and tricks; cases in point can be found in 1 Samuel 20:5-7; 21:14 (EV 21:13); 28:2; and 2 Samuel 11:25. Two instances of this aspect of David's behaviour need some more comment, first the story of David's trip to Nob and his meeting with Ahimelech the priest in 1 Samuel 21:2-10 (EV 21:1-9), and second his policy of misleading Achish king of Gath when he lived as a servant of Achish in Ziklag as related in 1 Samuel 27:8-12.

Contrary to the truth, David made Ahimelech believe that King Saul had charged him with a secret mission (21:3 [EV 21:2]). Next, he could but continue his misrepresentation by making some vague remarks on abstinence from sex and the holiness of his men's "things" (פְּלִיִּים) and his mission (21:6 [EV 21:5]; see also 21:9 [EV 21:8]). However, it would be too simple to state that in this case David was just misleading the priest for his own purpose. It may also be that he wanted to protect Ahimelech by not revealing to him the truth about what he was doing, so that the priest could not be accused

of having consciously supported a rebel against the king. If this was David's intention, his policy failed dramatically, for when Doeg the Edomite betrayed to Saul how Ahimelech had helped David, Saul decided to kill him and his fellow priests, eighty-five men in total (1 Sam 23:9-19).

In the days in which David lived as Achish' subject in Ziklag, he and his men raided the Geshurites, the Girzites and the Amalekites, non-Israelite tribes living in the desert between Canaan and Egypt (27:8). However, he made Achish believe that he had raided Judaeans living in the Negev and tribes allied to them. In order to prevent his real victims from revealing the truth to Achish, he killed them all, men and women (27:9-11). David, then, deliberately sacrificed the lives of these people for the sake of his policy of misleading his lord. This is the plain message of the text (see esp. 27:11). Yet it must be added that in killing Amalekites David contributed to the implementation of God's command to blot out the remembrance of Amalek (Ex 17:14; Deut 25:19). This might also suggest a contrast with Saul, who had killed the Amalekites no less than David, but had gone against God's orders by sparing king Agag and the best of the sheep and cattle (1 Sam 15:1-3, 8-9). As for the Geshurites, they were among the peoples who would be driven out by the LORD before the Israelites as part of the conquest of Canaan (see Josh 13:2-6; cf. also Ex 23:31). This might likewise apply to the Girzites but these people do not occur in any other biblical text.

The discussion of these controversial aspects of David's behaviour need not be pursued here, since it suffices to conclude this overview by just referring to his adultery with Bathsheba and the way in which he brought about the death of her husband, Uriah (2 Sam 11).¹² How could David, who acted in this way, be a man "after God's heart"? What made him better than Saul, who had never done such terrible things before God rejected him?

A discussion of 2 Samuel 6 will be helpful to find answers to these questions. This chapter sets forth what happened when David transferred the ark of God to Jerusalem. The story opens by telling that David "again brought together out of Israel chosen men, thirty thousand in all". After 2 Samuel 5, which informs the reader about three successful military actions, this idiom suggests that David planned the transfer of the ark as if it were a military campaign or parade. Apparently, he did all this on his own initiative. The outcome was terrifying: when Uzzah took hold of the ark, God

struck him down and he died.

David reacted by also getting angry.¹³ He became afraid of the LORD and his ark and decided that the ark should not come to Jerusalem but remain in the house of Obed-Edom. When, however, it turned out that the LORD had blessed Obed-Edom because of the ark, David realised that the danger did not reside in the ark itself. He decided yet to have the ark transferred to Jerusalem. This time he organised things differently. The text does not mention anything suggestive of a military parade. Instead, it says that David treated the ark with as much respect as possible. It was no longer transported on a cart but was carried on the shoulders of men. David made sacrifices and he put aside all his royal insignia, for he wore a simple linen ephod and "danced before the LORD with all his might".

Obviously, he had taken to heart the lesson that God had taught him by the death of Uzzah. He had learned that he could have the ark as the symbol of the God "who is enthroned between the cherubim" (2 Sam 6:2) nearby, but only if he treated it with utter respect. In the presence of the ark, he had to humble himself as a human being who, in spite of his kingship, was not greater before God than anyone of his subjects.¹⁴

The end of the story, the confrontation between David and his wife Michal, brings the reader back to King Saul because the chapter refers to Michal as "the daughter of Saul" no less than three times (2 Sam 6:16, 20, 23). She despises David for his leaping and dancing before the LORD as any vulgar fellow would have done. David replies that he will continue to humiliate himself and that he prefers to be held in honour by slave girls rather than by Michal with her royal pretensions (6:21-22).

This suggests that humility versus a desire to be honoured in the eyes of men is one of the things that distinguished David from Saul. This impression is corroborated by what 1 Samuel tells about the rejection of Saul (cf. below, on 1 Sam 15:30). However, in both chapters that relate this sad story, the main emphasis is on something else, namely that Saul had twice been disobedient to the express commands of the LORD. The first time he disobeyed by not waiting for the prophet who would tell him what to do (1 Sam 13:13-14).¹⁵ The second time he ignored God's orders by sparing Agag king of the Amalekites and the best of the sheep and cattle (15:18-19, 22-23). In this way Saul committed the particular sin against which Samuel had warned the people in his farewell speech. Samuel had said that kingship could only be acceptable to

the LORD if the people and their king would obey God and not rebel against his commandments (1 Sam 12:14-15). In 1 Samuel 15:23 Samuel tells Saul that “rebellion is like the sin of divination, and arrogance like the evil of idolatry”. The truth of these words would be revealed at the end of Saul’s life. The ultimate consequence of his disobedience was that he resorted to divination by asking the witch of Endor to bring up the spirit of Samuel (1 Sam 28).

David never disobeyed specific orders of the LORD in the way Saul did. Yet he evidently transgressed God’s commandments when he committed adultery with Bathsheba and had Uriah killed. At that time Nathan the prophet charged him with having despised the word of the LORD (2 Sam 12:9). David replied by confessing: “I have sinned against the LORD” (12:13; cf. also 2 Sam 24:10, 17). When Samuel called Saul to account because he had spared Agag and the best of the sheep and cattle of the Amalekites, Saul likewise said: “I have sinned” (1 Sam 15:24). However, Saul reduced the value of his confession by adding an excuse: “I was afraid of the people and so I gave in to them” (cf. also 15:15, 21). And when he said once again: “I have sinned”, he went on to beg Samuel: “But please honour me before the elders of my people and before Israel” (15:30). The verb used here (כָּבַד “to honour”) links these words with 2 Samuel 6:20: Michal used the same verb when reproaching David for behaving contrary to his status as the king of Israel. Whereas Saul tried to uphold his honour when he had to humble himself, David was willing to give it up.

The analysis of the portrayal of David in the Books of Samuel can be summarised as follows:

1. David was a man with many shortcomings, who even committed very serious sins. Yet he knew that God was the only source of his strength.
2. He was willing to wait for the moment when the LORD would deliver him from his enemies and avenge him. Nevertheless, he had to go through a long learning process in which God taught him what it meant to serve him faithfully as the king of his people.
3. He differed from king Saul in that he obeyed the orders of the LORD and listened to the prophets. When he nonetheless had been disobedient, he confessed his sin wholeheartedly.
4. Unlike Saul he did not hesitate to humble

himself and to give up his royal honour and insignia before the LORD.¹⁶

All this was characteristic for him as a man “after God’s heart” and made him a model of spirituality.

4. Job

Job is mentioned only once in the New Testament, namely in James 5:11. In this text James refers to Job’s perseverance and the fortunate change in his life, which the Lord brought about after a long period of affliction. James urges his readers to follow Job’s example and to trust in God’s compassion and mercy. Inasmuch as perseverance may be taken as an aspect of spirituality, James presents Job as a model of spirituality. For many Christians Job has become a model of spirituality particularly because of his words in Job 1:21: “The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised.”

According to Job 1:1, Job was blameless and upright. He feared God and shunned evil. These general terms are fleshed out in Job 1:5, which informs the reader of a concrete element of Job’s spirituality. Job was in the habit of sacrificing burnt offerings for each of his sons (and daughters?) after they had held a feast. He would do so because he was afraid that his children had sinned and cursed¹⁷ God in their hearts. According to some interpreters, this habit of Job displays over-anxiousness and perfectionism.¹⁸ It can be left undecided whether the author of the Book of Job shared this view or whether he, conversely, wanted to exhort the reader to copy this aspect of Job’s behaviour. Cursing God is the very sin Job would commit according to Satan, if he lost his possessions and health (1:11; 2:5). In 2:9, Job’s wife summons him to do this as the only reasonable option that is left. Moreover, her words show that cursing God is a very serious sin, since it will result in Job’s death (cf. also 1 Kgs 21:10, 13). In context, then, 1:5 obviously intends to point out how much Job abhorred the sin to which Satan and his wife attempted to entice him. Thus it provides evidence for Job’s uprightness and his fear of God mentioned in 1:1.

In Job 1:21, Job has lost his ten children and almost all his riches. In spite of all that, he still praises God: “The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised.” He motivates this by saying that he was naked at birth and will also be naked at his death. In this statement Job recognises that he had no claim to

anything he had possessed and that God had the right to take it all away.

Ellen van Wolde has suggested that in 1:21 Job makes use of a fixed formula for expressing faith, which might show that he had not yet come to grips with his sorrow.¹⁹ The rest of the story, from 3:1 onward, demonstrates that she is evidently right in pointing out that in 1:21 Job is still at the beginning of his struggles. Moreover, “may the name of the LORD be praised” may be a conventional liturgical formula, as can be inferred from the somewhat unexpected use of the name YHWH by a non-Israelite and from the parallel in Psalm 113:2.²⁰ Nevertheless, Job’s reaction as a whole is not a commonplace or traditional reaction of a believer. It is unique in the Old Testament. The Book of Psalms shows that if there was a standard reaction to huge troubles, it was not praise but complaint. In such circumstances, it was typical for the psalmists not to say “praise the LORD” but to ask him *why* he had acted in such a confusing way.²¹

Job refers to God alone as the source of the disasters which have hit him. He does not mention the Sabaeans or the Chaldeans (cf. 1:15, 17), nor does he allude to Satan. Admittedly, he does not know what had happened in heaven according to Job 1:6-12 and he will not be informed about it later on either. Yet it must be noted that the narrator comments that Job did not charge God with wrongdoing by speaking in this way (1:22). Given his situation and his knowledge, he was right in ascribing everything to God alone.

After the second round of disasters, Job’s wife suggests that he should curse God and die (2:9). Job replies: “You are talking like a foolish woman. Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?” One may be inclined to take these words as expressing a fatalistic attitude, but on closer examination it turns out that such a conclusion is mistaken.

The first part of the second sentence should not be taken as a question in itself. Instead, it is the presupposition on which the actual question is founded. The phrase can be paraphrased as follows: Given the fact that we have always been in the habit of accepting good from God, shall we not accept trouble from him? It must be noted that by using the first person plural “we”, Job includes his wife in what he is saying. Thus he appeals to her heart, reminding her of what they had always done, that is, accepting all good things from God. Apparently, he wants to point out that because of all those favours from God, they now know how

he is. Since they have experienced God’s attitude towards them during a long period, it is, Job argues, unreasonable to rebel now that he has done something they do not understand, however serious and terrible it may be.

In his reply to his wife, then, Job testifies to trustfulness rather than fatalism.²² However, this time Job does not praise God anymore, as he did in 1:21b. It seems as if he is no longer able to do so. Yet he is not blamed for that, for the narrator comments: “In all this, Job did not sin in what he said.”²³

In the dialogues of Job and his friends (Job 3-37), the friends persistently relate Job’s misery to his sins.²⁴ Job denies that God can justify the disasters that have hit him in terms of his sins and he holds on to his innocence.²⁵ He says that God has taken away (הסיר) his right (משפט) (27:2; cf. NRSV), which implies that he charges him of injustice.²⁶ Yet he appeals to this same God that he may intervene and vindicate him (19:23-27; 23:3-9). Job concludes his defence by pronouncing a conditional self-curse, in which he lists several kinds of injustice and sin, and denies having done any of them. He is so convinced of being in the right that he wants to put his defence on his shoulder and wear it as a crown and thus approach the Almighty as a prince (Job 31).

In his answers from the storm (Job 38-41), God calls Job to account for his words in a very critical way. Nevertheless, contrary to what many Calvinistic and maybe also other evangelical Christians might expect, God never says that Job’s misery can be accounted for in terms of his sins or his sinful nature. That God is critical of Job does not imply that he agrees with the friends! Actually, this need not surprise a careful reader of the Book of Job, for if God had agreed with the friends, he would have contradicted his own positive testimonies about Job in 1:8 and 2:3.

If God does not agree with the friends, what is the focus of his criticism on Job? The answer to this question can be found at the beginning of Job 40, where God formulates his reproaches vis-à-vis Job more specifically than anywhere else. Obviously, the main point is that Job wanted to justify himself at the expense of God’s justice:

Would you discredit my justice?

Would you condemn me to justify yourself?
(40:8; cf. also 40:2).

In other words, Job had the right to maintain his innocence, but he was wrong in concluding that

given his innocence, God could only be unjust.

Since this is the specific point on which God criticises Job, one may conclude that Job's expression of regret in 40:3-5 and 42:1-6 concentrates on this point. It need not be taken as a more general declaration, in which he concedes his friends that they had rightly ascribed his disasters to his sins. It is illogical to assume that Job wanted to make such a statement, for God had not urged him to do so at all.

In Job 42:7-8 God says to Eliphaz and his friends: "you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has." After God's criticism on Job in Job 38-41 this comes as a surprise. How can God say that Job has spoken right of him? If one does not want to submit to the view that the Book of Job is made up of conflicting sources, one must accept that there is something paradoxical in these words of God. Apparently, God wants to emphasise that in spite of all the shortcomings of Job's speeches, he definitely prefers his way of speaking to that of the friends.

Why does God prefer Job's way of speaking about God? Job's friends thought that they knew enough about God's policy in ruling the world. They thought that they could explain what had happened to Job in terms of their theological insights. They refused to admit that the reality of Job's life conflicted with their view, although they failed to demonstrate the opposite. They held onto their theological system at the expense of the facts.

Job refused to justify God by sacrificing the facts of his life to a theological conviction, however respected it might be. He frankly formulated his critical questions and addressed them to his friends as well as to God himself. In doing so, he went too far when he charged God with injustice. Nevertheless, in Job 42:7-8 God makes it clear that he prefers Job's open, inquiring and critical attitude to a justification of his divine behaviour by means of a theological system that can only be maintained by not doing justice to the facts; a justification, which had, moreover, the effect that Job had to suffer even more instead of being helped.

The most important elements of Job's spirituality can now be summarised as follows:

1. Job was able to praise God even after he had lost everything, because he had always related his prosperity to God. He had trained himself in praising God in the times when things were going well.²⁷
2. When Job was unable to praise God for a

while, God did not condemn him for that, but allowed him time to come to grips with what had happened.

3. Job should not have accused God of injustice. Nevertheless, he behaved better than his friends in that he expressed his critical questions frankly, instead of explaining God's actions in terms of a fixed theological system, which in spite of all its orthodoxy, failed to do justice to the reality of his life.

5. Peter

In the New Testament, Jesus Christ himself is evidently the most outstanding model of spirituality. He exhorted his disciples to follow his example in various aspects of life, such as denying oneself and taking up one's cross (Mat 16:24) and serving each other (Mat 20:26-28; John 13:14-15), but also in matters which relate more specifically to spirituality as defined in this article, such as prayer (e.g. Luke 6:12 and 18:1). Nevertheless, as he was without sin, he was unique. Accordingly, he cannot be put on a par with Abraham, David, Job and Peter. For that reason his spirituality will be left out of consideration in this article.

Next to Jesus, the apostle Paul may be looked at as a model of spirituality. However, the New Testament presents so many data with respect to his life and theology that it is impossible to analyse them properly within the scope of this article. Therefore, the apostle Peter has been chosen instead of Paul.

Peter received the honour to be the rock on which Jesus would build his church (Mat 16:18). As such he can rightly be expected to be a model of spirituality. He is a model indeed in his confession of Jesus as the Christ (Mat 16:16). Besides, in his letters he has provided all Christians with a model to be followed. He exhorts them to set their hope on the grace brought by Jesus Christ (1 Pet 1:13), to fear God (1 Pet 2:17), to be alert and on their guard (1 Pet 5:8; 2 Pet 3:17) and to pay attention to the words of the prophets (2 Pet 1:19).

The Book of Acts provides some information on the role of prayer in Peter's life. Acts 3:1 records that Peter and John went up to the temple at the time of prayer, at three o'clock in the afternoon. This was probably their habit when they were in Jerusalem (cf. 2:46).²⁸ Peter's going up to the roof of Simon's house in Joppa at noon in order to pray (10:9) may also reflect a habit, but this is uncertain because noon is not known for being a set time for prayer.²⁹

Instead of elaborating on these points, the rest of this section will be devoted to a number of data from the gospels, from John's in particular. These will further be connected with elements from 1 Peter.

After Peter's confession of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God, Jesus began to teach his disciples that he would suffer and die in Jerusalem and rise again on the third day. Peter took him aside and rebuked him (Mat 16:22; Mark 8:32). When Jesus said that Peter could not follow him now but would follow later, Peter asked: "Lord, why can't I follow you now?" He was so eager to follow his master that he affirmed that he was willing to lay down his life for him (John 13:36-37). That same night, the soldiers sent by the chief priests and the Pharisees came to Gethsemane to arrest Jesus. Peter tried to defend his master by drawing a sword and cutting off the ear of a servant of the high priest (John 18:10). Obviously, Peter loved Jesus so much that he could not accept his suffering and death, even though Jesus had said that that would be his way to glorification, resurrection and eternal life (cf. John 12:23-25; 17:1). When Jesus was about to be arrested, he acted spontaneously, as his heart dictated him. However, he overestimated his own capacities and only a few hours later, Jesus' prediction that he would disown him three times came true (John 13:38; 18:17, 25-27).

After his resurrection, Jesus asked Peter three times: "do you love me?" (John 21:15-17). Thus he reminded him of the vital importance of love for his relationship with the Lord Jesus. He also repeated his instruction to the effect that Peter had to follow him (21:19). That order fully agreed with Peter's own wish according to John 13:37, but Jesus pointed out that its implications would be different from what Peter had in mind:

I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go (21:18).³⁰

As an explanation, John adds that Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God (21:19). For Peter following Jesus implied that he had to glorify God by his death. At that time other people would decide what Peter had to do. He would love his master no less than when he was young but he would be quite different from the zealous soldier of John 13:37. He would no longer be an independent man, who decided

for himself to dedicate his life to his Lord and how to do that. According to Jesus, Peter would have to learn a different attitude. At the end of his life he would be more patient and less optimistic about his own capacities.

Peter's first letter demonstrates that he has taken this lesson to heart. In it, the apostle mentions suffering several times, pointing out that suffering is an inescapable element of Christian life (1 Pet 4:12). He urges his readers to follow Christ's example by accepting their suffering patiently (2:19-23; also 3:14, 17; 4:13-19). Moreover, he emphasises that Christians have to suffer before they can get a share in the glory which Christ has acquired for them (1:6-7; 4:13-14; 5:10; cf. also 5:1). So, in contrast with the time before Jesus' crucifixion, when he rejected his Lord's attitude as regards his suffering and death, he has now understood that glory must be preceded by suffering (see also 1:11).

Furthermore, Peter puts himself on a par with the elders of the congregation, as he addresses them as his fellow-elders (5:1). He exhorts them to be eager to serve. They should not be lording over those entrusted to them, but lead them as examples to the flock (5:2-3). This shows that Peter had learned the value of modesty. In perfect agreement with this, he admonishes all to clothe themselves with humility towards one another (5:5).

Summing up:

1. as a model of spirituality, Peter shows that love and zeal for the Lord Jesus are important and indispensable elements of true discipleship;
2. in the course of his life he had to learn that suffering is also an inescapable aspect of Christian life;
3. he likewise learned that zeal can only be fruitful if combined with patience, modesty and humility.

6. Conclusion

Abraham, David, Job and Peter were divergent characters and lived in different times and circumstances. Accordingly, when studying their spirituality, one finds different elements and aspects, as the summaries at the end of the sections above demonstrate. Nevertheless, the analysis has also brought to light some elements that are characteristic of more than one of these persons and that connect them with each other.

First, prayer obviously is an essential element

of evangelical spirituality. It may be disappointing, then, to discover that with the exception of David, the Bible does not tell much about the prayers of the models of spirituality studied in this article. Yet a remarkable aspect can be noted, namely the frankness which some of them (especially Abraham and Job) displayed in their prayers. God's answer to Job shows that one is not free to say to God everything that comes up in one's heart. However, other texts make it crystal-clear that God allows his people much freedom when they express what they are worrying about. In other words, he is like a real father, who loves to hear his children talking to him.

Second, humility distinguished David from Saul. Similarly, Peter exhorted all Christians to be humble. Job had to admit that as a mere human being he was not able to judge the way in which God ruled over his life and over the whole world. Abraham confessed that he was "but dust and ashes." Evidently, humility must be an outstanding feature of every spirituality that sets great store by the name "evangelical."

Third, each of these models of spirituality had shortcomings and weaknesses. In most cases, God did not blame them for that. He allowed them much time to learn what is involved in living with him and to train their spiritual life. This applies especially to David and Peter, but also to Abraham and Job. They could become models of spirituality only thanks to a long process of stumbling, falling and rising up, on the basis of God's grace and forgiveness.

It goes without saying that if other models had been selected from the Bible, the outcome might have been different. Yet it can be claimed that the aspects and elements just mentioned, which can be found in two or more of the models studied above, should be integrated in any genuine evangelical spirituality.

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Notes

1 Cf. A. L. Th. de Bruijne, "Ethiek en spiritualiteit", in *Gereformeerde theologie vandaag: Oriëntatie en verantwoording* (ed. A. L. Th. de Bruijne; TU-Bezinningsreeks 4; Barneveld: De Vuurbaak, 2004) 103-106.

- 2 Throughout this paper I have used the more familiar name Abraham and not Abram, the name he had before God changed his name according to Gen 17:5.
- 3 As a rule, quotations from Scripture in English translation have been taken from NIV.
- 4 On Gen 15:1-6, see G. Kwakkel, *De gerechtigheid van Abram: Exegese van Genesis 15:6* (Kamper Bijdragen 35; Barneveld: De Vuurbaak, 1996).
- 5 Cf. e.g. Lev 9:24; Num 16:22; Josh 7:6; Judg 13:20; 1 Sam 25:23; Ezek 1:28; 1 Chron 21:16.
- 6 As against Claus Westermann, *Genesis* (BKAT 1/1-3; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1974-1982) 2:323. Westermann rightly emphasises that obedience figures more prominently in Gen 17 than faith, but it seems doubtful whether this chapter (which Westermann, traditionally, attributes to P) should be contrasted with the description of Abraham as the father of faith in Gen 15:1-6, as Westermann does.
- 7 See Mat 22:43; Acts 1:16; 2:30; 4:25; Heb 4:7.
- 8 Note that the story of David's adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of Uriah does not recur in 1 Chronicles.
- 9 See 1 Sam 23:2-5, 9-13; 30:7-8; 2 Sam 2:1-2; 5:17-25; also 1 Sam 22:5-6.
- 10 See 1 Sam 23:24-29; 27; 2 Sam 1:15; 4:12; 6:1-2; 8:1-14; 10:7, 17; 11:1; 15:14; 20:1-6.
- 11 Contrast David's fear expressed in 1 Sam 27:1 with 24:20; 25:29; 26:24.
- 12 Overviews of David's life that are much more critical than the above can be found in recent biographies, such as Steven L. McKenzie, *King David: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) and Baruch Halpern, *David's Secret Demons: Messiah, Murderer, Traitor, King* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001). These biographies do not intend to represent the biblical view of David. Instead, they prefer to read the biblical account "against the grain" (McKenzie, 45) or to imagine the events "from a political and ideological position opposite that of the text" (Halpern, xv). Yet they may be helpful for those who want to study David's life from the perspective of the Books of Samuel in some respects. First, they oblige one to read the texts very carefully and to avoid the pitfall of overlooking negative aspects of David's behaviour or of interpreting his actions too positively. Second, they show how delicate David's position often was, as the appearances were against him at several occasions (see e.g. 1 Sam 22:2; 2 Sam 3:13-14; 16:8; 21:8-9).
- 13 Note that the same verb *חָרַד* is used for both God's reaction in 2 Sam 6:7 and David's reaction in 6:8 (although there is a minor difference in that *חָרַד* in 6:7 does not recur in 6:8).
- 14 David's decision not to take the ark with him when he fled from Absalom (2 Sam 15:25-26) also shows that he had learned the right attitude towards the

- ark.
- 15 Cf. also 1 Sam 10:8. On the relationship between 10:8 and 13:1-15, see V. Philips Long, *The Art of Biblical History* (Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation 5; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 205-218.
- 16 For David's humility, also see 2 Sam 7:18; 22:28.
- 17 Hebrew בֵּרַךְ Piel "to bless," here euphemistic for "to curse," as in 1 Kgs 21:10, 13; Ps 10:3; Job 1:11; 2:5, 9; cf. *HAL*, 153b.
- 18 David J. A. Clines, *Job 1-20* (WBC 17; Dallas: Word Books, 1989) 15; Ellen van Wolde, "A Text-Semantic Study of the Hebrew Bible, Illustrated with Noah and Job", *JBL* 113 (1994) 31-32.
- 19 Ellen van Wolde, *Meneer en Mevrouw Job: Job in gesprek met zijn vrouw, zijn vrienden en God* (Baarn: Ten Have, 1991) 24-26.
- 20 Cf. Clines, *Job 1-20*, 39.
- 21 See e.g. Pss 10:1; 22:2; 42:10; 44:24-25; 88:15.
- 22 Cf. Clines, *Job 1-20*, 54: "It is rather some kind of trustfulness that God knows what he is doing."
- 23 For a refutation of the view that the phrase "Job did not sin with his lips" implies that he did sin in his heart, see Clines, *Job 1-20*, 55.
- 24 See e.g. Job 4:7-8; 11:6, 13-15; 22:5-11; 34:10-11; 36:6-7.
- 25 See Job 7:20-21; 9:21-22; 10:7; 23:10-12; 27:5-6.
- 26 Cf. also Job 9; 19:6-7; 30:20.
- 27 The same idea can be found in Eccl 12:1.
- 28 The imperfect ἀνεβαινον in 3:1 may be taken in this sense; thus e.g. Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Acts of the Apostles* (New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990) 120. However, it seems just as probable that it pictures the scene of Peter and John going up to the temple, which was interrupted by the action of the crippled man (v. 3).
- 29 Kistemaker, *Exposition*, 376, infers from Ps 55:18 (EV 55:17) and Dan 6:11 (EV 6:10) that morning, noon and evening were the times of private prayer in Israel, but his argument is inconclusive; cf. also F. E. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary* (3rd ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans: 1990) 254.
- 30 Perhaps Peter alludes to these words of Jesus in 2 Pet 1:14; cf. P. H. R. van Houwelingen, *2 Petrus en Judas: Testament in tweevoud* (Commentaar op het Nieuwe Testament; Kampen: Kok, 1993) 43-44.

The Unique and Universal Christ Jesus in a Plural World

Michael Nazir Ali

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