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How significant is the Old Testament to missionaries who are immersed in their 'mission situation'? What role does it play in the nitty-gritty of life and ministry? We asked a number of current and former Redcliffe students about their experiences of the Old Testament in the context of their own mission circumstances. Although a relatively small sample, they represent a rich diversity of ages, cultural backgrounds and ministry roles. Many regions are represented either in the background of the students or in the contexts in which they have worked or are working. These include: Western and Eastern Europe, Africa, India, South East Asia, the Middle East and Central Asia.

We were encouraged by the results of the survey. It seems that missionaries can draw much from the Old Testament, particularly valuing its honesty, vitality and variety. May we all be inspired to dig deeper as a result.

### What role does the Old Testament play in your day-to-day life?

**Louis:** I frequently use the Old Testament in my daily devotions. It has been a source of reassurance to know that the same God that created the whole universe out of chaos, is the same God that will sustain and rescue us from our daily chaos.

**Anne:** Many times when faced with impossible situations I have read or remembered stories such as David and Goliath or Daniel in the lions' den. I have prayed for strength from God to persevere and overcome these situations and he has answered positively.

Other verses such as Numbers 6:24-26 (the priestly blessing) or Hosea 11:9 ("For I am God and not man: the holy one among you, I will not come in wrath") have helped me to understand God's heart and to be able to share this with others.

I remember one time I was feeling 'got at' from every angle. There was a thunder storm raging outside and the rain was lashing against the wall of the church where we were doing a seminar. I was facing the possibility of getting stuck in the mud on the way back, but God gave me the verse from Isaiah 25:4 "You have been a refuge for the poor... a shelter from the storm... when the breath of the terrible ones is like a storm driving against a wall."

**Magda:** I enjoy reading the Bible in a year. Last year I studied the book of Genesis in depth at a Bible study fellowship. Moses is a good example of the relevance of the Old Testament to the ups and downs of missionary life. God sent a fearful and hesitant Moses into a confrontation with the powerful forces of Pharaoh for the salvation of his people Israel. So how much more is he able to help, guide, protect and encourage us in the ups and the downs.

I also found that the Psalms are a good place to learn about prayer. They are a collection of prayers for the world, the nations and show us God's concern for their salvation.

**Margaret:** I really enjoy and appreciate most of the Old Testament, I read it regularly. God used a number of Old Testament passages in the past to challenge me about mission and

'full time' Christian work (Isaiah 61:1-3; Jeremiah 33:3; Genesis 12:1 and others). Once during my nursing training I was in danger of losing sight of my 'missionary call'; the stories of Naaman (2 Kings 5:1-19) and Jonah brought to my attention the need for obedience.

I read Old Testament passages alongside the New Testament ones day by day in my devotions. Some books being more difficult to understand (mainly the prophets) may get neglected at times! But there are some real gems: I really like Ezra and Nehemiah. Many verses even from the most difficult books can be very encouraging. I can truly say that I love the Old Testament.

**Zoe:** I am working through the Bible so ideally I like to read a chapter from the Old Testament and one from the New Testament. I appreciate the honesty of the stories in the Old Testament, particularly in the wisdom literature. The Old Testament is not scared to look our real life experiences in the face and ask questions/get angry/be real. It reassures me in difficult times that I should not smooth over my feelings and experiences with "pie in the sky" theology.

**Manoj:** I read a few chapters of the Old Testament almost everyday, trying to cover it as many times as possible to familiarize myself with it. Earlier I also had the habit of reading a few Psalms and one chapter from Proverbs daily but now I only do that occasionally.

**Lucy:** I like to read and study the Old Testament but don't do this as much as I'd like to! I have enjoyed good sermons and commentaries through some of the reputedly heavier books – particularly Chris Wright on Deuteronomy, Leviticus and Numbers. I nearly always enjoy sermons from Job – to tackle that book someone has to be real!

Psalms and Job are particular favourites – I have a tape of 2 sermons from the end of Job that I have taken with me all over the place and I have often lent to them to others.

**Since you have been in ministry, have there been passages or books of the Old Testament that have particularly struck you?**

**Louis:** The detailed structure of the priestly tradition in Exodus and Leviticus suggests to me the sense of God's love for beauty and order.

**Anne:** Yes, for instance Jacob's story (Genesis 25-50) with the struggles he had with God and the challenge to continue with him against all odds. Also the fact that at the end of Genesis the family was still together; God was working in their lives, reconciling them through Joseph's forgiving attitude.

**Magda:** From the beginning God's way has always been to choose the younger over the older, the weak over the strong, the lowly shepherd over the tall, handsome and the rugged, the prostitute over the Pharisee, the poor over the wealthy. The story of Joseph has also been important to me, as has the lesson in God's faithfulness to the Israelites in spite of their unbelief and his faithfulness to us will remain the same. He is the same God!

**Margaret:** While I was still at Redcliffe the then principal, Miss Naish, gave us a talk on the nitty-gritty and difficulties of life on the mission field. One thing she warned us about was the possibility of getting depressed (even the most cheerful and optimistic temperaments are not exempt) perhaps following illness, disappointment or after some kind of calamity. She told us that this kind of depression is common and could play unexpected havoc with our spiritual lives - taking away our desire to pray and read the Bible. She said that if or when we might be in that situation, we should not worry and we should not force ourselves to read any deep theological text (e.g. Paul's letters). Instead we should go to the Old Testament and read some of the exciting stories of famous people in difficult circumstances who persevered and won - Joseph in Egypt, David, Ruth, Esther, Daniel and others. In my experience such readings worked wonders.

**Zoe:** When I have felt alone and discouraged with lack of "progress" I feel spurred on by stories like Elijah with the 450 prophets of Baal, or some of the Psalms of David. The way God is patient with Israel throughout the Old Testament helped me to persevere and remember that it is God's work.

**Lucy:** Old Testament books that have helped me: Ruth (God's providence); Nehemiah; Esther (for such a time as this); Job (my hand on my mouth); Psalms 73; 139; Song of Songs; Isaiah; Jeremiah; Daniel; Habakkuk 3:17,18.

### **How has the Old Testament featured in your place of ministry?**

**Louis:** Perhaps the situation during the time of the pre-exilic prophets like Amos and their denunciation of social evils has similarities to the social-political situation where I work.

**Anne:** In my case I tend to live as a 'nomad', picturing myself as a 'wandering Aramean' (Deut. 26:5) trying not to put down roots, because this would change my whole approach to ministry; I would want to 'possess' the country in which I live instead of being a guest there with all the cultural implications.

Some of the people among whom I work are nomadic as well, herding cattle, sheep and goats like the patriarchs did. Their lives are closer to the Old Testament, so their understanding of the stories in it is in some ways more realistic than my own.

**Magda:** When I share the gospel with people from other faiths, I often start with stories such as Creation, Adam and Eve, the prophets and lead up to the coming of Jesus. For some, these stories are also common to them. Some are oral people who like story-telling and the OT is full of it.

**Margaret:** I worked in Thailand where the majority of people is Buddhist. To many, sin meant killing animals, smoking, drinking alcohol, deceit and killing people. We had the chance to share from the Old Testament the stories of creation and original sin, and the story of Israel.

We could explain the Gospel but in a society that knows nothing about Creation and the Fall our explanations often fell on apparently deaf ears. So it was necessary also to understand

the Old Testament and about the history of the Jews. This kind of teaching was mostly done in small house groups. Even though my main responsibility was as a leprosy nurse in village clinics, I also had a role in the Church Planting team.

**Zoe:** In international student Bible studies we would always start the series at Psalm 139, then go through Gen. 1-3 before taking them to Jesus in the New Testament. Even students from former communist countries seemed to really engage with the idea of God presented in psalm 139; it was always a great starting point for them.

**Manoj:** I have been working among the poor and marginalized people groups and my convictions have been reinforced reading and studying Old Testament passages dealing with God's love for the poor, his passion for justice and fairness, and his anger against oppression and exploitation.

Isaiah 58 has been a very special chapter defining what the Lord has called me to do and keeps me going when I am wanting to give up. It also reassures me that I have been given the privilege to be involved in what is so dear to the heart of God.

**Lucy:** A local believer has said that we should not just give people the NT, but should give them both NT and OT together. I have often given verses from Psalms (and other books) to encourage a local believer. I think that many parts of the world are still very similar to the OT situation (politically, socially and culturally) – it helps me to understand the culture I work in and the culture helps me to understand the OT!

### **How do the people you minister engage with the OT books?**

**Louis:** In Malawi the Old Testament is perhaps more accepted though sometimes wrongly applied. It seems to be nearer to the African traditions than the New Testament and it has sometimes been used to support African practices like polygamy. Despite the fact it has sometimes been used to support the beliefs of schismatic groups, it has been of inspiration to many Christians.

**Anne:** When the church elders were to be elected, the pastor of our church preached a very good word using examples from the Old Testament such as that of Moses and his election of the elders of the tribes of Israel following the advice of his father in law, Jethro in Exodus 18.

**Magda:** I find that many Christians ignore the teaching of the Old Testament, maybe because it is not so easy to understand - there are so many names and prophecies can be difficult to understand. However we cannot understand the New Testament without understanding the Old Testament.

**Margaret:** The Bible has been translated into Thai for more that 100 years. When I arrived in 1960 a new translation was in the making; I think the New Testament was already in use but it took a few more years to complete the Old Testament. So instead of waiting for the whole Old Testament to be completed in one book, the Bible Society published each book as it was finished. This meant the Old Testament could be sold very cheaply as small illustrated

booklets. Genesis, Psalms, and Proverbs were very popular even among non-Christians. Christians and young Churches found them very helpful.

**Zoe:** Whilst working with international students the OT was mainly used to set the scene and explain the problem that Jesus came to solve.

**Manoj:** The people we work with do not seem to engage with the Old Testament very much but we are encouraging them to read it and become familiar with it. The Old Testament inspires some people but not all understand and identify with what is taught. It is preached only by some in the team. Most prefer to limit themselves to the NT.

### **How have your experiences affected the way you read the OT?**

**Anne:** My experiences of missionary life date back to childhood. When we experienced near accidents on journeys to and from school or when God opened opportunities for us as a family or others, my mother would see them as signs of the love of God.

**Zoe:** From our evangelistic Bible studies I have learnt that you cannot just take the New Testament without the Old, that they are parts of one story. The God of the Old Testament is the same as the God of the New Testament. Both parts of Scriptures are rich in stories of grace and of the need for judgment. There is nothing totally new in the New Testament.

**Manoj:** I do struggle with portions of the Old Testament which depict God as violent and merciless to some of the people groups, a God who advocates war and annihilation of entire cities with the women and children but on the whole the Old Testament has made a significant contribution in my spiritual journey.

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