

Men and women of the Bible as spiritual companions

Gareth Brandt

The Bible is full of stories about people, real people with bodies and minds, and with an array of experiences, relationships, and emotions. How odd, then, that we so often turn to the Bible as little more than an instruction manual for communal and personal life. What would happen if we expanded our reliance on the Bible to include seeing the people in its pages as companions in our life with God?

Christian spiritual formation takes place primarily in the context of relationships: we grow in faith in community. What would happen if we saw the people in the pages of the Bible as companions in our life with God?

In a cursory survey of our college library I found few resources to assist us in this quest —apart from historical novels based on

biblical characters, and a few old “dictionaries” of biblical persons. And almost nothing has been written on the subject in the last fifty years!¹

The Bible is a major source in the work of Christian spiritual formation. Such formation takes place primarily in the context of relationships: we grow in faith in community. In a culture characterized by alienation and fragmentation, we more than ever need companions to walk with us in our lives as Jesus followers. No doubt the brothers and sisters we share life with in our churches are most significant for our formation, but the men and women of the Bible can also accompany us on the journey of following Jesus.

But how can these biblical believers become our spiritual companions? In order for that to happen, we’ll need to shift our perspective in two ways. First, we must see the Bible as a story of real people, a collection of human narratives rather than a series of divine propositions. Second, we must embrace the women and men of the Bible as fellow travelers on the journey rather than as models of morality or objects of study.

The Bible as a collection of stories about people

The Bible is a dynamic, living story of faith, not a static propositional statement of faith. From Genesis to Revelation the story unfolds. It is the story of the interaction between people and their Creator. Many people are part of this drama, from Abraham and Sarah and their growing family, to Ruth and Boaz, to kings and prophets, to Jesus and his disciples and followers. Even the people listed in genealogies and those who remain nameless are part of the story. These people can become our companions. Hebrews 11 invites us to an awareness of the cloud of witnesses cheering us on from the stands (Heb. 12:1), who can also become our running partners in the race of life.

The climax of the salvation drama is a person, Jesus Christ, who brings together the divine and the human. Truth is a person, not a doctrine or statement. Jesus says, "I am . . . the truth." God's primary and ultimate revelation of what divinity is like is not a book but a person. The four Gospels tell the story of this person, but the entire Bible includes the stories of the people who were the precursors to and the followers of Jesus.

The Bible is a story of people and their relationships with God. "The Bible is not concerned with right morality, right piety or right doctrine. Rather it is concerned with *right relationships* between God and God's people, between all the sisters and brothers in this community, and between God's people and the created world."² An ordinary book we can study and dissect, analyze and criticize, but when we approach the Bible we must remember that it is a living book. Its authors and characters are in conversation with us.

Maybe it would help if we gave up thinking of the Bible as a completed book and thought of it instead as an unfolding script in which we have been invited to play a continuing role, following the lead of the main actors whose names and lines are recorded in it.

People in the Bible as spiritual companions

When we see the Bible as story, we begin to embrace its characters as companions who are like us rather than as models we should emulate or learn lessons from. If I read the stories of people in the Bible propositionally, in order to extract lessons from them

on how to live, I may end up feeling like a failure, or perceiving them as failures. Too often preachers have tried to extract three propositional truths from a story, when a better idea might be to see how we can gain a friend through encountering the text—someone who has already been down the road we are now traveling. In the midst of a difficult experience, I'd rather have an experienced friend walk with me than any number of people handing out advice to me. I want the companionship of someone I can identify with.

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One rejoinder might be that this approach will merely reinforce our bad habits and make us feel good, but it will not lead to transformation. I would counter that spiritual change rarely happens because we receive moral instruction on what we should do or should not do. Consider the example of Jesus, who most of the time taught by telling stories that people could enter into. His listeners did not necessarily feel good as a result; the stories didn't reinforce their bad habits. Instead his hearers were invited to identify with the characters and events of his stories, and thus they were challenged to see themselves differently. They gained a new perspective, and unless they were self-righteous and stuck in their ways and just got angry, they were transformed. Something similar can happen to us when we identify with the stories of people in the Bible. "As we put ourselves into the situations of these men and women of God—not idealized out of all resemblance to truth, but in the real-life situation as the Bible presents them—we find something happening to us."³ The God who met them meets us.

A case study: Joseph

In the research and group work leading to the writing of *Under Construction: Reframing Men's Spirituality*,⁴ I asked men, who's your favorite Bible man? Almost as many men in the Bible were mentioned as there were men responding! I concluded that no one man in the Bible can provide a complete model of male spirituality; different men identify with different men in the Bible.

Who's your favourite man in the Bible? I might answer by naming the man I most admire or most want to be like, but maybe instead I should name the man I identify with most closely. That man could be my spiritual friend. The men I asked didn't give a lot of votes to David and Moses and the apostle Paul. Those they mentioned repeatedly included Jacob, because he struggled, and Thomas, because he had doubts. Neither struggles nor doubts make the front page news—not like David committing adultery or Moses committing murder—but struggles and doubts are the stuff of ordinary human life. I would guess more women might identify with Ruth, and her rather ordinary life, than with Esther, who won a beauty contest and became queen.

I chose the Joseph narrative as the outline for my book on men's spirituality. Why did I choose Joseph as a spiritual companion for men who read the book? The initial impetus was a dream I had had about Joseph, but Joseph was a good choice for a number of other reasons. I could identify with Joseph's internal struggles of pride, temptation, and revenge. I have also experienced woundedness, alienation, reconciliation, and vocational success, as he did. He is someone with whom I and other "ordinary" men might be able to identify.

My use of the Joseph character and story was more allegorical than exegetical, although my themes were in line with the exegesis of the entire narrative. Old Testament narratives must be interpreted as narratives, not illustrations of propositional points. All of Genesis 37–50 is one story, so one should really consider the entire narrative as one unit. But for our purposes here, a smaller, more manageable unit from the larger narrative can illustrate the two ways of reading a story discussed above.

Genesis 39:2–23 tells the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife. It is a powerful story, and not only because Joseph as a young man resists his boss's wife's sexual advances. That obvious exterior story has given rise to any number of moralizing sermons about the three R's of purity: resist, respond, run (or whatever other clever alliterative scheme the preacher can muster). If instead we consider the primary theme of the entire narrative—Yahweh's protection of Joseph in order to save Joseph's family—we might see a deeper message, one we can identify with as real human beings who face similar struggles and temptations. I too am tempted. I

too struggle and vacillate in temptation: will I be true to myself and God, maintaining my integrity, or will I yield to the momentary pleasure that boosts my ego in the present moment?

The former way of looking at the story may produce a clear message about proper moral behaviour, but the latter elicits our deeper reflection on spirituality and identity. Seeing people in the

Like Joseph in his encounter with Potiphar's wife, I too struggle and vacillate in temptation: will I be true to myself and God, maintaining my integrity, or will I yield to the momentary pleasure that boosts my ego in the present moment?

Bible as companions rather than models leads in the long run to deeper transformation. The former approach is more like the parent who runs through a list of do's and don'ts for the teenager leaving the house; the latter is more like a call to remember who you are. Our identification with people in biblical stories helps form an intrinsic morality, coming from within rather than being imposed from without.

In the former approach, negative stories provide models of what not to do, and from positive stories we derive models of what to do. But when we see people in the Bible as

companions on the journey, the most important thing is not identifying a moral of the story tacked on at the end; the most important thing is the story itself. What do friends do for us? We usually reject or ignore the advice of "friends" who tell us just what we should do. Real friends walk with us and help us discern our path by sharing out of their own experiences. When we see the journey of a friend, we see our own course more clearly. The stories of people in the Bible can function similarly. Women and men of the Bible become our friends, and then in their stories we see our own more clearly and begin to be transformed by the grand story of the gospel.

Conclusion

The effects of embracing men and women of the Bible as spiritual companions are numerous. These effects could include our recovery of the lost art of biographical preaching, and finding new ways to conduct group Bible studies. We could also uncover the great potential in this approach for pastoral counselling, spiritual direction, and for our personal spiritual disciplines. Seeing the

women and men of the Bible as a cloud of witnesses is not a new idea but one to which we do well to give renewed emphasis and apply our creativity in these times when people crave companions on the way.

Notes

¹ One of the only recent books of this type that I found was Virginia Stem Owens, *Daughters of Eve: Seeing Ourselves in Women of the Bible* (Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 2007).

² Walter Brueggemann, *The Bible Makes Sense* (Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 2001), 150.

³ William Sanford LaSor, *Great Personalities of the Bible* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1959), 4.

⁴ Gareth Brandt, *Under Construction: Reframing Men's Spirituality* (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2009).

About the author

Gareth Brandt is professor of practical theology at Columbia Bible College in Abbotsford, British Columbia, and author of *Under Construction: Reframing Men's Spirituality* (Herald Press, 2009).