



ERIC A. SEIBERT

ENJOYING
the OLD
TESTAMENT

A CREATIVE
GUIDE TO
ENCOUNTERING
SCRIPTURE



InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

Taken from *Enjoying the Old Testament* by Eric A. Seibert.
Copyright © 2021 by Eric A. Seibert. Published by InterVarsity Press,
Downers Grove, IL. www.ivpress.com.

WHY DO WE NEED THIS BOOK?

When inspired, I pick up the Bible for a few minutes at the beginning or end of the day. But often I am tired, and I do not get very far. I enjoy the feel of the pages; I glance over the chapter headings. Yet, over the course of days or weeks, I rarely make it through an entire book of the Bible, despite my best intentions. I have often found it more interesting to pick up a book about the Bible than to read the Bible itself.

JOHN P. BURGESS, *WHY SCRIPTURE MATTERS*

OVER THIRTY YEARS AGO, in the spring of 1989, something unexpected happened: I *fell in love* with the Old Testament. I was a first-year student at Messiah University (then College) and was enrolled in Old Testament Literature, a required course for my major. In that course, in an otherwise unremarkable classroom in the Sollenberger Sports Center, the Old Testament came alive for me in ways I never dreamed possible.

To be honest, I had never really paid much attention to the Old Testament while I was growing up. My knowledge of this part of the Bible mainly came through what I was taught in church—and I attended a lot of church: Sunday school, Sunday morning worship, Vacation Bible School, Sunday evening services and, for a time, even Wednesday evening prayer meetings. Still, for all that, I did not spend much time with the Old Testament on my own. I certainly had not read most of it, and my knowledge of what it contained was quite limited. Though I had

heard many of the most popular Old Testament stories, I had little real knowledge of how they fit together into Israel's larger story. Had someone pressed me to put twenty different Old Testament events in order, I am sure I would have done quite poorly.

True, I had once spent hours listening to sermons by Chuck Swindoll on the life of Moses. I can still picture myself sitting at home in my room in rural Pennsylvania, listening to Pastor Swindoll while I worked on an art project for school. It was a latch-hook rug I had designed that contained the symbol of a popular Christian rock band surrounded by lots of black yarn. As I was latch-hooking, I passed the hours listening to this mesmerizing preacher draw out lessons from the life of Moses. It was fascinating. Still, for all that, it did not propel me to dive into the Old Testament on my own. Instead, I spent most of my time focusing on that "other" part of the Bible, the New Testament.

Armed with a beautiful, burgundy-bound, one-volume *Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, I spent countless hours working through individual study guides on various New Testament books. The New Testament intrigued me. It contained so much wisdom and practical advice for Christian living that was easy to extract and export.

But that college class in 1989 really turned things upside down for me and charted a new course for my future. The professor, Dr. Terry Brensinger, brought the Old Testament to life in ways I had not previously experienced. Time and again he demonstrated how relevant the Old Testament was for people of faith like me. I was amazed that these ancient texts contained such profound insights about God, the world, and the way human beings were to relate to God and others. I was captivated.

Since I had neglected the Old Testament for so long, I had to make up for lost time. There was so much new terrain to cover, and I thoroughly enjoyed taking many Old Testament classes over the next three years of my college career. It was a blast! I loved those courses and the world they opened up to me.

Ultimately, this led me to seminary and graduate school where I earned a PhD in the area of Old Testament. Now, I have the good fortune

of teaching the Old Testament to undergraduate students at my alma mater. Not many people get to talk about the Bible for a living, and I consider myself very fortunate in that regard.

A VERY REAL DILEMMA

Teaching the Bible for many years has made it abundantly clear that not everyone shares the same level of enthusiasm for the Old Testament that I have described here.¹ Truth be told, many Christians really struggle with this part of Scripture, especially with its archaic laws, tedious genealogies, strange customs, and prophetic tirades. They know they are *supposed* to read the Old Testament but feel little desire to do so. While some stalwart churchgoers continue reading out of sheer duty, others give up on the Old Testament altogether, opening it only occasionally to revisit a few familiar psalms, stories, or well-known verses. And though many feel guilty about their lack of love for the Old Testament and may sincerely wish they could get more out of it, they have no idea how to make that happen.

Perhaps this describes you. Maybe you tried to read through the Old Testament in the past but got discouraged when you ran into material that failed to capture your interest. Or maybe you feel confused by what you have read and are unsure how to make sense of it all. Perhaps you find some parts morally offensive or theologically troubling. Or maybe you have been personally harmed by the Old Testament and have felt the sting of verses used to judge or condemn you. Or maybe you just find this whole part of the Bible largely irrelevant to your life today. Whatever the case may be, if you don't really like the Old Testament and want that to change, you have come to the right place!

¹Though Protestants, Catholics, and Orthodox Christians differ over exactly which books constitute the Old Testament, I am using the term to refer to the thirty-nine books Protestants recognize as the complete Old Testament. Catholics and Orthodox Christians include these thirty-nine books along with others. For an orientation to the other books, see David A. deSilva, *Introducing the Apocrypha: Message, Context, and Significance* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002).

READING THE OLD TESTAMENT: BLESSING OR BURDEN?

The purpose of this book is to offer some suggestions that can help you take joy in reading the Old Testament. I want the Old Testament to become something you are eager to return to time and again, not because you feel obligated to do so, but because you genuinely *want* to engage it. My hope is that you come to regard reading the Old Testament as a blessing rather than a burden, something to anticipate, not dread.

This is precisely what happened to Philip Yancey many years ago. In his book *The Bible Jesus Read*, Yancey talks about how he “came to stop avoiding and start reading—ultimately loving—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 those thirty-nine books, which were satisfying 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.²

Yancey’s journey from resisting the Old Testament to relishing it represents the kind of movement I hope this book inspires. Even if you don’t currently enjoy the Old Testament, I hope you feel more enthusiastic about it after reading this book.

But be warned. Some people start having so much fun with the Old Testament that they devote their lives to it. Take my friend David Lamb, for example. David is professor of Old Testament at Missio Seminary in Hatfield, Pennsylvania. Early in his academic career, he needed to decide which part of the Bible would be his focus. Although drawn to the New Testament, he opted to study the Old Testament instead. He was especially intrigued by the rich and multifaceted portrait of God he found there. As Lamb describes it:

The most compelling factor drawing me toward studying the Old Testament was God himself. . . . God in the Old Testament was complex.

²Philip Yancey, *The Bible Jesus Read* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 20-21, emphasis original.

There was so much about God in the Old Testament that I didn't understand. I thought I could study the Old Testament for the rest of my life and never feel bored.³

His feelings have not changed. "I still can't imagine getting tired of studying the Old Testament," says Lamb. "I love the Old Testament, and in particular examining the God who is revealed there."⁴

One of my primary goals as a college professor is to get people excited about reading Scripture. While I may not be able to persuade everybody to *love* the Old Testament the way David Lamb does, I can at least help them learn how to like it a whole lot more. When I teach a Bible class, I want people to leave that class with a *greater* desire to read the Bible than when they began. If this does not happen and students leave the class *less* interested in reading the Bible than when they began, I have surely failed. After all, what good is it to produce students who know lots of facts about the Old Testament but leave class vowing never to read it again? This book, like my classes, is designed to leave you wanting *more* of the Old Testament.

The benefits of reading the Old Testament are enormous, and we will have an opportunity to explore some of these in chapter three. For now, suffice it to say that reading the Old Testament can strengthen your faith, deepen your relationship with God, and show you how to live faithfully with hope, conviction, and joy. These texts have nurtured and sustained communities of faith for centuries, and they continue to be vital for the spiritual health and well-being of the church. Treasures await those who open its pages.

WHAT TO EXPECT FROM THIS BOOK

Before we get too far along, it might be helpful to say a few words about what to expect in the pages that follow. We'll begin with what the book is not. This book is *not* intended to be a general introduction to the Old Testament, and it makes no attempt to offer any kind of systematic

³David T. Lamb, *God Behaving Badly: Is the God of the Old Testament Angry, Sexist, and Racist?* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 10.

⁴Lamb, *God Behaving Badly*, 10-11.

summary of the basic content and themes of various Old Testament books. This book also does not concentrate on the context, background, and historical setting of Old Testament literature, or on historical-critical questions related to the study of this part of Scripture. While all these things are important, there are already many books on the market that cover them quite well.⁵

Instead, this book is designed to increase your interest in the Old Testament by demonstrating how reading it can be both pleasurable and rewarding. You will find an assortment of creative approaches to the Old Testament that are interactive, engaging, and enjoyable. This practical, “hands-on” approach will encourage you to return to this oft-neglected part of the Bible time and again with renewed interest and enthusiasm.

Along the way, numerous examples are included that illustrate the Old Testament’s contemporary relevance and applicability. Hopefully, this too will persuade you to open the Old Testament more frequently and discover for yourself its profound value and worth for spiritual growth and theological reflection.

WHY THIS APPROACH?

The approach taken in this book is rooted in the conviction that having a variety of ways to encounter the Old Testament is what keeps people engaged with it over the long haul. Although some people do the same thing with the Bible year in and year out—and seem to enjoy it—most of us cannot sustain such a routine. We need different ways to connect with the text. Otherwise, we get bored and lose interest. As the saying goes, “Variety is the spice of life.” If you want to enjoy reading the Bible, find various ways to engage it. That keeps things interesting.

I also believe people are most inclined to do what they love. That is why our family goes to the beach each year. It is why I have spent too much time playing Minecraft and Clash Royale over the years. And it’s why I consume so much sugar! It is easy to do what gives us pleasure.

⁵See “Old Testament Introductions” in the appendix.

That is why this book is so intentional about demonstrating various ways to enjoy reading the Old Testament. Admittedly, it will likely take more effort to have fun with the Old Testament than it does to go to the beach, play a video game, or eat a chocolate bar, but it is possible. You *can* discover ways of reading and engaging the Old Testament that are quite pleasurable and deeply satisfying.

Just to be clear, my goal in emphasizing the fun you can have reading the Old Testament is not simply so you can add “Bible reading” to a list of hobbies you relish doing from time to time, like hiking, boogie boarding, woodworking, or crocheting. Rather, I want you to have meaningful and edifying encounters with the Old Testament on a *regular* basis because I believe this is one of the key ways Christians grow and mature. Bible reading is an essential spiritual practice for Christians because of what the church claims these texts to be: authoritative Scripture. As the writer of 2 Timothy 3:16 puts it, “All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.” The Old Testament shapes our behaviors and beliefs and is therefore crucially important to the life of faith.

For the past two thousand years, the Old Testament has been an indispensable resource for the church. The church preaches and teaches from it, writes about it, reflects on it, and is sustained by it. It has played a vital role in bringing people to faith, freeing people from oppression, and inspiring people to live holy lives. The Old Testament is a crucial part of the Christian tradition, and we must continue to find new ways to engage it and be engaged by it. Having fun with it is one way to ensure this happens.

As you will discover in the pages that follow, many of the practical suggestions offered in this book require nothing more than a Bible, a comfortable chair, and perhaps paper and pencil close at hand. I have tried to suggest activities that do not require the use of other books such as commentaries, Bible dictionaries, and the like. While these are valuable reference tools, having firsthand experience with the biblical

text itself is *most* essential. While it is valuable to read books *about* the Old Testament (like this one), there is no substitute for your own direct encounter with the Bible itself. Ultimately, this is what gets you hooked.

The other reason for offering practical suggestions that can be implemented with just a Bible in hand is because I assume some of you may not have easy access to a theological library. I do not want you to feel that enjoying the Old Testament depends on being surrounded by scholarly books and articles. It does not. While I will recommend several books and websites that can enhance your appreciation of the Old Testament, there are lots of ways to have deeply satisfying encounters with this part of the Bible that do not require any additional resources.

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF COMING ATTRACTIONS

This book is divided into three parts. The first section, “Preparing to Read the Neglected Testament,” begins by explaining why so many people don’t seem to like the Old Testament very much. Chapter two briefly describes the declining use of the Old Testament among Christians and then discusses some of the reasons people commonly give for their lack of interest in this part of the Bible (e.g., it’s boring, morally problematic, irrelevant, confusing, and so forth). People sometimes wonder whether the Old Testament is even worth the effort. If there are so many “problems,” why bother with it? Chapter three addresses this question by highlighting seven of the Old Testament’s most attractive features in an effort to provide a compelling rationale for reading it. The following two chapters lay the necessary groundwork for having a positive encounter with the Old Testament. Chapter four discusses the importance of developing realistic expectations when reading this part of the Bible by exploring what you should and should not expect of the Old Testament. Chapter five extends this conversation by describing the kind of attitude you should have when approaching the Old Testament. I emphasize being observant, expectant, respectful, and honest with the text.

The next section of the book, “Having Fun with the Old Testament,” considers a number of concrete ways to enhance your enjoyment of this

part of the Bible. Chapter six focuses exclusively on Old Testament narratives. It discusses how observing important literary features such as repetition, naming, and the use of personal details is both pleasurable and profitable. Chapter seven explores prophetic literature, exposing common misperceptions about the prophets while emphasizing their importance as persuasive speakers who cared deeply about the communities they served. The remaining two chapters provide guidance for dealing with some of the most disagreeable parts of the Old Testament. Chapter eight offers advice for how to benefit from the “boring” parts of the Old Testament, such as the law codes, while chapter nine suggests ways to overcome some of the most formidable obstacles to enjoying the Old Testament, namely, passages you find morally or theologically problematic. Each chapter includes specific practices you can “try at home” to help you get more out of these intriguing stories, prophetic speeches, ancient laws, and troubling texts.

The final section of the book, “Encountering the Old Testament in New Ways,” provides a wide array of creative options for engaging the Old Testament. Chapters ten and eleven lay out some very practical ways to interact with the Old Testament. The ideas in chapter ten range from very basic suggestions (memorize Old Testament verses) to more targeted approaches (read a familiar Old Testament story from a different perspective). The suggestions in chapter eleven fall into one of three categories: those which are topically motivated (use the Old Testament to explore a topic of interest), artistically oriented (create a work of art related to a person, passage, event, or theme in the Old Testament), or personally reflective (connect your story with others in the Old Testament). Most of these suggestions are designed to help you move beyond just reading the Old Testament; all are offered with the hope they will help you find more ways to savor this part of the Bible. Chapter twelve focuses exclusively on one particular way to encounter the Old Testament, namely, doing a book survey. This easy-to-use method will enable you to get an overview of the basic content and structure of individual books of the Old Testament and can be used with the New Testament as well.

The final chapter, chapter thirteen, is especially important. It talks about the nuts and bolts of implementing the ideas presented in this book. I encourage readers to develop a plan for interacting with the Old Testament, experiment with different approaches along the way, and take practical steps to make their experience with the Old Testament more pleasurable, among other things.

The book concludes with an appendix containing a brief list of resources that can enrich your reading and enjoyment of the Old Testament immensely. While many of these are referenced throughout the book, they are brought together here for convenience's sake.

CONCLUSION

Though many books are published each year that promise to help people understand the Old Testament better, they often fail to address a prior issue: Why bother reading it in the first place? This book is different. It is intentionally designed to help you see that reading the Old Testament is not only worth the effort but is actually quite rewarding.

Throughout this book, you will gain many tools that will help you find creative ways to enjoy the Old Testament as you engage it in all its beauty and complexity. But before we offer these practical suggestions, it is necessary to consider what makes the Old Testament so challenging to read in the first place.

BUY THE BOOK!

ivpress.com/enjoying-the-old-testament