

EXCERPT

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## *Enjoying the Old Testament* *A Creative Guide to Encountering Scripture*

November 16, 2021 | \$26, 248 pages, paperback | 978-1-5140-0120-2

**Eric A. Seibert** (PhD, Drew University) is a professor of Old Testament and has served as the president of the Eastern Great Lakes Biblical Society. His most recent books are *The Violence of Scripture: Overcoming the Old Testament's Troubling Legacy* and *Disarming the Church: Why Christians Must Forsake Violence to Follow Jesus and Change the World*.

## Bringing the Old Testament to Life

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.

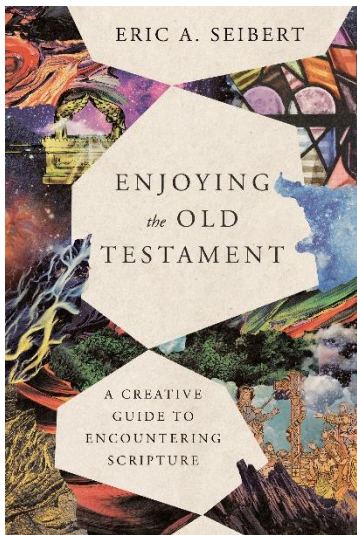


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Teaching the Bible for many years has made it abundantly clear that not everyone shares the same level of enthusiasm for the Old Testament that I have described here. Truth be told, many Christians really struggle with this part of Scripture, especially 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!

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.

—Taken from chapter one, “Why Do We Need This Book?”

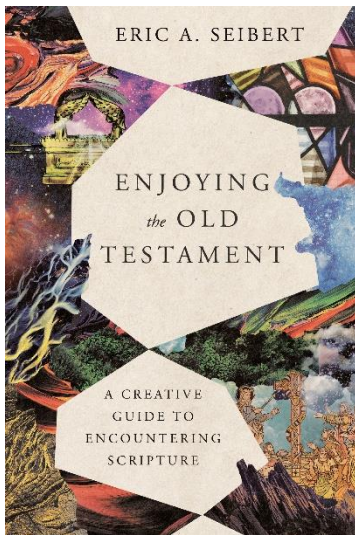


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Is it really possible to enjoy the Old Testament? Eric Seibert understands why many Christians find this part of the Bible confusing, theologically troubling, or just uninteresting. Offering dozens of practical exercises for hands-on interaction with the text, this unique resource equips readers with a variety of creative approaches to bring even the seemingly dry passages to life.

## A Few Basic Suggestions to Get You Started

Apart from beloved psalms, like Psalm 23, or foundational laws, like the Ten Commandments, the best-known parts of the Old Testament are the narratives, or stories, it contains: Noah's ark; Abraham and (the near-sacrifice of) Isaac; Joshua and the Battle of Jericho; Samson and Delilah; David and Goliath; Elijah and the prophets of Baal; Ruth and Naomi; and the story of Queen Esther—to name just a few. Stories like these are what many young children are taught in Sunday school, Vacation Bible School, and summer church camps. Many of these stories have been immortalized in Veggie Tales videos such as *King George and the Ducky*, a retelling of the David-and-Bathsheba debacle (2 Sam 11), and *Rack, Shack, and Benny*, a version of the story about Daniel's three friends and the fiery furnace (Dan 3). The popularity of Old Testament narratives is also evident in children's Bibles, which selectively retell very small portions of the Old Testament and include more stories than anything else. Why? Because stories are engaging and captivating. They are dramatic, memorable, and instructive. Everyone loves a good story.

The Israelites clearly prized crafting and telling stories. The sheer number of stories that have survived in the Old Testament bear ample testimony to this. According to one estimate, over 40 percent of the Old Testament consists of narrative. Considering the enormous size of the Old Testament, that's a lot of story!

Personally, I'm glad there are so many stories in the Old Testament. I love Old Testament narratives and maybe you do too. Whatever your current attitude may be, I hope this chapter enhances your enjoyment of these time-honored tales. I also hope it leaves you feeling better equipped to investigate them from different angles and perspectives. Doing so will enable you to get more out of these stories as you explore them with renewed energy and enthusiasm.

While many Christians are familiar with the most popular stories in the Old Testament, the majority of them remain virtually unknown. How often do we hear a Sunday school lesson or sermon about the tragic sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter (Judg 11:34-40) or the moral courage of Saul's concubine Rizpah (2 Sam 21:1-14)? Who tells the story of King Jehu's treacherous treatment of Baal worshipers in Samaria (2 Kings 10:18-31) or David's gracious treatment of Jonathan's son Mephibosheth in Jerusalem (2 Sam 9:1-13)? These stories and many others have been lost to us. They are typically not taught in the church, are not a part of the Revised Common Lectionary, and are not the stuff of children's books or Bibles.

Even stories that are familiar to us often aren't as well-known as we might think. Take the story of Jonah, for example. If you were to ask someone for the basic storyline, you might get something like this: "The book of Jonah is about a disobedient prophet who tries to avoid God's call, ends up inside the belly of a 'whale' for a few days, and eventually does what God commands by preaching to the Ninevites whose remarkable repentance causes God to spare the city." End of story, right?

Wrong. There is still another chapter to go! But many readers are unfamiliar with Jonah 4, the final chapter of the book in which Jonah wants to die because he is so angry that God showed mercy on his enemies. Children's books that retell the story of Jonah routinely omit this chapter, and many churchgoers are completely unaware of it.

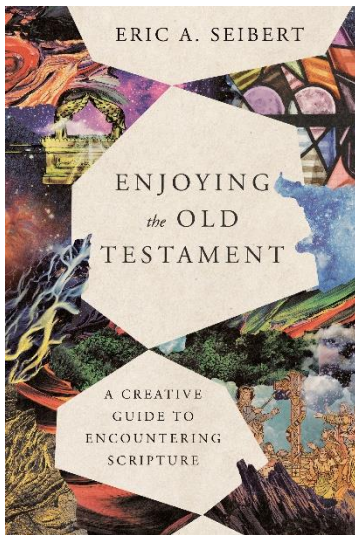
In light of our basic unfamiliarity with many of these Old Testament narratives, it seems that getting acquainted with them would be a good place to start. This would be time and energy well spent, especially given the historically low rates of biblical literacy in the church today. What follows are some brief and very basic guidelines for how you can get to know these stories better.



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**Select a story you want to explore.** The first thing you need to do is figure out what story you want to read. As we've said, there are lots to choose from. If you would find it helpful to have a list of options, a simple internet search of "popular Bible stories" will yield this. Stories about individual characters in the Old Testament come in many shapes and sizes and are of varying lengths. Some individuals have multiple chapters devoted to them (e.g., Abraham, Gen 12–25) while others merely get a single verse (e.g., Shamgar, Judg 3:31). For starters, I would suggest selecting a story that interests you and is not too long. Over time, you can examine longer stories and choose those you know little or nothing about. But to begin, start small and find something that piques your interest. If you are really unfamiliar with the Bible or want to work at this more systematically, you could look at the stories listed in the table of contents of Timothy Beal's book, *Biblical Literacy: The Essential Bible Stories Everyone Needs to Know*.

**Determine the boundaries of the story.** Next, determine where the story begins and ends. Sometimes, this is made easy because the story begins with the main character's birth and ends with the person's death. The story of Abraham, for example, runs from Genesis 11:27–25:11, and the story of Samson is found exclusively in Judges 13–16. Other times you may be introduced to a person at a certain age: we meet Joseph when he is seventeen (Gen 37:2) and Josiah at age eight (2 Kings 22:1). This marks the beginning of their accounts in the Old Testament. One easy way to get a quick sense of where someone's story begins and ends is to type the person's name into a searchable Bible, see what comes up, and then go to the earliest and latest references to see if you can determine the parameters of the story.

Once you have identified the boundaries of a particular story, keep in mind that it might also be part of a larger story. The story of Abraham (Gen 11:27–25:11), for example, is part of the patriarchal narrative which runs from Genesis 12–50. And the story of Samson (Judg 13–16) is part of the story of Israel's judges told in Judges 3–16. It is always helpful to read smaller stories in their larger literary context, especially when they are part of longer narratives.

**Read the story in its entirety.** After you have identified the story you want to explore and have determined where it begins and ends, read through the story in its entirety to get a general overview. You may want to have paper and pencil in hand so you can make some initial observations about things you find interesting or puzzling.

**Create a basic outline of the story.** When you are finished reading through the story, I would then suggest creating a basic outline of it. If it is a long story, you might want to work on this over several days. Stories about people like Abraham and Samson that occupy several chapters are comprised of several smaller stories embedded within the larger narrative. You can identify these and use a standard outline to map out the story. Alternatively, you might consider drawing a series of pictures that "outline" the major components of the story you are investigating. Either way, the goal is to produce a roadmap through the story. This will keep you from getting lost and will divide the story into more manageable portions.

You can repeat this process for as many Old Testament stories as you like. It is good way to become more familiar with these fascinating narratives.

—Taken from chapter six, "Finding New Meaning in Old Stories"



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