

THIS STRANGE
and
SACRED SCRIPTURE

WRESTLING WITH THE OLD TESTAMENT
AND ITS ODDITIES

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Baker Academic
a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Matthew Richard Schlimm, *This Strange and Sacred Scripture*
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Published by Baker Academic
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.bakeracademic.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Schlimm, Matthew Richard.

This strange and sacred scripture : wrestling with the Old Testament and its oddities / Matthew Richard Schlimm.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8010-3979-9 (pbk.)

1. Bible. Old Testament—Introductions. 2. Bible. Old Testament—Theology. I. Title.

BS1140.3.S35 2015

221.6—dc23

2014030699

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To
Stephanie Lind Schlimm



In Loving Memory of
Catherine Ann Schlimm

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Preface and Acknowledgments

STAYING ON MIDDLE GROUND IS DIFFICULT, like trying to walk along the jagged ridge of a mountain.

In this book, I try to find and remain on middle ground when approaching the Old Testament's problems. It's not easy. I have sought, on the one hand, to affirm the sacred status of the Old Testament, as the church has done for centuries. I refuse to give up on the Bible, no matter how problematic it may be. The Old Testament has been my friend since childhood, and as with any good friendship, there are commitments that persist amid difficulties.

On the other hand, I have also sought to be completely honest about the disturbing things readers find in the Old Testament. I refuse easy solutions that disrespect readers' honest reactions to the Bible. I will not abandon my God-given sense of what's right and wrong to endorse things like violence or sexism in God's name.

It's easy to lose one's footing on the top of a mountain, falling off one side or the other to injury or death. Similarly, it's easy either to give up on the Old Testament or to insist that people accept whatever the Bible says as an act of blind faith. But either option is hazardous: If we reject the Old Testament, our faith is harmed by abandoning all the riches there. If we accept it blindly and simplistically, our conscience is injured.

It's only on the summit that we see beauty in every direction. This book tries to find the Old Testament's beauty even while dealing with difficult issues.

This book is written for Christians by a Christian. There are times when a scholar needs to address a broader audience. But there are also times when a scholar has important words for her or his own faith community.

I try to write in an engaging and accessible style that makes this book readable by college students and educated laity. At the same time, I also aim

to address issues intelligently so that this book is useful to seminary students and perhaps even some scholars.

This book tries to answer questions that naturally arise when Christians today open the Old Testament. I don't address certain questions that result from academic study (e.g., how many layers of editing there are in different books of the Bible). At the same time, biblical scholarship has resources that can answer questions Christians find themselves asking about the Old Testament. I draw on these resources throughout. Readers wanting to dig deeper are invited to study the footnotes and the "For Further Study" sections at the end of chapters. The website www.MatthewSchlimm.com has additional resources.

Even with these limitations, this book is far from exhaustive. I don't focus on bizarre onetime happenings in the Bible, like the frightening events of Exodus 4:24–26 or the account of the *nephilim* of Genesis 6:1–4 (though I have used "Nephilim" as a name for one of my fantasy football teams). I don't have the space to explore issues like election (why God appears to have favorites) or how the Old Testament relates to the New. More could also be said about matters I deal with briefly, like imprecatory psalms. Perhaps future volumes will take up these issues.

A Word about the Words "Old Testament"

It may seem odd that in a book affirming the Old Testament's value, I have chosen to call it the *Old Testament*. This title has problems, and some have suggested that we instead talk about the first thirty-nine books of the Protestant Bible as either the *Hebrew Bible* or the *First Testament*.¹

There are good reasons for preferring these alternate titles. Today, "old" often means "inferior." No one boasts, "I get to do all my work on a really old computer!" Look up "old" in a thesaurus, and you're bound to find words with highly negative connotations: *outdated*, *obsolete*, *archaic*, *senile*, *decrepit*, *dilapidated*, *faded*, *dull*, *feeble*, *weak*, *remote*, *bygone*, *extinct*, *passé*, *replaceable*, and *on the way out*.² Hardly an attractive portrait.

Unfortunately, substitutes like *Hebrew Bible* and *First Testament* have problems as well. Some parts of the Old Testament were originally written in Aramaic, not Hebrew, so calling it the *Hebrew Bible* is inexact at best. Furthermore, this title isn't particularly relevant for the vast majority of Christians

1. For essays on this and related topics, see Brooks and Collins, eds., *Hebrew Bible or Old Testament?*; Knowles et al., eds., *Contesting Texts*; Bellis and Kaminsky, eds., *Jews, Christians, and the Theology of the Hebrew Scriptures*.

2. Rodale, *Synonym Finder*, 805.

A Jewish Perspective on the Term “Old Testament”

“At least for Christian seminaries and churches, the term *Old Testament* is not only appropriate but also desirable. I further contend that terms like *Hebrew Bible* . . . serve ultimately either to erase Judaism (since ‘Jews’ are not ‘Hebrews’ . . .) or to deny Christians part of their own canon. . . . The so-called ‘neutral’ term is actually one of Protestant hegemony.”

Amy-Jill Levine, “Jewish-Christian Relations,” 297

today, who read a translation rather than the original Hebrew. Some Jewish interpreters have even found the term *Hebrew Bible* to be more problematic than *Old Testament*. (See “A Jewish Perspective on the Term ‘Old Testament.’”)

The title *First Testament*, meanwhile, lacks currency. It has a biblical precedent (Heb. 8–9), but with so few people using it, it creates confusion. Those who have never heard the term before might even assume that it refers to something outside of Protestant and Catholic Bibles, like the *Book of Mormon*, which is subtitled *Another Testament of Jesus Christ*.

In the end, I have chosen to keep using the term *Old Testament*, because, despite its problems, Christians tend to know what I mean when I use the term. This name doesn’t match what it describes especially well. (While the Old Testament is old, it speaks in new ways to faith communities today.) It’s important to remember that names rarely do justice to the complexities of what they describe. My last name, for example, is a German word that means *bad, nasty, awful, and naughty*.³ I have no idea what my ancestors did to earn that name! Nevertheless, I hope that when German-speakers meet me, they recognize that my name’s meaning may not be the best description of who I am. In a similar way, the term “the Old Testament” doesn’t describe the contents of its books especially well. Yet we can still use that term for convenience’s sake, just as people can use my last name.

Acknowledgments

I couldn’t write this book without a community of support. First and foremost, I thank the president and trustees of the University of Dubuque. Their generous support of me as a scholar has allowed me to complete this book expeditiously. I am especially grateful for the sabbatical they granted me in

3. Fortey, *Collins German-English, English-German Dictionary*.

the spring of 2012 and for the Joseph and Linda Chlapaty Research Chair in Church Renewal that they awarded me for the 2012–13 academic year. The University of Dubuque Theological Seminary is a wonderful place, where we do a great job preparing pastors for ministry.

Furthermore, I am deeply grateful for the many people who read drafts of this book (or parts thereof) and offered vital feedback: John Goldingay, Amy Frykholm, Caleb Schultz, Elmer Colyer, Jacob Stromberg, Amanda Benckhuyzen, Margaret Jumonville, Stephanie Schlimm, David McNitzky, David Stark, and Christian education classes at Alamo Heights United Methodist Church (San Antonio, Texas) and Highland United Methodist Church (Raleigh, North Carolina). Thanks are also due to my trusty research assistants, John Emery, Stephen Cort, and Julius Sheppard.

Last of all, I thank my family: Roger, Ruth Ann, John, David, G & G, Gram, Amanda, Mom, and Dad. I give special thanks for my wonderful wife, Stephanie, and our children, Isaiah and Anna. They make me smile more than I had ever dreamed possible.

Abbreviations

General

ABD	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i> . Edited by D. N. Freedman. 6 vols. New York: Doubleday, 1992	COS	<i>The Context of Scripture</i> . Edited by W. W. Hallo. 3 vols. Leiden: Brill, 1997–2003.
AEL ²	<i>Ancient Egyptian Literature</i> . Edited by Miriam Lichtheim. 2nd ed. 3 vols. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006.	ed(s).	editor(s), edited by; edition
alt.	altered	e.g.	<i>exempli gratia</i> , for example
ANF	<i>The Ante-Nicene Fathers</i> . Edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. 1885–87. 10 vols. Repr. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994	esp.	especially
BCE	before the Common Era	et al.	<i>et alii</i> , and others
BDAG	Bauer, W., F. W. Danker, W. F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich. <i>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> . 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000	exp.	expanded
chap(s).	chapter(s)	<i>Gen. litt.</i>	<i>De Genesi ad litteram</i> , On Genesis Literally Interpreted
CE	Common Era	ibid.	<i>ibidem</i> , in the same place
CEB	Common English Bible	i.e.	<i>id est</i> , that is
cf.	<i>confer</i> , compare	KJV	King James Version
		LCL	Loeb Classical Library
		n.	note, footnote, endnote
		NASB	New American Standard Bible
		NIV	New International Version
		NJPS	<i>The Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures; The New JPS Translation according to the Traditional Hebrew Text</i>
		NLT	New Living Translation
		NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
		NT	New Testament
		OT	Old Testament

<i>OTP</i>	<i>Old Testament Pseudepigrapha</i> . Edited by J. H. Charlesworth. 2 vols. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1983–85	<i>TDOT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i> . Edited by G. J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren. Translated by J. T. Willis, G. W. Bromiley, and D. E. Green. 15 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974–95
pt(s).	part(s)	trans.	translator, translated by, translation
repr.	reprinted	vol(s).	volume(s)
rev.	revised	x	(number of) times (a term occurs)
<i>TDNT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i> . Edited by G. Kittel and G. Friedrich. Translated by G. W. Bromiley. 10 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–76		

Old Testament

Genesis	Gen.	Nehemiah	Neh.	Hosea	Hosea
Exodus	Exod.	Esther	Esther	Joel	Joel
Leviticus	Lev.	Job	Job	Amos	Amos
Numbers	Num.	Psalms	Ps. (Pss.)	Obadiah	Obad.
Deuteronomy	Deut.	Proverbs	Prov.	Jonah	Jon.
Joshua	Josh.	Ecclesiastes	Eccles.	Micah	Mic.
Judges	Judg.	Song of Songs	Song	Nahum	Nah.
Ruth	Ruth	Isaiah	Isa.	Habakkuk	Hab.
1–2 Samuel	1–2 Sam.	Jeremiah	Jer.	Zephaniah	Zeph.
1–2 Kings	1–2 Kings	Lamentations	Lam.	Haggai	Hag.
1–2 Chronicles	1–2 Chron.	Ezekiel	Ezek.	Zechariah	Zech.
Ezra	Ezra	Daniel	Dan.	Malachi	Mal.

New Testament

Matthew	Matt.	1–2 Thessalonians	1–2 Thess.
Mark	Mark	1–2 Timothy	1–2 Tim.
Luke	Luke	Titus	Titus
John	John	Philemon	Philem.
Acts	Acts	Hebrews	Heb.
Romans	Rom.	James	James
1–2 Corinthians	1–2 Cor.	1–2 Peter	1–2 Pet.
Galatians	Gal.	1–3 John	1–3 John
Ephesians	Eph.	Jude	Jude
Philippians	Phil.	Revelation	Rev.
Colossians	Col.		

1

Is the Old Testament an Enemy, Stranger, or Friend to the Christian Faith?

A DEEP TENSION EXISTS at the heart of the Christian faith. On the one hand, the church affirms the sacred nature of the Old Testament. We claim it as God's word. It forms three-quarters of our Bibles.

Yet the Old Testament is utterly strange. It's the last thing we would expect God's word to say. It remains foreign, even when translated into English. It's filled with bizarre stories, laws, and poetry. (See "Strange, Unfamiliar, and Surprising.")

Right at the outset, readers find talk of the world's origins, and it has nothing to do with what modern scientists have found.

As if this stumbling block weren't bad enough, the chapters that follow depict the legendary figures of our faith engaging in all sorts of sordid behavior. Abraham has multiple wives. The first thing Moses does as an adult is kill someone. David, supposedly the greatest king of Israel, is actually the sleaziest of politicians—someone who has his own friend killed after sleeping with the friend's wife.

Even if we can stomach the debauchery of Old Testament characters, we face a new set of challenges when confronted with the Old Testament's violence. Warfare appears in nearly every book of Old Testament. We cannot escape it. Perhaps most disturbing of all, God sometimes commands the Israelites to kill everything that breathes. Why has the church kept such writings in its Bibles?

Or, to turn to an equally pervasive problem, why does the Old Testament give so little attention to women? Why do some texts devalue women? Obviously the Old Testament came from an ancient culture that was biased in favor of men, but can we say anything positive about the Bible and women?

The Old Testament's strangeness takes center stage in its law codes. What do we do with these never-ending lists of rules and regulations? How could anyone possibly keep them all straight? Why would anyone want to? Why do these laws command people to do weird things like sacrifice animals at the place of worship? Why does the Old Testament forbid pork (including bacon!), but then allow people to eat locusts?

If readers stick with the Old Testament long enough, they begin to notice that one text will say something completely contrary to what's said elsewhere. To name one of many possible examples, some passages say that people get what they deserve in this lifetime (e.g., Deut. 28), while other texts are certain that the wicked prosper while the righteous suffer (e.g., Eccles. 8:14). Which one is it? How do we handle the contradictions of the Old Testament?

Prayers are another oddity in the Old Testament. Rather than being calm and collected, people praying in the Old Testament display their fiercest anger toward God. They scream with rage at the Creator, hurl insults at God, question God's ways, and demand that God get back to work. Who dares to talk to their Maker with such animosity?

Even more bothersome are texts where God speaks with animosity toward Israel. The God of the Old Testament strikes many readers as cruel, vindictive,

Strange, Unfamiliar, and Surprising

"There is something very strange about the biblical story—something that we cannot reduce to the categories of our experience, something that cannot be domesticated within our world. There is a 'scandalous,' offensive dimension to the biblical story."

Bernhard W. Anderson, *Living Word of the Bible*, 82

"Because the Bible is, as we confess, 'the live word of the living God,' it will not submit in any compliant way to the accounts we prefer to give of it. There is something intrinsically unfamiliar about the book, and when we seek to override that unfamiliarity we are on the hazardous ground of idolatry."

Walter Brueggemann, in Brueggemann, Placher, and Blount, *Struggling with Scripture*, 5

"The Bible is *essentially surprising* in all its parts."

Ellen F. Davis, *Wondrous Depth*, 4

If We Wrote the Bible

If God had put any of us in charge of writing Scripture for billions of believers in future generations, surely we would have come up with something quite different. Our account of the world's beginnings would match the latest scientific findings. The characters in our Scripture would avoid evil in fun ways that inspire others to do the same. Violence would recede to the background while blessings of peace showered down on everyone. Women and men would be treated as equals without inequalities that make no sense. Laws wouldn't ramble for very long, and they certainly wouldn't command strange behaviors. Every contradiction would be ironed out before things went to print. The prayers would be beautiful, and God's love would always be self-evident.

However, God didn't charge us with writing Scripture. So what do we do with the Old Testament, which is so different from what we expect God's word to be?

vengeful, and destructive. They see little resemblance between this wrathful deity and the forgiving God of the New Testament.

The Old Testament is seriously strange Scripture. (See "If We Wrote the Bible.")

The Old Testament as Enemy: Marcion and His Children

Faced with so many troubling features, many people have rejected the Old Testament's sacred status. About a hundred years after the death of Jesus, an influential leader named Marcion did just that. He firmly believed that the wrathful God of the Old Testament couldn't also be the loving God revealed by Jesus Christ.¹

Although the church in Rome kicked Marcion out in 144 CE, his ideas spread quickly. Some historians estimate that around 170 CE, the followers of Marcion outnumbered those opposed to him.²

In time, church leaders like Irenaeus and Tertullian mounted attacks against Marcion's thinking. Among other things, they showed that Jesus himself did not come to destroy the Old Testament (cf. Matt. 5:17).³ Marcion's movement

1. Cf. Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 1.25–26 (ANF 3:290–93); Moll, *Arch-Heretic Marcion*, 47–64, esp. 54, 59, 62–64. I use the term "Old Testament [OT]" for convenience's sake, not because Marcion used it.

2. Clabeaux, "Marcion," *ABD* 4:514–15.

3. Irenaeus deals with Marcion in *Against Heresies*, e.g., 1.27; 3.4; 3.12.12; 3.25.3; 4.27–32 (ANF 1:309–567, e.g., 352, 417, 434–35, 459, 498–506). Tertullian deals with Marcion in *Against*

Paving the Way for Nazism

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many prominent thinkers in Germany devalued the Old Testament. Both the theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher and the church historian Adolf von Harnack expressed deep sympathy for Marcion.^a In biblical studies, the famous Old Testament scholar Friedrich Delitzsch emphasized, “The Old Testament is full of deceptions of all kinds.”^b Meanwhile, the world-renowned New Testament scholar Rudolf Bultmann wrote, “To the Christian faith the Old Testament is not in the true sense God’s word.”^c It’s not difficult to imagine how such assessments contributed to a society willing to persecute Jews.

- a. Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, 608–11; Harnack, *Marcion*, esp. 134, 137–38, 142–43.
 b. Delitzsch, *Die grosse Täuschung*, 2:52 (trans. Kraeling in *Old Testament*, 158).
 c. Bultmann, “Significance of the Old Testament,” 32; see also 34–35. For more on this topic, see S. Heschel, *Aryan Jesus*.

eventually lost popularity. However, even while many details of his thinking have faded away, his basic impulse to devalue the Old Testament persists across time.

To name an extreme example, in the eighteenth century the British philosopher Thomas Morgan spoke with vehement hatred about the Old Testament, saying its authors were a “miraculously stupid People [who] were always inspired and prepossessed with the Spirit of the Devil.”⁴

Similar examples can be found, especially in the decades leading up to the Holocaust, when many German scholars spoke comparably. They called for a return to Marcion’s ideals while ridiculing the Old Testament’s contents. (See “Paving the Way for Nazism.”)

The Old Testament as Stranger: The Church Today

Today, few Christians want to go as far as Marcion or the Nazis. Yet the Old Testament is *so* strange that Christians have a much easier time ignoring it than wrestling with all the issues it presents.

In other words, we don’t openly oppose the Old Testament, but then again, we don’t go to great lengths to emphasize its importance either. We may recognize it as useful background for understanding Jesus and Paul, but we tend to stick to the New Testament. We treat the Old Testament less as an enemy and more as a stranger, a mere acquaintance, or a superficial friend. (See “The Situation Today.”)

Marcion (ANF 3:269–475); see esp. 7.7 (ANF 3:352). See the useful discussion of these and other ancient works in Moll, *Arch-Heretic Marcion*, 48–54.

4. Morgan, *Moral Philosopher*, 2:71.

The Situation Today

"It would be more correct to speak not of a rejection of the Old Testament but of an apathy towards it, a feeling that it does not matter greatly, a sense that, while no doubt theoretical arguments for its importance can be advanced, the whole matter remains remote and lacking in immediacy."

James Barr, "New Crisis," 29

"Few Christians today would take as extreme a negative view of the Old Testament as Marcion, Harnack, or the Nazis, but one need not officially and explicitly decanonize the Old Testament in order to achieve practically the same effect."

J. J. M. Roberts, "Old Testament for the Church," 18

Thus many churches do very little with the Old Testament during Sunday morning worship. Some congregations avoid reading the Old Testament altogether. Others read from it but then focus on the New Testament in preaching.⁵

My sense is *not* that these churches hate the Old Testament. Instead, people in these congregations are painfully aware of all the difficult issues the Old Testament raises. They recognize that these issues are too complex to address in the middle of a worship service. They realize that people often feel stupid when the Bible doesn't make sense—as though there's something wrong with them for not knowing what's going on. And so, it simply becomes easier to lay the Old Testament aside, to treat it as a stranger, rather than fix our attention on it.

The Old Testament as Friend in Faith

The problem with ignoring the Old Testament is that we make ourselves deaf to all the incredible things that God has to say to us through it. For thousands of years, Jewish and Christian readers have cherished the words of these Scriptures. People from across the world in different ages have made the audacious claim that they experience the one true God as they read and study the incredibly odd Old Testament.

In this book I argue that, even in the face of perplexing questions, we can still see the Old Testament as our friend in faith.⁶ This idea needs some unpacking. How can the Old Testament, or any other book, serve as a friend?

5. R. Hays, "Can the Gospels Teach Us?," 405.

6. Many books exist that wrestle with questions raised by the OT. Two recent examples are Lamb, *God Behaving Badly*; Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster?* A key difference between these other books and mine is my emphasis on seeing the OT as a friend in faith.

In a *Calvin and Hobbes* comic strip, Calvin waits for the school bus alongside his do-gooder neighbor and classmate Susie Derkins. Holding up a textbook, she remarks, “I love my schoolbooks. Just think! Pretty soon we’ll have read *all this!*” In the next frame, she continues: “I like to read ahead and see what we’re going to learn next. It’s so exciting to know stuff. Having a book is like having a good friend with you.”

Caring for Books

“People care for the books they read; and they are changed by what they care for—both during the time of reading and in countless later ways more difficult to discern.”

Martha Nussbaum,
Love’s Knowledge, 231

Calvin then lifts his own textbook, which he has obviously spent considerable time doodling in. He replies, “If you flip the pages of *my* book, an animated T. Rex drives the Batmobile and explodes!”

The strip ends with Susie staring blankly into space while remarking, “Sometimes I think books are the only friends worth having.”⁷

This idea of *literary friendships* has been around for centuries. In the Italian Renaissance, Niccolò Machiavelli described his friendship with books. After facing imprisonment and torture, Machiavelli went into exile. He spent his days as a farmer and his nights reading great books. He writes:

I take off my work-day clothes, filled with dust and mud, and don royal and curial garments. Worthily dressed, I enter into the antique courts of men of antiquity, where, warmly received, I feed upon that which is my only food and which was meant for me. I am not ashamed to speak with them and ask them the reasons of their actions, and they, because of their humanity, answer me. Four hours can pass, and I feel no weariness; my troubles forgotten, I neither fear poverty nor dread death. I give myself over entirely to them.⁸

Machiavelli’s sense that books could be companions has become increasingly common in our own day. The great literary critic Wayne Booth says that literary friendships offer “loves of a kind that make life together worth having.”⁹ (See “Caring for Books.”)

At the heart of this book is the basic idea that THE OLD TESTAMENT IS OUR FRIEND IN FAITH.¹⁰ As we get to know its characters and authors, we are drawn into their worlds. They teach us about the difficulty of the moral life,

7. Watterson, *There’s Treasure Everywhere*, 25.

8. Quoted in Marriott, “Biographical Note: Nicolò Machiavelli,” in *The Prince*, x.

9. Booth, *Company We Keep*, chap. 6, esp. 174.

10. My mentor Ellen F. Davis describes how the OT can be our friend in faith in “Losing a Friend,” 83–94; cf. Lancaster, *Women and the Authority of Scripture*, 169.

the wonder of worship, and the longings of the God who created the universe. As we embrace the Old Testament, we embrace its God. As we become close to the Old Testament, we also become close to the God who showed up at Abraham and Sarah's tent, the God who heard Hannah's desperate prayers, the God who stood beside Daniel in a foreign land.

"Without friends," Aristotle observed, "individuals would not choose to live, even if they possessed all other goods."¹¹ There are many reasons why Aristotle thought so highly of friendship, and each reason can help us see the value of the Old Testament as our friend in faith.

First, friendship dispels loneliness. Many Christians today feel very alone. Our secular culture teaches us to act as though God doesn't exist. And so, we need people in our lives who tell us we aren't crazy for believing in God. We need friends who admire rather than question self-sacrifice. The Old Testament does precisely this. It reminds us that people of faith are not alone. We are joined by a great cloud of witnesses—as the author of Hebrews puts it (12:1)—a community of Old Testament heroes who cheer for us even when the world tries to shoot us down. (See "Breaking Down Isolation.")

Second, friends are fun to be around. While some parts of the Old Testament are certainly difficult and require discipline to read, other parts are a joy to spend time with. For example, the story of Joseph and his brothers (Gen. 37–50) has been recognized as one of the great stories of world literature.¹² While it has much to teach us about God and ourselves, this learning is an innately pleasurable activity: we travel with Joseph amid his reversals of fortune and watch in suspense as he encounters his brothers later in life. Other parts of the Old Testament are similarly a joy to read, whether we think of the dazzling visions of hope in Isaiah 40–55, the intimate sexual imagery in Song of Songs, or the thrilling moments as Esther saves her people. When we read the Old Testament, it's like we're listening to a friend who knows how to capture our imaginations, whisper juicy secrets, and tell great stories.

Breaking Down Isolation

"Reading the Old Testament will lead us to community. The Old Testament breaks down our isolation and teaches us that we enter into the life of promise by joining ourselves to God's people."

Michael Duggan,
Consuming Fire, xiv

11. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 8.1 (trans. Rackham, LCL 73:450–51, alt. for gender inclusivity).

12. As Speiser (*Genesis*, 292) puts it, "For sustained dramatic effect the narrative is unsurpassed in the whole Pentateuch."

Third, in addition to bringing us happiness, friends are also useful to have around. They provide valuable information and ideas that allow us to navigate life more easily. The Old Testament provides us with equipment for faithful living (cf. 2 Tim. 3:16–17). Readers of the Old Testament receive prayers for crying out to God, stories that speak to our hearts, and prophetic speeches that challenge our ways of living. Ultimately, reading the Old Testament brings us into the presence of God.

Finally, the best of friends make us better people. Friends shape our attitudes, desires, and character. We become like our friends. When the Old Testament is our friend, we become more holy, more aware of God’s presence in the world, and more concerned with justice and righteousness.

Many of us do things we wouldn’t otherwise simply because a trustworthy friend recommends them. The Old Testament, similarly, inspires us to try new things. It gives us new ways of being and acting—ways of life that we never would have considered otherwise. (See “The World Anew.”)

The World Anew

“Friends create the world anew each day. Without their loving care, courage would not suffice to keep hearts strong for life.”

Helen Keller, via Seymour,
Treasure of Friendship, 8

Even while inspiring us to try new things, good friends know who we truly are. At times, they even know us better than we know ourselves. We need these sorts of close friends in our lives because all of us are prone to self-deception. Sometimes we fail to see sin as harmful to ourselves and all we love. Other

times, we suffer from low self-esteem, feeling worthless and unlovable. Like a good friend, the Old Testament reminds us of the dangers of sin, as well as how we are made in the very image of God (Gen. 1:26–28). It artfully holds in tension the worst of human nature and our worth in God’s eyes. The Old Testament reminds us of all that really matters.

Being a Good Friend to the Old Testament

Lasting friendship doesn’t just happen. Certain elements must be present, like trust, respect, and vulnerability. We won’t develop a deep friendship with the Old Testament if we are suspicious of it or somehow biased against it.¹³ Similarly, we won’t get very far if we assume we know what it will say before we’ve listened carefully. (See “Reading with Trust.”)

13. Davis, “Losing a Friend,” 86, 88.

Because the Old Testament is such a quirky friend, it requires extra work. We cannot relate to the Old Testament on the basis of a shared culture or common age. The cultural, geographic, and temporal barriers are too great. Our friendship with the Old Testament is like a long-distance relationship.

Communication mishaps are bound to happen. We will need a peaceful persistence as we deal with all the differences between our world and the world of the Old Testament.

Unfortunately, patience doesn't come easily for most of us. Our culture teaches us to read things as quickly as possible. With the Old Testament, we instead need to slow down. (See "Looking Closely.") Sometimes, passages make sense only if we're willing to read, reread, and read yet again, dwelling on particular words and phrases with much reflection. Talking about Scripture, an early rabbi said, "Turn it this way, turn it that way, everything is in it; keep your eye on it, grow old and aged over it, and from it do not stir—for you have no better portion than it."¹⁴ These words apply as much to us today as they did centuries ago.

Good friendships require not only patience but also ways of dealing with differences fruitfully. In the course of any friendship, unanticipated challenges arise. Even close friends are bound to have fundamentally different perspectives on some matters. An aspect of authentic friendship is that the relationship does not cease amid such differences. Instead, good friends are willing to be humble, to consider different perspectives, and to be open to new ways of living.

At times, friends say upsetting things. However, friendship means that these challenges

Reading with Trust

"I must subordinate my mind and heart to the book if I am to enjoy it to the full."

Wayne Booth,
Rhetoric of Fiction, 137–38

"No poem will give up its secret to a reader who enters it regarding the poet as a potential deceiver, and determined not to be taken in. We must risk being taken in, if we are to get anything."

C. S. Lewis,
Experiment in Criticism, 94

Looking Closely

"Movies and television, even modern novels have taught us to expect dramatic scene painting, psychological probing, explosive exchanges. But the Bible tells a story like Rembrandt etches one. You have to slow down and look closely to see much of anything at all, and then let your heart dwell on what you see."

Ellen F. Davis,
Getting Involved with God, 57

14. Goldin, ed., *Living Talmud*, 223, alt. to update the language. Ellen Davis first drew my attention to this quotation.

do not end the relationship. Friends stay committed to others even when they do not understand each other. We may question our friends. We may challenge them. We may playfully engage and entertain our differences, even joking about our contrary perspectives. However, we don't reject friends simply because they aren't what we expected. The Old Testament holds much that's unexpected, and friendship with it requires a willingness to deal with differences between ourselves and the text.¹⁵

Christians have many friends in faith: not just the Old Testament, but also the New Testament, the church's rich tradition, the church's teachings today, and fellow believers (i.e., literal friends). The Holy Spirit can even use our experiences, reason, and emotions to serve as friends in faith.¹⁶ While this book focuses on reclaiming the Old Testament as our theological companion, I hope that the Old Testament joins a great company of friends who together bring us into God's presence and help us discern to God's will.

Conclusion

Some of the most life-changing friendships are those we develop with people unlike ourselves, people who come from other cultures, people who don't belong to our age or demographic. As our worlds collide, new realities crack open. We are no longer stuck with the same old boring existence. We are transformed by the renewing of our minds. Despite its age, the Old Testament can give the church fresh ways of thinking about God, humanity, and creation.

For Further Study

Other books also foster deep friendship with the Old Testament, whether they use friendship imagery or not. The books below were written by two of the best seminary professors today, and each one offers many ways of growing closer to God's Word.

Davis, Ellen F. *Getting Involved with God: Rediscovering the Old Testament*. Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 2001.

Ellen Davis does a masterful job while carefully studying a variety of passages from the Old Testament. This book has led many to fall in love with the Old Testament.

15. Davis, "Losing a Friend," 88.

16. The Wesleyan tradition upholds the Bible as the primary source of theological authority, but it also recognizes the importance of tradition, reason, and experience (see Gunter et al., *Wesley and the Quadrilateral*). Additionally, one could make a case for adding emotions and fellow believers to the mix.

Fretheim, Terence E. *About the Bible: Short Answers to Big Questions*. 1999. Rev. and exp. ed. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2009.

Terry Fretheim excels at concisely and clearly explaining a host of questions people bring to the Bible, such as: Why do Bible translations differ? How does the Bible relate God to suffering? Do prayers change the future?

The website www.MatthewSchlimm.com has additional resources, including group discussion questions.