

Book Review

Old Testament Essentials: Creation, Conquest, Exile and Return

Tremper Longman III

(Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2014) 214 pages

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The title, *Old Testament Essentials*, and the author, Tremper Longman III, made this book essential reading for me. I am always looking for better ways to summarize what people need to understand to make sense of the Old Testament (OT) and relate it to their lives. I was surprised to find that this book is really seventeen brief lessons for small groups, with a few pages dedicated to answering questions. Each chapter relates the lesson to the New Testament and to Christians today. After reading the book, I realized that all the components combine to present Longman's conclusions about what he considers the essential points of the Old Testament.

Overall, I am in agreement with Longman and found confirmation of many of my own conclusions. Regrettably, I believe there are a few significant weaknesses. Also, typical of too many IVP resources, the book does not include an index, which would make the book more useable.

First, the four subtitle topics do not adequately present the essential theological/narrative points of the Old Testament story. I believe conquest should be subsumed under what I would title, "God's covenant/salvation plan." Then, I suggest, the major points of the story are "kingdom," and finally, "exile and return." As for the topic selections that serve as chapter titles, I agree with most but believe these seventeen

are unbalanced and imply a distortion of the theological priorities of the Old Testament story. Creation, Fall, Abraham (whose significance is that he represents the promise-plan of salvation and, therefore, the chapter should not be "The Father of the Faith") make perfect sense to me. The next major point should be the exodus, but Longman gives a chapter to the continuation of the promise through Isaac and Jacob, and one to the survival of the promise through Joseph. I think that provides far too much detailed coverage (though it was interesting) of less than essential material and way out of proportion to the rest of the OT books. The next chapters on Wilderness Wandering, Law, the Holy Place, and Conquest make sense. However, somehow there needs to be more emphasis on the covenant rather than just law and more coverage of Leviticus and Deuteronomy, which is a very significant book, laying out the covenant. Leviticus and Deuteronomy have more essential content, per page, than Joshua or Judges, which he expounds. In other words, I would summarize the latter and expound more on the former.

I agree with Longman's choices for the rest of the chapters, but I think his subtitles for the Psalms and the Exile miss the essential points. The latter is not just God's "hostility" but the consequences of unbelief and unfaithfulness of the nation in its mission. The Psalms, as he clarifies on page

155, are not just about worship but are better summarized by his often used quote from Calvin, “the mirror of the soul,” meaning that they express, in various ways, human responses, especially with emotions, to the challenges of life and to God’s blessings. (This is an example of how most of the points I wanted him to make in his titles, he ends up making in his texts.)

The biggest disappointment for me was how he handled the prophets. I am sympathetic to summarizing their principles in one chapter but, I am not convinced that the best way is to expound only Jeremiah and Daniel as representatives. I believe it would be better to summarize the messages and major themes of each prophetic book, with the basic background/context of each book, perhaps in a chart. I believe the author should provide a summary of the major contribution(s) of each prophet to the teaching of the Old Testament, particularly in relation to the promise-plan of salvation through the Messiah. For a book dealing with “essentials,” Longman does too much exposition of selected whole books (though nearly all are very well done and helpful to understanding the OT). Those sections contain too much nonessential detail while ignoring other books that contain essential points. He does not explain the essential concept of atonement or address the important Servant theology in Isaiah. The empowering of the various judges by the Spirit of God and the significant Spirit promises of Ezekiel 36 and Joel 2 are left

out, while mentioning other nonessential subjects. As far as I can tell, Longman failed to explain the theological perspectives and differences between Kings and Chronicles, which he promises to explicate (p. 184).

Longman eventually clarifies that the message of the OT is that God has promised salvation into a personal relationship with Him through His Savior. However, I do not think the author stresses this message enough. One of my biggest disappointments is that he ends his book without any reference to that hope, even though the OT does, in Malachi.

The greatest strengths of the book are the chapters on creation, exodus, law, holy place, psalms, and wisdom. His references to the faith journey is a good way to relate to the Old Testament. He makes a good presentation on the importance of Genesis 12:1-3 and 2 Samuel 7 (but missed Exodus 19:3-6). His point that grace preceded law in the OT is very important (p. 93). His summaries of Hebrew poetry and wisdom theology are excellent (that is the area of His greatest expertise). Longman’s explanation of the Song of Songs is one of the best I have read (pp. 172-173).

I recommend this book for Longman’s summaries of what he sees as essentials for understanding the Old Testament, with the above understanding of the weaknesses. As a guide for small group studies, it would be profitable.