

Book Review

*This Strange and Sacred Scripture:
Wrestling with the Old Testament and Its Oddities*

Matthew Richard Schlimm

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As clearly indicated by the title, Matthew Schlimm wrestles with the difficult issues and questions many Christians see in the Old Testament Scriptures. He seeks to find a middle ground between the extremes of rejecting the Old Testament and accepting repulsive messages such as the supposed one that God commanded genocide. His method and purpose is to affirm the Old Testament as a “friend” but a very human one, with whom we may disagree and still stay friends. Personally, I find the use of this metaphor as potentially problematic.

Although helpful for some specific issues, I find it unsatisfactory because he leaves possible doubt in what the Scriptures are teaching by implying human fallibility. I understand the struggles people experience with various parts of the Old Testament and that readers may miss the fact that many of these passages are purely human descriptions and not divine prescriptions. Generally speaking, Schlimm uses the friend metaphor in a very positive and helpful way. However, at some points, he seems unclear as to whether he agrees with me that this “friend” is not like other human friends who can be mistaken, but rather is like Jesus, who is infallible. I believe it is very important to affirm the total trustworthiness and truthfulness of both testaments as communicating what God intended. Therefore, even though God does not condemn the struggles people encounter

with difficult issues in the text, eventually people need to come to accept what God is teaching in the text. I recommend that anyone who questions submission to the teachings of the Old Testament look at how Jesus and the New Testament treated the authority and applicability of the Old Testament for followers of God. They never correct its teachings or even imply that it contains any mistaken ideas or that it sanctions any immoral actions in its intended teaching.

Schlimm makes a very important statement that needs careful definition: “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” (p. xi). First, I agree that violence and sexism present two of the most challenging issues for Christians in the Old Testament. Second, if sexism is defined as negative, prejudicial, hurtful treatment of people based on gender, I agree that God has made it clear in the Scriptures that that is wrong. Therefore, any interpretation or application of the Bible that makes sexism God’s intent is not a correct interpretation of the meaning. However, reference to the reality of sexism in that ancient context are not intended to encourage it. I believe a person can show that the supposed sexist passages in the Old Testament were not teaching this concept. The passages have been misunderstood, especially in missing

the difference between women's cultural roles and their worth in God's eyes. Third, one must clarify the definition of violence because some people view any destruction of life as evil. Ultimately, God cuts people off eternally if they reject Him and His gift of salvation through Christ. The Old Testament clearly indicates that God used His people, Israel, to execute some of the enemies of God. Scholars as well as laypeople who study the Old Testament must first submit all their definitions to what the Scriptures teach. Last, I am concerned that Schlimm's statement about his "God-given sense of what's right and wrong" may be taken to indicate that his final authority in life is what he "senses" rather than God's written Word. Believers must submit all their "senses" and beliefs to the clear teaching of the Scriptures. A person's sense of right and wrong is not infallible, but rather must be subjected to the infallibility of scriptural teachings. If Schlimm is ultimately trying to get people to recognize that some things intended for Israel are not intended for Christians and that some passages are only describing what happened and not prescribing what God wants to happen, then I whole-heartedly agree. My concern focuses on his implication that the biblical writers were actually mistaken about what the readers are to believe and do rather than a recognition that people simply misunderstand the text.

An example of Schlimm's often extreme and provocative wording of issues is when he says, "David, supposedly the greatest king of Israel, is actually the sleaziest of politicians ..." (p. 1). Now, we all agree that what David did with Bathsheba and Uriah was terrible and could be called very sleazy acts. However, summarizing the biblical David in modern terms that characterize a consistently dishonest and manipulative lifestyle or treatment of others

to gain and hold power is inaccurate. Schlimm should remain consistent with the whole picture presented in the Bible rather than express an emotional reaction to one situation with inaccurate language. Quite possibly he did not intend to communicate what I understood, but his word choice could cause a reader to stumble and doubt the authority of some parts of the Old Testament.

Schlimm presents many wonderful truths taught in the stories of the Old Testament. For various passages that have been misunderstood, he presents what many Evangelical scholars would agree are truths intended by God. He speaks of finding the "essentials," which I call "principles." For example, in the conclusion of chapter 11, he states that out of a deeper relationship with the Old Testament "we realize that God's wrath is an extension of God's goodness" (p. 207). On each issue, he gives several very helpful ways to look at them. However, I think he often does not deal specifically with the actual wording that offends people. He seems to say there are some good things we can learn from texts on killing the Canaanites despite disagreeing with the commands themselves. I appreciate that He looks for good in the texts and encourages people not to reject them, but he does seem to reject those commands as truly coming from God. I could be mistaken, but based on what I read, he does not go far enough into explaining how one should determine what things God intends for people of all times.

I agree that God welcomes our questions and our laments. Schlimm's approach, when addressing a teaching with which he does not agree, is to consider it falsely ascribed to God, thereby making himself the arbiter of what qualifies as God's Word.

I agree with and was encouraged by most of the book. I think many people could find a new friendship with the Old Testament

through reading this, although I also have a concern that a weaker brother or sister might stumble over some of his statements.