

CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

John Goldingay is a first-rate Old Testament scholar, a masterful teacher and an all-in Christian. Many will be familiar with his three-volume *Old Testament Theology* and his numerous other books. In his *Introduction to the Old Testament* he brings to us a fresh and engaging approach to teaching the Old Testament. IVP Academic editor Dan Reid asked him a few questions about the book.



AUTHOR

JOHN GOLDINGAY



IVP EDITOR

DAN REID

What are you trying to provide in this introduction that you don't see in other introductions to the Old Testament?

GOLDINGAY: Well I haven't read all the others, so I don't claim there are no others like this, but my main aim is to encourage people to read the Old Testament for themselves. Introductions that I have read spend a lot of time telling people what the Bible says, and I want to push and help people discover for themselves what the Bible says. Other introductions I've read are really introductions to scholarly study of the Old Testament, and I'm not against that at all, but it's easy for that study to take its entire agenda from what scholars say and never get to reading the Bible. I encounter a lot of fear about reading the Bible for oneself and an assumption that people need experts to tell them what it says and what it means, as if we've replaced the pope by the professor in that regard.

What puts a smile on your face when you have wrapped up a class session?

GOLDINGAY: When there is a smile on their faces! Actually I don't think I smile at the end of class, except at the prospect of getting home for a piece of fruit pie and ice cream; I am tired! (I usually teach in the evenings.) But I do smile when I've read a paper. I've just been reading a set of papers in which people have been studying particular passages from Isaiah, and I love it when someone seems to have "got it"—when they have studied the passage for themselves, seen what it's about, and seen how it might be significant for us.

I searched your manuscript and found 721 question marks. I'll bet Otto Eissfeldt didn't have any in his introduction. What's with all the questions?

GOLDINGAY: It links with my hope to get readers to think things out for themselves. One of the people you asked to blurb the book said he thought I should have included more answers. That would take away from the point of the book.

What in particular do you think really helps students turn the corner in appreciating and getting excited about studying the Old Testament?

GOLDINGAY: Getting them to read it! When they come to seminary they usually haven't read it. They may have been told by their pastor what it says. I send them away to read it and their eyes pop—in good ways and in challenging ways. I also have to show them the way it says interesting and stimulating things to us. Paul talks about the Scriptures being useful for teaching and correction and so on, so that it takes us on to maturity as believers. I'm aiming to enable them to see ways it does that.

Your positive approach to biblical criticism might surprise some conservative Christians. Can you comment on that?

GOLDINGAY: Biblical criticism started off as a way of not being limited to what the church said the Bible said. It's a way of seeking to discover what the Bible actually says. Of course criticism is often critical of the Bible itself. I'm not interested in that sort of criticism.

You do not seem overly concerned about arguing with viewpoints you disagree with nor giving extended reasons for the positions you take. Why not?

GOLDINGAY: I hope the implication is, "Look at the Bible in light of this approach. It makes sense, doesn't it?" In addition, I want to avoid "Introduction to the Old Testament" becoming "Introduction to arguments that Old Testament scholars have."

You write: “I sometimes get the impression that students assume that a professor’s job is to reassure them that the Bible says nothing different from what they believe already.” What is an Old Testament issue or topic that regularly causes this notion to surface among students today and how do you handle it?

GOLDINGAY: Here’s one from questions students posted for a class tonight: “In Isaiah 43 God says he gave Egypt, Ethiopia and Saba up for the sake of having Israel. That seems wrong.” I shall say that it means God surrendered any claim on those nations in order to get his people out of their enslavement, but that his dealings with people such as Egypt are ultimately designed to bless them and all the other nations. A related question is the one about genocide, which regularly comes up. One part of my answer to that question is that the New Testament is tougher than the Old in its talk of judgment. People often work with an oversimplified view of the nature of both Old and New Testament. They don’t realize how tough Jesus is! Another part is that Israel wasn’t told to make genocide its regular stance to other peoples. Its negative stance in relation to the Canaanites was a once-off stance God told it to take.

You discourage Christians from reading the Old Testament through a New Testament lens, from reading it christologically. Are you saying we should we never view the Old Testament thus?

GOLDINGAY: No. You can read the text christologically if you just want to find out what you already know from the New Testament! Jesus taught his disciples to learn from the Torah and the Prophets all the things about him—the Old Testament Scriptures help us understand Jesus. But he doesn’t say that all the Torah and the Prophets are about him. You could say that the Scriptures are all about God. Or he himself says they’re all about loving God and loving your neighbor. So I think a better question is “What does this book tell me about God?” or “What does this book tell me about that twofold love?”

Finally, what do you think your younger self—back when you were first beginning to teach Old Testament—would have to say to about this introduction? Would he see this as the fruit of his early attempts in the classroom or something quite different and unexpected?

GOLDINGAY: Something quite different. It’s partly that when I was young I didn’t know much so I had to control the discussion and keep within the parameters of what I thought I knew. It’s partly the result of an insight from my former Old Testament colleague Gillian Cooper, whom I mention in the preface, that we needed to focus on helping students work out answers, not telling them answers.

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