



The Epic of Eden: A Christian Entry into the Old Testament

Sandra L. Richter

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Does your knowledge of the Old Testament feel like a grab bag of people, books, events and ideas? How many times have you resolved to really understand the OT? To finally make sense of it?

Perhaps you are suffering from what Sandra Richter calls the "dysfunctional closet syndrome." If so, she has a solution. Like a home-organizing expert, she comes in and helps you straighten up your cluttered closet. Gives you hangers for facts. A timeline to put them on. And handy containers for the clutter on the floor. Plus she fills out your wardrobe of knowledge with exciting new facts and new perspectives.

The whole thing is put in usable order--a history of God's redeeming grace. A story that runs from the Eden of the Garden to the garden of the New Jerusalem. Whether you are a frustrated do-it-yourselfer or a beginning student enrolled in a course, this book will organize your understanding of the Old Testament and renew your enthusiasm for studying the Bible as a whole.

The Epic of Eden: A Christian Entry into the Old Testament Details

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Sam says

Sandra Richter's recent book, *Epic of Eden* is a great resource for those with a messy brain in regard to the Old Testament. In this book Richter writes primarily to cure what she has coined "the dysfunctional closet syndrome." *Epic of Eden* is intended to assist the reader in overcoming linguistic, historical, cultural, and geographical barriers. This is accomplished mostly through chronology and geography. Richter simplifies things by listing five names which serve as signposts for different eras (Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David). Further, three places are given in the Ancient Near East to give the biblical narratives a real place (Mesopotamia, Canaan, Egypt).

The first of Richter's key points is the concept of redemption through the lens of Israel's tribal or patriarchal culture. Then the concept of covenant (*berit*) is explored. This is laid as framework for the book. With the notion of covenant laid out, Richter writes on God's original intent in the Garden of Eden and his final intent in the New Jerusalem. Next, the author guides the reader chronologically through the Old Testament by enumerating Yahweh's covenants with Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and finally the New Covenant enacted by the incarnate Jesus. In essence, the covenants expand their limits from one man and one woman (Adam & Eve) to the church and all people (New Covenant, Christ).

In this book, Richter is primarily dealing with two things. The first is a disorganized knowledge of the Old Testament. The second is a misunderstanding of the Old Testament's culture and theology. Through her treatment of covenant, the reader is given an organizational system for the information and a better understanding of the patriarch's world. Through her explanation of creation, redemption, genealogies, and geography the reader is able to traverse the various barriers of a distant and different culture. Ultimately, Richter is providing the reader with a biblical theological hermeneutic - a lens through which to view the Old Testament. For the *Epic of Eden*, Yahweh's covenants with his people, co-opted from Ancient Near Eastern treaties, are the best way to grasp the information given in the Old Testament.

With any book, there will be merits and faults of the material. Richter's primary accomplishments are organization and helping her readers through Old Testament culture shock. She helps us organize, but she also explains Ancient Near Eastern culture in a relatable way. For example, the firstborn received a double portion because of their pivotal role in Israelite society, not an overt favoritism (p. 29). Also, she explains how the covenant in patrilineal societies was a way of making non-family into family (p. 30).

Richter fulfills her purpose well by giving the reader a good framework for the Old Testament through the five covenants. Her book is an excellent resource for any layperson. Her style is simple, and not too academic or dense. As the title suggests, *Epic of Eden* is about understanding all of the Old Testament in light of Genesis chapter one. This work covers introductory material, but it aims at the heart of a great misunderstanding of the Old Testament's culture and stories. The book successfully cleans up the metaphorical messy closet.

Another way that *Epic of Eden* fulfills its purpose is by its treatment of the word redemption. Admittedly, the word has strong usage among Christians, but the author shows that it is originally rooted in the laws and social mores of Israel's patriarchal culture. In order to bridge the gap between the Old and New Testaments, understanding the idea of redemption is beneficial, maybe even essential. Richter illustrates how Abraham, Boaz, Hosea, and Jesus all illustrated the idea of being a kinsman-redeemer (go el).

Far too many Christians today struggle with the relevance of the Old Testament to their lives. With an understanding of patriarchal culture and the patriarch's covenant with Yahweh, redemption then becomes one way of illuminating our view of Christ in the New Testament. In other words, knowing the various events of redemption in the Hebrew Bible can enlighten our understanding of truth unveiled by Yahweh in all scripture.

As said before, covenant is the organizing theme of Richter's work. The idea of covenant should help many to be aware of what is happening in the Old Testament in terms of overall themes and motivations. This very concept may expand the book's ability to be relevant to people who do not understand the Old Testament at present. Richter's book highlights the importance of grasping the historical ramifications of covenant in the Bible.

Furthermore, one point of disagreement with the author is in regards to the issue of genealogies. In her discussion on the impossibility of dating Eden (p. 51), Richter succinctly argues that genealogies do not always detail every descendant. However, in regard to the lifespans of pre-diluvian patriarchs, she ignores a hermeneutic rule of interpretation where the plain sense of scripture is taken as true unless otherwise denoted. Taking into account extra-biblical sources (e.g. Sumerian kings who live thousands of years) is probably not enough to influence one's understanding of pre-flood patriarchs, especially in light of Genesis 6:3. What are the "other messages" that the genealogies of Genesis 5 are communicating?

While the author does effectively organize a biblical hermeneutic for laity, this may be to the detriment of other wonderful stories which fill out the Old Testament. Quite a few stories are starkly absent in her book (e.g. Cain, Esau, Joseph, Deborah, Gideon, Samuel, Esther, Job, Daniel, Jeremiah, Amos, Haggai, and many others). Understandably, space is limited, but it is disappointing that Epic of Eden did not devote any attention to Wisdom Literature or the Minor Prophets. If Richter is aiming to help us organize our thoughts about the Old Testament, it would have been helpful for her to discuss these aspects. Why is there no mention of Wisdom Literature? Where do we put Job and his theology in our covenant closet?

In addition to this point, Richter could have expanded her writing by including various peoples who broke covenant with Yahweh and suffered the consequences. Other than God's original intent in Eden and Israel in exile, there seemed to be little attention to the failure of God's creation to keep covenant with Yahweh.

Similarly, how does the Old Testament point to Christ? A discussion of Christology in the Old Testament would have been helpful.

One point of concern is regarding what is termed as "getting Adam back to the garden." Richter called this God's final intent (p. 129). Although, this may be a simplistic approach to understanding the Old Testament. Perhaps a better understanding of God's final intent might not include a return to the garden, but God redeeming his creation into something better, by bringing them into the Heavenly Father's house (bet ab). For Christians, the New Jerusalem is not a return to the garden, it is God redeeming the fall of humanity into something like Eden, yet so much better. Yes, it is the people of God in the place of God dwelling in the presence of God, yet, we are not aiming to go back to Eden, but ultimately to bring heaven to earth (Revelation 21).

In summary, while not being an exhaustive treatment of the Old Testament, Richter's Epic of Eden suitably gives the reader a good framework and foundation for further study of the Hebrew Bible.

Destin Givens says

This is by far the best book I've read on the Old Testament to date. It is full of biblical truth, and especially shed new light on the covenants God made with His people throughout the Bible. It gave a wonderful view of Salvation History as a whole. I highly recommend it.

Anna says

A great overview of key events and concepts in the old testament!

Jennifer says

This is a really good book. I have a much deeper appreciation for the use of the OT by the NT after this.

Drew says

Excellent. I've never read a better take on the Old Testament for Christians. Readable and useful for laity, clergy, and scholars alike. Now I want to lead the DVD study.

Vincent Ng says

Richter coins a term "dysfunctional closet syndrome" suggesting that many people's understanding of the Old Testament is jumbled up in different stories and unrelated themes. In this book she attempts to deal a blow to this by drawing readers to particular themes that are helpful in understanding the Old Testaments as a whole and how it contributes to the overall redemptive purposes of God through focusing on the Covenants, and how they work to restore the people of God into the presence of God and in the place of God. I would highly recommend this book, as it is helpful for the average reader. Once I picked up the book, it was difficult for me to put it back down.

Carl Jenkins says

Have you ever felt like the Old Testament was too confusing, didn't make much sense, or seemed too different from the New Testament? Richter's book is one that does well to connect these two covenants into the one over-arching story that they are. In looking at the culture, the geography, Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and then Jesus, she does well in connecting all the dots. Anyone wanting a better understanding of how the Bible all fits together would do well to read this book.

A.C. Thompson says

In *The Epic of Eden*, Sandra Richter does a great job of pulling back the curtain on the Old Testament and explaining how it all fits together in an amazingly understandable style. I've been reading the Bible on an almost regular basis for almost two decades, and this book explained how and why things are laid out in the Old Testament in a way that I've never seen before.

The author does an exquisite job of defining the where, when, and why of the main events and people of the Old Testament and what they mean to us as New Testament Christians. The blurb on the back cover of the book claims that "This book will not only expand your knowledge, it will deepen your spiritual life," and it accomplishes this in an epic fashion.

My wife and I like reading books like this one together and discussing what we've read and learned as we go along. What I enjoyed most about The Epic of Eden is how clearly I now understand the culture, history, and geography contained in the Old Testament. The books contained there are not archaic or removed from my faith as a Christian. They are the very foundations on which my entire worldview rests. The relationships God establishes within its pages reveal His love, heart, character, and aspirations for the entire human race. I have a deeper understanding now of the character of Christ Himself, and the true proportions of what His sacrifice and love for me truly entail.

Whether you consider yourself to be a Biblical scholar or not, I strongly encourage you to read this book. It will reveal the Old Testament to you in ways you never before have seen. It explains the history of mankind and our relationship with Almighty God within the cultural context of the people with whom He originally established covenant relationship. This, in turn, explains the relationship He desires to have with you and me today.

If this book sounds interesting to you, you can find it on Amazon here: <http://amzn.to/2fOxFOY>

Until next time, stay safe, and above all, be true to yourself.

That Aaron Guy

Grant Robertson says

Amazing.

James (JD) Dittes says

Eden is not only the ideal place, Richter writes in this excellent guide to the Old Testament for Christians, it also represents the ideal covenant. The rest of the OT, from Genesis 5 onward, is the story of God's efforts to redeem covenant relationship through a family (Abraham), a confederation (Moses) a nation (David) and all of humanity (Jesus).

In order to connect the modern Christian with the original audience for the Old Testament, Richter provides insights into the "household" and the loyalties that shaped cultures in the middle Bronze Age. Along with solid biblical and linguistic scholarship, she draws upon archaeology and topography to provide a unique sojourn "between the lines" of the great books of the Old Testament.

I would recommend this book for anyone seeking to gain more insight from Bible study. I'm not a student, just a lay member who really cares about biblical history and literature. I can see this helping out in many future sermons and/or Sunday school lessons.

Chris says

My new favorite book on Genesis, although it covers a lot of other stuff as well. It's hard to define exactly what kind of book this is. Is it a commentary on Genesis? Is it a survey of Old Testament history? Is it an

attempt to explain the New Testament in light of the Old? Richter offers her insights into the first 11 chapters of Genesis but then uses this section of scripture as a springboard to discuss the entire Old Testament, along with its implications for understanding the New Testament. The goal seems to be to help lay Christians, many of whom may find the Old Testament confusing or inaccessible, to read it with a better understanding of how it all fits together and how it connects with their faith. Her writing is both easy to read and intelligent. I was personally helped by her material on ancient near eastern culture, especially patriarchal family units and covenants. These were things I thought I already understood--turns out there was a lot I didn't know! Richter has a great knack for explaining complicated issues in very straightforward ways, and in doing so makes it much easier to understand Old Testament scripture in context. Her work on Genesis is particularly good. She addresses most of the major questions of the text, presents helpful cultural context, includes the thoughts of other commentators and current scholarship, and shares her insights on how it all matters to the Christian faith, all without being overwhelming. She also approaches issues that might be difficult for many Christians (e.g. an honest discussion of the 7-day creation) with a good balance of intellectual honesty and pastoral wisdom.

This book will not be a very useful tool to use in conjunction with a study of Genesis--unlike a commentary, it's organized more by topic than by verse and chapter references. However, this is now THE book I will be recommending to students in my Genesis studies who want to do followup reading, and to Christians looking to understand the OT better.

Dave TN says

So glad I read this. Five stars all the way.

Joel Wentz says

This is one of the greatest, popular-level books I've read on the Old Testament. There are many remarkably helpful chapters in this book - including explanations of patriarchal culture, the economics of the ancient world, and even the geography of the Old Testament region. I gained so many wonderful insights from this volume. The way Richter paints ancient near-east culture, defining words like "redemption" and "covenant", breathes incredible life into the narrative. I also LOVED the way she describes the steps of the redemptive story in covenant terms. Her explanations of Mosaic law, as well as its relevance for the modern Christian, gives extremely helpful theological insight to the reader. Honestly, I put down this book and felt extremely excited about the Old Testament story, as well as a bit sad regarding how much the church avoids teaching it. I cannot recommend this book highly enough - every Christian, or those exploring Christianity - should read it!

Anna says

I really enjoyed this book, I loved the way Richter ties up the theology with the character, it really does make it all neat. If you have a messy brain, like mine, it gives you a way to help remember the stuff when it's useful. I recommend this book to anyone with a real interest in the theology of the Old Testament, no need to be a scholar but some prior knowledge is helpful.

Granne52 says

This is a fascinating and thrilling overview of God's redemptive plan, explaining the foreshadowing of Christ's fulfillment of that plan through the Old Testament covenant and prophecies.
