In his palimpsest of swashbuckling perfection, *The Princess Bride*, William Golding constructs an abridgement of one S. Morgenstern’s rambling tale of fantasy and intrigue, magical beasts, kidnapping, and true love in a timeless fairytale world: he calls it “The Good Parts Version.” I was reminded of this more than once on my way through the four hundred pages of main text that constitute Iain Provan’s thought-provoking and robust construction of the Old Testament and “what it really says.” This is “The Old Testament: The Good Parts Version.” It renders the Old Testament with coherence and conviction and contains many good things, though perhaps rather less mystery and intrigue than the full Old Testament seems happy to contain. I would like to offer a largely appreciative review of the content of Provan’s book, then raise some questions about the hermeneutical and theological scaffolding that appear to be in place. I will thereby suggest that Provan’s book might best be received as one reading of the Old Testament, rather than an account of “what it really says.” It is a reading with much to commend it, though like all readings it is not without lacunae and long-shots on matters of inherent interpretive difficulty.

In many ways this is a book within a book. Provan proceeds in fourteen chapters toward his hope for an embrace of properly biblical religion, argued throughout in dialogue with
counterproposals for such phenomena as dark-green religion, or axial age thinking. I confess to having no previous familiarity with these constructs, which may add to the list of reasons why I am not the book’s “ideal reader,” a list which is adumbrated on pages 18–19 as including fellow biblical scholars. Nevertheless, the inner part of Provan’s project, in chapters 2–11, takes up ten key questions and pursues a “biblical” answer to each one of them, in order to lay out what the Old Testament “really says.” The framing is significant, though. Chapter 1 sets out his stall and discusses “stories, art and life.” Chapter 12 reprises the Old Testament–centered part of the book by reviewing how the New Testament takes up the concerns of those other chapters. Chapters 13 and 14 then divert into rather different territory, and explore, respectively, whether the story thus reconstructed is (1) true and (2) dangerous. Provan’s conclusion is that it is indeed true but that its danger consists in being taken as a serious challenge to competing ideological constructs, rather than as a self-evident “problem” for the modern (or postmodern?) world.

The ten-chapter core of the Old Testament–oriented project offers a lucid account of many key issues, arranged thematically. The ten questions taken up might seem familiar from works of systematic theology but are none the worse for that, in a world where Old Testament reading seems all too often divided between scholarly expertise on details and popular broad-brush generalizations. Provan is in the tricky business of holding a middle ground that draws those two very different audiences together. He writes well and works from a broad canvas. The ten questions addressed are: What is the world? (ch. 2); Who is God? (ch. 3); Who are man and woman? (ch. 4); Why do evil and suffering mark the world? (ch. 5); What am I to do about evil and suffering? (ch. 6); How am I to relate to God? (ch. 7); How am I to relate to my neighbor? (ch. 8); How am I to relate to the rest of creation? (ch. 9); Which society should I be helping to build? (ch. 10); What am I to hope for? (ch. 11)

It is interesting, and perhaps significant, that the last six of these questions explicitly foreground an individual perspective: readers of the Old Testament are treated in singular terms rather than in any communal context, which is a point with further ramifications to be noted below.

The manner of proceeding is a little unexpected. It involves primary dependence on the book of Genesis as opening statement, foregrounding a reliance on expounding the Old Testament perspective on each question. Though Provan offers some useful reflections in his opening chapter on why it is helpful to read Genesis first, and indeed to read the Old Testament at all given widespread Christian ignorance of it, the result is an approach that often settles complex questions of canonical witness simply by taking Genesis’s view as bedrock, then modifying and refining by way of further texts. There is no reason why this
cannot be done (indeed, Provan does it), but the result will be one way of navigating the canonical witness rather than a definitive reading. A little caution might therefore be urged over calling the results “the biblical view” or “the biblical perspective.”

Strengths of Provan’s reading typically include his careful attention to details of the Genesis text, allied to sure-footed navigation through some core theological aspects of the view he constructs. Take chapter 2: the world is not eternal; it is created, ordered, and reflective of its personal creator. Thus it is divine but not sacred. Here Provan follows a reading that sees Genesis as mapping out the cosmos as divine temple and Eden as a way of thinking about that cosmos: “Eden is not a ‘place’ whose location has long been forgotten. It is the experience of being in the right relationship with God and with creation” (40). Finally, creation is good, a view Provan explores in dialogue with different Eastern and Western views that creation is not good. All of this represents a fruitful reading of Gen 1–3, although I might suggest that it is a good example of one reading that is not the only one that would persuade.

The next account concerns God and emphasizes God’s oneness, otherness, sovereignty, incomparability, and goodness. Here some interesting points emerge. “In any discussion of the God of the Bible, the best place to begin is with the notion of oneness itself,” says Provan (49). But any who would expect him then to turn to Deut 6:4–5 are in for a surprise. The Shema is not mentioned in this discussion, but the point is argued from Gen 1. There may be various reasons to defend such an approach, but surely one of them is a deliberate decision to say that reading the text from the beginning will get the reader to the right answer, whereas the fact that the Shema is a core reference point for later Jewish tradition, while supportive of the desired thesis, is a less good way to argue it. Later the discussion of “goodness” is structured by the categories of Exod 34:6–7. Provan offers constructive readings of “anger” and “jealousy” in this regard and insists that it is good news that the guilty will not be left unpunished (68–69). Strikingly, he never quite gets to the part of the verse that describes the visiting of the iniquity of the parents upon the children.

There is likewise much of value in every one of the explorations of the ten questions. Some headline affirmations are selected for the purposes of general indication. Humans are—wonderfully—bearers of God’s image, though how is not told to us. There are two types of suffering in the world: intrinsic, which is part and parcel of being in the (good but not “perfect”) creation; and “extrinsic,” which results from embracing evil. Genesis 3 has been persistently and unhelpfully interpreted as referring to a primal and irreversible “fall,” whereas “the Old Testament itself does not lead us to read the chapter in such a way” (135; note again the contrasting of the text with the readings from the tradition). The Bible instead emphasizes the ongoing goodness of created order and the potential for
goodness in divine-human relationship. Humans are to live with trust in the goodness of God and in love and obedience. The contrast with defaulting to suspicion is helpfully underlined. Further studies look at caring for the earth, working for the state of affairs to come, and hope.

The broad merits of all this are considerable. The book’s intended reader, a sort of interested enquirer into the mysteries of the Old Testament, will be much rewarded for pondering all that is laid out in these ten chapters, and indeed then in chapter 12, which interestingly takes up how the New Testament builds upon the Old Testament vision. It is always stimulating to see the link between the Testaments this way round, although perhaps Provan so emphasizes the excellent point about continuity between the two Testaments that a certain balance is lost. One almost wonders whether he thinks that the New Testament is merely an interesting further illustration that effects little substantive redirection at all. A brief note on the “Who is God?” discussion allows half a dozen lines on the need to consider the creeds and the doctrine of the Trinity in speaking rightly of Jesus’s identity in connection with the oneness of God (314). Provan does see development from the Old Testament in the attributing of divinity to Jesus, but clearly not of a sort to require substantial (e.g., christological) interrogation of former categories.

I hope enough has been said to indicate the riches on display in general here. However, I do have some questions. Writing on whether Christians are called to change the world, Provan argues that what we have is “the accommodation of the biblical moral vision to the realities of the world as the early Christians found it” (339). The result is a form of the hermeneutical apologetic that all the problematic New Testament texts (e.g., regarding women or slavery) are instances of accommodation but that if one took the underlying thinking seriously then in the long run what would result would be the kingdom of God with equality and justice for all. Well, one would like to believe it, but there is I think a step missing in the argument. A couple of Old Testament–focused examples may serve to draw this out.

In chapter 8 Provan offers an intriguing discussion of loving one’s neighbor, summarized under the heading “love all, trust a few, do wrong to none.” He insists that the command to “love my neighbor” means loving “every other human being who is, like me, made in God’s image” (212). Some of this comes from a reading of Genesis, some from the Ten Commandments. It fits with certain Old Testament texts regarding the treatment of various nonelect or anti-elect/enemy peoples is quietly passed over. I was quite struck by how little is said about some of the standard “problematic” passages that would trouble the positive conclusions—Num 31 would be a case in point where “every other human being” is a category that would extend to Midianite women and children, who were supposed to have been slaughtered, according to the text. It is not that I have to hand a
simple way of reading that text where everything comes out all right (though there are at least some options for constructive symbolic readings, as long rehearsed in the interpretive tradition) but rather that I suspect Provan does not either. His brief comments about *herem* in Joshua are limited to locating an appropriate ancient genre for reading such texts, which is fair but not quite to the point: the texts are still, surely, difficult. It might have been worth factoring such difficulties in to the kinds of confident pronouncements being made about “the biblical vision.”

Likewise, in a rather interesting analysis, Provan at one point addresses texts relating to women and recovers much that is liberating and life-giving. But when he turns to the sex laws of Deut 22, for example, he says that here God is not trying to bring about the desired end goal but is legislating for ongoing provision for redress for those badly treated. The result is odd. Provan says that a “limited good” is being pursued here and equally “what is not being pursued is the moral vision of the Bible with respect to male-female relationships” (271). In other words, Deut 22 can in some sense be counted as outside the moral vision of the Bible ... which vision turns out to be constructed from more positively focused texts. I believe the technical term for this is Sachkritik. It works rather well for as long as one knows how to extract the “good parts version” in the first place.

Where that knowledge comes from is, I think, the missing step—a theological-hermeneutical-ecclesiological one. Provan is commending a vision that looks a lot like a good Christian theological position, not unknown in the history of the church, and perhaps leaning a little to Protestant, arguably broad-minded evangelical convictions, with a certain degree of individualism in the mix. I take it that this is one of a handful of defensible Christian theological visions, none of which are self-evident (or self-evidently superior one to another). But Provan tends to present it as the ineluctable result of reading the Bible properly, or indeed the Old Testament, or, for much of the time, Genesis. In the end, I am not sure it does him any favors to elide one reading of the text with the biblical/Christian vision. All manner of judgments are required to work the canonical witness into a theological vision for life and how to live it, and twenty-first-century readers join a long line of those who have gone before in receiving the terms of debate and then reorganizing them, nuancing them, or at times rejecting them.

Provan’s final two chapters address the questions of truth and the “danger” involved in believing this truth. Provan is clear that he takes the Old Testament as true. But it is a little surprising to find that this often defaults to discussion of “the facts,” and this in a book that begins (4–5) with a discussion of Alasdair MacIntyre and the virtues of understanding ourselves in a narrative. MacIntyre appears nowhere else in the book, but had he done so perhaps these concluding chapters would have been framed in terms of
plausible narrative construals rather than “the facts,” which, as MacIntyre once reminded us, is a relatively modern conceptualization. It is not that one cannot use it to talk about the Old Testament and its witness but rather that to do so will result in an evaluative framework that is not the same as “simply reading the texts.”

The project in which Provan is engaged is of paramount importance. He lays out much excellent groundwork for it. I would be confident in giving this text to an interested (and rather patient) enquirer who wants to see how on earth one can handle the Old Testament responsibly in a climate of academic and cultural skepticism. I would then want to discuss with that enquirer what might be at stake in reframing all Provan’s questions in terms of “we” rather than “I” and asking what the interplay might be between his readings and their various Judeo-Christian receptions down through the ages, in church and synagogue. This might allow for the multiplicity of construals that are evident among faithful readers. The factors that persuade many readers are often much more relative to their sociocultural (and/or ecclesiological) location than this account seems willing to credit.

In the world in which biblical studies currently exists, projects such as this are worthy of extended time and reflection. I hope Provan will go on to develop further the implications and commitments involved in attending to the vibrant witness of the Old Testament today. I wonder, too, whether he might find that certain theologians down through the ages might not make excellent dialogue partners for the kinds of goals to which he aspires.