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A Précis of Brent A. Strawn's The Old Testament in Dying

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Brent Strawn opens *The Old Testament is Dying* with a vignette. While teaching at a church in the greater Atlanta metropolitan area, Strawn recounts asking the audience whence Jesus' famous cry of dereliction came (Matt 27:46; Mark 15:34). To his dismay, his question went unanswered. Strawn recounts, "That's when I realized in a way I have never realized before, that the Old Testament is dying" (p. 4).

This book is devoted to the claim that the Old Testament is dying. Such a topic initially suggests a depressing read. However, Strawn discusses the morbidity of the Old Testament on the way to considering how the current state can be rectified. Thus, the work ends with a sense of hope, albeit an uncertain hope.

This book exists in three parts. In part 1, Strawn attempts to justify his diagnosis. In part 2, he discusses the disease by looking at several manifestations in contemporary discourse. Finally, Strawn considers several methods of treatment. In the end, this is a thought-provoking book whether you find himself agreeing with Strawn or not. Anyone who has an interest in the vitality of scripture and its role in contemporary discourse should devote time to reading it.

I. Part 1

To make his diagnosis, Strawn begins with an analogy. The Old Testament is (like) a language. "Just as language...allows us to make sense of the world and ourselves, the Old Testament provides a kind of grammar for constructing, perceiving, and understanding the same" (p. 8). Indeed, Strawn recognizes the eventual shortcomings of this analogy, or any analogy for that matter (pp. 16–18). All analogies are ultimately imperfect. So, the question is whether the proposed analogy does enough. In this instance, I think it does.

Yet just as fast as Strawn presents his governing analogy, he pushes it aside to establish the warrant for his diagnosis. For languages to thrive, they need to be used and used properly. Thus, is the Old Testament being used and used properly? According to the implications of the 2010 U.S. Religious Knowledge Survey, published by the Pew Research Center, the aforementioned question must be answered negatively. That study found, among other things, that only fifty-seven percent of the self-identifying Christians who were surveyed knew that the Golden Rule was not one of the Ten Commandments. Seventy-one percent identified Moses as a critical religious figure, and sixty-one percent similarly identified Abraham. However, only forty-one percent could properly identify Job, and only two-thirds could name the first book of the Bible. According to Strawn, the people who profess to "speak the language of faith"...are actually missing huge portions of the most basic vocabulary, syntax, and so forth of their (putative) religious tongue" (p. 26).

From there, Strawn considers the “best sermons” of American Christianity. Taken from a series of publications that spanned decades (from the 1920s into the 1990s), Strawn found, among other things, that forty-nine percent of the sermons were developed from the New Testament alone. Seven percent were developed from a combination of Old Testament and New Testament texts, while twenty-three percent were developed without the New Testament or the Old Testament. When it came to the Old Testament alone, only twenty-one percent of the best sermons leaned exclusively on that corpus.

Indeed, there are caveats with Strawn’s examination, such as the criteria for including a sermon in the series, as well as the exhaustiveness of his analysis (Strawn would have had to read all 900 sermons!). However, there is enough data to establish his point. Fewer people are properly speaking the language of the Old Testament, and the first line of education—sermons from our local congregations—is not providing a consistent context to learn the language.

Strawn rounds out his diagnosis by considering the place of the Psalms in modern hymnody and liturgy, particularly in Church lectionaries. In each case, selectivity best describes the method of usage. Certain psalms and elements of the Old Testament enjoy a role, and some even enjoy a prominent role. However, for each psalm or element of the Old Testament that is used, there is at least one that is ignored. In the end, Strawn emphatically declares there are “serious signs of morbidity” (p. 56). But to be even more blunt, “The educational system is failing... the Old Testament is dying, and it seems that the Christian practice of sermon, song, and lectionary are at least partly to blame” (p. 57).

In chapter 3, Strawn revisits his linguistic analogy in detail, asking questions about language change and language development. If there are serious signs of morbidity with respect to the language of the Old Testament, then what does language change and death look like?

All languages change, and they do so through time and with contact with other languages. These are universal principles of linguistics. What is not universal is how and why languages change and die, as there are a host of unpredictable factors that go into each case. Yet Strawn isolates pidginization and creolization. The former is the process by which a language retracts into a minimalistic form. It’s an intense regression to a basic form, often due to the demands brought on by interaction with other languages and various external stimuli. In such cases, a language may drop complex morphological and syntactical elements, all for the hope of preserving the language. Creolization is the process by which a pidgin expands to become a new language. But significant in this process is that while a creole may preserve historical vestiges with its ancestor language(s), it ultimately becomes a different language.

Similar to language change, language death results from a number of forces that are difficult to predict. Languages die for a variety of reasons, but *they do die*. Most important to this process, “the telltale sign in language morbidity, then, is when only the elderly speak a language, but no middle-aged persons of child bearing years regularly employ it or teach it to their children” (p. 70). And when a language is only spoken by a small element within a culture, there is usually a systemic breakdown in communication. Applied to scripture and the Old Testament, Strawn believes that this breakdown in communication is manifested by the Church’s inability to discuss the totality of the Old Testament and scripture. The Church, according to Strawn, is either willing or only capable of speaking about a select number of sections, themes, or corpora. Even among the decreasing number of those who are willing to engage the Old Testament, they often do so selectively.

II. Part 2

Part 2 is devoted to discussing the signs of morbidity, the ways in which the Old Testament’s impending doom is revealed. First, Strawn tackles the accusations against God and scripture offered by the so-called New Atheists. Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens are all discussed in some detail. However, using Dawkins’ ethical arguments about the characterization of God across scripture, Strawn argues that Dawkins creates a straw man based on a select group of passages primarily located in the Old Testament. In other words, Dawkins only engages a pidgin of the Old Testament, not the full extent of it (pp. 97–98). However, what makes Dawkins’ arguments so detrimental, according to Strawn, is that Dawkins’ arguments are not completely off the mark: most people don’t know what’s in the Old Testament and they don’t know how to respond to the questions leveled against it!

In chapter 5, Strawn shifts gears, from those who fail to consider the Old Testament as a whole to those who simply reject the Old Testament. He first targets the early 20th century Church historian Adolf von Harnack. Von Harnack’s sympathy for Marcion, who famously rejected the authority of the Old Testament, quickly gives way to “Christian super-secessionism laced with anti-Semitism” (p. 123) and ultimately the rejection of the Old Testament’s authority. Also brought into view is Friedrich Delitzch, who argued that the Old Testament is only a small step removed from Mesopotamian religion. According to Delitzch, people would do better to look toward their national myths for guidance and wisdom. But before one wrinkles their nose at such a blatant disregard for the Old Testament, Strawn wonders if the overwhelming preference for the New Testament (seen in the *Best Sermon* series; see above) is somehow similar to von Harnack, Delitzch, and others.

The final demonstrations of the Old Testament's morbidity are seen in the group that Strawn labels the Happiologists. These people advocate some form of the Prosperity Gospel, such as Creflo Dollar and Joel Olsteen. Strawn interacts with some of their most popular publications, particularly those of Olsteen. In short, Strawn argues that the entire system assumed by the Prosperity Gospel is too simplistic and cannot possibly account for the variables in life or the depth of scripture. According to Strawn, Job and Ecclesiastes are enough to throw a wrench into the entire system! Thus, the Happiologists assume a language of scripture that is not indicative of the whole; a language that conveniently ignores the elements that would otherwise criticize their system. Yet what is most critical for the Happiologists, according to Strawn, is the reality that the Happiologists represent a creole, or new language, that is rivaling the original language. So, while the New Atheists and New Marcionites assume a pidgin of the Old Testament, the Happiologists offer a new language under the guise of the old, authoritative language.

III. Part 3

The final section is devoted to discussing how the Church can bring the Old Testament off death's doorstep. The good news is that dying languages—even dead languages (as was the case with modern Hebrew [pp. 163–65])—can be saved. Moreover, the critical ingredient is as simple as having enough speakers. “For a dying language to survive, it needs speakers—preferably a lot of them—and it needs good reasons for being spoken” (p. 163). The bad news is that this is easier said than done.

Strawn believes the way forward should take its cue from Child Language Acquisition and Second Language Acquisition systems. Because “baby talk is okay for a time” (p. 171), the Church should realize that a truncated understanding of the Old Testament is okay, so long as the parties involved are not content to stay at an infantile level. Growth and maturity assumes that the learner will pursue more, and when such a pursuit takes off, Second Language Acquisition systems become informative. The Old Testament is not a language with which one is born, and so they must effectively nurture the language of the Old Testament vis-à-vis other “languages” within their worldview.

In the end, the final section effusively discusses practical ways the Church can foster fluency in the Old Testament and ensure the revival of the corpus. To this end, Deuteronomy offers an important model for Strawn. As the final testament of Moses, Deuteronomy is contextualized against a strategic moment in Israel's history, when the “new generation” was transitioning into the Promised Land. What's more, Strawn believes that the method of instruction employed by Deuteronomy is conducive to the acquisition of Old Testament fluency. Deuteronomy is repetitive,

and anyone who has ever learned a new language, or revived one after years of dormancy, will testify to the criticality of repetition. In addition, Deuteronomy is both individually and corporately focused. Individuals are not lost in the crowd, but individuals are understood to be a part of something larger than themselves. Applied to the learning of the Old Testament, such an emphasis suggests that fluency is for the benefit of the individual believer as well as the Church as a whole.

Deuteronomy also exhibits a palpable sense of urgency. Just as Moses urged Israel not to waffle in their allegiance to the Lord and the covenantal ideal, the Church must buckle down and resurrect the Old Testament with a noticeable sense of urgency. Moreover, the notion that Deuteronomy's ideal affects all aspects of their society enhances its sense of urgency. Deuteronomy is concerned with creating a *habitus*, a way of life, and, similarly, fluency in the Old Testament will translate into a life that is entrenched in the Lord and his character. A final important element of Deuteronomy's program is its performance. In fact, Strawn alludes to its performance as the critical element for Deuteronomy's ability to root its audience in the past while propelling them forward toward a new context. Applied to the pursuit of fluency in the Old Testament, performing the language through liturgy, song, and other performances connects the performer to an older tradition while also ensuring that the tradition continues.

The final chapter offers a lengthy catalog of practical steps that will harness the essence of Deuteronomy and move the Old Testament away from the fringes of the Church. First and foremost, the Church must regularly use the Old Testament. "The Old Testament must be used—extensively and regularly, certainly far more extensively and regularly than has been the case of late—in formative moments of Christian practice and education" (p. 214). Strawn suggests the principle of quality over quantity as well as usage in more contexts than just the occasional Sunday sermon. Second, the Church must pursue fluency. It can't be satisfied with knowing parts of the Old Testament, or even select parts really well. Rather, the Church must be intentional about its usage and understanding of the Old Testament as a whole. By implication, it must employ methods of communication and instruction that are accessible and effective. Fourth, the Church must nurture bilingualism. To accomplish this, its usage must be calculated and be accomplished in a way that allows the Old Testament to imprint its "culture," its worldview, upon the believer. Finally, the Church must cultivate the notion of "bothness" between the Old and New Testaments. Both testaments are two sides of the same coin, and there should be no hint of subordination between the two testaments.

Strawn closes his books with an acknowledgement that his call to action, his call to revive the Old Testament and to rescue it from a terrible trajectory, will

be “difficult work,” “frustrating work,” but “rewarding work that will come, slowly, with time” (p. 241). I think such a perspective is prudent. The Church must realize that there is no quick fix to the current state of affairs. Moreover, the work done now will be for the benefit of the subsequent generations more so than the current one.

