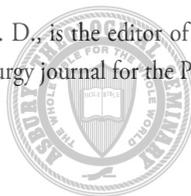


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Kimberly Bracken Long
A Response to Brent A. Strawn

Kimberly Bracken Long, Ph. D., is the editor of *Call to Worship: Liturgy, Music, Preaching, and the Arts*, the liturgy journal for the Presbyterian Church.



Introduction

Professor Strawn has given us a fascinating and provocative text to which to respond. He makes a compelling argument that the Old Testament is (like) a language and that the loss of this language in the life of the Church leads to a decline in the ability of Christians to view and understand the world. Ministers and scholars have long bemoaned the decline of biblical literacy in the church, and Dr. Strawn strives to put some flesh on the bones of that general complaint. He does so with wit, drawing on a variety of sources and his own deep knowledge of scripture.

As a scholar and practitioner of worship, I would like to offer a perspective that reflects a less alarming diagnosis of the problem than Professor Strawn's, especially with regard to the use of the Old Testament in preaching, congregational song, and liturgy. He does admit that his data are "far more anecdotal than statistical," and I acknowledge that limitation. Taking into account other sources, however, gives us a broader picture of what might actually be happening in the church these days.

I. Preaching

Dr. Strawn has distinguished himself as a respected biblical scholar. Consequently, if he has a hunch about something, then I want to pay attention. I wish, however, that he had drawn on different sources to make his case. For instance, the results of the *U.S. Religious Knowledge Survey* from the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion and Public Life do represent a cause for concern. Although, I would point out that I know plenty of seminary students who excel in their studies but do poorly on the sort of inventory described here. I'm thinking of the infamous Bible Content Exam for any Presbyterians who may be reading this review.

More important, however, I question the usefulness of the *Best Sermons* volumes to gauge what is happening in preaching. At the most, this gives insight into the sermons of preachers who are apt to submit sermons for possible publication, and nothing more. First, there is a certain ilk of pulpiteer who participates in this sort of exercise, and this group of people may or may not give us an accurate view of what was happening in preaching during the times in which they lived. Second, as Strawn points out, we do not know what criteria were used to judge which sermons merited inclusion. Third, using any sort of publication ignores the influence of non-manuscript preachers, many of whom are part of traditions that are not dependent on written liturgies, sermons, and/or songs.

In *The Heart of Black Preaching*, Cleophus LaRue points out that black preachers have historically valued "artful language" and that often preaching is extemporaneous. Furthermore, LaRue argues that black preaching is deeply rooted in scripture. Most notably, the Exodus narrative, featuring the God who delivers the

people from slavery, is central to preaching and also is far-reaching in its effect on preaching in general. According to LaRue, “The hermeneutic of God, the mighty sovereign who acts mightily on behalf of the powerless and oppressed, is the long-standing template blacks place on the scriptures as they begin the interpretive process” (2011: 110). Indeed, nearly all the sermons to which he refers in describing the nature of African American preaching draw on Old Testament texts, ranging from the narratives of prophets and kings to stories of Joshua and Samson and Delilah.

I would also point to the rise in the use of the Narrative Lectionary in recent years, a trend that both affirms and resists Professor Strawn’s conclusion. The popularity of this new lectionary is due, in large part, to preachers’ sense that their parishioners do not know the Bible well enough. The result of its use, presumably, is that more churches are hearing more preaching from the Old Testament. In the current lectionary year, those churches following the Narrative Lectionary heard sermons from the Old Testament every week for four months, from September through December of 2017, on texts from Genesis, Exodus, 1 Samuel, 1 Kings, Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel.¹

Finally, it should be noted that the increase in womanist biblical scholarship has turned the eyes of those who are paying attention to the Old Testament. If I may present some anecdotal evidence of my own—gleaned from an informal survey from Facebook—young female ministers from a variety of cultural backgrounds are taking note of Wilda Gafney’s new book, *Womanist Midrash: A Reinroduction to Women of the Torah and the Throne*, which considers the stories of numerous named and unnamed women in the Old Testament. Presumably some of these ministers will be taking Wil Gafney with them into the pulpit or the classroom.

II. Congregational Song

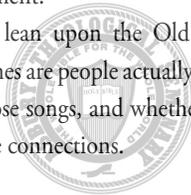
As one who values deeply the church’s singing, I appreciate that Dr. Strawn includes a discussion of sung scripture—particularly the psalms—in his book. Once again, however, I am afraid that the rather narrow scope of his research does not sufficiently support his claim that the Old Testament is dying when it comes to what is happening in worshiping communities. So, keeping with Strawn’s metaphor, I am not arguing that we don’t need medical attention, but I don’t think we are yet on life support.

Here Professor Strawn relies on W. Sibley Towner’s “Without our Aid He Did Us Make” (2003: 17–34). While Towner does raise important questions about the relationship between scripture and its paraphrases, as well as the lack of attention to psalms of lament, he uses a narrow range of sources to make his case.

More specifically, his research relies on a very small sample: five hymnals, published between 1987 and 1996, from four denominations with Reformed roots and one Methodist denomination.² The first problem with using the Towner study as a basis for making an argument regarding the use in worship of the Old Testament in general, and the psalms in particular is that it is 25-30 years out of date. The United Church of Christ issued a new collection, *Sing! Prayer and Praise* in 2009. The Christian Reformed Church and the Reformed Church in America collaborated on a new hymnal, *Lift Up Your Hearts*, and the Presbyterian Church (USA) produced *Glory to God*, both published in 2013. The CRC also published *Psalms for All Seasons*, the most complete and musically diverse psalter ever published in North America, and it has garnered attention across denominational lines. Furthermore, churches frequently draw from online resources that either supplement or supplant their hymnals, which incidentally raises its own set of questions. Indeed, a study of more recent hymnals would yield similar results. Yet it seems important to consult up-to-date resources in order to get a clearer picture of what is happening in present-day churches.

The second problem is that the sample is far too narrow to be instructive. It excludes the enormous repertoire of responsorial psalms used regularly in Roman Catholic (and some Protestant) churches, where psalms are sung and/or read on a weekly basis; a quick glance at the GIA Music catalog alone shows several dozen collections.³ One must also consider the widely used repertoire from the Taizé community, which is incorporated into Sunday morning worship as well as sung in separate prayer services. The texts of these songs are drawn often from the psalms. And last but certainly not least; the contemporary Christian music movement has been around long enough to become a tradition of its own. The movement emerged from Pentecostal revivalism in the mid-20th century and featured songs, usually taken from biblical texts—mainly the Psalms—that were short and easy to sing. The genre has expanded since then, but scripture remains the basis for song texts, as Swee Hong Lim and Lester Ruth demonstrate in their recent book, *Lovin' On Jesus: A Concise History of Contemporary Worship*. In addition, a look in the back of nearly any hymnal will reveal a scriptural index. The new PCUSA hymnal, *Glory to God*, includes four pages, with five columns on each page, of hymns with scripture references from the Old Testament.

So, the songs that lean upon the Old Testament are out there. The question, of course, is which ones are people actually singing, whether they recognize the scriptural references in those songs, and whether worship services and sermons are designed to highlight those connections.



All that said, Strawn is right to worry. I think that the psalms are not being read or sung enough in worship. Moreover, users of the *Revised Common Lectionary* disagree whether psalms are prayer only, or fodder for preaching. Another concern is the lack of understanding among many as to how the lectionary is designed to be used. Strawn is not unaware of all of this, but perhaps a root of all of this is the reality that no lectionary allows the full range of the psalter to be heard in worship. Selectivity is indeed a problem, and I agree that what is often lost are the voices of lament and complaint. At the same time, I do not think it is always edifying for worshippers—to cite an extreme example—to shout out their desire to dash the heads of enemies’ babies against the rocks without some sort of interpretive word from the pulpit. In the same way that I think we need to exercise care with the “texts of terror” of the Old Testament when children are present (and we hope they are present!). Some selectivity is in order for the sake of the whole worshiping community.

III. Liturgy

One important source of scripture in worship is liturgy. Any liturgy worth its salt is rooted in scripture and faithful to the biblical witness. In some traditions, the opening sentences of worship are often taken from the psalms. The classic, trinitarian form of Eucharistic prayer regularly rehearses the whole of salvation history, recalling key events and prophecies from the Old Testament. The Psalms are especially prevalent in funeral liturgies and are sometimes used in services of healing and wholeness. Those who pray well—whatever their tradition—are those whose language is embroidered with scriptural words, phrases, and ideas.

IV. What’s next?

So far, I have responded only to Professor Strawn’s methods of diagnosis. I now turn to the treatment. In response to his basic message of “we need more Old Testament,” I’d like to suggest three basic moves: (1) look around, (2) look back, and (3) look forward.

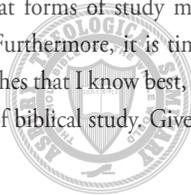
In saying, “look around,” I encourage us all to pay attention to what other corners of the church are doing. For instance, I mentioned previously that the Catholic Church has a rich tradition of psalm singing that reaches across all sorts of musical genres. The CRC/Faith Alive publication, *Psalms for All Seasons*, includes multiple settings of all 150 psalms in a range of musical styles, from chant to hip-hop. Moreover, studies on the various ways that psalmody is used in Christian worship are now available (Bracken Long 2014). In short, “What are other churches doing, and how are they doing it?”

I'd also like to see us "look back." I've long envied my Baptist friends who can quote scripture at the drop of a hat. I marveled at my father-in-law's ability to quote long stretches of both scripture and poetry. I can't even recite my own sons' phone numbers, because my phone remembers them for me! I can, however, remember the words to the songs I learned in elementary school chorus. What if we started memorizing again? As Strawn notes, children are good at this. Could we equip one another with tools for learning, spoken and sung? Are there clues from societies with oral traditions and in the poetic and narrative forms of scripture itself? Maybe in the process of teaching children, we older folks would catch on, too.

In *The Eucharistic Theology of the American Holy Fairs*, I tell the story of how Scots-Irish preachers—and later, early American revivalists—used biblical marital language and phrases from the Song of Songs to describe Christ's union with the believer in communion. One of my most fascinating discoveries is that worshipers would adopt the language they heard so that it became their own. So then, one Catherine Cameron recalled:

I was so ravished with the Love of Christ that night that I could
sleep little,
And all next Morning and day, I was in the same frame; and
saying as the Spouse
Of Christ, My Beloved is Mine & I am his, My beloved is
white and ruddy,
The Chief among 10,000 yea, Altogether lovely: and all the
rest of that week,
I continued rejoicing in the near views of the Sacrament in that
Place, hoping
I would then get my Interest in Christ and my Marriage
Covenant with him
Sealed there.⁴

The point I want to make here is that Catherine Cameron likely learned that language from several sources. Not only would she have heard it in sermons, but she might have also read it in devotional books and catechisms for youth, which all contained this language and were used widely. Catechisms seem hopelessly old-fashioned in an age of devices, I know. The point is, however, that worship alone is not enough to ensure that Christians are conversant in the language of the Old Testament and the New. What forms of study might be effective these days for children, youth, and adults? Furthermore, it is time for educational programs, at least in the liberal, white churches that I know best, to offer less in the way of topical studies and more in the way of biblical study. Given that the "adult forum" model



is more prevalent than plain old “Bible study,” perhaps there are ways to reclaim old practices in new ways.

Professor Strawn is right to assert, “even the best of biblical scholarship, even when executed at the highest of levels and for the best of reasons, is insufficient for language preservation *as long as it is devoid of practiced language-use*” (p. 192). Consequently, to “look forward” I suggest that we pay attention to what some new worshipping communities are up to. Liturgists speak about the “table of the meal” and the “table of the Word.” What if we thought about preaching as feeding? What if our encounters with scripture happened around a table and were accompanied by a meal? What if our leaders, pastors, and teachers came to such an event ready to offer gifts of their study and wisdom but in the context of table fellowship where all enter into conversation about the Word? I’m thinking here of St. Lydia’s church in New York City as a model. Similarly, the more church members are involved in the planning of worship, working with texts, thinking about language, discovering for themselves the relationship between scripture and liturgy, the more invested—and knowledgeable—they will be.

Professor Strawn raises an important issue in the life of the church. As he acknowledges, language is not only about knowledge but also about worldview. The words we use shape the world we see, help us to form the just world for which we work, and engender hope in the coming reign of Christ for which we pray.

End Notes

¹ One might counter that those using the Narrative Lectionary are hearing less scripture overall than those using the Revised Common Lectionary, which may be true if churches are actually reading all of the texts assigned by the Revised Common Lectionary for each Sunday. In fact, congregations use the Revised Common Lectionary in all sorts of ways. Some use all three readings and a psalm; others choose one reading from the Old Testament and one from the New. Some preachers use the same stream (either complementary or semi-continuous) consistently, and others skip about, choosing the texts that most appeal to them. And of course, still other preachers use no lectionary at all, opting instead to preach sermon series or choosing preaching texts at random, in response to the events of the week. Finally, there are pastors who choose one single verse on which to preach, using that verse as a springboard for a thematic sermon.

² The hymnals surveyed include *Psalter Hymnal* (CRC, 1987), the *United Methodist Hymnal* (UMC, 1989), the *Presbyterian Hymnal* (PCUSA, 1990), *Rejoice in the Lord* (RCA, 1989), and the *New Century Hymnal* (UCC, 1996).

³ Available at <https://www.giamusic.com/store/sacred-music/>

⁴ The recollections of Catherine Cameron, a worshiper at the revival in Cambuslang, Scotland, 1742; quoted in Leigh Eric Schmidt (2001) and in Kimberly Bracken Long (2011).

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