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A Response to Brent A. Strawn

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Introduction

In *The Old Testament is Dying: A Diagnosis and Recommended Treatment*, Brent A. Strawn offers a grim appraisal of the health of the OT. His basic thesis is that the OT, like a language, is dying out. After surveying the use of the OT in Christian worship, Strawn concludes that the OT is “in decline, suffering from ever-decreasing influence” (p. 214). Just as a language will die if it is not spoken, Strawn argues that this neglect “contributes directly” to the death of the OT (p. 214). Next, Strawn examines three phenomena that are understood to confirm his grim diagnosis: the New Atheism, Marcionism, and the prosperity gospel, which Strawn labels the “New Plastic Gospels of the Hapiologists” (p. 83). Each of these phenomena indicate that people have lost the ability to speak the language of the OT and are instead speaking a pidgin or a creole—a degenerate version of the language which has arisen through contact with another, more dominant language. On Strawn’s analogy, this dominant language includes various elements in wider secular culture, such as consumerism and post-enlightenment rationalism.

As Strawn acknowledges, these three phenomena point not only to the death of the OT, but also to the death of the NT. First, some of the New Atheists express even more contempt for the NT than the OT.¹ Second, the Marcionites cannot jettison the OT without severely dismembering and dismantling the NT. Finally, the prosperity gospel conflicts not only with the psalms of lament, but also with the message of the cross. Nevertheless, while Strawn suggests that most Christians are “equally deficient” in both testaments, he maintains that the OT is “far more imperiled at the moment” (p. 226). Furthermore, he maintains that the death of the NT is one of the “results” of the death of the OT (p. 224).

Given such a diagnosis, Strawn’s recommended treatment is not surprising. The OT must be used in the church “far more extensively and regularly than has been the case of late” (p. 214). Specifically, pastors and teachers must deliver “more sermons and lessons” from the OT (p. 214). Furthermore, the OT should be allowed to stand on its own, not granted authority only to the extent that it bolsters or explains the NT.

I agree with Strawn on many points and find his language analogy quite helpful. However, I believe one important element of Strawn’s thesis is open to challenge, namely that the OT is in decline in Christian worship. Given the many passages in the OT that offend modern sensibilities, the notion that the church is gravitating towards the NT certainly seems plausible. However, there is some evidence to the contrary that should be considered.

I. The Old Testament in Sermon

Strawn's contention that the OT is "in decline, suffering from ever-decreasing influence" is based on his analysis of sermon, scripture reading, and song (214). I will consider first the claim that the OT is in decline in sermon. Strawn's principle evidence here is his analysis of three collections of *Best Sermons* from the twentieth century. However, this analysis only demonstrates that the NT was more prominent than the OT in the sermons of the twentieth century. This data does not say anything about the prominence of the OT in the sermons of earlier centuries. Thus, this data does not demonstrate that the neglect of the OT is increasing.

In order to test the hypothesis that the OT is increasingly neglected, I have attempted to apply Strawn's methodology to earlier periods of church history. I have done so by surveying the sermons of several famous Christian preachers. First, I examined the 624 extant exegetical homilies of John Chrysostom (Quasten 1966: 3:433-51). Second, I examined the 304 extant text-based sermons of Augustine (Rotelle 1990: III.1.139-63).² Third, I examined the *Church Postil* by Martin Luther (Lenker 1995: 8.385-86). Though over 2,000 of Luther's sermons have survived, this one-year cycle of homilies was particularly influential and was identified by Luther as "the very best book which I ever wrote" (Hillerbrand and Lehmann 1974: 52:ix). Fourth, I examined a collection of sermons delivered by seventy-five puritan ministers including John Owen and Richard Baxter (Nichols 1884). These 161 sermons were delivered from 1659 to 1689 and published from 1660 to 1691. Fifth, I examined the 1,200 extant sermons of Jonathan Edwards.³ I also surveyed the twenty-nine sermons included in an 1842 collection of Edwards' works purporting to contain "all the most valuable of his writings heretofore published" (Edwards 1842: 1.iii). Sixth, I examined the fifty-seven sermons that George Whitefield authorized for publication (Gatiss 2012). Finally, I examined the 151 extant sermons of John Wesley (Outler 1984, 1.699-706).

The results of this analysis are shown in Table 1 below, along with the results that Strawn reported from his analysis of the *Best Sermons* series. These results appear to indicate that the neglect of the OT, which Strawn has documented, is nothing new. In fact, the Butler and Cox series give more attention to the OT than any of the collections I surveyed, with the exception of Jonathan Edwards' corpus. It is also noteworthy that while Edwards comes closest to giving equal attention to the OT and NT in his preaching, those sermons judged to be the "most valuable" are heavily skewed in favor of the NT.

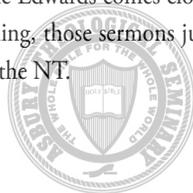


Table 1. The Use of the OT and the NT in Text-Based Christian Sermons

Preacher	Cent.	Source	OT Text	NT Text	Total	%OT	%NT
John Chrysostom	4	All extant exegetical homilies	152	472	624	24	76
Augustine	4-5	All extant text-based sermons	79	225	304	26	74
Martin Luther	16	<i>Church Postil</i>	2	135	137	1	99
Puritans (John Owen, Richard Baxter, etc.)	17	Collection published from 1659 to 1689	38	123	161	24	76
Jonathan Edwards	18	All extant sermons	506	694	1200	42	58
		Collection published in 1842	4	25	29	14	86
George Whitefield	18	All sermons authorized by Whitefield for publication	16	41	57	28	72
John Wesley	18	All extant sermons	38	113	151	25	75
Various	20	All single-text sermons in Newton Best Sermon series	18	67	85	21	79
Various	20	All single-text sermons in Butler Best Sermon series	99	206	305	32	68
Various	20	All single-text sermons in Cox Best Sermon series	69	159	228	30	70

While most of the data Strawn presents is taken from the twentieth century, he does briefly mention “the great writers and theologians in the history of Christianity, many of whom made it a practice to preach regularly and seriatim through the Old Testament books” (p. 37). He lists the following four examples: Augustine’s treatment of the Psalms, Calvin’s treatment of the Psalms, Luther’s “extensive work on Old Testament texts,” and Bernard of Clairvaux’s unfinished series of 86 sermons on the opening chapters of the Song of Songs (p. 37). However, the first two examples concern commentaries, and the third example principally concerns commentaries and university lectures. Since Strawn is seeking to determine how prevalent the OT is in Sunday morning preaching, these examples do not seem particularly relevant. As shown in Table 1 above, despite Augustine’s extensive work on the Psalms, he overwhelmingly favored the NT in his Sunday morning preaching. Likewise, only two of Luther’s 137 sermons for the liturgical year come

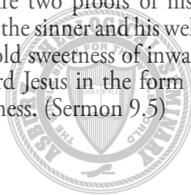
from the OT, and one of these two is from the Apocrypha. While Luther's students at the University of Wittenberg may have been exposed to extensive treatments of OT books, the peasants and farmers who filled the pews in Germany evidently heard relatively few sermons outside of the NT.

Strawn's fourth example, Bernard of Clairvaux's sermon series on the Song of Songs, is certainly relevant.⁴ However, note that Bernard delivered these sermons to his fellow monks, and begins by explaining that the sermons "will differ from those I should deliver to people in the world" (Sermon 1.1). More importantly, note the way in which Bernard uses the OT. Consider, for example, Bernard's comments on the opening line of the Song of Songs: "Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth" (Song 1:2).⁵ Bernard interprets this as an expression of longing for Christ.

The conscientious man of those days might repeat to himself: "Of what use to me the wordy effusions of the prophets? Rather let him who is the most handsome of the sons of men, let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth. No longer am I satisfied to listen to Moses, for he is a slow speaker and not able to speak well. Isaiah is 'a man of unclean lips,' Jeremiah does not know how to speak, he is a child; not one of the prophets makes an impact on me with his words. But he, the one whom they proclaim, let him speak to me, 'let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth.' I have no desire that he should approach me in their person, or address me with their words, for they are 'a watery darkness, a dense cloud'; rather in his own person 'let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth'; let him whose presence is full of love, from whom exquisite doctrines flow in streams, let him become 'a spring inside me, welling up to eternal life.'" (Sermon 2.2)

Bernard spends seven entire sermons contemplating the union with Christ entailed in this kiss. During these sermons, he makes continual reference to NT passages, but has very little engagement with the text of Song of Songs. Finally, in the ninth sermon, Bernard declares, "It is time now for us to return to the book" (Sermon 9.1). He picks up the text again with the second half of the first verse: "For your breasts are better than wine, smelling sweet of the best ointments" (Song 1:2-3). Once again, Bernard interprets this as a reference to Christ.

These two breasts are two proofs of his native kindness: his patience in awaiting the sinner and his welcoming mercy for the penitent. This twofold sweetness of inward joy overflows from the heart of the Lord Jesus in the form of tireless expectancy and prompt forgiveness. (Sermon 9.5)



In short, one could argue that Bernard is not really preaching the OT *per se*; rather, he is using the text of the OT as a springboard to preach the NT. In other words, to use Strawn's analogy, one could argue that Bernard's sermons on the Song of Songs draw so heavily on the dialect of the NT that the distinct dialect of the OT is almost completely lost.

II. The Old Testament in Liturgy

Having examined the claim that the OT is in decline in sermon, we turn now to the claim that the OT is in decline in scripture reading and song. In a footnote, Strawn cites the following statement by Barry L. Callen concerning the *Revised Common Lectionary* (RCL):

While it is understandably Christ-centered, the Foundational Testament [the OT] is significantly disadvantaged by the choice of passages suggested for consideration in Christian worship. Not including the Psalms, this lectionary contains some 435 readings from the last twenty-seven books of the Bible and only about 270 from the first thirty-nine books. ... Christian worship is thereby impoverished. (43–44; cited in Strawn, 51)

However, even in Augustine's day the Sunday morning liturgy typically consisted of one reading from the OT, the singing of a Psalm, one reading from the gospels, and one reading from the epistles (Sanlon 2014, 16). Thus, excluding the Psalms, the NT was heard twice as often as the OT. Note also that Augustine's OT included significantly more books than the thirty-nine referenced by Callen. Thus, the imbalance was even more pronounced than the imbalance found in the *Revised Common Lectionary*.

Nevertheless, in his analysis of scripture reading and song, Strawn focuses primarily on the neglect of the Psalter, particularly the psalms of lament and imprecation. Here I believe Strawn has indeed identified an important area in Christian worship in which the OT is increasingly neglected. As William L. Holladay observes,

For centuries, in great sections of the Christian church, every verse of the full Psalter has been recited. This has been the case with the weekly recitation of the Divine Office in the Eastern Orthodox Church and was the case in the Roman Catholic Church until 1970. The Calvinist churches, too, drew up metrical versions of all 150 Psalms. (1993: 304)

Strawn observes that the reading of a psalm is today often omitted in Sunday morning worship, even in those churches that follow a lectionary cycle. Furthermore, Strawn

observes that the Roman Catholic *Liturgy of the Hours*, the *Common Lectionary*, and the *Revised Common Lectionary* have omitted many psalms and censored others. While the *Revised Common Lectionary* represents an improvement over the other two in this regard, and even includes Psalm 137, it still omits a full fifty-one psalms, as well as portions of forty-three others. Finally, Strawn observes that hymns evidence a tendency to neglect lament.

III. The Old Testament in Children's Education

Up to this point we have only considered how the OT is used in “big church.” However, fluency in a language is typically acquired in childhood. Thus, given Strawn’s language analogy, the use of the OT in children’s church is particularly relevant. In order to assess the prominence of the OT in children’s education, I surveyed several popular Bible-based Sunday school curricula. For each of these curricula, I determined the approximate percentage of lessons from NT passages and the approximate percentage of lessons from OT passages. The results, shown in Table 2 below, reveal that these curricula consistently give roughly equal treatment to both testaments.

Curriculum	%OT	%NT
Gospel Light ⁶	52	48
FaithWeaver ⁷	52	48
Bible-in-Life/Echoes ⁸	45	55
Scripture Press ⁹	48	52
Wesley ¹⁰	45	55
Gospel Project for Kids ¹¹	47	53
Average	48	52

Strawn suggests that the use of the OT in children’s education is “almost always simplistically moralistic” (p. 172). The data presented in Table 2 does not indicate *how* the OT is used in Sunday school lessons, so I cannot dispute this claim. Nevertheless, the point remains that a conscious effort has clearly been made to balance the OT and the NT in many children’s Sunday school curricula.

IV. Conclusion

The evidence presented above tends to weaken Strawn's thesis that the OT is "in decline, suffering from ever-decreasing influence" (p. 214). As Strawn rightly emphasizes, the neglect and censorship of the Psalter does constitute a significant departure from the full language of the OT in Christian worship. Nevertheless, the neglect of the OT, which Strawn has documented in twentieth century sermons, appears, upon closer inspection, to be typical of Christian preaching down through the ages. Furthermore, excluding the Psalms, the twenty-seven books of the NT have long been more prominent in Christian liturgical readings than the thirty-nine books of the OT. Finally, at least on the surface, many modern Sunday school curricula do not appear to neglect the OT.

Therefore, while I am not opposed to Strawn's suggestion that the OT be used "far more extensively and regularly," I question whether an increasing neglect of the OT in Christian worship is the primary culprit behind the death of the language of scripture (p. 214). Perhaps instead the culprit is simply an increasing neglect of in-depth teaching from either testament, coupled with the increasing pressure exerted by the dominant "language" of secular culture.¹²

End Notes

¹ Strawn cites Christopher Hitchens' essay "The 'New' Testament Exceeds the Evil of the 'Old' One" (p. 226). See also Hector Avalos' *Slavery, Abolitionism, and the Ethics of Biblical Scholarship* (2011, 138).

² Another 160 of Augustine's sermons have survived, but they are not based on any particular text.

³ "Sermon Index," *Jonathan Edwards Center at Yale University*, n.p. [cited 15 January 2018]. Online: <http://edwards.yale.edu/research/sermon-index/canonical>.

⁴ Since Bernard's extant sermons are typically not based on a single text, it is difficult to assess what percentage is devoted to the OT. This is why I have not included Bernard in Table 1. For a collection of Bernard's sermons for the liturgical year, see *Sermons Pour l'annee*.

⁵ The biblical text is taken from Kilian Walsh's translation of Bernard of Clairvaux's sermons.

⁶ "Gospel Light Scope and Sequence," 1-2 [cited 17 January 2018]. Online: https://g.christianbook.com/ns/pdf/201709/GL_FullScope_2017_2020.pdf?event=Sunday-School-Curriculum|1004045.

⁷ "FaithWeaver Scope and Sequence," 1-12 [cited 17 January 2018]. Online: https://g.christianbook.com/ns/pdf/201604/3yearscopeandsequence_FaithWeaverNOW2016.pdf?event=Sunday-School-Curriculum|1007425.

⁸ “Bible-in-Life Scope and Sequence,” 1-2 [cited 17 January 2018]. Online: https://g.christianbook.com/ns/pdf/201604/BIL_Scope_Sequence2016_2018.pdf. “Echoes Scope and Sequence,” 1-2 [cited 17 January 2018]. Online: https://g.christianbook.com/ns/pdf/201604/Echoes_Scope_Sequence2016_2018.pdf?event=Sunday-School-Curriculum|1007462.

⁹ “Scripture Press Scope and Sequence,” 1-2 [cited 17 January 2018]. Online: https://g.christianbook.com/ns/pdf/201604/Scripture_Press_Scope_Sequence2016_2018.pdf?event=Sunday-School-Curriculum|1007464.

¹⁰ “Wesley Scope and Sequence,” 1-2 [cited 17 January 2018]. Online: https://g.christianbook.com/ns/pdf/201605/WesleyScopeSequence_2016_2018.pdf?event=Sunday-School-Curriculum|1007472.

¹¹ “The Gospel Project for Kids Session Plan,” 1-24 [cited 17 January 2018]. Online: <http://s7d9.scene7.com/is/content/LifeWayChristianResources/TGP-Kids-Session-Plans-2015-20181pdf.pdf>.

¹² Concerning the pressure exerted by secular culture, I am reminded of the frustration expressed by John Chrysostom: “What we build up here [in the church], is thrown down there [in the theatres]: and not only so, but the hearers themselves cannot help being filled with other filthinesses besides: so that the case is just the same as if one should want to clean out a place with a fountain above it discharging mire; for however much you may clean out, more runs in. So it is here. For when we clean people out, as they come here from the theatres with their filthiness, thither they go again, and take in a larger stock of filthiness, as if they lived for the purpose of only giving us trouble, and then come back to us, laden with ordure, in their manners, in their movements, in their words, in their laughter, in their idleness. Then once more we begin shoveling it out afresh, as if we had to do this only on purpose that, having sent them away clean, we may again see them clogging themselves with filth.” (*NPNF* 11:161)

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