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Clinton J. Moyer

*On Maladies Canonical, Christian, and Human: A Response
to Brent A. Strawn*

Clinton J. Moyer, Ph. D., is a Senior Fellow at Wake Forest University School of Divinity.



Undoubtedly, many Christians have sensed in a variety of ways the truth of Brent Strawn's central thesis that the Old Testament is dying. Few, however, have managed such a persuasive sustained articulation and defense of this assertion, specifically within the context of American Christianity. His book offers as evidence everything from striking anecdotal details that resonate with many of our experiences in both scholarly settings and faith communities, to statistical data and their nuanced interpretation, to an overview of demonstrative large-scale shifts within and around this body of religious tradition as a whole. With readability, wit, intelligence, and careful consideration—and on the back of a linguistic analogy whose fruitfulness he harvests to great illustrative effect—the author primes us early on to be receptive to his hypothesis. He then offers crucial guideposts at vista after vista where we glimpse ever more broadly the contours and details of his central assertion. This he achieves by navigating subject matter of immense complexity, which is exponentially more fraught given the intense and diverse feelings of personal investment—claims of “ownership,” one might say, or of “rejection”—among Americans both Christian and not. He performs this feat with a remarkable combination of balance and high-resolution detail, without being sidetracked by innumerable issues or concerns, all of which are legitimate and important. In the hands of another intellectual steward, they would threaten to hijack the discussion.

As Strawn observes, the problem under scrutiny is not new. In fact, it strikes to the heart of the notion of canon itself, which asserts by definition that some material is *in* and other material is *out*. This is not solely a Christian issue, to be sure, but within the Christian context it is worthwhile to highlight Strawn's awareness that neither are threats to the life of the Old Testament exclusive to modernity. Rather, they constitute a pattern that reaches back to the very beginnings of this particular faith tradition. In the opening pages of his book, Strawn cites the work of Christopher R. Seitz, which spans the past two decades and considers the Christian canon from a variety of angles, to point out the inherent pitfalls in the twofold canonical structure itself (p. 16 n. 43 and *passim*).¹ Later, he returns to this concern in his closing arguments, where he addresses the notion of Christian supercessionism: specifically, the “Christocentric, which is to say, Christomonic” idea that scripture “comes to a covenantal ‘climax’ in the New Testament and in the New Testament alone” (p. 228).

From this standpoint one is rather more sympathetic to the challenge of Old Testament “life support” faced by those involved in the emerging Christian faith in the first centuries of the Common Era, beset as they were by a collateral (and, for some, irresistible) invitation to juxtapose New-and-Old by way of New-*versus*-Old. Strawn makes quick work of Marcion with respect to this issue (pp.

105–21). Yet Marcion is only the most glaring instance of the canonical disputations of that era. With respect to the Apocrypha, for instance, Jerome wrote, contra his contemporaries, that the Old Testament canon should accord with his principle of *Hebraica veritas* and thus exclude the deuterocanonical works retained in the Septuagint.²

Moreover, as Strawn observes with Marcion specifically, such challenges to canonical norms in antiquity exhibit noteworthy resonances in subsequent periods, all the way up to the present. Martin Luther’s well-documented dismal opinion of not only Esther, but also James, Jude, and Revelation,³ echoes ancient perspectives such as that of Eusebius.⁴ Even today, there is something like irony in the fact that Jerome is venerated by the Catholic Church, for whom the Apocrypha are unquestionably canonical, but granted only modest authority in Protestant Christianity, where *Hebraica veritas* evidently justifies the noncanonical status of the very same works.

The remarkable persistence of this crux is due in part, no doubt, to the relative ease of determining what is *out* of one’s canon, as opposed to what is *in*. Thus, materials that take centuries organically to accrue widespread acceptance and veneration are later summarily dismissed with the flick of a pen and some heated rhetoric. But lest we forget the magnitude of the stakes, it is important to realize that this sorting process, despite its expediency, is much more than just the delineation of some kind of cool-kids book club. On the contrary, in the case of Christianity, both individual and collective core identities are in play; and from that vantage it is plain that the tendency toward canonical reductionism corresponds precisely with the habitual definition of the Self vis-à-vis the Other, by castigating what we are *not* as a means of establishing what we *are*.

Strawn illustrates this point marvelously by offering the example of self-proclaimed “New Testament churches” (pp. 5, n. 2; 121; 183–83; 239). I concur wholeheartedly with his suggestion that while such communities do not identify themselves explicitly as “*non-Old Testament churches*”—that is, as predicated on a rather Marcion-like rejection of the Old Testament and its (perceived) God—nevertheless it seems that institutions claiming the epithet “New Testament church” may tend just as often to be concerned less with actual validation and promulgation of the New Testament or its teachings (and even then, often in pidginized form), and more with focusing on the radiant glory of the New Testament specifically by way of its contrast with or correction of the horror of the Old. In point of fact, to my mind, a community who truly wishes to purport devotion to the New Testament alone, *without tacit reference to the Old*, might convey this more effectively by abandoning entirely the term “New Testament”—which implies the standing of its

polar opposite, the “Old Testament”—in favor of a more self-contained designator like “the Testament of Jesus” or some such.

For those of us who wish to preserve and revitalize the Old Testament, therefore, the great challenge is to find ways to assert the relationship, relevance, range of perspectives, and human complexity of the Old Testament (and the New as well, although it offers less than a quarter the volume of material), as they relate to and serve as foundations for our Christian identity and faith. To be sure, this process of open-ended, positivist (re)expansion—or, more properly, reclamation—is far more difficult than negative approaches that lead to an ever-diminishing canon! Yet I suspect that those of us who are involved in any kind of education have learned to relish precisely this challenge: how to distill without reduction; how to instill discipline without rigid constraints; how to lead our students to one door without implying that another should not be opened. Is it possible for someone studying Sanskrit literature, say—or European history, or any discrete humanistic discipline—to gain both an effective working knowledge of and a genuine affection for the subject matter, without actually living in and through the entire relevant span of time (let alone space)? Miraculously, the answer is yes, at that happy confluence between the student’s dedication and trust and our attentiveness and devotion as educators.

The Christian element adds another layer of complexity to our task, however. In the course of advancing an entirely different point, Strawn nevertheless effectively captures this complexity in a single sentence that comes as part of his opening remarks: “[F]or many contemporary Christians, at least in America, the Old Testament has ceased to function in healthy ways in their lives as sacred, authoritative, canonical literature” (pp. 4–5). The latter half of the sentence is a dense cluster of ambiguities: “function...in their lives”; “in healthy ways”; “sacred”; “authoritative”; “canonical”; “literature.” To be sure, the vast majority of American Christians would recognize and be completely comfortable with most or all of these phrases. They are part of a shared vernacular that resonates across a broad spectrum of denominations and perspectives. But precisely *how* would they resonate, from one context to the next? The question “How does scripture function in your life?” would undoubtedly elicit a staggering range of responses. Some might describe the struggle to obey every biblical commandment (real or perceived) to the letter. Others might identify one or more passages that function as creeds or mottos for them in daily life. Still others might offer a general sense of comfort, inspiration, or even aesthetic appreciation with regard to specific portions of scripture as a whole. Likewise, the suggestion that we should do more to invoke scripture “in healthy ways” could lead in one scenario to an altar call; in another, to counseling for

domestic problems, substance abuse, or other matters; in another, to donations or charity work, and so on. And the other terms in Strawn's sentence are just as fraught. Indeed, to isolate a single additional example, in a sense the complex and variegated question of scriptural "authorit[y]"—or of *some* scriptures' authority over against *other* scriptures'—sits at the very heart of Strawn's entire topic!⁵

With respect to our *own* authority, therefore, as champions of the Old Testament we must take care not to allow our passion for and expertise in the material to delude us into self-satisfaction. Strawn stresses that "one must be fluent in and attempt to understand the whole linguistic complex" of the Old Testament (pp. 98 and *passim*). He even asserts that "[d]eficient knowledge of the Old Testament leads to defects in Christian knowledge" (p. 14). Yet which of us can claim total, perfect knowledge of the Old Testament, any more than anyone can claim to know every word in the English language? Thus, a critical part of our advocacy must be to demonstrate that even as we teach, we remain willing and eager to learn—more to the point, that there remains a huge range of legitimate hermeneutical perspectives available to the entire spectrum of American Christianity. In short, we must take great care not to weaponize Strawn's linguistic analogy such that any viewpoint we find unpalatable is relegated to "pidgin" or "creole" status. After all, he is careful to warn us that "one must guard against implying that there is (or ever was) a pure, original 'language' of 'biblical belief' and that all subsequent developments are somehow deficient or substandard"—let alone the conceit that *my* subsequent belief approaches that "true faith" more closely than someone else's (p. 17). Rather, we must follow Strawn's lead, carefully assessing on their own terms the many and variegated habitual patterns and processes by which the Bible is called upon (or rejected) as the ostensible source of important religious ideas.

And just as Strawn does by turning directly to Deuteronomy as a model for teaching scripture that is analogous to second-language acquisition, we might just as productively turn to the canon for instructive principles on the management of pluralism. Given the condemnation of Jehu's slaughter at Jezreel in Hos 1:4-5, how might the prophet respond when directly confronted with the Deuteronomist's praise of the same king, for the same acts, in 2 Kgs 10:30? Or what would Ezekiel, whose vision for the restored Temple is strictly exclusive (cf. Ezek 44), think of Trito-Isaiah's universalist vision in chapter 56, in which foreigners offer sacrifices and serve as Temple personnel (cf. Is 56:6-7)? The canon's routine incorporation of these and a great many other wildly disparate viewpoints must not be written off merely as "[what] you would expect of a chaotically cobbled-together anthology of disjointed documents," as Richard Dawkins would have it (2006: 268; cited in Strawn, p. 85). On the contrary, notwithstanding the well-established complexity of these

texts' developmental history, in philosophical terms the impact of such inclusiveness should be exactly what I am emphasizing here: *pluralism*, that is, a fundamental recognition of the value and importance of plurality within an overarching body of tradition.

Having said this, we may zoom back out to Strawn's big-picture perspective on American Christianity writ large, where we see in his articulation of Old Testament advocacy the proffering of a potentially scandalous idea: that *Christianity is about more than just Christ*. This is Strawn's rejection of the Christomonic approach to the faith, and it comes at the expense of even such vaunted Christian minds as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who, notwithstanding his continual emphasis on the importance of the Hebrew canon in the Confessing Lutheran Church, nevertheless offered the opinion that "it is not Christian to want to take our thoughts and feelings too quickly and too directly from the New Testament" (Bonhoeffer 1972,: 157; cited in Strawn, pp. 228–29).⁶

Certainly, such sentiments are troubling for those of us who hold that the Hebrew canon is essential to Christianity. But I would submit, for my part, that we could go even further. Frankly, I am no less troubled by a variety of remarks called upon in Strawn's work as *testimonia*, such as this one from Karl Barth. "The language of faith, the language of public responsibility in which as Christians we are bound to speak, will inevitably be the language of the Bible. ... For certain lights and indications and heartening warnings can be uttered directly in this language alone" (1959: 31; cited in Strawn, pp. xxiv–xxv; 74). I concede, of course, that such a statement is interpreted by Strawn—and likely was originally crafted—as an observation made and intended for consumption within the confines of the Christian community. But even in that event, the idea that wholly new formulations of Christian religiosity are flatly impossible remains troubling. I turn again to Bonhoeffer, who offers his own linguistic analogy on this point when he describes looking forward to what has been termed a kind of "religionless" Christianity. "It will be in a new language, perhaps quite nonreligious language, but liberating and redeeming like Jesus's language, so that people will be alarmed and yet overcome by its power—the language of a new righteousness and truth" (Bonhoeffer 2010: 390). Strawn himself seems to concede the point when he notes, "*every* language... is subject to change, growth, and development" (p. 16).

Moreover, as Strawn repeatedly reminds us, context is crucial.⁷ So, the modern Christian—often haplessly prone to ignorance of context, as Strawn's entire book reveals—is exposed to potentially grave misinterpretation of Barth's statement.⁸ Are we to understand that, by its very nature, faith (or anything else) outside of Christianity falls short of the ideal of "public responsibility;" or, worse,

that intimate access to the divine comes through Christian—more specifically, biblical—“language” alone? Such problematic implications strike me as no less Christian-supercessionist than the assumptions Strawn highlights about the New Testament obviating the Old.

I believe the lesson here is that just as we must intentionally foster pluralism within Christianity—even the most Old Testament-fluent Christianity—we must also link arms with our fellows outside of Christianity. That is to say, while Christianity carries special risk due to the claim it exercises on the Old Testament, nevertheless the significance of the looming death of the Hebrew canon is not merely a Christian issue but a pan-religious one, indeed a human one.⁹ After all, as Thomas Merton reminds us, “God speaks, and God is to be heard, not only in Sinai, not only in my own heart, but in the voice of the stranger” (Merton 2013: §9).¹⁰ It seems to me that we have ready allies outside of Christianity in our effort to restore the Old Testament to full health, who, while they may not claim it as “authoritative” or agree that it “functions...in their lives” *per se*, nevertheless stand behind any sober, earnest, informed effort to understand the human–divine relationship and the impact it should have on our lives. Furthermore, stepping outside the realm of religion entirely, I concur wholeheartedly with Strawn that while the academic/secular mode of analysis surely has produced opportunities for the advancement of the Old Testament’s semi-terminal illness, it also serves as a crucial component in its preservation (pp. 191–92).

Thus, we should not sell short the real possibility of both non-Christian and nonreligious advocacy for the preservation of the Old Testament as a corpus with tremendous faith-based *and* humanistic value. I conclude, therefore, with what I see as the most fruitful path forward beyond Strawn’s book, a path that advances the discussion from its posture squarely within the realm of American Christianity and into the domain of the humanities generally. I must emphasize that I see the absence of a sustained treatment of this avenue in Strawn’s book not as an omission, but rather as a matter of the limitations of the volume’s well-defined scope. Thus, I perceive an opportunity to extend Strawn’s treatment of the Old Testament in American Christianity outward into a broader contextual overview. To wit, I believe is important for us to understand the demise of the Old Testament within a concurrent issue in American culture more generally; namely, the decline of the humanities, a decline that by now is well documented and requires little or no review. It practically is a foregone conclusion that the teachers among us have reckoned regularly with the “Will this be on the test?” mentality, that disgruntled parents (or students!) are inclined to reach out for a “solution” to some unsatisfactory grade, despite—or indeed, often, because of—their remission of payment to the institution

in question, or that the degrees our learning institutions offer are increasingly valued only insofar as they provide an inconvenient but requisite credential for the job-seeker. The current popular emphasis on STEM instruction at the college level, which is predicated on the twin notions of “making money” and “helping America to get ahead,” has led to such unfortunate statements by American leadership as that of former Florida Governor Rick Scott. “If I’m going to take money from a citizen to put into education then I’m going to take money to create jobs. So I want that money to go to degree where people can get jobs in this state. Is it a vital interest of the state to have more anthropologists? I don’t think so” (Anderson 2011).

To be clear, of course, there is absolutely nothing wrong, and much that is good, about instruction in STEM disciplines. But, as I suspect we all agree, the idea that *any* humanist discipline has minimal or no value is deeply, profoundly troubling. In the face of declining postgraduate enrollment by international students in American universities (Quilantan 2018), the ever-increasing (capitalist?) drive to “quantify everything” (Muller 2018), and the absurdist generalization that defense of the liberal arts “sounds defensive and self-interested” (Rawlings III 2017), it cannot come as a surprise to any of us that critical thinking continues to suffer a devastating assault from all sides. Indeed, it is striking to consider how the privileging of STEM instruction dovetails with some of the current American religious disposition. One imagines—and admittedly is puzzled by—those who wish, first, to exercise their so-called “religious liberty” by refusing to acknowledge the validity of scientific evidence. Second, that we would stop teaching their children impractical disciplines that don’t make any money, and teach STEM instead. Third, that those children would stop growing up to be godless heathens who rely on scientific truths rather than their faith background!

Especially noteworthy in this regard is the counterpoint to such posturing, evident in a recent study of algorithmic hiring data conducted by Google. The research project, which “[tries] to understand the secret of a great future employee,” is described as follows:

Google originally set its hiring algorithms to sort for computer science students with top grades from elite science universities... Project Oxygen shocked everyone by concluding that, among the eight most important qualities of Google’s top employees, STEM expertise comes in dead last. The seven top characteristics of success at Google are all soft skills: being a good coach; communicating and listening well; possessing insights into others (including others’ different values and points of view); having empathy toward and being supportive of one’s colleagues; being a good critical thinker and problem

solver; and being able to make connections across complex ideas (Davidson 2017).¹¹

Based on such evidence, it seems that we may be poised for a resurgence of the humanities *if* we can but marshal the necessary tools to move the needle in that direction. Seen from this perspective, in fact, one is inclined to understand Strawn's emphasis on Old Testament fluency as a vector uniquely positioned for impact in such an effort. Dare we dream of a movement at whose heart stands increased Old Testament fluency among American Christians, and whose outcome is a broad-based rediscovery of the indispensability of critical thinking?

Admittedly, this vision is idealistic, but I would contend that its idealism does not in any way mitigate its value or potency. Indeed, despite the dire signs of morbidity laid out in Strawn's book, I cannot help but cling to that most Christian of virtues: hope in a future that more closely resembles the Kingdom, that compels us to imagine and to "live into" a world that is better than it was before, that reassures us that our efforts are not futile gestures but vital sowings that promise abundant fruit. Seen from this perspective, the revitalization of the Old Testament is a singular element in a much broader process, one that can both benefit from and contribute to our efforts to restore biblical fluency in American Christianity.

Taking Strawn's book as a jumping-off point, therefore, I am exceedingly grateful for this opportunity to help foster the rediscovery of a corpus with which I myself am in love, while simultaneously engaging in the broader defense of the humanities, even if only within my narrow area of expertise. I see Strawn's book as a throwing-down of this multifaceted gauntlet, which I am eager to take up in my own work, certainly, but perhaps most productively within the context of this conversation, as we work together to treat our ailing patient. For this reason, Dr. Strawn, I am most grateful for your rich, studied, and careful examination, and I find myself excited to see where the journey leads us as we undertake our important task.

End Notes

¹ Strawn references three of Seitz's books (1998: 61–74; 2001: 91–190; 2011).

² "This prologue to the scriptures can serve as a defensive [galeatum; lit.: helmeted] introduction to all the books that we convert from Hebrew into Latin, so that we may be certain that whatever is outside of these is to be set among the Apocrypha(l works). Therefore *Wisdom*, which is commonly ascribed to Solomon,

and the book of *Jesu son of Sirach* and *Judith* and *Tobit* and the *Shepherd* are not in the canon. The first book of *Maccabees* is in Hebrew, (whereas) the second is in Greek, as can be proved from the very style [φράσει]” (*Prologue to the Books of Samuel and Kings* [called *Prologus Galeatus*], emphasis added; Latin text: Hic prologus Scripturarum, quasi galeatum principium omnibus libris, quos de Hebræo vertimus in Latinum, convenire potest: ut scire valeamus quidquid extra hos est, inter ἀπόκρυφα esse ponendum. Igitur Sapientia, quæ vulgo Salomonis inscribitur, et Jesu filii Syrach liber, et Judith, et Tobias, et Pastor, non sunt in Canone. Machabæorum primum librum, Hebraicum reperi. Secundus, Græcus est: quod ex ipsa φράσει probari potest [*PL* 28, cols. 555–57]). In this Jerome appears to concur with the contemporary rabbinic rejection of the Septuagint, according to which the work was a necessity in its time but ultimately yielded inaccuracies in translation and, perhaps more significantly, the opportunity for the emergence of “hellenistic heresies” (“hellenistische Irrlehren”; Gärtner 1999, 44).

³ See, e.g., Luther’s preface to the book of Revelation in his translation of the New Testament (1522), where he says, “I say what I feel. I perceive various things missing in this book, so that I consider it neither apostolic nor prophetic.... I...cannot believe, all things considered, that it is written by (means of) the Holy Spirit” (Martin Luther, “Vorrede auf die Offenbarung Johannes”; German text: Ich sage, was ich fühle. Mir mangelt an diesem Buch verschiedenes, so daß ich’s weder für apostolisch noch für prophetisch halte.... Ich...in allen Dingen nicht spüren kann, daß es von dem heiligen Geist verfaßt sei [Wittenberg, 1522]).

⁴ See, e.g., the rejection of James and Jude as authoritative documents in Eusebius (*Ecclesiastical History* II.xxiii.25).

⁵ Strawn does devote significant space to an examination of the notion of “canon” and how it relates to that of “authority” (178–84).

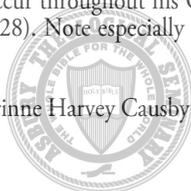
⁶ See further Strawn’s remarks on “bothness,” as well as a variety of other manifestations of this point throughout the volume (222–30).

⁷ For example, see Strawn’s unpacking of Joel Osteen’s (apparent) partial citation of Prov 13:2 or of Joel 4:10 [3:10] (135–37). And these are but single (half-) verses! The broader context of the Hebrew canon as a whole remains exponentially more unplumbed by treatments such as Osteen’s.

⁸ See especially his Chapter 2, *The Old Testament Is Dying*, 19–58, and the Pew Forum data cited therein.

⁹ Strawn, on page 16 n. 43, points out that the “death” of some portion of the canon is not necessarily unique to Christianity, specifically highlighting the Jewish encounter with this problem as addressed in Frymer-Kensky’s work (2006: 367–68). Additional brief references to the biblical fluency (or lack thereof) exhibited in other religious traditions occur throughout his Chapter 2, in his analysis of the Pew Forum’s survey data (19–28). Note especially his remarks on Mormonism on (22–24).

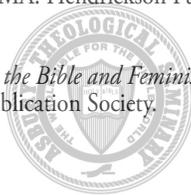
¹⁰ My thanks to Corinne Harvey Causby and Bill J. Leonard for drawing my attention to this.



¹¹ Davidson's article appears in a blog by Valerie Strauss, who researches and writes on public education.

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