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Brent A. Strawn

The Old Testament's Moribund Condition: Still Critical

Brent A. Strawn is a Professor of Old Testament at the Candler School of Theology, Emory University.



Introduction

I want to begin by thanking my interlocutors for the care and attention they have paid to my book, *The Old Testament Is Dying* (2017). I also express my thanks to David B. Schreiner, who spearheaded the effort to set up the review panel on the book that was held at the Southeastern Commission for the Study of Religion on March 3, 2018, and from which emerged the articles now gathered together here in *The Asbury Journal*.¹

In what follows, I reply to each respondent independently, though there is a decent bit of overlap among them. This is especially true of the reviews by Murray Vasser and Kimberly Bracken Long, both of whom focus most of their remarks on the second chapter of my book. Given this fact, I'd like to begin with a general statement that I deem most of the criticisms that they have raised about this chapter to belong to the category of friendly amendment. The additional material they discuss or raise is not unimportant by any means, but, in the end, that material offers at best a nuancing, not an overturning of my central conclusions. I will say more about this in due course, but would say up front that I believe my main claims about the morbid health of the Old Testament still hold true in part due to the fact that the tests I ran in Chapter 2 of the book were only preliminary—that chapter is entitled “initial testing,” after all, which means more tests were needed. More tests were subsequently performed in later chapters. And so, I believe the balance of the book's other chapters round out my dismal diagnosis and preliminary testing in greater and hopefully more compelling detail. In short, despite various quibbles with Chapter 2, I remain fully convinced that the Old Testament is dying, with the New not far behind. Consequently, as I write in the book, my prayers that this situation were not so have continued to go unanswered (at least positively).² Indeed, I judge some, more cavalier responses (and such a descriptor does *not* apply to the careful engagements by Vasser, Bracken Long, and Moyer) that have resisted my claim about the decline of the language of scripture to be mostly cases of wishful thinking, many of which have not considered the full range of evidence I present in the book. I do not deny that there are pockets of excellence here and there that have not yet manifested the pathology—and I celebrate those—but these do not disprove the overall case. Instead, such instances of best (or, at least relatively better) practice stand out precisely because of the widespread desuetude of the Old Testament elsewhere. But I am getting ahead of myself since, on at least a few points of detail, Vasser and Bracken Long challenge the evidence on which I base these judgments. I turn now, then, to each of my reviewers before offering a few concluding remarks at the end of this essay on the still-critical state of the Old Testament's health and therefore the still-critical need for fluency in the language of scripture.

I. A Response to Murray Vasser

In many ways the crux of Murray Vassar's response hinges on whether the decline I identify in the health of the Old Testament is "increasing." Vasser offers a larger, longitudinal study to see if such an "increase" is, in fact, the case. Vasser's work is impressive and assesses several corpora that I did not examine, and, in one case, a body of literature I intentionally set aside (Sunday School curricula).³ I am happy to have his additional statistics to add to the material I gathered. I would reiterate, however, my basic sense—already indicated above—that Vasser's additional research nuances, but does not overturn, my diagnosis. Vasser himself admits, after all, that my argument about the decline of the Psalms survives his additional scrutiny.⁴ But I think Vasser's sober assessment of the Old Testament in other corpora also ultimately supports my argument about its demise for at least two reasons.

First, the force of my argument in my book was never to establish the *novelty* of the present situation such that the contemporary moment represents an *increased* decline in the health of the Old Testament.⁵ I have no problem whatsoever in recognizing, with Vasser, that the neglect of the Old Testament is a sickness that the patient has suffered with for quite some time. Indeed, the bulk of the fifth chapter in *The Old Testament Is Dying* is to observe just how far back the pathology goes: at least as far back as the second-century arch-heretic Marcion (pp. 103–29). Further, already in my opening chapter I warn against valorizing early stages of the language as "pure" in some form such that all subsequent developments are devolutions (pp. 16–17; 59–61; 203–33), and, in the second chapter, I note how the U.S. Religious Knowledge Survey results cannot be used in diachronic fashion since it is the first of its kind, with no prior baseline with which to compare.⁶

Second, as the old saying goes: there are lies, damn lies, and statistics! This holds true for my statistics as much as it does for Vasser's—but also for Vasser's statistics as much as for mine. That is to say that statistical results alone do not, and probably cannot, tell us the whole story about the place and significance of the Old Testament in some of these corpora. I punted a bit on this in my book by noting that it isn't simply a question of *if* the Old Testament is present (preached, sung, and so forth) but *how* the Old Testament is present. Quality, not just quantity, matters, and statistics can't get at the former like they can get at the latter. So, to illustrate by way of an example, it is quite possible that many of the sermons in the *Best Sermons* series—even those only on New Testament texts—actually do engage the Old Testament in responsible and helpful fashion, but I didn't see that given my primary focus on what the preached text (purportedly) was for each one. So, again, my statistics—but also Vasser's, too, I suspect—only tell *part* of the story and the

part they tell may not be entirely accurate. I attempted to signal that in my book, but that is also why my sermon analysis is only one of *four* initial tests (pp. 29–30).

I should quickly add that the converse situation might also hold true: that many of the Old Testament only sermons that appear in the *Best Sermons* corpus may not be so helpful after all. Once again, the issue is not just *if-present*, but *how-present*. Vasser seems to be getting at this second possible situation in his querying my positive appeal to Bernard of Clairvaux's sermons on the Song of Songs. Vasser deems the figural nature of these sermons to be heavy handed to say the least. Point granted. Then again, I am forthcoming in my book, especially in Chapters 4 and 5, that I am quite open to figural interpretation of the Bible (pp. 93–94; 110–11; 118–21). Ultimately, therefore, I would not claim, as Vasser states, that “the Old Testament should be allowed to stand on its own”—a statement that is increasingly nonsensical to me (though that is a topic for another time); instead, I advocate in the book for something I call “bothness” (pp. 222–30). By that term I mean to signify “the inextricably intertwined relationship of the Testaments and that both must proceed together, equally yoked, as it were” (p. 227). This “bothness” or co-procession holds true for what we deem promising *and* for what we deem problematic about the testaments.⁷

So, insofar as my ultimate concern is with the language of scripture, not just the Old Testament, and the language of scripture as a subset—though a primary one—of the language of Christian faith, I don't have any major problem with Clairvaux's figural interpretation of the Song of Songs. I wouldn't put the issue there (if there is an issue at all) as Vasser does—namely, that Bernard's sermons have “very little engagement with the text of Song of Songs,” which strikes me as perhaps somewhat overly historical-critical in its concerns. Now I myself do not engage in extensive Christological reading or preaching of the Old Testament, and I would strongly resist arguments that would *require* or *mandate* Christological interpretation, but that resistance comes from my understanding of Trinitarian doctrine (Strawn 2004). My resistance to (certain forms of) Christological interpretation—especially as the *only* acceptable interpretation—is therefore *theological*; it does not come solely or even primarily from textual reasons, and does not come at all from flat-footedly historicist concerns. What this means, I think, is that I am probably okay with at least some of the preaching that Vasser calls “not really preaching the OT *per se*,” though, again, I'm not sure I know exactly what *per se* means in that phrase given my interest in “bothness.” Still further, given that interest and my concerns with the language of scripture writ large, I may even be okay with at least *some* preaching that, according to Vasser, “uses the text as a springboard to preach the New Testament.”

Once again, much depends on *how-present*, never just *if-present*. The *how* can, of course, be exceedingly poor. But the *how* can also be quite fine or at least decent, and the “bothness” recommendation I make in my final chapter makes clear that I would be perfectly satisfied with thoughtful integration of the testaments in Christian faith and practice (including the sermon)—more than satisfied, in fact! I have no doubt that many of the *Best Sermons* may do exactly that, just as I have no doubt that many of the sermons from the grand interpreters of the past don’t. I suspect it is very much a hit-or-miss, case-by-case basis sort of situation.

But, again, this is to nuance not overturn my claim. My claim was never primarily or extensively an historical one: the present day vs., say, Augustine’s. Furthermore, as I’ve already indicated, my general claim regarding the sickness of the Old Testament stands because the four initial tests are only a starting point, which the rest of the book attempts to round out, especially by investigating three further and more pressing signs of morbidity found in the New Atheism, old and new Marcionites, and in the prosperity “gospel” (pp. 83–102; 103–29; 131–55, respectively). In the end, then, whether the neglect of the Old Testament is “increasing” is far less important to me than that the neglect is happening in the first place. Vasser’s helpful essay shows that it is, in fact, happening, and has been happening for a long time. He thus adds further support to my own sense of this neglect, even as he notes that the modern moment may not be much worse than so much prior Christian practice. I welcome this additional confirmation but not happily, since it brings me great sorrow to receive still more proof that the Old Testament’s neglect and disuse is a longstanding pathology in the Christian church, especially in worship. In any event, Vasser’s longer view does not refute my claim that the Old Testament is dying in the least; it only *underscores* it. I thank Vasser for his thoughtful essay.

II. A Response to Kimberly Bracken Long

Somewhat similarly to Vasser, but even more so, Bracken Long offers what she calls “a less alarming diagnosis” than do I. In part this is due to the fact that she wishes I had used different sources to test the patient. That is fair enough, though I wish to underscore once more that my book is not silent about the problems critics have raised about the U.S. Religious Knowledge Survey and also offers my own problems with the *Best Sermons* series (see above; also pp. 21–23; 29–30). Even so, I wouldn’t write either of these first two tests off too quickly. I am not Presbyterian, but I do know of the infamous Bible content examination of which Bracken Long speaks. The seven questions in the Religious Knowledge Survey are a rather far cry from that, however: far shorter and much easier. Five of the questions on the

survey were multiple choice, with only two open-ended, and none was particularly difficult. Indeed, the first was to simply name the first book of the Bible. In any event, the analysis the Pew Forum offered on the Survey and the way it controlled for various matters remain far more empirical than Bracken Long's anecdotal appeal to seminary students who excel in their studies but do poorly on certain instruments like Bible content exams. Perhaps some do, but the survey data suggest otherwise, at least for the general populace—with all crucial caveats duly entered.⁸

In any event, Bracken Long makes excellent points about the weaknesses of the *Best Sermons* series, and the “certain ilk of pulpiteer” that submits sermons for publication (a delicious phrase). But I should point out that not all of the sermons published in these series were in fact submissions; others were specifically solicited—some from the most famous preachers, homileticians, and biblical scholars of the day (p. 36). Furthermore, in some cases the submission pool numbered in the thousands (p. 29). Not a bad data set, at least as far as those things go, even if it isn't perfect. And it certainly *isn't* perfect, but, again, my analysis of the *Best Sermons* series was just one test and I, too, was aware of its limitations.

I wonder, however, if the other types of preaching and preachers Bracken Long mention really fare much better. Here I think Bracken Long might be too positive in light of the survey statistics, which, again, lean the other way. So, for example, while it is a well-established fact that African American preaching has long trafficked heavily in the Exodus narrative, and it may be equally true that the Old Testament figures more prominently in the Black Church tradition than in some others,⁹ the Religious Knowledge Survey does not attest to higher scores for African American Protestants. A comparable point could be made with regard to the lectionary and the Roman Catholics surveyed. One hears more scripture in a Roman Catholic Church than in the majority of Protestant worship services on any given Sunday, but Catholics underperform on the Bible questions in the survey. Now, I have no doubt that Bracken Long's suspicions are quite right: that the survey data don't tell the whole story. Once again, I indicated my own doubts along the same lines in my book (pp. 21–23). But, as was also the case with Vasser, these results do tell us at least part of the story and I think we have to at least consider what the Religious Knowledge Survey results may suggest. What those results seem to suggest is that, despite an increased presence of the Old Testament in the African American pulpit, or a more robust lectionary selection in Roman Catholic worship, these two groups do not perform particularly well in the survey. We probably need to return, therefore, to the issue of *if-present vs. how-present* and (re)consider the possibility that effective use of the Old Testament in Christian preaching (however defined) is probably a hit-or-miss, case-by-case basis sort of situation and not widely

or generally applicable to whatever group or groups were surveyed (especially if they underperformed). We should also remember that the primary factors in higher scores on the Religious Knowledge Survey did not correlate with hearing good preaching or good liturgy but had to do with the regular practice of religion (including regular church attendance, frequent discussion of religion with friends and family, and weekly reading of scripture) and with having had some formal instruction in religion, typically in college (p. 26). In any event, on the Bible portions of the Religious Knowledge Survey, the reported results are that, after Mormons (5.7 answers correct out of 7), white evangelical Protestants score best (5.1), outperforming every other Christian demographic surveyed, not only as a whole, but on every single question. After these two groups, African American Protestants are next best (4.4),¹⁰ followed by white mainline Protestants (3.9), white Catholics (3.8), and Hispanic Catholics (2.4).¹¹

With Bracken Long, I believe (and hope!) that there are, in fact, positive stories and counter trends amidst the Old Testament's general decline—whether that is demonstrated by means of the survey or otherwise—and she has helpfully noted several of these. The survey, too, suggests as much, at least here and there, now and then; that is why my claim about the Old Testament's decline was applied to “many” but not “all” Christians, and why I limited my claim to North America, though I have my suspicions that the Old Testament's sickness is not restricted to this continent but has become an airborne pathogen, as it were.¹² Whatever the case, the roots of my concern with the Old Testament's decline are not due to an upbringing in liberal mainline Christianity along the lines Bracken Long speaks of, but in a far more conservative wing belonging to American Christian holiness movements (of the Wesleyan variety). So, while I'm confident that there can be and truly are countertrends, upticks, signs of life, pockets of excellence—at least here and there, now and then—I remain convinced and convicted that the cumulative case, evidenced in part by the further, more public signs of morbidity, especially the enduring legacy of Marcion's ghost and the fantastic commercial success of the prosperity “gospel” (which is most assuredly *not* limited to white mainline Protestantism!), demonstrates that the Old Testament's decline is real and profound.

I have similar feelings about Bracken Long's critique of the data I used on mainline hymnody. I based my remarks on Sibley Towner's work, published in 2003, which was, at best, only *semi-empirical* (pp. 39–48). Certainly Towner's study is now out of date in the light of the newer publications Bracken Long discusses, though I believe Towner's work still deserves commendation and attention—especially since, to my knowledge, it is the first work of its kind. With Bracken Long, I, too, know of some instances of better practice beyond the hymnals Towner analyzed. So she is

quite right, I think, when she says, better “songs are out there”—or, probably more accurately, are *beginning to get* out there—but she’s also correct when she immediately admits, “The question...is which ones people are actually singing, whether they recognize the scriptural references in those songs, and whether worship services and sermons are designed to highlight those connections.”¹³ The latter points are ones that Towner tries to answer and his judgment is mostly negative. That seems to be an important factor that would temper, at least to some degree, Bracken Long’s confidence that contemporary musical practice is much better.

I would also agree with Bracken Long that the contemporary Christian music scene seems to be getting better on these various matters, at least in some ways, but I wouldn’t say all of that music is better and a good bit of it isn’t better at all—it might be worse! I discuss two contemporary Christian songs in my book: one a rather bad example (at least for the point under discussion) and the other quite good in my judgment (p. pp. 47–48; 230). In any event, in my own, low-church experience, the majority of most recent contemporary Christian music, especially in worship, is not, as Bracken Long states, “usually taken from biblical texts—mainly the Psalms.” Quite to the contrary, in fact—a problem that is exacerbated by the almost total lack in such churches of any scripture-based liturgy, even around the Eucharist, which Bracken Long is able to depend upon in some (but probably not all) higher church traditions.¹⁴ That is why my book ends with a call for more Christian songwriters to write more songs about and more songs based on the Bible, and to write far fewer that are neither of those, and why it ends with a call for liturgists who will read more extensive sections and read more extensively from the Bible in worship (pp. 213–16). I celebrate whenever and wherever that is happening and appreciate Bracken Long’s lifting up of several examples of good practice.

Regarding the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL), I suspect that Bracken Long and I may differ a bit on what should or should not be used in Christian worship—how, when, why, and for whose “sake.” I think I may favor a more robust, unedited presentation than Bracken Long’s essay otherwise suggests.¹⁵ In any event, in my defense on lectionary resources, I would note that in addition to David Bartlett and others, I cited work by Gail Ramshaw as well as Fritz West’s important book, *Scripture and Memory* (pp. 48–56). Be that as it may, I am not the liturgical scholar that Bracken Long is, and I take her correction seriously. Even so, the larger point I am after is language decline vs. language dexterity and fluency. For a language to survive, it needs a lot of living speakers who use it regularly. I no longer believe we reach that goal using the RCL—even in a best-case scenario (pp. 49–56). Indeed, the introduction of the Narrative Lectionary is precisely a recognition of the problems inherent in the RCL, perhaps especially *vis-à-vis* the Old Testament (p. 54

and n. 103).¹⁶ But I would go further and say that I don't think any one particular worship instrument can hit the mark we need, perhaps not even in the aggregate. On its own, that is, the once-a-week worship service for an hour (give or take) simply will not impart enough language learning to fund a full, faithful Christian life. Far more than that is needed—even if the worship instruments are functioning perfectly. Bracken Long and I are in complete agreement on this, as we are on the importance of teaching children, and the place of orality, memory, and musicality in transmission.¹⁷

In sum, then, I take Bracken Long's comments, no less than Vasser's, as friendly amendment, though I realize that she, no less than Vasser, may feel otherwise! Even so, just as with Vasser, I see nothing in Bracken Long's helpful response that refutes my ultimate point, which is that without concerted effort and a deliberate program to keep it alive, the Old Testament—indeed all of Christian scripture—will die as a living language. I am grateful for the work of liturgical scholars like Bracken Long to prevent such death within the Church's worship, and I thank her for her insightful review.

III. A Response to Clinton Moyer

I am grateful to Clinton Moyer for his generous response, and I am intrigued with how he has sought to think with my book and beyond it into closely related arenas, some of which I touch on and others that I do not. In the former category, I put Moyer's remarks that pertain to the theology of scripture and the function of the Christian canon; in the latter I put his thoughts on the place of the Old Testament amidst the present-day languishing of the humanities. Let me begin with the latter, though, in the end, I think I can see, as he does, that the two categories are connected in some interesting ways.

So, first, I join Moyer in bemoaning the decline of the humanities. I, too, am sorry about this "death" (of sorts), and think that, yes, ideally, the cultivation of an ability to read critically and generatively with, say, the Old Testament could easily be carried into other arenas of the humanities such that reading of the plays of Shakespeare or the poetry of Sharon Olds or the novels of Toni Morrison could benefit from increased biblical fluency even as it might demonstrate the profound importance—dare one even say utility?—of humanistic inquiry. In any event, I may differ from Moyer in that I somehow doubt that most humanistic inquiry writ large is going to care much about what happens to the Old Testament, and so the survival of scripture cannot be hitched to that horse, even if that ol' gray mare really was what she used to be. But, of course, she ain't! So, with reference to Moyer's question: whether we might dare to dream of a movement that proceeds from "increased Old

Testament fluency among American Christians” to “a broad-based rediscovery of the indispensability of critical thinking,” I say probably not. I might even go further to advise *against* such dreaming because the goal of Old Testament fluency is not, in my mind, ultimately a matter of critical thinking—not, at least, as that is typically understood in secular academic circles, though I will return to this point below.

Second, let me comment on the category of things Moyer lifts up that I do touch on in the book, at least obliquely, especially with regard to the theology of scripture and the function of the Christian canon. While I would want to avoid the most narrow or sectarian of understandings on these matters, I find it most reasonable to suspect that those who care most for sacred literature of whatever sort are, ultimately, adherents of the religion for whom such literature is...well, sacred (Smith 1993). For those who are not adherents, such belief will remain a curiosity—perhaps respected but perhaps not.

I doubt, therefore, that Christians will find many outside their communion who will help them with this particularly Christian problem. I intimated in my book, and Benjamin D. Sommer has agreed in a recent review, that the situation I lay out for Christianity might also be applied *mutatis mutandis* to some segments of contemporary Judaism (p. 16, n.43; Sommer 2018). But outside adherents of the so-called “Religions of the Book” and/or other proponents of book religion(s) who might be comrades-in-arms in a more general struggle to “save our book-religion’s book,” I doubt that there will be much support for the specific issues at hand. We might hope for some non-Christian help in the fight to save scriptural language—at least of a certain kind—but probably should not hold out hope for a non-religious cavalry to deliver us to where we need to be.

But, again, I would like to do my best to avoid an excessively narrow or sectarian mindset—and definitely wish to avoid any and all “weaponized” uses of my linguistic analogy (a helpful insight from Moyer). This is where I find Moyer’s remarks about pluralism within the canon particularly insightful. In my own iteration of the linguistic analogy I wouldn’t call this pluralism *per se*—and, again, not as typically understood within the secular university—but would call it something like lexicographic scope, which in any living language is considerable. There are, after all, synonyms but also antonyms, denotive and connotative phrases, circumlocutions, euphemisms, and so on and so forth. Oh, and cuss words. Lots of cuss words.

At this point I agree with Moyer, therefore, but also offer a slightly different take on the matter. The language that is scripture, in its full lexicographic range, does contain pluralism and diversity but not solely to that end or for that purpose, but, rather, for practical and/or everyday use. The *Oxford English Dictionary*

contains more than 200,000 words,¹⁸ but people get by on a daily basis with far, far fewer than that—maybe 3-5,000 words which are usually packaged, in average speech, in much smaller clusters of five to seven words. But the bigger language, the fuller vocabulary, is there when it is needed to get important jobs done—especially jobs that take great specificity and care. The latter type of jobs always take more than five to seven word clusters and often require a decent amount of technical vocabulary, syntactical complexity, and grammatical nuance.

At the end of the day, I think that the job of faith or, to put it differently, the job of getting God said right and living accordingly, is precisely such an important, even technical job. It takes a lot of words, a lot of dexterity, skill, and above all practice (pp. 220–22; 240–41). And even then, full fluency in 200,000+ words will remain elusive and, in all honesty, impossible to reach. But again, despite that fact, those many “words”—these many books of the Bible, its many traditions, poems, stories, this very large language—are all still there, ready to be used by the best of language users at just the right time in just the right way. Here is where Moyer’s emphasis on critical thinking could figure in precisely and quite helpfully because using the language of scripture requires such “criticality,” and may, in turn, engender it (pp. 201; 238; 240). The *Oxford English Dictionary* is pretty big, but so is the canon of Christian scripture. Full fluency—not to mention dexterous use—is thus a lifetime project (pp. 217–18).

Contrary, therefore, to some critics of canonical phenomena, I do not think that the canon needs to be expanded; nor do I think that the primary function of the canon is to somehow castigate what is non-canonical. Instead, I think the primary function of the canon of Christian scripture is to help the faithful who live by it to better see, perceive, understand, negotiate, resist, recognize, and (re)describe the world as it is and as it can be—charged, as it *might* be, per Gerard Manley Hopkins, with the grandeur of God.¹⁹ All of that, effectively, is what any language does, and that is why I employed the linguistic analogy in the first place, and is what I mean by thinking of the Old Testament, and all of scripture, as a language (pp. 6–13). But figuring out the implications of all that, like how and when to use all of the language of scripture (or as much of it as possible) whether in resistance, say, or recognition, will take a lifetime precisely *because that is how languages are used and how long they are supposed to be used*. I fully agree, therefore, with Moyer (and the other reviewers too, in various ways) when he worries about “a dense cluster of ambiguities” in my opening diagnosis, or when he states that querying how scripture functions in peoples’ lives “would undoubtedly elicit a staggering range of responses.” Yes, undoubtedly!²⁰ Such ambiguities and range are to be expected, but are not, to my mind, a problem,²¹ or at least not always or invariably a problem. The

problem I worry about far more is a reduced, narrow, and overly fixated or settled “mini-range” when it comes to biblical (or theological) vocabulary: the so-called and dreaded “canon-within-a-canon,” which may always be operative but which must always be resisted if for no other reason than the fact that it is the larger canon, and not some reduced (pidginized?) subset thereof, that God bequeathed to the Church through the Spirit.²²

To be sure, many people get by well enough with just a few thousand words, but basic functionality is a far cry from superlative performance. And while it is true that precious few will probably ever attain to the highest heights of the latter, it is equally clear that the only way to even begin to imagine approaching that lofty goal is by means of a capacious knowledge of one’s preeminent vernacular. My own approach has been, with much of Christian theology, to attempt to (re)situate scripture as precisely that preeminent vernacular, and to worry about other languages that impinge on it overmuch, interfere with it, or otherwise dominate it. Holding to scripture as the preeminent linguistic frame is not easy, especially in the face of ever-present linguistic change, which is inevitable, and a sign of vitality, but which is also a potential threat ending up in language occlusion and obsolescence.²³ There are ways, I think, to celebrate the liveliness of linguistic change and simultaneously guard against potential problems,²⁴ but none of them involves short-shrifting a robust, generative, working knowledge of the grammar and vocabulary of Christian scripture, comprised of both the Old and New Testaments.

IV. Conclusion: Morbidity and Fluency Both Still Critical

To conclude, the moribund condition of the Old Testament is still critical in my judgment, which means that the need for fluency—and concrete strategies toward achieving it—is also critical. To return for a moment to Vasser’s review: I suspect he is quite right when he states that it is the neglect of in-depth teaching from *either* testament that is a major culprit in the decline of the language of scripture. I say as much in the book, especially given my concern with the death of Christian scripture writ large and my belief that the same issues ultimately face both testaments. But, per the essays by Bracken Long and Moyer, it is clear that teaching is only part of the way to move forward: practical uses, especially in Christian liturgy, are vital parts of the language revival project. I also concur with Vasser’s sense that secularization—or, to utilize my linguistic analogy: language contact with larger and more prestigious languages like globalism, urbanism, capitalism, commercialism, and so forth—is most certainly a complicating factor. While I talk about poor instruction and increasing secularization at various points in my book, in the end, I see them not as discrete, non-overlapping entities, but as profoundly interrelated:

the new plastic “gospels” of the happiologists demonstrate their confluence in the prosperity creole (pp. 131–55, esp. 142–52).

There are always other languages impinging on us and impeding our acquisition, let alone recall and use of the language of scripture. But, while it is a difficult task—hard work and word work—I continue to believe that the language of scripture, and for my most immediate purposes the Old Testament, can norm our other languages and dialects. And though I do not want to unduly valorize prior generations—nor underestimate the unmatched genius of figures like Origen and Tertullian—I can’t help but end with two citations from earlier days in the history of the Church, both of which demonstrate how widespread the language of theology really can be and which hold out hope for scripture truly “being spoken here” and everywhere. First, Gregory of Nyssa (335-394 CE) on the extent of Trinitarian debates in his day:

Everywhere, in the public squares, at crossroads, on the streets and lanes, people would stop you and discourse at random about the Trinity. If you asked something of a moneychanger, he would begin discussing the question of the Begotten and the Unbegotten. If you questioned a baker about the price of bread, he would answer that the Father is greater and the Son is subordinate to Him. If you went to take a bath, the Anomoean bath attendant would tell you that in his opinion the Son simply comes from nothing.²⁵

Second, Erasmus (1466-1536 CE), in the preface to his first edition of the Greek New Testament, on scripture as a true vernacular:

I disagree very much with those who are unwilling that Holy Scripture, translated into the vulgar tongue, be read by the uneducated, as if Christ taught such intricate doctrines that they could scarcely be understood by very few theologians, or as if the strength of the Christian religion consisted in [people’s] ignorance of it. The mysteries of kings, perhaps, are better concealed, but Christ wishes His mysteries published as openly as possible.... Surely the first step is to understand [the scriptures] in one way or another. It may be that many will ridicule, but some may be taken captive. Would that, as a result, the farmer sing some portion of them at the plow, the weaver hum some parts of them to the movement of his shuttle, the traveler lighten the weariness of the journey with stories of this kind! Let all the conversations of every Christian be drawn from this source. For in general our daily conversations reveal what we are.... Only a very few can be learned, but all can be Christian, all can be devout, and—I shall boldly add—all can be theologians. (Olin 1987: 101; 104)

End Notes

¹ Further thanks to Schreiner for his editorial work. I am also indebted to Collin Cornell for comments on an earlier draft. Citations to Strawn 2017 are by page only and often parenthetical in the body of the essay.

² See pages 5–6. The parenthetical caveat above is important: there are biblical examples of God answering prayer in decisively negative terms (see, e.g., Deut 3:26).

³ I am particularly grateful that Vasser looked into Sunday school curricula. I considered this but found it so daunting I didn't know where to start (p. 28, n. 23). Considering Sunday school curricula is especially helpful given the importance of children to my linguistic analogy, as Vasser rightly notes. I am not sure we can be certain that the balance of the testaments that Vasser finds in the curricula he examined is “a conscious effort,” but that is one possible and reasonable conclusion. Whatever the case, I celebrate this testamental balancing act even as I suspect that it is a quite recent phenomenon (the curricula Vasser examines date from 2015-2018). I would hazard a guess, then, that this more equal attention to the testaments is a contemporary move—one influenced by better awareness about the importance of the entirety of Christian scripture. Where this better awareness comes from, I cannot say, but I take it as an encouraging sign. See further my own recommendation of “bothness.”

⁴ But cf. the comments of Bracken Long on songs and hymnody more generally; she might continue to take issue with me (and Vasser) on this point.

⁵ A quick electronic search of the book reveals that I do employ the following phrases at two points in the book: “ever-decreasing influence” (p. 214); and “increasingly devoid of fluent users” (p. 184), but, in context, neither of these statements is quite along the lines of Vasser's concern, and, regardless, both are somewhat minor remarks. In an endorsement found on the first page of the book, I note that Dennis Olson does use the phrase “increasingly neglected.”

⁶ See pages 20-21. Vassar is correct, however, when he observes that I do suggest that certain grand interpreters were better with regard to Old Testament interpretation (which I do, in fact, believe to be true), and he is equally correct when he notes that what I specifically cite in this regard from Calvin, Augustine, and Luther aren't all sermons (cf. p. 37).

⁷ It also has a pedagogical aspect (p. 229).

⁸ I would not want to underestimate the importance of anecdotal evidence, however (cf. p. 20). And so let me add to Bracken Long's own account by sharing some of my own semi-empirical “anecdotal”: I have tested two successive years of a year-long introduction to Old Testament course at the Candler School of Theology with an anonymous and not-for-credit baseline quiz of ten questions on the first day of the Fall semester (2014, 2015). The total sample size was 242 students. The low score was a zero, achieved (if that is the right term!) by nine students; the high score was 7/10, which was achieved by only two students (one per year). The other students weren't so fortunate: 6 points = 9; 5 points = 19; 4.5 points = 1; 4 points = 41; 3.5 points = 4; 3 points = 52; 2 points = 64; 1 point = 40; .5 points = 1; 0 points = 9. (Half points were given at my discretion—partly as

a sign of charity.) My quiz was also a combination of fill in the blank and multiple choice. It was considerably harder than the Religious Knowledge Survey and intentionally so. It was pedagogically designed, that is, and somewhat facetiously at that, to demonstrate the students' lack of knowledge about the subject matter. The instrument clearly performed as planned! I should add that in both years, the students took great pleasure (hilarity is not far off the mark) in learning of their scores on the second day of class.

⁹ In addition, the work of LaRue (2000), which Bracken Long cites, see also Callahan (2006).

¹⁰ Tied with Atheists/Agnostics (4.4) followed by Jews (4.3).

¹¹ Between the latter two groups come unaffiliated individuals (3.5) and those who described themselves as nothing in particular (3.2).

¹² See pages 4-5 for the basic claim. As but one example of how the problem extends beyond just North America, consider the following email blast that arrived in my inbox on 12/27/2017 from one Professor and Pastor Jairo Goncalves from Brazil. The material is drawn from what the email says is his "warrior book," *Evangelho de Glória de Cruz de Cristo*, available at <http://www.jairogenoma.com.br/>. I have corrected some of the errors in the email but have left some of the infelicities (and the emphases) as originally presented. "VT" in the first sentence stands for the Old Testament:

The *Law of the Lion of Judah* (VT) commands: "You shall love your friend and hate your enemy" (Mt 5:43; Ps 139:22; Ps 3:7). The *Law of the God-Abba-Lamb* (Gal 4:6; John 1:29) states: "Love your enemies; do good to those who mistreat you; love as Christ the Lamb loved you" (Mt 5:44, Lk 6: 27, 35, Jn 15: 12-14). "Husbands, love your wives as Christ the Lamb loved the *Bride Church*" (Eph 5:25-28). The "defective Law of Moses" never perfected anything (Heb 7:19; Heb 8:7). The *Law of Moses* contains "shadows" (Heb 8:5-7, 10:1, Col 1:17) and "Jewish fables" (Titus 1:14, Isa 45:7, Prov 16:4, Prov 22:2). Christ-*Lamb* began his ministry here on earth by rebutting the Law of Moses and the diversion of the Jewish lineage (Mt 5:21, 27, 33, 38, 43; etc.; Jn 6:60, 66; John 8:39-44). Christ-Lamb was condemned to death because he prophesied the destruction of Solomon's Temple (Mt 24: 2; Mt 21:42); called the scribes and Pharisees hypocrites (Matthew 23:13), scandalized the disciples of Moses (John 6:61; Mt 26:31) and stated that the Jews are "children of the devil" (John 8:44) equal to all other human beings not yet converted (Rom. 3:23; 1 Cor. 15:22; John 1:12). But, unfortunately, the "Churches" of Brazil and the World follow the *Old Testament* and the *Law of Moses* to build their temples, their altars and to carry out the priestly offices.

¹³ I confess I am not sure how to judge Bracken Long's appeal to the scripture indices in some more recent hymnals. It is unclear, that is—at least to me—how many of these references are original, intentional, or otherwise generative for the composers vs. how many have been otherwise "found" or somehow contrived,

perhaps by the editors, to maximize the use of the songs and hymnals at hand for worship leaders. Still further, how are these scriptural references available to the average worshiper? How are they activated or otherwise known, if they are? See further Towner's study on some of these matters.

¹⁴ This is probably a best-case scenario but is decidedly mainline. Low-church Protestants often do not use any formal liturgy at all, and the Eucharist, even if it is celebrated regularly, can be highly informal. Furthermore (and to echo an earlier point), mainline white Protestants perform very poorly on the Religious Knowledge Survey. See further, and more generally, Ann Monroe (2000) and Smith with Lundquist Denton (2005). Bracken Long also speaks of the "liberal, white churches that I know best," but the problem she is addressing at this point—needing less topical studies and more biblical study—is certainly not limited to that demographic, even as her insight helps to explain the poor scores for that demographic in the Religious Knowledge Survey.

¹⁵ See, e.g., my treatment of the imprecatory psalms (2013).

¹⁶ For the Narrative Lectionary, see https://www.luthersem.edu/lifelong_learning/narrative_lectionary.aspx (accessed 4/9/18).

¹⁷ See Bracken Long's wonderful citation of Catherine Cameron in this regard. For my own reflections, see esp. pages 205-11; 233-38.

¹⁸ According to <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/explore/how-many-words-are-there-in-the-english-language> (accessed 2 March, 2018), 171,476 of these words are currently in use with 47,156 others largely or completely obsolete. To these two totals there are some 9,500 more, derivative words that are included as various subentries to the main ones.

¹⁹ As an aside, I would add that I think the rest of Hopkins' poem also rings true, not just the first line. Those other parts include statements that God's grandeur "will flame out" and that it is "crushed," and make mention of God's "rod" which should be reckoned with.

²⁰ See, for example, "The Bible in American Life" study, once available online, but now discussed extensively in Goff, Farnsley, and Theusen (2017).

²¹ See R. W. L. Moberly (2018, 92). Moberly discusses how endless variation within a selected, delimited corpus is the norm with authoritative, canonical literatures. This is another reason why the canon of scripture doesn't require "(re)opening." It's already open...to interpretation! And seemingly endless interpretation at that!

²² Moyer is thus correct when he states that I have no problem with saying that "*Christianity is about more than just Christ.*" Of course it is! And how could it be otherwise? The doctrine of the Trinity alone (!) indicates as much.

²³ See pages 230-33. I take as quite important the study of John McWhorter (2007), which shows how incomplete adult language acquisition can cause major (frequently problematic) changes in a language.

²⁴ Robert W. Jenson's *Canon and Creed* (2010) is insightful in suggesting how canon, creed, and ecclesial authority ("bishop") may helpfully function to

restrict the potentially negative effects of linguistic change. In any event, Moyer reads me right: I am definitely against “wholly new formulations of Christian religiosity.” They are not “flatly impossible” but entirely possible! But it is a real problem if they are “wholly new,” since that means they are effectively a new language, no longer a later dialect of historic Christianity. This is the general force of my argument against the prosperity “gospel” (and why I chose to put the latter term in scare quotes).

²⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, *Oration on the deity of the Son and Holy Spirit* (PG 46: col. 557, section B; GNO 120:14-121:14). Thanks to Anthony Briggman and Brendan Harris for help in tracking this reference down. A French translation of the oration, by Matthieu Cassin, is available online at http://www.revue-conference.com/images/stories/n29/pdfs/CONF_29_SUR_DIVINITE_FILS_ET_ESPRIT.pdf (accessed 4/10/18); for the passage in question, see there p. 591.

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