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*The Strangeness of Culture: A Response to Brent A. Strawn*

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In *The Old Testament is Dying*, Brent Strawn looks to return the Old Testament to a place of prominence among North American churches by treating biblical instruction as a kind of language learning. This extended analogy based on linguistics is provocative, not least in that he suggests that the contemporary church is losing its ability to “speak” the Old Testament. His basic claim that the Church is functionally illiterate in the Hebrew scripture will ring true to most theologians and biblical scholars. However, can we say confidently that his diagnosis is rigorous or helpful? Is a linguistic approach the most appropriate in attempting to elevate the status of the Old Testament in current church praxis? In this essay I will reflect on his thesis in light of my personal experience teaching Old Testament in a different cultural setting, specifically Mexico. Many of Strawn’s diagnoses and prescriptions do not translate well to this setting. Interestingly, however, encouraging Second Language Acquisition such as the kind needed to work in another culture can help interpreters become more empathetic to the “strangeness” of Old Testament culture.

In the first chapter, Strawn is careful to note that his linguistic analogy is merely an analogy and not meant to be an exact representation (p. 6). However, modern linguistic study does not attempt to define “proper” language or grammar, nor does it make evaluative judgments on the diachronic development of a language. Strawn complains that contemporary churchgoers speak a kind of Old Testament language, but they do not know the essential grammar of the language (p. 26). Modern descriptive linguistics makes no attempt at prescribing “proper” grammar and as such is ill suited to the task at hand. For example, Strawn utilizes the linguistic concept of a “pidgin,” a truncated language used for communication between two communicators who do not share a common language, as a negative example of the contemporary discourse on the Old Testament in the Church (p. 78). Pidginizing the concepts of the Old Testament is absolutely necessary, though, when engaging in pioneering evangelism.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps this approach stems from Strawn’s reliance on Levi-Strauss’ anthropology, which seeks to discern underlying structures in culture that produce observable phenomena in social behavior (p. 12). Strawn rightly acknowledges that this method of anthropology is debated, but does not mention the ascendant challenger to structuralism, cognitive anthropology.<sup>2</sup> Cognitive anthropology takes into account the dynamic interplay between the individual and culture in constructing models of meaning with which to process the sensory information presented by the outside world. Humans necessarily derive meaning in their individual and collective lives from the models of reality transmitted to them by their host culture. Information that coheres well with an already existing mental model is easily assimilated, while dissonant information will either be assimilated

with difficulty or jettisoned altogether. This approach to anthropology has current support from a number of contributing fields and will diagnose the sickness in the Church with respect to the Old Testament more clearly.

The main cause for the marginalization of the Old Testament in contemporary churches is its strangeness to church members. This is to be expected when a member of a foreign culture tries to evaluate a cultural document for which they have no preexisting models to evaluate the material. Strawn notes that Richard Dawkins complains of this strangeness in his polemic against religion, but incorrectly labels his rhetoric as pidginizing the Old Testament (pp. 97–102). In fact, Dawkins has advocated for biblical literacy by privileging the King James Version in school curriculum alongside other great literature (2012). The reason Dawkins comes to such disdainful moral conclusions on the Old Testament is that he is evaluating Hebrew scriptures far removed from the host culture.<sup>3</sup> Dawkins feels confident in asserting his ignorance because most of the interaction he has had from churchgoers with respect to the Bible operates on the same position of cultural ignorance with respect to the Old Testament.

Examining Marcion's motivation reveals a similar cultural distance generating an aversion to the Hebrew scriptures. His primary difficulty with the Hebrew scriptures were their strangeness. In other words, he did not share cultural affinity with Jews and as such was unable to translate the tradition into his own cultural models. Tertullian rebuts Marcion's heterodox theology as a betrayal of the original apostolic culture in the Church, not as a pidginization of scripture (pp. 108–14). The clearest example of this transmission of cultural tradition is seen in Irenaeus, who hands down the Gospel as a unified distillation of Hebrew scripture and early Church tradition to his disciple Marcianus (1997: 39). This accepted tradition was considered to be the rule by which other teachings were evaluated. Though this canon was highly dependent on the Hebrew scriptures, Jews of the time vigorously disputed the appropriation of the scriptures by the early Church. In fact, early orthodoxy is a creole (to use Strawn's term) drawing on the diverse influences of Hebrew scripture, early Church tradition, and Hellenistic philosophy (p. 132). This was the canon that refuted Marcion, not merely Old Testament scholarship. His model primarily was incompatible with Christian tradition, not Jewish orthodoxy.

Strawn senses this problem of cultural distance in his critique of specialization with the field of biblical scholarship (pp. 188–90). He rightly notes that the volumes of technical scholarship on the Hebrew Bible are not filtering down to the Church, but it seems that the cause is mis-diagnosed. The evangelical split from critical scholarship after the ascendancy of Wellhausen is well attested and remains today the major barrier between practicing pastors and research scholars.

The models used in scholarship continue to threaten the received understanding of many who are engaged in the work of the Church. From the perspective of a cognitive anthropologist, this is expected given the nature of how humans approach foreign ideas and cultures. In that sense, Strawn is correct to note that two different languages are being spoken, but the root cause is not specialization. Rather, the perception on each side of the researcher/practitioner gulf is that the other side participates in a foreign, possibly hostile, culture.<sup>4</sup>

My time teaching in a Protestant evangelical Bible college in Mexico had shown that this cultural dissonance is not felt in similar ways outside of a North American context. The Protestant church has grown quickly in the preceding three decades in Latin America, initially from Protestant missionaries, and more recently indigenous churches have gained strength and popularity. Removed from the cultural struggles of the 20<sup>th</sup> century American church, pastors and laity feel free to read the Old Testament as an undiluted source of authority. Undergraduate students routinely come to class with a desire to study the Old Testament deeply, even in the original languages. They frequently bring pressing doctrinal concerns stemming from Old Testament scripture as well.

It is important to note that this is not attributable merely to unfamiliarity with critical scholarship. One contributing factor is likely the differing cultural models available to Bible students in Mexico to engage with the text. In general, the culture privileges oral communication and family tradition more than American culture. While not an identical analogy, sharing this model with the culture that produced the Hebrew scriptures mitigates the strangeness of the writings.

Another important factor is the prevalence of bilingualism among the student body. Mexican culture is influenced by American hegemony, and as such most students are at least functionally conversant in American language and culture. Recent research into bilingualism has shown that it improves cultural empathy and communication skills, both necessary in order to engage with texts from a foreign culture (Lieberman, *et. al.* 2016; Fan, *et. al.* 2015). These two advantages of Bible students in a Mexican context allows for freer engagement with a text that is less strange and culturally subversive.

Of course, this cultural intuition does not always produce an accurate interpretation of the texts themselves. The seeming familiarity with the culture of the texts has emboldened many to make incorrect connections between the cultural milieu of ancient Israel and that of current day Mexico. Charismatic pastors can draw on a small set of Old Testament scriptures to build a church that acts more like a sect than a part of the wider Church. It is also easier to feign knowledge of a specific discipline or biblical language in order to deceive congregants and students.

Cultural empathy can facilitate engagement with a strange text, but scholarship is still needed to discern between real and false cultural cognates.

Now returning to Strawn's prescription, I would like to suggest a change in praxis based on this diagnosis. Strawn's proposed method for rehabilitating the role of the Old Testament in the Church is to treat it as a second language to be learned through repetition in various modes (pp. 176; 214–29). From the perspective of cognitive anthropology, this will not reduce the strangeness of the text for the American Christian. Therefore, it seems that the key to opening up the Hebrew scriptures to a contemporary American Christian audience is through cultural encounter. Current adult educational theory emphasizes the need to promote transformative experiences in the learners in order to cause them to reevaluate their learned cultural assumptions.<sup>5</sup> Facilitating transformative cultural experiences for both pastors and researchers will engender communicative abilities that will allow them to penetrate the strangeness of the Hebrew scriptures.

In particular for research scholars, bilingualism in a modern language is a major advantage. Not only does it allow for greater ease in learning ancient languages relevant to the biblical texts, but it allows for interaction with other scholars from different cultures and the intuitions brought about by their cultural models. Research writing by these scholars gives more attention to “translating” the culture of the Hebrew scriptures to the target audience's culture. Vital, generative scholarship will go a long way to rehabilitate the place of the Old Testament in the North American church.

Additionally, evangelical theology must substantively reengage with critical scholarship. Dissolving the perception that Old Testament scholarship is a threat to orthodoxy will allow pastors and even laity to interact with work that can interpret and translate the strangeness of the Old Testament for the Church. In many cases, according to Transformative Learning Theory, one impactful sermon, article, or book can inspire an individual to engage with the entire canon of Hebrew scripture. As more individuals, both clergy and laity, find intrinsic motivation to study the Old Testament its relative prominence and use will naturally rise.

Strawn's work is commendable in its desire to see the Old Testament returned to a place of prominence in the life of the North American church. The linguistic analogy is a provocative entrée into the discussion. However, in the interest of best practice, the Church in North America should consider contemporary anthropology rather than linguistics in diagnosing and rehabilitating the patient. Listening to the lived experience of Christians around the world will make Christian scholars and clergy much better equipped to translate the living culture of the Old Testament for the Church today.

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, modern scholarship has created new categories to explain ancient Israelite language and culture. By Strawn's definitions, modern discourse on historical Israel is a "creole", developing from a tremendous cultural gap between ancient Israel and modern scholars.

<sup>2</sup> For further reading in cognitive anthropology, see Shore (1996) and Geertz (2001).

<sup>3</sup> It is easy to imagine that Dawkins could get as easily frustrated with evangelical critiques of evolutionary theory and its implications if they are coming from a similar position of ignorance with respect to the scientific model.

<sup>4</sup> It could also be noted that traditional evangelical theory holds praxis in a position of prominence. The ideal of evangelicalism is to deliver the simple Gospel message to unbelievers. This will necessarily reduce the entire teaching of the Bible to a "pidgin" for the sake of pragmatics.

<sup>5</sup> Jack Merizow summarizes this theory (1997). See also Merizow and Taylor (2009).

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