

Introduction

On the State of the Old Testament: Essays in Review of Brent Strawn's The Old Testament is Dying

The essays highlighted in this volume, save one, are the product of a 2018 panel discussion of Brent A. Strawn's *The Old Testament is Dying* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017). It took place at the annual meeting of the Southeastern Conference for the Study of Religion (www.secsor.org), March 3 in Atlanta, Georgia. The idea for Strawn's book came from Robert Foster of the University of Georgia, and as I step back and consider how the project unfolded, I am pleased. Consequently, Foster deserves thanks for being perceptive enough to propose the idea.

Each of the contributors were chosen for a variety of reasons. Most importantly, at the time when invitations to contribute were sent out, each was associated with an institution in the southeast region. Second, each contributor was chosen for his or her ability to critically engage a facet of Professor Strawn's argument. Kimberly Bracken-Long has published widely on issues of homiletics and worship theory, and she is currently the editor of *Call to Worship*, a liturgical journal of the Presbyterian Church. Clinton Moyer has displayed an ability to insightfully analyze and critique arguments as well as develop avenues for further discussion, all while keeping his finger on the trends within the American Church and American religious discourse. Moyer is a Senior Fellow at Wake Forest School of Divinity. Murray Vasser is a Ph. D. Candidate at Asbury Theological Seminary. Specializing in New Testament studies, he was invited to contribute because Professor Strawn's thesis poses important implications for scripture as a whole.

Brad Haggard is a Ph. D. Student at Asbury Theological Seminary. He was invited to contribute to the journal because of his familiarity with the Church in Mexico, specifically the evangelical Church. Having taught and preached in a Mexican context, Haggard's perspective is important, for what Professor Strawn observes, at least as it is presented in the book, is a distinctly American problem. As

I see it, the most logical trajectory proceeding from Strawn's work on the state of the Old Testament is how much of what is observed in the American Church can be seen on the global scene. Is he observing an American phenomenon, or a global one? In a footnote, Strawn suggests that what he observes may go beyond the American Church. Haggard questions this in his response.

The sequence of essays here is largely the same as that of the SECSOR meeting. This portion opens with a *précis* designed to articulate the general contours of Strawn's presentation. Next, Bracken-Long's essay gives way to Vasser's, and then to Moyer's. Professor Strawn then responds in detail to Bracken-Long, Vasser, and Moyer. Haggard's essay concludes this portion of the journal.

I would be remiss not to thank Robert Danielson, the editor of *The Asbury Journal*, for his willingness to devote a volume to this topic. He was very gracious and highly receptive of my idea when I pitched the project. So, it's my prayer that he finds it worthy of *The Asbury Journal*. Of course, the biggest thank-you must go to Professor Strawn, who allowed SECSOR to highlight his work. I hope that he looks back on the entire experience fondly.

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A Précis of Brent A. Strawn's The Old Testament in Dying

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Brent Strawn opens *The Old Testament is Dying* with a vignette. While teaching at a church in the greater Atlanta metropolitan area, Strawn recounts asking the audience whence Jesus' famous cry of dereliction came (Matt 27:46; Mark 15:34). To his dismay, his question went unanswered. Strawn recounts, "That's when I realized in a way I have never realized before, that the Old Testament is dying" (p. 4).

This book is devoted to the claim that the Old Testament is dying. Such a topic initially suggests a depressing read. However, Strawn discusses the morbidity of the Old Testament on the way to considering how the current state can be rectified. Thus, the work ends with a sense of hope, albeit an uncertain hope.

This book exists in three parts. In part 1, Strawn attempts to justify his diagnosis. In part 2, he discusses the disease by looking at several manifestations in contemporary discourse. Finally, Strawn considers several methods of treatment. In the end, this is a thought-provoking book whether you find himself agreeing with Strawn or not. Anyone who has an interest in the vitality of scripture and its role in contemporary discourse should devote time to reading it.

I. Part 1

To make his diagnosis, Strawn begins with an analogy. The Old Testament is (like) a language. "Just as language...allows us to make sense of the world and ourselves, the Old Testament provides a kind of grammar for constructing, perceiving, and understanding the same" (p. 8). Indeed, Strawn recognizes the eventual shortcomings of this analogy, or any analogy for that matter (pp. 16–18). All analogies are ultimately imperfect. So, the question is whether the proposed analogy does enough. In this instance, I think it does.

Yet just as fast as Strawn presents his governing analogy, he pushes it aside to establish the warrant for his diagnosis. For languages to thrive, they need to be used and used properly. Thus, is the Old Testament being used and used properly? According to the implications of the 2010 U.S. Religious Knowledge Survey, published by the Pew Research Center, the aforementioned question must be answered negatively. That study found, among other things, that only fifty-seven percent of the self-identifying Christians who were surveyed knew that the Golden Rule was not one of the Ten Commandments. Seventy-one percent identified Moses as a critical religious figure, and sixty-one percent similarly identified Abraham. However, only forty-one percent could properly identify Job, and only two-thirds could name the first book of the Bible. According to Strawn, the people who profess to "speak the language of faith"...are actually missing huge portions of the most basic vocabulary, syntax, and so forth of their (putative) religious tongue" (p. 26).

From there, Strawn considers the “best sermons” of American Christianity. Taken from a series of publications that spanned decades (from the 1920s into the 1990s), Strawn found, among other things, that forty-nine percent of the sermons were developed from the New Testament alone. Seven percent were developed from a combination of Old Testament and New Testament texts, while twenty-three percent were developed without the New Testament or the Old Testament. When it came to the Old Testament alone, only twenty-one percent of the best sermons leaned exclusively on that corpus.

Indeed, there are caveats with Strawn’s examination, such as the criteria for including a sermon in the series, as well as the exhaustiveness of his analysis (Strawn would have had to read all 900 sermons!). However, there is enough data to establish his point. Fewer people are properly speaking the language of the Old Testament, and the first line of education—sermons from our local congregations—is not providing a consistent context to learn the language.

Strawn rounds out his diagnosis by considering the place of the Psalms in modern hymnody and liturgy, particularly in Church lectionaries. In each case, selectivity best describes the method of usage. Certain psalms and elements of the Old Testament enjoy a role, and some even enjoy a prominent role. However, for each psalm or element of the Old Testament that is used, there is at least one that is ignored. In the end, Strawn emphatically declares there are “serious signs of morbidity” (p. 56). But to be even more blunt, “The educational system is failing... the Old Testament is dying, and it seems that the Christian practice of sermon, song, and lectionary are at least partly to blame” (p. 57).

In chapter 3, Strawn revisits his linguistic analogy in detail, asking questions about language change and language development. If there are serious signs of morbidity with respect to the language of the Old Testament, then what does language change and death look like?

All languages change, and they do so through time and with contact with other languages. These are universal principles of linguistics. What is not universal is how and why languages change and die, as there are a host of unpredictable factors that go into each case. Yet Strawn isolates pidginization and creolization. The former is the process by which a language retracts into a minimalistic form. It’s an intense regression to a basic form, often due to the demands brought on by interaction with other languages and various external stimuli. In such cases, a language may drop complex morphological and syntactical elements, all for the hope of preserving the language. Creolization is the process by which a pidgin expands to become a new language. But significant in this process is that while a creole may preserve historical vestiges with its ancestor language(s), it ultimately becomes a different language.

Similar to language change, language death results from a number of forces that are difficult to predict. Languages die for a variety of reasons, but *they do die*. Most important to this process, “the telltale sign in language morbidity, then, is when only the elderly speak a language, but no middle-aged persons of child bearing years regularly employ it or teach it to their children” (p. 70). And when a language is only spoken by a small element within a culture, there is usually a systemic breakdown in communication. Applied to scripture and the Old Testament, Strawn believes that this breakdown in communication is manifested by the Church’s inability to discuss the totality of the Old Testament and scripture. The Church, according to Strawn, is either willing or only capable of speaking about a select number of sections, themes, or corpora. Even among the decreasing number of those who are willing to engage the Old Testament, they often do so selectively.

II. Part 2

Part 2 is devoted to discussing the signs of morbidity, the ways in which the Old Testament’s impending doom is revealed. First, Strawn tackles the accusations against God and scripture offered by the so-called New Atheists. Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens are all discussed in some detail. However, using Dawkins’ ethical arguments about the characterization of God across scripture, Strawn argues that Dawkins creates a straw man based on a select group of passages primarily located in the Old Testament. In other words, Dawkins only engages a pidgin of the Old Testament, not the full extent of it (pp. 97–98). However, what makes Dawkins’ arguments so detrimental, according to Strawn, is that Dawkins’ arguments are not completely off the mark: most people don’t know what’s in the Old Testament and they don’t know how to respond to the questions leveled against it!

In chapter 5, Strawn shifts gears, from those who fail to consider the Old Testament as a whole to those who simply reject the Old Testament. He first targets the early 20th century Church historian Adolf von Harnack. Von Harnack’s sympathy for Marcion, who famously rejected the authority of the Old Testament, quickly gives way to “Christian super-secessionism laced with anti-Semitism” (p. 123) and ultimately the rejection of the Old Testament’s authority. Also brought into view is Friedrich Delitzch, who argued that the Old Testament is only a small step removed from Mesopotamian religion. According to Delitzch, people would do better to look toward their national myths for guidance and wisdom. But before one wrinkles their nose at such a blatant disregard for the Old Testament, Strawn wonders if the overwhelming preference for the New Testament (seen in the *Best Sermon* series; see above) is somehow similar to von Harnack, Delitzch, and others.

The final demonstrations of the Old Testament's morbidity are seen in the group that Strawn labels the Happiologists. These people advocate some form of the Prosperity Gospel, such as Creflo Dollar and Joel Olsteen. Strawn interacts with some of their most popular publications, particularly those of Olsteen. In short, Strawn argues that the entire system assumed by the Prosperity Gospel is too simplistic and cannot possibly account for the variables in life or the depth of scripture. According to Strawn, Job and Ecclesiastes are enough to throw a wrench into the entire system! Thus, the Happiologists assume a language of scripture that is not indicative of the whole; a language that conveniently ignores the elements that would otherwise criticize their system. Yet what is most critical for the Happiologists, according to Strawn, is the reality that the Happiologists represent a creole, or new language, that is rivaling the original language. So, while the New Atheists and New Marcionites assume a pidgin of the Old Testament, the Happiologists offer a new language under the guise of the old, authoritative language.

III. Part 3

The final section is devoted to discussing how the Church can bring the Old Testament off death's doorstep. The good news is that dying languages—even dead languages (as was the case with modern Hebrew [pp. 163–65])—can be saved. Moreover, the critical ingredient is as simple as having enough speakers. “For a dying language to survive, it needs speakers—preferably a lot of them—and it needs good reasons for being spoken” (p. 163). The bad news is that this is easier said than done.

Strawn believes the way forward should take its cue from Child Language Acquisition and Second Language Acquisition systems. Because “baby talk is okay for a time” (p. 171), the Church should realize that a truncated understanding of the Old Testament is okay, so long as the parties involved are not content to stay at an infantile level. Growth and maturity assumes that the learner will pursue more, and when such a pursuit takes off, Second Language Acquisition systems become informative. The Old Testament is not a language with which one is born, and so they must effectively nurture the language of the Old Testament vis-à-vis other “languages” within their worldview.

In the end, the final section effusively discusses practical ways the Church can foster fluency in the Old Testament and ensure the revival of the corpus. To this end, Deuteronomy offers an important model for Strawn. As the final testament of Moses, Deuteronomy is contextualized against a strategic moment in Israel's history, when the “new generation” was transitioning into the Promised Land. What's more, Strawn believes that the method of instruction employed by Deuteronomy is conducive to the acquisition of Old Testament fluency. Deuteronomy is repetitive,

and anyone who has ever learned a new language, or revived one after years of dormancy, will testify to the criticality of repetition. In addition, Deuteronomy is both individually and corporately focused. Individuals are not lost in the crowd, but individuals are understood to be a part of something larger than themselves. Applied to the learning of the Old Testament, such an emphasis suggests that fluency is for the benefit of the individual believer as well as the Church as a whole.

Deuteronomy also exhibits a palpable sense of urgency. Just as Moses urged Israel not to waffle in their allegiance to the Lord and the covenantal ideal, the Church must buckle down and resurrect the Old Testament with a noticeable sense of urgency. Moreover, the notion that Deuteronomy's ideal affects all aspects of their society enhances its sense of urgency. Deuteronomy is concerned with creating a *habitus*, a way of life, and, similarly, fluency in the Old Testament will translate into a life that is entrenched in the Lord and his character. A final important element of Deuteronomy's program is its performance. In fact, Strawn alludes to its performance as the critical element for Deuteronomy's ability to root its audience in the past while propelling them forward toward a new context. Applied to the pursuit of fluency in the Old Testament, performing the language through liturgy, song, and other performances connects the performer to an older tradition while also ensuring that the tradition continues.

The final chapter offers a lengthy catalog of practical steps that will harness the essence of Deuteronomy and move the Old Testament away from the fringes of the Church. First and foremost, the Church must regularly use the Old Testament. "The Old Testament must be used—extensively and regularly, certainly far more extensively and regularly than has been the case of late—in formative moments of Christian practice and education" (p. 214). Strawn suggests the principle of quality over quantity as well as usage in more contexts than just the occasional Sunday sermon. Second, the Church must pursue fluency. It can't be satisfied with knowing parts of the Old Testament, or even select parts really well. Rather, the Church must be intentional about its usage and understanding of the Old Testament as a whole. By implication, it must employ methods of communication and instruction that are accessible and effective. Fourth, the Church must nurture bilingualism. To accomplish this, its usage must be calculated and be accomplished in a way that allows the Old Testament to imprint its "culture," its worldview, upon the believer. Finally, the Church must cultivate the notion of "bothness" between the Old and New Testaments. Both testaments are two sides of the same coin, and there should be no hint of subordination between the two testaments.

Strawn closes his books with an acknowledgement that his call to action, his call to revive the Old Testament and to rescue it from a terrible trajectory, will

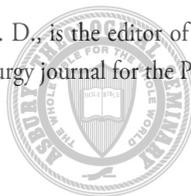
be “difficult work,” “frustrating work,” but “rewarding work that will come, slowly, with time” (p. 241). I think such a perspective is prudent. The Church must realize that there is no quick fix to the current state of affairs. Moreover, the work done now will be for the benefit of the subsequent generations more so than the current one.



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Kimberly Bracken Long
A Response to Brent A. Strawn

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Introduction

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

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

I. Preaching

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

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

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

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

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

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

II. Congregational Song

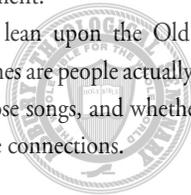
As one who values deeply the church’s singing, I appreciate that Dr. Strawn includes a discussion of sung scripture—particularly the psalms—in his book. Once again, however, I am afraid that the rather narrow scope of his research does not sufficiently support his claim that the Old Testament is dying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

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

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

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

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



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

III. Liturgy

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

IV. What’s next?

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

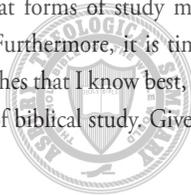
In saying, “look around,” I encourage us all to pay attention to what other corners of the church are doing. For instance, I mentioned previously that the Catholic Church has a rich tradition of psalm singing that reaches across all sorts of musical genres. The CRC/Faith Alive publication, *Psalms for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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

End Notes

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

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

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

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

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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.

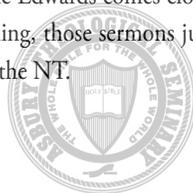


Table 1. The Use of the OT and the NT in Text-Based Christian Sermons

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

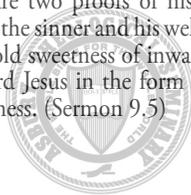
from the OT, and one of these two is from the Apocrypha. While Luther's students at the University of Wittenberg may have been exposed to extensive treatments of OT books, the peasants and farmers who filled the pews in Germany evidently heard relatively few sermons outside of the NT.

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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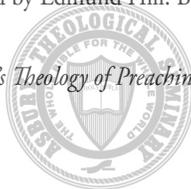
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Clinton J. Moyer

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

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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).

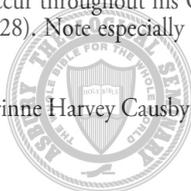
⁶ See further Strawn’s remarks on “bothness,” as well as a variety of other manifestations of this point throughout the volume (222–30).

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).

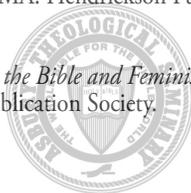
¹⁰ My thanks to Corinne Harvey Causby and Bill J. Leonard for drawing my attention to this.



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

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The Old Testament's Moribund Condition: Still Critical

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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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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.¹

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.² 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.³ 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.⁴

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 20th 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.⁵ 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

¹ 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.

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

³ 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.

⁴ 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.

⁵ Jack Merizow summarizes this theory (1997). See also Merizow and Taylor (2009).

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