

pleasant to read and convincingly makes his case. He will push many who are evangelical in the way they want to fall. His thesis rubs us up in the right way because we want to think that God is not violent and judgmental, or that all that is over and done with through the lens of the cross. It is a boon, as Brian McLaren says on the dust jacket, for those who want to “detoxify their understanding of God and rediscover God as most fully and beautifully imaged in a nonviolent man who loved all, hated none, and brought healing rather than harm wherever he went”(!)

Three final comments. Firstly, Boyd doth protest too much, methinks. The texts that he reinterprets are so numerous, so categorical, and so obvious that to try and explain them as referring to a “nonviolent” God demands flights of imagination that are just too much. Secondly, the idea of God allowing himself to be seen as a “warrior god” flies in the face of divine kingship and lordly control. It leaves us with the nasty taste that before Christ appeared to set the record straight, God was involved in some duplicity about his real nature. This approach does not do much for the trustworthiness or the faithfulness of God to himself. Finally, Boyd claims his hermeneutic to be a conservative evangelical one, even if it more specifically Anabaptist. This raises the question as to whether “the lens of the cross” is appropriate for reading the Old Testament. If Christ is the center of Scripture and the history of salvation in an Oscar Cullmann sense flows to Christ and from Christ, is this in and of itself a hermeneutical key? Is it not the New Testament that interprets the Old and Scripture that interprets Scripture, and not a “cross lens” abstracted from Scripture itself?

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Brent A. Strawn. *The Old Testament Is Dying: A Diagnosis and Recommended Treatment*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017.

Any book that seeks to keep the Old Testament from dying and to revive its use among God’s people is to be encouraged simply because it raises the issue. People tend to view the Old Testament as distant in time and culture and therefore irrelevant to modern-day life. In fact, taking the Old Testament seriously could lead to problems because of its many difficult texts. This book seeks to solve some of the difficulties related to the Old Testament by treating it like a dead language that needs to be recovered. It gives a diagnosis of the problem, evidence of the signs of the Old Testament’s demise, and

then offers a path to recovery with four specific positive recommendations. The general argument of the book will be given, followed by an evaluation of the prescription to fix the problem of a dying Old Testament.

The author argues that the Old Testament is dying because too many individuals and churches do not regard it as highly as the New Testament, do not understand it, and for all practical purposes neglect it in private devotion and public worship. The issue is not that the Old Testament is never read or preached, but the way it is read and preached. Chapter 2 provides initial tests related to the thesis and presents four pieces of hard evidence. First, the United States Religious Knowledge Survey confirms that Christians of various ethnic and denominational backgrounds are uninformed, or ill-informed, concerning the rudimentary details of their beliefs. Second, a series of books entitled *Best Sermons* collected in several volumes throughout the twentieth century show that only twenty-one percent of the sermons are taken from the Old Testament alone whereas forty-nine percent of the sermons are taken from the New Testament alone. Third, hymnals show a selective use of psalms with a neglect of the lament psalms. This represents a death of sorts because Christians never sing the full language of the psalms. Finally, the book examines the Revised Common Lectionary. It appears balanced with an Old Testament lesson, a psalm or hymnic response, a Gospel lesson, and an epistle lesson. Strawn, however, points out that many times the Old Testament lesson gets dropped for a reading from Acts and there is no guarantee that if there is an Old Testament lesson, it will be used. These four initial tests are evidence that the Old Testament is dying because of selectivity and lack of use.

In chapter 3 Strawn goes into great detail to explain the linguistic analogy in order to know more about the pathologies from which the Old Testament is suffering. He compares the death of the Old Testament to the death of a language. To explain this, he describes the processes of pidginization and creolization. A pidgin is a simplified version of a language that develops when two groups of people with their own native languages need to communicate. If a pidgin becomes the dominant language of a people group, it is no longer a pidgin but becomes a creole: the latter takes on a life of its own in its growth and development in grammar, syntax, and meaning of words. Strawn also discusses how and why languages die, and what is lost when they do. Because the Old Testament is like a language, it can be learned and forgotten, but it can also be “revived.”

Armed with the diagnostic tools of chapter 3, Strawn examines in chapters 4–6 three areas that confirm the demise of the Old Testament. He focuses on “The New Atheism,” “Marcionites Old and New,” and “The New Plastic

Gospel of the ‘Happiologists’” (the health and wealth gospel). Each of these operate with profound misunderstandings of the Old Testament and are evidence that it is dying in considerable and public ways.

Before analyzing Strawn’s diagnosis of the problem, it is helpful to examine his recommendations for its recovery because the diagnosis and the remedy are related. In chapters 7–9 Strawn lays out a path to restoring the Old Testament. This is important because once a language dies, it is virtually impossible to bring it back. In chapter 7 (“Recommended Treatment”), he turns again to the linguistic analogy to discuss strategies linguists adopt to save dying languages. He highlights the success story of the Hebrew language. Four factors led to its successful rebirth: (1) Israel was newly constituted as a nation, (2) there was a massive influx of Jews into Israel from all over the world, (3) Hebrew had been preserved in written form, and (4) there was a strong religious impulse to revive Hebrew. Strawn also discusses the importance of early language learning among children and second-language acquisition by adults. For a language to recover, there must be a strong impulse among the people for its recovery, and there must be a commitment to learning the language, including willingness to practice and use it.

The Old Testament is in a critical condition because of disuse, misuse, and abandonment. While not very hopeful that the Old Testament can be revived to a full language, Strawn gives further evidence of the problem in chapter 8 (“Saving the OT”) and then turns to strategies to help revive it. Professional biblical scholarship is part of the problem because academic study has not been concerned to teach the church how to understand the Old Testament. Even the best scholarship is insufficient for language preservation as long as it lacks language practice, and biblical scholarship will revive the Old Testament for the church only if it is followed by practice. He also looks at how the book of Deuteronomy is a model for second-language acquisition. In Deuteronomy, the content is being passed on to the next generation; repetition allows the material to be mastered and put into practice, and the teaching is embedded in Israel’s history. All of these help keep Deuteronomy a full language for future generations.

Finally, in chapter 9 (“Ways Forward and Not”) Strawn offers concrete recommendations on how to save the Old Testament. The most obvious recommendation is to use the Old Testament in formative moments of Christian practice extensively and regularly. It must be seen as a speaking presence that exercises beneficial influence on our lives. This recommendation puts great responsibility on those who preach, teach, and lead worship. Part of the problem is that pastors, who are the resident language experts, seem less and less fluent in the language. Pastors need to know the full

language of Scripture. The second recommendation fits the first well because if a pastor is to be a resident language expert, there is the need for adequate language training. Formal education is part of the answer, but immersion in the Old Testament and regular use of it is also needed. The third recommendation is that the language of the Old Testament must be communicated intentionally and in keeping with the ability of those who are taught. The fourth recommendation is that a person needs to be able to switch between the languages and know when to do so (one must be bilingual). This ability must become a way of life. The fifth recommendation is that both the Old Testament and New Testament can contribute to the solution because they are intertwined. If the next generation is not taught the language of the Old Testament, then the future looks bleak for saving it.

Several things can be said in response to Strawn's diagnosis of the death of the Old Testament and his recommendations to save it. Recognizing that there is a problem and that the Old Testament should be saved is positive. He does a good job of showing the problems of New Testament-only Christianity. His diagnosis of the problem, however, uses very general examples. Do we expect atheists, or even the health-and-wealth proponents, to understand the Old Testament? The lack of the use of the Old Testament in the lectionary and the hymnal provides evidence that supports his case. Information from a survey of lay people that attend church would give more concrete evidence. Strawn's linguistic analogy is a bit tedious. A person has to wade through a lot of information and terminology, like pidgins and creoles, to understand the death of a language just to get to the discussion of the death of the Old Testament. One wonders if the payoff is worth the effort.

The foundational issue to be addressed to fix the problem is only hinted at or mentioned in passing. The recovery of the Old Testament will not be achieved through a linguistic analysis that compares the Old Testament to a language. The problem goes much deeper because it is theological. There is little theological discussion about the importance of the Old Testament or its character as the living word of God. The author shifts gears in one paragraph from speaking linguistically to speaking theologically in answering the question of who would want to preach the entirety of the Old Testament. The answer is those for whom the Old Testament functions as authoritative Scripture (38). Instead of explaining why this is so, the author drops back into the linguistic analysis. Later, in chapter 8, he again raises the issue that the professionals in the fields of theology and the Bible are part of the problem because these fields of study have become too academic with little relevance to human society. He describes the inefficiency of professional biblical scholarship committed to historical criticism that has moved further away

from the text by “filleting the biblical materials into ever smaller and more disparate layers” (191). He also muses that it is a small miracle that so many people go to church given the smallness of the vision that they receive. Instead, they need to be exposed to something bigger and grander. He hints at the necessity for a robust worldview where ultimate commitments are more crucial than the choice of study method. Strawn touches on the problem but does not discuss the real issue: the character of Scripture. Many churches view Scripture as a purely human document, not the inspired, revealed word of God. If the Bible is only a human document, it loses its character as the living word of God through which God still speaks to his people. If Scripture is a limited human product that is historically conditioned, it is hard to see its relevance to God’s people today. If the Bible can be used along with other, more contemporary sources to instruct God’s people, it is no wonder that the Old Testament loses influence. The Bible itself is relegated to a subordinate position, or at least it is not given the priority it deserves, leaving little hope that people will take the Old Testament seriously.

The solution to the problem of the death of the Old Testament is to accept Scripture as the Word of God. When seminaries have a low view of the authority of Scripture, pastors are sent into churches without great confidence in the Word of God. This impacts all levels of a church’s life, from preaching to the choice of the Sunday School material to teach the next generation. In such an environment there is no great impetus to learn the language of the Old Testament. There is no great vision related to the supremacy of Christ and the glory of God. Seminaries and churches with a high view of the authority Scripture are in a better position to see the importance of the Old Testament as the living word of God that is written for God’s people today (1 Cor 10:6; Heb 4:12). A high view of the Old Testament does not solve every problem because people have to be taught how to understand it, but it gives pastors the boldness to preach and the people the impetus to understand and to pass it on to their children.

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Pierre Courthial. *A New Day of Small Beginnings*. Tallahassee, FL; Lausanne: Zurich Publishing, 2018).

It has been one of the privileges of my life, not only to know Pierre Courthial and to share his friendship, but also to participate actively in the