

Brent A. Strawn. *Lies My Preacher Told Me: An Honest Look at the Old Testament*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2021. 116 pages. \$16.

Playing off of James Loewen's book, *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* (1995), Strawn proposes a study that seeks to set the record straight about the history and interpretation of the Old Testament with the hope of fostering a renewed love of these scriptures. On its face, Strawn's project echoes other key scholarly treatments of the Old Testament by encouraging delight (e.g., Davis, *Wondrous Depth* (2005) and offering corrective information (e.g., Brueggemann, *Preaching from the Old Testament* (2019)). However, Strawn's work is even more accessible to non-academic readers. I like to think of this book as his own pastoral response to his earlier work, *The Old Testament is Dying* (2017).

The book's simplicity in language while discussing biblical studies, its clarity of thought, and its included discussion questions would work well as a book study or a Sunday school class. Strawn's helpful clarification statements, though sometimes not as pithy as this preacher would like, are helpful tools for enlivening Old Testament usage within the church.

At the same time, because the ten lies that Strawn addresses remain pervasive and pernicious in the church's preaching, I could see this book as a helpful resource for training lay preachers and working with students in alternative clergy licensing programs. He states early on that he finds it more constructive to think of these lies as mistruths. A mistruth evinces an "insidious" and "intractable" lack of care about truth that harms not only the Old Testament but any society that is swayed by them (2). Mistruths that Strawn confronts include: The Old Testament is boring, written for someone else, and rendered obsolete by the New Testament. The Old Testament God is mean and hyper-violent. The Old Testament is not relevant or spiritually enriching. The Old Testament Law is a burden and what really matters is Jesus.

For most of the ten mistruths, Strawn also highlights harmful preaching examples. For instance, he calls out Andy Stanley for treating the Old Testament as not also written for Christians, and he labels Marcion an anti-Jewish preacher. More often, Strawn points to preaching that promotes mistruths from a place of privilege. For instance, a cartoonist reducing the Old Testament to violence in order to win a laugh; preachers seeking political influence by making scripture hyper-relevant; and rich preachers refusing to listen to the poor and marginalized, are indicative of preaching practices against which Strawn writes.

As alternatives to this harmful preaching, Strawn highlights corrective preaching examples. He cites Ellen Davis, Abraham Heschel, rabbis in the Talmud, African American preachers (though he never names a preacher), Bernard of Clairvaux, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the prophets, Jesus, and Paul. In many instances, he analyzes how the homiletical strategy of a particular exemplar confronts a mistruth and offers a different way of preaching today. These are helpful homiletical guides, though they'd be more helpful if the author included more contemporary examples and had a few more pages in this slim volume to reflect on preaching.

Nevertheless, what I find most intriguing and innovative about this book is the way the author reflects on the root cause of preaching mistruths. Returning to Loewen, Strawn observes that false history is a weapon historically used to oppress people (105). In the church, Strawn asserts, there has always been a close connection between mistruths about the Old Testament and anti-Semitism. Furthermore, oppressive and violent uses of mistruths continue into the present through white supremacy and totalitarian regimes that employ a thin, censored, and intentionally misinformed reading of the Bible to "reap the worst harvests imaginable" (106).

Here Strawn helpfully names that the modern church's problem with the Old Testament is deeper than what can be fixed with a little insight from a gifted biblical scholar. In the end, Strawn argues that the lies preachers tell are mistruths in service to anti-Semitism and white supremacy. These mistruths can only be confronted by the liberating, justice-seeking God and gospel. Unfortunately, Strawn only offers readers four pages of this truth-telling, good news preaching. While the connection between power and misuse of the Old Testament could be more developed, the argument is so important and so rarely said that I would commend this book to any who want to think more deeply about Old Testament hermeneutics and homiletics.

David Stark, The University of the South, Sewanee, TN