

# The Old Testament Is Dying

A Diagnosis  
and Recommended Treatment

Brent A. Strawn

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For my parents,  
my first Bible teachers  
שמע בני מוסר אביך  
ואל תטש תורת אמך  
(Prov. 1:8)

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## Series Preface

Long before it became popular to speak about a “generous orthodoxy,” John Wesley attempted to carry out his ministry and engage in theological conversations with what he called a “catholic spirit.” Although he tried to remain “united by the tenderest and closest ties to one particular congregation”<sup>1</sup> (i.e., Anglicanism) all his life, he also made it clear that he was committed to the orthodox Christianity of the ancient creeds, and his library included books from a variety of theological traditions within the church catholic. We at Nazarene Theological Seminary (NTS) remain committed to the theological tradition associated with Wesley but, like Wesley himself, are very conscious of the generous gifts we have received from a variety of theological traditions. One specific place this happens in the ongoing life of our community is in the public lectures funded by the generosity of various donors. It is from those lectures that the contributions to this series arise.

The books in this series are expanded forms of public lectures presented at NTS as installments in two ongoing, endowed lectureships: the Earle Lectures on Biblical Literature and the Grider-Winget Lectures in Theology. The Earle Lecture series is named in honor of the first professor of New Testament at NTS, Ralph Earle. Initiated in 1949 with W. F. Albright for the purpose of “stimulating further research in biblical literature,” this series has brought outstanding biblical scholars to NTS, including F. F. Bruce, I. Howard Marshall, Walter Brueggemann, Richard Hays, Terence Fretheim, and Joel Green. The Grider-Winget Lecture series is named in honor of J. Kenneth Grider, longtime

1. John Wesley, *Sermon 39*, “Catholic Spirit,” §III.4, in *Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), 2:79–95. We know, however, that his public ties with Anglicanism were at some points in his life anything but tender and close.

professor of theology at NTS, and in memory of Dr. Wilfred L. Winget, a student of Dr. Grider and the son of Mabel Fransen Winget, who founded the series. The lectureship was initiated in 1991 with Thomas Langford for the purpose of “bringing outstanding guest theologians to NTS.” Presenters for this lectureship have included Theodore Runyon, Donald Bloesch, Jürgen Moltmann, Robert Jenson, and Amy Plantinga Pauw.

The title of this monograph series indicates how we understand its character and purpose. First, even though the lectureships are geared toward biblical literature *and* systematic theology, we believe that the language of “theological explorations” is as appropriate to an engagement with Scripture as it is to an engagement with contemporary systematic theology. Though it is legitimate to approach at least some biblical texts with nontheological questions, we do not believe that doing so is to approach them *as Scripture*. Old and New Testament texts are not inert containers from which to draw theological insights; they are already witnesses to a serious theological engagement with particular historical, social, and political situations. Hence, biblical texts should be approached *on their own terms* through asking theological questions. Our intent, then, is that this series will be characterized by theological explorations from the fields of biblical studies and systematic theology.

Second, the word “explorations” is appropriate since we ask the lecturers to explore the cutting edge of their current interests and thinking. With the obvious time limitations of three public lectures, even their expanded versions will generally result not in long, detailed monographs but rather in shorter, suggestive treatments of a given topic—that is, explorations.

Finally, with the language of “the church catholic,” we intend to convey our hope that these volumes should be *pro ecclesia* in the broadest sense—given by lecturers representing a variety of theological traditions for the benefit of the whole church of Jesus Christ. We at NTS have been generously gifted by those who fund these two lectureships. Our hope and prayer is that this series will become a generous gift to the church catholic, one means of equipping the people of God for participation in the *missio Dei*.

Andy Johnson  
Lectures Coordinator  
Nazarene Theological Seminary  
Kansas City, Missouri



## Author Preface

The chapters that follow were originally presented as the Earle Lectures on Biblical Literature at the Nazarene Theological Seminary (NTS) in Kansas City, Missouri, on April 16–17, 2012. I am thankful for the honor bestowed on me to give these lectures, which are named after a prominent biblical scholar in the Church of the Nazarene whose family is well known by my own. I am also grateful for the warm and gracious hospitality showed to me by the faculty, staff, and students of NTS, including the then-president Dr. David Busic, Academic Dean Roger Hahn, and especially Dr. Andy Johnson, the coordinator of the lectures, who first invited me to come to NTS and who edits the series within which the book is now housed. Although the material that follows has been significantly expanded beyond the original lectures, I have tried to retain something of the oral style of the lectures if for no other reason than to increase the readability of the book. Perhaps this will also help those parts intended as humorous to come across in the right way.

Even before the lectures at NTS, students in several years of introductory courses at the Candler School of Theology at Emory University listened to me discuss the problem of the Old Testament's linguistic death, even if only sporadically and inchoately. The same is true for an early presentation I made on the subject to Candler's Committee of 100 and to Grace Episcopal Church in Gainesville, Georgia. A more developed, but still incomplete form of the larger idea was given as the Marcy Preaching Lectures (March 2012) in Orlando, Florida, as a run-up to the NTS lectures. Since the NTS lectures, I've had the opportunity to speak on the topic at a number of different types of ecclesial gatherings in Atlanta and elsewhere in Georgia, Mississippi, Texas, and Florida, including the inaugural Thompson Lectureship at First United Methodist Church in Gainesville, Georgia, and in various academic

settings, including the Thirteenth Annual Joe R. Engle Institute of Preaching at Princeton Theological Seminary (2015), and at Point Loma Nazarene University in San Diego (2015). I think I learned more each time I spoke about the topic, including more about all that I do not yet know about the subject matter! I remain thankful for each of these opportunities and for the people who helped to make them happen.

It is appropriate to acknowledge up front my intellectual debt to John McWhorter, whose wonderfully engaging lectures for the Teaching Company on linguistics, especially those devoted to language death, pidginization, and creolization, not only relieved the pain of my daily commute, but also served as my first formal introduction to these subjects. The combination of listening to McWhorter's lectures while driving to school to teach Old Testament to students training for Christian ministry is what first prompted me to consider the Old Testament in an analogical, linguistic fashion. Despite this debt to McWhorter, anyone familiar with his work will know (as do I) that he would no doubt quarrel with a number of the quite prescriptive ways to which I have put his (and others') largely descriptive linguistic research, especially on dialects and creole continua. Then again, McWhorter himself rarely shies away from the political ramifications of his scholarly work. In any event, I have taken great inspiration from McWhorter's teaching and writing—indeed, from the very inception of the idea. My further indebtedness to him and to other linguists can be traced in the footnotes and bibliography.

I must also mention my great debt to Jim Kinney. After many years of talking, it has been a pleasure to finally be able to work with Jim and all the wonderful people at Baker Academic. Jim has been exceedingly patient and gracious during the several delays the project encountered, which makes me even more appreciative of him and the press.

I'm also thankful to several individuals who read pieces of the manuscript, discussed its ideas with me, or provided help in one crucial way or another, especially (and alphabetically) the following: Bill T. Arnold, Lewis Ayres, Anthony A. Briggman, William P. Brown, Walter Brueggemann, Greg Carey, Stephen B. Chapman, Tracey A. Cook, Kenda Creasy Dean, Julie A. Duncan, Christy Lang Hearlson, E. Brooks Holifield, Luke Timothy Johnson, Steven J. Kraftchick, Joel M. LeMon, Thomas G. Long, Ian A. McFarland, R. W. L. Moberly, Ted A. Smith, Tim Suttle, and Reese A. Verner. Thanks, too, to my Emory colleagues Steven M. Tipton, for assistance with the U.S. Religious Knowledge Survey and its cultured despisers; to <sup>†</sup>John H. Hayes, Jonathan Strom, and Phillip Reynolds for thoughts on the Apocrypha, for which I also thank my more distant colleagues John Endres and David deSilva; and to Andrea White and Don E. Saliers on George Lindbeck and “post-post-liberal

theology.” Andrew Thomas gave me permission to cite lyrics from his song “You Are” featuring Kawan Moore. I am grateful to Timothy K. Beal for bibliography on Bible publishing and for his profound reflections on such in his wonderful book *The Rise and Fall of the Bible*. I also gladly acknowledge the help I received from several doctoral students who gathered needed items, listened to ideas, and occasionally brainstormed how to address certain problems: Harry Huberty, K. Parker Diggory, and Josey Bridges Snyder. A fourth, T. Collin Cornell, was especially helpful at the eleventh hour, offering me key encouragement and support. Collin also performed a final read-through and compiled the bibliography. I am also grateful to my Dean, Dr. Jan Love, for the sabbatical that afforded me the time to finish this and several other projects. Finally, I single out for special mention Ryan P. Bonfiglio, who read the entire manuscript (portions of it more than once) and, as is his custom, offered numerous suggestions that bettered it in virtually every possible way. It seems obligatory, but is nevertheless quite important given the number of people listed here and the arguments I make in what follows, to state that none of these individuals should be held responsible for my arguments even as I am more than happy to share with them the credit for any good ideas that might be found herein.

I also wish to thank my wife, Holly, sine qua non, who listens to me and to my thoughts about the Old Testament (and everything else) far more than anyone should ever have to, and my three children—Caleb (כָּלֵב), Hannah (חַנָּה), and Micah (מִיכָה)—whose names bear evidence of their father’s primary linguistic love, but equally also my love for them. I can’t imagine more beautiful names (or kids).

Given the particular focus of this book, it is imperative that I recognize my first Bible professors: Dr. Reuben Welch, Dr. Robert W. Smith (my first Greek teacher), and Dr. Frank G. Carver (my first Hebrew teacher) of Point Loma Nazarene University. These three somehow put me on the path of lifelong study of Scripture in ways that continue to amaze me—ways I hope to emulate in my own teaching and somehow pass on to my own students.

Last, since this book is so much about language and, ultimately, about parents and their children, it seems only right to dedicate it to my parents, David and Sharon (two more Hebrew names—surely a sign of providence!). They were the first to teach me not only the English language but also the language of faith and Scripture, even, I’m quite sure, at *preverbal* stages and in embodied sorts of ways. I dedicate the book to them with profound love and gratitude—far beyond what words in any human language could express.

# Abbreviations

## General and Bibliographic

*	hypothetical/unattested form	BR	<i>Biblical Research</i>
√	verbal root	BT	<i>The Bible Translator</i>
A	answer	BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
AB	Anchor Bible		
ABD	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i> , ed. D. N. Freedman, 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992)	CAL	Cambridge Approaches to Linguistics
ABRL	Anchor Bible Reference Library	CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
alt.	altered translation	CBQMS	Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series
AnBib	Analecta Biblica	CBR	<i>Currents in Biblical Research</i>
ANF	<i>The Ante-Nicene Fathers</i> , ed. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, 10 vols. (New York: Christian Literature, 1885–96; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950–51)	CEB	Common English Bible
AOS	American Oriental Series	CEL	<i>Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language</i> , by David Crystal, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997)
app(s).	appendix(es)	cf.	<i>confer</i> , compare
ASR	<i>American Sociological Review</i>	chap(s).	chapter(s)
ATJ	<i>Asbury Theological Journal</i>	CSCD	Cambridge Studies in Christian Doctrine
AYBRL	Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library	CTL	Cambridge Textbooks in Linguistics
BASOR	<i>Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research</i>	DBI	<i>Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation</i> , ed. J. Hayes, 2 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999)
BCP	Book of Common Prayer, used by the Episcopal Church	ed(s).	editor(s), edited by, edition
BCW	Book of Common Worship		
BH	Biblical Hebrew		

Abbreviations

EDSS	<i>Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls</i> , ed. L. H. Schiffman and J. C. VanderKam, 2 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000)	LHBOTS	Library of Hebrew Bible / Old Testament Studies
e.g.	<i>exempli gratia</i> , for example	LSAWS	Linguistic Studies in Ancient West Semitic
esp.	especially	LXX	Septuagint
et al.	<i>et alia</i> , and others	MH	Mishnaic Hebrew
etc.	et cetera, and the rest, and so forth	MoTh	<i>Modern Theology</i>
FAT	Forschungen zum Alten Testament	MT	Masoretic Text
GBS	Guides to Biblical Scholarship	NAB	New American Bible
GNT	Greek New Testament	NASB	New American Standard Bible
HB	Hebrew Bible	NCB	New Century Bible
HBM	Hebrew Bible Monographs	NCBC	New Cambridge Bible Commentary
HCOT	Historical Commentary on the Old Testament	NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
HSS	Harvard Semitic Studies	NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
HTS	Harvard Theological Studies	NIDOTTE	<i>New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis</i> , ed. W. A. VanGemeren, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997)
ICC	International Critical Commentary	NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
i.e.	<i>id est</i> , that is	NIV	New International Version
IH	Israeli Hebrew	NJPS	<i>Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures</i> (New Jewish Publication Society Translation)
Int	<i>Interpretation</i>	NLT	New Living Translation
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>	NovTSup	Supplements to Novum Testamentum
JCTCRS	Jewish and Christian Texts in Context and Related Studies	NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
JSOT	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>	NT	New Testament
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series	NTA	New Testament Apocrypha
JTI	<i>Journal for Theological Interpretation</i>	NTM	New Testament Monographs
JTISup	Journal for Theological Interpretation, Supplements	OBT	Overtures to Biblical Theology
KJV	King James Version	ODCC	<i>Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church</i> , ed. F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997)
L1	First (native) language		
L2	Second (acquired) language		
LAI	Library of Ancient Israel		
LALD	Language Acquisition and Language Disorders		
LCC	Library of Christian Classics		
LDS	Latter-day Saints		

Abbreviations

OED	<i>Oxford English Dictionary</i> , 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989)	s.v.	<i>sub verbo</i> , under the word
		SymS	Symposium Series
OHLT	Oxford Handbooks for Language Teachers	TDOT	<i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i> , ed. G. J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren, trans. J. T. Willis et al., 15 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974–2006)
orig.	original		
OT	Old Testament		
OTA	Old Testament Apocrypha		
OTL	Old Testament Library	<i>TbTo</i>	<i>Theology Today</i>
OTM	Oxford Theological Monographs	TLOT	<i>Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> , ed. E. Jenni, with assistance from C. Westermann, trans. M. E. Biddle, 3 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997)
OTP	Old Testament Pseudepigrapha		
OTT	Old Testament Theology		
PNG	Papua New Guinea		
PRSt	<i>Perspectives in Religious Studies</i>		
PSB	<i>Princeton Seminary Bulletin</i>	TLZ	<i>Theologische Literaturzeitung</i>
Q	question	trans.	translated by
RBS	Resources for Biblical Study	TU	Texte und Untersuchungen
RCL	Revised Common Lectionary	UBL	Ugaritisch-biblische Literatur
repr.	reprint	UBS	United Bible Societies
SB	Sources bibliques	vs.	versus
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series	VT	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
SBTS	Sources for Biblical and Theological Study	VTSup	Supplements to <i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
SLA	Second-Language Acquisition	v(v).	verse(s)
STDJ	Studies on the Texts of the Desert of Judah	WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
		WTT	Westminster Morphologically Tagged Hebrew Text
STI	Studies in Theological Interpretation	WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
STR	Studies in Theology and Religion	ZAH	<i>Zeitschrift für Althebräistik</i>

Old Testament

Gen.	Genesis	Ezra	Ezra
Exod.	Exodus	Neh.	Nehemiah
Lev.	Leviticus	Esther	Esther
Num.	Numbers	Job	Job
Deut.	Deuteronomy	Psa(s).	Psalms(s)
Josh.	Joshua	Prov.	Proverbs
Judg.	Judges	Eccles.	Ecclesiastes
Ruth	Ruth	Song	Song of Songs
1–2 Sam.	1–2 Samuel	Isa.	Isaiah
1–2 Kings	1–2 Kings	Jer.	Jeremiah
1–2 Chron.	1–2 Chronicles	Lam.	Lamentations

## Abbreviations

Ezek.	Ezekiel	Mic.	Micah
Dan.	Daniel	Nah.	Nahum
Hosea	Hosea	Hab.	Habakkuk
Joel	Joel	Zeph.	Zephaniah
Amos	Amos	Hag.	Haggai
Obad.	Obadiah	Zech.	Zechariah
Jon.	Jonah	Mal.	Malachi

### New Testament

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Matt.	Matthew	1–2 Thess.	1–2 Thessalonians
Mark	Mark	1–2 Tim.	1–2 Timothy
Luke	Luke	Titus	Titus
John	John	Philem.	Philemon
Acts	Acts	Heb.	Hebrews
Rom.	Romans	James	James
1–2 Cor.	1–2 Corinthians	1–2 Pet.	1–2 Peter
Gal.	Galatians	1–3 John	1–3 John
Eph.	Ephesians	Jude	Jude
Phil.	Philippians	Rev.	Revelation
Col.	Colossians		

### Old Testament Apocrypha

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2 Esd.	2 Esdras	Tob.	Tobit
1–4 Macc.	1–4 Maccabees	Wis.	Wisdom of Solomon
Sir.	Sirach		

### Other Ancient Sources

---

<i>b.</i>	Babylonian Talmud	<i>m.</i>	Mishnah
<i>Ber.</i>	tractate <i>Berakot</i>	<i>Sanh.</i>	tractate <i>Sanhedrin</i>

## *Testimonia*

Tell me what you would strike from the Old Testament and I'll tell you what defect there is in your Christian knowledge.

—Wilhelm Vischer

Indeed, it would be no exaggeration to understand the hermeneutical problem of the Old Testament as *the* problem of Christian theology, and not just as one problem among others, seeing that all the other questions of theology are affected in one way or another by its resolution. . . . This question [of whether and why the Old Testament is part of the canon of Scripture and what its relevance is] affects the extent and also qualitatively the substance of what may be regarded as Christian. No more fundamental question can be posed in all theology; providing an answer for it defines the realm in which theology has to be done.

—A. H. J. Gunneweg

The passing of the debate over the higher criticism still leaves us with the real problem of the Old Testament: *should it have any authority in the Christian Church and if so how is that authority to be defined?* Once one has awakened to [the] commanding importance of this question one will be able to see that it runs through the whole of Christian history with a scarlet thread. Yea, more: one can see that much of the difference in theologies springs from the extent to which they build Old Testament ideas or impulses into the primitive Christian patterns. And the latter, one may discover, differ in themselves already because of the degree of Old Testament influence received. The Old Testament problem, therefore, is not just one of many. It is the master problem of theology. And even for those who regard the first half of the question, as formulated above, beyond



debate, the second half still remains in force. All theology that operates in any way with [the] biblical heritage hangs in the air until it is settled.

—Emil G. Kraeling

The current fashion of thought has regarded the Old Testament as a monument of antiquity, interesting to the historian, the literary critic, and the archaeologist, but of little serious value for the life and thought of the modern Christian. Our approach to it has been by means of an overconfident “historicism,” wherein it is assumed that, once we are able to trace the accurate, detailed history of the linguistics and institutions of the Hebrew people in their proper life-situation, our task is finished. In reality, however, it has scarcely begun. Those of us who are Christian theists are still faced with the fundamental question: What is the relevance of the prophetic “Thus said the Lord” for our day? . . . One reason for such confusion . . . may be the lack of familiarity with a positive treatment of Old Testament theology. Not merely is this subject neglected in modern biblical teaching; it is almost entirely forgotten.

—G. Ernest Wright

“I shall go to my grave,” a friend of mine once wrote me, “feeling that Christian thought is a dead language—one that feeds many living ones to be sure, one that still sets these vibrating with echoes and undertones, but which I would no more use overtly than I would speak Latin.” I suppose he is right, more right than wrong anyway. If the language that clothes Christianity is not dead, it is at least, for many, dying; and what is really surprising, I suppose, is that it has lasted as long as it has.

—Frederick Buechner

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, the Hebrew and the Greek Bible and the translations of them, and the language of Christian tradition, the language in the forms of the thoughts, concepts and ideas, in which in the course of centuries the Christian Church has gained and upheld and declared its knowledge. There is a specifically Church language. That is in order. Let us call it by the familiar name by saying that there is a “language of Canaan.” And when the Christian confesses his faith, when we have to let the light that is kindled in us shine, no one can avoid speaking in this language. For this is how it is: if the things of Christian faith, if our trust in God and His Word is to be expressed precisely, so to speak in its essence—and time and again it is bitterly necessary for this to be done, so that things may be made clear—then it is inevitable that all undaunted the language of

Canaan should sound forth. For certain lights and indications and heartening warnings can be uttered directly in this language alone. . . . One thing is certain, that where the Christian Church does not venture to confess in its own language, it usually does not confess at all. Then it becomes the fellowship of the quiet, whereby it is much to be hoped that it does not become a community of dumb dogs.

—Karl Barth

Gather everyone—men, women, children, and the immigrants who live in your cities—in order that they hear it, learn it, and revere the LORD your God, carefully doing all the words of this Instruction, and so that their children, who don't yet know the Instruction, may hear it and learn to revere the LORD your God. . . . So in light of all that, you must write down this poem and teach it to the Israelites. Put it in their mouths so that the poem becomes a witness for me against them . . . this poem will witness against them, giving its testimony, because it won't be lost from the mouths of their descendants.

—Deuteronomy 31:12–13a, 19, 21 CEB

You've taught me since my youth, God,  
and I'm still proclaiming your wondrous deeds!  
So, even in my old age with gray hair, don't abandon me, God!  
Not until I tell generations about your mighty arm,  
tell all who are yet to come about your strength,  
and about your ultimate righteousness, God,  
because you've done awesome things!  
Who can compare to you, God?

—Psalm 71:17–19 CEB

When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, reason like a child, think like a child. But now that I have become a man, I've put an end to childish things.

—1 Corinthians 13:11 CEB

God's goal is for us to become mature adults—to be fully grown, measured by the standard of the fullness of Christ. As a result, we aren't supposed to be infants any longer who can be tossed and blown around by every wind that comes from teaching with deceitful scheming and the tricks people play to deliberately mislead others.

—Ephesians 4:13a–14 CEB

The Old Testament Is Dying

The days are surely coming, says the LORD God,  
when I will send hunger and thirst on the land;  
neither a hunger for bread, nor a thirst for water,  
but of hearing the LORD's words.  
They will wander from sea to sea,  
and from north to east;  
they will roam all around,  
seeking the LORD's word,  
but they won't find it.

—Amos 8:11–12 CEB

PART 1

# The Old Testament as a Dying Language

# 1

## The Old Testament Is Dying

### A (Non)Telling Vignette

Like many others who make their living as theological educators, I do a fair amount of teaching in local church settings. It is often and increasingly the case that the majority, if not the entirety, of the audiences at these events are senior citizens, with most more than a bit beyond the fifty-five-year age minimum to get cheaper coffee at McDonald's. Since I myself have school-age children at home, I understand and can sympathize with the fact that parents with children are stretched very thin, and if they aren't altogether absent from church that day due to soccer practice, cheerleading, or a debate team competition, they are perhaps assisting in children's worship, Sunday school, teen activities, or the like. While I have no doubt that this may very well be the case, the fact that so many of the regulars at the church events where I speak are septuagenarians, if not octogenarians or nonagenarians, is of great significance for the diagnosis that I offer here because one of the primary signs of language death is when only the elderly speak it.

Now let me be clear: I'm very thankful for the opportunities I get to teach, and I'm very thankful for any who will listen, whatever their age. Moreover, the elderly who so frequently predominate at my talks are, to borrow a churchy term, "the saints"—and that means that even if they aren't particularly holy, they've at least been around the church barn a few times. The odds are that they are fairly faithful people, on various fronts, that they know their Bibles decently well, and, although they may not like what's happening in the contemporary service, they'll almost certainly be back next Sunday along with

their title envelopes. Then too there is the additional fact that the saints, especially the quite elderly ones, always seem happy to have someone—especially someone (relatively) younger—come and spend some time talking to them.

But as I was teaching in a church in metropolitan Atlanta a summer or two ago, something shocking took place that I had never experienced before. I admit to being momentarily dumbfounded when it happened, but the full significance of what transpired didn't hit me until later. I was teaching a two-week series on biblical poetry and was introducing the topic by pointing out the use of poetry at certain key junctures in the Bible. I had mentioned several examples from the Old Testament and had just turned to the New Testament. I began with the role of prophetic poetry at the start of Jesus's ministry (the citation from Isa. 40:3; Mal. 3:1; and Exod. 23:20 in Mark 1:2) and then moved to the Passion Narratives, at which point I quoted Jesus's well-known "cry of dereliction" from the cross: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"—in the King James Version, no less (to tap the recall of the elderly audience). Given what I had just said, I figured the class was following me and that it was relatively clear that this saying from the cross was (a) poetic and (b) a citation from the Old Testament. So I asked the class of hoary heads what Jesus was quoting. Where, I questioned, did his words come from?

Total silence.

No one knew. Or if they did know, they certainly weren't telling. But the pause was long enough and the silence deafening enough to make it clear to me that this wasn't a case of being tight-lipped. It was a case of *not knowing*. One sweet-faced, white-haired woman finally shook her head, confirming my suspicion. No, they did not know the answer to my question. Not even this elderly group of "saints" knew that Jesus's cry was a direct quotation of Psalm 22.

That's when I realized, in a way that I had never realized before, that the Old Testament was dying.

### The Diagnosis, in Brief, with a Caveat

That, in brief, is my claim—or to employ a medical metaphor, my diagnosis: the Old Testament is dying. Much needs to be said about this claim to explain it, let alone establish it, but for now let me gloss it further by stating my firm belief that for many contemporary Christians, at least in North America,<sup>1</sup> the

1. I make no claims about Christianity elsewhere; perhaps other places on the planet are doing better. For the similarities and differences between Judaism and Christianity with reference to my diagnosis, see note 43 below.

Old Testament has ceased to function in healthy ways in their lives as sacred, authoritative, canonical literature. These individuals—or in some cases, groups of individuals (even entire churches)<sup>2</sup>—do not regard the Old Testament in the same way (or as highly) as the New Testament, do not understand the Old Testament, would prefer to do without the Old Testament, and for all practical purposes do exactly that by means of their neglect and ignorance of it, whether in private devotion or public worship or both. All of that is what I mean by the shorthand claim “The Old Testament is dying.” Indeed, in many circles, the claim “The Old Testament is dying,” as stark as it is, is not nearly stark enough. “The Old Testament is dead” is far more accurate.

Before going further, I want to clarify what I do and do not mean by this claim that the Old Testament is dying if not already dead. First and foremost, I do not intend any connections with the earlier (in)famous “God Is Dead” controversy of the 1960s.<sup>3</sup> Given the not-so-serendipitous convergence of the language, I admit to having entertained a different title for the present book by rephrasing it altogether as a question, “Is the Old Testament Dying?” While I have opted for the indicative formulation, it is nevertheless true that what follows is an *essay*, not a final or definitive statement, and it is the nature of all such claims to be contestable.<sup>4</sup> Some will no doubt challenge what I present here, and that is well and good. I would be *beyond* delighted

2. As one example, I mention a church near my home whose sign reads “The Praise Center: A New Testament Church for the 21st Century.” So-called New Testament churches of various sorts (typically of the low-church or free-church variety) are not uncommon in the United States; by contrast, I have never once seen an “Old Testament Church.” Regardless, the root problem is not restricted to more conservative-evangelical wings of Christianity and may be even more pronounced outside such circles. Ellen F. Davis tracks the same trend in mainline Christianity: “The Old Testament is ceasing to function as Scripture in the European-American mainstream church” (“Losing a Friend,” 83).

3. For the “God is dead” controversy, see Elson, “Theology: Toward a Hidden God,” beginning on 82. The stark black-and-white cover of that issue of *Time* has “Is God Dead?” in red (<http://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19660408,00.html>). Note also the slightly earlier treatment in Elson, “God Is Dead Movement”; the letters responding to “Theology: Toward a Hidden God” in *Time*, April 15, 1966, 13; April 22, 1966, 9; April 29, 1966, 19; and May 6, 1966, 9; and the publisher’s letter on May 20, 1966, 23. The God-is-dead idea and Thomas J. J. Altizer, one of the theologians with whom it is inextricably linked, are also mentioned in the unsigned article by Elson, “Changing Theologies for a Changing World,” 42–43; cf. the cover story in that issue, “Is God Coming Back to Life?,” beginning on 40. More recently, see the autumn 2006 issue of *Emory Magazine*. In 1966, Anthony Towne wrote an entertaining obituary for God for the *New York Times* (“Obituary’ for God”): “God, creator of the universe, principal deity of the world’s Jews, ultimate reality of Christians, and most eminent of all divinities, died late yesterday during major surgery undertaken to correct a massive diminishing influence.” Long before Altizer et al., there was Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, esp. 181. Cf. R. Morgan with J. Barton, *Biblical Interpretation*, 60.

4. See, e.g., Booth, Colomb, and J. Williams, *Craft of Research*, 120–29.

to be proven wrong—indeed, to borrow words from Bill McKibben,<sup>5</sup> it is my prayer to be proven wrong, but thus far my prayers have gone unanswered, and so I remain convinced that my diagnosis is correct. I have based my assessment on the available data at hand and my interpretation of those data, but I admit that “the parties” involved in my study—the Old Testament and its life within contemporary Christianity—are very large subjects, and so any one person’s assessment cannot help but be limited, perspectival, and to some degree anecdotal.<sup>6</sup>

Let me be clear: I have no doubt that the Old Testament is read, at least occasionally, by many Christians and in many churches, but part of my larger point—not to mention the larger problem—is not simply *if* the Old Testament is present (somehow), read (intermittently), or preached from (sporadically), but *how* it is present, read, preached from, and so on and so forth. The Old Testament was also present in Nazi Germany, at least for a while, but *how?*—which is to ask, *To what end?*<sup>7</sup>

Further, even at the points where I do make firm claims, where I do mean to describe the terminal state of the Old Testament among certain people or groups, my argument should not be confused with an affirmative or prescriptive statement on my part. As will be obvious in what follows, the death of the Old Testament is not something I endorse. Far from it! Instead, it constitutes my greatest sadness.

## The Old Testament Is (Like) a Language

My diagnosis that the Old Testament is dying, if not already dead, depends on a linguistic analogy. The analogy is that the Old Testament is a language or very much like a language; hence, like other languages, it can die out relatively quickly, even definitively, never to return in living form. But what does it mean to say that the Old Testament is a language or very much like one? I begin with what I do *not* mean by this statement.

First, I do not mean to discuss the language of the Old Testament itself, which, in truth, is not one language but several. When studying the Old Testament “in the original,” one must actually reckon with many ancient languages: Classical (or Biblical) Hebrew primarily, of course, but also Biblical

5. Cf. McKibben, *End of Nature*, xxiv (on environmental issues).

6. To be sure, anecdotes aren’t all bad and comprise part of the arsenal in the New Historicism (see Hens-Piazza, *New Historicism*). Note also Prothero’s instructive use of both hard data and anecdotes in his *Religious Literacy*. See chap. 2 below for some (semi)empirical data to support the diagnosis offered here.

7. See Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 143–54; and chap. 5 below.



Aramaic for those bits of Genesis, Jeremiah, and especially Daniel and Ezra that exist in that language. Next in importance, though very important in and of itself, is the Greek of the Septuagint (LXX), which in turn is a complex entity comprising “one” (yet again, one out of many) of the most important textual witnesses to the Old Testament, together with those apocryphal or deuterocanonical books that survive exclusively or primarily in that language.<sup>8</sup> This listing doesn’t yet include the many other languages that have preserved important versions of the Old Testament—the Latin Vulgate, for instance, or the Syriac Peshitta, both of which contain additional deuterocanonical material—nor does it include certain languages that have proved to be particularly useful for the study of the Old Testament in terms of understanding low-frequency words, analyzing poetry, or providing crucial historical and cultural contexts for the biblical texts. One thinks here of the ancient Near Eastern languages, especially of Hebrew’s close Northwest Semitic cousin, Ugaritic, but also and especially the massive gold mine that is Akkadian in its various dialects and periods.

All of these languages are important, and the most competent biblical scholars work with several at a time, but it should be quickly admitted that a thorough knowledge of even just one, even Biblical Hebrew itself, while of great help, does not (re)solve every problem one encounters in the Old Testament. Part of why that is the case is precisely due to the nature of these languages and how they differ from our own.<sup>9</sup> Walter Brueggemann has this to say about Biblical Hebrew specifically:

Of all that could be said of this script [the Bible], my initial point is a simple but crucial one. It is in Hebrew, not Latin. I do not say that to suggest that one cannot read it without knowledge of Hebrew grammar, though such knowledge is a good idea and a real advantage. I say it rather to make the point that this text, in its very utterance, in its ways of putting things, is completely unfamiliar to us. . . . Hebrew, even for those who know it much better than do I, is endlessly imprecise and unclear. It lacks the connecting words; it denotes rather than connotes; it points and opens and suggests, but it does not conclude or define.<sup>10</sup>

8. Hebrew fragments of some apocryphal books were found at Qumran—notably Sirach, Tobit, Psalm 151, and the Letter of Jeremiah. See Collins, “Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha”; and chap. 7 below.

9. Similarly, neither does simply reading the Bible guarantee some sort of “faithful” engagement or response. See, anecdotally, Plotz, *Good Book*; and chaps. 2, 4–6 below. Some studies on correlations between Scripture reading and various ethical activities show this as an area that is at least theoretically open to social-scientific analysis. See, e.g., Fawcett and Linkletter, “Bible Reading and Adolescents’ Attitudes.”

10. Brueggemann, “Preaching a Sub-Version,” 197.

Or, as another Old Testament scholar, Peter Enns, has written: “Knowing the original Hebrew does not always make the text ‘come alive’! It often introduces obscurities that English readers are not aware of.”<sup>11</sup>

The point here, however, is not the number of languages necessary for a minimally adequate interpretation of the Bible; neither is the point how difficult these various languages can be. Despite the truism about how much is “lost in translation,”<sup>12</sup> one hopes that one’s native vernacular will suffice for much biblical interpretation (particularly if we are speaking of *minimum* competency), especially given the large number and range of excellent translations of the Bible into English, not to mention the countless resources for the study of the Bible that are based on its original languages, even for those who know none of them.<sup>13</sup> Instead, my point is that the Old Testament itself *is* a language, or, to back off ever so slightly, very much like a language.

What I mean by this linguistic analogy, then, is that the Old Testament, like any other piece of literature or art—like any other way of figuring the world—is, or at least can be, a way of constructing reality, a way of understanding the world, a way of perceiving all that is, including ourselves.<sup>14</sup> Just as language—preverbal, nonverbal, and verbal—allows us to make sense of the world and ourselves, the Old Testament provides (or can provide) a kind of grammar for constructing, perceiving, and understanding the same.<sup>15</sup>

There are several ways to unpack this notion of the language that is the Old Testament.

First, we might observe that the languages used in the Old Testament—Hebrew primarily, but also Aramaic, Greek, and all the others—reflect a certain way of perceiving reality (see further below). This is a basic insight regarding the social construction of reality familiar from the work of, among

11. Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation*, 71–72.

12. Bly puts it memorably in *Eight Stages of Translation*, 15–16: “As we read the literal [translation of the poem], our first reaction is: What happened to the poem? Where did it go? So we read the original again and it’s still marvelous; so evidently something has been left out [of the translation]—probably the meaning.”

13. These, too, don’t guarantee much of anything. See at note 9 above and chaps. 8–9 below.

14. For literature more generally, see Booth, *Company We Keep*, esp. his chapters on figurative language (293–373). For the “livability” of metaphor, see also Lakoff and M. Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*.

15. John Calvin puts things similarly, though using a visual metaphor: “Just as old or bleary-eyed men and those with weak vision, if you thrust before them a most beautiful volume, even if they recognize it to be some sort of writing, yet can scarcely construe two words, but with the aid of spectacles will begin to read distinctly; so Scripture, gathering up the otherwise confused knowledge of God in our minds, having dispersed our dullness, clearly shows us the true God” (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1:70 [1.6.1]).

others, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman.<sup>16</sup> Biblical Hebrew (or Aramaic or Greek, etc.) is thus hardly unique at this point. Every society constructs reality in a certain way, with language serving as a primary vehicle of the construction.<sup>17</sup> The same holds true for *religious* societies and/or for *religious aspects* of a society.<sup>18</sup>

A second, closely related way to understand the notion would be to observe how the Old Testament itself—as a complex whole, not simply by means of its specific linguistic form(s)—is a way of constructing and understanding the world. In this view, the issue is not, for example, to notice how interesting (if not odd) it is that deep emotions are often associated with the bowels in Hebrew anthropology, or how rage is located in the nose.<sup>19</sup> Neither is the issue to wonder how Hebrew conceptions of time seem oriented, to some degree at least, toward the cardinal points of the compass, with the speaker evidently facing the past, since “the past” is קדמ/ *qdm*, a word related to what lies “before” or “in front of,” which means the speaker rows backward into “the future,” which in Hebrew is related to אחר/ *’hr*, “behind.”<sup>20</sup>

The way Hebrew terms reflect anthropology and time are both interesting points and not without significance, yet to speak of the Old Testament writ large as a language says that it is more than the sum of its (specific Hebrew) parts in the same way that the book of Job is more than a list of its vocabulary items. Thus the language that is the Old Testament is more than just one book, such as Job. The book of Job may be one piece of the language—perhaps a lexical item or a syntactical unit, maybe even a sentence, paragraph, or larger unit of discourse—having to do with suffering, for example; yet certain other pieces of the language of the Old Testament also have something to contribute to that subject: Proverbs, say, or Deuteronomy. Calling the latter two “lexemes” that are antonyms to Job’s “word,” or calling them “sentences” that are antithetical to Job’s, isn’t entirely wrong, but it also isn’t very helpful, mostly because the word/antonym structure is too simplistic for complex compositions like these ones.<sup>21</sup> Even so, an important point in this second way of understanding the linguistic analogy of the Old Testament as (like) a language is that, in this construal, in order to “speak

16. Berger and Luckman, *Social Construction of Reality*.

17. Cf. the following works, some of which are in debate: Deutscher, *Through the Language Glass*; McWhorter, *Language Hoax*; and Pinker, *Stuff of Thought*.

18. Cf., e.g., D. Morgan, *Visual Piety*, esp. 1–20.

19. See Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, 63–66; M. Smith, “The Heart and Innards.”

20. See Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, 88; and Wyatt, “Vocabulary and Neurology of Orientation”; reprinted in Wyatt, *Mythic Mind*, 125–50.

21. For the dialogical complexity within Job, see, e.g., Newsom, *Book of Job*.

the language,” especially with any sort of fluency, one would need to know *both* Job *and* Proverbs, Job *and* Deuteronomy, Deuteronomy *and* Proverbs, and so on and so forth. Otherwise one isn’t speaking the full language but something significantly less than that: an incomplete or severely abbreviated version of the language—baby talk, as it were.<sup>22</sup>

A third way to understand the notion of the Old Testament as being (like) a language is to consider the possibility that someone could conceivably adopt one or both of the former approaches and so construct one’s own world similarly. This would be an exercise in forming what is sometimes called a “biblical worldview.” Such worldviews are rarely constructed in terms of the first understanding offered above. Few indeed would advocate reconceptualizing modern understandings of cognition so as to locate it where ancient Israelites believed cognition was housed, not in the brain at all, but in the “heart” (לֵב/*lēb*). Only a very few and rather unique individuals, that is, have the wherewithal and zaniness to spend a year “living biblically”—in an extreme sort of way, at any rate—though evidently doing so can occasionally lead them to write best-selling books.<sup>23</sup> (But even these people can only stand a year of it!) Instead, the idea of a “biblical worldview” is almost always predicated on something similar to the second understanding: perceiving reality in terms commensurate with the Bible. In this perspective, Christianity is a way of “imagining the world Scripture imagines.”<sup>24</sup> Of course, so too is Judaism, especially with the yearly remembrance of the exodus in the Passover Haggadah: “We were slaves in Egypt. . . .”<sup>25</sup>

For some people the idea of constructing a biblical worldview makes good sense (probably because they are thinking in terms of the more sober option above); to others the exact opposite is the case (especially if they are thinking in terms of the more zany option above). Either way, it is safe to say that, whether consciously or not, intentionally or otherwise, worldviews are being formed all the time—to one degree or another—and literature and other works of art are a part of that formation, if not the primary way they are formed.<sup>26</sup>

22. See further chaps. 3–7 below.

23. See Jacobs, *Year of Living Biblically*. Note also R. Evans, *Year of Biblical Womanhood*; B. Cohen, *My Jesus Year*; within the same orbit, Plotz, *Good Book*.

24. See L. Johnson, “Imagining the World Scripture Imagines.” See also, inter alia, Brueggemann, *Book That Breathes New Life*, xv–xvi; Brueggemann, *Inscribing the Text*, 13–14; and more generally, Kort, “Take, Read.”

25. Cf. Fishbane, *Exegetical Imagination*, 4; also chaps. 4–5 below on figural reading.

26. Booth, *Company We Keep*, is helpful on this point: such formation is neither automatic nor invariably “positive.” Rather, readers are always making judgments about what they read, which, for Booth, ultimately comes down to a decision regarding whether or not the reader will choose to keep company with this or that piece of literature, deeming it a close friend, a distant

It thus should come as no surprise, and there is no obvious rebuttal to it (at least in theory), that the Old Testament could be used in similar ways. To put the matter more directly: it seems clear that the Old Testament works (or *can* work) on readers in these world-constructing ways quite apart from intentional use or conscious awareness. One example of this kind of “work” is found in the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL) and how it (re)presents the Bible as a lens through which one can and does—perhaps even must—reflect on a season in the Christian year or the themes of that particular liturgical season, assuming one uses it.<sup>27</sup> This example granted, there still remain significant problems with the notion of a biblical worldview and with constructing one—not the least of which is that there is no one, simple, unified “biblical worldview” (recall above on speaking “only Job”), and even if there were just “one,” getting it from back there—from “Bible Land” where it was written in “Bible-ese”—to here and now is no small task or mean feat.

Despite the problems besetting this third approach—or at least simplistic versions of it—it remains reasonable to think that the Old Testament is (like) a language in the sense that the Old Testament could be used in the creation of a biblical worldview (the third approach), or in the sense that it could be used to perceive the world (the second approach), whether that perception is modern in orientation or outcome (the second and third approaches) or ancient—meaning, in the last case, Israel’s articulation of its own reality (the first approach). Whether the Old Testament *would* be so used (and in the best-case scenarios) is precisely the question at hand.

One could appeal to yet other disciplines beyond those of the Bible or linguistics in support of the notion that the Old Testament is (like) a language, useful for understanding the world. In systematic theology, for example, George A. Lindbeck famously advocated a “cultural-linguistic” understanding of Christian doctrine.<sup>28</sup> More broadly and in truth more fundamentally (since

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acquaintance, or a downright enemy. Other useful works include Ricoeur, *Rule of Metaphor*; and Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*.

27. See, e.g., Kaltner and McKenzie, *Back Door Introduction to the Bible*, 127–28. On the RCL, see chap. 2 below.

28. Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, esp. 18–27; also 152–65, with an extensive listing of reviews and secondary treatments of Lindbeck’s work. Among others, note Tracy, “Lindbeck’s New Program for Theology”; Michalson, “Response to Lindbeck”; and reviews by Corner; Raynal; G. Kaufman. See also Marshall, “Introduction: *The Nature of Doctrine* after 25 Years,” which details many critiques of Lindbeck but also offers Marshall’s own refutation of several of them. An OT scholar’s perspective may be found in Childs, *New Testament as Canon*, 541–46; and Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*, 21–22. Lindbeck, in turn, contributed to one of Childs’s *Festschriften*: “Postcritical Canonical Interpretation.” Two other works that deal with linguistics and cultural factors are Blount, *Cultural Interpretation*; and Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, esp. 3–25.

Lindbeck depended on anthropological theory), one could note the use of linguistic analogies, structures, and concepts in cultural anthropology in order to understand social systems along the lines of linguistic ones.<sup>29</sup> To quote Claire Jacobson, the translator of Claude Lévi-Strauss's classic work on the subject, *Structural Anthropology*: "Language can . . . be treated as a conceptual model for other aspects of culture; these aspects can also be regarded as systems of communication."<sup>30</sup> So it is that many fields have taken "the linguistic turn."<sup>31</sup> Close to the Old Testament proper, we might cite the iconographic work of Othmar Keel and Christoph Uehlinger, who have used similar insights to depict ancient Israelite religion as a massive "symbol system" replete with an artistic grammar and correlate syntax.<sup>32</sup>

Indeed, the linguistic analogy of Christian belief, along with its foundational texts, as being (like) a language has informed two recent books by two very different theologians, both of whom, despite their deep disagreements, write about "speaking Christian."<sup>33</sup> Marcus J. Borg argues that *to be Christian is to speak Christian*:

Why do I express this crisis [in the ability to "speak Christian"] as a problem of language? Because language is the medium through which people participate in their religion. To be part of a religion means being able to speak and understand its language. Every religion has a basic vocabulary: its "big" words and collections of words, spoken and heard in worship, embodied in rituals and practices.

Thus to be Jewish means "speaking Jewish"; to be Muslim means "speaking Muslim"; to be Buddhist means "speaking Buddhist"; and so forth. By "speaking" I do not mean merely knowing either the ancient languages of these religions or their modern descendants. I mean something more basic: the way practitioners use the concepts and ideas from their religion as a lens through which to see the world, the way they use them to connect their religion to their life in the world. . . .

29. Lindbeck is explicitly dependent on Clifford Geertz (esp. his essays "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," "The Impact of the Concept of Culture on the Concept of Man," "The Growth of Culture and the Evolution of Mind," and "Religion as a Cultural System"—all in Geertz's *Interpretation of Cultures*, 1–30, 33–54, 55–86, 87–125, respectively) among others. Lindbeck's debt to Ludwig Wittgenstein is also notable (seen in the index to *Nature of Doctrine*, 170). See also the classic study by Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, esp. 31–97. Of course structuralism, which depends heavily on linguistic research and analogues (note Lévi-Strauss's dependence on Saussure), has also been vigorously debated and critiqued, esp. by thinkers writing from poststructuralist perspectives (including that of deconstruction).

30. Jacobson, "Translator's Preface," xii.

31. See, e.g., Rorty, *Linguistic Turn*.

32. Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses, and Images of God*.

33. Borg, *Speaking Christian*; and Hauerwas, *Working with Words*.

In this respect, being Christian (or Jewish or Muslim) is like being French (or Turkish or Korean). One of the criteria for being French is the ability to speak French. Another is being able to understand French. We would not think someone fluent in French if that person could speak it but not understand it. In the same way, literacy means more than simply being able to make sounds out of written words. It also involves having some understanding of what the words mean. Christian literacy means not simply the ability to recognize biblical and Christian words, but also to understand them.<sup>34</sup>

Stanley Hauerwas asserts that theology is “work with words,” and therefore “the work of the theologian is word work.”<sup>35</sup> Like Borg, he believes that the problem facing Christianity is mostly a linguistic one:

I think the characterizations of the challenges facing those going into the ministry are the result of the loss of the ability of Christians to speak the language of our faith. The accommodated character of the church is at least partly due to the failure of the clergy to help those they serve know how to speak Christian. To learn to be a Christian, to learn the discipline of the faith, is not just similar to learning another language. It *is* learning another language.<sup>36</sup>

Not all of the disciplines of study mentioned above (systematic theology, cultural anthropology, ancient Israelite religion) use language in exactly the same way—no more than do Borg and Hauerwas agree on every detail—but they do represent a confluence around the usefulness of the linguistic analogy, which also commends its use and utility with reference to the Old Testament.

### Plan of the Book and Two Additional Caveats

Now if the linguistic analogy is apt and instructive for the Old Testament, this would mean that, just like any other language, the Old Testament could be taught, learned, and spoken, whether well or poorly, fluently or haltingly. It would also mean that, like any other language, the Old Testament is subject to the same kinds of processes that affect all other languages. These processes include linguistic growth and change, but also, depending on the language and

34. Borg, *Speaking Christian*, 5–6; in this same context he explicitly cites Lindbeck. Cf. also *ibid.*, 18: “It is the premise of this book that religions are like languages. If we take this seriously, it means that being Christian means speaking Christian. To cease to speak Christian would mean no longer being Christian—just as ceasing to speak French would mean no longer being French. Speaking Christian is essential to being Christian.”

35. Hauerwas, *Working with Words*, x.

36. *Ibid.*, 86–87, emphasis original.

the circumstances, linguistic decline, demise, and ultimately death—the full extent, in other words, of the language life cycle. The death of any human language is a tragedy, given the amazing repositories of knowledge that each encodes in its own unique way.<sup>37</sup> The death of religious language is similarly tragic, and often accompanied by serious sociohistorical, even geopolitical ramifications.<sup>38</sup> In the case of the (seemingly imminent) death of the Old Testament, the problem is acute for the reasons already expressed, as well as other reasons presented in chapters 2 and 4–6. But the gravity of the situation is already signaled in several of the *testimonia* used as the epigraphs to the present book. Deficient knowledge of the Old Testament leads to defects in Christian knowledge, according to Wilhelm Vischer; *all* theological questions are related in one way or another to the hermeneutical problem of the Old Testament, according to A. H. J. Gunneweg; indeed, understanding the Old Testament is the master problem of theology, according to Emil G. Kraeling. All of these points are made even more poignant by G. Ernest Wright’s remark that, for many, the Old Testament is nothing but an ancient monument, which means that a “positive treatment” of its theology is a subject that is not only neglected but almost entirely forgotten; and by Frederick Buechner’s comment: it is no small miracle that the language clothing Christianity “has lasted as long as it has.” Finally, the passage from Karl Barth underscores once more what is at stake: the “language of Canaan” is absolutely necessary if one wishes to speak precisely about—or better, to *confess*—the essence of Christian faith.<sup>39</sup>

Given my diagnosis that the Old Testament is dying, the problem of language death is of special concern here. But before addressing that issue directly, it is helpful to step back and offer some (semi)empirical evidence as proof that the Old Testament qua language is truly in dire straits. This “initial testing” of the patient is carried out in chapter 2 with reference to four distinct data sets, the first of which concerns the health of the Old Testament (not to mention some other religious subjects) among the general populace, while the other three speak to the life (or rather, death) of the Old Testament in Christian liturgical practice(s).

With these preliminary tests confirming the initial diagnosis, chapter 3 addresses language death proper, including how languages die, why they die,

37. See, e.g., Harrison, *Last Speakers*; and D. Wheeler, “Death of Languages.” See further chap. 3 below.

38. See Prothero, *Religious Literacy*.

39. Respectively: Vischer, “Das alte Testament als Gottes Wort,” 386; Gunneweg, *Understanding the Old Testament*, 2; Kraeling, *Old Testament since the Reformation*, 7–8; G. E. Wright, *Challenge of Israel’s Faith*, v–vi; Buechner, *Magnificent Defeat*, 110; Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, 31.



and what is lost when they die. Treating these matters requires some background on how languages grow and change, as well as some discussion of the linguistic processes known as pidginization and creolization, because these bear directly on how languages change and survive and how they disappear and die. Indeed, pidginization and creolization are on further display in the signs of morbidity that are the focus of chapters 4–6. On the one hand, the signs of the patient’s demise discussed in those chapters offer nothing new: they simply confirm the diagnosis and the results of the initial testing. On the other hand, they are especially important and troubling because they showcase the death of the Old Testament in three discourses or areas that are in many ways larger and more public—and thus more problematic—than those treated in chapter 2. The three discourses are the so-called New Atheism, Marcionites Old and New, and what I am calling, for lack of a better term, the New Plastic Gospels of the “happiologists.”<sup>40</sup> In each of these three areas, the Old Testament seems to be on its last breath. In truth, in the case of the first two, the patient has already been laid to rest, without even the dignity of a proper funeral. Regardless, chapters 4–6 demonstrate that it is precisely the death of the Old Testament as a language that permits these three discourses to flourish after their own fashion and in their own way—fashions and ways that, in my judgment, are deeply flawed both theologically and ethically.

Thus far, then, my primary claim is that the Old Testament is dying, if not already dead. I have referred to this claim, both here and in the book’s subtitle, as a “diagnosis,” a word typically defined as “determination of the nature of a diseased condition; identification of a disease by careful investigation of its symptoms and history.”<sup>41</sup> The problem of language death and the signs and symptoms of this pathology in the life of the Old Testament are presented in chapters 2–6. But, lest I seem completely pessimistic about the patient’s future—that the Old Testament is completely incurable, altogether terminal—let me also draw attention to the other part of the book’s subtitle, the part that mentions “recommended treatment.” Part of my diagnosis—a word that also means “the opinion (formally stated) resulting from . . . investigation” of an illness<sup>42</sup>—is that the disease need *not* be terminal and so, in chapters 7–9, I move from diagnosis to prognosis, asking what can be done

40. I take the term “happiologists” from Peterson, *Primer in Positive Psychology*, 7–8, who is careful to say that “happiology” is not the same as authentic happiness, one of the primary foci of Positive Psychology. Peterson does not use the term with reference to prosperity preachers, which is how I am employing it.

41. See *OED*, s.v. “diagnosis, n.”

42. *Ibid.*

to prevent the death of this particular and precious language known in Christian circles as “the Old Testament.”<sup>43</sup> Here too I draw from linguistics—not only with regard to the preservation, revival, and even resurrection of dead and dying languages, but also via insights from children’s language learning and second-language acquisition. These theories will, in the end, highlight the importance of two crucial factors in the future life of the Old Testament as a vibrant living language of faith that is “spoken here”: the significance of children and the important role of poetry and music. As we will see, these are profoundly interrelated.

Finally, two caveats are in order. First, I am aware that my linguistic analogy—that the Old Testament is (like) a language—like any other analogy, is imperfect. There are several reasons for this. One is the nature of analogy itself: there is no one-to-one correspondence in analogy. But further, on the linguistic side of the analogy, we might recognize that the study of languages is an inexact science, and it is inexact precisely on matters relating to several crucial differentiations—when, for instance, a dialect is no longer a dialect but a truly distinct “language,” or how “languages” themselves are something of a construct because languages are, in truth, complex conglomerations of many smaller though similar idiolects spoken by individual speakers.

On the biblical-theological front, there is the constant temptation to reify the linguistic analogy in some way such that (or with the result that) the Old Testament (or belief system or sacred text of whatever sort) becomes *unlike* any real language. As chapter 3 makes clear, *every* language—even a freshly invented one—is subject to change, growth, and development.<sup>44</sup> Why shouldn’t

43. It is not altogether clear to me that the adjective “Old” in “Old Testament” is part of the problem; while it certainly isn’t the whole of it, it may well play into it. Christopher R. Seitz has thought hard about the matters of nomenclature and the two-testament form of the Christian Bible; see his *Word without End*, esp. 61–74; Seitz, *Figured Out*, esp. 91–190; and most recently, Seitz, *Character of Christian Scripture*. In any event, the Christian language I employ here (and throughout) is intentional precisely because what I am discussing is largely a Christian issue. The problem is not evident in quite the same way in Judaism, for several obvious reasons. Even so, Judaism also has a kind of NT analogue, a corpus of postbiblical authoritative literature: the rabbinic material (esp. Mishnah and Talmud). Thus Judaism, too, may not be completely immune from the potential death of Scripture. In this regard, notice Tikva Frymer-Kensky’s critique of rabbinic “supersessionism” in which the rabbis always trump the Bible (“The Emergence of Jewish Biblical Theologies,” in *Studies in the Bible and Feminist Criticism*, esp. 367–68). At least it seems safe to say that certain portions of the Hebrew Bible are more authoritative than others in many segments of contemporary Judaism, representing small deaths of a kind. See, e.g., Sommer, “Scroll of Isaiah as Jewish Scripture”; and the related matters in chaps. 2 and 4–6.

44. Cf. G. Kaufman’s review of *Nature of Doctrine*, where he makes the point that “no linguistic grammar ever is unchanging in the way in which Lindbeck’s doctrinal ‘grammar’ is supposed to be” (241); Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 138–43.

the language that is the Old Testament do the same, especially if and when it is regularly practiced? Indeed, reification of any “cultural-linguistic” system is doubly problematic if (and when) it seems to reflect only a cognitive approach to meaning, belief, and language. Matters of meaning, belief, and language are all best understood as *embodied*,<sup>45</sup> and one must not neglect that crucial insight, nor the importance of *practice* as such in any “language” of whatever sort.<sup>46</sup> A closely related issue is 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.<sup>47</sup> The Old Testament itself bears witness to multiple dialects and diachronic change—whether that is in terms of the Hebrew used within the Bible,<sup>48</sup> in stories about (and data from) ancient Israel and its linguistic realities (e.g., Judg. 12:4–6; cf. Isa. 19:18; Ps. 114:1), or in the analogical sense discussed above (the “Job” dialect vs. “Deuteronomy” dialect). Which dialect was “the original”? Which stage was most “pure”?<sup>49</sup>

I will return to these issues in various ways in the chapters that follow. For now, though, it is enough to point out that since the analogy is imperfect, we shouldn’t press it too hard or far. It remains an *analogy*. Even so, despite any and all problems, the analogy remains highly instructive, helping to explain, among other things, why the saints in that church in metropolitan Atlanta

45. See Lakoff and M. Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh*; W. S. Brown and B. D. Strawn, *Physical Nature of Christian Life*. For the power of poetry to combine thinking and feeling, see chaps. 8–9.

46. This was, of course, a major critique of Lindbeck; see notes 28 and 44 above. The work of Ludwig Wittgenstein is important at this point. See Sluga, “Wittgenstein,” esp. 977–78, 980. Perhaps the most embodied form of language is sign language.

47. Cf. Holm, *Introduction to Pidgins and Creoles*, 1–4. In several of his works, John McWhorter makes a compelling case against any pure, “blackboard” grammar, and the best proof against that is precisely the historical development of the language in question. See, e.g., McWhorter, *Word on the Street*; McWhorter, *Doing Our Own Thing*; McWhorter, *Our Magnificent Bastard Tongue*; McWhorter, “Linguistics from the Left”; McWhorter, *What Language Is*. Even so, the existence of diachronic development does demonstrate change from earlier forms and thus at times highlights more pristine (at least theoretically) linguistic stages. For more on pidgins and creoles, see chap. 3. On the English language, see Crystal, *Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*.

48. See, e.g., I. Young, Rezetko, and Ehrensverd, *Linguistic Dating of Biblical Texts*, esp. 1:173–200; Kutscher, *Linguistic Background of the Isaiah Scroll*, 62–71; Bauer and Leander, *Historische Grammatik der hebräischen Sprache*; Sperber, *Historical Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*; Rendsburg, “Comprehensive Guide to Israelian Hebrew”; Rendsburg, *Diglossia in Ancient Hebrew*; Miller-Naudé and Zevit, *Diachrony in Biblical Hebrew*; Day, *Recovery of the Ancient Hebrew Language*; Sáenz-Badillos, *History of the Hebrew Language*; Waldman, *Recent Study of Hebrew*; Schmiedewind, *Social History of Hebrew*; Sawyer, *Sacred Languages and Sacred Texts*; and more generally, chap. 3 below (with additional bibliography).

49. I mean to avoid, then, giving the impression that “God spoke Hebrew” and also skirt some of the (comparable) critiques raised to Lindbeck’s work (see above). See further chaps. 8–9.

didn't know their Psalm 22, and why that (non)telling vignette is, upon further reflection, a very disturbing story indeed.

Second, although I am at pains here to diagnose and prevent the death of the Old Testament, and therefore the talk is everywhere about the Old Testament, I nevertheless believe that the argument also holds true for the entirety of the Christian Bible. If the Old Testament dies, the New Testament will not be far behind it, even if that process takes a bit longer (see chaps. 4–7 for proof of the point). The “linguistic” problems that face the Old Testament also face the New. In the main, then, I believe the data show that it is the language of Scripture *as a whole*—not just that of the Old Testament—that is seriously threatened. Even so, as Christians move further away from Scripture, they surely move furthest away from the Old Testament, since it is at the farthest remove from them in terms of chronology, ideology, ethics, theology, and so on.<sup>50</sup> That is why it is increasingly difficult for Christians to understand and speak “Old Testament.” Of course, that is only true for the uninitiated—those who are novices in the language of Scripture. The biblically fluent, by way of contrast, already know that the Old Testament provides the deep structure for the New Testament and thus the Bible's deep language, maybe even its universal grammar.<sup>51</sup> This is further proof of how the death of the Old Testament bears directly and profoundly on the death of the New Testament. After all, the saints who didn't know Psalm 22 also, and as a direct result, didn't know the Gospel of Mark.

50. Cf., inter alia, Gunneweg, *Understanding the Old Testament*.

51. For an example of how the Passion Narratives of the NT depend on the book of Exodus (“deep structure”), see Strawn, “Exodus,” esp. 33–34. “Deep language” alludes to C. S. Lewis's *Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*; and “universal grammar” alludes to Noam Chomsky's linguistic theory.