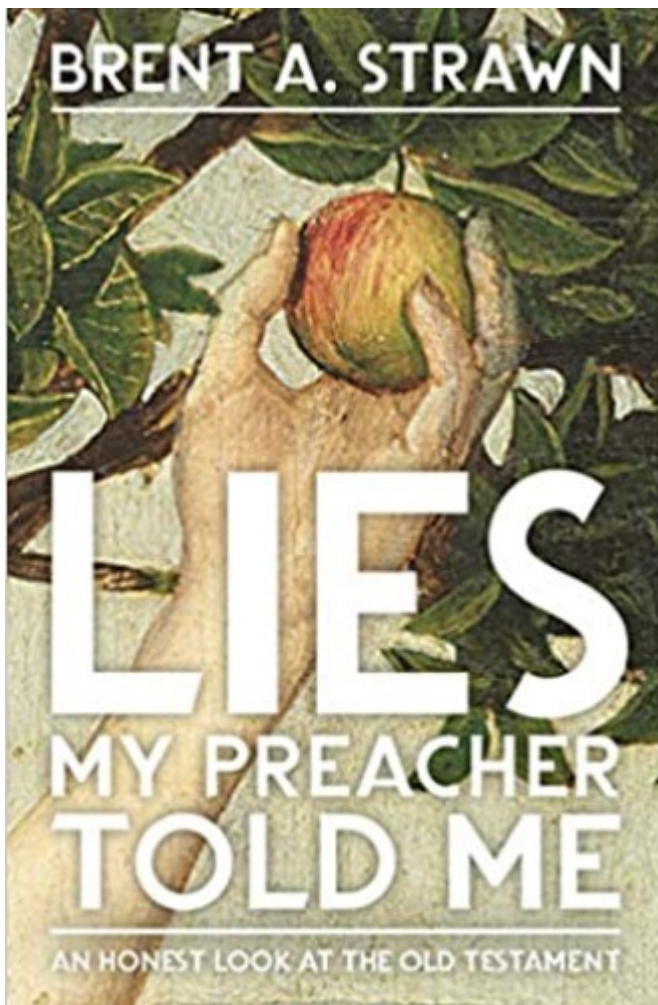


Lies about the Old Testament

Brent Strawn aims to debunk mistruths that come from biblical illiteracy and anti-Semitism.

by [Sally Dyck](#) in the [April 21, 2021](#) issue

In Review



Lies My Preacher Told Me

An Honest Look at the Old Testament

By Brent A. Strawn
Westminster John Knox Press
[Buy from Bookshop.org >](http://www.bookshop.org)

At least three times in this book, Brent Strawn assures readers that he doesn't believe that Christian preachers and teachers intentionally tell lies about the Old Testament. But that doesn't diminish the seriousness of the mistruths that are prevalent in pulpit and pew.

Strawn calls them mistruths rather than lies in part to emphasize how dangerous they can be. "In the case of a lie, the truth simply needs to be brought to light for things to be set right," he writes. While lies can be set straight with the truth, mistruths are harder to identify. They have deeper (and often unexamined) roots of misinformation or prejudice. "Mistruths are thus far more insidious and intractable than a bald-faced lie," Strawn explains.

The book covers ten mistruths touching on a variety of topics, including God's nature, violence in the scriptures, what the law is (and is not), and how the Old Testament relates to Jesus Christ.

Strawn begins with the common mistruth that "the Old Testament is 'someone else's mail,'" meaning that it wasn't written for Christians. Pastors and teachers often convey the narratives and teachings of the Old Testament in a way that fails to connect them with the Christian story. And yet the humanity of many Old Testament characters makes them inspiring examples for Christians. Moses, Aaron, and Miriam model how to live in the midst of adversity; Daniel and Esther exemplify the need to be courageous. The Old Testament's teachings, too, offer timeless truths that seek to connect us with God and our neighbors.

Perhaps a more puzzling mistruth is that "the Old Testament is a boring history book." *Au contraire!* The stories of the Torah in particular are quite scintillating at times. Are there troubling stories in the midst of them? Yes, and Strawn addresses some of these, especially in his discussion of the mistruth that "the Old Testament is hyper-violent." These and the other mistruths that Strawn raises are important for Christians to consider as we learn more about the Old Testament and its role in our own tradition.

"The Old Testament isn't spiritually enriching" is a very unfortunate mistruth for those who have adopted it. The chapter on this subject is one of Strawn's strongest.

He draws out the many ways Old Testament genres—the Psalms, narratives like the exodus—have historically been and continue to be sources of great inspiration when we allow them to enter our hearts as well as our heads.

I would have liked for Strawn to spend more time unpacking the mistruth that “the Old Testament has been rendered permanently obsolete.” Of all the mistruths, I’ve found this one to be the most prevalent in my own ministry. I’ve encountered many Christians with supersessionist beliefs, in which the church is seen as the new Israel. In the New Testament there is a lot of language contrasting what is new with what is old—think old and new wineskins, for instance. Strawn counters this idea with the fact that much of the New Testament draws on the Old Testament “in terms of citation and allusion.” He argues that “old doesn’t mean bad” and “new doesn’t mean Christian.” Yet I fear that the mistruth of supersessionism is major fuel for anti-Semitism in the church’s teaching.

Although I found this book both interesting and enlightening, I was distracted by recurring questions. I kept wondering which of the book’s mistruths, if any, I’ve learned along the way. Which of them have I preached or taught, even if unintentionally? This prompting to self-reflection is the book’s strength, especially but not exclusively for those of us who have spent much time in the scriptures, the pulpit, and the classroom.

I also kept trying to figure out where the mistruths come from. With few exceptions, Strawn doesn’t spend much time addressing the underlying causes of the mistruths he identifies. Are there particular aspects of history, church life, or American culture that lead us to embrace and perpetuate these mistruths? These are unavoidable questions that reflection and discussion can bring out with the book as a guide.

These questions permeated not only my waking hours but my sleep, too. I woke up one morning to the realization that the mistruths arise from at least two different influences.

The first is the increasing lack of biblical literacy in both pews and pulpits. This makes it difficult to differentiate truth about the Bible from mistruth. How would a casual reader know that the book of Revelation has a lot of Ezekiel and other Old Testament allusions in it?

More troubling is the second reason these mistruths are so prevalent: they are the result as well as the source of anti-Semitism in culture. Strawn tells the story of

Marcion, the second-century preacher who declared the Old Testament permanently obsolete as a result of Jesus. While Marcion was eventually excommunicated for heresy, he still had an influence on the spread of the idea that Christ abolished the Old Testament. Strawn names anti-Judaism as a factor in Marcion's rejection of the Old Testament, but he doesn't then trace that anti-Judaism even in a cursory way through the history of Christian interpretation of scripture. Marcion is an obvious example, but there are many other perpetrators of anti-Jewish readings of the Bible in the history of the church, including Martin Luther.

Strawn does mention anti-Semitism in the conclusion, recognizing "the perilously close relationship between neglect and denigration of the Old Testament and terrible acts of anti-Semitism" that are found among White supremacist groups that use Christian language. He maintains that members of these hate groups "don't use the *whole* Bible." They engage in "ideological cherry-picking" stemming from the mistruths, half-truths, and misinformation they received from their Christian upbringing.