

Brent A. Strawn. *Honest to God Preaching: Talking Sin, Suffering, and Violence*. Working Preacher Books. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2021. 232 pages. \$19.99.

Preaching from the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament (hereafter HB/OT) presents significant challenges to the contemporary preacher. The complexity of the original language used, the strangeness of the cultural customs, and the ambiguity of the geographic locations are just some of the foundational issues that present themselves at the beginning of the exegetical process of the sermon development process. While necessary to be faithful to the biblical text, many who willingly (or unwillingly, depending on whether they follow the lectionary) preach from the HB/OT often stop short of moving beyond the exegetical, failing to move to the theological except where it may support a particular Christological or political agenda. However, the HB/OT is a deeply rich theological text that can certainly stand on its own two feet (and has for hundreds of years) and presents a beautifully woven story of God interacting with humanity. It is not a perfect story, to be sure. It is a story full of sin, suffering, and violence—themes today’s preacher must carefully yet honestly address. The problem is that these themes are so foreign to contemporary Christian listeners, many often steeped in flannel graph renditions of biblical stories, that speaking on these themes presents a contradictory rather than complimentary view of God and the scriptures that speak of God.

This is the concern that Brent Strawn addresses in this more recent addition to the ever-growing catalogue of books produced by Working Preacher through their publishing arrangement with Fortress Press, books that are intended to offer a more practical take on preaching. At its printing, Strawn’s book marked the third publication in the series that focuses on the HB/OT. The first two books in the series were by Walter Brueggemann. The first book provided a general overview on preaching from the HB/OT and included samplings of some of Brueggemann’s “greatest hits” from his prolific career in preaching, teaching, and writing. The second book focused on the theme of restoration in Jeremiah, something of a new endeavor for Brueggemann. Strawn’s book functions similarly to the first book from Brueggemann, in that it focuses on the HB/OT *en masse*, it also functions similarly to the second book from Brueggemann, in that it focuses on specific themes proclaimed in the biblical text.

The emphasis in Strawn’s argument is that we, as people of faith, are “only as sick as your secrets” (3). While Christian readers often read the HB/OT with skepticism or contempt, Strawn argues that the Hebrew people demonstrate theological honesty by recounting their secrets for all to see. Moses openly disobeys God. David openly organizes a murder. Solomon is an open womanizer and heretic. Job and Qohelet openly question God’s goodness and sovereignty. And these are just the stories that are commonly known. The HB/OT is full of honest examples of sin, suffering and violence, Strawn argues, something that Christian readers would be wise to take note of. Contemporary Christians face themes of sin, suffering, and violence, and the HB/OT offers us a plethora of texts from which to address these themes today. Each theme receives a chapter-long treatment, and the final chapter offers a homiletic for preaching these themes based on Qohelet’s witness. Aside from specific sermon examples, little is lacking from this rich exploration of the HB/OT. It provides a wonderful conversation on how to honestly preach from the Hebrew Bible.

Rob O’Lynn, Kentucky Christian University; Grayson, KY