

LIES

MY PREACHER TOLD ME

AN HONEST LOOK AT THE OLD TESTAMENT

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INTRODUCTION

LIES SOMEBODY TOLD US ABOUT THE OLD TESTAMENT

As noted in the Preface (please take a moment to read it if you haven't already), the title of the present book cribs from a well-known book by James W. Loewen: *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, which is subtitled *Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*.¹ Apparently I'm not the only person to take inspiration from Loewen's eye-grabbing title. There are books called *Lies My Doctor Told Me* and even *Lies My Pastor Told Me*.² My own title is somewhat tongue in cheek—after all, the situation may not be as sinister as *lying*. Lying implies intentional misrepresentation of the truth, and I suspect—or at least I dearly hope—that that is rarely the case in church contexts. Instead, the situation is usually far more innocent than that. For various reasons, people often feel compelled to speak about all sorts of matters without really knowing what they are talking about, and, when they do so, the result can become a *laissez-faire* attitude toward the truth. That isn't lying *per se*, but it is no less damaging. Harry G. Frankfurt, a moral philosopher who taught at Princeton University for years, has argued (quite seriously but also somewhat tongue in cheek) that people who don't really care about truth are

actually a greater threat than liars. Liars know the truth, Frankfurt says, they just misrepresent it on purpose. But people who don't care about the truth . . . well, *they just don't care*.⁵ Truth doesn't matter to them; maybe it doesn't even exist for them.

Given my hope that things weren't quite yet malicious, I decided to call each of the topics I discuss in this book "mistruths" rather than bald-faced lies. Even so, as Frankfurt suggests, the end result of a mistruth could be just as, if not more damaging than, a lie. In the case of a lie, the truth simply needs to be brought to light for things to be set right. That is easier said than done, of course. As Loewen notes in his own work on lies in history textbooks and in history classrooms, there is often no shortage of factual evidence, but there is also no shortcut in the time-consuming tasks of amassing and assessing that evidence.⁴ Mistruths are like misinformation in this way: they are hard to expose so as to set the record straight. Mistruths are thus far more insidious and intractable than a bald-faced lie: they extend their tendrils to all sorts of areas, like the roots of a tree, so that uprooting them is often very difficult. Even if you chop one down to size, the stump is likely to sprout again. Surely the Internet, especially social media, is the fastest fertilizer known to humankind to facilitate such regrowth.

Given these various considerations, I have no doubt that not every reader will agree with my assessment of some of these mistruths—that is to be expected. I only ask readers to keep open minds and to keep searching for the truth, the whole truth, so help them God—the truth about God's Word. Contrary to what some Christians have been led to believe, erroneously, that Word is also found in the Old Testament. That comment leads directly to the first mistruth.



MISTRUTH 1

THE OLD TESTAMENT IS "SOMEONE ELSE'S MAIL"

In my first few years as a seminary professor, I frequently commuted to work with a friend, let's call him Tom, who was on staff at the same institution. We had a number of things in common but there were also differences that became apparent fairly early on—the respective cleanliness of our vehicles comes to mind, though I won't reveal whose was cleaner (okay, it was mine). At some point in one of our commutes, another difference rose to particular clarity when Tom expressed a bit of confusion as to why I cared so much for the Old Testament (my academic specialty).

"That's *somebody else's* mail!" he said, appearing a bit flabbergasted if not angry, after I tried to explain why I studied the Old Testament and thought it so important, equally important (I probably remarked) as the New Testament.

I can't remember what I said after Tom's comment. I admit that it caught me off guard, so I probably didn't say much, if anything. Evidently Tom's statement was sufficiently disturbing to me that it encoded in my long-term memory so that I remember it to this day. Whatever the case, I know what I would say now, if I could rewind the

conversation and do it all over again. Here's how it would go down:

Tom: "That's *somebody else's* mail!"

Me: "So, you live in Corinth, Tom?"

Now there are plenty of Corinths peppered across the United States of America, but I mean by this witty and far too-late retort the ancient Greek city to which Paul wrote a couple of famous letters. Tom most certainly did *not* live in *that* Corinth. But for some odd reason Tom thought that the Old Testament was "somebody else's mail," while at the same time imagining that First and Second Corinthians were letters somehow addressed *to him*. But, of course, they weren't. And yet, in a way, they are! Both points deserve some discussion.

1. On one hand, 1 and 2 Corinthians were definitely *not* addressed to Tom — not originally — because the Epistles to the Corinthians, no less than other letters of Paul or other writings in the New Testament, were written to a group of Christians in a drastically different context and situation than the state that Tom and I were living in at the time (Kentucky, ca. 1998). So, no: we weren't living in ancient Corinth and the letters to the Corinthians in the *New Testament* are clearly and obviously "someone else's mail." Not only is this true, most Christians today would not want to be members of that ancient church in Corinth. You think your church has problems! Corinth was *worse*: they had more than their fair share of dissension, sexual scandal, problems with worship, and so on and so forth. Well . . . come to think about it, that list makes it sound like many people today *do* belong to churches like the one in ancient Corinth!

2. While nothing to celebrate, that last point shows how in another, very real sense the letters to the Corinthians *are* addressed to Tom (and me) because they are letters written *to Christians*. "To God's church that is in Corinth," is how Paul puts it (1 Cor 1:2; 2 Cor 1:1 CEB). Since those

ancient Corinthians were followers of Christ, and Tom and I are too, we can somehow receive Paul's words across the miles and millennia and hear them as our own.

Now I suspect that part of what Tom meant in his remark is that, in contrast to the New Testament, the books of the Old Testament weren't originally written *for or to Christians* in the same way that the Corinthian correspondence was. That is true to a degree, but the first point mentioned above indicates that the Corinthian correspondence was also *not* written directly to Tom. How then did Tom come to see it and receive it as his "own" mail?

Simple: Because 1 and 2 Corinthians are now part of Holy Scripture.

The inclusion of the Epistles of Paul (and the rest of the New Testament writings) in a corpus of literature that the church deems to be a special, even sacred collection—the technical term is "canon"—transports letters that were originally meant for a very different (and cantankerous) group of Christians way back when, and places them front and center, here and now, as letters also for Christians today, even if we don't live in Corinth, Mississippi, let alone Corinth, Greece, and despite the fact that we live in the *twenty-first*, not the first, century after Christ. (It goes without saying that we may be equally cantankerous as the folks back then.)

So, no, the letters to the Corinthians were *not* addressed to Tom. They, too, are "someone else's mail." But, yes, on the other hand, these letters *are* addressed to Tom because they are now part of Christian Scripture.

But here's the most important part—the truth to correct Mistruth 1—*the same is true for the Old Testament*. Sure, the Old Testament wasn't originally written to Christian believers in the twenty-first century, but neither was the New Testament. But the Old Testament, no less than the New, is now part of the canon of Christian Scripture. That means that the Old Testament, not unlike the New, and in

fact, *exactly* like the New, is now *our* mail. It is no different in this regard than the letters to the Corinthians, let alone those letters of Paul written to specific, named individuals who are not named “Tom” (or “Brent” for that matter): Timothy, Titus, Philemon. The letters that are addressed to particular individuals would seem by definition, or rather by addressee, the ultimate instance of “not my mail.”



How did the Old Testament come to be included in Christian Scripture such that it, too, is our mail? That is a big question that cannot be answered fully here. A few brief remarks must suffice for now.

To begin with, the earliest Christian community was made up entirely of Jews, which means that Holy Scripture was, prior to the rise of the early Jewish Christian community, for all intents and purposes, the Old Testament and the Old Testament alone.¹ The Old Testament was, therefore, *the only Scripture* that early (Jewish) Christians knew. Or that Jesus knew. When the New Testament writers speak of Scripture, therefore—say, in the famous verse in 2 Timothy 3:16, which states that “all scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching”—they are referring to the Old Testament.² This is, in fact, why the Old Testament features so prominently throughout the New Testament—in both explicit ways and in ways that lurk under the surface at the level of allusion and echo.

The explicit ways are how the Old Testament is frequently cited in the New Testament: for example, the many times Matthew writes that this or that thing in his Gospel happened in order to fulfill what had been written in the Old Testament (Matt. 1:22; 2:15, 23; 4:14; 8:17; 12:17; 13:35; 21:4). Old Testament citations in the New Testament run in the hundreds. Less obvious, especially in English translation, but even more prevalent are the

“under the surface” echoes and allusions to the Old Testament found throughout the New Testament. These number in the *thousands*. One way to put this would be to say that if you tried to remove all of the Old Testament “stuff” from the body of the New Testament, the patient wouldn’t survive the surgery.

Even after the early church opened up to Gentiles, Paul continued to evangelize in the synagogues in addition to his work with non-Jewish populations. And it is this very same Paul—the one Tom thought was speaking directly to him—who *constantly* depended on the Old Testament to make his arguments about faith, the meaning of Jesus, and so on and so forth: to both Jews and Gentiles. Paul, that is, read the Old Testament as *his own mail* not just when he was a Pharisee but even, and this is a very important point, *after* his “conversion” to Christ on the road to Damascus.

In one of his most famous letters, Romans, Paul explains how Gentile Christians have been grafted into the tree that is Israel (11:11–24). In this very important image, in this very important part of this very important letter, Gentile Christianity isn’t something altogether new, nor independent, but, instead, simply a branch freshly attached to a tree that preexisted it. Branches, especially ones that have been grafted in, take sustenance from the trunk and the root system, which, in Paul’s image, are nothing less than the story of Israel and God’s work in the Old Testament. So, according to the great Apostle to the Gentiles, now that Christians are part of Israel’s family tree, nothing that belongs to that tree is not also ours, even if only belatedly and secondarily. There is nothing, that is, that is not our mail or that is not directed to us who call ourselves Christians simply because we, too, are now part of biblical Israel—thanks to a gifted Gardener who specializes in tree grafts. All of what was said to Israel in the Old Testament is thus said also to Christians, is related to Christians—we who draw life itself, our very sustenance, from that mother

tree. That is why Christians have, from day one, consistently looked to the Old Testament for the truth about God and life in the world.

So, contrary to what Tom was misled to believe, the Old Testament is not someone else's mail.³ It is *our* mail, addressed to us, eminently useful to us—just as 2 Timothy 3:16–17 clearly states:

Every scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for showing mistakes, for correcting, and for training character, so that the person who belongs to God can be equipped to do everything that is good. (CEB)

Other texts in the New Testament say the same in hundreds, even thousands of ways, by explicit citation or subtle allusion and echo, but here are two important examples drawn, again, from Paul:

Whatever was written in the past was written for our instruction so that we could have hope through endurance and through the encouragement of the scriptures. (Rom. 15:4 CEB; see also Rom. 4:23–24)

These things happened to them [the Israelites] as an example and were written as a warning for us to whom the end of time has come. (1 Cor. 10:11 CEB; see also 1 Cor 9:9–10)

Written *for our instruction*, so *we* could have hope. And also written as a warning *for us*.

It is thus a terrible mistruth to say that the Old Testament is someone else's mail. In fact, this first mistruth may be the most pernicious, most troubling of the ten treated in this little book. That's why it deserves pride (or, perhaps better, shame) of place and must be set right first and

foremost, before any and all others. The real truth is that the *entirety* of Scripture—Old Testament and New—is to be viewed and heard as an urgent speaking presence exercising benevolent pressure on our lives.⁴ That statement does not mean that the Old Testament (or the New for that matter) is always easy to understand, let alone easy to apply to our lives now. Of course not! It also doesn't mean that the Old Testament is mail to *Christians only*. Of course not! The Old Testament also belongs to Judaism, where it wouldn't be called the "Old Testament" at all but rather something like "Scripture" or "Bible." But these important subjects—interpretation, application, the place of the Old Testament in Christianity *and* in Judaism, along with others—are best taken up with reference to some of the other mistruths treated later (see especially Mistruths 3 and 10). Here, then, instead of Mistruth 1, I offer the following first clarification:



CLARIFICATION 1:
**The Old Testament, no less than the New,
is Christian Scripture.**

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Have you ever thought the Old Testament was someone else's mail? If so, why? What texts in particular seemed to be not intended for you? If not, why not?
2. Have you ever thought the New Testament was someone else's mail? If so, why? What texts in particular seemed to be not intended for you? If not, why not?
3. Do you find it difficult to think of the Old Testament as "an urgent speaking presence exercising benevolent pressure" on your life? Why or why not?

4. What difference would it make to our reading of Scripture if we thought of all of it, Old Testament and New, as that kind of speaking presence? Would it make a difference in how we think about the Old Testament? The New?
5. Give an example of a time when a biblical text spoke to you directly and you heard it in a way that helped you in some concrete way for the better.

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