

Sacred Scripture
A Short History of Interpretation

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JOHN KNOX PRESS
LOUISVILLE • KENTUCKY

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Introduction

The following chapters focus on some of the major theological issues the church has faced through the centuries in the interpretation of sacred Scripture. What follows is obviously not a complete history—even of the issues considered. It is, rather, a basic discussion—at times somewhat narrowly focused—of topics that bear on scriptural interpretation.

The key rubric used in the chapters is a very simple one: *a question*. What is sacred Scripture? Which Scripture is sacred? Which manuscripts? Which translation? These and other questions have been chosen because they illuminate the task of scriptural interpretation from a distinct vantage point.

Chapters 1 through 3 are preliminary to the more chronologically ordered topics that follow. Chapter 1 asks the question, “What is sacred Scripture?” In the experience of Israel and the church, it is argued, Scripture arose out of the common need to pass on in writing the experience of the Divine within the secular, the holy amid the mundane. Chapter 2 asks the question, “Which Scripture is sacred?” Here we get an overview of the struggle in the first and second centuries between Judaism and Christianity, as well as between emergent Catholicism and heterodox Christian communities, to define which writings were to be regarded as sacred and which were not. Out of this struggle came not only the Christian canon known as the New Testament, but the Hebrew canon as well.

Chapters 3 and 4 (“Which Manuscripts?” and “Which Translation?”) find their place among these essays because it is too often assumed by laity and seminary students alike that the Bible is like any other book in print, that the English copy in hand reads as Mark, Paul, or Isaiah intended it to read, without slippage of any kind. To ask which manuscript is “sacred,” or at least “the best,” is not an idle question. Much doctrinaire foolishness results from not being humbled by the lack of certainty about the biblical text. Chapter 4 extends this caution to translations of the Bible. Here too stumbling stones exist when,

without stated criteria of judgment, all translations are treated equally without cognizance of the nature and purpose of a specific translation.

With chapter 5, the book begins to take a more conventionally chronological shape. The questions we examine provide the opportunity to view some of the major developments in the history of Christian biblical interpretation.

Chapter 5 asks, “How does Scripture interpret itself?” and in some respects it is the heart of the matter. It tries to show, in a limited way, how the interpretation of sacred traditions began with the appearance of the traditions themselves. The phrase, “I mean—” is an overused contemporary colloquialism, a space-filler to steal time for the mind to organize its thoughts. But it expresses the human proclivity to seek meaning and to reexamine old assumptions and valuations about what is thought to be known. So ancient authors boldly reexamined claims about the nature and will of God, the nature of sin and salvation, of justice and injustice, and so on. From the Christian perspective, Jesus of Nazareth posited a radical reinterpretation of normative Judaism in his day, just as the early church cherished not one but four Gospels, each offering a different interpretation of the message and meaning of Jesus. Cognizance of how Scripture interprets Scripture is itself a liberating and cautionary tale, and so we devote time to it here.

Chapter 6 (“What Did the Early Church Leaders Say?”) begins an illustrative (not exhaustive) account of how the church of the second to the fifth century interpreted the story of Jesus to a non-Jewish culture by appealing on the one hand to the thought-forms of Hellenism, while on the other hand acknowledging the church’s roots in Judaism. We turn to the foremost thinkers of the three centuries: Irenaeus (second century), Origen (third century), and Augustine (fourth-fifth centuries) in order to show the power of Scripture to captivate three of the greatest minds of their day on behalf of the Christian faith.

Chapter 7 (“How Many Senses Does Scripture Have?”) is a bit more playful in that it focuses a thousand years on the lives of three twelfth-century contemporaries as different as life permits and yet equally devoted to the Christ of Scripture. The three abbots (Suger of St.-Denis, Bernard of Clairvaux, and Peter Abelard) each ascribed to the multiple senses of Scripture but in fascinatingly divergent ways. To our abbots, as we shall see, a literalist, univocal view of Scripture in the modern fundamentalist sense would have been unimaginable.

In chapter 8 (“What Is the Center of Scripture?”) we turn to Luther (1483–1546) to the exclusion of John Calvin (1509–1564) because it

is Luther who sought to get behind the encrustations of church doctrine and the patristic tradition of multiple senses to the center of Scripture itself: Jesus Christ. While Protestant Scholastics sought to defend the objective truth of that claim, the Pietists argued that until scriptural truth was subjectively appropriated it remained ineffectual. One Lutheran follower of a pietistic bent put it this way: “Were Jesus born a thousand times in Bethlehem and not in me, I would still be lost.”

With chapter 9 we turn to “one of the most perplexing yet important” questions in the history of biblical interpretation: “What is the literal sense of Scripture?” To illustrate the problem we turn to three “misinterpretations” of the question that come from the latter days of the Enlightenment: H. S. Reimarus, F. D. E. Schleiermacher, and Thomas Jefferson. The rubrics of the chapter are taken from the work by Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975).

Chapter 10 asks, “What is modern biblical interpretation?” Here the term “modern” refers to the approach to biblical interpretation that dominated the field for well over a hundred years, from the middle of the nineteenth century to the last third of the twentieth. We call it “modern biblical interpretation” because, originating in the Enlightenment, it was sustained by the conviction that, as in science, objectivity in interpretation was not only necessary but possible.

The final chapter (“What Is Contemporary Biblical Interpretation?”) looks at three broadly representative perspectives: postmodern, liberation, and postcritical biblical interpretation. Each has experienced numerous permutations and garnered an equal number of advocates, none of which can be discussed here because of space limitations. For the first two perspectives we turn to John Frank Kermode and to Jon Sobrino, SJ. We end with Hans Frei’s “postcritical” approach to Scripture, not because his thought is readily accessible to students of Scripture; indeed, it is not. We close with him because of the fecundity of his ideas, and because they most readily explain the experience of the ordinary Christian, like those I have described of myself as a child reared in a family for whom the Scriptures of the Christian church were sacred.

Chapter 1

What Is Sacred Scripture?

Not every religion has sacred Scripture. Even among the three “religions of the book,” Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, scripture plays significantly different roles. In Islam, for example, according to tradition the Qur’an was revealed over a period of years to one man in Arabic and is conceived of as the Word of God in itself. The situation is different in Judaism and Christianity. How and why the Scriptures of these two religious faiths came into being as sacred literature, and in what their sacrality lies, is the focus of this chapter.

THE OLD TESTAMENT AS SACRED SCRIPTURE

“Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets” (Heb. 1:1a). With these words the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews in the New Testament expressed the widely held sentiments of first-century Judaism and Christianity. Recorded in the Scriptures of the Old Testament were accounts of the “many and various ways” by which the ancestors of Judaism experienced the self-revelation of God, first preserved as oral traditions. The most important of these traditions are the divine revelations through which God called the people of Israel into being (Gen. 12), made covenant with them to be God’s people (Gen. 15), revealed the law to guide their life (Exod. 19–20, *passim*) and, finally, blessed, comforted, warned, and chastised them through the generations.

These are the ancient traditions that form the core of Israel's Scriptures. The many and various ways by which Scripture said divine self-disclosure took place included visions (e.g., Gen. 15; Isa. 6), dreams (e.g., Num. 12), auditions (e.g., 1 Sam. 3), visitations (e.g., Gen. 12), direct encounters—either with the messengers of God (lit. “angels”; e.g., Gen. 16; 19) or with God himself “face to face” (e.g., Gen. 32; Exod. 33:11)—and, most prominently, the prophetic oracle (Elijah, Elisha, etc.). In time these traditions were inscribed and, since all were considered sacred revelations, all the writings were attributed to inspired “prophets” or *nebiim*, a Hebrew term that designated a variety of religious functionaries, including the role played by Moses, the greatest of all the prophets.¹

The many and various ways God “spoke” also took on the many and various linguistic forms appropriate to its varied content: narratives, laws, oracles, psalms, and wisdom sayings—to name only the larger genres—all of which became sacred speech in its own way and setting. Of this vast subject, the single point to be illustrated here is that behind the varied forms of sacred literature lie many and varied sacred epiphanies of divine self-disclosure, the greater number of which were perceived linguistically as “Word of God.” That *Scripture* should follow upon God's speaking was a matter of course, since Israel conceived its relationship to God as covenantal, that is, as a legal agreement binding to both parties, as *promise* on the one hand and *faithful obedience* on the other. Written codes, cultic and social, set down the commandments, statutes, and ordinances by which the covenant between God and Israel was to be observed (see, e.g., Deut. 4–6; Ps. 119).

On occasion, God himself is said to write the laws of the covenant, as with the Ten Commandments (Exod. 34:1; Deut. 10:2). At other times, God commands his prophet to write (Exod. 34:27; Deut. 6:9). Once written, the resulting inscription on tablet or scroll was to serve as a “memorial” for posterity (e.g., Exod. 17:14). The words were to be read publicly (Exod. 24:7) or privately, for example, by the king (Deut. 17:19).

Creation

The first and inescapable memorial of divine revelation is creation itself, and for that reason the story of creation assumes its rightful place at the beginning of Israel's sacred Scripture (Gen. 1:1–2:4).

1. See the classic study that informs this chapter by Samuel Terrien, *The Elusive Presence* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978).

The rhythmic pattern of the opening verses of Genesis is representative of Hebrew poetic speech in general. Poetry not only speaks of the beauty that creation presents to the eye, it re-creates it for the ear. Nevertheless, beauty is finite and transitory; it speaks not of itself but of the transcendent majesty of the Creator upon whom all creation is dependent. This profoundly religious intuition is eventually ineffable, but it springs forth in poetic metaphor. As Michael Fishbane has written, “the poet does not so much imitate the world as remake it.”²

The heavens are telling the glory of God;
 and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
 Day to day pours forth speech,
 and night to night declares knowledge.
 There is no speech, nor are their words;
 their voice is not heard;
 yet their voice goes out through all the earth,
 and their words to the end of the world.

(Ps. 19:1–4)

To the Hebrew mind, nature is revelatory, but insufficient. The proper medium of revelation is not the eye, but the ear.³ The heavens “*tell . . . declare . . . proclaim*” the glory of God. One can *see* that creation is good, as the days of creation in the beginning are divinely declared to be; but less susceptible to idolatry as things visible and far more stunning to contemplate is the efficacy of the word that brought creation into being. God says, “Let there be . . .” and it came to be (Gen. 1:3, *et passim*)! It is God’s word of power that is sacred, and since God cannot be identified with any created thing, least of all images made by hands (Hab. 2:18–19), divine epiphany occurs only at God’s own choosing.⁴

Theophany

Theophany (or divine appearing) is thus another of the “many and various ways” God spoke to the ancestors in addition to creation itself. A theophany can occur at any time and at any place. The Lord’s presence

2. *Sacred Attunement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 29.

3. Unlike Hellenism, Judaism bequeathed few aesthetic forms of value whether of pottery, sculpture, bas relief, or architecture until the Hellenistic period.

4. There is nothing in Hebrew thought akin to later mysticism in which by stages of psychic preparation and skill one ascends into union with God.

is therefore inescapable; as the psalmist says: “If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there” (Ps. 139:8).

The two most important theophanies in shaping the self-understanding of Judaism and its Scriptures concern Moses: the calling of Moses, in which God’s name is revealed (Exod. 3), and the giving of the Ten Commandments (Exod. 19–20), by which God’s ethical will is made known. Each has its own special role in the sacred narrative that the Scriptures tell.

The Divine Name

The calling of Moses and the revealing of the divine name occur on Mount Sinai/Horeb in a moment of divine self-disclosure: Moses, herding sheep after fleeing slavery in Egypt, comes upon a burning bush that is not consumed. It is a natural wonder—not a dream, as when Jacob envisions angels descending and ascending a ladder leading to the exalted Lord (Gen. 28:1–17). Like fire, the bush is not to be approached, nor can it be adequately described. The visual experience is ineffable. With Moses made attentive by the miracle, the eye gives way to the ear as a divine-human dialogue ensues. Moses removes his sandals, because the ground on which he stands is holy, made holy by the divine self-disclosure itself. He is given a commission by a voice from the burning bush: he who fled Egypt is now commanded to be an actor in the flow of history. He must return to Egypt to set the enslaved people free. The commission is curious. Moses is to be the representative of the one who speaks, but who is he? Who shall Moses say sent him? It is then that the Lord reveals his name. It is a name holier than any other name. It will become known simply as a name of four letters: *YHWH*, the Tetragrammaton. It is so holy that it is not to be pronounced, nor can it be written with a defiled pen. It can be referred to only by its surrogate, “*Adonai*, LORD.”

The significance of the revelation is clear: Only those who know the name of the Lord belong to him. To deny the name is to be denied by the name (Hos. 1:8). When, centuries later, Jesus proffers the model prayer, it is the hallowing of this name that forms the prayer’s first petition (Matt. 6:9–13 par.). Further, as the name is holy and mysterious, so is the story of how it was revealed to Moses. There is disclosure, but there is also concealment. The identity behind the name is not disclosed, only the enigmatic response, “I am who I am,” is given (Exod. 3:14). Little wonder, then, that the narrative of the burning bush should be

written on a scroll to become sacred Scripture, as sacred as the name it contained; and that the story be told within the context of a people set free from bondage by “the mighty hand and the outstretched arm” of the Lord (Deut. 4:34). The identity of the Lord is to be known by his deeds of salvation and by his law.

Sacred Narrative

Although world history is conveyed in the Genesis stories of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah’s ark, and the tower of Babel, with which both Jews and Gentiles may identify, it is the stories of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and the many generations of “ancestors” (Heb. 1:1) that constitute the history of salvation for the people of Israel. What is thought to be the oldest formulation of that story, stated in the form of an affirmation of faith, is found in Deuteronomy, thought by some to be perhaps a later form of the scroll found in the temple of Jerusalem in the days of Josiah the king (ca. 639–608 BCE). The creed (Deut. 26:5–9) alludes to the patriarchs, but the central affirmation is that the very Lord who revealed his name to Moses is the same Lord whose mighty acts, hundreds of years earlier, had freed the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt and led them into the promised land. The creed, couched in the mysterious holiness of a sacred festival, is placed in the first person. It speaks of “my” Aramean ancestors who went down to Egypt and became a mighty nation, how the Egyptians treated “us” harshly, how “we” cried to the Lord, how the Lord heard “our” voice, saw “our” toil and affliction, and how the Lord with signs and wonders brought “us” into a land flowing with milk and honey. For these great and ancient acts of divine blessing the people are now to place the offering of the firstfruits of the harvest before the Lord and to bow down in reverence before him. It is rightly suggested that the whole of the Old Testament (apart perhaps from Job and Ecclesiastes) is an explication of this creed. As such, the Old Testament (as narratives, genealogies, laws, psalms, proverbs, wisdom sayings, and oracles of warning and comfort) is the sacred canopy under which the whole of life is blessed and given meaning, to the Jew first, but also to the Christian (Rom. 1–2). For those who affirm, in whatever way it may entail, the “my,” “we,” “our,” and “us” of these verses, the Old Testament is sacred Scripture.⁵

5. On this theme, see chap. 5, “How Does Scripture Interpret Itself?”

Such an affirmation, however, involves responsibility. What one notes about the creed is that there is no reference to Sinai/Horeb as the holy mountain on which the commandments were given to seal Israel's part in being "the people of God." To reclaim that side of the covenant with God is the task of the writer (or writers) of the book of Deuteronomy.

The Ten Commandments

A dominant genre (or way) of divine revelation in the Pentateuch is that of legal sayings. Law is of primary importance because it is the articulation of God's righteous and holy will for the whole of Jewish life. Nevertheless, covenantal law⁶ is a two-way street. It is the standard by which God's faithfulness and justice as well as that of Israel is to be measured, for nothing is truly holy that is not also at least ethical.⁷ In the Hebrew language, the Ten Commandments are called the ten "words" (Exod. 34:28). Written by the finger of God, they may be thought of as Judaism's first holy scripture (Exod. 31:18). By their observance Israel is to become "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exod. 19:6; see especially Leviticus, *passim*). Because of the law's centrality, the term *Torah*, which in its first meaning is "teaching" or "instruction," came to refer not only to "the five books of Moses" in which the law is found (the Pentateuch—including Deuteronomy!), but to the whole of the Hebrew Bible, and later also to the Oral Torah (set down in the Mishnah and commented upon in the Gemara, the two sections comprising both the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmud⁸) as well. This suggests that Torah, whether narrowly or broadly defined, is sacred not only because of its divine origin as revealed law, but because of its efficacy as teaching to create, order, and explain life, even to preserve and defend it.

6. Usually divided into the Covenant Code (Exod. 21–23), the Priestly Code (the rest of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers), and Deuteronomy.

7. The classic discussion of the holy is that of Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1923; 2nd ed. 1950). Otto argues that the experience of the Holy is more than of pure goodness or the ethical, to which he gives the name "the numinous" and equates with the feeling of awe before tremendous and ineffable mystery. Of course, the intellectual history of Israel is marked by a constant reevaluation of "what the Lord requires" (Mic. 6:8).

8. Dates for the two Talmudic traditions created in Palestine and Babylon are debated, the former generally placed in the mid-fifth century, the latter in the mid-sixth century, although the Mishnah, upon which the Gemara is commentary, was written down around 200 CE under the guidance of rabbi Judah ha-Nasi. For brief definitions, see Richard N. Soulen and R. Kendall Soulen, *Handbook of Biblical Criticism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001).

Psalm 19, quoted above, continues by suggesting that what the heavens are *telling* is not only the glory of the Lord but also the wisdom of God's handiwork as revealed in the law:

The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul;
 The decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple;
 The precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart;
 The commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes.
 (Ps. 19:7–8)

Like the encounter with the burning bush, the theophany accompanying the giving of the Ten Commandments is also shrouded in mystery. Mystery is the essence of sacred narrative. There is earthquake, fire, smoke, thick clouds, thunder, and the sound of trumpets—all of which symbolize the enormity of what is about to be written on tablets of stone: “The tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, engraved upon the tablets” (Exod. 32:16). Enunciating God's holy will for all who would be the people of God, the commandments become the centerpiece of the covenantal law binding God with Israel. Thus called to be holy, the law by which Israel's holiness is defined must a posteriori be sacred and holy. Hence the warning: “You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take from it” (Deut. 4:2 RSV). The holiness of Scripture is inseparable from the holiness of the Law; Scripture is to be handled with the deference holy things acquire.

The Prophetic Oracle

By the first century, all the writings of the Hebrew Bible, from Genesis through 2 Chronicles,⁹ were attributed to prophets, including Job, the Psalms (David), Proverbs, and the Song of Songs (Solomon). This conviction arose from the high esteem accorded not only to Moses but to the great “writing prophets,” Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Amos, and so on. Only in a few instances do we have an account of the moment when the great prophets received the divine calling that gave legitimacy and authority to their words. The most vivid is that of Isaiah (chap. 6). His revelation occurred in the temple of Jerusalem “in the

9. Second Chronicles is placed at the end of the Hebrew Bible, with its eschatological exhortation for the gathering of the people and the restoration of Jerusalem, whereas the Christian Old Testament concludes with the twelve minor prophets, ending with Malachi.

year that king Uzziah died.” In a dazzling ecstatic vision, Isaiah sees the Lord seated on a high throne, attended by spectacular seraphs in flight. The seraphs hover in adoration about the throne and proclaim in a loud voice, “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts. . . .” Terrified by what he is allowed to see, Isaiah cries out, overcome by his own unworthiness: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!” Then, with a live coal from the altar, a seraph touches Isaiah’s lips, the symbol of his inmost being. His sin is cauterized, his guilt removed. Thus purified, he hears the voice of the LORD: “Whom shall I send [to the people of Israel]?” And Isaiah answers, “Here I am! Send me!” (6:8).

Jeremiah is but a boy when he is confronted by the Lord. The Lord tells Jeremiah that he had been chosen to be the Lord’s spokesman even before he was born. The terrified Jeremiah protests: he is too young to be a mouthpiece for the Lord. “Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the LORD said to me, ‘Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant’ (1:9–10). Here it is the hand of the Lord that is the agent of inspiration.¹⁰

Although in most instances we are not told how individual prophets received their divine commission, the symbolism present here in both Isaiah and Jeremiah suggests a common idiom: the symbolic purification of the mouth, to enable the prophet to declare boldly the word of the Lord. “Thus says the LORD” is a phrase used over 160 times in the oracles of Jeremiah alone. Made holy, the prophetic oracle is holy, and as Scripture written down by Jeremiah’s scribe Baruch, it is sacred Scripture. In Ezekiel the prophet eats the heavenly scroll handed to him by one described with reverent circumlocution as “the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD” (Ezek. 1:28b). Having consumed the scroll he may now speak “the word of the Lord.”

According to first-century Jewish tradition, well known to the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews in the New Testament, prophecy had ceased in the fifth century BCE shortly after the exile in Babylon. This is the contrast the author draws in the first sentence of his epistle between God’s speaking “long ago” and the revelation of his Son “in

10. On “the hand of the Lord,” see “Life in the Present and Hope for the Future” by Werner E. Lemke in *Interpreting the Prophets*, edited by James Luther Mays and Paul J. Achtemeier (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 200.

these last days.” Herein also lies the significance of Jesus’ question to the Pharisees: Is John the Baptist a prophet as the people say he is, or had prophecy ceased centuries before, as both the Sadducees and the Pharisees claim (Luke 20:3–8; cf. Matt. 11:7–15 par.)? If prophecy has not ceased and John is truly a prophet, then perhaps a new revelation is unfolding, not just spoken but lived—a Word made flesh! This was the Christian claim.

THE NEW TESTAMENT AS SACRED SCRIPTURE

“Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son” (Heb. 1:1–2). With words such as these, the followers of Jesus differentiated themselves from the rest of contemporary Judaism. The difference between Jews and Christians in these early days lay not in what constituted sacred Scripture or in the identity of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, whose name Christians continued to hallow. The difference lay in the identity of Jesus of Nazareth and how the Scriptures, on which that identity was based, were to be interpreted. Who was Jesus? By whose authority did he speak? To orthodox Judaism, Jesus was not, as his followers claimed, God’s Messiah of whom the prophets had spoken: To the Sadducees, he was a troublemaker who had violently disrupted temple order. To the Pharisees, he was a lawbreaker and blasphemer for reasons beyond number. But to others, this Jesus was the Messiah, the Christ; he was the Suffering Servant, the Son of God, the Redeemer, the Lord of life, the Lamb who was slain, attested to and prophesied by Scripture itself. By way of various titles and ascriptions, Jesus was identified as the one through whom God had revealed his saving love by raising him from the dead. This is the good news “handed on . . . by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of *the word*” (Luke 1:2–4).

If “Torah” as instruction is the appropriate way to refer to the sacred Scriptures of Judaism, and the heart of that instruction is the Law, then “the Word” as good news is the appropriate way to refer to the sacred Scriptures of Christianity, and the heart of that “news” is the forgiveness of sins brought about by Jesus’ death and resurrection.

According to the Synoptic Gospels, however, the identification of Jesus with the forgiveness of sins and a new law began during his own lifetime.

Sayings of Jesus as “Sacred Scripture”

The earliest identity given to Jesus is that of “teacher” (*didaskalos*; Mark 1:22; 4:8, *et passim*).¹¹ It is little wonder then that the oldest “scripture” in the New Testament (other than Old Testament quotations) is a collection of Jesus’ sayings, now incorporated in the Gospels of both Matthew and Luke. For convenience’ sake, scholars refer to this collection of sayings as “Q” (from the German *Quelle*, meaning “source”). Although the exact wording of verses comprising this body of sayings is disputed, as well as its role in the theology of the early church,¹² it is clear that the sayings were treated as authoritative: “For he taught them as one having authority and not as the scribes” (Mark 1:22). These sayings include the injunction to love one’s enemy (Matt. 5:43–48 par.), to lay up treasures in heaven (Matt. 6:19–21 par.), not to serve two masters (Matt. 6:24 par.), and to build one’s house (faith) on rock (Matt. 7:24–27 par.); it includes as well beatitudes and woes, the Lord’s Prayer (Matt. 6:9–13 par.), the Golden Rule (Matt. 7:12 par.), and so on.

Many of these sayings differentiated Jesus and his disciples from the practices that characterized the scribes and Pharisees—laws concerning Sabbath observance, for example (cf. Matt. 12:1–8 par.). One may think of Q as the “torah” (or teachings/instructions) of Jesus. It acquired a degree of sacrality during his ministry for that reason. But, following his crucifixion and in a manner not completely paralleled by the Law in the Old Testament, the teachings of Jesus are made subordinate to the *story* of Jesus, most notably his passion. This is partly the case because all the teachings of Jesus are subsumed by him under one commandment: to love God with one’s total being, and one’s neighbor as one’s self, for it is the sum of the Law and the Prophets (Matt. 22:36–40). But it is also the case that laws are by nature finite and transitory, whereas love is infinite and eternal in its reach.

Were the sayings of Jesus all that was known of him, Jesus would at most have been considered a peripatetic teacher of wisdom, and perhaps an eschatological prophet in the manner of John the Baptist. It is not likely that the sayings themselves would either have been preserved or considered sacred by anyone had the speaker of the sayings not had the fate of being crucified as a common criminal, and then been pro-

11. Jesus is not called “rabbi” in the Synoptic Gospels; in Matthew Jesus warns his disciples not to be called “rabbi” (23:8).

12. For a proposal concerning the place of Q in the development of the early church, see John S. Kloppenborg, *Q, the Earliest Gospel: An Introduction to the Original Stories and Sayings of Jesus* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008).

claimed as raised from the dead “in accordance with scripture” (1 Cor. 15:4)—though no such explicit reference is to be found in the Old Testament.

The *sayings* of Jesus, however, are equaled in antiquity with *stories* about Jesus that arose during his ministry in Galilee and its environs. They too undoubtedly began as oral traditions and, whether oral or written, served in addition to the Gospel of Mark as another source for Luke in setting down his own account (Luke 1:1–4). Such stories were passed down as epiphanies of an ordinary kind. They too revealed who Jesus is, filling out the identity of the one crucified, and like his sayings became sacred stories and sacred Scripture for that reason.

Epiphanies of an Ordinary Kind

As with figures in the Old Testament who had an encounter with God, so also in the Gospel story those who encountered Jesus “in many and various ways” experienced the transformation of their lives. The stories of these encounters are of an ordinary kind, but they are also demonstrations of Jesus’ spiritual power (Greek *dynamis*). The call of the disciples is stark and simple. Simon and Andrew, like James and John, make their livelihood by fishing on the Sea of Galilee, but confronted by Jesus they abandon their nets to follow him (Mark 1:16–20). The same happens to Levi, a tax collector (2:13–17). Once encountered, these men cannot go back to life as it had been. One may suppose that some of the miracles (*dynamis*) of healing are in their brevity parables of these sudden transformations of a psychic nature: so a fever is healed by a touch, as is a withered hand; sight is given to the blind, the lame are made to walk, the deranged are made whole, the dead are brought back to life. However miraculous in themselves, and whatever their historicity, physical wonders in the Gospels are often subsumed under a more telling narrative, for example, concerning the authority of Jesus to forgive sins or the power of faith to bring about wholeness, as in the story of a paralytic (Mark 2:1–12 par.), and the woman with a hemorrhage (Mark 5:25–34). What is being asserted is that only the presence of transcendent holiness can make one whole or holy: recognizing Jesus’ holiness to be of that nature, a harlot washes his feet with her tears and anoints them with costly ointment. Her deeds are received as acts of repentance to the one who is holy, and she is forgiven (Luke 7:36–50). In all such instances in the Gospels the narrative conveys an

awareness of divine presence, of something that interfuses the ordinary with the extraordinary, the human with the Divine. Not everyone who knew Jesus experienced this presence; and of those who did it was not always in the same way or to the same degree. Those closest to Jesus (and therefore principals in the Gospel story) are Peter, James, and John, and also the sisters Mary and Martha, and Mary Magdalene. Peter, James, and John are the first to be called by Jesus, the last to be with him in the Garden of Gethsemane. It is they who are chosen to ascend a “high mountain” where Jesus is transfigured before them in an epiphany of a special kind. These life-transforming epiphanies are experienced by ordinary men and women.

What proved to be universally appealing about the narratives of the Gospels is that they are about ordinary people—among whom Jesus himself was counted (cf. “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” [John 1:46]). Such lives are the *subject* of sacred Scripture. It is a hallmark of the Jesus movement that this is so (cf. 1 Cor. 1:26–31); and it largely remained so for the subsequent three centuries, that is, throughout the period during which the canon of sacred Scripture was being formed. Chapter 16 of Paul’s Letter to the Romans captures this phenomenon in a remarkable way. By sending greetings, Paul blesses and immortalizes twenty-seven persons by name, from Andronicus to Tryphosa. He greets them in the Lord’s name, calling them all “saints,” not because they are holy, but because they have been made righteous in Jesus Christ (Rom. 3:21–26) and because they are *called* to be holy. The ordinary people who later made Paul’s letters “canonical” and therefore authoritative did so because they could identify with their predecessors in faith. Like the Deuteronomist’s personal identification with his Hebrew ancestors in Egypt, readers of Paul’s letters decades and centuries later recognized *themselves* as those who were being “greeted in the name of the Lord” and blessed thereby. This power of *the word* to incorporate the believer into the body of Christ, like the sacrament of baptism, lies also at the root of what makes Scripture sacred. Hearing in faith is an epiphany of an ordinary kind (Rom. 10:14–17).

Epiphanies of an Extraordinary Kind

Had the story of Jesus ended with his crucifixion, there would be no Christian church. The experience of the risen Lord, and the stories that related that experience, brought the church into being and formed the

core of its Scriptures. The Gospels do not describe the resurrection, and what is said about the resurrected body by the Gospel writers and Paul is contradictory (cf. Luke 24:39 with 1 Cor. 15:50). What the New Testament does describe are encounters with the risen Lord. Even here, however, such encounters remain largely mysterious and ineffable. Luke's account of Paul's conversion, for example, is told three times in three different ways (see Acts 12; 22; 26). His story of Cleopas and his companion is no less elusive, yet it is telling.

The Road to Emmaus

An encounter with the risen Christ is called a christophany (cf. Matt. 28:16–20; John 20–21). The most compelling of the Gospel christophanies, and the most illuminative as theological reflection, is told by Luke as taking place on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13–35). Two disciples are walking together engaged in a theological discussion concerning the events they have witnessed when, unrecognized, the risen Christ meets them along the way. What are you discussing? the stranger asks. Surprised that the stranger does not know what has happened, one of the disciples, Cleopas, tells him of Jesus' crucifixion at the hands of the high priests and the rulers of Jerusalem, how certain women that very morning had discovered his tomb empty, and how in a vision angels had told them Jesus was alive. Then the Lord chides the disciples. Did they not know what the prophets foretold, that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and be exalted? Then, "beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself" (Luke 24:27).

Still there is no recognition. The idea that the Christ had to suffer was too unexpected and unwanted to connect the crucified Jesus with the Anointed One (Messiah) of God. Being near to the village, they ask the stranger to join them for the evening. At supper, he takes bread, blesses it, and shares it with them. Through these words and the breaking of bread (the Eucharist) the companions recall Jesus' living presence. Then "their eyes were opened and they recognize him," and he "vanishes out of their sight." As with Old Testament theophanies, the presence of the Divine is elusive, even ephemeral. Astonished at what they have experienced, they reflect on the course of the day. They say to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to

us?” Reversing their course, they return to the disciples in Jerusalem, where the risen Lord instructs them all concerning his identity: “Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all the nations’” (Luke 24:45–47).

Here understanding who Jesus is by way of sacred Scripture and table fellowship is itself an epiphany apart from which the encounter would remain mysterious and ambiguous. Given clarity by Scripture and experience, their own story takes on sacrality as part of the “good news.” “The Lord is risen,” they say; “the Lord is risen indeed! And he has become known to *us* in the breaking of bread” (Luke 24:34–35). The story becomes both Scripture and sacrament.

The Road to Damascus

The most dramatic christophany in the New Testament concerns the apostle Paul (1 Cor. 15:8–9). As the story is told by Luke, the event occurred as Paul was on his way to Damascus to arrest followers of “the Way,” having been sent by the high priest to bring Christians back to Jerusalem for trial (see Acts 9; 22; 26; 1 Cor. 15). As Paul approaches the city, he is confronted by the risen Christ, and though all he sees is a blinding light, Paul hears Christ’s voice, which, in Luke’s third account, commissions Paul to preach the forgiveness of sins and the sanctification that comes through faith in Jesus (Acts 26:18).¹³

Writing of the event in his Letter to the Galatians and in a manner fully commensurate with the great prophets of the Old Testament, Paul tells his readers that his calling into the ministry of Christ was something God had destined for him even before he was born. Thus called by grace, he recalls, “God was pleased to reveal his Son to me so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles” (Gal. 1:15–16).

From Paul’s letters we know that by this encounter with Christ, Paul believed that he had been reconciled to God through Christ Jesus, that *faith* in Christ’s death as a divine sacrifice of love and not *works* of the Law had set him right with God, and that this good news pertained to all the world, to the Jew first but also to the Greek (i.e., Gentiles; Rom. 1–2). To come to faith in Jesus’ death and resurrection as some-

13. This third rendition of Paul’s conversion conflates into one experience what the earlier accounts suggest occurred over a period of time; see Acts 12 and 22.

thing God had done for the salvation of the world, Paul argued, meant to follow Jesus, to enter into his death through baptism so that the old self might die to sin, and the new self might rise a new being reconciled to God. Through this sacrament of baptism, through dying and rising with Christ in faith, the believer became part of the body of Christ, the church. Thus reconciled with God and made righteous through faith, the believer was called to become an ambassador for Christ in the continuing ministry of reconciling the world to God (2 Cor. 5:18).

Paul's epiphany is thus understood as a calling into the ministry of reconciliation. Hearing with faith is thus a common theme in his letters: "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? . . . Faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ" (Rom. 10:13b–17). In the first century, even reading in private was done *aloud*.

As noted above, the Christian tradition presents its Scriptures as the *Word* of God. The good news is something *proclaimed*. News is something to be heard, that is, what is proclaimed has to be appropriated person by person, by the individual who has the ears to hear. The most personal form of written communication is the letter, and for this reason the greater portion of the New Testament is made up of letters. Form fits content. Of course, more personal than the letter is the person. The Christian claim, spelled out most distinctly by the Gospel of John, is that the Word, in the beginning with God (1:1), has become flesh in Jesus (1:14) that in *him* God, whom "no one has ever seen," might be made known (1:18).

Because of this belief the words of Jesus and the word about Jesus became sacred to the *community* of faith, the church. Scripture not only identified the Lord, it also identified the church as the body of Christ in the world, and gave practical guidance for its ministry of reconciliation: "All scripture," writes the author of 2 Timothy, "is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work" (3:16–17). In short, Scripture is the Logos become *logoi* (the Word become words), containing all that is sufficient "for faith and practice." In sum, what had been seen became something heard, so that what had been heard might become seen again (cf. 1 John 1:1–4).