

Part 2 - What is the Bible?

Where does Holy Scripture sit in our doctrine? This is answered by saying that Scripture is the first and foundational of three factors that make up our theology; the other two are Christian tradition and reason.

Christian **tradition** is the record of the church's efforts to understand and convey the faith of the Bible in terms of the view of reality in every period of its history. The more successful of these efforts remain authoritative for us today as examples of the way biblical faith can be rephrased in the thought of a later age, and also can be extended to comprehend situations and knowledge not envisioned by biblical writers.

The application of **reason** in our theology is not meant to suggest that we plug into some timeless logic. Rather, it means that we express our Christian belief in terms of the understanding of reality and in the thought forms of our own times. The task of theology is mediating between the historic faith of the church and society's constantly revised construction of reality.

The Bible's Authority from Five Perspectives

1. Scripture as the Word of God

For Anglicans, the Bible is considered the **Word of God**; but we do not view this in an inerrant, literalist sense. The Church of England never claimed the inerrancy of Scripture, even during the Reformation, and the more modern Anglican Church does not hold that the Bible is literally the "words" of God in every detail. As stated in the catechism, "We call them (the Holy Scriptures) the Word of God because God inspired their human authors and because God still speaks to us through the Bible" (BCP 853).

The Bible is viewed as divinely inspired but a very human product, the work of numerous human authors, constructed over a thousand years or more, and conditioned by the cultural assumptions of their age. It is a highly pluralistic document, containing the personal views of different writers, and shaped by the particular situations in which they were written. Consider, for example, the seeming conflict between the Apostle Paul and James, Jesus' brother, over the role of works in Christian doctrine; two different slants that, when studied carefully, richly inform our faith.

Essentially, then, the Bible contains the Word of God in the sense that it speaks to us of Jesus Christ, but does so as conveyed by God through human beings.

The Word of God expressed through human words is analogous to the doctrine of the **Incarnation**, wherein the eternal Word of God became incarnate as a first century Jew—Jesus. It is analogous to the **sacraments**, wherein “God uses the frail elements of water, bread, and wine to communicate the redemptive presence and action of his Word to us.” It is also analogous to the **Church**, a very human institution that is always in need of reform.

2. Scripture as Inspired by God

The notion that Scripture is **inspired** by God is a belief **inherited** by the Christian Church from Judaism. While some have interpreted this to mean that God “guided the pens of the human writers or dictated his words to their minds,” more indirectly it is viewed that God was the ultimate, not the immediate, cause behind the writing of Scripture. While it was human beings who wrote the Bible, God was the primary cause of its being written.

Third, we share the doctrine of inspiration in our **ecumenical** dialogue with the Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Lutheran Churches, all of which affirm the doctrine. This is important because it evidences our relationship with and commitment to the larger Church.

The claim to inspiration applies to both Old and New Testaments. Also, the inspiration of Scripture is not a once-for-all event. When read in church, the Holy Spirit uses Scripture to proclaim the **living word** of salvation. The work of the Holy Spirit is not restricted to the original writing, which produced the authoritative witness of the salvation event.

3. Sufficiency of Scripture

In the Anglican view, the Bible does contain all that is necessary for us to obtain salvation. Article VI of the Thirty Nine Articles states explicitly: “Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation...”(BCP 868). No other book, however primitive or inspiring, can add anything to the **witness** of these acts of God, however much it may contribute to our understanding of them. This witness is the work either of those who had themselves directly witnessed those events...or of those who were in immediate contact with that witness.

4. The Primacy of Scripture

When talking about the primacy of Scripture, what we mean is that Holy Scripture is the **norm** of our faith; it is the norm by which the other norms of our Church (the creeds, tradition, confessions of faith) are judged. In calling it the norm, we are not saying that the Bible is an absolute prescription for a ready-made theology; rather, it offers a model of procedure whereby we can move from the

fundamental message to our own problems and questions. Theological propositions have only secondary importance and represent the attempt of the faith to understand itself.

Paul, for example, starts out with the apostolic message and draws out its implications for interpretation as in 1 Cor. 15 where he deals with the resurrection from the dead. Paul's doctrinal conclusions are influenced by and limited to the worldview of his day. Thus, while not rigidly prescriptive, the Bible serves more like a series of guidelines from which we may proceed to formulate our doctrine.

The Bible is also the norm for ethical behavior. Modern Anglicans do not see it as a code book of law, but specific ethical commands of the Bible are **illustrations** of the kind of behavior God requires in specific situations. We encounter situations today not covered by specific edicts in the Bible, so we have to go beyond the confines of the canon.

The Old Testament has also been a "characteristic source" regarding ethics for Anglicans, particularly as embodied in the teachings of the prophets, such as Amos and Isaiah. Anglican concern for and involvement in the cause of world hunger, for example, may be rightly claimed to be biblically based.

5. The Bible as Canon

Closely associated with the idea of Scripture as the norm of our faith is the idea of the **canon**: the list of books recognized as belonging to the normative writings of our faith. For Anglicans, all books of the New Testament are canonical and the Old Testament books of the Hebrew Bible are considered canonical. The additional books of the Greek Bible, called the **Apocrypha**, are valued and used in our modern day lectionaries. However, they occupy a secondary position in our theology and amplify rather than establish doctrine.

It is interesting to see how the New Testament canon has informed and shaped all Christian theology including our own Anglican theology. The structure of the New Testament canon is first, the Gospels, followed by Acts, then the Epistolary writings, and finally, Revelation. The fact that four Gospels come first means that the incarnation together with the Trinity is, for Anglicanism, fundamental to the faith.

Biblical Interpretation Through the Ages

Interpretation is a fundamental activity, not only in the communities of faith that were formed in response to Scripture, but also in the communities of faith that recorded and preserved the words of the Bible. The history of Christianity, the history of Judaism, the history of the formation of the Bible itself, is the history of interpretation. All our words about Scripture are acts of interpretation, without

the status of **revelation** or **authority**. Through a process of interpretation, and ongoing encounters with this living God, the Bible took on its present form. And this whole is greater than the sum of its parts, enabling these words to address the human spirit in all its diverse cultural and personal expressions.

As Anglicans, we share this attentiveness to the words of Scripture, and this reverence for the God who speaks in Scripture—the God who continues to speak in all the world to all of humankind. We also share a reverence for tradition, the ongoing history of the reception of this word.

Rabbinic Interpreters

The older brother of the Church, the **synagogue**, had a profound reverence for the vitality of the word of the God who spoke—of the God who speaks in Scripture. Each Sabbath, in the setting of confession of faith, prayer, and praise, Scripture was read and heard—and interpreted to the worshippers. For the devout, there were other gatherings for the study and interpretation of Scripture. This study and interpretation was carried out in the context of the life of the community, and of the life of individuals. One term that has survived for these gatherings is the “house of **midrash**.” Midrash is a close examination—inquiry—of Scripture, led by a respected master of the tradition, and related to present issues or events that concern the community.

The Early Church

The path that led to modern Christianity was laid out by teachers whose interpretation began with the crucifixion and resurrection of the Messiah. Their treatment of Scripture bound the story of the crucified one into the ancient stories of God’s works among the people of God. At every point, in a variety of ways, they established connections between the words and stories in the **Law** and the **Prophets** and the new stories of the crucified one. Paul engages the discussion of the specific qualities of a righteous life in the light of the stories of the crucified one. The proclamation of Christ crucified was the proclamation of a theology of grace that made reconciliation with God the starting point, and not the result, of our efforts to be righteous. In the process, the plain meaning of the text was dramatically transformed. In the light of this proclamation, the story of the Jerusalem Council in Acts abolishes observances of the Torah that are fundamental to widespread definitions of righteousness according to the **Torah**.

The Gospels bring together the words and sayings of Jesus, in close dialogue with the stories in the Law and the Prophets, as new stories in the history of the work of God in the history of the people of God. In the light of this new proclamation of the risen Messiah, subtle themes in the book of Isaiah—the

God who comes as a healer and the suffering servant who will come—become the foundation for a substantial rereading of Scripture.

The Medieval Church

The Church Fathers were educated teachers who read Scripture within the world of Hellenistic intellectual circles in the Roman Empire dominated by a new understanding of Plato. For these readers, the text had two levels of meaning. The **literal** sense described the events, with all the moral and intellectual dilemmas they present. The **spiritual** sense described the divine truth that they disclosed. Every text of Scripture was read in the light of the movement of the universe from bondage toward communion with God, now understood in terms of the crucified, resurrected, and exalted incarnation of God, Jesus Christ.

The Medieval Church intentionally preserved this repository of faith from the early Church, and read Scripture in dialogue with these traditional readings. Their literary readings substantially elaborated the “spiritual” readings from the earlier period. In a literal reading of the Exodus, the ancient Israelites left the land of Egypt in the time of Moses. In an allegorical reading, it refers to the redemption done by Christ. In a moral reading, it refers to the conversion of the soul from sin to grace. In an ultimate reading (anagogic), it refers to the final liberation of the soul from corruption to glory. This rich elaboration of the spiritual meaning of the text never displaced the literal (or historical) reading of the text, with all its untamed meanings and implications.

The Reformers

The Protestant **Reformation** of the sixteenth century was, at one level, a reaction to the accommodation of the Church to the power and policies of the various European states—and the power and privilege that the Church shared with the rulers of these states. The gospel of the reformers in Germany and Switzerland was dominated by the Pauline proclamation of the grace of God. The grace of God is the beginning and the presupposition of our life in the presence of God, not the result of a life of virtue and piety. This proclamation of grace is entrusted to the Church, but it is not the property of the Church. Scripture is fundamentally a witness to the mystery of the grace of God, not a founding text for the prevailing political order undergirded by official doctrine. For Martin Luther, the word of God is “in- lettered” in the human voices we hear in Scripture, as God is incarnate in the human being Jesus Christ. For John Calvin, the words of Scripture are “mean and lowly words”—the rhetorical accommodation of the divine word to the capacities of its human hearers. In their interpretation of Scripture, the reformers worked from the historical meaning of the text, rather than the traditional body of spiritual readings from the fathers and doctors of the Church. The emphasis on “**scripture alone**” was a rejection of the authority of this repository of faith, as well as a preference for

a reading of the Bible as a whole. Under the rubric of “scripture interpreting scripture,” the reformers made the mystery of divine grace and its capacity to transform human life the central principle of interpretation.

The reformer’s emphasis on “scripture alone” never displaced their profound awareness of their confessional model for interpretation and of their own finitude as interpreters of the word.

The Anglicans

From the beginning of the Anglican tradition, the reading and hearing of Scripture has been integrally connected with our worship—“the rule of prayer is the rule of faith.” For **Richard Hooker**, who articulated the spirit of the new Anglican tradition, the “**medicine of grace**” that comes through Jesus Christ is **communicated** in the Word and in the Eucharist. This is the context in which Scripture is read and interpreted.

In our reading of Scripture, as in our common prayer and worship, we are brought into the presence of a God who ever calls us into **communion**. This is the beginning and end of our interpretation of Scripture.

Our Reading of Scripture within the Community of Faith

Within the community shaped by our common worship, we also carry forward the old tradition of meeting for the purpose of reading and coming to terms with scripture. There we learn the power of the voices and the power of the stories within the text to address us directly at our deepest level. The voice that is heard in the text of scripture is the voice of the Living God that we worship. In all our worship and all our study, we bear witness to the God whose voice is heard in Scripture, whose voice is heard in the cloud of witnesses that preceded us, and whose voice is heard ever-fresh in our own life and circumstances.

The former Archbishop of Canterbury, **Rowan Williams**, has summed it up. “The hearing of God at one point does not exhaust God’s speaking.... God names God in Scripture as the unconditioned and uncaptured, apprehended as such only in the upheavals and new beginnings of the history of those God encounters in grace and freedom.”

OLD TESTAMENT

PENTATEUCH

Ge
1430 BC
GENESIS
Moses

Ex
1400 BC
EXODUS
Moses

Lv
1445 BC
LEVITICUS
Moses

Nu
1400 BC
NUMBERS
Moses

Dt
1400 BC
DEUTERONOMY
Moses

HISTORY

Js
1375 BC
JOSHUA
Joshua

Ju
1050 BC
JUDGES
Samuel

Ru
1050-1000 BC
RUTH
Samuel

Sa
900 BC
1 SAMUEL
Samuel

Sa
900 BC
2 SAMUEL
Samuel

POETRY

Ch
450 BC
1 CHRONICLES
Unknown

Ch
340 BC
2 CHRONICLES
Unknown

Er
450 BC
EZRA
Ezra

Ne
425-400 BC
NEHEMIAH
Nehemiah

Es
450 BC
ESTHER
Unknown

MAJOR PROPHETS

Jb
1900 BC
JOB
Unknown

Ps
1400-450 BC
PSALMS
Multiple Contributors

Pr
970-675 BC
PROVERBS
Solomon

Ec
940-931 BC
ECCLESIASTES
Solomon

Ss
970-950 BC
SONG OF SONGS
Solomon

MINOR PROPHETS

Is
700-680 BC
ISAIAH
Isaiah

Je
585-570 BC
JEREMIAH
Jeremiah

La
585 BC
LAMENTATIONS
Jeremiah

Ez
590-570 BC
EZEKIEL
Ezekiel

Da
526-530 BC
DANIEL
Daniel

MINOR PROPHETS

Ho
750-710 BC
HOSEA
Hosea

Jo
UNKNOW BC
JOEL
Joel

Am
750 BC
AMOS
Amos

Ob
UNKNOW BC
OBADIAH
Obadiah

Jh
772-754 BC
JONAH
Jonah

Mi
735-710 BC
MICAH
Micah

Na
650 BC
NAHUM
Nahum

Ha
640 BC
HABBAKUK
Habbakuk

NEW TESTAMENT

GOSPELS

Mt
60-65 AD
MATTHEW
Matthew

Mk
50-60 AD
MARK
John Mark

Lk
60-61 AD
LUKE
Luke

Jn
80-90 AD
JOHN
John

ACTS

Ac
62 AD
ACTS
Luke

PAUL'S LETTERS

Ro
56 AD
ROMANS
Paul

Co
55 AD
1 CORINTHIANS
Paul

Co
55-56 AD
2 CORINTHIANS
Paul

Co
49-50 AD
GALATIANS
Paul

Ep
60-62 AD
EPHESIANS
Paul

Ph
60-62 AD
PHILIPPIANS
Paul

Th
51 AD
1 THESSALONIANS
Paul

Th
51-52 AD
2 THESSALONIANS
Paul

Th
62-64 AD
1 TIMOTHY
Paul

Ti
66-67 AD
2 TIMOTHY
Paul

Tt
63 AD
TITUS
Paul

Pl
60 or 61 AD
PHILEMON
Paul

GENERAL LETTERS

Is
75 AD
JUDE
Jude

Jn
90-95 AD
1 JOHN
John

Jn
90-95 AD
2 JOHN
John

Jn
90-95 AD
3 JOHN
John

Re
90-95 AD
REVELATION
John

PROPHECY

Re
90-95 AD
REVELATION
John

Date Written

Book Abbreviation

Book Title

Author

Additional Reading Suggestion:

[*The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*](#); by Robert Alter

[*An Introduction to the New Testament*](#); by Raymond Brown

[*The Christ Key: Unlocking the Centrality of Christ in the Old Testament*](#); by Chad Bird

[*The New Testament in Its World*](#); by N.T. Wright

[*Holy Imagination*](#); by Judy Fentress-Williams

[*The Prophetic Imagination*](#); by Walter Brueggemann

[*The Bible Tells Me So*](#); by Peter Enns

[*How the Bible Actually Works*](#); by Peter Enns

[*Inspired*](#); by Rachel Held Evans

[*Making Sense of the Bible*](#); by Adam Hamilton

[*Why Read the Bible?*](#); by N.T. Wright

[*How Can Anyone Read the Bible?*](#); by L. William Countryman

[*A Word to Live By*](#); by Lauren F Winner

[*Transforming Scripture*](#); by Frank Wade

[*Opening the Bible*](#); by Roger Ferlo

[*What is the Bible*](#); by Rob Bell

[*A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*](#); by Bruce Metzger