

# Wisdom from the Early Church

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# Forming the Christian Bible

## Scripture

**Luke 4:14–21** If Jesus is the fulfillment of prophecy (Isaiah 61:1–2), the identity of Jesus is to be found in the prophecy, and the meaning of the prophecy is to be found in Jesus. Neither can be understood apart from the other.

## Prayer

Almighty Father,  
we give you thanks for your beloved Son, Jesus Christ.  
Who, for his astounding love toward creatures,  
was born of the virgin,  
uniting his humanity to God,  
suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
rose again,  
was received in glory,  
and shall come in glory.

This is the character of our salvation,  
This is the way of life,  
which the prophets announced  
and Christ confirmed  
and the apostles handed over  
and the Church, in the whole world,  
hands down to her children.

Glory to the All-Holy Trinity and one Divinity:  
Father and Son and all-provident Holy Spirit, forever. Amen.  
—Irenaeus of Lyons, adapted

## Introduction

When officers are ordained in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), they are asked, “Do you accept the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be, by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative

witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal, and God's Word to you?"<sup>1</sup>

Underlying this question are several remarkable assumptions. One is that God addresses us primarily through words, those written in books as well as those spoken in sermons interpreting these books. This claim does not doubt God addresses us in other ways as well, e.g., in the wonders of creation, in the sacraments of baptism, and the Lord's Supper. Yet in acknowledging these, we insist it is through the witness of Scripture that we gain a full understanding of their meaning.

Another assumption is that the Scriptures constitute a unity in which each of the parts contributes to the understanding of the whole. Most fundamentally, for Christians the meaning of the Old Testament is found in the New, and the meaning of the New Testament is grounded in the Old. Neither can be rightly understood without the other. Though as individuals we may give far more attention to some books of the Bible than to others—perhaps preferring the Gospels to the Epistles, the Psalms to the Prophets—we, as Presbyterians, believe these documents, with all their differences, together offer one multifaceted message about the God revealed conclusively in Jesus Christ.

A final assumption is that it is not the Bible that is ultimate, but God. Though we believe God addresses us through the words of the Bible, it is Jesus Christ, the Word to whom these words attest, whom we worship.

These assumptions form the foundation of our perception of Christ through the Bible. Yet, for early Christians, the process was reversed. Theirs was the monumental task of deciding whether this One, whom they had encountered in person or in the preaching of his immediate followers, was even accessible through written words and documents, and, if so, which documents. We take the Bible for granted. This is a luxury early Christians did not enjoy.

## **The Scriptures of Israel**

Jesus' disciples knew him in person. The next generation of believers encountered him through the Spirit-inspired preaching of those who had known him firsthand. It was not at all clear, however, how later generations were to gain access to that same life-giving encounter. Christianity, of course, developed out of the religion of Israel, which held that God addresses us in words, initially spoken and

1. *Book of Order* (2009), W-4.4003b.

then written. Yet that conviction came to stand in tension with the deepening certainty of Christians that the definitive revelation of God had come not through words but in a person: Jesus Christ.

After the ascension, however, it was again words, first preached and then written, that provided access to God. The result is a paradox: the Word of God, definitively revealed as person, as the meaning of all the prophetic words, is now available only through words. We must approach the Savior indirectly, as the Savior now approaches us: through words that are by their nature interpretations. The very titles of the Gospels make the point: the Gospel *according to* Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John. That paradox lies behind early struggles among Christians over the authority of texts.

Of course, as Jesus and his first followers were Jews, their sacred text was, in general terms, what we describe as the Old Testament. It was understood to have three parts: the Law, Prophets, and Writings.<sup>2</sup> The content of the Law was standardized by the time of Jesus. The contents of the Prophets and the Writings were somewhat more fluid.

Contributing to the fluidity was the problem of language. By the third century B.C., Jews were scattered around the Mediterranean, where the common language was Greek. For these Jews and their descendants to retain their ancestral religion, their sacred Hebrew texts had to be translated into Greek. That translation, made in Alexandria, was called the Septuagint and designated by the Roman numerals LXX. The name, meaning seventy, refers to the widespread legend that seventy or seventy-two Jewish elders, separated so they could not communicate with each other, produced exactly the same Spirit-inspired translation.

The Septuagint came to include all the books of the Hebrew Bible, as well as additional materials, which Protestants refer to as Apocrypha (hidden) and do not consider authoritative. Yet because these additional materials were preserved in the Septuagint, both Greek-speaking Jews and early Christians regarded them as sacred.

The important point for us is that by the early second century and beyond, it was the Greek Bible that was authoritative for Christians. The Septuagint was used when they visited synagogues

2. Law (also called *Torah* or *Pentateuch*) referred to Genesis through Deuteronomy. Generally, *Prophets* referred to Joshua through 2 Kings as well as Isaiah through Malachi; *Writings* (also called *Hagiographa* or *Sacred Writings*) referred to Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, and 1 and 2 Chronicles.

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around the Mediterranean and sought to demonstrate to their fellow Jews that Jesus was the fulfillment of the Scriptures. It was almost entirely upon that text that the authors of the New Testament drew for their own writing. Nevertheless, not all who called themselves Christians accepted its authority, and even for those Christians

who did, the Septuagint was never considered adequate in its witness to Jesus. These issues need further attention.

## **The Old Testament in the Church**

As the church became increasingly Gentile, the status of the Old Testament as sacred Scripture came into question. Attracted to the message of Jesus and his followers, Gentiles often found themselves repelled by elements of the church's inheritance from Judaism. In particular, the God presented in the Old Testament appeared to be considerably at odds with the God revealed by Jesus. The question these Gentile Christians raised was whether the Old Testament could be discarded and with it the God of Israel.

The man who forced the question of the status of the Old Testament and its God in the mid-second century was Marcion, an immigrant from Pontus on the Black Sea to Rome. Marcion was convinced the Old Testament was, indeed, the revelation of the God who had created the material world, given the law to Moses, and sent the prophets to proclaim the coming of a Messiah who would establish an earthly kingdom, all of which Marcion decried. This revelation and its God, Marcion believed, were in direct opposition to the revelation of the infinitely superior, entirely spiritual, and previously unknown God of love, proclaimed by Jesus.

Marcion held that, of all the apostles, Paul alone had grasped the message taught by the Savior. The others, he was convinced, had been misled by their own Jewishness. Therefore, Marcion compiled a collection of documents he thought provided the most trustworthy witness to the Savior. These included the ten epistles he believed that Paul had written and the gospel composed by Paul's companion, Luke. Moreover, Marcion cut from Paul's letters anything that appeared favorable to the Old Testament and removed from Luke the account of the birth of Jesus as well as the account of the

resurrection of the flesh. He believed Jesus was completely spiritual, bearing no relation to the material world and its God.

Marcion was eventually driven out of the church in Rome. Nevertheless, his challenge to second-century Christianity was of immense importance. He, as well as other critics of the Old Testament and its God, forced the church to clarify for itself and others the relation of these writings and this God to the Christian faith. By now, many recognized Christianity to be a religion separate from Judaism. The church's affirmation of the Septuagint as a necessary witness to Christ, the Word of God, served to confirm that the God of Israel was also the God of Jesus and his followers and that Israel's sacred Scriptures rightly belonged to Christians as well.

By claiming the Old Testament was essential to the Christian message, the church was asserting that Christianity was not a new religion. To the contrary, in the church was to be found the fulfillment of God's ancient, even eternal, plan for humanity, which had been manifested initially in Israel but had attained its ultimate expression in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The church claimed for itself Israel's title of the people of God.

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## **The Church's Bible**

If Christians came to believe the Old Testament was necessary for understanding Jesus, they also believed Jesus was necessary for understanding the Old Testament. As Luke 4:14–21 illustrates, if Jesus were to be recognized as the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies, then not only was he to be understood in relation to them, but they were to be understood in relation to him.

When Jesus was no longer physically present as the interpretive counter to the Old Testament, it was the preaching of the apostles and the writings attributed to them that were used to serve that function. Thus, when Christians met for worship, they read not only from the Old Testament, which prophesied the coming of the Savior, but these other materials that told of the Savior who had come. These latter writings came to constitute what we know today as the New Testament.

For decades the arrangement seems to have been informal. Fairly early copies of Paul's letters were circulated among churches and

read in worship. The same may have been true for collections of sayings of Jesus. Gospels would have been available by late in the first century. Other documents, ultimately rejected, were read in worship as well.

The need to have an official, exclusively Christian collection of documents, or a New Testament, became urgent in the mid-to-late second century not only with Marcion's attempt to limit the number of texts that were authoritative, but also because of others (today

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called Gnostics) who sought to expand that number by writing their own texts. Both Marcion and the Gnostics operated out of highly idiosyncratic interpretations of the revelation given in the Savior.

To protect the integrity of the church's message, Irenaeus of Lyons (d. ca. 200) argued for the necessity of relying entirely on apostolic witness.

Only those texts that could be traced to the apostles or their closest disciples should be considered authoritative. Though the apostolic authorship of some of the documents that became authoritative was considered dubious even in the second century, the perspective of Irenaeus was widely shared. Christ had entrusted his message to the apostles; they had proclaimed it in speech and writing. To ensure the ongoing integrity of the message, the church must count as authoritative only texts of apostolic origin.

Irenaeus was arguing for something more as well. It is in the combined witness of Old Testament, Gospels, and Epistles that the apostolic faith is encountered. The message is the same: the one God revealed in Jesus Christ. But that message can be rightly discerned only when all elements are held in tension. Any element read in isolation from the others creates distortion.

In effect, Irenaeus and those who shared his views were seeking to ensure for the church what the Presbyterian ordination vow also seeks: the experience that Luke 4:14–21 describes. It is an understanding of Christ by reference to the Scriptures and an understanding of the Scriptures by reference to Christ. At the heart of it all is a person, the Word, whom we know through words.

## **Spiritual Practice**

If the entire body of Scripture is to be valued as a witness to Christ, then engagement with the broadest spectrum of texts can contribute to growth in love and knowledge of God. The disciplined use of a daily lectionary (see the *Book of Common Worship* or [pcusa.org](http://pcusa.org)) is one way to gain access to this expansive proclamation.

## **Questions for Reflection**

By affirming and rejecting individual texts, the early church sought to preserve what it understood to be apostolic teachings about God as revealed in the life and person of Christ. Through this process the church shaped the scriptural tradition on which our knowledge of God depends. If you could edit the Bible to present your own understanding of God, which books or passages would you delete? Which material would you consider essential?

The Directory for Worship in the *Book of Order* charges ministers with the responsibility of choosing readings for public worship “so that over a period of time the people will hear the full message of Scripture” (W-2.2002). What is the value of reading from the full range of Scripture in worship? How is the Old Testament used in the life of your congregation? What about the Epistles? Can you suggest any changes to worship or programs in your church that might ensure a broader exposure to Scripture?

What is the meaning for you of the ordination question regarding Scripture with which this study began (W-4.4003)? Regardless of whether you are ordained in the PC(USA), how does the question challenge you?