

“How the Word Became Text”<sup>1</sup>

Coffee and Conversation Speaker Series Presentation – September 30, 2018

Introduction (10 minutes)

Thank you for coming today. Let me begin with a question. What would you think if I said that my doctor’s medical training came from books that were written 1,500 years ago?

Why then read the ancient texts of the Bible? Why so much emphasis upon Scripture?

One answer is that for Christians the Bible has been the rule of faith and life for some 1,500 years. People have found that it has guided them closer to God and deeper into meaningful life.

Another answer is that Scripture focuses on our interactions with God, self and others and the importance of those matters do not change over time.

While the Bible is reportedly the most purchased book, it is not always read regularly or even profitably read.

As one Christian teacher said,

Many things hold us back: Some think only scholars can understand these ancient books from unfamiliar cultures. Some fear that if they open the Bible that they will find a rulebook, a long list of “dos” and “don’ts.” Some suspect the Bible is all about things that science has proven wrong.<sup>2</sup>

Each of these is, at most, a half-truth.

- Scholars can know things the average person cannot. However, an ordinary Christian reading the Bible, without Greek or Hebrew, can learn a vast amount about God and life in harmony with God.
- While the Bible does affirm some things and disapprove of others, the biblical faith is never about legalism. In Scripture, God always aims to help us toward *an abundant life of freedom in loving relationship with God*.
- While the Bible reflects cultural and cosmological understanding of past ages, Scripture majors in God and human nature and those are perpetually relevant issues through the ages.

One final question for reflection: What does it mean when we say in worship “The Word of the Lord”? Did God write the books of the Bible? Is every word exactly what God said?

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<sup>1</sup> The information that follows is taken from two primary resources: “Introduction to the Canon” in The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. 1, p. 7-21, M. Robert Mulholland Jr., Companions in Christ: The Way of Scripture, Upper Room Books, Nashville, TN, 2010 and Gary Neal Hansen, “Love Your Bible”, Climacus Press, 2015

<sup>2</sup> Gary Neal Hansen, “Love Your Bible”, Climacus Press, 2015, p. 4

Not all Christians agree on the answers to those questions, but understanding of our Bible came to be and how it is Scripture for us is essential if we are to be open to what God has to say to us. Let's begin with some general observations about our Bible.



Around the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE, Israel was defeated by the Babylonians and exiled to what is roughly modern day Iraq.

It was there that the Hebrew people began writing much of their history that had been orally passed on from generation to generation. They wrote on individual scrolls that were later found and assembled and eventually organized into the Old Testament collection we now have.

With the invention of the printing press in the 15<sup>th</sup> century individuals could possess a copy of the collected books of the Bible.

Because the Old Testament covers a much longer period of time and a history much older than the era in which Jesus lived, its writings are much more diverse than those of the New Testament.

They include

- Stories, meant to teach God's ways
- History, actual records of the chosen people
- Visions and prophecies
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The material come from various sources – for example there are *two creation stories* in the Book of Genesis<sup>3</sup> and the *four Gospels* in the New Testament.<sup>4</sup>

The New Testament books were written during a much shorter time period. They address many concerns. In addition to the teachings of Jesus that we read in the Gospels, we read about Christians living peaceably, forbearing, forgiving, being humble and resolving their disputes. Their authors wrote to enable Christians in their communities to express faithful discipleship in their particular time and place.

Let's take a few minutes to explore the Scripture Resource Sheet. They describe the Books of the Old and New Testaments in 4 Ws: what, when, to whom and by whom.

Exploration: (10 minutes)

People Right – explore the Old Testament Resource Sheet  
People Left – explore the New Testament Resource Sheet

What do you learn about the 4 “W”s: what, when, to whom and by whom?

Note that there are 4 basic divisions/types of Old Testament Writings

Torah (instruction) – sometimes called “law”

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<sup>3</sup> Genesis 1:1-2:4a and Genesis 2:4b-3:24

<sup>4</sup> Matthew, Mark, Luke and John

History –  
Wisdom –  
Prophets –

There are 4 basic divisions/types of New Testament Writings

Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John (written 40-73 CE)  
Acts – 1<sup>st</sup> book of church history (written 65-80 CE)  
The Apostle Paul’s Letters – conflict management by theological reflection (49-100 CE)  
Other Letters and the Apocalypse (80-150 CE)

Those of you who looked at the Old Testament Resource Sheet, did you learn anything you had not previously known?

Those of you who looked at the New Testament Resource Sheet, did you learn anything you had not previously known?

A Word about the names “Old” Testament and “New” Testament. In ancient times “old” meant tried and true and “new” had to be proven true. In our day “old” can sometimes mean outdated and no longer relevant.

A second issue is the name by which we call the first part of our Bible. What we call the “Old” Testament was and remains Scripture for the Hebrew people. In our culture “old” can mean outdated and no longer relevant.

For both of these reasons some Christians call the Old Testament “the Hebrew Scriptures” and some call the New Testament the “Greek Scriptures” because they were written mostly in Greek.

However, using the term Hebrew Scriptures could be misinterpreted as denying Christianity’s Jewish heritage. For that reason common references in most Christian Bibles remain to the Old and New Testaments.

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Let’s explore how the writings in our Bible became Scripture.

### Oral History

It is likely that much of Scripture began as oral history. The faith stories that were told over and over again were eventually written down.

### The Canon (Rule or Measuring Stick) of Scripture

In the first 3 centuries of Christianity, “canon” (Greek: *kanon*) was used to refer to *the rule or norm of faith and life*.

It was not until the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the fourth century that “canon” was applied to the list of books sacred to Christians. The Synod of Laodicea in 363 CE ruled that only “canonical” books should be read in the churches.

By the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE the two components of the Christian concept of “canon” came together: the rule or norm of Christian faith and life, and the list of books sacred to Christians.

### The Shape of the Old Testament Canon

Jewish tradition has divided the Old Testament books into 3 categories

Torah (sometimes called “law”) – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy

Prophets - Joshua, Judges, 1-2 Samuel, 1-2 Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Twelve Minor Prophets

Writings – Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, Esther, Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, 1-2 Chronicles

Taken together the 24 books are called “Tanakh” which is an acronym derived from the first Hebrew letter of each category (Torah, Nebiim and Ketubim) or TNK.

PROTESTANT versions of the Old Testament correspond to the Hebrew Bible, but the material is arranged differently under the influence of the Greek Old Testament which is called the *Septuagint* and is divided into 39 books.

THE CATHOLIC BIBLE contains all the books of the Hebrew Bible plus 7 more: Tobit, Judith, 1-2 Maccabees, Wisdom, Sirach, and Baruch...along with some additions to Esther and Daniel. The Roman Catholic Bible takes its order of the books from the Greek (Septuagint) and Latin (Vulgate) Bibles.

Other churches such as the GREEK ORTHODOX and the ETHIOPIAN ORTHODOX churches contain other scriptures that are not included in the Protestant or Roman Catholic Bibles.

### The History of the Old Testament Canon

One unlikely theory of the development of the Old Testament Canon

- *Council of Jamnia* about 70 CE (Jamnia is a town near the Mediterranean coast in Israel located near modern Tel-Aviv. The best historical sources reveal that what took place at Jamnia was not a typical “council” but rather discussions or debates. The sources reveal that there were no resolutions that were immediately accepted or taken to be definitive for all of Judaism.

It is likely that the Hebrew Scriptures were collected and used over a period of time. It was not until after Jesus’ lifetime that the Hebrew Scriptures were officially listed.

The Greek Old Testament (Septuagint) was developed primarily for Greek speaking Jews living outside of Israel.

With the Reformation and its emphasis on *Sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone) new questions about the canon of Scripture were raised. In 1534 Martin Luther included the so-called Apocrypha in an appendix to his German translation. His choice set the pattern for many Protestant churches of including them as an appendix.

In response to Luther and other Reformers, the Roman Catholic Church held the Council of Trent (1546) at which they chose to follow the tradition of the Latin Vulgate and adopted the wider canon. It produced the first definitive list of Old Testament books. Its decree is followed in Bibles prepared under Catholic auspices until this day.

### The Shape of the New Testament Canon

All Christians today share the same 27 New Testament canonical books.

Gospels come first in the Bible: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John (stories of Jesus)

The Acts of the Apostles (written by “Luke”) (history of the early church)

13 epistles (letters) by Paul divided into 2 categories

- Those written to communities
- Those written to persons

(These letters are arranged by length from longest to shortest.)

Letter to the Hebrews (likely placed here because it was associated w Paul – (Hebrews 13:22-25)

7 general or “catholic” epistles

The Apocalypse of John (speaking of the end time and thereafter) concludes the New Testament canon.

### The History of the New Testament Canon

For the first Christians their Bible was the Septuagint (Greek speaking Old Testament). When quoting the Old Testament most New Testament writers quoted from the Septuagint. It was studied carefully as a book about Jesus the Messiah...the place where prophecies that Jesus fulfilled could be found. It was read publicly at church gatherings. There seems to have been no conscious effort to produce a new collection of sacred books.

The earliest New Testament writings were authored by the Apostle Paul beginning some twenty years after Jesus’ resurrection. These occasional writings (in response to issues in the primitive church) were considered to have lasting value and significance for other churches.

One response was to collect them into a Pauline anthology. Another response was to imitate Paul’s style and language and to bring them to bear on the problems of the 1<sup>st</sup> century church in the Mediterranean area. The second type of “in the style of Paul” writings are called *deutero-Pauline* epistles considered by many scholars to include: Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, 1-2 Timothy and Titus. In the first and second centuries CE it was common practice to write in the name of one’s teacher or mentor or a recognized authority. To identify a book as deutero-Pauline is not to discredit it, but to acknowledge that it was likely written by a student or an associate of Paul.

The Gospels of Matthew and Luke followed Mark's biographical-theological outline and supplemented it with teachings from a so-called "Sayings Source" ("Q" which I think is the first letter of the German word for "source") and other sources. John likely wrote independently from the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) that developed into the Johannine school and presented them in the framework of Jesus' public activity (Book of Signs, John 1-12) and his last days (Book of Glory, John 13-21).

We may say that the four gospels, while not identical, present one story of Jesus. The gospel writers whose identities we do not know for certain are written by different persons, from different perspectives, for different communities.<sup>5</sup>

- Matthew introduces Jesus as the King of the Jews who is the fulfillment of Jewish Scripture and God's Plan. (written to the Jews)
- Mark reveals how Jesus was the suffering, misunderstood Messiah (written to the Romans)
- For Luke, Jesus is the savior of the world (written to Greek-speaking peoples)
- In John, we meet Jesus as cosmic savior who descends from heaven.<sup>6</sup> (unknown audience, but it's purpose was to produce faith)

While the Books of the Bible were completed by the start of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE, they were not immediately considered as "cannon" (the official list of Scripture which presented the authoritative way for Christian faith and life).

Two historical forces led to the development of a New Testament canon.

1) Marcion in the mid-2<sup>nd</sup> century CE proposed to reduce the authoritative books. His idea was that the God of the New Testament (goodness) superseded the God of the Old Testament (justice). Therefore, he rejected the entire Old Testament and reduce the New Testament to 9 Pauline epistles. His direction would have completely rejected Christianity's past in Judaism...a step too far for the churches in Rome and elsewhere.

2) Two sects sought to expand the list of sacred books to include an emphasis on revelations from above related to religious experiences. This interest to expand the sacred books was a step too far for the churches that coalesced into "orthodoxy".

By the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE the churches faced the problem of distinguishing among the various Christian writings? Which were to be taken seriously? Which were to be read in the churches? On which were they to base Christian doctrine?

The major criteria for setting the "canon" seem to have been these three:

- *Orthodoxy* of content – i.e. consistent with the basic doctrines already recognized as normative by churches
- *Apostolic origin* – the presumption of apostolic authorship or association

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<sup>5</sup> See Marianne Blickenstaff, "Four Gospels", a "Thoughtful Christian" resource

<sup>6</sup> See Marianne Blickenstaff, "Four Gospels", a "Thoughtful Christian" resource

- *Acceptance by churches* – used in the churches and cited by reliable bishops and theologians.

The Third Council of Carthage (397 CE) resolved that nothing should be read in church under the name of divine Scriptures except the canonical writings.

Shortly after 400 CE the 27 books of our present New Testament canon were recognized as sacred writings that can serve as the rule or norm of Christian faith and life.

That canon was challenged in the 16<sup>th</sup> century by Martin Luther. He had doubts about Hebrews (because it teaches no repentance for sinners after baptism), James (because it is an epistle of straw), Jude (because it depends on 2 Peter and quotes apocryphal Old Testament writings); and Revelation (because it lacked the proper prophetic and apostolic dimensions). Still, Luther included these books at the end of his German translation of the New Testament.

The principle by which Luther objected to these books was that they did not sufficiently promote Christ. That principle caused Luther to consider a “canon within the canon”...some books of the Bible are more canonical because of their great value in promoting Christ.

While we may find certain portions of the Bible speak more to our situation or are more easily understood, we avoid “creating our own Scriptures” by seeking to listen to the whole of Scripture.

The traditional canon of 27 New Testament books was confirmed by several Protestant confessions of faith including the Westminster Confession of 1646. Hence the general agreement about the New Testament canon among Catholics and Protestants to this day.



We can summarize how Scripture became Scripture by summarizing three criteria

- its use, and, in the case of New Testament,
- letters written by the apostles or associated with the apostles and
- consistent with Christian belief as they understood it.

Are there questions to this point?

What remains for us today is the question, “how is Scripture Scripture for us?” “How does Scripture lead us to deeper faith and life?”

Let’s begin to address that question with 2 common understandings of Scripture.

1. One is that SCRIPTURE IS A DIVINE DOCUMENT. In its most extreme form, Scripture was dictated by God to human writers who simply recorded what God said. Consistent with this understanding is that Scripture is inerrant, infallible set of propositional truths. Some proponents of this view might say: “Scripture says it, I believe it, that settles it.”

2. The second understanding is that SCRIPTURE IS A HUMAN DOCUMENT. In its most extreme form Scripture is a human composition that is no different than something that could be found in any self-help section of a bookstore. Sometimes the writings could become a human record of experiences of God. This second understanding is likely the perspective of college courses labeled “Scripture as Literature”.

A clue to resolving this issue of divine or human comes in considering a similar issue related to the nature of Jesus. Some saw Jesus as WHOLLY DIVINE. Others saw Jesus as simply a HUMAN BEING. What we read in the opening verses of the Gospel of John<sup>7</sup>, however, is that “The Word became flesh”. This core statement of faith and other witnesses of Scripture make the claim that Jesus was both divine and human at the same time...a mystery.

Relating this understanding to the issue of Scripture’s nature...many of us would agree that God had a part in the development of Scripture and human beings also had a part. The proposition of Biblical scholar M. Robert Mulholland<sup>8</sup> is that the nature of Scripture is similar to the nature of Jesus. He affirms that Scripture is both divine and human.

While the writings of Scripture do not provide much insight into its own nature we do have some insight. 2 Peter 1:20-21 states “...no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one’s private interpretation because no prophecy was ever motivated by human will but persons being motivated by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.”

Peter addresses three elements of Scripture:

- God addresses persons. God encounters us.
- God addresses or encounters us through a text that has come into existence through persons speaking out of their experience of the Holy Spirit’s motivation.
- Readers may not simply freely interpret the text from their personal frame of reference.

Peter seems to suggest that the reading of scripture falls under the same guidance as its writing. Just as the writer spoke from God under the movement of the Spirit, so the reader hears God speak through the text while being moved by the same Spirit. When the reader is “motivated by the Holy Spirit,” the text becomes more than a source of information; it becomes a place of deep, intimate, experiential relationship with God.

When, as readers, we open ourselves to God’s presence in and through the words of Scripture, we complete the circuit; the Word becomes text – a place full of possibilities for divine encounter.

A personal story. During one of the traumas of my youth I searched the Psalms for comfort. I may have experienced the rejection by a girl I was fond of, or I may have been discouraged about my home life. I don’t remember the cause, only that I felt despair. With what I have come to regard as the work of the Holy Spirit, I landed on Psalm 88.

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<sup>7</sup> John 1:14

<sup>8</sup> See M. Robert Mulholland Jr., Companions in Christ: The Way of Scripture, Upper Room Books, Nashville, TN, 2010



<sup>1</sup> O LORD, God of my salvation, when, at night, I cry out in your presence, <sup>2</sup> let my prayer come before you; incline your ear to my cry. <sup>3</sup> For my soul is full of troubles, and my life draws near to Sheol. <sup>4</sup> I am counted among those who go down to the Pit; I am like those who have no help....

I first felt a connection with the author – who was/is unknown to me. I had a deep sense that I was not alone in my trials. And because this Scripture has been prayed again and again by God’s people, I felt that the prayer would echo in God’s ear...that God would know my distress. At the time, I wasn’t yet looking for help or a solution, it was enough to know/trust that God knew my situation; I trusted that God would somehow respond.

The word had become Scripture by the working of the Spirit and by the working of that same Spirit, I was led to the psalm and believed that God heard my prayer through it.

We do not have to land on one side of Scripture as either wholly divine or completely human. There is no need to defend what seems indefensible: that the Bible was dictated by God or a God-less, human invention. By our understanding of the Holy Spirit’s work we can understand Scripture as inspired by God at work in human beings and understand that the working of that same Spirit helps us to meet God in the text.

In the words of John Wesley, “Scripture can only be understood through the same Spirit whereby it was given.”<sup>9</sup>

### To Provide a Place of Transforming Encounter with God

So, if we believe that we can, by the Spirit, meet God in Scripture, what may we expect to encounter in our reading Scripture?

Trappist monk Thomas Merton proposed that the Bible is not a comfortable collection of stories, sayings, teachings, and history from which we may *glean information to enhance our knowledge or buttress our world view*. Merton used the language of ENCOUNTER, CONFRONTATION and TRANSFORMATION to describe what happens when we allow Scripture to be God’s Word to us. In his words,

It is of the very nature of the Bible to affront, perplex, and astonish the human mind. Hence the reader who opens the Bible must be prepared for disorientation, confusion, incomprehension, perhaps outrage.<sup>10</sup>

Roman Catholic theologian Marva Dawn says hyperbolically that when we listen to Scripture in worship we should wear helmets and body protectors to guard against Scripture’s assault on who we are and how we live and interact with God and others.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Mulholland, p. 19

<sup>10</sup> Mulholland, p. 19

<sup>11</sup> A paraphrase of a quote I cannot find but think it is in Marva Dawn, Reaching Out without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for the Turn-of-the-Century Culture, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1995

The Bible challenges our worldview, challenges our self-perception that we might be changed...that the Word might become flesh in us so that we may grow toward maturity in Christ.

When we approach Scripture we need prayers for illumination that ask God to help us hear what we may not want to hear. But we always remember what we strain to hear are not the dictates of an authoritative God, but the loving word to free us and lead us to abundant and eternal life.

As a result of our time together, I hope that the prayer for illumination will remind you that Scripture is more than a place for moral guidance; it is a place where we may encounter God.

### How Then May We Be Open to Encountering God/God's Word as We Read Scripture

We cannot call God in on demand. We can, however, put ourselves in a position to hear what God may want to say to us.

One way of reading Scripture for encountering God is to put ourselves into the text, to be a character in the story so that we may explore the story *from the inside*.

### Exploration: How Our Reading of Scripture May Become Encounter with God (15-20 minutes)

Let us pray:

God, we read this Scripture trusting that the Spirit who inspired its writing will be at work in us in our reading. Settle our minds and open our hearts that we may meet you or hear you speaking in this Scripture. Amen.

Read the context of the Scripture passage and then read the story from Mark 2-3 times.

The Context:

- Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."
- Jesus then called his disciples
- Jesus taught in the synagogue and people were astonished at his authority
- Jesus healed a man with the unclean spirit. He also healed Simon's mother-in-law and many who were sick or possessed with demons.

The next morning...

#### **Mark 1:35-39 (NRSV)**

<sup>35</sup> In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. <sup>36</sup> And Simon and his companions hunted for him. <sup>37</sup> When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." <sup>38</sup> He answered, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do." <sup>39</sup> And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

Once you have some initial familiarity with the passage, choose one of the characters (Jesus, Simon, one of Simon's companions who were searching for Jesus that morning) as your imaginative identity in the story.

Close your eyes and imagine yourself as the character you chose in that story. From what you remember about the story “relive” it through your character and then take note:

- What are you thinking? What are you feeling?
- What do you discover as you imagine that you are in the story?
- Do you get a hint or a clear message that God is speaking to you?
- What is that message?

As time permits, share your experience with a person next to you.

### Sharing with the larger group.

#### Conclusion

I close with the words of Barbara Brown Taylor.

The Bible tells us the stories we need and want to hear – stories to help us live, stories to help us die, and stories to help us believe we shall live again. Listening to them, we are called into relationship with the One who tells them to us. Believing them, we are changed. The living words of God heal our hurts and soften our hearts; they clear our vision and guide our feet. Like a lifeline strung from the beginning of time to the end, they show us a way through all the storms of culture, nature and history. They show us the way to the Word beyond all our words, in whose presence we shall be made eloquent at last.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, The Preaching Life, Cowley Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1993, p.62