



## **The Scriptures as Paradigm for Life and Ministry**

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How do we view the Scriptures? In what framework or context do we understand these ancient writings that have been set apart and preserved by the synagogue and by the church? How do we organize them or picture them in our minds? And, most important, how do we gain perspective and direction from them for life and ministry with other people?

As a paradigm for life and ministry, the Scriptures provide a particular way of viewing reality, a way of making sense of the world and our place in it. They give us guidance for resolving conflicts. They also assist us in facing the future by preparing us to face illness, aging, and death with a certain confidence, trust, and hope. Furthermore, the Scriptures call us to ministry, for they are not neutral or static writings. They confront us with issues of good and evil, right and wrong, and they call us again and again to a life of faith.

The problem is that the Scriptures have been viewed in so many different ways. Over the centuries, the Scriptures have been viewed through a variety of different confessional, systematic, or dogmatic categories. Words or themes from the Scriptures have been transformed into “proof” texts or “biblical absolutes” in support of particular systematic paradigms for understanding faith.

This manner of approaching the Scriptures has contributed directly to countless religious conflicts and even to wars fought over issues such as the authority of the church, the nature of the Eucharist, election, or predestination. In our time, conflicts continue to be focused primarily around highly charged emotional issues such as homosexuality, abortion, or divorce. Nothing is more frustrating than the attempt to have a dialogue with a person whose systematic biblical paradigm prompts the statement again and again, “But the Bible says....”

In recent years, biblical interpretation has undergone a basic paradigm shift from systematic to historical categories. As in the time of the Copernican revolution, this paradigm shift in biblical studies has caused pain and discomfort for many people. In the time of Copernicus, people had to shift their view of the

entire solar system to incorporate the new concept that the earth was not a stationary center for our moon, sun, and stars. Today, people who are rooted in systematic ways of viewing the Scriptures may find the historical approach just as upsetting as hearing for the first time that the sun does not rise or set!<sup>1</sup> The pain of the paradigm shift in biblical studies is still very much in evidence around us among students in our theological seminaries and colleges and in the local parishes of the church. And yet, despite all sorts of setbacks, the historical approach continues to gain increasing support from people of different denominations and religious backgrounds. In fact, the ecumenical dimension is one of the most exciting aspects of the new approach to the

Scriptures! Amid all of the divergent streams of scholarly research, a certain basic consensus has developed concerning guidelines and controls for “seeing” and “understanding” the Scriptures. A new historically oriented paradigm continues to emerge!<sup>2</sup>

The fundamental point of agreement is that in interpretation of the Scriptures, we must seek first to understand what a particular text meant at the time when it was written. We seek the original context, audience, and intent of the author, listening for the historical meaning of the text. We also take serious account of the manner in which traditions and texts were preserved and used in later generations. Beyond this, we recognize that the context and intention of the author must guide us as we use the texts of Scripture to interpret life and ministry today.

Rather than viewing the Scriptures through systematic categories, those who use the historical approach see the Scriptures as the writings of an ancient people who understood life as a pilgrimage. These people were convinced that their God, the creator of heaven and earth, journeyed with them. The Scriptures give us a picture of their pilgrimage and insight about their journey.

## I. REMEMBERING THE SCRIPTURES

Our view of the Scriptures is enriched when we keep clearly before us the memory of how the sacred canon came into being. The Torah, embracing the first five books of the Bible, gained recognition as the definitive story of the earliest eras of people of faith, receiving its distinctive shape during the difficult years of the Babylonian captivity (587-539 B.C.). The five books were formally set apart as sacred canon soon after 400 B.C. because religious leaders wanted to assure that these writings would be preserved unchanged for future generations.

The second part of the Hebrew Bible, the Prophets, gained similar status sometime after 200 B.C. as these works also gained their own place of respect and honor within the community. The refrain heard in the New Testament

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<sup>1</sup>On paradigms and paradigm shifts, see further, Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1962) 43ff.

<sup>2</sup>In some ways, the 1982 decision by three Lutheran denominations in North America to establish formal pulpit and altar fellowship with the Anglican church results from the paradigm shift. On the other hand, the decision by Missouri Synod Lutherans to end altar and pulpit fellowship with certain other Lutherans follows from their reaffirmation of a traditional systematic paradigm.

reflects their status as established sacred Scriptures: “On these two commands depend all the Law and the Prophets” (Matt 22:40).<sup>3</sup>

The third part of the Hebrew Bible, the Writings, included the Psalms, the wisdom literature, and works from the priestly traditions of the post-exilic era.<sup>4</sup> Evidence suggests that the books in this third section were given formal canonical status when rabbis gathered at Jabneh in 90 A.D.

The collection of writings which we know as the New Testament emerged by a similar process as certain books gained recognition and respect within the Christian community. It appears that the four gospels and certain epistles of Paul were widely recognized by about A.D. 130 and were united with the Hebrew canon about A.D. 170-220, with other writings added later.

When we think about these historic sections of our canon, it is helpful to draw an analogy

with the human body. Like the human body, the Scriptures find their life through “earthen vessels” of ancient and modern translations. In a profound sense, the Torah has long been recognized as the heart and blood system of the Scriptures. The Prophets can be viewed as the muscle system of the Scriptures. And in certain ways, the Writings are the nervous system of our sacred heritage. The New Testament writings, however, should probably not be seen as another system or part of the body. Rather, I suggest that the New Testament writings are more like a pair of glasses, or series of distinctive lenses, that give focus and perspective to our biblical heritage.

1. *The Torah: Heart and Blood System of the Scriptures.* The Torah preserves the “life story” of people of faith in ancient Israel. In one sense, the stories in Genesis 1-11 are primarily a prologue to the real story of Abraham, Sarah and their descendants, which begins in Genesis 12. Their call to be pioneer people of faith is remembered in the context of stories about the creation, flood, and the spread of corruption throughout the world. They were charged to go from their homeland as pilgrim people seeking life in a new land, trusting in God to journey with them. Later generations remembered that despite their doubts, mistakes, and human frailties, Abraham and Sarah did go as God commanded them. Those later generations remembered the promise and the word of comfort given to Abraham:

Fear not, Abram, I am your shield;  
your reward shall be very great! (Gen 15:1)

2. *The Prophetic Books: The Muscle System of the Scriptures.* The Torah preserves the saga of a people from Adam to the death of Moses. Within the Prophetic books we find stories preserved concerning the community from Joshua to the death of Jehoiachin during the era of Babylonian captivity. Here we also

<sup>3</sup>For a more detailed discussion, see David N. Freedman, “Canon of the Old Testament,” *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible: Supplementary Volume*, ed. Keith Crim (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976) 130-136. The Palestinian tradition of the Prophets (Nebi’im) in the Hebrew Bible (the Masoretic text) includes the Former Prophets: Joshua, Judges, 1-2 Samuel, 1-2 Kings and the Latter Prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Book of the Twelve.

<sup>4</sup>Included in the Writings (Kethubim) of the Hebrew Bible are the Tehillim (Psalms), Job, Proverbs, The Festal Scroll (Ruth, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, Esther), Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, and 1-2 Chronicles. See further, Bernhard W. Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1966) 554-559.

find the writings of Israel’s great prophetic figures. The prophets appear to have drawn enormous insight and courage from the Torah stories. Like muscles in a body which draw their strength from the heart and from good circulation of blood, the prophets translated insight into new activity and interpretation of life. We read the words of Amos and wonder what led him to leave his remote village of Tekoa south of Bethlehem to travel north and disrupt the royal shrine at Bethel. Where did he gain his insight and confidence as he spoke out about injustice toward the poor and indifference toward widows, orphans and refugees? As we read the book of Amos, we almost sense that the people, and even the king, knew that Amos was properly interpreting their common heritage of Torah.

The prophetic tradition continued in the powerful words of Hosea, Isaiah ben Amoz,

Micah, Zephaniah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Second Isaiah, Joel, and others. Combining intellect and conscience, the prophets spoke to the political and economic affairs of their time. Over a three-year period, Isaiah ben Amoz walked naked and barefoot through the streets of Jerusalem, warning that the reckless foreign policy of the government was leading to certain slavery and deportation (Isa 20:1-6). Jeremiah was beaten and thrown into a dungeon on suspicion of treason (Jer 37:11ff.). As a protest against shortsighted political leadership, Ezekiel shaved his head in public, burned a third of his hair, cut up another third with his sword and scattered the remaining third to the winds (Ezek 5:1ff.).

The key for understanding the prophets is that they viewed the world through the eyes of the poor, the needy, and the oppressed. They were convinced that God sees the world in this way, identifying with those who are most oppressed or marginal in the world. When the world is viewed from their vantage point, selfishness among the rich becomes most apparent. Thus people of faith are urged to identify with the poor and there discover an agenda for ministry in the world. The opening chapter of Isaiah stands as a hallmark of the prophetic tradition:

Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;  
remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes;  
cease to do evil, learn to do good;  
seek justice, correct oppression;  
defend the fatherless, plead for the widow (1:16-17).

3. *The Writings: The Nervous System of the Scriptures.* The nervous system in the body includes the brain, spinal cord and the complex system of nerves which puts us in close contact with the environment around us. As in a nervous system, we find in the Writings an international flavor reflective of contacts with surrounding cultures. We also see an array of human emotions: moods of joy, praise, and thanksgiving in the psalms, skepticism and doubt in Ecclesiastes, pain and suffering in Job, sensuality in Ruth and Song of Songs, and even defensiveness and authoritarian tones in Ezra and 1-2 Chronicles. In these writings, attention is centered on the deep emotional and existential questions of life that people in every culture and age have experienced.

Like muscles, nerves are also closely related to the heart and good circulation of blood. The Writings were understood in dialogue with the Torah.

Proverbs, Daniel, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, and Esther were all read and preserved by people who reserved their deepest devotion and love for Torah. We see this connection clearly in the third poem of the book of Lamentations. There a traditional lament turns to prayer and then to these words:

But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope:  
The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,  
his mercies never come to an end;  
they are new every morning;  
great is thy faithfulness.  
“The Lord is my portion,” says my soul,

“therefore I will hope in him” (3:21-24).

4. *The New Testament as Lens or Focus.* Anyone who has adjusted to bifocals or who needs glasses to see will recognize the seriousness of this analogy. Life is painful when vision is blurred. In contrast, a new pair of well-fitted glasses can bring joy and peace to body and spirit alike. Suddenly the world comes into focus again!

In a similar way, the New Testament writings can be understood as a collection of lenses which seek in various ways to capture the meaning of ancient traditions of faith in light of what has happened in a new event. They do not suggest that God has changed! But these writers were convinced that a momentous event had taken place. In the gospels, Jesus is proclaimed as the Messiah anticipated in the ancient prophetic writings. He is seen not as an ideal political ruler but as the servant figure anticipated by the author of Isaiah 40-55. In keeping with an ancient biblical pattern of thought, the life, death, and resurrection accounts of Jesus are remembered as a new and decisive theophany of God in history, making biblical faith available to all people.

Paul and other New Testament writers suggest that human life has a recurrent tendency to get out of focus. When people of any era are plagued by fears, they tend to turn quickly to legalistic or idolatrous solutions. In Christ the perspective of the prophetic tradition is restored and renewed. In Christ the power of life and community is seen to be triumphant over the fears of death and the world.

## II. CONTINUING THE PILGRIMAGE

As we study the Scriptures today, it is important that we allow them to retain their distinctive historical character. By doing so, we allow these ancient texts to speak to us with greatest clarity and power. Understanding the New Testament as a lens or pair of glasses reminds us that these writings need to be studied in light of the sacred traditions which precede them. Failure to do this brings the risk of distortion and even the possibility of idolatry where we might least expect it!

The historical approach does not yield simple solutions or textbook answers for problems of contemporary life or ministry. But it does surround us with a host of witnesses who help us face new challenges in life. The Torah is still the gracious heart and center of the Scriptures. The Prophets, Writings and the New Testament books all add important dimensions and perspectives. By

them we are encouraged to live as people of faith, guided by our rich and diverse body of tradition, governed by the fruits of the Spirit and focused in our faith by the confident mood of the gospel which we have known in the proclamation of the resurrection of the Christ.

Most of all, when the paradigm is focused in an historical manner, we sense our freedom to live as responsible people who continue the pilgrimage of faith into new and uncharted lands amid all of the strange new sights, sounds, and dangers of our era. On the journey, we are called to face the future without fear by the same God who guarded and guided Abraham and Sarah long ago.