# Scripture

In the Bible itself, the word *scripture* in the singular usually refers to a particular passage from the Old Testament (e.g., Mk 12:10; 15:28), but the church came to use the word to refer to the Old and New Testaments as a whole. The New Testament uses the plural *scriptures* to refer to Judaism’s sacred writings (e.g., Mk 12:24; 14:49), which correspond approximately to what Christians call the Old Testament (I include the word “approximately,” because we do not know whether the extent of these writings in New Testament times exactly corresponded to the bounds of the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings as these are accepted in Judaism and are the collection termed in Christian parlance “the Old Testament”).

**Memory, History, Witness, Tradition.** Theology has traditionally used categories such as authority, inspiration, and revelation in order to understand the theological status of the scriptures, but these need supplementing with other categories in order to do justice to the scriptures’ own nature. In particular, these categories do not very satisfactorily illumine the narrative works that occupy the first half of each Testament.

***Memory*.** Those narrative works embody the memory of Israel and of the early Christian church concerning key events of their story as the community corporately wished it to be remembered. The works suggest that Jewish and Christian faith focuses on certain sequences of past events that the narratives relate. The faith emerging from them does not center on timeless statements about God or on obeying certain behavioral imperatives. It involves seeing particular events and interactions between God and people as foundationally important for living by and living in light of.

The Old Testament narratives comprise two multi-part works, the books from Genesis to Kings and the books of Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah. Both begin from creation but focus on the story of Israel down to the time of the author and readers. The first highlights the time of Abraham and Jacob, Moses, Joshua, and David; the second highlights the time of David, Ezra, and Nehemiah. Both works attach importance to the events that are remembered and also to the significance of their memory for succeeding centuries – in particular for the time of author and readers. Both also reflect the interaction between the events and the community’s life over the intervening centuries. Scholarly study has attempted to trace that interaction by dating the sources that lie behind the works, but changing views on the nature of that process suggest that we are not in a position to uncover this history; the only certainty is the narrative we have.

The two works assert the importance of the fact that God made a commitment to Israel’s ancestors in order to pursue a purpose for the whole world that he had created, then delivered Israel’s ancestors from serfdom, instructed them about their community life, settled them in their own land, set up a stable government and instructed them about building a sanctuary, let their life unravel so that they lost their land, then partial reestablished them. Such a summary combines the stories told by the two works. The first story extends from creation to the fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C.E. and thus tells of the failure of God’s plan to fulfill his purpose for the world (Rudolf Bultmann spoke of the Old Testament story as a whole as the failure of God’s plan, but strictly the description applies more to the first of these two great narrative works). It is a formulation of the way the narrative’s authors in the exile wished the story to be understood by their generation, who needed to own their responsibility for its shape, to reaffirm their trust in the divine promises it nevertheless incorporates, and to make a new commitment to God. The second of the two works focuses on the period from David onwards and takes the story beyond the fall of Jerusalem into the time when the community has been restored, in order to suggest a different way of remembering the story for a generation that needed both encouragement and direction.

The earliest known designation for the first of these narratives treats it as a two-part work, “The Torah” (Genesis to Deuteronomy) and “The Former Prophets” (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings). The Hebrew word *torah* was rendered into Greek and other languages by words meaning “law,” which give a false impression of its nature. As a title for Genesis-Deuteronomy as a whole, Torah suggests “teaching” that puts a framework of narrative around large tracts of instruction regarding the life of the community and of individuals. As a title for Joshua-Kings, “Former Prophets” perhaps suggests a prophetic perspective on Israel’s story. Chronicles-Ezra-Nehemiah is then part of “The Writings,” the miscellany of scrolls that closes the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings.

***History, witness, tradition*.** In the context of modern study these two works came to be viewed as *histories*, a term that recognizes one aspect of their significance but obscures another aspect. Seeing them as history recognized the importance of historical events to Israel’s faith and to the story these scriptures tell. Timeless theological statements and behavioral expectations such as “Yahweh our God Yahweh one” (Deut 6:4; all translations are the author’s), “You shall love Yahweh your God” (Deut 6:5), and “Love your neighbor as someone like yourself” (Lev 19:18) are given their content and grounds by means of historical statements about the way Yahweh acted in creating the world and taking Israel out of serfdom. The archetypal illustration is the declaration that opens the Decalogue, “I am Yahweh your God who brought you out of the country of Egypt” (Exod 20:2), which is the basis for the expectations that follow.

The description of the narratives as *witness* links with that significance of them. There are several sense in which theology can speak of the witness of the scriptures or the witness of a particular book. The word can imply that the scriptures are only a witness, not the reality; it can also imply that a particular book gives one partial witness, while another gives a different partial witness. When the scriptures themselves use the term “witness,” they do so in another connection. Israel is Yahweh’s witnesses to the fact that Yahweh has spoken and then delivered (e.g., Isa 43:10-12); the Twelve are witnesses to Jesus’ resurrection (e.g., Acts 1:8, 22; 2:32). They are able to give testimony to things they have seen. In life in general, the testimony of other people is indispensible to most of our knowledge of events in the world. The scriptures’ witness to Yahweh’s acts in Israel and in the New Testament events is one key instance of the indispensible nature of witness.

It is the task of witnesses to “pass on” what they have seen; witness becomes *tradition*. Most Israelites did not experience the exodus; the people who did experience it passed on an account to their children, and they to their children, and so on. Most believers in Jesus did not meet him; the people who did meet him passed on an account to others, and they passed it on to yet other people, and so on. In each case they did so in a way that suggested the significance of the events to the ongoing needs of the community. In due course the testimony came to be written down, possibly in part to ensure that the tradition did not get lost in a time of crisis, in part to ensure that the process of updating did not fatally compromise the tradition’s reliability as testimony.

While there is thus a close relationship between scripture and tradition, the scriptures also use the term “tradition” is a negative way. The New Testament warns readers about Jewish and Christian traditions that are alien to the scriptures. In the history of theology, tradition has also been distinguished from scripture as a supplementary source of truth—for instance, in its affirming that the primacy of the Pope or the bodily assumption of Mary are traditions that can and must be accepted or are interpretations of the scriptures that are hallowed by tradition.

There is yet another sense in which tradition, like witness, is a term that can be used to avoid giving the scriptures too absolute a position. There are various traditions of faith in the world, such as Buddhist traditions and Native American traditions. The biblical tradition is one of these faith traditions alongside others. This way of using the idea of tradition contrasts with the use of the idea to safeguard the scriptures’ authenticity. It presupposes that many or all traditions have some value and that no single one should be absolutized.

***The history in the scriptures and our history.*** We cannot verify most of the testimony that has been passed on in the biblical tradition. Indeed, the scholarly community regards much of it as falsified, while many ordinary readers instinctively doubt elements in the narrative such as the account of God creating the world over a six-day period a few thousand years ago. In light of such scholarly work and such human instincts, one might see the narratives as more like movies that are “based on fact” than documentaries. In such works the basic historical reference of the story is vital, but so is the way the story has been retold so as to have an impact on the audience. Even the account of creation expresses facts, such the fact that God created the world, acted in a purposeful way, brought into being something that was “good,” made men and women in the image of God, and so on. With regard to subsequent parts of the narrative that are nearer to being historical in a modern sense, their being “based on fact” without being thoroughly factual does not compromise the indispensability of the witness or the memory that they pass down. It is important that it does not do so, because of that characteristic of Christian faith that we have noted, that Christian faith is centrally a gospel, the report of a piece of news, of things that happened.

In his book *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*,Hans Frei identified a fundamental change that came about in Christian thinking about scriptural narrative in the eighteenth century. Until that time, Christian belief took for granted that the narrative corresponded to what actually happened, and took for granted that our story needs to be seen in the context of that story. In the eighteenth century both unities came apart.

Henceforth scholarship distinguished between the story and the history that lay somewhere behind it, and had to decide which mattered more. The importance of history to modern thinking made it inevitable that scholarship focused on discovering the actual history rather than the not-wholly-historical story. We have noted that two centuries of intensive study have unfortunately proved only that the attempt to trace the actual history of Israel or the actual history of Jesus cannot reach definitive results. There has been no progress in the investigation, and we have no basis for thinking that there will ever be progress. The material frustrates the quest. It was in part for this reason that the late twentieth century saw a turn back to an interest in the narrative that tells the story rather than the events that might lie behind the narrative. The disillusion also coheres with the quest’s not yielding results that made it possible to use the scriptures in theology, spiritual formation, or preaching.

This fact in turn links with the other unity that came apart. From the eighteenth century onwards, Christian instinct was to interpret the scriptural story in light of our story rather than the other way around. In other words, we assume that our understanding of our story is true and we evaluate the truth of the scriptural story in light of that understanding. This takes us into a consideration of traditional ways of thinking about the status of the scriptures.

**Authority.** In recent centuries in Christian thinking the notion of authority has been of paramount importance in connection with the scriptures. The idea of authority suggests that the scriptures have the right to determine what people believe and what they do. How is it possible to tell people what they must believe? Perhaps only God might be able to do so, and belief in the scriptures’ authority implies that it is God’s authority that they mediate. On what basis can one say that God’s authority lies behind the scriptures?

***Authority to shape belief*.** The scriptures themselves are familiar enough with the notion of authority (e.g., Matt 8:9; 21:23), and it is therefore striking that they do not speak of the authority of the scriptures—for instance, when the New Testament refers to the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings. On the other hand, the New Testament does use the expression “It is written” in referring to them (e.g., Matt 4:1-11), which conveys the implication, “so that settles it.” Elsewhere the phrase “it is written” occurs in connection with declarations about the future; events take place “as it is written” (Luke 18:31). Sometimes it does refer to theological statements (e.g., Rom 1:17).

We can say, then, that Jesus and the New Testament writers do assume that the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings have the authority to determine what people should believe and do. It is logically impossible for there to be an equivalent statement within the scriptures about the New Testament having this authority. It is the post-New Testament church that attributes such authority to the writings that make up the New Testament. Does authority therefore lie in the church that attributes the authority? But the church has usually taken the view that the authority lies inherent in the scriptures themselves; the church is simply rubber-stamping it.

That understanding points to an alternative way of construing the notion of authority. When people describe Jesus as speaking with authority (Matt 7:29), they do not mean he is an accredited expert like a scribe. They yield to his teaching because it has a compelling profundity and wisdom. Many or most or all of the biblical documents seem likely to have gained their authority among Israelites by a parallel dynamic. At some points an official body such as the Persian authorities may have decreed that the Torah had authority in Jerusalem; likewise the churches eventually became involved in discussing whether different Christian writings should have an official position in their scriptures. The process whereby scriptures became authoritative thus involved two stages. Individual writings found informal appreciation; later, a collection received formal recognition. Reference to the canon of scripture implies reference to this second stage. Possibly the Jewish community went through a similar two-stage process, but we do not have records of discussions parallel to the ones that happened in the churches.

Theologically, there is a further basis for applying the notion of authority to the scriptures. Their status in Christian faith and theology issues from the nature of Christian faith as a gospel, a message that hinges and focuses on things that happened in a particular past. The writings of other religious groups can be true and edifying, but they cannot tell us this gospel. James Barr has further commented that what counts as Christian faith is not whatever the church today may think but what the first Christians articulated in light of their proximity to Jesus’ own time and to his acts and their involvement in the beginnings of the church. Christian faith is a historical faith in the sense that it focuses on who Jesus was, what he said, what happened to him, what he achieved, and how his significance was articulated in the context of these events. The authority of the scriptures lies in their being able to tell us what the first generations of Christians articulated, as writings from a thousand or two thousand years later cannot. It is not an argument for the authority of the particular writings in the New Testament (e.g., as opposed to other Gospels) but an argument for the authority of a collection of documents of this kind as opposed to later Christian writings or non-Christian writings.

This principle does not imply the scriptures must be the writings that come from closest to the events. It can take time for the significance of events to emerge. The authority of the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings lies in their significance for an understanding of Yahweh’s dealing with Israel through its history from its beginnings to the Greek period, even though the books themselves mostly come from long after many of the events to which they refer. The authority of the New Testament lies in their capacity to testify to Christian beginnings.

***Authority to shape behavior*.** Jewish thinking in terms of the authority of the Torah moves in a different direction. The first occurrences of the phrase “it is written” in the New Testament draw our attention to the fact that in everyday speech “authority” connotes the right to tell people what they should do. While the Torah does have the framework of a narrative, it is dominated by vast tracts of instruction material. And while “law” is a misleading umbrella term for the Torah, even for its instruction material with its exhortations and rules for life, it is not unreasonable to characterize the Torah as designed to give direction for the life of the people of God. The scriptures lay down the stances people should take to God and to one another.

Sometimes they do so without giving reasons. The Torah three times tells Israelites not to cook a baby goat in its mother’s milk, without saying why (Exod 23:19; 34:26; Deut 14:21). Paul says that women should remain silent in the churches (1 Cor 14:34). In both cases, we can only guess at the reasons for the commands. The Torah says that people should love their neighbors, and the New Testament agrees, but again does not give reasons (Lev 19:18; Mark 12:31). Both the Torah and the New Testament assume that this expectation about loving one’s neighbor is self-evident and needs no explaining. Perhaps they make the same assumption about those other commands whose rationale is not obvious to readers in an urbanized Western context.

Sometimes the scriptures do give reasons when they lay the law down. It is because the Israelites were serfs in Egypt and their God got them out of that serfdom that they should care for their own bondservants and for other needy people; it is because Jesus loved the disciples that they should love one another. The scriptures likely take these commands also to be obvious expectations of humanity. They are not distinctive of the scriptures. What the scriptures do is provide extra arguments for fulfilling such expectations.

There are scriptural commands or beliefs that readers may find uncongenial, which leads into consideration of the relationship between scriptural authority and other authorities. The question of authority came into prominence in theology in the West at the time of the protestant reformation, which raised questions concerning the authority of the scriptures and the authority of the church or of the Pope or of church tradition. As the Enlightenment developed, Richard Hooker expressed the question in terms of the relationship of scripture, tradition, and reason. The Wesleyan Quadrilateral speaks in terms of the relationships between scripture, tradition, reason, and experience.

These two or three or four loci of authority are not simply alternatives. Christian thinking and behavior is properly subject to all these influences; the practice of the scriptures themselves justifies that fact. One way to think of their interrelationship is to ask about the dynamic balance between them. Which source has decisive influence on thinking and behavior at crucial points? Another way is suggested by the word canon. In origin it is the Greek word for a ruler. To describe scripture as canon is to give it a decisive role in another sense: where there is a clash between scripture, tradition, reason, and experience, scripture has the last word.

In the twenty-first century in the West, it is clearer that the formulations of tradition, reason, and experience are all shaped by the culture in which people live, like the scriptures themselves, so that the question might be put more simply in terms of the relationship of the scriptures in their culture and us in our culture. At one level, this relationship then compares with the relationship between the scriptures and movements such as feminism and post-colonialism. At another level, it concerns the relationship between the scriptures and Western assumptions such as the importance of the individual, of human choice, of the possibility of progress towards peace and justice, and of the rejection of violence. There are overlaps between the scriptures and these movements and assumptions, but there are also ways in which the scriptures imply a need to qualify their assertions, or in which the movements imply a need to qualify the scriptures’ authority. Twenty-first century theology thus has to decide between giving final authority to ways of thinking that emerge from our culture or to ways of thinking that emerge from the scriptures. More realistically, it lives in an ongoing dialogue over such questions.

Yet another related insight that emerges from twenty-first century Western awareness is that authority is not a very useful category for thinking about theology. The idea that something or someone can tell you what to think now seems odd, and is hardly requiredby the scriptures themselves.

**Inspiration.** The explicit scriptural background to the idea of the inspiration of the scriptures comes in the description of every (Old Testament) scripture as *theopneustos*, in 2 Timothy 3:16, the first known occurrence of this word It is usually taken to mean “God-breathed,” but 2 Peter 1:21 speaks of the scriptural prophets being “moved by the Holy Spirit” (the verb in this passage might be more forcibly translated “carried”), and *theopneustos* may similarly suggest “blown over by God.” This understanding would fit references in the Prophets themselves. On the more usual understanding, the idea is that the words in the scriptures were breathed out by God.

***How inspiration may work***. The prophets have at least three ways of describing the origin of their words. Sometimes they say “Yahweh has said this…,” speaking like a king’s messenger. Now a king need not dictate the words of his message, but rather provide the gist of it; the messenger formulates the words. That fact does not compromise the message’s authenticity; the messenger’s words count as the king’s words and have the force of the king’s words. Second, sometimes the scriptures refer to God speaking “by means of” a prophet, more literally, “by the hand of” the prophet (e.g., Haggai 1:1), or “by the mouth of” someone (e.g. Acts 1:16). Here God is using the person as an instrument, like a ventriloquist. The prophet does not formulate the words but simply opens the mouth, and out the words come. Third, sometimes prophets speak words that they themselves simply devise. Whereas in other contexts they speak of what Yahweh is saying, here they speak as their own “I.” The book of Jeremiah provides examples as it records prayers and reflections of Jeremiah. When the idea of inspiration is extended to other forms of writing that appear in the scriptures such as narratives, acts of praise, and letters, then this last form of inspiration is the one that applies. The speaker or writer takes the initiative, but God works through the person.

Following on the development of biblical criticism in the nineteenth century, theologians such as B. B. Warfield inferred from “God-breathed” that the scriptures must be infallible (the word “inerrant” has come into more recent usage in this connection). This inference seems unjustified. On one hand, the scriptures speak of Yahweh arousing Sennacherib to do his work, and see Nebuchadnezzar as Yahweh’s servant, without implying a validation of all that these conquerors do, or of the way they do it. Indeed, the prophets critique the acts in question. The scriptures could be God-breathed yet be compromised by the fact that they more literally emerge from human mouths. It need not be so; perhaps the words are exactly what God wants said and the narratives are infallible or inerrant. But describing them as inspired does not in itself carry this implication.

***Powerful words*.** The context of 2 Timothy 3:16 suggests that the point about declaring scriptures to be *theopneustos* lies elsewhere. The scriptures’ inspiration explains the counter-intuitive claim that these “sacred writings” are able to convey a wisdom that leads to salvation “in Christ Jesus”—who was not born when they were written—and it undergirds the subsequent declaration that they are therefore “useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in right living” for believers in Jesus. The involvement of God’s Spirit accounts for these scriptures’ capacity to be significant far beyond their original context and audience. The point is made elsewhere by speaking more directly of the involvement of God’s Spirit in the generating of the scriptures. It was “by the Holy Spirit” that God spoke in Psalm 2, which explains the extraordinary fact that it describes the activity of people persecuting believers in Jesus (Acts 4:25-26; cf. 28:25; Mark 12:36; Heb 3:7; 9:8).

Something that “Yahweh has said” can naturally be described as “Yahweh’s word” (e.g., 1 Kings 18:1; Isa 1:10) or occasionally “God’s word” (e.g., 1 Sam 9:27; 1 Kings 12:22). In the New Testament “God’s word” can refer to a particular scripture (Mark 7:13; John 10:35), but it more characteristically denotes the message about Jesus (e.g., Acts 4:31; 6:2). The convention of describing the scriptures as a whole as “God’s Word” does not correspond to the scriptures’ own usage, though the description of them as “God’s words” would be an unexceptionable extension of the scriptural usage.

What is the point about referring to a message as “the word of God” or “the word of Yahweh”? One answer is that a message from God characteristically declares or implies a divine intention—either a promise or a warning. Its being God’s message draws the listeners’ attention to the fact that the word will find fulfillment, because God does as he says. The other answer is that listeners are therefore advised to take the message seriously and give it the appropriate response of trust and expectation, or of repentance and turning to the right way.

**Revelation**. As is the case with authority and inspiration, the idea of revelation does appear within the scriptures, but in more concrete and narrower connections from the one that has classically obtained in discussion of the scriptures’ theological nature. In the Christian thinking of the medieval period, revelation was commonly set alongside reason; these were two complementary sources of truth. Modernity was more inclined to set revelation and reason over against one another; the relationship became more fraught.

The scriptures sometimes speak of God revealing himself in the sense of personally appearing to a person (e.g., Gen 35:7) but they more often speak of God revealing something in words spoken into someone’s ear (e.g., 1 Sam 9:15). Twentieth-century theology further debated the question whether revelation lay in God’s words as preserved in the scriptures or in God’s acts as reported in them. Within the scriptures themselves, both are involved, and each is dependent on the other. When God reveals something, the revelation commonly concerns something God intends to do (e.g., Isa 22:14). The event then provides evidence that the revelation was real. Conversely, when God acts, this act is characteristically preceded by a revelation concerning the event, and it is commonly followed by a comment on the event’s significance. This sequence reflects the fact that the event would not in itself reveal anything unless it was accompanied by some words. There is thus a close relationship between talk in terms of revelation and the Prophets’ more characteristic talk in terms of “Yahweh’s word.”

The noun “revelation” is used in a similar way to refer to coming events in the introduction to the book known as Revelation, “the revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place” (Rev 1:1). But the book also “reveals” much more than events to come in the future. In rabbinic thinking, “revelation” applied to “things above and below, things in front and behind”—that is, both heaven and hell, and both the past (especially creation) and the future (especially the End). In other words, it covers anything that human beings could not know by using their human insight.

Once more, then, the use of the term “revelation” to refer to the scriptures as a whole does not link very well with their own use of the word, partly because the word’s use in theology reflects issues in later contexts. But the idea of revelation is useful for conveying the sense that one discovers from the scriptures things that one would not have guessed or worked out.

Theological study has commonly made a distinction between general revelation and special revelation. Although the scriptures do not use the words in this way, the categorization fits some assumptions that appear there. A prophet such as Amos and a writer such as Paul assume that the world in general is aware of the basic truths about God and about human obligation. People do not need a special revelation in order to know that God is real and is powerful, moral, and compassionate, or to know that adultery, false witness, and torture are wrong – though such awarenesses can be surrendered and lost. These truths are aspects of human awareness like the awareness that we exist. One can think of them as the general revelation available to all humanity through being made in God’s image. Further, the scriptures assume that there are truths about life and the world that human beings discover by looking at the world itself and by reflecting on human experience. It is the truths that cannot be discovered in this way (the “things above and below, things in front and behind”) that are the subjects of special revelation.

**Praise and Protest.** A surprising feature of the collection of writings called “Holy Scriptures” is the presence among them of substantial material that addresses God, as opposed to narrating the story of God’s involvement with people or laying down God’s expectations of people or conveying messages God has given. The Psalms are the main such repository, but Lamentations takes the same form; Job and Ecclesiastes also largely comprises protest.

While the New Testament quotes the Psalms in the conviction that they have a similar nature to prophecy as God’s words (e.g., Acts 1:20; 2:25-31), the form of the Psalms suggests that most of them began life as prayers and praises addressed to God. Apparently the Israelite community believed them to be prayers and praises that were acceptable to God and could model proper prayer and praise. The form of the Psalter as a whole reflects this conviction. It comprises five books of praise and prayer, with “Amen” codas after Psalms 41, 72, 89, and 106 to mark this structure (the headings “Book One” and so on which appear in English translations make the point explicit, but the “Amen” codas themselves are part of the Hebrew text). The five books of praise and protest thus correspond to the five books of the Torah. They offer instruction on praise and prayer in the form of one hundred and fifty examples of praise and protest that the community has recognized as acceptable to God and in keeping with the Torah and the Prophets.

The fact that they address God in confrontational ways and ask God for things that seem scandalous to modern readers has raised the question whether they are present in the Psalter as examples of prayers that people prayed rather than of prayers whose content God approves. But there is only a quantitative difference between the protests in the Psalms and ones that appear elsewhere, including the New Testament (Rev 6:9-11), so this “solution” to that modern problem seems implausible. There is a link with the fact that the Psalms comprise the densest collection of theological affirmations in the scriptures. It would be ironic if they are present in the scriptures only as examples of the way people prayed not as embodying that may properly be said of God. The Psalms have been thought to provide evidence for some theological ideas such as divine omniscience that have been favored by theologians and ordinary people but are hard to find in the scriptures, but ironically, the chief proof text for this idea (Ps 139:1) works in the opposite direction in that it describes God as getting to know about the psalmist and thus as not knowing about the psalmist through an inherent omniscience. The Psalms make other scandalous statements about matters such as God’s abandonment or sleepiness (which Christian thinking commonly reformulates as apparent abandonment or sleepiness).

**The Scriptures and Theology.** We have been considering ways in which one might look at the scriptures theologically. The converse question is, how do we look at theology scripturally? What is the relationship between scripture and theology?

***Biblical theology and systematic theology*.** Theology in the West developed through an interaction between a Middle Eastern way of thinking and a European way of thinking. The Creeds and the doctrines they presuppose such as the Trinity reflect the process whereby the thinking embodied in the scriptures came to be formulated in conceptual categories that were recognizable to Christian leaders familiar with Greek thinking; hence the use of terms such as “hypostasis” and “persona.” It was a necessary aspect of the contexualization of the gospel in their context.

One difficulty with this particular form of contextualization was that these European categories obscured the vivid and dynamic content of what the scriptures communicate. Theology had to focus on problems such as the sense in which Jesus could be both divine and human or the sense in which God can be both one and three, which easily distract from conveying a sense of the vigorous presentation of God and of Jesus in the scriptures. Images and metaphors become analytic concepts. Doctrines of the atonement find it difficult to convey the lively nature of Paul’s account of the significance of Jesus’ execution.

It was also hard for these European categories to preserve the centrally narrative character of the scriptural message. The creeds illustrate the difficulty. While they do justice to the narrative character of Jesus’ own life, they do not set it in the context of the story that runs through the scriptures as a whole. There are no narrative statements about God, only about Jesus.

Making a distinction between systematic theology and biblical theology might be expected to help with this difficulty. Systematic theology is a discipline that seeks to express the nature of Christian faith as a coherent whole in light of the categories of analytical Western thinking and concepts. Biblical theology might then be seen as a discipline that seeks to express the nature of Christian faith as a whole in the terms of the scriptures themselves. In practice, however, attempts at biblical theology also reflect the categories and concepts of Western thinking. Partly out of an awareness of this difficulty, ventures into biblical theology are inclined to stop short of attempting to outline one biblical theology and more often seek to describe a set of biblical theologies (plural): the theology of Genesis or Jeremiah, of Paul or John, of Old Testament or New Testament.

We have noted that one theological significance of the prominence of narrative in the scriptures is the fact that theological statements need to do justice to the fact that Christian faith centrally involves committing oneself to the vital importance of something that happened in the past. Another theological significance of the prominence of narrative is that narrative makes it possible to discuss theological questions in a way that does justice to their depth and complexity. The narrative account of Moses’ interaction with Pharaoh in Exodus, for instance, constitutes a nuanced discussion of the interrelationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility, but it is hard to preserve the subtlety of this presentation when one abandons narrative form. The same applies to the Sinai narrative in Exodus with its narrative discussions of the idea of God’s presence and of the various possible responses God can make to the rebellion of his people. It applies to the discussion in Job of the meaning of human suffering and of its implications for an understanding of God’s relationship with us, which is presented as a kind of debate in which all the participants make significant contributions even if some are more relevant than others to Job himself. It applies to the juxtaposition of Jesus’ ministry of power and then his submission to martyrdom in the two halves of Mark’s Gospel.

***Unity and diversity*.** The common Christian designation of the scriptures (plural) as “Scripture” (singular) implies a unity about the collection of works as a whole. But one characteristic that imperils the idea of their having authority or being inspired or constituting a divine revelation is the diversity and inconsistency they manifest. Thus some parts of the Old Testament emphasize the importance of offerings in the temple, while other parts declare that these do not matter. In the New Testament, Paul declares that people are put right with God through faith alone and not by doing the right thing, and adds that people need only to consider the story of Abraham to see that it is so. James declares that people are put right with God by doing the right thing and not by faith alone, and adds that people need only to consider the story of Abraham to see that it is so. In response to an awareness of such diversity, one might choose between different texts, or one might see them as witnessing to different aspects of what is truthful and right, or one might see them as reflecting different contexts. One problem that then emerges is that readers are likely to focus on the affirmations they appreciate and already affirm, and to discount the ones for which they care less, instead of focusing on the ones they are inclined to discount.

Yahweh’s discourse to Job points to a further insight and a further question. As a human being, Yahweh points out, Job has only a very small place in the world and only a very partial understanding of God and his ways in the world. In a post-modern context, the partial nature of what we perceive has become central to our awareness. This awareness heightens the importance of that scriptural way of doing theology that recognizes complexity and seeks to analyze it, rather than thinking it can be resolved. This awareness also links with the classic post-modern suspicion of meta-narratives, if by a meta-narrative one means a total system or theory or explanation of reality.

In connection with the scriptures, it is appropriate also to use the term meta-narrative in the narrower sense of an overarching story, and then to note that suspicion of meta-narratives encourages a questioning of the kind of meta-narrative that has emerged from theology and has aimed to encapsulate the scriptural message (e.g., creation, fall, redemption, second coming). It provides another stimulus to the recognition that this summary of the implicit meta-narrative of the scriptures is oversimplified. The scriptures themselves incorporate a series of “local narratives” and do not construct a grand narrative out of them. We might, indeed, more tentatively infer from the scriptures a meta-narrative (in the more literal sense) that does more justice to the scriptures’ many local narratives, a narrative about creation, human rebellion, God’s promises to Israel’s ancestors, God’s involvement with Israel itself, Israel’s exile and restoration, Jesus’ coming, ministry, martyrdom, and resurrection, the outpouring of God’s spirit and the spreading of the Jesus story, and the prospect of his final appearing and our resurrection. Christian faith does affirm such a narrative insofar as this is a proper summary of the narrative that we might infer from the scriptures. It is a grand narrative within which we need to live.

**The Scriptures of the Old Covenant and of the New.** The diversity and inconsistency within the scriptures emerges particularly clearly in differences between the two Testaments. Corresponding to the nature of the scriptures themselves are several ways of seeing the relationship between the Testaments.

***Continuity and difference*.** Between them they give a prominent place to the story of Israel, of Jesus, and of the early church, and the New Testament sees its story as the continuation of the story in the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings. John Bright thus sees the scriptures as a drama in which the Old Testament is Act One and the New Testament Act Two. While the Old Testament story hardly requires continuation in a story such as that in the New Testament, it is possible to argue that the Old Testament story does not reach closure and needs some form of continuation. Genesis-Kings ends with exile and a coda telling only of the release of the Davidic king. Chronicles-Ezra-Nehemiah relate the restoration of Judah but close with Judah still chafing under Persian authority and needing the further action of reformers such as Nehemiah. It is then possible to see the story of Jesus and the early church as bringing the restoration of Judah. Yet the New Testament’s story also does not reach closure. Judah is not free of the Roman yoke and does not recognize its Messiah; the church does not look like a community in which the new covenant has become a reality. The New Testament does make clear that one cannot understand its story except as the continuation of the Old Testament story. It is the narrative link between the two Testaments’ story that requires Christian faith to give a status to Israel’s scriptures that it does not give to the religious traditions of other nations.

Another New Testament way of making a link with the Old Testament is to note that promises expressed in the Old Testament are fulfilled within the New. Thus Mark begins with a reference to God’s promise to send a messenger who would herald the Lord’s own coming, and sees John the baptizer as fulfilling this role. When John is born, his father sees his birth as an indication that God has acted “as he said through his holy prophets” (Luke 1:70). In parallel with the way the story in the New Testament links with that in the Old, it is not simply the case that Old Testament promises are fulfilled in the New. Fulfillment is a motif within the Old Testament itself, and living in hope in light of God’s promise is a feature of New Testament faith.

Christians often think in terms of the Old Testament God being wrathful and the New Testament God being loving, but such distinctions hardly survive a reading of the scriptures themselves. Jewish readers are not inclined to see the God of the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings as wrathful. Neither does the New Testament itself make this contrast. Whereas God spoke piecemeal through the Prophets and has now spoken through a Son (Heb 1:1), the content of the speaking is the same. Further, wrath is a prominent theme in the New Testament. It is Jesus who introduces into the scripture the idea that God sends people to Hell. This particular fact does link with the one major theological difference between the Testaments, which is that the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings assume that when people die they simply go to Sheol or Hades, whereas the New Testament is able to declare a new piece of news, that God has “given us a new birth into a lively hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Peter 1:3). It is this fact to which Hebrews testifies, in declaring that the new covenant is better than the old. The two Testaments thus complement each other: Dietrich Bonhoeffer noted that it was only when God had driven home in the Old Testament the importance of this life that he could risk entrusting people with the news about resurrection life.

***Vision and accommodation*.** In laying out God’s expectations, Jesus declares, “You have heard it said, but I say…,” and at first sight may seem to be introducing a higher standard than the Old Testament. But it is hard to locate any point at which his expectations are not already expressed in the Old Testament. For instance, it has already urged that people forswear anger and lust, that their word should be trustworthy, that they should be forgiving rather than seek redress, and that they should love their enemies. There are other points at which the Old Testament approves of redress and of attacks on enemies; but then, there are also points at which the New Testament indicates an acceptance of slavery and of the submission of wives to husbands in a way that implies a lower standard than the Old Testament. Both Old and New have mixed standards.

One clue that Jesus offers to the inconsistency in the instructions in the Torah comes in connection with divorce (e.g., Mark 10). Some Pharisees note that Deuteronomy 24 permits divorce; Jesus notes that Genesis 1-2 implicitly rules it out. Jesus’ comment is that Genesis indicates what God intended from the beginning, while Deuteronomy makes allowance for the human stubbornness that causes divorce. On another occasion he identifies the command to love God and to love one’s neighbor as the commands in the Torah on which the rest of the Torah and the Prophets depend, and one could infer that Deuteronomy’s regulation about a divorce certificate is an expression of love in the way it provides some evidence of status to a woman who has been divorced.So aspects of the Torah are expressed in a way that reflects God’s creation intent, while other aspects make allowance for human sinfulness. The same is true about the New Testament. The vocation of interpretation involves perceiving how expectations in both Testaments relate to the creation ideal and how they make that allowance.

If there is a difference between the Testaments concerning God’s expectations, it lies not in their levels but in their foci. The Old Testament speaks both to the obligations of the individual and to those of the nation. It is the duty of the individual to be forgiving (as Joseph is in relation to his brothers); it is the duty of the nation or the local community to see that justice is done in a way that honors “an eye for an eye.” The New Testament does not speak to the administration of local community life or the administration of justice, as it does not offer any regulations to control slavery.

A related difference is the two Testaments’ approach to worship and purity. In both areas the early church reverts to something like the pattern of the time of Abraham, though it also takes for granted participation in the ongoing worship in the temple. After the destruction of Jerusalem the post-New Testament church in due course follows the line taken by the Old Testament, building churches, appointing priests, and developing set forms of worship. The purity rules are even more unequivocally annulled in the New Testament. These rules were designed as an adjunct to God’s missional purpose, which involved keeping Israel distinct from the nations in order to attract the nations. In Acts God inverts his strategy; the purity rules are annulled in order to serve that same missional purpose.

As the account of God’s activity in effecting his purpose for the world, and as his commentary on that purpose and its implications for his people, the scriptures tell the story in whose context the church is invited and challenged to live if it wants to be Christian.

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