

# Scripture

## Scripture (Christian Perspective)

Dr. Paul Niskanen,

### Old and New Testaments

The Christian Scriptures consist of both Old and New Testaments, which are viewed as a unity containing God's revelation for human salvation. While Christians believe that "the Word of God... is presented and shows its force supremely in the writings of the New Testament," they also maintain that the books of the Old Testament, "written as they are under divine inspiration, retain lasting value" (Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation §§17, 14). This unity and complementary relationship between the two Testaments of the Christian Bible found expression in the saying of St. Augustine: "the New Testament is hidden in the Old, and the Old is made manifest in the New."

Even among the books of the New Testament, however, a special pride of place is reserved for the Gospels as "the primary testimony to the life and teaching of the incarnate Word, our savior" (Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation §18). This preeminent position of the Gospels within the canon of Christian Scripture (which is evident especially in the place given to the Gospel reading in Christian liturgies) highlights the central role of Christ in the Christian understanding of revelation and salvation. Thus, while all the books of the Bible in their entirety are venerated as God's word, it is above all Christ, the eternal Word, who speaks through all of Scripture (see Catechism of the Catholic Church 102; St. Augustine, *En in Ps.* 103, 4, 1), and Christ, the incarnate Word, to whom the Scriptures bear witness (see John 5:39).

There is universal agreement among the main branches of Christianity regarding the contents of the New Testament. This consists of the four Gospels, Acts of the Apostles, Pauline and Catholic Epistles, and the Book of Revelation. With regard to the Old Testament, which Christians generally divide into four main sections (Pentateuch, Historical Books, Wisdom, and Prophets), there are disagreements as to the canonical status of some books (Apocrypha/Deutero-canonical Books). Although the formation of the different canons of scripture is a complex question, for simplicity's sake one can say that the major difference (as witnessed for example between Catholic and Protestant Christianity) has to do with the parallel development of a Hebrew/Aramaic canon and a Greek one. While the early Church for the most part adopted the larger Greek canon (followed by Catholic and Orthodox Christians), St. Jerome (and later the Protestant Reformers) preferred the shorter Hebrew/Aramaic canon, which had been adopted by Judaism.

### Authorship, Inspiration, and Interpretation

Christians believe that “all scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for refutation, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Tim 3:16). God is understood to be the primary author of scripture. There are, however, different ways of understanding how God speaks through scripture. This is the question of biblical inspiration. Again for the sake of simplicity, two main views of inspiration may be highlighted. A very widespread view is that of many Christian Fundamentalists who argue for a verbal dictation model of inspiration. That is to say that God dictated the words of scripture to the human scribes who recorded these words. This is often accompanied by a so-called “literal reading” of the biblical text and the claim of absolute inerrancy even in matters beyond the religious scope of the biblical text.

Such is not the position of the Catholic Church, Eastern Orthodoxy or most of mainline Protestantism. The Catholic Church rejects this Fundamentalist approach to scripture as being “rooted in an ideology which is not biblical” and tending towards “a kind of intellectual suicide” (*The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* 109; 116). The predominant Christian perspective sees biblical inspiration according to the analogy of the Incarnation. That is to say, God remains the true author of scripture, but works in and through real human authors in order to speak to us the Eternal Word of God in human language. Thus the individuality and literary genius of the human authors is the medium of God’s revelatory word.

A consequence of this is that to more fully understand God’s word in scripture, one must endeavor to understand the intention of the human authors as well. One must familiarize oneself with their language, culture, and modes of expression. For if God speaks to us in scripture in human language, then the proper interpretation of scripture necessitates an understanding of the various types of human speech. Thus scripture scholars investigate the ancient languages in which the scriptures were written. They study the historical and cultural contexts of the biblical texts, their literary modes of expression (genres) and structure, seeking thereby to determine the meaning of the authors through whom the Author of all scripture is speaking.

To give an example, one should not attempt to read a parable or poetry as if it were history. To do so would be to miss its point. The truth of Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32) lies not in whether or not the events described happened historically, but in what the story reveals about the mercy of God, who is represented by the father in the narrative. The Catholic Church, no less than Fundamentalism, affirms the inerrancy of scripture, but this consists in “such truth as God, for the sake of our salvation, wished the biblical text to contain” (Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation §11).

Recognizing that God is the author of all scripture, the Catholic Church also states that due attention must be paid to the unity of scripture, of not reading texts out of context or in isolation from the whole of scripture and the living tradition of the Church. For God does not lie, and there can therefore be no true contradiction in the scriptures, or between the scriptures and the rule of faith (*regula fide*)—the central teachings of faith as expressed for example in the Creed. It is important to read scripture “in the light of the same Spirit through whom it was written” (Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation

§12). To this end, the Church also reminds the faithful that “prayer should accompany the reading of holy scripture” (Dogmatic constitution on Divine Revelation §25).

### Scripture in the Life of the Church

Scripture plays a central role in the Church’s liturgical life. All major Christian denominations include reading from scripture in their public worship. This is usually accompanied by a homily or sermon expounding upon the biblical readings. Private or devotional reading of scripture is also encouraged by the Church which sees scripture as God’s living word that has the power to transform our lives. Scripture, as the revealed word of God, also forms the foundation of all Christian doctrine. On this final point, however, there are some differences among Christian denominations as to how this scriptural authority is to be understood.

While Protestant Christianity has long had *sola scriptura* (scripture alone) as one of its central doctrines, the Catholic Church maintains a more nuanced understanding of the role of scripture in formulating doctrine. In the first place, the Catholic Church recognizes that scripture does not come into being in and of itself, but is born in the faith communities of ancient Israel and the Church and is recognized and received as God’s word by these living faith communities. Ancient quarrels over scripture versus tradition are thus seen to be presenting something of a false distinction since scripture itself is part of a larger tradition—the handing on of what has been received (see TRADITION).

In the second place, the Catholic Church recognizes that scripture does not simply interpret itself. Just as scripture does not establish its own canonical boundaries, so too, once established, the texts of scripture can be and have been read and understood in radically different ways. So the Catholic Church claims that “the task of authentically interpreting the word of God...has been entrusted only to those charged with the Church’s ongoing teaching function” (Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation §10). Properly understood, this means that while all of the faithful have a role in the interpretation of scripture, the final discernment or judgment on any particular interpretation belongs to the magisterium acting in Christ’s name.

### Scripture

by Dr. Adil Ozdemir

*The Qur’an refers to Jews and Christians as “the people of the book.” Muhammad, too, was given the book, al-Qur’an.*

In the epistemology of the Qur’an, one of the essential concepts is the idea of the Book (*al kitaab*). The Book, in the Qur’anic sense, is the manifestation and embodiment of the knowledge of God. It is both divine and divinely revealed, a direct dictation to the heart of the prophets through the angel Gabriel. The concept of the Book is larger than the Qur’an,

including earlier revealed books such as those given to Moses, David and Jesus (the Torah, Psalms and Gospels). To explain the Book, the Qur'an refers to a preserved tablet with God as the mother of the Book and the infinite knowledge of God out of which the Qur'an and the other books descended. Texts written by holy men, no matter how inspired (*elhaam*), cannot be raised to the level of the divine Book.

The Qur'an, which literally means recitation, applies various names to itself to express this fundamental idea of the Book. Some of these names are: revelation (*wahy*), descend (*tenzeel*), reminder and remembrance (*zikr, zikraa, tezkeraa*), criterion of right and wrong (*al-furqan*), the final word (*al-qawl al-fasl*), the speech of God (*kalamullah*), explanation and exposition (*al-bayaan*), communication (*al-balaag*), the truth (*al-haq*), the healing (*al-shefaa*), the guidance (*al-hudaa*), the teaching (*al-'ilm*), and the judgement (*al-hukm*). The Qur'an applies some of these names to the Torah and the Gospels as well, such as guidance, criterion, prophecy and healing.

To stress the fact that the Qur'an is a direct revelation from God free from any human word and aberration, the Qur'an refers to the illiteracy of the prophet. No human could have dictated the Qur'an to Muhammad because he did not know how to read or write. Rather, scriptures are revealed to the prophets as part of God's covenantal relationship with humanity. God, out of His love and care for humanity, enters this relationship and speaks to and guides humanity through His messages, known as the holy or sacred books. Both the angel Gabriel who brings the message to the prophets and the prophets who convey it to the people are called messengers of God (*rusul*). God supports the prophets through miracles, as proof of the truth (*sidq*) of His message and His messengers. The Qur'an describes the prophets as honest, infallible, trustworthy, intelligent and innocent, while rejecting such attributes as lying, betraying, and committing adultery.

The Qur'an's prediction that it would be preserved from any alteration or aberration by human hands was fulfilled through its miraculous preservation in memory and in writing. The Qur'an was complete when the prophet died, and its verses and chapters were arranged during the time of the first Caliph Abu Bakr, a year after the prophet died. Out of this original compilation (*al-Mushaf*), copies were made during the rule of the third Caliph Othman, about fifteen years after the prophet's death. Muslims universally and unanimously agree that the Qur'an we have today is the same Qur'an that was revealed to the prophet.

Historically, the revelation of the Qur'an was unlike that of any other scripture. Over a period of 23 years, the verses and chapters (*suras*) of the Qur'an were revealed to address particular occasions in the life of the believers. The Qur'an therefore was not a written composition but a dictation by God addressing particular contexts. This has made the Qur'an a practical and living guide.

Reflecting its historical revelation, the Qur'an is divided into longer verses revealed in Medinah (at the beginning of the Qur'an) and shorter verses revealed in Mecca (at the end). In the Medinan chapters, the style is oracular and the focus is mainly on issues of

community building, reflecting the needs and level of the Medinan context. In the Meccan chapters, the style differs visibly. These verses are rather brief and poetic, with a concentration on faith in God and the approaching hereafter. To help understand these chapters and their context, Muslim scholars have authored specialized books (*Asbaab al-Nuzu'*) that refer particularly to the occasions addressed by the chapters.

The essence of the Qur'anic revelation revolves around the idea of one God who is good and just. God is the truth and the reality, while all else is a creation dependent on His provision, guidance and judgment. Implanting the truth of God in the minds, hearts and souls of humans and guiding them to God's will is the concern of the Qur'an. To do this it recounts the stories of the earlier prophets, their struggle for faith, and the fate of their communities. It relates how God supports His cause through His prophets and His believers, against the idolaters who deny, cover up and distort the truth. It describes how God created all of creation and names creation as the open book of the universe, the miracles, wonders and signs of God in nature. God's works in creation, history and faith are all considered signs (*ayaat*) of the Qur'an, the "rope of God" for believers to hold onto.

Based on Qur'anic verses, Muslim theologians have asserted that belief in the divine books and their teachings as verbatim truth from God is an essential part of the Islamic faith. Belief in the divine books shapes the mindset of all Muslim believers and creates in the individual a deep, unshakable sense of faith in God, angels, prophets, revelations, righteousness and resurrection. In a sense these books embody the covenant (*ahd mithaq*) that God makes with each faith community (*ummah*), and in matters of faith and law the books' teachings hold unquestionable authority over believers. God chooses the community through the messenger He sends them and remains loyal to His covenant, expecting the community to observe the covenant for their own good. If the covenant is violated, God either renews it or replaces the community with a new faith community that loves God and serves his purpose. Stressing human value and responsibility, the Qur'an is clear that communities that do not regard and honor God, that break His law, and that act unjustly are punished by God and unable to survive. Yet those communities that are loyal to their covenant with God and maintain His ways by doing good, caring for the poor and needy, and commanding the right and forbidding the wrong will attain the promises in this world and the life to come.

With the unmatched beauty and power of its style, the unequaled authority it has on believers, and its mastery of existential questions concerning the individual and the community, the Qur'an has created the worldwide Islamic community and its long-lasting civilizations. The Qur'an continues to guide and inspire Muslims of all orientations, including philosophers, mystics, scholars and leaders. It is recited for the living and the dead. It is inscribed into the stones, woods, metals and carpets. It is memorized by millions. It sees itself as the abiding and living word of God, and Muslims believe and experience it to be so.

Although the concept of the Book includes the teachings given to Moses and Jesus, the Qur'an also maintains that human writings (*tahreef*) were later added to these teachings. The Qur'an denies the validity of these additions and asserts that they justify the

revelation of a new book (the Qur'an). The Qur'an maintains that raising Jesus to the divine office as the son of God is a latter addition to the *injeel*, or the original and pristine message given to Jesus. The claims that Jesus is one with God, has the same authority as God, and is the second person of the Trinity are due to these later writings. According to the Qur'an, Jesus came to glorify God, not to divinize his own person and share God's divine sovereignty. The Qur'an also sees incarnation, Christological and soteriological theologies in this light, as inconsistent with the monotheistic faith that Jesus preached. The Qur'an, as it describes itself, is the final revelation to humanity, stressing the unity of God (*tawheed*) and rejecting the shades of idolatry (*shirk*) and faithlessness (*kufur*).

### Points of Agreement

Both Muslims and Christians believe that their scriptures are inspired by God and are the word of God. In both traditions, scripture plays a very large role, and is often memorized and looked to as a guideline for belief and behavior.

### Points of Disagreement

Muslims believe the Qur'an was dictated by God and therefore has no human author. The Qur'an is not the words of Muhammad, but the words of Allah--God himself, in Arabic. If a Muslim is referring to the Qur'an, she will say "Gods says..." whereas if she says "Muhammad says..." she is referring to the hadith, not to the Qur'an.

The most basic disagreement between Muslims and Christians concerns precisely the claim that the Qur'an is the direct words of God. It is unlikely that any Christian would accept this; indeed, anyone who believed that the Qur'an was the direct word of God would almost certainly be or become a Muslim. Non-Muslims, on the other hand, are very unlikely to accept this belief. The most likely Christian opinion would be that the Qur'an is the words of Muhammad, not the direct word of God. This would almost certainly also be the opinion of secular scholars who study the Qur'an. Typically, such scholars would also believe that there is some borrowing from other sources in the Qur'an. But again this is inadmissible by Muslims.

This disagreement is foundational; and therefore probably not capable of being resolved. Christians cant expect Muslims to renounce the foundations of their faith, and the belief that the Qur'an is dictated by God is certainly a foundational belief of Islam. Likewise, Muslims cannot expect Christians to renounce the foundations of their faith, while still remaining Christian. Thus, while Christians and Muslims could discuss the claim that the Qur'an has no human author, but is the direct word of God in Arabic, it is unlikely that this discussion would lead to any fruitful outcome.

### Points for Further Discussion

Although the concept of the Book includes the teachings given to Moses and Jesus, the Qur'an also maintains that human writings (*tahreef*) were later added to these teachings. The Qur'an denies the validity of these additions and asserts that they justify the

revelation of a new book (the Qur'an). The Qur'an maintains that raising Jesus to the divine office as the son of God is a latter addition to the *injeel*, or the original and pristine message given to Jesus. The claims that Jesus is one with God, has the same authority as God, and is the second person of the Trinity are due to these later writings. According to the Qur'an, Jesus came to glorify God, not to divinize his own person and share God's divine sovereignty. The Qur'an also sees incarnation, Christological and soteriological theologies in this light, as inconsistent with the monotheistic faith that Jesus preached. The Qur'an, as it describes itself, is the final revelation to humanity, stressing the unity of God (*tawheed*) and rejecting the shades of idolatry (*shirk*) and faithlessness (*kufur*).

There is a wide range of opinion in Christianity regarding the divinity of Jesus, so some Christians might accept the claim that those New Testament writings, for example the gospel of John, especially its first chapter, are later additions to the message of Jesus.

At the same time, Muslims are open to the same sorts of objections that they would bring against Christians, namely the claim that the Qur'an itself is not free of human authorship, and may in part, or even in full, represent the words of Muhammad, rather than the direct, unmediated words of God.