



## **Scripture: A Spiritual Covenant in Dialogue**

By Wesley Tenney

As a believer in God, I confess I have at times found it troubling how scripture has passed through the hands of so many authors, cultures, translators, and interpreters. Certainly, by the time a preacher proclaims a message of faith to me or my peers, I'm left wondering, "Does this person *really* have it right?" How can they know their interpretation of God's message is the correct one? Who gave them the authority to make these claims? Unfortunately, I am not alone in my persistent doubts. Many people today, regardless of religious background, find themselves in stark disagreement and confusion over not just the authority of scripture, but also its divine message. People of common faith often cannot even agree upon what constitutes scripture, let alone how to best interact with it. The question at hand today, then, for many religious believers is this: *What, precisely, can we affirm about scripture?* Since scripture is by definition a text from God, regardless of religious background, we can begin to make at least some fundamental affirmations of its nature and how to interpret it. As a Christian personally, I believe scripture is the covenantal dialogue between God and humanity, which has been ongoingly preserved in writing by the Spirit-given authority of God's people. Once I know this, the authority of scripture begins to make sense, both as a text proclaimed publicly and as a text read privately.

Written text, scripture included, is typically some form of communication between two or more parties.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, at its essence, scripture is dialogue. Consequently, this written dialogue requires some form of intentional empathy between authors and readers. The authors of messages must write in a manner that impacts the readers; conversely, the readers of messages must pay close attention to the intent of the authors. Together, this establishes a definitive hermeneutical context for the receivers of any written message – a meeting of the author’s and the receivers’ perceptive horizons.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the message of scripture has a relational context: the continual incarnation<sup>3</sup> of God meeting humanity.<sup>4</sup> From this context, one can derive a relational hermeneutic,<sup>5</sup> recognizing that whoever is in relationship with God is the current receiver of God’s message. As this receiver responds to God’s message, God’s words come alive in this receiver’s context enabling the dialogue between God and humanity to continue in line with how God has revealed Godself prior. This faithful exchange of meaning between God and humanity – this dialogue – is the essence of scripture. Who, though, is the current recipient of this Godly message?

---

<sup>1</sup> Jeannine Brown, *Scripture as Communication: Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 13.

<sup>2</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald Marshall (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2004), 316. For Gadamer, the relationship between author and receiver actually forms a rather post-liberal context. For Gadamer both the interpreter and the author rise to an outside universality, overcoming both parties. Contrast this view with Heidegger’s lack of hermeneutical context. Brown writes that for Heidegger, “the interpreter’s presuppositions are challenged by the text; the text is then challenged by other assumptions of the interpreter, and so on” (66). Unlike Gadamer, Heidegger does not seek to empathize with the author of a given text. Rather, Heidegger is interested only with the text itself.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 18. Enns uses the term, “Incarnational analogy: Christ’s incarnation is analogous to Scripture’s ‘incarnation’.” Hence, for Enns, scripture has a nature similar to Christ’s nature. Preserving Enns’ frame of reference of revelation, I use it not so much as an analogy but as a context for hermeneutics. In other words, incarnation is not just a concept useful for describing scripture’s nature because it unites divine and human qualities, rather incarnation is the literal medium or holy moment in which God breathes Scripture.

<sup>4</sup> For Christians, this is most clear with the Incarnation proper (John 1:1, 14).

<sup>5</sup> Joel Green, “(Re)turn to Narrative” in *Narrative Reading, Narrative Preaching: Reuniting New Testament Interpretation and Proclamation*, ed. Joel Green and Michael Pasquarello III (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003).

Scripture is covenantal dialogue. God’s self-disclosure to humanity (that is, God’s revelation), is available to all people,<sup>6</sup> revealing otherwise unknown aspects of Godself in a way that necessitates reciprocity.<sup>7</sup> All religious traditions, though, understand themselves as the receivers of God’s message in some special way, making their heritage of the dialogue between God and humanity the proper rule or “canon” against which other worldviews are measured. This is where faith plays an important epistemic role: one’s faith determines who is in this special relationship, or “covenant” with God. Hence, one’s faith determines what composes one’s scripture. Regardless of religious tradition, scripture is still dialogue between God and humanity.<sup>8</sup> As such, the elements of the above posited definition should theoretically remain true regardless of one’s religious worldview. As a traditioned Christian, I believe followers of Jesus are in this special covenantal relationship with God, who by nature is both personally immanent and independently transcendent. Given this premise, Christians are the ones who can receive, contextualize, and thus interpret God’s message as a form of reciprocity to God’s revelatory grace. Indeed, by covenant, Christians are the ones who can know God<sup>9</sup> and share God with the

---

<sup>6</sup> John 17:21; Rom. 1:18-20. Jesus desires for the whole world to know the Truth of the Father. Paul later writes that, “God’s invisible qualities... have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse,” in *The Holy Bible, New International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984). Many Christians uphold a doctrine of general revelation claiming that God’s message is available to all people in universal ways that lead them to Jesus’ special revelatory teachings.

<sup>7</sup> Elaine Phillips, “*One Thing God Spoke; These Two I have Heard...*” (*Psalm 62:12*): *Truth, (Deception), and Interpretation* (Wenham, MA: Evangelical Theological Society Annual Meeting, 2001), 5.

<sup>8</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical reflections on the claim that God speaks* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 14-15. As a proponent of Reformed Epistemology, Wolterstorff claims, “it is entirely right and proper for persons to believe things about God without doing so on the basis of propositional evidence” (14). Indeed, for Wolterstorff, “a discussion of divine discourse, along with a discussion of divine revelation, belongs on the agenda of the epistemologist,” and he thus wants to ask, “what a *non-evidentialist* epistemology of beliefs grounded on divine discourse might look like” (15).

<sup>9</sup> Esther Meek, *Loving to Know: Introducing Covenant Epistemology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), 36.

rest of humanity.<sup>10</sup> Thus, to continue this exploration of scripture we now must examine the heritage of Christianity's covenantal dialogue, beginning in Christianity's Hebraic roots.

God established a covenant of special revelation<sup>11</sup> first with the nation of Israel, the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.<sup>12</sup> Here began the written word in the Judeo-Christian revelatory heritage – the Torah, God's instruction, given to Moses at Sinai. Subsequently, in the desert, the *Ruach Ha-Qodesh*,<sup>13</sup> or Spirit of the Lord, “comes down” on Israel to the Tent of Meeting to rest upon the nation's 70 elders.<sup>14</sup> Here, the Spirit began a heritage of communication and interpretation of God's word through the prophets, which spanned Israel's history within the periods of the Judges, Monarchies, and Exile.<sup>15</sup> Gradually, interpretation and meditation on God's revelation bore a canon of scripture under Israel's Spirit-guided authority. The latter two folds of the *Tanakh*, the *Nevi'im* and *Ketuvim*, emerged. By the end of the Tannaitic Period this

---

<sup>10</sup> Gen. 26:4; Gen. 28:14; Is. 49:3, 6. See also Is. 41:8-42:6-7, Is. 53 (a single servant focus) and Is. 56 (a group of servants again); these all are servant songs which lead up to the sharing of Israel's covenant with the rest of creation.

<sup>11</sup> While other covenants between God and humanity are recorded in Judeo-Christian scripture prior to the Abrahamic covenant, namely the Eden and Noahide covenants, it is not until Abraham that God reveals himself in a special revelatory way to a named, chosen audience. Therefore, the presuppositions that allow dual-covenant theology, such as how God remains true to Godself over time, cannot be transmitted farther back in time to God's previous promises. These prior covenants lack the same incarnational presence of the Abrahamic and New Covenants since they do not name a specific audience or impart any sense of chosen status or responsibility to said audience before God.

<sup>12</sup> Gen. 15:17-18 (Abraham); Gen. 26:2-5 (Isaac); Gen. 28:13 (Jacob); Gen. 32:28-30 (Israel at Peniel); Ex. 19:5-6 (Israel at Sinai).

<sup>13</sup> “Ruah Ha-Qodesh,” *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*, ed. R. J. Werblowsky and Geoffrey Widiger (New York, NY: Oxford University Press 1997), 592. God's Spirit did not manifest between the destruction of the 1<sup>st</sup> Temple and the death of the last two prophets in the *Tanakh*: Zachariah and Malachi. However, Christians might observe that the *Ruach Ha-Qodesh* later returned to rest on Peter at Pentecost so he could faithfully interpret two Psalms and the prophecy of Joel in light of Jesus' victory. See Richard B. Hayes, “Figural Exegesis and the Retrospective Re-cognition of Israel's Story” in *Bulletin for Biblical Research*, Vol. 29, No. I (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019). Hayes notes, “The very description of Ps. 16 as predictive prophecy is a retrospective re-cognition made possible only by rereading the text through the lens of the resurrection of Jesus.”

<sup>14</sup> Num. 11:25

<sup>15</sup> For an example of the Spirit of God inspiring later prophetic speech, see David's last words in 2 Sam. 23:2. Aside from blatant notes of the Spirit's work, all the prophets are noted in the Hebrew text to have received the word of God (Ez. 1:3; Mic. 1:1; 3:8; Hos. 1:1. Jer. 1:2, etc.). Furthermore, Peter later notes this word to the prophets was sustained by the Spirit (2 Pt. 1:21).

hermeneutical tradition granted both Written and Oral Torah canonical authority in mainstream Judaism.<sup>16</sup> Those religious leaders within the Jewish faith, with whom the Spirit clearly rested, carried this hermeneutical tradition in an unbroken chain from Sinai to Jesus' lifetime.<sup>17</sup> With whom the Spirit rested, however, was not always as clear as scripture might depict.

Various groups within and around Israel, like the Samaritans, Zealots, Sadducees, Pharisees, and the Qumran community, among others, laid claim to the reception of the covenantal Spirit over the years of the Tanakh's emergence. With whom the Spirit of God, or *Shekinah*,<sup>18</sup> rested, was important because this covenantal group had the Spirit's inspiration supporting their interpretation of God's message. In other words, whoever claimed their group constituted God's chosen people, Israel, had the Spirit's wisdom to interpret scripture well. They could decide what composed scriptural canon.<sup>19</sup> The Sadducees, for example, considered themselves to inherit the chosen identity of Israel. They cited the priestly line passed down through Aaron, Phineas, and the family of Zadok who was blessed by Ezekiel.<sup>20</sup> They only affirmed the canonicity of the Written Torah, not the Oral Tradition.

---

<sup>16</sup> Sanhedrin 5b.5, in *The Babylonian Talmud: Seder Nezikin Vol. 19*, trans. Jacob Shachter, ed. I. Epstein (London, UK: Sonoco Press, 1994).

<sup>17</sup> Avot 1.1-18, in *The Mishnah: A new translation*, trans. Jacob Neusner (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), 672-5. The Rabbis claimed those Israelite leaders who received the *smicha*, the laying on of hands from Moses to Joshua onward, were the receivers of this tradition. Where the 70 elders received the Spirit to prophesy from Moses in the desert, Joshua also received the Spirit – directly from Moses – via the laying on of hands (Num. 27:15-23). Joshua, in contrast to the elders, is depicted in a leadership role that carries an authority. Deuteronomy notes, “the Israelites listened to him and did what the LORD had commanded Moses” (34:9 NIV). From Joshua's line of interpretation then (i.e. the *smicha*), and from the spread of prophecy to Israel's 70 elders, the Rabbis see themselves carrying on this tradition.

<sup>18</sup> “Shekinah,” *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*, 629-30. *Shekinah* refers to the manifestation of divine presence in human life, typically the life of the Israelites (629). First appearing in Ex. 25:8 to dwell in the Tabernacle, the *Shekinah* later grew synonymous with the *Ruach Ha-Qodesh*, Spirit of God, and Spirit of Prophecy.

<sup>19</sup> For a distinctly Christian articulation of this idea see 1 Cor. 2:6-10.

<sup>20</sup> E. Baneth, “Sadducees,” in *Encyclopedia Judaica Vol. 17: Ra-Sam*, ed. Fred Skolnik and Michael Berenbaum (Farmington Hills, MI: Keter Publishing House Ltd., 2007), 654-5; Cf. Ez. 40:46; 44:15.

Similarly, the Qumran community considered themselves the true inheritors of the Spirit of Israel, as evident in their interpretation of Habakkuk 1:5. In the literary context of this passage, God reveals to Habakkuk that Babylon will soon come to conquer the land. The Qumran community interpreted this passage, however, in light of their own reception of the Spirit of Israel. They claimed Hab. 1:5 referred to, “those who were unfaithful together with the Liar, in that they [did] not [listen to the word received by] the Teacher of Righteousness from the mouth of God.”<sup>21</sup> Clearly, since there was no Teacher of Righteousness<sup>22</sup> at the time of Habakkuk’s penning, the Qumran group interpreted this passage in light of present events understood within their own communal identity. This hermeneutical style was common for many 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple Jewish groups. Just as the scriptures informed their traditions, their traditions equally informed their scriptural understanding. Each Jewish tradition or sect claimed the identity of Israel’s Spirit through the lens of its own underlying identity, historiography, and hermeneutical tradition. Each sect had its own understanding of canonicity,<sup>23</sup> and its own understanding of how prophecies or laws in said canon support the sect’s reception of the Spirit of Israel. Even Apostolic Jews, that is Christians, did the same.

This competition for claim of the covenantal, Spirit-held authority of the identity “Israel” led to the eventual Christian reception of God’s word. According to John, Jesus understood himself to be blessed with the wisdom of the Spirit of God. “The Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name,” Jesus states to his disciples, “will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.”<sup>24</sup> Not unlike the Qumran community’s Teacher of Righteousness,

---

<sup>21</sup> 1QpHab ii. 1-3. Quoted in Enns, 129. Brackets in original.

<sup>22</sup> This title refers to the founder of the Qumran Community within the Qumran area’s various *peshers*.

<sup>23</sup> It should be noted that while various Jewish groups differed in canon during this period, there still often remained large overlap between these different groups’ canons. The Qumran texts, for example, are remarkably similar to the scripture tradition preserved by the Masoretes a few hundred years later.

<sup>24</sup> Jn. 14:26, *NIV*

Jesus claims only those who listen to the word he received from God are within the fold of righteousness.<sup>25</sup> He notes further, “The Spirit of truth... will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you.”<sup>26</sup> Jesus claims the truth of the Lord and the Lord’s revelation rests on him. In Luke’s account, Jesus went so far with his disciples that he directly, “opened their minds so they could understand the scriptures.”<sup>27</sup> Jesus’ interpretation of the *Tanakh* that follows is very similar to Qumran’s understanding of Habakkuk. To Jesus, the writings of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms are fulfilled in His followers’ understanding of, and witness to, recent events.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore for Luke, Jesus’ Spirit arrives on the whole Church come Pentecost.<sup>29</sup> Paul similarly teaches the primitive Church, “If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.”<sup>30</sup> Early Christian leaders undoubtedly claimed the Spirit-held authority of the identity “Israel” for their own.

Was it proper, however, for the early Christians to utilize this hermeneutic of typology for themselves?<sup>31</sup> According to most modern-day interpretive standards, it was absolutely improper.

---

<sup>25</sup> Jn. 14:6, Jesus claims, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (NIV). Cf. Jn. 20:23, in which Jesus says only those his disciples forgive by the power of His Spirit are truly forgiven. A soteriological exclusivism began to appear within Jewish theology during the late 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple and subsequent Tannaitic periods. Earlier, sons of light, or *Laos*, was strongly the Jews. With the increased frequency of different claims on this identity during the time around Jesus’ life, “*Laos*” (i.e. who was saved) became pigeon-holed within each of the different Jewish sub-groups and their respective sympathizers. No longer was a universal Jewish identity of God’s chosen people a clear reality. Jesus’ exclusivism here in John 14:6 fits this cultural-religious context.

<sup>26</sup> Jn. 16:13-14, *NIV*

<sup>27</sup> Lk. 24:45

<sup>28</sup> Lk. 24:44, 48

<sup>29</sup> Acts 2

<sup>30</sup> Gal. 3:29, *NIV*; Cf. Rom. 11:17, where Paul claims all Christians, Jew and Gentile, are grafted into God’s Covenant with Israel. Also see 1 Pt. 1:1, 12, where Peter too, claims the Spirit’s prophets knew their messages were for followers of Christ. Peter writes, “It was revealed to them [the prophets] that they were not serving themselves but you,” God’s elect. Truly, the self-awareness of the Spirit’s authority was prevalent across the Apostolic Church.

<sup>31</sup> This hermeneutic has a few different titles in current literature, the most prominent being *figural exegesis*, see R. B. Hayes, “Figural Exegesis and the Retrospective Re-cognition of Israel’s Story”. I choose to use the nomenclature *typology* to maintain coherence and unity between the Apostolic hermeneutical tradition and the subsequent Ante-Nicaean hermeneutical tradition. Despite the usual scholastic separation of the two historical periods (intertextual scholars often focusing on the former and patristic scholars often focusing on the latter), interpreters in both eras were making hermeneutical choices that reflected and furthered the establishment of a distinctly Christian identity amongst the plethora of emergent Judeo-Christian belief systems. Both typology and

This hermeneutic of typology was partly eisegetical – reading into the scriptures meaning that was not originally fully present. Early Christian typology often reframed the history of the *Tanakh* passages in ways that while not ignoring, certainly added to the historical-grammatical context.<sup>32</sup> In the historical context of Jesus and the apostles themselves, however, this hermeneutical style was normative. Many can argue, and their observation is valid, that simply because the apostle’s use of eisegesis was normative doesn’t mean it was proper. I agree. Instead, in order to test how scripture functions in the apostolic context, one must return to an understanding of *what* scripture is (its ontology) and *why* scripture exists (its telos).<sup>33</sup> Scripture exists as a form of special revelation – divine self-disclosure – of God to God’s people. Therefore, the purpose of scripture is to know, via covenant, the Lord. The Apostolic Jews, unlike their Jewish contemporaries,<sup>34</sup> were redefining God’s identity, the ultimate author of scripture, alongside their own identity in light of Jesus’ victory.<sup>35</sup> Christians equate the Messiah and God,<sup>36</sup> meaning all interpretation henceforth must premise that Jesus is God. For Christians, then, scripture becomes covenantal dialogue between Jesus and humanity designed by the Spirit so that people may know the Father. The apostle’s hermeneutics were thus proper since they

---

figural exegesis refer to a hermeneutical style that falls squarely between allegorical interpretation and recognition of prophetic fulfillment. Typology/figural exegesis includes elements of both hermeneutical styles, thus avoiding the extremes of each (allegorical interpretation’s tendency to ignore historical context and prophetic fulfillment’s tendency to preserve history solely through the lens of the reader’s present).

<sup>32</sup> Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation*, 152.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 160. For Enns, “What drives apostolic hermeneutics is not adherence to a method.” With this understanding, it is irrelevant not only whether the apostles were performing eisegesis or exegesis, but it is altogether irrelevant *how* they were interpreting scripture. “Rather,” to Enns, “the coming of Christ is so climactic that it required the New Testament writers to look at the Old Testament in a whole new light.” This leads Enns to refer to the apostle’s hermeneutics as “Christotelic” (158), for the apostles were concerned only in spreading the truth of Jesus’ victory. This purpose, and this purpose alone, defined their hermeneutical standards.

<sup>34</sup> An examination of how other Jewish groups, particularly Pharisaic Judaism, continued to claim the identity of Israel, both historically and hermeneutically, while fascinating, is beyond the scope of this work. Of pertinence, however, is that Judaic interpretation of scripture needed to continue in line with how they viewed the personhood of God. Just as the hermeneutic of typology functioned for Christians, only a clear cohesion between theology of God and faith-based confession of identity can justify its eisegetical tendencies for Judaism.

<sup>35</sup> Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation*, 152.

<sup>36</sup> Jn. 1:1; Jn. 8:58



were tested against the standard revealed to them by the Spirit of Christ.<sup>37</sup> How can Christians today, though, know we have accurately received Christ's Truth as revealed by Christ's Spirit in the scriptures we read and profess?

The Spirit-given authority of the apostles can be verified in Christian history by the lineage of human leadership established by Christ. This lineage is important to protect Christians against false interpretations, teachings, and writings. This was especially true in the Early Church. In John, Jesus breathes the Spirit of Truth on his apostles to grant them authority.<sup>38</sup> Mirroring the laying on of hands in Rabbinic *Smicha*,<sup>39</sup> the apostles lay their hands upon other qualified Christian leaders<sup>40</sup> to spread the authority of Christ's Spirit from Jerusalem<sup>41</sup> to Samaria<sup>42</sup> to the rest of the known world.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, this line of authority then functions for the Early Church as a Tradition-based check and balance upon the Spirit's revelation, defending orthodoxy. A clear example of this is Paul's exhortation to Timothy,<sup>44</sup> when Paul anticipates opposers of the Truth in the last days.<sup>45</sup> Paul's confidence these opposers', "folly will be clear to everyone,"<sup>46</sup> is rooted in his Christ-centered friendship with Timothy<sup>47</sup> and in Timothy's knowledge of holy scriptures.

---

<sup>37</sup> Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation*, 152. "Apostolic hermeneutics was driven by a Spirit-initiated intimacy with the crucified and risen Christ."

<sup>38</sup> Jn. 20:22

<sup>39</sup> Rosh Hashana 31a, in *The Babylonian Talmud: Seder Mo'ed Vol. 6*, trans. Maurice Simon, ed. I. Epstein (London, UK: Sonoco Press, 1983). The *Smicha* settles in Yavneh as a recipient of the Sanhedrin tradition after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 Ad. At Yavneh, the Rabbis focused on the importance of Torah study as it will bring the return of God's Spirit. Christians also maintain this strong connection between study of scripture and the presence of the Spirit, only Christians understand the Spirit to already be present with them as they faithfully read the scriptures.

<sup>40</sup> The examination of what made one qualified to receive the authority of the Spirit by the laying on of hands is a discussion beyond the scope of this work, however, 1 Tim. 5:22 shows a beginning guideline.

<sup>41</sup> Acts 6:3-7

<sup>42</sup> Acts 8:14-17

<sup>43</sup> Acts 19:6 exemplifies this practice continued even outside *Eretz Israel*, such as here in Ephesus.

<sup>44</sup> 2 Tim. 3:14-15, *NIV*. Paul exhorts Timothy, "to continue in what you have learned... because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures."

<sup>45</sup> 2 Tim. 3:1-7, *NIV*. Paul notes how people will control others based on their passions and always learn, "but never... acknowledge the truth."

<sup>46</sup> 2 Tim. 3:9, *NIV*

<sup>47</sup> 2 Tim. 3:10-11. Of importance to note, Timothy did receive the laying on of hands from a body of Christian elders (1 Tim. 4:14), of whom Paul was likely a member (2 Tim. 1:6).

Paul states the scriptures are, “God-breathed,” like Jesus’ authority on the apostles. They are, “useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.”<sup>48</sup> As it does for Paul and Timothy in the face of godless opposition, it is the connection between God-breathed scriptures and God-breathed authority of the apostles that maintains proper hermeneutical standards for the Early Church. Later Christians follow this Apostolic Authority over scriptures,<sup>49</sup> and it continues to affirm Christian hermeneutics today, for the Spirit will not witness against Godself.<sup>50</sup>

The work of Christ’s Spirit to preserve the dialogue between God and God’s people is also noticeable beyond the apostolic writings. Namely, the Spirit works in the *ongoing* interpretation of this dialogue amongst Christian believers in every generation. Just as we see God’s message emerged over time with the passing and sharing of God’s covenant, we see God’s message continue to emerge throughout Christian history even into the present. Christ continues to make himself known so that all Christians will be unified with God.<sup>51</sup> On an even more fundamental level, since scripture is dialogue, it necessitates reciprocal listening and speaking from all who read it. This means Christians today are held to the same responsibility of Spirit-given interpretation of scripture’s meaning as their ancestors in the faith.<sup>52</sup> Christians today also have the same standard of Christological foundations for their hermeneutics, so they must still

---

<sup>48</sup> 2 Tim. 3:16, *NIV*

<sup>49</sup> This apostolic tradition became incredibly important during Christianity’s infancy in the following 300 years. Many patristic claims to apostolic tradition exist to defend hermeneutical and theological reasoning. These claims can be found in the writings of many fathers, such as Irenaeus. See Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, Book III § 3, trans. Alexander Roberts and William Rambaut, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 1: The Apostolic Fathers, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1885).

<sup>50</sup> Christians believe in God’s eternality and omniscience, a corollary of this being God’s truth is absolute and unchanging. See Heb. 13:8, in which the author of this epistle is also exhorting the audience to continue in the ways of their leaders (v. 7) to avoid strange teachings (v. 9). (See also Ps. 90:2; Ps. 102:27; Mal. 3:6).

<sup>51</sup> Jn. 17:26

<sup>52</sup> 1 Cor. 2:12-13, *NIV*. Paul writes how mature Christians receive, “the Spirit who is from God that we may understand what God has freely given us.” Further, this Spirit lets believers speak, “in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words.” Hence, believers in each generation should – indeed, they have the responsibility to – interpret by the Spirit for ongoing dialogue with God, just as the Apostles like Paul and Peter did.

embrace the mind of Christ to spiritually discern the thoughts of God by the power of Christ's Spirit.<sup>53</sup> Likewise, just as the Early Church had the boundary of apostolic authority to qualify the Spirit's presence in their interpretations and teachings, believers today have this same boundary present in the Tradition of the Christian Church's heritage.<sup>54</sup>

As stated at the beginning of this work, the words of God come alive again in every receiver's context enabling the dialogue between God and humanity to continue. To guard against the dangers of a reader's unhinged existentialism, the Spirit of God stays true to Godself. Where many modernist scholars have attempted to articulate a rational standard of principle against which a reader's interpretation must be tested,<sup>55</sup> they have unfortunately overlooked the already revealed corporate interpretation of God's truth received by the collective Christian identity over time. Any revelation given by the Spirit today, found in scripture or elsewhere, must be tested against the heritage of the Spirit's truthful teaching within Christian community thus far. One example might help clarify the consequences of this Scripture-Tradition union.

When Christians speak of scripture, they typically speak of the Bible, a canon of writings agreed upon by the collective whole of Christianity, both the whole of believers today and the

---

<sup>53</sup> 1 Cor. 2:16, 14, 11

<sup>54</sup> I am using the phrases "Tradition" and "Apostolic Authority" broadly here to refer to the history present in all Christian Traditions' confessions of faith. My goal here is not to stake a claim on what defines "Christian" today, other than belief in God as stated in my Christian presuppositions at the start of this work. My goal is neither to trace the transference of any line of authority to specific individuals today. My personal opinion is that it is beyond our human right to judge who is "in" or "out" of God's salvific plan; this is a mystery of the faith. What we can know is that the authority of the apostles continues in the leadership of Christian circles and has an ever-increasing body of insight from its now 2000-year-old accumulation of Christian thinkers, leaders, and local church bodies.

<sup>55</sup> Karl Barth and Richard Bultmann in particular struggled to respond to Friedrich Schleiermacher's doctrine of scripture which claimed the Bible to be an infallible, yet errant, record of humanity's encounters with God. Where Bultmann settled on a hermeneutic of mythos – similar to allegorical interpretation in that it was just as divorced from historical-grammatical context – Barth settled on a Christological hermeneutic based solely on one's individual relationship with Christ, the living Word of God. Barth's bibliology was just as divorced from the historical context of God's message as Bultmann's was, only the history Barth missed was the historical context that followed the writings included in Christian canon. Barth missed the interpretive implications of the broad, divine-human relationship between Christ and the Church over time.

whole of believers historically. Shortly after the Apostolic Era, there already existed a general consensus of scriptural canon.<sup>56</sup> The writings in this canon were all revealed to the authors as authoritative due to their received authority by the Holy Spirit.<sup>57</sup> This inspiration by the Spirit was then checked against the Christian Tradition already revealed by that time<sup>58</sup> (which would have included the Judaic Tradition Jesus and the Apostles received) by Spirit-given authority of the contemporary, wider Christian Church.<sup>59</sup> The formation of scripture and the authority of the Christian believers' tradition are inherently bound together since the Spirit of Christ functions both as the initial revealer of scripture's message to a subjective, finite reader and as the standard objective Truth against which one checks the reader's interpretation. This example of Scripture and Tradition's inherent union remains true regardless of time.

For Christians today, then, I posit a delineation between *scripture* and *canon*. Scripture I define as I did above: the covenantal dialogue between God and humanity, which has been ongoingly preserved in writing by the Spirit-given authority of God's people. Canon is merely the standard against which all scripture is checked for Truth. As such, one can organize scripture threefold:

1. Scripture that sets the standard of Truth for all time – *Canon*:

Scripture in this revelatory fold is that which composes the rule against which one tests all other revelatory claims by the Spirit. What scriptures compose one's canon depends on one's Christian tradition; however, among all Christian traditions a unified list of at least sixty-six

---

<sup>56</sup> Rodger Nicole, "The Canon of the New Testament," in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40.2 (March 1997), 199-206. Nicole notes, "A notable consensus on the OT existed among the Jews in or before the first century of our era and that a similar consensus on the NT prevailed among Christians no later than AD 400" (199).

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, 200. This criterion for canonicity is commonly referred to as the apostolicity of a text's authorship.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, 201-202. This criterion for canonicity is commonly referred to as the orthodoxy of the text.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, 203-204. This criterion for canonicity includes both Nicole's sixth and seventh criteria.

books is common.<sup>60</sup> Scripture in this fold also includes the authoritative creeds or confessions of one's tradition. Scripture in this revelatory fold cannot be added to or detracted from,<sup>61</sup> and it is permanent for all time.

2. Scripture that perennially testifies to this standard of Truth – *Deuterocanon*:<sup>62</sup>

Scripture in this revelatory fold is that which the Christian community treats with high regard despite the passing of time. Example texts would include all the debated books in the above category that do not make the cut of "Canon" for one's own tradition but do for other traditions. These texts, while not setting the standard of Truth in one's own tradition certainly are close enough to the standard that some Christian groups would call them to be canonical. This is where many Protestants would put the Old Testament Apocrypha. Also included in Deuterocanon are Patristic writings such as *I Clement*, Irenaeus' *Adversus Haereses*, or Origen's *De Principiis*. Some Christian groups might include Rabbinic midrash in this fold of Christian scripture since it also testifies to the Truth present in the Old Testament. Scriptures in this fold range broadly from medieval poetry such as Hildegarde de Bingen's *Ordo Virtutum* to the Reformer's great treatises like Luther's "95 Theses" or Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

All these writings witness to the Truth of God's covenantal dialogue with humanity over time as it is already preserved in the canonical scriptures. Additionally, all these texts have been recognized perennially as, "useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in

---

<sup>60</sup> Most Protestants limit their canon to just these 66 Books. Roman Catholics include an additional 6 Books from the Old Testament Apocrypha in their canon, bringing their canon's total to 72 Books. Various different Orthodox Traditions, including the Nestorian and Oriental Churches, vary in the range of how many books they include in their canons, however the most I've encountered is the Ethiopian Orthodox 81-book canon.

<sup>61</sup> Deut. 4:2; Rev. 22:18-19

<sup>62</sup> *Deuterocanon*, as I use it here, differs from the Roman Catholic use of the term. In my use of the term it is not a part of the Bible's broader canon, but rather it is its own entirely separate category of scripture.

righteousness,”<sup>63</sup> just as Paul writes is a key attribute of scripture. These texts have stood the test of time in Christian heritage and have become as some might say the “Classics” of the faith.

While scripture in this fold testifies to the standard of Truth, it does so in midst of words that may not be God-breathed, so therefore is not always perspicuous or permanent. This is precisely why scripture in this fold is not canonical – it is incapable of setting a standard; at most, scripture in this revelatory fold testifies to the Truth already realized by Christianity’s corporate heritage.

### 3. Scripture that contextually supports the standard of Truth – *Tritocanon*:

Lastly, scripture in this revelatory fold is that which is authoritative in the reader’s context as it appropriates to local audiences the Truth held within the preservation of God’s ongoing dialogue with humanity. Scriptures in this revelatory fold are thus highly cultural or relevant. Examples of scriptures in this fold are biblical commentaries, theological dictionaries, sermons, and other important documents like Martin Luther King Jr.’s *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*. Also included in this revelatory fold are the writings average Christians might share with one another to spur each other on in the faith, like a woman’s letter or text message to her grandchildren or a missionary’s email to his sponsors. As long as the message preserved in these writings testifies to the Truth already preserved under the Spirit-given authority of the wider Church, these writings too, are scriptures inspired by Christ’s Holy Spirit.<sup>64</sup> Over time, if wider Christian circles continue to regard a writing’s value, it might become more authoritative and move into the deuterocanonical fold.

A clear presupposition of a threefold view of scripture like the one above is that current receivers of God’s message have not only a capability but a responsibility in Christ’s Spirit to

---

<sup>63</sup> 2 Tim. 3:16, *NIV*

<sup>64</sup> Col. 3:16, Teaching and admonishing others is possible because the Word of Christ dwells in believers.

continue studying, interpreting, and professing God's Word.<sup>65</sup> Indeed, Christians must be like Jeremiah, Ezekiel or John the Apostle, ready to eat the scroll of God's covenant-bound Truth to share God's message with the world around them.<sup>66</sup> Eugene Peterson, the translator of *The Message*,<sup>67</sup> encourages Christians today to read scripture liturgically, in a way that, "situates everything past and present coherently as participation in the revelation."<sup>68</sup> Practically, for a Christian believer then, *what does a responsible interaction with scripture look like?*

Responsible spiritual reading of God's ongoing covenantal dialogue with humanity requires those in community with God to submit themselves to God's intended meaning for the text. This meaning is, as Brown puts it, "complex and determinate."<sup>69</sup> The meaning is complex in that a reader of scripture is bound not only to the authority of the text itself, but also to the, "millennia-deep and globe-encircling community of others who are also at the table eating this book."<sup>70</sup> This diversity of readers will understand the Truth of scripture in different contextual ways that clarify its meaning.<sup>71</sup> The meaning is simultaneously determinate, though, since this diverse community also includes scripture's original human authors and audiences. Thus, Christians need to pay dire attention to scripture's authorial intent, plus scripture's historical, grammatical, cultural, and physical contexts. Christians today, whether laity, students, or professional theologians, must study scripture! For N.T. Wright, this is what it means for scripture to be authoritative in the life

---

<sup>65</sup> Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation*, 67-68. "The incarnational dimension of scripture continues today... each generation, by the power of God's Spirit, has to make the gospel message its own by wrestling with how the gospel connects with the world in which that generation is living."

<sup>66</sup> Jer. 15:16; Ez. 3:3; Rev. 10:10

<sup>67</sup> Eugene Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1993).

<sup>68</sup> Eugene Peterson, *Eat this Book* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2006), 73.

<sup>69</sup> Brown, *Scripture as Communication*, 83.

<sup>70</sup> Peterson, *Eat this Book*, 72.

<sup>71</sup> Brown, *Scripture as Communication*, 94.

of a believer – namely, that God exercises His authority through the meaning of the text.<sup>72</sup> It is not the text itself that has the power, but it is the Spirit of the God who authored it and who reads it with us. Under community in this Spirit, Christians respond to scripture responsibly.

Scripture is not just a collection of the great texts of a faith. Scripture likewise is not merely a standard or canon of a faith. Scripture encompasses both these kinds of writings and more. While scripture can occasionally feel ambiguous,<sup>73</sup> even for communities over time,<sup>74</sup> it still clearly communicates God’s Truth because it is an articulation of God’s immanent relationship with us, the Spirit’s dwelling place.<sup>75</sup> Scripture is the Word of God inspired, written, read, interpreted, and proclaimed in every generation and culture by the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit. Scripture is covenant, meaning that its telos is a knowledge of, “intimacy, friendship, communion, the richest of interpersonal relationships, in which persons are persons to the full, as is the communion between them.”<sup>76</sup> Scripture binds God and God’s people together as an ongoing covenantal dialogue preserved by God’s Spirit, who authoritatively works amongst all God’s people. Scripture must be fixed upon the hearts and minds of the Body of Christ, the Incarnate Word of God.<sup>77</sup> Indeed, just as Christ continues to redeem all God’s children, Christ’s covenant of love should be repeated for all people who come to know Jesus as Lord.

---

<sup>72</sup> N. T. Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God: How to Read the Bible Today* (HarperCollins Publishers, 2011), 23-28.

<sup>73</sup> Brown, *Scripture as Communication*, 90.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid*, 88.

<sup>75</sup> 1 Cor. 3:16

<sup>76</sup> Meek, *Covenant Epistemology*, 198.

<sup>77</sup> Deut. 11:18-19



*My special gratitude to Dr. Elaine Phillips for her guidance in the research and writing of this academic paper. Dr. Phillips, your insights helped enable me to articulate scripture's rich living power, not only in this paper, but also in my personal faith journey.*



## Bibliography

*The Babylonian Talmud: Seder Mo'ed Vol. 6.* Translated by Maurice Simon, edited by I. Epstein.

London, UK: Sonoco Press, 1983.

*The Babylonian Talmud: Seder Nezikin Vol. 19.* Translated by Jacob Shachter, edited by I.

Epstein. London, UK: Sonoco Press, 1994.

Baneth, E. "Sadducees." In *Encyclopedia Judaica Vol. 17: Ra-Sam*, edited by Fred Skolnik and

Michael Berenbaum. Farmington Hills, MI: Keter Publishing House Ltd., 2007.

Brown, Jeanine. *Scripture as Communication: Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics.* Grand

Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007.

Enns, Peter. *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament.*

Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005.

Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Truth and Method*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Revised Edition. Translated by Joel Weinsheimer

and Donald Marshall. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2004.

Green, Joel. "(Re)turn to Narrative." In *Narrative Reading, Narrative Preaching: Reuniting New*

*Testament Interpretation and Proclamation.* Edited by Joel Green and Michael

Pasquarello III. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003.

Hayes, Richard B. "Figural Exegesis and the Retrospective Re-cognition of Israel's Story." In

*Bulletin for Biblical Research*, Vol. 29, No. I. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania

State University Press, 2019.

*The Holy Bible, New International Version.* Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984.

Irenaeus. *Adversus Haereses*, Book III § 3. Translated by Alexander Roberts and William Rambaut. In *Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 1: The Apostolic Fathers, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus*, edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1885.

Meek, Esther. *Loving to Know: Introducing Covenant Epistemology.* Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011.

*The Mishnah: A new translation.* Translated by Jacob Neusner. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988.

Nicole, Rodger. "The Canon of the New Testament." In *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40.2, 199-206. March 1997.

Peterson, Eugene. *Eat this Book.* Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2006.

Peterson, Eugene. *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language.* Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1993.

Phillips, Elaine. "One Thing God Spoke; These Two I have Heard..." (*Psalm 62:12*): *Truth, (Deception), and Interpretation.* Wenham, MA: Evangelical Theological Society Annual Meeting, 2001.

"Ruah Ha-Qodesh." In *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*, 592, edited by R. J.

Werblowsky and Geoffrey Widoger. New York, NY: Oxford University Press 1997.

“Shekinah.” In *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*, 629-30, edited by R. J.

Werblowsky and Geoffrey Widoger. New York, NY: Oxford University Press 1997.

Wright, N. T. *Scripture and the Authority of God: How to Read the Bible Today*. HarperCollins

Publishers, 2011.

Wolterstorff, Nicholas. *Divine Discourse: Philosophical reflections on the claim that God*

*speaks*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1995.