

word of GOD, word of LIFE

Understanding the Three-Year Lectionaries

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AUGSBURG FORTRESS

WORD OF GOD, WORD OF LIFE
Understanding the Three-Year Lectionaries

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Introduction

IDENTIFYING THE THREE-YEAR LECTIONARIES



How sweet are your words to my taste,
sweeter than honey to my mouth! . . .
Your word is a lamp to my feet
and a light to my path. . . .
You are my hiding place and my shield;
I hope in your word.

Psalm 119:103, 105, 114

Around the world, especially on Sundays, Christians assemble to honor God, to listen to readings from their sacred scriptures, and to share a holy meal of bread and wine. When a biblical reading is completed at these gatherings, it has become common for the reader to call out, “The word of the Lord,” to which the worshipers respond, “Thanks be to God.” More than sixteen centuries ago, Augustine described these very scriptures in this way: “I therefore decided to give attention to the holy scriptures and to find out what they were like. And this is what met me: a text lowly to the beginner but, on further reading, of mountainous difficulty and enveloped in mysteries.”¹ Yet at weekly worship, despite at least some selections being “of mountainous difficulty and enveloped in mysteries,” the baptized community receives these passages, acclaims them as the “word of God,” and praises God for the gift of this word.

What do Christians mean by the phrases “the word of the Lord” and “the word of God”? Especially over the last two hundred years, some Christians have suggested that “word of God” means that God dictated the words of the Bible: the scriptural authors were channeling the voice of God; thus the Bible—at least in its original languages of Hebrew and Greek—is inerrant. However, throughout Christian history, the meaning of these phrases has been more complex. It is as if the designation “the word of God” is a door that opens to the faithful a crowded dining room filled with conversations about divine mystery. Christians believe that never throughout human history was God silent. Rather, God’s continuous activity in the universe and among believers has been described as speech: God is heard in words of mercy and challenge, not only within the human heart, but primarily through the texts of the Bible.

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In Genesis 1, God speaks words and so creates the world, and repeatedly in the scriptures God speaks to persons by name and calls them into ministry. The prologue of the fourth gospel calls Jesus the very Word of God, and Christians believe that this Word continues to talk to and with the faithful through the power of the Holy Spirit. Referring to the Bible as “the word of God” is thus a shorthand way to give the highest honor to these many ancient writings. Although biblical writings were crafted over a millennium by a motley crew of forebears in the faith, with all the authors writing for their own time and place, the church judges them as continuously invaluable. The will and the ways of God are still heard today by the faithful in, with, and under the texts of these scriptures. Revered as “the word of God,” the scriptural passages affirm that the presence of God in the assembly is assured.

For which biblical readings does the assembly offer thanks to God? How were the readings for worship chosen? In order to determine which religious material was suitable and efficacious for public reading, first Jews and then Christians chose the individual books that together became the Bible. Thus the function of the Bible from its inception was “lectionary”; that is, the writings were chosen as appropriate for public proclamation during communal worship. (The noun *lectionary* is also used to designate a ritual book in which the biblical readings for worship are bound sequentially, to assist the reader in public worship. However, in this volume, *lectionary* carries the meaning of the list of biblical selections intended for public worship that is utilized by one or more ecclesial communities.)

In some ecclesial communities, the preacher is expected personally to choose an appropriate “word of God” for each worship event. Sermons extant from the early centuries of the church, however, suggest that at least as early as the fourth century for the primary festivals, the choice of appropriate biblical readings was shared from one Christian community to another. Fuller lectionaries began to appear in the fifth century, although without the kind of commentary that we would appreciate as to why certain passages were chosen and others omitted. Scholars agree that the Christian practice of selecting various passages from throughout the scriptures, rather than of reading sequentially through each book, meant that for public worship the codex—what we call a book—was more practical than the scroll, and this preference led subsequently to the dominance of the book format for all purposes throughout society. Over later centuries, it was often the case that one group of Christians could be distinguished from another by its lectionary, its leaders having made decisions as to which biblical readings were more essential than others for the people’s belief and practice.

During the twentieth century, a phenomenal consensus across denominational boundaries brought about the widespread use of a single lectionary family, designated in this volume as “the three-year lectionaries.” On this single lectionary tree are several major branches. The *Ordo Lectionum Missae*, the parent of this three-year system, was the work of a Roman Catholic committee authorized for its momentous creative task by the Second Vatican Council. First promulgated in 1969, this Lectionary for

Mass (LM) is canonically required for use by Roman Catholics in the United States in a 1998 version and in Canada in a 1992 version; other regional variations exist.²

The brilliance of this lectionary inspired some Protestants to shape their own adaptations of it. Given denominationally differing hermeneutics, there arose an increasing number of variants of the LM. This led in 1983 to a version upon which several Protestant churches collaborated, and this ongoing cooperation culminated finally in the 1992 Revised Common Lectionary (RCL).³ This ecumenical offering was not intended as an inviolate rule for worship, but rather as a proposal to the many Protestant churches: the RCL provided a common approach to the weekly proclamation of the Bible, while leaving room for decisions related to denominational calendars and concerns. Increasingly in use around the world,⁴ the RCL in some churches is canonically required, in others is standard practice, and in still others is advice meant to inform local decisions for preaching.⁵

Both the LM and the RCL regularize the practice of reading not only from first-century Christian writings, but also from the sacred texts of Judaism. In reaction against centuries of anti-Semitism in church and society, Christians have become aware of the dangers inherent in their use of the Hebrew scriptures, and some suggest that the very term *Old Testament* be replaced.⁶ Yet Christians mean to affirm that the Hebrew scriptures are also their parental texts, the essential initial source of their testimony to Christ, the “old” without which the “new” would be incomprehensible.⁷ Thus, as the conversation about terminology continues among Christians, this volume will generally refer to the Christian use of the Hebrew scriptures as their Old Testament.

Because the Protestants who designed the RCL brought to their collaborative task their own historically grounded hermeneutical differences, especially when considering how the Old Testament ought to be proclaimed in Sunday worship, the RCL includes two tracks for the non-festival half of the year, from Trinity Sunday through the last Sunday of the liturgical year. One track is called “complementary” (hereafter in this volume “RCL*”) and always in some way ties the Old Testament reading to the gospel selection.⁸ The other track is called “semicontinuous” (hereafter in this volume

“RCL+”) and for half of the year reads more or less sequentially, following a proposed historical order of events, through parts of the Old Testament.⁹ Other slightly emended forms of the RCL have been developed by several Protestant denominations for use by their own members.

In all the variants of this lectionary family, readings are appointed for the historic seasons of Advent, Christmas, Lent, and Easter; for three years of Sundays; and for the non-Sunday festivals of Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, Epiphany, Ash Wednesday, the Triduum (Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and the Easter Vigil), Ascension, and All Saints. The LM also includes readings for many explicitly Roman Catholic days and occasions, while the RCL includes Presentation, Annunciation, Visitation, Holy Cross, and Thanksgiving. Some churches have added their own favored Sundays and festivals to their practice. For example, some Lutherans keep Reformation Sunday with its own set of biblical readings.

Although the majority of readings are held in common, some differences between the LM and RCL are apparent. Often the RCL appoints a longer reading than does the LM. The various church bodies also use their own distinctive labels for Sundays and feasts, so that what for some churches is the “Nativity of the Lord” or the “Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ,” is for others the “Birth of the Lord, Christmas Day.” Consecutive Sundays during non-festival times of the year are numbered differently, so that the ninth Sunday in ordinary time in the LM is Proper 4 in the RCL. These variations make the ecumenical use of liturgical resources something of a challenge. In addition, some differences in readings correspond to the churches’ characteristic emphases. For example, on one Sunday, illustrative of Roman Catholic reverence for Peter, the LM readings include Acts 5:15, which speaks of those who were sick hoping that Peter’s shadow would fall on them. On the same Sunday, illustrative of Protestant emphasis on preaching, the RCL reading quotes instead the preaching of Peter and the apostles in Acts 5:29-32.

Some studies discussing this lectionary family have stressed the historic hermeneutical differences between Roman Catholics and those Protestants who are now committed to the use of a common lectionary system.¹⁰

Although on occasion this volume will comment on the differences within this lectionary family, the intention here is not to dwell on these differences, but rather to emphasize the commonality of proclamation of this lectionary family throughout the world. As the First Ecumenical Imperative recently proposed by Roman Catholics and Lutherans states, churches are to “always begin from the perspective of unity and not from the point of view of division in order to strengthen what is held in common even though the differences are more easily seen and experienced.”¹¹ There is currently around the world a tendency to promote one’s own distinctive identity, rather than any shared humanity. To counter this narrow practice, one way that Christians can celebrate the unity God promises to the church throughout the world is a willing agreement to read the Bible in similar ways at Sunday worship and to rejoice in that commonality.

Several denominations and religious publishing houses provide impressive commentaries on this lectionary system, offering weekly exegetical assistance and suggestions for sermon preparation, as well as for liturgical complements in music, art, and action.¹² Much of this material meets specifically denominational interests and preferences, and the vast amount and high quality of these liturgical resources are in themselves praiseworthy contributions to the worship life of twenty-first-century churches. Given all these notable materials, this volume need not proceed week by week through the three years with homily helps and liturgical suggestions.

Rather, this volume attends to the underlying principles upon which this family of lectionaries is constructed. Many persons who utilize these lectionaries remain unaware of such principles, and thus they cannot capitalize on them to maximize the meaning of the appointed selections. Of such minimal understanding of the logic behind this lectionary system, the lectionary scholar Fritz West wrote, “Such uses are like playing checkers with a chess set.”¹³ However, it is the hope of this volume that increased attention to the lectionaries’ foundational principles will assist all interested Christians in the weekly task of biblical interpretation for the life of the church: both preachers and hearers will understand why the chess pieces are placed where they are, what is their interrelationship with each other, and which are designed to exert dominance over others.

Each of the ten chapters in this book addresses one foundational principle. Chapter 1 addresses the first and primary hermeneutical principle of this lectionary family: that for Christians, every Sunday is resurrection day. This emphasis on Christ’s resurrection is manifest especially during the fifty days of Easter. Chapter 2 focuses on the gospel reading for the day and illustrates principle 2 especially in the season of Christmas. Chapter 3 addresses the Old Testament reading, chapter 4 the assembly’s singing of the psalms, and chapter 5 the second reading’s use of New Testament writings. The principles discussed in chapters 6 and 7 apply to the seasons of Advent and Lent. Chapter 8 deals with Holy Week, the Triduum, and Easter Day. Chapter 9 demonstrates how the Trinity permeates the entire lectionary, and chapter 10 attends to the worldwide Christian unity that this lectionary provides. The conclusion addresses some of the criticisms raised against the three-year lectionaries, including the perceived anti-Semitism of the Holy Week readings in particular.

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Each chapter opens with a biblical citation, indicating that the ten principles derive from the Bible itself, and a summary statement of the foundational principle at hand. From there each chapter is divided into three parts. The first part presents a theological and liturgical exposition of the principle, based on both the church year and the biblical books from which the readings come. The second part looks at the principle in wider context, as described in the next paragraph. The third part analyzes several samples from the lectionaries that illustrate the principle. For example, according to principle 1, the three-year lectionaries understand every Sunday to proclaim the death and resurrection of Christ; this principle helps to determine each week’s readings over the three years. One obvious example of this principle is seen on the second Sunday of Easter; a more obscure example is the Sunday on

which the severe parable of the king's wedding banquet in Matthew 22:1-14 is proclaimed.

The second half of the title of this volume is "Word of Life." As an optional response to the Sunday biblical readings, the primary worship resource used by many North American Lutherans offers the phrase "Word of God, word of life," to which the assembly responds, "Thanks be to God."¹⁴ The scripture readings are the "word of life" for us in two ways. Not only do these biblical texts apply to all of life, serving both as the foundation of our days and the windows for our vision, but these words also offer the life of God to the whole of our existence. In this study of the three-year lectionaries, all ten principles are shown not only to strengthen Christian faith but also to connect with the daily ordinary worldview of many twenty-first-century people. The second part of each chapter considers this value hidden within the lectionaries' principles. For example, Sunday worship that attends to Christ's resurrection is seen as an example of human ritual, and enacting such ritual is shown to have substantive value for the individual and the community. It is hoped that these nonreligious psychological and social parallels to the church's situation might prove interesting also to persons who are not worshipping Christians.

Other lectionary systems are utilized around the world. Quite different from the lectionaries of churches in the West, the one-year lectionary maintained by the Eastern Orthodox churches is treasured because it is ancient, rather than because it is continuously updated.¹⁵ During the twentieth century several Protestant churches expanded the medieval one-year Western lectionary into a two- or three-year system, in which subsequent years mimic the logic of the one-year pattern.¹⁶ These lectionaries, even if they are three years long, are not part of the single lectionary family that is addressed in this volume. Yet other lectionaries—some rather idiosyncratic, some with narrow purpose—are currently in use. Perhaps this volume will help to inspire their users to adopt or adapt instead this three-year lectionary system, and thus to participate with millions of other Christians in a worldwide unity in proclaiming the word of the Lord.

The cover art by John Coburn titled “Transfiguration, 1979” can be seen as a graphic depiction of the exuberant vitality of the proclamation of the word: the readings from the New Testament, especially the four gospels, and from the Old Testament circle around Christ, who is always the center; together the readings hover over what recalls both the font and the chalice; and all around springs forth life—trees and leaves and seeds of color—in places both nearby and distant.

This book has been written by a laywoman, who never preaches in the assembly, for all worshipers, both clergy and laity. The author knew from early childhood that the lectionary listing, which was provided in the front pages of the hymnal held in everyone’s hands, was God’s gift not merely for preachers, but for all the baptized. As a septuagenarian, this author believes that the more preparation we all can bring to Sunday morning, the more intentional might be our response, “Thanks be to God.”

NOTES

- 1 Augustine, *Confessions*, III v. 9, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1991), 40.
- 2 See *Lectionary for Mass*, study ed., vol. 1: *Sundays, Solemnities, Feasts of the Lord and the Saints* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000). For a comparison between the USA and Canadian versions, see 1273-83. For a detailed explanation of the committee’s work, see Normand Bonneau, *The Sunday Lectionary: Ritual Word, Paschal Shape* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), 21-55.
- 3 See Consultation on Common Texts, *The Revised Common Lectionary*, 20th-anniversary annotated ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012). For a detailed explanation of the formation of the Revised Common Lectionary, see Horace T. Allen Jr. and Joseph P. Russell, *On Common Ground: The Story of the Revised Common Lectionary* (Norwich, UK: Canterbury, 1998), 3-12.
- 4 For a reasonably accurate listing of the churches that support the Revised Common Lectionary, see “The Consultation on Common Texts,” www.commontexts.org.
- 5 See Thomas O’Loughlin, *Making the Most of the Lectionary: A User’s Guide* (London: SPCK, 2012), for a persuasive defense of the lectionary, given critical reactions to it.
- 6 See Gail Ramshaw, “The First Testament in Christian Lectionaries,” *Worship* 64 (1990): 494-510, for a sustained discussion of this question.
- 7 See Gordon W. Lathrop, *Saving Images: The Presence of the Bible in Christian Liturgy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017), 50-51.
- 8 For a discussion of this method, see Gail Ramshaw, *A Three-Year Banquet: The Lectionary for the Assembly* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2004), 47-54.

- 9 For a discussion of this method, see Peter C. Bower, ed., *Handbook for the Revised Common Lectionary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 8-13.
- 10 See Fritz West, *Scripture and Memory: The Ecumenical Hermeneutic of the Three-Year Lectionaries* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1997) and Victoria Raymer, *The Bible in Worship: Proclamation, Encounters and Response* (London: SCM, 2018), especially “The Synoptic Lectionaries: Characteristics,” 162-77.
- 11 Lutheran-Roman Catholic Commission on Unity. *From Conflict to Communion: Lutheran-Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2013), par. 239, #87.
- 12 See the bibliography for a list of the most impressive of many print and online lectionary guides now available.
- 13 West, *Scripture and Memory*, 183.
- 14 *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 102, 124.
- 15 See Georges Barrois, *Scripture Readings in Orthodox Worship* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1977).
- 16 See, for example, Nils-Henrik Nilsson, “The Principles behind the New Sunday Lectionary for the Church of Sweden,” *Studia Liturgica* 34 (Sept. 2004): 240-50.