

**Sermon for Morning Prayer
The Fourth Sunday in Advent**

Lessons:¹

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the thirty-second Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.²

“Behold, a king shall reign in righteousness, and princes shall rule in judgment. And a man shall be as an hiding place from the wind, and a covert from the tempest; as rivers of water in a dry place, as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land. And the eyes of them that see shall not be dim, and the ears of them that hear shall hearken. The heart also of the rash shall understand knowledge, and the tongue of the stammerers shall be ready to speak plainly. The vile person shall be no more called liberal, nor the churl said to be bountiful. For the vile person will speak villany, and his heart will work iniquity, to practise hypocrisy, and to utter error against the LORD, to make empty the soul of the hungry, and he will cause the drink of the thirsty to fail. The instruments also of the churl are evil: he deviseth wicked devices to destroy the poor with lying words, even when the needy speaketh right. But the liberal deviseth liberal things; and by liberal things shall he stand. Rise up, ye women that are at ease; hear my voice, ye careless daughters; give ear unto my speech. Many days and years shall ye be troubled, ye careless women: for the vintage shall fail, the gathering shall not come. Tremble, ye women that are at ease; be troubled, ye careless ones: strip you, and make you bare, and gird sackcloth upon your loins. They shall lament for the teats, for the pleasant fields, for the fruitful vine. Upon the land of my people shall come up thorns and briers; yea, upon all the houses of joy in the joyous city: Because the palaces shall be forsaken; the multitude of the city shall be left; the forts and towers shall be for dens for ever, a joy of wild asses, a pasture of flocks; Until the spirit be poured upon us from on high, and the wilderness be a fruitful field, and the fruitful field be counted for a forest. Then judgment shall

dwell in the wilderness, and righteousness remain in the fruitful field. And the work of righteousness shall be peace; and the effect of righteousness quietness and assurance for ever. And my people shall dwell in a peaceable habitation, and in sure dwellings, and in quiet resting places....”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the fourteenth Verse of the third Chapter of the Second Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to Timothy.³

“... But continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned them; And that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.

“I charge thee therefore before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the quick and the dead at his appearing and his kingdom; Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all long suffering and doctrine. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables. But watch thou in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, make full proof of thy ministry. For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing.”

BLESSED Lord, who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience, and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace, and ever hold fast, the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.¹²

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The Rev'd Canon John A. Hollister¹³
 December 19, 2010.

¹ *An Alternative Table of Lessons (The Table of 1922, As Revised in 1928)*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER, WITH THE ADDITIONS AND DEVIATIONS PROPOSED IN 1928 31 (Canterbury Press 2008); *The Table of Lessons (The Table of 1922, As Revised In 1928)*, A BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxii (South Africa 1954); *A Table of Lessons (authorized by the Episcopal Synod)*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xx (CIPBC 1963).

² Isaiah 32: 1-18 (KJV).

³ 2 Timothy 3: 14—4: 8 (KJV).

⁴ 2 Timothy 3: 16-17 (RSV).

⁵ Tobit, Judith, 1 and 2 Maccabees, the Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus (also called Sirach), Baruch, The Letter of Azariah, the Song of the Three Holy Children, Susanna, and Bel and the Dragon.

⁶ Oddly, although today's Jews do not regard 1 Maccabees as canonical Scripture, they do celebrate the festival of Channukah which celebrates events reported only in that book.

⁷ Especially the Greek and Russian ones.

⁸ 3 Maccabees, 1 Esdras, and the Prayer of Manasseh.

⁹ A. M. Stibbs, *The Pastoral Epistles*, in D. GUTHRIE AND J. A. MOTYER, EDS., THE NEW BIBLE COMMENTARY REVISED 3RD ED. 1166 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company 1970).

¹⁰ F. F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, in D. GUTHRIE AND J. A. MOTYER, EDS., THE NEW BIBLE COMMENTARY REVISED 3RD ED. 1154 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company 1970).

¹¹ 2 Timothy 3: 16 (RSV).

¹² *The Collects, Epistles, and Gospels of the Sundays and Other Great Feasts*, A BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 55 (South Africa 1954).

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inspired Scripture, they very quickly came to see some of these institutional writings as having qualities of inspiration and teaching on a par with those of the Old Testament writings, especially as these new writings were incorporated into the essential life of the Church by being read as formal portions of its worship services.

Today's Second Lesson gives us a snapshot of, or a window into, that process as it was occurring. St. Paul's letters to Timothy, in fact all his letters, were written as administrative, policy, and training memoranda, to serve the needs of his growing missions in just the same way as any modern business or other organization uses administrative, policy, and training documents.

And this one, in particular, is fascinating because it both refers to the Old Testament notion of Scripture, the very notion that enables us to think of "Bible" at all, and is itself a portion of the New Testament in the process of composition. That is, as St. Paul wrote to Timothy to remind him of the importance of Scripture, St. Paul was, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, simultaneously teaching about and recording Scripture.

Some scholars regard Second Timothy as the Apostle Paul's last letter,⁹ written not later than the mid-60s A.D. as the capstone to a process that had begun less than twenty years after Christ's death, or in about 50 A.D., with Paul's letters to the Thessalonians.¹⁰

Conclusion:

Paul's injunction, that "All scripture is inspired by God, and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness,"¹¹ is echoed in the beloved Collect for the Second Sunday in Advent, a prayer that many use at the beginning of Bible study sessions:

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: "All scripture is inspired by God, and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work."⁴ In the Name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Homily:

"All scripture is inspired by God..." This statement is so familiar, and so basic to our approach to the Christian Faith, that it is easy to overlook what it meant to St. Paul's original readers.

When we Christians think of "Scripture", we all automatically think of a set of writings, the authorship of which was inspired by God for the purpose of conveying to us His Revelation, and composed of a New Testament of twenty-seven books, together with an Old Testament of at least the thirty-nine books of the Hebrew Bible. However, the Old Testament is seen slightly differently by the Eastern Orthodox and the Roman Catholics, on the one hand, and the Churches of the Reformation on the other.

The Romans and the Easterners follow the pattern of the Greek Old Testament known as the "Septuagint" [**sepp-TWO-ah-gint**]. That Septuagint was the Greek Bible of the Jewish diaspora in ancient Alexandria, Egypt. This adds to the Hebrew Canon twelve books or portions of books⁵ which appear either to have been originally written in Greek rather than Hebrew or for which the earliest surviving manuscripts are in Greek, even though those books may actually have been composed in Hebrew versions that have since been lost. On these linguistic grounds, these "Greek" books were re-

jected from the Masoretic [*mazz-oh-RETT-ick*] text which is the Jewish Canon of today.⁶

The traditionally-minded Churches of the Reformation also retain these additions to the Hebrew Old Testament although they place them in a separate section called “the Apocrypha” or “the Deutero-Canonical Books”. Modern Protestants, on the other hand, tend to be utterly unaware of these books and, when they are so aware, tend to reject them.

In addition to the Old Testament writings upon which both the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox communions are agreed, some Eastern Orthodox⁷ usually add one Psalm, the 151st, and three other books.⁸

So, to summarize, when we Christians today hear or read the word “Scripture”, we instinctively think of both the *process* by which Scripture came into being and also of the *product* of that process, that is, of the inspired books themselves. We presume God’s own action in initiating a scribal process through the agency of selected authors or groups of authors, which produced the Old and New Testaments in the forms, and with the contents, which our own particular communions generally use.

However, this perspective, formed as it has been over two millenia of Church history, obscures from us what St. Paul’s words meant to St. Timothy and his other readers at the time. For that first generation of Christians, there was only one Bible, that is, only one set of Scriptures. That was the Hebrew Bible, which we now know as the Old Testament. This could scarcely have been otherwise, for two very compelling reasons.

The first such reason that their perspective differed from ours is that the original Christians were either Jews or Hellenicized residents of the Roman Empire. The Jews unquestionably had Scriptures and had a concept of Scripture

that is similar to ours, although limited to what we today call the Old Testament. Indeed, it is to those Jews that we owe thanks for our concept of, and three-quarters of the contents of, our Scriptures. However, those Jews’ only Scriptures then, as now, were and are what we today call our Old Testament.

The Greeks and Romans, on the other hand, had no concept of Scripture whatever. The pagan religion of the Olympian gods, and the other pagan religions prevalent in various places throughout the Empire, had myths about the origins or activities of their gods and, indeed, those myths were often written down. Had they not been, we would have no knowledge of them today.

However, at no time or place did those pagans believe that either the process of recording their myths or the contents of their myths were especially inspired by any deity. Instead, these myths merely formed part of the literature or folklore of their cultures, on a plane similar to that of the Greek epics about the Trojan War – if with less literary merit than the works attributed to Homer.

So the idea that Scripture, as we understand it, is a means by which God speaks to us – indeed, is the primary means by which He does so – is a concept we could have inherited only from those very first Christians who were themselves Jews. But even they could not have conceived of Scripture as the body of writings that we do because the most uniquely Christian portion of that body, the New Testament, did not exist in their time.

In fact, the New Testament was only beginning to come into existence during their lives. And it did so in the form of internal writings that were intended to be the administrative memoranda, training manuals, and archives of the new Christian movement. Because so many of the early Christians were imbued with the Jewish concept of divinely-