



# Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina

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Thinking about Scripture  
Deuteronomy 11:18-20; Psalm 119:103-114  
II Timothy 3:14-17

I am honored to be speaking to you this morning as your 2016 Turnage lecturer. As an historian of religion who is neither ordained nor a theologian, I will not pretend to preach to you, but I hope that as a scholar who has devoted a half-century to the comparative history of religion I might be able to offer some reflections that will be thought-provoking and in some way relevant to each of you here in your regular place of worship.

Specifically, I want to talk with you this morning about scripture across religious traditions. It is a topic on which I have done a fair amount of thinking, teaching, and writing, not only in the Islamic tradition—my special expertise—but globally. This includes in my own heritage tradition of Protestant Christianity, where, as everyone here will know, the faithful see Scripture, instead of Church or Tradition, as *the* authority for Christian life, offering God's guidance directly to every person of faith.

Christians of all confessions think of Scripture simply as another word for the Christian Bible, the Old and New Testaments. This understanding of scripture differs of course from that of the Jews, even though a major portion of the Christian Bible is also sacred to Jews and was, in fact, the *only* Scripture of the early Christian Church before there was a "New Testament." Meanwhile, non-Jewish, non-Christian communities obviously look to still other texts that are sacred for them. Muslims recognize the Torah and the New Testament as authentic Divine revelations that were less than perfectly preserved by their faithful over the centuries before the Qur'an was sent by God to supplement and replace both of them in one final Divine dispensation. Farther afield, Hindus have the Vedas as scripture—and indeed the Upanishads, Puranas, and other works also function as scripture for them; Buddhists have myriad Sutras carrying the word of the Buddha, Sikhs the Guru Granth Sahib, Confucians the Analects, and so on, in many other traditions. Some kind of Scripture exists in virtually every religious tradition, worldwide and history-long.

This morning, I want to suggest a way for us to think about scripture so as to do justice to the commitment both to one's own Scripture and also to the scriptural faith of persons in other traditions. Specifically, I want to focus on two aspects of "scripturality" that recur across diverse traditions of faith. The first is the basic **concept** itself, how "scripture" is understood, and the second aspect is its **function**, how scripture is used.

**As to the concept of Scripture**, what do we mean when we use it as a general term for any community's most sacred texts?

**First**, as a general category in the history of religion, "scripture" does not refer to a specific kind of text nor to a text with particular content. We can describe a book of poems in terms of *form* as "poetry," or a short story as "prose"; in terms of *content*, a novel can be classed as "fiction" or a physics text, "non-fiction." Scripture is not, however, definable by either *form* or *content*; a text is "Scripture" only by virtue of its relationship to a community of faith for whom it is sacred and authoritative. **In other words, "scripture" is NOT an absolute but a relational category.** Within a given community of faith, a text can be revered and used as "Scripture," even "THE Scripture," but to the outsider that text will be just another book, possibly one that is strange or even repellent. Thus we must begin by recognizing that a scripture is always a text in special relationship to religious persons; apart from that relationship it does not function *scripturally*. This is not simply a fine academic distinction, but an affirmation that not just Christians, but those of other faiths are also, even equally, "scripture folk" (to borrow the term the Muslim Qur'an uses for fellow monotheists, such as Jews or Christians). This recognition allows us to think and talk about the scriptures of other people respectfully, by analogy to our own.

**A second aspect of scripture as concept is also important:** we have to recognize that defining scripture in terms of "writtenness," its being a "sacred book," is to miss the overwhelming oral presence of scripture in the lives of millions of persons past and present, both in other traditions and even in our own Christian tradition. Especially because Jewish and Christian traditions have been relentlessly tied to the authority of the written word—the document, the codex, the book—Jews and Christians fixed on writing-related words—"scripture," "writings," and "bible" (translating of course Hebrew, Greek, or Latin originals)—to designate sacred texts. By contrast, Buddhist, Hindu, and Chinese terms for sacred texts are precisely **not** words for written documents. Even in the case of the Bible, infinitely more Jews and Christians

have known it as an oral text than have known it as a written text—this we know from the simple facts of literacy rates over the centuries and the relatively modern practice of "silent" reading. Pope Gregory the Great reminds us of this when, in citing the Bible, he spoke of "*what we have heard in the sacred pages.*" Luther in particular underscored the primacy of the oral word of scripture, which for him was God's audible Speech. Hence his dictum that "the ear is the organ of the Christian person," and his statement that "*[the] Gospel is not really that which is in books and composed in letters, but rather an oral preaching and living word, and a voice that resounds through the whole world and is shouted forth abroad.*"

The same emphasis on the oral message or *kerygma* of scripture is even more visible in Muslim piety: remember that "*al-qur'ān*" in Arabic means "the reciting," and the recited Qur'an accompanies and cadences all of life for the faithful. Historically, far more Jews, Christians, and Muslims have known and used their respective scriptures as recited, heard, read-aloud, preached, and memorized words than as silently-read written, or printed, documents.

And if we err in conceiving of these monotheistic scriptures as fundamentally written books or scrolls, when we move to Hindu, Buddhist, Shinto, Chinese, or Zoroastrian traditions—and others—the mistake of thinking that their sacred texts have functioned primarily as written texts is even greater. ***I am not exaggerating in saying that the holiest texts in human history have been primarily oral realities for those who revere them.***<sup>1</sup>

So much for the *concept* of scripture; let me turn to its *function* in religious life around the globe. My argument here is more heuristic: I want to suggest how we might best think about how Scripture functions for the faithful in any tradition. When we look at scripture's role in diverse religious communities around the globe, we can observe what I like to describe as *an extension or opening out of every scriptural text in two opposite directions*: one towards, and connecting with, the faithful adherents who revere it—what we may call the "*interpretive extension,*" and one towards, or connecting with, the divine or transcendent reality that is understood to be the source of scripture—what we may call the "*transcendent extension.*" Let me take these up in turn.

***First, scripture always demands interpretation;*** indeed, it cannot be used without constant, ongoing interpretation. Here its relational character becomes clear: because scripture exists only when a community of faith

deems a text uniquely sacred and authoritative, the *extension* of the scriptural text into human faith and practice (which demands comprehension and therefore interpretation) is always present. To read or hear a text as scripture, just as to translate any text, is already to engage in interpretation; scripture is always being extended in the meaning-making of the faithful, always becoming something more than its linguistic text alone. Every text, but none more than a scriptural text, is at every moment being interpreted in the light of every reader's faith, comprehension, experience, context, and tradition. Just as there is no single form or content of a text that defines it as "scripture," *neither is there any single "literal" or "true" meaning of a scriptural text—as the history of exegesis in every world religious tradition shows vividly*—for even literalist interpreters of a sacred text cannot agree on what every literal reading is. *Literal meaning is a chimera, a will-o-the-wisp.* The "interpretive extension" of scripture reminds us that scripture could not function as holy and authoritative without interpretation, if only in the act of reading it as scripture rather than as merely another text.

Interpreting scripture for life is essential to being religious in any scriptural community. For the faithful, scripture is transformative, salvific, and of necessity, differently so for every person. In a real sense, there is no "*sola scriptura*," even for the first Protestant reformers, since anyone who takes scripture as sole authority stands already in both an interpretive tradition and a discrete historical context and cannot escape reading the scriptural word through that tradition and out of that context. The scripture vs. tradition tension, source of so much polemic in Christian history, is a false dichotomy: scripture is always read in the light of whatever cumulative tradition the reader stands in, however novel his or her reading may be; conversely, that tradition is always being changed by new scriptural readings. This is why protestant preachers are charged to "preach the biblical word"—that is, interpret the Word of God for their congregation in a particular time and place. And, ultimately, not the Church but the individual, has finally to do his or her own interpretive work—*that* is the true Protestant "scripture principle."

Long before the Reformation, early Christians were engaged in interpretation—at the outset, of the Hebrew scriptures (as we see throughout the New Testament), which was, as noted, "the Bible" of the early Church. "Scripture" designated the Word of God encountered first in the Torah (or Tanakh)—the Hebrew scriptures—and then, as time went on, in newer writings that read the Hebrew scriptures to foretell the good news of the Christ. The living Word of God was always in process of being interpreted as

Christian thinkers sought to proclaim the Christ they saw revealed in first the old and then new covenant.

On this point of interpretive extension, apart from Christianity a telling example is found in Jewish tradition, in the notion of "*oral Torah*,"<sup>iii</sup> which is found especially in the Talmud. Historically, this oral Torah has carried the same authority for Jews as the "*Written Torah*."<sup>iii</sup> Oral Torah is the vast body of discussion and commentary of the rabbis over centuries on the meanings of the written Torah, and it is held to have been also revealed to Moses at Sinai alongside the written Torah: Whatever the rabbis have been able to tease out of the latter in the way of interpretation was already given by God at Sinai for the guidance of His people. Here the division between Scripture and Tradition is no longer meaningful: neither functions without the other; both are ontologically and theologically Torah, God's revealed Law. At Sinai, God saw not only to the revelation of His Law, but also to its explication. The written Torah without the interpreting tradition of Rabbinic learning is unthinkable. "*Love of Torah*" is the heart of rabbinic Judaism, and it means fundamentally unceasing Torah interpretation.

If we move to Asia, the Hindu and Buddhist traditions also provide clear examples of this "interpretive extension." Historically, it has been unthinkable for any Hindu to read a sacred text independently of a human guide, a qualified teacher, a guru who stands in a long line of teachers (the *guruparampara*). Here, as one Indologist puts it, "*written documents, unvivified by personal relationship, are meaningless.*"<sup>v</sup> Meaning is inseparable from a teaching tradition of textual interpretation.

In the Buddhist case, we find that its myriad *sutras*, or scriptures, have been constantly growing over the centuries, as new texts attach themselves to older ones, claiming to be also the Buddha-Word (*buddhavacana*) kept for ages in secret traditions discovered long after the historical Buddha's death. These texts expand, as well as expound, the oldest *sutras*, and in this way the so-called "Buddhist Canon" has been greatly enlarged by later texts—especially in the Mahayana tradition, where one sees a tendency to identify a single text such as the Lotus Sutra as the holiest of scriptures and the key to interpreting all the others. Sometimes even purely commentarial texts (such as the *Abhidharma* books) are reckoned as Scripture: one Sûtra<sup>v</sup> goes so far as to say that "everything good that has been said, has been said by the Buddha," which blurs completely the line between scripture and interpretation.

We could multiply examples, but the point would be the same: Scripture never stands alone, apart from its interpretation: this is both its dynamic quality and its endless potential for relevance in any time, any place.

**Thus the "interpretive extension" describes the ongoing mining of scripture for the lives of the faithful; the "transcendent extension" of scripture, on the other hand,** points to the ultimacy that a scriptural text carries for its faithful. For the faithful, *scripture is never merely a text*. In true scriptural piety, the linguistic text of Scripture is not its essence. A sacred text always tends to participate in the divine reality it reveals and mediates to the faithful. Whether we are talking about Torah, which for Jews is far greater than the biblical text itself; or the Veda, which is itself Eternal Wisdom, the transcendent cosmic sound, or *Shabda*, at the heart of Reality—we are in each case speaking about a Scripture that shares in, or even IS, Ultimate Reality, the Divine itself. A recurring aspect of any text considered holy and authoritative is that it is held to participate in the Divine, and thus to embody Transcendence and Truth in the mundane, contingent world. Scripture is, in the eyes of any person of faith, an extension of divine Truth into a textual word, which is ultimately what gives that word unique authority and scriptural status.

In the Christian case, the sense for many Christians of the Bible as God's Word makes the Scriptures not only a testimony to the Christ but a medium of contact with God in Christ. At the heart of the Book tradition, Luther himself testifies to this in statements such as, "...**God is especially concerned with the revelation and recognition of his Son; throughout the entire Scripture, Old and New Testaments, everything is directed to the Son.**"<sup>vi</sup> Often he speaks of the Holy Spirit as the mediating force in the Scriptures, calling them, for instance, "*the Holy Spirit's own special book, writ and word.*"<sup>vii</sup> Here Scripture is not only the linguistic center of the Christian life; it is also the medium of intimacy with God Himself, as *His Word*, theologically understood as the *Word (Logos)* of the Christ, mediated in the biblical *word (logos)* by the Spirit.

In the Islamic case, this is vivid in the Muslim understanding of the Qur'an as God's uncreated, verbatim Speech, which is best grasped in Christian terms by saying that the Qur'an is for Muslims the Divine Logos, equivalent to the Christ for Christians, *not* the Bible (thus likening Qur'an recitation to the Eucharist). The Muslim Sunnī majority ultimately deemed the Qur'an the uncreated Word of God so as to guard its ultimacy. As God's very

speech, it is the medium of contact between human and divine, which is why Muslims insist that any translation is not Qur'an but an interpretation of it. The anthropologist Clifford Geertz expressed well the transcendence of the Qur'an when he said that, in reciting the Qur'an, the Muslim "chants not words about God but of Him, and indeed, as those words are His essence, chants God himself."<sup>viii</sup>

To say that a Biblical or a Qur'anic word is "God's Word" is to say that this word is where the possibility of encountering God is found. Similarly, if we turn to Buddhist tradition, the Mahayana majority tradition in particular, we find scripture identified with the Buddha's Holy Teaching or eternal Dharma that it embodies, and thus also identified with the Buddha in his eternal form, and ultimately also with release from rebirth in Nirvana. The Lotus Sutra says of itself: *"This scripture is the first. / If there is someone who can grasp it, / then he grasps simultaneously the "Buddha-body."* "Buddha-body" here is the *Dharmakaya*, the eternal being of the Buddha in Mahayana philosophy. *Dharma* refers both to the Buddha's Teaching (transmitted by Scripture), and to eternal Truth, which is the goal of the Dharma Teaching. Scripture here becomes Ultimate Truth, and Mahayana commentators make clear comparisons among Scripture, Dharma, the Buddha-body, and Ultimate Reality. With respect to the "Perfection of Wisdom" [*Prajñāparamita*], which is also the name of one category of scripture, the sage Dignāgā says,

*The perfection of Wisdom is nondual knowledge; it is also the Buddha (Tathagata) and [the goal] to be attained. 'Perfection of Wisdom' also refers to the book and the path, since [both] have this [Perfection of Wisdom] as their meaning and their goal.<sup>ix</sup>*

Here Scripture is the Truth, the Book, and the path to Truth; all three interpenetrate. Scripture is Transcendence itself.

For a last example, let us look to the Indian tradition: in the treatment of the Veda we find many traits that we noted in the Torah, above all the idea that Veda—holy Knowledge—already existed before Creation and is eternal. Further, there is the repeated claim that Veda is much more than a body of texts. We read in Rg Veda X.164.39 that the Vedic hymns

*exist in the immortal [realm] [Ak ara], beyond the universe [Vyoman] where all the gods live. Whoever knows not that*

*immortal [realm], how could the hymns help him? You, who do know it, are grounded in Eternity."*

In the Taittirîya Brahmana, the Rg, Sama, and Yajur vedic texts are described as "threefold Wisdom" [*traya veda*] and said to be equivalent to the Supreme Reality (Brahman). Later also, in the Puranas, we find Veda fully identified with Brahman (or Visnu or Shiva)—namely Supreme Reality. This transcendent character of the Veda is behind the unforgettable answer an 18th-century Brahmin teacher gave to a European visitor who asked about "the vedic books"; his reply? "*Veda is that which pertains to religion; books are not Veda.*"<sup>x</sup> In other words, Veda transcends its earthly linguistic form as scripture.

Let me close by recapitulating briefly: what I am suggesting is that in every tradition, a scripture is far more than a bound volume of text. **First**, "Scripture" is an identifiable category of text in every tradition; it is, however, a relational, not an absolute concept; and it is also a living, oral word even more than a written word. **Second**, for the faithful, scriptures open out in opposite directions: in their earthly dimension, towards the faithful themselves who interpret and use them (their "interpretive extension"); and in their divine dimension towards God, the Transcendent Absolute, whence they come and which they reveal or even embody in powerful fashion. This latter, "transcendent extension" is, of course, ultimately what, for the faithful, separates a scripture from all other texts.

If we pay close attention to the historical record of scriptural faith and piety around the world, across the centuries, I think that we find in scriptural texts and their usage a shared range of religious sensibility that reminds us that our own or any other conception of scriptural witness to God or the Absolute—and therefore to religious Truth—has its counterpart in other conceptions that are all different but recognizable. This suggests that both our own and others' conceptions of scripture ought to be taken, if we are thoughtful about it, not as conflicting and irreconcilably different objects of faith that separate us from our fellows of other faiths, but instead as shared human efforts of religious persons everywhere to find Divine guidance for living in the world we also share. It is possible for awareness of multiple scriptures to bind us to, rather than separate us from, our fellows of other faiths. The existence of many scriptures similarly conceived and similarly functioning is one of many reminders that persons of all faiths share a thirst for "more than meets the eye," for the Transcendent, for the Divine.

<sup>i</sup> This fact goes against the grain for today's Protestants who have been raised with the idea of scripture as a tangible "thing," a bound book. The modern print society we live in, the intense focus of Biblical studies on the written word, and the relative neglect of the historically oral role of the Bible among Jews or Christians have further perpetuated this misconception. A further point on the correlative assumption that scripture exists only in relatively high-literacy contexts: Native American, or African, or Aboriginal religious traditions are widely considered to be scripture-less and are dismissed as "pre-literate" or "non-literate" religious communities. This ignores the rich mythic and other texts of these traditions, which function in many instances exactly the same as do the scriptures of the major traditions of world religion in actual religious life and practice. Of course here we rarely have any written scripture at all. Which should only reinforce the point that we treat scripture solely as a written text, and most dangerously as a physical icon that can be almost idolatrously (bibliolatrously) worshipped, at our spiritual as well as intellectual peril, if we really want to do justice to the richness of the roles of sacred texts in the history of religion.

<sup>ii</sup> *Tôrâh she be-'al peh*

<sup>iii</sup> *Tôrâh she bi-ktâb*

<sup>iv</sup> Thomas Coburn, "'Scripture' in India: Towards a Typology of the Word in Hindu Life", in Miriam Levering, hrsg., *Rethinking Scripture: Essays from a Comparative Perspective* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1989), p. 111.

<sup>v</sup> *The Adhyâshayasamcondana.*

<sup>vi</sup> *Und sonderlich ists Gott zu thun umb die offenbarung und erkenntnis seines Sons, durch die gantze Schrift, Alts und Newen Testaments, Alles gehet auff den Son . . . .*

<sup>vii</sup> *"des heiligen Geists eigen, sonderlich Buch, Schrift und Wort", WA 54:474, l. 4.*

<sup>viii</sup> "Art as a Cultural System", *MLN* 91 (1976), p. 1490.

<sup>ix</sup> *Prajñâpâramitâ jñânam advayam sâ tathâgatah / sâdhyâ tâdarthyayogena tâcchabdyam granthamârgayoh*, aus dem *Prajñâpâramitâpindârtha* des Dignâga (G.Tucci, hrsg., *JRAS* (1947): 56), from Malcolm David Eckel, *To See the Buddha: A Philosopher's Quest for the Meaning of Emptiness* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1992]), pp. 99-100.

<sup>x</sup> *Vedam est, quidquid ad religionem pertinet, vedam non sunt libri.* Theodor Zachariae, in *Goettingische gelehrte Anzeigen (Koenigliche Gesellsch. der Wissenschaften* 183 (1921):160.