

READING THE
OLD TESTAMENT
WITH THE
ANCIENT CHURCH

Ronald E. Heine,

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EVANGELICAL *RESSOURCEMENT*
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Exploring the Formation
of Early Christian Thought

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To the memory of my friend and former colleague

Prof. Dr. Otto Betz,
who was a master in using the Old Testament
to interpret the New

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“You are not able to enter into the Holy Scriptures
without a guide to show you the way.”

Jerome, *Epistle* 53.6

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ABBREVIATIONS

Modern Sources

<i>ABD</i>	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i>
ACW	Ancient Christian Writers
<i>ANF</i>	<i>The Ante-Nicene Fathers</i>
BETL	Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium
CCSL	Corpus Christianorum: Series Latina
FC	The Fathers of the Church
<i>JECS</i>	<i>Journal of Early Christian Studies</i>
<i>JTS</i>	<i>The Journal of Theological Studies</i>
LXX	Septuagint
NIV	New International Version
<i>NPNF</i>	<i>The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church</i> , 2 series
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
OECS	Oxford Early Christian Studies
<i>PG</i>	Migne, <i>Patrologia Graeca</i>
WSA	<i>The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century</i> , 3 parts
<i>ZAC/JAC</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für antikes Christentum/Journal of Ancient Christianity</i>

Ancient Christian and Jewish Sources

<i>ComMt ser.</i>	<i>Origenes Werke</i> 11 (Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller), ed. E. Klostermann, E. Benz, and U. Treu
<i>Exp. Ps</i>	<i>Augustine, Expositions of the Psalms</i>

For the other commentary and homiletical literature of the church fathers the following abbreviation system has been used. *Com* (= *Commentary on*) or *Hom* (= *Homilies on*) is joined to a standard abbreviation of the biblical book, so that *ComJn* means *Commentary on John*, and *HomEx* means *Homilies on Exodus*, and so on.

- 4Q174 *Florilegium, or Midrash on the Last Days*
- 4Q175 *Testimonia, or Messianic Anthology*
- 4Q252 *Commentary on Genesis A*
- 4Q377 *A Moses Apocryphon^c*
- 4Q521 *Messianic Apocalypse*
- 11Q5 *Apocryphal Psalms (1)*

PREFACE

THE EVANGELICAL CHURCH is in danger of having a cut-flower faith. Its message of Jesus is largely severed from its roots in the Old Testament Scriptures. This is more the result of neglect than of intention. I am part of an evangelical tradition that began in the nineteenth century with the dream of restoring the church of the New Testament. The leaders of this tradition placed a great emphasis on the New Testament but neglected the Old. They failed to perceive that the Old Testament was the Bible of the church of the New Testament.¹ Many evangelical communions make that same error. None of them, including my own, would claim that the Old Testament is not Scripture or that it should not be a part of the Christian canon. Its vital connection with the church's gospel of Jesus Christ, however, is rarely understood today and even less frequently taught in the church.

This book examines how the church fathers, the leaders and teachers of the church in the first four centuries, used the Old Testament as Christian Scripture. It is not a book about the methods of interpretation used by the fathers, at least not in the usual sense of such studies. Frances M. Young is correct, I believe, when she discounts the adequacy of the approaches customarily taken in the study of the church fathers' interpretation of the Bible.² Their interpretative methods will, of course, sometimes be an unavoidable part of the discussion but the purpose of my study does not lie in this arena. I am interested in examining the central role that the Old Testament played in the formation of Christian

1. See Ronald E. Heine, "Alexander Campbell and the Old Testament," *Stone-Campbell Journal* (2002): 163–81.

2. Frances M. Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 2.

thinking and life in the early centuries of the church. I hope to capture the way the fathers regarded the Old Testament and some of the uses to which they put it.

While it was natural that the earliest Christians should take up the Jewish Scriptures as their Scriptures, it was also problematic. How should they, as Christians, relate to the demands of the Jewish law? How could they understand Isaiah 53 to speak of the sufferings of Jesus of Nazareth when the leaders of the synagogue understood it to refer to the sufferings of the Jewish people? Does Isaiah 7:14 refer to a virgin giving birth as the Christians held, or to a young woman giving birth as the Jews argued? These were the kinds of questions forced on the early Christians as they took up the Jewish Scriptures as their Bible.

The Old Testament provided the glasses through which the early Christians looked at Jesus of Nazareth. The doctrines they put forth regarding him and the significance of his life for humanity depend on Old Testament texts that they read in relation to him. There would have been no Christianity without the Old Testament. When the books that make up our New Testament were eventually written and elevated to the status of Scripture alongside the books of the Old Testament, the two testaments together formed the Christian Bible. The Old Testament was as much Christian Scripture as the New and was used in the same way as the New in Christian teaching and preaching. This attitude of the fathers concerning the two testaments continued through the period of the Protestant Reformation. Luther and Calvin considered both testaments to be vital for Christian teaching. It was in the post-Enlightenment period that the New Testament began to be orphaned from the Old. This process reached its climax in the critical studies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The end result of this process has been an ambivalence about the use of the Old Testament in the church.

Various organizations and individuals contributed to the writing of this book. Chapters 2 and 3 began as lectures I delivered for the C. H. Phillips Lectures at Puget Sound Christian College in 2002. It was this series of lectures that provided the impetus for me to begin developing the seed idea that had lain dormant in my mind for several years. Chapter 2 was also presented to the Kolloquium für Graduierte at the Eberhard Karls Universität in Tübingen, Germany, in 2004.

A stipend from the Institut zur Erforschung des Urchristentums and the European Evangelistic Society made possible a pleasant summer of research in 2004 in Tübingen on the contents of chapter 4. One of the enjoyable times of that summer was a morning spent sitting at table with Prof. Otto Betz and discussing the messianic understanding in the prophets and the rabbis. I must record here my indebtedness to Prof. Betz for many aspects of my understanding of ancient Judaism. This is

not the kind of indebtedness that can be footnoted, for it is not based primarily on the many books and articles that he wrote on this subject. It is the unconscious influence from my experiences with him during the ten years we worked together as co-leaders of the Kolloquium für Graduierte at the University in Tübingen. I must also thank my student assistant at Puget Sound Christian College, Ron Schaffner. He read large portions of the book as it was in preparation and caught several slips in typing and consistency. My friend and pastor, Dr. Milton Jones, read a draft of the book and made many helpful suggestions that have made it more reader friendly. I thank also Dr. D. H. Williams, the series editor, for the invitation to contribute a volume to this series and for his helpful criticisms. I, of course, take full responsibility for the flaws that remain. Finally, my wife Gillian and daughter Katrina have been supportive of and patient with my long hours of isolation with books and a computer.

REH



CHRISTIAN SCRIPTURE BEFORE THE NEW TESTAMENT

“And Philip . . . began from this Scripture and proclaimed Jesus to him.”

Acts 8:35

THE CHURCH HAS never been without Scripture even though the Pauline epistles, the earliest writings that constitute our present New Testament, were not composed for two or more decades after the resurrection of Jesus. The remaining writings that make up our New Testament were written in the second half of the first century, some near the end of that century. It would be at least another century before most of these writings were placed together to constitute a recognized canon of Scripture in the church. Yet the writings we call the New Testament, which are our source of information about the beginnings of the Christian movement, indicate that the apostles and evangelists regularly appealed to Scripture to substantiate their teachings about Jesus of Nazareth and other subjects of vital importance to their faith. These references to Scripture are all to what we call the Old Testament, which the early

church referred to simply as the “Scriptures.”¹ This chapter will briefly examine these early Christian references to the Scriptures. In addition, it will survey the translations in which the early Christians read their Scripture.

The Scripture of Christians in the First Century AD

The very earliest Christians were Jews by birth. Their Scripture had always been what we call the Old Testament or the Hebrew Bible. When they became Christians they continued to use these writings as their Scripture. They did not consider following Jesus to conflict with the faith they had learned from the Old Testament. Jesus was the fulfillment of the hopes they found expressed there.

All references to Scripture in the New Testament are to the Old Testament.² When Paul says that “Christ died on behalf of our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he was buried, and was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures,” he means in accordance with what the Old Testament Scriptures say about the Messiah (1 Cor. 15:3–4).³ When Luke says that Paul entered the synagogue in Thessalonica and “reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and declaring that the Christ must suffer and rise from the dead,” he means that Paul reasoned from the Old Testament Scriptures (Acts 17:2–3). The same is true in Luke’s report that Apollos refuted the Jews in Achaia by “demonstrating from the Scriptures that Jesus is the Christ” (Acts 18:28). And when Paul reminds Timothy that he has known from childhood the sacred writings that can instruct him for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus and then adds, “All Scripture is inspired of God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for instruction in righteousness,” he is talking about the Old Testament (2 Tim. 3:15–16).

The phrase “it is written,” which appears so often throughout the New Testament to introduce Scripture, always introduces statements from the Old Testament. It appears frequently in the four Gospels to show the connection between particular aspects of Jesus’s ministry and words found in the Old Testament. These connections range from statements regarding the place of Jesus’s birth, through specific deeds during

1. Melito, bishop of Sardis in the late second century, appears to have been the first to have applied the expression “Old Testament” to the books of the Hebrew Bible (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 4.26).

2. The one possible exception to this statement is found in 2 Pet. 3:16, in which Paul’s letters may be included with the Old Testament under the term “Scriptures.”

3. Biblical quotations are my translations unless the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) is indicated along with the reference.

his ministry, to his final suffering on the cross. Luke uses the phrase to introduce a statement from the Psalms justifying the choosing of an apostolic replacement for Judas after the latter's suicide (Acts 1:20). Luke indicates that Paul used the phrase to connect the second Psalm with the resurrection of Jesus in his sermon at Antioch of Pisidia (Acts 13:33). Paul grounds many of his most characteristic doctrines in Old Testament Scripture joined with his understanding of God's action in Christ. These doctrines include the bondage of all humanity to sin (Rom. 3:10–20), the importance of faith in salvation (Rom. 1:17), justification through faith (Romans 4), the stumbling of the Jews and the salvation of the Gentiles (Rom. 9:33; 10:15–21), and his doctrine of the two Adams (1 Cor. 15:45). Paul thought that the events narrated in the Old Testament were recorded to instruct and encourage Christians (Rom. 15:4; 1 Cor. 10:11).

Luke asserts that it was Jesus who taught his followers that the Old Testament was a book about himself. At the end of his Gospel, Luke reports that the risen Jesus walked with two disciples on the road to Emmaus and “interpreted for them what was written about himself in all the Scriptures,” meaning, of course, the Old Testament Scriptures (Luke 24:27). Just before his account of the ascension, Luke again relates that Jesus taught his disciples that the law, the prophets, and the psalms all contained material about himself. This final instruction that Jesus gave to his disciples, according to Luke, states that the suffering and resurrection of the Messiah were related in the Old Testament. It also asserts that the Old Testament contains the announcement that the message of repentance and forgiveness of sins was to be proclaimed “to all nations” in Jesus's name (Luke 24:44–47).

There can be no question that the Old Testament was the Scripture of the earliest Christians and that they read it in terms of Christ. This was completely natural for them because they did not consider themselves to be distinct from the Jews. They believed that Jesus was the fulfillment of the promises made to the fathers in the Old Testament; therefore, their beliefs about him were completely compatible with their Jewish faith. When Philip heard the Ethiopian reading from the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah, Luke says that Philip started “from this Scripture,” that is Isaiah 53, and “proclaimed Jesus to him” (Acts 8:35). Paul declared to the Roman Christians that the gospel he preached had been “proclaimed in advance through” the “prophets in the holy Scriptures” (Rom. 1:2). The writings of the Old Testament were joined with the Christian message in a seamless connection in the minds of the earliest Christians. They could not have conceived of the possibility of Christian faith without the Old Testament. It was essential to their understanding of who Jesus was, what his life, death, and resurrection had been about, and what he wanted them to do as his followers.