

Lectionary

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I. Introduction

A lectionary is a liturgical book that provides readings for use in the Eucharist or another form of organized communal or individual prayer. In the Christian Eucharist, lectionaries gradually developed to provide scriptural readings that preceded the consecration of the bread and wine; in the divine office or liturgy of the hours, the lectionary provides passages from both Scripture (usually the HB/OT and NT but mostly excluding the Gospels) and non-scriptural texts such as patristic homilies or lives of saints. A selection provided by a lectionary is often referred to in liturgical scholarship as a “pericope.”

Innocent Smith

II. Christianity

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A. Patristics and Orthodox Churches

According to Justin Martyr (*1 Apol.* 67), writing in the mid-2nd century, at the early Roman Eucharist the “memoirs of the apostles and/or the writings of the prophets are read as long as time permits.” Although early Christians may have read the Bible in continuous or consecutive sections (*lectio continua*) for purposes of instruction and edification, recent liturgical scholarship suggests that at the Eucharist the Scriptures were more often read not in a continuous manner, but with proper readings that were chosen in conjunction with the feast or season being celebrated.

Tertullian (*Apol.* 39) and Augustine (*Tract. Ev. Jo.*, prologue) indicate that certain liturgical occasions called for appropriate scripture readings. In some cases, such as the feasts of Christmas, Epiphany, the Baptism of Jesus, Ascension and Pentecost, scriptural passages from the Gospels and Acts of the Apostles narrating these events (or prophesying them, as in the case of Joel 2:28–3:8 on Pentecost) were read on their corresponding liturgical commemorations. In other cases, OT passages became associated with particular feasts, such as the reading of Job during Holy Week and especially on Holy Thursday (cf. Ambrose, *Ep.* 76(20).14).

The earliest extant indications of clear selections of readings come from Ambrose and Augustine in the late 4th and early 5th centuries. By the late 5th and early 6th centuries, there are references to the existence of lectionaries which contained biblical readings for the liturgical year, and the readings in use in certain areas can be discerned from the surviving sermons of figures such as Caesarius of Arles.

The number of readings provided for the Eucharist differed in various regions. In non-Roman

regions, many sources indicate the presence of three readings: one from the HB/OT, one from the NT epistles or Acts of the Apostles, and one from the Gospels; evidence from Rome indicates only two lessons, an epistle and a gospel, although some sources provide indications of a third reading on certain occasions. In some cases, particularly celebrations of a vigil, multiple readings were provided before the epistle and gospel for masses. Some non-Roman liturgical sources provide readings from the acts of the martyrs, although over time these non-biblical readings tended to be restricted to the Divine Office.

Eastern sources indicate a variety of liturgical traditions. Important extant sources include the Georgian Lectionary from Jerusalem of the 5th through 8th centuries CE, the Armenian-Palestinian Lectionary of the 5th century CE, and the Syro-Palestinian Lectionary of the 9th century CE (see the bibliographical references in Lengeleng). In the Byzantine tradition, early sources provided liturgical pericopes before the book of the gospels, providing semi-continuous readings for Saturdays and Sundays, weekdays between Easter and Pentecost, and certain saints; the Gospel of John was read from Easter until Pentecost, Matthew from after Pentecost until the Exaltation of the Holy Cross; Luke from after the Exaltation until Lent, and Mark during Lent. Beginning in the 8th century, lectionaries began to develop presenting the readings in liturgical order. In addition to the gospel lectionary, the *Praxapostolos* presented pericopes from Acts and Paul for the seasonal and festal liturgies. Readings from the HB/OT were provided in the *Prophetologion* for vespers and vigils rather than for the Eucharist.

Extant early Western liturgical sources utilize several different modes of indicating readings: 1) marginal notes in a biblical codex; 2) lists of opening and closing verses (incipits and explicits) of scriptural passages to be read (sometimes called a “capitulare”); 3) full readings provided in a separate codex; 4) full readings provided within the context of another liturgical book (e.g., a missal, which contained the prayers, readings, and other texts necessary for the celebration of the eucharist). All four systems coexisted throughout the early and high Middle Ages. Each of these modes of presentation often divided the readings provided from the HB/OT, the NT, and the gospels into different sections or different manuscripts, and it is possible that the selections of readings developed somewhat independently for the various types of readings. The articles of Godu remain a helpful overview of various traditions of epistle and gospel cycles.

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B. Medieval Times and Reformation Era

In the Middle Ages, a range of similar but distinct lectionary systems developed in churches, dioceses, and religious orders, providing scriptural readings for the Mass and scriptural and non-scriptural readings for the divine office. In the medieval liturgical practice, the readings were presented in various formats, such as lectionaries (containing all the readings for mass and/or office), epistolaries and evangelaries (containing the epistles then attributed to St. Paul and the gospels respectively), Missals (books for the mass containing antiphons, readings, and prayers) or Breviaries (books for the office containing antiphons, psalms, readings, and prayers). In the 16th century, Reformers adapted individual lectionary traditions in different ways, while the Catholic Church effectively standardized one of the medieval lectionary traditions through the 1568 *Breviarium Romanum* and 1570 *Missale Romanum*.

Beginning in the 7th and 8th centuries CE, liturgical sources indicate a variety of systems of readings for mass. Though not universally consistent, several themes are apparent among the most widely used systems. The readings are drawn especially from the Epistles and the Gospels, especially Matthew and John, but with some passages from Luke and a few from Mark. The sources often present roughly similar biblical content, but often differ in arrangement. For instance, Rom 13:11–14 appears for the Epistle of the first Sunday of Advent in the 13th century Dominican and Franciscan Missals, but the two Missals differ in the gospel assignment that day: the Franciscan Missal provides Luke 21:25–33, whereas the Dominican Missal provides Matt 21:1–9, reserving Luke 21:25–33 for the second Sunday of Advent. In this case, the Dominican selection is identical with that provided in the Sarum rite, while the Franciscan selection is identical with the 13th century Missal of the Roman Curia.

In the divine office, long readings from the OT and NT were read at the office of Matins (along with non-scriptural readings such as patristic homilies and lives of saints) with short readings at each hour of the office. As proposed by the 7th-century CE source known as *Ordo Romanus XIII*, during the celebration of Matins (also known as Nocturns or the night office), “the Bible was read according to the following continuous cycle: the Heptateuch in the weeks from Septuagesima to Passion Sunday,

including most of Lent; Jeremiah and the Lamentations in Passiontide; Revelation, Acts and the Canonical Epistles after Easter; Kings and Chronicles after Pentecost; the Wisdom books and Apocrypha (as now known) in the summer months; the remaining Prophets in November and December; and the Pauline Epistles after Christmas” (Parke: 78). Although this basic ordering was widely followed, there was considerable flexibility and variation in the lengths and distribution of readings in individual communities and traditions. While early implementation of this schema appears to have relied on conventional biblical manuscripts, on rare occasions manuscripts presented the books of the Bible in liturgical order. Beginning in the 10th century, lectionaries and collectars emerged that presented specific passages to be read at Matins and the other hours of the office, and these selections (sometimes abbreviated) were incorporated alongside the other elements of the office in Breviaries which began to develop in the 11th and 12th centuries and became widespread beginning in the 13th century.

In the 16th century, individual Reformation leaders took different approaches to the medieval lectionary legacy. Martin Luther maintained “the customary Epistles and Gospels” for the Eucharist, while proposing a more flexible approach to biblical readings for other services, stating that “for the Epistles and Gospels we have retained the customary division according to the church year, because we do not find anything especially reprehensible in this use ... This we think provides sufficient preaching and teaching for the laypeople” (see Luther: 68). Cranmer largely adopted the Sarum lectionary (which was practically identical to that used in German lands) for the eucharistic readings of the *Book of Common Prayer*, while providing a list of biblical readings for Matins and Evensong that presented most of the books of the Bible in biblical order, reading the OT (except 1 and 2 Chronicles and parts of Ezekiel) over the course of one year, the NT three times, then twice each year, and the Psalter read once monthly. Martin Bucer, Ulrich Zwingli, and John Calvin abandoned the concept of a lectionary composed of selections from the Bible, proposing instead the proclamation of continuous selections from Scripture (see “Lectio Continua”). These varying approaches are undergirded by a common concern for providing biblical texts for preaching, but reveal different conceptions of the best means to approach this goal.

Within the Catholic Church, a radical revision of the approach to reading scripture in the office was proposed by Cardinal Quinones in the 1530s. This attempt at liturgical was deeply influential on the approach of Cranmer, but was officially repudiated by the Catholic Church in 1568 with the promulgation of the pruned but traditional *Breviarium Romanum*. In the period following the promulga-