

The Lectionary Problem

(Presidential Address to the Leighton Club, Edinburgh, March, 1969).

THE lectionary problem is not difficult to state—the question is, how should the Bible be read in worship—service? How much should be read? The whole Bible, or only selected parts of it? And if selected parts, on what principle (if any) should they be chosen? The problem is easy to state, but it is far from easy to answer. And perhaps it cannot be answered without an examination of past practice.

The problem for us concerns the worship of the Christian Church. Yet we must begin with a reminder regarding the practice of the Jewish synagogue. The main purpose of the synagogue was the reading and exposition of the Law (Pentateuch, Torah). Two lessons were read in the Sabbath-service, the main one from the Pentateuch, and the other from the Prophets. The Pentateuch was divided into approximately 150 portions in a three-year cycle. This lesson was read by the leader or ruler of the synagogue, first in the Hebrew text and then in Aramaic translation. The second lesson, which was not fixed, was taken from the Prophets and could be read by a member present on the call of the ruler. There are references to this practice in the New Testament. (i) In Luke 4:16ff. we see how our Lord was invited to read the second lesson, and was given or chose verses from Isaiah 61. After reading the lesson, our Lord spoke about it. The lesson from the Law is not mentioned, but the ruler of the synagogue would already have read it. (ii) In Acts 13:14ff. we are told that Paul and his friends were invited by the ruler of the synagogue in Pisidia in Antioch to say a word of exhortation after the reading of the Law and the Prophet. (iii) In Acts 15:21 it is recorded that at the Council of Jerusalem, St. James said that “Moses of old time hath in every city them that preach him, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath day”. (iv) Finally, another possible reference is in Luke 24:44, where our Lord said that everything written about him in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled. Whether this refers to a three-fold system of reading, or only to the three parts of the Hebrew Canon of Scripture may be a matter of argument. But it will be remembered that some scholars have suggested that the Psalms as well as the Law and the Prophets were

read or recited in the services. Moreover there are 150 psalms, and the Septuagint has an extra psalm, giving a number nearly equal to the number of sections of the Law.

Now it seems that in the early Christian services, something similar must have been in use. The Pauline letters make much reference to Old Testament passages, giving them as it were Christian interpretation or application, and some at least of these letters were requested to be read to the Christian congregations to which they were addressed (Cp. Col. 4. 16 ; I Thess. 5. 27.) It would seem to be fairly certain that the Old Testament continued to be read and studied, together with Christian interpretations and applications. The actual details are difficult to decide about on account of lack of information.

An early indication as to the Christian services is given in Justin Martyr's *First Apology* (ch. 67). He says that all in the towns or the country gather for worship (he is speaking of the Eucharist), and the 'memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read as long as time permits'. What these terms mean is perhaps not quite clear. The 'memoirs' would seem to be part of a gospel or gospel passage known to Justin, and the 'writings of the prophets' would seem to be Old Testament passages, though some have suggested that the latter may mean writings by persons such as the prophets referred to in the *Didache*. But the general deduction seems to be an Old Testament lesson and/or a New Testament lesson, or at least passages corresponding to these. Certainly very shortly afterwards, we find Old and New Testament lessons regularly read in the services. Incidentally Justin does not mention any psalmody in the service, but that that was a regular feature very soon afterwards is shown by plentiful documentary evidence.

The Ancient Church Orders give us some information on the lections, but the fact that the dates of many of the Orders are doubtful lessens their usefulness in this respect. The numbers of lections seems to have varied considerably. For example, *Apostolic Constitutions* (ca. A.D. 380) at one point (II, 57, 5) mentions the Law, historical books, Job and the Wisdom books, Prophets, Acts, Epistles and Gospels, and says, 'let the lections be read two by two', and at another place (VIII, 5, 5) speaks of lessons from the Law, Prophets, Epistles, Acts and Gospels.

A little later we begin to see more clearly what the custom in reading lessons was. St. Augustine is a very useful instance, as he so often mentions what the lections were in

particular instances, and we are greatly helped by the work of Dr. G. G. Willis on what he calls "St. Augustine's Lectionary" (London, S.P.C.K., 1962. Alcuin Club Collections No. XLIV). In his sermons, Augustine very frequently speaks about the lessons, and also often the psalms which had preceded the sermon. For example, "In the apostolic lesson (i.e. the Epistle), thanks are given to God for the faith of the Gentiles. In the psalm we said, Turn us again, O God of hosts, and cause thy face to shine, and we shall be saved. (Ps. 80. 7). In the gospel we are called to the feast" (PL. XXXVIII, col. 1043). Again, in another sermon he said, "We saw this in the apostolic lesson. Thereafter we sang a psalm, exhorting one another with one voice and with one heart as it ought to be (he quotes Ps. 95 here). After these things, the gospel showed us the cleansing of the lepers" (PL. XXXVIII, col. 875). A large proportion of the sermons followed the two lessons which became characteristic of the Eucharist—the Epistle and the Gospel. But in quite a number of cases (Dr. Willis notes almost 40) there was also an Old Testament lesson. But it seems that by Augustine's time, that lesson was disappearing, leaving only Epistle and Gospel. Further, it should be noted that, at this point, there seems to have been as yet no fixed lectionary. Augustine chose his own lessons, as is clear from various remarks. Thus, there was the occasion when he intended to preach on a particular psalm and instructed the lector to read it. The lector, *perturbatus*, as Augustine says, read a different psalm by mistake. But the preacher took this as an indication of the will of God, and preached on the psalm which had been read. Other preachers also chose their own lessons to suit themselves.

There was however another system in common use, namely, a true, *lectio continua*. This had been the case in the synagogue so far as the Torah was concerned. This practice is evident from the many expositions of whole books by preachers, not only Augustine himself, but also Origen, Chrysostom, Jerome and others. These courses of expositions seem to have been given at daily services rather than at the Eucharist, and certain books were regarded as specially suitable for particular seasons. Thus, Augustine refers not only to the reading of the Resurrection narratives at Easter, but also to the reading of the Book of Acts between Easter and Pentecost (PL. XXXVIII, col. 1426). Ambrose mentions the reading of Job and Jonah in Passion Week (PG. XII, col. 1031f.)

This practice of *lectio continua* became the regular monastic custom, seen very clearly in the *Rule* of St. Benedict (ca. A.D. 530), the whole Bible being divided over the Daily Offices. The intention was to read the Old Testament once and the New twice in the year. The Psalter was to be recited once each week. This became the regular custom for monasteries and nunneries in the Middle Ages, the book containing the details being the *Breviary*. As time went on, the scripture lessons became much shortened, and readings from the lives of the Saints, and from the writings of the Fathers came to take up much space. A movement against this process was seen in the revision of the *Breviary* proposed by Quignonez in the sixteenth century. His proposals came to little, being rejected by the Roman Church, though they had some influence on the *Book of Common Prayer*. It was left to quite recent times to see much difference on the Roman custom.

Lectio continua was used in the Daily Offices of the *Book of Common Prayer*. Cranmer reduced the number of these Offices to two, Morning and Evening Prayer. But he still wanted as much as possible of the Bible to be read, which meant longer lessons on the average. In the introductory article, "Concerning the Service of the Church", he said, "the reading of Holy Scripture is so set forth that all things shall be done in order, without breaking one piece from another". The "Order how the rest of Holy Scripture (i.e. other than the Psalter) is appointed to be read" describes the whole procedure. Most of the Old Testament will be read once in the year, at the first lesson in Morning and Evening Prayer, the whole of the New Testament to be read at the second lesson, once in the morning, and once in the evening. Only very little of the Apocrypha was included. As a result of this, the *Book of Common Prayer* and all its derivatives have Tables of Lessons for Morning and Evening Prayer. To this we shall return shortly.

Another method of lesson-selection and arrangement has dominated the Eucharistic Service for many centuries—namely, the formation of a lectionary which contains special lessons suited to the season (the *Temporale*), or to particular days, as of the Saints (the *Sanctorale*). At a fairly early date, as soon as days or seasons such as Christmas and Easter came to be observed, it was felt that the Eucharistic lessons should have some suitable and immediate reference to the time. And so we have, for example, the custom of reading on Good Friday the Passion narratives, or at least one of them. Similarly, many writers witness to the reading of the

Nativity narratives at the Christmas season. Among the many interesting references to this custom may be mentioned those in the *Peregrinatio Etheriae*.

As more and more scriptural events came to be celebrated, there was greater need to set out suitable lessons, and we find various attempts to form lectionaries for the Sunday Eucharist. Gennadius of Marseilles (*ob. ca.* A.D. 485) says that Musaeus, also a priest in Marseilles prepared a lectionary for the whole year (*De script. eccles.*, 79. *PL.* LVIII, col. 1104). It seems that there was no Roman lectionary before the time of Gregory the Great, though a few others (non-Roman) such as that of Luxeuil of the fifth century are known. Bishop Frere in his *Studies of the Roman Lectionaries* (Alcuin Club Collections. XXX and XXXII, Oxford, 1934, 1935) points out that for the century between Gregory I (590-604) and Gregory II (715-731) there is no literary evidence (*Op. cit.* II. p. 59), but adds that the Gospel-books of the 9th, 10th and 11th centuries are important sources for the Gospel lists.

It should perhaps be noted that St. Jerome was credited with a determining influence on the formation of the lectionary system, this being due to an alleged letter from him to Constantius. This letter is quoted in full in Frere *Op. cit.* II. p. 74. But this was really a pseudonymous production of the early part of the eighth century. Frere says it cannot have been genuine, because of the nature of the contents both of the *Temporale* and of the *Sanctorale*. This letter is often found in the book called the *Comes*, which contains passages for the prophet (the Old Testament lesson), the Epistle and the Gospel (thus providing for three lessons) for particular feasts. Later, the *Comes* came to have only the Epistles, as Gospel-books became much more common.

Modern examples of both these practices—*lectio continua* and special choices for Sundays and Holy days—are found, e.g. in the *Roman Missal* and the *Book of Common Prayer*. The former is the more complicated, because there is no Table of Lessons for Sundays, the lessons being fully printed in the text. One interesting point may be mentioned. At the announcement of the Gospel, words frequently used are —“*sequentia sancti evangelii secundum . . .*” Even the very first Gospel in the book, in the Mass for the First Sunday of Advent, begins in this way, the Gospel being St. Luke, Chapter 21. This is an indication of the practice of *lectio continua*. The Gospel for Saints’ Days is announced in the same way, though in such cases there could hardly be *lectio continua*.

The two systems are more clearly seen in the *Book of Common Prayer* where there are Tables of Lessons for Morning and Evening Prayer, and also for Sundays and Holy Days. The former is combined with the Calendar showing *lectio continua*, and the latter shows a selection of lessons suited to the times. Cranmer's arrangement stood with only some additions of special lessons for Holy Days and Sundays till 1871. Then the arrangement was adjusted to the Christian Year, and other alterations have been permitted since, as in 1922 and 1955. The latter of these arranged the *lectio continua* idea for the mornings and for the evenings separately.

In the selection of the proper lessons, there is a difficulty which is not yet fully met. It is comparatively easy to find suitable lessons for the period, Advent to Pentecost, a period concerned largely with the ministry of our Lord. In the other half of the year—the post-Pentecost period—it is not so easy to work out a suitable scheme or even to lay down a principle of choice of lessons. It has been said that the first period deals with the acts of God and the second with what the Church should be doing, the “acts we ourselves are enabled to perform because of all that God has done for us in Jesus Christ” (L. E. H. Stephens-Hodge. *The Collects. The Prayer Book Commentaries*, p. 119). *The Book of Common Worship* of the Church of South India provides a selection of themes for the post-Pentecostal period. For all Sundays of the year, the lectionary provides, for the morning service (i.e. the Eucharist) an O. T. lesson, a psalm, an Epistle and a Gospel, and for the evening service, a lesson from the O. T. and one from the N. T. The Propers for ‘days on fixed dates’ suggest the three lessons and a psalm for each occasion. It may be suitable to mention here that the book contains also a table of Daily Bible Readings, in which two O. T. and two N. T. passages are suggested for each day—which allows the scheme to be spread over two years. To revert to the problem of the Post-Pentecostal period, the difficulty about themes is of course that we can find in Scripture far more themes than the 25 or 26 required. A two-year scheme has therefore been suggested, but some are very critical of that idea.

We must now notice, in the third place, another system (or lack of system) in the reading of the Bible. This has been and indeed is, found in the Church of Scotland and many non-conformist denominations. In this form there is no definite rule. Soon after the Reformation in Scotland, the

Sunday service (that is, the forenoon service, for the afternoon was largely devoted to catechising) was in two parts—first the Reader's service. He read the prayers in the *Book of Common Order* and the lesson, which presumably was chosen by the minister, perhaps to suit his subject. It is true, however, that the *First Book of Discipline* (XI, 6) said, "We think it most expedient that the Scripture be read in order, that is, that some one book of the Old or New Testament be begun and orderly read to the end For this skipping and divagation from place to place of Scripture, be it in reading, or be it in preaching, we judge not so profitable to edify the kirk, as the continual following of one text". The *Westminster Directory* of 1644/45 abolished the office of Reader, and reading of Scripture was to be done by 'pastors and teachers', though 'such as intended the ministry' could occasionally read if permitted by the Presbytery. The *Directory* further said that 'all the Canonical Books of the Old and New Testament' (but not the Apocrypha) 'shall be publicly read in the vulgar tongue'. 'How large a portion shall be read at once, is left to the wisdom of the Minister; but it is convenient that ordinarily one Chapter of each Testament be read at every meeting; and sometimes more . . . It is requisite that all the Canonical Books be read over in order and ordinarily where the reading in either Testament endeth on one Lord's Day, it is to begin the next'.

When the Reader's service came to an end, this meant a considerable diminution in Bible reading, and certainly, for whatever reason, the regulations of the *Directory* were widely ignored. Even as late as 1867 Dr. Robert Lee of Greyfriars in Edinburgh was complaining that the Bible was scarcely read at all in church. After his time matters improved, and the later service-books of the Church of Scotland printed Tables of lessons. *Euchologion*, for example (in the 1905 edition), had a Table of Psalms and Lessons for Divine Service on every Lord's Day throughout the year'. This provided a lectionary for two years. There were also, 'A Table of Psalms and Lessons for special services', 'A Table of Psalms for a month', and a 'Table of Daily Lessons for a year'. The lectionary provided for two lessons for each service (one O. T. and one N. T.); the Psalter was divided over one month; but in both alternative sets of lessons, a certain amount of Scripture was omitted as being 'less suitable'.

The Lectionary in *Prayers for Divine Service* (1923 and 1929) is a 'Table of Lessons from Holy Scripture for Two Years', containing O. T. and N. T. lessons for morning and

evening services for Sundays. In these there is only a certain amount of *lectio continua*, as for example, I Samuel 3 ; 4. 1-18 ; 9. 1-20 ; 10 ; 16 ; 17. 1-11, 32-50 ; 18. 1-16 ; 24 ; 30. 1-25. In each year there are only two lessons from Job. This book contains also a 'Table of Psalms for a year' (Sundays only), 'Psalms for Sacred Seasons', and 'Psalms and Lessons for other Special Times'. The *Book of Common Order* (1940) followed similar lines, and the revised edition of 1952 contained a new lectionary, this having been prepared by one member of the Committee, the Reverend John Macrae, of Livingston. Neither of these lectionaries has proved quite satisfactory, and it is expected that the next revision of the book, now being seriously contemplated, will have a new lectionary, as well as many other improvements. Many hope that the lectionary issued by the Joint Liturgical Group will, after some revision, be accepted.

I wish now to look at some points that have arisen in recent times.

First, in the Roman Church. The lessons in the *Missal* had been reduced to very small proportions. But the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* in para. 92(a) says, "Readings from sacred Scripture should be arranged so that the riches of God's Word may be easily accessible in more abundant measure".

Secondly, as to the Church of England. We have seen that the *Book of Common Prayer* has a daily lectionary, and it is Canon Law that every minister shall read Morning and Evening Prayer daily either in church or privately. Many have been finding this a heavy burden, partly because some of the lessons are very long, and also because of the ever-increasing burden of duties that fall to the minister's lot. But there is more in the problem than just that. In Morning and Evening Prayer combined, nearly the whole of the Bible is supposed to be read, but to cover that ground, attendance at both services is necessary. But few are present at both services. Moreover it is much less common today, compared with, say, Victorian days, for families to read the services at home. The result is that large portions of the Bible are not read or heard. This consequence is also brought about by the wide success of the 'Parish Communion', for in that service, only the Epistle and the Gospel are read. Because of all this there has been a move towards having three lessons in the Eucharist—an O. T. lesson as well as the usual Epistle and Gospel. Thus, the new lectionary of the Joint Liturgical Group provides for this, as do some other

new lectionaries, such as those of the Presbyterian Churches of Canada and the U.S.A. Objections have been raised to this, it being said to be a departure from long-established custom (though it is in fact a return to very early custom), and in the second place, it is objected that too much time would be taken up with these readings. It is perhaps difficult to come to the right conclusion here, and still more difficult to prophesy. But there is a widespread feeling that Bible-reading should have more time allotted to it.

Thirdly, as to the Church of Scotland. We have seen that the service-books provide in the lectionaries, for lessons normally O.T. and N.T., at each service. But it is to be feared that very few ministers use the lectionaries. It seems that the normal procedure is—the minister looks for a subject and a text first. Then he decides on the lessons, one of which is almost certain to contain the text. If this is in O. T., a N. T. lesson is not often difficult to find. If it is the N. T., what is to be read from O. T. ? Only too frequently the easy way is taken—one of the better-known chapters of Isaiah, or a Psalm. Another frequent conclusion is, have only the one lesson. That will leave more time for the sermon. This is a course most frequently taken for the evening service. But perhaps in many cases the purpose of the service would be better served by longer lessons and shorter sermons.

Surely the use of the lectionary is a far better practice. The minister has his lessons suggested (if not prescribed !) and can get right on with his preparation—for there must be few lessons that do not suggest something of importance for proclamation. Moreover in this way the congregation is more likely to hear a larger proportion of the Bible.

In conclusion, can we now say anything about the principles by which a lectionary should be arranged ? I fear I have nothing new to suggest, for it seems to me that the best thing is to abide by the ideas which have developed in the experience of the Church ; that is, in the Eucharistic Services, with Epistle and Gospel, to follow the Christian Year, and at other services to cover as much as possible of the rest of Holy Scripture, though in these services too there should be some reference to the seasons of the year. This seems to be the general trend in the making of modern lectionaries.

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