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"Read and Mark in Holy Scripture": Reassessing the Scripture Readings of *A Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols* in a Post-Shoah World

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Introduction

The popular Christian service, *A Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols*, dates to 1880 when Edward White Benson, Bishop of Truro, England (and later Archbishop of Canterbury), produced the first version of the innovative service for Christmas Eve.[1] Its connection to King's College, Cambridge, for which it is now known, dates to 1918 and the end of World War I.[2] The selection and order of the nine lessons (i.e., biblical passages) have remained generally consistent at King's College and most, but not all, places where the service is held since 1919.[3] Today, many churches around the world celebrate the Christmas season with a version of this service, often reading the same nine lessons.[4]

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[1] I am grateful to David R. Bains, Anna M.V. Bowden, Susan R. Garrett, Marcus Hong, Dhawn Martin, Timothy McNinch, Amy Plantinga Pauw, Patricia K. Tull, and two anonymous reviewers for reading versions of this article and providing helpful feedback. Any mistakes are all mine.

[2] For more information on the history of the service, see William Pearson Edwards, *The Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols as Celebrated on Christmas Eve in the Chapel of King's College, Cambridge* (New York: Universe Publishing, 2004); Andrew Robinson, "Telling the Christmas story in words and music: the development of and contemporary missional value of the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols within cathedrals," *Journal of Beliefs & Values*, 44.4 (2023): 546–562; Stephen Cleobury, "Nine Lessons and Carols at King's: 70 Years On," *The Musical Times* 129.1750 (1988): 687+689; and the King's College, Cambridge website: https://www.kings.cam.ac.uk/chapel/a-festival-of-nine-lessons-and-carols/history-of-a-festival-of-nine-lessons-and-carols
Orders of service for the King's College, Cambridge, services from 2000 onwards are available here: https://www.kings.cam.ac.uk/chapel/a-festival-of-nine-lessons-and-carols/archive

[3] Benson's 1880 service included the following Scripture readings: Genesis 3:8-16; Genesis 22:15-19; Numbers 24:15-18; Isaiah 9:6-8; Micah 5:2-4; Luke 2:8-16; John 1:1-15; Galatians 4:4-8; and 1 John 1:1-5. The Scripture readings for the 1918 (first) festival service at King's College included (changes from 1880 in bold): Genesis 3:8-**15**; Genesis 22:15-**18**; Isaiah 9: **2, 6-7**; Micah 5:2-4; **Luke 1:26-33, 38**; John 1:1-**14**; Luke 2:8-16; **Matthew 2:1-11**; and Galatians 4:4-**7**. The Scripture readings for the 1919 festival service at King's College included (changes from 1918 in bold): Genesis 3:8-15; Genesis 22:15-18; Isaiah 9:2, 6-7; Micah 5:2-4; Luke 1:26-33, 38; **Matthew 1:18-23**; Luke 2:8-16; Matthew 2:1-11; John 1: 1-14. In later years, three alternatives have been used: Isaiah 11:1-9 in place of Micah; Isaiah 60:1-6 in place of Luke 1; and Luke 2:1-7 in place of Matthew 1.

These nine Scripture readings—Genesis 3:8-15, 17-19; Genesis 22:15-18; Isaiah 9:2, 6-7; Isaiah 11:1-4a, 6-9; Luke 1:26-35, 38; Luke 2:1, 3-7; Luke 2:8-16; Matthew 2:1-12; John 1:1-14—were chosen presumably to narrate the story of Christmas.[5] The lessons move theologically from early humanity's disobedience in the Garden of Eden to the themes of anticipation and prophecy concerning a messiah and finally to the Gospels' stories of the birth of Jesus. As the service's Bidding Prayer—added by Eric Milner-White, former Dean of King's College in 1918—states, "Let us read and mark in Holy Scripture the tale of the loving purposes of God from the first days of our disobedience unto the glorious Redemption brought us by this Holy Child."[6]

This collection of biblical passages—chosen in a pre-Holocaust world over a century ago—creates a coherent, traditional Christmas story for the congregation, a Christmas standard canonical narrative, that covers familiar Christian theological territory: human sin, messianic promise, and incarnational salvation. However, this story is not without its ethical and theological difficulties in our religiously pluralistic world today. I seek to rethink the biblical selections in such a Christian service in light of contemporary Christian ethical commitments to faithful Christian worship in a post-Holocaust world.

In light of the Holocaust, Christians took steps in the late twentieth century to remedy anti-Jewish statements in their official documents and unofficial educational materials.[7] However, Christian liturgy sometimes still falls into the traps of unintentional anti-Judaism and supersessionism. Liturgical practices have not kept pace with official statements and good intentions. Thus, while the original Lessons and Carols service may have reflected earlier Christian sensibilities, more than a century later, the service no longer accurately mirrors the theology of the denominations in which it is still used.

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[4] Lessons and Carols services in various denominations use some alternative lessons. The Episcopal Church in its *The Book of Occasional Services* (New York: Church Publishing, 2022), 37-41, provides instructions and liturgy for the Christmas Festival of Lessons and Carols including thirteen possible lessons from which to select: Genesis 2:4b-9, 15-25; Genesis 3:1-23 or 3:1-15; Isaiah 40:1-11; Isaiah 35:1-10; Isaiah 7:10-15; Luke 1:5-25; Luke 1:26-58; Luke 1:39-46 or 1:39-56; Luke 1:57-80; Luke 2:1-20; Luke 2:21-36; Hebrews 1:1-12; John 1:1-18. *Common Worship: Times and Seasons*, published in print and online by Church House Publishing, is an official liturgical resource of the Church of England. It offers three distinct sequences for the readings. "Sequence 1: Good news for the poor" includes Micah 5:2-4; Isaiah 35; Haggai 2:5b-9 or Jeremiah 22:13-16, 23:5-6; Isaiah 11:1-9; Isaiah 52:7-10 or Isaiah 40:1-11; Philippians 2:5-11; Luke 2:1-20. "Sequence 2: The Gospel of Luke" basically contains readings from Luke 1-2. "Sequence 3: Christmas Eve" provides the nine lessons that are the focus of this article. The United Methodist Church's *Book of Worship* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1992) notes that the nine lessons they prescribe are the ones that are typically used at King's College. See the Book of Worship website for the service: https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/book-of-worship/a-christmas-eve-or-christmas-season-festival-of-nine-lessons-and-carols. The Presbyterian Church (USA)'s *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 185, also lists the nine lessons typically used at King, College.

[5] These nine Scripture readings have been read at King's College, Cambridge in recent years.

[6] The original Bidding Prayer from 1918 offered slightly different wording with the same basic meaning.

[7] John Pawlikowski, "Accomplishments and Challenges in the Contemporary Jewish-Christian Encounter," in *Removing Anti-Judaism from the Pulpit*, ed. Howard Clark Kee and Irvin J. Borowsky (Philadelphia: American Interfaith Institute, 1996), 29–35; Clark M. Williamson, *A Guest in the House of Israel: Post-Holocaust Church Theology* (Louisville; Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 27-47.

Therefore, I examine these nine biblical passages through the lens of Christian liturgical hermeneutics—the notion that Christian readings of the Old and New Testaments ought to take the liturgical season seriously as an appropriate hermeneutical context. This type of interpretive work reflects the central role of the bible in Christian liturgy. Liturgical hermeneutics of the bible highlights the vital relationship between the bible and Christian worship. Gordon Lathrop notes,

> This important relationship may be seen, first of all, in the simple fact that for the vast majority of people who regard themselves as Christian a primary encounter with the actual text of the Bible comes when they go to church, comes in one of those public rituals. This was certainly true in the long history of Christianity, when Bibles or even parts of the Bible were expensive and mostly kept and owned as communal books. But it remains true today, in an age of privately owned Bibles and easily accessible electronic texts.[8]

The lens of liturgical shaping of passages is one helpful way to read the bible faithfully as a Christian.[9] Nevertheless, liturgical shaping can potentially distort the biblical texts and create unhelpful and harmful readings of biblical passages.

So, how do Christians understand the biblical selections read during the King's College Christmas Eve Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols in light of the Holocaust?

This article unfolds in three sections as it critically examines the nine biblical lessons to problematize their selection and ordering within this popular Christmas Eve service. First, I review the nine Scripture lessons typically used in the King's College Christmas Eve service. I place these scripture readings within the literary context of the biblical canon and the liturgical context of the service to understand how these readings weave a particular theological story within the overall service. I focus on how the King's College service frames the lessons liturgically, examining its use of an introductory interpretive sentence at the beginning of each lesson as an exercise in liturgical hermeneutics of the bible.[10] Second, I critique the assumed theology and hermeneutics behind these biblical selections using the theological concept of the Christmas standard canonical narrative, i.e., a hermeneutical framework that unifies the bible's overall message into a coherent story with three stages: humanity's fall, messianic prophecy, and Jesus's birth. I argue that these specific Scripture readings in this particular sequence (i.e., the reading of the biblical passages in canonical order from Genesis to Isaiah to the three gospels) are ethically and theologically problematic in a post-Holocaust world. These lessons, both individually and collectively, posit an implicit, problematic theology of the bible as a whole and of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament in particular, as well as of its understanding of the grand story of Scripture.[11] Third, I suggest five new guidelines for selecting lessons and examples for a reimagined service. For example, I call for a shift from a canonical narrative sequencing of the lessons to poetic, polyphonic arrangements of biblical passages to disrupt the standard sin-salvation story. I explore how Christian leaders might rethink the role of Scripture in this service as they take seriously the notions that the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament is shared Scripture and that the two testaments can be brought into conversation. I do not offer a complete set of new lessons, however, as I do not want to suggest that only one appropriate set exists.

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[8] Gordon W. Lathrop, *Saving Images: The Presence of the Bible in Christian Liturgy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 2–3.

[9] Karen Armstrong, *The Lost Art of Scripture: Rescuing the Sacred Texts* (New York: Knopf, 2019), 454, argues that "scripture was always heard in the context of ritual….without this liturgical context, an essential dimension of scripture is missing. Contemplating scripture outside a ritualised setting is like reading the lyrics of an aria."

[10] Some churches observe the sequence of the lessons faithfully but without the introductory statements. Usually, in the Anglican liturgy, there is no thematic introduction to a Scripture reading.

"From the First Days of Our Disobedience unto the Glorious Redemption Brought Us by This Holy Child": Scripture Lessons in the Service of Nine Lessons and Carols

Nine lessons are read during the service: Genesis 3:8-15, 17-19; Genesis 22:15-18; Isaiah 9:2, 6-7; Isaiah 11:1-4a, 6-9; Luke 1:26-35, 38; Luke 2:1, 3-7; Luke 2:8-16; Matthew 2:1-12; John 1:1-14. Four readings are from the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament (only two biblical books therein); five are from the New Testament (three of the four gospels). It is helpful to briefly explore these passages through their literary and historical contexts, as well as the liturgical shaping they receive in this service at King's College via the use of introductory statements.[12]

First Lesson: Genesis 3:8–15; 17–19

In its literary context, Genesis 3 continues the story of Genesis 2 but introduces a new character: the serpent. This serpent convinces the woman and man to eat the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The selected verses of the reading (vv. 8-15, 17-19) focus on the events immediately after this incident when

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[11] I am aware of valid Christian efforts to use better terminology for the first testament of the Christian Bible. I am not yet convinced we have found a more appropriate alternative. In this article, I will use both "Old Testament" and "Hebrew Bible/Old Testament" interchangeably.

[12] We might also speculate about how much hearing these readings and understanding their larger contexts depends on a higher level of biblical literacy than we currently have in American and Western European contexts.

God questions the couple. God ultimately curses the serpent and the ground, causing hardship for the man.[13] The passage is part of a larger origin story that begins in Genesis 2 (Creation Story) and continues into Genesis 4 (Cain and Abel).[14]

In the context of the Lessons and Carols service, Genesis 3, as the first lesson, provides an opening for the story arc. According to this service's liturgical context, the Christmas story begins, not with creation, but with humanity's disobedience in the garden, or, even more accurately, with the consequences of such disobedience.[15] The Christmas story begins with God's questions and the delivery of God's punishments. The decision to start the lesson at Genesis 3:8 is not an obvious one contextually.

Further, the lesson is prefaced by this theologically weighty sentence: "God tells sinful Adam that he has lost the life of Paradise and that his seed will bruise the serpent's head." This introduction is awkward as an overview of the passage for several reasons. For example, the thematic introduction erases the woman from the scene. In addition, the concepts of sin and Paradise are not explicitly mentioned in Genesis 3 and must be imported into the story. Christian tradition typically interprets the Genesis passage as the fall, the moment when the first humans sinned, resulting in profound theological repercussions for humanity throughout time. It is this Christian doctrine that opens the service. By reading Genesis 3 as the first lesson, the congregation is compelled to reflect on later elements of the service in terms of the fall and original sin.[16] This theological emphasis is even more pronounced when the choir sings immediately after this lesson, "Adam Lay Ybounden," a text that reflects its fifteenth-century theological origins.

Second Lesson: Genesis 22:15–18

The brief second lesson contains another reading from Genesis. Service attendees may not immediately or fully recognize the literary context of these four selected verses. Standing alone without the surrounding framework, this selection emphasizes God's promise of blessing to Abraham. His children will be numerous, and they will be a blessing to other nations. These blessings result from Abraham's obedience in not withholding his son. This last detail concerning Abraham's son opens into the larger context of this lesson: Genesis 22 tells the story of the near sacrifice of Isaac by his father, Abraham. God tells Abraham to offer his son, Isaac, as a burnt offering, and Abraham obeys—up to the moment when God provides a ram to sacrifice instead of Isaac.[17]

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[13] Genesis 3:16—the divine speech to the woman about the pain of childbirth—is excluded from this first lesson.

[14] For more commentary on Genesis 3, see David M. Carr, *Genesis 1-11* (International Exegetical Commentary on the Old Testament; Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer), 85-147.

[15] The Episcopal Church's *The Book of Occasional Services* (New York: Church Publishing, 2022), 40-41, provides thirteen possible lessons for the Christmas Festival of Lessons and Carols including Genesis 2:4b-9, 15-25, which narrates a story of the creation of man and woman.

[16] The Episcopal Church's *The Book of Occasional Services* (New York: Church Publishing, 2022), 40, specifies that the Genesis 3 lesson is never omitted from the Christmas Festival of Lessons and Carols.

In the context of the service, the lesson is prefaced by this sentence: "God promises to faithful Abraham that in his seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed." This introduction accurately summarizes the four-verse lesson without dealing with the ethical and theological implications of the larger chapter. The prefatory remark and the lesson ignore the chapter's complicated interpretive and theological issues. For example, why would God test Abraham by asking him to sacrifice his son? In the context of the service, Genesis 22 brings forward the theme of God's blessing and implicit notions of covenant. The reading also emphasizes the need for the sacrifice of an only son and creates an inclusio with the last lesson, which speaks of "a father's only son" (John 1:14).

Third Lesson: Isaiah 9:2; 6–7

The brief third lesson, three verses from Isaiah 9, samples a poetic oracle concerning darkness and light. The whole passage provides three reasons for the people's shift from darkness into light: 1) oppression has been broken; 2) battle weapons will now be destroyed with fire; and 3) the birth of a child. The last reason alone is a part of the service's lesson because only verses 6-7 have a history of Christian interpretation that leans into messianism. Verse 6 announces the birth of a child. The child *has been* born—in the immediate past—therefore, the originating context of this passage imagines a person living during Isaiah's day.[18] Further, a plain sense reading of the text gives the impression that Isaiah 9 has a young person in mind. However, after mentioning a child, the poem continues, "and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace."[19] How can a child have such responsibilities? The poem continues, "Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom."[20] A search for this imagery elsewhere in the bible leads to Psalm 2:7, which demonstrates that child and son language in the ancient world could refer to the king's accession to the throne. Thus, the passage speaks either metaphorically about a new Davidic king being enthroned as such or literally about the actual birth of a future king.

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[17] For more commentary on Genesis 22, see Jon D. Levenson, *Inheriting Abraham: The Legacy of the Patriarch in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 66-112.

[18] For more commentary on Isaiah 9, see Tyler D. Mayfield, *Unto Us A Child Is Born: Isaiah, Advent, and Our Jewish Neighbors* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), 81-92.

[19] I quote the King James Version here because King's College, Cambridge uses this English translation in its service. While the King James Version can be beautifully poetic and has cultural and historical significance, the early 17th-century translation is based on less reliable manuscripts than we now have today.

[20] The hopefulness of Isaiah 9 and its imagery of a prince of peace and a new government may have also factored into the selection of this chapter for a post-WWI service.

In the context of the service, the lesson is prefaced by this sentence: "The prophet foretells the coming of the Saviour." Thus, within the liturgical framework of the service, Isaiah 9 is understood as a straightforward prediction about Jesus. Isaiah predicts the birth of Jesus several centuries in advance, a profoundly Christocentric reading of the prophet that ignores his book's originating context and the plain sense of the passage's past-tense verbs. This understanding of Isaiah 9 as future-telling prophecy dates back at least to Justin Martyr in the second century CE. Curiously, the New Testament writers, including Matthew, Luke, and Paul, do not evoke Isaiah 9 in relation to Jesus. This festival service uncritically continues a long Christian tradition of viewing prophecy only as distant future-telling; yet, this is not the only interpretive option for a Christian reading of this prophecy.

Fourth Lesson: Isaiah 11:1–4a; 6–9

The fourth lesson – selections from Isaiah 11—is a prophetic word about the qualities of an ideal king and good leadership. Jesse, King David's father, is characterized as a stump, a damaged tree section; from it, a branch of new growth will sprout again. Within its historical context, Isaiah 11 becomes a prophecy of hope referring to a king of Judah in the line of David who is given the markers of the spirit that describe the ideal king.[21] This king will be a promoter of justice in the land as described in Psalm 72 and Isaiah 32. Accordingly, the originating context does not have an early Christian messianic figure in mind. Early components of a messiah concept are undoubtedly present in this Davidic kingly figure and his ability to create a new realm. This passage is near the beginning of a trajectory toward a notion of messianism. Still, it remains grounded in the reality of a kingdom within the current political realm. It does not envision an end-time scenario brought about by a messianic figure.[22]

In the context of the service, the lesson is prefaced by this sentence: "The peace that Christ will bring is foreshown." Within the framework of the service, the passage is viewed as a prediction in which Isaiah is seen as proclaiming a vision fulfilled many centuries later in Jesus. It is striking, then, that the Gospel writers do not allude to Isaiah 11. Just as with the lesson from Isaiah 9, the service defines prophecy as a distant future-telling activity irrelevant to the original ancient audience of Isaiah's time.

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[21] For more commentary on Isaiah 11, see Patricia K. Tull, *Isaiah 1-39* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2010), 225-244.

[22] Notions of the messiah developed considerably during the middle and late Second Temple Period, that is, after most of the writings of the Hebrew Bible. For example, the Dead Sea Scrolls mention messianic or eschatological figures. By the time of the arrival of Jesus during the first century CE, Judaism holds a belief in the expectation of a Davidic messiah. For more information about the concept of messiah in Second Temple Judaism, see John J. Collins, *The Scepter and the Star: The Messiahs of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Other Ancient Literature* (Anchor Bible Reference Library; New York: Doubleday, 1995); Matthew V. Novenson, *Christ Among the Messiahs: Christ Language in Paul and Messiah Language in Ancient Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Matthew V. Novenson, *The Grammar of Messianism: An Ancient Jewish Political Idiom and Its Users* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). For more information about the messiah within the Hebrew Bible only, see Ronald E. Clements, "The Messianic Hope in the Old Testament," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 43 (1989): 3-19.

Fifth Lesson from Luke 1:26–35; 38

The next three lessons in the service guide the congregation through sequential selections of Luke 1-2. The first lesson from Luke focuses on the angel Gabriel's encounter with Mary. Luke has already told the story of Gabriel's appearance to Zechariah, John the Baptist's father, so that these birth announcements depend on each other literarily. Feminist biblical scholars have described this passage as a call story.[23] The lesson ends with Mary accepting the call and describing herself as the Lord's slave.[24]

In the context of the service, the lesson is prefaced by this sentence: "The angel Gabriel salutes the Blessed Virgin Mary." This preface notes the two main characters of the passage and uses one of Mary's traditional Christian titles, "Blessed Virgin Mary," a combination of her characteristics in the passage— "blessed" from v. 28[25] and "virgin" from v. 27. The introductory statement hides the fact that Mary responds to Gabriel, creating a conversation. Fortunately, Baring-Gould's "The angel Gabriel from heaven came" is often sung after this lesson at King's College; it recounts a version of the dialogue between Mary and Gabriel.[26] The preface does not highlight Mary's agency and voice in the passage; she does not call herself "blessed."

Sixth Lesson from Luke 2:1; 3–7

This lesson narrates the emperor's decree and Joseph's and Mary's journey from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem in Judea. Joseph is related to King David and needs to be registered in his ancestral home. While in Bethlehem, Mary gives birth to Jesus. It is challenging to align Luke's historical claim with knowledge of ancient Rome (e.g., Caesar Augustus did not conduct a registration or census), but Luke seems more concerned with the theological effect of alluding to the Roman Empire and contrasting the empire with Jesus's birth in a guestroom alongside animals. Luke's narration of the birth is straightforward and brief.

In the context of the service, the lesson is prefaced by this sentence: "St Luke tells of the birth of Jesus." Luke will become a Christian saint, and the preface refers to the evangelist with this title (just as the ninth lesson refers to St. John). In this lesson, Christians hear the central historical event of the Christmas story.[27] However, liturgically, its theological importance is developed in the following three lessons.

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[23] Bea Wyler, "Mary's Call," in *A Feminist Companion to the Hebrew Bible in the New Testament* (ed. Athalya Brenner, FCB 10; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996), 136-148. See the discussion in Barbara E. Reid and Shelley Matthews, *Luke 1-9* (Wisdom Commentary Series; Liturgical Press, 2021), 15-19.

[24] For more commentary on Luke 1, see Amy-Jill Levine and Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Luke* (New Cambridge Bible Commentary; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 32-37.

[25] The phrase "*Blessed are you among women,*" is not found in some important early Greek manuscripts including Codex Vaticanus. See Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (London: United Bible Societies, 1971), 129.

[26] See The Episcopal Church, *The Hymnal 1982* (Church Hymnal Corporation, 1985), 265.

Seventh Lesson from Luke 2:8–16

The succeeding lesson continues Luke's story exactly where the previous lesson ended: the shepherds—ordinary people, not Matthew's magi—are visited by angels who announce the birth of a Savior, the Christ, the Lord, in the city of David. The shepherds decide to visit the family and find them in Bethlehem. Introducing shepherds into the narrative reminds ancient readers of Moses and David. The titles given to the child, "Savior" and "Lord," were typically attached to Roman emperors.[28]

In the context of the service, the lesson is prefaced by this sentence: "The shepherds go to the manger." This phrase describes the resulting action of the humans in the passage but ignores the role of the angels. As offered at King's, this passage is the first of three that prepares the congregation to sing, after the ninth lesson, "O Come All Ye Faithful." In that carol, in the third stanza, the congregation rehearses the story of the shepherds and then proclaims, "We too will thither / bend our joyful footsteps." Furthermore, ending the lesson at verse 16 leaves Mary's perspective out of the story. When this lesson is read in relation to the following one from Matthew, Christians have the impression that the Christ child was visited by shepherds first, then magi.

Eighth Lesson from Matthew 2:1–12

The following lengthy lesson takes listeners to Matthew's version of the Christmas story and this gospel's unique contribution: the magi. Just as Luke brings angels and shepherds to the telling of the Christmas story, Matthew narrates the story of the magi. The passage creates a parallel between the magi meeting the supposed king of the Jews, Herod, in Jerusalem and the magi meeting the actual king of the Jews, Jesus, in Bethlehem.[29]

In the context of the service, the lesson is prefaced by this sentence: "The wise men are led by the star to Jesus." This description adequately summarizes the main action within the passage but overlooks the political rhetoric and Herod's role in the story. For much of the century-long history of the festival at King's College, the congregation has not had the opportunity to respond to the story of the magi. Since Daniel Hyde became the director of music in 2019, the stanza about the magi has always been included in "O Come All Ye Faithful" (following the ninth lesson), where the congregation sings, "We to the Christ Child / bring our hearts' oblations."[30]

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[27] For more commentary on Luke 2:1-7, see Amy-Jill Levine and Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Luke* (New Cambridge Bible Commentary; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 54-58.

[28] For more commentary on Luke 2:8-16, see Amy-Jill Levine and Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Luke* (New Cambridge Bible Commentary; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 58-62.

[29] For more parallels between the two sections of this passage, see Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1-7* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 102.

Ninth Lesson from John 1:1–14

The final lesson of the service is taken from the opening words of John. It is a poetic "prologue" concerning the Word coming into the world. John begins not with Jesus's birth or baptism, but at the beginning of time, by echoing Genesis 1. The chapter serves as an introduction and highlights Johannine themes such as life and light.[31]

In the context of the service, the lesson is prefaced by this sentence: "St John unfolds the great mystery of the Incarnation." As is typical of these prefaces, this one includes a theological summary of the passage using the words "mystery" and "Incarnation." This is not the language of John, but rather that of later Christian tradition. At King's College, the congregation responds by singing the Catholic hymn "O Come All Ye Faithful," which references the Nicene Creed's interpretation of John 1 in the second stanza and then proceeds to reference the central events of the seventh and eighth lessons as mentioned above.

The *Christmas Standard Canonical Narrative* and Problems with the Lesson Selections

The preceding section's study of the nine Scripture lessons demonstrates the disconnect between the literary and historical contexts of the nine scripture passages and their use as liturgical lessons in the service, allowing for critical engagement with the collection. What do these nine lessons in this sequence—taken together as a particular retelling of the Christmas story—communicate about the Christian message, the Old Testament, and the Christian Bible as a whole with two testaments?

Most of the hermeneutical challenges to these lessons stem from their participation in Christianity's *standard canonical narrative*.[32] A canonical narrative is a theological framework for interpreting the bible used to unify the bible's overall message. R. Kendall Soulen notes, "[A] canonical narrative is a story that permits Christians to read the multiplicity of biblical stories (and legal codes, genealogies, letters, etc.) in reasonably coherent and consistent terms."[33] A canonical narrative regarding the bible can be distinguished from actual biblical passages, as this narrative serves as a unifying structure for reading these passages. Soulen comments further that the canonical narrative: "is a working hypothesis about how the canon hangs together as a coherent witness to and instrument of God."[34]

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[30] The most recent leaflet from the Hyde service can be found online here: https://www.kings.cam.ac.uk/chapel/a-festival-of-nine-lessons-and-carols. The carol is displayed on page 44. The stanza about the magi, "Lo! star-led cheiftans" does not appear in most American hymnals, not even that of The Episcopal Church, *The Hymnal 1982* (Church Hymnal Corporation, 1985), 83.

[31] For more commentary on John 1, see Warren Carter, *John and Empire: Initial Explorations* (New York: T&T Clark, 2008), 149-156.

[32] The phrase belongs to R. Kendall Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996).

While numerous canonical narratives are possible as interpretive frameworks, one in particular has both a long history and a certain authority in the Christian tradition.[35] This standard canonical narrative is a salvation history paradigm and has its origins with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus, two second-century C.E. Christian theologians who proposed "an interpretive framework for reading the bible in light of which the church could defend its basic confession" in the face of pagans, Jews, and gnostic Christians.[36] This narrative and its emphasis on the history of salvation became a means to understand the relationship between the two testaments of the Christian Bible, simplifying and unifying its core message by positing a particular connection between the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament writings about Jesus. According to Soulen, this framework told the story of God's relationship to humanity in four stages: creation, fall, redemption, and final consummation. The framework presents a limited Christology, viewing Jesus as the personal Savior from sin for the entire world. Soulen critiques the standard canonical narrative, arguing that it often leads to supersessionism.[37] In addition, he notes another feature of the standard canonical narrative: "Israel-forgetfulness"—the idea that Christians do not give attention to God's covenant with Israel.[38]

A version of this standard canonical narrative is clear in the nine lessons of the festival service and the theological prefaces that are often read before each lesson: the *Christmas standard canonical narrative*. This version of a coherent, traditional Christian story has three stages: humanity's fall, messianic prophecy, and Jesus's birth. The Lessons and Carols service at King's College summarizes this narrative in its Bidding Prayer, which states, "…the tale of the loving purposes of God from the first days of our disobedience unto the glorious Redemption brought us by this Holy Child." Disobedience leads to promise, and promise leads to redemption. The festival at King's College does not lean into the Advent theological theme of the future coming of Christ at the end of time, the eschaton, or final consummation, as in the standard canonical narrative.[39] The service at King's College also skips

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[33] R. Kendall Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 15.

[34] R. Kendall Soulen, *Irrevocable: The Name of God and the Unity of the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2022), 8.

[35] For example, Amy Plantinga Pauw's recent work, *Church in Ordinary Time: A Wisdom Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017) is an example of a canonical narrative focused on creation.

[36] R. Kendall Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 19.

[37] R. Kendall Soulen, *Irrevocable: The Name of God and the Unity of the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2022), 9-12.

[38] R. Kendall Soulen, *Irrevocable: The Name of God and the Unity of the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2022), 13.

[39] The absence of this penitential, eschatological theme demonstrates perhaps that this festival service is meant liturgically for the Christmas season and not the Advent season. However, it should be noted

God's creation to begin the story with sin. Therefore, two of the four stages from the original standard canonical narrative are emphasized in the Christmas version. In addition, the notion of messianic prophecy regarding Jesus is highlighted in the Christmas version of the canonical narrative. In fact, it may be possible to interpret the inclusion of messianic prophecies as an early phase of the redemption stage of the standard canonical narrative.

A Christian interpretive approach to these nine lessons is understandable, given that the service is devotional and cannot present the entire biblical canon. The existence of a standard canonical narrative in the tradition underscores the need for both an interpretive framework of the Christian Bible and a concise way to refer to all the significant events therein. The biblical selections that constitute the Christmas standard canonical narrative are cherished and time-honored readings from the bible; they are not without substantial value. Nevertheless, the Christmas standard canonical narrative has numerous and severe theological and hermeneutic limitations when read in a post-Shoah world by Christians who seek to avoid harming Judaism and Jews and to maintain commitments to religious pluralism.[40]

I will now briefly describe seven challenges to the Christmas standard canonical narrative, focusing on the weaknesses of the selection and sequencing of the nine Scripture readings and of their prefatory statements.

Only One Valid Interpretive Framework for the Christian Bible?

The interpretive framework used to select the nine lessons in the festival does not acknowledge (much less celebrate) the existence of multiple valid interpretive frameworks. The Christmas standard canonical narrative tacitly presents its framework as normative, as *the* narrative. It does not allow for additional Christmas canonical narratives, such as one that does not present Jesus as the personal Savior from sin, but rather as an incarnation of Woman Wisdom or as standing with Israel's prophets.

I suggest that Christians can explicitly communicate in liturgical settings that biblical passages have multiple possible meanings. For example, regarding the two Isaiah lessons, Christians can affirm that these two texts provide elements that lead to an understanding of messiahship in first-century Judaism. However, these texts do not point unequivocally to Jesus despite the introductory statements within the service. They also have meaning related to their originating context. This openness to alternative readings does not dictate the meaning of Isaiah for all religious traditions, but instead permits Jews and Christians to interpret these prophecies within their respective traditions. Patricia K. Tull summarizes the crucial issue regarding prophecy well:

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that many American congregations today hold their Lessons and Carols service in (late) Advent and not as the first service of Christmas. By moving the service to the Advent season, we may be able to speak of an *Advent standard canonical narrative* that is similar to the Christmas narrative articulated here.

[40] The Christmas standard canonical narrative also cramps Christians' understandings of their own faith.

> [T]he greatest danger presented by Christian messianic interpretation of Scripture, or for that matter by any dogmatic interpretation, is not really critical inadequacy, historical inaccuracy, apologetic conditioning, or methodological obsolescence. No matter how thin the hermeneutic used to get from Isaiah to Jesus may sometimes seem by modern standards, the root of the problem is not, in itself, the insistence that Isaiah is about Jesus. The danger lies rather in the insistence that Isaiah is *only* about Jesus, that such a christological reading exhausts the text, that there is no other valid way to understand the Hebrew Scriptures, and therefore that the Jews are simply wrong.[41]

In a post-Shoah world, Christians must be wary of totalizing interpretations—that is, interpretations that assert their sole validity explicitly or implicitly. As Walter Brueggemann notes, "For those who do interpretation—especially Christian interpretation—the Shoah stands as a dread-filled summons to unlearn a great deal. For Christians, this means the unlearning of 'final readings,' for 'final readings' tend, I suggest, to give ground for 'final solutions.'"[42] One of the enduring qualities of the bible is its potential for multiple meanings across time and place. As Christians and Jews read their shared Scriptures within their respective traditions, they need a generous way to display interpretive humility. Furthermore, considering the Shoah, and the enduring power imbalance between these two faiths, the burden of humility falls especially to Christians. As two Jewish biblical scholars recently noted, "It is privilege for some Christians to presume that they have the only correct interpretation of the Scriptures, especially the Old Testament/Tanakh, which was produced by and remains central to Judaism."[43] Furthermore, Christians may learn from their Jewish neighbors, including the ancient rabbis, how to make allowance for multiple readings of a biblical passage.[44]

Univocality of the Christian Bible?

The Christmas standard canonical narrative imposes a univocality on the bible as if it speaks in one voice about theological matters. The narrative assumes that these biblical texts—written across centuries in various locales—tell the same Christocentric story, i.e., that Genesis 3 and Luke 1 agree regarding the Christmas story. It depends on an understanding of Christian Scripture as a theologically univocal text with a single understanding of Jesus's role. The standard canonical narrative bears the influence of Origen's hermeneutical assumption, as Ellen Davis describes it: "Israel's Scripture is a unity, which in its entirety points to Jesus Christ."[45]

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[41] Patricia K. Tull, "'Isaiah 'Twas Foretold It': Helping the Church Interpret the Prophets," in *Strange Fire: Reading the Bible after the Holocaust* (ed. Tod Linafelt; New York: New York University Press, 2000): 192-207, here 202.

[42] Walter Brueggemann, "A Fissure Always Uncontained," in *Strange Fire: Reading the Bible after the Holocaust* (ed. Tod Linafelt; New York: New York University Press, 2000), 62-75, here 64. See also his "Reading from the Day 'In Between,'" in *A Shadow of Glory: Reading the New Testament after the Holocaust* (ed. Tod Linafelt; New York: Routledge, 2002), 105-116.

[43] Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, "Antisemitism in Biblical Interpretation: Causes, Examples, Suggestions," *Interpretation* 79(3) 2025: 220-233, here 229.

[44] See James L. Kugel, *The Bible As It Was* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997) and Marc Zvi Brettler, Peter Enns, and Daniel J. Harrington, S.J., *The Bible and the Believer: How to Read the Bible Critically and Religiously* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

In a post-Shoah world, Christians need to explore polyphony as a positive and fruitful attribute of the Christian Bible. As noted above, an interpretive framework need not be singular, and the bible's witness need not be univocal. Christians have often listened only for unison within a contrapuntal text.[46] Consider the four gospels as a brief example. The early church decided not to include one definitive gospel in its new collection of sacred writings, but rather four separate books, each standing side by side and witnessing in its own way to the story of Jesus. Mark and Matthew, for example, may sing in harmony at points, but a study of their content makes it difficult to imagine the books singing in unison. A claim concerning the unified message of the bible must first struggle to hear Mark and Matthew in unison, then find a way to bring Deuteronomy, Ezekiel, and Song of Songs into this song.

In a quest for narrative and theological unity, some biblical books are marginalized in the standard canonical narrative. This standardized narrative does not reflect the reality of the bible's diverse content, given its numerous authors, places of composition, and time periods. However, unity of story and unity of theological perspective are not necessarily required theologically. The church's attempt to hear one message across the canon is not a theological mandate. This way of reading is certainly a part of the Christian tradition, but it can be revisited in light of recent biblical scholarship's highlighting of multiple theological and generic perspectives. The perceived unity of the Bible as the interpretive framework is not the only way to read theologically. It is perhaps even more theologically fruitful to begin with a polyphonic Bible. Theological univocality is not a prerequisite for the bible to speak authoritatively.

Supersessionism

The Christmas standard canonical narrative, as narrated by the nine lessons and their introductory statements, is read in a linear sequence from Genesis to

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[45] Ellen F. Davis, *Opening Israel's Scriptures* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 365. See also Brian Barrett, "'Of His Fullness We Have All Received': Origen on Scripture's Unity," in *Studia Patristica Vol. XCIV* (Leuven: Peeters, 2017): 211-218.

[46] To foreground the diversity of the biblical witness and to claim uncertainty about the unity of the Bible is a characteristic of biblical scholarship. R. Kendall Soulen, *Irrevocable: The Name of God and the Unity of the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2022), 7, notes "Many contemporary biblical scholars are so impressed by the Bible's diversity that they passionately resist the suggestion that it can be meaningfully interpreted as a unity. The best that can be done, they maintain, is to understand the Bible's components singly and on their own terms, without attempting to understand them as contributing to or participating in a deeper unity."

Isaiah to the gospels, creating the appearance of supersessionism or replacement theology.[47] Supersessionism, as defined by Susannah Heschel, is:

> the appropriation by the New Testament and the early church of Judaism's central theological teachings, including messiah, eschatology, apocalypticism, election, and Israel, as well as its scriptures, its prophets, and even its God, while denying the continued validity of those teachings and texts within Judaism as an independent path to salvation.[48]

The retelling of the biblical story in the nine lessons erases ancient Israelites and Jews from the story of salvation. As Paul van Buren notes,

> Generally, it appears that the church does not think it need give thanks for the long history of God's dealing with Israel, or of Israel's life with God prior to the coming of Christ. It seems to be content with creation and "the fall," apparently not thinking that the story of what God then did about the situation by calling Abraham and his heirs, and in calling Moses and giving the Torah, is a matter that should concern the church.[49]

The Christmas standard canonical narrative ignores Israel as the chosen people of God. More generously, it sees Israel as merely instrumental, the temporary scaffolding necessary for the coming of Jesus. The lessons, as sequenced, make this story seem like the inevitable and only story a congregant could tell.

Christians today do not typically support explicit supersessionism—for example, claiming that the covenant with the Jews is no longer valid. However, when interpreting the bible, Christians are tempted to fall into supersessionistic readings that portray Christianity as the natural successor to ancient Israel and Judaism. Christians share at least some of these biblical texts with Judaism, but the Christmas standard canonical narrative reads them through the lens of a single tradition, leading to theological and ethical challenges. Christians may create helpful and beautiful interpretations that are both faithful to their tradition and not harmful to Judaism. However, if Christians are not diligent, some readings may ignore the presence of Judaism or assume that Christians are the only religious people reading these biblical books.

For example, a twelfth-century Latin manuscript of Jerome's commentary on the biblical book of Isaiah contains a miniature drawing of Jerome and Isaiah. Jerome looks up at Isaiah and says: "Dic tu Isaias, dic testimonium Christi" ("Tell, Isaiah, tell the testimony of Christ"). I detect supersessionistic tendencies in this drawing, as Isaiah is subtly portrayed as an evangelist, rather than a prophet. Isaiah's message pertains to Christ. The book of Isaiah then becomes a Christian book as opposed to a prophetic book shared by Jews and Christians, thereby erasing Isaiah's prophetic ministry and his relevance to Judaism today. Instead, acknowledging Isaiah's role as a prophet to both Christians and Jews leads to dialogue about this prophet and his message. Seeing Judaism as a living tradition can help Christians move beyond their provincialism.[50]

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[47] See Edward Kessler, *An Introduction to Jewish-Christian Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 170-79; Tyler D. Mayfield, *Unto Us A Child Is Born: Isaiah, Advent, and Our Jewish Neighbors* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), 47-53.

[48] Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and The Bible in Nazi Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 26.

[49] Paul van Buren, *According to the Scriptures: The Origins of the Gospel and of the Church's Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 78.

Viewing the Old Testament as a Problem in Need of a Solution

The Christmas standard canonical narrative primarily reads the Old Testament selections as a problem that the New Testament solves. Although the service may not intend to explicitly communicate the relationship between the testaments, it conveys a message about the entire Christian canon whenever it brings the testaments into conversation. In this festival service, the Old Testament readings, as understood by this specific Christian tradition, are entirely dependent on the New Testament readings. They point out the *problem* of humanity's sin; they offer a *promise* of a messiah; they call forth a *prediction* about this messianic figure. It is often assumed that these theological elements will only be resolved through the New Testament readings about Jesus.

The theological implication of reading the Old Testament primarily as a problem needing a solution is that it forces the Old Testament to depend on the New Testament for meaning. However, a New Testament passage is not theologically superior to an Old Testament passage simply because of its placement in the New Testament section, its authorship later in time, or even its mention of Jesus. As Johanna Bos notes, "God's presence with the world permeates the entire Bible, and did not begin with the arrival of Jesus Christ."[51] Both testaments contain wisdom and revelation. Many Christian interpreters today contend that Old Testament passages contain profound theological truth without reference to or support from the New Testament.

Problematic Prophecy-Fulfillment Paradigm

As used in the Christmas standard canonical narrative, the two Isaiah passages are read within a problematic prophecy-fulfillment paradigm.[52] This paradigm interprets the Old Testament lessons as unfulfilled predictive prophecies, awaiting the arrival of Christ to bring about their proper fulfillment. This method of reading is quite old, dating back to Second Temple Judaism, and is frequently employed in the Gospel of Matthew.

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[50] Marianne Moyaert, *Fragile Identities: Towards a Theology of Interreligious Hospitality* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), 70; Paul F. Knitter, *One Earth, Many Religions: Multifaith Dialogue and Global Responsibility* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1995), 456.

[51] Johanna W. H. van Wijk-Bos, "Responsible Christian Exegesis of Hebrew Scripture," in *The Peoples' Companion to the Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 78-82, here 80.

[52] Tyler D. Mayfield, *Unto Us A Child Is Born: Isaiah, Advent, and Our Jewish Neighbors* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), 21-26.

The prophecy-fulfillment paradigm creates several theological challenges. First, it supports a narrow understanding of ancient Israelite prophecy as primarily the prediction of the long-term future. However, Isaiah (or any other ancient Israelite prophet) attempts to convey a reliable message about the real theological and political issues of the day to an ancient audience. They are not principally concerned about events centuries later. In fact, much of the prophetic message concerned social critique of the prophets' contemporary situations. Reading the Hebrew prophets as distant future-tellers stretches historical credibility and misrepresents their self-understanding. As The Pontifical Biblical Commission notes in *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*:

> It would be wrong to consider the prophecies of the Old Testament as some kind of photographic anticipations of future events. All the texts, including those which later we read as messianic prophecies, already had an immediate import and meaning for their contemporaries before attaining a fuller meaning for future hearers….The original task of the prophet was to help his contemporaries understand the events and the times they lived in from God's viewpoint.[53]

The stubborn understanding of prophecy as prediction about Jesus can lead to incorrect and harmful attitudes toward Judaism and Jews who do not read prophetic literature in this way. As *God's Unfailing Word: Theological and Practical Perspectives on Christian-Jewish Relations* notes:

> Those who teach and preach in the Church of England should avoid implying that the meaning of Old Testament prophecy points to Christ in such a direct and obvious way that anyone who denies it must be refusing to pay attention to the text or be somehow defective in their understanding. Such implications feed directly into the negative stereotyping of Jewish people that forms the fundamental structure of antisemitism.[54]

Second, when readers assume that the Old Testament supplies a promise that the New Testament will fulfill, the Old Testament becomes increasingly irrelevant as an authoritative text for the community's life. This type of reading presupposes that the Old Testament is incomplete and cannot stand alone as a witness to God's actions. Yet, for Jews, the Tanakh does stand as Scripture without the New Testament. Even for Christians, the Old Testament stands as a faithful witness to God.

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[53] Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2002), II, A, 5.

[54] Faith and Order Commission of the Church of England, *God's Unfailing Word: Theological and Practical Perspectives on Christian-Jewish Relations* (London: Church House Publishing, 2019), 67-68.

The Old Testament is a story of God's people who are repeatedly redeemed, not the story of a people waiting for redemption.

Third, the prophecy-fulfillment paradigm can also create a theological sense that the prophecy does not speak to the modern situation. This way of reading the prophetic text emphasizes its single fulfillment and ignores the many times a prophetic word speaks into new situations. What can Christians do with an already fulfilled text? How can this prophetic text speak to current situations if its truest fulfillment has been found earlier in history? The language and theology of prophecy and fulfillment create a mostly closed system. One text directly references another text, creating a closed loop that makes it challenging to be presented as a prophetic word.

Ignoring Historical / Literary Contexts

The historical and literary contexts of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament selections are not considered important to their Christian interpretation. For example, the first lesson in the service uses Genesis to introduce the Christian understanding of the fall, a doctrine that developed many centuries later in an entirely different context after the ancient composition of Genesis 3 as one distinct Christian interpretation of Genesis. Ultimately, Genesis and Isaiah are read almost wholly with recourse to traditional Christian doctrine concerning sin and salvation in the first four lessons. The prefatory statements used by King's College display a complete lack of interest in historical and literary contexts; they serve to reify the Christmas standard canonical narrative as each biblical passage is read.

Of course, historical and literary readings are not the only way to approach the biblical text, especially during a Christmas Eve service. However, the introductory statements used at King's College often ignore the text's plain sense and impose a singular Christian theological understanding of it. Attention to contextual matters (such as the immediate literary context or historical development of a religious concept) may aid congregants as they both listen to these ancient biblical passages and create theological meanings. Congregants need not seek a historical reading as a means of disengagement from Christian interpretations of passages. Historical and literary contexts inform numerous Christian and even Christological interpretations. To read historically and literarily is not necessarily to abandon a Christian interpretation.

Lessons Represent a Narrow Selection Across the Biblical Canon

The nine lessons do not represent a diverse and wide selection of biblical books and genres. They originate from five biblical books. Genesis and Isaiah represent the whole of the Old Testament. Three gospels represent the New Testament. Reducing the beautiful diversity of the Hebrew Bible to two well-recognized books obscures the canon's multiplicity. Entire genres are missing. The Psalms—a collection particularly dear to the Christian tradition—are notably absent. The epistles are missing, too. Of course, any nine selected passages from the Christian Bible will present a limited understanding of the entire collection. However, these nine selections, in particular, portray a narrow vision from five biblical books. The limitations are especially acute given that the service claims to represent the whole story of Scripture in the Bidding Prayer, which states, "Let us read and mark in Holy Scripture the tale of the loving purposes of God."

To summarize this section: many of the interpretive details related to the lessons—including their selection and their sequence—as well as the introductory statements to the lessons participate in a flawed Christian interpretive paradigm, the Christmas standard canonical narrative. This narrow interpretation of the biblical Christmas story, which utilizes a Christology that views Jesus as the personal Savior from sin for the whole world, presents many challenges to a Christian pluralistic reading. Many of the prefaces do not account for the actual details of the textual passage. They ignore the text's plain sense and impose specific Christian theological understandings on it.

"To Hear Once More the Message of the Angels": Lessons for a Reimagined Christmas Eve Festival Service

In this section, I suggest selecting lessons for a reimagined Christmas Eve festival of Nine Lessons and Carols. Within the discussion of each proposal, I also propose examples of possible new lessons.

Poetic, Rather than Linear, Sequencing of Lessons

Many of the concerns noted above regarding univocality, supersessionism, and the prophecy-fulfillment paradigm could be remedied meaningfully by a shift away from a canonical narrative sequencing of the lessons, i.e., the story-focused reading of the biblical passages in canonical order from Genesis to Isaiah to the three gospels (which are admittedly and curiously out of canonical order). The linear approach of the current nine lessons may have the strength of telling a compelling story. Still, it also maintains the illusion of an inevitable, unified theological trajectory of progress both in time and in theological depth. However, the bible is not a unified literary story.

In a post-Shoah world, Christians need poetic, polyphonic, and diverse arrangements of biblical passages. Christians in this moment need a disruption to the sin-salvation story of the Christmas standard canonical narrative. The sequencing of lessons can be free from the need to create a coherent story. Further, reading biblical passages in canonical order is not a theological virtue. Perhaps the "message of the angels" is more like a poem.

I suggest a poetic arrangement of the selected lessons based on the theme(s) of a Christmas service.[55] Two chosen biblical passages may contain literary echoes or thematic resonances that invite reading them together. For example, Genesis 1 and John 1 or Isaiah 2:1-5 (paralleled in Micah 4:1-4) and Psalm 85:10. Or the Christmas stories in Matthew and Luke could be separated by other Scripture readings so that the gospels' telling of Jesus's birth is not the culmination but a feature throughout the service. For example, readings could include Proverbs 8:22-30, John 1:1-14, Galatians 4:4-7, and Matthew 1:18-25, among others. This type of arrangement of the lessons does not signify unified linear progress but can center on the story of Jesus's birth as appropriate for the Christmas season.

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[55] This type of poetic arrangement may result in the need to rewrite the traditional Bidding Prayer used in the festival at King's College. Its phrase "the tale of the loving purposes of God from the first days of our disobedience, until the glorious redemption . . ." suggests a linear story.

Additionally, a poetic arrangement grounded in a Christmas theme may benefit from selected lessons from across the biblical canon. Only two Old Testament books and three New Testament books are included in the traditional service's nine Scripture lessons. Five biblical books for nine lessons. I suggest diversifying these selections by incorporating Scripture readings from the wisdom tradition, the Psalms (e.g., Psalm 8), and epistles (e.g., Philippians 2:5-11), as well as various prophetic books.

Sharing Scriptures

How might the approach to the selection and interpretation of passages from the Old Testament shift if Christians take seriously the notion that these are shared scriptures? This section of the Christian Bible is not for Christians alone. These passages have been read and interpreted within Judaism for centuries by people of faith seeking inspiration and transformation. Paul M. van Buren notes:

> The Scriptures which Jews and Christians share are of course Israel's first of all, for they were written by Jews, preserved by Jews and addressed to Jews. They were all written before there ever was a church. They are the storehouse of Israel's memories of its own past history with God and of God's history with this his people. They are Israel's memories of and reflection upon the oldest, longest, and stormiest love affair of recorded history, that between God, the Creator of the heavens and the earth, and Israel, the people of his choice, a love affair still going on to this day, with all its ups and downs, between the Jewish people and their God, the God of Israel. The Scriptures are, therefore and in every sense of the word, Israel's. They belong to the Jews. The Jewish people read them as their own.[56]

In response to the Christian participation in "Israel-forgetfulness"—Soulen's name for the idea that Christians generally ignore God's covenant with Israel—the selection of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament texts for a Lessons and Carols service ought to intentionally paint a picture of God's relationship with God's people at various points in history. The intention would be not to create a coherent story but to testify creatively to God's presence. For example, the service could include God's covenant with Abraham in Genesis 17:1-8, Moses's encounter with God in Exodus 3:1-6, God's covenant with David in 2 Samuel 7, Psalm 105, Jeremiah's new covenant in Jeremiah 31:31-34, and Hosea's metaphorical image of God as Parent in Hosea 11. One colleague noted her longing for a selection of biblical passages centered on the theme of birth stories.[57]

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[56] Paul M. van Buren, "On Reading Someone Else's Mail: The Church and Israel's Scriptures," in *Die Hebräische Bibel und ihre Zweifache Nachgeschichte: Festschrift für Rolf Rendtorff zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. E. Blum et al. (Neukirchen–Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1990), 595–606.

Accurate Preface for Each Lesson – or No Preface

The preface to each Scripture lesson need not frame the reading in a theologically narrow way according to a sin-salvation framework and its accompanying limited Christology nor ignore the historical and literary contexts. The preface, if necessary to include, could provide historical and/or literary context that might be helpful for the Scripture reading. Alternatively, the preface could provide the ligaments that connect the new selections to each other in a poetic manner.

I suggest creating a one-sentence preface for each reading that accurately summarizes the passage or establishes a theological connection to the passage immediately before or after. If this contextualization is not helpful, then omit the introductory statement altogether. For example, if the service includes Isaiah 9:2-7, a preface could state, "An announcement of joy at the birth of a new leader for ancient Israel." If the service includes Isaiah 11, then a preface could declare, "An ancient prophetic word about new, wise leadership for the people of God." If the service includes Luke 2:8-16, a preface could proclaim, "Luke recalls the angels' announcement of good news to the shepherds."

A Polyphonic Conversation Between Old Testament and New Testament

One way to shift the focus from a linear approach is to create a more conversational approach, allowing various biblical texts to speak to one another. Specifically, Christians can create a conversation between an Old Testament passage and a New Testament one. This conversation celebrates a different relationship between the Old and New Testaments, one that is more complex, in which the Old Testament does not simply provide "background" or even "foundational" material for the New Testament. This approach requires Christians to reject the implicit theological idea that the Old Testament is a problem in need of a New Testament solution.

This paradigm of understanding the testaments is consistent with Erich Zenger's proposed "hermeneutic of canonical dialogic discourse," which offers a way forward despite its complicated title.[58] He emphasizes how the two testaments function together as one Christian Bible and how the reader can bring texts from the two testaments into conversation without either taking precedence. They are equal partners with equal status as Scripture. Together, the two testaments create a polyphonic text that speaks with many voices. These voices need to be placed into conversation with each other, but not in a way that foresees the New Testament as the dominant voice.

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[57] The idea of birth stories was the suggestion of my colleague, Patricia K. Tull.

[58] Erich Zenger, *Einleitung in das Alte Testament* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2012), 21.

The service could contain six or eight readings, rather than the traditional nine, to create this dialogic discourse. In addition, a smaller number of readings would allow for reading whole passages, rather than closely circumscribed verses. This approach would limit the proof-texting of key phrases or ideas within passages that are out of context. Additionally, an even number of lessons provides the opportunity to have an equal number of readings from the Old and New Testaments.

For example, a service could pair Genesis 1 and John 1 together, not to present a prediction or type and its fulfilment, but to offer two divergent yet profound understandings regarding the world's beginnings. Or Proverbs 8:22-30 and John 1. Alternatively, Matthew 2 and the verse it quotes in Micah 5:2. Or Hannah's song in 1 Samuel 2:1-10 and Mary's song (the Magnificat) in Luke 1:46-55 (one could add Deborah's song in Judges 5 and Simeon's song in Luke 2). In fact, a service could be ordered alternating between Old Testament readings and New Testament readings to highlight the conversational nature of the bible.

Prophets Speak to the Contemporary Moment

Allowing the prophets to speak directly to the moment (instead of predicting the long-term future about Jesus) provides an antidote to the prophecy-fulfillment paradigm. As Ellen Davis notes, "we like to keep the frame of reference for prophecy within the 'safe' confines of the Bible, by reading prophecy solely as illuminating what has already happened—the birth, life, and death of Jesus Christ—and not allowing it to meddle much in the current lives of Christians."[59] The festival service might contain meaningful and relevant readings from the prophets. These readings would be chosen not because of their supposed predication of Jesus's birth but to celebrate the ongoing prophetic vision needed during Christmas. These readings could include ancient prophetic visions we await today, such as Isaiah 2 and 65.

I also suggest reading passages such as Isaiah 42:5-10, Isaiah 43:1-5, and Isaiah 61:1-4. These are beautiful prophetic hymns and promises that are relevant to any moment for people of faith. Alternatively, the service could include some of the traditional prophetic texts used in this service, but with new prefaces and not sequenced in a way that conveys a predictive quality.

"Be It This Christmas Eve Our Care and Delight": Conclusion

This article reviews the nine Scripture lessons often used in the King's College Christmas Eve *A Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols* in light of Christian post-

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[59] Ellen F. Davis, *Biblical Prophecy: Perspectives for Christian Theology, Discipleship, and Ministry* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014), xii.

Shoah hermeneutics. I argue that these biblical selections and their prefatory interpretive statements participate in a narrow Christian hermeneutical framework, the Christmas standard canonical narrative. This canonical narrative presents itself as the single interpretive paradigm for the bible and imposes univocality onto the Bible's diverse messages. Furthermore, this canonical narrative creates the appearance of supersessionism by ignoring Israel's role in the biblical story. The Christmas standard canonical narrative presents the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament as a problem in need of a solution in the New Testament. Thus, these particular biblical readings in this specific sequence are ethically and theologically problematic in our contemporary post-Holocaust world. I suggest that the selection of new lessons for this Lessons and Carols service shift away from a canonical narrative sequencing of the lessons to poetic, polyphonic, and diverse arrangements of biblical passages, thereby disrupting the traditional *Christmas standard canonical narrative*. By selecting new biblical texts and creating innovative arrangements, Christians can craft a service that more accurately reflects their contemporary Christologies and their neighborly commitments in a religiously pluralistic, post-Holocaust world.