

An Overview of
Revised Common Lectionary Daily Readings

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Historical Background

A lectionary is a list or table of readings (“lections”) from scripture. As early as the fourth century the church began to value the discipline of private and corporate reading of the Bible.

The Revised Common Lectionary (1992), based on the *Ordo Lectionem Missae* of the Roman Catholic Church (1969) and on *The Common Lectionary* of the Consultation on Common Texts (1983), is a response to diverse voices in the ecumenical church for a comprehensive lectionary.

For example, William D. Maxwell proposed a two or three year lectionary with Sunday readings

from the Old Testament, a psalm, an epistle and a gospel as early as 1936 in his book *An Outline of Christian Worship*.

More recently, the value of a daily lectionary related to the Sunday readings was demonstrated by the excellent work of Gail Ramshaw published in *Between Sundays* (Augsburg Fortress, 1997). This course of scripture provided three Old Testament readings, one gospel reading, one epistle reading, and one psalm or canticle reading for the six weekdays, assigned one per day. They were selected most often for their relationship to the Revised Common Lectionary readings of the prior Sunday. Her careful and scholarly work was gratefully incorporated, along with 2,000 additional readings, in *Revised Common Lectionary Daily Readings*.

Broad ecumenical enthusiasm for the Revised Common Lectionary, a three-year cycle of readings, reflects the hunger of Christians to explore the Bible together. The three years (A, B, and C) begin on the First Sunday of Advent and center on one of the three synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), with selections from the Gospel of John used in all three years. The portrait of Jesus Christ in the reading from each gospel provides the focus for each Sunday or holy day.

In the first half of the church year, from Advent through the Day of Pentecost, the first reading (usually Old Testament, occasionally from Acts or from the Apocrypha) is chosen for its relation to the gospel reading. The second reading, from the epistles, is also frequently related to the gospel. The psalm or canticle relates most closely to the first reading. In the second half of the church year, called either Ordinary Time or Sundays after Pentecost, two distinct options for the series of first readings are offered. The same assigned epistle and gospel readings remain paired in both series. The option described as semicontinuous reading (*lectio continua*) provides

a selected part of the Old Testament or Apocrypha, paired with a related psalm or canticle. The option described as complementary provides an Old Testament or Apocrypha reading and a related psalm or canticle complementing the gospel for the day. It is recommended that users follow one series and not mix the two. Where a reading from the Apocrypha is indicated, an alternate from the canonical Old Testament is also provided.

Why a New Daily Lectionary?

The decision to prepare *Revised Common Lectionary Daily Readings* was shaped by the predicament of churches and persons already using the Revised Common Lectionary but unable to relate its table of readings to existing daily lectionaries. The readings provided in those lectionaries were chosen to stand independent of assigned scripture proclaimed in the principal worship of the community of faith on Sundays.

This isolation of Sundays from weekdays, combined with a desire to include scripture texts not found in the Revised Common Lectionary, suggested the value of a comprehensive, three year set of daily readings that would intentionally relate to and support the Sundays and festivals with their appointed readings. In order to accent the relationship of Sunday and the other days of the week, this lectionary proposes that the daily readings revolve around Sunday as the axis of the week. The weekly cycle begins on Thursday with scripture that prepares the people of God to hear with more understanding the readings to be proclaimed on the approaching Sunday. The cycle continues on Monday through Wednesday with readings that extend and reflect on the themes of the Sunday readings. Festivals and special days that occur on a weekday use their own appointed readings.

The Pattern of Revised Common Lectionary Daily Readings

The weekly pattern of the daily lectionary includes two readings each day. In addition, the psalm or canticle for the coming Sunday is indicated for use from Thursday through Sunday, and another psalm used from Monday through Wednesday. A brief descriptor indicating the theme of the passage is included. Readings rich in content and relevance may appear in more than one place in the listings. The principal source of the readings for each day is illustrated in the following table. (Where “Old Testament” is noted, readings are occasionally from Acts or the Apocrypha. Where “Psalm” is noted, biblical canticles other than the psalms are occasionally used.)

<i>Readings that Prepare for Sunday</i>	
Thursday	Old Testament and epistle
Friday	Old Testament and epistle
Saturday	Old Testament and gospel
Psalm	Psalm for approaching Sunday, repeated daily
<i>Sunday Readings</i>	
Old Testament	
Psalm	
Epistle	
Gospel	
<i>Readings that Reflect on Sunday</i>	
Monday	Old Testament and epistle
Tuesday	Old Testament and epistle
Wednesday	Old Testament and gospel
Psalm	New psalm or alternate Sunday psalm, repeated daily

The Appeal of a Daily Lectionary

A lectionary can be an eye-opener to the vast salvation narrative contained in scripture. It invites us to engage texts we have not read before, and to read again familiar ones that may surprise us with previously un-mined meaning. The selections listed in *Revised Common Lectionary Daily Readings* were carefully chosen by the compilers to support, expand, and provide additional context for the Sunday and festival readings of the liturgical year appointed in the Revised Common Lectionary. Discovering these riches requires diligent commitment to engage the texts.

The Selection Process

In preparing this table of daily readings, the compilers were guided by principles used to create the Revised Common Lectionary. Among these principles was the decision to relate the use of the psalm or canticle to the first reading. This required two distinct sets of psalms for the two series offered in the time after Pentecost, the semicontinuous and complementary series. Even with this diversity it was not possible to use the entire psalter. By adding a new set of psalms for Monday through Wednesday, however, material is now included from *all* 150 psalms. In limited cases, some psalm verses remain unused: for example, the vindictive complaint in Psalm 109:1-20, or the prophetic words in Psalm 119:45-60. However, selected verses with similar meaning were chosen. In this way the message of all the psalms is present even in the absence of particular verses.

Regard for the place of women as well as men in the history of salvation was another principle applied to the selection of texts. In the daily readings the stories of Miriam, Deborah, Ruth, Esther, widows, Mary of Magdala, Lydia, and others are more fully represented. The book of Ruth, for example, is included in the Sunday readings once in year A and twice in year B. The

daily lectionary provides 17 additional readings from the book of Ruth

Another principle identified by the compilers was allowing for multiple perspectives on a specific text, depending on where the text is assigned in relation to other scripture texts and in relation to the liturgical year. Using the book of Ruth once again as illustration, we note the relationship of the weekday selections to the first reading for the “axis” Sunday. The fidelity of Ruth to Naomi and the Moabite people and God’s fidelity to Ruth and her posterity are related to God’s fidelity to Israel in the Isaiah reading for Advent 3 of year A. The connection is thematic. In a similar way, for thematic reasons, Ruth is read again in the days following Proper 27 in the complementary series of year A. In this instance, where the first reading for Sunday (I Kings 17:8-16) tells of God feeding Elijah and the widow of Zarephath, Ruth’s story is told on Monday through Wednesday to show the compassion of God and of Naomi’s kin for two widows, both Naomi and Ruth.

Another selection principle is the provision for additional narrative continuity. In the semicontinuous readings of year B, Ruth is the first reading for two successive Sundays and the full book of Ruth is read from the Thursday before Proper 26 through the Sunday of Proper 27, i.e., for a period of eleven days. Additional narrative continuity is the result, though the sequence of the text has been adjusted to accommodate the Sunday readings. The stories of Rebekah, Rachel, Esther, Hulda, and others are similarly expanded in the daily readings.

The compilation of both the Revised Common Lectionary and the related Daily Readings has sought to be sensitive to anti-Semitism, exclusive nationalism, and the culturally limited domestic codes of Israel and the early church. Care has been taken not to treat the Old Testament as a Christianized book no longer central to the life of a continuing, vital, and faithful contemporary Jewish community. The use of the Old Testament on most Sundays and each

weekday affords the opportunity to read more broadly, although through Christian lenses, precious stories that Jews and Christians share in common today. New Testament readings that refer to specific Jewish opponents of the Christian movement, while included in the readings, often begin and conclude in ways that provide adequate contextual sense, so as to avoid the contradictory and negative stereotyping of all Jews as opponents in the era of the earliest church.

Concern about apparent ethnocentric nationalism in some of the biblical record pressed the compilers to identify the rich witness of scripture to God's love for the entire world and signs of that love in the relationship of peoples. The hospitality of Egypt in the time of Joseph, the positive behavior of Israel toward aliens residing in the community of faith, the love of God for nations beyond Israel, and similar narratives are represented in selected daily first readings for each of the three years. Israel's faithlessness, followed by repentance, is not distinguished rigidly from Nineveh's sin and its repentance before a merciful God. Gospel stories of healing the sick are linked to Israel's stories of healing foreigners like Naaman. The seldom used story of Uzziah (2 Chronicles 26:1-21), one of Israel's kings, afflicted with leprosy for usurping the role of the temple priests in the offering yet remaining unrepentant, is related to the healing of proud but obedient Naaman, Peter's healing of a lame beggar, and Jesus' healing of a leper (Epiphany 6, year A).

The domestic and other codes (rules) of the Bible, as well as other narratives that are conditioned by the cultural context in which they arose, presented a difficult challenge to the compilers. For example, scripture passages have sometimes been used to demonstrate suppression of women, undervalue children, equate same-gender relationships with same-gender rape or temple prostitution, or give slavery the appearance of divine sanction. Such passages have been omitted from the readings or set in a holistic frame of reference that acknowledges

them while affirming larger truths. For example, Genesis 19:1-29, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, listed in the daily complementary series (year A), is selected to show God's saving compassion for Lot and his family in a hostile world.

Using the Daily Readings

This daily lectionary is intended primarily for individual, family, or small group use. A brief devotional order is suggested in the published text:

the lighting of a candle or lamp

a song or hymn

the psalm

the first reading

a short time of silence and reflection

the second reading

a silence

prayer for the needs of others, for the world, and for one's self

The readings may also be adapted for corporate worship, including holy communion, on weekdays if desired. For such services, scripture may be selected from the whole collection of readings for the week, including a gospel for services of holy communion.

Postscript

Revised Common Lectionary Daily Readings is subtitled "Proposed by the Consultation on Common Texts." In its current form it is offered for use and evaluation, with an openness to revision and updating in the future. It harbors no claim to perfection! You are invited to share your insights and suggestions with the Consultation on Common Texts at any time. Visit www.commontexts.org to offer your comments.