

THE PUBLIC READING OF SCRIPTURE IN EARLY JUDAISM

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I. INTRODUCTION

The public reading of Scripture has long been a central component of Jewish practice. The special significance of this component lies partly in its great antiquity: the communal reading of Scripture is pre-rabbinic, and its earliest attestations, even in rabbinic literature, provide a unique glimpse into the world of first-century Judaism. Beyond this, however, the public reading of Scripture is also significant because of the ways in which the Rabbis themselves shaped and formed the practices that they inherited. Much can be learned about the theology of rabbinic Judaism from the Rabbis' appropriation and development of Scripture reading as part of the liturgy.

The study of ancient Jewish liturgy has a special significance for students of early Christianity. It is generally accepted that specific elements of early Christian worship can best be understood in light of the Jewish practices out of which they are thought to have arisen.¹ The earliest layer of material is believed to offer potential insights into the liturgical context of the NT,² and later traditions are used for comparative purposes to trace the development of Christian liturgical practices during the patristic period.³ This approach has yielded many important insights, and there is every reason to think that the origins and development of the Scripture reading rubric in early Jewish (and later, specifically rabbinic) liturgy will have the same comparative value.

Yet, the use of Jewish liturgical practices to reconstruct early Christian worship is not without difficulties. One of the major problems is the fact that many Christian historians, to some extent following older Jewish scholarship, have operated with the assumption that Jewish liturgy was essentially fixed and uniform in the first century AD. This assumption, however, cannot be reconciled with the available evidence. Recent scholarship on the history of Jewish worship has painted a more complex picture of Jewish liturgical development, thus forcing scholars of Christian liturgy to rethink the potential

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¹ This approach was exemplified especially by Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (2d ed.; London: Continuum, 1945; new ed. 2005).

² For example, the Scripture reading and homily of early Judaism are presupposed in Acts 13:15; see Larry W. Hurtado, *At the Origins of Christian Worship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 33.

³ As an example, certain prayers in book seven of the *Apostolic Constitutions* appear to have been modeled after Jewish benedictions; see Richard Sarason, "On the Use of Method in the Modern Study of Jewish Liturgy," in *Approaches to Ancient Judaism: Theory and Practice* (ed. W. S. Green; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1978) 111–12.

relationships between early Jewish and Christian forms of worship.⁴ Out of this new research has arisen greater awareness of the diversity and flexibility in the earlier stages of development, and also a more skeptical stance toward the use of later documents to reconstruct the customs of earlier times.⁵ Of course, total skepticism toward rabbinic reports is unwarranted, and one cannot dismiss older historical and philological studies as having nothing to offer.⁶ But when the sources present a picture of diversity, or when no evidence exists for a given practice at a certain time and place, one must avoid simply harmonizing one tradition with another or an earlier time period with a later one.

There is particular need to keep these principles in mind when attempting to describe the public reading of Scripture in early Judaism. Most works that have addressed this topic with an eye toward the Christian comparative context have not given enough attention to questions of method. In general, more attention needs to be paid to chronology and development, as well as to issues of diversity and fixity.⁷ It is also extremely important to avoid construing the data in specifically Christian terms.⁸ Furthermore, the Scripture reading component must be seen from within the whole context of Jewish worship and thought.⁹ The present study attempts to fill these needs by

⁴ See Sarason, "On the Use of Method" 97–172; and Stefan Reif, *Judaism and Hebrew Prayer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). Cf. Paul Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship* (2d ed.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) 23–46.

⁵ On the issue of diversity and flexibility in the development of Jewish prayer, see Joseph Heinemann, *Prayer in the Talmud: Forms and Patterns* (trans. R. Sarason; Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 1977) 37–76. On the topic of skepticism in using rabbinic sources to describe first century Judaism, see Jacob Neusner, "The Use of the Later Rabbinic Evidence for the Study of First-Century Pharisaism," in *Approaches to Ancient Judaism: Theory and Practice* 215–28.

⁶ As stated by Reif, *Judaism and Hebrew Prayer* 92: "To accept uncritically the historicity of all talmudic reports, particularly as they relate to events in the pre-Christian period, and the attribution of all statements and policy changes to particular personalities is as misguided as the approach that claims that all previous studies are antiquated and distinguished talmudists now obsolete and refuses to credit the rabbis with any credible information about the origin of their own religious traditions."

⁷ One can see a lack of attention to these issues in Ralph P. Martin, *Worship in the Early Church* (rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 18–27.

⁸ For example, Hughes O. Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Church, Volume I: The Biblical Period* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 104, describes a rabbinic homily as a "classic three-point sermon, each point taking off from a phrase in the text," which is said to be "as old as it is familiar." This could leave the misleading impression that rabbinic homilies were much like contemporary Christian sermons.

⁹ An excellent survey of the Scripture reading schedules in early Judaism can be found in Charles Perrot, "The Reading of the Bible in the Ancient Synagogue," in *Mikra* (ed. M. J. Mulder; Assen, Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1988) 137–59. Perrot is indeed sensitive to questions of method in his use of sources. Yet, he does not pay much attention to how the reading of Scripture was framed within its liturgical context. The framing, however, is very important, not only because the framing elements (e.g. blessings, translation, homily) are of interest in their own right, but also because they allow us to see more clearly the place of Scripture reading within the larger conceptual framework of Jewish worship. On the blessings, see the excellent study by Ruth Langer, "From Study of Scripture to a Reenactment of Sinai: The Emergence of the Synagogue Service," *Worship* 72 (1998) 43–67.

offering a survey of the ancient evidence for the public reading of Scripture in early Judaism, with due reference to older scholarship and to the insights of more recent studies.

Because our goal will be to describe the practice of public Scripture reading, other liturgical expressions of Scripture, such as the early practice of reciting the *Shema*, will not be addressed here. On the other hand, elements of the liturgy that were at some point attached directly to the Scripture reading will be included in our discussion. These elements include the translation of the Scripture portions, the homily, and the benedictions that accompany the reading. In a broad sense, our subject may be defined as the entire Scripture reading rubric in early Judaism. Nevertheless, the structuring element within this rubric is always the actual reading of the scriptural text.

II. THE EARLIEST DEVELOPMENT OF COMMUNAL SCRIPTURE READING IN JUDAISM

The first allusions to the public reading of "Scripture" are found in the biblical materials themselves. In Deut 31:10–13, Moses commands the priests and elders of Israel to read "this law" before the people every seven years. This prescription probably served as the foundation for the public reading of the "book of the covenant" described in 2 Kgs 23:1–3. In Neh 8:1–8, Ezra the scribe reads "the book of the law of Moses" to all the people at the Water Gate on the first day of the seventh month. Ezra stood on a wooden platform to read, and all the people stood up to listen. Then Ezra blessed God, and the people answered "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands, and then bowing their heads and prostrating themselves. The Levites and others gave the sense of what was read, interpreting (or translating) it for the people.¹⁰

Some elements of later practices appear in these texts, but in an obviously less developed form. Although the reading prescription mentioned in Deuteronomy and reflected in Kings indicates a fixed schedule, it is only done once every seven years. Furthermore, apart from the covenant reconfirmation, it lacks any real ritualization. The public reading in Nehemiah, on the other hand, has clear ceremonial components, such as the standing, the blessing, and the explanation. Clearly, during the OT period serious religious significance was already being placed on the public reading of the "Law." These accounts were extremely influential as models for the later development of formal Scripture reading ceremonies.

Unfortunately, we have no other clear evidence for the public reading of Scripture until the time of Philo. In *Som.* 2.127, Philo describes a challenge made against the Jews by a high-ranking prefect in Egypt, who asked the Jews in Egypt, if some sudden catastrophe should occur on the Sabbath, "will

¹⁰ Regarding the ideas of "interpreting" or "translating," the word in question, *קִפְּשׁ*, has been taken to mean "with interpretation," "with translation," or "paragraph by paragraph"; see H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah* (WBC 16; Waco, TX: Word, 1985) 277–79. It is the meaning "with translation" that is followed in rabbinic tradition; see *Gen. Rab.* 36.8: *מִפְּרֵשׁ וְהָ תַרְגּוּם*.

you sit in your conventicles (συναγωγίαις) and assemble your regular company and read in security your holy books, expounding any obscure point and in leisurely comfort discussing at length your ancestral philosophy?"¹¹ According to Philo's account, the Jews were meeting together in "synagogues," reading sacred books, explaining what was not clear, and discussing the contents.

As for the custom in Judea, Josephus affirms much the same practice. Describing Moses, the legislator of the Jewish people, Josephus writes: "He appointed the Law to be the most excellent and necessary form of instruction, ordaining, not that it should be heard once for all or twice or on several occasions, but that every week men should desert their other occupations and assemble to listen to the Law and to obtain a thorough and accurate knowledge of it, a practice which all other legislators seem to have neglected" (Ap. 2.175). As with Philo, Josephus reports a weekly gathering where holy books (specifically identified as the "Law" here) were read aloud and explained.

Also from this time period, we learn about the practice of Scripture reading from the "Theodotus inscription" from a synagogue in Jerusalem:

Theodotus, son of Vettenos the priest and synagogue leader (*archisynagogos*), son of a synagogue leader and grandson of a synagogue leader, built the synagogue for the reading of the Torah and studying of the commandments, and as a hostel with chambers and water installations to provide for the needs of itinerants from abroad, which his fathers, the elders and Simonides founded.¹²

A similar picture of the synagogue as a place of reading and instruction is found in Luke-Acts. Luke 4:16–19 reports that Jesus read from a scroll of the prophet Isaiah in a synagogue on the Sabbath "as was his custom." In Acts 13:15–16, Paul visits a synagogue in Antioch of Pisidia on the Sabbath, where the Law and the Prophets were read. Finally, Acts 15:21 claims that from early generations, Moses was read every Sabbath in the synagogue.

The synagogue in early Judaism was apparently a place where Scripture was read and studied every Sabbath. Yet, the Mishnah indicates that there were other customs of local Scripture reading. In *m. Taan.* 4:2, it is stated that, at the time when the priestly representative of a locality would officiate in the temple, "the Israelites who were from the same locality would come together to their own towns to read the story of Creation." Lee Levine suggests that the place for this public reading might have been a city gate, since no synagogue is mentioned.¹³ Whether at the city gate or in a synagogue building (Levine argues that the latter evolved out of the former),¹⁴ this text affirms that at an early period the reading of Scripture was taking place on special days of the year separate from the Sabbath reading.

One final piece of evidence for the earliest phase of communal Scripture reading is the public reading ceremony connected to the temple service. The Mishnah describes Torah reading ceremonies both for the high priest

¹¹ See also *Op.* 128.

¹² Cited in Steven Fine, *This Holy Place: On the Sanctity of the Synagogue during the Greco-Roman Period* (Chicago: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997) 30.

¹³ Lee Levine, "The Nature and Origin of the Palestinian Synagogue Reconsidered," *JBL* 115 (1996) 439–40.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 442–43.

(*m. Sot.* 7:7, *m. Yoma* 7:1–3) and for the king (*m. Sot.* 7:8). The high priest would read on the Day of Atonement. According to *m. Yoma* 7:1:

Then the high priest came to read. If he was minded to read in the linen garments he could do so; otherwise he would read in his own white vestment. The minister of the synagogue used to take a scroll of the Law and give it to the chief of the synagogue, and the chief of the synagogue gave it to the prefect, and the prefect gave it to the high priest, and the high priest received it standing. And he read “After the death . . .” (Lev 16) and “Now on the tenth day . . .” (Lev 23:26–32). Then he used to roll up the scroll of the Law and put it in his bosom and say, “More is written here than I have read out before you.” “On the tenth day . . .” (Num 29:7–11), which is in the book of Numbers, he recited by heart. Thereupon he recited eight benedictions: for the Law, for the temple-service, for the thanksgiving, for the forgiveness of sin, and for the temple separately, and for the Israelites separately, and for the priests separately; and for the rest a [general] prayer.

The scroll is brought from the synagogue and delivered to the high priest in stages, thus showing respect for his position. The high priest, however, honors the Torah by standing to receive it. The high priest reads portions appropriate to the Day of Atonement. Yet, he does not begin his reading with any kind of blessing, a fact which was considered problematic for later Rabbis, since this seemed to violate the principle of framing the reading with benedictions.¹⁵ Although nothing is said about the return of the scroll to the synagogue, the high priest does conclude his reading with eight benedictions, the themes of which accord well with later rabbinic prayers, three of them appearing in the *Amidah* or “Eighteen Benedictions.”¹⁶ This ceremony does not appear to be rabbinic in origin, but it likely served as a model upon which the Rabbis drew to develop their own practice.

The reading ceremony for the king appears to be based on the exegesis of Deuteronomy and Nehemiah. The scroll is brought to the king in the same way as to the high priest, and the king recites eight benedictions after the reading just like the high priest, except that the king replaces the benediction about the “forgiveness of sins” with one concerning the “feasts.” Every seven years the king reads portions from Deuteronomy, as in accord with Deut 31:10–13. A wooden platform is built for the king, echoing the scene in Neh 8:1–8. Following the scruples of the Mishnah, even the king shows deference to the Torah, as is also illustrated in *m. Sot.* 7:8: “King Agrippa received it standing and read it standing, and for this the sages praised him.” Because these details could so easily have been derived from Scripture and fit so neatly into rabbinic ideology, one may question the historical credibility of the king’s Torah reading ceremony.

Nevertheless, it is entirely plausible that the high priest at least would read from the Torah as part of the temple ceremony for the Day of Atonement.

¹⁵ Cf. *y. Ber.* 7:1, 11a; *y. Meg.* 4:1, 74d; and *b. Ber.* 48b.

¹⁶ The 2nd, 3rd, and 4th benedictions of the high priest agree essentially with the 17th, 18th, and 6th benedictions of the *Amidah*, the central prayer of the synagogue service, which did indeed consist of 18 benedictions during the tannaitic period (cf. *m. Ber.* 4:3; a 19th was added later), although the actual wording of these benedictions did not reach a fixed form until later times; see Heinemann, *Prayer in the Talmud* 42–69.

Of course, the Torah reading did not form an integral part of the temple worship.¹⁷ It had no particular ritual focus within the temple and was not the center of any liturgical service. As Ruth Langer suggests, "These observations lend support to claims that these Scripture readings were possibly foreign or late interpolations into the temple cult; their native locus was in another social setting."¹⁸ This "other social setting" which Langer refers to is likely the synagogue. Yet, even if the reading of Scripture was a late addition to the temple service, the very attempt made by those in charge of the temple to assimilate the Scripture reading into their ritual (e.g. the use of benedictions) must have provided a framework for the Rabbis to use in ritualizing the reading of Scripture in their own liturgy.

III. THE READING OF SCRIPTURE: TORAH AND HAFTARAH

1. *The development of Torah reading schedules.* Out of the backgrounds of synagogue and temple, the Rabbis promoted the practice of reading Scripture in accordance with set reading calendars. The central scriptural text was the "Torah," that is, the five books of Moses, with additional readings from other parts of Scripture being arranged around this center. Regarding the details of the reading schedules, diversity of practice in different locales existed early on, with greater uniformity emerging in later times.

The earliest practice may have been to read the Torah only on special Sabbaths and festivals, the custom of reading weekly arising later.¹⁹ If so, however, the weekly reading schedule was already traditional by the time of Philo (see above). Moreover, the special Sabbath/festival readings and the weekly Sabbath readings were older than the readings on the "days of assembly" (i.e. Monday, Thursday, and Saturday afternoon), a recollection reflected in *y. Meg.* 4:1, 75a, which ascribes the origin of weekly Sabbath, festival, and New Moon readings to Moses, but claims that the "assembly day" readings were instituted by Ezra. In reality, since Monday and Thursday were market days, and Saturday was already a day of gathering, these days were well suited to the institution of such readings.²⁰ These assembly readings, however, were of lesser status than the regular Sabbath readings, since they were not to be concluded with a reading from the Prophets (*m. Meg.* 4:1).²¹ Furthermore, the regular Sabbath readings were apparently

¹⁷ Heinemann, *Prayer in the Talmud* 126.

¹⁸ Langer, "From Study of Scripture to a Reenactment of Sinai" 45.

¹⁹ Ismar Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy: A Comprehensive History* (trans. R. P. Scheindlin; Philadelphia: JPS, 1993) 131. There were four special Sabbaths, starting on the last Sabbath before the month of Adar, on which a specific passage of Torah was read. The names of these special Sabbaths (with the Torah passages themselves) are: "Shekels" (Exod 30:11–16); "Remember" (Deut 25:17–19); "Heifer" (Num 19:1–22); and "Month" (Exod 12:1–120).

²⁰ Abraham Z. Idelsohn, *Jewish Liturgy and its Development* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1932) 113. According to Idelsohn, the gathering on these specific market days implies that the Jews were still living in Palestine when this practice began.

²¹ Ben Z. Wacholder, on the other hand, claims that some communities did conclude the assembly day Torah readings with a prophetic reading, and that this practice was still observable in geonic times ("Prolegomenon," in Jacob Mann, *The Bible as Read and Preached in the Old Synagogue*, vol. 1 [New York: KTAV, 1971] xx).

of lesser status than the festival and other special day readings: when a festival or other special day fell on a Sabbath, the Sabbath reading was set aside for the festival/special portion (*m. Meg.* 3:4–6; *b. Meg.* 31b). It is clear, in sum, that by the time of the Mishnah, there were already scheduled Torah readings for (1) festivals and special days; (2) Sabbath mornings; and (3) “days of assembly” (Mondays, Thursdays, and Sabbath afternoons).²²

The precise reading schedule as it was practiced in the tannaitic period is difficult to identify. It has often been assumed that the earliest custom in Palestine was to read the Torah through in roughly three to three and a half years. This is based primarily on two references to a triennial lectionary in Palestine: (1) The Babylonian Talmud refers to “the people of Palestine, who complete the reading of the Pentateuch in three years” (*b. Meg.* 29b); and (2) a geonic work, *The Differences between the People of the East and the Children of the Land of Israel*, states that “the children of the Land of Israel celebrate *Simchat Torah* [at the conclusion of the reading of the entire Torah] only once in three years and a half.”²³ This “triennial” cycle is in contrast to the annual cycle, known later in Babylonia, which became standard for almost all of Judaism. Many have attempted to reconstruct a single original form for this “triennial” cycle, but with little success.²⁴ In fact, it is doubtful that a single original form existed. For example, in the above-mentioned geonic work, *The Differences*, it is implied that while one district in Palestine was finishing the Torah cycle, another was reading an entirely different pericope.²⁵ In fact, recent studies have pointed to numerous pieces of evidence suggesting that multiple schedules existed side by side.²⁶ It seems that variety, rather than uniformity, held sway in this formative period.

²² There were conflicting opinions among the Rabbis as to whether (1) the weekday readings should carry forward from where the Sabbath morning reading left off, so that the next Sabbath morning reading picks up at the point where the last weekday reading ended; or, conversely, (2) whether each Sabbath morning reading should pick up where the previous Sabbath morning left off, with the weekday readings simply previewing the upcoming Sabbath morning. In *t. Meg.* 3:10, position #1 is given anonymously, and position #2 is reported as that of R. Judah. It is, however, the position of Rabbi Judah (#2) that eventually became standard practice (see *b. Meg.* 31b, which ascribes position #1 to R. Meir).

²³ Cited in Joseph Heinemann, “The Triennial Lectionary Cycle,” *JJS* 19 (1968) 42.

²⁴ Marc Bregman, “The Triennial Haftarah and the Perorations of the Midrashic Homilies,” *JJS* 32 (1981) 74–75. For earlier attempts to reconstruct all or part of the “triennial” Torah reading cycle, see Adolph Büchler, “The Reading of the Law and the Prophets in a Triennial Cycle,” *JQR* 5 (1892–93) 420–68; 6 (1893–94) 1–73; and Mann, *The Bible as Read and Preached*, 2 vols.

²⁵ Heinemann, “Triennial” 42.

²⁶ Evidence includes manuscript testimonies (see M. L. Klein, “Four Notes on the Triennial Lectionary Cycle,” *JJS* 32 [1981] 66–67); the liturgical poetry of Yannai (5th and 7th centuries), whose poems incorporated the weekly Torah reading into the first three verses (cf. Heinemann, “Triennial” 43–44; and Wacholder, “Prolegomenon” xl–xli); and *b. Meg.* 31b, where R. Simeon b. Eleazar, a contemporary of Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi, is said to ascribe to Ezra a regulation presupposing the annual cycle. Wacholder suggests that the annual and various triennial cycles all derived ultimately from earlier Palestinian customs that were in use in the early tannaitic era (“Prolegomenon” xxii–xxiii).

It is clear that the Torah was read regularly and consecutively in early rabbinic practice.²⁷ Yet, it appears that many different customs prevailed in different localities regarding the schedule and division of the readings. We know from later sources, however, that an annual reading cycle was extant in Babylonia in the early amoraic period. Ultimately, due to the political and academic prominence of the Babylonian academies, the annual cycle prevailed and became the normative custom for almost all of Judaism. Nevertheless, versions of the “triennial” cycle were still in use during the 12th century.²⁸

2. *The reading of the Haftarah and Hagiographa.* We now turn our attention to the public reading of non-Torah passages of Scripture. From very early times (cf. Luke 4:17, Acts 13:15) a selection from outside the Torah, usually from the Prophets, was read along with the weekly Torah portion. The prophetic reading came at the conclusion of the Torah reading segment, so that the prophetic portion came to be known as the *haftarah* (from להפטיר, “to conclude”). Because the Prophets are read only selectively, are not read in order, and are not subject to the same stringent rules as the Torah, it is probable that the custom of reading the Prophets is later than the practice of reading through the Torah. This conclusion is supported by the fact that most of the prophetic readings are thematically dependent on their corresponding Torah portions.

The first mention of the reading of the Prophets regulates that they be read on festivals and on the Sabbath: “On a festival-day it (the Torah) is read by five, on the Day of Atonement by six, and on the Sabbath by seven. They may not take from them but they may add to them, and they close with a reading from the Prophets” (*m. Meg.* 4:2). The specific prophetic readings for festivals are given in a *baraita* in the Babylonian Talmud (*b. Meg.* 31a–b.). *Haftarot* for the four special Sabbaths are listed in the Tosefta.²⁹ It is possible that the practice of reading the Prophets, like that of the Torah, originated with festivals and special days, and then only later expanded into a weekly custom.³⁰

The *haftarah* readings were selected with specific aims in mind. Some of the *haftarah* portions were intended to complement the liturgical calendar. Thus, the *haftarot* for the weeks surrounding the fast day of the Ninth of Av address themes of mourning and consolation.³¹ In general, though, most *haftarot* were chosen because of some similarity or link with the Torah portions that they followed (see *b. Meg.* 29b). But in what way was the *haftarah* to be similar to the Torah reading? This question was answered in slightly different ways by the Palestinian and Babylonian communities. In the

²⁷ *M. Meg.* 3:4 refers to “breaking off” from the regular reading for festival/special days and “reverting to the set order.” *M. Meg.* 2:1 refers to “reading the scroll in the wrong order.”

²⁸ Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy* 132–33.

²⁹ The *haftarot* for the special Sabbaths are: “Shekels,” *haftarah* = 2 Kings 12; “Remember,” *haftarah* = 1 Sam 15:2; “Heifer,” *haftarah* = Ezek 36:25; “Month,” *haftarah* = Ezek 45:18 (*t. Meg.* 3:1–4).

³⁰ Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy* 144.

³¹ Wacholder, “Prolegomenon” xxiv.

Babylonian tradition, the *haftarah* was expected to share a common theme with the Torah portion, and this theme could express itself anywhere within the *haftarah* reading. Since the focus was on the connection of themes, the Babylonian rite showed no preference for any particular books within the Prophets. Passages to fit the themes could be found in almost any prophetic book.

For the Palestinian *haftarot*, on the other hand, there was usually a verbal linkage between a key word in the first or second verse of the Torah portion and the same word in the first verse of the prophetic reading. In this system, the *haftarah* served not as a further expression of the Torah theme of the day but as a messianic peroration, which summed up the reading of Torah with an eschatological hope. For this reason, almost half of the Palestinian *haftarot* were taken from Isaiah, especially chaps. 40–66, and another one fourth derive from the Minor Prophets. One can perceive in the variations between the Babylonian and Palestinian rites a difference in the way each community viewed the overall relationship of the Prophets to the Torah.³²

The only substantive reading from the *Hagiographa* prescribed in the Mishnah is that of Esther on Purim (*m. Meg.*). The liturgical readings of Ruth, the Song of Songs, Lamentations, and Ecclesiastes (the four other *Megillot*) are not recorded until later. The reading of Ruth on Pentecost, the Song of Songs on the last two days of Passover, and Lamentations on the Ninth of Av are listed in the post-talmudic tractate *Soferim* (*Sof.* 14:3). Although the reading of Ecclesiastes on Tabernacles does not appear in *Soferim* according to its direct transmission, medieval authors claim that it is found there, and no other reading is assigned for Tabernacles at all.³³ It is likely that the practice of reading Ecclesiastes on Tabernacles goes back at least to the period of tractate *Soferim*.

3. *The procedure for the Scripture reading.* Although we do not know for sure who actually performed the readings in our earliest accounts, we know that during the tannaitic period both minors and slaves were permitted to read the Torah scroll, assuming that they were proficient to do so (*m. Meg.* 4:6; *y. Meg.* 4:3, 75a). Even when numerous readers were liturgically required, only congregants who were sufficiently learned could read in the Torah. Thus, even though the Sabbath generally required seven readers, if only one person was present who was proficient to read in the Torah, he alone would read all seven segments (*y. Meg.* 4:3, 75a; cf. *t. Meg.* 3:12). Some of these regulations would change in later periods. For example, after the full development of *Bar Mitzvah*, minors were no longer allowed to read in the Torah scroll.³⁴

The amount of Scripture that needed to be read on a given occasion also changed over time. According to the earliest practice, the readings were relatively short,³⁵ and in some places one person may have done all the

³² *Ibid.* xxx–xxxiii.

³³ Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy* 150.

³⁴ *Ibid.* 139.

³⁵ In the Mishnah, the traditional readings for New Year (Lev 23:23–25) and for the special Sabbath “Remember” (Deut 25:17–19) are only three verses each (*m. Meg.* 3:4–5).

reading.³⁶ Later, the Mishnah stipulated how many people should read from the Torah on each day: three on weekdays, four in the beginnings of months and during mid-festivals, five on a festival-day, six on the Day of Atonement, and seven on the Sabbath (*m. Meg.* 4:1–2), three being the minimum number of verses to be read by a single reader. Eventually, however, on days when only three readers were called up, the required number of verses was raised from nine to ten (*b. Meg.* 21b). As the amount of text to be read was being set, it was recognized that some of the oldest readings did not meet the minimum requirement of ten verses. Some of these readings were left unchanged, such as the nine verses of Torah read on Purim (Exod 17:8–16), since no other pericope was liturgically appropriate (*y. Taan.* 4:3, 68b). The readings for the four special Sabbaths may have been reduced to additional readings because they did not meet the required minimum. At other times, an attempt was made to bring the older readings into conformity with the current rules.³⁷ In general, there was a strong tendency to find some way to preserve older readings.

The Mishnah records no rules governing the length of the *haftarah*. The Tosefta lists several specific *haftarot*, the shortest of which is only one verse, Isa 52:3 (*t. Meg.* 3:18). In the Talmuds, the number of required prophetic verses is lengthened to twenty-one, matching the minimum of twenty-one verses of Torah on the Sabbath (i.e. 7 readers × a minimum of 3 verses each) (*y. Meg.* 4:2, 75a).³⁸ The practice of reading at least twenty-one verses for the *haftarah* eventually become standard, although exceptions were made for older readings that were too short. In general, the rules regarding the *haftarot* were more flexible than those for the Torah portions.

Ultimately, the length of the readings, the declining knowledge of Hebrew, and the increasing role of fixed cantillation required that a “professional” reader take over the responsibilities of reading the Scripture.³⁹ In post-talmudic Babylonia, a precentor would help the reader along by accompanying him softly. As time went on, the role of the precentor increased to the point that the one “called up” was no longer reading at all.⁴⁰ Hence, the one called up to the Torah was responsible only for saying the benedictions.

IV. THE CEREMONIES SURROUNDING THE READING OF SCRIPTURE

1. *The translation of the Scripture reading.* Because we are interested in biblical translation only as part of the public reading of Scripture, we will

³⁶ Cf. Philo’s description in *Prob.* 12.82 of the Essenes, who convene in “synagogues”: “Then one takes the books and reads aloud” (εἰθ’ εἷς μὲν τις τὰς βίβλους ἀναγινώσκει λαβών).

³⁷ E.g. see the differing opinions of Kahana and Assi (both 3d century) on how to bring the reading for the first day of the *maamad* (Gen. 1:1–8), the time when a town’s priestly representative would officiate in the temple, up to the minimum requirement of ten verses (*y. Meg.* 4:2, 75a).

³⁸ Cf. *b. Meg.* 23a. *Sof.* 14:1 indicates that twenty-two verses are the minimum.

³⁹ Jakob Petuchowski, “The Liturgy of the Synagogue: History, Structure, and Contents,” in *Approaches to Ancient Judaism IV: Studies in Liturgy, Exegesis, and Talmudic Narrative* (ed. W. S. Green; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1983) 31.

⁴⁰ Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy* 140.

focus exclusively on the Aramaic renditions as they were offered in conjunction with the reading.⁴¹ The practice of translating the scriptural portion into Aramaic may be as old as ritual Torah reading itself, the precedent being found at Neh 8:8 in the account of Ezra's reading at the Water Gate which was discussed above. As with other customs, the rules governing the translation were less stringent earlier on. For example, anyone, even a minor, could serve as a translator (*m. Meg.* 4:6; *t. Meg.* 3:21). Over time, as the Torah portions grew longer and expectations for the translation increased, the office of "professional" translator, *meturgeman*, (מתורגמן) was introduced.⁴² By amoraic times, the rendering of the Scripture reading into Aramaic (Targum) was an almost universal custom in Babylonia and Palestine.⁴³

In the synagogue service, the Targum was given on the Sabbath and on holidays. The prevailing opinion seems to have been that the translation was to be made orally, and that written texts were not permitted, although one of the key texts presenting this view, *y. Meg.* 4:1, 74d, reports a violation of this principle: "R. Haggai said R. Samuel bar R. Isaac went into a synagogue. He saw a teacher [reading from] a translation spread out, presenting materials from the book. He said to him, 'It is forbidden to do it that way. Things which were stated orally must be presented orally. Things which were stated in writing must be presented in writing.'" The association of Targum with oral instruction is made even more explicit in *Pesiq. R.* 5.1:

He who translates orally must not look at a written text [of the translation]; as for the reader of Scripture, he must not, lifting his eyes away from the text of the scroll, recite from memory, for the [written] Torah was given solely in the form of a written text, as is said, "The Lord said . . . I will write on the tablets" (Exod 34:1); on the other hand, he who translates orally must not turn his eyes upon the text of the [biblical] scroll. These injunctions—so stated R. Judah [the son of R. Simon] ben Pazzi—are clearly indicated by "And the Lord said to Moses: Write these words" (Exod 34:27), which refers to the text given in writing; and by "For these words are by mouth" (*ibid.*), which refers to the translation that must be given by word of mouth.⁴⁴ For, as R. Judah the son of R. Simon [ben Pazzi] went on to say, the very same verse goes on to state, "I have made a covenant with you" (*ibid.*). A covenant made by what means?

⁴¹ On the written Targums in general, see John Bowker, *The Targums and Rabbinic Literature: An Introduction to Jewish Interpretations of Scripture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969); and P. S. Alexander, "Jewish Aramaic Translations of Hebrew Scriptures," in *Mikra* 217–53. Cf. also A. D. York, "The Targum in the Synagogue and in the School," *JSJ* 10 (1979) 74–86; and P. S. Alexander, "The Targumim and the Rabbinic Rules for the Delivery of the Targum," in *Congress Volume Salamanca 1983* (VTSup 36; ed. J. A. Emerton; Leiden, 1985) 14–28. There is no doubt that some Greek-speaking congregations made use of Greek translations (e.g. Aquila), but the distinctive features of their customs are now lost.

⁴² Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy* 152.

⁴³ Lee I. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000) 546. Since it was not always needed, the practice of making a translation for the Scripture reading was not required. Yet, it was to be done properly if done at all (see *y. Meg.* 4:1, 74d).

⁴⁴ The twofold revelation of Written Torah and Oral Torah is explained through Exod 34:27: the first phrase of the command, כְּתַבְהֶן הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה ("Write these words"), refers to the Written Torah; whereas the second phrase, עַל־פִּי הַדְּבָרִים (literally, "upon the mouth of the words"; cf. תורה שבעל פה, "Oral Torah"), refers to the Oral Torah. Thus, as the Rabbis read the verse, it was on the basis of the Oral Torah together with the Written Torah that God made his covenant with Israel.

By means of "Write these words," and also by means of "These words are by mouth" (ibid.). If you maintain in written form that which was ordained to remain written, and maintain by utterance of mouth that which was ordained [to be uttered] only by mouth, then "I, [the Lord], have made a covenant with you." But if you set down in writing that which was ordained to be uttered by mouth and [utter] with your mouth that which was ordained to be written, then I shall not maintain my covenant with you.

The Torah passage had to be read from a scroll, thus signifying the written component of the Sinaitic revelation. The translation into Aramaic had to be done orally, without the aid of a written text, signifying the oral dimension of the Sinaitic revelation, i.e. the "Oral Torah." The covenant that God made with Israel at Sinai, on this understanding, is grounded in the proper transmission and reception of both the oral and the written forms of Torah.⁴⁵ As early as this custom developed in the first centuries of the Common Era, the manner in which the Targum was delivered in the synagogue came to represent the theology of written and oral Torah existing side by side.⁴⁶

The relationship between the Scripture reading and the translation was one of both distinction and closeness. It was forbidden for the same person to read the biblical text and also to translate (*t. Meg.* 3:20; *y. Meg.* 4:1, 74d; *b. Meg.* 21b). In *y. Meg.* 4:1, 74d, the need for a separate translator is explained on the analogy that the Torah itself was given through an intermediary, namely Moses. The reading and translation were to be kept separate in terms of actual performance as well: "the translator is not permitted to begin the translation until the verse has been completed by the reader; and the reader is not permitted to begin another verse until the translation [of the preceding verse] has been completed by the translator" (*b. Sot.* 39b). In the Babylonian Talmud, the desire is expressed to make clear to the congregation what exactly is in the written Torah and what is not: "Why did they lay down that he who reads from the Torah should not prompt the translator? So the people should not say that the translation is written in the Torah" (*b. Meg.* 32a). At the same time, there was also a concern to keep the reading and the translation close together. When discussing how much of a prophetic passage might be left out in the reading, the guideline given is that only enough text may

⁴⁵ *Pesiq. R* 5.1 goes on to say: "Moses asked that the "Mishnah" (i.e. oral teaching) also be in written form, like the Torah. But the Holy One, blessed be He, foresaw that the nations would translate the Torah and, reading it in Greek, would declare: 'We are Israel; we are the children of the Lord.' The scales would appear to be balanced between both claims, but then the Holy One, blessed be He, will say to the nations: What are you claiming, that you are my children? I have no other way of knowing other than that my child is he who possesses my secret lore.' The nations will ask: 'And what is your secret lore?' God will reply: 'It is the Mishnah.'" Cf. also *Tan. B. II*, 87–88 (*Vayyera* 6).

⁴⁶ One does not find in the tannaitic period a clear statement of the dual revelation of both Written Torah and Oral Torah from Sinai. On the contrary, in the so-called "tannaitic midrashim" the oral law is grounded in the written law through scriptural exegesis. It is in the beginning of the amoraic period, that is, in the third century AD, when the idea begins to be expressed more clearly that God's revelation at Sinai consisted of both an Oral Torah (תורה שבעל פה) and a Written Torah (תורה שבכתב); see Martin Jaffee, *Torah in the Mouth: Writing and Oral Tradition in Palestinian Judaism 200 BCE–400 CE* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) 84–99, 126–52.

be omitted so that the translator does not have to pause (*m. Meg.* 4:4; *b. Sot.* 41a). One can see here the desire to associate the oral embodiment of the text closely with the text itself, while at the same time maintaining the clear distinction between the two.

Along these lines, the translator would not give his Targum all at once at the end, but instead would render either verse by verse or thought by thought, depending on whether the Torah or *haftarah* were being read: "He that reads the Law may not read less than three verses; he may not read to the translator more than one verse, or, in the Prophets, three verses; but if these three are three separate paragraphs, he must read them out singly" (*m. Meg.* 4:4). During the Torah reading segment, the translator was required to render verse by verse, presumably to assure accuracy. In the Prophets, where less care was needed (and perhaps where the thought units were larger), the translator could render up to three verses at a time. Yet, even for the Prophets, if one verse constituted a single thought, so that the following verse changed topics, the translator was to render that verse by itself.

There were other rules for translating that reflected the special status of the Torah. While only one translator was allowed for the Torah reading (presumably to maintain consistency), two translators were permitted to work together for the reading of the Prophets (*t. Meg.* 3:20; cf. *y. Ber.* 5:3, 9c; *b. Meg.* 21b). Likewise, Esther, when translated, was also allowed two translators (*t. Meg.* 3:20), although the preferred practices were either to read it only in Hebrew or to read it only in the vernacular: "But it (the scroll of Esther) may be read in a foreign language to them that speak a foreign language" (*m. Meg.* 2:1). These regulations helped to express liturgically the honor due to each division of the Scriptures—the Torah proper being held in highest esteem, followed by the Prophets, and then by Esther, representing the Writings.

Certain passages were not to be translated at all, either because of their unflattering content (e.g. Gen 35:22 and Exod 32:21–25) or because they were already well known in Hebrew (e.g. Num 6:24–26).⁴⁷ It seems that some passages were questioned but ultimately deemed acceptable for translation (e.g. Exod 32:1–20). Undesirable passages in the Prophets could simply be forbidden as *haftarah*, since the Prophets were not read in their entirety anyway.

The goal of proper translation was to capture the correct "meaning" of the original. This impossible task was especially difficult to accomplish in a liturgical context: "He who translates a verse literally is a liar, and he who adds to it is a blasphemer" (*t. Meg.* 3:41). Philip Alexander identifies two distinct ways that a Targum might both follow and also elaborate on the scriptural text.⁴⁸ First, the Targum might consist of a relatively "word for word" translation of the base text, with explanatory additions inserted at key points

⁴⁷ Cf. *m. Meg.* 4:10; *t. Meg.* 3:31–38; and *b. Meg.* 25a–b. These lists underwent revision over time; see P. S. Alexander, "The Rabbinic Lists of Forbidden Targumim," *JJS* 27 (1976) 171–91.

⁴⁸ Alexander, "Targumim and Rabbinic Rules" 17–21.

in the passage (this being the most common approach in the Pentateuch). Second, the translation might represent a free-running paraphrase of the base text, where the scriptural passage is essentially “dissolved” into the interpretive restatement (this approach being more common in the Five *Megillot*). One can imagine both of these approaches serving a certain useful purpose in the translation and explanation of the scriptural portion in a liturgical setting.

This tension between literalism and paraphrase seems to have played itself out in different ways in Babylonia and in Palestine. The practice in Palestine tended toward paraphrase, sometimes incorporating *aggadic* material into the translation. Targum Pseudo-Jonathan contains some six thousand additions, many of which reflect popular exegesis and belief.⁴⁹ The frequent addition of the phrase, “My people, my people, children of Israel,”⁵⁰ indicates that this was a common way for the translator to address the text more dramatically to the congregation. That these insertions reflect liturgical practice in Palestine is demonstrated by the strong correlation between additions in the Palestinian Targums and the beginning verses of known triennial *sedarim*.⁵¹ Apparently, the *meturgeman* would preface his translation with a brief statement introducing the general theme of the passage.

The more periphrastic method seen in Palestine may be contrasted with the more literal approach of the Babylonians. Perhaps in response to perceived excesses in periphrasis, official Targums were eventually adopted—Targum Onkelos for the Torah and Targum Jonathan for the Prophets. Compiled in Babylonia, they provided a more straightforward rendition of the biblical text. Yet, once these official translations were deemed authoritative, they became almost obligatory, even when Aramaic was no longer spoken. Eventually, they became less understandable than the Hebrew text itself, and therefore fell out of use.⁵² By the Middle Ages, only select groups were still using translations of the Scripture as part of the liturgy.⁵³

2. *The homily for the Scripture reading.* An early inspiration for the liturgical homily can be found in the same Torah reading account cited above with respect to the translation (Neh 8:1–8). The idea of the Levites, priests, and others “teaching” (וְיִלְמְדוּ) the people out of the book of the Law of the LORD can also be found in 2 Chr 17:9. By the first century AD the sermon was an important part of the Torah reading ceremony. The Gospels give several reports that Jesus taught in the synagogue on the Sabbath.⁵⁴ Philo gives the following (Hellenized) description of Sabbath day activities: “it was customary on every day when opportunity offered, and pre-eminently on the

⁴⁹ Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue* 547–48.

⁵⁰ Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy* 152, 155.

⁵¹ Avigdor Shinan, “Sermons, Targums, and the Reading from Scriptures in the Ancient Synagogue,” in *The Synagogue in Late Antiquity* (ed. L. I. Levine; New York: JTS, 1987) 105–7.

⁵² Petuchowski, “Liturgy of the Synagogue” 31–32; and Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy* 153–54.

⁵³ According to Alexander, “Targumim and Rabbinic Rules” 21: “The Targum remained in liturgical use in the Yemen down to modern times.”

⁵⁴ Mark 1:21, 6:2; Luke 6:6, 13:10. Cf. also Matt 4:23, 9:35, 13:54; Luke 4:15; and John 18:20.

seventh day, as I have explained above, to pursue the study of wisdom with the ruler expounding and instructing the people what they should say and do, while they received edification and betterment in moral principles and conduct" (*Mos.* 2.215). He goes on to state that "the Jews every seventh day occupy themselves with the philosophy of their fathers," calling their meeting places both "places of prayer" (προσευκτήρια) and "schools" (διδασκαλεῖα) for the virtues (*ibid.* 2.216).⁵⁵

The customs governing the delivery of the sermon seem to have varied in the early centuries AD; but we have little evidence to go on. Sermons were primarily given on Sabbaths and holidays, although Philo refers to "every day when opportunity offered" (*Mos.* 2.215), and R. Meir (2d century) is said to have delivered lessons in the synagogue on Friday nights (*y. Sot.* 1:4, 16d). Based on Luke 4:20, we may suppose that the homily could be given by the same person who read the Scripture portion, and also that the homily could follow the *haftarah*; yet, there is no way to identify any "common practice" in these matters. As with other aspects of the service, in the earliest period the sermon was probably given by anyone in the congregation who was qualified; but by the 2d century AD the responsibility was more often relegated to a specialist.⁵⁶ Many titles were associated with the function of homilist, including priest, elder, and sage, but eventually, at least by the period of the Mishnah, *darshan* (דרשן) emerged as the distinctive term for a public expounder of Scripture.⁵⁷ In spite of this diversity, it appears that all sermons were delivered in the vernacular, since the purpose of the sermon was comprehension.

Based on the incidental reports contained in rabbinic texts about sages delivering homilies in synagogues, it is difficult to reconstruct precisely what the sermon would have looked like even in its most widespread forms. We must content ourselves with mere glimpses into the world of the rabbinic homily. Many sermons were probably delivered from a high platform, called a *bimah* (במה), which harkened back to the platform upon which Scripture was read in the days of the temple, and which architecturally may have developed with some influence from the church.⁵⁸ We are not certain what posture the preacher would take: for example, Jesus sat down to deliver his homily (Luke 4:20), while Paul stood up (Acts 13:16). It was expected that the homily would be based on the scriptural text for the day, as exemplified by references to sages expounding (דרש) the "passage of the day"

⁵⁵ See also *Hypoth.* 7.13: "But some priest who is present or one of the elders reads the holy laws to them and expounds them point by point till about the late afternoon, when they depart having gained both expert knowledge of the holy laws and considerable advance in piety"; and *Prob.* 12.82 on the Essenes: "Then one takes the books and reads aloud and another of especial proficiency comes forward and expounds what is not understood." Cf. also *Som.* 2.127.

⁵⁶ Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy* 157–58.

⁵⁷ See *m. Sot.* 9:15. The Babylonian Talmud (*b. Pes.* 70b) ascribes the title דרשנים, perhaps anachronistically, to Shemaiah and Avtalyon (late 1st century BC).

⁵⁸ Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue* 320.

(ענינו של יום).⁵⁹ The lection-based nature of the homily may be illustrated by the story of R. Hanina b. Abba (3d century?), who, while traveling, was asked to give a homily in the synagogue and was forced to improvise his exposition because the Torah portion was unexpected (*Lev. Rab.* 3.6).⁶⁰ One can get a sense for the great care that went into preparing the homily from the application given in *Exod. Rab.* 40.1 to Job 28:27 (“then he saw it and declared it; he established it, and searched it out”), where the four repetitive statements of activity are seen as a model for thorough preparation: “Man must take an example [from God] and revise his lesson, or *aggadah*, or midrash prior to delivering them in public. . . . One can learn this from God: when He was about to teach the Torah to Israel, He revised it four times to Himself before saying it to Israel.” We can perceive in all of this the desire to keep a close connection between the homily and the Scripture reading, as well as a serious attitude toward preparation.

These factors did not, however, prevent the homilists from making use of whatever techniques were available to enliven their expositions. For example, it is reported that Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi would wait until his audience had fully gathered before making his (dramatic) entrance (*Deut. Rab.* 7.8). As time went on, preachers began to make more use of creative *aggadot*, both to comfort and (partly) to entertain their listeners.⁶¹ *Cant. Rab.* 1.15.3 shows one way that a preacher (it is said to be Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi) might deal with the problem of listener sleepiness: “As Rabbi was once expounding the Scripture, the congregation became drowsy. In order to rouse them he said: ‘One woman in Egypt brought forth six hundred thousand at a birth. . . . This was Jochebed who bore Moses who was counted as equal to six hundred thousand of Israel.’” Resh Lakish is said to have criticized an exposition of Jose of Maon by comparing him to a clown who entertains in the theatres and circuses (*Gen. Rab.* 80.1). On that note, there are examples to be found of whole congregations receiving a sermon unfavorably.⁶² Yet, overall, the *darshanim* seem to have been successful: the large number of “homiletical midrashim” that we possess illustrates the popularity of the sermon throughout the amoraic period.⁶³

⁵⁹ Wilhelm Bacher, *Die exegetische Terminologie der Jüdischen Traditionsliteratur*, pt. 2 (Leipzig, 1905) 150–51.

⁶⁰ That such a traveling preacher might meet with success can be seen in the account of an “associate sage” (חבר) who had been shipwrecked and stranded in a strange town, and who was able to receive both community standing and financial maintenance through his ability to expound Scripture (*Rab. Tan., Terumah*, I). For an earlier reference to a traveling instructor, see *m. Erub.* 3:5.

⁶¹ On the increased interest in *aggadah* reflecting the hardness of the times and the need for consolation, see *Pesiq. Rab Kah.* 12.3. At the same time, *Pesiq. Rab Kah.* 12.5 also refers to a “joyous face” as descriptive of the proper mood for *aggadah*, and many of the delightful and even humorous stories found within this genre would surely have accomplished this purpose.

⁶² E.g. “R. Judah lectured thus, but the congregation would not accept it” (*Gen. Rab.* 28.3).

⁶³ There is a well-known saying in *m. Sot.* 9:15: “When Ben Zoma (early 2d century) died there were no more preachers.” Yet, it is not clear in what respect this is meant; at any rate, this saying appears in a list of formulaic sayings of the same sort (“when such-and-such person died, there was no more such-and-such, etc.”), and so should not be taken to reflect anything more than a general respect for the earlier generations and for Ben Zoma as a preacher.

Two components of rabbinic exposition known from midrashic literature may be mentioned: the *petihah* and the *hatimah*. Within the so-called “homiletical midrashim,”⁶⁴ the exposition of the Torah verse proper is preceded by a series of mini-lessons that usually begin with a remote verse from somewhere else in Scripture (often the “Writings”), and which generally conclude with a citation of the Torah verse to be expounded. Each of these mini-lessons, where a remote verse is cited, discussed, and then connected to the main Torah passage, is called a *petihah* (פתיחה, literally “opening”). Each chapter of the document begins with a number of *petihot*, all or most of which conclude with the Torah passage at hand. After these *petihot*, the chapter proceeds to the verse-by-verse exposition of the main Torah passage.

It was once assumed that the *petihot* were introductions to the main Torah homilies. It is now more commonly believed that each *petihah* was actually a homily in its own right, which was delivered prior to the Torah reading.⁶⁵ The length and complexity of many written *petihot* probably reflect the editorial activity of the shapers of the midrashic documents rather than the forms of the original oral homilies, although there are narrative accounts of Rabbis delivering sermons in this style, suggesting that the *petihah* form does arise out of a real oral setting.⁶⁶ In general, we may suppose that something can be learned from the basic idea of the *petihah* about how brief homilies might have been used to introduce the Torah readings.

The primary appeal of the *petihah* form was that the remote verse with which the homilist began might at first appear to have little to do with the Torah portion to follow. The art of the *petihah* then unfolded as the *darshan* would form a logical-theological link between the *petihah* verse and the first verse of the Torah portion. Thus, the *petihah* not only grasped the attention of the listener, who was eager to find out how the expositor was going to connect the *petihah* verse with the Torah portion, but it also served to demonstrate the overall unity of Scripture.⁶⁷ Another kind of *petihah* would begin with a halakhic question.⁶⁸ The preacher would answer the question,

⁶⁴ E.g. *Lev. Rab.* and *Pesiq. Rab. Kah.*; see H. L. Strack and Günter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (trans. M. Bockmuehl; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) 288–314.

⁶⁵ See Joseph Heinemann, “The Proem in the Aggadic Midrashim: A Form-Critical Study,” *SchHier* 22 (1972) 100–122.

⁶⁶ Richard Sarason, “The Petihot in Leviticus Rabba: ‘Oral Homilies’ or Redactional Constructions,” *JJS* 33 (1982) 557–65; and idem, “Toward a New Agendum for the Study of Rabbinic Midrashic Literature,” in *Studies in Aggadah, Targum and Jewish Liturgy in Memory of Joseph Heinemann* (ed. J. Petuchowski and E. Fleischer; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1981) 64–68. Sarason points out the redactional nature of the *petihot* as we have them, and also calls attention to the fact that we cannot demonstrate with certainty the original oral setting of even the simplest *petihot*. Yet, Sarason does accept that there was an oral setting, and the example he cites (*Lev. Rab.* 3.6) suggests that a popular synagogue audience was at least sometimes in view, even if the material was later expanded in the rabbinic academies. For other reports of sages expounding Scripture according to the *petihah* form, see *b. Meg.* 10b–11a and *b. Mak.* 10b.

⁶⁷ Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* 245.

⁶⁸ Cf. Shinan, “Sermons” 103–4, who suggests that in some cases the halakhic question was taken from the audience. This type of *petihah* is found especially in the *Tanhuma-Yelamdenu* midrashim, the phrase “let our master teach us” (״למדנו רבנו״) serving to introduce the halakhic question.

again linking the answer to the assigned Torah portion, thus showing the unity of Scripture and the harmony of Scripture with halakhah.⁶⁹

The *hatimah* (חתימה) was the conclusion of the Torah sermon. It usually began with the first or last verse of the weekly Torah portion and moved to a passage from the Prophets that emphasized comfort and hope.⁷⁰ Often, the preacher would refer to the weekly *haftarah* portion in his *hatimah*: “In this way the ‘consolation’ at the conclusion of the homily was elegantly and artistically linked to the particular ‘consolation’ which concluded the reading from the Scripture, that is, the *Haftarah*.”⁷¹ It must be remembered that, as with the *petihah*, so also with the *hatimah*, the forms in which we have them may not be identical to the forms they took in their original oral contexts, since they come to us in well-edited midrashic collections. Nevertheless, the clear relationships between the *petihot* and *hatimot*, the midrashim, and known *sedarim* of the Palestinian Torah cycles indicate that our written “homiletical midrashim” do have roots in liturgical Scripture reading settings.

3. *The prayers accompanying the Scripture reading.* The earliest testimony that we possess to the saying of prayers in conjunction with Torah reading is *m. Sot.* 7:7–8, describing the reading ceremonies of the high priest and the king, already discussed above. Although there are no prayers said before the readings, eight benedictions are given at the conclusion of the readings. But no specific wording is mentioned for these benedictions.

Yet, it is clear from the Rabbis' adoption of a fixed reading cycle that they intended to make the public reading of Scripture into a liturgical event. That prayers soon came to be recited both before and after the Scripture reading rubric is stated in the Mishnah (*m. Meg.* 4:1; cf. *b. Ber.* 21a). By early amoraic times, it was becoming customary for every individual reader to say a benediction both before and after his reading (*b. Meg.* 22a). The earliest hint at the wording of a prayer is found in *y. Yoma* 7:1, 44d: “He who has chosen the Torah” (הבּוּחַר בַּתּוֹרָה). Ruth Langer has argued that set prayers were used to frame the Torah reading even in the amoraic period, since these prayers are found in post-talmudic sources and appear in all later rites without variation.⁷² The opening prayer blesses God for choosing Israel and giving Israel the Torah: “Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who hast chosen us from all the nations and given us thy Torah. Blessed art Thou, O Lord, Who givest the Torah.” The closing prayer also mentions God as the Giver of Torah, who gave truth and eternal life to Israel through

⁶⁹ See also Martin Jaffee, “The ‘Midrashic’ Proem: Towards the Description of Rabbinic Exegesis,” in *Approaches to Ancient Judaism IV* 95–112. Jaffee highlights the hermeneutical complexities that arise from the way in which the *petihah* verse is juxtaposed with the Torah passage.

⁷⁰ Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* 245–46.

⁷¹ Bregman, “Triennial Haftarah” 80.

⁷² Langer, “From Study of Scripture to a Reenactment of Sinai” 50. The closing prayer appears in *Sof.* 13:8, together with a different opening prayer (intended for individual use). The standard opening prayer actually appears as one of several options in *b. Ber.* 11b.

this gift: “Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who hast given us a Torah of truth and hast planted everlasting life in our midst. Blessed art Thou, O Lord, Who givest the Torah.” Both of these prayers emphasize the relationship that God established with Israel at Sinai.

Further links may be pointed out between the Torah reading ceremony and Sinai. The Babylonian Talmud indicates that one should stand when reading the Torah because God himself stood when he gave the Torah: “A tanna stated: This (that one may read sitting) is not the case with Torah. Whence this rule? R. Abbahu said: ‘Because Scripture says, ‘But you, stand here by (or ‘with’) me’ (Deut 5:31).’⁷³ R. Abbahu also said: ‘Were it not written in the Scripture, it would be impossible for us to say it: as it were, the Holy One, blessed be He, also was standing’” (*b. Meg.* 21a). The Palestinian Talmud connects the custom of standing while translating the Torah to the Sinai experience: “R. Samuel bar R. Isaac went to a synagogue. He saw someone standing and serving as a translator, leaning on a post. He said to him, ‘It is forbidden to you (to lean). For just as the Torah was given, originally, in fear and trembling, so we have to treat it with fear and trembling’” (*y. Meg.* 4:1, 74d). These texts give further credibility to the idea that fixed blessings linking the Torah reading with Sinai were extant in the amoraic period. Although little else can be inferred about the early prayers surrounding the Torah ritual, it appears that some attempt was made both to frame the Scripture reading with prayers and to portray the Torah reading event as a ritual reenactment of Sinai.

V. CONCLUSION

The public reading of the Law is first described in Deut 31:10–13, but the primary biblical model for the development of ceremonial Scripture reading in Judaism was the reading and explanation of the Law in Neh 8:1–8. A Scripture reading ceremony probably developed in the post-exilic period in conjunction with the synagogue, and was well established by the first century AD, as witnessed by Philo, Josephus, and the NT (e.g. Luke 4:16–21; Acts 13:15–16, 15:21). It is probable that a ceremony involving the reading of Scripture and the recital of blessings also became part of the temple service, perhaps borrowed from the synagogue. This custom, in turn, may have influenced the later formation of the synagogue liturgy. At any rate, however long synagogue and temple ceremonies may have coexisted, after the destruction of the temple only the synagogue practice survived and continued to develop, with increasing guidance from the Rabbis.

The public and ritualized reading of Scripture is clearly part of the Jewish world presupposed by the NT. We cannot determine how uniform the practice might have been in the first century AD, but it is not unlikely that details about the public reading of Scripture found in Philo and Josephus,

⁷³ In Deut 5:31, God says to Moses: *אַתָּה פֹּה עִמָּךְ עִמָּדִי*, which the Talmud takes to mean “But you, stand here (together) with me”; i.e. God was also standing.

and perhaps in the earliest strata of rabbinic tradition, may shed light on first century Christian practice. At the same time, we have also seen how the Scripture reading rubric in Judaism developed and changed over time, moving from our earliest evidence through the periods of the tannaim (1st century AD to early 3d century), amoraim (mid-3d century up to ca. 500), and beyond. We also had occasion to notice certain differences in custom between the Palestinian and Babylonian Jewish communities. In fact, much of what is preserved in classical rabbinic literature is post-NT; for example, there was no widely recognized fixed lectionary that can be identified in the first century AD; and the liturgical readings of four of the *Megillot* (excluding Esther, which is mishnaic) do not appear until the amoraic period at the earliest. Most of what we find in the early rabbinic tradition would fit best in comparison with the development of Christian worship in the patristic period, from the second to the fifth centuries. As this comparative work is carried out, it is important to keep in mind the possibilities of influence in both directions, as well as shared dependence on the common Greco-Roman culture of late antiquity.⁷⁴

The central theological motif that emerges from the rabbinic ritualization of Scripture reading is the centrality of Torah. The practice of reading began with the Torah, and the reading schedules that came into use had the completion of the Torah as their goal. Most *haftarot* (prophetic readings) were selected to match their corresponding Torah readings, and the procedures for reading the various Scripture passages ascribed the greatest position to the Torah. Furthermore, the rules governing the translation embodied the unity of the written Torah with the oral teaching of the Rabbis, while maintaining the written Torah's distinct status; and part of what we saw in the rabbinic homilies was the desire to demonstrate the coherence between the Torah proper (i.e. the Pentateuch), the rest of Scripture, and rabbinic legal tradition. Particularly in the benedictions that framed the Scripture reading, we observed a conscious effort to present the public reading of Scripture as a reenactment of the revelation at Sinai.

There has been some recent discussion about the possibility of using the concept of "Torah" as a major theme with which to structure a theology of the OT.⁷⁵ One can see the obvious benefits of this proposal, considering the central role that the Torah played within the shape of the OT's own thought world. It also has the benefit of making possible dialogue between Christian and Jewish scholars on the "theology" of the OT/Hebrew Bible.⁷⁶ As part of

⁷⁴ Cf. Burton Visotsky, "Fathers of the World: An Introduction," in *Fathers of the World: Essays in Rabbinic and Patristic Literatures* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1995) 1–27.

⁷⁵ E.g. Otto Kaiser, "The Law as Center of the Hebrew Bible," in *'Sha'arei Talmon': Studies in Bible, Qumran, and the Ancient Near East Presented to Shemaryahu Talmon* (ed. M. Fishbane and E. Tov; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1992) 93–103. I am grateful to Prof. C. H. Bullock for this reference. Cf. Ronald Clements, *Old Testament Theology: A Fresh Approach* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1978) 104–30.

⁷⁶ Cf. Rolf Rendtorff, "Toward a Common Jewish-Christian Reading of the Hebrew Bible," in *Canon and Theology* (trans. M. Kohl; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 31–45.

this dialogue, however, one must take note of the particular way that the concept of Torah developed within Rabbinic Judaism. "Torah" came to represent a broad category of teaching, including not only Scripture but also rabbinic tradition. It is through this lens that Torah could serve as a governing category for rabbinic thought. In some ways, if one were to search for an analogue in Christian theology, the best match might be the concept of "revelation." In the Christian task of reading the "OT" theologically, the rabbinic tradition has the potential to provide many needed insights and fresh (to Christians) perspectives. At the same time, it is important for Christian scholars to recognize the differences between the two belief systems, and to take these differences into account when appropriating rabbinic thought for Christian theology.