

The Public Reading of the Scriptures in the 1st Century Synagogue

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Introduction

The title of this article seems quite simple and straightforward and you, as the reader, no doubt anticipate a survey of the relevant historical materials that will help paint the picture of a 1st Century synagogue service, and particularly the reading of the Torah and Prophets during that service. A notable problem exists, however, in this endeavor: most of the extant historical materials that describe synagogue practices were written in the 2nd Century and later. In great measure they reflect the *halachot* and traditions developed by the rabbis at Yavneh and in the later Babylonian academies, traditions that were necessary to maintain a vibrant diaspora Judaism without Temple or priesthood.¹ In the rabbinic literature, it is difficult (some would say impossible) to decipher between descriptions of early practice and that of later rabbinic Judaism. Even more, in order to garner greater authority for their *halachah*, the Sages often portrayed their current rulings as though they had actually existed in antiquity. An obvious example is the rabbinic myth that the Oral Torah (essentially the Mishnah) was given to Moses at Sinai.² We must exercise much caution, then, in ascribing to the 1st Century what the later rabbinic literature portrays. We may have to be content with reasoned conjectures about how the Torah portions were selected for reading and in what manner texts from the Prophets and/or Writings were chosen.

And there is another factor to consider: the historical sources make it clear that there were Judaisms existing in the early centuries, not a monolithic, homogenous “Judaism.” This changed, of course, after the destruction of the Temple (70 CE) and particularly following the defeat of Bar Kochba in the second Jewish revolt (135 CE) and the persecutions under Hadrian that resulted. In fact, it was the utter devastation of the Jewish communities and their dispersion that compelled the Babylonian academies to create a unifying *halachah* forming what we now know as “rabbinic Judaism.” But the pre-destruction Jewish sects were anything but homogenous—they differed both in theology and practice. This being the case, we should presume that synagogue worship and traditions differed among the various sects as well as from one region to another. What took place in the synagogues near Jerusalem, for instance, may have varied widely from synagogue services in Galilee and even more so in the diaspora.

Yet in spite of the apparent differences among the Judaisms of the 1st Century, there were doubtlessly certain core beliefs and practices that remained universal. One of these was the central place of the Torah in the life of the Jewish people. We can presume that every community had a copy of the Torah and most likely other scrolls containing some of the prophets and maybe the Psalms as well.³ Individuals

¹See Philip Segal, *The Emergence of Contemporary Judaism*, 4 vols (The Pickwick Press, 1980), 1/2.297f; William Scott Green, “The Scholarly Study of Judaism and its Sources” in Jacob Neusner, ed. *Judaism in Late Antiquity*, 3 vols (Brill, 2001), 1.1–10; Jacob Neusner, *Transformations in Ancient Judaism* (Hendrickson, 2004), 37ff; Lee Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years* (Yale, 2000), 502–03; Ben Zion Wacholder, “Prolegomenon” in Jacob Mann, *The Bible as Read and Preached in the Old Synagogue*, 2 vols. (KTAV, 1971), 1.xviiiff; Anthony Saldarini, “Reconstructions of Rabbinic Judaism” in Robert Kraft and George Nickelsburg, eds., *Early Judaism and Its Modern Interpreters* (Fortress, 1986), 437ff; Ephraim Urbach, *The Sages* (Harvard, 1975), 593ff; H. L. Strack and G. Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (Fortress, 1992), 50ff; Charles Perrot, “The Reading of the Bible in the Ancient Synagogue” in Martin Mulder, ed., *Mikra* (Van Gorcum, 1988), 149.

²m.Avot 1.1; cf. Lawrence Hoffman, “Jewish Liturgy and Jewish Scholarship” in Jacob Neusner, ed., *Judaism in Late Antiquity*, Op. cit., 1.246.

³Julio Treballe Barrera, *The Jewish Bible and the Christian Bible* (Brill, 1998), 118; cf. Acts 15:21.

may have owned their own copies of some of the biblical texts,⁴ but this was no doubt the exception rather than the rule. Thus, one could imagine that the public reading and discussion of the Torah and Prophets must have occupied an important place among the 1st Century synagogues in general, even if we lack clear evidence to determine exactly what portions were read and how the reading took place.

My purpose in this article, then, is to survey the historical sources that give some description of the public reading of the Torah in the synagogues of the early centuries, and to suggest from these what might have been common practices in the early 1st Century CE among the synagogues in which Yeshua and His disciples gathered.

The Ancient Precedence for the Public Reading of Torah

When God instructed Moses to ascend Mt. Sinai, He said to him: "...I will give you the stone tablets with the Torah and the commandment which I have written for their [Israel's] instruction" (Exodus 24:12). Thus, from the very beginning, the Torah was intended to be read publicly and to be explained so that the people would understand God's instructions and obey them. Before he died, Moses specifically gave this duty to the priests who were to read the Torah to the people at the Sukkot festival marking the completion of the Sabbatical year (Deuteronomy 31:9–13).⁵ Later, after the defeat of Ai in the conquest of the Land, we see Joshua reading the entire "book of the Torah" to the people of Israel who had entered the Land (Joshua 8:34–35).

Thus, the tradition to read the Torah publicly derives from the earliest times of Israel's history. It is no surprise, then, that in the historical account of the return of the exiles from Babylon we are given a detailed account of the public reading of the Torah (Nehemiah 8:1–8). It was the first day of the seventh month (Tishri), that is Rosh HaShanah, and Ezra the scribe stood before the people on a raised wooden podium, flanked by six men on his right and seven on his left.⁶ When he opened the Torah scroll to read from it, all the people stood up. He then blessed "the Lord the great God"⁷ and all the people, with uplifted hands, responded "Amen, Amen," bowing in worship. The Torah was then read and translated so that the people could understand its sense,⁸ and the words were further explained by the Levites.

Here, for the first time in the Bible, we have a detailed description of what took place when the Torah was read publicly. It is from this account that the later rabbinic traditions were derived: reading the Torah from a raised podium; standing when the Torah is read; pronouncing a blessing before reading; the response of the congregation to the blessing; translating the Hebrew for those not fluent in the language; and the giving of a midrash or homily after the reading to explain its meaning. Yet even though we have such a detailed description of the Torah reading in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah, there is nothing in this story to indicate that a cycle of Torah readings for Sabbath and Festivals had been es-

⁴cf. 2Timothy 4:13.

⁵In 2Kings 23:1–3, we find King Josiah reading the Torah publicly in a renewal of the covenant. The mishnah (m.*Sota* 7.8) interprets Deuteronomy 31:10f and the requirement to read the Torah at Sukkot in the Sabbatical year to apply specifically to the King.

⁶b.*Megila* 23a considers "Zechariah" and "Meshullam" to be one and the same person, thus numbering 12 who stood with Ezra rather than 13, six on his right and six on his left.

⁷R. Joseph in the name of Rav (b.*Yoma* 69b) interprets the "blessing" to have been the declaration of the Ineffable Name.

⁸The Hebrew participle *mephorash* from the verb *parash* in Nehemiah 8:8 is regularly understood to mean "to translate." See *KB* on *parash*; Chaim Rabin, "Hebrew and Aramaic in the First Century" in Safrai and Stern, eds., *The Jewish People in the First Century* (Van Gorcum, 1987), 1013; b.*megila* 3a.

tablished. It seems more likely that, in accordance with Deuteronomy 31, Ezra read the entire Torah to the people, starting on the first day of the seventh month and finishing on the last day of Sukkot (Nehemiah 8:18).

Evidence from Early Sources

There is near universal agreement that reading from the Torah and Prophets on Shabbats and Festivals was an established synagogue tradition by the 1st Century.⁹ Indeed, this is clearly stated in the Apostolic Scriptures. The Jerusalem Council presumes that the Gentiles who gather in the synagogues will hear the Torah read each Shabbat and be instructed in its meaning: “For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath” (Acts 15:21).¹⁰ Likewise, while in Pisidian Antioch, Paul and his traveling companions entered the synagogue on the Shabbat and Luke describes what happened: “After the reading of the Torah and the Prophets the synagogue officials sent to them, saying, “Brethren, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, say it” (Acts 13:15). Then Paul stood up and proceeded to give a short homily, apparently based upon the readings from the Torah and Prophets.

A similar scene is described by Luke in his Gospel (4:16–30). Following His testing by Satan in the wilderness, Yeshua returned home to Nazareth, and as was His custom, entered the synagogue on the Shabbat. During the reading of the Torah and Prophets, He stood to read, and the scroll of Isaiah was handed to Him by the synagogue attendant.¹¹ (We may presume on the basis of the verses from Acts cited above, that the Torah portion had already been read.) He then found Isaiah 61 and read the portion (verses 1–2a) after which He handed the scroll back to the attendant, sat down and began to give His teaching.

A number of interesting facts can be gleaned from this account of Luke. We see that already in the 1st Century the duty of caring for the synagogue scrolls was assigned to a specific person, here called an “assistant” (ὑπηρέτης, *huperetes*).¹² He most likely answered to the ruler of the synagogue (ἀρχισυνάγωγος, *archisynagogos*) and was given the specific task of maintaining the synagogue scrolls and dis-

⁹Lee Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue*, 136ff; 506; E. P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief 63B CE–66 CE* (Trinity Press, 1992), 198; Charles Perrot, “Reading the Bible” in Martin Mulder, ed., *Mikra* (Van Gorcum, 1988), 149–150; Ismar Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy: A Comprehensive History* (JPS, 1993), 129ff. The Theodotus Inscription, usually dated to pre-70 CE, describes the function of the synagogue as “...for the reading of the Law and for the teaching of the Commandments...” See Adolf Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1922), 439–41; Levine, *Ibid.*, 54–56; S. Sifrai, “The Synagogue” in *The Jewish People in the First Century*, Op. cit., 2.912. Some have argued that the Theodotus Inscription is post-70 CE. See Howard Clark Kee, “Defining the First-Century C.E. Synagogue” in Kee and Cohick, eds., *Evolution of the Synagogue* (Trinity Press, 1999), 7–11; Heather A. McKay, *Sabbath & Synagogue* (Brill, 2001), 222–23, 242–45.

¹⁰We may also note the words of Paul in 2Corinthians 3:14–15, “But their minds were hardened; for until this very day at the reading of the old covenant the same veil remains unlifted, because it is removed in Messiah. But to this day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their heart....”

¹¹The Great Isaiah scroll from Qumran (1QIs^a) gives us a good example of the size of the scroll handed to Yeshua. The Qumran Isaiah is 24 ft. long, composed of 17 sheets of sheepskin (Cross, Freedman, and Sanders, eds. *Scrolls from Qumran Cave 1* [Albright Institute, 1974], 3). This is substantially shorter than modern Torah scrolls. Likewise, if one takes the scrolls discovered at Qumran as somewhat normative, it is doubtful that the scroll handed to Yeshua had sticks upon which the vellum was rolled. None have been found at Qumran. Likewise, in one of the panels contained in the frescoes that covered the west wall of the 3rd Century CE Dura-Europos synagogue, Moses or Ezra is depicted as reading from a scroll without wooden sticks (Joseph Gutmann, ed. *The Dura-Europos Synagogue* [Scholars Press, 1992], 215).

¹²The Greek word in the Apostolic Scriptures regularly denotes subordinate officers, whether of religious leaders (John 7:32, 45–46), judges (Matthew 5:25) or military personnel (Mark 14:54). It is also used of the Apostles as “servants” of Messiah (1Corinthians 4:1). Rengstorff (“ὑπηρέτης” in *TDNT*, 8.540, n. 81) notes that the title is found on a Jewish burial plaque in the catacomb of the Vigna Randanini in Rome where other known synagogue officials were also buried.

tributing them for reading during the service.¹³ Luke tells us nothing about where the scrolls were kept. Was there a special cabinet or niche that housed the scrolls? To date, the archaeological data from Second Temple synagogues give no evidence of a podium, niche or apse where the scrolls were stored. Levine suggests that the Torah scrolls (and presumably the other scrolls as well) were housed in a mobile Torah chest that was brought into the main hall of the synagogue only when they were to be read.¹⁴

Luke also says that Yeshua stood up to read. Does this mean He volunteered to be a reader or was He called upon to do so? If in Acts 13:15 Paul and his companions were invited to address the gathering because they were honored visitors, we might also think that Yeshua, having been absent from His home synagogue during His 40 days in the desert, was offered the privilege of reading as a recognition of His having returned home. But, of course, we cannot be certain.

Luke tells us that Yeshua unrolled the scroll¹⁵ and “found the place” for the portion He would read. Some see this as proof of a fixed reading schedule from the Prophets in the 1st Century. It is possible that the scroll had already been rolled to the appropriate place (indicating a predetermined cycle of readings), and that Yeshua then only had to open it and locate within the column of text the exact place where He was to begin reading. But it is also possible that by this description, Luke intends to inform us that Yeshua chose the reading Himself.¹⁶ Moreover, Luke’s account indicates that Yeshua read only a verse and a half. Was this long enough to constitute a complete Sabbath reading from the Prophets? Or does Luke include just the opening lines of the section in order to identify the place in Isaiah from which Yeshua read? The difficulty is that the words Yeshua read from Isaiah, at least as Luke recounts them, are neither strictly from the Hebrew or the Septuagint as we now have them. This might favor the idea that Luke is giving us a general rather than specific notice of what Yeshua actually read.¹⁷

It is generally presumed that the scroll of Isaiah from which Yeshua read was in Hebrew, but even this is not absolutely certain. The way Luke tells the story, Yeshua read the portion and the people understood it without the need of a translator. This could mean either that Hebrew (in whatever form) remained a living language among the Jewish communities of 1st Century Israel,¹⁸ or that Yeshua read the

¹³Whether *huperetes* can be linked to the later חָזַן (*chazan*) or שָׂמַשׁ (*shamash*) of the post-70 CE synagogue is not certain. See Rengstorff, *Op. cit.*, 8.537–38. The tradition of a synagogue official taking the scroll and handing to the person who would read from it probably goes back to Temple times. According to the *m.Yoma* 7.1, the High Priest read from the Torah on Yom Kippur and the ceremony began by the *chazan* taking the scroll, handing it to the “head of the assembly” (רֹאשׁ הַכְּנֶסֶת) who in turn hands it to the “prefect” (רַבֵּן), who gives it to the High Priest.

¹⁴Lee Lavine, *The Ancient Synagogue*, 328. It is also most likely that there were separate scrolls for each of the five books of the Torah. In the *Letter of Aristeas*, 179, the presentation of the Torah to the king is described as consisting of “parcels” (τεύχη, *teuxe*) which most likely describes “cases of papyrus” (so Perrot, *Op. cit.*, 154). Liddell & Scott, *Lexicon*, ad. loc., notes that *teuxe* can refer to “books,” and thus our English “Pentateuch,” “five books.” Note also *Letter of Aristeas*, 310.

¹⁵There is a textual variant here. Some manuscripts have the participle form of ἀνοίγω (*anoigo*), “to open” but the reading ἀναπτύσσω (*anaptusso*), “to unroll” or “unfold,” though found only here in the Apostolic Scriptures, has the greater weight of manuscript evidence. The corresponding verb πτύσσω (*ptusso*), “to roll up” or “fold up” is found in v. 20 where Yeshua rolls up the scroll and hands it back to the assistant.

¹⁶As noted above (n. 11), 1QIs^a is approximately 24 ft. long. If, in fact, Yeshua chose the text to be read from Isaiah, and if the beginning of Isaiah was on the outside of the roll, He would have had to roll the scroll quite a bit to arrive at chapter 61. If, however, the end of Isaiah was on the outside of the roll, He would have had only a short distance to roll to come to the portion He read.

¹⁷On the whole matter of the variants between the MT, Lxx, and Luke’s Gospel as pertains to the portion Yeshua read, see James Sanders, “From Isaiah 61 to Luke 4” in Evans and Sanders, eds., *Luke and Scripture* (Fortress, 1993), 46–69; Darrell Bock, *Luke*, 2 vols. in Silva, ed., *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Baker Books, 1994), 1.410–11.

¹⁸See Chaim Rabin, “Hebrew and Aramaic in the First Century” in Safrai and Stern, eds., *The Jewish People in the First Century*, *Op. cit.*, 1033–1037. Rabin notes that in societies that are bi-lingual or even multi-lingual, a “home language” and a *lingua franca* function simultaneously. Thus, in Jerusalem mishnaic Hebrew was the “home language” and Aramaic the

Prophetic portion in a language more widely known, such as Aramaic or Greek.¹⁹ Though usually reserved for synagogues outside of Israel, it is recognized that the Septuagint was utilized for Scripture reading in synagogues of Greek-speaking Jews such as those mentioned in Acts 6.²⁰ Later, when the *halachah* demanded that synagogue scrolls be written only in Hebrew,²¹ the presence of a translator became necessary. However, there is no information to substantiate the presence of translators in the synagogues before 70 CE.²²

From these few texts we have noted a number of important traditions that had attached to the reading of the Torah and Prophets in the 1st Century synagogues. Interestingly, nothing in the texts clearly indicates that the portions read were determined ahead of time. There are, however, a few hints that might suggest some cycle of readings did exist in the Apostolic era. First, there are a number of instances in the Apostolic Scriptures where portions in the Tanach seem to be referenced by a “catch word.” In Romans 11:2, for instance, Paul writes: “God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew. Or do you not know what the Scripture says in the passage about Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel?” Actually, the Greek has “...in the passage in Elijah,” not “about Elijah.” Paul goes on to quote from 1 Kings 19, a section of the former prophets apparently known as “Elijah.” The same phenomenon occurs in Mark 12:26. During Yeshua’s dialog with some Sadducees over the issue of the resurrection, He quotes from Exodus 3:6, identifying the passage this way: “...have you not read in the book of Moses, in the passage about the burning bush, how God spoke to him, saying, ‘I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’?” First He identifies the place generally: “in the book of Moses.” Then He narrows the reference to a given portion which He identifies (literally) as “about the bush.”²³ It appears likely that recognized divisions within the text of the Torah were already identified by a “catch word” in the Second Temple period. If various means were employed to prescribe sections within the Torah, it is possible that these provided handy units for public reading as well.

Likewise, in some of the Qumran scrolls, we find divisions of the text clearly marked, and one could imagine that one purpose for such divisions was to facilitate the public reading of the text. For instance, in the Paleo-Hebrew Leviticus scroll (11QpaleoLev), paragraphs are marked by an enlarged *vav* and roughly correspond to the *parashot* of the later Masoretic text of Leviticus.²⁴ While the impetus for such paragraph divisions may have been exegetical, there is also the clear possibility that such thematic divisions of the text conveniently apportioned it for public reading. Indeed, when the Torah was read publicly, it is only natural to think that predetermined starting points for such reading existed within the text it-

lingua franca, in Galilee Aramaic was probably the “home language” and mishnaic Hebrew the “upper language of a diglossia,” meaning that while mishnaic Hebrew may not have been the common daily language of communication, it was sufficiently known to be used without difficulty in the synagogue. One should also be reminded, however, that among the Dead Sea Scrolls, Hebrew, Aramaic, as well as Greek are represented.

¹⁹Note m.Shabbat 16.1 (cf b.Shabbat 115a), “All Holy Scriptures—they save them from fire, whether they read in them or do not read in them. And even though they are written in any language, [if they become useless] they require storage [and are not to be burned].”

²⁰Charles Perrot, “Reading of the Bible” in *Mikra*, Op. cit., 155.

²¹m.*Megillah* 2.21; t.*Megillah* 2.6;

²²Julio Treballe Barrera, *The Jewish Bible and the Christian Bible* (Brill, 1998), 118.

²³The MT identifies Exodus 3 as the beginning of the third *Seder* (*Sidra*) of Exodus.

²⁴See D. N. Freedman and K. A. Matthews, *The Paleo-Hebrew Leviticus Scroll* (ASOR, 1985), 11–12. For a clear example of the paragraph divisions in this scroll, see plate 16, column 3, p. 129.

self.²⁵ In the well-known Isaiah Scroll from the Dead Sea Scrolls (1QIs^a), for instance, clear paragraph divisions within the text can be seen, and once again, these roughly correspond to the divisions in the later Masoretic text. Since the Prophetic readings (*haftarot*, singular *haftarah*) were chosen to correspond to the Torah reading on the basis of verbal as well as thematic parallels, such divisions within the text itself would also offer beginning and ending markers for a given portion. We cannot be dogmatic on this, but marking sections or paragraphs in the pre-Masoretic text of the Tanach, such as were found in the Dead Sea Scrolls, may suggest that already in the late Second Temple period some systematic reading of the Torah, coupled with readings from the Prophets, existed.

A medieval legend (14th Century) appears to substantiate the tradition that the Prophets were read in the synagogues of the Second Temple period. It ascribes the origin of the *haftarah* reading to the days of Antiochus IV (2nd Century BCE) when he issued an edict prohibiting the public reading of the Torah. As the legend goes, the edict was evaded by reciting a portion from the Prophets which in some way was reminiscent of the Torah portion scheduled to be read. In this way, the study of the Torah was achieved without actually reading it publicly. Unfortunately, there is nothing in the sources themselves to substantiate such a legend and so whether it actually preserves historical facts or not is debated.²⁶ Others have suggested that the *haftarah* was instituted against the Samaritans, who accepted only the Torah and the book of Joshua as canonical, and then later against the Sadducees who likewise diminished the authority of the Prophets.

It is curious that Acts 13:15 mentions only the Torah and Prophets as being read in the synagogue on Shabbat. What about the Writings, the third section of the Tanach? Were sections from the Writings also read on a regular basis in the early 1st Century synagogues? It is possible that in Acts 13:15 Luke uses “Torah and Prophets” to describe the Tanach in general and that he intended us to understand the Writings to be included in the readings. Yeshua apparently uses the phrase to refer to the whole Tanach a number of times.²⁷ Yet in the upper room following the Emmaus road incident, Yeshua refers to the Tanach with the common three-fold designation: “the Torah of Moses, the prophets, and the Psalms” (Luke 24:44), where “Psalms” undoubtedly refers to the Writings. So we are left to wonder what part the Writings played in the early synagogue practice of reading Scripture. Clearly the earliest sources that describe the triennial and annual cycles do not include portions from the Writings. Some have suggested that the reason for this is that the reading of Scripture in the synagogue began at a time when the Writings had not yet gained canonical status or at least during the time when the canonical status of these “other books of our fathers”²⁸ was in the process of being determined.²⁹ It is argued that by the time the Writings did gain canonical status, the reading of the Torah and Prophets was so firmly established that it could not be altered. If this theory is correct, we have yet another indication that the weekly public reading of the Torah and Prophets was a well established tradition long before the 1st Century CE.

²⁵See the comments of Charles Perrot, “Reading of the Bible” in *Mikra*, Op. cit., 156.

²⁶Manford Harris, “Haftarah” in *The Encyclopedia Judaica*, 16.1343, thinks the explanation offered by the story is “most plausible.” Wachholder, “Prolegomenon,” in Jacob Mann, *The Bible as Read and Preached in the Old Synagogue*, 2 vols. (KTAV, 1971), 1.xv, on the contrary, finds nothing of historical substance in the legend.

²⁷Cf. Matthew 5:17; 7:12; 11:13; 22:40; Luke 16:16; John 1:45.

²⁸This is the phrase used to describe the “Writings” or “Hagiographa” (*Ketuvot*) in the prologue to the Greek translation of Ben Sira (also known as The Wisdom of Ben Sirach or Sirach, for short), usually dated to 175 BCE and not later than 130 BCE. Three times in the prologue, the translator refers to the “Torah, Prophets, and other writings,” indicating that by this time, the Hagiographa was considered an integral part of the Hebrew canon. See Roger Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church* (Eerdmans, 1985), 110–11.

²⁹Wachholder, “Prolegomenon,” 1.xv–xvi.

Philo likewise gives evidence that the reading and study of Scripture predominated the synagogue services in the early 1st Century.³⁰ He speaks of Jews in Rome conducting regular weekly meetings on “sacred Sabbaths” when they are “trained” in their ancestral philosophy.³¹ He refers to such gatherings as *proseuche* (“place of prayer”) as well as *sunagoge* (“synagogue”), calling them schools where the people were taught a virtuous life based upon the reading of Scripture.³²

Josephus also writes that Moses ordained the Torah to be read, not “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 Torah and to obtain a thorough and accurate knowledge of it....”³³

Our brief investigation so far has yielded significant information about the reading of Scripture in the synagogues of Yeshua’s day. We know that reading from the Torah and Prophets was common and from this we may presume that some schedule or cycle of readings was in place, though it is possible that at this early date the section from the Prophets was not fixed and may have been chosen by the reader himself. We also know that synagogues possessed scrolls, the care and distribution of which were the responsibility of a synagogue official. We see that the one reading stood as he read³⁴ and that a teaching normally followed the reading, though not necessarily given by the readers themselves. Further, the teaching incorporated open responses by those assembled rather than being a strict monologue or lecture.

Evidence from the Rabbinic Literature for the Triennial Cycle

A fixed cycle of Torah readings, only hinted at in the texts we have studied so far, is explicitly described by the rabbis. In *m. Megillah* 3.4–6 we read about the four special Shabbats of the month of Adar and the portions of the Torah that are to be read on each of these.³⁵ However, in the Gemara of the Bavli (*b. Megilla* 29a), a controversy is noted. Various rabbis assign different Torah readings for the first Shabbat in Adar, Shabbat Shekalim. Diverse means of resolving the conflict are offered, but one is that two different reading cycles exist: an annual cycle in which the Torah is read in one year, which was the tradition of the Babylonian academies, and a three year cycle (called the triennial cycle) used by those dwelling in the land of Israel. It is interesting to note that this controversy, raised in the period of the Talmud (c. 220–500 CE), does not appear in either the Mishnah (c. 70–220 CE) nor the Tosefta (c. 220–300 CE). It is reasonable to presume that a dispute such as this arose in the 3rd or 4th Centuries, when the Babylonian academies attempted to standardize the weekly readings.

Still, we lack sufficient data to know precisely what Torah portions comprised the triennial cycle, and even less information exists regarding the *haftarah*³⁶ readings. Moreover, it is not entirely clear that

³⁰Precise dates for Philo are not known, but given the datable data in his writings, he was probably born 20–15 BCE and died around 50 CE.

³¹*Embassy*, 156; *Hypothetica* 7, 12.

³²*Moses*, 2, 215–16; *Special Laws*, 2, 62, 63; *Embassy*, 312.

³³*Against Apion* 2.175. Note also *Antiquities* 16.43.

³⁴Though according to the Mishnah, one may read *Megillat Esther* either standing or sitting, *m. Megillah* 4.1.

³⁵Shabbat Shekalim: Exodus 30:11–16; Shabbat Zakor: Deuteronomy 25:17–19; Shabbat Parah: Numbers 19:1f; Shabbat HaChodesh: Exodus 12:1–20.

³⁶Actually, the term *haftarah* was chosen by the Babylonian schools as a designation for the prophetic text in the annual cycle. The Palestinian term for the prophetic portion of the triennial cycle was *’ashlamata*, apparently meaning “that which finishes the readings” or “that which completes the Torah.” Thus the Masorete Aaron ben Asher, in his *Diqduqei haTa’amim*,

the so-called “triennial cycle” was actually completed in three years. The Hebrew manuscripts of the Masoretic era (c. 600–1000 CE), besides containing the vowel signs (*nikkudot*), accents (*ta’amim*), and verse and paragraph divisions,³⁷ also divide the text into sections for public reading. Either at the end of each book or in the notes of the Masorah, the Masoretes give the total number of verses (called *pesuqim*) and the total number of reading portions (called *sedarim*). But not all of the manuscripts agree on the number of *sedarim*. The Leningrad Codex,³⁸ for instance, has a total of 167 *sedarim* for the Torah.³⁹ Since a normal year in the Hebrew calendar has 52 or 53 Shabbats, if one portion were read for each Shabbat, a cycle comprising 167 *sedarim* would obviously take longer than three years to complete, especially taking into account that portions for the Festivals and special Shabbats suspended the regular Torah reading.⁴⁰ Even if the three year cycle included a leap year, 167 *sedarim* would have required at least three and a half years to complete.⁴¹ Other manuscripts and rabbinic lists offer various totals for the *sedarim*: 175, 158, 155, 154 and 141.⁴² Ultimately, dividing the Torah into 154 *sedarim* became the most widespread custom in the later centuries, presumably because the goal was to complete the cycle in three years.⁴³ Doing so meant that once every three years they would finish reading the Torah in sync with those using the annual cycle.⁴⁴ Yet the fact that different totals of *sedarim* continued to exist (as the biblical manuscripts indicate) means that the beginning and ending of the reading cycle also varied among

refers to the Prophets as “*shilum haTorah*,” “the completion of the Torah.” See Jacob Mann, *The Bible as Read and Practiced in the Old Synagogue*, 2 vols. (KTAV, 1971), 1.558.

³⁷A “closed section” (*setumot*) is indicated by a space in the line (or an indentation if the last line of the section takes up the entire line). An “open section” (*petuchot*) is indicated by leaving the remainder of the line blank and beginning the new section on the next line, or skipping a line if the last line of the section takes up the full space.

³⁸The Leningrad Codex (B19a) is the base manuscript for the current critical edition of the Hebrew Tanach (Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia).

³⁹45 for Genesis; 33 for Exodus; 25 for Leviticus; 33 for Numbers; and 31 for Deuteronomy.

⁴⁰m. *Megillah* 3.4–6.

⁴¹On average there are 52 Shabbats in a year. The custom of omitting the cyclical readings during Festivals and on special Shabbats (including Hanukkah and Rosh Chodesh) would have lengthened the cycle by about six weeks each year. This could actually make the cycle closer to four years in some cases. We should presume, then, that the term “three year cycle” found in the Mishnah is only a general designation and not intended to be precise. See the remarks of Wachholder, “Prolegomenon,” xxi–xxii.

⁴²Wachholder, “Prolegomenon,” xxvii. In Mid. Rab. *Esther* 1.3, the phrase “And none shall buy” (Deuteronomy 28:68) is being expounded. Rab explains “none shall buy” as meaning, “Because you did not acquire the words of the covenant; there was none among you who purchased the words of the five books of the Torah, the numerical value of *qoneh* (‘to buy’).” The numerical value of *q-n-h* is 155, and some have thought that this alludes to 155 *sedarim* of the Torah. See also Ismar Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy* (JPS, 1993), 134.

⁴³See Christian D. Ginsburg, *Introduction to the Massoretico-Critical Edition of the Hebrew Bible* (London, 1897; reprinted KTAV, 1966), 34. See also Wachholder, “Prolegomenon,” xxvii. The question of whether the special Festival reading was added to the normal Torah reading when the Festival fell on the weekly Shabbat or if the normal reading was suspended in favor of the Festival portion (see m. *Megillah* 3.4–6) may account for the variation in *sedarim* found in the various manuscripts and rabbinic lists. In the Second Rabbinic Bible (which was the first printed edition to include the Masorah) edited by Yaacov ben Chaim (Venice 1524–25), he gives the list of “Christian chapters” for each book which he inserted into the text (pp. 7–10 of the Introduction). But he also mentions that late in the printing process he obtained the Masoretic divisions (*sedarim*) and so he added these in a separate table (p. 11 of the Introduction). In this list, a total of the *sedarim* for each book of the Tanach is given first, then each *sefer* is noted by the opening word(s). For Genesis, the total *sedarim* is given as 43, but then only 42 are listed. The final *sefer* (49:27) was apparently left out as an oversight. Thus, the list of Yaacov ben Chaim also has 154 *sedarim* for the Torah: 43 for Genesis; 29 for Exodus; 23 for Leviticus; 32 for Numbers; and 27 for Deuteronomy.

⁴⁴The celebration at the completion of the Torah reading cycle began as part of the celebration of Shemini Atzeret (cf. b. *Megilla* 31a). Known later as Simchat Torah, its unique celebrations began to be developed during the geonic period (589–1038 CE) when the one year cycle had gained wide acceptance.

some of the Jewish communities. Thus, while those following the annual cycle always finished Deuteronomy immediately after Sukkot each year, some of the communities using the triennial cycle finished at various times throughout the final year of their cycle. Apparently, these communities simply celebrated whenever they finished reading the Torah,⁴⁵ without respect to the calendar. In fact, the triennial cycle, unlike that of its annual counterpart, was not linked to the calendar.⁴⁶ The point of all this for our study is that the triennial cycle gives evidence of diversity in the synagogal reading of the Torah rather than indicating widespread unanimity. If we were hoping that the rabbinic description of the triennial cycle would help us pinpoint, for instance, what Torah portion was read on the Shabbat that Yeshua read from Isaiah 61 (as noted in Luke 4), we have found just the opposite. Rather than describing a universally accepted cycle of readings, the rabbinic literature portrays a synagogue practice still in formation and therefore quite diverse.

This is even more the case when it came to the weekly reading from the Prophets. As noted above, when the Isaiah scroll was handed to Yeshua from which He was to read, we cannot be certain whether the assistant gave Him the scroll of Isaiah because it contained the scheduled reading, or if Yeshua requested it because He had personally chosen to read from Isaiah that Shabbat. However, if we allow the later rabbinic texts to shed light on this Gospel story, the data would suggest that a fixed cycle of readings from the Prophets came at a later time and that in the 1st Century considerable freedom existed for local communities and even individual readers to choose a Prophetic section appropriately matched to the particular Torah portion read that Shabbat. This may be demonstrated by comparing *m. Megillah* 3:4–6 with its parallel text in the Tosefta. In the Mishnah text, the Torah portion (*sefer*) for each of the four Shabbats in Adar is named, but no mention is made of the accompanying *haftarah*. However, the Tosefta not only reiterates the same Torah *sedarim* for each of the four Sabbaths but also identifies the accepted reading from the Prophets for each of them. This would indicate that a recognized cycle of *haftarot* readings did not exist until the late 2nd or early 3rd Centuries. And even when the *haftarot* readings began to be compiled, differences continued to exist among the Jewish communities.⁴⁷

Given the fact that no clear uniformity existed in the early centuries for the triennial cycle, either in the number of *sedarim* or their exact delineation, it seems pointless to speculate as to when the cycle usually began. Some scholars state that Genesis 1 was read on Nisan 1⁴⁸ while others think the reading cycle began on Tishri 1 (Rosh HaShannah).⁴⁹ But given the fact that most of the lists of *sedarim* make it impossible for the cycle to finish on the anniversary of its beginning, it appears that in the majority of

⁴⁵Wachholder, “Prolegomenon,” xliii. Wachholder (Ibid.) also notes that this practice, of celebrating Simchat Torah whenever the cycle was finished, continued into the middle ages. Benjamin of Tudela, who visited Egypt about 1170, reports that two synagogues in Cairo, one following the annual cycle and the other the triennial, celebrated Simchat Torah at different times. The final demise of the triennial cycle may have been helped along by the words of Maimonides: “We continue reading according to this order until the Torah is complete, during the Sukkot festival. There are those who finish the Torah reading in a three-year cycle. However, this not a widely accepted custom” (*Hilchot Tefilah* 13.1).

⁴⁶See Wachholder, Ibid., xxvi, xxx. This is contrary to the article in the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, “Triennial Cycle” (15.1386–89) in which the author states that the triennial cycle was designed so that the beginning of each of the five books of the Torah began to be read on one of the four “new years” throughout the 3 1/2 year cycle. He also seeks to show a thematic coincidence between the triennial readings and the calendar, but admits that such correspondence was not always possible and did not always occur. On the contrary, the differing number of *sedarim* found in manuscripts and lists shows that there was no uniform expression of the triennial cycle but that differences existed from one location to another. If the triennial cycle had been linked to the calendar, surely a greater uniformity of *sedarim* would have resulted.

⁴⁷See the table compiled by Wachholder, “Prolegomenon,” lii–lxvii.

⁴⁸*Encyclopedia Judaica*, “Triennial Cycle,” 15.1386;

⁴⁹See Jacob Mann, *The Bible as Read and Practiced in the Old Synagogue*, 2 vols. (KTAV, 1971), 1.6ff.

cases, the reading of the first *seder* in Genesis shifted from season to season.⁵⁰

Evidence from the Rabbinic Literature for the Annual Cycle

The annual cycle of Torah readings, in which the entire Torah is read in one year's time, is taken for granted by the Bavli.⁵¹ To accomplish this, the Torah is divided into 54 portions, called *parashot* (singular, *parashah*)⁵² and referred to by the first significant word(s) of the portion. In the Masoretic manuscripts, each *parashah* is marked and most often begins at a verse or paragraph break. These are also noted in the Masoretic lists (in the Leningrad Codex, lists follow at the end of each of the three sections of the Tanach). The manner in which the *parashot* are marked in the text itself differs among the manuscripts. Some (like Leningrad) have a special sign in the margin. Others use a *peh*, either in the margin or at the end of the *parashah*.

In contrast to the triennial cycle which may shift in relationship to the calendar, the annual cycle was developed with the yearly calendar in mind. This is explicitly stated in a *baraita*⁵³ found in b.*Megillah* 31b: "It has been taught: R. Shimon b. Elazar [a contemporary of Yehudah HaNasi] says: Ezra made a regulation for Israel that they should read the curses in Leviticus [26:15–31] before Shavuot and those in Deuteronomy [27:15–26; 28:15–68] before Rosh HaShanah." The only way this could occur is if the Torah was being read in a single year. Accrediting the annual cycle to Ezra should be understood as a rabbinic invention in order to endow the current *halachah* with the authority of antiquity. But even leaving aside the reference to Ezra, the fact that R. Shimon b. Elazar is the one making this statement would indicate that by the late 2nd Century CE, the annual cycle was known and functioning as *halachah*, at least for some of the Jewish communities.

But it is also clear that the two cycles were, in some measure, interdependent. For instance, of the 54 *parashot* in the annual cycle, 43 of them begin precisely where one of the *sedarim* of the triennial cycle begins. This could not be coincidental. It is possible, then, that both cycles existed in the Land, with different regions utilizing one or the other.⁵⁴ Though we cannot be certain, given the fact that the Masoretic manuscripts mark the *sedarim* of the triennial cycle even at a time when the annual cycle had gained clear prominence, it seems likely that the triennial cycle was the source from which the annual cycle was

⁵⁰See the remarks of Joseph Heinemann, in Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy*, Op. cit., 134; Wachholder, "Prolegomenon," xxii.

⁵¹b.*Megillah* 29b, where the exception is that "the people of Palestine complete their reading in three years," meaning the annual cycle was universally established among the Babylonian academies.

⁵²Later a *parashah* (plural, *parashot* or *parashiyot*) section was erroneously called a *sidra* or *seder* and the two terms became synonymous by usage. But technically a *seder* of the Torah relates to a portion in the triennial cycle (as marked in the Masoretic manuscripts with a marginal *samech*) and a *parashah* denotes a reading in the annual cycle (marked in the manuscripts either by a special symbol including the word *parash* or the letter *peh* in the margin or in the space of the *setumah* or *petuchah* that ends/begins the *parashah*). The division of the Torah into *parashot* is as follows: 12 in Genesis; 11 in Exodus; 10 in Leviticus; 10 in Numbers; and 11 in Deuteronomy.

⁵³A *baraita* is an anonymous saying found in the Talmud, which, though not attributed to a given rabbi, was widely known and therefore given credibility. Such recognition could only have come about if the saying were well founded in the tanaitic period.

⁵⁴Wachholder, "Prolegomenon," xxiii conjectures that the annual cycle became prominent in Judea while the triennial cycle continued to be used in Galilee. This is based upon the fact that a diversity of *minhagim* prevailed in the Land in the 1st Century, that the *halachah* of Galilee was known to differ at times with the prevailing *minhag* of Judea, and that "R. Shimon b. Elazar appears to be sometimes associated with the southern part of Palestine." For the view that the annual cycle actually pre-dated the triennial cycle, see Gary Edward Schnittjer, "Outside the Ark—Outside the Camp: Torah Reading Intertextuality and the Imagery of Matathew 24–25," paper delivered at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, November, 1999

derived. Or to say it another way, it is easier to suggest reasons why the annual cycle would have developed out of the triennial cycle, but not *visa versa*.

What would have been the impetus for developing an annual cycle? A number of factors could be suggested, but perhaps the most obvious was the desire of the Sages to solidify the *halachah* in order to unify the communities of the diaspora. The annual cycle offered much in this regard: every synagogue would read the same *parashah* from the Torah and Prophets and would begin and end the cycle at the same time. Moreover, the centrality of the Torah in the Jewish diaspora would be strengthened by the fact that Simchat Torah would be celebrated by all at the conclusion of Sukkot. Finally, establishing the annual cycle of readings also paved the way for additional *halachot* governing how the Torah and Prophets were to be read. Standardizing the *halachah* for this central institution of the synagogue no doubt also had a unifying effect upon the diverse Jewish communities in the Land as well as in the diaspora.

From the rabbinic materials we also discover that, in addition to Shabbat morning, the Torah was read publicly on Shabbat afternoons, on Mondays and Thursdays, though on these additional occasions there was no accompanying section read from the Prophets.⁵⁵ The Bavli states that Ezra was the one who decreed the days upon which the Torah was to be read publicly,⁵⁶ but since neither the Mishnah nor the Tosefta mention this, we should presume that this was something initiated by the Sages at Yavneh or later, and was common practice in the 2nd or 3rd Centuries but not much earlier. Moreover, it was not the more frequent public reading of the Torah that resulted in the annual cycle. The Mishnah makes it clear that reading the Torah on these three other occasions did not diminish the *parashah* read on Shabbat morning.⁵⁷ Thus, beginning Shabbat afternoon and continuing on Mondays and Thursdays, the entire *parashah* was read in the synagogue. Then on Shabbat Morning it was repeated in its entirety with the chosen *haftarah*. This meant that synagogues utilizing the annual cycle spent three times longer reading the Torah portion on Shabbat mornings when compared to those synagogues reading the triennial cycle. Inevitably, this diminished the teaching time that traditionally had followed the reading of Scripture.

The Haftarah Readings in the Rabbinic Literature

It is in the Talmud that we first learn of separate scrolls containing the *haftarah* readings used in the synagogues. Since these scrolls did not contain a contiguous text of any of the Prophets, it was disputed whether they were valid or not. Rabbah (b. Nachmani, c. 270–330 CE) and R. Yoseph (b. Chayai, c. 270–333 CE) both ruled that *haftarah* scrolls were invalid.⁵⁸ The conclusion of the Bavli, however, is that they were necessary because not every synagogue had complete scrolls of all the Prophets. The very fact that a dispute over the validity of *haftarah* scrolls was active in the late 3rd Century indicates that prescribed cycles of readings from the Prophets existed at that time, cycles that must have been in formation much earlier. And even though the annual cycle won prominence, promoted as it was by the Babylonian academies, the triennial cycle continued to be used by some communities. This being the case, it is obvious that at least two distinct cycles of *haftarot* readings also existed, though the assigned *haftarot* readings in the annual cycle probably became fixed before those of the triennial cycle.

⁵⁵m. *Megillah* 3.6; 4.1; y. *Megillah* 4.1, 75a; b. *Megillah* 21b; 31a; Ismar Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy*, Op. cit., 129.

⁵⁶ b. *BavaKama* 82a.

⁵⁷m. *Megillah* 3.6.

⁵⁸b. *Gittin* 60a.

Unlike the Torah portions of the triennial and annual cycles, which share a remarkable affinity in terms of their starting point in the text, the *haftarot* for each cycle vary widely.⁵⁹ Many factors may account for these difference, but the primary one may be the method employed for selecting the *haftarah* reading in the first place. For the annual cycle, some thematic connection to the Torah *parashah* was the primary criterion,⁶⁰ and as such, the link could appear in any part of the section read from the prophets. For example, the *haftarah* for the annual *parashah* of Noah (Genesis 6:9–11:32) begins at Isaiah 54:1 and, depending on the tradition (Ashkenazi or Sephardi), ends at 55:5 or 54:11. The linkage, however, is the promise never again to destroy the world, alluded to in Isaiah 54:9–10.

For the triennial cycle, however, the primary impetus for choosing a particular *haftarah* reading was verbal rather than thematic, the opening of the *haftarah* reading containing some word or words found in the opening of the Torah portion. For example, the *sefer* that begins with Genesis 8:1, “But God remembered (*zakar*) Noah” is matched with Habakkuk 3:2, which contains the phrase “in wrath remember (*zakar*) mercy.” Likewise, the *sefer* which begins at Genesis 8:15, “God said to Noah, ‘Go out (*yatza*)’ from the ark...” is matched with Isaiah 42:7, “To bring out (*yatza*)’ the prisoners from the dungeon.”

But it was not only similar vocabulary that governed the choice of the *haftarah* for the triennial cycle. There was also the concerted effort to emphasize the messianic kingdom as a dominant theme. This may be demonstrated by the *haftarah* reading for the first *parashah* in Genesis. The annual cycle chose Isaiah 45:5ff, which describes Adonai’s sovereignty in creating the physical universe. The majority of witnesses for the triennial *haftarah* for the opening *sefer* of Genesis, however, begin at Isaiah 65:17, which speaks of the creation of a “new heavens and new earth” and that the former creation would no longer be worth remembering. This penchant for emphasizing the messianic kingdom explains why almost half of the triennial *haftarot* are taken from the book of Isaiah, and almost two-thirds of these from Isaiah 40–66. Likewise, the Twelve Minor Prophets were also favored in the readings. In contrast, Jeremiah and Ezekiel were nearly ignored in the triennial *haftarot*. This desire to emphasize the messianic kingdom also explains why there exists a clear connection between the midrashim and the triennial *haftarot*.⁶¹

This difference in criteria for selecting the *haftarot* readings also resulted in the length of the chosen text. Since the annual cycle chose *haftarot* to reflect the theme of the Torah *parashah*, it naturally would require a larger context. The Bavli requires that the *haftarah* have a minimum of twenty-one verses, though R. Yochanan reduced this to ten when an Aramaic translation was necessary.⁶² The Yerushalami (which would favor the triennial cycle), however, claims that this same Rabbi Yochanan fulfilled the obligation of reading the *haftarah* with only three verses.⁶³ Thus, in contrast to the annual readings, the *haftarot* of the triennial cycle are relatively brief, sometimes as short as two verses,⁶⁴ because the point of the triennial *haftarot* was to open the Torah reading to an eschatological midrash.

⁵⁹Though occasionally, the *haftarot* of the annual and triennial cycles are from the same portion of the prophets.

⁶⁰b. *Megillah* 29b.

⁶¹Wachholder, “Prolegomenon,” xxxiv. He suggests that the *halachic* midrashim and Genesis Rabbah reflect the earliest stage of the triennial cycle, Pesikta d’ Rab Kahna and Leviticus Rabbah the middle stage, and Tanhuma, or the Yelamdenu midrashim, the final stage, Ibid., xxxvii–xxxix.

⁶²b. *Megillah* 23b.

⁶³y. *Megillah* iv.1, 75a.

⁶⁴As noted above, in Luke 4 when Yeshua read from the scroll of Isaiah, His reading was from 61:1–2a.

The Public Reading of Scripture in the Rabbinic Traditions

As the public reading of the Torah and Prophets became the norm in the early centuries, various *halachot* evolved to govern how they were to be read. For instance, in the Mishnah we discover that a specific number of people were chosen to read on various occasions:

On new moons and on the intermediate days of festivals four read [in the Torah]. They do not assign fewer, and they do not assign more, to their number. And they do not conclude with a prophetic lection. He who begins the reading of the Torah and he who completes the reading of the Torah says a blessing before and afterward. This is the governing principle: On any day on which there is an additional offering, and which is not a festival day, four read. On a festival, five [read]. On the Day of Atonement, six [read]. On the Sabbath, seven [read]. [On that day] they do not assign fewer, but they do assign more, to their number. And they do conclude with a reading of a prophetic lection. And he who begins the reading of the Torah and he who completes the reading of the Torah says a blessing before and afterward.⁶⁵

The Tosefta (*Megillah* 3.11) repeats the *halachah* of the Mishnah but notes that R. Akiva differed in that he assigned five readers on festivals, seven on Yom Kippur, and six on Shabbat.⁶⁶ The Bavli expands on this dispute, noting that the ruling of R. Ishmael (c. 110–135 CE) upon which this Mishnah is based, is variously reported by two different Ta'anim.⁶⁷ In the end, the Bavli upholds the ruling as stated in the Mishnah, offering various suggestions for the symbolic significance of the number of readers. The Talmud also teaches that three readers were chosen for the *mincha* service on Shabbat, for Mondays and Thursdays.⁶⁸ Thus, it seems obvious that the number of readers increased with the holiness assigned to the day, the weekly morning Shabbat service being the most holy.

Interestingly, a *baraita* in *b.Megillah* 23a teaches that women and even minors may make up the seven readers on Shabbat morning, though the later Sages considered this inappropriate:

Our Rabbis taught: All are qualified to be among the seven [who read], even a minor and a woman, only the Sages said that a woman should not read in the Torah out of respect for the congregation.

The earlier Tosefta has a similar reading:

Everyone can be counted in the minyan of seven (who read the Torah in the Shabbat service), even a woman, even a minor, but one does not bring a woman up to read to the congregation.⁶⁹

But if a woman is counted in the seven, why do the Sages not allow her to read “out of respect for the congregation?” Apparently this ruling retains a more ancient tradition in which women did read from the Torah publicly, a practice that was later suppressed by the Sages. Likewise, this early ruling, which allowed minors to be counted in the seven as well as to read Torah to the congregation, was later receded with the rise of the bar mitzvah.⁷⁰

⁶⁵m.*Megillah* 4.2.

⁶⁶Akiva therefore put the sanctity of Yom Kippur as higher than that of the weekly Shabbat.

⁶⁷b.*Megillah* 23a.

⁶⁸b.*Megillah* 21b.

⁶⁹t.*Megillah* 3.11 (4.11 in Zuckermandle).

⁷⁰See the remarks of Bernadette J. Brooten, *Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue* (Scholars Press, 1982), 94–95.

As we have seen, it appears that choosing specific Torah portions for publicly reading first began with the four Shabbats in Adar, anticipating the Fall Festivals. This no doubt gave rise to choosing Torah portions for each weekly Shabbat, which was then extended to the two “days of assembly,” Mondays and Thursdays, “so that villagers who did not have synagogues or regular services would have the opportunity to hear the Torah read and expounded.”⁷¹ The final stage came when readings for Hanukkah, Purim, and fast days were assigned, reflecting the view that there could be no solemn day without a Torah reading. We may presume, then, that in the earliest stages of reading the Torah publicly, selected passages were chosen.⁷² But when it became the norm to read the Torah every week, it was ruled that the Torah was to be read in a contiguous fashion: “One may not skip in the Torah.”⁷³ Yet on Festival and fast days, this *halachah* was suspended since on these days selected Torah texts continued to be read.⁷⁴

The rabbinic literature gives evidence that in ancient times, the Torah portions read on Shabbat and Festivals were not long. According to the Mishnah, the portion read on Rosh HaShanah was only three verses,⁷⁵ and the longest portion recorded by the Mishnah was Leviticus 16, read on Yom Kippur. The Bavli states that a minimum of ten verses constituted a valid reading of the Torah on Shabbat afternoon and on weekdays.⁷⁶ On Shabbat morning, however, where seven readers are chosen, a minimum of twenty-one verses are read, three verses for each of the seven.⁷⁷ Yet it is clear that at times the number of verses read were more or less than the minimum of twenty-one verses. For instance, the *seder* which begins at Genesis 8:1 ends at 8:14, comprising 14 verses, while the opening *seder* of Genesis (1:1–2:3) contains 34 verses. Further, the fact that some Torah portions contained less than twenty-one verses gave rise to *halachic* disputes over how the text should be divided among the various readers.

The *halachah* of the Mishnah, that seven readers are chosen for Shabbat morning, and that this number may be increased but not diminished, most likely reflects a later ruling. We note, for instance, that the Tosefta speaks of synagogues in which only one person was able to read.⁷⁸

A synagogue which has only one person who can read—he stands and reads [in the Torah] and sits down, stands and reads and sits down, stands and reads and sits down, even seven times. A synagogue comprised of those who speak a foreign language [other than Hebrew]—if they have someone who can read in Hebrew, they begin in Hebrew and conclude in Hebrew [and the remainder is read in the vernacular]. If they have only one who can read, only one reads.⁷⁹

⁷¹Ismar Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy*, Op. cit., 131.

⁷²y.*Megillah* 4.5, 75a.

⁷³m.*Megillah* 1.5; b.*Megillah* 24a.

⁷⁴m.*Megillah* 3.5–6; note t.*Megillah* 3.5, “And on all the days of Passover they skip around among the passages referring to Passover which are written in the Torah.”

⁷⁵Leviticus 23:23–25, m.*Megillah* 3.5.

⁷⁶b.*Megillah* 21b.

⁷⁷b.*Megillah* 23a. m.*Megillah* 4.4 states: “He who reads in the Torah should read no fewer than three verses.” Compare m.*Ta’anit* 4.3.

⁷⁸Note Philo, *Legatione* 12, “(81) Now these laws they are taught at other times, indeed, but most especially on the seventh day, for the seventh day is accounted sacred, on which they abstain from all other employments, and frequent the sacred places which are called synagogues, and there they sit according to their age in classes, the younger sitting under the elder, and listening with eager attention in becoming order. (82) Then one, indeed, takes up the holy volume and reads it, and another of the men of the greatest experience comes forward and explains what is not very intelligible....”

⁷⁹t.*Megillah* 3.12–13.

It is most likely that in the earliest synagogue traditions, only one person read the Torah portion for a particular Shabbat, Festival, or weekday and that the calling of multiple readers occurred in the 2nd Century CE and later.⁸⁰

Similarly, the earlier tradition was that the first and last readers pronounced blessings for the reading of the Torah. By the 4th Century, however, it became the *halachah* for each of the readers to pronounce the blessings:⁸¹

A Tanna stated: The one who reads first makes a blessing before the reading, and the one who reads last makes a blessing after it. Nowadays that all make a blessing both before and after the reading, the reason is that the Rabbis ordained this to avoid error on the part of people entering and leaving synagogue.⁸²

As we saw from the description of Ezra's reading of the Torah (Nehemiah 8:1–8), the Hebrew text needed to be translated in order for the people to understand. The fact that knowledge of the Hebrew language steadily declined among the masses gave rise to the translation of the Scriptures into various languages—Aramaic and Greek being the most common. The Hebrew word “Targum,” meaning translation, could be used of any translation⁸³ but eventually became the term used to designate the Aramaic translations of the Scriptures. However, since the Sages eventually ruled that the Torah was to be read in Hebrew, it was required that it be translated as it was read. In the earliest times, a regularly appointed translator did not exist, and anyone could perform the translation duties, even a minor.⁸⁴ In time, however, the translator (called variously a *meturgemon*, *turgemon*, or *targaman*) became a regular functionary of the synagogue and performing this duty was considered as important as the reading of the Torah itself.⁸⁵

The Sages enacted specific *halachot* for the translation of the Torah as it was read.⁸⁶ The reader was to read a single verse from the Torah and then wait for the translator to complete his translation. In the case of the *haftarah*, three verses were read and then translated. In earlier times, it may have been that a written translation was employed (such as the Targums or the Lxx), but by the Talmudic era, such was prohibited. The translation had to be improvised⁸⁷ and was not to be “wooden” but understandable to the

⁸⁰Ismar Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy*, Op. cit., 138.

⁸¹The wording of the blessing said before reading from the Torah was disputed among the early Sages. Eventually, the view of R. Hamnuna (250–290 CE) was accepted as *halachah* and the blessing “...Giver of the Torah” became standard (b.*Berchot* 11b). For the blessing after reading Torah, see *Sophrim* 13.8. Maimonides added *torato* (“His Torah”) before *torat emet* (“Torah of truth”) to the blessing after the Torah so that it reads: “...Who has given us His Torah, a Torah of truth, thereby implanting within us the seed of eternal life. Blessed are You, Adonai, Giver of the Torah” (*Hilchot Tefillah* 12.5). This wording is still followed in some Sephardic communities.

⁸²b.*Megillah* 21b. Those who come in late would not hear the blessing before reading the Torah and presume that such a blessing is not required. Similarly, those leaving early would not hear the final reader and would presume that no blessing is needed at the conclusion of the reading. To remedy these misconceptions, the Sages ruled that each reader should say the blessings.

⁸³See m.*Megillah* 2.1, “He who reads the Scroll backwards has not fulfilled his obligation. [If] he read it by heart, [if] he read it in translation in any [other] language (תַּרְגוּם בְּכָל לְשׁוֹן) he has not fulfilled his obligation. But they do read it to those who speak a foreign language in a foreign language.”

⁸⁴m.*Megillah* 4.6; t.*Megillah* 3.21.

⁸⁵Ismar Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy*, Op. cit., 152.

⁸⁶m.*Megillah* 2.1; 4.4–10; t.*Megillah* 3.20–21; b.*Megillah* 21b; 32a.

⁸⁷y.*Megillah* 4.1, 74c; b.*Megillah* 32a.

audience.⁸⁸ Yet the translator could not add or leave anything out unless he was the father or master of the reader. Nor could the reader help the translator for fear that the people would become confused what was actually being read from the Torah and the translation. Furthermore, in order to accommodate the public reading in a synagogue setting where women and children were in attendance, certain texts were read but not translated.⁸⁹ The so-called *tiqqune sopherim* “emendations of the scribes,” noted by the Masoretes and listed in several *midrashim*, no doubt arose from this synagogue practice.⁹⁰

Conclusion

This brief overview of the reading of the Torah and Prophets in the 1st Century synagogues has yielded a number of important facts. First, Luke’s description of Yeshua’s reading in the synagogue at Nazareth shows some affinity to the later traditions found in the Mishnah and Talmuds. Thus, even though the rabbinic materials in large measure reflect a later period, they also retain a knowledge of the earlier traditions. Second, it is certain that the Torah and Prophets were read in the 1st Century synagogue, and it is most likely that at least the Torah was read according to some fixed schedule, even if we cannot be certain exactly what that was. On the basis of what data is available, however, it seems most probable that the Torah cycle for Shabbats and Festivals in the 1st Century conformed more closely to what we now know as the triennial cycle. Third, while we are able to piece together a general picture of how the Torah and Prophets were read in the synagogues of Yeshua’s day, it is certain that synagogue traditions evolved rapidly after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE as the rabbinic materials give clear evidence. That being the case, we dare not presume that the later rabbinic *halachot* regulating the public reading of Scripture were in place in the late Second Temple period. This is particularly the case when it comes to the later reading cycles for the Torah and *haftarot*. As much as we would like to think that the same pairing of Torah and *haftarah* portions found in the later annual cycle existed in the time of Yeshua, we simply have no firm data upon which to base such an assertion. Finally, what is certain is that the reading of Scripture, the Torah and Prophets, followed by a teaching that explicated its meaning and application, was a central part of the synagogue service in the early 1st Century and provided a key element for defining the Jewish community in the days of our Master. The same must be true of our own assemblies, for it is the centrality of the Scriptures, understood and applied to our daily lives, that will enable us to walk in the footsteps of Yeshua as His true disciples.

⁸⁸t.*Megillah* 3.41.

⁸⁹m.*Megillah* 4.10; t.*Megillah* 3.31–40. The list of texts read and translated, read and not translated, or not read nor translated differ between the Mishnah and Tosefta. Apparently the reasons for not reading or not translating certain texts had to do with sexual content deemed unfit for mixed company, passages that emphasized the sins of the Patriarchs and Israel, and sections that seemed too mystical (e.g., Ezekiel 1:1ff).

⁹⁰For a list of the 18 *tiqqune sopherim*, see my *The Masorah of the Hebrew Bible* (TorahResource, 2003), 31–32. Cf. *Mechilta* on Exodus 15:7; *Tanchuma* on Exodus 15:7 (Vilna Edition).