

Some notes on the Public Reading of Scripture

By Ross K Nichols



These are some notes meant to stress the importance of reviving the ancient practice of reading Scriptures¹ in public in order to enhance and develop the faith of the faithful. Jews have done this to some degree and in some form since the time of Moses. Jesus and Paul participated in these readings from the Law and Prophets, but regrettably modern Christians know very little about this practice.

While only traces of the earliest strata of these reading cycles have survived in tact from antiquity, scholars have made advances in their recovery through careful study of early Jewish sources².

Judaism still places strong emphasis on the public reading of Scripture. While there are variations within Judaism in regards to this practice, the importance of communal reading and learning is highly valued³.

Christianity could learn a great deal from a renewed interest and involvement in the public reading of the Hebrew Scriptures. Indeed there is something to the idea of "hearing the word of God". The New Testament records that Faith comes by hearing the word of God. It is time for teachers of the Bible to restore the ancient practice of public readings of the Scriptures within their congregations. After all, are Christians not commanded to walk as Jesus walked (I John 2:6), and was James the brother of Jesus, not convinced that Christians would continue to learn of God's ways by attending their local synagogues and hearing Moses preached (Acts 15:21)?

The central teaching of Hebrew Faith, called by Jesus the first and greatest commandment in the Torah (LAW) begins with the Hebrew word – SHEMA! (Deuteronomy 6:4 / See Matthew 22:34 and Mark 12:28). I translate this by the old word "hearken". It implies an active listening. There are numerous examples in the Bible where this human sense is upheld as the means whereby truth is conveyed.

¹ By Scriptures, I mean the Sacred Collection of texts commonly referred to by Christians as the Old Testament, but properly termed the Hebrew Bible or TaNaK – an acronym formed by the first letter of three Hebrew words representing the major divisions thereof; Torah – Law, Neviim – Prophets, Ketuvim – the Writings or Psalms. This was the Bible that Jesus read, and the Bible that the early Christians used in the first century of the Common Era – before the New Testament was written.

² For a chart showing various listings of the ancient "triennial" Torah Readings – look on my website / http://rootsofffaith.org/pdfs/Triennial_Torah_Reading_Chart.pdf.

³ **Hertz Pentateuch and Haftorahs**, published by Soncino Press in London is a good source containing a weekly cycle of readings that takes the reader through the entire Torah and assigned readings from the prophets in a year. This is a classic, in its second edition and will put the reader in sync with Jews worldwide in a practice that they have followed for centuries faithfully. It is available from J Levine Books and Judaica, NY NY. They have excellent prices and outstanding service. Check them out on the web at; www.levinejudaica.com. The ISBN is 0-900689-21-8.

As Jesus of Nazareth often said, “Let him who has ears, HEAR!”

So here are a few quotes from ancient sources on the ancient practice of reading the Torah and Prophets in public.

Moses’ Instructions in the Torah about the Public reading of the Torah

KJV **Deuteronomy 31:10** And Moses commanded them, saying, At the end of *every* seven years, in the solemnity of the year of release, in the feast of tabernacles, 11 When all Israel is come to appear before the LORD thy God in the place which he shall choose, thou shalt *read this law before all Israel in their hearing.*

Josephus on Reading Moses every week – *Contra Apionem ii.18*

18. But for our legislator, he very carefully joined these two methods of instruction together; for he neither left these practical exercises to go on without verbal instruction, nor did he permit the hearing of the law to proceed without the exercises for practice; but beginning immediately from the earliest infancy, and the appointment of every one's diet, he left nothing of the very smallest consequence to be done at the pleasure and disposal of the person himself. Accordingly, he made a fixed rule of law what sorts of food they should abstain from, and what sorts they should make use of; as also, what communion they should have with others what great diligence they should use in their occupations, and what times of rest should be interposed, that, by living under that law as under a father and a master, we might be guilty of no sin, neither voluntary nor out of ignorance; for he did not suffer the guilt of ignorance to go on without punishment, but demonstrated the law to be the best and the most necessary instruction of all others, **permitting the people to leave off their other employments, and to assemble together for the hearing of the law, and learning it exactly, and this not once or twice, or oftener, but every week; which thing all the other legislators seem to have neglected.**

Ezra Performs a Torah Service

^{NRS} **Nehemiah 8:1** all the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had given to Israel. ² Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding. This was on the first day of the seventh month. ³ He read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law. ⁴ The scribe Ezra stood on a wooden platform that had been

made for the purpose; and beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah on his right hand; and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hash-baddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam on his left hand.⁵ And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up.⁶ Then Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. Then they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.⁷ Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites, helped the people to understand the law, while the people remained in their places.⁸ So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

James, the Brother of Jesus on the Public Reading of Scripture

^{NRS} **Acts 15:19** Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God,²⁰ but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood.²¹ For in every city, for generations past, Moses has had those who proclaim him, *for he has been read aloud every Sabbath in the synagogues.*"

Evidence of a Torah Service attended by Paul

^{NRS} **Acts 13:13** Then Paul and his companions set sail from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia. John, however, left them and returned to Jerusalem;¹⁴ but they went on from Perga and came to Antioch in Pisidia. And on the sabbath day they went into the synagogue and sat down.¹⁵ *After the reading of the law and the prophets,* the officials of the synagogue sent them a message, saying, "Brothers, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, give it."¹⁶ So Paul stood up and with a gesture began to speak: "You Israelites, and others who fear God, listen.

Jesus Participates in the Public reading of Scripture – It was his custom to do so!

^{NRS} **Luke 4:16** When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, *he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read,*¹⁷ and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:¹⁸ "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free,¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."²⁰ And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.²¹ Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Paul encourages Timothy to give attention to the public reading of Scripture!

^{NRS} **1 Timothy 4:11** These are the things you must insist on and teach. ¹² Let no one despise your youth, but set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity. ¹³ Until I arrive, *give attention to the public reading of scripture*, to exhorting, to teaching. ¹⁴ Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you through prophecy with the laying on of hands by the council of elders. ¹⁵ Put these things into practice, devote yourself to them, so that all may see your progress. ¹⁶ Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; continue in these things, for in doing this you will save both yourself and your hearers.