

Bite Size Bible Study

Sabbath Readings #142

By Pastor Lee

Is there any advantage to understanding first century Judaism when reading the New Testament?

Now when he (Jesus) went to Natzeret (Nazerith), where he had been brought up, on Shabbat he went to the synagogue as usual. He stood up to read, and he was given the scroll of the prophet Yesha'yahu (Isaiah). Unrolling the scroll, he found the place where it was written,

*“The Spirit of Adonai is upon me;
therefore he has anointed me
to announce Good News to the poor;
he has sent me to proclaim freedom for the imprisoned
and renewed sight for the blind,
to release those who have been crushed,
to proclaim a year of the favor of Adonai.”*
[Isaiah 61:1-2; 58:6]

After closing the scroll and returning it to the shammash (synagogue attendant), he sat down; and the eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fixed on him. He started to speak to them: “Today, as you heard it read, this passage of the Tanakh was fulfilled!” (Luke 4:16-21, CJB)

Isa 61:1-4 NIV Proclaims the Year of the Lord's Favor
The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendor. They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated; they will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations.

Jewish Rabbis teach from a sitting position. With this information, we now know that Jesus was the Rabbi, not a congregant.

In the time of Jesus the Torah was probably read over a 3½ year time span, not like today where it is read in one year. Each Sabbath service includes two regularly scheduled readings. The first is from the *Torah* (Genesis through Deuteronomy). The second is the *haftarah*, which are specific passages from the Writings and the Prophets of the Tanakh (Old Testament). *Haftarah*

readings were not yet synchronized over the world as they are today. It is not likely that Jesus chose the reading but that it had been chosen locally by the *shammash* (synagogue attendant), possibly years ago. The *Haftarah* reading for that day probably was one envisioning the expected Messianic rule of the world.

In the earliest period, the readings differed slightly from town to town. Also, synagogues did not have a single leader who preached every week, like a rabbi or pastor.

The discovery of the “triennial” tradition of reading the Torah was a surprise to Jewish scholars, who had been following an annual liturgy for 1500 years. It had been developed by rabbis in Babylon, while the older triennial tradition persisted in Israel, Egypt and northern Africa until the annual cycle became universal circa. 1100 AD.

In looking at the Torah and *Haftarah* readings, scholars saw some similarities between the two traditions, but also some key differences. The later Torah readings were clearly derived from the early tradition, but the *Haftarah* texts were completely different.

In the annual tradition, the preassigned readings from the Prophets usually focused on Israel's past, connecting the events in the Torah with other historical accounts in Scripture. But in the earlier tradition, the readings focused on the future, on God's promised messianic reign over the world. Every week, synagogues were listening to God's word and asking how God's redemptive plans would come to pass.

When Genesis 1 was read, the *Haftarah* may have been Isaiah 65:17-25:

“See, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind... The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox, and dust will be the serpent's food. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain,” says the Lord.

Notice how this passage begins by echoing the words of Genesis 1:1, “In the beginning God created the *heavens* and the *earth*,” and then ends with a wonderful promise of the New Creation. As the ancient readers meditated on the beginning of history, they would think ahead to God's vision of a redeemed earth.

It is fascinating that a prominent theme in early synagogues was the fulfillment of God's prophetic promises. It fits perfectly with Jesus' ministry about the coming of God's redemptive Kingdom.

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