



# The Public Reading of Scripture

## STUDY NOTES



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## 1 | Public Reading in the Old Testament

The first mention in Scripture of writing the Bible is right after Israel defeats the Amalekites. "Then the Lord said to Moses, 'write this on a scroll as something to be remembered...'"

**EXODUS 17:14**

This story, written down and later recited, served to remind the Israelites of the faithfulness of God that rescued them again and again.

The first time we see Israel gathered as a group to meet before God and hear a divine word is in Exodus 19-24 at the foot of Mount Sinai. Israel had just experienced profound salvation in their liberation from slavery in Egypt. Now they are standing together at the foot of Mount Sinai where God will appear in person and invite them into a covenant relationship. Moses met with God and wrote down all of the terms of the covenant. He then reads them aloud to the people, and the people respond by saying, "everything the Lord has said, we will do."

**EXODUS 24:3**

It's in this hearing of their covenant relationship with God that their identity is remade. They have the opportunity to transform from slaves into priests—God's very representatives among the nations.

Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words you [Moses] are to speak to the Israelites.

**EXODUS 19:5-6**

In these initial instances of Scripture written and read aloud, we find insight into the very purpose of Scripture itself. Not only does publicly reading the Scriptures serve to retell the story of what God did in saving his children, it also invites them into an intimate covenant relationship and a whole new way of life! When people gather together to listen, they are empowered to renew their commitment to the story while simultaneously finding, remembering, and reaffirming their own identity and way of life. This process and result is known as identity formation.

## 2 | Reciting Scripture in Israel's Education

Read Deuteronomy 4:5-14 and 31:9-13. Moses had written a "proto-Torah" and committed it to the priests who were to read "this Torah" aloud every seven years at the feast of booths. The importance of reciting Scripture was crucial in terms of Israel's common education, starting with their children. "...do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them slip from your heart as long as you live. Teach them to your children and to their children after them."

DEUTERONOMY 4:9

In his commentary on Deuteronomy, Jeffrey Tigay writes:

The public reading of the Teaching is part of the "democratic" character of biblical religion, which addresses its teachings and demands to all its adherents, with few distinctions between priests and laity, and calls for universal education of the citizenry in law and religion. The entire people, and not only a spiritual, intellectual, or clerical elite, are God's children and consecrated to Him.

THE JPS TORAH  
COMMENTARY:  
DEUTERONOMY  
JEFFREY TIGAY

After Israel enters the promised land, Scripture says:

Joshua read all the words of the law—the blessings and the curses—just as it is written in the Book of the Law. There was not a word of all that Moses had commanded that Joshua did not read to the whole assembly of Israel, including the women and children, and the foreigners who lived among them.

JOSHUA 8:34-35

The book of Judges describes how the entire generation that followed the death of Joshua forgot what God had done for them. Centuries later in 2 Kings, Josiah rediscovers the Scriptures and calls together a public reading once again.

JUDGES 2:10

2 KINGS 23:1-3

In both cases we see that identity formation was the main purpose of the gathering. With Joshua, it was to re-establish their identity in a brand new setting. With Josiah, the reading called them to renew their covenant identity after a period of apostasy. Unfortunately Israel forgot their story once again, and they end up in exile.

After Israel returns from exile in Babylon, Ezra and Nehemiah team up to put on a public reading of Scripture. They construct a kind of elevated “reading station” for the people to gather around while the Levites do the reading.

They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read.

**NEHEMIAH 8:8**

This is the first example of an expository teaching before God’s people. They gather not only to renew their commitment and hear the divine word read aloud, but also to have it explained to them.

### 3 | Public Reading of Scripture in Jewish Tradition

In the Middle Ages, Jewish communities in Palestine created a three and a half year-long system for reading through the Torah, combining the readings with selections drawn from the Prophets and Ketuvim. Because readings were shorter, this aided in the development of the homily, i.e. short educational messages of exhortation based on texts that were read aloud.

As Jeffrey Tigay observes, publicly reading Scripture wielded power to shape Jewish identity.

The religious education of the entire public also led to the democratization of leadership in Judaism. The fact that even laws about the priests were addressed to the public as a whole put the public in a position to supervise the priests, as the rabbis perceived. As a result, expertise in religion did not remain confined to the hereditary priesthood, and it became possible for any Jew who had the intellectual qualifications, irrespective of family background, to master it. This is the significance of the fact that rabbis rather than priests are the religious leaders in Judaism.

**THE JPS TORAH  
COMMENTARY:  
DEUTERONOMY  
JEFFREY TIGAY**



Jesus and the apostles participated in traditional weekly readings from the Torah and the Prophets in the synagogue. It was in this context that Jesus launched his mission after publicly reading from the book of Isaiah. Later, Paul and Barnabas used this time to announce the good news of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.

From Perga they went on to Pisidian Antioch. On the Sabbath they entered the synagogue and sat down. After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the leaders of the synagogue sent word to them, saying, "Brothers, if you have a word of exhortation for the people, please speak."

**ACTS 13:14**

This tradition formed the pattern for reading the apostles' writings out loud during Christian worship gatherings.

I charge you before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers and sisters.

**1 THESSALONIANS 5:27**

After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea.

**COLOSSIANS 4:16**

Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching.

**1 TIMOTHY 4:13–14**

## Conclusion

As the author of life, Jesus has included all of us into his grand narrative. Publicly reading Scripture allows us to understand our place in it as a community. It also wields power to challenge whatever preexisting stories we have about God, ourselves, and the world. Biblical narrative and poetry creates an active environment inside our imagination, shaping the very fabric of what we believe to be plausible!

This is, I think, one of the reasons why God has given us so much story, so much narrative in Scripture. Story authority is the authority that really works, because stories determine how we see ourselves, others and the world, and how we experience God. Throw a rule book at people's head, or offer them a list of doctrines, and they can duck or avoid it, or simply disagree and go away. Tell them a story, though, and invite them into a community of people living by that story, and you invite them to step into a different world; you invite them to share an entire worldview. And when someone comes into the Gospel story and finds how compelling it is, it begins to quietly shatter the worldview that they were in already. There is no telling what can happen, when God himself, breathes new lives and new worlds into being through his word.

**HOW CAN THE BIBLE  
BE AUTHORITATIVE?**  
N.T. WRIGHT

## Discussion Questions

- 1 | In the book, "Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern World," the authors asks five questions that every worldview attempts to answer.  
  
 Setting: Where are we? What is real in the world where we find ourselves?  
 Characters: Who are we? What is the nature and purpose of human beings?  
 Conflict: What's wrong? How do we account for evil and pain?  
 Resolution: What's the solution? What's the hope for a better future?  
 Narrative Time: What time is it? Where in the storyline is the reader located?  
  
 Throughout your life, what narratives have you drawn upon to answer these questions? What about your larger community?
- 2 | Is gathering in a synagogue, church, or Bible study to hear the story of Scripture the same as people gathering to watch a play or a film? What's similar? What's different?
- 3 | Read Deuteronomy 5:15. Notice that part of the fourth commandment is simply to remember what God has done. Does breaking this commandment cause us to break the others as well? Why or why not?
- 4 | After the time of Joshua comes an era of Judges in Israel's history. Read Judges 2:6-23 which introduces a brand new generation in verse ten. Keep flipping through your Bible and discuss other periods where Israel forgot their identity. Imagine ways the story could have been different if Israel was faithful in publicly reading Scripture.
- 5 | Paul says believers are "living epistles" (2 Corinthians 3:2). How is sharing the good news of Jesus similar or different to publicly reading Scripture? How was your identity transformed when you heard the gospel story?
- 6 | Jesus is the Word, the very incarnation and fulfillment of the Scriptures living within us. How does our life in Christ transform our understanding of the Bible? Check out 2 Corinthians 3:14 and John 5:39-40 for talking points.

