

The Function of the Public Reading of Scripture in 1 Timothy 4:13 and in the Biblical Tradition

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Most commentators agree that the three activities listed in 1 Timothy 4:13—the public reading of Scripture, exhorting, teaching—were typical features of a worship meeting.¹⁾ However, beyond linking the emphasis on activities related to Scripture to the presence of heretics in the community, little attention has been paid to the actual function performed by the public reading of Scripture in the believing community. It is this question that this paper will seek to explore in an introductory way.

Even a cursory reading of 1 Timothy 4:13 immediately suggests that getting behind the instructions will require investigating backgrounds—first, the broader background of Scripture reading in Judaism and the early church, second, some parallel situations in Greco-Roman society in which public readings had a place, and third, the specific situation in Ephesus that gave rise to the instruction. The reference to “reading” is not accompanied by any helpful elaboration. In fact in the instruction, “Until I arrive, give attention to the public reading of scripture, to exhorting, to teaching”, as the Greek text shows, the three activities, reading, exhorting, and teaching, are mentioned without explicit reference to their object. Almost all agree that the understood object is “the Scriptures” (αἱ γραφαί). And on this assumption, we turn first to other texts that might shed light on the activity envisioned in the instruction along with its social and theological meaning.

1. Antecedents of the Church’s Public Reading of Scripture

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1) See I. H. Marshall, and P. H. Towner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, ICC (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999), 562-563; J. Roloff, *Der Erste Brief an Timotheus*, EKK (Zürich/Neukirchen-Vluyn: Benziger/Neukirchener, 1988), 254.

Public Reading in Judaism. There is little doubt that the formative background of the activity enjoined in 1 Timothy 4:13 is the practice in Judaism of public Scripture readings in the synagogue.²⁾ The NT gives up practically nothing in the way of information about the activity as it was carried out within the Christian communities.³⁾ But the close relationship between worship in the synagogue and the worship of the early Christians, especially in the Diaspora, clearly explains the reference to the practice in a Christian document in a way that implies that it was a standard feature of worship.⁴⁾ Texts that turn more or less around a Pauline axis such as Acts 13:15; 15:21 and 2 Corinthian 3:14 assume the practice of reading the Scriptures aloud in the synagogue setting. The assumption, even if the text in 1 Timothy reflects a later situation, is that the content of the Scriptures consisted of the OT writings, whether in Hebrew or, as would have been normal in the Pauline churches, in Greek translation.⁵⁾ While it is arguable that the scope of the Scriptures might have been expanding to include the stories that would become the Gospel tradition and the Pauline letters, as texts such as 2 Corinthian 7:8; Colossian 4:16; 1 Thessalonians 5:27 and 2 Thessalonians 3:14 show for the Pauline letters, the term αἱ γραφαί (e.g. πᾶσα γραφή 2 Tim 3:16) still signifies, with some fluidity of content in this period, the collection of writings that would in large part become the OT canon. For our purposes, the Pauline letters and Jesus tradition can be regarded as transitional material that was still coming of age. Thus surely in the case of the

2) Most regard the first part of the three-fold instruction, πρόσχε τῇ ἀναγνώσει (“devote yourself to the reading [of the Scriptures]”) as a reference to public or community reading associated with the worship meeting, rather than as a call to personal Bible study. W. D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, WBC 46 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 200, while acknowledging that a public reading is envisioned with synagogue practices in the background, nevertheless sees the focus in “reading” to be on Timothy himself: “Timothy is to immerse himself in the biblical text...” Despite the second person singular shape of the command, it is not to be understood as personal reading, but as a community practice designed to steer the congregation out of the unorthodox backwaters of the heretical reading of certain texts and back into the mainstream of the biblical story. See further, below. Cf. L. T. Johnson, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy*, AB 35A (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 252.

3) In later centuries, readers of Scripture became liturgical ministers. See Justin, *1 Apol.* 67; Tertullian, *Praescrip.* 41.8; *P. Apoll.* 99.5; cf. H. Leclercq, “Lecteur”, *DACL*, 8:2, col. 2242ff; J. M. Nielen, *Gebet und Gottesdienst im Neuen Testament* (Freiburg, 1937), 182ff.

4) In corroboration, the presence of the definite article with each noun indicates typical or familiar activities (πρόσχε τῇ ἀναγνώσει, τῇ παρακλήσει, τῇ διδασκαλίᾳ).

5) See P. H. Towner, “The Old Testament in the Letters to Timothy and Titus”, G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, eds., *Commentary on the Use of the Old Testament in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, forthcoming).

majority of references to the public reading of Scripture in synagogue the reading of the OT is in view, and this should also be assumed for 1 Timothy 4:13.

The earliest evidence for the practice of reading Scripture publicly is to be found in the record describing the assembly in Nehemiah 8:7-8:

Neh 8:7 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.

Synagogue reading is not in view here, but the fundamental practice later adopted for synagogue worship is. Somewhat closer to our time, the Qumran community can be seen to continue what was for Judaism the standard practice of reading the Scriptures in assemblies and explaining its meaning.

6 ...And in the place in which the Ten assemble there should not be missing a man to interpret the law day and night, 7 always, each man relieving his fellow. And the Many shall be on watch together for a third of each night or the year in order to read the book, explain the regulation, 8 and bless together (1 QS 6:6-8; see also 8:11-12; 9:12-14; cf. 1QpHab 2:6-9).

Any attempt to reconstruct the actual format of the Jewish order of service in the first century C.E. requires drawing on the Mishnah ([mMeg 4; mMeg 2] with some corroboration from Qumran and NT texts [Mat 23:6; Mar 12:39; Luk 11:43; 20:46; see Philo, *Every Good Man is Free*, 12.81 on the seating of the Essenes); this literary background allow us to approximate the shape of synagogue worship in the period of our interest. In addition to information describing the seating arrangements (in which is set out the relative positions of distinguished members in the front and younger members in the back; and the segregation of men and women can probably be assumed),⁶⁾ we learn that the Scripture readings were rather carefully scheduled to include (following the recitation of the *Shema* and the prayer) the reading of the Torah, the reading of the prophets, followed by the priestly blessings:

6) E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, 3 (rev. ed. G. Vermes, F. Millar, M. Black; Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1979-1987), 2: 447-448.

mMeg 4:3 If there are less than ten present they may not recite the *Shema* with its Benedictions, nor may one go before the Ark, nor may they lift up their hands, nor may they read the [prescribed portion of] the Law or the reading from the Prophets, nor may they observe the Stations⁷⁾

Further, we learn that the Scripture readings could equally be done by any member of the congregation, even by a minor (mMeg 4:4-6). There were certain exceptions to this apparent openness; if priest or Levites were present, they took precedence in the reading (mGit 5:8). The Torah reading was arranged so that the whole Pentateuch was read consecutively in a 3-yearly cycle (mMeb 29b).⁸⁾ The Masoretic arrangement of the Pentateuch into 154 sections probably traces back to this 3-year cycle (but there were also known arrangements of 161 and 175 sections).⁹⁾ Several members would have been invited by an officer (ἀρχισυνάγωγος; Act 13:15; 18:8, 17; etc.) to take part in the reading: at least seven at the Sabbath service (fewer on week days), of whom the first and last would pronounce a benediction at the beginning and the end. This Palestinian practice (i.e. prescribed in Mishnah) varied in non-Palestinian settings (i.e. as prescribed in Talmud): most importantly, the readings would have been conducted by one man (corroborated by Philo, *The Special Laws*, 2.15.62).

In NT times (see Luk 4:17; Act 13:15; mMeg 4:1-5), readings from Torah were joined by sections from the Prophets. The activity itself as carried out in a synagogue setting is illustrated in Luke 4:16-20.

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.

7) Cf., *Ibid.*, 448.

8) Cf., *Ibid.*, 450.

9) *Ibid.*, 451.

If this depiction seems a bit stylized, it is nonetheless well enough attested outside of the canon as Philo indicates (*On Dreams*, 2.127: “And would you still sit down in your synagogue, collecting your ordinary assemblies, and reading your sacred volumes in security, and explaining whatever is not quite clear, and devoting all your time and leisure with long discussions to the philosophy of your ancestors?”; cf. *Who is the Heir*, 253).

The reading from the Prophets concluded the service and the congregation was dismissed. It is not clear whether the selection of the prophetic passage for reading was left to the one chosen to read. But in NT times there seems not to have been a schedule of readings from the Prophets (in post-Mishnaic times the concluding readings from the Prophets were fixed).¹⁰⁾

One final item sheds light on the procedure implied in 1 Timothy 4:13, and that is the matter of exposition or sermon. First, as the language in which Scripture was read became less and less familiar to the members of the congregation, a translation had to be provided. This device came to be called the Targum. This was a continuous rendering of the Hebrew text into Aramaic. The evidence is not clear whether the synagogue officer(s) had the duty of so rendering the text. In any case, the procedure seems to have been verse-by-verse for the reading of the Torah, and 3-verses-at-a-time for the Prophets. This was apparently an oral procedure: there is no evidence until the 4th century C.E. to the translation being read from a written Targum (yMeg 74d).

Second, the reading from the Bible was followed by something on the order of a sermon, in which the portion read was expanded upon for purposes of practical application. References in the NT to the activity of teaching in the synagogues (e.g. Mat 4:23; Mar 1:21; Luk 4:15; etc.; as well as in Philo and Qumran) bear witness to this feature of synagogue worship.

Public Reading in Greco-Roman Society. A complete consideration of the background to almost any NT church practice, especially in the case of the Pauline churches, would include relevant parallels in the Greco-Roman environment. The matters of literacy, reading and writing both in ancient Jewish and Greek cultures have been examined with the net result being a range of estimates.¹¹⁾ As A. Millard

10) Ibid., 454, n. 128.

11) See esp. A. Millard, *Reading and Writing in the Time of Jesus* (New York: NYU Press, 2000), 154-184; W. V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

suggests, one might conclude that the literacy situation in Jewish society was on a better footing than Greco-Roman society, because of the strong tradition of education designed to ensure that Jewish men were able to read the Scriptures in synagogue worship gatherings (see *y.Ket.* 8.32c [reflecting presumably on a situation about B.C.E. 100] on the education of children; Josephus, *Against Apion*, 2.178).¹²⁾ But in fact it is uncertain how far this program was carried out in practice.

While popularly the Greco-Roman culture is often described as a “literate culture”, the actual degree of literacy was almost certainly rather low and limited (at least in the fullest and modern sense of “being literate”).¹³⁾ Providing some corroboration of this is the indisputable evidence of oral features in documents of the period, showing that they were written for oral delivery and aural reception by an audience. The extreme cost of books and the limited availability of written texts itself would necessitate the continued practice of oral presentation for a community,¹⁴⁾ but this in itself should not disguise the fact that most people would have relied upon the reading skills of a smaller literate group for engaging with other than the simplest day to day lists, placards and signs.

Nevertheless, certain discussions that speak of the difficulty of reading and the importance of the task begin a Greek background sketch. Epictetus wrote: “When you say, ‘Come listen to a reading that I am going to do,’ make sure that you do not grope your way through” (3.23.6; see also Plutarch, *Alex.* 1.1; 23.3). Apprenticeship to the scholar began in the school (Plato, *Leg.* 810b), and if the pupil misread a syllable or stumbled in the reading, he often experienced extreme embarrassment (Plautus, *Bacch.* 423ff.). Training in reading became a fundamental element in the rhetorical education, because in the recitation-declamation component of the official examination, the student had to give critical comment on the text that was sight read (Plutarch, *De aud. Poet.*). The point of such references is simply that reading was an act whose success was measured by its accuracy in communicating the content of a written discourse exactly. Reverence for the biblical texts in the case of ancient Jewish culture assures the same level of concern within the Jewish context. Those

12) Millard, *Reading and Writing in the Time of Jesus*, 157; see Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ* 2, 417-421, 450.

13) Some degree of literacy was very widespread, as merchants and common people all needed to deal with written documents, deeds, and so on to at least a limited extent (Millard, *Reading and Writing in the Time of Jesus*, 166-168).

14) See further, Millard, *Reading and Writing in the Time of Jesus*, 166-184.

called on to read in a Christian church, whether in Palestine or the Diaspora, would be expected to conform to high standards of quality control.

More specifically, the practice and function of public reading in the Greek religious sphere, including both the more publicly relevant Delphic Oracles and the more private mystery cults, might be regarded as a useful backdrop to reading Scripture in Pauline churches. The institution of the Delphic Oracle, more relevant to the classical period, provided Greek society with a divine touchstone, embracing the religious, moral and political facets of Greek life. Its role in reinforcing the sense of corporate Greek identity (normally segmented into city-groups), in these terms, cannot be overestimated.¹⁵⁾

The broad religious category of the so-called “Mysteries” is potentially more relevant to the NT period, but as a category it does not represent a religious or cultural phenomenon that is particularly unified, stable or predictable, and so great care is needed in assessing the data that has come to light.¹⁶⁾ D. E. Aune reminds us that our knowledge of the liturgical practices of the ancient religious cults is fragmentary at best, and often ancient writers intentionally withheld from their descriptions the very details our reconstructions could most profit from.¹⁷⁾ Nevertheless, glimpses of practices in this setting provided by the ancient writers suggest that various readings and recitations (of materials at first perpetuated in an oral tradition but eventually written down and read) did play a part in the groups’ communal activities. Of greatest interest is the observation that a myth (e.g. surrounding Dionysius, *Mithras*; cf. the *Hymn to Demeter*) that would be “recited and enacted” (Pausanias, 8.6.5) lay at the center of a group’s identity. The central myth celebrated by a given cult was not a secret, whereas the initiation rites were indeed kept secret, and in addition to the central myth, the withholding of the initiatory revelation was paramount to a group’s distinctiveness and sense of identity.¹⁸⁾

Given the strong links of the NT church with the beliefs and practices of Judaism

15) See the discussion in E. Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 166-171.

16) See the introduction and survey in Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 197-240.

17) D. E. Aune, “Prolegomena to the Study of Oral Tradition in the Hellenistic World”, H. Wansbrough, ed., *Jesus and the Oral Gospel Tradition* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), 59-106, 83-85 (see refs. to the sources).

18) See E. Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 197-240.

from whence it came, it is not likely that a Pauline church such as that in Ephesus depicted in 1 Timothy would derive its liturgical shape and customs from a pagan institution. However, in terms of the role of readings and recitations of central stories within the reinforcement of group identity, the Greco-Roman parallel is certainly worth noting (see further below).

2. A Glimpse of the Practice of Scripture Reading in 1 Timothy 4:13

The activity of reading the Scriptures alluded to in 1 Timothy 4:3 is, then, to be understood against the background just surveyed. Certain assumptions are probably justified, however. 1 Timothy purports to address not a synagogue situation but rather that of a Pauline church that has separated itself from the synagogue. Despite all the questions about the authenticity of 1 Timothy, the letter envisages the Pauline community that emerged from the developments described in Act 19: initial association with the synagogue; eventual separation from it; continuation of the community following the riot. In fact 1 Timothy, if authentic, may well reflect a stage of the church just after the riot, with the letter being addressed to Timothy (to aid him in straightening out the community) by Paul from somewhere in Achaia or Macedonia.¹⁹⁾ It need not be assumed that the sort of worship organization described in the Mishnah or Talmud was slavishly adhered to in the newly separated church; yet at the same time there is no reason to doubt that much would have carried over.

Undoubtedly, the references to “exhortation and teaching” that follow the reference to “reading the Scriptures” correspond to the exposition or practical sermonizing that followed the readings in synagogue practice.²⁰⁾ In Pauline communities the readings would almost certainly have been done in Greek, from the LXX, making the practice of targumic readings unnecessary.

19) See L. T. Johnson, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy*, 65-68.

20) See I. H. Marshall, and P. H. Towner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, 562-563; L. T. Johnson, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy*, 252-253.

3. The Function of the Public Reading of Scripture within Judaism and Christianity

The setting of 1 Timothy 4:13 provides a window onto the way in which Scripture reading in the OT and NT communities functioned. What lay behind this instruction to Timothy? Some scholars argue that here the author simply projected “Timothy” as a paradigm of the minister, thus giving instructions for the continuous worship of the church on into the next (post-apostolic) generation. However, the context suggests another reason for emphasizing this instruction. 1:4-7 and 4:1-3 are texts leading up to 4:13 that identify the deviant use (speculations on “myths and genealogies” from which various ascetic practices may have been derived) of not just Scripture but possibly also other early religious texts on the part of a group of opponents who seem to have emerged from within the ranks of the church’s leadership. Their position within the community and their proclivity for arcane teaching may well have resulted in a shift in the worship meetings that found more time being given to new theological speculations (with certain OT texts receiving an abnormal amount of exposure). Within the job description given to Timothy (1:3-5), which was basically designed to bring an end to the false teaching and to reestablish the church’s leadership structure and stability, it would make sense to ensure that there was a corresponding return to regular reading of the Scriptures in a balanced and systematic way. Along with this would be the emphasis on teaching and application following from this ordered reading of the Scriptures, the three Scripture-related elements forming a whole. This assumes, of course, that such liturgical reading and exposition were indeed normal or traditional elements of worship in Pauline churches. The more fundamental question concerns the function that such reading performed.

Modern studies of narrative and human social experience and of the role of reading and readers within the broader discussion of hermeneutics and communication events work from very different bases and arrive at different assessments of the place of the reader/hearer in the determination of meaning.²¹⁾ But

21) So cf. the different programs of N. Holland, *The Dynamics of Literary Response* (New York: OUP, 1968); id., *5 Readers Reading* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1975); D. Bleich, *The Double Perspective: Language, Literacy and Social Relations* (New York: OUP, 1988); S. Crites, “The Narrative Quality of Experience”, *JAAR* 39 (1971), 291-311; D. H. Kelsey, “Biblical Narrative and Theological Anthropology”, G. Green ed., *Scriptural Authority and Narrative*

while almost all aspects of the related discussions continue to be under construction, a point of convergence that seems to have emerged, whether the individual reading event (N. Holland) or the corporate/public reading event (D. Bleich, S. Crites, D. H. Kelsey, S. Hauerwas) is considered, is that reading/hearing of certain significant texts influences the formation, shaping, defining and redefining of individual and corporate identity.²²⁾ The significance of this observation for understanding the role of the public reading of Scripture in the Jewish and Christian tradition may be invaluable.

From the perspective of the historical description of the practice as noticed in the OT and NT records (as well as in other relevant literature in Judaism), it may be suggested that the Scriptures were intentionally read as a way of answering an always present and pertinent question: who are we? Related but subsidiary questions (e.g. if this is who we are, how should we live, what should we do, etc.?) were equally ever-present and addressed as the didactic response to the regular public readings of the holy texts (in the form of Targumic expansion, preaching, teaching). Although the question of identity was always the given subtext, the need for a particularly relevant re-expression of the answer clearly became more acute whenever situations that threatened the community's well-being presented themselves (whether internal in the form of idolatry, rebellion against God, etc.; or external in the form of attacks from the outside).

The public reading of Scripture becomes a point of emphasis at crucial or crisis moments. The sort of events depicted in Nehemiah (see above), in the story of Josiah (2 Chr 34:18-19, 30, with both public and private settings in view), and in 1 Timothy all share a common theme that sheds light on at least one common feature of the function of community Scripture reading. In the OT incidents mentioned, Israel is depicted in crisis situations, either back from exile and puzzling about her identity, or coming back to God after a time of spiritual exile (as in the case of Josiah). The people are being recalled to their God; their identity as the people of the covenant is being restated, redefined for a new generation. These exceptional incidents explain the function of Scripture reading by relating the activity to the corporate identity of the people. Assuming the practice of the regular reading of the

Interpretation (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 121-143; S. Hauerwas, *A Community of Character* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

22) See esp. the items (just cited) by Crites, Kelsey and Hauerwas.

text, in some organized fashion, it is almost certainly the case that the practice is to be linked to the sort of command found in Deuteronomy 31:11-12:

11 when all Israel comes to appear before the LORD your God at the place that he will choose, you shall read this law before all Israel in their hearing.
12 Assemble the people — men, women, and children, as well as the aliens residing in your towns — so that they may hear and learn to fear the LORD your God and to observe diligently all the words of this law.

While Deuteronomy may be a later reflection of the covenant and practices associated with it, the public reading of Torah was apparently designed to remind the people of their origin in YHWH, their continued existence within a covenant relationship and their obligations within that relationship. The content of the formative “story” to be read grew to include the prophetic writings and Psalms (as the relevant Mishnah and NT texts confirm). But then the sense of living in YHWH’s story necessarily entailed a lengthening of that story to ensure that the present people of God, in any place and time, not only knew where their identity came from but also where it was at present and where it was headed. In response to the new realities presented by exile and eventual resettlement in the land, weekly synagogue readings, along with other heavily symbolic cultic acts, served to tell and retell the story that kept Israel’s faith and identity alive.

The function of Scripture reading in the NT era within the Christian movement undoubtedly served the same basic purpose. Again new realities are absorbed into the growing story of Israel’s salvation. Now regular public reading of Scripture also served to locate the new identity in Christ being experienced by various non-Jewish converts in the story that had been in process for centuries. And the Christ event, particularly its core-forming elements of crucifixion and resurrection, became the relocated story-“center”, not displacing the event of the Exodus, but rather prolonging the meaning of that formative covenant-founding event and bringing the salvation it proclaimed to a new point of climax. Crisis points continue to underline the importance of what could easily be mistaken for a simple liturgical fixture. In fact were it not for crisis, habituated activities (such as the public reading of Scripture) would come up only for passing references (cf. Act 13:15; 15:21; 2 Co 3:14 of synagogue practices). Given the OT examples cited, it does not seem surprising that, in the context of a church being led away from a focus on a

traditional reading of the Scriptures to disputes and speculation engendered by new readings of certain texts and a new interpretation of “Christian identity”, Timothy would receive the command to “pay attention to” an activity that would remind the community of its identity in Christ and in covenant relation with God. A different sort of crisis from those seen in the OT, perhaps, but it was again a crisis situation that brought to light something of the function of the practice of the public reading of Scripture.

Judaism and Christianity (even in the first century) were movements whose members linked their identities and their worldviews to a written record, a story, the Scriptures. For numerous reasons this story was written down (a practical necessity to ensure preservation of an authoritative version, etc.), and surely one of the reasons was the sheer importance of the story for the community’s identity. The Writings were intrinsic to Jewish and Christian identity, and they were read regularly in worship gatherings and at other important social occasions to reinforce this identity and underline the implications that existed within that identity.

But beyond the matter of historical description — the meaning and background of Scripture reading in 1 Timothy 4:13 — lies the question of the importance of this practice in the church today. It is well known that different Christian traditions give differing amounts of attention to the various components normally associated with the worship gathering. And there are historical, social, cultural and political reasons for the variety of practices.²³⁾ Liturgical traditions may still incorporate readings set on a yearly calendar from the OT, Psalms, NT and Gospels. Non-liturgical traditions may select as a reading the text to be expounded by the preacher. And between these poles a variety of practices can be found.

What needs to be asked, however, especially in light of the identity-creating and nurturing function of Scripture reading in the biblical tradition, is whether Scripture in one way or another is still given the room to perform this task today. Modern western culture, generally speaking, enjoys a high rate of literacy, easy access to printed versions of the Scriptures, and tends to be far more individual-orientated than was the case in the cultures that produced the Scriptures. If it is argued that the public reading of Scripture was simply a practical necessity then (low literacy rates,

23) See e.g., M. Labberton, “Ordinary Bible Reading: The Reformed Tradition and Reader-Oriented Criticism”, Ph.D. Dissertation (University of Cambridge, 1990); cited by A. C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 532.

oral cultures, scarcity of printed texts), it might follow that as a practice it has now been rendered irrelevant or obsolete by the printing press, wide-spread literacy, the preference for private reading and availability of Bibles. However, it is doubtful that the task of identity forming, shaping, defining and redefining will be carried out meaningfully in a community by so many individual readings by its members. The hazards of personalized spiritual reading, done outside of the influence of a shared and stable tradition of interpretation, are well known.²⁴⁾ This is not to say that personal Bible study is a threat to Christian identity; it is rather to suggest that it is not a substitute for the practice of corporate public reading.

Perhaps western individualist culture militates against a unified sense of Christian identity. This should probably not surprise us. The NT perspective on the Roman Empire (Rom 12:1-2; Revelation) was similar. Then the church was faced with the task of grounding its identity in Christ — among other things by telling and retelling the story of faith — in an environment shaped and dominated by the Roman discourse and worldview. This opposing message and the various cross-currents that challenged Christian values (religious, political, economic, racial, etc.) were to be identified for what they were and for the dangers they held. The church was called to live in that hostile world as a transforming presence, and maintaining a focused Christian identity (who are we, where did we come from, where are we going?) was central to the task.²⁵⁾ Solidarity was crucial to survival, and while the value of corporate solidarity could be called a cultural fixture (unlike in the modern West), it was not necessarily easily maintained.²⁶⁾ Worship gatherings in house churches became the occasions for solidarity and identity to be formed, expressed and reinforced. Among the solidifying activities (prayer, praise and celebration of the Eucharist) was the public reminder of the story of faith, rehearsed regularly, both for its didactic/parenetic value, and for the way in which it underlined the identity of the present believers in Messiah in continuity with the past people of God (1 Cor 10:11).

24) See discussion in Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, 579.

25) For the missiological function of a text like Rom 13:1-7, see P. H. Towner, "Romans 13:1-7 and Paul's Missiological Perspective: A Call to Political Quietism or Transformation?", S. K. Soderlund, and N. T. Wright, eds., *Romans and the People of God: Essays in Honor of Gordon D. Fee on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 149-169.

26) See the discussion in J. Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, R. A. Wilson, J. Bowden, trans. (London: SCM Press, 1974; San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991), 8-28.

A modern response to our versions of the competing social/political/economic discourse and worldview, and the means by which they are promoted, is not to attempt (somehow) a return to an ideal first-century church. It is easily enough seen in the NT writings that such a church did not exist; on the contrary, letter after letter addresses the churches at various crisis points. Realizing this does not limit the helpfulness of the NT writings; if anything, it allows us in our modern situations to relate all the more to the challenges they faced. We are susceptible to the same kinds of cultural forces and messages that challenge an orthodox Christian value system and worldview. In view of the diverse media with which modern societies spread their messages today (television, internet), and in view of the ready access most believers have to these media, the need to ensure that measures are taken in the church to reinforce Christian identity is all the more urgent. We are also called to live out a distinctively Christian witness within the world, not separate from it—so, putting distance between us and the competing messages and values is not an option. But where within the maelstrom will the church find its solidifying and anchoring sense of identity as God’s people? It must come through a shared participation in the symbolic and spiritual activities that we practice when we gather for worship. The lesson to be learned from 1 Timothy 4:13, and the background that informs the exegesis of this text, is that the deliberate public reading of Scripture (according to a schedule or plan of some sort) is one way of rehearsing the acts of God in behalf of his people and his creation and finding and renewing our identity-center in that story over and over again. It takes only a minimal amount of honest reflection to reveal how easily we are attracted to other competing stories (and value systems) for our sense of identity.

<Keyword>

reading, Scripture, social identity, liturgical cycles, narrative

<Abstract>

디모데전서 4장 13절과 성서적 전통에서 성서 낭독의 기능

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분명히 대부분의 디모데전서 주석가들은 4:13에 나오는 “회중 앞에서 성경을 읽는 것”에 대한 가르침을 설교에서 말씀을 풀이하기 위해 준비 단계로서 성경 본문을 읽는 것을 가리키는 것으로 해석한다. 이것은 피상적인 해석으로서, 성서적 전통이나 유대교에서 성경을 회중 앞에서 낭독하는 방식에 대해서 충분히 이해하지 못한 것이며, 다른 종교나 문화적 상황에서 거룩한 본문들이 그 공동체의 사회적 정체성을 수립하고 발전시키는 데 어떠한 역할을 하는지 충분히 알지 못한 데에서 기인한 것이다. 이 연구를 통해서 나는 21세기를 맞이한 교회들이 그리스도인으로서의 정체성을 수립하고 더욱 강화하는 데 성경을 낭독하는 행위가 어떤 역할을 하는지 다시금 평가할 필요성이 있음을 제시하였다.

(양재훈 역)