

WHERE IS JESUS' HAFTARAH?

(FINDING JESUS IN TODAY'S SYNAGOGUES) ¹

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Things in the modern church have changed since I was a boy. When I grew up in the Church of Christ in Margaret Street, Toowoomba, Queensland, Australia, in the 1950's and 60's things were a lot more formal.

Only men took part in the public speaking during the services. We all wore white shirts and ties with coats --- even in the middle of our oppressively hot summers --- no air cons then (the women carried hand fans and waved them back and forth over their faces). Certainly, all women and girls wore dresses and stockings. Many of the older women still wore hats and ribbons.

The church services too were rather predictable. They used to talk about "the three hymn sandwich" with communion in-between and the hymn to finish the sermon! The men who were to participate in the public part of the services would meet in the vestibule for a prayer meeting asking the Lord to honour His name and bless His people in the service. We would then file down in order to the front and either take our place on the platform (if we were taking a speaking role) or sit in the front middle pew (if we were to distribute the Lord's supper).

On the stage were two pulpits, with the communion table the centrepiece. Invariably, there were two Bible readings. The first was from the right-hand pulpit and was an Old Testament passage. The second reading was from the left pulpit and was a New Testament passage that was thematically linked to the first reading --- after all "the OT is the NT concealed and the NT is the OT revealed"! When it came time the speaker (preacher) would give a sermon --- hopefully based on the two Bible readings.

I did not know it at the time, but this practice for public Scripture reading followed by a sermon has solid Jewish roots that goes back, yes, *thousands* of years! I am not suggesting of course, that in the synagogues the New Testament was read. But for way more than two millennia the Torah and "the Law and the Prophets" have been the focal point of the synagogue Scripture readings, and remains so to this very day.

For centuries traditional Jewish practice has been to read aloud the entire **Torah** (the first 5 books by Moses) each year. ² This Torah portion is called the *parashah*. Then, selections from the prophetic and historical writings (called **Neviim**) were read aloud. This portion was called the *haftarah*, which means "completion".

After the second reading from the prophets --- the *haftarah* --- the rabbi or visiting speaker would deliver his homily, his message, which was based on the passages of Scripture just read. It's this practice that Christians have emulated, mostly not realizing how very Jewish its method is!

¹ I acknowledge the title *What Happened to Jesus' Haftarah?* is not mine. It originally appeared on August 12, 2005 at <http://www.haaretz.com/news/what-happened-to-jesus-haftarah-1.166699>. I also freely acknowledge that the inspiration for this article comes from Lois Tverberg's chapter *Moses and the Prophets Have Spoken: Finding Promises in the Synagogue* in her book, *Reading the Bible with Rabbi Jesus: How a Jewish Perspective Can Transform Your Understanding*, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2017.

² Some of the standardised lectionary lists that date from before Christ show an earlier triennial tradition, rather than the later annual cycle for the Torah readings.

UNIFORMITY AROUND THE WORLD.

Did you know that, to this day, the very same Old Testament Scripture readings from the Torah and the prophets are synchronised in every part of the world? If you went into a synagogue in Israel, in New York, in Sydney, in Europe, anywhere that Jews congregate, you will hear the same Bible passage(s) read aloud for that Sabbath?

This rhythmic pattern is so engrained in Jewish life that even secular Israeli calendars mark off the weeks of the year by the names of the *parashah* (Torah) that will be read that week. Can you imagine participating in a Bible study so universal that you can glance at a free calendar you got at the bank to see what you'll be studying this week?

In Orthodox synagogues, the same Scripture texts have been recited each week of the year for over fifteen centuries. On the day they finish reading Deuteronomy, they throw a big party that they call *Simchat Torah* --- "The joy of the Torah." After parading the scrolls around the synagogue with great pomp and circumstance, they read the last word of Deuteronomy followed immediately by the first words of Genesis. Not a moment should be spent outside of the Scriptures. ³

JESUS AND HIS APOSTLES FOLLOWED THIS PATTERN

Two quick NT examples prove this standardised practice for millennia. The first in **Luke 4** concerns Jesus' opening public sermon made in his hometown of Nazareth. Although it had been Jesus' lifelong weekly practice to participate in the public prayers and readings in the local synagogue, on this special Sabbath day he **stood up to read (v.16)**. ⁴

After the Torah portion from Moses had been read, the scroll of the prophet **Isaiah** was handed to Jesus for the *haftarah* --- the second reading --- and, **when he had opened it (⁵), he found the place where it was written ... (v. 16-17)**. Jesus then proceeded to give the 'sermon' in which he dramatically announced **the year of God's favour**, the Year of Jubilee, with himself being the very one promised in the Scriptures, the long-awaited messianic king! Jesus read aloud,

The Spirit of the LORD is upon me, because He anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favour (v. 18-19).

A careful study of this Lukan passage shows Jesus was very Jewish in these actions, even if his exegesis was to the ears of the locals most controversial, unorthodox, and yes, confronting!

The second example follows the public reading of the Torah and the Prophets in Antioch. On the Sabbath day Paul and his companions **went into the synagogue and sat down. After the reading of the Law (Torah) and the prophets (Neviim), the officials of the synagogue sent them a message, saying, 'Brothers, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, give it.'** Paul then stood up, and with a gesture began to give his address (**Acts 13: 13ff**). Two Bible readings followed by a sermon!

A DISCOVERY IN THE STOREROOM!

Most of us have heard of the **Dead Sea Scrolls** discovered by a bedouin shepherd boy in 1946. Their significance cannot be overestimated, but this is not the place to go into that. But are you aware of

³ *Op Cit. Reading the Bible With Rabbi Jesus, pp 194-195*

⁴ **Lk. 4: 16** informs us this had been Jesus' regular custom or habit (*eioutha*) in Nazareth where he **had been raised**.

⁵ The Greek verb *anaptusso* rightly translated means Jesus "**unrolled it**". It takes some skill to be able to find the place you are looking for on a scroll many metres long! The fact Jesus carefully selected his verses on this occasion indicates he was familiar with handling the scrolls and of course, could read Hebrew!

another earlier and equally important discovery in 1896 in Cairo of over 300,000 (!) Jewish documents? These discarded holy texts in a synagogue storeroom (called a *genizah*) contained, amongst many other documents, multiple lectionary lists.

To the astonishment of all, these were not the annual readings so well known today, but were from a more ancient synagogue tradition dating to well before Christ, and that had persisted in Israel, northern Africa and Egypt until at least 1100 A.D.

Upon close examination, the researchers noted that the modern Torah reading (remember it's called the *parashah* portion) was derived from, and based upon, this much older tradition. Today's Torah readings take one year to cycle through. This older liturgy was split into a cycle lasting three-and-a-half years.

All of this is simply to say that, synagogue liturgies were not synchronised until they became standardized to the annual cycle instituted in Babylon a couple of hundred years after Christ. So it seems that Jesus and Paul on their travels would have encountered slightly different public readings from today's as they travelled from town to town, village to village.

THE MOST STAGGERING DISCOVERY OF ALL!

Lois Tverberg notes that, *The most fascinating thing the researchers found was that while the Torah readings had hardly changed, the *haftarah* readings from the Prophets were completely different.*⁶

How, in what way, had the liturgical readings changed from their ancient lectionary to what is practised in synagogues this day? Well, in the ancient cycle the interest was on Israel's future. The Torah reading was followed by the *haftarah* reading from the Prophets that focused on God's promises of a glorious future messianic kingdom age.

Every week the haftarah readings asked the question: What will the world look like when God establishes His earthly kingdom? How will Israel's story ultimately play out? Let's give an example or two.

THE NEW CREATION

If the Torah portion was on the creation story from **Genesis 1** the *haftarah* reading would be about the new creation of the heavens and the earth from **Isaiah 65**;

"For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth, and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind ... the wolf and the lamb shall graze together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox ... they shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain", says the LORD (vs. 17,25).

ONE LANGUAGE TO REFLECT UNIVERSAL WORSHIP

And on the week they read about the confounding of the languages at Babel from **Genesis 11**, the *haftarah* would cite the promise from **Zephaniah 3: 9**,

For at that time I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech, that all of them may call upon the name of the LORD and serve Him with one accord.

⁶ *Op. Cit.* p 196 (My underlining).

A NEW COVENANT

Or, when they read about Moses descending Mount Sinai with the tables of the covenant in **Exodus 34: 27-35**, they would read the *haftarah* portion from **Jeremiah 31: 32-39**,

This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people (v.33).

A SON TO TAKE THE REIGNS OF THE NEW GOVERNMENT

One last example. When they read **Leviticus 12-13** about purification after childbirth, they'd read **Isaiah 9:6** that looks forward to the birth of Israel's messianic king, who would sit on David's throne and receive an everlasting kingdom;

For unto us a child is born, unto a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Well, you get the idea from these few examples. The standard practice in the earlier synagogue liturgy was that the theme connecting the Torah reading (what's it called? You remember! That's right! The *parashah* portion) was oriented towards God's promised future redemption for Israel --- and by extension the salvation of the nations of the world through Messiah.

As Christians this should excite and enthrall us to the point of jumping out of our skin with joy. To learn the earliest synagogue lectionaries --- the ones Jesus and the apostles were accustomed to --- were invariably oriented towards the future kingdom helps us understand why there was such power and controversy in their ministries, for they announced God's promised future had arrived in the person of Jesus of Nazareth right in front of their very eyes.

Lois Tverberg says it is especially noteworthy that, **over half of the prophetic readings came from Isaiah, especially chapters 40-66, which focus on promises of redemption and renewal. Jesus often quoted Isaiah 40-66. When he read in the synagogue in Luke 4, he was quoting from Isaiah 61, and the Beatitudes in Matthew 5 are filled with references from Isaiah 55-57 and Isaiah 66. Paul's favourite book to quote was also Isaiah.** ⁷

Now a big question: Do we know which lectionary was used in the days of the New Testament? Scholars are sure the Torah portion (you got it this time! the *parashah*) was predetermined, but the second reading, the prophetic portion, the *haftarah*, was left up to the reader to choose so he could fit it to hopefully, a good and inspiring message showing how the prophets predict the Torah fulfillment.

This practice took a reasonable amount of knowledge and familiarity with the Scriptures, because the whole had to be thematically woven together as well as end with the promise of future blessing and redemption. Even back then, congregants wanted happy endings to their sermons!

JOINING THE DOTS

Understanding this practice helps us better understand some of the connecting arguments we find in the NT. For instance, when we understand the earlier lectionary reading pairs from **Genesis 16 and Isaiah 54: 1-10**, the apostle Paul's argument in **Galatians 4** is not such a stretch.

⁷ *Op Cit.* p199

Genesis 16 is the story about Sarah's barrenness and her hatching a plan to bear Abraham a child through the mistress Hagar. The *haftarah* reading from **Isaiah 54** offers a future hope to end Sarah's sorrow,

"Sing, O barren one, who did not bear; break forth into singing and cry aloud, you who have not been in labour! For the children of the desolate one will be more than the children of her who is married", says the LORD (v.1).

Paul makes the connection in **Galatians 4**. He starts with the Hagar/Sarah story then connects it to **Isaiah 54** to support his argument about Gentile believers in Messiah now being sons of Abraham. Commentators have often struggled with how Paul likens Jews to the Egyptian slave Hagar. Some go so far as to suggest Paul has a strong anti-Semitic streak all of a sudden!

However, now we understand how the lectionary readings had already connected the two passages, we see how Paul is actually being very Jewish indeed when he links **Genesis 16** with **Isaiah 54**. The Jews themselves had been connecting the two passages in their synagogue readings! But now in the full light of Messiah's arrival, they were failing to see the implications.

THE BIG PICTURE

So, what is the big picture so far? By examining the standardised synagogue readings we learn that Jews were reading their Bibles in the synagogues earnestly looking forward to the fulfillment of God's ancient promises about His future Messianic Kingdom.

A classic example in the lectionary reading is the story of Joseph at **Genesis 39: 1-6**,

Now Joseph had been brought down to Egypt, and Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard, an Egyptian, had bought him from the Ishmaelites who had brought him down there. The LORD was with Joseph, and he became a successful man, and he was in the house of his Egyptian master ... Now Joseph was handsome in form and appearance.

The assigned *haftarah* passage from the Prophets was in **Isaiah 52:3 - 53:5**, which recalls Israel's oppression in Egypt and then God's promise to intervene, **For thus says the LORD: "You were sold for nothing, and you shall be redeemed without money." For thus says the LORD God: "My people went down at the first into Egypt to sojourn there."**

Notice how the readings tie Joseph's fate of going down into Egypt with Israel's. Both were slaves. But all is not hopeless because God will arise and deliver from Egypt. But He is going to do something far greater than even the Exodus when He sends a "Servant" figure,

See, My servant will act wisely; he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted. Just as there were many who were appalled at him --- his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any human being and his form marred beyond human likeness --- .

As Tverberg comments, **For centuries, Jewish congregations were reading Joseph's story in light of the Suffering Servant of Isaiah. The short Genesis reading stops with the words that Joseph was "handsome in appearance", deliberately contrasting with Isaiah 52: 14, "his appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of the children of mankind."** ⁸

The Isaiah reading goes on to the greatly loved words, **Surely, he has borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our**

⁸ *Op Cit.* p204

transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought our peace, and with his wounds we are healed (53: 4-5).

Repeat: In synagogues at the time of Christ, as people read about the Suffering Servant they were thinking about Joseph. And you remember the end of his story. It doesn't finish with him sold into slavery, falsely accused of crimes he didn't commit, rejected by his brothers, wasting away in the dungeon all those years. Not at all. Joseph ends up being promoted to second in command over all Egypt and if it were not for him, not only would his own family have perished in the famine, but also many nations.

It is a fact that Jewish tradition has struggled with the question as to whether there would be two messiahs or just one. The prophets describe visions of both a royal, victorious King who would sit on David's throne --- son of David --- and they describe visions of a Suffering Servant who would atone for Israel's sins --- son of Joseph. So, would both callings be found in one individual or two Messiahs? One who would die and one who would reign? Massive debate!

Go back to their lectionary readings for a moment. A few weeks after reading about Joseph's imprisonment in Egypt, they read about Pharaoh setting him up as commander-in-chief over Egypt in **Genesis 41**. That passage ends with Pharaoh asking, "Can we find anyone like this man, one in whom is the Spirit of God" (v.38)?

The *haftarah* reading for this text is **Isaiah 11: 2-16, The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him --- the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the LORD --- and he will delight in the fear of the LORD.**

Here is the vision of Israel's glorious Messianic King (note too, it comes from Isaiah's famous **shoot from the stump of Jesse** prophecy about a future son of David who will rule over a glorious renewed world).

Jewish synagogues were reading about Joseph's suffering in light of **Isaiah 52 - 53** and then a few weeks later reading about his reign over Egypt in light of **Isaiah 11**. Wowah! Could it be that a messiah who is the son of Joseph could someday *reign*? Hmmm.

CRUNCH TIME!

We have now arrived at the time for impact. If you have followed all the way to now, you will have a pressing question. Why don't the People of the Book, the People who have treasured, poured over, loved, revered, publicly and *thematically* read the Torah & Neviim in their synagogues for millennia and yes, why don't the people who have died for their holy Scriptures rather than deny them, why of all people don't they --- didn't they --- accept that Jesus is their Messianic King so hoped for?

Perhaps it might help to ask another question first: **What happened to Jesus' *haftarah*?** What about the messianic prophecies that all point to Jesus? Prophecies like **Micah 5:2** about a ruler to be born in Bethlehem? Like **Zechariah 9:9** about Jerusalem's future King riding into the city on a donkey? Like **Isaiah 7: 14** about being born of a virgin? Like **Isaiah 61** which Jesus read as being fulfilled in himself, "The LORD has anointed me"? Like the dozens and dozens of prophecies all evidently fulfilled in Jesus the Christ all the way down to his rejection and crucifixion, and resurrection --- all foretold to the minutest detail?

Where do we find these *haftarah* in the synagogue lectionaries today? I'll let **Tverberg** answer,

Brace yourselves, but they are nowhere to be found in the annual lectionary that is used now. Bear in mind that the Torah is read aloud in its entirety during synagogue services, but only a subset of the Neviim is read, selected because it complements the Torah reading.

In 2004, an Israeli newspaper published an article called “What Happened to Jesus’ Haftarah?” where Jewish scholar Hananel Mack examined the lectionary readings. He concluded that the pattern was clear enough to show that it was intentional. Any passage that was quoted in the New Testament as being about Jesus as the Christ was intentionally avoided in synagogue readings.

Could it be just a coincidence that the fourth century AD, when Jewish liturgy began adopting a lectionary that downplayed prophetic promises, was also the era that Christian persecution of the Jews reached a peak during the reign of Constantine? At the same time that Christians were chopping themselves free of their Jewish roots, the synagogue was silencing the prophecies of a coming Messiah. ⁹

Horror! Historically then, as Christianity was cutting its ties from its historical and theological moorings to Israel, the Jews were separating themselves from their own Messiah too. Both have been the losers! Christianity adopted its pagan tri-theism with its two-natured Jesus. Judaism lost her Saviour King.

Let us pray for that Day Jesus himself predicted, the Day when the nation of Israel will say, “Blessed is he who comes in the Name of the LORD!” For on that Day Jewish acceptance will be life from the dead (Rom. 11: 15). On that Day the Torah of Moses and the prophets who spoke of the coming Kingdom of everlasting glory will have arrived. On that Day Israel’s Messianic King will be coronated. On that Day the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the one with the lamb’s Suffering Servant heart, will at last receive his promised inheritance with the faithful, blessed ones.

Even so. Come Lord Jesus Messiah! Your *haftarah* will not, cannot be denied, for your God and our God, your Father and our Father, is faithful!

Amen!

⁹ *Op Cit.* p202

