

AN HISTORICAL, BIBLICAL, AND PRACTICAL  
ANALYSIS OF PUBLIC SCRIPTURE READING  
IN CORPORATE WORSHIP GATHERINGS

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## CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
Definition of “Public Reading of Scripture”.....	2
Introduction.....	2
Old Testament Vocabulary.....	2
New Testament Vocabulary.....	5
Historical Traditions.....	5
Biblical Examples.....	12
The Old Testament.....	12
The New Testament.....	13
Biblical Commands.....	14
2 Chronicles 34.....	15
Colossians 4 and 1 Thessalonians 5.....	15
1 Timothy 4:13.....	16
Practical Outworkings in the Local Church.....	17
The Importance of Public Scripture Reading.....	18
The Reverence of Public Scripture Reading.....	19
The Preparation of Public Scripture Reading.....	20
The Length of Public Scripture Reading.....	21
The Voice of Public Scripture Reading.....	21
The Posture of Public Scripture Reading.....	23
The Response of Public Scripture Reading.....	23
Conclusion.....	24
Bibliography.....	26

## Introduction

Public worship . . . should encourage private worship.<sup>1</sup> And if we surveyed many churches inquiring as to whether or not there is a deliberate portion of the service dedicated to the public proclamation of God's Word, we would quickly find out that we—though we would never dare say it outright—have a low view of Scripture. The average pattern of public worship diminishes, if not outright neglects, the preeminence of Bible reading in the private lives of Christians. Unfortunately, in today's contemporary evangelical church service, the art of the public reading of God's Word has long been forgotten. It is, so to speak, buried underneath the rubble in the Temple services waiting for someone such as Hilkiah to find, recognize, and read for all the people (cf. 2 Kings 22:8).<sup>2</sup> We must recognize that it is when the Bible is read, it goes forth with conviction, authority, and divine unction. The axiom is true and is ever-needed in our pulpits today: when a person reads the Bible, God speaks! But sad to say, many churches prefer to *worship* without allowing God to utter a word. Earey recognizes this melancholy irony:

It is ironic that among Evangelicals (those people who, above all, see themselves as 'Bible people') there is so little enthusiasm for the public reading of the Bible. In many an evangelical church the Bible reading is kept to a minimum: only one passage is likely to be read and the passage will be kept as short as possible.<sup>3</sup>

Because this is a sad but true reality, the purpose of this paper is to examine what the public reading of Scripture is by giving a simple definition and the vocabulary used in both the Old and New Testaments. Then I will turn to historical traditions where I will briefly summarize

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<sup>1</sup> Glenn E. Hinson, "Private Springs of Public Worship," *Review and Expositor* 80, no. 1 (Winter 1983): 112.

<sup>2</sup> All English Scripture quotations are from the New American Standard Bible (1995 Updated edition), unless otherwise noted.

<sup>3</sup> Mark Earey, "This is the Word of the Lord: The Bible and Worship," *Anvil* 19, no. 2 (2002): 92.

some of the early church's incorporation of corporate Scripture readings in public gatherings. Subsequently, I will examine some of the Old Testament<sup>4</sup> examples then followed by some examples in the New Testament.<sup>5</sup> Because there are numerous statements in the Scriptures that intimate commanding God's followers to the public reading of Scripture, I will endeavor to elucidate these texts. Finally, I will conclude the paper with some practical suggestions as to how we can work these biblical principles out in our local assemblies as we meet together corporately.

### **Definition of "Public Reading of Scripture"**

#### Introduction

As I see it, a working definition of the public reading of Scripture is: *the reverential, repetitive, corporate, and audible reading from the Word of God in the regular gathering of believers for the purpose of reinforcing what God has said, recommitting oneself to obedience, and recognizing both the holiness of God and the holiness that God demands from his worshippers.* This working definition is circumscribed from the Hebrew and Greek vocabulary and the various examples of public reading in Scripture.

#### Old Testament Vocabulary

In the OT, occurrences abound where individuals read God's Word in public. Some of the Hebrew words delineating this are as follows:

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<sup>4</sup> Hereafter, OT.

<sup>5</sup> Hereafter, NT.

**קרא** – This verb is found most often in the OT in passages where the Scriptures are “read.” The verb **קרא** occurs 880 times in the Hebrew Bible and most often is translated as “he called” (Gen 1:5), “he named” (Gen 2:20), “to call upon in worship” (Gen 4:26), or “to recite” or “to read aloud” (Deut 17:19; Ex 24:7). **קרא** is well attested in all Semitic languages (Ugaritic, “to call, invite”); specifically, in Arabic, *qara’a*, means to recite, read, announce, proclaim.<sup>6</sup>

In contexts of “oral reading” or “public reading” “the basic meaning of *qr*’ is to draw attention to oneself by the audible use of one’s voice in order to establish contact with someone else.”<sup>7</sup> In the OT, many things can be proclaimed: “festivals or feast days (Ex 32:5; Lev 23:2, 4, 21, 37; Isa 1:13; Lam 1:15; 2:22), special days (Lam 1:21), a general fast (1 Kings 21:9, 12; Joel 1:14; 2:15; Jonah 3:5; 2 Chron 20:3; Ezra 8:21), liberty or liberation (Lev 25:10; Isa 61:1–2; Jer 34:8, 15, 17), a famine (2 Kings 8:1), Yahweh’s remission (Deut 15:2), a king (Isa 34:12), a holy war (Joel 4:9 [3:9]).<sup>8</sup>

For our purposes, **קרא** can refer to the reading of God’s Word as Joshua “read all the words of the Law” (Josh 8:34), Shaphan the scribe who “read” the Law (2 Kings 22:8), and Nehemiah who “read from [the Law] . . . from early morning until midday” (Neh 8:3). Most

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<sup>6</sup> Louis Jonker, “קרא,” in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, 5 vols., edited by Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 3:971.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. Cf. F. L. Hossfeld and E. M. Kindl, “קרא,” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 15 vols., edited by G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, translated by David E. Green (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004), 13:119.

<sup>8</sup> See Hossfeld and Kindl, “קרא,” 119.

often, the book or other object from which something is to be read or recited is introduced by *b<sup>e</sup>* (Deut 17:19; Neh 8:8, 18; 9:3; Jer 36:6, 8, 10, 13, 14; Hab 2:2).<sup>9</sup>

We must not neglect to mention that in Jeremiah 36, “the verb *qara* occurs 12 times, twice in the sense of ‘dictate’ (vss. 4, 18) and 10 times in the sense of ‘read (aloud)’ (vss. 6 [twice], 8, 10, 13, 14, 15 [twice], 21, and 23). The subject of the verb is Baruch; the listeners include all the people of Judah who have come to Jerusalem to observe the fast (v. 9).”<sup>10</sup> Jeremiah 36 is a quintessential text displaying the importance of the Word of God to be publically read before all people.

**קָרָא** – Though this verb is found often in the OT, it seldom refers to one “reading” except in a few specific cases. **קָרָא** is used when Moses “came and spoke all the words of this song in the hearing of the people” (Deut 32:44) and when Yahweh commanded Ezekiel to eat the scroll and “speak [all these words] to the house of Israel” (Ezek 3:1).

**נָגַד** – Similarly, this root is common in the OT but sparsely refers to one who is “reading.” It occurs when Micaiah “declared to them all the words that he had heard” (Jer 36:13). Regarding the public proclamation of Scripture a fixed institution existed from the time of Joshua to the time of Ezra and Nehemiah.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> See F. L. Hossfeld and H. Lamberty-Zielinski, “קָרָא,” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 15 vols., edited by G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, translated by David E. Green (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004), 13:124.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 13:125.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

## New Testament Vocabulary

In the NT, there is one primary root for the reading in public, ἀναγινώσκω. This lexeme (ἀναγινώσκ-) literally means “to know exactly” or “to recognize”<sup>12</sup> and it occurs 32 times in the NT and often is rhetorical in asking the listeners, “Have you not read in Moses?” (Matt 12:3; 19:4); it refers to Jesus when he “entered the synagogue . . . and stood up to read” (Luke 4:16); it refers to the “prophets which are read every Sabbath” (Acts 13:27); and it refers to Paul’s letter to the Colossians exhorting them to have it “read before all the brethren” (1 Thess 5:27). Therefore, it proves accurate to note that ἀναγινώσκω “always means public, vocal reading.”<sup>13</sup>

## Historical Traditions

It is beyond the scope of this study to examine how the Scriptures have been read in different stages and in different cultures throughout church history. With that said, however, it behooves us to examine briefly how the early church implemented this foundational aspect of corporate worship.

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<sup>12</sup> See Rudolf Bultmann, “ἀναγινώσκω,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 vols., ed. by Gerhard Kittel, trans. by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2006), 1:343.

<sup>13</sup> Christopher K. Lensch, “The Public Reading of Scripture,” *Western Reformed Seminary* 7, no. 1 (Feb 2000): 20.

Because the ancient world was an oral culture<sup>14</sup> by which many children learned both from parents and from school by audible hearing and sheer memorization, this factors in to our understanding of how the early church read the Scriptures.<sup>15</sup> Everett Ferguson affirms: “It must be remembered that the principal opportunity for most Christians to become acquainted with the Scriptures was through hearing them read in church. Therefore, the regular consecutive reading of the Bible occupied a principal place in the service.”<sup>16</sup> This only served to heighten the importance of regular gatherings together with likeminded Christians for the reading and teaching of God’s Word.

When Israel was exiled no Temple remained for the Jews to gather together to sacrifice, pray, and worship God. He had enough of their trampling of His courts (cf. Isa 1:12).

Consequently, she was carried off to Babylon because of her idolatry and sin. But even there,

Osborn notes:

In reverence for the Law, in reading, hearing, and interpreting Torah as the divine Word, even in a strange land, Jews continued to worship the God whose glory had once filled the Temple. Instead of a sometime thing—a seasonal festival in Jerusalem attended perhaps once or twice in a lifetime if one lived in the Diaspora—communal worship in

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<sup>14</sup> Even Hammurabi’s Code makes reference to public reading: “Let any oppressed man who has a cause come into the presence of the statue of me, the king of justice, and then *read carefully my inscribed stela*, and give heed to my precious words . . .” (Theophile J. Meek, “The Code of Hammurabi,” in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, ed. by James B. Pritchard, 3rd ed. [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969], 178); cf. James W. Watts, “Public Readings and Pentateuchal Law,” *Vetus Testamentum* 45, no. 4 (Oct 1995): 542. Similarly, the Scriptures note that the Persian culture placed emphasis on the public reading of formal documents: “Archival material was sometimes read aloud; in the narrative of Esther, the Persian monarch, unable to sleep, had the royal chronicles read to him and thus discovered that Mordecai had never been rewarded for supplying information about a plot to assassinate the king (Est. 6:1–3)” (Philip W. Comfort, “Service of the Word,” in *Biblical Foundations of Christian Worship*, Complete Library of Christian Worship 1, ed. by Robert E. Webber [Nashville: Star Song Publishing Group, 1993], 295).

<sup>15</sup> Lloyd G. Patterson agrees when he writes that “early Christian liturgy, like its Jewish and pagan counterparts, was an oral-formal phenomenon” (“The Worship of the Early Church (to A.D. 500),” in *Twenty Centuries of Christian Worship*, Complete Library of Christian Worship 2, edited by Robert E. Webber [Nashville: Star Song Publishing Group, 1993], 31).

<sup>16</sup> Everett Ferguson, *Early Christians Speak* (Abilene, TX: Biblical Research Press, 1981), 87.

their own community became the climax of every week in the year wherever Jews might find themselves. The name for their local meeting or gathering together (*synagogue* in Greek) soon attached itself also to the place where they assembled.<sup>17</sup>

When Israel returned to her homeland under the decree of Cyrus (Ezra 1:1–4), they began to worship regularly to pray and read the Law corporately.

In the early church, Ronald Osborne notes that in the Jewish synagogue, “[Worship] services were held at the three daily hours of prayer (9:00 am, noon, and 3:00 pm) . . . after the Shema, there followed the eighteen blessings, psalms, and hymns, then readings from the Law and the Prophets, with translation into the common speech, Aramaic or Greek, and the midrash or homily.”<sup>18</sup> This typical pattern demonstrates the notion that worshipping God is not something that we “go to do” once a week; rather, it is the way of life.

Interestingly, in the Jewish and subsequently in the early Christian practice, the worship gatherings climaxed at the reading of the Scripture. “Worship was preeminently the service of the Word, with the Law subdivided into portions for weekly reading; in Palestine the entire Torah would be read through in three years, in Babylonia in one year.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ronald E. Osborn, *Folly of God: The Rise of Christian Preaching*, A History of Christian Preaching 1 (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1999), 110–11.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 112. Ralph Martin enhances this thought: “The chief element in the worship practiced in the synagogue was the reading and exposition of the Law. The Law was read, first in the original Hebrew and then in Aramaic paraphrases, known as Targums, followed in turn by a homily. This is the centre of gravity of the synagogue’s service” (Ralph P. Martin, *Worship in the Early Church* [Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987], 66).

The similarities between the synagogue and church services are numerous.<sup>20</sup> Ferguson explicates: “The synagogue service included Scripture readings, interspersed with Psalm chants, a sermon, prayers, and almsgiving. We find these same elements in the early accounts of Christian worship: readings, singing, preaching, praying, and giving.”<sup>21</sup> This is one aspect of the Jewish synagogue service that the Christian church has borrowed thus making it a “Word-of-God service.”<sup>22</sup> This illuminates our understanding of such texts as Acts 2:42: “And they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer;” and 1 Timothy 4:13: “Until I come, give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation and teaching.” These practices implemented in the early church were carried over from Jewish worship customs in the synagogue.

Justin Martyr (100–165 AD) wrote: “On the day which is called Sunday we have a common assembly of all who live in the cities or in the outlying districts, and the memoirs of the

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<sup>20</sup> Lensch writes: “In matters of church government and worship, the New Testament church followed the general pattern of the synagogue. The synagogue grew out of the Old Testament church and developed during the intertestamental period. In place of the immature worship of the temple system, it served as the transition to new covenant worship “in spirit and in truth.” The synagogue of the apostolic church discarded sacerdotalism’s visual crutches of sacrifices and symbolic ornamentation. Instead, through the synagogue’s systematic reading and exposition of God’s mercy and truth found in His in-scripturated revelation, God’s people met in God’s presence, heard His Word for themselves, and returned the spiritual responses of prayer and praise” (“The Public Reading of Scripture,” 19). It is noteworthy to quote Josephus (*Against Apion* 2.175): “[Moses] appointed the Law to be the most excellent and necessary form of instruction, ordaining, not that it should be heard once for all or twice or on several occasions, but that every week men should desert their other occupations and assemble to listen to the Law and to obtain a thorough and accurate knowledge of it, a practice which all other legislators seem to have neglected” (Flavius Josephus, *The Works of Josephus: New Updated Edition*, trans. by William Whiston [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1987], 804–5); cf. Michael Graves, “The Public Reading of Scripture in Early Judaism,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 50, no. 3 (Sept 2007): 470.

<sup>21</sup> Ferguson, *Early Christians Speak*, 86.

<sup>22</sup> Martin, *Worship in the Early Church*, 69.

Apostles or the writings of the Prophets are read, as long as there is time” (*First Apology*, 67).<sup>23</sup>

A few things are noteworthy of mention here. First, by the early to mid second-century A.D., Sunday was the commonly accepted day of fellowship and teaching. Additionally, the reading of the Apostles and/or the Prophets was read—as long as time permitted!<sup>24</sup> And the writings of the Prophets, according to Justin Martyr, apparently encompassed the entire OT—not just the major or minor prophets per se.<sup>25</sup> The Christians devoted themselves to this rite “as long as time allowed.”

The mid second-century homily, 2 Clement (c. 150 AD), notes:

Wherefore, brethren and sisters, after the *God of truth hath been heard*, I read to you an entreaty that ye may give heed to the things that are written, in order that ye may save both yourselves and him that readeth among you. For as a reward I ask of you that ye repent with the whole heart, thus giving to yourselves salvation and life. For by doing this we shall set a goal for all the young who are minded to labor on behalf of piety and the goodness of God (2 Clement 19:1; *emphasis added*).

Tertullian (160–220 AD), in writing on the practices of the early church, wrote: “we assemble for the consideration of the Holy Scriptures, to see if the circumstances of the present times demand that we look ahead or reflect.”<sup>26</sup>

Clement of Alexandria (c. 182–202 AD) speaks of early Christians in their worship, “always giving thanks in all things to God through righteous hearing and divine reading”

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<sup>23</sup> See Thomas B. Falls, *Writings of Saint Justin Martyr*, Fathers of the Church 6, edited by Ludwig Schopp (New York: Christian Heritage, 1948), 106. Justin continues: “When the reader has finished, the president of the assembly verbally admonishes and invites all to imitate such examples of virtue.”

<sup>24</sup> Consider Nehemiah 8:3: “While they stood in their place, they read from the book of the law of the LORD their God for a fourth of the day; and for another fourth they confessed and worshiped the LORD their God.” They read from the Law for six hours each day!

<sup>25</sup> See Ferguson, *Early Christians Speak*, 87.

<sup>26</sup> Emily Joseph Daly, *Tertullian Apologetical Works: and Minucius Felix Octavius*, Fathers of the Church 10, edited by Roy Joseph Deferrari (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1950), 98.

(*Miscellanies* 6.14.113.3). He also exhorted married couples to “read the Scriptures together” (*Paedagogus* 2.10.96). He “promoted personal study of the Scripture (*Paedagogus* 3.12.87), and said that “such reading should be done before the chief meal of the day” (*Stromata* 7.7.49).

Origen (c. 185–254 AD) believed the Scriptures were accessible to all and he spoke frequently of individuals reading the Scriptures at home, as well as at church (*Homily on Genesis* 2.8). He recommended that “Christians read the OT, Apocrypha, Psalms, Gospels, and Epistles” (*Homily on Numbers* 27.10).

Irenaeus (d. 202 AD) encouraged “the unrestricted use of Scripture” (*Against Heresies* 5.20.2). Jerome (c. 347–420 AD) says that “Pamphilus had Bibles copied to keep in stock for distribution to those in need” (*Against Rufinus* 1.9).<sup>27</sup>

Later, Theodore of Mopsuestia in the late 4th century said, “All of us, having come to faith in Christ the Lord from the nations, received the Scriptures from them and now enjoy them, reading them aloud in the churches and keeping them at home.”<sup>28</sup>

It is clear, then, that from synagogue worship in the Intertestamental Period, to first-century synagogue worship during the time of Jesus and the Apostles, to the early Church Fathers, the role of the public reading of Scripture figured prominently.

Skipping ahead to modern practices,<sup>29</sup> Barry Liesch helps unfold the typical pattern in the Western Church service:<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> See Philip W. Comfort, “Service of the Word,” in *Biblical Foundations of Christian Worship*, Complete Library of Christian Worship 1, edited by Robert E. Webber (Nashville: Star Song Publishing Group, 1993), 296.

<sup>28</sup> Robert C. Hill, *Theodore of Mopsuestia: Commentary on the Twelve Prophets*, Fathers of the Church 108, edited by Thomas P. Halton (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2004), 289.

<sup>29</sup> Because of the limitations of time and space, a thorough examination of liturgical practices of various denominations is omitted.

## Entrance

- Gathering of God's people

- Entrance Song

- Greeting

- Penitential Rite

- Acts of Praise

- Prayer of the Day (These bring the people before God, form them into the body of Christ, and ready them to hear the Word of the Lord)

## The Service of the word

- Hearing God Speak

- The OT Lesson

- The Psalm (responsive)

- The Epistle Lesson

- The Alleluiah (or other response)

- The Gospel Lesson

- The Sermon (Emphasis is placed on the full range of God's revelation. Readings are chosen from a three-year lectionary. Readings may be dramatized or told as story).

## Responding to God

- The Creed

- The Prayers of the people

- The Kiss of Peace (The response to God comes after God has spoken. A great deal of variation of forms may be used to accomplish the response).

## Service of the Table

- Invitation

- Salutation

- Lift up your hearts

- Prayer of proclamation

- Sanctus* (Holy Holy Holy)

- The Words of the Institution

- Prayer of Intercession

- The Fraction

- The Distribution

- The Communion Songs and Hymns

- The Closing Prayer

- The Dismissal

- Announcements

- Benediction

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<sup>30</sup> Barry Liesch, "The Traditional Fourfold Pattern of Worship," in *Biblical Foundations of Christian Worship*, Complete Library of Christian Worship 3, edited by Robert E. Webber (Nashville: Star Song Publishing Group, 1993), 211. He helps by breaking down the traditional service into four phases which are, more-or-less, present in Western worship services: (1) the entrance; (2) the Word; (3) the Lord's Table/thanksgiving; and (4) the dismissal (ibid.).

Hymn of Dismissal  
Words of Dismissal

To be sure, much variation exists but all in all, much of the basic structure remains consistent across the board. And today, sad to say, the practice seems to rest upon a few verses which are hurriedly read so that the pastor can quickly get to his sermon.

### **Biblical Examples**

But what does the biblical text exemplify? How did the Godly men of old handle God's revelation? It will profit—and rebuke—us to observe some key instances.

#### The Old Testament

The logical starting point in observing how the Word of God has been implemented in corporate worship gatherings is the OT itself. Passages abound with examples of men reading the “Book of the Law,”<sup>31</sup> the “Law,” and “the words of this Book.” Tom McComiskey affirms: “The practice of reading Scripture in public spans the Testaments. It is supported by ancient example and apostolic authority. It deserves our careful attention not only because it is an aspect of the

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<sup>31</sup> Of course, no consensus exists—even to this day—as to what the book of the law specifically refers to: all of Deuteronomy, the Decalogue in Deuteronomy 5, much of Deuteronomy though not all of it, and all of the Torah have all been fronted as views. For discussions on this issue, see Katherine Stott, “Finding the Lost Book of the Law: Re-reading the Story of ‘The Book of the Law’ (Deuteronomy – 2 Kings in Light of Classical Literature,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 30, no. 2 (Dec 2005): 153–54; H. H. Rowley, *Men of God: Studies in Old Testament History and Prophecy*, 2 vols., (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1963), 161; Martin Noth, *The Laws in the Pentateuch and Other Studies*, trans. by D. R. Ap-Thomas (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 41–49; Otto Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament: An Introduction*, 3 vols., trans. by Peter R. Ackroyd (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1965), 173–76; Paul House, *1, 2 Kings*, in *New American Commentary*, ed. by E. Ray Clendenen (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2003), 381–84; and J. A. Thompson, *1, 2 Chronicles*, in *New American Commentary*, ed. by E. Ray Clendenen (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1994), 377–78.

Judeo-Christian tradition of worship, but also because of the importance of the Scriptures in fashioning our understanding of God and our response to him.”<sup>32</sup>

The first person in the OT who “reads Scripture” is Moses. In Deuteronomy 17, speaking in context of the future king who would rule over the nation of Israel, he speaks of the importance of the persistent reading of the Law:

<sup>18</sup> “Now it shall come about when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself a copy of this law on a scroll in the presence of the Levitical priests. <sup>19</sup> ‘And it shall be with him, *and he shall read it all the days of his life*, that he may learn to fear the LORD his God, by carefully observing all the words of this law and these statutes’” (Deut 17:18–19; *emphasis added*).

Later in Deuteronomy, Moses speaks to the people and to Joshua, the son of Nun, exhorting them to remember what he tells them (cf. Deut 32:44–47).<sup>33</sup>

Moses’ successor, Joshua the son of Nun, came before the nation of Israel after they crossed the Jordan and entered the Promised Land and “he read all the words of the law, the blessing and the curse, according to all that is written in the book of the law” (Josh 8:34).

### The New Testament

In the NT, one strains to find many clear-cut examples of the public reading of Scripture in corporate worship gatherings, yet examples do exist. Many of the traditions that the early church practiced stemmed from Jewish synagogue worship.<sup>34</sup> LeRoy Kennell helps by noting:

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<sup>32</sup> Thomas Edward McComiskey, *Reading Scripture in Public: A Guide for Preachers and Lay Readers* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 14.

<sup>33</sup> This is after Yahweh tells Moses: “And you shall write on the stones all the words of this law very distinctly” (Deut 27:8; cf. 31:19).

<sup>34</sup> See Ralph P. Martin, “Elements of Synagogue Worship,” in *Biblical Foundations of Christian Worship*, Complete Library of Christian Worship 1, edited by Robert E. Webber (Nashville: Star Song Publishing Group, 1993), 135.

“the origin of the Service of the Word and its instructive orientation lies in the synagogue. The early Christians who were Jews probably adapted what they did in the synagogue to the context of Christian worship.”<sup>35</sup>

Interestingly, a synagogue found in Jerusalem dating to the first-century A.D. reads:

Theodotus, son of Vettenus, priest and archisynagogue, son of an archisynagogue, grandson of an archisynagogue, built the synagogue *for the reading of the Law and the teaching of the commandments*, and the guest-house of the rooms and the water supplied as an inn for those who have need when they come from abroad.<sup>36</sup>

John Harvey correctly applies this in exhorting: “It is time that we recapture the ancient paradigm of orality as one of our tools for biblical studies!”<sup>37</sup>

### **Biblical Commands**

One may turn to both the OT and NT to find commands to have God’s Word read in public before “all the people.” But for our purposes here, only three commands will be examined.

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<sup>35</sup> LeRoy E. Kennell, “What Does the Service of the Word Do?” in *Biblical Foundations of Christian Worship*, Complete Library of Christian Worship 3, edited by Robert E. Webber (Nashville: Star Song Publishing Group, 1993), 237.

<sup>36</sup> This quotation is copied as found in C. K. Barrett, *The New Testament Background: Selected Documents* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1961), 51 (emphasis added).

<sup>37</sup> John D. Harvey, “Orality and Its Implications for Biblical Studies: Recapturing an Ancient Paradigm,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 45, no. 1 (Mar 2002): 109.

## 2 Chronicles 34

The context of 2 Chronicles 34 rests late in the history of the Divided Monarchy. Israel has been carried off to Assyria in 722 B.C. by Shalmaneser. Judah followed in Israel's footsteps but with a bit more time before exile dawned. Josiah was the king over Judah and while his officers were bringing out the money which had been brought into the house of the Lord, "Hilkiah the priest found the book of the law of the LORD given by Moses" (v. 14). Then Hilkiah gave the book to Shapan, the scribe, who in turn read the book "in the presence of the king" (v. 18).

Amazingly, King Josiah heard the message of Yahweh spoken through the prophet Moses, and he responded with grave repentance (v. 19, 21). Later in the same chapter, the text reads that king Josiah went up to the House of the Lord with all the men of Judah (v. 30) and he "read in their hearing all the words of the book of the covenant which was found in the house of the Lord" (v. 30). Not only did the righteous king Josiah read the words of God's Law to the people of Israel, he stood up:

[A]nd made a covenant before the LORD to walk after the LORD, and to keep His commandments and His testimonies and His statutes with all his heart and with all his soul, to perform the words of the covenant written in this book. <sup>32</sup> Moreover, he made all who were present in Jerusalem and Benjamin to stand *with him*. So the inhabitants of Jerusalem did according to the covenant of God, the God of their fathers (2 Chron 34:31–32).

Though there is no implicit command to read the Word from this text *per se*, the obvious application and implication of the passage is that the public reading of God's Word produces repentance, change, and holiness in God's people.

## Colossians 4 and 1 Thessalonians 5

In the early church, Christians gathered together to hear from God's Word as they devoted themselves to the OT texts and the writings of the Apostles. Paul, an apostle, wrote

letters to various churches and we have two letters where he specifically commands each church to have the letter<sup>38</sup> read before everyone. This is, of course, before chapter and verse divisions were added to the text.

First, when Paul concludes his treatise to the church in Colossae, he writes: “When this letter is read (ἀναγνωσθῆ) among you, have it also read (ἀναγνωσθῆ) in the church of the Laodiceans; and you, for your part read my letter that is coming from Laodicea” (Col 4:16). In a word, Paul is commanding the church (cf. 1:2) to read the letter—in one sitting in its entirety is the implication—among the church. Subsequently, the church in Colossae must deliver the letter to the church in Laodicea (11 miles away) and have it read to them corporately as well.

Second, Paul writes to the church in Thessalonika and, after his benediction (vv. 23–24), he concludes with the personal exhortation that they “have this letter read to all the brethren” (1 Thess 5:27).<sup>39</sup> The command Paul gives the church at Thessalonika is for them to have this letter read (ἀναγνωσθῆναι) publically to “all the brethren.”

#### 1 Timothy 4:13

As part of the “Pastoral Epistles,” 1 Timothy abounds with references to pastoral leadership and ministry in the local church. In fact, Paul specifies the theme of this letter: “I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth” (1 Tim 3:15). Therefore, 1 Timothy instructs us as worshippers as to proper conduct and God-honoring worship in the local

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<sup>38</sup> Greek, ἐπιστολή.

<sup>39</sup> Similarly, note the implied notion of public reading in 2 Thess 3:14: “If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that person and do not associate with him, so that he will be put to shame.” Obviously, if one refuses to heed the instruction of the Apostle through the letter which was read in corporate gatherings, he was to be ostracized from the community.

assembly. In 4:13 Paul narrows his command to Timothy, and by application all leaders, to be devoted to three things: “give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation and teaching.” These three aspects of corporate worship have seemingly been forgotten through the centuries.<sup>40</sup>

The early church observed the formal time of the reading of the Word but in today’s average church assembly, the exhortation and teaching may be present but the public reading of God’s Word often is absent. It is my persuasion that we must incorporate what it is that distinguishes us from the rest of man-made religions, namely, a constant hunger for, commitment to, and listening ear for the Word of God, for if God’s Word is not read, then God’s mouth is silenced in His own house.

### **Practical Outworkings in the Local Church**

We now turn from theology to practice to see how we, as twenty-first century church-leaders, can implement this oft-neglected aspect in our worship gatherings. This may appear subjective and this is by no means prescriptive. However, I endeavor to draw out some practical implications from the biblical texts and from church history so that we may better fulfill the command from the Apostle Paul to “give attention to the public reading of Scripture” (1 Tim 4:13). To begin, Dudrey heralds the urgency of this act of worship in stating:

One thing we and all believers must do is to give heed to the public reading of Scripture: not only does God speak in his word, not only will his word not return to him void, but also God’s word is powerfully framed for speaking, for public oral reading and auditory reception in the setting of Christian worship. Many of the new postmodern and postliterate generation are less likely to read the word of God than they are to hear it:

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<sup>40</sup> See Steven J. Lawson, “The Passion of Biblical Preaching: An Expository Study of 1 Timothy 4:13–16,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 159, no. 633 (Jan-Mar 2002): 79–95.

therefore we must make sure that we give them every opportunity to hear it read aloud, read clearly and reverently and publicly.<sup>41</sup>

### The Importance of Public Scripture Reading

Ralph Martin states that “the place which it holds in the ordering of divine service must always be central and determinative.”<sup>42</sup> The high point of the corporate worship service ought not to be the music, as uplifting as that may be. It ought not to be the offering, as generous as the givers may be. It ought not to even be the sermon, as biblically and exegetically sound it may be; the high point of the service is when God divinely speaks in and through His Word. Webber reminds contemporary worshippers: “The service of the Word is the central act of worship.”<sup>43</sup>

If we believe that the reading of the Scriptures is the most important aspect of our corporate worship gatherings, then we must not quickly skim over a verse or two before we “start worship” with music (as is so often spoken by church leaders). We ought to give it the high point of the service with sufficient time necessary to read the passage with conviction and clarity so that everyone present at the gathering knows that this is the apex of the service when God Himself speaks.<sup>44</sup> Kennell summarizes: “The reading and preaching of God’s Word in worship is

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<sup>41</sup> Russ Dudley, “1 John and the Public Reading of Scripture,” *Stone-Campbell Journal* 6, no. 2 (Fall 2003): 255.

<sup>42</sup> Martin, *Worship in the Early Church*, 69.

<sup>43</sup> Robert E. Webber, “A Pattern for the Convergence of Traditional and Contemporary Worship,” in *Biblical Foundations of Christian Worship*, Complete Library of Christian Worship 3, edited by Robert E. Webber (Nashville: Star Song Publishing Group, 1993), 215; cf. Richard R. Caemmerer, “Give Attendance to Reading,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 23, no. 9 (Sept 1952): 628.

<sup>44</sup> Robert Webber explicates: “The focal point of the Service of the Word is the reading and proclamation of Scripture. Two or three Scripture readings may be read (OT, Epistle, Gospel) interspersed with psalms, canticles, or choruses. Scripture content may be communicated through reader’s theater, drama, or storytelling” (ibid.). Elsewhere, he states: “Jewish worship has always had Scripture at the center of its worship” (Robert E. Webber, “Principle Three: In Worship God Speaks and Acts,” in *Twenty Centuries of Christian Worship*, Complete Library of Christian Worship 2 [Nashville: Star Song Publishing Group, 1993], 371).

the central act of divine action.”<sup>45</sup> After all, “since the Scriptures represent the normative means but which God reveals himself to us and since they are the only sure foundation of belief and practice, it is imperative that the reading of and instruction of the Scriptures be given the highest place in worship.”<sup>46</sup>

### The Reverence of Public Scripture Reading

When a person reads from the Bible, the Almighty God of the universe speaks. This is no time for flippant or casual worship. Even the way in which (i.e. the tone) the leader reads the Scriptures teaches the hearers how to approach God and His revealed Word.

Lensch illustrates by saying: “Reading the Bible is not like reading an insurance policy; a monotone voice will not do. It is not like reading a newspaper with detached interest. Rather, the intelligible revelation of God Who has condescended to communicate His thoughts to His world calls for reverent reading.”<sup>47</sup>

Recall when Ezra opened the Book to read. Not only was he behind a wooden pulpit which they constructed for that very occasion (Neh 8:4), but when he opened the book all the people “stood up” (Neh 8:5). After Ezra read from the book, the people “bowed low and worshipped . . . with their faces to the ground” (Neh 8:6). This is the kind of reverence for God

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<sup>45</sup> Kennell, “What Does the Service of the Word Do?” 239.

<sup>46</sup> Daniel Block, “For the Glory of God!: A Biblical Theology of Worship,” *Unpublished Course Notes* (The Master’s Seminary, Sun Valley, CA: 2009), 193. Dr. Block gives eight ways in which we can remember that when the Scriptures are read, the voice of God is heard: (1) devote more time to reading the Scriptures; (2) read large blocks of Scripture at a time; (3) promote an atmosphere of reverence when reading the Scriptures by standing, having the congregation stand, and formally inviting the people to hear the word of the Lord; (4) involve the congregation in the reading of Scripture; (5) develop skill in the expository reading of Scripture; (6) develop creative ways of communicating Scripture; (7) prepare oneself spiritually for the ministry of reading—it is a sacred task; and (8) subordinate your sermon to the Scripture—what God has to say to you and the congregation directly is by definition more important than what you have to say to yourself or to them (*ibid.*, 193–94).

<sup>47</sup> Lensch, “The Public Reading of Scripture,” 21.

and His Word which needs to be reinstated in contemporary churches. This is not to prescribe that every churchmember, at the sight of the opened Word about to be read, falls down prostrate to the earth, but it should cause us to reevaluate where our minds are focused when God speaks to us through His word. When the preacher reads from God's Word, reverence must be characteristic of that time.

### The Preparation of Public Scripture Reading

Because of the reverence due to God and His Word, it behooves the reader to practice and prepare adequately. It embarrasses the preacher, humiliates the congregation, and dishonors the Lord when the preacher stumbles through a text mispronouncing words or making vocalized errors. This can easily be sidestepped by reading through the passage ahead of time and figuring out the proper pacing, stressed syllables, pronunciation, and periodic pausing. Additionally, Webb Garrison gives five very practical preparatory helps:<sup>48</sup>

1. Write out the Scripture lesson and read from the manuscript rather than from a printed page. (This will enhance study and new thoughts.)
2. Read the lesson in its larger context at least once (reinforce it on your mind).
3. Try to imagine yourself in the situation with which the lesson deals.
4. Go back over your manuscript and underline and mark for emphasis and shades of meaning.<sup>49</sup>
5. Read your lesson *aloud* as many times as necessary in order to master it.

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<sup>48</sup> Webb Garrison, "The Art of Public Bible Reading," *Christianity Today* 10, no. 8 (January 21, 1966): 11–12.

<sup>49</sup> John A. Owston enhances this thought: "There is no substitute for simply going over the Scripture reading several times *out loud* before it is read to the congregation" ("Reading Scripture Effectively," 39).

### The Length of Public Scripture Reading

Though one cannot find a normative pattern in the Scriptures regarding the length of Scripture readings, it is abundantly clear that the Scripture readings were central in corporate worship gatherings. In the early church, the public reading of Scripture was one way for people to internalize God's Word by memorizing it and meditating on it; hence, it must have been a lengthy portion of Scripture. Moses and Joshua each read from the Book of the Law (Ex 24:7; Josh 8:34). Josiah had the Book of the Law read to him (2 Kings 22:10). Moses even commanded that the King of Israel saturate himself with the Book of the Law (i.e. "God's Words") upon ascending the throne (Deut 17:18–19). Even the Jewish people endeavored to read through the Torah once every three and a half years in the weekly synagogue service (and once every year while in Babylon!).

Even the Apostle Paul assumed that his letters would be read before the entire church in their entirety (1 Thess 5:27; Col 4:16). John, in his apocalypse, wrote that the one is blessed who "reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near" (Rev 1:3). Therefore, it may be deduced that the pattern of Scripture reading was that of lengthy sections of Scripture.

### The Voice of Public Scripture Reading

Though one may assert that, because of the sanctity of the moment, no emotion, nor variation of voice, nor the raising of the voice ought to be incorporated, we must bear in mind that the voice<sup>50</sup> is crucial in making the reading of God's Word an interesting, rather than a

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<sup>50</sup> See the helpful article by James Wallace, "The Public Reading of Scripture," in *Biblical Foundations of Christian Worship*, Complete Library of Christian Worship 3, ed. by Robert E. Webber (Nashville: Star Song Publishing Group, 1993), 239–40 for reading effectively with passion, aesthetic beauty, intellect, and clarity.

boring, part of worship. Clayton Schmit affirms: “oral interpretation is an art that employs techniques for body and voice to make written texts come alive as they are spoken.”<sup>51</sup> Later in his work, he writes: “Because the Word of God is the source and foundation of our faith, it needs to be read with conviction.”<sup>52</sup> I could only imagine the disgrace brought upon God and His Word when the congregation begins to sense that the Bible reading is unimportant and unimpressive because of the apathetic way in which it is read on a given Sunday. Owston writes: “Some good preachers who have good messages will stumble through the Scripture reading as if it is the first time they ever saw it . . . They will miss words in the written text and mispronounce others. They often read with little feeling and conviction.”<sup>53</sup>

Perhaps we would do well to heed McComiskey’s advice: “[We must] remember that expressing emotion in public reading is just one way to help your readers understand what the author said.”<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Clayton J. Schmit, *Public Reading of Scripture: A Handbook* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 10.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 25. He gives eight principles for the lector to bear in mind when reading the Scripture in public: (1) a lector should possess a capacity and desire for studying the Bible; (2) the lector should be prayerfully open to interpretation of the text; (3) the reader of Scripture in worship should possess confidence to speak boldly the Word of God; (4) the lector should have a clear, pleasant voice; (5) the reader should have vocal facility, the ability to utilize the full range of modulation, volume, and tone; (6) lectors should possess liturgical presence. . . . It is the ability to present oneself confidently and unselfconsciously and to use one’s body appropriately in the rendering of a part; (7) the lector should possess the capacity for abandonment. This is the ability to lay aside personal concerns and the awareness of self so that one’s full attention, voice, and body are available as resources for interpreting the text in its reading; and (8) the lector should be transparent in the reading. . . . The reader of these texts should be as hidden in their presentations of them as the authors are in writing them. It is God’s Word that should be heard, and not the word, opinion, or persona of the lector (26–27).

<sup>53</sup> John A. Owston, “Reading Scripture Effectively,” *Preaching* 5, no. 4 (Jan-Feb 1990): 39.

<sup>54</sup> McComiskey, *Reading Scripture in Public*, 64.

### The Posture of Public Scripture Reading

Again, Scripture refuses to prescribe any posture while reading the Word of God in public. Nevertheless, examples do exist of individuals standing (Neh 8:5) and tearing garments as a sign of repentance (2 Kings 22:11) when the Scriptures are read. However, for sake of reverence and to help in keeping God's Word unique rather than a sheer "habit of duty," having the congregation stand together with the lector seems to be one of many ways in which the public reading of Scripture can be effectively accomplished with reverence.

### The Response of Public Scripture Reading

The worshipper must respond accordingly to what he has heard from God through His Word. Robert Webber enhances this thought in practically exhorting us to "try to remember that it is the record of God's covenant with us. It is a record of how God has initiated a relationship with me, sought me out, and brought me to himself."<sup>55</sup> That is, God's Word is our manual for everything pertaining to spiritual and physical life. We must, therefore, respond accordingly with a reverent, submissive, and humble attitude to make necessary changes in thought and action.

See also King Josiah's response when he heard the Book of the Law read:

<sup>30</sup> The king went up to the house of the LORD and all the men of Judah, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the priests, the Levites and all the people, from the greatest to the least; and he read in their hearing all the words of the book of the covenant which was found in the house of the LORD. <sup>31</sup> Then the king stood in his place and made a covenant before the LORD to walk after the LORD, and to keep His commandments and His testimonies and His statutes with all his heart and with all his soul, to perform the words of the covenant written in this book. <sup>32</sup> Moreover, he made all who were present in Jerusalem and Benjamin to stand *with him*. So the inhabitants of Jerusalem did according to the covenant of God, the God of their fathers (2 Chron 34:30–32).

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<sup>55</sup> Webber, "Principle Three: In Worship God Speaks and Acts," 372.

Robert Webber illuminates our understanding as he describes how the early church responded to the public reading of Scripture in the weekly corporate gatherings: (1) a recital of the Nicene Creed or some other appropriate affirmation of faith drawn from Scripture; (2) a discussion and application of the sermon in small groups of four to six people seated near each other; (3) a hymn of response; or (4) an invitation to receive Jesus, to rededicate one's life to the Lord, or to come for baptism or church membership.<sup>56</sup>

When the act of hearing from God through His Word is made regular in our worship assemblies, we will learn to fear God—for we will learn more about God. And when we grow in our fear of God, we will then commit ourselves to unconditional and total obedience to the will of God for this is the mark of a true encounter with God and true worship, namely, a transformed life.<sup>57</sup> This is the proper response to the public reading of the Word of God!

### **Conclusion**

It should amaze no one that the statement by Sperry-White rings true: “The reading of Scripture is the most widely attested activity of first-century synagogue services.”<sup>58</sup> In attempting to understand the importance of the public reading of God's Word from the earliest days of the Church—in which case, practices were borrowed from the Jewish synagogue liturgy—I plead that we see the urgent need for God to speak yet again in contemporary churches! Clayton Schmit aptly summarizes:

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<sup>56</sup> Webber, “A Pattern for the Convergence of Traditional and Contemporary Worship,” 215.

<sup>57</sup> See Block, “For the Glory of God!” 195.

<sup>58</sup> Grant Sperry-White, “Order of First-Century Synagogue Worship,” in *Biblical Foundations of Christian Worship*, Complete Library of Christian Worship 1, ed. by Robert E. Webber (Nashville: Star Song Publishing Group, 1993), 139.

There is no more important proclamation, today or in any age, than the public speaking of the Word of God. Chiefly, we proclaim this message in public worship as God speaks to us through the Scriptures. Preachers use the Word as the basis for their sermons, messages that are prepared to draw a connection between the affairs of people's lives and God's word of promise. But before the proclamation of preaching is the proclamation of reading God's Word aloud. When the Word is read, God's people hear it and are transformed by it.<sup>59</sup>

In this paper, I see the concept of the public reading of Scripture as *the reverential, repetitive, corporate, and audible reading from the Word of God in the regular gathering of believers for the purpose of reinforcing what God has said, recommitting oneself to obedience, and recognizing both the holiness of God and the holiness that God demands from his worshippers*. And after observing how  $\text{קָרָא}$  in the OT and  $\text{ἀναγιγνώσκω}$  in the NT are used referring to public reading of God's Word, I discussed how the early Church and the early Fathers incorporated this aspect of worship as they met with their assemblies. Then, I examined some OT and NT examples of individuals who read the Scriptures in the context of corporate worship gatherings to decipher some applications for our contemporary church services. Finally, I gave some practical ideas as to the importance, the reverence, the preparation, the length, the voice, the posture, and the response to the public reading of Scripture in public worship gatherings. I hope that we as shepherds will never fail to remember that: "you can preach the best sermon ever, but the only thing in the service *guaranteed* to be inspired is the Bible reading that precedes it!"<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Schmit, *Public Reading of Scripture*, 16.

<sup>60</sup> Earey, "This is the Word of the Lord: The Bible and Worship," 92.

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