

## Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Third Sunday after the Epiphany – Year C

**RCL:** Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a; Luke 4:14-21

**ACNA:** Nehemiah 8:1-12; Psalm 113; 1 Corinthians 12:12-27; Luke 4:14-21

**Introduction.** This week, we continue to meditate on the manifestation of God and the revelation of his good news to the whole world.

**Common Theme.** This week's readings focus our attention on the epiphany or the manifestation of God through the Scriptures, through creation, through the announcement of the messianic mission by Jesus at Nazareth, and through his "body," the local church.

**Nehemiah 8:1-12.** The end of the previous chapter tells us that by the time of the seventh month of the year, all the returning exiles were settled in their towns. The temple and the wall around Jerusalem had been rebuilt and the people's hearts turned to spiritual matters, probably prompted by the example of Ezra (Ezra 10:1). Ezra had specifically returned from exile for this purpose (Ezra 7). The people gathered with a single heart to ask Ezra to read to them from "the scroll of the teaching of Moses."

The Hebrew word *sefer* here would mean a scroll, not a book, at this stage in history. Also the word "teaching" or "instruction" here is the Hebrew word *torah*, which probably has its root meaning of instruction (*yarah*). The formal use of "The Torah," meaning the five books of Moses, emerged later. It is also not certain whether the five books were being referred to as one scroll here or whether this term specifically refers to the scroll of Deuteronomy, as the book most obviously containing "the instruction of Moses." Also, the term here "read in" (*qara b'*) suggests the reading of portions, rather than the reading of the whole Torah. It is probable that the reading of the Scriptures became very precious to the faithful remnant in exile, as they realised they had lost their land, temple and offerings. The faithful probably gathered around the faithful Levitical priests to listen to the reading of the Scriptures, and to devote themselves to following it, even in a foreign land. When they were finally allowed to return, according to God's promise through Jeremiah, they determined to continue to listen to the "Scroll of the Torah" (Ezra 8:3).

The people gathered at the plaza inside the Water Gate, which was on the eastern wall, not far from the Gihon Spring and opposite the temple (8:3, 16; 3:26; 12:37). The tower platform that Ezra set up in the plaza was maybe a reminder of the Torah coming from heaven at Sinai. It seems as if Ezra is intentionally re-enacting Sinai here, and the people are submitting once again to the terms of the covenant (cf. Josh 8:30–35). God always intended his people to be a people of knowledge and wisdom based on understanding of his word. Mindless superstition is a mark of paganism (Isa 44:18) and this had been the downfall of Israel at the exile (Hos 4:6).

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It is the seventh month<sup>1</sup>, so Ezra could be enacting the command of God to read the law<sup>2</sup> to the people in every seventh year during the Festival of Tabernacles (Deut 31:10–13). There were three responses to Ezra's blessing:

1. Cry of "Amen, Amen," Hebrew for "truly, truly," as they concur with Ezra's words.
2. Raising hands—in the sense of need and dependence (Ezra 9.5; Ps 28.2; 134.2) with the thought here that God would meet their need through the reading of the Scriptures.
3. Prostration—in worship and humble adoration with their faces to the ground. Literally, the last phrase is "noses earthwards." It is interesting that this passage refers to the direction of the people's ears (v.3), eyes (v.5) and noses (v.6)! There's a sermon here!

So, Ezra, and the ones on the platform, read from the scroll, and the Levites among the people, moved from group to group, to make sure the reading was understood. It is probable that many of the returning exiles had lost their understanding of Hebrew, and so the reading of the scroll needed translation into their *lingua franca*, which was then Aramaic. This Aramaic translation of the Bible came to be known as the Targum. But there was not only translation as the Levites also made sure the people understood the reading by interpreting difficult or unknown ideas (b. Meg. 3a; b. Ned. 37b; Gen. Rab. 36.8). This was the role of reading and explaining the scriptures was what God had always intended for his priests (Lev 10:10; Deut 33:10; 2 Chron 17:7–9, 35:3–6). Notice verses 8 and 12, the reference to the people understanding what they heard. Reading with explanation leads to understanding and this is a source of joy and should then issue in obedience and in turn, this will result in joy!

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<sup>1</sup> They gathered on the first day of the seventh month, the month of Tishrei. This is loaded with significance, as it was the beginning of the autumn/fall holy days, as described in the Torah (Lev 23.23-25; Num 29.1-6).

- 1st day<sup>1</sup>: Called *Trumpets*, like awakening God's people to the beginning of a new season, and later became known as *Rosh HaShanah*, the head/beginning of the year. The reading of the Torah here was like a trumpet call to the people, for repentance and celebration of God's blessing upon them.
- 10th day: *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement, a day of fasting and humbling before YHWH.
- 15th day: *Sukkot* or the Festival of Tabernacles or Booths, a seven-day festival celebrating the fulness of God's redemption from Egypt, and his blessings in his promised land.

<sup>2</sup> When Ezra opened/unrolled the scroll, all the people stood. So today, when the Torah is raised, the people in the synagogue rise to stand in complete silence to hear the Torah read. Ezra started with a blessing: "Blessed be YHWH, the Great God." Rabbis say the mention of "Great God" was Ezra saying the Tetragrammaton (b. Yoma 69b). As we know, use of the special divine name became taboo by rabbinic times, and it certainly fell out of use in post-exilic texts, but not so in biblical times.

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**Psalm 19.** A Psalm of God's epiphany, through Cosmos and Logos

Psalm 19 is read as part of the preliminary morning synagogue service on Saturdays and at festivals. It is made up of three parts (using English verse numbering):

- 1–6 is a hymn focusing on creation, especially the sun,
- 7–10 is a hymn focusing on the Torah,
- 11–14 is a petition to be saved from sin and for prayers to be heard.

A superficial reading of the psalm may suggest two different songs sewn together, but in the Hebrew Bible, God's revelation is consistently seen in heaven and on earth. Light and Torah are frequently related (e.g. Prov 6:23). Also, we now know from Ancient Near East (ANE) texts that the Sun was a major deity in the ANE. In Israel, the discovery of cylinder seals and references such as 2 Kings 23:11 show the existence of the idolatry of the sun, despite the teaching of Torah and the appeals of the prophets. So, this Psalm should also probably be read as a polemic against the sun worship of other nations.

Like the creation in Genesis 1, this psalm when speaking about heaven and the sun refers only to Elohim. However, YHWH is the one who speaks in the Torah. There may be a play on words in verses 6 and 12 that again shows a parallel between the sun and the effect of the Torah: Verse 6, speaking of the sun, says: "there is nothing that is hidden from its heat" and verse 12, speaking of the conviction coming from the Torah, says in the second half of the verse (literally): "from things-being-hidden cleanse/free me," referring to sins hidden deep within our conscience, that needs exposure by God's Word and cleansing. Commentators since Rashi have seen verse 8 talking of the Torah as like the sun, "giving light to the eyes."

Note, too, Paul's application to the gospel. In Romans 10:16–21, he discusses how the gospel has come to Israel and to all the world. He asks the question of Israel specifically (Rom 10:18): *Did they not hear the message?* And replies: *Of course they did (like everyone)*, and then proves it with this quotation from Psalm 19:4. Of course, in Psalm 19, the message going out is about the glory of God being revealed in the natural universe, but this is "gospel" to Paul and applies to the specific message of Christ—it goes out to everyone, Jew and Gentile alike.

**1 Corinthians 12:12-31a.** Paul is talking here of the local church, the church in any town or city, and says it is like a body—it has many members, but is still one body, just as the Messiah is! The word "Christ" here has the definite article in the original, so could be read: "So also the Messiah." What a dramatic epiphany—the local church is the body of the Messiah in each place!

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This body metaphor has hints in Israel (e.g., Isa 1:5–6; Philo, *Spec. Laws* 3.131). And the many members have been made one body because they have been baptised in the one Spirit. All differences, religious, ethnic and otherwise, are dissolved, and God creates a single expression of the Messiah in every place, whether Jew or Gentile, slave or free. Notice it is God's sovereign work in each member and in our local church "just as HE determines" (v. 11): "God has placed (v. 18) ... God has blended together (v. 24) ... God has placed (v. 28)". Feelings of subordination are out (vv. 15–20). Feelings of superiority are out (vv. 21–26). Verse 26: "All suffer"—vicarious suffering and reward appear in prophetic and later Jewish writings (Isa 53; also hints in *b. Shabb.* 39a, *Lev. Rab.* 4.6). Members are to have mutual concern for one another, and to give privilege to the gifts that bring the greatest benefit to others, and especially love!

**Luke 4.14-21.** Jesus has been under the power and control of the Spirit from his baptism (Luke 3:22; 4:1, 14, 18) as "the anointed one" which is the root of the word "Christ" or "Messiah," from the Hebrew *HaMaschiach* and the Greek *ho Christos*. Gathering for reading and understanding the scriptures, had probably emerged during exilic times and was certainly established in the Land after the exile from the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. The Greek word for gathering, assembly or congregation was "sunagōgē." As the practice of gathering continued, local communities built community buildings for this purpose, and they were called synagogues—places of assembly. We read of a centurion who had paid for the building of a synagogue in Capernaum (Luke 7:5) and of Jairus, who was a leader in the local synagogue (Luke 8:41).

Here in this passage, we see Jesus following in the tradition of Ezra and the Levites, in reading and teaching the scriptures to the people. The passage emphasises that (literally): "he went, according to his custom, on the sabbath day, into the synagogue, and stood up to read." Attending the synagogue every sabbath was his custom, and it implies that reading in the synagogue was his custom also.

In normative Judaism of the period, scripture was read and discussed in the synagogue by the men who were present (*m. Megillah* 3–4; *m. Berakhot* 2). First came the law, then selections from the prophets (*haftarah*), then someone was asked to speak on the texts. Normally a person *stood up to read* the scriptures, out of respect, and then *sat down* (v. 20) to expound them. Here specifically, it says Jesus was given the scroll of Isaiah the prophet, and he unrolled and found the place he wanted (there were no chapters and verses included in the text). The passage he chose was Isaiah 61:1–2a, which is not part of the Haftarah readings nowadays. Like Ezra, it says all eyes were fixed on him, and he commenced by saying: "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." The Greek word for *today* (*sēmeron*) in Luke and Acts frequently

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signifies the epiphany of the era of messianic salvation and the fulfilment of the plan of God. Not only does it underscore the idea of fulfilment in Jesus' ministry, but in Acts, it also indicates salvation present in the church.<sup>3</sup>

The anointing of Isaiah 61 had obviously been fulfilled at Jesus' baptism (Luke 3:21–22). Note the word for preach-good-news is the word (*euangelizo*). What a mission, to evangelize the poor! *The poor* is a key term in Luke. It refers to the pious poor and indicates Jesus' desire to reach out to those the world tends to forget or mistreat. It is like Luke 1:52 in force and also will be echoed in 6:20. Jesus is commissioned to do this.<sup>4</sup>

*The year of the Lord's favour* (Grk “the acceptable year of the Lord”) is a description of the year of Jubilee (Lev 25:10). The year of the total forgiveness of debt is now turned into a metaphor for salvation. Jesus had come to proclaim that God was ready to forgive sin totally. Isaiah 61:2b is omitted by Jesus: “... and the day of our God's vengeance.” Jesus' first coming was to be seen as inaugurating “the year of the Lord's favour,” and in his grace, he left the sobering message of the day of God's vengeance for the future.

Many in the synagogue were amazed at his gracious words, but some were doubtful of the origin of his authority, as they knew him just as “Joseph's son.” Jesus' response, pointing to the examples of a Sidonian widow with Elijah and a Syrian leper with Elisha, results in anger by many, not because of xenophobia, but because Jesus was withholding from his home town, the messianic blessings he was granting to others.

### ACNA Reading

**Psalms 113.** The psalmist praises the Lord as the sovereign king, who bends down to help the needy. Verse 3 requires praise for the Lord “from the rising of the sun to its setting.” This is not strictly referring to time but space. It does not mean from morning to night (all day) but from the east where the sun rises to the west where it sets. In other words, all over the world the Lord is to be praised. Of course, both thoughts are true!

Verse 4 sets out a striking parallel—the Lord is exalted above the nations, and above the heavens! Verses 5 and 6 are difficult to translate easily. Literally, it could read, in parallel, as:

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<sup>3</sup> NET Bible Luke 2:11 note.

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Who is like YHWH our God?

The One who sets (himself) on high to sit (enthroned)

The One who stoops (himself) low to see

on the heavens

& on the earth

The verbs are active descriptions of God as the one who exalts himself in the highest place to sit enthroned and to dwell, but then chooses to stoop himself down, to humble himself to look at the heavens or on the earth! Verse 7 reflects the words of Hannah in her prayer of praise to God (1 Sam 2:8).

### Further Reading.

- *The Jewish Study Bible*: Nehemiah: Hindy Najman
- *The Jewish Study Bible*: Psalms: Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler
- *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*: Ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler (with sections on the NT readings above, and an excellent essay on The Synagogue).
- *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary* (3 vols): Robert Alter
- *NET Bible*: Translation and Notes

**About the Author.** Dr Paul Hocking has had a varied career in education, leadership and management development, planting and pastoring of a social-enterprise church, supporting the leadership of many churches and Christian charities under the auspices of Evangelical Alliance Wales, and directing the Cymru Institute for Contemporary Christianity (2010-2019). He has qualifications in Microbiology, Public Health and Action Research, and a PhD on the Hebrew Bible focusing on the composition of the book of Leviticus. He has publications in health services management and the Hebrew Bible, including two papers for CMJ on the Decalogue and Leviticus. Paul is married with two adult children.