THE USE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT IN SCRIPTURE READINGS IN EARLY CHRISTIAN ASSEMBLIES

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From the earliest times, Christians have made the reading aloud of important texts an element of their gatherings. They began by reading out “letters received,” that is, letters from apostles. They could also read letters from apostles received by other congregations and circular letters sent by apostles to more than one congregation. In time they proceeded to repeat the reading out of letters formerly received. Finally, they began to include portions of the OT prophets, the Gospels and other texts as content of the public Scripture reading.

Among those who have studied this historical process, one can detect a tendency to interpret the public reading of scripture in church as a continuation of the reading of Scripture in the synagogue. To quote an expert on the subject: “The mere idea of reading from a holy Book was borrowed by the Christians from no other institution or tradition than that of the Synagogue. It seems therefore very obvious that there must have been some sort of continuity…”

In this essay, dedicated to a scholar who has written so much on the use of the Old Testament in the New, I would like to reexamine the historical relationship between the public reading of authoritative texts in the gatherings of the earliest Church and that in early Judaism. First, let us review the evidence about the reading of scripture in the Church until about 400. Since we want to investigate the relationship between public Scripture reading in the early Christian congregations and that in the

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1 See for instance 1 Thess 5:27.
3 A case in point is the repeated reading of 1 Clement in Corinth; see Dionysius of Corinth apud Eus. H.E. 4.23.11.
synagogue, we shall concentrate on the Christians’ use of OT writings, for in the use of such books the continuity between the synagogal and early Christian reading of Scripture may be supposed to become most clearly observable. For this reason, the following survey will list only those passages in early Christian writings that mention Scripture readings either from both the OT and the NT, or from the OT alone, or from the Scriptures in general which possibly include OT writings. Passages mentioning lessons from the NT alone are not included. The purpose is to collect as many references as possible to the reading or possible reading of the OT in the gatherings of the early Church.

1 Timothy 4:13 (c. 100, Asia, Ephesus?)

The fictive Paul who is the author of this letter urges the fictive addressee Timothy, his co-worker, and leader and organizer of the church in Ephesus, to educate the members of his church in a Christian way of life. In order to achieve this object, Timothy should “give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhorting, to teaching.” For “the public reading of Scripture” the biblical text has only ἡ ἀνάγνωσις. But since παράκλησις and διδασκεῖν belong to the activities that took place in the informal social gathering of the congregation following the communal meal (see, e.g., 1 Cor 14:3, 6, 26), the “reading” must also have been a reading aloud in the community gathering. Here authoritative texts were read to serve as the basis for exhortation and teaching. The author of 1 Timothy certainly meant these texts to include a number of letters of Paul. Not only did the Pauline letters serve as the literary model for his own compositions, but the public reading of letters of Paul and other apostles in the gatherings of Christian communities was also a well established tradition by then. This is clear from such passages as 1 Thess 5:27; Eph 3:4; Col 4:16; Acts 15:31 and Rev 1:3 and 22:18. It is unlikely that the “reading” in 1 Tim 4:13 was taken from any Gospel. Mark and Q did exist but do not seem to have circulated widely. If Matthew, Luke and John already existed, they may not have had the authority yet to serve as sources of lessons. It is more probable that what

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5 1 Tim 4:13: Ἕως ἔρχομαι πρόσεχε τῇ ἀνάγνωσει, τῇ παρακλήσει, τῇ διδασκαλίᾳ.