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The reading schedule of the Law and the Prophets in the Jewish synagogue at the time of the Feast of Dedication relates Old Testament prophecies in Ezekiel 37 to the coming forth of the Book of Mormon.
The Jewish Lectionary and Book of Mormon Prophecy

John L. Fowles

During New Testament times, the law of Moses was read in the synagogues (Acts 15:21). This tradition hearkened back to Moses when he declared that all Israel was to appear before the Lord and hear a Levite priest read the Law (Deuteronomy 31:9-11). Later, following the Babylonian captivity, under the direction of Ezra and Nehemiah, public reading of the Law in the synagogue was reinstituted (Nehemiah 8:4-8, 17-18). By the first half of the third century B.C., regularly scheduled readings from the Law became standardized. In fact, the Septuagint was apparently compiled so that public synagogue readings could take place throughout the Greek-speaking diaspora.¹

To accomplish the goal of reading all of the law of Moses on consecutive Sabbaths, the first five books of the Bible were divided up into approximately 150 sections called sedarim. In Palestine there developed a three-year cycle for completing the reading of the Law, while in Babylon there was a tradition of completing the reading of the Law in one year. Sometime later there also developed a tradition of haphtarot. These synagogue readings from the Prophets paralleled thematically with their corresponding

sedarim. During the synagogue service, the Law would be read first and then the concluding passage from the Prophets.²

Instances of public readings of the scriptures during the synagogue service are reported in the Bible. When Paul went into the synagogue at Antioch on the Sabbath day, he heard the reading from the Law and Prophets. After being invited to speak, Paul gave a discourse on the history of Israel (Acts 13:14–15). Even earlier than Paul, Jesus also taught in the synagogue after hearing the reading of the Law and Prophets. Jesus’ experience at Nazareth is a most fascinating reference to this practice. On that occasion, Luke says that, “as his custom was, he went into the synagogue on the sabbath day, and stood up for to read. And there was delivered to him the book of the prophet Esaias. And when he had opened the book, he found the place where it was written . . .” (Luke 4:16–17). One cannot help noticing that the scroll of Isaiah was delivered unto him. It does not appear that Jesus asked for that specific scroll. This illustrates the high probability of a set prophetic reading schedule for that day from Isaiah. Luke also says that he “found” the place where it was written. The Greek word behind the text for “found” is heurein. It is an irregular verb which literally means to find without previous search or by chance.³ In addition, the Greek word for “place” is topos and carries the idea of a place or portion marked off as it were from surrounding space.⁴ All of these nuances from the language of the text demonstrate again the idea that Jesus was simply reading the prescribed passage for that particular Sabbath.

The passage Jesus read from was Isaiah 61:1–2. The prophetic haphtorahs were also known to be short and corresponded to the accompanying sedarim from the Law. It is interesting to note that,

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² Aileen Guilding, Jewish Worship and the Fourth Gospel: A Study of the Relation of St. John’s Gospel to the Ancient Jewish Lectionary System (Oxford: Clarendon, 1960), 6. One scholar, Leon Morris, has written that Guilding’s thesis is flawed because there is not an extant list of the triennial cycle at the time of Jesus. However, others have posited that there was not an exact list because different communities had different haphtorahs at the time; see H. L. Strack and G. Stemberger, Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash (Edinburgh: Clark, 1991), 262, for a bibliography on this subject.
⁴ Ibid.
according to Aileen Guilding’s modern reconstruction of the *sedarim* schedule, the passage from the Law during Jesus’ visit at Nazareth would have been “If there be among you a poor man of one of thy brethren within any of thy gates in thy land which the Lord thy God giveth thee, thou shalt not harden thine heart, nor shut thine hand from thy poor brother” (Deuteronomy 15:7). Therefore, the *haphtaroh* from Isaiah, like the corresponding *sedarim* from the Law, also mentioned the preaching of the gospel to the poor or meek, “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me; because the Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound; to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord, and the day of vengeance of our god; to comfort all that mourn” (Isaiah 61:1–2). After Jesus finished reading the scroll he gave the book to the minister and sat down. Everyone in the synagogue was waiting for his comment about the reading. In majestic fashion, Jesus announced that, “This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears” (Luke 4:21). Jesus, as on many other occasions, fulfilled this messianic prophecy from Isaiah, which also was related to a similar theme from the Law which the people of Nazareth would have been reading at the time.

Aileen Guilding’s major contribution to the study of the triennial cycle of the reading of the Law and Prophets related to her study of the arrangement of the gospel of John against the backdrop of the synagogue reading schedule. She showed that John’s gospel was organized according to the major Jewish feasts and preserved many of the long discourses of Jesus which the synoptics do not mention. According to this view, John’s gospel was written to show Jewish readers that Jesus fulfilled prophecy, particularly as it related to each successive feast. Guilding showed that not only did Jesus comment upon the very scriptures that were being studied at the particular feast, but also the customs and practices associated with them. In her words, “These [John’s] discourses are nearly all given on the successive feasts of the Jewish year, and in each case the text is taken from the lection read at the feast in question, whilst the purpose of the sermon is to set forth

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Jesus himself as the fulfillment of the things typified by that feast."

Jesus' announcement of visiting other sheep while in Jerusalem came during the time of the Feast of Dedication. This Jewish festival, sometimes called Hanukkah, was an annual eight-day festival commencing on the 25th of Kislev (usually in December). Jewish tradition says that Judah Maccabee and his followers instituted the feast after their recapture of Jerusalem in 164 B.C. Another name for the feast is actually the "dedication of the altar." The celebration was to be observed with joy and gladness (1 Maccabees 4:59). The book of Maccabees tells us that Judah Maccabee defeated Lysias, entered Jerusalem, and purified the temple by demolishing the altar that had been built there by Antiochus Epiphanes. Judah and his brothers next deliberated concerning what to do about the altar of burnt offerings. They decided to rebuild the sanctuary and interior of the temple. After this was completed, Judah and his brothers chose blameless priests to offer sacrifices again upon the consecrated altar. This feast is closely related to Solomon's consecration of the temple and the Feast of Tabernacles. In fact, the Feast of Dedication is called Tabernacles in 2 Maccabees 1:9, 18. Josephus said that the feast from his time onward was called the Festival of Lights because the right to serve God came to the people unexpectedly, like a sudden light.

According to Guilding's reconstruction of the triennial cycle, the sedarim during the Feast of Dedication came from Genesis 46:28-47:31, which spoke of the reuniting of Joseph and Judah. The accompanying haphtorah for the first year was Ezekiel 37:15-28 regarding the reuniting of Judah and Joseph, including their records. John tells us in his gospel that the time of the year when Jesus uttered the famous "other sheep" prophecy was at the time of the "feast of dedication, and it was winter" (John 10:22).

Guilding's research on the triennial cycle, including the possibility of Ezekiel 37 being the background to Jesus' sermon of

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6 Ibid., 45.
8 Ibid., 7:1283.
other sheep, is impressive. Therefore, Christ promised to visit his other sheep at the same time themes of shepherding, gathering, and Ezekiel’s prediction of the Nephites’ record being joined with the record of Judah were being studied and read in the synagogue. In a profound but subtle way, Jesus was expounding upon the Law and prophetic readings associated with the Feast of Dedication when he said he would visit his other sheep.

No one except Latter-day Saints makes the claim that the prophecy of Ezekiel 37 applies to the Book of Mormon. Moreover, no one except Latter-day Saints believes that John 10:16 has anything to do with the prophecy of Ezekiel or of Christ’s visit to the New World. Rather, these critics would say Ezekiel’s prophecy is simply a symbolic representation of the reunification of Israel or that Jesus’ sermon of visiting other sheep had reference only to the Gentiles and not to the rest of the house of Israel. This historical background and setting regarding the synagogue reading schedule and the Feast of Dedication provides another look at the exciting connection between these Old and New Testament prophecies concerning the coming forth of the Book of Mormon.

9 Guilding attributes this phenomenon more to the literary genius of the gospel of John than to Jesus himself. For Guilding, the complete book of John was organized according to the chronological Jewish feasts. Moreover, Raymond Brown, one of the most prolific and respected New Testament scholars, commented on Guilding’s findings when he discussed Christ’s “bread of life” sermon in The Gospel according to St. John I-XII (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 279-80: “For Miss Guilding the setting in John vi is fictional, and it is a Christian author who has composed the discourse by blending the themes. However, once again if Jesus did speak in a synagogue (John 6:59), how can we be certain a priori that he was not the one who drew the themes of the discourse from the synagogue readings? It may be objected that the discourse reflects readings for all three years; yet, in a liturgical tradition, as a cycle is repeated over and over again, one becomes familiar with all the readings for the great feasts. Thus Jesus may have illustrated his general topic taken from the seder of one year (Exodus 16) with pertinent phrases from the Passover sedarim and haphtorah of other years.”

10 In Jewish terms, Jesus would have been giving a midrash, or interpretation, on the prophetic reading of Ezekiel 37:15–28.