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Reading Regularly

The Liturgical Reading of Torah in its Late Antique Material World

The Bible was read in antiquity: we can say this much, at least, without inviting much controversy. It is in the details of this statement that the devil lies: what that Bible looked like—or whether, indeed, we should even call it the Bible—where it might have been read, and how it was accessed, understood, and used by ancient readers, hearers, and listeners are all matters of great, and worthwhile, debate.¹ In this paper, I will examine one small aspect of how the text that the rabbis of late antiquity called the Torah was read. Specifically, I am interested in the formation of the *parashah*, or the liturgical unit of text that was, for the rabbis, the base unit of the ritual reading of the Torah.² I argue that the formation of the *parashah* was bounded by material concerns, such as the length of a column of text, and the placement of spaces and gaps in the written scroll. These concerns find their expression in another aspect of the *parashah*: the content of *parshiyyot*—where they start, where they end, and how they contain or expand a narrative—was informed by similar sets of concerns to those by which the Homeric epics were divided into twenty-four books, and it is instructive to regard the two together.

This paper identifies three sets of criteria that the rabbis of late antiquity took into consideration when they excerpted portions of the Torah into *parshiyyot* for reading. These are performative or liturgical criteria, content-based or thematic criteria, and physical criteria. Performative or liturgical criteria are perhaps the most obvious. These are the criteria by which a reading can be deemed too long or too short, or whether it should be read continuously, or broken up. Content-based divisions are based on natural gaps in the narrative: where should they fall, and how should they be interpreted? Finally, physical criteria come from the actual shape of the text: these include paragraph endings, column and scroll length, and other similar factors.

Most of the rabbinic evidence in this paper comes from one tractate in the Mishnah, Tosefta, Palestinian Talmud, and Babylonian Talmud, tractate Megillah. The vast majority of rabbinic discussion regarding Torah reading, synagogue readings, and general public liturgical reading comes in this tractate, which treats the laws and regulations of the holiday of Purim before discussing the liturgical reading of other

¹ Cf. Mroczek 2015, 3–18; Stern 2017, *passim*.

² The word פֶּרֶשָׁה, used to indicate a unit of text, is present in the earliest layers of rabbinic literature, including the Mishnah, Tosefta, Sifra, and both Sifres. I am less interested, in this paper, in the historical development of the Hebrew word, than I am in the process by which the rabbis selected units of text for liturgical reading.

texts—particularly the “special portions” of the Torah. For this reason, I have chosen to focus specifically on these practices in relation to the wider context of material reading in late antiquity, and the way the rhetoric surrounding them is changed and deployed. This allows us to conceive of rabbinic liturgical reading practices, and the divisions of texts from which they are constituted, in greater historical detail, and to place them into the material worlds of late ancient education and literary scholarship. As I move through the evidence from the Mishnah to the Bavli, I will indicate which set of criteria is being highlighted.

The majority of performative evidence, we will see, is drawn from the earlier texts of rabbinic literature, indicating *either* that such concerns were present early in the development of the liturgy, or that the presence of thematic criteria in later texts was the result of attempts to justify earlier received traditions. The Mishnah and Tosefta use the word *parashah*/פרשה to refer to a specific reading from a book of the Bible that extends beyond a single verse or chapter. The root of the word *parashah*, פ-ר-ש, is present in Biblical Hebrew and means “to divide,” or “to separate.”³ Both of these early rabbinic texts provide information about the contents of *parshiyyot*, as well as the acceptable length of a liturgical reading and the rituals to be performed before and after. Mishnah Megillah 4:4, for example, gives explicit instructions regarding the reading of the Torah: how much is read, and in what manner it is done.

הקורא בתורה לא יפחות משלשה פסוקין לא יקרא לתורגמן יתר מפסוק אחד ובנביא שלשה אם היו שלשתם שלוש פרשיות קורים אחד אחד מדלגים בנביא ואין מדלגים בתורה עד כמה הוא מדלג עד כדי שלא יפסיק התורגמן:

The one reading the Torah shall not do less than three verses. And he will not read more than one verse to the translator. And in the Prophets, (he can read) three. And if the three are three separate *parshiyyot*, they read them one at a time. They may skip in the Prophets but may not skip in the Torah. And how much time may he skip? Until the translator does not interrupt.⁴

We learn a significant amount from this short mishnah. Proper liturgical reading of the Torah is performed in the presence of a translator, and an appropriately sized *parashah* for a ritual lectionary is composed of three verses, each of which is read one at a time, so that the translator can successfully relay his or her meaning to the congregation in time with the reading—at least as far as reading from the Torah goes. The rules of the ritual relax a bit for *haftarot*, or readings from the Prophets that are appended to the weekly Torah cycle: the reader can read three verses at once, and the *turgeman* (*meturgeman* in other manuscripts) can translate them all at once.⁵ The only

³ See Baumgartner/Koehler (eds.) 1998, s. v.

⁴ The Mishnah text is this chapter is from Ms. Kaufmann A 50, the Kaufmann Mishnah manuscript. Megillah 4:4 (in this manuscript, 4:5) falls on 81v. As a general rule, I will refer to *mishnayot* by their numbering in Albeck for ease of reference, but I will also give the manuscript’s numbering as well.

⁵ It seems likely to me that this “grouped” translation was more similar to paraphrasing.

time this does not hold explicitly true is when three verses are seen as three separate divisions, necessitating three separate translations.

This is a performative set of criteria, although it seems to shade into one of the other two categories as well. Does the Mishnah mean three separate divisions in the text itself, therefore making this a practical matter, relating to how the text is written? Or is this an interpretive, contextual issue, in which three separate verses are understood as having three different intents and referents? Put differently: in this instance, is the performance of the text constrained by the manner in which the physical document is written, or by the narrative content of the text?

The implications of these two different outcomes are important. In the former, the format of the reading itself is dictated by the physical form of the text, by decisions made by scribes and earlier rabbis, and not by the liturgical participants themselves. In the latter situation, a reader and translator could decide between them what counted as “three individual *parshiyyot*,” three verses that are differentiated enough to constitute three separate readings. While it is possible that both explanations hold true in different cases—sometimes, the text clearly provides three clear divisions, while at other times, the reader and *meturgeman* must use their own judgment—it seems most likely that there is an eventual fusing of the two: physical breaks in the written text are ultimately taken as shifts in meaning, and constitute an important consideration in the creation of a liturgical reading. We see this in rabbinic texts that treat breaks in the text as an opportunity to impute shifts in meaning—a strategy that we will see later, as well.⁶

A passage from the Tosefta (tMegillah 2:5) shows us that, even outside the reading of the weekly Torah portion, there are different opinions on how much of any given text should be read. The Tosefta claims that the entirety of the scroll of the Megillah need not even be read, according to some rabbis: there are three different starting points, according to Rabbis Yehuda, Shim’on, and Liezer, but the important thing, they are all sure to say, is that the scroll is read from that point until its end.

מצות מגלה מתחלתה ועד סופה דברי ר' מאיר או' מאיש יהודי ר' יוסה או' מאחר הדברים האלה ר'
שמעון בן לעזר או' מבלילה ההוא אבל הכל מודים שמצותה לגמור עד סוף⁷

The commandment for the Megillah is from its beginning to its end—the words of Rabbi Meir. [Rabbi Yehudah]⁸ says, from “There was a certain Jew” (Esther 2:5). Rabbi Yose says, from “One of these things” (Esther 2:3). Rabbi Shim’on ben Liezer says, from “On that night” (Esther 6:1). But all agree that the commandment is to finish it until the end.

⁶ See, for example, Mekhilta d’Rabbi Yishmael, Beshallah 7. This midrash posits a link between the last verse of Exodus 14 and the first verse of Exodus 15. These two verses are separated in the Masoretic text by an “open” paragraph—a material reality that does not figure into the Mekhilta’s exegesis of why the verses are sequential.

⁷ All Tosefta texts are from the Vienna Manuscript, Codex Hebr. 20.

⁸ Rabbi Yehuda’s name is cited in mss. Erfurt and London.

This tosefta suggests that it is not simply the completeness of the text that is at stake, but its order and internal logic. Starting later, but still reading through to the finish, preserves this integrity.⁹ Also at stake here is a concern about the length of the reading: by shortening the lectionary from the entire scroll to a portion of the scroll, the length of the reading may be more in line with other readings.¹⁰ This is both a performative criterion, as well as a physical one, if we are to assume that the book of Esther comprised an entire scroll.

The absence of certain formal strictures for the liturgical reading of Esther in Mishnah Megillah yield to the much more rigid regulations of reading the Torah, and in some cases, the *haftarah*, or selection from the Prophets that is typically added to the end of a Torah reading on the Sabbath and holidays. The latter half of mMegillah 4:1 presents a series of rules that delineate and specify the regular, cyclical reading of the Torah: how often it happens, and the manner in which it should be done, a classic performative criterion.

בשני ובחמישי ובשבת במנחה קורין שלשה אין פוחתין מהן ואין מוסיפין עליהן ואין מפטירין בנביא
הפותח והחותם בתורה מברך לפניו ולאחריה:

On Monday and Thursday and Shabbat in the afternoon, they read three—they do not reduce the number, and do not add to them, and they do not conclude with a prophet. The one initiating and closing the Torah blesses before it and after it.

Already, this is a significant shift from the first portion of mMegillah 4:1, which describes the reading of the Megillah as a relatively casual (or at least, less formalized) affair.¹¹ The reading that takes place on Mondays, Thursdays, and Shabbat afternoons—the Torah reading—must be done in a certain way. There are three *parshiyyot*, or individual lectionaries, and no selection from the Prophets. The blessings that begin and end the reading are performed, it seems, only once: once before the reading begins, and once after it ends. This is in sharp contrast to the way they are performed today, with each reading receiving a blessing prior and a blessing after.

The proper order of reading, as well as the amount of reading that is to be done on a specific day, also has a bearing on the formation of *parshiyyot*, and constitutes a set of performative criteria. Mishnah Megillah 4:2 continues in a similar vein, relaying instructions on how many *parshiyyot* are to be read on certain holidays. The New Moon (Rosh Chodesh) and the intermediate days of long festivals are each given four, without an addition from the Prophets; the first and last days of longer festivals have five

⁹ mMegillah 3:6, for example, dictates that the curses of Leviticus 26 or Deuteronomy 28 must be read in their entirety, and not interrupted.

¹⁰ Although the length of readings, as we will see, is highly variable.

¹¹ “The one who reads the Megillah either stands or sits. One person reads it, two people reads it—it is fulfilled. In a place where they are accustomed to blessing, they bless, and where they do not bless, they do not bless.”

readings, Yom Kippur has six, and the Sabbath seven. These latter three all conclude with *haftarot*, or readings from the Prophets, and in addition, it is entirely acceptable to have additional readings as well.

בראשי החדשים ובחולו של מועד קורים ארבעה אין פוחתים מהן ואין מוסיפין עליהם ואין מפטירים בנביא הפותח והחותם בתורה מברך לפני ולפניה ולאחריה זה הכלל כל שיש בו מוסף והוא אינו יום טוב קורין ארבעה ביום טוב חמשה ביום הכפורים ששה בשבת שבעה אין פוחתים מהן אבל מוסיפים עליהם ומפטירים בנביא הפותח והחותם בתורה מברך לפני ולפניה ולאחריה:¹²

On the first day of the month, and the middle days of holidays, we read four. We do not decrease from them, nor add to them, and we do not conclude with a section from the prophets. The one who initiates and concludes the Torah blesses before it and after it. This is the general rule: every day on which there is an additional service/sacrifice and it is not a festal day, we read four. On a festal day, five. On Yom Kippur, six. On Shabbat, seven. We do not decrease from them, but we may add to them and conclude with the Prophets. The one who initiates and concludes the Torah blesses before it and after it.

In providing a general rule, the Mishnah suggests that there was something *resembling* an attempt at formalization on the part of the tannaitic rabbis. The liturgical reading cycle for the Torah was different between Palestine and Babylonia, and likely even between communities within those two centers, but the “*kelal*,” or general rule which we are given here, represents a slightly different reading cycle overlaid on top of the more regular, cyclical, *continuous* one.¹³ The degrees to which these two influenced each other are likely deep, and in all probability, mutually entailing. For our purposes, though, it is important to note that the rabbis stipulate both the length and the number of readings, and both of these things, as we will see, are important factors in the formation of individual *parshiyyot*.

The Yerushalmi continues to interpret the Mishnah, with some help from the Tosefta, as regards the appropriate divisions of Torah readings for specific events. Mishnah Megillah 3:6, which states that the “curses” (Deut. 28 or Lev. 26), to be read on fast days, cannot be interrupted, is expanded and elucidated in the following passage, from yMegillah 3:8 74b.¹⁴ This segment also includes a relatively explicit theorization of how a *parashah*, or reading, is constructed—the former of these is a performative criterion, the latter, a content-based criterion.

אין מפסיקין בקללות אמר רבי חייא בר גמדי אל תקוץ בתוכחתו אל תעשה קוצים קוצים אמר רבי לוי אמר הקב”ה אינו בדין שיהיו בני מתקללים ואני מתברך אמר רבי יוסה בי רבי בון לא מטעם הזה אלא זה שהוא עומד לקרות בתורה צריך שיהא פותח בדבר טוב וחותם בדבר טוב

¹² Ms. Kaufmann A50 81r, mMegillah 4:1–2.

¹³ The most comprehensive work on the regular Torah reading cycle has been done by Shlomo Naeh. See Naeh 1998 and Naeh 2004.

¹⁴ For a historical contextual analysis of Deut 28, see Quick 2018.

One does not interrupt in the curses. Rabbi Hiyya bar Gamda said, “Do not be repelled by his reproach” (Proverbs 3:11). Do not make many thorns. Rabbi Levi said that the Holy One, Blessed Be He, said, “It is not in justice that my children are cursed and I am praised.” Rabbi Yose be Rabbi Bun said, “It is not for this reason, but because the one who stands up to read in the Torah needs to begin with a good word and conclude with a good word.”¹⁵

The Mishnah states that the *parashah* to be read on fast days—the curses from Leviticus 26 or Deuteronomy 28—cannot be interrupted. Several reasons are given for this in the Yerushalmi, all of them revolving around stated and unstated rules regarding the importance of crafting a biblical pericope correctly. The first of these, the statement of Rabbi Hiyya, revolves around the interchangeability of two words: curse and reproach. The section of “curses” is often also called the “reproaches”: the *tokhechot*. The verse “do not be repelled by his reproach,” from Proverbs 3:11,¹⁶ presents something of an oddity, however: its relevance to the matter at hand is difficult to discern, but is based on a pun established between the word for “repel,” and the word for “thorn” used in the next line.

The gemara continues, “Do not make thorns upon thorns.” The implication is that a singular curse stings like a thorn, and that by dividing the text into multiple readings, or *parshiyyot*, the reader is multiplying the effects of that sting. This stands in contrast to the sense of the biblical verse, however: if one should not be repelled by divine reproach, it should stand to reason that breaking up the text makes very little difference one way or another.

The verse and its explanation make a little more sense, however, if we consider another layer to the word *gotz*. Shlomo Naeh has suggested that this word should actually be read as “pericope,” as a shortened form of the rare Hebrew noun *qutzah*.¹⁷ When this meaning is read into the passage, it becomes significantly subtler. Instead of “do not be repelled,” the pun suggests that Proverbs 3:11 means something like, “do not make pericopes (or, with a very minor leap, *parshiyyot*) from his rebuke.” The gemara’s explanation, read this way, similarly instructs the reader to not make too many pericopes.

This meaning brings out a tension in the rabbinic use of this verse, a tension that is ultimately resolved later. The paradoxical shifting of meanings in the Proverbs verse highlights this tension: read alone, the verse instructs a reader to submit to reproach: to be willing to be chastised and corrected in the pursuit of knowledge and ethical formation. Read in the gemara’s context, it tells the reader to *not* submit to the text’s literal reproach, the curses—at least, not completely: the curses should

¹⁵ Yerushalmi texts are quoted from the Leiden manuscript, with citations given according to the standard Venice edition.

¹⁶ מוֹסֵר יְהוָה בְּנִי אֶל-תִּמְאָס וְאֶל-תִּקְץ בְּתוֹכָהָּ / The discipline of God, my son, do not hate, and do not be repelled by his rebuke.

¹⁷ Naeh 2010, 108–111.

be read in one fell swoop, rather than broken into smaller bits. Of course, by leaving the curses in one large reading, the Yerushalmi is ultimately ensuring that they be heard as one, and therefore serve as a disciplinary, reproachful reading for those in the congregation.

Rabbi Levi's statement is also cryptic, although it makes sense in the context of what comes later. The issue at stake is the recitation of a blessing before and after each individual reading. Should the curses be broken up into multiple readings, there would be multiple blessings recited before and after them. This, according to Rabbi Levi, is indecorous: it would mean breaking up a curse with multiple blessings. The gemara goes on to discuss lectionary blessings directly after the next statement.

The last statement in this section, however, encodes a significant amount of information about the way in which *parshiyot* are established, and the theorization of reading that lies behind them. Rabbi Yose ben Rabbi Bun disagrees with Rabbi Levi, and says that the actual issue at stake is not the interspersing of blessings and curses, and the fragility of the deity's emotions, but rather the proper composition and performance of an oral reading. "One who stands up to read the Torah," he declares, "must begin with a good word, and end with a good word." The force of "good word" is not entirely clear. Is it, quite literally, a "good word?" Should the reading begin with the name of God, for example, or some other divinely favored noun, or perhaps a blessing? Or is "*davar*," the "word," more metaphoric? It could possibly construe an "event," or even a "passage." "Good" in this sense might mean something in which a divine act, or a "good thing" occurs—but as we have already seen, relative order is important in addition to absolute value judgments. Such distinctions, then, are difficult to tease out, although it seems most likely to me that a spectrum exists for the identification of a "*davar tov*." If we take the curses as our example, it seems relatively clear that anything that might be construed as negative—in this case, a strong rebuke—does *not* count as a *davar tov*, hence the *parashah* must go on until the rebukes are completed. The material and the interpretive combine here. A *parashah*'s formation is bounded by both: continuity of content, and the embodied practice of reading it.

The rabbis were not the only literarily-inclined figures in late antiquity concerned with the content and scope of individual portions of text, and if we expand our gaze outward, we can better understand the context within which their specific rubrics formed. Classical orations, of course, needed to be composed according to a specific formula: length, speed, diction, style, and argument were all crucial elements of a public speech in the Greek and Roman worlds, and fundamental aspects of the higher levels of education.¹⁸ Similar principles could govern the phenomenon of public reading: lengthy texts were rarely read aloud in one session, and therefore choosing where to begin and end a reading were important decisions.¹⁹ These rules and notions often

¹⁸ Cf. Cribiore 2001.

¹⁹ Cf. Habinek 2005.

come from the educational background of literate elites, and have as much to do with the ways in which texts and reading were themselves learned as they do with ideas about style, grandeur, and elegance.²⁰

The Babylonian Talmud contains a relatively lengthy disquisition on the formation of a *parashah* in tractate Megillah, beginning on 21b. This *sugya* makes it clear that the number of readings to be performed on a given day are instrumental in the division of a text into its proper segments. It also testifies to the fact that the verse divisions we today take for granted were, in practice, not set in stone in late antiquity, even if the rhetoric surrounding them attributed their formation to Moses. Additionally, this *sugya* attests directly to the division of a text into smaller parts as a practice used in the education of children.

This *sugya* is very concerned with the reasons that lie behind certain traditions of reading the Torah. It takes its start in this manner, questioning the tradition of reading the Torah in three sections, as mandated in the latter half of MMegillah 4:1. The answer is brought forth in a *baraita* by Rav Assi, placing the coordination of weekday and Sabbath afternoon Torah readings into the tannaitic period. The next question, however, regards the minimum number of verses to be read in one of these liturgies. The correspondence drawn there, between the ten verses and various instantiations of ten utterances, including those by which God created the world, is not proven from a *baraita*, but rather an Amoraic statement.

בשני וב[ח]מישי ובשבת במנחה קורין שלשה וג' הני שלשה כנגד מי אמ' רב אסי כנגד תורה נביאים וכתובים רבא אמ' כנגד כהנים לויים וישראלים²¹

On Monday and Thursday, on the Sabbath at Mincha, we read three, etc. What do these three correspond to? Rav Assi said: They correspond to the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings. Rava said: They correspond to the priests, the Levites, and the Israelites.

והא דתאני רב שימי מבירתא דשיחורי אין פוחתין מעשרה פסוקין בבית הכנסת ווידבר עולה מן המגין והאחרון קורא ארבעה הני עשרה פסוקין כנגד מי שפ'ן סימן אמ' ר' יהושע בן לוי כנגד עשרה בטלגין שלבית הכנסת רב יוסף אמ' כנגד עשרת הדיברות שנאמרו לו למשה בסיני ור' יוחנן אומ' כנגד עשרה מאמרות שבהן נברא העולם והי גינהי אי נימא ויאמר ויאמר דיש בבראשית הני תשעה הוו בראש' נמי מאמר הוא דכת' בדבר ייי שמים נעשו

But with regard to this *baraita* Rav Shimi taught, “We do not read less than ten verses in a synagogue, and “*Vayidabber*” counts for the total,²² and the last one reads four verses. What do the ten correspond to? SH-P-N-a mnemonic. Rabbi Joshua ben Levi said: They correspond to those who are idle in the synagogue. Rav Yosef said: They correspond to the ten utterances which were

²⁰ Cf. Larsen 2006. See Roberts 1989 for more on style and poetry in late antiquity, and Brown 1992 for a deeper beginning analysis on the importance of education and *paideia* among the elite of late antiquity.

²¹ Texts from bMegillah are taken from Ms. New York, Columbia T-141, which has been identified by the *Historical Dictionary of the Hebrew Language* as the best text for Bavli tractate Megillah.

²² This is a reference to verses that state only, “And God spoke to Moses, saying [...]”.

spoken to Moses at Sinai. And Rabbi Yochanan said: They correspond to the ten speeches by which the world was created. What were these? Instances of “*vayyomer*” in *Bereishit*? But there are only nine! *Bereishit* is almost a speech, for as it is written, “That by the word of God, the heavens were made [and the wind of his mouth, all their host]” (Ps. 33:6).

There is a rhetorical move in these statements that shifts the scope of the Torah reading from a literary context (“they correspond to the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings”) to a cosmic context (“They correspond to the ten speeches by which the world was created”). A performative criterion—no less than ten verses being read—is linked to the foundation of the world. The Torah, Prophets, and Writings are, of course, the traditional Jewish divisions of the Hebrew Bible—divisions that, as we see here, were present during the later Babylonian rabbinic period.²³

It is also, I think, no coincidence that the interpretive statements are made by rabbis of increasingly earlier generations as they progress. Rav Yosef, who identifies the ten utterances with the Ten commandments—another literary connection—was a Babylonian Amora. In some manuscripts, an additional line follows, in which Rabbi Levi associates the ten verses with King David’s ten “utterances” when he recited the Psalms. Rabbi Levi was possibly the father of Rabbi Yehoshua, an earlier Amoraic figure, and his connection of the ten verses to the ten recitations of the book of Psalms is a likewise literary gesture, connecting the verses of the *parashah* to the content of the text itself—a text, however, that would not be read in a liturgical setting like the Torah would be. Rabbi Yochanan, who ultimately connects the ten verses of a Torah reading to the very act of creation itself, was, according to the rabbis’ own testimony, the founder of the school of Yavneh, an important early figure in the rabbinic movement, a seer, and a rabbi who survived the fall of the Second Temple.²⁴ The authority of the claims is linked to the cosmic nature of the text they are being made about: to read ten verses of the Torah, the bare minimum required, is to participate, in some manner, in the creation of the world.

The next section of the text focuses on the actual practice of reading these ten verses in three differentiated readings: when only ten are read, this means that one reading must be composed of four verses, and the other two of three verses. These are largely physical criteria: the actual grouping of the verses is important to their liturgical reading. Which reading is longer, who reads it, and the honor the reader gains from reading a longer text are sources of much debate for the rabbis, although they do not bear directly on our discussion here. We rejoin the text at the very end of

²³ For rabbinic descriptions of the Bible as composed of *Torah*, *Nevi'im*, and *Ketuvim*, see bShab 88a, bSanh 101a, bKid 49a, bMoedKatan 21a.

²⁴ It is possible that this Rabbi Yochanan is not Yochanan ben Zakkai, but rather a later Amora: in which case, the text does not move through a progression of earlier and earlier authorities. Even if this is the case, however, an early reader of the gemara (and later readers, like this one) might still associate the name Yochanan with an earlier generation of rabbinic activity.

bMegillah 21b, when mMegillah 4:2, which instructs that there be four readings on New Moons and the first days of festivals, is introduced.²⁵

An important feature of this section is the usage of the Hebrew word *parashah*/פרשה. While today the word is most commonly used in religious Jewish circles to refer to either the weekly division of the Torah into “portions,” or the division of those portions into specific readings, it seems to have a slightly more amorphous quality in this *sugya*. It sometimes seems to indicate the entirety of a set reading—“*Parashat Rosh Chodesh*,” for example, signifies the entire reading for the New Moon. Other times in the same passage, however, it clearly indicates a particular division of the text, and is perhaps best conceived of as we might consider a paragraph.

בעא מניה עולא בר רב מרבא פרשת ראש חדש כיצד קורין אותה צו את קרבני דהויא תמניא פסוקי היכי נעביד תרי תלתא תלתא פשו לה תרי ואין משיירין בפרשה פחות משלשה פסוקין ליקרו ארבעה ארבעה וביום השבת תרי ובראשי חדשיכם חמשה הינו ליעביד ליקרו תרי דהא וחד מיהך אין מתחילין בפרש(ת)ה] פחות משלשה פסוקים ליקרו תרי דהא ותלתא מיהך פשו להו תרי ואין משיירין בפרשה פחות משלשה אמ' לו זו לא שמעתי כיוצא בו שמעתי דתנן ביום הראש' בראשית ויהי רקיע פרשה גדולה קורין אותה בשנים קטנה קורין אותה ביחיד ותאני עלה בראשית בשנים ויהי רקיע באחד

[At the New Moons, and on the intermediate days of holidays, four read ... etc.] Ulla bar Rav raised a problem from this before Rava: The *parashah* of Rosh Chodesh, how does one read it? “And command [the children of Israel and say to them,] ‘My offerings,’” is eight verses, what is to be done?²⁶ If you say that two should read three verses each, then only two remain, and we cannot leave less than three verses in a *parashah*. You might say let each read four—then seven will be left. “And on the Sabbath,” [the next paragraph] is two verses, “And on your New Moons” [the paragraph after that] is five, so what is to be done? Should he read two verses from this and one from the next, [this violates] that we do not begin to read a *parashah* with less than three verses. And if he should read two from this and three from that one—then there are only two remaining! He said to him: “I have not heard of this problem, but I have heard about one similar. As we learned: “On the first day of creation,” “And let there be a firmament.” The large *parashah* is read by two people, the small one reads together. And they taught regarding it: Two read “Bereshit,” and one reads “Let there be a firmament.”

The important points of this section are that the reading for the New Moon / *Rosh Chodesh* (or the first part of this reading) is composed of three sections, one of which is eight verses long, one two verses, and one five verses; there are supposed to be

²⁵ “On New Moons, and on the intermediate days of festivals, four read. They do not reduce from that, and they do not add to it, and they do not conclude it with the Prophets. The one who begins and the one who ends in the Torah blesses before it and after it. This is the general rule: every day on which there is an additional offering, but is not a Good Day (a holiday), four read. On a holiday, five read. On Yom Kippur, six; on Shabbat, seven. They do not reduce from them, but they may add to them, and they conclude with the Prophets. The one beginning and the one ending in the Torah blesses before it and after it.”

²⁶ The issue here is the division. The first paragraph alone is eight verses, and not dividing it into pieces would mean that the remaining readings are too short.

four readings, each reading must have at least three verses, and (this is the part that throws everything into confusion) sections of the text should not have “orphan lines.” This last stipulation means that in a paragraph of eight verses, two three-verse readings would leave two verses orphaned at the end, unable to constitute an entire reading on their own, and unable to be added to another, as they might cross the boundaries that are themselves written into the text.

The solutions that are offered in this section create more problems. If the first paragraph of eight verses is divided into two readings, then the next two paragraphs are troublesome to divide: though they are seven verses in total, the fact that the first paragraph is simply two verses means that more must be added to it. If an appropriate amount is added, however—and the text instructs that a full three verses from the beginning of a paragraph must be utilized—then the remainder of the paragraph is too short for a proper reading.

The entire dilemma is presented as a question that Ulla bar Rav brings to Rava. Rava claims that he is stymied, but he proceeds to speak about a similar problem: the Sunday Torah reading of the *ma'amadot*,²⁷ the non-priestly watches, which is comprised of the first two days of creation, is similarly eight verses,²⁸ with the first day comprised of a paragraph of five verses, and the second a paragraph of three. He cites a tannaitic tradition, which is also paralleled on bTa'anit 26a,²⁹ that the first paragraph of five verses should be read by two people, and the second paragraph by one. This is a problem, of course: one or the other of the readers of the first paragraph will only be reading two verses. The Gemara agrees, and articulates this problem.

והוינן בה: בשלמא יהי רגיע, באחד - דתלתא פסוקי הוו, אלא בראשית בשנים? חמשה פסוקי הוו, ותניא: הקורא בתורה לא יפחות משלשה פסוקים! ואיתמר עליה: רב אמר: דולג, ושמואל אמר: פוסק. רב אמר דולג, מאי טעמא לא אמר פוסק? קסבר: כל פסוקא דלא פסקיה משה אנן לא פסקינן ליה

And we discussed it: Granted, “let there be a firmament” is read by one, for it is three verses, but “Bereshit” by two? It is five verses, and it is taught: The one reading from the Torah cannot read less than three verses! And it was stated with regard to this: Rav said, “He repeats” and Shmu’el said, “He divides it in half.” Rav said he repeats it, how come he does not say to divide it? He believes that every verse that Moses did not divide, we do not divide it.”

Two solutions are suggested for the problem paragraph. The first, articulated by Rav, is to repeat the middle verse, making each reading three verses; the second, given by Shmu’el, is to divide the middle verse in half, thus effectively creating a sixth verse. An additional reason is given for the solution that Rav gives: the versification of the Torah is the result of Mosaic activity, and must therefore be preserved at all costs.

²⁷ mTa'anit 4:2.

²⁸ This is stated on bTa'anit 26a.

²⁹ פרשה גדולה קורין [אותה] בשנים והקטנה ביחיד (Ms. Munich 140).

This statement is a major indicator of rabbinic ideology. The words of the Torah are not the only part of the Bible that was transmitted by Moses: how those words fit together, the way in which they were written, and the divisions between them were also part of the text that Moses gave. As remnants of Moses' scribal hand, they must be respected and remain unchanged.³⁰ As all-encompassing as this statement might seem, however, it is not the end of the issue. Shmu'el's opinion is not universally popular, and Rabbi Hanina Qara³¹ claims that the dividing of verses into smaller pieces is only acceptable in a scholastic context: so that students may learn them.

ושמואל אמר פסקינן ליה ומי פסקינן והא אמ' ר' חנינה קרא צער גדול היה לי אצל חנינה הגדול ולא התיר לי לפסוק פסוק אלא לתינוקות שלבית רבן הואיל ולהתלמד הן עשויין התם טעמא מאי משום דלא אפשר הכי נמי לא אפשר

And Shmu'el said: We divide it, and how do we divide it? And did not Rabbi Hanina Qara say, "I had great distress on account of Rabbi Hanina the Great, and I did not allow him to divide except for schoolchildren, so that they might be taught! In this case, why is it allowed? Because it is not possible otherwise. Here too—it is not possible otherwise.

The import is clear: dividing verses into smaller pieces is an appropriate activity for the school room, but not for the public reading of the Torah—unless, according to Shmu'el, there is simply no other choice.

The Gemara also offers a reason for Shmu'el's *not* suggesting that the second reader repeat a verse.

ושמואל מאי טעמא לא אמ' דולג גזרה משום הנכנסין וגזירה משום היוצאין

And Shmu'el said, "He divides," how come he does not say, "He repeats it?" It is a decree on account of those who enter and it is a decree on account of those who leave.

The reasoning here, though succinct, is complex: "those who enter" and "those who leave" are typically understood as congregants who leave or enter a synagogue in between readings from the Torah. If a congregant should enter and hear the third verse of Genesis 1 read as the first verse of a reading, he or she might assume that the previous *parashah* had only contained two verses, and therefore be invalid, and improperly performed. To avoid this eventuality, then Shmu'el suggests that the verse itself be divided into two. The concern is with perception, rather than the actual performance, and is meant, I believe, to give us a glimpse of Shmu'el as a particularly thoughtful and sharp interpreter of the law.

³⁰ There is a tension here with other stammatitic statements: bMenachot 29b, for example, portrays God as the scribal architect of scripture, adding the final touches to the Torah.

³¹ Hananya in other mss.

The *sugya* does not end conclusively here, but we have seen enough of it to examine the particular concerns about forming a *parashah* that it evinces. A *parashah* is constrained by the internal structure of the text, as well as the external factors of its reading: it can be either (or both) formed by the reader, or a textual division that the reader him or herself responds to and reads. The word *parashah* itself is a useful indicator of what we are looking for: it is both the formal division of the text, written into the material of reading itself, and an interpretive grouping of material, composed from internal criteria—the Yerushalmi’s “good ending”—and the external criteria, such as the Bavli’s liturgical constraints.

The tannaitic sources discussed, largely from Mishnah and Tosefta Megillah, describe a *parashah* as needing to consist of at least ten verses, made up of three readings of three or four verses each. The Yerushalmi expands on this, providing some internal guidelines and explaining, at least initially, why some *parshiyyot* are longer than others: there are rules of content and continuity that must be observed. Finally, the Bavli’s interest lies in both the performance of the reading, and the proper choreography thereof, and it gives several solutions for problems that might arise from the correct reading of properly formed *parshiyyot*.

Late ancient rabbis were not the only elite literate specialists concerned with the actual form of a text: the way it was written, divided, taught, and read. Similar concern with both internal and external factors helped to create the standard divisions of the Homeric epics. By internal factors, I am referring to content and interpretation; by external, I mean concerns regarding length and performance. Both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are divided into twenty-four books, which came to be associated with letters of the alphabet by the Hellenistic period. These divisions are more than just accidental: the books are of varying lengths, and while a *general* material concern can be deduced (each book, or several books together, could easily fit on one standard-length roll of parchment),³² it is clear that there is more at work in the divisions between books. A scroll was typically 16–17 cm to 28–30 cm tall, and between 2.5 to 12 m long; it is reasonable to imagine Homeric books, or groups of Homeric books (or songs as they were known in antiquity) gathered in groups of scrolls.³³ Importantly, both ancient Greek and ancient Jewish scrolls tended to contain only one unit of text, except in rare circumstances.³⁴ Scrolls used for liturgical reading are typically easily distinguished from those used as amulets or otherwise, although this is not always the case.³⁵

The division of Homer into books, or “songs” as they were called in antiquity, however, represents a significant issue in the scholarship: book divisions do not simply happen at the top of columns, or at the end of certain length of material. Scholars

³² See Cavallo, 2002. Cavallo argues that Greek scrolls were significantly shorter than their Egyptian predecessors.

³³ Cf. Cavallo, 2002.

³⁴ Cf. Tov 2004, 39.

³⁵ Cf. Reed 2009.

are divided on when, exactly, it occurred, and how standardized it was. An older consensus view which states that the divisions were imposed by scholars in Hellenistic Alexandria has recently been challenged, although the evidence for this remains somewhat scanty.³⁶

Bruce Heiden, on the other hand, has examined the actual book divisions themselves. In two articles—one on the *Iliad* and one for the *Odyssey*—he examines the breaks in the text that the book divisions seem to represent.³⁷ For the *Iliad*, he concludes that book divisions happen at junctures in the text that follow a consistent pattern. They enclose narrative passages that are somewhat consistent, and draw attention to what he terms “high-consequence scenes”: scenes that affect the narrative considerably beyond their occurrence.³⁸ His examination of the *Odyssey* reveals other important aspects of the text, and both epics at large.³⁹ Like the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*’s book divisions come after low-consequence scenes, and before high-consequence scenes. Moreover, they occur at points of entrance and exit in the text, and provide useful information, enabling the audience to keep track of the plot and narrative. He suggests that they are, in fact, native to the text itself, to a degree: as the *Odyssey* would not have been performed straight through, the segment markers represent an “intermission”.⁴⁰

Heiden’s conclusions are compelling, although they ultimately fall short of convincing that the division of Homer’s epics into books, or “songs,” are original to the composition of the texts themselves. What seems more likely is a process similar to what we might observe in the biblical text. There are both narrative and textual breaks in the text: these are a result of the various “seams” that come about from the composite redaction of the Bible from a wide variety of sources. Seams can be more or less obvious: the break between Genesis 2:3 and 2:4 is very clearly a gap between sources, and the traditional Jewish lectionary schedule reflects this. At other times, the seams might be more subtly interwoven, such as in the intertwined flood narratives in Genesis 6–8. There is also an additional layer of division possible in the text of the Hebrew Bible: the Masoretic text is written in paragraphs, or *parshiyyot*, a tradition that likely existed in some form at the time of the Babylonian Talmud. Divisions could easily have been traced along the physical paragraphs of the text.⁴¹ In this instance,

³⁶ Cf. Jensen 1999, 99. The explicit evidence for Homeric book divisions (rather than actual papyrological evidence, which is largely later) comes from passages in Pseudo-Plutarch, Eustathius, a commentary on the fourteenth book by Apollodorus of Athens, and an h-scholion. Nünlist 2006, 47 has suggested that the traditional view of scholars, that Pseudo-Plutarch invented both the divisions and the reasons for them, is less than tenable, given the other evidence.

³⁷ Heiden 1998, 2000.

³⁸ Cf. Heiden 1998, 69.

³⁹ Cf. Heiden 2000, 250–251.

⁴⁰ Heiden 2000, 259.

⁴¹ There are two types of paragraph in the Masoretic text: open and closed. See Khan 2012, 35–37.

dividing the text into separate readings based on internal consistencies would rip the narrative to shreds.

This does not mean, of course, that there was necessarily a formalized structure of dividing the text of the Hebrew Bible into chapters and verses at the moment of composition. It does mean, however, that the activities of those figure who *did* divide the text—late ancient rabbis, and eventually the Tiberian Masoretes—might have done so based on “natural” seams or breakages in the text, at least part of the time. Alexandrian scholars of the Homeric epics may have done exactly the same: read the text of their epics, and with varying degrees of formalization, established divisions based on natural breaks and textual irregularities.

Our three sets of criteria, then, seem to be present at different times in the rabbinic period. Liturgical and performative criteria are present early on, while content-based, or thematic criteria, make their main appearance in the Yerushalmi. Physical criteria are the least explicitly theorized by the rabbis, but this is likely because, in part, these criteria would have been evident in the written, material text of the Torah itself. By examining the ways in which late ancient rabbis implicitly and explicitly divide and excerpt the text of the Torah for liturgical reading, we gain a greater understanding of their orientation towards that text, and their understanding of its place in the world.

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