

CHRISTOPHER TUCKETT (Ed.)

FEASTS AND FESTIVALS



PEETERS

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THE PUBLIC READING OF SCRIPTURES AT FEASTS

Arie VAN DER KOOLJ

1. Introduction

The Hebrew Scriptures yield a number of feasts, the most well-known being Passover and the Feast of the Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Weeks, and the Feast of Tabernacles. A number of passages in the books Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy provide some information about when, where, and why the festivals were to celebrate, but as to the rituals of the festival days, Lev 23 and Num 28–29 are the most important sections in the Pentateuch. These chapters offer detailed information about the cultic ceremonies (sacrifices in particular) to be conducted in the central sanctuary, the temple of Jerusalem.

In this contribution to the theme of our conference I want to concentrate on a part of the ritual which is not mentioned in the relevant passages in the Pentateuch, but which is known from later sources – the public reading of Scriptures at feasts. The public reading, the reading aloud of Scriptures in a public and official setting is of course to be distinguished from private reading, a way of reading intended for study purposes.¹ According to the Mishnah (*Meg.* 3.5-6) which is the oldest source for our subject matter, the following passages were read at the feasts:

at	Passover	Lev 23.1ff. (vv. 4-8?)
	Feast of Weeks	Deut 16.9-12
	New Year	Lev 23.23-25
	Day of Atonement	Lev 16
	The Feast (of Tabernacles):	
	– the first festival day	Lev 23.1ff. (vv. 33-36?)
	– the other days	Num 29.17-38
	Dedication	Num 7.1-89
	Purim	Exod 17.8-16. ²

¹ See e.g. Deut 17.19; Prologue Ben Sirach 7-10; CD 5.2; 1QS 6.7.

² Other occasions mentioned in *Meg.* 3.6 are: the first days of the months, the *Maamads*, and the days of fasting.

As to the Day of Atonement, a more detailed information is to be found elsewhere in the Mishnah, *Yoma* 7.1 (cf. *Sotah* 7.7):

Then the High Priest came to read. [...] The minister of the synagogue used to take the scroll of the Law and give it to the chief of the synagogue, and the chief of the synagogue gave it to the Prefect, and the Prefect gave it to the High Priest, and the High Priest received it standing and read it standing. And he read *After the death ...* and *Howbeit on the tenth day ...*. Then he used to roll up the scroll of the Law and put in his bosom and say, 'More is written here than I have read out before you'. *And on the tenth ...* which is in the book of Numbers, he recited by heart. Thereupon he pronounced eight Benedictions [...] (tr. Danby)

Lev 16 ('After the death ...') apparently was not the only section to be read at the Day of Atonement because the High Priest read another part from the same book – Lev 23.26-32 ('Howbeit on the tenth day ...'). And in addition to these readings from Leviticus, he recited by heart a paragraph from the book of Numbers – Num 29.7-11.

The passage of *Meg.* 3.5-6 is meant to inform the reader about readings in the synagogues of the time. However, the selection of the festal readings (cultic readings) and in particular the more detailed information regarding the Day of Atonement in *Yoma* 7.1 strongly suggest that all this testifies to a reading practice which goes back to the ritual in the temple of Jerusalem.³ It is not certain whether this also applies to the reading at Purim – Exod 17.8-16⁴ – since this passage is not of a cultic nature. It is clear however that things were different as far as the reading of the book of Esther at this feast is concerned. This scroll, always designated as *megillah* (not as *seper*) in the Mishnah, was read on the 11th, 12th, 13th, 14th, or 15th of Adar, in villages and towns (*Meg.* 1.1).

The Mishnah has, of course, more to say about public readings. As is well known it also testifies to the regular reading of the Law in the sense of a cycle of Sabbath readings from the Pentateuch in synagogues (e.g. *Meg.* 3.4; 4.1-6).⁵ These readings of the Law did not only take place on

³ Cf. C. Perrot, 'The Reading of the Bible in the Ancient Synagogue', in Martin Jan Mulder (ed.), *Miqra. Text, Translation, Reading and Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity* (CRINT Section II, Vol. 1; Assen/Maastricht, Philadelphia, 1988), 146.

⁴ This passage (on the war with Amalek) was chosen for Purim because Haman is presented in Esther as being an Amalekite (see Esth 3.1).

⁵ On these readings see Lawrence H. Schiffman, 'The Early History of Public Reading of the Torah' in Steven Fine (ed.), *Jews, Christians, and Polytheists in the Ancient Synagogue. Cultural Interaction during the Greco-Roman Period* (Baltimore Studies in the History of Judaism; London and New York, 1999), 49-54.

Sabbaths, but also on other days (Monday, Thursday), including Festival-days (*Meg.* 4.2).⁶

It is not my intention to deal with the regular reading of Torah on Sabbaths and other days, including Festival-days, nor with the issue of the Esther scroll although the latter is a special case of public reading of Scriptures at a feast. Rather, I want to focus on a tradition regarding a particular festal reading not yet referred to. I have in mind the tradition to be found in *Sotah* 7.8. It reads as follows:

After the close of the first Festival-day of the Feast [of Tabernacles], in the eighth year, after the going forth of the Seventh Year, they used to prepare for him in the Temple Court a wooden platform on which he sat, for it is written, *At the end of every seven years in the set time* The minister of the synagogue used to take a scroll of the Law and give it to the chief of the synagogue, and the chief of the synagogue gave it to the Prefect, and the Prefect gave it to the High Priest, and the High Priest gave it to the king, and the king received it standing and read it sitting. King Agrippa received it standing and read it standing, and for this the Sages praised him. (tr. Danby)

This passage is about the public reading from a particular scroll of the Law at the Feast of Tabernacles in the temple of Jerusalem. Interestingly, this is the only instance where the reading practice is said to be based on a regulation in the Law itself since the text explicitly refers to the order given by Moses in Deut 31.10-11.

I will deal with this tradition about a reading practice at the Feast of Tabernacles by discussing *Sotah* 7.8 and two related passages of an earlier date – Deut 31.9-13 and Josephus, *Ant.* 4.209-211. In addition, I will pay attention to the related story about the public reading of the law by Ezra to be found in Neh 8 (vv. 1-6[8], and v. 18). As to Neh 8.1-6, I will also comment on the corresponding passages in 1 Esdras (9.37-47) and in Josephus' *Antiquities* (11.154-155).

2. *Mishnah Sotah* 7.8

Sotah 7.8 states that the reading ceremony was carried out at the end of the first Festival-day of the Feast of Tabernacles. The whole ritual is located in the temple court, presumably the Court of Women because of

⁶ According to *Meg.* 3.4, the regular reading of the Law was to be interrupted for special occasions: portions prescribed for the feasts of Dedication, Purim, the fasts, the *Maamads* and the Day of Atonement were to be read instead of the weekly reading of Torah.

the presence of the women as part of the audience.⁷ For this special occasion a wooden platform was prepared on which the reader used to sit, or stand.

The scroll of the law to be read was presented to the reader according to a specific procedure: ‘a minister of the synagogue’ gave the scroll to ‘the chief of the synagogue’, the latter then gave it to ‘the Prefect’ who in turn gave it to the High Priest who finally gave it to the king. One gets the impression that this procedure, which is also described in *Sotah* 7.7 and *Yoma* 7.1, testifies to a hierarchy of positions. This is at least clear as far as the Prefect (*segan*) and the High Priest, as well as the King are concerned. The Prefect is the Captain of the Temple who had a position just below the High Priest. However, the persons designated as ‘the minister of the synagogue’ and ‘the chief of the synagogue’⁸ raise questions since they do not fit into what is known about the hierarchy of the clergy of the temple. Moreover, the rendering ‘synagogue’ for Hebrew *keneset* is far from certain because in that case one would expect the phrase *bet hakkeneset*. I therefore propose to translate the underlying phrases in Hebrew – *hazzan hakkeneset* and *rosh hakkeneset* – in a different way, namely, as ‘the servant of the storage (store-house)’, and as ‘the chief of the storage’, i.e. ‘the treasurer’. This makes perfect sense since ‘the chief of the storage’ is someone who belonged to the chief priests who were also the treasurers of the temple. These priests were ranking just below the Prefect. Furthermore, the term *hazzan* can also be used for a servant of the chief priests as is clear from *Tamid* 5.3. If so, the servant of one of the treasurers had the duty to bring out one of the book scrolls, which were stored in the treasure rooms of the temple, and to give it to his superior, etc.⁹

The scroll handed over this way to the king is designated in Hebrew as *seper torah*. To which book or books does this phrase refer? To the Pentateuch as a whole, or to one of its books? The answer to this question is given in the last part of our passage (not quoted above). It appears that the book of Deuteronomy is meant since according to *Sotah* 7.8 the following sections from this book were read at the occasion: Deut 1.1–6.3; 6.4–9; 11.13–21; 14.22–28; 26.12–15; 17.14–20 (‘the paragraph of the king’), and 28.2–28 (‘the Blessings and the Cursings’). A selection of

⁷ See Strack-Billerbeck, 2.34.

⁸ So Herbert Danby, *The Mishnah* (Oxford, reprint 1974), ad locum.

⁹ See A. van der Kooij, *Die alten Textzeugen des Jesajabuches. Ein Beitrag zur Textgeschichte des Alten Testaments* (OBO 35; Freiburg, Göttingen, 1981), 332–334.

sections was read, not the book of Deuteronomy as a whole. Thus, the phrase *seper torah* does not refer to Torah as a whole, but to one of its books. This is also the case in *Yoma* 7.1, quoted above, but there the same phrase, *seper torah*, actually refers to the book of Leviticus.¹⁰ That is why the High Priest recited a passage from the book of Numbers (called *homesh happiqqudim*) by heart because he only had the scroll of Leviticus in his hands.

The one who is said to perform the public reading at the feast, is king Agrippa.¹¹ He did so standing, and not sitting which might have been the normal practice for a king.¹² So the public reading was done by the highest authority of the moment. The whole procedure of the reading of the law, i.e. of sections from the book of Deuteronomy, at the Feast of Tabernacles in the temple is presented as an official or national event.

3. Deuteronomy 31.9-13

I now turn to the passage which lies at the basis of the story in the Mishnah – Deut 31.9-13. It reads as follows:

(9) And Moses wrote this law, and gave it to the priests the sons of Levi, ... and to the elders of Israel. (10) And Moses commanded them, 'At the end of every seven years, at the set time of the year of release, at the feast of Booths, (11) when all Israel comes to appear before the Lord your God at the place which he will choose, you shall read this law before all Israel in their hearing. (12) Assemble the people, men, women, and little ones, and the sojourner within your towns, that they may hear and learn to fear the Lord your God, and be careful to do all the words of this law, (13) and that their children, who have not known it, may hear and learn to fear the Lord your God, as long as you live in the land which you are going over the Jordan to possess'. (RSV)

Having finished his presentation of 'this law', both orally and in writing, Moses gave the book (*seper*, see e.g. 31.24-25) to the priests and the elders, i.e. the leading authorities of the people of Israel. He then commanded them that this law should be read in public at the end of every seven years, at the Feast of Tabernacles. The cycle of every seven years is explicitly related to the institution of release (15.1), presumably in

¹⁰ This book is also designated as 'the Law of the Priests' (see e.g. *Meg.* 3.5).

¹¹ It is not clear whether the passage alludes to Agrippa I, or to Agrippa II. On this issue, see Strack-Billerbeck, 2.709f.; Schiffman, 'Public Reading', 55f., note.

¹² On the issue of sitting, see Strack-Billerbeck, 2.34.

order to underscore the stipulation found in Deut 15.1-6, as well as to evoke the related idea typical of Deuteronomy, the liberation from Egypt.¹³

The reading ceremony is said to take place ‘at the place which God will choose’. This is a reference to a particular city (cf. Deut 16.5-6 [‘one of your cities [gates] // ‘the place’]) which in the book of Kings is the city of Jerusalem (see e.g. 2 Kgs 23.27). One could think of the Jerusalem temple as the location of the reading event, as Runesson does,¹⁴ but the text does not specify the place of the meeting in the city.

The book of ‘this law’ to be read is the Deuteronomic law which, seen from the perspective of Deut 31.9, may comprise Deut 1–28, or Deut 1–30.¹⁵ As to the question of who is the one that is supposed to read aloud before all Israel, the text is not so clear. The MT has a singular here, ‘you’ (*tiqra*), whereas the Septuagint (LXX) and 4QDeut^b attest the reading ‘you’ in the plural.¹⁶ Both readings make sense, but in view of the singular *haqhel* in v. 12 the reading *tiqra* can be regarded the older one.¹⁷ The plural form, on the other hand, may be due to harmonization to ‘them’ in v. 9. Be this as it may, the leading authorities, priests and elders, are the ones who have the task to arrange the meeting at the Feast of Tabernacles and are responsible for the reading ceremony of the Deuteronomic law in public. Given the official character of the event it stands to reason that the reading was done by someone who was considered to represent the highest authority.¹⁸

Weinfeld is of the opinion that the phrase ‘you shall read’ in Deut 31.11 is to be construed as a reference to Joshua.¹⁹ He considers the

¹³ Weinfeld may be right that the ordinance of periodic reading of the law goes back to a periodic reading of treaties as stipulated in Hittite treatises (Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomical School* [Oxford, 1972], 64).

¹⁴ Anders Runesson, *The Origins of the Synagogue. A Socio-Historical Study* (CB NTSeries 37; Stockholm, 2001), 286.

¹⁵ The passages to be read according to *m.Sotah* 7.8 are from Deut 1–28.

¹⁶ So too Targum Pseudo-Jonathan. The Samaritan Pentateuch reads a third person singular, *yiqra*, i.e. ‘one’, or ‘he’.

¹⁷ Cf. C. Labuschagne, *Deuteronomium III* (POT; Baarn, 1997), 184; *Biblia Hebraica Quinta 5: Deuteronomy* (Prepared by Carmel McCarthy; Stuttgart, 2007), ad loc.

¹⁸ Cf. M. Weinfeld, ‘The Emergence of the Deuteronomical Movement: The Historical Antecedents’, in Norbert Lohfink (ed.), *Das Deuteronomium. Entstehung, Gestalt und Botschaft* (BETL 68; Leuven, 1985), 97 (‘the leader’).

¹⁹ Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy*, 65 note. According to Ulfgard there is an association here with king Josiah reading the discovered law scroll to the people, 2 Kgs 23.1-3. See Hakan Ulfgard, *The Story of Sukkot. The Setting, Shaping, and Sequel of the Biblical Feast of Tabernacles* (BGBE 34; Tübingen, 1998), 94.

ceremony of Josh 8.30-35 to be an ‘execution of the ordinance’ given in Deut 31. It is true that both ceremonies have important elements in common – the reading being performed by a leader, and this being done before ‘all Israel’, men, women, and children as the audience. Yet, the public reading by Joshua in Josh 8.34 is of a different kind.²⁰ It is a one-time event marking the promulgation and proclamation of the Deuteronomic law as soon as the people had entered the promised country (compare Deut 27.1-8, although this text does not speak of a public reading). Hence, it can not be seen as the execution of a periodical reading as stipulated in Deut 31. This is not meant to say, however, that a leader like Joshua could not be the intended figure in Deut 31.11.

4. *Josephus, Antiquities 4.209(-211)*

The command given in Deut 31.9-13 is rephrased by Josephus as follows:

When the multitude hath assembled in the holy city for the sacrifices, every seven years at the season of the feast of tabernacles, let the high priest, standing upon a raised platform from which he may be heard, recite the laws to the whole assembly; and let neither woman nor child be excluded from this audience, nay nor yet the slaves... (LCL)

According to Josephus it is the High Priest who was to read aloud ‘the laws’, standing on a raised platform (ἐπὶ βήματος ὑψηλοῦ), in order to be heard (ἐξ᾽άκουστος). The place of the public reading is not specified, but both the reference to the sacrifices (at the Feast of Tabernacles) and more in particular the mentioning of the High Priest as reader point to the temple in ‘the holy city’. The specification that he was standing on a raised platform is not found in Deut 31, but is present, as we have seen, in *Sotah* 7.8.

The phrase ‘the laws’ seems rather vague, but the broader context in *Ant.* 4 clearly points to the book of Deuteronomy. In 4.193-194 the expression ‘these laws and this constitution’ (4.194: ‘he presented them with these laws and this constitution recorded in a book’ [cf. Deut 31.9]) refers to the book of Deuteronomy. Josephus considers this book of the Pentateuch to contain the constitution (πολιτεία) of the Jews.²¹

²⁰ This also applies to the reading by king Josiah in 2 Kgs 23.

²¹ Cf. Cécile Dogniez et Marguerite Harl, *La Bible d’Alexandrie, 5: Le Deutéronome* (Paris, 1992), 26-27.

Summarizing, the three sources discussed so far – Deuteronomy, Josephus' Antiquities and the Mishnah – testify to the public reading of a book of the law at the Feast of Tabernacles. The reading is performed by a leader, a high priest (Josephus) or a king (Mishnah). It is a ceremony, a ritual, which is supposed to take place, every seven years, in the city of Jerusalem (cf. Deut 31), and according to later sources, in the temple (cf. Josephus, and explicitly so, *Sotah* 7.8), presumably in the large court of the women because of their being part of the audience. In all three sources the reading ceremony is presented as a national event.

The book to be read is Deuteronomy, presumably not as a whole, but by way of a particular set of sections. (The Mishnah attests a defined selection of sections, and one wonders what the underlying principles of this selection might have been.) The way this book was passed on to the reader as specified in the Mishnah seems to reflect the hierarchy of the clergy of the temple in Jerusalem. It may well be that this was the procedure at a reading ceremony in the temple court. It clearly underscores the official character of the whole event. The book to be read was a copy of the temple, belonging to its sacred treasures.

The purpose of the reading ritual is educational, as is emphasized by Josephus (see *Ant.* 4.210-211), or to put it with the words of Deut 31.12, in order 'that all the people may hear and learn to fear the Lord, and to do all the words of this law'.

It is difficult to say, however, whether this ceremony at the Feast of Tabernacles was conducted during the Second Temple period, every seven years. There are no other sources (e.g. among the Qumran documents) which refer to this event, but this does not say so much as rituals were usually taken for granted and therefore described only in specific cases. The story contained in *Sotah* 7.8 seems to suggest that the public reading as prescribed in Deut 31 was performed, in some period of time before the year 70.

5. *Nehemiah* 8 and corresponding passages

The story told in *Nehemiah* 8 too deserves our attention since the public reading of Scriptures is a dominant feature of this chapter: Ezra, priest and scholar, read from 'the book of the law of Moses' (vv. 2-3), then, according to v. 8, the Levites read from the same book ('the book, the law of God'), and finally, 'he', presumably Ezra again, read from 'the book of the law of God' (v. 18). The reading ceremony in vv. 1-8 is not described as a public reading taking place at a feast, but may well be

related to the Feast of Tabernacles which is the subject matter of vv. 13-18. The reading referred to in v. 18, on the other hand, is said to have been performed during this feast because it is stated that he read 'from the first day to the last day' of the festival.

I will concentrate in this part of my contribution on two elements, (a) the public reading by Ezra in vv. 1-6, – leaving aside the passage on the Levites (vv. 7-8)²² –, and (b) the reading at the feast in v. 18. In both cases, the question is whether and if so how the presentation of the reading event is related to Deut 31.9-13. As to vv. 1-6, I will also comment on the corresponding passages in 1 Esdras (9.37-47) and in Josephus' *Antiquities* (11.154-155).

5.1 *Nehemiah 8.1-6*

The first section of the chapter, Neh 8.1-6(12), might be termed the story of 'the Water Gate Event'. We are told that all the people was gathered in Jerusalem, on the square before the Water Gate. At the people's request Ezra brought 'the book of the law of Moses' (v. 2) before the assembly, and read from it before the men, the women, and the other ones who were able to understand, i.e. the children of a certain age (compare Neh 10.29)(v. 3). According to the verses that follow, vv. 4-6, Ezra stood on a wooden platform which had been made for the purpose, with beside him six persons on his right hand and seven on his left. Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, and when he did so all the people stood. Ezra then blessed the Lord, and all the people answered 'Amen, Amen', lifting up their hands, followed by the act of bowing down their heads, worshipping the Lord. Although these verses follow v. 3, as to content they explain things before the actual reading took place. I agree with Williamson and other scholars that 'v. 3 is to be regarded as a summary heading' to the following verses.²³

Scholars have argued for a close relationship between Neh 8.1-6 and Deut 31.10-13. Both passages have the public reading of the book of the law in common. According to Ulfsgard the whole event may be seen as 'a concrete manifestation of the deuteronomic commandment in Deut

²² On the role of the Levites, see below.

²³ See H.G.M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah* (WBC 16; Waco, 1985), 280; Michael W. Duggan, *The Covenant Renewal in Ezra-Nehemiah (Neh 7:72B-10:40). An Exegetical, Literary, and Theological Study* (SBLDS 164; Atlanta, 2001), 89. For a different view, see Juha Pakkala, *Ezra the Scribe. The Development of Ezra 7-10 and Nehemiah 8* (BZAW 347; Berlin, 2004), 146-147.

31,10-13'.²⁴ Others point to the similarities between Deut 31.11-12 and Neh 8.2-3:

Deut 31: 'you shall read this law before all Israel in their hearing. Assemble the people, men, women, and children ...'

Neh 8: 'he read from the book of the law of Moses ... before the men, the women and those who could understand (i.e. the children, see above), and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law'.²⁵

Furthermore, as Duggan observes, the localization of the reading ceremony in Neh 8, the square in front of the Water Gate, is in line with 'the Deuteronomistic mention of the location of the gathering' in Deut 31.11 – 'in the chosen place', i.e. in Jerusalem.²⁶ In addition, one could also point to the wooden platform which was made for the occasion, an element not referred to in Deut 31, but part of the picture, as we have seen, in the related passages of Josephus and the Mishnah.

It is true that the event as described in Neh 8 has important elements in common with Deut 31.10-13. Both share a leader as reader of the book of the law, and all Israel, men, women, and children, as the audience. There is, however, a major difference between the two passages – the public reading by Ezra did not take place at the Feast of Tabernacles, but a few days before. Moreover, the event as presented in Neh 8.1-6 does not seem to reflect a regular practice, i.e., as something that was to be done every seven years. Rather, the Water Gate Event is better understood as a one-time event.²⁷ The story of Neh 8.1-6 is strikingly reminiscent of the reading of the book of the law by Joshua in Josh 8.34-35, and by king Josiah in 2 Kgs 23.2-3.²⁸ Josh 8.34-35 in particular is close to Neh 8.2-3: '... he (Joshua) read all the words of the law, the blessing and the curse, according to all that is written in the book of the law. before all the assembly of Israel, and the women, and the little ones, and the sojourners who lived among them' (RSV). In both cases, Josh 8 and 2 Kgs 23, we are dealing with a one-time event, marking a new phase in history: in Josh 8, the promulgation of the law after the settlement in the

²⁴ Ulfgard, *Sukkot*, 125.

²⁵ Duggan, *Covenant Renewal*, 108; Pakkala, *Ezra*, 157. See also Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 287; and C. Levin, 'Die Entstehung der Büchereinteilung des Psalters', *VT* 54 (2004) 88-89.

²⁶ Duggan, *Covenant Renewal*, 108.

²⁷ See Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah. A Commentary* (OTL; London, 1989), 285.

²⁸ Cf. Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 285 (as to Josiah). Ulfgard (*Sukkot*, 125) points to Exod 19 and Josh 24.

land, and in 2 Kgs 23, the reestablishment of the law after the book had been found in the temple. Similarly, Neh 8.1-6 evokes the idea of a promulgation and proclamation of the book of the law of Moses by Ezra, this time after resettlement in the land (cf. Neh 7).²⁹

By reading aloud the (written text of the) law Ezra affirmed 'the authority of the written word for the life of the community'.³⁰ In so doing the law was publicly ratified and put in force.³¹ Such a proclamation of the law, however, is only effective if the person by whom the ceremony is conducted, is an authority who is recognised by the people. So the putting in force of the law, in our text, is closely related to the position held by Ezra. The way Ezra is depicted in Neh 8 is obviously that of a man in power, a leader. In my view, the purpose of the whole story is to make clear that Ezra should be regarded the leader of the people, like Joshua, and Josiah before him.

According to Ezra 7.1-6 and Neh 8, Ezra was 'priest' and 'scribe'.³² As to the latter element, he is designated 'an expert scribe (*soper mahir*) in the law of Moses' (v. 6). In this instance the term *soper* (see also Ezra 7.11; Neh 8.1, 4, 9, 13; 12.26, 36) does not denote a Persian official, a scribe in the Persian administration,³³ but is best understood in the sense of 'scholar', as for example in the case of Achiqar.³⁴ In the *Story of Achiqar* the latter is described likewise – *spr hkym wmhyr*, 'a wise and expert scribe'.³⁵ According to this *Story*, dating to the second half of the fifth century BCE, Achiqar was a wise scholar at the Assyrian court, 'counsellor of all Assyria' (col. i, 12). The status of Achiqar as a high ranking scholar sheds light on the position assigned to Ezra in Ezra 7 and Neh 8. Achiqar is a man of great wisdom, the same applies to Ezra

²⁹ For a similar idea, see Pakkala, *Ezra*, 176 ('reestablishment of the law after a period of lawlessness').

³⁰ Gary N. Knoppers and Paul B. Harvey Jr., 'The Pentateuch in Ancient Mediterranean Context: The Publication of Local Lawcodes', in Gary N. Knoppers and Bernard M. Levinson (eds), *The Pentateuch as Torah. New Models for Understanding Its Promulgation and Acceptance* (Winona Lake, IN, 2007), 137.

³¹ On this aspect, see Joachim Schaper, 'The 'Publication' of Legal Texts in Ancient Judah', in Knoppers and Levinson, *Pentateuch as Torah*, 231.

³² See also Ezra 7.11, and Neh 8.1-2, 9; 12.26.

³³ On this issue dealt with from a historical perspective, see e.g. David Janzen, 'The 'Mission' of Ezra and the Persian-Period Temple Community', *JBL* 119 (2000) 619-643, and Reinhard G. Kratz, *Das Judentum im Zeitalter des Zweiten Tempels* (FAT 42; Tübingen, 2004), 115-118.

³⁴ Cf. Karel van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible* (Cambridge, MA, London, 2007), 79.

³⁵ See A. Cowley, *Aramaic Papyri of the Fifth Century B.C.* (Oxford, 1923), 212.

the difference being that, in the Aramaic section, the wisdom of Ezra is related to the law of God (see Ezra 7.14 // 7.25!).

The first element, Ezra as priest, is fully in line with all this, if one realizes the way Ezra is introduced in Ezra 7.1-5. He is said to be the son of Seraiah, son of Azariah, ..., son of Eleazar, son of Aaron, 'the chief priest', thus being presented as a descendant of the priests who were holding the office of high priest (see 1 Chron 6.29-41 [MT; RSV: vv. 3-15]). Hence, the underlying claim is that Ezra should be seen as the legitimate priestly leader of the Judean people. Since, as far as we know, others were holding the office of high priest in the Persian period (Neh 12.10-11),³⁶ this strongly suggests that a rival claim is implied here. The presentation of Ezra, in the final redaction of Ezra-Nehemiah, as a major figure – a leading scholar and a priestly leader – is best understood as part of the propaganda of the whole work,³⁷ issued by a group of people that were not only critical of fellow Judeans who were in favour of kingship (see Ezra 4.20), on the one hand, but also of the priesthood of the time (see Neh 13.29), on the other.

Ezra as a leading scholar and priestly leader in Neh 8 is to be distinguished from the Levites who are also part of the story (vv. 7-8). The latter have a lower position because they are Levites and Ezra is priest. The Levites are not designated as *soper*,³⁸ but depicted as playing the role of teachers (*mebin*)³⁹ because they help the people to understand the law by reading it 'clearly' and 'by giving its sense' (Neh 8.7-8).⁴⁰

³⁶ On this passage which seems to present a reliable picture regarding the high priests in the Persian period, see James C. VanderKam, *From Joshua to Caiaphas. High Priests after the Exile* (Minneapolis, Assen, 2004), 46-49, and Kratz, *Judentum*, 106-111. It is unlikely that Ezra has been high priest in Persian Yehud; on this issue, see also James W. Watts, 'The Torah as the Rhetoric of Priesthood', in Knoppers and Levinson, *Pentateuch as Torah*, 323 n. 9.

³⁷ The authorization by the Persian government is, in my view, also part of the propaganda of the whole book.

³⁸ The term *soper* in the sense of (leading) scholar is also attested in Ben Sirach (38.24) and in 11QPs-a (27.2 [David]). In sources of the time – Ezra-Nehemiah and Chronicles – this term, in the sense of scholar, is not used for the Levites (the two instances, 1 Chr 24.6, and 2 Chr 34.13, are about Levites as scribe in the sense of secretary, administrator). It is not to be denied, however, that the Levites as portrayed in Neh 8.7-8 are supposed to have reading and teaching abilities (see also 2 Chr 17.7-9), Ezra being though the prime authority in reading and interpretation.

³⁹ For this term, see also Ezra 8.16; 1 Chr 25.7-8.

⁴⁰ On the rendering 'clearly', see A. van der Kooij, 'Nehemiah 8.8 and the Question of the "Targum"-Tradition', in Gerard J. Norton and Stephen Pisano (eds.), *Tradition of the Text. Studies offered to Dominique Barthélemy in Celebration of his 70th Birthday* (OBO 109; Freiburg, Göttingen, 1991), 79-90.

Ezra is the prime authority as is also clear from another verse in this chapter, v. 13: ‘On the second day the heads of father’s houses of all people, with the priests and the Levites, came together to Ezra the scribe in order to study the words of the law’. Ezra is the one who explains to both the representatives of the lay people and to priests and Levites the words of the law.

Summarizing, Neh 8.1-6 is not in line with Deut 31.9-13 insofar as the reading of ‘the book / scroll of the law’ is not described as having been performed at the feast of Tabernacles. The public reading by Ezra is rather to be seen as a one-time event, similar to the promulgation and proclamation of the book of the law of Moses by Joshua (Josh 8) or Josiah (2 Kgs 23). Yet, given the link with the festival of Tabernacles in the rest of Neh 8 it may well be that Deut 31 stands at the background of Neh 8, the more so since the event as described in Neh 8.1-6 has important elements in common with Deut 31.

Deut 31 together with Josh 8 and 2 Kgs 23 may help us find an answer to the disputed question to which book of the law Neh 8 refers. Several suggestions have been made: the Pentateuch as a whole, an early version of the Pentateuch, part of the Pentateuch (Deut, or the priestly torah), or a similar but not identical collection of laws.⁴¹ In the light of the three passages just mentioned it seems likely that ‘the book of the law of Moses’ in Neh 8.2 refers to the book of Deuteronomy. Importantly, this is in keeping with the fact that this book is the only one of the five books, making up the whole Pentateuch, which, according to Deut 31, is to be read publicly to the people.

5.2 *1 Esdras and Josephus*

The passages in 1 Esdras and in Josephus’ *Antiquities* corresponding to Neh 8.1-6 are interesting since in both of them the issue of priestly leadership is at stake. Some comments on both passages are in order.

The Greek version of Neh 8.1-6 as found in 1 Esd 9.37-47 represents a text which, compared to the MT tradition, is marked by some interesting features. First, the reading ceremony does not take place at the Water Gate of the Old City, but ‘in the broad space in front of the east gateway

⁴¹ See e.g. Ulfgard, *Sukkot*, 125; Meindert Dijkstra, ‘The Law of Moses: the Memory of Mosaic Religion in and after the Exile’, in Rainer Albertz and Bob Becking (eds.), *Yahwism after the Exile. Perspectives on Israelite Religion in the Persian Era* (STAR 5; Assen, 2003), 90-91.

of the temple precinct', that is to say, in the temple.⁴² Second, Ezra is designated here as 'high priest' (ἀρχιερεύς) and 'reader' (ἀναγνώστης) (MT, 'priest' and 'scribe'). Thirdly, the ceremony on the wooden platform (v. 42) is more detailed than in Neh 8: according to vv. 45-46, Ezra was seated in a prominent place (προεκάθητο ἐπιδόξως; the notion of being seated is not present in MT); he took up (ἀναλαβόν) the book of the law, and opened it (λῦσαι) (in both cases the verb 'to open' in MT); and he praised 'the Lord, the most high God, God Sabaoth, the Almighty' (MT, 'the Great God').⁴³

According to this Greek text, the public reading of the law was carried out by Ezra designated here as 'high priest', in the temple area. As to the position of Ezra one could say that 1 Esdras makes explicit what is implicit in Ezra–Nehemiah. It is to be noted, however, that Ezra is not called 'high priest' from the outset, but only from 9.39ff. onwards ('priest' in 8.9, 19). His position as high priest seems to be related to his acting as public reader of the law, on the first day of the seventh month. Seen this way, the passage conveys the notion of the inauguration of Ezra as priestly leader. A similar event is to be found in 1 Esdras 5.46-52 (cf. Ezra 3.1-6), about the inauguration of the altar and of the sacrificial cult, on the first day of the seventh month.

In 1 Esd 5.40 it is stated that 'Nehemiah (not in MT Ezra 2.62 // Neh 7.65), and Attarias, said to them not to partake of the sacred food until there should be a high priest (MT, 'priest') wearing the Revelation and Truth'. Read within 1 Esdras as a whole, Ezra, the high priest in ch. 9, is easily understood to be the high priest who is announced in 5.40.

Regarding our main topic, it is clear that, just as in Neh 8, the public reading of the law in 1 Esd 9 is not said to have taken place at Tabernacles. Notably, unlike Neh 8, the text of 1 Esdras, as we have it, does not refer to the Feast of Tabernacles in ch. 9 at all.⁴⁴

Josephus retells the story of the reading of the law by Ezra in a different way:

⁴² The Water Gate of Neh is replaced here by one of the temple gates. See Zipora Talshir, *I Esdras. A Text Critical Commentary* (SBL SCSS 50; Atlanta, 2001), 485.

⁴³ On the latter part of the Greek text, see Talshir, *I Esdras*, 491, with references to Sir 50.14, 17.

⁴⁴ On the issue of the ending of 1 Esdras, see A. van der Kooij, 'On the Ending of the Book of 1 Esdras', in Claude E. Cox (ed.), *VII Congress of the International Organization for Septuagint and Cognate Studies Leuven 1989* (SBL SCSS 31; Atlanta, 1991), 37-49. For a different view, see Zipora Talshir, *I Esdras. From Origin to Translation* (SBL SCSS 47; Atlanta, 1999), 6-9.

In the seventh month they celebrated the festival of Tabernacles and, when almost all the people had gathered for it, they went up to the open court of the temple near the gate which faced the east, and asked Ezra to read to them the laws of Moses. So he stood up in the midst of the multitude and read them, taking from the early morning until noon. (*Ant.* 11.154-155)

If one realizes that the section about Ezra in *Ant.* 11 (121-158) is based on 1 Esdras,⁴⁵ it strikes one that Josephus' version of the reading of the law by Ezra differs greatly from 1 Esd 9. The divergencies clearly indicate that he wanted to play down the status of Ezra. First of all, the reading ceremony took place, according to Josephus, at the Feast of Tabernacles, and not a few days earlier (the first day of the seventh month). As a result, the public reading by Ezra is no longer a significant one-time event, but a performance in line with the regulation given in Deut 31. Second, Ezra is not portrayed as high priest, as in 1 Esdras. It is clear that Josephus does not regard him to have been a high priest because in the section on Ezra he explicitly mentions the one who was the high priest at that time – Joakeimos, the son of Jesus (11.121, 158; compare Neh 12.36). This also explains why the genealogy of Ezra is not mentioned by Josephus.⁴⁶

As we have seen, according to *Ant.* 4.209 the high priest when reading aloud the laws at the Feast, is standing on a raised platform. The fact that Ezra is not depicted as standing on a platform may well be due to the fact that he is not considered to be high priest by Josephus. It is said that he stood in the midst of the multitude (compare *Ant.* 10.63), but not on a platform.

Ezra was asked to read 'the laws of Moses'. Just as in *Ant.* 4.209 Josephus seems to have in mind the book of Deuteronomy. As we have seen, this book is referred to by him as 'the laws and this constitution' (see *Ant.* 4.193-194). In the section under discussion both the phrase 'the laws (of Moses)' as well as the term 'constitution' do occur. In 11.157 it is told that having celebrated the festival the people returned home 'singing hymns to God and expressing thanks to Ezra for rectifying the offences against the laws of the state (τῶν περὶ τὸ πολίτευμα παρανομηθέντων)'.

In short, unlike Neh 8 and 1 Esdras 9, Josephus has it that Ezra read the law at the Feast of Tabernacles, in line with Deut 31.

⁴⁵ This also applies to *Ant.* 11.1-120. See Louis H. Feldman, 'Josephus' portrait of Ezra', *VT* 43 (1993) 213.

⁴⁶ See Feldman, 'Portrait', 194.

5.3 *Nehemiah 8.18*

We now turn to the second passage in Neh 8 which is of interest to our topic – Neh 8.18. It reads thus:

And day by day, from the first day to the last day, he read from the book of the law of God. They kept the feast seven days, and on the eight day there was a solemn assembly, according to the ordinance.

This part of Neh 8 clearly refers to a public reading of Scriptures at a feast because we are told that ‘the book of the law of God’ was read daily at the Feast of Tabernacles. In light of the whole context of Neh 8 it stands to reason to think of Ezra as the one who did the reading.

Scholars usually refer to the command of Deut 31 as a kind of explanation of the practice implied in this verse. Ulfgard: ‘the reading ... each day ... may be associated with the command in Deut 31.10-13’;⁴⁷ Blenkinsopp: ‘reading of the Torah recalls Deut 31.10-13’;⁴⁸ Fishbane: ‘there is good reason that this festival lection is to regard ... as an exegetical deduction based on Deut 31.10-13’.⁴⁹ Duggan, on the other hand, is of the opinion that ‘Ezra’s reading of the law corresponds with Joshua’s actions on behalf of the Israelites’ (with reference to Josh 8.32-35 and 24.1-18).⁵⁰ However, the command in Deut 31, the public reading of the law every seven years at a particular moment at the Feast of Tabernacles, is different from a daily reading at the same festival. Nor does in my view the reading of the law by Joshua (Josh 8) shed any light on the practice of a daily reading at the feast. Furthermore, the reading in v. 18 is not said, at least not explicitly so, to be carried out before a large audience (the people of Israel), which forms an important element in Deut 31.10-13, as well as in Neh 8.1-6 and in Josh 8.32-35. Fishbane suggests that the daily reading has to do with the ritual of daily sacrifices prescribed for the whole period of the feast.⁵¹ This seems to me a plausible suggestion, since the reference to the days of the feast in Neh 8.18 has a parallel in Ezra 3.4, a passage which refers to the daily sacrifices at the same feast. Consequently, this does not point to Deuteronomy as the book being read, but rather to the section in the book of Numbers where the Tabernacles’ sacrifices of each day

⁴⁷ *Sukkot*, 135.

⁴⁸ *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 293.

⁴⁹ Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford, 1985), 112.

⁵⁰ *Covenant Renewal*, 134.

⁵¹ *Biblical Interpretation*, 112.

are specified (Num 29.12-38).⁵² If so, it would mean that the tradition found in the Mishnah (*Meg.* 3.5) goes back to the late Persian period.⁵³

6. Concluding remarks

1. Deuteronomy, Josephus' *Antiquities* and the Mishnah testify to the public reading of a book of the law at the Feast of Tabernacles. The reading is done by a leader, a high priest (Josephus) or a king (Mishnah). It is a ceremony which is supposed to take place, every seven years, in the temple, presumably in the large court of the women. The book of the law to be read on this national event is Deuteronomy, presumably by way of a selection of passages (cf. Mishnah). The purpose of the reading ceremony is educational, in line with Deut 31.12 (cf. Josephus), although one might doubt the effectivity of such an official event, once in seven years time.

It is difficult to say whether this ceremony at the Feast of Tabernacles did take place in history, but *Sotah* 7.8 seems to suggest that the public reading as prescribed in Deut 31 really was performed, at some time before 70 A.D. We do not know, however, when this procedure started, but it may be that the story of Neh 8.1-6 presupposes this type of practice (late Persian period).

2. The public reading by Ezra as described in Neh 8.1-6 can also be seen as a national event since it shares the same structure - with a leader as reader and the people of Israel (men, women, and children) as the audience. Unlike the procedure prescribed by Deut 31 the reading in Neh 8 is meant as a one-time event just as the public reading by Joshua in Josh 8, presumably in order to highlight and to underline the leadership of Ezra. Similar to Joshua 8, the event in Neh 8 marks the inauguration of a new period under the leadership of the one who conducts the public reading. This may explain why the public reading by Ezra is not presented, in Neh 8, as taking place at the Feast of Tabernacles. Because the reading at this feast would suggest a regular practice, and not a one-time event. It is interesting to note that this is precisely the difference between the corresponding passages in 1 Esd

⁵² Interestingly, Neh 8.14-15 is closely related to Lev 23.33-43. See Pakkala, *Ezra*, 158-164, and on Sukkot in Lev 23, see Karl W. Weyde, *The Appointed Festivals of YHWH. The Festival Calendar in Leviticus 23 and the sukkot Festival in Other Biblical Texts* (FAT 2, Reihe 4; Tübingen, 2004), 113-142.

⁵³ A minor difference is that, according to *Meg.* 3.5, the portion read on the first day of the feast is from Lev 23 (see above), and not Num 29.12-16, as one would expect.

- 9 (even to the extent of not referring to the Feast of Tabernacles at all), on the one hand, and in Josephus' *Antiquities*, on the other.
3. The daily reading referred to in Neh 8.18 is of another type, not related to Deut 31 nor to Josh 8. It probably refers to a reading of the section in the book of Numbers where the Tabernacles' sacrifices of each day are specified (Num 29.12-38), very much so as stated in the Mishnah. It was a reading ritual carried out in the temple area. There is no explicit reference to the people as the audience, but this may be due to the fact that a reading from Num 29, about the sacrifices for each day of the festival, was not meant to be directed to the people, but rather to the acting priests in the temple.
 4. It is important to note that both the public reading at the Feast of Tabernacles and the reading event as depicted in Neh 8 are quite different from the regular reading of the law in the synagogues. First, the reading of the law of Moses at the Feast of Tabernacles as well as in Neh 8 is a national event taking place not that often (only once in seven years time), whereas the meeting in a synagogue is of a different kind taking place every week, and secondly, the scriptures involved are not the same: (sections from) the book of Deuteronomy, on the one hand, and the Pentateuch as a whole, on the other. Hence, it is far from certain to consider the prescribed reading in Deut 31 and the reading as presented in Neh 8 as part of the background of the synagogue practice at a later stage.⁵⁴
 5. Finally, a note on terminology. As noted above, in the Mishnah, the expression *seper torah* can be used as reference to one of the books (scrolls) of the Torah (Pentateuch); so in *Sotah* 7.8 (Deuteronomy), and in *Yoma* 7.1 (Leviticus). The same turns out to be the case in Neh 8 where 'the book of the law of Moses' (v. 1) seems to refer to the scroll of Deuteronomy, whereas 'the book of the law of God' in v. 18 is best understood as a reference to the scroll of Numbers.

⁵⁴ Hence, it is difficult to assume that the public reading of the law, in the sense of the Pentateuch, were introduced during Darius' reign, as is argued by Runesson (*Origins of the Synagogue*, 285).