

Reading Shir haShirim, Ruth, Eicha and Kohelet

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The reading of *Megillat Esther* on Purim is dealt with extensively in the Mishna and Talmud in *Masechet Megilla*. Today it is customary to read *Shir haShirim* on Pesach, the *Book of Ruth* on Shavuot, *Eicha* on the Ninth of Av and *Kohelet* on Sukkot. None of these readings are mentioned in the Talmud. In this article we will trace the origin of this custom, the ways it was performed and the reasons given for it.

The Traditional Connections Between the Holidays and the *Megillot*

Shir haShirim

A possible conceptual source for reading *Shir haShirim* on Pesach is found at the end of R. Saadia Gaon's introduction to his commentary to *Shir haShirim*. He states there "and when Solomon reigned and sat on his throne in the last days of Pesach he prophesized in *Shir haShirim* (ניבא) (בשיר השירים)." The source for this idea is unknown, but it may explain the connection between *Shir haShirim* and the last days of Pesach, when it is customarily read.¹

The earliest source that provides explanations for reading each of the *megillot* on a particular holiday is the 11th-century work *Machzor Vitry*. *Machzor Vitry* explains that *Shir haShirim* is read on Pesach because it was understood to hint to the redemption of the Israelites in 1:9, "I have likened you, my darling, to a mare in Pharaoh's chariots."² In the 1300s, R. Avraham b. Natan haYarchi reiterated the explanation found in *Machzor*

¹ S. Wertheimer, *Geon haGeonim* vol. 1 (Jerusalem, 1925), p. 81, note 49.

² S. Hurwitz, ed., *Machzor Vitry* (Nuremberg: J. Bulka, 1926), p. 304.

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Vitry in his work *Sefer haManbig*,³ which was in turn quoted by Abudraham.⁴ Additionally, many verses in *Shir haShirim* are interpreted in *Shir haShirim Rabbah* as referring to the Exodus⁵ and there are kabbalistic connections between Pesach and *Shir haShirim* as well.⁶

Another approach is that many songs are associated with Pesach, the *Song at the Sea*, the *Hallel* sung at night and at the Seder, the song to be sung in the future in the *Haftorah* of the last day of Pesach in the Diaspora, making *Shir haShirim* an appropriate addition to this holiday of songs.⁷

Ruth

The earliest explanation for why Ruth is read on Shavuot is found in the beginning of the midrash *Ruth Zuta*. The midrash asks, “What is the connection between Ruth and Atzeret, so that it is read on Atzeret, the time of the giving of the Torah? To teach you that the Torah is only given through suffering and poverty. And so it is written, ‘Your tribe dwells there; O God, in Your goodness You provide for the needy’ (Psalms 68:11).” The Torah said before the Holy One Blessed be He, “Master of the Universe, make my portion with the tribe of the needy, for if the wealthy deal with me they will become haughty, but when they are needy and deal with me, they know that they are hungry, as it is said, ‘Folly was placed on lofty heights, while rich men sat in low estate’ (*Kobelet* 10:6).”⁸ It is not clear when this midrash was composed. Most opinions range from the 10th through 12th century, though some give a much earlier date.⁹ This explanation is also brought at the end of the 11th-century work *Midrash Lekach Tov* on Ruth,¹⁰ with slightly different phrasing. Later this explanation was quoted in *Yalkut Shimoni Ruth* (end of remez 596), and from there in *Magen Avraham (Orach Chayyim 490:8)*.

³ Y. Refael, ed., *Sefer haManbig* (Jerusalem: Mossad haRav Kook, 1978), pp. 416-417.

⁴ *Sefer Abudraham* (Jerusalem: 1995), p. 266.

⁵ See for example, *Shir haShirim Rabbah* 1:2 and 1:7. See also Shmuel Gelbard, *Otzar Ta'amei haMinbagim* (Petach Tikvah: Mifal Rashi, 1995), p. 296.

⁶ See J.D. Eisenstein, *Otzar Dinim u'Minbagim* (Tel Aviv: Shilo, 1975), p. 414.

⁷ Amos Chacham, *Da'at Mikra – Shir haShirim* (Jerusalem: Mossad haRav Kook, 1990), p. 15.

⁸ S. Buber, ed., *Midrash Zuta* (Vilna: Romm, 1925), p. 39, 1:1. See the discussion of this teaching in Yosef Chaim David Azulai, *Simchat Haregel* (Lemberg: 1863), *limud* 3, p. 5.

⁹ Anat Reizel, *Introduction to the Midrashic Literature* (Alon Shvut: Tevunot, 2011), p. 178 (Hebrew).

¹⁰ S. Bamberger, ed., *Peirush Lekach Tov – Ruth* (Mainz: Lehman, 1887), p. 46.

After bringing the explanation found in *Ruth Zuta*, *Midrash Lekach Tov* on Ruth brings another reason to read Ruth on Shavuot, “Since this *megilla* is all *chesed*, and the Torah is all *chesed*, as it is said, ‘the law of kindness (*torat chesed*) is on her tongue’ (Proverbs 31:26), and the Torah was given on the holiday of Shavuot.”¹¹

Machzor Vitry explains that Ruth is read on Shavuot because it takes place during the harvest (Ruth 1:22),¹² and also because Ruth underwent a conversion and accepted the Torah, just as the Israelites did at Sinai.¹³ Besides these two new explanations, *Machzor Vitry* also quotes the explanation from *Ruth Zuta*, adding that R. Yehuda b. Barzilai explains that when the Israelites left Egypt through suffering they were redeemed, so too Ruth lived through famine and then accepted the Torah and converted.¹⁴ As with the explanation *Machzor Vitry* gave for *Shir haShirim*, these explanations were also quoted in *Sefer haManbig*,¹⁵ and then by Abudraham.¹⁶ He was in turn quoted by R. Moshe Isserles in his *Darkei Moshe* (490:1), making the two explanations of *Machzor Vitry* the most well-known classic explanations for reading Ruth on Shavuot.

In the 1500s, R. Mordechai Yaffe explained that Lev. 23:15–21 talks about Shavout, and immediately after that, Lev. 23:22 states, “When you reap the harvest of your land you shall not reap all the way to the edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger...” This is exactly what Boaz fulfilled, so we read Ruth on Shavuot.¹⁷

¹¹ S. Bamberger, ed., *Peirush Lekach Tov – Ruth* (Mainz: Lehman, 1887), p. 47.

¹² Note however that Ruth takes place “at the beginning of the barley harvest” (Ruth 1:22), which is actually at Pesach, when the *omer* of barley is offered, while Shavuot is the time of the wheat harvest (Exodus 34:22). Ruth 2:23 mentions that Ruth “gleaned until the barley harvest and the wheat harvest were finished” so the narrative did continue into the time of Shavuot.

¹³ See BT *Yevamot* 46b. Abraham Hirshowitz, *Minbagei Yeshurun* (Vilna: 1899), *siman* 135, p. 74, explains that based on this, Ruth is read specifically on the second day of Shavout because that was the day when the Israelites made a covenant to accept the Torah and said, “We shall do and we shall listen.”

¹⁴ S. Hurwitz, ed., *Machzor Vitry* (Nuremberg: J. Bulka, 1926), p. 344. Note that the association with leaving Egypt would make Ruth appropriate to be read on Pesach as well.

¹⁵ Y. Refael, ed., *Sefer haManbig* (Jerusalem: Mossad haRav Kook, 1978), pp. 416–417.

¹⁶ *Sefer Abudraham* (Jerusalem: 1995), p. 266.

¹⁷ Moredechai Yaffe, *Levush Haachur* (Bardichev: 1818), *siman* 494:2. It may also be that the reading of Ruth was meant to instruct the listeners regarding the charity

Later works added more explanations to these. R. Alexander Schorr (1673–1737), in his book *Bechor Shor*, writes that he thinks the connection is that Ruth was written to provide the lineage of King David, who according to the JT *Chaggiga* 2:3 died on Shavuot. R. Schorr reasons that since God completes the years of the righteous, it must be that David was also born on Shavuot,¹⁸ so it is appropriate to read Ruth on the day of the birth of King David, in his honor.¹⁹ R. Schorr seems to be the originator of this particular explanation, which proved to be very popular. This same explanation is found, without attribution, in the book *Binyan Ariel*, by R. Shaul Levinstam (1717–1797), head of the Amsterdam beit din,²⁰ and in the writings of many other later figures.²¹

R. Yosef David Chaim Azulai (Chida, 1724–1806) gives another explanation based on *gematriya*, that at first Ruth observed only the seven Noahide Laws, and when she accepted the Torah, she took on 606 more commandments. The *gematriya* of 606 contains the same letters as the name Ruth (ר"ת), so on Shavuot when all of Israel accepted an additional 606 commandments, Ruth is read.²²

given to the poor at harvest season. See Feivel Meltzer, *Da'at Mikra – Ruth* (Jerusalem: Mossad haRav Kook, 1990), p. 20, note 56.

¹⁸ Although there is no explicit early source that David was born on Shavuot, JT *Berachot* 2:1, JT *Rosh Hashanah* 1:1 and *Moed Katan* 3:7 all refer to David living “full days” based on I Chronicles 17:11, “When your days are done and you follow your fathers.” Thanks to Avi Levine for finding these references.

¹⁹ Alexander Schorr, *Bechor Shor* (Zitomir: 1868), p. 26, comment to Baba Batra 13b. This is the source quoted by Yosef Chaim David Azulai in *Birkei Yosef, Orach Chayyim* 494:11. There he refers to Schorr by his major work on the laws of *shechitta, Simlah Chadasha*. Zevin mentions this explanation in his *Hamoadim b'Halacha* (Jerusalem: Yad haRav Herzog, 1980), p. 393, referring to Schorr by another of his works, *Tevuot Shor*. Abraham Hirshowitz, *Minbagei Yesburun* (Vilna: 1899), siman 135, p. 75, explains that based on this Ruth is read specifically on the second day of Shavout because that was the day King David was buried.

²⁰ Shaul Levinstam, *Binyan Ariel* (Cracow: 1905), p. 248. This is the source mentioned by Avraham Sperling, *Sefer Ta'amei haMinbagim u'Mekorei haDinim* (Lemberg: David Roth, 1928), p. 74a and in Feivel Meltzer, *Da'at Mikra – Ruth* (Jerusalem: Mossad haRav Kook, 1990), p. 21, note 57.

²¹ For example, Schorr is quoted in *Shaarei Tesbuvah, Orach Chayyim* 494:7, Avraham Khalfon, *Chayei Avraham* (Levorno: 1826), p. 41b, siman 282 (in later editions siman 289). See also Nachman Zelnik, *Sefer Atzeret – Chag haShavuot* (Jerusalem: Machon Harry Fischel, 1989), pp. 211–212.

²² Yosef Chaim David Azulai, *Birkei Yosef, Orach Chayyim* 494:11. See there for another *gematriya*-based explanation. This explanation is quoted in Yitzchak Leip-

In the introduction to the Book of Ruth printed in the Sefardic *machzor Moadei Hashem* another reason is given, that we read Ruth on Shavuot to teach us that “Ruth only attained perfection through her good choices and diligent effort to enter under the wings of the Divine Presence, so too should each person whose heart prods him to attain happiness, and not rely on his background and lineage.”²³

R. Yehudah Leib Alter, the *Sfat Emet*, explains that Ruth was chosen to be read on the day when we commemorate the giving of the Torah because the entire story of Ruth is based on the Rabbinic interpretation in TB *Yevamot* 76b of Deut. 23:4, “No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted into the congregation of the Lord,” that this applies only to males and not female Ammonites and Moabites. Reading Ruth on this day shows that the Oral and Written Torah are inseparable and comprise one unit.²⁴ Taking this idea further, R. Yehuda Leib Maimon (Fishman) explains that the reading of Ruth on Shavuot was instituted against the Karaites. Shavuot was a contentious holiday because there were conflicting Rabbinic and Karaite interpretations of Lev. 23:15, “And you shall count for yourselves from the day after the Sabbath...seven full weeks,” the Rabbis understanding “the day after the Sabbath” here to mean the day after the first day of Pesach, and the Karaites understanding that it is referring to the day after the Saturday that falls out during Pesach. Thus the Rabbinic method led to Shavuot always being celebrated on the sixth of Sivan but on different days of the week, and the Karaite system always had Shavuot fall on a Sunday, but on different calendar dates. The founder of the Karaite movement was Anan, who was of Davidic descent. Reading Ruth on Shavuot was tantamount to saying to the Karaites that if you do not accept the Rabbinic interpretations, your founder himself would not be a legitimate member of the Jewish people.²⁵

itz, *Sefer Matamim* (Warsaw: 1890), p. 57, *siman* 59, and from there in J.D. Eisenstein, *Otzar Dinim u'Minbagim* (Tel Aviv: Shilo, 1975), p. 383 and Shmuel Gelbard, *Otzar Ta'amei haMinbagim* (Petach Tikvah: Mifal Rashi, 1995), p. 307.

²³ *Moadei Hashem* (Livorno: 1872), p. 190a. This book was first published in 1839. A Chassidic take on this basic idea can be found in Yehuda Aryeh Leib Alter, *Sfat Emet – Bemidbar* (Petrikov:1905) Shavuot 5644, p. 36.

²⁴ Yehuda Aryeh Leib Alter, *Sfat Emet – Bemidbar* (Petrikov:1905) Shavuot 5633, p. 23. See also Eliyahu Kitov, *Sefer haToda'ab* (Jerusalem: Beit Hotza'at Sefarim, 1958), vol. 2, p. 301.

²⁵ Yehuda Leib Maimon, *Chagim u'Moadim* (Jerusalem: Weiss, 1943), pp. 269-270. This idea is also found in Maimon's series of articles *Midei Chodesh b'Chodsho* in *Sinai* vol. 35, 1953, pp. 158-159, later collected in his book *Midei Chodesh b'Chodsho* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1962).

While these multiple explanations indicate that it may be a confluence of reasons that led to Ruth being read on Shavuot,²⁶ a certain progression can be noted in the explanations given over time. The earliest explanation, found in both *Ruth Zuta* and *Midrash Lekach Tov*, was based on an understanding that the Torah is associated with suffering. This explanation would fall by the wayside over time, being replaced with more positive associations, such as the theme of *chesed*. Also we find many explanations in the time of the Rishonim revolving around textual elements and themes in the Book of Ruth itself, such as acceptance of the Torah and the harvest season. It was only much later that the connection would be associated with King David.

Eicha

The connection between *Eicha* and the Ninth of Av is far more obvious than the connections provided for other *megillot* and the holidays on which they are read. TB *Taanit* 30a states that it is prohibited to read from the Tanach on the Ninth of Av as this creates joy. One of the exceptions noted is “*Kinnot*,” *Megillat Eicha*, which deals in its entirety with the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem.²⁷ While the Talmud says that one is allowed to read *Eicha* on the Ninth of Av, it does not record a custom to specifically do so. However, in the Jerusalem Talmud *Shabbat* 16:1 we do read of rabbis studying *Eicha* on the eve of the Ninth of Av that fell out on Shabbat.

Kohelet

Machzor Vitry explains that *Kohelet* is read on Shabbat Chol haMoed of Sukkot or Shmini Atzeret because of the verse “Distribute portions to seven or even to eight” (11:2), which was understood as referring to the seven days of Sukkot and the eighth day of Shmini Atzeret.²⁸ Also because of I Kings 8:2, “All the men of Israel gathered (*vayikabalu*) before King Solomon at the Feast, in the month of *Ethanim*, that is, the seventh month.” This was taken to hint at reading *Kohelet* at this time of year.²⁹

²⁶ Feivel Meltzer, *Da'at Mikra – Ruth* (Jerusalem: Mossad haRav Kook, 1990), p. 20.

²⁷ Yechiel Zvi Moskovitz, *Da'at Mikra – Eicha* (Jerusalem: Mossad haRav Kook, 1990), pp. 3–5.

²⁸ See BT *Erwin* 40b. See note 30 in Hurwitz, ed., *Machzor Vitry* (Nuremberg: J. Bulka, 1926), p. 441. This explanation is also brought in Salomon Buber, ed., *Siddur Rashi* (Berlin: Chevrat Makitzei Nirdamim, 1910) p. 104, siman 222.

²⁹ S. Hurwitz, ed., *Machzor Vitry*, pp. 440-441.

Sefer haManhig expands on the connection between *Kobelet* and Shmini Atzeret noted in *Machzor Vitry*. The connection between *Kobelet* and the verse “Distribute portions to seven or even to eight” (11:2) is that since this time of year is when the harvest is collected, it was considered appropriate to warn about giving the tithes and priestly portion. It is also when vows are due (BT *Rosh Hashanah* 4b).³⁰ Additionally, Natan haYarchi explains that Sukkot was the time of year for gathering the people together, particularly for chastising,³¹ so it was appropriate to read *Kobelet* then. When discussing these explanations, haYarchi notes that he heard these reasons from others, they are not his own invention.³² These explanations are quoted in Abudraham.³³

Magen Avraham (490:8) gives another explanation, that since Sukkot is a time of joy (Lev. 23:40, Deut. 16:14, 15), and in *Kobelet* 2:2 it says “Of merriment, ‘What good is that?’” it is appropriate to read *Kobelet* on Sukkot. While this would seem actually to be a reason not to read *Kobelet* on Sukkot, as *Kobelet* seems to be pointing out that joy is pointless, it is usually explained that *Kobelet* is denigrating foolish revelry, and Sukkot is a time of spiritual joy.³⁴

A more general explanation for reading these three *megillot* over these three holidays is based on the teaching of R. Yochanan in *Shir haShirim Rabbah* 1:10, that *Shir haShirim* reflects the youthful practice of composing songs and poems and *Kobelet* reflects the thinking of an old man looking back on life. The three pilgrimage festivals follow the agricultural cycle, from its beginning at Pesach at springtime, to the harvest of Shavuot, to the end of the cycle at Sukkot, so a *megilla* appropriate for each phase in this cycle and each corresponding phase of life is read on each holiday.³⁵

The Early Version of the Custom

The earliest source for the reading of all of these *megillot*, except for *Kobelet*, is *Masechet Soferim*, one of the Minor Tractates. This work is understood

³⁰ *Kobelet* 5:3-4 warns not to delay the fulfillment of vows.

³¹ See Deut. 31:10; also I Kings 8:2.

³² Y. Refael, ed., *Sefer haManhig* (Jerusalem: Mossad haRav Kook, 1978), pp. 416-417.

³³ *Sefer Abudraham* (Jerusalem: 1995), p. 266.

³⁴ See Yehuda Shaviv, “Kohélet on Sukkot,” *HaMayaan*, Tishrei 5761, 41:1, pp. 13-14.

³⁵ See J.D. Eisenstein, *Otzar Dinim u'Minbagim* (Tel Aviv: Shilo, 1975), p. 414; Mordechai Zer-Kavod, *Da'at Mikra – Kobelet* (Jerusalem: Mossad haRav Kook, 1990), p. 6.

to represent rulings and customs from the middle of the Geonic period, around the 8th or 9th century.³⁶

Reading *Shir haShirim* on Pesach and *Ruth* on Shavuot is described in *Masechet Soferim*, 14:16.³⁷ “*Shir haShirim* is read on the last nights of the additional day of the holiday in the Diaspora, half on one night, half on the second night. *Ruth* is read on the night after the first day of Atzeret—up to half—and is completed on the night after the last day of the holiday. Some say: In all we begin on the Saturday night before the holiday.” Soferim concludes that this is all based on custom. *Kobelet* is not mentioned as being read at any time during the year.³⁸

This way of reading the *megillot* is similar to the way Soferim describes an additional reading of Esther. There it is noted there that the “congregation reads together” *Megillat Esther* in two halves on the two Saturday nights of Adar preceding Purim. The first five chapters are read on one Saturday night, the last five chapters on the following Saturday night. The custom is presented after stating the rule that one must read *Megillat Esther* on both Purim eve and day, a ruling found also in TB *Megilla* 4a. The first Mishnah in *Megilla* discusses additional days when Esther can be read, and TJ *Megilla* 1b brings the teaching of R. Natan that “the entire month is fit for reading the *megilla*.” This demonstrates that there is the possibility of a certain amount of leeway regarding when a *megilla* is read relative to the holiday it is associated with, something also seen in the first Mishna of *Masechet Megilla*, where the 11th, 12th, 13th, 14th and 15th of Adar are all presented as viable days for the reading of Esther. The reading on the

³⁶ See M.B. Lerner, “*Massekhet Soferim*” in *The Literature of the Sages. First Part: Mishna, Tosefta, Talmud, External Tractates*, S. Safrai and P.J. Tomson, eds. (Assen/Maastricht and Philadelphia: van Gorcum, 1987), pp. 397–400.

³⁷ In some editions 14:17 or 14:18.

³⁸ Some versions of *Masechet Soferim* include *Kobelet* in the list of *megillot* over which a blessing is recited in *Soferim* 14:3. For example, the versions of *Masechet Soferim* quoted in S. Hurwitz, ed., *Machzor Vitry* (Nuremberg: J. Bulka, 1926), p. 344, *siman* 312, note 20; p. 706, *siman* 527; Alexander Suslin, *Sefer haAgudab* (Cracow: 1575), p. 227b; *Mordechai, Megilla, siman* 784. The Vilna Gaon also added *Kobelet* to the list in *Soferim* 14:3, see *Biur haGra, Orach Chayyim* 490:9. See also M. Hager, *Masechet Soferim* (New York: 1937), p. 251; Shmuel Wasserstein, *Masechet Soferim* (Jerusalem: 2001), pp. 119–120. *Kobelet* does not appear in the versions of *Masechet Soferim* quoted in *Sefer Abudraham* (Jerusalem: 1995), p. 266; *Heghot Meimoniai, Hilchot Taanit*, 5:2 and in the section “*Minhagei Tisha b'Av*” at the end of *Hilchot Taanit* chapter 5; Asher Siev, ed., *Shut Rema* (Jerusalem: 1970), number 35, p. 197, see there note 31. Even the versions of *Masechet Soferim* that do include *Kobelet* have no mention of it being read at any particular time of year.

Saturday nights before Purim seems not to have been led by a *shalich tzibbur* as it is described as the congregation reading together.³⁹ It would seem that this is also the way Soferim understood *Shir haShirim* and *Ruth* were read.

We see that *megillot* were read in parts, on the nights after Shabbat or a holiday.⁴⁰ That the additional holiday day of the Diaspora figures so prominently in this custom suggests that this custom may not have been practiced in Israel at all.⁴¹ However, *Masechet Soferim* has long been considered to be a work of Palestinian provenance,⁴² and this chapter in particular is understood to be very influenced by the Jerusalem Talmud,⁴³ so this may be the Diaspora version of an Israeli custom to read the *megillot*.

Regarding the reading of *Eicha*, *Soferim* 18:4 states that “Some read the Book of *Eicha* in the evening, and some delay reading it until the morning after the Torah reading.”⁴⁴ This section is understood as reflecting the custom in Israel,⁴⁵ which is also seen in JT *Shabbat* 16:1, where we find rabbis studying *Eicha* on the eve of the Ninth of Av, planning to finish it on the Ninth of Av itself. This shows that there was some flexibility regarding when the reading took place, something noted in *Masechet Soferim* regarding *Shir haShirim* and *Ruth* as well. This flexibility is reflected in later practices regarding the *megillot*, as we will see.

The nighttime reading of *Eicha* became the dominant custom. It is already indicated in *Eicha Rabbah* (*petichta* 17), where it is mentioned that people go from eating and drinking at a meal right before the Ninth of

³⁹ Yitzchak Landa, *Masechet Soferim – Mikra Soferim* (Suwalki, Poland: 1862), p. 29a, note 11.

⁴⁰ Although *Soferim* explicitly discusses reading on Saturday night after Shabbat (*מוצאי שבת*), the other readings are described as taking place on “the night of the holiday” (*לילי יום טוב*), which for the second day of the holiday would seem to indicate once the holiday is over. However, sometimes the usage of *ליל* can indicate the late afternoon right before actual nightfall, as in the mishna in TB *Nedarim* 63b, according to the understanding of Rabbenu Nissim there, *ad sha'ah*. However, others interpret this mishna differently, see Rashash.

⁴¹ Wasserstein, *Masechet Soferim*, p. 132.

⁴² Blank, “It’s Time to Take Another Look at ‘Our Little Sister’ Soferim: A Bibliographical Essay,” pp. 2,4.

⁴³ M. Hager, *Masechet Soferim* (New York: 1937), p. 23, section 3:8.

⁴⁴ In some editions 18:5.

⁴⁵ M. Hager, *Masechet Soferim* (New York: 1937), p. 27.

Av to reading *Eicha*.⁴⁶ Many early works, such as *Machzor Vitry*⁴⁷ and *Hegbot Meimoniot*,⁴⁸ only mention the reading of *Eicha* at night. While *Tur* (*Orach Chayyim* 559) brings the custom to read *Eicha* only at night as well as the approach of *Masechet Soferim* that some read *Eicha* in the morning, it is clear that he presents the night reading as the standard approach.⁴⁹ Based on the *Tur*, R. Isaiah Horowitz in his *Shnei Luchot haBrit* writes that although *Eicha* is read publicly only at night, it is appropriate for God-fearing individuals to read *Eicha* again in the daytime.⁵⁰ This idea is brought in the *Mishna Berura* (559:2).

Machzor Vitry has the readings of *Shir haShirim*, Ruth and *Kobelet* all taking place during the daytime of the holiday. The nighttime readings and Saturday night readings before the holiday found in *Soferim* are no longer customary in *Machzor Vitry*. For example, *Machzor Vitry* states that *Shir haShirim* is read before the Torah reading in the morning of Shabbat Chol haMoed, and if there is no Shabbat Chol haMoed, it is read on the last day of Pesach.⁵¹

While the night readings are no longer common, R. Yitzchak Landa notes that his community's custom in 19th-century Poland was that in addition to the daytime readings, *Shir haShirim* was read on the first two nights of Pesach, and Ruth was read on the first night of Shavuot.⁵²

Similarly, while the divided readings are no longer common, they remained customary in some communities, mostly Sephardic. The 19th-century prayer book *Moadei Hashem*, subtitled “according to the custom of the holy Sephardic community,” writes that *Shir haShirim* is read before *mincha*, half on the seventh day of Pesach and half on the eighth.⁵³ Ruth is also read at *mincha*, divided over the two days of Shavuot.⁵⁴ The second part of Ruth begins with Ruth 3:8, “In the middle of the night, the man gave a start and pulled back—there was a woman lying at his feet!” a turning

⁴⁶ See the commentary of R. David Luria to this midrash.

⁴⁷ S. Hurwitz, ed., *Machzor Vitry* (Nuremberg: J. Bulka, 1926), p. 224.

⁴⁸ Both in *Hilchot Taanit*, 5:2 and in the section “*Minhagei Tisha b'Av*” at the end of *Hilchot Taanit* chapter 5, *Hegbot Meimoniot* mentions *Masechet Soferim* regarding the custom to read *Eicha* on the Ninth of Av in general, and to do so with a blessing, but a daytime reading is not mentioned.

⁴⁹ See *Beit Yosef* (*Orach Chayyim* 559), *Aval*.

⁵⁰ Isaiah Horowitz, *Shnei Luchot haBrit* vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Machon Shaarei Ziv, 1993), *Masechet Taanit*, Ner Mitzvah siman 1, p. 89.

⁵¹ S. Hurwitz, ed., *Machzor Vitry* (Nuremberg: J. Bulka, 1926), p. 304.

⁵² Yitzchak Landa, *Masechet Soferim – Mikra Soferim* (Suwalki, Poland: 1862), p. 29b, notes 12 and 13.

⁵³ *Moadei Hashem* (Livorno: 1872), p. 175a.

⁵⁴ *Moadei Hashem* (Livorno: 1872), p. 190a.

point in the story.⁵⁵ A Romanian prayer book gives two options for where the first part of *Ruth* ends, either with *Ruth* 2:4 or 3:12, which could also be considered turning points in the story.⁵⁶ A divided reading of *Shir haShirim* over the seventh and eighth days of Pesach is also found among the Jews of Libya⁵⁷ and Georgia.⁵⁸

Some communities divided up the *megillot* into even smaller sections. The Romanian community read *Shir haShirim* and *Kobelet* in four parts, one part after mincha on the first two and last two days of the holiday.⁵⁹ A similar division for *Shir haShirim* is recorded as a Bucharian custom.⁶⁰

Siddur Knesset Gedola describes a Yemenite custom of reading the *megillot* before *mincha* divided into parts. The first four chapters of *Shir haShirim* were read on the seventh day of Pesach, and the rest on the eighth. In Israel, since there is no eighth day, the reading took place over Shabbat Chol haMoed and the seventh day, or if there was no Shabbat Chol haMoed, on the first and seventh days of Pesach. Similarly, *Kobelet* was read in two parts over Shmini Atzeret and Simchat Torah,⁶¹ and in Israel in three parts over the first day of Sukkot, Shabbat Chol haMoed and Shmini Atzeret. *Ruth* was also read over the two days of Shavuot, ending with *Ruth* 2:12 on the first day, and completing the rest on the second day. Since there is no option to divide *Ruth* in Israel, it was all read at one time.⁶² The original custom in Yemen was clearly to always have a divided reading of the *megillot*, similar to what is described in *Masechet Soferim*.

While many Sephardic communities no longer kept up the divided reading of the *megillot* upon relocation to Israel,⁶³ we see that among some communities this custom was preserved as much as possible even in Israel. Similarly, while the nighttime readings were no longer customary, an

⁵⁵ *Moadei Hashem* (Livorno: 1872), p. 202b.

⁵⁶ *Siddur Tefilot haShana l'Minbag Kehilot Romania* (Venice: 1523), pp. 182b, 189b.

⁵⁷ Asher Wassertil, ed., *Yalkut Minbagim* (Jerusalem: 1996), Frija Zuartz, "Customs of the Jews of Libya," p. 382, 11:13.

⁵⁸ Asher Wassertil, ed., *Yalkut Minbagim* (Jerusalem: 1996), Asher Chadad, "Customs of the Jews of Georgia," p. 256, 9:18.

⁵⁹ *Siddur Tefilot haShana l'Minbag Kehilot Romania* (Venice: 1523), p. 130a, 404a.

⁶⁰ Asher Wassertil, ed., *Yalkut Minbagim* (Jerusalem: 1996), Giora Pozilov, "Customs of the Jews of Buchara," p. 216, 11:43.

⁶¹ Alternatively, half on Shabbat Chol haMoed and half on Simchat Torah. Asher Wassertil, ed., *Yalkut Minbagim* (Jerusalem: 1996), Shimon Gridi, "Customs of the Jews of Yemen," p. 545, 4:7.

⁶² Yosef Tzubiri, *Siddur Knesset HaGedola* vol. 2 (Tel Aviv: 1976), p. 327.

⁶³ Asher Wassertil, ed., *Yalkut Minbagim* (Jerusalem: 1996), Asher Chadad, "Customs of the Jews of Georgia," p. 256, 9:18.

aspect of the original custom was preserved by having the readings take place not in the morning, but in the afternoon, connected to mincha.⁶⁴

The Origin of the Custom

The original custom to read these *megillot* at night seems to be connected to the ruling in the Mishna (TB *Shabbat* 115a) that Ketuvim were not read on Shabbat “because of neglect of the *beit midrash*.” The “*beit midrash*” here refers to the time when rabbis would give a public lecture (*pirka*) on Shabbat. Rashi explains that this shiur was delivered on Shabbat before the Mussaf service, after which the congregation would come to the synagogue for Mussaf.⁶⁵ This shiur functioned to provide halachic instruction to working people who would not have time to study during the week. It is the forerunner of the sermon that today takes place at this point in the service.⁶⁶ Rashi in the name of his teacher, R. Yitzchak haLevi, explains that “Ketuvim draw the heart” and their study would cause people not to attend the public lecture, so the study of Ketuvim was banned during that time.⁶⁷ TB *Shabbat* 116b records the practice of Nehardea, “Nehardea was Shmuel’s town, and in Nehardea they *paskei sidra* with Ketuvim at *mincha* on Shabbat.” The Talmud explains that this is in keeping with Shmuel’s understanding that the Ketuvim may be studied as long as it was “not the time of the *beit midrash*.”⁶⁸ By the time of the Shabbat meal,⁶⁹ and certainly by the time of mincha, this lecture was over,⁷⁰ so the *paskei sidra* did not interfere with the lecture.

⁶⁴ The custom in Amsterdam is reported to have shifted around World War II from daytime readings of the *megillot* to mincha time. Yehuda Berelman, *Minhagei Amsterdam* (Jerusalem: Machon Yerushalayim, 2002), p. 44, chapter 3, 7:7.

⁶⁵ Rashi, *Berachot* 28b, *lo*.

⁶⁶ See Leopold Zunz, *HaDerashot b'Yisrael* (Hebrew translation of *Die Gottesdienstliche Vorträge der Juden Historisch Entwickelt*), (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1974), pp. 170–173.

⁶⁷ Rashi, *Shabbat* 115a, *bein sh'ei*, in the name of Rabbenu Yitzchak haLevi.

⁶⁸ Yosef Ingbar, *Minchat Yosef* (Lakewood, NJ: 2009), p. 41, uses the Shabbat morning ban on studying Ketuvim to explain why the Grace after Meals on weekdays uses the form *magdil* quoting from Psalms 18:51, while on Shabbat and holidays the form *migdol* is used from the parallel verse, 2 Samuel 22:51. This is to hint to the ban on Ketuvim on Shabbat and holidays during the time of the *beit midrash* lecture.

⁶⁹ Rashi, *Shabbat* 116b, *b'zman, shelo*. See Zunz, *HaDerashot b'Yisrael*, p. 167, notes 92, 94.

⁷⁰ Leading to the ruling that Ketuvim may be read from mincha and on, TJ *Shabbat* 16:1, *Masechet Soferim* 15:3. Philo reports that these lessons lasted “till about the late afternoon”; see Folker Siegert, “The Sermon as an Invention of Hellenistic

What does *paskei sidra* mean? Rabbenu Tam explains that it refers to a practice to read a Haftorah from the Ketuvim at *mincha* on Shabbat.⁷¹ Tosafot write that “there are places where it is customary to do this,”⁷² indicating that the custom was still practiced in certain places even in the time of the Tosafot.⁷³ However, the term *pasik sidra* in other places in the Talmud always refers to study rather than a liturgical reading, usually in connection to the study of Ketuvim in particular.⁷⁴ For example, in TB *Baba Batra* 164b we read that R. Shimon was *pasik sidra* in Psalms, having nothing to do with a Haftorah or even Shabbat. Rabbenu Gershom there explains that R. Shimon was learning one of the five sections of the Book of Psalms. In TB *Shabbat* 152a we read of R. Kahana being *pasik sidra* in *Kobelet*. In TB *Avodah Zara* 19a we find that after being *paskei sidra* and completing the book they were studying, Levi asked that Proverbs be brought in for study, and R. Shimon asked that Psalms be brought in. Similarly, in TB *Yoma* 77a Rav is described as *pasik sidra*, which Rashi there explains as studying a section of Tanach. Rashi in TB *Shabbat* 116b explains that it was customary to read a portion of Ketuvim in the *beit mid-rash*.⁷⁵ R. Isaiah di Trani (Rid) therefore explains, against Rabbenu Tam, that the *paskei sidra* mentioned in TB *Shabbat* 116b was a study session devoted to Ketuvim rather than a Haftorah reading.⁷⁶

From all this it would seem that TB *Shabbat* 116b shows that at least in Nehardea there was some kind of communal study of Ketuvim that

Judaism,” p. 35, in Alexander Deeg, Walter Homolka and Heinz-Gunther Schottler, eds., *Preaching in Judaism and Christianity* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008); Zunz, *HaDerasbot b'Yisrael*, pp. 164–166, 170–171.

⁷¹ Tosafot, Shabbat 24a, sh'Ilmalei; Megilla 21a, v'Ein Maftirin.

⁷² Tosafot, Megilla 21a, v'Ein Maftirin.

⁷³ The Tosafot printed in *Megilla* are understood to be those of R. Yehudah of Paris (Sir Leon), (1166–1224). See Ephraim Urbach, *The Tosaphots: Their History, Writings and Methods* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1954), p. 617. See also Ismar Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy: A Comprehensive History* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1993), p. 150, note 8, where based on Yehuda b. Barzilai, *Sefer haIttim* (Cracow: Makitzei Nirdamim, 1903), p. 289, he discusses whether the custom of *paskei sidra* in Ketuvim still existed in the time of the Geonim and Early Rishonim.

⁷⁴ See Samuel Mirsky, “Mekorot haHalacha b'Midrashim,” *Talpioth*, Nissan 5707 (1947), p. 122, note 20; Marc Hirshman, *The Stabilization of Rabbinic Culture, 100 CE – 350 CE* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 72.

⁷⁵ Rashi, *Shabbat* 116b, *paskei*.

⁷⁶ S.A. Werthheimer, ed., *Sefer HaMachria* (Jerusalem: Ktav Yad V'Sefer, 1998), item 31, p. 162.

took place in such a way that the regular beit midrash was unaffected.⁷⁷ It may have been formalized as a Haftorah, but probably it was a *drasha* and study session:⁷⁸ “there can be no doubt that a regular reading of the Hagiographa is what is meant.”⁷⁹ It has been suggested that this is the origin of the custom to recite certain Psalms or study *Pirkei Avot* on Shabbat afternoons at *mincha* time.⁸⁰ For example, the custom to say Psalm 92 aloud after the Shabbat *mincha* Torah reading.⁸¹ The custom of saying Psalm 111 after the Shabbat *mincha* Torah reading was also explained as a remnant of the custom to have a Haftorah from the Ketuvim at that point in the service. It is for this reason that that particular chapter was chosen, as it contains ten verses, the minimum for a Haftorah reading.⁸² Note that the other customary Psalm said after the Torah reading on Shabbat *mincha*, Psalm 112, is also ten verses long, and so may also be a vestige of the Ketuvim Haftorah.⁸³

This practice is reflected in the statement in *Masechet Soferim* 14:4 that “One who reads the Writings must say, ‘Blessed are You...Who commanded us to read holy writings’ (*b’kaivei hakodesh*).” The simple understanding of this ruling is that it is referring to the communal reading of a selection from Ketuvim on Shabbat afternoons.⁸⁴ While the Torah was

⁷⁷ See Zvi Gombo, *Or Zvi – Shabbat vol. 2* (Bnei Brak: 2000), p. 141, where it is suggested that the initial reading of a selection from Writings was followed by individual study.

⁷⁸ Eliezer Levi, *Yessodot HaTefilla* (Tel Aviv: Avraham Zioni Press, 1958), p. 322.

⁷⁹ Ismar Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy: A Comprehensive History* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1993), p. 150.

⁸⁰ Eliezer Dinner, *Zichron Avraham Moshe* (Jerusalem: 1945), p. 64, on *Megilla* 21a; Shlomo Elkayam, “Machzor Fez as a Source for Ancient Prayer Customs,” *Hemda’at*, vol. 6, pp. 17-18 (Hebrew).

⁸¹ Yosef Tzubiri, *Siddur Knesset HaGedola* vol. 1 (Tel Aviv: 1976), p. 523.

⁸² A ten-verse Haftorah is mentioned in *Megilla* 23b. The Haftorah for *Ki Teitzze* is ten verses long. Yisrael Friedman, *Likutei Maharich* vol. 2 (Sighet: 1900), pp. 73b-74a. See also Reuven Margalio, *Nitzotzei Or* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 2002), p. 40 who gives this basic explanation and adds a kabbalistic explanation as well.

⁸³ Shmuel Weingarten, “*Reishitan shel haHaftarot*,” *Sinai* 83, 1978, p. 126.

⁸⁴ Yitzchak Landa, *Masechet Soferim – Mikra Soferim* (Suwalki, Poland: 1862), p. 27a; Shmuel Wasserstein, *Masechet Soferim* (Jerusalem: 2001), p. 121. Mordechai (Megilla 783) explains that this blessing was recited when reading one of the megillot written as part of the Ketuvim rather than on its own scroll, but this is difficult as there is no example of two different blessings recited over the same thing. Furthermore, it appears that this interpretation is based on a textual variant of

read on Shabbat and Mondays and Thursdays, and selections from the Prophets were read as the Haftorah on Shabbat and holidays, there was no mechanism to familiarize the people with the Ketuvim. This was remedied by the institution of the study of Ketuvim on Shabbat afternoons,⁸⁵ a practice still found among some Sephardic communities.⁸⁶ For example, the North African custom to recite a different Psalm each week at the conclusion of Shabbat *mincha*, chosen as having some connection to that week's Torah reading.⁸⁷

An example of a system for studying Ketuvim used by Ashkenazic communities in Germany was found in a manuscript from 1326. There we read that Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Daniel and Ezra-Nehemiah were studied on Shabbat before *mincha* over the course of the weeks between Shavuot and Rosh Hashanah. It is significant that it is prefaced by an introductory remark, "This is the order of our custom to read the entire *Ketuvim* and *Avot* a little before *mincha*, and the five *megillot* over the festivals,"⁸⁸ which puts the *megillot* in the general context of the cycle of reading Ketuvim.

The reading of Proverbs, Job and Daniel in the late afternoon of Shabbat during the summer months is found among many Sephardic communities.⁸⁹ Moroccan communities based their study on the arrangement found in the book *Arba'a Gevi'im*, where Proverbs, Job and Daniel

this part of *Masechet Soferim*. See Yehuda Heschel Levenberg, "Regarding Blessings Over Reading the Megilla and Reading the Writings," *Oraita*, vol. 11, Adar 5751 (1991), pp. 73, 74 (Hebrew).

⁸⁵ Shlomo Rapoport, *Erech Millin* vol. 1 (Prague: 1852), p. 174, paragraph 10; Levenberg, "Regarding Blessings Over Reading the Megilla and Reading the Writings," p. 75.

⁸⁶ Ezra Zion Melamed, *Pirkei Minhag v'Halacha* (Jerusalem: Kiryat Sefer, 1970), p. 84.

⁸⁷ Amram Aburabia, *Netivei Am* (Petach Tikvah: 2006), p. 192, *siman* 284:1; David Ovadiah, *Nabagu haAm* (Jerusalem: Machon Yismach Lev, 2000), p. 37, *siman* 29. There he lists the customary Psalms for every week as recited by the community of Sefrou, Morocco. Specific Psalms recited on given Shabbatot is an ancient custom; see Jacob Mann, *The Bible as Read and Preached in the Old Synagogue* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav: 1971), p. 15.

⁸⁸ A. Kirsch, "Hagiographen Lection am Sabbatnachmittag Ein Schwaebischer (altzuercher) Minhag," *MGWJ* (Monatsschrift fuer Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums) vol. 12 (December, 1880), pp. 543–548. This is discussed in Issachar Jacobson, *Chazon HaMikra* (Tel Aviv: Sinai, 1989), p. 33.

⁸⁹ See the two articles on this subject by Tuviah Persel in the newspaper *haDoar*. An article from Sivan 1, 5726 deals with the custom to learn Proverbs on Shabbat afternoons, and an article from 24 Sivan, 5737 discusses the custom to learn Job and Daniel on Shabbat afternoons.

are each divided into sections, called *hafsakot*, read before Shabbat *mincha* from Pesach to the beginning of Elul.⁹⁰ These Ketuvim were read using the cantillation of the *megillot*.⁹¹ There is an almost identical Algerian custom to read these books after Shabbat *mincha*. What is particularly interesting about the Algerian custom is that *Eicha* is also included in the cycle, between Job and Daniel, said in two parts on the two *Shabbatot* before the Ninth of Av,⁹² recalling the divided reading of *megillot* in *Masechet Soferim*.

Evidence of a regular study of Ketuvim is that *Agadat Bereishit* contains material for the Torah reading and Haftarah of every Shabbat, as well as a selection from Ketuvim,⁹³ and that the proem verses of the aggadic midrashim on the Torah are almost always taken from Ketuvim.⁹⁴ It may be that these aggadic *derashot* were given in the afternoon of Shabbat, while the halachic *derashot*, the *pirka*, took place earlier in the day, before Mussaf. The fact that these midrashim originated in Israel suggests that in Nehardea they were following an Israeli custom of studying Ketuvim on Shabbat afternoons.⁹⁵ A remnant of the afternoon sermon relating to Ketuvim can be seen in the custom of the Jews of Georgia that the rabbi would give a sermon relating to the theme of *Shir haShirim* before *mincha* on the last days of Pesach when it was read.⁹⁶

The idea of Ketuvim study in the late afternoon and evenings can shed light on the *Mishna*, *Yoma* 1:6, where we read that in order to help the high priest stay up on Yom Kippur night, Job, Ezra, Chronicles and

⁹⁰ *Arba'a Gevi'im* (Livorno: 1935); Proverbs begins there on page 157. See Shlomo Elkayam, "Machzor Fez as a Source for Ancient Prayer Customs," *Hemda'at*, vol. 6, p. 19, note 36 (Hebrew).

⁹¹ David Ovadiah, *Nabagu haAm* (Jerusalem: Machon Yismach Lev, 2000), p. 37, siman 29.

⁹² Yaakov Partosh, "The Order of Prayers According to the Custom of the Jews of Algeria," *Tagim* vol. 1, 1968, pp. 71-72 (Hebrew).

⁹³ Ismar Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy: A Comprehensive History* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1993), p. 151.

⁹⁴ Shlomo Rapoport, *Erech Millin* vol. 1 (Prague: 1852), p. 171, paragraph 7. See Shmuel Weingarten, "Reishitan shel haHaftarot," *Sinai* 83, 1978, p. 128, where he notes that the opening verses of sections 4-6 of *Bereishit Rabbah* are taken from Psalm 104, *Barchi Nafshi*, customarily recited after Shabbat *mincha* from Sukkot to Pesach. See also Gunter Stemmerger, "The Derashah in Rabbinic Times," p. 21, in Alexander Deeg, Walter Homolka and Heinz-Gunther Schottler, eds., *Preaching in Judaism and Christianity* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008).

⁹⁵ Shlomo Rapoport, *Erech Millin* vol. 1 (Prague: 1852), p. 174, paragraph 10. There he notes that Nehardea had a particular connection to the community in Israel.

⁹⁶ Asher Wassertil, ed., *Yalkut Minbagim* (Jerusalem: 1996), Asher Chadad, "Customs of the Jews of Georgia," p. 256, 9:18.

Daniel would be read before him. It is not a coincidence that these are all from the Ketuvim, whose time of study was late in the day.

The ancient evening study of Ketuvim may even be reflected in the reading of *Megillat Esther*. Ri explains that although a *sbebechayanu* blessing is said over the Purim evening megilla reading, another *sbebecheyanu* must be said over the daytime reading, because that reading is the “main expression of publicizing the miracle,”⁹⁷ implying that only the daytime reading was recognizable as something out of the ordinary. Rav Soloveitchik comments that the nighttime reading only functions to prepare people for the daytime reading, allowing them to understand it better after having reviewed it the night before.⁹⁸ Thus the evening reading can be viewed as functioning within the regular study of Ketuvim, while the daytime Purim reading was the truly unique reading, demonstrating that it was a special obligatory reading.

The reading of the *megillot* described in *Masechet Soferim* can now be seen as a mechanism of providing a framework for studying of the *megillot*. All study takes place “after hours” when regular beit midrash study was not going on, Saturday night, festival nights and in the case of *Eicha*, the day of the ninth of Av when regular Torah study was prohibited.⁹⁹ The night reading of *megillot* seems to be a subsection of the reading of Ketuvim at times that did not conflict with the beit midrash. Note that Rashi gives “*Midrash Shir haShirim* and *Kobelet*” as examples of the learning that went on during Shabbat afternoons,¹⁰⁰ indicating that the time of studying Ketuvim in general and *megillot* in particular was the afternoon.¹⁰¹

The verse brought in *Machzor Vitry* to explain why *Kobelet* is read on Chol haMoed Sukkot, “Distribute portions to seven or even to eight,” (11:2) would seem to indicate that all seven days of Sukkot are equally valid for the reading of *Kobelet*, yet the preferred custom noted there is to read it on Shabbat Chol haMoed.¹⁰² It may be that the Ashkenazic custom

⁹⁷ Tosafot, *Chayyav*, *Megilla* 4a.

⁹⁸ Michel Zalman Sirkin, *Hararei Kedem* vol. 1 (Jerusalem: 2000), *siman* 203, p. 335.

⁹⁹ TB *Taanit* 30a.

¹⁰⁰ Rashi, *Shabbat* 116b, *shonin*.

¹⁰¹ We find R. Meir giving a lesson involving *Kohelet* and *Job* on Shabbat in JT *Hagigah* 2:1, though it is not indicated whether this took place in the afternoon. See the discussion of this case in Gunter Stemberger, “The Derashah in Rabbinic Times,” p. 14, in Alexander Deeg, Walter Homolka and Heinz-Gunther Schottler, eds., *Preaching in Judaism and Christianity* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008).

¹⁰² Hayyim Palagi, *Yafeh Lalev* (Izmir: 1876) *Orach Chayyim* 663:2, explains that “portions to seven” is a reference to Shabbat.

to read *Shir haShirim* and *Kobelet* on Shabbat Chol haMoed when possible,¹⁰³ rather than on the last days of Pesach and Sukkot, is reflective of the same early custom to study Ketuvim at some point on Shabbat.

Customs varied as to how the *megillot* were read, either by individuals on their own or by a *shaliach tzibbur*. Regarding *Eicha*, we find in the Kolbo that there were various customs, in some places each individual read it on their own, and in some the *shaliach tzibbur* read it aloud while everyone else followed along silently. Kolbo notes that in his community the custom was for each person to read it on their own.¹⁰⁴ Maharil writes, “and he recites *al mikra megilla* before beginning *Eicha*.”¹⁰⁵ However, regarding Ruth and *Shir haShirim*, Maharil writes that “each person recites the blessing *al mikra megilla* before it,”¹⁰⁶ which indicates that these *megillot* were read by individuals on their own.¹⁰⁷ R. Moshe Isserles discusses this matter at length in a responsum regarding whether to recite blessings over reading these *megillot*. He explains that only *Eicha* was read by an individual for the congregation, and the others were not read in this manner,¹⁰⁸ which follows the language of Maharil. He concludes that therefore only *Eicha* is recited with a blessing and not the others, because the others are recited individually. He explains that *Masechet Soferim* writes that they all have blessings either because in that time one person read it aloud for the whole congregation, or that they were read in those days in the context of the custom of reading Ketuvim as a Haftorah at mincha on Shabbat. Since the previous chapter in *Masechet Soferim* deals with Haftorahs, R. Isserles understands that the following chapter, dealing with the *megillot*, is part of the general custom of Haftorot.¹⁰⁹ The approach of R. Isserles confirms that originally the *megillot* were read as some variant of the afternoon reading of Ketuvim.

¹⁰³ Israel Elfenbein, ed., *Sefer Minhagim of the School of Rabbi Meir ben Baruch of Rothenburg* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1938), p. 28; S. Hurwitz, ed., *Machzor Vitry* (Nuremberg: J. Bulka, 1926), pp. 304, 440, 446.

¹⁰⁴ Kolbo (Jerusalem: Even Yisroel, 1997), p. 249, *siman* 62.

¹⁰⁵ Shlomo Spitzer, *Sefer Maharil* (Jerusalem: Machon Yerushalayim, 1989), p. 251.

¹⁰⁶ Shlomo Spitzer, *Sefer Maharil* (Jerusalem: Machon Yerushalayim, 1989), p. 147, 161.

¹⁰⁷ Shlomo Zevin, *Hamoadim b'Halacha* (Jerusalem: Yad haRav Herzog, 1980), p. 391. However, regarding *Kobelet* this language is not used, rather it says “on it is recited the blessing *al mikra megilla*,” but it could be because there the main idea being stressed is that a blessing is said over *Kobelet* at all, as this was a matter of varying opinions; see *Sefer Maharil*, p. 380, and notes 9 and 10 there.

¹⁰⁸ Asher Siev, ed., *Shut Rema* (Jerusalem: 1970), number 35, p. 195.

¹⁰⁹ Asher Siev, ed., *Shut Rema* (Jerusalem: 1970), number 35, p. 197.

We have seen that the reading of the megillot began as part of a general system of learning Ketuvim, and at first this was done in the late afternoon or evening. However, as the general Ketuvim custom waned in popularity, the reading of the *megillot* in many Ashkenazic communities was shifted to a time of day that seemed more appropriate, during the morning service, when the reading of both the Torah and Haftarah took place. Still, some communities kept the reading of the *megillot* at the time when the Ketuvim used to be studied. For example, the custom of Italian,¹¹⁰ Yemenite and other communities to read *Shir haShirim* after *mincha* on the seventh day of Pesach,¹¹¹ the Algerian custom to read *Shir haShirim* after the *mincha Amidah* on the last day of Pesach¹¹² and the entire Book of Ruth after the *Amidah* of *mincha* on the second day of Shavuot,¹¹³ and the custom of the Jews of Afghanistan to read Ruth in the synagogue right before *mincha*.¹¹⁴ The Tunisian custom is for each family to read Ruth together after the meal on Shavuot, and an additional reading took place in the synagogue for those who did not do so at home.¹¹⁵ Note that Ruth was read specifically after the meal, which is when the *beit midrash* was no longer in session according to Rashi. The original evening readings may also be reflected in the custom to read *Shir haShirim* at night after the Pesach seder, and Friday afternoons, either right before or right after *mincha*.¹¹⁶

The divided and afternoon readings of the *megillot* were preserved mainly by Sephardic communities, who also maintained the cycle of Ketuvim study more than Ashkenazim. Among the Ashkenazic communities, where the Ketuvim cycle was largely forgotten, the reading of the *megillot* was transformed into a daytime reading of the whole *megilla*, using the daytime reading of Esther as a model. However, even where the *megillot* are read in the daytime, they are read before the regular Torah reading.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁰ *Machzor Kol haShanah Keḥi Minbag Kehilat Kodesh Italiani* vol. 1 (Livorno: 1856), p. 131a.

¹¹¹ Amos Chacham, *Da'at Mikra – Shir haShirim* (Jerusalem: Mossad haRav Kook, 1990), p. 15.

¹¹² Eliyahu Gig, *Zeh haShulchan* vol. 2 (Algiers: 1889), p. 129, *siman* 52.

¹¹³ Eliyahu Gig, *Zeh HaShulchan* vol. 2 (Algiers: 1889), p. 136, *siman* 58:7.

¹¹⁴ Asher Wassertil, ed., *Yalkut Minbagim* (Jerusalem: 1996), Giora Pozilov, “Customs of the Jews of Afghanistan,” p. 46, 19:13.

¹¹⁵ Asher Wassertil, ed., *Yalkut Minbagim* (Jerusalem: 1996), Mordechai Satbon and Avraham Hatel, “Customs of the Jews of Tunisia,” p. 515, 14:3.

¹¹⁶ See Amos Chacham, *Da'at Mikra – Shir haShirim* (Jerusalem: Mossad haRav Kook, 1990), p. 15.

¹¹⁷ S. Hurwitz, ed., *Machzor Vitry* (Nuremberg: J. Bulka, 1926), p. 440, 446; S. Buber, ed., *Siddur Rashi* (Berlin: Chevrat Makitzei Nirdamim, 1910) pp. 104, 147.

At first glance this is unusual, since the general rule is that that which is more common is done first. Esther is in fact read on Purim day after the Torah reading, but not the other customary *megillot*. R. Sternbuch explains that this distinction is because the reading of the other *megillot* is only a custom; they are read earlier so that whoever comes late will at least hear the Torah reading, which is obligatory.¹¹⁸ Based on what we have seen, we can also explain that placing a reading from Ketuvim after the Torah reading would put it right where the *pirka* would take place, something that the Talmud specifically warned against. Esther is read then in order to demonstrate its special status, that it in fact overrides Torah study (TB *Megilla* 3a).¹¹⁹

No explanation is provided in *Masechet Soferim* as to why these particular books should be read on these particular occasions, although reading *Eicha* on the Ninth of Av seems self-evident. The connections drawn between Ruth, *Shir haShirim* and *Kobelet* and Shavout, Pesach and Sukkot are many and varied, often involving thematic connections and textual allusions. These kinds of connections are also found in explanations tying a specific Haftorah to a particular Torah reading,¹²⁰ which is to be expected, since as we saw, the reading of the *megillot* was itself a permutation of the general custom to read from the Ketuvim over the course of the year in a way that paralleled the Haftorah from the Nevi'im.

It may well be that *Masechet Soferim* understood that there was no inherent connection between each *megilla* and the holiday on which it was read, they just happened to fall out then as part of the Ketuvim learning cycle. It is further possible that the *megillot* were the Ketuvim portion associated with the Torah reading on these occasions, rather than with the holiday itself. This being the case, *Shir haShirim* could have been the Ketuvim reading connected to the Torah reading of the last day of Pesach, which includes the Song at the Sea. Similarly, Ruth parallels verses and

¹¹⁸ Moshe Sternbuch, *Teshuvot veHanbagot* vol. 1 (Jerusalem: 1992), p. 226, siman 323.

¹¹⁹ There is a classic question noted by many *Acharonim* regarding the formulation in *Megilla* 3a that Torah study is cancelled in order to read Esther, since Esther itself is part of the Bible and should be considered Torah study. The simple explanation is that generally the study of Ketuvim specifically was set aside at the time of public lectures, and it is this public study that was cancelled in order to read Esther.

¹²⁰ See the explanations for the Haftorahs given in Issachar Jacobson, *Chazon haMikra* (Tel Aviv: Sinai, 1989).

themes found in the Torah readings right before and right after Shavuot.¹²¹ For example, in *Parashat Bemidbar*: Numbers 3:4 and Ruth 1:5 (death of brothers), Numbers 4:18 and Ruth 4:10 (cutting off), in *Nasso*, Numbers 5:8 and Ruth 3:12 (a redeemer), Numbers 6:24 and Ruth 2:4 (“May God bless you”), Numbers 6:27 and Ruth 4:14 (a name in Israel), and in *Beha'alotcha*, the section in Numbers 10: 29-30, where Yitro returns home “to my land and to my family,” a reverse parallel of Ruth.¹²² This is particularly significant in light of the custom reported in *Masechet Soferim* that Ruth was read beginning the Saturday night before Shavuot.

Addendum: The Case of *Kobelet*

Machzor Vitry and *Siddur Rashi* are the earliest sources for the custom of reading *Kobelet* on Sukkot. They both state that it is ideally read on Shabbat Chol haMoed of Sukkot, and if it was not, for example in a year when there is no Shabbat Chol haMoed, it is read on Shmini Atzeret.¹²³

Why was *Kobelet* not mentioned in *Masechet Soferim*? The most obvious reason is that *Kobelet* may have been viewed as less than suitable for communal study. *Eduyot* 5:3 records that Beit Hillel held that the scroll of *Kobelet* can render a person's hands impure, like all other Biblical books, but Beit Shammai did not agree with this. This indicates that it was not clear that *Kobelet* had the same level of sanctity as the other parts of Tanach. Similarly, TB *Shabbat* 30b tells us that “R. Yehuda b. R. Shmuel b. Shilat said in the name of Rav: The Sages wished to hide *Kobelet* because its words are self-contradictory,” but they did not “because its beginning is religious teaching and its end is religious teaching.” There explanations are given to resolve what appeared to be contradictions within *Kobelet*. It may be that while *Kobelet* was ultimately accepted as a holy book worthy of inclusion in Tanach, since some verses of it seem to present contradictions and ideas not in accordance with standard religious thinking, its public study was downplayed. This idea is reflected in the practice of R. Shalom of Neustadt, teacher of Maharil. He stated that while blessings are

¹²¹ One of the oldest elements in the fixing of the Torah portion according to TB Megillah 31b is completing Bechukotai before Shavuot, which then became completing Parashat Bamidbar before Shavuot as well, see Tosafot there, *Moshe*.

¹²² See an elaboration of all these in Dr. Chaim Chamiel, “Megillat Rut b'Atzeret,” *Turei Yeshurun*, vol. 31, May 1972, pp. 8-9.

¹²³ Reading on Shabbat Chol haMoed: S. Hurwitz, ed., *Machzor Vitry* (Nuremberg: J. Bulka, 1926), p. 440; S. Buber, ed., *Siddur Rashi* (Berlin: Chevrat Makitzei Nirdamim, 1910) p. 104, siman 222. Reading on Shmini Atzeret: *Machzor Vitry*, p. 446; S. *Siddur Rashi*, p. 147, siman 307.

recited over the other *megillot*, it is customary not to recite a blessing over *Kobelet*, because “it does not contain matters of holiness.”¹²⁴ Similarly, R. Israel Bruna (Mahari Bruna) writes that although the rabbis ultimately decided not to hide *Kobelet*, there was never a command to read it since it was not written with *ruach hakodesh*, so no blessing is recited over it.¹²⁵

The unique status of *Kobelet* may also be seen in the fact that most Sephardic communities did not have a custom to read *Kobelet* publicly ever.¹²⁶ As we have seen, the Sephardic practice more closely adhered to the original custom as recorded in *Masechet Soferim*, with divided readings taking place later in the day, and the exclusion of *Kobelet* is part of the original custom as well.

There may be hints to the controversial nature of *Kobelet* even in places where it was read. *Sefer haManhig* writes that it was customary in France to read *Kobelet* in the synagogue on Shmini Atzeret before reading the Torah portion, while in Provence it would be read in the sukka individually. He writes that it is better to read it publicly in the synagogue since many people are not proficient enough to read it on their own.¹²⁷ This may be a reference to the ideas found in *Kobelet* as well as the difficult words themselves. *Kobelet* should thus be read specifically in a synagogue setting where the rabbi can address and interpret any difficult verses.

Having seen that the *megillot* originally were part of a cycle of studying Ketuvim, it may be that *Kobelet* was originally not associated with Sukkot also because of a more technical reason. The lists of the Ketuvim learning cycle from the various Jewish communities take place over the summer months, when Shabbat and Yom Tov have long afternoons. Some cycles began at Pesach, some at Shavuot, ending by Rosh Hashanah. *Shir haShirim*, Ruth and *Eicha* all fall out during this time period; only *Kobelet* falls out during the autumn. It may be that a combination of factors served

¹²⁴ *Halachot U'Minbagei Rabbenu Shalom of Neustadt*, ed. Shlomo Spitzer (Jerusalem: Machon Yerushalayim, 1997), p. 47, no. 121.

¹²⁵ *Shut Mahari Bruna* (Jerusalem: 1973), p. 54, *siman* 66. Moredechai Yaffe, *Levush HaChur* (Bardichev: 1818), *siman* 663:2 also brings this as a reason a blessing is not recited over *Kobelet*, although he wonders about this answer since most opinions agree that it was written “with a spirit of prophecy.” *Magen Avraham (Orach Chayyim* 662:1) writes that all agree that no blessing is recited over the reading of *Kobelet*. *Machazit haShekel* (490:9) states that the only explanation for that is because at first the Rabbis thought *Kobelet* should be hidden away. However, the Vilna Gaon (*Orach Chayyim* 490:9) writes that since it was decided to accept *Kobelet* as part of Tanach, it has the same status as any other megilla and a blessing should be recited over it.

¹²⁶ Abraham Idelsohn, *Jewish Liturgy and its Development* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, Inc., 1932), p. 200.

¹²⁷ Y. Refael, ed., *Sefer haManhig*, pp. 416-417.

to exclude *Kobelet* from the early version of the custom as found in *Masechet Soferim*. It is the longest *megilla* at twelve chapters, the afternoon is relatively short during Sukkot, and its content was considered somewhat controversial. Only later, when the summer Ketuvim cycle would be forgotten, and the *megillot* were more explicitly associated with particular holidays, *Kobelet* was used to fill the void as the *megilla* associated with Sukkot. Thus it is no coincidence that the Sephardic communities, which best preserved the summer Ketuvim cycle, tend not to have a custom to read *Kobelet* on Sukkot. 