

Wednesday, December 31, 2008

## Reading in the New Testament Period

The listserv of the [Association of Christian Librarians](#) isn't usually very active between Christmas and New Year's Day. This year was no exception, but there was an interesting exchange this week about the extent of Jesus' reading--whether he read Greek or Latin, whether his socioeconomic status afforded him access to the limited literature available in first-century Palestine.

Reading this exchange reminded me of something I investigated briefly a few months ago: references to reading in the New Testament. The Greek verb for *read* is *anaginosko*; forms of this word occur [32 times in the New Testament](#). The cognate noun, *anagnosis*, occurs [3 additional times](#).

An analysis of these passages paints a very different picture of reading than we are accustomed to in 21st-century America. The fact is that, in the first-century, reading was the privilege of an elite class of persons. When the writers of the New Testament mentioned reading, they often described the person doing the reading as a leader--whether religious, political, or otherwise. Second, they often referred to reading with the assumption that it was to be done aloud, in public--not privately and silently, as is common in our day.

The New Testament refers to the following persons as engaged in (or at least capable of) reading:

- Noteworthy Jewish religious leaders, such as Pharisees, Sadducees, elders, scribes, and lawyers (e.g., [Matt. 12:1-8; 21:23, 42-45; Mark 12:18-27; Luke 10:25ff](#))
- Leaders of Jewish synagogues (e.g., [Luke 4:14-21; Acts 13:27; 15:19-21](#))
- Leaders of Christian churches (e.g., [Acts 15:30-31; Col. 4:16; 1 Thess. 5:27; 1 Tim. 4:13-14](#))
- Government officials (e.g., [Acts 8:26-35; 23:33-35](#))

The public reading of Scripture, a staple of synagogue worship, was also an essential practice in Christian assemblies. The Apostle Paul directed the churches of Colosse, Laodicea, and Thessalonica to read publicly the letters he had sent them ([Col. 4:16; 1 Thess. 5:27](#)). Furthermore, he reminded his protégé Timothy to give priority to reading along with exhortation and teaching ([1 Tim. 4:13](#))--each a form of public Christian communication.

We are privileged to live in a time when literacy is widespread, and when there is abundant access to the Bible and Christian literature. The New Testament teaches that reading should play a prominent place in the life of the local church and that religious leaders should study the Scriptures diligently. We must, then, *give attention*

*to reading.*

For more information, see the following sources:

- Gamble, Harry Y. "Literacy and Book Culture." [\*Dictionary of New Testament Background\*](#). Ed. Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000.
- Garland, David E. "Read." [\*International Standard Bible Encyclopedia\*](#). Ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley. Rev. ed. 4 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979-88. [A shorter entry from the 1st ed. is [available here](#).]