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## The Art of Reading

Literacy was not uncommon in New Testament times, though there were often “levels of literacy”: many people could read a simple or familiar text, especially if they had time to figure it out and possessed the patience to do so. Still, it was an art to be able to read texts fluently, so there were professional lectors who would be employed for such a task.

Some reasons why reading was an art:

1. Though not uncommon, basic literacy was nowhere near as widespread as today; many people probably never learned to read anything at all.
2. Texts were not printed clearly on paper but were written by hand on papyri, requiring the lector to contend with various handwriting styles complicated by the uneven quality of the writing materials that had been employed.
3. The writing style of the day did not include features that we take for granted, such as
  - punctuation
  - both lower-case and capital letters
  - spaces between words

The style was simply to write in a continuous stream of capital letters, without any breaks between words or sentences—not even at the end of a line. If we wrote this way, the first five verse of John's Gospel would look like this:

INTHEBEGINNI  
NGWASTHEWORD  
ANDTHEWORDWA  
SWITHGODANDT  
HEWORDWASGOD  
HEWASINTHEBE  
GINNINGWITHG  
ODALLTHINGSC  
AMEINTOBEING  
THROUGHHIMAN  
DWITHOUTHIMN  
OTONETHINGCA  
MEINTOBEINGW  
HATHASCOMEIN  
TOBEINGINHIM  
WASLIFEANDTH  
ELIFEWASTHEL  
IGHTOFALLPEO  
PLETHELIGHTS  
HINESINTHEDA  
RKNESSANDTHE  
DARKNESSDIDN  
OTOVERCOMEIT

Difficult, but not impossible—especially if you already know what it says!

Reading Scripture in a synagogue (as Jesus does in Luke 4:16–19) was relatively easy because the lectors knew the scriptural texts almost by heart. And, of course, most lectors could practice reading these standard or familiar texts in advance.

To be handed a text and read it at sight would be another matter. So in Petronius's *Satyricon* a young man is considered very impressive because "he can do division and read books at sight" (75).

The New Testament Gospels were probably intended to be read aloud in settings where the early Christians would gather for fellowship and worship. If a congregation possessed a coveted copy of a Gospel, lectors might become as familiar with it as they were with the Scriptures or other "published texts."

The New Testament letters were probably another matter.

Sometimes the content of these letters was intended for an entire congregation (1 Thess. 5:27) and, apparently, letters were sometimes passed around from one church to another (Col. 4:16). If a newly received letter was to be read smoothly to a gathered congregation, the services of a gifted lector would be invaluable.