CHAPTER 3

Lectors in Early Christian Communities

In the previous chapter, I addressed an often overlooked aspect of early Christian reading culture: the manuscripts from which New Testament texts were read. I found that although early Christian manuscripts contained features that helped the reader, a trained lector was nevertheless needed for successful public reading. The distinctive features of these manuscripts did, however, aid weak readers in private study of the texts.

In this chapter I will turn from material to sociocultural factors of early Christian reading culture. In the first half (Sociocultural Aspects of Reading and Public Reading), I will present widespread sociocultural conceptions and practices of reading during the early Empire, as well as investigate the settings and conventions of public reading. I will primarily consider aspects of the dominant reading culture of the Greek and Roman world of the early Empire. Nevertheless, notions specific to an early Christian reading culture—such as the centrality of writings in ancient Judaism and early Christianity—are also examined.

The chapter's focus is found in the second half (Lectors in the Greek and Roman World and Lectors and Public Reading in Early Christianity), in which I will focus on the professional reader—the lector—in the Greek and Roman world in general and in early Christian communities in particular. I will investigate the identity, training, and tasks of first- and second-century lectors. I will try to demonstrate that not only does ancient reading culture inform our understanding of lectors, but a study of their role in early Christianity profoundly alters commonly held preconceptions about how and by whom New Testament writings were read aloud.

Sociocultural Aspects of Reading

The sociocultural conceptions and practices of reading are decisive features of a reading culture. They include—among other things—ideas about what reading is and what it signifies. A number of sociocultural ideas and practices about public reading were pervasive during the early Empire, some of which are relevant to this study and will be briefly presented below.

Although silent reading certainly existed, writings were commonly read aloud in antiquity.\(^1\) Literary texts were written with this in mind and authors

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1 On the debate about silent reading vs. reading aloud, see the excellent summary in Johnson,
strived to make their writings pleasing to the ear. Most reading events consisted of public reading, even in elite settings in which all participants were literate. Wealthy men and women regularly used lectors to read literary writings aloud, even when alone in a private setting.2

Early Christianity displayed a similar pattern: most people experienced literary writings—Old Testament texts as well as early Christian compositions of various kinds—through public reading. C.H. Roberts concludes that “[t]he lector and the interpreter of the scriptures would have been no less familiar figures in the early churches than was the διδάσκαλος or teacher, as important in early Christian life as he was in Judaism.”3

Literacy and the implements of literature functioned as cultural capital in the Greek and Roman world. Books and lectors were prized possessions and status symbols that were used not only to access literature, but also as means to display learning, wealth, and power.4 The first-century historian and biographer Plutarch described the value of Crassus’ silver mines and lands as nothing compared to the worth of his slaves, among whom Plutarch mentioned lectors and secretaries.5 Similarly, Petronius ironically let his character Trimalchio, a pretentious nouveau riche freedman, make grandiose claims by using the contemporary idea of books as a symbol of culture: “Even if I by all means do not act in court, I nevertheless learned literature for household use. And do not think that I despise learning. I have two libraries, one Greek and one Latin.”6

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5 Plutarch, Crass. 2.5–6.