

## The First Reading

### Roman Missal: The First Reading

*Then the reader (Latin lector) goes to the ambo and reads the First Reading, while all sit and listen. To indicate the end of the reading, the reader acclaims:*

*The word of the Lord.*

All reply:

*Thanks be to God.*

(Roman Missal, *Order of Mass*, no. 10)

## Scripture

### The Torah is Read in the Presence of All the People

And Moses wrote this law, and gave it to the priests the sons of Levi, who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord, and to all the elders of Israel. 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, 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. 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, 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.*” (Deuteronomy 31:9-13)

### Jesus Reads the Prophets in the Synagogue

And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up; and he went to the synagogue, as was his custom, on the sabbath day. *And he stood up to read; and there was given to him the book of the prophet Isaiah. He opened the book and found the place where it was written, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor...” And he closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant, and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.* (Luke 4:16-22)

## Tradition

### Jewish Tradition: Sitting and Listening to the Old Testament

Philo of Alexandria: Accordingly, on the seventh day there are spread before the people in every city innumerable lessons of prudence, and temperance, and courage, and justice, and all other virtues; during the giving of which *the common people sit down, keeping silence and pricking up their ears, with all possible attention, from their thirst for wholesome instruction; but some of those who are very learned explain to them what is of great importance and use, lessons by which the whole of their lives may be improved.*

(Philo, *Special Laws* 2.62)<sup>1</sup>

### **Reading from the Old Testament in Rome (2<sup>nd</sup> Century)**

St. Justin Martyr: And on that day that is called Sunday all who live in the cities or in rural areas gather together in one place, and the memoirs of the apostles and *the writings of the prophets are read for as long as time allows*. Then after *the lector concludes*, the president verbally instructs and exhorts us to imitate all these excellent things.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Office of Lector in the Roman Liturgy (3<sup>rd</sup> Century)**

St. Hippolytus: *The reader is appointed when the bishop gives him the book, for hands are not laid on him.*<sup>3</sup>

### **The “First Reading” from the Old Testament (5<sup>th</sup> Century)**

St. Augustine: Cast your minds back to *the first reading* from the prophet Isaiah, because we can't possibly remember or talk about everything that has been read... [quotes Isa 57:13]. Then up comes *a reading from the apostle* [Paul], and it begins with these words... [quotes 2 Cor 7:1]. [I]n Isaiah we are promised something, while in the apostle we are told, “Having therefore these promises, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement...” as though it were only one reading from the prophet and the apostle.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Italian Custom of the Laity Sitting (5<sup>th</sup> century)**

St. Augustine: In certain overseas churches [=Italy] *not only are bishops seated to address the people, but seats are available for the people too*. Thus it can be avoided that a frailer person, worn out by standing, would be distracted from his highly salutary purpose or even forced to leave.<sup>5</sup>

## **Mystagogy**

### **The Readings and Active Participation (7<sup>th</sup> Century)**

St. Isidore of Seville: *Tradition teaches that to proclaim the reading is an ancient institution of the Jews. For indeed on the legitimate and prescribed days they used readings from the Law and the Prophets in the synagogues. [The churches of Christ preserve this by ancient institution of the Fathers.] The reading is not an unimportant*

---

<sup>1</sup> In *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged* (trans. C. D. Yonge; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2006), 574.

<sup>2</sup> Justin Martyr, *1 Apology* 67. In Johnson, *Worship in the Early Church*, 1:68. (

<sup>3</sup> Hippolytus, *Apostolic Tradition*, 11. In Johnson, *Worship in the Early Church*, 1:203.

<sup>4</sup> Augustine, *Sermon* 45.1. In Saint Augustine, *Sermons II: 20-50* (Works of Saint Augustine, III/2; trans. Edmund Hill, O.P.; New York, N.Y.: New City Press, 1992), 285.

<sup>5</sup> Augustine, *On Catechizing the Uninstructed* 13,19. In Augustine of Hippo, *Instructing Beginners in Faith* (trans. Raymond Canning; Hyde Park, N.Y.: New City Press, 2006), 49.

*building up of the hearers. Thus, it is proper that when psalms are being chanted they be chanted by all, that when there is praying all pray, and that when the reading is being read, silence is made, so that it may be heard by all.* For even if then someone were to come in while the reading is being celebrated, he would simply adore God and, having marked his forehead, solicitously lend his ear, laying aside his prayer lest he lose the reading. (It is clear that we must pray with all during the time of praying, it is also clear that he can pray privately when he wishes.) We do this because it is not always possible that one have a reading at hand, while the ability to pray is always present. *Nor should you think there is little usefulness generated from hearing the reading. Perchance the prayer itself may grow stronger when the mind, filled by a recent reading, runs through images of divine things that it has recently heard. For even Mary the sister of Martha “who listened” more intently to “what he was saying, and sat at the Lord’s feet,” having neglected her sister, was strengthened by the voice of the Lord [who said] that she had “chosen the better part” [Luke 10:39-42].* Thus also the deacon in a clear voice admonishes silence so that, whether psalms are being chanted or the reading is being read, unity might be conserved by all, so that what is preached to all might be heard equally by all.<sup>6</sup>

### Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. What books of the Bible can be used for the First Reading? Why?

---

---

---

2. Why is it important to continue to read the Old Testament in the Liturgy even though we are in the New Covenant?

---

---

---

### For Further Reading

Jungmann, Joseph, S.J. *The Mass of the Roman Rite: Its Origins and Development*. 2 Volumes. Translated by Francis A. Brunner, C.S.S.R. Reprint. Notre Dame, Ind.: Christian Classics, 2012.

Danielou, Jean. *The Bible and the Liturgy*. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame, 2009.

---

<sup>6</sup> Isidore of Seville, *On the Ecclesiastical Offices*, 10.1-3. In Isidore of Seville, *De Ecclesiasticis Officiis*, 33.