When people read the Bible, the works of Homer, or any other ancient text, they link themselves to the people who read these works millennia ago. “We have read the same text,” they may think, “so we are alike.” This happens particularly within religions; modern Christians who read the Bible, for instance, may imagine themselves to be like the ancient Christians who read the same Bible.

But nothing could be further from the truth. In the ancient world, reading was a different kind of activity from what it is today. In this column, I will lay out three ways ancient reading differs from modern.

First, in ancient Mediterranean cultures, the ability to read marked someone as elite, as an influential member of society. Not many people in countries such as Egypt, Palestine, Rome, or Greece could read more than a few, special words. Reading required learning, which required time. Few members of agricultural societies had the leisure to attend school rather than working for the food and other materials that enabled them and their families to survive.

Although there is some debate over the exact numbers, only two to seven percent of adult males in antiquity could read. Almost no women could read. Since ancient Judaism emphasized reading’s importance, perhaps a percentage point or two more of their men could read, but probably only in the cities.

Second, in antiquity, people did not read books; they read scrolls. Scrolls were heavy, awkward rolls of parchment or leather, which required manual dexterity to be read. Readers looked at one column at a time, perpendicular to the scroll’s length. To read a new column, one had to take up the finished column onto a roll at one end of the scroll while letting out a new column from the roll at the other end. The new-fangled notion of a codex, or book, with pages bound together on one side, did not become popular until the end of the fourth century AD—almost the Middle Ages.

Third, people always read out loud. They did not read silently, as we are taught today in school. St. Augustine, fourth century, tells of his astonishment upon discovering that St. Ambrose, the bishop of Milan, not only read without sound but without moving his lips. Apparently, Ambrose became hoarse quite easily from speaking. So he developed a technique of reading that did not strain his voice.

To read, then, was to perform the text, even when one was alone. The meaning of the text resided not on the page, but in the performed, spoken words. This performance required choices, even interpretation, for writing during antiquity had not yet developed ways of representing all elements of the language.

As late as the fifth century, for example, Greek was written in a continuous form with no breaks between the words. Nor did it indicate accents and breathing marks yet. Different accents and breathings changed the sound and meaning of the words being read. A reader had to know by memory the possible spoken words represented by the incomplete written code. So the task of a Greek reader was to decipher the written text and render it into speech so it could be understood.

As Semitic languages, Hebrew and Aramaic had developed the practice of word separation many centuries before the Greeks. The problem facing these languages was that writing represented the consonants but not the vowels. Readers had to know every possible oral combination of vowels that could be placed with a particular set of consonants to make valid, spoken words.

Readers had to choose the right vowels to give the right meaning. For instance, take the two consonants R and N. One could supply vowels to make the present-tense “run” or the past-tense “ran.” The letters could also stand for the boys' name “Ron” or the girls' name “Erin.”

This requirement of decoding the written text into spoken language means that the complete text existed only while the reader performed it. To be sure, someone could try to remember it. But if a reader returned to study the written text a few days later, they would have to perform it again, and they may not perform it the same way as they did the first time.

This uncertainty led groups of Rabbis known as Masoretes to create a set of signs to represent vowels and accents for Hebrew and Aramaic. But it was not until the early Middle Ages, in the ninth century, that these signs were used extensively in writing. At that time, the Masoretes used them identify the words in the biblical text and thus to fix its meaning. This aimed to guide future readers so that they would no longer know the uncertainty of the reading experience which had been common in Antiquity.

Flesher is director of UW’s Religious Studies Program. Past columns and more information about the program can be found on the Web at www.uwyo.edu/relstds. To comment on this column, visit http://religion-today.blogspot.com.