How many Christians by near the end of the New Testament period – say, 100 CE – could read and write? In his intriguing article “Christian Number and Its Implications,” Roman historian Keith Hopkins tries to come up with some ball park figures.

As you may recall, he is assuming that there were Christian churches in about 100 communities in the world at the time (we have references to about 50 in our surviving texts, and he is supposing that maybe there were twice as many as we have any evidence for); and he agrees that if Christianity started out with about 1000 believers in the year 40 then with a growth rate of 3.4% per year, by the year 100 there would be just over 7000 Christians in the world.

That would mean the 100 churches would have an average of 70 believers. (Some of course would be larger – think, Rome – others would be much smaller; we’re talking averages here. And if Rome did have, say 120 believers, they would be meeting in *different* house churches throughout the city).

Hopkins points out that in antiquity the population would be roughly 30% adult male; 30% adult female; and 40% children under the age of 17. And so an average church at the time would have 20 men, 20 women, and 30 children.

Now, how many of them could read? The reality is that....

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