INTRODUCING A NEW CONTROL CATEGORY: COMMUNAL READING EVENTS DURING THE FIRST CENTURY AD

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I. Introduction

During the first few centuries AD, literary traditions were often broadcast via communal reading and recitation events. These events, in part, help explain why many ancient authors note the importance and influence of them. Among Christian communities, the author of 1 Timothy instructs the recipient of his letter to prioritize the communal reading of Scripture: “Devout yourself to the communal reading of Scripture” (1 Tim 4:13). The author of the Book of Revelation addresses both the reader and the ones who hear the reading: “Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it” (Rev. 1:3). The author of 2 Clement urges his community to listen to what is being read communally: “Therefore, brothers and sisters, following the God of truth I am reading you an exhortation to pay attention to what is written, in order that you may save both yourselves and your reader” (2 Clem. 19:1).1 The author of the Shepherd of Hermas narrates an account of an elderly woman, who represents “the church” (8.1), holding a book (2.2), reading the book (3.3), allowing copies of the book to be made for other believers (5.3), and then making this request, “Therefore you will write two little books, and you will send one to Clement and one to Grapte. Then Clement will send it to the cities abroad, because that is his job [. . .] But you yourself will read it to this city, along with the elders who preside over the church” (8.3).2

Among other groups, Pliny writes in his Letters with excitement about personally hearing literary works read or recited in community among young students (Sentius Augurinus in 4:27),3 old teachers (Isaeus in 2:3),4 and many others (Calpurnius Piso in 5:17).5 In his work Progymnasmata, Theon urges students to listen to good communal

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2 Holmes, Apostolic Fathers, 468–9. This passage is not the only one in the Shepherd of Hermas that has a command to write and read. For instance, the author writes elsewhere, “I am commanding you to write down first the commandments and parables so that you may read them at once and be able to keep them” (25.5; ibid., 502–3).
3 All references to classical texts will be from the digital Loeb Classical Library (LCL) unless noted otherwise, with only the volume number and facing page numbers noted, except when there is no facing page with a foreign language. LCL 55: 310–1.
5 LCL 55: 382–3.
reading in order to improve their overall rhetorical skills (Theon 61–62). Apuleius states that one of the mystery cults (Pastophores) reads directly from a book during their meetings: “Then from a lofty platform he read aloud from a book verbatim” (Met. 11:17). Pausanias notes that the Persian Cult magicians even sing from a book: “Entering the chamber a magician piles dry wood upon the altar; he first places a tiara upon his head and then sings to some god or other an invocation in a foreign tongue unintelligible to Greeks, reciting the invocation from a book” (5.27.6). The first-century funerary monument of an 11-year-old boy (Quintus Sulpicius Maximus) pictures him holding an open roll while publicly delivering his poem during the third Capitoline games shortly before his death in AD 94 (CIL VI, 33976). As these selected examples demonstrate, reading and reciting texts promulgated literary traditions.

At the same time, only some literary traditions were shared, read aloud, or recited during certain communal gatherings. For example, Tertullian specifically mentions the communal reading of the books of God during Christian gatherings: “We meet to read the books of God” (Apol. 39:3). Bishop Serapion writes to the Church in Rhossus about the Gospel of Peter advising them not to read it communally (Hist. Eccl. 6.12.2). Pliny’s reading group often promoted or rejected certain texts, authors, and participants for their events (Pompeius Saturninus in Letters 1:16). The Muratorian Fragment notes that some people are not willing to read the Apocalypse of Peter in church (72), and even though the Shepherd of Hermas should be read personally (77), “it cannot be read publicly to the people in church” (78). Justin Martyr refers to the communal reading of the apostolic memoirs and the writings of the prophets on the Lord’s Day: “On the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits” (1 Apol. 1:67). Gregory Snyder perceptively points out another important implication worth noting here. He states:

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7 See also the first century BC funerary inscription of a fourteen-year-old girl who is memorialized as being educated and erudite in all the arts (CIL I, 2.1214).


10 LCL 55: 50–1.


In fact, nine of the thirteen references to the ἀπομνημονεύματα τῶν ἀποστόλων [memoirs of the apostles] involve some form of γράφω [writing]. Justin’s conceptions about Gospel literature draw from him a manner of reference that acknowledges the textual and documentary character of the source. By contrast, the Books of Moses and the Prophets massively favor modes of reference that involve voice or speech. Clearly, there is something about the writtenness of the Memoirs that is important.\(^\text{13}\)

This sampling of evidence at least suggests the possibility that various traditions eagerly awaited acceptance or rejection from various communal reading events. Will the literary community read it communally? Will they endorse it? Will they actively make copies and circulate it? Will the god(s) accept this text? Will the god(s) answer our petition? Will they preserve it for future generations—via manuscripts, monuments, frescos, notebooks, etc.?

These types of evidence and questions led William Johnson, professor of classical studies at Duke University, to conclude, “Reading [among the elite] in this [High Roman Empire] society is tightly bound up in the construction of the community. Group reading and serious conversation devolving from reading are twin axes around which much of the elite man’s community turns.”\(^\text{14}\) His book, however, focused solely on the High Roman Empire during the second to fourth centuries AD, and on elite people like Gellius, Galen, and Lucian. Many other individuals, centuries, and trajectories are left open for further academic inquiry and scrutiny.\(^\text{15}\) In addition, Johnson’s goal was merely to “redirect scholarly attention” to the fact that ancient reading was unlike “the reading-from-a-printed-book model familiar to us today.” Furthermore, he only mentions “public reading” once in his entire book—and even then it is only a quote from someone else’s work.

The problem, as I see it, is that this entire subject of communal reading events and its role in controlling literary traditions has been largely neglected in early Christian studies. By control, I simply mean a tendency to preserve the integrity of a tradition’s propositional content, even while acknowledging that variation was inevitable, and local contingencies could shape the preservationist tendency itself.\(^\text{16}\) For example, Tommy

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\(^\text{15}\) The author does recognize this when he states, “Further work along these lines could be profitably pursued also for the classical period (esp. Cicero) and for the context of early Christian writings” (ibid., n. 22).

\(^\text{16}\) Though it is outside the scope of this presentation, future research should compare this type of control with others in order to note further avenues or limitations. For example, eyewitnesses were not everywhere in the first century, and they died off by the second century. Thus, even though eyewitnesses were an essential type of quality control, they were necessarily limited in nature. On the other hand, if communal reading events were widespread in the first century and continued into subsequent centuries, then they demand more attention than they have previously received.
Wasserman points to a situation recorded in a letter from Augustine to Jerome. According to Augustine, there was one word in Jerome’s Latin translation (the Vulgate) of Jonah 4:6 that differed from what they had been hearing read communally for generations and it caused an uproar in his congregation.\(^{17}\) Academic literature even hinting at the fact that communal reading events were a means of controlling literary traditions is sporadic and implicit at best—often centuries removed from the tradition(s)’s inception.

Take Harry Gamble’s remarkable study on books and readers in the early church, where one might expect to find such a treatment. Out of the 337 pages, only three pages specifically deal with “the public reading of Christian books,” and another three on “the reading of Scripture in early Christian worship.”\(^{18}\) Yet he does not appear to argue for or against communal reading as a major control of the Christian tradition, nor does he attempt to determine whether communal reading events were widespread. He does, however, help actualize the importance of our discussion when he suggests that communal reading was “probably universal” by the middle of the second century, but that “it is still difficult to determine just how early this practice began or how widely it was followed.”\(^{19}\) And he does note in another publication that the “formation of the canon of scripture was nothing other than the church’s retrospective recognition of its own reading habits.”\(^{20}\) More recently, Guy Stroumsa made a similar statement regarding reading practices in late antique Christianity when he said that “the public reading of Scriptures had become a major aspect of Christian ritual.”\(^{21}\) Again, the discussions often begin after the first century and insinuate that communal reading events were not always the norm.

Similarly, Lee Martin McDonald’s academic work on the Biblical Canon does not deal with communal reading.\(^{22}\) Although he does mention that Christian traditions and texts were originally and often transmitted orally, he does not appear to make specific mention of the impact communal reading events had on controlling the tradition or overall process of canonization.\(^{23}\) In relation to both communal reading and Canon


\(^{19}\) Ibid., 205 and 206 respectively (italics added).


\(^{22}\) Lee Martin McDonald, The Biblical Canon: Its Origin, Transmission, and Authority (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008). More recently, however, Bokedal does discuss communal reading as part of liturgical worship at a number of key points in his treatment on biblical canonicity (Tomas Bokedal, The Formation and Significance of the Christian Biblical Canon: A Study in Text, Ritual and Interpretation [London: T&T Clark, 2014]).

\(^{23}\) For example, even though they did not discuss “canon(icity)” as scholars do today, their understanding of readability arguably foreshadowed it.
studies, Peter Davids writes this in his critical commentary on the Epistle of Jude, “It was the Christians who started asking two questions in the second century: (1) which works should be bound together in a codex (book)? And (2) which works should be read in church (since most people could not read and so were dependent upon what was read in church) as reflecting the rule of faith?”24 His assumption that Christians “started” asking such a communal question in the “second” century further exposes the value of our topic at hand.

Narrowing the focus from academic works on more general topics to more specialized ones on specific topics, one should expect different results. Unfortunately, one arrives at the same dead-end. Even more specialized works appear to have overlooked or dismissed communal reading as another distinct means of controlling the Christian tradition. Take Richard Bauckham’s work, Jesus and the Eyewitnesses.25 It has several fruitful sections dealing specifically with quality controls. While some controls are interwoven throughout his entire work, others are given a distinct section and subtitle. For example, “Controlling the Tradition: Memorization” (280), “Controlling the Tradition: Writing?” (286), and “Controlling the Tradition: Eyewitnesses and Gospels” (305) are dealt with individually. Thus, he approached the overall subject well, but he did not go far enough. One reason for this seems to be that no study has yet determined how widespread these events were in order to determine what role they played as a guardian of the tradition. In light of this neglect, and observing that communal reading events were no inconsequential matter given the amount of ancient references to them, concerted attention is warranted for further illuminating the book culture of the early church.

The same neglect can be seen in Petr Pokorný’s 2013 monograph. After analyzing the role oral gospel traditions played in shaping the earliest literary Gospel (Mark) and the way Gospels as texts (re-)introduce Jesus traditions into Christian liturgy and literature, he concludes by discussing the origins of the idea of the Christian canon.26 Yet “public reading” is only mentioned once (in order to highlight the fact that certain literary genres helped readers read the text communally),27 and when the author does mention certain liturgical settings in which texts were read (though only about half a dozen times

24 The Letters of 2 Peter and Jude (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 76 (italics added).
26 Communal reading as a quality control has remained unaddressed elsewhere, even though many other scholars have offered various critiques of Bauckham’s work, and he has often responded in kind. Take Bauckham’s response to the reviews of Samuel Byrskog, David Catchpole, Howard Marshall, Stephen Patterson and Theodore Weeden in his article, “In Response to My Respondents: Jesus and the Eyewitnesses in Review,” JSJH 6 [2008]: 225–53, and to Jens Schröter and Craig Evans in “Eyewitnesses and Critical History: A Response to Jens Schröter and Craig Evans,” JSNT 31.2 [2008]: 221–35).
28 Ibid., 108.
in 248 pages), he seems to suggest that they were merely an aid for memory. Yet the formation of the Gospels—and entire Christian tradition—should be examined in light of both the oral culture and book culture.

Larry Hurtado has also noticed this lack of familiarity among some biblical scholars regarding book culture in the first few centuries AD. After noting several academic works by classicists on this topic that appear to have gone unnoticed or unchallenged, he points to several pertinent gaps that need filling by biblical scholars. For example, clarity on what scholars mean when referring to “performance” during communal reading events, and the need for greater attention to the physical properties of the earliest Christian MSS which contain various “readers’ aids.” Hurtado also remains one of the few scholars to even note the likely effects repeated communal readings had as a stabilizing force in the textual transmission of certain texts. Similarly, Craig Evans has acknowledged the possibility that communal reading events “may well have created something like a ‘standardized’ text and undoubtedly facilitated memorization, which would also have a stabilizing affect on the text.” But apart from raising the possibility, he does not develop this factor much further.

II. A New Control Category: Communal Reading Events

Over the past few decades, various scholars have argued for or against certain “quality controls” that must have been in place—consciously or unconsciously—in order to account for the transmission of the earliest Jesus movement. By successfully identifying one or more of these controls, it is thought, one can better account for the similarities and differences between the various Christian traditions, get closer to the earliest sources of the nascent Jesus movement, and ultimately understand the historical Jesus more accurately. For example, Richard Bauckham argues that “eyewitnesses” were a means of controlling the Christian tradition. James Dunn proposes “communal memory.”

For example, see p. 127 (ibid.).

Several important works have approached the subject via performance and audience response, but not in the same sense that it will be addressed in this volume. See among others William D. Shiell, Reading Acts: The Lector and the Early Christian Audience (Biblical Interpretation Series 70; Lieden: Brill Academic, 2004); idem., Delivering from Memory: The Effect of Performance on the Early Christian Audience (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011).


Jesus and the Eyewitnesses.

Kenneth Bailey suggests “memorization.” Alan Millard puts forth “writing.” Samuel Byrskog proposes “performance.” Chris Keith advocates “Jesus-memory.” Mikael Tellbe points to “texts.” John Dominic Crossan stresses “mimetics.” Tommy Wasserman and Jennifer Knust highlight “liturgical singing.” Of course, one could list several others. The debates, however, do not end there. Additional disputes exist over the different levels of quality within each control category. Were they flexible, somewhat flexible, or totally flexible? Rudolph Bultmann seems to imply that the transmission of the earliest Jesus tradition was fluid (often labeled informal and uncontrolled). Kenneth Bailey suggests that it was informal but controlled (i.e., the community exercised the control). Birger Gerhardsson argues for a formal controlled tradition. Richard

40 Christ-Believers in Ephesus (WUNT 242; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009).
43 Michael Bird, for example, while including several of the usual categories just mentioned, like eyewitnesses, adds a few other viable controls as distinct categories, like “Pedagogical and Rhetorical Devices,” “Teachers as Custodians,” “Interest in Jesus,” and “Aramaic Sources,” in order to better determine “what factors or controls may have enabled that [Jesus] tradition to be preserved effectively” (“The Purpose and Preservation of the Jesus Tradition: Moderate Evidence for a Conserving Force in Its Transmission,” BBR 15.2 [2005]: 161–85). To a lesser and slightly different extent, but nonetheless suggestive of other avenues for consideration, “genre” is being discussed more frequently as a type of control. For instance, see the portion of Mark Goodacre’s response to John S. Kloppenborg under “Genre” in “Did Thomas Know the Synoptic Gospels?: A Response to Denzey Lewis, Kloppenborg, and Patterson,” JSNT 36.3 (2014): 287–8, entire article 282–93. Likewise, other societal controls have been written about, like when Robert A. Kaster describes the grammarians who teach the younger generations as “guardians of articulate utterance” in his book Guardians of Language: The Grammarian and Society in Late Antiquity (The Transformation of the Classical Heritage 11; Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 17, but they are not as directly involved with our present study.
44 Rudolph Bultmann, Jesus and the Word (New York, NY; Scribners, 1934).
Bauckham incorporates another transmission continuum for scholars to consider: *stability-flexibility*.\(^47\) While all of these controls and various degrees of each have their place in the overall picture—strengths and weaknesses aside for now—one control that has not been explicitly proposed or given sufficient academic scrutiny is communal reading events. If it is shown, then, that communal reading events were a widespread phenomenon in the first century AD, this will open up new vistas in the study of the formation of the Jesus tradition, the contours of book culture in early Christianity, and factors shaping the transmission of the text of the New Testament.

### III. A Brief Survey of the Dynamic Environment in which Jesus and His First Followers Operated

French historian Jérôme Carcopino wrote one of the classic texts on ancient Roman life,\(^48\) with an entire section devoted to communal reading and recitation events. His work, however, is often missing from such discussions in modern works.\(^49\) This is unfortunate since he still has much to offer. He writes about communal reading events as follows:

> This practice [of Asinius Pollio reading his works before his friends] was too well suited to the conditions of writers and the desires of government not to become the fashion quickly. Thus the conjunction of omnipotent publishers and servile libraries gave birth to a monster, the public *recitatio*, which soon grew to be the curse of literature. The calculations of the politicians and the vanity of authors set the fashion. After that nothing could stop it.\(^50\)

He goes on to say that communal reading events even crossed social boundaries. He states, “[E]xamining the contemporary literature, we soon get the impression that everyone was reading something, no matter what, aloud in public all the time, morning and evening, winter and summer.”\(^51\)

Overall, Carcopino complains that due to “the public-reading mania”\(^52\)—that became “a chaos of deafening sound”\(^53\)—these events eventually ate away at the moral

\(^47\) Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 257–60.

\(^48\) *La Vie quotidienne à Rome à l’apogée de l’Empire* (Paris, 1939).

\(^49\) The same can be said regarding Ludwig Friedländer’s work, *Roman Life and Manners under the Early Empire: Authorized Translation of the Seventh Enlarged and Revised Edition of the Sittengeschichte Roms, Volume III* (trans. J. H. Freese; New York: E. P. Dutton, 1910), which draws many of the same conclusions.


\(^51\) Carcopino, *Daily Life*, 199.

\(^52\) Carcopino, *Daily Life*, 203.
and intellectual fabric of the Empire. He even concludes that communal reading events became “cancer-like”: “When there were as many writers as listeners, or, as we should say, as many authors as readers, and the two roles were indistinguishable, literature suffered from an incurable, malignant tumour.”

At first blush, Carcopino may seem extreme. Yet he is merely summarizing the sentiments of numerous Roman authors who felt crushed by the sheer volume of communal reading events. He is also not alone in describing these types of communal reading events as “the trend of the day.” Pliny writes to Sosius Senecio, “This year has raised a fine crop of poets; there was scarcely a day throughout the month of April when someone was not giving a public reading” (Letters 1.13.1). Later in the same work, after discussing the great pleasure he received from having friends come to listen to him read for several days, Pliny reflects, “Am I to look upon this as a tribute to myself or to the art of oratory? I hope the latter, as it is now enjoying a revival after almost dying out” (Letters 3.18.5–6). He goes on to share that his ultimate audience is the mass population, “I have not forgotten that only a few friends have heard me read what I have written for the general public; but even so, my delight in their keen attentiveness makes me hopeful that popular opinion will coincide with theirs” (Letters 3.18.9).

In Satyricon, Petronius writes this about a bad poet:

Some of the people who were walking in the colonnades threw stones at Eumolpus as he recited. . . . [he later told me] ‘whenever I go into the theatre to recite anything, this is the sort of come-if-you-wish gathering with which the house usually welcomes me’. . . . We left Eumolpus behind—for he was reciting a poem in the bathroom . . . [he found us later and explained] ‘Why, I was nearly flogged while I was washing,’ he cried, ‘because I tried to go round the bath and recite poetry to the people sitting in it, and when I was thrown out of the bathroom as if it were the theatre, I proceeded to look round all the corners, and shouted for Encolpius in a loud voice’ (Sat. 90–92).

Martial tries explaining to a man, Ligurinus, why no one wants to spend time with him, and why the people even leave when they see Ligurinus coming. “You are not too much of a poet,” Martial states, “[yet] You read to me while I am standing, and read to me

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53 Carcopino, Daily Life, 201.
54 Carcopino, Daily Life, 203.
55 Zelnick-Abramovitz, “Look and Listen,” 183. She arrives at this conclusion by examining still other primary texts not included in Carcopino, such as Lucian, Quomodo Historia Conscribenda Sit, 5–51, esp. 7.
56 LCL 55: 40.
57 LCL 55: 225.
when I am sitting; while I am running you read to me, and read to me while I am shitting” (Ep. 1.3.44). 60 Ironically, some authors during this time period, like Galen, suggest that certain people were not permitted to speak in public (e.g., On the Therapeutic Method, 1.2.3). Yet the context of Galen’s remarks (i.e., complaining about a below-par physician who became publicly popular) seems to support Carcopino’s appraisal even more. Galen is simply jealous of a rival and attempts to belittle him with a statement that has no real justification. In other words, communal readings were rampant, and even unqualified people were doing it to such an extent that some elites were responding to it via their writings.

According to Carcopino, the multiplication of libraries and the rise of publishers provided the early impetus to these communal reading events. From there, certain celebrities—and their rivals—were created. Once book merchants, with their team of scribal slaves, capitalized on the profits, then publishers and authors grew quickly—though most authors remained in relative poverty. It was only a matter of time that those not qualified would also seize the opportunities—financially and socially. He summarizes and concludes as follows:

When once the public reading became an established fashion in Rome, and was recognised as the main and almost exclusive occupation of people of letters, literature lost all dignity and all serious purpose. The fashionable world adopted a currency which became more and more alloyed as the circle of amateurs was enlarged. Those who were invited wished to be the inviters in their turn, and when everybody mounted the dais in rotation, it ended by every listener becoming an author. This was in appearance the triumph of literature. But it was a Pyrrhic victory, an insensate inflation which foreshadowed bankruptcy. 61

If Carcopino’s interpretation is generally accurate—and I think it is—then it also helps scholars better understand and interpret certain ancient texts. Lucian’s Rhetorum Praeceptor may well be a reaction to the students of his day wanting to bypass the traditional education system by finding new and faster ways to gain enough rhetorical abilities to participate in the reading craze. 62

There are still many factors beyond merely the quantity of communal reading events. Therefore, instead of relying solely on Carcopino’s interpretation above, here are a few provisional considerations from primary evidence beyond that which Carcopino cites. What follows is merely a sampling, with no commentary or qualifications

60 LCL 94: 188–9.
61 Carcopino, Daily Life, 203.
62 Though he does not mention Carcopino or communal reading events, see the recent work on this text and topic in Craig Gibson, “How (Not) to Learn Rhetoric: Lucian’s Rhetorum Praeceptor as Rebuttal of a School Exercise,” GRBS 52 (2012): 89–110.
provided. Instead, they are designed to help situate and actualize the social context as it relates to ancient book culture and communal reading events.

Communal reading events in the context of ancient book culture were instrumental in social networking (Pliny, *Letters* 1.13). Invitations were sent out (P.Oxy. 2592). Children were involved (Fronto, *Ad M. Caes*. 1.7.2). Women were involved (P.Oxy. VIII 1148/1149). Literary contests existed (Martial, *Epi.* 4.54; *CIL* IX 2860). Certain authors criticized communal reading events as nothing more than popular pandering (Persius 1.13–23). Other authors defended the aristocratic nature of these communal reading events (Statius, *Silv.* 5.3.215). Some authors felt completely cut off from society when they were not reading communally (Ovid, *Ex Ponto* 4.25). Other authors were content to send representatives to read their works to others (Lucian, *Symposion* 21). Still other writers roamed around mocking communal reading events (Juvenal, *Sat.* 1.1–14). Satirists criticized communal reading events (Persius, *Sat.* 1.67–70). Notaries attempted to write down everything they heard (Seneca, *Apoc.* 9.1). Local publications discussed communal reading events (*Acta Diurna*). There were “ghostwriting” services available (dating all the way back to Antiphon). There were “historical reporters” (Dionysius, *Roman Antiquities* 1.1.4). There were artistic representations of communal reading events (*IGUR* 1228). There were times when participants (re-)wrote their text on the spot during communal reading events (Suet. *Poet. Vir.* 34; cf. Tacitus, *Ann.* 13:15). There were other individual controls over texts before being performed or published (Tertullian, *Adv. Marcion* 1:1). There were scripts sold to

63 I drew several of these sample texts from Donka D. Markus’s outstanding study, “Performing the Book: The Recital of Epic in First-Century C.E. Rome,” *Classical Antiquity* 19.1 (2000): 138–79. For an extended treatment on many of them, consult her work.


65 In this account, a man, Hetoemocles, sends his slave to a symposium of his friends to read the small tablet he sent with his slave: “You see, a servant came into the midst of us, saying that he was from Hetoemocles the Stoic and carrying a paper (γραμματίδιον) which he said his master had told him to read in public, so that everybody would hear, and then to go back again. On getting the consent of Aristaenetus, he went up to the lamp and began to read.”

66 It is also interesting to note that some authors, such as the one noted here, assumed it was normal to have a written report to examine after a discourse. Seneca states, “He made an eloquent harangue, because his life was passed in the forum, but a harangue too fast for the notary to take down. That is why I give no full report of it, for I don’t want to change the words he used.”
actors (Juvenal, 7.87). Some events circulated as pamphlets (Lysias 12, Eratosthenes). There were times when members of the audience would take notes and attempt to plagiarize the work of the presenter after the event (Quintilian, Inst. 1.7–8). Forgeries existed (Lucian, Pseud. 30). Book dealers existed (P.Oxy 2192). Bookstores existed (Catullus, Carm. 14:17–20). Authors generated various kinds of reading lists for people and requested others (Quintilian, Inst. 1.8.2; Lucian, Ind. 27). Bibliographies were provided upon request (Pliny, Letters 3.5). Pre-publication drafts were delivered at certain gatherings with editorial purposes in mind (Horace, Ars. P. 438). There were grammar books (a first-century schoolteacher, Quintus Remmius Palaemon, wrote one noted grammar: Juvenal, Sat. 6.452) and lexicons (Aelius Dionysius and Pausanias) to assist readers. Various kinds of public libraries existed, both ancient and modern (Suetonius, Dom. 8.20). Substantial personal libraries existed (Strabo, 13.1.54). Books were often given to friends as gifts (Martial, 14:183–96). Elite members of society sometimes pretended they were more highly educated than they really were (Seneca, Epi. 27:5–7). Some people thought memorizing was a waste of time because they had written texts (Suet. Aug. 84).

This list could go on, but the real debates are not over the statements given above, especially with only one example given of each. Rather, the debates exist over the extent and qualifications of each one. No one disputes that libraries existed, but to what extent did libraries exist? No one argues against the fact that communal reading events existed, but can the events be reconciled with statements such as the one from Seneca, who said there were only three events that popularized people’s views (Cic. Sest. 106)? Ancient writers often withheld the very details now needed to increase the accuracy of modern historical reconstructions. At the same time, by underscoring the social context as it relates to ancient book culture and communal reading events, we are in a better position to propose that communal reading events were deeply embedded within the social fabric of society and we can no longer (or so easily) claim that any evidence of them is “the exception to the rule.”

One additional point that has yet not been specifically addressed is relevant here. For whom were communal reading events held? Though the answer is not simple, nor is it the focus of our investigation, it seems that many texts and events were produced and held not solely for the elite, but also for popular consumption because their appeal was


broad. They were certainly able to utilize the events more than most people since they could hire multiple slaves to read, take dictation, or both. Nicholas Horsfall, after noting many examples, puts the matter this way, “Lector and notarius mean that twenty-four hours per day are available for work, if their owner so wishes.” Furthermore, not much has been written on non-elites in ancient or modern sources. Ancient literary sources only seem to mention the lower classes when they become a public nuisance or are needed for some specific task, such as reading literature. Ovid writes, “You too, plebeian hands, receive, if you may, our verses dismayed by the shame of their rejection” (Ovid, Tristia 1.1.82). Since some local libraries appear to have rejected Ovid's work (the temple of Apollo, the porticus Octavia, and the temple of Liberty), he appeals to “plebeian hands” to pick up and read his book. Even if this type of readership is rarely petitioned or acknowledged by the “elite” literary culture, evidence like this confirms it existed in a quantity enough to petition.

What remains may merely be “the ‘bestseller list’ of late antiquity” or works primarily written by only a segment of society; neither of which provide a representative picture. But that does not negate popular culture’s involvement. For instance, although surviving evidence written by or about ancient women is minimal, Kim Haines-Eitzen notes, “women were (occasionally? rarely? sometimes?) involved in the many and various stages of the production, reproduction, and dissemination of early Christian literature. . . . And the combined documentary, epigraphic, and literary evidence surely suggests we must rethink the ancient book world as being entirely male.”

By popular culture, I essentially agree with Jerry Toner’s simply definition: “Popular culture is probably best defined in a negative way as the culture of the non-elite [i.e., peasants, craftsmen and artisans, laborers, healers, fortune-tellers, storytellers and entertainers, shopkeepers, and traders, slaves, and most women and children]” (Popular Culture in Ancient Rome [Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009], 1). In other words, it consists of all the “have-nots” of Roman society.


A similar, general conclusion was drawn by Neville Morley regarding his study of ancient women (Theories, Models and Concepts in Ancient History [London, 2004], 90), and specifically stories about women in the Apocryphal Acts by Prema Vakayil (“‘Go and Teach the Word of God’: Paul’s Missionary Command to Thecla,” Indian Theological Studies 49 [2012]: 23–9).

simplistically regarding a smaller portion of women in antiquity, one can infer that
prostitutes would not have put their profession on their tombstones. But surviving
evidence shows that prostitutes existed by the graffiti they wrote on the walls with their
own hands as advertisements in Pompeii (4.1969, 4.4023, 4.4150, 4.4439, 4.2450,
4.5203, 4.5127, 4.2193, et. al). In fact, after noting the vast amount of graffiti in Pompeii,
which included about 10,000 political advertisements on top of all the other categories,
such as ads for sex trade, real estate, and gladiatorial games, Ben Witherington reasoned,
“[T]here seems to have been more writings on the wall than inhabitants within them. . . .
[which] may suggest a higher level of literacy than previously suspected in the Greco-
Roman world.”

And on top of all these examples, the words of Ramsey MacMullen still ring
broadly true regarding modern pursuits of evidence, “Archeology fails us [regarding non-
elites], for no one has sought fame through the excavation of a slum.” Putting all this
still another way, historical reconstructions are more often drawn from texts popular
enough, copied enough, and circulated enough. The societal elite necessarily would have
had the resources to make that happen.

IV. Background in Judaism

If history shows that Jewish communal reading events were not a new phenomenon in the
first century AD, or only found within certain communities across the Mediterranean
world, then such evidence would necessarily increase the probability that communal
reading events were widespread in the first century AD.  

1. Jewish Communal Reading Events

The first mention of a communal reading event in the OT is found in Exodus 17:14–16.
In this passage Moses is told to first write down the events that just occurred, and then to
read the written account to/with Joshua. From there, numerous examples of communal

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76 “Graffiti at the SBL,” which he posted on his online blog, http://benwitherington.blogspot.com/2008/12/graffiti-at-sbl.html Tuesday, December 16, 2008 [accessed: January 4, 2017]).

77 Ramsey MacMullen, Roman Social Relations: 50 B.C. to A.D. 284 (New Haven: Yale
University Press, 1974), 93. Among works on non-elites, see Peter O’Neill, “A Culture of Sociability:
Popular Speech in Ancient Rome” (PhD diss., University of California, 2001); Robert Knapp, Invisible
Romans: Prostitutes, Outlaws, Slaves, Gladiators, Ordinary Men and Women . . . the Romans that History

78 Though absent from several more recent monographs on synagogues, like Levine’s and
Duncan’s mentioned below, Stephen Spence’s work has additional considerations worth exploring,
especially regarding “the parting of ways” between the church and synagogue (Stephen Spence, “The
Separation of the Church and the Synagogue in First-Century Rome” [PhD diss., Fuller Theological

79 Contra several scholars that state Exo. 24:1–18 is the first communal reading event since it is
the first time קָרָא is used with a written text as its direct object. Ronald Bloomfield lists 46 occurrences of
קָרָא (39 in Hebrew and 7 in Aramaic) in 20 passages that directly relate to communal reading events
(“Reading Sacred Texts Aloud in the Old Testament” [ThM thesis, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary,
reading events exist in the OT, often involving larger groups of people than just two (e.g., Josh. 8:30–35; Jer. 36:6). In fact, communal reading events are often the point of emphasis at key historical moments: at the conclusion of the Torah (Deut. 31:11–12); the return of the exilic community in Nehemiah (8:7–8); a community turning to God during the reign of Josiah (2 Chron. 34:18, 30). Given that the OT portrays several ideal scenes of the Torah being read before larger groups and assemblies of Israelites at key moments in Israel’s sacred history, Jewish communal reading events are pre-rabbinic, pre-Christian, and pre-Qumran.\(^\text{80}\)

2. Synagogues

Several recent studies have questioned a strong continuity between early Christian communal reading events and Jewish communal reading events. Both Henk Jan de Jonge\(^\text{81}\) and Valeriy Alikin\(^\text{82}\) propose that there is no evidence of Christians reading the Law communally prior to the third century AD—whereas for the Jews the primary characteristic of Jewish worship was the communal reading of the Law. Due to the scope of this presentation I will not be able to examine these types of claims more closely, but for the moment it is worth noting that Alikin does not seem to consider (since he does not include) several key NT texts that suggest a strong connection or even an adapted liturgical parallel. Consider [τὰ ἱερὰ γράμματα] in 2 Timothy 3:15, which is the only time this terminology is used in the NT in order to authenticate the Gospel both prophetically and scripturally via the OT.\(^\text{83}\) The main point here is that regardless of what or when texts were read communally, no serious doubt exists that the term “synagogue” was often used explicitly in connection with communal reading events in the first century AD, as an assembly of people more generally or as a meeting place more specifically. Synagogues as structures were in active use during the first century AD (with the main one being


\(^{83}\) See among others Hans-Jürgen van der Minde, Schrift und Tradition bei Paulus (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1976), 39.
Jerusalem, where the Great Council was). One can find literary references to them in Philo, Josephus, Christian writings, pagan writings, inscriptions, papyri, Dead Sea Scrolls, and rabbinical documents. Moreover, no less than seven first-century synagogues have been uncovered archeologically (Masada, Herodium, Gamla, Herodian Jericho, Qiryat Sefer, Modi’in, and Magdala), with an eighth already receiving more academic attention.

Synagogues were (most) often a place of communal reading—though debate continues over what form(s) the readings took (sermons, homilies, etc.). This picture is consistent with archeological excavations. Emanuel Tov suggests the strong possibility of communal reading given the burial of a couple damaged scrolls underneath a synagogue floor. He states:

. . . the only solid piece of identifying information is that two biblical scrolls were buried under the floor of the synagogue, in two separate genizot, namely scrolls of Deuteronomy and Ezekiel. Why these specific scrolls, and not others, were buried there remains unknown since only fragments of the scrolls have been preserved. However, it stands to reason that these scrolls, or segments of them, had been damaged at an earlier stage, making them unfit for public reading, so that religious storage in a special burial place (genizah) became mandatory.

Major articles have appeared regarding the decorated stone from a synagogue at Migdal. Among them, Mordechai Aviam argues well that the stone served as a base for a lectern.


86 Peter Richardson, in his published book review of Alexander to Constantine: Archaeology of the Land of the Bible (BASOR 370 [2013]: 242–4, here 243), notes Khirbet Qana as another likely first-century synagogue that was excavated by the late Douglas Edwards. This evidence is confirmed by Lee Levine’s most recent count: “Solid archaeological evidence for the first-century synagogue is attested at eight sites in Judea” (“The Synagogues of Galilee,” in Galilee in the Late Second Temple and Mishnaic Periods, 129–50, here 130).

87 For a well-argued critique of such distinctions, though not in direct relation to synagogues, see James A. Kelhoffer, “If Second Clement Really Were a ‘Sermon,’ How Would We know, and Why Would We Care?: Prolegomena to Analyses of the Writing’s Genre and Community,” in Early Christian Communities between Ideal and Reality (WUNT 342; ed. Mark Grundeken and Joseph Verheyden; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 83–108.

on which Jewish Scripture was read communally. More recently, Richard Bauckham and Stefano De Luca agree with Aviam’s general point here, and add, “What the stone would have done was make constantly visible to the people assembled in the synagogue the connection of what they were doing with the Temple in Jerusalem. For this reason it makes a hugely important new contribution to discussion of early synagogues in Palestine.” In addition, even after the two Jewish revolts in AD 70/135, Eric Meyers points to the continued focus on communal reading in everyday Jewish life.

The editors of A Comparative Handbook to the Gospel of Mark state:

Although the implements of the Temple were later associated with synagogues, the ark for the scrolls of the law is attested as early as Caesar’s edict as quoted by Josephus (Antiquities XVI § 164). The centrality of reading and interpreting the law is also conveyed in the scene of Nehemiah 8, which the Rabbis of Talmud later associated with reciting the scripture and giving its interpretation in Aramaic (see b. Megillah 3a; b. Nedarim 37b).

These pictures of “a type of ethnic reading-house” are also consistent with what is seen in the NT. Jesus reads in the synagogue in Luke 4:16. Luke relates how Paul stood up and addressed the congregation in Antioch after the leaders read in the synagogue (Acts 13:14–6). Luke also writes that James told the church in Jerusalem that Moses was still read communally every Sabbath (Acts 15:21). The author of the Book of James uses both συναγωγή (2:2) and ἐκκλησία (5:14) without appearing to differentiate between the two. Some scholars suggest that the phrase used at the end of Acts 18:7 is significant in regards to Christians and the synagogue (i.e., οὗ ἦν συνομοροθσα)


90 “Magdala As We Know It,” EC 6 (2015): 91–118, here 111.


92 A Comparative Handbook to the Gospel of Mark: Comparisons with Pseudepigrapha, the Qumran Scrolls, and Rabbinic Literature (NTGJC 1; eds. Bruce Chilton, Darrell Bock, Daniel M. Gurtner, Jacob Neusner, Lawrence H. Schiffman, and Daniel Oden; Leiden: Brill, 2010), 570.

93 Paula Fredriksen, “How Later Contexts Affect Pauline Content, or: Retrospect is the Mother of Anachronism,” in Jews and Christians in the First and Second Centuries, 17–51, here 23.


Martin Hengel, while discussing communal reading in early Christian communities, concludes:

From the end of the first century we can presuppose the reading of letters of Paul in numerous communities. The prescripts and endings of Paul’s letters are deliberately formulated for liturgical use. The ‘holy kiss’ at the end of the letter . . . marks the transition to the Supper at the end of the reading of the letter . . . I would say that in its basic form primitive Christian worship was more uniform than is usually assumed today.”

Simply put, the “Jesus movement was born and nurtured in Second Temple synagogues,” and inherited, at least in part, its practices in regard to its book culture, reading communities, and literary practices, even if early Christian communities modified them or transformed them in diverse ways.

V. Summary

Surveying the social context, especially in relation to communal reading events, it would be no exaggeration to state that virtually all literature during this time period was composed to be read communally. We found out that communal reading events crossed social boundaries. They involved numerous segments of the population—and most importantly, not just the elite. They took place in many different indoor and outdoor settings. Communal reading events could be sacred or non-sacred, Christian or non-Christian. Given that such events had the ability to attract people, they had the potential to create an intellectual and textual community.

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96 David Peterson writes, “It must have also been very disturbing for the synagogue to have the rival Christian meeting taking place in the house next door” (David G. Peterson, The Acts of the Apostles [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009], 512).


In addition, the background of Judaism was considered as a relevant source for better understanding Christian communal reading events. In the least, it was shown that Christian communal reading events were not a new sacred phenomenon. It appears most likely that the early Christian movement largely inherited the book culture, reading communities, and literary practices of Judaism, even if early Christian communities modified or transformed them in diverse ways. A main factor suggesting this was the role that synagogues played in early Christian origins. Despite the reality that synagogues were not exclusively for Jewish communal reading events, or even Jewish by necessity, it was shown that they were most often associated with communal reading events in Jewish traditions. This picture coincides with what we read about Jesus in the Gospel accounts.

The main conclusion here is that communal reading events existed in many different contexts and could have been an available conserving force within literary traditions in the first century AD.