

**The Gospels as Diverse Reading Events**  
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**Disclaimer:** This paper is a summation of portions of my forthcoming book, *Gospel Media: Reading, Writing, and Circulating Jesus Traditions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2023). If you wish to cite ideas from this paper, please reference the book when doing so.

## **Introduction**

Antique reading modes, events, technologies, and cultures were as diverse as our own. Persons in Greco-Roman antiquity read privately and silently. They read privately and aloud. Those who were illiterate participated in reading events by having texts read to them in small-, medium- and large-sized groups. Literate individuals likewise had texts read to them, sometimes by slaves, sometimes by colleagues and in groups of varying size. Persons were read to out of medical necessity, for the purpose of entertainment or education, or because they simply did not want to read themselves. As physical objects with permanence, texts were used in differing ways. And, as William A. Johnson has put it, “The reading of different types of texts makes for different types of reading events.”<sup>1</sup>

In this presentation I aim to briefly counter two myths about reading operative in some New Testament scholarship. In my estimation, these two myths hinder us from appreciating the diversity of reading practices and events in the first-century world. After briefly addressing these two myths, we shall turn to the Synoptic Gospels themselves to suggest that they are all different kinds of texts that made for different kinds of reading events. There was no singular way that the gospels were engaged, whether it be performance, public reading, private reading, or some other such.

## **Myth #1: Silent Reading**

The first myth still operative in some streams of New Testament scholarship is that antique reading was always or usually aloud. In my estimation, Paul Achtemeier’s 1990 JBL article, “*Omne Verbum Sonat*: The New Testament and the Oral Environment of Late Western Antiquity” ossified this myth and several others.<sup>2</sup> Therein Achtemeier writes, “Reading was therefore oral performance *whenever* it occurred and in whatever circumstances. Late antiquity knew nothing of the ‘silent, solitary’ reader.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> William A. Johnson, *Readers and Reading Culture in the High Roman Empire: A Study of Elite Communities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 11.

<sup>2</sup> Achtemeier, “*Omne Verbum Sonat*: The New Testament and the Oral Environment of Late Western Antiquity,” *JBL* 109 (1990): 3–27.

<sup>3</sup> Achtemeier, “*Omne Verbum Sonat*,” 17. Again, Achtemeier writes, “It is apparent that the general — indeed, from all evidence, the exclusive — practice was to read aloud” (“*Omne Verbum Sonat*,” 15). Harry Y. Gamble similarly writes, “The most important thing to be said is that in the Greco-Roman world virtually all reading was reading aloud; even when reading privately the reader gave audible voice to the texts”

Achtemeier's claim is demonstrably false. On the handout, I have provided a sampling of ten primary source texts that attest to silent reading in differing contexts and that vary widely in literary genre, date, and provenance. These are not the only texts that imply silent reading was known and even common. We will not examine these texts closely for the sake of time and because, especially in classics, the fact that persons could and did read silently in antiquity is well-established. For whatever reason, this fact has not made its way into New Testament scholarship, where many still assume that reading was always vocalized.

My interest is not so much in establishing that persons could and did read silently for its own sake. Nor is my claim that silent reading was more common than vocalized reading. Rather, my interest is in establishing these mechanics to de-romanticize antique reading. No doubt reading cultures in the first few centuries CE were different than our own, but this does not mean that reading was an exotic act. On the contrary, authors very often depict it as completely normal.

## **Myth #2: Communal / Public Reading**

A myth corollary to the all-reading-was vocalized myth is that reading was always or usually "communal" or "public" in antiquity. Under the influence of the vocalized reading myth and the communal reading myth, the logic is that when individuals did read to themselves, they did so in preparation for or imitation of public reading. One recent monograph on early Christian reading practices states, "It would be no exaggeration to state that virtually all literature during this time period was composed to be read communally."<sup>4</sup>

This claim is also demonstrably false. It would in fact be an exaggeration to state that most literature was composed to be read communally. Yet again, there is no shortage of primary source evidence that testifies to the normalcy of reading to oneself. In addition to instances of silent reading, I've listed on the handout occasions that depict a person reading to themselves, reading to a very small group, or assume that solitary reading was a normal act. Again, the evidence is limited to ten entries. Many more could be added.

None of this is to claim that texts were not read communally. They were. Ancient reading is not a zero-sum game. As today, in antiquity different kinds of texts were read in different ways and in different settings. While I have not engaged them here or referenced them on the handout, there is ample evidence to reading texts in small groups, in medium-sized groups, and in large groups. These are what we might call "communal" reading events.

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(*Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995], 203).

<sup>4</sup> Brian J. Wright, *Communal Reading in the Time of Jesus: A Window into Early Christian Reading Practices* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017), 59.

And here I'd like to offer some precision to our terminology. Very often in New Testament scholarship "public reading" and "communal reading" are treated as synonyms. Both are used to refer to any event in which more than one person participates, regardless of the space in which that event takes place.<sup>5</sup>

I think we ought to be more nuanced than this. "Communal reading" is a fine term for an event in which more than one person participates. I propose it as an umbrella category under which small-, medium-, and large-group reading events fall, whatever number one might consider small, medium, and large to be. An enslaved person reading to their enslaver and a lector reading to a group of thirty persons are both communal reading events, but have very different social dynamics from one another.

I also think it productive to differentiate public reading from communal reading. Public reading, as I define it, is an event wherein a text is directly read from in a space where persons can be present without much difficulty or social barriers.<sup>6</sup> "Private reading," in contrast, is an event in a social situation or space that is not readily accessible to anyone and everyone. There are social barriers to participation. For example, a recitation at an individual's residence would require both an established relationship and an invitation.

The adjectives "public" and "private" thus refer to the sociality and space of the event, whereas "communal", "small group", "medium group," and "large group" refer to the number of people involved in it. Under these definitions, most reading events in Greco-Roman antiquity, Second Temple Judaism, and early Christianity would be private. And from my survey of the evidence most communal events would involve small- to medium-sized groups.

What all of this gives us is parameters for thinking about the different kinds of reading events in Greco-Roman antiquity, and for the gospels in particular. One the handout I've created a matrix onto which different kinds of reading events might be plotted.

The question is then where might the canonical gospels fit onto this matrix?

### **The Gospels as Diverse Reading Events**

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<sup>5</sup> Dan Nässelqvist prefers the phrase "public reading" but explicitly notes that this kind of reading event "exists in both public and private settings" (*Public Reading in Early Christianity: Lectors, Manuscripts, and Sound in the Oral Delivery of John 1-4*, NovTSup 163 [Leiden: Brill, 2016], 15). For him, "public" simply means that multiple persons are present. Wright, in contrast, prefers the phrase "communal reading" to "public reading." Communal reading is any event "in which two or more persons are involved" (*Communal Reading*, 12). This sets the parameters for what constitutes a communal reading event wide. Wright considers Luke 1:63, wherein Zechariah writes the four words "his name is John" (Ἰωάννης ἐστὶν ὄνομα αὐτοῦ) on a writing tablet and a small group reads them to be a communal reading event (*Communal Reading*, 128). The loose definition thus flattens reading events into a single category with little nuance. The reading of four words on a writing tablet is as communal as reading the entirety of Torah to all gathered Jerusalem (*Communal Reading*, 128 and 106–07, respectively).

<sup>6</sup> A reading at a private residence to persons who are invited is not a public reading event. Similarly, a public event where a text is utilized, but not directly read from, under this definition is not a public reading event. I have no wish to be uncompromising when it comes to the number that constitutes a "large group," but I consider a large group to be approximately ten persons.

I wish to be clear from the outset that the gospels need not be limited to one place on this matrix or to one kind of reading event. The same text can be used in different ways at different times. That is, a given gospel can be silently read by an individual at one point in time and communally read to a medium-sized group at another.

Nonetheless, I am interested in how the gospels themselves indicate the kinds of reading events for which they might have made. If different kinds of texts make for different kinds of reading events, then what kinds of texts do the gospels indicate that they are? And what kind of reading events did each gospel author imagine that their text might have made for?

Conveniently, the gospels give some indication about the kinds of text that it is, and each labels itself differently than the others. Mark 1:1 calls the discourse that follows “good news” or a εὐαγγέλιον. Matthew describes itself as a “book” or βιβλος at its beginning, whereas John uses a related though not identical term, “document” or βιβλίον at its end. Luke is self-conscious about its writtenness, but nowhere designates itself as “good news” or a “book” as its predecessors do. Luke indicates its medium with a literary preface.

In the reminder or the time we’ll fly through each of these labels for the Synoptics and I’ll offer ancient comparanda to them.

### **Mark as “Good News” (εὐαγγέλιον)**

As far as I have found, the Gospel of Mark is the first occasion in which either the noun “gospel” (εὐαγγέλιον) or its verbal counterpart “to proclaim good news” (εὐαγγελίζομαι) designates something written. Elsewhere these words carry expressly oral freight.<sup>7</sup>

This is Mark’s innovation: the gospel textualizes antecedent oral Jesus traditions and is self-conscious about this from its outset. While Mark may be innovative in using εὐαγγέλιον to label something written, other ancient authors recognized the complex relationship between orality and textuality. Pliny, for example, claims that court speeches should be pre-written and the delivered speech should match the written version, but the text ought not be present when its delivered, as it distracts from its effectiveness.<sup>8</sup> Galen similarly tells his readers that oral events were the genesis for several, though certainly not all, of his texts.<sup>9</sup> Some were intentionally textualized by Galen after the oral events and others he claims were dubiously textualized and published by charlatans under their own names. Notably, several of these texts that have an oral pre-history to them are labeled by Galen as ὑπομνήματα or “notes” and were re-used in subsequent oral contexts, such as debates or lectures.

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<sup>7</sup> For discussions of the various primary sources see John P. Dickson, “Gospel as News: Εὐαγγελ- from Aristophanes to the Apostle Paul,” *NTS* 51 (2005): 212–30; Michael F. Bird, *The Gospel of the Lord: How the Early Church Wrote the Story of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 9–11; Nicholas A. Elder, *The Media Matrix of Early Jewish and Christian Narrative*, *LNTS* 612 (London: T&T Clark, 2019), 158–61.

<sup>8</sup> Pliny the Younger, *Ep.* 1.20; 2.19.

<sup>9</sup> Galen, *Thrasylbulus* 1; *Affections and Errors*.

There is precedent for oral discourses becoming textualized and then re-oralized. Ancient authors were not oblivious to the various ways that orality and textuality interfaced. Such an interface, in my estimation, makes best sense of many features of Mark, not least the label εὐαγγέλιον. If there were a gospel text to be engaged performatively, as some have suggested, then Mark is the best candidate.

## Matthew

Matthew does not use the label εὐαγγέλιον. That Matthew has replaced “gospel” from Mark suggests that the author rejects the term as a designation for the text that they are writing. Gospel was not a literary genre when Matthew was written. It connoted orally proclaimed news. The author was not writing news; the author was writing a book, a βιβλος.

The primary connotation of the term “book” (βιβλος) for Matthew’s contemporaries is something authoritative and Scriptural. The majority of the uses of this word in the New Testament refer to a specific text considered to be authoritative Scripture.<sup>10</sup> The same is true for Philo and Josephus, who frequently use the adjective “holy” (ἱερά) to modify the word βιβλος and use it refer to what became Scripture.<sup>11</sup>

Books in Matthew’s context are Scriptural and meant to be revered. Matthew 1:1 thus has high aspirations when it labels itself a book, alludes to Genesis, and immediately connects Jesus with two prominent figures from Israel’s past: David and Abraham.

If Matthew depicts itself as akin to revered Scripture, then the most natural reading event for which it will have made was synagogue reading. As is well documented, the reading of Jewish Scripture, and especially Torah, was a principal activity of synagogues.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, reading in this context was not an end in itself. Normal practice was to exposit the text after a discrete portion of it was read. If Matthew’s author presents their text as a Scriptural book to be read in synagogue, then it is not likely that the book was intended not to be read in its entirety in one sitting, but rather in piecemeal fashion. This kind of reading event was already well established in Second Temple Judaism and waxed in popularity in the wake of the destruction of the Temple

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<sup>10</sup> In most cases the term is modified by a genitive word or phrase that specifies the contents of the book, whether it be “the book of Moses” (τῇ βίβλῳ Μωϋσέως) in Mark 12:26, “the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet” (βίβλῳ λόγων Ἰσαΐου τοῦ προφήτου) in Luke 3:4, “the book of the Psalms” (βίβλῳ ψαλμῶν) in Luke 20:42 and Acts 1:20, or “the book of the prophets” (βίβλῳ τῶν προφητῶν) in Acts 7:42.

<sup>11</sup> Philo, *Worse* 161; *Posterity* 158; *Drunkenness* 208; *Migration* 14; *Heir* 258; *Dreams* 2.127; *Abraham* 156, 177, 258; *Moses* 2.11, 2.36, 2.45, 2.59, 2.95; *Decalogue* 1, 154; *Special Laws* 2.150, 4.175; *Virtues* 34; 95; *Eternity* 19; Josephus, *Ant.* 1.82, 1.139, 2.347, 3.81, 3.105, 4.326, 9.28, 9.46, 10.58, 10.63, 16.164, 20.261; *J.W.* 3.352; *Ag. Ap.* 1.1.

<sup>12</sup> Charles Perrot, “The Reading of the Bible in the Ancient Synagogue,” in *The Literature of the Jewish People in the Period of the Second Temple and the Talmud, Volume 1 Mikra* (Brill, 1988), 137; Lee I. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 150; Anders Runesson, *The Origins of the Synagogue: A Socio-Historical Study*, ConBNT 37 (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 2001), 191–92; Chris Keith, *The Gospel as Manuscript: An Early History of the Jesus Tradition as Material Artifact* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 203–04.

and the emergence of Christianity. This positioned Matthew well in the competitive textual environment of early Christianity.

## **Luke**

Unlike Mark and Matthew, Luke does not possess a title and does not explicitly use a term to designate what kind of text it is, though the author may be implying that it is a δῆγησις, (“account”).

What Luke uniquely does, though, is address the narrative to an individual. Luke’s preface states that the narrative is written for Theophilus. He is mentioned in Luke 1:3 with a second-person singular personal pronoun. The significance of Luke being written for an individual is sometimes paid lip-service but then quickly passed over in favor of a “communal” reading event. For example, F. Gerald Downing speculates that Theophilus experienced Luke “aloud” in a one- or two-sitting reading of Luke-Acts at a “relaxed mealtime.”<sup>13</sup> Both the all-reading-is-vocalized and the all-reading-is-communal myths are at work here. Given the abundant evidence to private and personal reading in antiquity, we ought to assume that a text addressed to an individual was first read by that individual.

This can be corroborated by prefaces that resemble Luke’s, especially from Galen. Galen’s texts with prefaces that are dedicated to individuals were intended to be read by the individuals addressed and then by a wider audience. The dedications to individuals in these texts are meaningful and they suggest something about how the author envisioned the text to be received initially. This is the case in *On Exercise with a Small Ball* written for Epigenes, *Method of Medicine*, which Galen began for Eugenianus but finished for Hiero, and the recently discovered *Avoiding Distress*, written to an unnamed friend. In all of these Galen uses second-person singular forms and sometimes even engages directly with personal matters relevant to his addressee.

While Galen recognizes that all of these discourses are likely to reach a wider audience than their first addressee, they are written first for that individual and he imagines that they will read them alone, not in a communal event.

I propose a similar scenario for the Gospel of Luke. Luke intended Theophilus to read the gospel himself. Given the surfeit of evidence to solitary reading, our default assumption ought to be that texts addressed to individuals were read by individuals. This is not to argue that the same text was not also read by other people or groups. But it is to suggest that one gospel author had private, solitary reading in mind as part of the text’s reception.

## **Conclusion**

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<sup>13</sup> F. Gerald Downing, “Theophilus’s First Reading of Luke–Acts,” in *Luke’s Literary Achievement: Collected Essays*, ed. C. M. Tuckett, JSNTSup 116 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995), 92–93. Similarly, Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 1:1–9:50*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 1:64; Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 45.

In conclusion, recognizing that each gospel uniquely labels itself better attunes us to the diversity of practice in early Christian reading culture, which consisted of different kinds of texts that made for different kinds of reading events. The Gospel of Mark presents itself as news meant to be proclaimed, Matthew as a book that imitates and presents itself like other authoritative Scriptural texts to be read and expositied. Luke is an account written to an individual but with an eye to wider reception. The Synoptics are different kinds of texts that will have made for different kinds of reading events.

The Gospels as Diverse Reading Events  
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### Silent Reading

1. Augustine states that when Ambrose read “his voice and tongue remained silent” (*vox autem et lingua quiescebant*). In the *tolle lege* account, Augustine claims that he himself read the passage from Romans “silently” (*legi in silentio*).<sup>14</sup>
2. Athenaeus reproduces a riddle, purportedly from Sappho, that implies letters are by their very nature silent and that someone standing near the reader of an epistle will not hear them (οὐκ ἀκούσεται).<sup>15</sup>
3. On the stage, in both tragedies and comedies, characters read to themselves and reveal the contents of a text to other characters and thus also the audience.<sup>16</sup>
4. In *Leucippe and Cleitophon*, the male protagonist, Cleitophon, pretends to read silently as he walks around a house so that he can steal glances of the of Leucippe.<sup>17</sup>
5. Dionysius reads a letter to himself in the middle of a symposium in *Chaereas and Callirhoe* that causes him to faint.<sup>18</sup>
6. Josephus stealthily reads a letter in the presence of others, “quickly taking in the writer’s design.”<sup>19</sup>
7. Suetonius writes that when Nero was considering judicial cases he read “silently and in private” (*tacitus ac secreto legens*) his advisors’ opinions before rendering his decision.<sup>20</sup>
8. Plutarch reports that at the height of the Catiline conspiracy, Cato was indignant that Caesar read a note silently to himself that turned out to be a sultry letter from Servilia.<sup>21</sup>
9. Philo regularly portrays reading as an affair of the eyes.<sup>22</sup>
10. Pliny the Younger draws a distinction between auditory and visual appreciation of a text, stating that he wishes to created something worthy of both the ears (*auribus*) and the papyri (*chartis*).<sup>23</sup>

### Solitary Reading

1. Cato and Seneca read and studied alone.<sup>24</sup>
2. Martial frequently embeds jokes in the *Epigrams* that are experienced between author and reader alone, using the second-person singular.<sup>25</sup>
3. Severus read Martial’s poetry to himself while at parties or the theatre because he preferred it to the entertainment happening in those venues.<sup>26</sup>
4. Pliny the Younger went on reading and making extracts as Vesuvius erupted.<sup>27</sup>
5. Aristotle asked why reading causes some people to become sleepy and other to be enlivened.<sup>28</sup>
6. Augustine writes of reading a page of text, forgetting what was just read, and having to re-read it.<sup>29</sup>
7. Reflecting on the prescription from Deut. 17:18 that the king must write out a copy of the Book of the Law in his

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<sup>14</sup> Augustine, *Confessions* 6.3.3; 8.12.29 (text and trans. Hammond LCL).

<sup>15</sup> Athenaeus, *The Learned Banqueters* 10.450–51 (text Olson, LCL).

<sup>16</sup> E.g., Euripides, *Hippolytus* 866–73; Aristophanes, *Equites* 117–31

<sup>17</sup> Achilles Tatius, *Leuc. Clit.* 1.6.

<sup>18</sup> Chariton, *Chaer.* 4.5.7–10.

<sup>19</sup> Josephus, *Life* 222–24; text and trans. Thackeray, LCL.

<sup>20</sup> Suetonius, *Nero* 15.1; text and trans., Rolfe, LCL.

<sup>21</sup> Plutarch, *Brut.*, 5.2–3.

<sup>22</sup> Philo, *Spec. Laws* 1.214; *Leg.* 1.83; *Prelim. Studies* 20.

<sup>23</sup> Pliny the Younger, *Ep.* 4.16; text, Radice LCL.

<sup>24</sup> Cicero, *Fin.* 3.7–10; Plutarch, *Cat. Min.* 68–70, Appian, *BC* 2.98–99, Dio Cassius, *His. rom.* 43.11.2–5; Seneca, *Ep.* 65.1.

<sup>25</sup> Martial, *Epigrams* 3.68.11–12; 3.86.1–2; 11.16.9–10.

<sup>26</sup> Martial, *Epigram* 2.6.

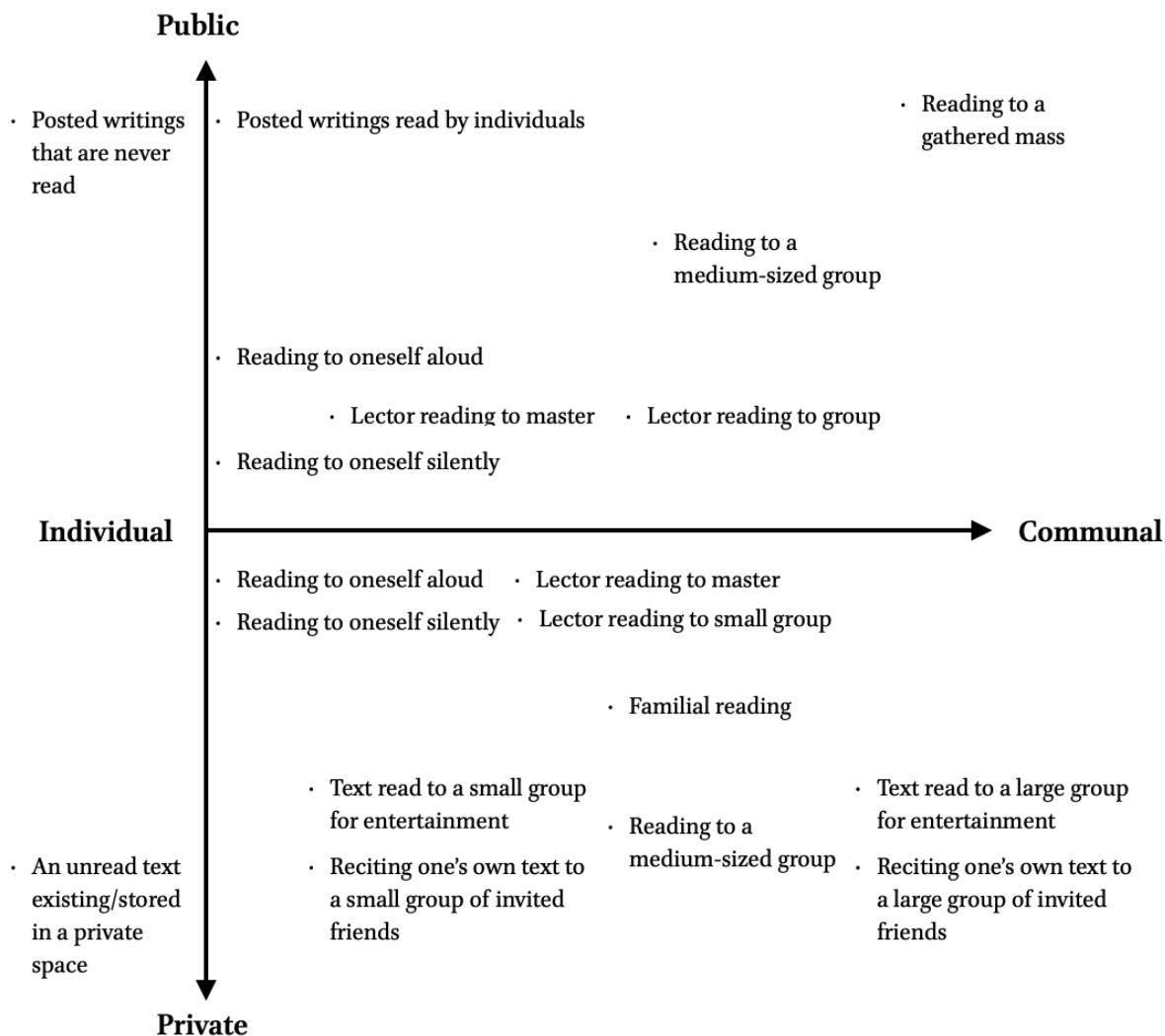
<sup>27</sup> Pliny the Younger, *Ep.* 6.16; 6.20.

<sup>28</sup> Aristotle, *Probl.* 18.1.1.

<sup>29</sup> Augustine, *Trin.* 11.8.15.



- own hand, Philo suggests that the king should also read this self-made copy to himself daily.<sup>30</sup>
8. Josephus relays an account of Eleazar finding the Parthian king Izates reading the law of Moses to himself.<sup>31</sup>
  9. Justin Martyr and Tertullian assume that interested and antagonistic outsiders to Christianity are able personally to examine Christian writings.<sup>32</sup> Tatian states that his conversion was precipitated by a chance textual encounter with Scripture.<sup>33</sup>
  10. Clement, the *Apostolic Tradition*, Origen, and John Chrysostom all counsel early Christians to read Scriptures personally in their homes; Clement's best Christian practice is to read Scriptures before meals at home.<sup>34</sup>



<sup>30</sup> Philo, *Spec. Laws* 4.163.

<sup>31</sup> Josephus, *Ant.* 20.43–45.

<sup>32</sup> Justin Martyr, *1 Apol.* 28; *2 Apol.* 3; *Dial.* 10, 18; Tertullian, *Apol.* 31

<sup>33</sup> Tatian, *Or. Graec.* 29.

<sup>34</sup> Clement, *Stromata* 7.7; *Trad. Ap.* 41.4; Origen, *Hom. in Gen.* 11.3; John Chrysostom, *Hom. Jo.* 11.1.