

Article

Between Reading and Performance: The Presence and Absence of Physical Texts

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Abstract: In New Testament scholarship, there is a division between practitioners of performance criticism and those who engage the sociology of reading and reading cultures in the ancient Mediterranean context. The former, as the name of their methodology implies, tend to emphasize the performative nature of engaging textual traditions and downplay the importance of the physical document in a performance event. The latter stress the importance of the physical text in a reading event. This article reaches across the division between performance and reading, suggesting that written manuscripts play different roles in different kinds of performance and reading events. It surveys primary source evidence of two types: one in which the physical text is absent from or de-emphasized in the performance event and another in which the document is explicitly present and figures prominently in the reading event. The article concludes by suggesting that performance critics ought to be more explicit about what role they imagine physical documents to have in hypothetical performance events and that those engaging the sociology of reading ought to be more attuned to the performative potential of communal reading events.

Keywords: performance; performance criticism; reading; communal reading; solitary reading; sociology of reading; New Testament; orality; textuality; literacy



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1. Performance Criticism and the Sociology of Reading

The fundamental principle of performance criticism is that texts, and especially biblical texts, were predominantly encountered through oral events in the ancient world. Performance, rather than private reading, was, according to performance critics, the default medium for experiencing written discourses for the majority of individuals in Greco-Roman antiquity (Iverson 2021, p. 189). Per performance critics, biblical traditions were transmitted through embodied storytelling and oral discourse, a premise predicated on the supposition that most people in antiquity lacked the ability to read literary texts (Rhoads 2006, p. 4). As its name implies, performance stands at the center of performance criticism.

Yet what constitutes a performance is ill defined. The tendency amongst performance critics has been to adopt expansive definitions. David Rhoads, for instance, defines performance as “any oral telling or retelling of a brief or extensive tradition—from sayings to gospel—within a formal or informal setting of a gathered community, involving trained or untrained performers, under the assumption that each rendition was a vibrant retelling of that tradition” (Rhoads 2006, p. 119). Kelly Iverson follows the performance theorist Richard Schechner’s comprehensive definition, which states that “performance is an activity conducted by an individual or group in the presence of and for another individual or group” (Schechner 2003, p. 22, n. 10; Iverson 2021, p. 8). Both definitions permit a wide range of activities to count as performance. While Whitney Shiner does not define performance, he includes the following as types of oral performances in antiquity: private readings, public readings, storytelling, novels, drama, pantomime, poetry, epic, reading in worship, scriptural chant, and early Christian speeches (Shiner 2003, pp. 37–56).

What is excluded from these definitions and examples of performance is solitary reading. A person reading a text to themselves, either silently or aloud, is expressly not a

performance, per these definitions. Performance always involves more than one person. In this respect, performance criticism is a reaction and corrective to the chirographic and post-Gutenberg biases that have dominated biblical studies. Rhoads diagnoses the perspective that performance criticism aims to redress: “Our own cultural experience of the Second Testament texts in the contemporary Western world has been private and silent reading by individuals or public reading that has fragmented the text into lectionary lessons in the context of parish worship and teaching” (Rhoads 2006, pp. 119–20). The point of opposition for performance criticism is solitary reading, which becomes a cipher for reading in general. The binaries between performance and reading are presented by Iverson: “Performance is a face-to-face, personal experience while reading involves a degree of distance; performance is a corporate and communal experience while reading is solitary; performance is transient and ephemeral while reading is grounded in the permanence of the written word; performance is a multimodal, sensory experience while reading is primarily an imaginative experience” (Iverson 2021, p. 183). While Iverson is adamant that the performance perspective does not entail a return to the Great Divide approach to orality and literacy, he does appear to make a strong distinction between performance and reading (Iverson 2021, p. 185).

The distinction proceeds from the tendency to construe reading as an individualistic, private, and solitary affair. This kind of reading is normalized in modernity to a greater extent than it was in antiquity, and it is precisely the perspective that performance criticism has aimed to correct. Yet it is not the case that reading in our present context is exclusively or even primarily a solitary event. People read all kinds of texts in communal contexts. It is also not the case that persons in antiquity could not or did not read silently to themselves in solitary settings (Knox 1968, pp. 421–35; Gavrilov 1997, pp. 56–73; McCutcheon 2015, pp. 1–32; Elder 2024, pp. 7–78).¹ “Reading,” in both ancient and modern contexts, is a far more expansive enterprise than is usually acknowledged by performance critics. More than just a cognitive act, reading, as William A. Johnson puts it, is “a highly complex sociocultural system that involves a great many considerations beyond decoding by the reader of the words of a text.” Johnson continues, “Critical is the observation that reading is not simply the cognitive processing by the individual of the technology of writing but rather the negotiated construction of meaning within a particular sociocultural system” (Johnson 2010, p. 12). Innumerable factors are at play with respect to the negotiated construction of meaning in any context, including what kind of text is read, who it is read by and who else is involved in the reading event, where it is read, and why it is read.

In Greco-Roman antiquity, Second Temple Judaism, and early Christianity, there were a variety of settings and purposes for reading. Persons read to themselves silently. They read in small, medium, and large groups. They read privately and publicly. There was not one single, normalized manner of engaging texts in these contexts (Elder 2024, pp. 5–121). Aside from solitary reading, all of these would theoretically fall under the umbrella of performance as defined by Iverson and Rhoads. They also fall within the bounds of the examples offered by Shiner.

What, then, sets apart reading from performance? I propose that the key factor lies in emphasis, particularly in terms of whether the physical text is a crucial component of the reading or performance event. While performance critics do acknowledge the potential presence of texts in the performance of biblical discourses, the extent to which they emphasize the bearing that the text has on an event varies among them. Rhoads tentatively suggests, “Frequently, perhaps more often than not, no written text was present to the event” (Rhoads 2006, p. 118).² In contrast, Iverson writes, “I have no objection with the concept of a ‘lector’ or ‘public reading.’ However, I use the terms performer or performance to emphasize the oral dynamics of these communication events” (Iverson 2021, p. 12, n. 46). A text may have been present at an event, but, according to most performance critics, it was of subsidiary importance and simply a conduit for the oral experience.

Those in biblical studies who focus on reading events and cultures, what is sometimes called the sociology of reading, tend to center the text itself. In *The Gospel as Manuscript*,

for example, Chris Keith argues that it was the gospels' existence as physical, written artifacts that imbued them with authority, specifically in the act of public reading (Keith 2020, pp. 163–200). He critiques those who underplay the gospels' textual media dynamics, tracing what he calls the “oral-preference perspective” back to Werner Kelber's *The Oral and the Written Gospel* (Keith 2020, pp. 82–85; Kelber 1983). Those adopting this perspective, per Keith, “focus upon the texts' effects upon oral tradition or the manners in which texts still function like oral tradition” (Keith 2020, pp. 167–71). While acknowledging the potential performative aspects of communal reading, Keith asserts that more significance lies in the physicality of the text itself and the act of reading from it than in these performative features.

This divide between performance and reading lies at the center of the debate: on one side, there are those who prioritize the oral aspects of the event, valuing them over the written text, while, on the other side, there are those who emphasize the significance of the physical text itself. The proponents of the former viewpoint, largely performance critics, argue that textuality serves as a foundation for orality, providing support and structure to the oral performance. Conversely, advocates of the latter perspective, largely those interested in reading events and cultures, argue that orality serves to enhance the significance and interpretation of the written text in the communal reading event.

On both sides, the reconstruction of reading or performance events is usually theoretical. Based on assumptions about how texts were experienced, and sometimes based on ancient comparanda, theoretical events by which biblical texts *might* have been experienced are imagined. But we need not be dependent on imagined performance or reading events. There is primary source evidence indicating how texts of all sorts, including a variety of early Christian texts, were experienced in antiquity.

My aim in this essay is to marshal and engage some of this evidence to demonstrate that there were different kinds of performance and reading events that took place in antiquity and that these different kinds of events had different features. There was not one normative way to engage a text or tradition, and different texts functioned in different ways in different reading and performance events. The focus in what follows is the significance of the physical text in each scenario, specifically evaluating whether the written document serves as a foundation for the event or whether it assumes a subsidiary role. The central question is whether the physical manuscript is ancillary or central to the given event. The first section of the essay engages instances where the physical text is absent or relatively insignificant in the performance arena and the second section engages primary sources in which a physical document is present and of relative importance to the reading event.

2. Physical Documents Absent from or Ancillary to a Performance Event

2.1. Pliny the Younger

According to Pliny the Younger in *Ep.* 2.19, there is one type of discourse that is best performed without the text present: court speeches. In this letter to Tuccius Cerialis, Pliny entertains the recipient's request for him, Pliny, to give a reading (*recitem*) of one such speech. He agrees to do so, but expresses hesitancy and the reasons for his hesitancy:

I know very well that speeches when read lose all their warmth and spirit, almost their entire character, since their fire is always fed from the atmosphere of court: the bench of magistrates and throng of advocates, the suspense of the awaited verdict, reputation of the different speakers, and the divided enthusiasm of the public; and they gain too from the gestures of the speaker as he strides to and fro, the movements of his body corresponding to his changing passions. (Hence the loss to anyone who delivers his speech sitting down—he is at a real disadvantage by the mere fact of being seated, though he may be as gifted generally as the speakers who stand.) Moreover, a man who is giving a reading has the two chief aids to his delivery (eyes and hands) taken up with his text, so it is not surprising if the attention of his audience wavers when there is no adventitious attraction to hold it nor stimulus to keep it aroused. (Pliny the Younger 1969, text and trans., Radice)

This particular speech that Pliny agrees to read, like his other court speeches, exists as a written artifact after it is delivered, since obliging the request is possible. Because he believes a communal reading will not do the speech justice, Pliny hesitates, though, as we shall see, his reluctance may be feigned. Pliny avers that a speech is best experienced live in performance. In this letter, Pliny emphasizes several aspects of speeches that performance critics often identify as the key elements that differentiate a performance from solitary reading.

According to Iverson, there are five foundational aspects of performance events that differentiate them from the modern act of reading: proximity, community, transience, perception, and participation (Iverson 2021, pp. 21–52). Each of these foundational aspects is present in the selection above.

Proximity refers to the “corporeal context” shared by persons in a performance event (Iverson 2021, p. 22). There is a physical co-presence between the performer and their audience. Pliny calls attention to the various persons that share in the social biosphere of a court speech: the performer, the bench of magistrates, the advocates, the other speakers, and the public. And these people are not simply present at the event—they affect it and alter the experience and interpretation of the discourse. Iverson theorizes that performance communities work with a collective consciousness (Iverson 2021, pp. 26–32). He writes, “Performance unleashes dynamics that allow for, and even encourage, communal responses that shape (individual) interpretation” (Iverson 2021, p. 31). This is what it means to say that performance is characterized by community. The other individuals and groups present at the performance event—in Pliny’s case, the magistrates, speakers, and public—affect how it unfolds.

Transience refers to the fact that the event unfolds in limited space and time. “The permanence of the written text functions as a physical resource that enables readers to dictate certain aspects of the interpretive process. The transience of the spoken word challenges audiences to keep in step with the unfolding performance” (Iverson 2021, p. 36). Hearers cannot stop to scrutinize a performance in the way that readers can a written text. Later in this letter, Pliny states that a speaker should not expect their audience to labor over and carefully consider the logic of the argument. He writes, “There are certainly very few members of an audience sufficiently trained to prefer a stiff, close-knit argument to fine-sounding words.” A stiff, close-knit argument is the stuff of discourses that are read in a solitary event, not speeches that are performed, because the latter are transient.

Pliny refers to the “warmth” (*calorem*) and “spirit” (*impetum*) of a speech. These come from the event itself. They correspond to the concepts of perception and participation of performance criticism (Iverson 2021, pp. 36–52). Whereas silent, individualized reading happens imaginatively in the mind, a performance is perceptually perceived by audience members, who also influence, or participate, in the event as it unfolds. Perception and participation have a profound impact on audience members’ emotions and sensory experiences of the discourse (Iverson 2021, pp. 53–137). Pliny notes that the audience is influenced by “the gestures of the speaker as he strides to and fro [and] the movements of his body corresponding to his changing passions.” It is precisely for these reasons that Pliny would rather *not* read the speech communally. The social biosphere of a reading differs from that of a performance.³

One chief reason that it differs, according to Pliny, is because, at a reading, the text is present. While the presence of the text is wholly appropriate for certain kinds of events, when it comes to a court speech, it detracts from the discourse’s effectiveness. This is because the reader’s attention is on the text. Their “hands and eyes” (*oculi manus*) are occupied with the written artifact.

Pliny’s letter indicates that a written discourse could be performed without the direct aid of the text. While, in their “original performance,” court speeches were delivered without text, they were both pre-written and circulated textually when they were subsequently released for publication. In another letter, *Ep.* 1.20, written to Tacitus, Pliny claims that it is best for the pre-written and the spoken version of a speech to align with one another

because the text “is the model and prototype for the spoken version” (*est enim oratio actionis exemplar et quasi ἀρχέτυπον*).⁴ After the performative event, however, the textual artifact of the speech could be revised. Despite his comments and supposed misgivings about reading a speech that are outlined in *Ep.* 2.19, Pliny claims to have given readings of speeches to revise them for publication. For Pliny, publication of his speeches expressly did *not* come in the form of the public or communal reading of them.⁵ Publication happened when he ceded control over the speeches and allowed them to be read privately by other individuals.

In *Ep.* 7.17, Pliny writes, “Personally, I do not seek praise for my speech when it is read aloud, but when the text can be read after publication, and consequently I employ every possible method of correction.” In the letter, Pliny confronts criticism he has faced regarding his practice of delivering readings of speeches. Interestingly, some of these critiques closely resemble his own reservations about the act of reading a speech aloud, as expressed in *Ep.* 2.19.⁶ Apparently, his reservations were not all that strong, were feigned, or Pliny was of different opinions at different points in time, because, in this letter, he indicates that reading speeches was a normal practice for him.⁷ It was a tool he used to revise them. He describes his revision practices step-by-step: “First of all, I go through my work myself; next, I read it to two or three friends and send it to others for comment. If I have any doubts about their criticisms, I go over them again with one or two people, and finally I read the work to a larger audience; and that is the moment, believe me, when I make my severest corrections, for my anxiety makes me concentrate all the more carefully” (Pliny the Younger 1969, trans., Radice).

What all this suggests is that there are multiple receptive contexts for Pliny’s court speeches. First, they can be delivered without the direct aid of the text. This is their “original” performative context. Subsequently, however, they can be read communally by their author. The purpose of the event is different in each case. In the first, the pre-written text supports the oral discourse. The speech is elevated over the written artifact, and so the presence of the written artifact at the speech is unhelpful. In the second, the emphasis is on the text and its revision. The written artifact is read from with the intention that it will be revised based on the oral event. After the textual publication of the speech, there are further reading events of it, though most of these would have been private and solitary, not communal. The presence or absence of the text in these various events depends on the social situation, the purpose for which it is engaged, and the kind of text that it is.⁸ Yet even in the less performative receptive modes, namely Pliny’s communal readings of speeches and the private reading of them upon publication, there is a memory of their original, performative form codified in the text itself. This is on display in Pliny’s lone surviving published speech, the *Panegyricus*. Based on the content of his court speeches, which was an established spoken and written genre in Pliny’s context, the fact that the written artifacts were textualized instantiations of an oral, performative event would not have been lost on their reading audiences.

2.2. 4 Maccabees 18

4 Maccabees 18:10–18 also indicates that there were multiple receptive modes for written texts, in this case Jewish Scripture.⁹ In the selection, the mother of the seven martyred sons from 2 Maccabees 7 praises the way that their father engaged scriptural traditions with them. The author, through the speech of the mother, imagines the different ways that these traditions were engaged in a familial setting. A variety of verbs are used, some of which suggest direct textual mediation between the father and his sons, while others imply non-textual means of engaging the traditions:

While he was still with you, he taught (ἐδίδασκεν) you the law and the prophets. He read (ἀνεγίνωσκεν) to you about Abel slain by Cain, and Isaac who was offered as a burnt offering, and about Joseph in prison. He told (ἔλεγεν) you of the zeal of Phinehas, and he taught (ἐδίδασκεν) you about Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael in the fire. He praised (ἐδόξαζεν) Daniel in the den of the lions and blessed him. He reminded (ὑπεμύνησκειν) you of the scripture of Isaiah (τὴν

Ἡσαίου γραφήν), which says, ‘Even though you go through the fire, the flame shall not consume you.’ He sang (ἐμελώδει) to you songs of the psalmist David, who said, ‘Many are the afflictions of the righteous.’ He recounted (ἐπαροιμιάζειν) to you Solomon’s proverb, ‘There is a tree of life for those who do his will.’ He confirmed (ἐπιστοποιεῖ) the query of Ezekiel, ‘Shall these dry bones live?’ For he did not forget to teach (οὐκ ἐπελάθετο διδάσκων) you the song that Moses taught, which says, ‘I kill and I make alive: this is your life and the length of your days. (NRSV)

It may be, as David A. deSilva suggests, that the author of 4 Maccabees, who demonstrates advanced Jewish and Greek *paideia*, is projecting their own educational experiences onto those of the seven brothers. He writes, “The author envisions the home as the primary locus of training in the practices, stories, and convictions of the Torah and the Jewish canon” (DeSilva 2017, p. 237). Whether they are projecting experiences or are imagining them altogether, the author of 4 Maccabees understands texts and traditions from the Jewish canon to have been experienced in multiple different ways.

Most of the verbs in the passage need not imply that a text was present and mediated in the pedagogical act. The only verb that assumes textual mediation is “read” (ἀνεγινώσκεν), which has three objects: “Abel slain by Cain” (τὸν ἀναιρεθέντα Ἀβελ ὑπὸ Καὶν), “Isaac who was offered as a whole burnt offering” (τὸν ὁλοκαυρπούμενον Ἰσαάκ), and “Joseph in prison” (τὸν ἐν φυλακῇ Ἰωσήφ). While all of the other stories, traditions, and texts alluded to existed in writing, the verbs imply different kinds of “performances” of them: “teaching” (ἐδίδασκεν), “telling” or “speaking” (ἐλεγεν), “glorifying” (ἐδόξαζεν), “reminding” (ὑπεμύνησκεν), “singing” (ἐμελώδει), “recounting” or “speaking proverbially” (ἐπαροιμιάζειν), and “making credible” or “confirming” (ἐπιστοποιεῖ). The length of each discourse referred to as the object of these verbs varies. Some are individual sayings, such as the Isaianic verse (Isaiah 43:2), the Solomonic proverb (Proverb 3:18), and the question of Ezekiel (Ezekiel 37:3). In the case of the songs of David and Moses, the entire hymn appears to be in mind, though only a line of each is paraphrased.¹⁰ The author of 4 Maccabees adds paraphrased excerpts of these traditions for rhetorical flourish, not because they presume the father only engaged a limited portion of the tradition.

Notable from 4 Maccabees 18 is that the verbs used have a natural correspondence with the kind of text that is engaged. One sings hymns, recites proverbs, and reads stories. There were different kinds of performances and readings in 4 Maccabees’ context, and physical, textual instantiations of the tradition had various functions in these different kinds of readings and performances.

2.3. Conclusions

In summary, Pliny the Younger’s letter to Tuccius Cerialis sheds light on the distinctive nature of court speeches and the limitations of communal readings of them, and 4 Macc 18:10–18 reveals different receptive modes of engaging written texts, particularly Jewish Scripture. Pliny emphasizes the importance of the performative context. The presence of the text during a communal reading hinders the speech’s impact as the reader’s attention is divided between the text and the audience, lacking the atmosphere and dynamics of a live performance. While Pliny initially expresses hesitancy about reading court speeches communally, other letters reveal that he did engage in readings for the purpose of revising his speeches for publication. The various receptive contexts for Pliny’s speeches demonstrate their multiple forms of engagement, from the original performative context without the text to communal readings for revision and private readings upon publication. The different receptive modes in 4 Macc 18:10–18 imply diverse forms of performance and reading, with some involving direct textual mediation while others rely on non-textual means. The verbs used align with the nature of the texts being engaged, emphasizing the various functions and performances associated with different kinds of texts.

In both Pliny’s letter and 4 Maccabees 18, the presence or absence of the documents during different receptive contexts indicates the nuanced relationship between oral perfor-

mance and textual mediation. The performative aspects of speeches and the diverse modes of engaging written texts demonstrate the complexity of reception and the significance of the social situation and purpose for which texts are encountered. In the next section, we consider cases in which the text is explicitly present at the reading event and thus serves an important, physical role within it.

3. Physical Documents Absent from or Ancillary to a Performance Event

3.1. Solitary Reading

When a text is read in a solitary setting, the document itself is necessarily the central element to that event. It is a myth, and a very persistent one in New Testament scholarship, that texts in antiquity were always or usually read communally and not in solitary contexts.¹¹ Paul J. Achtemeier, in his highly influential article, “*Omne Verbum Sonat: The New Testament and the Oral Environment of Late Western Antiquity*,” writes, “Late antiquity knew nothing of the silent, solitary reader” (Achtemeier 1990, p. 17).

Not all, nor even most, texts were engaged communally in antiquity. Consider, for example, the tens of thousands of extant documentary papyri, which represent only a fraction of the overall volume that would have once existed. The vast majority of the non-literary papyri, which consist of documents such as receipts, ledgers, various ephemera, wills, letters, testimonies, and petitions, were not written for communal reception. Rather, they were written for individuals or simply to offer permanence to human thought.

The documentary papyri are of course not literature proper. The point, however, is to de-romanticize ancient reading practices. If literate persons could and did read documentary papyri in non-communal settings, then they could also read literature in non-communal settings. And they did.

There is abundant evidence of the solitary reading of literature of various sorts in this context (Parker 2009, pp. 196–98). There are many occasions of solitary reading narrated or alluded to in antique texts. Because this essay’s interest lies in early Christian reading and performance, we consider two cases in which a biblical text is engaged in a solitary context, though there are at least forty other instances of solitary reading in Greco-Roman, Second Temple Jewish, and early Christian sources.¹² The purpose of evoking these two occasions of solitary readings is to dislodge the notion that reading Scripture was always communal or performative.

In Acts 8:26–40, the Ethiopian eunuch reads to himself from Isaiah. Acts 8:28 narrates the reading event, making it clear that it is solitary:

ἦν τε ὑποστρέφων καὶ καθήμενος ἐπὶ τοῦ ἄρματος αὐτοῦ καὶ ἀνεγίνωσκεν τὸν προφήτην Ἠσαΐαν.

“And as he was returning home he was sitting in his chariot and was reading the prophet Isaiah”.

Philip, instructed by the spirit, overtakes the chariot and hears that Isaiah is being read. Philip’s questions to the eunuch reiterate the fact that the reading was not communal. Questioning the eunuch, Philip uses two second-person singular verbs: “Do you comprehend [γινώσκεις] what you are reading [ἀναγινώσκεις]”? Then, again, in Acts 8:32, a singular form of “read” (ἀνεγίνωσκεν) is employed by the narrator as they indicate that the specific passage (περιοχή) from Isaiah being read is LXX Isaiah 53:7–8. In total, four different singular forms of the verb “read” appear in Acts 8:28–32, making it clear that the eunuch is reading to himself, not communally.

Initially, the written artifact is not subordinate to the event at hand; rather, it is central to it, fostering direct engagement between the individual and the text. The reader does not act as a textual mediator. However, as the narrative progresses, the solitary reading of Isaiah serves as a springboard for another explicitly oral event. Acts 8:35 suggests that this particular Isaianic passage served as the starting point from which Philip “proclaimed the good news [εὐηγγελίσατο] about Jesus” to the Ethiopian eunuch. Reading transitions into verbal instruction. Thus, an interface between reading and orality emerges, bridging the

divide, but the event's oral and performative aspect does not pertain to direct engagement with the text or its mediation.

A similar dynamic is at play a few centuries later in Chrysostom's instructions at the beginning of a homily on John 1:14. Here, he requests that his hearers sit down in their homes (οἱ καθήμενος), take the text in their own hands (μετὰ χειρὸς λαμβάνων ἑκάστος), and read the entire portion (ἀναγινωσκέτω συνεχῶς) of the gospels that will be read aloud in a communal setting later in the week (τὴν μέλλουσάν ἐν ὑμῖν ἀναγνώσθῃσθαι τῶν Εὐαγγελίων περικοπὴν).¹³ Chrysostom advocates for two distinct approaches to engaging with the text. The first approach is a direct and individual one, which aligns with the type of reading that performance critics suggest was uncommon in the ancient world. The second approach, on the other hand, is communal. The first approach assumes both the necessary literary skills to read gospel texts, a proficiency not shared by all of Chrysostom's listeners, as well as personal access to gospel texts. Although the encouragement may not have been applicable to everyone in Chrysostom's audience, it must have been relevant to a significant portion of them, as he states that the request is neither burdensome nor challenging (βαρὺ τι καὶ ἐπαχθές).

The second mode of engaging the gospel, which is communal in nature, stems from the first. In other words, the initial type of reading serves as a preparation for the second. The purpose of solitary reading is to equip individuals for engagement in communal reading. Chrysostom's comments indicate a preference for the second mode of reading over the first.

The account of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8 and Chrysostom's encouragement share several significant similarities relevant to early Christian reading and performance events. First, both demonstrate that the solitary reading of scriptural texts was practiced in the first few centuries CE. Moreover, personal ownership of or access to these texts was known. Second, neither account assumes that the text is read sequentially or in its entirety. Instead, only a specific portion of the larger discourse is engaged. Acts 8:32 reveals that the eunuch was reading a "section" (περιοχή) of Isaiah, while Chrysostom mentions a "pericope" (περικοπή) of the gospel. Both terms imply the selection of a specific portion of the text, rather than reading the entire discourse.¹⁴ Third, in both cases, solitary reading serves as a catalyst for another action. In the case of Acts 8, it leads to Philip evangelizing the eunuch orally, while, for Chrysostom, it paves the way for the communal reading of the same text, which likely involves accompanying oral teaching or instruction. The text takes the central focus, but only until it relinquishes its place to a different form of oral engagement. When this shift occurs, the discourse being directly interacted with is no longer the scriptural text itself. Therefore, in accordance with the perspective of performance critics, there is indeed oral activity, but it does not entail a recitation of the biblical text.

3.2. Justin Martyr 1 Apology 67 and the Acts of Peter 19–20

The pattern of reading transitioning to another oral activity is also evident in two written accounts that reference communal reading of gospel texts in the second century CE. The first comes from Justin Martyr, who describes early Christian gathering practices in 1 *Apol.* 67. According to Justin, during the weekly gatherings, the "memoirs of the apostles" (ἀπομνημονεύματα τῶν ἀποστόλων) or the "writings of the prophets" (συγγράμματα τῶν προφητῶν) are read aloud to all those assembled from the nearby cities and countryside, for as long as time permits (μέχρις ἐγχωρεῖ). Once the reader concludes, the leader of the gathering proceeds to provide verbal instruction (διὰ λόγου) to the gathered group.¹⁵

Justin does not specify the exact amount of text that is read during these gatherings. In comparison to Acts 8 and Chrysostom, it appears that he envisions a more extensive portion of text, although his comments do not imply the sequential reading of an entire gospel or prophetic text. While the reading of the scriptural text constitutes the first and perhaps most significant activity, it is not the sole focus. Instead, the reading of the text transitions into verbal instruction, which entails the encouragement to emulate "these good things" (τῆς τῶν καλῶν τούτων μιμήσεως) outlined in the prophetic or gospel text that is read. Several other activities follow the reading and instruction: communal prayer,

thanksgiving offered for the bread, wine and water that is then shared, and an offering taken for orphans, widows, the sick, needy, aliens, and refugees.

In Justin's account, no reading event, whether real or imagined, is expressly narrated. Rather, he explains what happens at a typical Christian religious gathering. Communal reading is but one part of such gatherings. Justin's testimony is illuminating insofar as it indicates which texts are typically read: "the memoirs of the apostles" (ἀπομνημονεύματα τῶν ἀποστόλων), which are gospel texts, and the "writings of the prophets" (συγγράμματα τῶν προφητῶν).¹⁶ It is notable that gospel texts are read alongside prophetic ones in the mid-second century.¹⁷ This likely is both in imitation of and springs from Jewish synagogue reading practices.¹⁸ It is likewise notable that other genres of New Testament texts, namely acts, letters, and the apocalypse, are not mentioned by Justin. This does not mean that such texts were not read communally during early Christian gatherings, since a lack of evidence is not itself evidence. However, on those occasions when it is reported or narrated that New Testament texts are read communally in the first few centuries CE, the text read is always a gospel text.

Whereas Justin reports how one kind of reading event functions within early Christian gatherings, the Acts of Peter 19–20 narrates an early Christian gathering and the reading of a gospel text that occurs during it, though this gathering does not appear to be as formalized as those that Justin describes.¹⁹ Like *1 Apology*, the Acts of Peter are commonly dated to the second century CE (Schmidt 1930, pp. 150–55; Elliott 1993, pp. 390–92; Bremmer 1998, pp. 17–18; Klauck 2008, p. 84). In the text, Peter is urged to come to a "service" (*ministerium*) in the house of Marcellus, in which the widows and elders will pray with him and everyone present will receive a piece of gold for their service.²⁰ Upon arriving at the house, Peter heals a blind woman and then enters into the dining room, where he sees the gospel being read (*introibit autem Petrus in triclinio et uidit euangelium legi*). Peter himself "rolls up" (*ineuolues*) the gospel scroll and speaks to the gathered group. He begins by stating that they ought to know the manner in which "the holy scriptures of our Lord should be pronounced" (*scitote, qualiter debeat sancta scriptura domini nostra pronuntiari*) and implies that he himself is a writer of said scripture with the verb *scripsimus* ("we have written"). Peter then states that he will "explain to you that which has been read" (*nunc quod uobis lectum est iam uobis exponam*) before offering a first-person account of the events of the transfiguration, which is presumably the passage from the gospel reading that Peter happened upon. Following Peter's explanation, various events and actions unfold. There is communal prayer and a transfiguration-like experience where the gathered group witnesses a dazzling bright light and blind widows perceive Jesus in different forms, which leads to the miraculous restoration of their sight. Peter then exhorts the audience to understand the Lord and he ministers to the virgins.

Once again, the reading of the gospel text is depicted as a discrete action within the larger context of the gathering, rather than being the sole or central event. It serves as a catalyst for other actions to unfold. The narrator provides only a brief description of the reading, stating, "When Peter came into the dining room, he saw that the gospel was being read" (*introibit autem Petrus in triclinio et uidit euangelium legi*).

While the reading event is subsidiary to the other activities, several aspects of the account are worth noting. First, the narrator assumes the regularity of reading gospel texts to a gathered group. The mere mention of this event in passing implies that communal reading from gospel texts was a familiar practice. Second, the Acts of Peter bestows the gospel text with the status of Scripture. This establishes a connection with Justin's description of reading the memoirs of the apostles alongside prophetic texts. The text is read because of its scriptural significance.

Third, like the eunuch's reading in Acts 8, Chrysostom's instructions, and Justin Martyr's description, the Acts of Peter 20 appears to depict only a select portion of the gospel being read, namely the transfiguration account. The narrator does not explicitly note that the transfiguration and only the transfiguration is read, but the content of Peter's

teaching in the passage, as well as the narrative events that surround the reading, implies as much.

Fourth, and most important for our purposes, the author of the Acts of Peter depicts the gospel physically existing and being read from in scroll or bookroll form, as Peter “rolls up” (*ineuolues*) the document before offering his account of the transfiguration. In this way, the physical presentation of the text matters and indicates something about its status. The author imagines a gospel tradition to be engaged from a physical document that is read from, not performed from memory.

4. Conclusions

In what precedes, I have marshalled various occasions in which the physical text played different roles in various kinds of antique performance and reading events. It was possible for a written tradition to be orally declaimed without the presence of a written manuscript. However, the primary source evidence cannot support the claim that this was the standard way that textual traditions were engaged in antiquity. Certain kinds of discourses, especially speeches, were more likely than others to be engaged without the direct aid of the written text, as indicated by Pliny in *Ep.* 2.19.

The survey of events in which the physical text was featured during a reading indicates that Scriptural texts were very often present and an important component of such events. In fact, the primary sources suggest that reading from a physical artifact was more common than engaging one from memory, an act that does not frequently happen in such sources. The default assumption ought to be that a manuscript was present and read from when a written tradition was engaged.²¹

This is not to imply, however, that New Testament texts were never engaged in a performative context. Broad definitions of performance allow for the presence of the text, and even direct reading from it, during a performative reading event. Reading from a written artifact in a communal setting is itself a performative act. Moreover, the scarcity of direct evidence of non-textual performances does not imply that there were no such performances of New Testament texts.²² The kind of performance event, whether textually mediated or not, was influenced by the kind of text engaged.

It is thus crucial for both performance critics and those engaging the sociology of reading New Testament texts to remain attentive to textual presence or absence and its respective impact on the reading or performance event. By acknowledging the possibility of the text being present or not, we open ourselves to a deeper understanding of the intricate relationship between performance and textuality. The absence or presence of the text changes a reading or performance event, opening different interpretive possibilities in both cases. This being the case, it is essential for performance critics to consider and state whether or not the text was present and read from when constructing a hypothetical performance event. It is likewise crucial for those engaging the sociology of reading to be attuned to the performative potential and elements of reading events, even when the text was present and directly read from.

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Notes

¹ While it is often taken as evidence that persons usually read communally and aloud in antiquity, the account in *Conf.* 6.3.3 of Augustine happening upon Ambrose reading silently to himself is actually direct evidence that persons in antiquity read in such a manner. As Gavrilov and Carsten Burfeind have demonstrated, Augustine is not surprised that Ambrose has the ability to read silently but that he is reading in such a manner in a certain social context (Gavrilov 1997, p. 63; Burfeind 2002, p. 139).

² (Rhoads 2006, p. 118). Elsewhere, with Joanna Dewey, he writes, “The direct experience of written scrolls was not unimportant, but it was limited and peripheral, especially in the first century” (Rhoads and Dewey 2014, p. 12).

- 3 In *Ep.* 6.15, Pliny offers a negative example of participation that he had observed. As Passennus Paulus began a reading, he was jocularly interrupted by Javolenus Priscus to the audience's great delight, which resulted in the "chilly reception" of Paulus's reading.
- 4 Text and translation, Radice LCL. Pliny further states in the letter, "The perfect speech when delivered is that which keeps most closely to the written version".
- 5 In *Dial.* 3.1–3, Tacitus also alludes to the practice of giving recitations as a means for revision, though he indicates that, on this particular occasion, Curatius Maternus's reading of his tragedy did not result in significant revisions. Maternus remarks, "you will find [the written work] just as you heard it read." (Tacitus 1914, trans. Peterson, LCL).
- 6 The primary critiques that Pliny addresses are the notion that it is unnecessary to read a speech that has already been delivered and the inherent difficulty of providing a reading that captures the aura of the speech as it was delivered.
- 7 Pliny also addresses or alludes to the practice or reading speeches in *Ep.* 3.18; 5.3; 5.12; 9.34.
- 8 Earlier in *Ep.* 7.17, Pliny indicates that there are several other kinds of texts from which communal readings are offered, even though this is not their natural receptive mode. These include history, tragedy, and lyric poetry.
- 9 For some time, the consensus, following Elias J. Bickerman, was that 4 Maccabees was a product of the mid-first century CE, written between 20 and 54 CE (Bickerman 1945; reprinted Bickerman 2007). Tessa Rajak has argued that the work is better understood as a product of the Second Sophistic, specifically suggesting the decades of the revolts against Rome in the late first and early second centuries as an apt chronological context (Rajak 2017, pp. 70–79).
- 10 The NRSV reproduced above implies that multiple songs of David are mentioned in 4 Macc. 18:15, though the Greek is simply "he sung you the Psalmist David" (τὸν ὕμνογράφον ἐμελῶδει ὑμῖν Δαυίδ).
- 11 Brian J. Wright, for example, claims that "virtually all literature during this time period was composed to be read communally" (Wright 2017, p. 59). Similarly, Paul J. Achtemeier claims that "all material in antiquity was intended to be heard" (Achtemeier 1990, p. 18).
- 12 With respect to Greco-Roman texts, see Cicero, *Fin.* 3.7–10; Plutarch, *Cat. Min.* 68–70 [792–94]; Appian, *Bell. civ.* 2.98–99; Dio Cassius, *His. rom.* 43.11.2–5; Horace, *Sat.* 1.6.122–23; Seneca, *Ep.* 65.1; Martial, *Epigr.* 2.6; 3.68.11–12; 3.86.1–2; 11.16.9–10; Pliny the Younger, *Ep.* 6.16; 6.20. With respect to Second Temple Jewish and early Christian texts, see 1 En. 13:7–10; Philo, *Spec. Laws* 1.214; 4.160–67; *Embassy* 1.83; Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 20.43–45; Cyril, *Catech.* 4.36; John Chrysostom, *Hom. Jo.* 11.1; Origen, *Hom. in Gen.* 11.3; Hippolytus, *Trad. Ap.* 41.5; Clement; *Strom.* 7.7; Tatian, *Or. Graec.* 29; Tertullian, *Apol.* 31; Justin Martyr, *1 Apol.* 28; 2 *Apol.* 3; *Dial.* 10, 18. For a more thorough review of the evidence of solitary reading from Greco-Roman, Second Temple Jewish, and early Christian sources, see (Elder 2024, pp. 38–54).
- 13 John Chrysostom, *Hom. Jo.* 11.1 (PG 59:77); I am dependent on Harry Y. Gamble for this reference (Gamble 1995, p. 233).
- 14 LSJ s.v. περικοπή and περιοχή.
- 15 It appears that Justin has in mind specific titles and roles for these gatherings, as he refers to both "the reader" (ὁ ἀναγινώσκων) and "the leader" (ὁ προεστώς).
- 16 In the context immediately preceding, *1 Apol.* 66, Justin indicates that the "memoirs of the apostles" are gospels: "For the apostles in the memoirs created by them, which are called gospels, thus handed down to us what was commanded of them" (οἱ γὰρ ἀπόστολοι ἐν τοῖς γενομένοις ὑπ' αὐτῶν ἀπομνημονεύμασιν, ἃ καλεῖται Εὐαγγέλια, οὕτως παρέδωκαν ἐντετάλθαι αὐτοῖς τὸν Ἰησοῦν).
- 17 It may be the case that "the writing of prophets" refers to more than just prophetic texts and also includes the Law and perhaps the writings. See (Keith 2020, pp. 187–88).
- 18 Communal reading of Scripture, especially Torah, was a principal activity of the synagogue, especially on the Sabbath. Anders Runesson lists the following texts in which Torah figures in a synagogue setting: Philo, *Dreams* 2.127; *Creation* 128; *Hypothetica* 7.11–13; *Embassy* 156–57, 311–13; *Moses* 2.215–16; *Spec. Laws* 2.60–62; *Contempl. Life* 30–31; *Good Person* 80–83; Josephus, *J.W.* 2.289–92; *Ant.* 16.43–45, 164; *Ag. Ap.* 2.175; Mark 1:21, 39; 6:2; Matt 4:23; 9:35; 13:54; Luke 4:15, 16–30, 31–33, 44; 6:6; 13:10; Acts 9:20; 13:5, 14–16; 14:1; 15:21; 17:2–3, 10–11, 17; 18:4–6, 26; 19:8; John 6:59; 18:20 (Runesson 2001, pp. 91–92, n. 91). Justin's description indicates that Christian gathering practices were similar to and likely grew out of Second Temple Jewish Sabbath reading practices.
- 19 It is clear in the narrative that the events described in *Acts of Peter* 19–21 occur on the day before the Sabbath.
- 20 Text, Lipsius and Bonnet (1891); translations of the Acts of Peter are based on Elliott (1993), and are sometimes slightly emended.
- 21 This is not to suggest that traditions were never engaged from memory in communal settings. Engaging a tradition in one way at one time does not preclude engaging it in a different way at a different time. However, as far as I can tell, there is little to no direct evidence of engaging any New Testament text from memory in a communal setting.
- 22 The Gospel of Mark is a particularly good candidate to be considered a discourse that was performed without the aid of the text for three reasons. First, Mark expressly declares itself to be "orally proclaimed news" from its first five words: ἀρχὴ τοῦ εὐαγγελίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ("beginning of news about Jesus Christ"). The term with which Mark labels itself, εὐαγγέλιον ("gospel"), along with its corresponding verbal form, εὐαγγελίζω ("to proclaim good news"), had an explicitly oral connotation in the first century context and earlier. See Bauer and Arndt (2000) s.v. εὐαγγέλιον, εὐαγγελίζω; Liddell and Scott (1945) s.v.

εὐαγγέλιον, εὐαγγελίζομαι. For a review of the primary sources, see (Dickson 2005; Bird 2014, pp. 9–11). Second, Eusebius of Caesarea in *HE* 2.16.1 implies that the Gospel of Mark was non-textually mediated. Following a reproduction of Clement of Alexandria's claims about Mark's composition scenario, Eusebius writes that Mark "was the first to be sent to preach in Egypt the Gospel which he had also put into writing." Eusebius applies a verb associated with the oral lifeworld, κηρύξαι ("to preach, proclaim"), to Mark's written text, "the Gospel which he had also put into writing" (τὸ εὐαγγέλιον, ὃ δὲ καὶ συνεγράψατο). Third, Mark's Gospel continues to find success in the oral medium. It works well as a performance delivered from memory, as demonstrated by the likes of Max McLean, Phil Ruge-Jones, and Thomas Boomershine, amongst others.

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