“Let the Reader Understand”
Ancient Pedagogy and the Social Setting of Mark

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Abstract

Mark’s only direct reference to the reader of his Gospel (Mark 13:14) has long fascinated interpreters. But what kind of reading event is presumed in this authorial aside? This essay compares Mark 13:14 to similar interpretive asides from the commentarial traditions of ancient schools. Through analysis of relevant material from Epictetus, the author of this essay demonstrates that a reader’s comprehension of authoritative texts was a primary objective of ancient education. He further shows that the practice of drawing a reader’s attention to particular interpretive conundrums is well evidenced in ancient commentaries like Origen’s Commentary on Matthew and the commentaries of Philo. The author argues that this evidence from pedagogical reading events can fruitfully illuminate Mark 13:14, and can help us to theorize better about the social setting of Mark’s Gospel.

Keywords

education – Epictetus – reading culture – Gospel of Mark – Philo – Origen

When you see the abomination of desolation standing where it should not be (let the reader understand), then let those in Judea flee to the mountains

MARK 13:14

1 My translation, following the text of the NA28. All other translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.
This verse has long fascinated interpreters of Mark’s Gospel. Though Mark elsewhere makes authorial asides that function as explanatory glosses (e.g., 5:41; 7:34; 14:22; 7:3–4), this is the only occasion in the gospel where the evangelist explicitly addresses the “reader” (ὁ ἀναγινώσκων) of his text. There has been some debate on whether this refers to an individual reader of the Gospel or to a group of addressees who might have heard the Gospel read aloud. Recent research on the aural nature of ancient Mediterranean book culture leads some commentators to a “both/and” solution, wherein the aside could refer to a lector as well as individual hearers of the reading.

But what kind of reading event is presumed by the evangelist’s injunction to his reader? This question usually goes unasked and unanswered in expositions of Mark 13, aside from general references to some manner of Christian audience or community. In one of the most recent major treatments of the subject, Chris Keith notes that “the author of Mark’s Gospel offers no explicit commentary on how the significance (or insignificance) of the public reading


3 Throughout, I will refer to the author of the Gospel as “Mark,” which should not be taken as a historical judgment on the Gospel’s authorship.

4 The vast majority of interpreters see this as an authorial aside, as it makes little sense for Jesus to refer to a reader in the context of his apocalyptic discourse. Attempts to use 13:4 as evidence for a pre-Markan literary source have not proven persuasive (see Collins, Mark, 608; C.E.B. Cranfield, The Gospel According to Saint Mark: An Introduction and Commentary [CGTC; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959] 403).

5 Best (“The Gospel of Mark,” 128–131) argues that the aside is meant to clarify a grammatical ambiguity for an individual reader: while βδέλυγμα is a neuter noun, it is modified by the masculine participle, ἑστηκότα. As Collins (Mark, 597) notes, however, similar constructions occur elsewhere in Greek literature, and even elsewhere in Mark without authorial comment (e.g., Mark 9:20, 26). Collins herself concludes that the phrase refers to the reader, not an audience: “The evidence supports the conclusion that ‘the reader’ ... is the one who actually reads the text to the audience, rather than the individual member of the audience” (Mark, 598); see also E.M. Boring, Mark: A Commentary (NTI; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 366–367; R.H. Stein, Mark (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008) 602. Conversely, Joel Marcus comments that the aside is meant for Mark’s “addressees” (Mark 8–16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary [AB 27a; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009] 891).

6 Shiner, Proclaiming the Gospel, 177; Fowler, Let the Reader Understand, 87; D.B. Standaert, o.s.b., Évangile selon Marc Commentaire: Troisième partie: Marc 11,1 à 16, 20 (EBib 61; Leuven: Peeters, 2010) 927.
should be construed.”7 According to Keith, Mark 13:14 proves only that “Jesus followers were reading manuscripts of the Gospels publicly already by the mid-first century.”8

Recently, two scholars in particular have urged students of Christian origins to seek greater specificity when it comes to situating early Christian books like the Gospels within Greco-Roman literary culture. The first is Robyn Faith Walsh, who argues in a provocative monograph that unproven assumptions about early Christian communities have exercised undue influence on interpreters of the Gospels.9 Walsh reminds us that the original readers of the Gospels likely participated in the patterns of literary consumption already prevalent in the imperial period. Walsh herself envisions the evangelists as elite literary producers who wrote their stories for the enjoyment of “circles of like-minded consumers and critics,” not unlike the sophists on display in Athenaeus’s Deipnosophistae.10 Whether or not this is an accurate reconstruction of early Gospel readers, Walsh is correct to emphasize the need to move beyond undefined appeals to “Christian assemblies” when reconstructing Gospel audiences.11

Even more recently, an article by Jan Heilmann in The Journal of Theological Studies has challenged the consensus that early Christian texts like the Gospels were most likely read in social contexts that mirrored Greco-Roman symposia.12 Heilmann argues that the ancient evidence for mealtime recitationes indicates that such readings were expected to be relatively short. In Heilmann’s analysis, the Gospels are too long to have functioned as the objects of such recitationes.13 Because of a “lack of positive evidence for the regular reading of New Testament texts in early Christian gatherings,”14 Heilmann proposes instead that the Gospels were intended to circulate on the book

7 Gospel as Manuscript, 181.
8 Gospel as Manuscript, 199.
10 Walsh, Origins of Early Christian Literature, 200; for her use of Athenaeus, at 105–110.
13 Heilmann, “Ancient Literary Culture,” 123.
market and to be read by individual readers. Whether Heilmann’s arguments will overturn the long-standing *communis opinio* that the Gospels were originally read in group settings remains to be seen, but his work certainly suggests that we explore other models to help us imagine early Gospel reading.

In light of these recent challenges to traditional reconstructions of the social settings of the Gospels, we are justified in seeking new comparanda for the reading event envisioned in Mark 13:14. To that end, this essay compares Mark 13:14 to similar phenomena from the commentarial traditions of ancient schools. Through analysis of relevant material from Epictetus, I demonstrate that a reader’s comprehension of authoritative texts was a primary objective of ancient education. I further show that the practice of drawing a reader’s attention to particular interpretive conundrums is well evidenced in ancient commentaries like Origen’s *Commentary on Matthew* and the commentaries of Philo. I argue that this evidence from pedagogical reading events can fruitfully illuminate the reading event of Mark 13:14, and can help us to theorize better about the social setting of Mark’s Gospel.

1 Ignorant Students and Authoritative Texts at the School of Epictetus

The arrangement of Epictetus’s discourses published by his student Arrian provides some of our best evidence for the practices of philosophical education in the first century CE. Epictetus founded his private school in Nicopolis sometime after Domitian banished all of Rome’s philosophers in

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15 Others have also proposed that the reading cultures of the schools can illuminate the practices of early Christians. See especially A.D. Nock, *Conversion: The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933) 164–192; W. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983) 81–4; E.A. Judge, “The Early Christians as a Scholastic Community,” *JRHe* 1 (1960–61) 4–15, 125–137. These analyses focus mainly on the social context of Pauline groups. Despite his own statements to the contrary (*Epict. diss. Praef*, 1–4) Arrian should probably be viewed as the “author” of the *Discourses*. The most extreme version of this position was articulated by T. Wirth, who argued that the scenes in the *Discourses* probably had little historical connection to Epictetus himself (“Arrians Erinnerungen an Epiket,” *MH* 24 [1967] 149–189). Others have argued that, to the contrary, the *Discourses* represent stenographic reports from Epictetus’s classroom (e.g., K. Hartmann, “Arrian und Epiket,” *NJahr* 15 [1905] 248–275), or that Epictetus wrote them himself (H.W.F Stellwag, *Epictetus: Het Eerste Boek der Diatriben* [Amsterdam: H.J. Paris, 1933]). More recent scholarship tends to take a mediating view, wherein Arrian’s literary creativity is acknowledged but the *Discourses* are still accepted as accurately reflecting the thought and practice of Epictetus himself. For an articulation of such a position see R.F. Dobbins, *Epictetus:
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92 or 93 CE. There, he educated students (mostly elite men) in his unique brand of Stoicism. Arrian’s *Discourses* do not offer a thoroughgoing account of Epictetus’s curriculum, but his references to lessons and teaching can “provide a rough idea” of how Epictetus ran his school.\(^{17}\)

Most pertinent for our purposes is the fact that Epictetus evidently utilized the written works of reputable Stoics, especially Chrysippus, in his teaching.\(^{18}\) Arrian reports Epictetus once saying “as soon as day breaks I call to mind briefly what author I must read over” (*Diatr.* 10.8; Oldfather, lcl). This is usually interpreted as a reference to a text that Epictetus had planned to have his students read, and on which Epictetus would probably offer his own interpretive comments.\(^{19}\) Elsewhere, Epictetus indicates that many of his students come to him to learn how to interpret the Stoic authority Chrysippus:

> But what is it I want? To learn nature and to follow her. I seek, therefore, someone to interpret her; and having heard that Chrysippus does so, I go to him. But I do not understand what he has written; I seek, therefore, the person who interprets Chrysippus. And down to this point there is nothing to justify pride. But when I find the interpreter, what remains is to put his precepts into practice; this is the only thing to be proud about. If, however, I admire the mere act of interpretation, what have I done but turned into a grammarian instead of a philosopher? The only difference, indeed, is that I interpret Chrysippus instead of Homer.

> **Epictetus, *Ench.* 49 (Oldfather, lcl)**

\(^{17}\) G.E. Sterling, “The School of Moses in Alexandria: An Attempt to Reconstruct the School of Philo,” in *Second Temple Jewish Paideia in Context* (ed. Gabriele Boccaccini and Jason Zurawski; BZNW 228; Berlin: de Gruyter 2017) 141–166, at 145.


\(^{19}\) So Dobbin’s: “§8 provides a brief look at the daily workings of E’s school. Study apparently included reading and commenting on philosophical texts; responsibility was shared among E and his students” (*Discourses Book I*, 130). William Oldfather offers a similar comment: “Apparently Epictetus read over, or made special preparation upon a certain text, before meeting his pupils. In class then he would have a pupil read and interpret an assignment” (see W.A. Oldfather, *Epictetus, The Discourses as Reported by Arrian, the Manual, and Fragments* [2 vols.; lcl; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1925–1928] 175 n. 42).
Here, Epictetus uses a speech-in-character to rebuke students who want to learn how to interpret Chrysippus without implementing his precepts in their daily lives. The general conceit of the passage is to suggest that the act of interpretation is not the end of philosophical study. But it also demonstrates the weight that Epictetus’s curriculum must have placed on the interpretation of written works that he viewed as foundational for Stoic philosophy. Students came to Epictetus because of his reputation as an interpreter of Chrysippus. Epictetus urged his students to absorb his interpretations not just as intellectual precepts but as the basis for a life lived in accordance with nature. Yet the prerequisite for this kind of practical commitment, as Epictetus makes clear, was a correct understanding of the text.

Epictetus’s concern for students’ comprehension of reading material is well-illustrated by a scene from *Diatr.* 1.26:

Once, after Epictetus had interrupted the reader (τὸν ἀναγιγνώσκοντα) of the hypothetical arguments and the person who assigned him the reading was laughing, Epictetus said: “you’re laughing at yourself. You didn’t assign the young man a preliminary exercise, nor did you know if he was able to follow these things; you’re just using him like a reader (ὡς ἀναγνώστης). Why do we entrust praise and blame, judgement over what’s good and bad, to a mind that’s not able to follow the argument of a complicated matter?”

*Epictetus, Diatr.* 1.26.13–14

The “hypothetical arguments” (τοὺς ὑποθετικούς) the student reads are the basic tenets of classical Stoic logic, which constructs multi-layered arguments out of hypothesized syllogisms (“if P, then Q,” etc.). Though Epictetus does not specify, it is possible that the hypotheticals assigned in his curriculum came from Chrysippus himself, who wrote on them extensively. In any case, the student has been assigned to read a difficult text that was meant to serve as the primary instructional material for that lesson.

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21 On the use of logic in Roman Stoicism, see J. Barnes, *Logic and the Imperial Stoa* (PhA 75; Leiden: Brill, 1997). See especially pages 85–98 on the hypothetical arguments.

22 See Barnes, *Logic and the Imperial Stoa*, 90.

23 Some have suggested that the student was reading a composition of their own (e.g., B.L. Hijmans, *ἈΣΧΗΜΗΣ: Notes on Epictetus’ Educational System* [Assen: Van Gorcum, 1959] 42 n. 5). But this is unlikely in light of the fact that the reading was assigned by
Epictetus interrupted the reader when it became clear the student could not understand what he was reading. He has likely “ignored or misunderstood one of the rules for dealing with such arguments.”

24 Otto Halbauer suggests that the student was expected to exegete the text, thereby demonstrating his grasp of the material. Epictetus’s frustration with the reader’s lack of comprehension quickly turns into a criticism of the student who had assigned the reading in the first place. That student, Epictetus says, ought to have made sure that the reader could follow the argumentation of the text appointed for that lesson, given that it dealt with a “complicated matter” (συμπεπλεγμένον).

Epictetus further suggests that the more advanced student should have given the other student more practice via preliminary exercises to better prepare for dealing with more complex material.

This episode offers a fascinating window into the dynamics of a reading event in a philosophical school of the early Imperial period. Several features are especially illuminating for our purposes. The first is that “the reader” (ὁ ἀναγιγνώσκων) clearly distinguishes the student engaged in the act of reading from his fellow students. Here, “reader” does not refer to anyone hearing the book read. Second, the reader is engaged in an act of interpretation. He is expected to demonstrate via his reading that he has properly understood a selection of a written text, probably one from a respected Stoic author.

26 That the older student is rebuked for using the other merely “as a reader” demonstrates the high value that the school environment placed on reading with comprehension, especially when it came to complicated passages. A reading

another student who already knew it was difficult (see Barnes, Logic and the Imperial Stoa, 90 n. 263; Dobbins, Discourses Book I, 213).
24 Barnes, Logic and the Imperial Stoa, 90. Dobbins comments that “the logic of the student appointed to read the lesson is weak” (Discourses Book I, 213).
25 O. Halbauer, De diatribis Epicteti (Lipsiae: Noske, 1911) 52–53. In support of this there is the fact that in Diatr. 1.4, Epictetus uses the verb ἀναγιγνώσκω to indicate not just literal reading, but achieving interpretive mastery over a text of Chrysippus: “Take the treatise Upon Choice and see how I have mastered it (πῶς αὐτὴν ἀνέγνωκα)” (Oldfather, lcl). On another occasion (Diatr. 3.21.7) a student boasts to Epictetus about his ability to exegete (ἐξηγέομαι) the works of Chrysippus, further suggesting that students were expected to offer their own interpretations of the reading material. See also Snyder, Teachers and Texts in the Ancient World, 26.
26 See Halbauer, De diatribe Epicteti, 52–53; Barnes, Logic and the Imperial Stoa, 90.
27 The pejorative connotation Epictetus seems to apply to the noun ἀναγιγνώστης probably relates to the term’s connection to enslaved persons who could be trained as lectors for wealthy individuals (e.g., Cicero, Att. 1.12). A survey of similar “reader” terminology leads D. Nässelqvist to conclude that there was in antiquity “a widespread view of the lector—who is of servile status—as someone who is taken for granted and rarely mentioned”
event in this educational environment was primarily aimed at the careful exposition of authoritative texts by a competent and well-trained reader.

2 Interpreting Difficult Passages in Ancient Commentaries

Epictetus’s school offers us a glimpse into the kind of reading event that occurred within school settings in the Roman period. We noted that the reader of a given text was expected to demonstrate mastery over its difficulties, and could face consequences if he did not. A similar anxiety surrounding a reader’s comprehension is reflected in some ancient commentaries that emerged out of educational environments. This anxiety often manifests itself by means of an authorial injunction to the reader, one that draws the reader’s attention to a particular interpretive problem that requires trained insight. This section will consider relevant examples of this phenomenon in Origen and Philo of Alexandria. We will begin with Origen, for whose school we have the most reliable evidence.  

2.1 Authorial Imperatives in Origen’s Commentary on Matthew

Eusebius reports that Origen ran a catechetical school (τὸ τοῦ κατηχήσεως διδασκαλεῖον) in Alexandria prior to his relocation to Caesarea (Hist. eccl. 6.3.3). It seems that he founded a similar school in Caesarea, as Eusebius mentions the names of several students that Origen trained there (Hist. eccl. 6.30.1).  

We know little about the structure of Origen’s curriculum, but Eusebius indicates that he separated beginning students, whom he entrusted to an assistant teacher named Heraclas, from the more advanced, whom he taught himself (Hist. eccl. 6.15.1).

This period of Origen’s life was one of significant scholarly productivity. At Caesarea he wrote commentaries on most of the Pauline epistles (including a 15-volume commentary on Romans), a commentary on Matthew, much of the book of Revelation, and a large number of homilies and sermons. Although he wrote some 150 years after the composition of Mark, it is clear that Origen operated within much the same system of Greek education that had dominated the Mediterranean for centuries before him and which remained standard for centuries to come, and thus can serve as instructive evidence for pedagogical settings in the ancient Mediterranean more broadly (see R.E. Heine, Origen: Scholarship in Service of the Church [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010] 60–64). It is also important to note that Origen is utilized in this study of Mark not because he is a Christian teacher, but because he is an excellent and well-documented example of a literate educator in the Roman period.

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29 See also Heine, Origen, 188.
a commentary on John, and a massive commentary on the Psalms.\textsuperscript{30} Several scholars have argued that this extensive literary production was likely facilitated by the use of lectures and classroom discussion notes in the writing process.\textsuperscript{31} Such a hypothesis about the commentaries’ production is not strictly provable, but there is certainly internal evidence that suggests Origen used his commentaries in a classroom setting. One such instance occurs in Comm. Matt. 14.12. Origen is commenting on the parable of the unforgiving servant (Matt 18:23–35), and notes that the evangelist does not provide his own interpretation of the parable as he does elsewhere. Origen indicates that this mirrors his own practice when writing a commentary:

\begin{quote}
But some of the things that we seem to have found after a great deal of trial and seeking (whether by the grace of God or by the power of our own mind), we do not dare to entrust to written letters, but other things we expound to a certain extent, as a mental exercise (γυμνασία) for us and for those who read it (οἱ ἐντευξομένοι).
\end{quote}

Origen, Comm. Matt. 14.12\textsuperscript{32}

The fact that Origen describes his own exposition of the biblical text as a γυμνασία strongly suggests he envisions it being employed in an educational context. The word is attested in other educational contexts as early as the first-century BCE. Dionysius of Halicarnassus uses it to refer to the daily lessons he will offer his pupils on literary composition (Comp. 20). Iamblichus (fourth-century CE) uses it to describe the educational program of the Pythagorean school (De communi mathematica Scientia 24).\textsuperscript{33} Origen's use of this term probably indicates that he intends his interpretations to function as useful lessons in his classroom. It is further clear that these mental exercises are to be read, as Origen indicates via the substantival participle from ἐντυγχάνω; the word is commonly used as a synonym for ἀναγιγνώσκω in ancient literature.\textsuperscript{34} In other words, we can be reasonably confident that Origen’s

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{32} The Greek text is from \textit{Origenes Werke 10: Origenes Matthäuserklärung i: Die griechisch erhaltenen Tomoi} (ed. E. Benz and E. Klostermann; GCS 49; Leipzig, 1935) 305.
\bibitem{33} See also LSJ s.v. γυμνασία. Plato also uses the word to refer to Socrates’s style of interlocution (\textit{Tht.} 169c).
\bibitem{34} E.g., Plutarch, \textit{Rom.} 12.6.8; Pseudo-Lucian, \textit{Encom. Demosth.} 27.5; Polybius, \textit{Hist.} 1.12. See also B.J. Wright, \textit{Communal Reading in the Time of Jesus} (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017) 20–21.
\end{thebibliography}
commentaries were intended to be read and grappled with by students in his school at Caesarea.\textsuperscript{35}

Several passages from Origen’s \textit{Commentary on Matthew} are especially interesting in light of the probability that Origen used his commentaries with his students. These are places where Origen seems to command the reader in a style that feels reminiscent of a classroom setting.\textsuperscript{36} One such instance occurs in \textit{Comm. Matt.} 11.17, where Origen draws attention to the Canaanite woman’s use of the title “Son of David” for Jesus (Matt 15:22):

\begin{quote}
Gather together (συνάγαγε) from all the Gospels everyone who calls him “Son of David” in the way she does and in the way the blind men from Jericho do, and who calls him “Son of God,” especially without the addition “truly,” (like the demon-possessed people who say “what do you have to do with us, Son of God?”) ... For bringing these passages together will, I think, be useful to you (σοι) for seeing the differences among those who come to Jesus.
\end{quote}

\textit{Origen, Comm. Matt.} 11.17.503–504

As a part of his interpretation, Origen instructs the (singular) reader to seek other passages from the Gospels that would illuminate Matthew’s use of this particular phrase. In this particular instance, Origen goes on to aid the reader by providing examples of the kind of references he has in mind (the synagogue ruler of Luke 7:12, the nobleman of Matthew 9:18, etc.). Perrone cites this passage as a key example of the “dynamisme créatif du lecteur-disciple” that is present in Origen’s biblical commentaries.\textsuperscript{37} By inviting the reader into the interpretive endeavor, Origen clearly “envisage un lecteur intéressé et capable de poursuivre une démarche exégétique autonome.”\textsuperscript{38}

Origen puts even more trust in his reader’s “exégétique autonomie” in \textit{Comm. Matt.} 10.1.443. Commenting on Matthew 13:36, Origen invites the reader to investigate Matthew’s reference to Jesus’s house:

\begin{quote}
“So that it might be understood more carefully (ἀκριβέστερον νοηθῇ) what Jesus’s house is, let someone
\end{quote}

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{35} See G. Bendinelli, \textit{Il Commentario a Matteo di Origene: L’Ambito della Metodologia Scolastica dell’Antichità} (Rome: Institutum patristicum Augustinianum 1997) for a thorough treatment of the place of Origen’s commentaries in his school.

\textsuperscript{36} These cases have been well treated in the studies of L. Perrone (“Les commentaires d’Origène sur Jean et Matthieu: Tradition, innovation et système,” \textit{Proche-Orient Chrétien} 51 [2001] 35–69) and Solheid (“Modelling a Christian Academy,” 416–422). I follow much of their argumentation in what follows.

\textsuperscript{37} Perrone, “Les commentaires d’Origène sur Jean et Matthieu,” 65.

\textsuperscript{38} Perrone, “Les commentaries d’Origène sur Jean et Matthieu,” 64.
\end{footnotes}
gather (συναγαγέτω τις) from all the gospels everywhere where Jesus’s house is mentioned, and what is spoken in it or what is done by him there.” By means of a third person singular imperative, Origen once again enjoins his reader to compare the passage in Matthew with other material from the Gospels that he believes might prove exegetically helpful.

Unlike at Comm. Matt. 11.17.503, Origen does not here provide his own treatment of the relevant passages. Instead, he offers the reader further encouragement in their own exegetical efforts: “For gathering these passages together will convince the one who attends closely to this reading (τὸν προσέχοντα ταύτῃ τῇ συναγνώσει) that the letters of the gospel are not simple, as some people think” (Comm. Matt. 10.1.443). In this fascinating comment, Origen claims that the person who wishes to “attend closely to this reading” (that is, the passage from Matthew 13) must engage in Origen’s style of intertextual interpretation. Attending closely to the reading demands study, not just of Matthew’s Gospel, but of relevant intertexts from all of the Gospels. Only when such study has been carried out will the reading be “more carefully understood” (ἀκριβέστερον νοηθῇ).

As Solheid rightly notes, these comments from Comm. Matt. 10.1.443 are telling indicators of the “pedagogical context of the commentary.”39 We see here an example of the stratagem that Origen outlines himself in Comm. Matt. 14.12: some details of interpretation are expounded only “to a certain extent” (ἐπὶ ποσόν) in order to serve as an intellectual exercise for his students.40 A reading event that involved Comm. Matt. 10.1.443 would find Origen effectively creating a kind of “homework assignment,” withholding some of his own interpretive insights to encourage his students to “attend closely to this reading.”41 Origen’s commentaries thus offer us insight into the reading habits of another ancient educational community. As the text was read, students were challenged to consider exegetical conundrums and urged to pursue further study of the book.

2.2 Authorial Imperatives in Philo of Alexandria

The commentaries of Philo of Alexandria present us with evidence of authorial injunctions similar to the ones we observed in Origen. Philo’s works are traditionally organized by scholars into three distinct commentary series, along

41 Solheid, “Modelling a Christian Academy,” 416.
with a few standalone philosophical and apologetic treatises. Surprisingly, nowhere in this voluminous corpus does the Alexandrian exegete offer us a direct statement regarding the intended audiences of these commentaries. Nevertheless, a number of scholars have advanced the theory that Philo’s commentaries (though perhaps not his apologetic treatises) were written for some kind of school environment, either associated with a Jewish synagogue or a separate institution.

The most thorough treatment of this subject in recent years has come from Gregory E. Sterling, who has argued in multiple publications that Philo operated a private school out of his own home or another personally-owned building, much like Epictetus. Sterling’s original article marshals a variety of internal evidence, including Philo’s many references to other Jewish exegetes (a shared exegetical tradition is a good indicator of a scholastic setting), Philo’s frequent use of school-related terminology to describe Jewish study of scripture, and a scene in Anim. 6 where Philo addresses his nephew as if he were a student, sitting before Philo as a teacher. We might add to this list the fact that Philo several times refers to himself and to his readers as “school associates and pupils of Moses” (φοιτηταὶ καὶ γνώριμοι Μωσέως, Spec. 1.319).

42 The three commentary series are the Questions and Answers on Genesis and Exodus, the Allegorical Commentary, and the Exposition of the Law. Each has its own distinctive features and mode of exegesis. For an introduction to the relevant issues see G.E. Sterling, “The School of Moses in Alexandria: An Attempt to Reconstruct the School of Philo,” in Second Temple Jewish Paideia in Context (ed. G. Boccaccini and J. Zurawski; bznw 228; Berlin: de Gruyter 2017) 141–166, especially 155–163; M. Niehoff, Philo of Alexandria: An Intellectual Biography (aybrl; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018) 7–11. V. Nikiprowsky (Le commentaire de l’écriture chez Philon d’Alexandrie: Son caractère et sa portée; Observations philologiques [ALGHJ 11; Leiden: Brill, 1977] 192–202) argued that the Allegorical Commentary and the Exposition actually represent one commentary series, but this remains a minority perspective.


45 The description “presumes a formal school setting” (Sterling, “School of Sacred Laws,” 157–158).
Sterling has also noted the fact that ancient commentaries usually emerge out of some kind of school setting. Sterling’s arguments are persuasive and provide the best hypothesis to date concerning the original setting of Philo’s commentaries. Others have built upon his thesis. James R. Royse’s study of Philo’s internal references to his own work concludes that Philo never formally “published” his works, but used them as the “private, unpublished books of his school.” Maren Niehoff’s recent treatment of Philo’s œuvre similarly presupposes Sterling’s hypothesis about a school setting for at least some of Philo’s works.

Royse’s suggestion that Philo’s commentaries are the “private unpublished books of his school” makes good sense of a number of features of Philo’s writing. To begin with, Philo very regularly addresses his reader(s) by using the first-person plural. This phenomenon occurs countless times in Philo, but a few examples are illustrative:

Let us look even more carefully at what is being indicated (ἔτι δὲ ἀκριβέστερον ἴδωμεν τὸ δηλούμενον).

\[ \text{PHILO, Leg. 3.115} \]

Let us look at the words (ἵδιωμεν δὲ καὶ τὰς λέξεις).

\[ \text{PHILO, Leg. 1.65} \]

Now Abram means “lifted up father,” but Abraham means “elect father of sound.” We will understand (εἰσόμενον) more wisely how these differ from each other if we first read (ἀναγνώσομεν) what is signified by each one.

\[ \text{PHILO, Mut. 66} \]

So much for a foundation. Now let us build (ἐποικοδομῶμεν) the superstructure, following the directions of Allegory, that wise Master-builder, while we investigate the details of either dream.

\[ \text{PHILO, Somn. 2.8 (Colson and Whitaker, LCL, with alterations)} \]

Is it not worth investigating the cause of these things? It certainly is. Let us then look into what it is in a detailed fashion (Τίς οὖν ἐστι, μὴ παρέργως σκοπήσωμεν).

\[ \text{PHILO, Somn. 1.167} \]

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46 Sterling, “Philo’s School,” 121–142.
But we pointed out (ἐδηλώσαμεν) that God when ceasing or rather causing to cease, does not cease making, but begins the creating of other things.

Philo, *Leg. 1.18*

This mode of address has been well-studied in the context of other ancient commentators and is generally regarded as a reliable indicator of a school setting.\(^\text{50}\) Though it is possible that it reflects simply an “editorial we,” it seems likely to many that the use of first-plurals in ancient commentaries reflects the text’s relationship to a classroom environment. Commenting on Alexander’s commentaries on Aristotle, Snyder concludes that the use of first-person address indicates that the commentaries “were generated from his teaching activity.”\(^\text{51}\) Sharples notes that an especially telling diagnostic can be found in a commentary’s use of a past-tense first person verb (“we discussed,” “we observed”), which is a phenomenon that occurs in Philo (e.g., *Leg. 1.18*).\(^\text{52}\) As for any ancient commentator, such evidence cannot constitute indisputable proof, but it seems likely that Philo’s choice of the first-person plural supports Royse’s suggestion that the commentaries were intended for the use of students in Philo’s school.\(^\text{53}\)

In addition to his use of the first-person plural, Philo, like Origen, can also use a singular address to involve the reader more directly in his exegesis. Philo’s treatment of Genesis 31:13 in *De Somniis* is an important example. The Greek version Philo exeges reads “I am the God who appeared to you in the place of God” (ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ θεὸς ὁ ὀφθείς σοι ἐν τόπῳ θεοῦ). Rather than beginning his interpretation directly, Philo first stops to enjoin his reader: “Don’t overlook what has been said (μὴ παρέλθῃς δὲ τὸ εἰρημένον), but carefully inquire (ἀκριβῶς ἐξέτασο) whether or not there are two Gods” (*Somn. 1.228*). Philo employs a second person singular imperative and a second person singular prohibitive subjunctive to draw the reader’s attention to what he views as a serious interpretive problem. If there were two Gods represented in the biblical text, it would present a significant challenge to Philo’s commitment to


\(^{51}\) Snyder, *Teachers and Texts in the Ancient World*, 89.

\(^{52}\) Sharples, “The School of Alexander,” 110.

The reader is alerted to this important issue, and commanded to investigate the matter carefully, without “passing over” the text too quickly.

Philo goes on to offer his own investigation into the curious phrase. He compares the statement in Gen 31:13 with other instances of divine self-disclosure in the Pentateuch such as Exod 3:14, Num 23:19, Gen 16:13, and Exod 17:6. Consideration of all the scriptural evidence leads Philo to conclude that it is the Logos that is spoken of as the second “God” in Genesis 31:13. Philo has thus walked his reader through the practice of “carefully inquiring” about the meaning of this difficult passage. Just as the famous Homeric scholars in Alexandria “interpreted Homer by Homer,” Philo teaches his reader to interpret Moses by Moses. The reader is urged to think carefully about a portion of the text that required elucidation from other portions of scripture.

Another relevant text for our purposes is Spec. 1.195, where Philo once again appeals to the reader’s own interpretive interest before offering his own comments:

For if anyone wishes to examine closely (εἰ γὰρ βούλοιτό τις ἐξετάζειν ἀκριβῶς) the motives which led men of the earliest times to resort to sacrifices as a medium of prayer and thanksgiving, he will find (εὑρήσει) that two hold the highest place.

PHILO, Spec. 1.195 (Colson, LCL)

Philo must of course assume that the reader of his work will have the requisite desire for deeper understanding of the phenomenon in the text. The creation of a “hypothetical” student who wishes to read and examine the text as carefully as Philo reminds the reader of their own interest and vividly situates them within the interpretive endeavor of the master exegete. It is not at all difficult to see how such a text could function in a school environment.

The above examples are not offered as a comprehensive analysis of all of Philo’s asides to his readers; there are others (e.g., Leg. 1.20; Spec. 1.345). What I have shown is that Philo at times employs different kinds of authorial injunctions to encourage his readers to attend carefully to his interpretations and expositions of the biblical text. These can appear as first-person plural hortatory subjunctives (e.g., ἵδωμεν, Leg. 1.65; μὴ παρέργως σκοπήσωμεν, Somn. 1.167), second-person singular imperatives (e.g., ἀκριβῶς ἔξετασον, Somn. 1.228), or as a hypothetical third-person interlocutor (e.g., Spec. 1.195). All of this coheres very nicely with the hypothesis, advanced especially by Sterling and Royse,
that these commentaries were meant to serve as foundational texts in the curriculum of a school run by Philo himself. Philo's commentaries, like Origen's, explicitly address their readers in order to encourage them to pursue deeper study and fuller comprehension of an authoritative text.

3 Revisiting Mark 13:14

The previous two sections examined a selection of evidence for the kinds of reading events that occurred within scholastic settings in the Roman world. For Epictetus's school and for the reading communities addressed in the commentaries of Origen and Philo, reading events centered around the interpretation of authoritative texts. Readers were expected to demonstrate their comprehension and were urged by the teacher/commentary to seek further clarity on especially difficult or significant passages. In this section, I identify important points of coherence between these reading events and what we can glean from Mark 13:14. The goal is not to offer a wholesale re-interpretation of this well-studied verse, but to plausibly situate the reading event in 13:14 alongside salient ancient comparanda.

3.1 Text, Intertext, and Interpretation in Mark 13:14

How much can we discern from Mark 13:14 about the kind of reader the evangelist envisions? The most significant item for our purposes is that the author’s note to the reader in Mark 13:14 is intended to draw the reader’s attention to a relevant intertext. It is commonly noted that Jesus’s reference to the “abomination of desolation” alludes to several apocalyptic warnings about the defilement of the temple in the book of Daniel, especially 11:31 and 12:11.\(^{56}\) Mark’s appropriation of this image has been interpreted in a variety of ways, but no one hypothesis has gained wide acceptance.\(^{57}\) For many commentators, all


\(^{57}\) Depending on their preferred dating of Mark, commentators have suggested that Mark intends to refer to Caligula’s attempt to erect a statue of himself in the temple (ca. 40 CE), Titus’s presence in Jerusalem during its destruction (70 CE), or to the 67–68 Zealot occupation of the temple, among other options. The best review of the various propositions is Collins, *Mark*, 607–610.
that can be said with confidence is that Mark intends to indicate the grim fate of the temple, either just before its destruction in 70 or in its aftermath.\footnote{See especially Collins, \textit{Mark}, 610–611: “The evangelist was aware of the course of events in the war and was writing in some proximity to them. He wrote not primarily to portray present or past events as prophecy after the fact but to place in the mouth of Jesus a prophecy of the turning point in the war which was still future from his perspective.” See also Boring, \textit{Mark}, 367: “The abomination of desolation is cryptic apocalyptic language for the desecration and destruction of the temple, which is about to happen or has just happened.”}

What seems certain is that Mark is crafting a complex and layered discourse that ties (1) Jesus’s own apocalyptic teaching and (2) the tumultuous events of 66–70 CE to the prophetic warnings about the temple found in the book of Daniel. As Richard Hays notes, the use of the Danielic phrase “unmistakably links Jesus’ discourse to Daniel’s apocalyptic picture of history and prepares the way for Mark’s introduction of the triumphant Danielic Son of Man in Mark 13:24–27.”\footnote{R. Hays, \textit{Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels} (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016) 58.} In other words, in Mark 13 we find the evangelist engaged in a subtle reinterpretation of several of Daniel’s prophecies.\footnote{It has even been suggested that Mark 13 is dependent on a pre-existing Jewish midrash on Daniel. See L. Hartman, \textit{Prophecy Interpreted: The Formation of Some Jewish Apocalyptic Texts and of the Eschatological Discourse Mark 13 Par.} (ConBNT 1; Lund: Gleerup, 1966) 235.}

It is the complex interplay between the story of Jesus’s ministry, the contemporary upheaval at the time of Mark’s composition, and the Danielic prophecy that the reader is urged to understand in Mark 13:14. Hays asserts that the authorial aside indicates that “Mark expected the allusion to be grasped without need for explanation,” but this is not quite accurate. Rather, the evangelist is offering an interpretive clue to his reader in the midst of a discourse that he knows to be fraught with allusion and subtlety. Much like Origen, Mark does not offer his own interpretation explicitly, but invites the reader to test their own exegetical autonomy.\footnote{Cf. Perrone, “Les commentaires d’Origène sur Jean et Matthieu,” 64.} Contra Hays, it is the very need for explanation that occasions the aside. We know that at least one early reader of Mark \textit{did} find that Mark’s allusion required explanation, because the parallel in Matthew 24:15 explicitly cites Daniel as the source of the allusion.\footnote{J. Heilmann comments that in Matthew the reader “wird jedoch etwas von der Interpretationsarbeit abgenommen” (\textit{Lesen in Antike und frühem Christentum: Kulturgeschichtliche, philologische sowie kognitionswissenschaftliche Perspektiven und deren Bedeutung für die neutestamentliche Exegese} [Texte und Arbeiten zum neutestamentlichen Zeitalter 66; Tübingen: Narr Francke Attempto, 2021] 454.}

Nevertheless, Mark has left the reference opaque, inviting the reader into further inquiry. Stein captures this sense of the aside well: “This indicates that...
it will require some thinking on their part to recognize the present realization of the event referred to as the abomination of desolation in Dan. 9:27; 11:31; 12:11 ... for the meaning lies below the surface level." The reader of Mark 13:14 is urged to figure out that the evangelist is interpreting contemporary events in light of the book of Daniel, and vice versa.

3.2  A Markan School?
The reading of Mark 13:14 offered above is not a novel one; it is commonplace to acknowledge that Mark's note to the reader clues them in to his interpretation of Daniel's prophecies. What has gone unnoticed is the extent to which this interpretive aside coheres with the authorial comments we identified in commentaries produced within scholastic settings. We have in fact precisely the same cluster of phenomena that we observed in Philo's and Origen's injunctions to their reader: (1) a singular imperative clearly aimed at a reader outside of the world of the text; (2) the presence of a difficult or otherwise opaque reference; (3) the author's suggestion (implicit or explicit) that the meaning of the text needs to be assessed via intertextual analysis of a wider canon.

The strength of this coherence suggests that Mark's Gospel may have been read within a similar scholastic environment. An educational setting for the Gospel of Mark would likely involve students who were interested in studying the teachings and messianic claims of Jesus of Nazareth, much as Epictetus's students came to his school seeking to interpret Chrysippus. This theory comports well with Mark's emphasis on proper discipleship throughout his narrative. Since the work of Tannehill, it has become common for interpreters to view Mark as an encouragement towards discipleship. This concept has recently been advanced further by Heidi Wendt, who reconstructs Mark

63  Stein, *Mark*, 602.
64  In V.A. Alikin's words, the aside indicates that “in light of Daniel 11:31 one should understand that the presence of the Romans in the Jerusalem temple is a sign of the end” (*The Earliest History of the Christian Gathering: Origin, Development and Content of the Christian Gathering in the First to Third Centuries* [VCSup 102; Leiden: Brill, 2010] 179).
65  See again *Ench.* 49. It should be noted that though the case studies employed in this essay (Epictetus, Philo, and Origen) all represent education of a philosophical and/or theological nature, this authorial self-awareness is a feature of many different types of school literature in the ancient world. Very similar injunctions about careful reading can be found in the school texts of Galen (see the discussion of this phenomenon in W.A. Johnson, *Readers and Reading Culture in the High Roman Empire: A Study in Elite Communities* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010] 83–84).
as a “pedagogical” text and the Markan reader as a “Greco-Roman disciple.” Wendt’s suggestions support the reading of Mark 13:14 offered in this essay.

The school hypothesis represents a significant step forward in the attempt to discern what kind of reading is at play in Mark 13:14. Like Origen and Philo, Mark explicitly calls a reader’s attention to an opaque part of the text that needs elucidation from a relevant intertext. The implication must be that the reader has the requisite tools (literate training and book access) to accomplish the interpretive task encouraged by the aside; they must pause and pursue the matter further before continuing to read. This fact sits a little uneasily within certain reconstructions of a “performative” Gospel setting. Shiner acknowledges that we find in educational texts an “interplay between text and authoritative interpretation,” one wherein a teacher is needed to guide the reader to a fuller understanding of the text. Shiner goes on to argue that such a dynamic is absent in Mark. Yet that interplay is present in Mark 13:14, and it is the same kind of authorial interjection that we find in authors who taught in educational settings. This does not discount the valuable insights that Shiner and others offer into the oral/aural details of how a text might have been read aloud, but it does suggest that some proponents of performance criticism have too quickly dismissed the relevance of educational reading for reconstructing the Gospel’s social context.

Alikin’s expansive study of the social context of early Christian gatherings treats Mark 13:14 in just one paragraph. He asserts that it is unlikely that the reader “read the Gospel in Church,” as the call to understand seems to apply not only to a lector but to anyone who needed to understand the reference to Daniel. A similar line of reasoning is taken by Heilmann, who argues that Mark was written for private, individual reading. Heilmann’s emphasis on “individuelle Lektüre” is to be appreciated. As we saw with Epictetus, an individual reader in a school setting would have been expected to study a text extensively in private. Yet they might also be called upon to demonstrate their own grasp of the material, even when that material was also intended to

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70 Alikin, *Earliest History*, 179.
instruct a larger group. In this way, the dynamics of the educational environment mirror the pedagogical tack of Jesus himself in Mark 13:37: “What I say to you, I say to everyone.” The evangelist highlights that the instruction Jesus imparts to a small group of disciples privately (κατ’ ἰδίαν, Mark 13:3) is actually applicable to a much broader group. In other words, acknowledging that Mark addresses an individual reader does not require a wholesale rejection of the possibility that the text was also read within a group setting. Imagining a reading environment that involved a plurality of students allows us to read Mark 13:14 as an aside to an individual while acknowledging that it was relevant to a wider audience.74

As noted above, Keith is pessimistic about the prospect of determining the kind of reading event envisioned in Mark 13:14. He prefers to speak of Mark’s reception in later liturgical settings, “regardless of Mark’s or Matthew’s intentions.” Keith is of course correct that we lack direct evidence for the Gospel’s original setting. Yet it is significant that Mark 13:14 is the best glimpse that the evangelist gives us of his reading event, and that this glimpse looks a good deal like the reading events we know of from educational communities. This is not to deny that the Gospel of Mark came to be used in Christian worship at a relatively early date, nor that the “reader” of Mark 13:14 could take on different resonances as the Gospel was read in different contexts.76 But plausibly situating Mark’s original readers within an educational setting may actually help bridge the divide Keith sees between Mark’s original readers and its later reception in second century Christian ἐκκλησίαι. It is not difficult to see how a learning community centered around the person and

73 Cf. Diatr. 1.26.13–14. The idea that the reader of Mark 13:14 was meant to explicate the text to others was suggested long ago by C. Weizsäcker (Das apostolische Zeitalter der christlichen Kirche [Freiburg im Breisgau: Mohr Siebeck, 1892] 363), but without attention to implications for the Gospel’s social setting.

74 A similar point is made by Wright, Communal Reading in the Time of Jesus, 125.


76 It is even possible that a transition away from a school environment had already occurred by the time Matthew rewrote Mark (see P. Pokorny, From the Gospel to the Gospels: History, Theology, and Impact of the Biblical Term ‘Euangelion’ [BZNW 195; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2013] 161), though an educational context for Matthew has also been suggested (see especially K. Stendahl, The School of St. Matthew and its Use of the Old Testament [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968]).
teaching of Jesus might have developed into the phenomenon in our second century evidence.77

4 Conclusion

This study has argued that the evidence for reading events in school communities can help us understand Mark’s jarring reference to his reader in Mark 13:14. Reading events in ancient educational contexts show a demonstrable emphasis on a reader’s ability to correctly understand a text that would serve as the centerpiece of a given discussion or set of instruction. This is especially true in the literature written for such educational environments, where authors frequently urge their readers/students to seek greater clarity on weighty interpretive issues. All of these authorial concerns are mirrored in Mark’s note to the reader in Mark 13:14. Especially in light of recent calls to reevaluate the ways that early Gospel audiences fit within established Roman reading patterns, we would do well to consider the possibility that Mark’s Gospel was written to be read and studied in a pedagogical setting comprised of Jesus followers.

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77 One of the earliest references to the use of the Gospels in Christian gatherings comes from a much-discussed passage from Justin (1 Apol. 67.3–4). There Justin describes the reading and expounding of the “memoirs of the apostles” during a worship service. Highly relevant is the fact that Justin is also known to have operated a kind of school in Rome, one which presumably relied on the same library of Christian texts that was used by his worshipping assembly (see Gamble, Books and Readers, 151–152; Alikin, Earliest History, 52; H.G. Snyder, “Above the Bath of Myrtinus: Justin Martyr’s ‘School’ in the City of Rome,” HTR 100 [2007] 335–362). At least in Justin’s circles, the divide between educational and liturgical uses of the Gospels was not so wide even in the second century.