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1 Tim 4:13: Public Lecture or Private Study?

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Abstract: Almost all contemporary commentaries claim that in 1 Timothy 4:13 Paul urges Timothy to read from Scripture and teach during worship services. This essay traces how this interpretation arose in the early modern period and became established in the 19th century. From antiquity to the Reformation, however, 1 Tim 4:13 was understood without exception to mean that Paul was urging Timothy to read Scripture for himself and to teach on that basis. This understanding of 1 Timothy 4:13 can be easily contextualized within ancient ideas of character formation. It seems much more plausible than the interpretation that is common today.

Keywords: 1 Tim 4:13; public reading; history of liturgy; character formation in antiquity

1 Introduction

1 Tim 4:13 is regarded as one of the central testimonies to the fact that biblical texts were regularly read aloud in assemblies of Christ-followers from the earliest times. Commentaries on 1 Timothy,¹ works on the development of

¹ See, e.g., Martin Dibelius and Hans Conzelmann, *Die Pastoralbriefe*, Handbuch zum Neuen Testament 13 (4th edition, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1966), 55–56 (with the – incorrect – reference to 2 Clem 19:1); Joachim Jeremias, *Die Briefe an Timotheus und Titus*, Das Neue Testament Deutsch 9 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1975), 34, who considers the passage to be the oldest evidence for a reading of Scripture in Christian worship; Jürgen Roloff, *Der erste Brief an Timotheus*, Evangelisch-katholischer Kommentar XV (Zurich: Benziger, 1988), 254; Howard I. Marshall, *The Pastoral Epistles*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999), 563; Lorenz Oberlinner, *Die Pastoralbriefe, Folge 1: Kommentar zum ersten Timotheusbrief*, Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament (Freiburg: Herder, 1994), 206–207 (with reference to Acts 13:15 and 2 Corinthians 3:14); David W. Pao, *1–2 Timothy, Titus*, Brill Exegetical Commentary Series (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2024), 282, 288.

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Christian liturgy,² and essays on the passage in question³ are unanimous in assuming that Timothy is called upon, here, to read aloud during the worship service and to then exhort and teach the assembled congregation on the basis of the reading. The NRSVUE even translates: “Until I arrive, give attention to the public reading of scripture, to exhorting, to teaching.” The only point of contention seems to be whether this alludes to the practice of reading from the Torah and Prophets – allegedly adopted from the “synagogue service” – or to the reading of the Pauline letters in addition to the Torah and Prophets.⁴

Few researchers are cautious enough to mention at least the possibility that the individual (private) reading of Timothy could be intended.⁵ To my knowledge, the only recent commentary that understands the passage as an invitation to individual reading is that of Christopher Hutson. He refers to numerous texts of ancient philosophy that recommend private reading for character formation.⁶ Jan Heilmann also argues decidedly against an understanding of the passage as a public reading for worship. In his detailed study of the use of lexemes of the word family ἀναγιγνώσκω, he demonstrates that they denote different types of reading processes. Only the context determines whether individual reading is meant, reading aloud to a group,

2 Gerhard Delling, *Worship in the New Testament* (London: Darton, Longmann and Todd, 1962), 92–93. Brian J. Wright, *Communal Reading in the Time of Jesus: A Window into Early Christian Reading Practices* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 173–182. Valeriy A. Alikin, *The Earliest History of the Christian Gathering: Origin, Development and Content of the Christian Gathering in the First to Third Centuries*, Supplements to *Vigiliae Christianae* 102 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2010), 162–164, 194.

3 Philip H. Towner, “The Function of the Public Reading of Scripture in 1 Timothy 4:13 and in the Biblical Tradition,” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 7 (2003): 44–54. Claude E. Cox, “The Reading of the Personal Letter as the Background for the Reading of the Scriptures in the Early Church,” in *The Early Church in Its Context*, ed. Abraham Malherbe, Frederick Norris, James Thompson, *Novum Testamentum Supplements* 90 (Leiden: Brill, 1998): 74–91. Predrag Dragutinović, “Die Schrift im Dienst der gesunden Lehre: Text-pragmatische Erwägungen zu 2 Tim 3,14–17,” *Annali di Storia dell’Esegesi* 32 (2015): 309–24.

4 Annette Merz, *Die fiktive Selbstauslegung des Paulus: Intertextuelle Studien zur Intention und Rezeption der Pastoralbriefe*, *Novum Testamentum et Orbis Antiquus* 52 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004), 235.

5 Stefano De Feo, “A Critical Analysis of the Use of the Verb ἀναγινώσκω in the *Corpus Paulinum*: A Reappraisal of the Reading Practice in Early Christianity,” *Annali di Scienze Religiose* 13 (2020): 297–335 (322–24). Jens Herzer, *Die Briefe des Paulus an Timotheus und Titus*, Theologischer Handkommentar zum Neuen Testament (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2024), 433–34. Stanley E. Porter, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2023), 365: He thinks the text is clearly about three functions of Timothy in the divine service. However, he qualifies that the meaning of the lexeme ἀνάγνωστις is “to read” (and not “to read aloud”). The form in which reading takes place depends on the context.

6 Christopher R. Hutson, *First and Second Timothy and Titus*, *Paideia* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 115–16.

or other forms of reception of a written text.⁷ Heilmann's study of passages from Ancient Jewish and nascent Christian texts (especially 2 Cor 3:14–15 and Acts 13:15) makes it clear that we should by no means assume that the earliest groups of Christ-followers would have adopted a practice of synagogue readings that were already established in the 1st century CE. The testimonies of the meetings and meals of these groups do not suggest regular readings.⁸ 1 Tim 4:13 should therefore not be seen as an expression of a pre-existing, self-evident practice of public readings. If ἀνάγνωσις should refer to readings before a group, then it should be clearly marked in the context. Heilmann, like Hutson, points out that in 1 Tim 4:11–16, Timothy's exemplary education and character formation are the theme. His function in the community of Christ-followers in Ephesus and his behavior towards third parties are subordinate to this topic. Therefore, from the context, individual reading should be considered, which, like the rest of the "spiritual training program" described from 1 Tim 4:6 onwards, should enable Timothy to fulfill his role in the community.

However, the conventional interpretation defines the theme of the passage differently: it is about Timothy in his function as a minister who should authoritatively confront the "false teachers." In this context, it seems plausible that the text is about Timothy's tasks in the assembly of Christ-followers. He is to read, exhort, and teach on behalf of the apostle ("until I come again").⁹ If one considers the letter to be pseudepigraphical¹⁰ and sees in it a reflection of an already advanced institutionalization, Timothy stands for the ministers who permanently assume this role in relation to the believers after Paul's death.¹¹

The answer to the question of whether we are talking here about private study or public lecture, therefore, depends crucially on the assessment of the topic of the text and the letter as a whole. Conversely, the answer to this question has an impact on the understanding of the passage and on the determination of the genre of the entire letter: Is this (primarily) about church order and administrative instructions, or is it (also) about paraenesis and spiritual training?

⁷ Jan Heilmann, *Lesen in Antike und frühem Christentum. Kulturgechichtliche, philologische sowie kognitionswissenschaftliche Perspektiven und deren Bedeutung für die neutestamentliche Exegese*, Texte und Arbeiten zum neutestamentlichen Zeitalter 66 (Tübingen: Narr Francke Attempto, 2021), 121–126.

⁸ Heilmann, *Lesen*, 386–392, 406–407.

⁹ Dragutinović, "Schrift," 322: It is only a matter of reading the Scriptures aloud and interpreting them authoritatively, not of reading and theological reflection.

¹⁰ In my opinion, this is still the most plausible assumption, but not a fact that should be taken as a basis for interpreting the letter. As far as I know without exception, even new evangelical commentaries that understand 1 Timothy as an authentic Pauline letter advocate for understanding ἀνάγνωσις as a public reading (cf. e.g., Porter, *Pastoral Epistles*, 365; Pao, *1–2 Timothy, Titus*, 288).

¹¹ Thus, e.g., decidedly Roloff, *Der erste Brief an Timotheus*, 254.

In the following, I would like to contribute to a clarification of this question by tracing the history of the interpretation and reception of the text. In order to do this, some basic methodological considerations are necessary. I will then trace how the current standard interpretation emerged in the early 17th century and prevailed from the 19th century onwards. Thereafter, I will discuss the ancient interpretation of 1 Tim 4:13 and show its lasting influence on medieval and early modern commentators. Finally, I will clarify which understanding of the text is favored by its history of reception and interpretation.

2 Can the History of Interpretation Contribute to Exegesis?

The founding myth of modern exegesis is that it pierces through centuries of misinterpretation to locate the original meaning of the biblical texts. Already in the early modern period, humanists and reformers painted a history of decay. While the commentators of antiquity and late antiquity were still mostly appreciated, and the early medieval commentators were regarded as their faithful interpreters and compilers, the high and late medieval exegetes were seen as falsifiers whose grotesque ignorance had to be overcome.¹² With the emergence of so-called historical-critical exegesis from the Enlightenment onwards, this narrative was reinforced and is still very much alive to this day. Its argumentative power should not be underestimated. The “New Perspective on Paul,” and even more so “Paul within Judaism” (and to some extent also “Paul and Empire”), draw their legitimacy, to a large extent, from advancing to the “real” Paul through de-Lutheranization or de-Christianization.¹³ In these perspectives, even the earliest receptions of Paul, the Acts of the Apostles, and the Deutero-Pauline letters are misunderstandings, even falsifications, which are, at times, diametrically opposed to what was originally intended.

On the other hand, there has been a growing interest, in recent decades, in the history of interpretation and, above all, the broader reception and impact of biblical

¹² An impressive example is Heinrich Bullinger's preface to his commentary on Paul's letters, see Heinrich Bullinger, “Christiano lectori Heinrychus Bullingerus gratiam et vitae innocentiam a deo patre per dominum Iesum Christum precatur,” in *Kommentare zu den neutestamentlichen Briefen: Rom – 1Cor – 2Cor*, ed. Luca Baschera (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2012), 3–12.

¹³ On the current debate, see Michael Bird, Ruben A. Bühner, Jörg Frey, and Brian Rosner (eds.), *Paul within Judaism: Perspectives on Paul and Jewish Identity*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 507 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2023).

texts.¹⁴ The main focus here is on overarching hermeneutical questions.¹⁵ The question of whether the history of interpretation can help with the understanding of exegetical details is rarely asked. One can observe that historical, usually ancient, commentaries are used to argue for a certain understanding of a text.¹⁶ But how can this be done in a methodologically meaningful way? This is not the time or place to propose a comprehensive model for this. I would just like to mention the following, important points for the examination of the passage in this article:

- a. First, it should be clarified which text the historical exegetes used or quoted. This is often not the same as the biblical text used today. Finding this out can be time-consuming and not without its pitfalls because, for example, the Bible lemmata are not written out in the manuscripts but have only been added in modern editions.
- b. Interpretations by ancient Greek *native speakers* carry a particular weight. Of course, their understanding of the text is not necessarily “correct,” *per se*. However, unless there are strong arguments against them, one should first assume that their perception of the meaning of lexemes and syntax within the biblical text is probable or even obvious.
- c. This effect increases the smaller the temporal and cultural distance between the interpreters in question and the authors and intended recipients of the texts.

¹⁴ See from the vast amount of research literature on this topic, only Christina Hoegen-Rohls, “Rezeptionskritik und Rezeptionsgeschichte des Neuen Testaments: Eine methodologische Skizze,” *New Testament Studies* 69 (2023): 258–270; Hoegen-Rohls, “Überlegungen zur Rezeptionsgeschichte des Neuen Testaments im Gespräch mit Régis Burnet,” *New Testament Studies* 69 (2023): 291–98; Moïses Mayordomo, “Was heißt und zu welchem Ende studiert man Wirkungsgeschichte? Hermeneutische Überlegungen mit einem Seitenblick auf Borges und die Seligpreisungen (Mt 5,3–12),” *Theologische Zeitschrift* 72 (2016): 42–67; Samuel Vollenweider, “Paulus zwischen Exegese und Wirkungsgeschichte,” in *Antike und Urchristentum: Studien zur neutestamentlichen Theologie in ihren Kontexten und Rezeptionen*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 436 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020), 507–22. In addition, there are large-scale projects such as Brennan Breed, Constance M. Furey, Peter Gemeinhardt, Joel Marcus LeMon, Thomas Chr. Römer, Jens Schröter, Yvonne Sherwood, and Barry Dov Walfish (eds.), *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2009–2025); Timothy George (ed.), *Reformation Commentary on Scripture* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2011–2025); John Sawyer, Ian Boxall, David M. Gunn, Judith Kovacs, Andrew Mein, Christopher Rowland, Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer (eds.), *Blackwell Bible Commentaries* (Chichester: Blackwell, 2005–2025). Specifically on the early reception of Paul, compare, e.g., Adela Yarbro Collins, *Paul Transformed: Receptions of the Person and Letters of Paul in Antiquity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022).

¹⁵ See in particular Ulrich Luz, *Theologische Hermeneutik des Neuen Testaments* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2014).

¹⁶ To cite just one example where this has been done with resounding success: the interpretation of Rom 7:7–25 as prosopopoeia developed on the basis of Origen in Stanley Stowers, *A Rereading of Romans: Justice, Jews, and Gentiles* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 264–69.

Here, too, one should assume that – unless weighty observations speak against it – their impression of the text's genre, rhetorical intention, and theme is possible and plausible. Hans-Ulrich Weidemann argued that ancient commentaries show which interpretations the text triggered, stimulated, and directed, and which of the interpretation techniques known and practiced in the text's environment were used for this purpose. The fact that these methods were known not only to the later commentators, but also to the authors of the texts, opens up perspectives for exegesis today: it is at least a plausible assumption that the commentators used their interpretation techniques to express the semantic potential of the text.¹⁷

- d. The most important limitation of this heuristic rule is that ancient theologians almost always impute to the biblical texts the religious ideology and practice that they consider to be orthodox or correct. Since pre-modern interpreters often made anachronistic interpretations of biblical texts regarding these points, it is pivotal to consider the context in which they use the biblical text in question. It is particularly crucial to examine whether they have a theological or political agenda, meaning they use the biblical text in question as an authority to legitimize their view.
- e. If possible, one should try to obtain a broad overview of the interpretation of a particular biblical passage. Sometimes it may be possible to recognize a consensus, several alternative positions, or trends. However, a statistical evaluation would not make any sense. This is because, on the one hand, the textual transmission is random, and, on the other, it is biased by the deliberate sorting out of positions that were later considered "heretical."

The inclusion of the history of interpretation in the methodology of exegesis can therefore only ever be a cautious process of consideration. As such, however, it can produce helpful results, as will be evident in a consideration of 1 Tim 4:13.

3 The Emergence of the Understanding of 1 Timothy 4:13 as a Public Reading

The earliest evidence that 1 Tim 4:13 was understood in the sense of a public reading from the Bible in a church service appears to be in the writings of Caspar Cruciger the Elder. He interprets the passage with an anti-Anabaptist agenda: The fanatics

¹⁷ Hans-Ulrich Weidemann, Andreas Hoffmann, Nestor Kavvadas, *Das Johannesevangelium: Johannes 18–19*, Novum Testamentum Patristicum 4,1 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2024), 19.

rejected the study of Christian doctrine as useless and appealed only to promptings of the Holy Spirit. Paul opposes this and obliges Timothy to study the Scriptures. This meant both personal reading and public reading aloud in church (“Reading means private study as well as the public admonition of the congregation by reading and reciting the text of the Scripture”).¹⁸

Cruciger combines, without elaborating, both possible understandings. I found the earliest discussion of the interpretation of 1 Tim 4:13 in the writings of Friedrich Balduin (1575–1627).¹⁹ He writes that “some” understood ἀνάγνωσις as the public reading that was recited to the people during the lifetime of Paul and Timothy. Balduin cites Origen’s homilies on Joshua in the assertion that such readings from the Old Testament already existed in church services at that time.²⁰ Balduin also refers – probably for the first time – to the two passages that still play a major role today in justifying the understanding of ἀνάγνωσις as a public reading: Acts 13:15 and 2 Cor 3:14. However, he ultimately decides against this interpretation: πρόσεχε/attendere refers to a frequently repeated and intensive activity. This only applies to individual study, not to reading aloud.

Throughout the course of the 17th and 18th centuries, this new interpretation of the verse became increasingly widespread. One can observe how it correlates with the overall understanding of the letter. Around 1700, Justus Christoph Schomer already defined the reading of Scripture as part of the public ministry of proclaiming the word.²¹ In 1755, Johann Lorenz von Mosheim concluded that in the absence of the Apostle Paul, some had appointed themselves as readers and preachers “according to the custom of the first times of Christianity.” Timothy had allowed this to happen and listened. Paul opposed this and made it clear to him that this was solely his task as a minister. His main argument against the interpretation of individual reading (which he still mentions) is that the instruction applies “until I come.” However, Timothy reads the Bible for the rest of his life. The point here is that he is appointed as the apostle’s representative in the church’s services.²² In his commentary from 1836,

¹⁸ Caspar Cruciger, *In epistolam Pauli ad Timotheum priorem Commentarius, dictatus in Schola Vuitenbergensi, per Doctorem Casparum Crucigerum*. Item. Brevis et familiaris in epistolam Pauli ad Titum expositio. Autore D. Iodoco Vuillichio, Argentorati ([Strasbourg]: Crato Mylius, 1542), 178: Lectio est et privatum studium et publice exercere Ecclesiam legendo et recitando textum Scripturae.

¹⁹ Friederich Balduin, *Commentarius in omnes epistolas beati apostoli Pauli* (Frankfurt am Main: Wustius, 1664), 1,332.

²⁰ Sources Chrétiennes [SC] 71, to Jos 15.

²¹ Justus Christoph Schomer, *Exegesis in omnes epistolas s[ancti] Pauli minores* (Rostock: Joh. Weppling, 1700), 164.

²² Johann Lorenz von Mosheim, *Erklärung der beiden Briefe des Apostels Pauli an den Timotheum* (Hamburg: Bohn, 1755), 411. This argument is quite common, see e.g., also Johann Friedrich von Flatt, *Vorlesungen über die Briefe Pauli an den Timotheus und Titus, nebst einer allgemeinen Einleitung über die Briefe Pauli* (Tübingen: Ludwig Friedrich Fues, 1831), 155.

Martin Joseph Mack reconstructs the ancient Jewish synagogue service and the early Christian service from texts such as 2 Cor 3:15; Luke 4:16; Acts 13:15–27; Justin Apol. 1.67, and Tert. apol. 39 and concludes that, against this background, reading aloud to the believers should be considered.²³ Julius Holtzmann also refers primarily to the description in Justin. The idea, which would shape the future, that preaching would be restricted to the minister in the fight against false teachers, is fully developed in his work: “A teaching office whose voice, apart from prayer and congregational singing, dominates the worship gatherings of Christianity.”²⁴

Exceptions to this major trend in the history of interpretation are rare. Commentators with a pietistic slant, in particular, cling to the traditional understanding. This gives the traditional understanding the reputation of being edifying and unscientific. Paul Anton, from whom the name Pastoral Epistles originates, understands reading, here, as the daily pious meditation on Scripture and applies this to the pastors of his time. They should read the Bible every morning, so that they can exhort and teach during the day.²⁵ Johann Tobias Beck recalls that individual reading was common in antiquity in general and within early Christianity (he refers to Matt 24:15; Luke 10:26; 2 Cor 3:14). As one of the very few interpreters of modern times, he sees no obstacle to this interpretation in “until I come.” Timothy was not Paul’s representative in the divine service, and “until I come” should in no way be understood to mean that Timothy should stop reading the Bible after Paul’s return. Rather, he is advised to work on himself by studying the Scriptures in the absence of his teacher.²⁶

4 Ancient Interpretations of 1 Timothy 4:13 and Their Influence on Medieval and Early Modern Commentators

If we now go back to the beginnings of the interpretation of 1 Tim 4:13, we see that ancient commentaries on the passage and references to it in other contexts

²³ Martin Joseph Mack, *Commentar über die Pastoralbriefe des Apostels Paulus* (Tübingen: Osiander, 1836), 327.

²⁴ Julius Holtzmann, *Die Pastoralbriefe kritisch und exegetisch behandelt* (Leipzig: Engelmann, 1880), 250: “Ein Lehramt, dessen Stimme, von Gebet und Gemeindegesang abgesehen, die gottesdiestlichen Versammlungen der Christenheit beherrscht.”

²⁵ Paul Anton, *Exegetische Abhandlung der Pastoral-Briefe Pauli an Timotheum und Titum, im Jahr 1726. und 1727. öffentlich vorgetragen*, ed. J. A. Majer, vol. 1 (Halle: Verlag des Waysenhauses, 1753), 524–25.

²⁶ Johann Tobias Beck, *Erklärung der zwei Briefe Pauli an Timotheus*, ed. J. Lindenmeyer (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1879), 198.

understand the text as an instruction for individual reading. This serves to educate Timothy both intellectually and spiritually, enabling him to admonish and instruct others.

Already, the earliest mentions in Origen²⁷ show that he understood ἀνάγνωσις as an individual reading. The pseudo-Ignatian Epistle to Hero applies what Timothy is told to the Antiochian deacon Hero. He should read so that he himself can understand “the laws” and explain them to others (1:3).²⁸ The same view can be found in John Chrysostom,²⁹ Theodoret of Cyrus,³⁰ and also in the Latin tradition in Ambrose of Milan, who links 1 Tim 4:13 with Titus 1:9 and interprets both together as referring to the need for intensive study of the Scriptures.³¹ Other quotations or allusions to the text found via BiblIndex, the search in the Thesaurus Linguae Graecae, or in Brepolis also confirm this interpretation.

Only two references to the text in antiquity could be understood differently. The first is Pelagius’ commentary. He explains 1 Tim 4:13: “Till I come, attend to the reading, [to exhortation], to doctrine. Let be read (fac legi), exhort what is read to be carried out, show how the obscure things are to be understood, so that the things that are read can be done.”³² “Fac legi” could be understood as “let be read publicly.”³³ In this case, however, Timothy himself would not read biblical texts in the assembly, but only arrange for a lector to do so. It does not seem plausible to me that Pelagius would be guilty of such a blatant anachronism. Above all, however, “fac legi” can also be understood to mean that Timothy instructs others to read. The sequel, in which Timothy is also asked to instruct others to behave in a certain way, suggests this.

27 Comm. in Gen. 1:17 (Die Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller [GCS] 29, 22): “However, in accordance with the words of the Apostle Paul, we devote ourselves to reading so that, as he himself says, we may receive the mind of Christ [...]” (Sed nos secundum Apostoli Pauli sententiam attendamus lectioni, ut possimus, sicut ipse ait, “sensum Christi” accipere [...]]; Comm. in Luc. 9 (GCS 49, 54): “But he who carefully examines the Holy Scriptures and listens to Paul, who says, devote yourself to reading, [...]” (Sed qui scripturas diligentissime contemplatur et audit Paulum loquentem: “attende lectioni” [...]).

28 [Τ]ῇ ἀναγνώσει πρόσεχε, ἵνα μὴ μόνον αὐτὸς εἰδῆς τοὺς νόμους, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἄλλοις αὐτοὺς ἔξηγῃ.

29 De sacerdotio 4,8; Comm. in 1 Tim. ad loc. (Migne Patrologia Graeca [MPG] 62, 565).

30 Comm. in 1 Tim. ad loc. (MPG 82, 816). Cf. Theodoret of Cyrus, *Commentary on the Letters of St. Paul*, Volume Two, transl. Robert C. Hill (Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2001).

31 Ambrose of Milan, *Expositio psalmi cxviii*, 10.39 (Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum [CSEL] 62, 227).

32 Dum venio attende lectioni, exhortationi, doctrinae. Fac legi, exhortare ut fiant, doce quo modo intellegantur obscura, ut possint fieri quae leguntur. (*Pelagius’s Expositions of Thirteen Epistles of St Paul II: Text and Apparatus Criticus*, ed. Alexander Souter [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1926], 492). English text: Thomas P. Scheck, *Pelagius, Commentaries on the Thirteen Epistles of Paul with the Libellus fidei*, Ancient Christian Writers (New York: Newman Press, 2022), 324, slightly modified.

33 The translation in Scheck, *Pelagius*, 324, “Do the readings” is not correct, in my opinion.

Unlike almost all other ancient exegetes, Pelagius does not understand the passage to mean that Timothy should read for himself. However, his commentary does not serve as clear evidence for an interpretation wherein Timothy publicly reads the biblical text.

The second passage can be found in Athanasius' *Vita Antonii*.³⁴ “For he had given such heed to what was read (τῇ ἀναγνώσει) that none of the things that were written fell from him to the ground, but he remembered all, and afterwards his memory served him for books” (3.7).³⁵ This is often understood to mean that Anthony attentively followed the reading from Scripture in church. However, when Athanasius clearly wants to describe that Anthony heard biblical readings in church, he formulates it differently: He was “attentive to what was read (τοῖς ἀναγνώσμασι), keeping in his heart what was profitable in what he heard” (1.3).³⁶ That is, “reading” in the sense of the act of reading could be meant in 3.7 rather than “reading” in the sense of “what is read.” Whether one regards Anthony himself or a reader in the church as the subject of the reading depends decisively on *Vita Antonii* 1.2. If we understand this passage to mean that Anthony was (deliberately) illiterate, then Athanasius must also be speaking here about public readings in church. If one assumes that Anthony had only denied himself a higher education, then it may well mean that he read biblical books himself, memorized what was written, and, in the end, replaced the books with his memory. In both cases, προσεῖχεν τῇ ἀναγνώσει does not mean “devoting himself to the public reading of books,” but Anthony would be the recipient of the texts, once through the spoken word and once through writing.

Even in view of these two unclear cases, it can be stated that ancient recipients, almost without exception, understood 1 Tim 4:13 in such a way that Timothy is here called upon to read privately.

The medieval interpretation continues this tradition. The *Glossa ordinaria*³⁷ links 1 Tim 4:13 with the preceding verse via the interlinear gloss “in order that you can do this” (ut hoc possis), i.e., the reading of Scripture enables Timothy to become

³⁴ Athanasius von Alexandrien, *Vita Antonii: Leben des Antonius*, introd., trans. and comm. Peter Gemeinhardt, *Fontes Christiani* 69 (Freiburg: Herder, 2018).

³⁵ Καὶ γὰρ προσεῖχεν οὕτω τῇ ἀναγνώσει, ὡς μηδὲν τῶν γεγραμμένων ἀπ' αὐτοῦ πίπτειν χαμαί, πάντα δὲ κατέχειν καὶ λοιπὸν αὐτῷ τὴν μνήμην ἀντὶ βιβλίων γίνεσθαι. English text: *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Philip Schaff (Buffalo: The Christian Literature Co., 1886–1890), accessed March 28, 2025, <https://bkv.unifr.ch/en/works/cpg-2101/versions/the-life-of-antony/divisions/5>.

³⁶ [Κ]αὶ τοῖς ἀναγνώσμασι προσέχων τὴν ἔξ αὐτῶν ὀφέλειαν ἐν ἑαυτῷ διετήρειαν. English text: Schaff, *Nicene and post-Nicene Fathers*, accessed March 28, 2025, <https://bkv.unifr.ch/en/works/cpg-2101/versions/the-life-of-antony/divisions/3>.

³⁷ Accessed March 28, 2025, https://gloss-e.irht.cnrs.fr/php/editions_chapitre.php?id=liber&numLivre=69&chapitre=69_4.

an example to other believers. “Give attention to reading, to exhorting, to teaching” (*attende lectioni, exhortationi et doctrine*) is explained with three interlinear glosses: “of those who are already willing” (*iam volentium*) is noted for *exhortationi*, i.e., the exhortation refers to believers who already have basic knowledge and want to align their lives with it. To *doctrine* is added “of those who do not know” (*nescientium*), i.e., the task of teaching is understood here as the basic instruction of the ignorant. The second gloss on *exhortationi* is “after reading” (*post lectionem*). This could, perhaps, initially be understood in the sense of a liturgical sequence: the exhortatory sermon follows the reading. However, the context of the three other glosses makes it clear that this would be a misunderstanding. The sequence is that Timothy first reads himself and *then* exhorts and teaches others on the basis of what he has acquired through reading.³⁸

Nicholas of Lyra can serve as an example of the late medieval adoption of this interpretative tradition. He does not focus on the reference in 1 Tim 4:13 to the preceding passage, but on the inner connection between reading, exhortation, and teaching: “Give attention to reading: to the law of the prophets and the law of the Gospel, and what has been acquired through study must be passed on to the crowd by exhorting and teaching” (*Attende lectioni] legi prophetarum et Evangelii, et quia illud quod accipitur in studio debet refundi per exhortationem et doctrinam in populo*). Exhortation and teaching are the passing on of what Timothy himself has acquired through reading the Bible. Nicholas no longer distinguishes between different addressees, but between content: it is about moral (*quantum ad agenda*) and doctrinal (*quantum ad credenda*) instruction.³⁹

Even in the early modern period, this interpretation persisted. From the countless commentaries on the Pauline letters that were written throughout the course of the 16th century, here are just a few examples: The Catholic Cardinal Cajetan explains *lectioni* succinctly with “to edify yourself” (*ad pascendum*)

³⁸ The more detailed formulations of the *Media glossatura* and the *Magna glossatura* confirm this: “Until I arrive, give attention to the reading, so that you understand the Scriptures, to exhorting, so that you arouse piety in others, and to teaching, by which you explain what is obscure in the Scriptures” (*Dum venio attende lectioni, ut Scripturas intelligas, et exercitationi qua pietatis affectum in ceteris moveas, et doctrine qua Scripturarum obscura aperias*), https://gloss-e.irht.cnrs.fr/php/editions_chapitre.php?id=media&numLivre=69&chapitre=69_4. “In order that you are able to do this, until I arrive, give attention to the reading, so that you understand the Scriptures, after reading give attention to exhorting those who are already willing and to teaching those who do not know” (*Ut autem hec possis servare, dum venio, attende lectioni, ut Scripturas intelligas et, post lectionem attende exhortationi iam volentium, et doctrine nescientium*), accessed March 28, 2025, https://gloss-e.irht.cnrs.fr/php/editions_chapitre.php?id=magna&numLivre=69&chapitre=69_4.

³⁹ Accessed March 28, 2025, https://gloss-e.irht.cnrs.fr/php/editions_chapitre.php?id=lyr&numLivre=69&chapitre=69_4

te ipsum).⁴⁰ The reformed Andreas Hyperius explains that the study of Scripture was intended to enable Timothy to exhort and instruct, especially during Paul's absence.⁴¹ Heinrich Bullinger from Zurich expands the interpretation into a brief excursus on the importance of Bible study for clergymen. He refers to Theophylact of Ohrid when he draws a conclusion a maiori ad minus: Timothy had been instructed in the Holy Scriptures from his earliest childhood (2 Tim 3:15). If Paul prescribed constant Bible study for him, how much more intensively should today's clergy study the Bible?⁴² The Lutheran Johann Gerhard (1,582–1,637) interprets the text no differently: "The apostle had given Timothy hope for his coming (1 Tim 3:14). Now that he is late, he tells Timothy what he should do. Take care to read, namely the Holy Scriptures. So the first thing he recommends to him is to read the Scriptures constantly, so that he may learn from them what to teach the others."⁴³ This list could easily be continued.

5 Evaluation and Conclusion

As explained in Section 1, the history of interpretation can never simply provide "correct" interpretations of a biblical text. However, it can provide important clues in the process of weighing up which possible understandings of a text are historically plausible.

The overview of the history of the interpretation of 1 Tim 4:13 shows undoubtedly that the certainty granted to today's standard interpretation is not appropriate, in view of the fact that, for around 1,300 years, almost no reader known to us understood the text in this way. Thus, it is unwise for one to claim it is "without doubt"⁴⁴ a matter of public reading during church service. The interpretation of

40 Thomas de Vio Cajetanus, *Epistolae Pauli et aliorum apostolorum ad Graecam veritatem castigatae, et per reverendissimum dominum dominum Thomam de Vio Cajetanum cardinalem sancti Xisti iuxta sensum literalem enarratae*. Recens in lucem editae (Paris: Jean de Roigny, 1532), CLXXIII.

41 Andreas Hyperius, *Commentarii D. Andreeae Hyperii doctissimi, in epistolas D. Pauli ad Timotheum, Titum, Philemonem et D. Iudae, nunc primum opera Iohannis Mylii in lucem editi* (Zurich: Froschauer, 1582), 100.

42 Heinrich Bullinger, *Kommentare zu den neutestamentlichen Briefen 1-2Thess – 1-2Tim – Tit – Phlm*, eds. Luca Baschera and Christian Moser (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2015), 165–66.

43 Johann Gerhard, *Adnotationes ad utramque d. Pauli ad Timotheum epistolam* (Leipzig: Fleischer, 1666), 76: *Apostolus spem adventus sui Timotheo fecerat, 1 Timoth. 3. v. 14. interim, dum is differtur, praescribit Timotheo, quid agere debeat. Πρόσεχε τῇ ἀναγνώσει, scilicet Scripturae Sacrae. Primum ergo omnium commendat ei assiduam lectionem Scripturae Sacrae, ut ex ea discat, quod alios doceat.*

44 Roloff, *Der erste Brief an Timotheus*, 254.

individual study of the Scriptures, which is not even mentioned by most of today's commentaries or is dismissed out of hand, certainly deserves reconsideration.

Of course, one could argue that the insight that the Pastoral Epistles are not authentic Pauline letters is an epochal advance in the history of their interpretation. It is the basis of historical-critical exegesis to make "the pseudepigraphical character of the Pastoral Epistles [...] a *starting point for interpretation*."⁴⁵ The idea that 1 Tim 4:13 is not about the private reading of Timothy, but about the instruction to ministers to read and interpret the Scriptures authoritatively in church services, fits into the progress narrative of modern biblical scholarship outlined above.

However, precisely on the assumption that 1 Timothy is not an authentic Pauline epistle, the results of Sections 2 and 3 must give us pause for thought. The earliest ancient interpreters, and then the interpreters up to the 16th century, obviously read the pseudepigraphical letter as it was intended: they fall for the forgery or, if one assumes open pseudepigraphy, they play along with the fictional communication in the letter. In contrast, an interpretation that "unmasks" the pseudepigraphy, reconstructs (or constructs) its real communication situation, and understands the communication in the letter on this basis is "artificial" and runs counter to the pragmatics of the text. The ancient interpretations presented in this article show that it was natural to the intended readers of the text to understand it as an invitation to Timothy to read the Scriptures, rather than as a coded description of the liturgical reading by a cleric.

This conclusion is reinforced by the fact that with the early exegetes, one cannot recognize the pursuit of a theological agenda in their interpretation. On the contrary: for them, who were already familiar with Christian liturgies with biblical lessons, the idea would have been rather obvious that this had been the case since the time of the apostle and his co-worker. This makes it all the more relevant that they consistently regarded the formation of Timothy's character as the theme of the passage. Only in the early modern period did this become a controversial topic in the commentaries: the question of the necessary education of clergymen.

By contrast, the interpretation of "readings done by church ministers," which is often taken for granted today, has had a bias from the outset: it first emerged during the controversy surrounding Anabaptist lay preachers. Ancient and contemporary "heretics" were quickly equated, so that the text became evidence of the authority of church ministers. This trend was further strengthened as soon as the Pastoral Epistles were regarded as pseudepigraphical letters. Holtzmann set the tone in his commentary. While early pietistic interpreters still deviated, today, the interpretation of the reading minister has prevailed even in evangelical commentaries.

⁴⁵ Oberlinner, *Die Pastoralbriefe*, XXII: "den pseudepigraphischen Charakter der Pastoralbriefe [...] zur Voraussetzung der Interpretation [zu machen]."

These considerations lead us, contrary to the current mainstream of exegesis, to consider the understanding of 1 Tim 4:13 as talking about the individual study of Scripture, and not public lecture, to be by far the more plausible interpretation.

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