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## Books, Libraries, and the Ideal of Christian Scholarship

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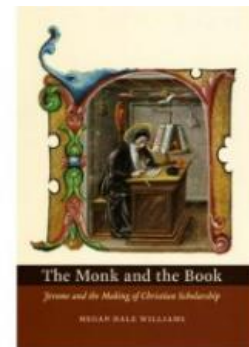
We moderns tend to take books and libraries for granted, assuming that, at least since the invention of writing, all human beings have always enjoyed such access to the printed page. In reality the story is much different. Only in fairly recent times have books become available to the vast majority of citizens in the developed world.

As a matter of fact, for most of the Christian centuries, books have been the possessions of the privileged few. All this changed with the Gutenberg revolution and the invention of movable type, but the mass availability of the book required other economic transformations as well. The mass availability of books and other printed materials is a fairly recent development, but we take it for granted.

The middle classes started building home libraries and book collections in the Victorian era and developments like the Book of the Month Club brought books solidly into what sociologists now call “middlebrow” culture.

In constant dollars, books have never been so inexpensive as they are now. Best-sellers are routinely discounted by 40% and more in the big-box stores and book chains. Relative to personal income, books have never been so accessible. We do take this for granted.

This came to my mind as I was reading Megan Hale Williams’ recent book, *The Monk and the Book: Jerome and the Making of Christian Scholarship* [University of Chicago Press, 2006]. Williams traces the development of Jerome as one of the paradigmatic models of Christian scholarship, looking at his role as both monk and scholar. She argues that Jerome modified the monastic ideal so as to allow monks to be scholars and to have access to scholarly materials. What made this so important is the fact that in classical antiquity books were the possessions of the rich and powerful alone — not monks sworn to an oath of poverty and simplicity.



Jerome would build the great monastic library in Jerusalem, and Williams looks at Jerome’s library in detail, using the collection as a means of following Jerome’s intellectual development and his rise as a paragon of Christian scholarship. This included, of course, Jerome’s achievement in developing the textual commentary as a literary form.

In explaining all this, Williams makes some insightful observations about the role of the book in late antiquity:

*The library in antiquity reflected the way books were produced as well as the place of literary culture in the social world of the ancient Mediterranean. Unlike modern collections, ancient libraries were not primarily composed of books purchased on the market. Booksellers did play a role, especially in the orbit of the major cities. Great libraries, like other collections of precious objects, could also be assembled through plunder or corruption, as they were by some of the generals who fought in Rome’s civil wars. But most of the books in most libraries were copied by or for their owners from originals borrowed from other participants in a network of literary exchange. Authors, too, disseminated new works by producing copies as gifts for their readers. Ancient libraries, therefore, grew by means of the exchange of books among*

*like-minded members of literate elite, each prepared to copy his own books (or more likely, to have a slave copy them) and pass them on to his friends. Jerome's own case, in his early days as an ascetic at Antioch in the 370s, exemplifies this model.*

She also explains why books were so rare, so expensive, and so difficult to produce:

*So books were not only difficult to obtain but also, because they had to be hand-copied, very expensive. One would therefore expect book collections to be limited in size. Many ancient libraries, however, were very large. Some private libraries contained thousands of volumes; and some public libraries—at Alexandria, at Rome, even at Athens—tens or even hundreds of thousands. This may seem a paradox in a world where even basic literacy was limited to perhaps 10 percent of the population, and the kind of literacy required for the extensive use of books restricted to between 1 and 5 percent. In fact, the steep pitch of the social pyramid, and the fact that the vast majority of resources were controlled by the top 2 or 3 percent of the population, meant that ancient elites could accumulate books—as they did other status-conferring objects of value—in almost incredible quantities.*

And what about the churches?

*Christian churches possessed libraries from a very early time. We know this in part because the books were catalogued when they were confiscated by the authorities during the persecutions of the second half of the third century. The lists of books included in accounts of martyrdom tend to be pitifully short. But by the second half of the third century, Christian churches in major urban centers had begun to accumulate much larger and more varied collections. The trend only accelerated in the fourth century. In different senses, both elite private collections and the libraries of ancient temples served as points of origin for these new Christian libraries. Christian leaders in major cities were frequently men of wealth and learning, who might bequeath their books to the church. Moreover, Christian groups likely felt it necessary to keep books on hand for the purpose of religious instruction and research.*

Christianity has been closely connected with the book and the written word from its inception. Books remain important to Christians — scholars and laypersons alike. We should be thankful that at this historical juncture the book is more accessible than ever. Serious Christians can and should start personal libraries of important and worthy Christian books. Some will be large and some will be small, but each can serve us the way Jerome's library served him — and blessed the church.

