



‘The Books and Especially the Parchments’: Libraries in Society, early Christianity and today

(2 Kings 22:1-10; 2 Tim 3:14-4:13)

by Alan Mugridge

Libraries in society and amongst God’s people

Libraries in society

Libraries have existed since ancient times, as you know better than I do. They existed in Egypt since the 3rd millennium BC. In Mesopotamia they had their beginnings c. 3000 BC in archives of palace and temple records, and probably in schools. Later, they included hymns to the gods, songs, prayers, as well as epics, myths and lexical texts. Even then, storage had to be constructed, in some form, along with catalogues and labels – which sometimes included a curse on those who might steal the books! In some places, the loan period was between one day and several months.

Private libraries developed in Greece, and a number of philosophical schools had libraries as well. In the Hellenistic world, there were so-called ‘public’ libraries in palaces, gymnasia and some large cities, but, of course, only a limited range of people could borrow. The Libraries of Alexandria are well-known to most of us. In the Roman world, libraries developed, often under the patronage of the emperor, and they continued even when the Empire split into East and West. And libraries have developed and grown to the present day – although sometimes being plundered or destroyed, or just falling into decay.

And, lest we think that libraries were the preserve of the West, we should remember the Chinese scholar, Liu Xiang, who established the first library classification system during the Han Dynasty (c. 200 BCE – 200 CE). The catalogue was written on rolls of fine silk, and stored in silk bags!

Libraries have played a major role in world history, from ancient times right down to the present. You may know that Karl Marx spent a lot of time in the reading room of the British Museum, in his quest to understand capitalism. Books are written and movies are made about libraries and librarians. I remember vividly one of those disaster movies, when the world was freezing over, and the only way they could keep warm was to start a fire in the building where they had taken refuge – a library! And they used the books for the fire! I think they did the tax law books first!



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Libraries in Israel and Christianity

Books and libraries in Israel

But books and libraries were prominent in the history of Israel too. In the OT there are numerous references to royal archives (1 Kings 11:41; 14:19, 29; 1 Chron 9:1; 29:29; 27:24; 16:11; 27:7), as well as books that we know only by name – like the Book of the Wars of the Lord (Num 21:14) or the Book of Jashar (Josh 10:13; 2 Sam 1:18). The royal archives of other nations also rate a mention, such as those of Artaxerxes in Babylon (Ezra 4:15; 5:7; 6:1; Esther 2:23; 6:1; 10:2). There were Jewish family archives as well (Neh 12:23).

Jeremiah wrote a scroll with his prophecies on it, and it was burnt – although it was rewritten by Baruch, his sidekick (Jer 36; cf. 30:2; 45:1; 51:60, 63). Isaiah also wrote his words down (Isa 30:8). Apparently, even Joshua had written a record of the decrees and laws of God in a book, ‘the Book of the Law of God’ (Josh 24:26). Books were so prominent that the writer of Ecclesiastes suggested that there was no end to the writing of them (Eccl 12:12)!

We don’t know much about where scrolls were kept in Israel, but probably most of the official records were kept in the palace. We do know that some books that were important to the nation were kept in the temple, because when Josiah was supervising renovations there after a period of neglect, Hilkiah the priest came across that old copy of the Book of the Law, and it sparked a national renewal (2 Kings 22-23).

In Maccabean times, certain records were kept in the temple (1 Macc 14:49). Josephus referred to Ptolemy of Egypt as the one responsible for having the OT copied into Greek (Ant. 1.10, 12.36, 39). Philo recommended that the King copy out God’s law in his own hand, so that he would be more familiar with it (de spec. Leb. 4.163). We also know that, by Jesus’ day, there were OT rolls in synagogues, both in Palestine, such as in Nazareth (Luke 4:16-21), and as far away as Antioch in Pisidia (Acts 13:15) – and, at least in Antioch, they included rolls of ‘the Law and the prophets.’ In the little village of Nazareth they had a roll of the prophet Isaiah!

Books and libraries in early Christianity

And the early Christian church carried on that focus on books – and libraries – even if only with a few books at times. The apostle Paul wrote letters, and expected churches to keep them (cf. Col 4:16). He urged Timothy to focus on ‘the public reading of scripture’ (1 Tim 4:13) as the heart of his teaching ministry, so he must have had access to at least some rolls of the OT. In fact, Timothy had been familiar with the Scriptures since he was a child (2 Tim 3:15), and Paul saw the truth set out in them as being enough to equip Timothy for his role as a pastor and teacher (v. 16), and to reveal the truth of the gospel to his flock (v. 15). Indeed, he told Timothy to bring ‘my scrolls, especially the parchments’ with him, when he caught up with Paul (2 Tim 4:13) – ‘my scrolls, especially the parchments’ –



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presumably, including his copies of the OT scriptures. The writer of 2 Clement called the OT ‘the scripture,’ i.e., the writing (14:2).

There is an account of the persecution of Christians in the North African town of Cirta early in the fourth century, when their books were sought out and burnt. The church was found to have had a number of books, which the readers kept at home. The books included four books at Eugenius’ house, five at another, eight at another, five large books at another, two small books at another, two books and four fascicules at another, and six at the last (see Optatus, *Gesta apud Zenophilum*). This church certainly had a small library, although it was housed in the readers’ homes, probably so that they could practise reading before they read in church. Clearly, early churches had their own ‘libraries’ in the form of a certain number of rolls (and then books), just as synagogues had some rolls of ‘the law and the prophets.’

But as time went on, there were also private libraries that did not belong to churches (cf. Eusebius, HE 6.22), some in connection with the schools at Alexandria (cf. Eusebius, H.E. 6.23; Athanasius, *Apol. Const.* 4), Jerusalem (Eusebius, H.E. 6.20; Jerome, Ep. 5), and Constantinople (cf. Eusebius, *Vita Const.* 4.36-37). Origen himself had an extensive personal library (cf. Gregory Thaumaturgos, *Pan. Or.* 13.150-53), which was later copied onto parchment in order to preserve it (Jerome, *adv. Ruf.* 1.9; cf. Eusebius, *Vita Const.*, 4.36-37; Jerome, Ep. Marc. 34.1; *Vir. ill.* 112-13), and that was the basis of a library at Caesarea – and Pamphilus added to it (Eusebius, H.E. 6.32.3; Jerome, *Vir. ill.* 75).

Some monasteries, such as the monastery of Pachomius, had calligraphers in connection with a library (*Vita Pach.* 40). In fact, later on, monks often copied manuscripts on a commercial basis, as well as for their own use or for their friends, presumably utilizing the monastic library. So, a number of monasteries came to have extensive libraries. We only have to think of Cassiodorus’ monastery in Vivarium (*Cassiod. Inst.* 1) or St. Catherine’s monastery at Mt. Sinai. Such libraries often contained an enormous range of works in several languages, and they weren’t limited to Christian works either (cf. P. Oxy. 412; Eusebius, HE 6.20).

And I don’t need to tell you that libraries grew up in numerous centres, both in the West and the East, some of which were plundered or destroyed, and others just decayed. And in the late Middle Ages libraries were begun in the universities of Paris and Oxford, and in the German Empire, and they played a big part in the Renaissance and Reformation, and then the Enlightenment – and things have developed since then, with some very extensive university libraries, city libraries and national libraries, down to the present day. And I am sure that you are well aware of the many changes and challenges in a world where technology is having an enormous impact on the whole idea of books and libraries.

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Elements of a Christian library

But Christian libraries also have grown, not least in Australia, and they are facing the same issues that other libraries face, especially with the impact of technology. This Association has the Christian libraries, the theological libraries, of Australia and New Zealand, as its focus, and when the conference is called ‘Trax4transition,’ it can’t but discuss the issues of the electronic age, and the challenges and issues they face in the modern world in a number of ways. I suppose that the elements of a Christian library which face those changes are fairly obvious.

Apart from anything else, the new age of ebooks is something that would not have been dreamed of 50 years ago. Staffing libraries now has to take account of IT matters, although I doubt that many of us will go down the track of the Automated Retrieval Collection at Macquarie University. The whole field of managing a theological library is now very much connected to the new age of computers and the internet.

But, what is at the heart of a theological library? What makes it tick, so to speak? And what is it all for? I would like to conclude by mentioning four things that seem to me to be at the heart of a theological library.

Conclusion

Dedicated staff

Well, of course, first of all, there are the dedicated staff who make it tick! They are the ones who keep it going – and I would like to say that those of us who are library users are very grateful to God for them – for you!

Ease of use

Secondly, what also makes everything happen is that the library is usable and, again, the staff play an important part in that, along with the fabric of the building, the layout, reading and borrowing procedures, and a host of other things.

Valuable service

For, thirdly, after all, a theological library is not there just to exist, but to perform a service – perhaps in research, but especially in helping students learn, helping them think, and helping them grow in wisdom, as they read and assess the ideas of others – and finally in helping to equip them for Christian service of one kind or another. Libraries are there for people, for the users – for lecturers, for students – and they play a vital role in their preparation for Christian service in numerous roles, in various contexts and often in a range of places around the world.

Prioritised collection

The fourth thing that I would like to highlight begins with the huge contrast between our libraries now and those early Christian



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libraries that belonged to churches and individuals in the early years of the Christian Church. It’s so much more complex now. There is so much more written now. It takes so much more managing now, and the range of material is so much greater. That’s the first thing – it’s such a different world! Christian libraries are so different now.

But there is one thing that modern theological libraries have in common with those early Christian libraries – and that is what the Apostle Paul wanted Timothy to bring him, when he could – ‘the scrolls, and especially the parchments.’ He wanted his Bible – although at the time it was not in one book. He wanted the Words of God. The early churches prized their copies of the Scriptures, and the authorities in the time of Domitian tried to eradicate those scriptures by searching them out and destroying them. The Bible was at the heart of those early Christian libraries, however much they might have had other works as time went on. Even in Josiah’s day, discovering and hearing the Words of God was life-changing for the nation of Israel.

And it is no different today. Theological libraries today hold an enormous range of material from various fields related to Christian service, and rightly so, because it can all be relevant. But at the heart of it all, ‘the scrolls, and especially the parchments,’ now the OT and the NT, are the foundation stone on which any good theological library rests: the OT and the NT – Biblical studies, and all the related tools to assist in that. Take that away, and it’s just a lot of books – and bytes! Keep that at the centre, and it can be a means of changing people’s lives and equipping them for Christian service, as each of us is bound to pursue in some form or other.

May I urge the Australia and New Zealand Theological Library Association to keep the Bible and Biblical Studies as their foundation, the heart of their collections, even when dealing with the enormous changes and challenges in the modern world, and even when you are looking for ‘Trax4transition.’