

The Scribal Culture of Early Christianity

Christianity has long been known as a “religion of the book” and Christians as “people of the book.” A simple glance at the booming Christian publication business reveals the truth of these statements. Christians buy in bundles their Bibles, commentaries, devotionals, fiction, inspirational reading and theological tomes. This phenomenon, however, is not a new innovation within Christianity. One of the most distinguishing factors of Christianity from other religions of Greco-Roman antiquity is the role literature plays in the religion.¹ While we are lacking literature from nearly every Greco-Roman religious system², we have a plethora of writings from Christianity from the period. This suggests that Christians, unlike their religious counterparts from the surrounding Christian world, took an exceptional interest in literature.³

These Christian texts served many roles within early Christianity. Some works passed on (or claimed to pass on) the teachings from the earliest church leaders, the Apostles. Some texts retained the traditions concerning the life of Jesus Christ. Some books preserved the history of the earliest church. Many texts have come down to us that preserve

¹ This, of course, is also true of the other “religion of the book”, Judaism.

² “Among the many religious movements of antiquity, only Christianity and Judaism produced much literature at all. Greek and Roman religions appear to have been largely indifferent to the use of texts.” Harry Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts* (New Haven: Yale, 1995), 18.

³ In the words of Loveday Alexander, “There is an accumulation of data from paleography and papyrology that suggests that the early church showed an unusual interest in book production from the earliest centuries of its existence.” (“Ancient Book Production and the Gospels,” in Richard Bauckham, ed., *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998], 72).

letters from Christian leaders to churches spread throughout the Mediterranean world. These texts were used for instruction, edification, and authority to settle theological disputes as the early church sought an identity.⁴

Due to the importance of texts and writing within Christianity, this paper will examine several aspects of early Christian book culture, including physical characteristics of the documents, literacy and literacy education, and scribal activity within early Christianity.

Characteristics of the Early Christian Documents

The corpus of early Christian documents is quite diverse. “[E]arly Christians produced, copied, and read a noteworthy range of writings.”⁵ Included within the early Christian literature are Old Testament documents, New Testament documents, apocryphal texts,⁶ letters, theological tractates, psalms, prayers, liturgies and more. While there is great diversity in the genre of the surviving early Christian manuscripts,

⁴ “[T]exts came to have an unqualified importance in the context of second- and third-century heresiological debates and more broadly in the questions of self-definition that occupied the church in the period.” (Kim Haines-Eitzen, *Guardians of Letters: Literacy, Power, and the Transmitters of Early Christian Literature* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2000], 124.)

⁵ Larry W. Hurtado, *The Earliest Christian Artifacts: Manuscripts and Christian Origins* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 24.

⁶ Among these are both Old Testament apocryphal and psuedepigraphical works and New Testament apocryphal and psuedepigraphical works. Useful introductions to the OT works include Daniel Harrington, *Invitation to the Apocrypha* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) and David DeSilva, *Introducing the Apocrypha* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002.) For the text of the OT works see, James Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, two volumes (Garden City, NY : Doubleday, 1983-85.) On the New Testament apocryphal works see Wilhelm Schneemelcher and Edgar Hennecke, editors, *New Testament Apocrypha*, revised edition, translate by R. McL. Wilson (Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991.)

there are also several physical characteristics that are fairly common to nearly all early Christian documents.

The bulk of the earliest Christian documents were written in Koine Greek,⁷ but considering the context out of which Christianity emerged this is neither surprising, nor distinctive. Greek was an important language both within first century Judaism and the Greco-Roman culture. Despite the influence of Aramaic, Hebrew and Latin, Greek was the primary common language in much of Palestine. Outside Palestine Greek served as the primary language of the Jews of the Diaspora and the secular Greco-Roman world, among whom Christianity laid an early foothold.

The earliest extant Christian documents are the writings which are now known as the New Testament. It is fairly well accepted that papyrus⁸ was the medium that was used for most, if not all of the original autographs of the New Testament,⁹ though it is not impossible that parchment may have been used for a few. The author of 2 John gives us a clue to his use of papyrus as he writes, “I have much to say to you, but I do not want to use paper and ink. Instead, I hope to visit you

⁷ For an excellent introduction to the history and development of the Greek language used by early Christians see esp. Chrys C. Caragounis, *The Development of Greek and the New Testament: Morphology, Syntax, Phonology, and Textual Transmission* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006.) For a shorter introduction see Gerard Mussies, “Languages (Greek)” in David Noel Freedman, ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), IV:195-203 and the references included there.

⁸ On papyrus see especially Richard Parkinson and Stephen Quirke, *Papyrus* (Austin: University of Texas, 1995.) On the use of papyrus in the production of the New Testament see T. C. Skeat, “Early Christian Book-production: Papyri and Manuscripts” in *The Cambridge History of the Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), II:54-79 and Andre Lemaire, “Writing and Writing Materials” in David Noel Freedman, ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), VI:999-1008.

⁹ F. F. Bruce, *The Books and the Parchments*, 5th ed. (London: Marshall Pickering, 1991), 6.

and talk with you face to face, so that our joy may be complete.”¹⁰

Papyrus also seems to have been the preferred writing material for the other early Christian documents in the first few centuries.

Papyrus was made from the Papyrus reeds that grew in shallow waters through the Near East but especially in Egypt along the banks of the Nile.¹¹ Strips were cut from the reed about as long as a man’s arm and two inches wide. These strips were laid side by side, with a second layer of reeds set on top at right angles. As the reeds were pressed or beaten the cellulose formed a natural glue that formed a sheet of the pressed leaves. The sheet was then polished with a shell forming a smooth writing surface. The resulting sheet of papyrus was usually around 8 by 10 inches with horizontal strips on the recto side and vertical strips on the verso. The sheets were then usually glued together into a roll of around twenty feet. Rolls could be lengthened by gluing additional papyrus sections to the end of the standard roll. Rolls were normally written in narrow columns written down the short side of the roll. Codices, however, were usually written in a single, wider column across the entire page (though there are several examples of multiple columns per page).

Papyrus afforded the author and recipients the convenience of a lightweight, readily available material that could be easily joined into

¹⁰ 2 John 12. All Bible quotations are from the New International Version unless otherwise indicated. The word translated “paper” here is the Greek *χαρτης*, a roll of papyrus.

¹¹ For an ancient account on the making of papyrus see Pliny, *Natural History*, 13.74-82.

scrolls or codices. Papyrus, however, was not nearly as durable as other writing materials (namely parchment and clay) and as a result we have no original autographs of New Testament documents. To date the oldest known New Testament document is a papyrus fragment (P⁵²) from around 125 C.E. that contains a few verses of John chapter 18. While parchment was the preferred writing material for the Hebrew Scriptures, the New Testament authors chose papyrus, perhaps for its availability and relative inexpensive cost as compared to parchment.

This relative inexpensive cost, however, should not suggest that books were ever cheap in the ancient world. Books were copied by hand and the scribe's time had to be compensated. In addition the material had to be purchased. A standard roll of papyrus (around 20 feet long) in mid-first century Egypt sold for four drachmae.¹² T. C. Skeat has calculated the cost of the 224 page papyrus Chester Beatty codex¹³ as being about 20 drachmae for the materials and 24 drachmae for the work of the scribe, bringing the total to around 44 drachmae for the completed work.¹⁴ In other words, this codex would cost around a month and a half salary of a skilled worker.

During the first century black ink was the most common ink, though red was also available. Black ink was made from lamp black or

¹² Millard, *Reading and Writing*, 165. The average skilled worker made a drachma per day. Hence, a standard blank roll would cost the average skilled worker four days' salary.

¹³ The Chester Beatty codex is the earliest extant complete Christian codex, dating from the third-century, containing the four Gospels and Acts.

¹⁴ T. C. Skeat, "A Codicological Analysis of the Chester Beatty Papyrus Codes of Gospels and Acts (P 45)" in *The Collected Biblical Writings of T. C. Skeat*, ed. J. K. Elliott (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 157.

ground charcoal that was mixed with gum arabic. While black ink was cheap, durable and easy to make, it was not water resistant.¹⁵

Pens were readily available and cheap. The most common pen was made from a small reed, about 8 to 10 inches long, from the *Juncus Martimus* plant. The reed was sharpened at one end, with a small slit cut in the sharpened end.¹⁶

The materials used to actually write the documents of early Christianity were not significantly different than the tools that would have been used only a hundred years ago – paper, ink, pen. Slight technology advances have improved the materials, but until the invention of the typewriter and later, the computer, the tools were primarily unchanged.

One major difference between writing in antiquity and more recent writing is the surface chosen to write on. While tables were readily available for eating and other purposes, scribes do not seem to have regularly used tables for writing.¹⁷ For quick notes and short letters the scribe would stand while holding a wax tablet or papyrus sheet and palette in one hand and the reed in the other. A wet rag was tied around the waist to correct any quick mistakes.¹⁸ For longer letters the scribe

¹⁵ E. Randolph Richards, *Paul and First Century Letter Writing: Secretaries, Composition and Collection* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 47.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Bruce Metzger, “When Did Scribes Begin to Use Writing Desks?” in *Historical and Literary Studies: Pagan, Jewish and Christian* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 123.

¹⁸ Richards, *Paul*, 54.

would sit on a stool, bench or the ground and stretch his robes tightly across his knees to form a hard surface upon which he could write.¹⁹

*Education in Antiquity*²⁰

Formal education in antiquity occurred in both public and private settings. Education was available publicly both in the marketplace²¹ and in more official public schools. Even the “public” schools, however, should not be considered public in the modern sense, since they were primarily only open to those with financial means.²² “The opportunity for formal schooling even at the primary level was a luxury.”²³

While there is still much that is unknown and debated concerning the educational systems of antiquity, it is clear that at the elementary levels, every educational system included the basic skills for reading and writing.

¹⁹ Metzger, “When Did Scribes Begin to Use Writing Desks?”, 123-125.

²⁰ Especially useful works on the educational systems of antiquity include Robin Barrow, *Greek and Roman Education* (London: Bristol Classical Press, 1976); Stanley F. Bonner, *Education in Ancient Rome: From the Elder Cato to the Younger Pliny* (Berkeley: University of California, 1977); A. D. Booth, “Elementary and Secondary Education in the Roman Empire” *Florilegium I* (1972): 1-14; M. L. Clarke, *Higher Education in the Ancient World* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971); Raffaella Cribiore, *Gymnastics of the Mind: Greek Education in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt* (Princeton: Princeton University, 2001); idem, *Writing, Teachers, and Students in Graeco-Roman Egypt* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1996); Robert S. Dutch, *The Educated Elite in 1 Corinthians: Education and Community Conflict in Graeco-Roman Context* (New York: T & T Clark, 2005); Aubrey Gwynn, *Roman Education from Cicero to Quintilian* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1964); H. I. Marrou, *A History of Higher Education in Antiquity* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1956); Yun Lee Too, ed., *Education in Greek and Roman Antiquity* (Leiden: Brill, 2001.)

²¹ For marketplace education see, Stanley F. Bonner, *Education in Ancient Rome: From the Elder Cato to the Younger Pliny* (Berkeley: University of California, 1977), 120-125.

²² “What was lacking... in most communities throughout the Greek world was the will to allocate public or philanthropic funds to schooling for children of the poor.” William V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1989), 245.

²³ Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 6.

There has been much discussion concerning the way in which students were taught to read and write.²⁴ Of particular interest to this study is the fact that through the educational system there developed two fairly distinctive handwriting styles. Papyrologists refer to these as “book hands” and “documentary hands.” The “book hand” had the aim of producing clear, regular letters, written in all capitals.²⁵ This was the writing found in most ancient literary documents. The writing is easier to read and more pleasing to the eye. The “documentary hand”, however, was a quicker, cursive hand, often using many abbreviations, written for speed rather than beauty. This handwriting is found in most of the documentary papyri (e.g., official and government documents). Both the “book hand” and the “documentary hand”, however, appear to be more developed hands, learned at a higher level than elementary education. These seem to be the primary hands of the scribes, but not the primary hand of the average literate person. The average person appears to have learned a “semicursive writing that aimed in part at legibility as well as regularity.”²⁶ This hand was useful for a variety of types of writing, but lacked the speed and beauty of the more learned hands.

Christian scribes tended towards the middle of the spectrum between “book hands” and “documentary hands.” The handwriting and

²⁴ For the time period under study in this work see especially the works of Raffaella Cribiore, *Gymnastics of the Mind and Writing, Teachers, and Students in Graeco-Roman Egypt*.

²⁵ Turner refers to this writing as “bilinear” in that it appears “to have been placed between an upper and a lower line notionally present to the scribe as he wrote” (Eric G. Turner, *Greek Manuscripts of the Ancient World* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971], 3).

²⁶ Kim Haines-Eitzen, *Guardians of Letters*, 63.

style is basically documentary, with a little more literary beauty and regularity than normal for documentary hands. Christian papyri contain many abbreviations common in documentary texts, but not literary texts.²⁷ The overall writing and consistency of scribal skill found in Christian papyri suggests that early Christian scribes were multi-functional scribes, capable of producing regular, legible texts, but not trained in the calligraphic hand of the typical literary copyist.²⁸

The evidence for Christian views towards the public educational system in antiquity is conflicting. Clearly some authors speak out against the educational system.²⁹ The Greco-Roman educational system was built upon pagan canonical texts that were often morally, religiously and philosophically opposed to Christianity.³⁰ Other Christians, however, seem to have approved of the system enough to allow children to be educated by the non-Christian teachers.³¹

A second avenue for education within the Greco-Roman world was private education within the homes of the economic elite. This education would take place either through the use of a tutor or an in-house school

²⁷ We should probably exclude the *nomina sacra*, *nomina divina*, *staurogram*, and *Christogram* here, since these seem to have been written for pietistic purposes, rather than brevity. However, Christian scribes regularly abbreviated for numerals, as well as other common documentary abbreviations.

²⁸ See Haines-Eitzen, *Guardians of Letters*, pp. 65-68. C. H. Roberts has written, "Almost all of the early Christian manuscripts are written in hands which, although those of practiced and professional scribes, have some resemblances... to the better documentary hands of the period. They are the work of men who, used to writing, are not accustomed to writing books." ("P. Yale 1 and the Early Christian Book," in *American Studies in Papyrology*, A. E. Samuel, ed., [New Haven: American Papyrological Society, 1956]: 25-28.)

²⁹ See Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 3.58; Hippolytus, *Apostolic Traditions*, 2.16.13; Tertullian, *de Idolatria*, 10.

³⁰ Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 6.

³¹ See Clarke, *Higher Education*, 127.

or *paedagogium*. Through these means young elites would learn to read and write, as well as learn philosophy, rhetoric, composition, family history and other subjects as selected by the family and tutor. Private education allowed the benefit of specialized education to prepare the young for the life expected of them, whether in the public realm or private business.

For Christians a potential third avenue for education existed – education through the church or Christian schools. Christian schools often built up around exceptional teachers such as the second century schools of Valentinus, Ptolemy, Clement and Justin. These schools, however, were secondary level schools, focusing upon education in distinct Christian thought (theology) and practice (Scriptural interpretation).

While monasteries and their educational efforts post-date (or at least begin near the end of) the period under study in this project, there is evidence of educational efforts designed towards increasing literacy among followers. Among the Bodmer Papyri there is a small Greek codex dated to the 3rd or 4th century that contains a work simply titled *Rules*. Some have argued for this as being the monastic rules of the Pachomian Monastery.³² Regardless, the *Rules* contains a definite demonstration at early efforts at literacy education:

³² James M. Robinson, *The Pachomian Monastic Library at the Chester Beatty Library and the Bibliotheque Bodmer* (Claremont, CA: Institute for Antiquity and Christianity, 1990.)

Whoever enters the monastery uninstructed shall be taught first what he must observe; and when, so taught, he has consented to it all, they shall give him twenty psalms or two of the Apostle's epistles, or some other part of Scripture. And if he is illiterate, he shall go at the first, third, and sixth hours to someone who can teach and has been appointed for him. He shall stand before him and learn very studiously with all gratitude. Then the fundamentals of a syllable, the verb, and nouns shall be written for him, and even if he does not want to, he shall be compelled to read.³³

This quote demonstrates, at least for this community, that a high value was placed on literacy within early Christianity. When means were lacking to take advantage of the normal educational system, Christians were capable of creating their own educational processes in which initiates could learn to read and write. These educational efforts by early Christians help demonstrate the importance of the book culture to early Christianity.

Literacy in Early Christianity

An important aspect of book culture is literacy. Our understanding of early Christian book culture will be greatly enhanced if we can understand the literacy levels of the earliest Christian groups. This, however, is an extremely difficult task. We do not have access to clear, explicit ancient evidence to inform of us of the literacy levels in the first few centuries of Christianity. "All one has is chance information that may or may not be helpful, and is often inclusive."³⁴ A further

³³ *Rules*, 139.

³⁴ Robert A. Derrenbacker, Jr., "Writing, Books and Readers in the Ancient World." *American Theological Library Association Summary of Proceedings* 52 (1998): 207. Similarly Harry Y. Gamble has

difficulty is the fact that, for the most part, early Christianity spread among multi-cultural and multilingual groups, making generalizations for literacy levels difficult, if not impossible.³⁵ The multilingual environment of the Greco-Roman world in general and Christianity in particular makes judging literacy especially difficult. Greek, Latin, Hebrew, Aramaic, Coptic and Syriac all played important roles in early Christianity. An early Christian may be fully literate in Greek, but completely illiterate in any of the other languages, and thus be accused of illiteracy.

Literacy in the ancient world never approached levels matching that of the modern western world. William Harris has provided an extensive investigation of literacy in the ancient world, in which he defines literacy as the ability to read and write at any level. Harris has argued, given occasional geographic and demographic variances, that literacy was generally about 10 percent and never more than 15 to 20 percent.³⁶

One of the interesting paradoxes of education and literacy in the ancient world was that the educated social elite, that is, the class that was most literate, actually often had less need to write, since they could afford to employ slaves and scribes to write on their behalf. “One might almost say that there was a direct correlation between the social

written, “[D]irect evidence for literacy is scarce for antiquity generally and scarcer still for early Christianity in particular.” (p. 3)

³⁵ Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 3.

³⁶ Harris, *Ancient Literacy*.

standing that guaranteed literacy and the means to avoid writing. But this should not be taken to mean that men of this standing did not do a fair amount of writing all the same.”³⁷ For the elite literacy was another tool, another means of power that could be controlled and manipulated for economic, political or intellectual advantage. This control, however, was quite often carried out through the use of scribes, rather than through direct literary activity on the behalf of the elite themselves.

Literacy within Christianity meant much more than simply being able to read and be aware of the texts that have been written. Most Christians could accomplish this simply by attending Christian gatherings. The oral culture of early Christianity meant that texts were regularly read aloud in gatherings, allowing the non-literate to be fully aware of the Scriptures, instructions from bishops, as well as other religious writings. Literacy levels are not necessarily an effective metric for determining the participation in the book culture of early Christianity for “in antiquity one could hear texts read even if one was unable to read, so that illiteracy was no bar to familiarity with Christian writings.”³⁸ Literacy levels within Christianity were almost certainly well within the average for the secular Greco-Roman world since Christianity as a whole was comprised of a fairly representative social and economic cross-section of the population.³⁹

³⁷ Roger S. Bagnall, *Reading Papyri, Writing Ancient History* (London: Routledge, 1995), 25.

³⁸ Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 4.

³⁹ See Gamble, *Books and Readers*, p. 5 and the works referred to there.

Literacy at a high level (being able to fully read and write), however, “provided a means to enter into the debates over beliefs and practices through the medium of writing... writing becomes a resource of power: the very texts that scribes (re)produced were those that had utmost significance and importance for questions of theology, self-definition, and praxis.”⁴⁰

So while a high value was placed on literacy, the oral culture of the Greco-Roman world in general and the Christian communities in particular did not demand literacy skills for Christians to be informed concerning Christian teachings. Literacy, however, allowed Christians to more fully participate in the developing belief system of the growing religion of Christianity.

The Book Trade in Early Christianity

Defining the “book trade” in antiquity can be difficult, especially within Christianity. Defined loosely, “the ‘book trade’ consists of the transmission – production, (re)production, and dissemination – of literature, either in public settings or through private means.”⁴¹

Attaining literary works was usually not a simple matter of purchasing an already prepared work. Usually the reader/collector was

⁴⁰ Haines-Eitzen, *Guardians of Letters*, 131.

⁴¹ Haines-Eitzen, *Guardians of Letters*, 23.

almost entirely dependent upon acquiring privately made copies of literature.⁴²

Publishing in antiquity was a significantly different process than the publishing process in the modern world. Literary works tended to be released through an ever widening circle of private individuals. The author of the work would bring together an inner circle of like-minded friends, patrons and clients and offer a private reading of the work. “These first readings were entirely closed. The audience would naturally discuss the work during and after the recitation, but the text itself did not circulate.”⁴³ Whether or not the work ever progressed beyond this stage would be entirely dependent upon the author. If the work was to continue towards “publication” the author would next polish the text based upon the initial reading, have slaves make copies of the text and then send the polished form to a wide circle of friends and supporters. This circle of recipients would include the dedicatee of the work and close friends connected to the work or author.⁴⁴

As a result of sending the work out to friends, the author effectively lost control of the text.⁴⁵ The work can now be copied by friends and acquaintances of the original recipients. These copies often found their

⁴² See F. G. Kenyon, *Books and Readers in Ancient Greece and Rome* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1951), 70-71.

⁴³ Raymond J. Starr, “The Circulation of Literary Texts in the Roman World” *The Classical Quarterly* 37 (1987): 214. However, occasionally the author would allow the audience to make written records of the recitation at this stage. See Juvenal, *The Satires of Juvenal*, 3.41-42.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 214-215.

⁴⁵ At this stage the author might also ask recipients of the work to assist in making the work known to a wider audience. For example, Cicero asked Atticus to make a work known in Greece (*Letters to Atticus* 2.1.2).

way into the book trade and private libraries of collectors. The work could also be deposited into a public library either by the author or one of the recipients. The work then came into the public domain where it could be copied by anyone with the means to access the work and employ a scribe for the reproduction.

Another route to publication followed a similar pattern. Many philosophers were averse to publishing their thoughts and teachings, preferring instead the oral tradition of antiquity.⁴⁶ The philosophers preferred to maintain control over their teachings and felt that the written text allowed their teachings to be passed beyond their control, outside the dialogical pattern of philosophical training. Students, however, did not always share the reservations of their teachers towards the written word and often composed extensive notes of the teachers and later brought them to publication.⁴⁷

In the same way, notes could be “published” from any public recitation of a literary (or potentially literary) text. These recitations were quite common in the ancient world and occurred in many venues. In addition to private readings and educational lectures, there were also public educational lectures – often delivered in the forum where any passerby could record the gist of the lecture. There were poetry readings

⁴⁶ On this attitude see Millard, *Reading and Writing*, 199-202.

⁴⁷ Millard, *Reading and Writing*, 202-203. For a more in depth discussion concerning philosophers and their attitudes towards reading and writing see Anthony Grafton and Megan Williams, *Christianity and the Transformation of the Book: Origen, Eusebius, and the Library of Caesarea* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 2006), 25-53. Quintilian informs us that not only did his students publish his work without his permission, but that his work was not intended, nor prepared for such a wide audience (*The Orator's Education*, I. pref. 7-8).

given in the forum and public baths. There were countless public speeches given in the Senate and the surrounding political system.⁴⁸ There were public festivals and games in which readings were also featured and even part of the competition.⁴⁹ In short, there were many opportunities in the oral Greco-Roman world for an ambitious scribe to record and publish a wealth of works.

Booksellers were common in the city of Rome by the end of the second century C.E.⁵⁰ Booksellers were known in antiquity as *librarii* and later as *bibliopola*. The booksellers of antiquity, however, should not be confused with modern bookstores. The stalls of the bookseller were not normally filled with ready to purchase scrolls and codices. Instead, bookshop activities often included literary readings and discussions of texts. Copies of texts could be ordered by customers, as long as the bookseller owned or had access to an exemplar of the text in question. The bookseller or scribes in his employ would then set about copying the text for the customer. So in effect, every (or very nearly every) text sold by the bookseller was first copied by the bookseller. Booksellers did not purchase texts from one source and then sell to customers. They actually made (copied) the products they sold.⁵¹

⁴⁸ See Elizabeth Rawson, *Intellectual Life in the Late Roman Republic* (London: Duckworth, 1985), 51-53.

⁴⁹ F. Gerald Downin, "Word-Processing in the Ancient World: The Social Production and Performance of Q" *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 64 (1996), 31.

⁵⁰ See for example, Aulus Gellius, *Noctes Atticae* 5.4.1, 13.31.1, and 18.4.1.

⁵¹ Starr, "Circulation of Literary Texts", 220.

Booksellers, however, seem to have relied primarily on the mid to lower classes for their clientele. Men of means could afford private scribes, and hence had little need for the public trade. “Neither Cicero nor Pliny, for instance, two of our major sources for the circulation of literary texts, ever mentions going to a bookshop.”⁵² Since the elite seem to be the primary class interested in literature during this period, the public trade seems to have been meager at best. Instead, the book trade was driven primarily through private social networks. “[T]he primary way of distributing books was not in any case by means of a trade of any kind, but through fits and loans among friends.”⁵³ As a copy was needed or desired, the copy was made, through private means.

So while libraries and book dealers played a minor role in the publication and circulation of texts within the Greco-Roman world, the more extensive publication efforts were carried out through private social networks. Books were loaned and given as favors, often forming part of the patron/client relationships that existed in the Roman social structure.⁵⁴ These networks stretched throughout much of the Mediterranean world. Early Christian documents from Egypt demonstrate that there were “extensive and lively interactions between Alexandria and the outlying areas, and also between the outlying areas

⁵² Ibid, 221.

⁵³ Harris, *Ancient Literacy*, 225. Not only was this the case in the public, secular trade, but the same can be said concerning the Christian book trade, even when it comes to the copying of the New Testament documents (see, Bruce Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration* [New York: Oxford, 1992], 14).

⁵⁴ Grafton and Williams, *Transformation of the Book*, 14.

and other parts of the Roman world.”⁵⁵ Groups throughout the Roman Empire communicated with other groups in distant parts of the empire through a “brisk intellectual commerce.”⁵⁶ This communication greatly aided the spread of Christianity, enhanced the “publication” process of Christian literature, and contributed significantly to the diverse book culture of early Christianity.

Scribes of Antiquity

The men and women who prepared literary copies for the public book trade were known as the *librarii*.⁵⁷ Literary copies in the public book trade were produced by scribes (usually slaves or freedmen) in the public libraries or the bookshops. Many literary copies, however, were made privately by scribes employed by men of some means. The copying of literary texts was, by and large, not considered an honorable task. As a result, this work was done almost exclusively by slaves or freedmen.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Eldon Jay Epp, “The Significance of the Papyri for Determining the Nature of the New Testament Text in the Second Century: A Dynamic View of Textual Transmission,” in *Gospel Traditions in the Second Century: Origins, Recensions, Text, and Transmission*, ed. William L. Petersen (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1989), 81. Hurtado writes there was “an impressive geographical breadth of communication and interchange between the Egyptian-based Christians whose copies of texts we have and Christians in other places... early Christian circles, whatever their geographical or religious particularities, also seem to have been keen on exchange of texts and ideas with other Christian circles” (*Earliest Christian Artifacts*, 41.) It should be pointed out that we are almost completely dependent here upon the texts from Egypt. These texts may not necessarily represent the broader Christian world in this respect, but to date we are limited with this evidence and there is no reason to believe Christians elsewhere did not follow similar communication practices. What we do find, however, is that copies of texts are found spread throughout the Mediterranean within only a decade or two of their composition (see Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 82.)

⁵⁶ Eldon Jay Epp, “New Testament Papyrus Manuscripts and Letter Carrying in Greco-Roman Times,” in *The Future of Early Christianity: Essays in Honor of Helmut Koester*, ed. Birger A. Pearson (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 55.

⁵⁷ In its earliest usage *librarii* could also refer to booksellers or even bookshops.

⁵⁸ Haines-Eitzen, *Guardians of Letters*, 21. For ancient attestation of the view of copying Haines-Eitzen cites the anonymous *Rhetorica ad Herennium*.

There were several categories of scribes in the Greco-Roman world, not all of whom copied texts (not all were even literate enough to copy texts). There were also varying levels of ability within the scribal groups. Some scribes were able to only copy texts, unable to produce original documents.⁵⁹ Scribes also varied in their in ability to take dictation, an important scribal skill.⁶⁰

The highest category of scribe is that of the administrative scribe (*scriba*). These officials could serve a wide range of roles: archive keepers, financial overseer, agricultural overseers, prefect assistants, temple scribes, document preparers and more.⁶¹ Administrative scribes were employed at every level of government. Some scribes held upper-level offices and were important men within the government structure. In the words of Cicero, “the order (of the scribes) is honourable, for to the good faith of these men are entrusted the public laws, and the sentences of the magistrates.”⁶²

Most of these administrative scribes, especially the higher ranking scribes, did not actually prepare or copy documents themselves. They had copyists, clerks and note takers in their employ who performed the

⁵⁹ See Raffaella Cribiore, *Writing, Teachers, and Students in Graeco-Roman Egypt* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1996), 10-11.

⁶⁰ Cicero compares Tiro, who could take dictation sentence by sentence, with Spintharo, who could only take dictation syllable by syllable (*Letters to Atticus*, 13.25). The author of the *Shepherd of Hermas* claims to only be able to take dictation letter by letter (2.1.4).

⁶¹ Haines-Eitzen, *Guardians of Letters*, 27.

⁶² Cicero, *The Verrine Orations*, 3.79.183.

actual writing tasks.⁶³ While not all administrative scribes were employed at high-levels, most were men of some importance and some means.

A second class of scribe were the public *librarii*. These scribes were usually freedmen with some level of literate skill who worked in the public markets and were available for preparing legal documents, writing letters, reading documents or letters; simply put, these scribes performed any literate task needed by the general public for a fee.

A third class of scribe were the privately employed (either freedmen serving in the households of the wealthy or slaves). These private *librarii* might take dictation, write letters, prepare legal documents, copy letters, copy literary texts, deliver documents, read documents, serve as messengers and more (more on this below).

Many acquired skills were required for the scribe to carry out his role: reading, writing, short-hand, composition, grammar, calligraphy, even rhetoric and legal knowledge, depending upon the exact role and duties of the particular scribe. Some of these skills could be learned through either the public or private school system discussed above.⁶⁴

Scribes also were known to learn their skills through apprenticeships.⁶⁵

⁶³ See Haines-Eitzen, *Guardians of Letters*, 27. In fact, there is evidence that some of these administrative scribes were barely literate, able to only sign their names and produce simple memorized formulae (see Haines-Eitzen, 28).

⁶⁴ On the education of Christian scribes during the first three centuries of the Christian era see especially Haines-Eitzen, *Guardians of Letters*, 53-75.

⁶⁵ See E. Randolph Richards, *The Secretary in the Letters of Paul* (Tubingen: Mohr, 1991), 57.

Scribal skill within Christian literary circles seems to vary only slightly with that found in the broader Greco-Roman world. We have already seen that Christian papyri reveal that Christian scribes tend toward the middle of the handwriting range, producing text that were neither remarkable for the beauty of their “literary hands”, nor distinguishably poor in handwriting either. The same can be said when it comes to general scribal skill among the Christian papyri. Christian scribes tended to produce the same sorts and amounts of errors in copying that is found in the broader scribal culture. Errors due to exhaustion, eye skips, and lack of concentration all appear at normal rates within Christian documents.

Within early Christianity it is difficult to determine the role scribes played within the hierarchal leadership system. Scribes clearly had great impact on early literature. Scribes were involved in composition, transmission, reproduction, and more. It is difficult to tell, however, whether the scribes were viewed in a religious leadership fashion, as the Jewish scribes were,⁶⁶ or whether they were viewed as administrative/political leaders, as the Roman *scribae* were, or whether they were viewed as low workers within the overall system, as the slaves and freedmen who served as *librarii* were.

⁶⁶ On Jewish scribes during this time period see especially Karel van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 2007); Christine Schams, *Jewish Scribes in the Second Temple Period* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998) and Anthony J. Saldarini, *Pharisees, Scribes, and Sadducees in Palestinian Society: A Sociological Approach* (Wilimington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1988.)

While the evidence for scribal presence within Christianity itself is lacking for the first few centuries of the movement, there is one line of evidence found in *The Shepherd of Hermas*. Hermas is a slave or freedman who writes the work after receiving a visit from an angel telling him exactly (letter by letter) what to write. Hermas then makes three copies of the work. One of these copies he brings to Rome and with the church elders he reads the document to the church. We see here, Hermas, a slave, a scribe, sharing a position of authority with the elders of the church.

Scribes as Emissaries

As seen above, one of the categories of scribes included private scribes, those who were in the employ of the elite of the Greco-Roman world. These scribes would often be employed in a manner that went beyond typical writing duties, into actual delivery, reading and explaining of written documents.

Many of the earliest documents that have come down to us from Christianity fall within the literary genre of epistolography. Letter writing was not only a means of keeping in touch with personal acquaintances and family members, but also served as a means for a leader or influential figure to project his presence into a locale that he was unable

to visit.⁶⁷ In this way authors could “appear” to an audience via the letter and offer instruction, encouragement or rebuke.⁶⁸

The imperial postal system of the Roman world was reserved primarily for official documents of the government and military. A typical letter writer was forced to rely upon a chance traveler who was heading the right direction or the sending of a private letter carrier. Often scribes served as these private letter carriers because the duties of the carrier went beyond mere delivery.

The letter carrier was expected to convey additional information to the recipients of the letters.⁶⁹ This information could be personal information concerning the general well-being of the author, additional information related to the text of the letter, or explanations concerning the contents of the letter.

In addition to explaining the letter and providing additional information, the letter carrier was often expected to actually read the letter. In this way, the carrier continues the rhetorical efforts of the

⁶⁷ While this is our primary concern here, since it seems to be the primary reason behind early Christian letter-writing, especially the epistles of the New Testament, Gamble has pointed out the extensive purposes that letters could serve in the ancient world. “[T]he educated wrote letters, not only as a means of private communication, but also as a vehicle for philosophical exposition, moral exhortation, literary criticism, and the treatment of other intellectual subjects.” (*Books and Readers*, p. 37.)

⁶⁸ Peter, Paul and other early Christian leaders took great advantage of these “apostolic *parousia*.” Margaret M. Mitchell has gone so far as to argue that letters could actually be a more effective appearance of the author than actual physical presence (“New Testament Envoys in the Context of Greco-Roman Diplomatic and Epistolary Conventions: The Example of Titus and Timothy,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 111 [1992]: 641-662.) On this phenomenon in early Christianity see also Robert W. Funk, “The Apostolic Parousia: Form and Significance,” in *Christian History and Interpretation: Studies Presented to John Knox*, W.R. Farmer, C. F. D. Moule and R. R. Niebuhr, eds, (Cambridge: University Press, 1967), 249-268.

⁶⁹ Richards states this was so common place an occurrence that the recipients would expect that the letter carrier had more information, even if the letter did not explicitly state that this was so. “The sender did not usually state that the carrier had additional news; it was expected.” (*Paul*, 183.)

author by reading the letter in a manner that emphasizes the rhetorical skill of the author. In discussing the combined role of orality and textuality Gamble writes, “in antiquity virtually all reading, public or private, was reading aloud: texts were routinely converted into the oral mode. Knowing this, ancient authors wrote their texts as much for the ear as for the eye.”⁷⁰ The authorial intent, therefore, is that texts be read and heard in a particular manner. The scribal carrier is well suited to carry out this intent, since he has been involved with the actual production of the letter. He is familiar with the tones and emotions with which the letter has been written. By having the scribe read the letter, there is less opportunity for miscommunication. The ancient world was still primarily an oral world. The written text was seen primarily as an extension of that orality. The scribal carrier who reads the letter then conveys the words orally from the written text with the rhetorical intention in which they were written.

Scribes and Textual Transmission

As mentioned above scribal mistakes in the copying of the text were commonplace in antiquity. Scribes made mistakes due to exhaustion, eye skips, lack of concentration, and more.⁷¹ Scribes would

⁷⁰ Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 30.

⁷¹ Cicero makes mention that errors in the scribal process are merely a part of the publishing of a text (*Atticus* 13.23; 13.44). For a brief introduction to the types of unintentional errors made by scribes during their work see Bruce M. Metzger and Bart D. Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, 4th ed., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 251-259.

also occasionally intentionally change the text from which they were copying. These changes may be “corrections” made to agree to another reading, they may be ideologically driven changes,⁷² or they may be confluents to agree with parallel sayings from a similar text. Scribes and owners of the finished text also often made notes in the margins of text. These notes were often interpretations and explanations of the text. The papyri evidence shows that readers were active readers, interacting with the text and commenting on the text by writing in the margins. Often these later additions would then be copied by later scribes and included as part of the text. In this way many ancient texts have become corrupted.

Several early Christian documents show an awareness of this practice of intentional textual corruption by including warnings in the actual text against corrupting the text through scribal changes.⁷³

Scribes were aware of their tendencies for mistakes and many of the early Christian papyri show evidence of scribal corrections. These corrections are often in the same hand, but sometimes show the work of

⁷² For example Irenaeus accuses Marcion and his followers of corrupting the text of the Gospel of Luke (*Against Heresies*, 1.27.2) and Eusebius accuses the Theodotians of corrupting texts they copied in order to support their theological positions (*Ecclesiastical History*, 5.28). Heretics, however, may not have been the only groups to change the text for ideological purposes. See Bart D. Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament* (New York: Oxford, 1993.) Kim Haines-Eitzen (among others) stretches this idea so far as to even claim Matthew and Luke have corrupted the text by modifying the wording of Mark for ideological purposes (*Guardians of Letters*, 117-124.)

⁷³ Most notably is the warning in the New Testament book of Revelation: “I witness to all who hear the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone should add to them, God will place upon him the plagues written in this book; and if anyone should take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his portion in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are written in this book.” (Revelation 22:18-19.)

a second reader or corrector of the text. Corrections could be made by either comparing the work with another exemplar, or simply by reading the copied work and comparing it to the original.

Scribal Practices in Early Christianity

Early Christian literature contains several distinctive features that set this literature apart from other literary writings of the period. First and foremost is the Christian preference for the codex as a book form (discussed below). Also distinctive is the Christian practice of giving numbers as ciphers in the Greek system (A=1, B=2...) While this was common practice in legal and administrative texts, the tendency in literary texts was to spell out the numbers as words. Christian texts, however, use the abbreviations.

Christian texts also employ large initial letters to open new paragraphs.⁷⁴ This practice would help distinguish new blocks of thought within a document that might otherwise be difficult to separate (especially if written in the common literary practice of lacking any spacing or punctuation). Again, this was a fairly common practice in secular administrative documents, but outside of Christianity this was rare in literary texts. Perhaps the expectation that these texts would often be read in public Christian gatherings explain the need to use more features to clearly mark breaks in thought.

⁷⁴ Millard, *Reading and Writing*, 72-73.

A further significant distinction of early Christian documents is the use of unique abbreviations for special names. These abbreviations are known as *nomina sacra* (sacred names) and appear in Christian documents quite regularly and from the earliest available manuscripts. “All of our earliest Christian papyri exhibit the *nomina sacra*, and the effort to explain this fact has been vigorous.”⁷⁵

The *nomina sacra* is typically formed by using only the first and last letter of the word, sometimes including a middle letter or two as well. The abbreviation is then highlighted with a horizontal line written above the entire abbreviation.⁷⁶ The four words most often abbreviated in this fashion are θεος, κυριος, χριστος, and Ιησους.⁷⁷ Less commonly other words are also abbreviated this way, including: πνευμα, ανθρωπος, υιος, πατρος, σταυρος, Δαυιδ, μητηρ, σωτηρ, Ισραηλ, Ίερουσαλήμ, and ούρανος.⁷⁸ These abbreviations are so common within early Christian literature that the presence of one of these forms on even a fragment of a manuscript is enough for papyrologists to identify that fragment as “Christian.”⁷⁹

The significance of these abbreviations is that even within the very scribal practices of early Christianity we see reflections of Christian devotion and piety. “[T]he dominant view by far has been that the *nomina sacra* arose from, and reflect, early Christian piety... the impulse

⁷⁵ Haines-Eitzen, *Guardians of Letters*, 92.

⁷⁶ On the phenomenon of the *nomina sacra* and their possible origins see esp. Hurtado, *Earliest Christian Manuscripts*, 95-134 and the extensive references included there.

⁷⁷ Schuyler Brown has correctly pointed out these are not just *nomina sacra* but are *nomina divina* (“Concerning the Origin of the *Nomina Sacra*,” *Studia Papyrologica* 9 (1970): 7-19.)

⁷⁸ Hurtado, *Earliest Christian Artifacts*, 134.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 96.

was a high regard among early Christians for the referent(s) of these key words.”⁸⁰ These words were marked off in the text by the scribes as special words, reflecting the worship of Jesus and God in early Christianity and combining the early literary culture of Christianity with the early visual culture of Christianity.

Also contributing to the visual culture of early Christianity was the scribal practice of using the staurogram. The staurogram is found when writing the Greek word for cross (σταυρος.) “This particular device is a monogram or ‘compendium’ formed by superimposing the Greek letter rho upon the tau.”⁸¹ Monograms were typically used to refer to a person’s name or title, but here we find the monogram referring to the significant event that (at least in part) represents the person Jesus. The staurogram, like the nomina sacra then, is a representation of Christian piety and worship of Jesus “with a certain iconographic function and significance.”⁸² Once again we have a textual scribal device used in a visual fashion to represent worship.

An additional monogram known as the Chi-Rho or christogram was also used in place of the word for Christ. This symbol was formed by superimposing the chi and rho upon one another, forming a single symbol to visually represent the word that was so revered by the early Christians.

⁸⁰ Ibid, 120-121.

⁸¹ Ibid, 135.

⁸² Ibid, 139.

Perhaps we shouldn't be surprised to find visual markers of piety in the work of the early Christian scribes. For Christians, scribal activity itself often became a marker of piety. "Correcting and copying central Christian texts was a religious act."⁸³ Scribal work, then, became another ascetic form of worship and this piety is shown in the *nomina sacra*, christogram and staurogram.

A further Christian distinctive in early Christian texts is the scribal inclusion of readers' aids in the text. While these aids are not as widespread as the unique use of abbreviations and the preference for the codex, they still stand out in many early Christian manuscripts. The typical Greco-Roman practice was for scribes to write in unbroken lines of text, without spaces between words (known as *scripta continuo*), without punctuation and without markings. The concern seems to be for the aesthetical appearance of the written text, especially among the literary papyri. "As a rule Greek manuscripts make very few concessions to the reader."⁸⁴ In contrast, the Christian concern often seems to be for the readability of the text as the scribes include several types of readers' aids:⁸⁵

- Diaresis – a double dot over an initial vowel to indicate the beginning of a word.

⁸³ Grafton and Williams, *Transformation of the Book*, 192.

⁸⁴ Colin H. Roberts, "Two Biblical Papyri in the John Rylands Library, Manchester" *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 20 (1936): 227.

⁸⁵ Hurtado, *Earliest Christian Artifacts*, 177-185. In addition to these textual readers' aids other characteristics indicate a special interest among Christian scribes in producing texts that were particularly readable; most notably, fewer lines per column and fewer letters per line than was typical. See Turner, *Typology*, 84-87.

- Breathing marks – a mark above initial vowels to indicate an aspirated vowel.
- Punctuation
- Paragraph markers
- Section markers
- Page numbering

The Codex and Christianity

The first through third centuries saw a major shift in the technology of the book as the primary form of books moved from the roll to the codex. The beginning of this transformation is difficult to trace, however, Christianity seems to have been on the leading edge of the shift. “[Q]uite strikingly, the proportion of Christian texts on codices during the second and third centuries is near 100 percent, while for classical texts the number of codices is scant (2.0-4.5 percent).”⁸⁶

The use of the codex in early Christianity is so widespread that that “[t]he Christian preference for the codex form is not disputed.”⁸⁷ Christians show a strong preference for the codex over the roll, but show an exceptionally strong preference for the codex for canonical texts.⁸⁸

Certainly Christianity did not invent the codex. The earliest Christian codices date from the same period as the earliest non-Christian

⁸⁶ Haines-Eitzen, *Guardians of Letters*, 95.

⁸⁷ Hurtado, *Earliest Christian Artifacts*, 44. Hurtado supplies an impressive array of statistics to demonstrate that not only was this a preference, but a fairly overwhelming preference (47 ff.)

⁸⁸ With the exception of one opisthograph roll, every New Testament manuscript from the period under study found in Oxyrhynchus was in codex form (Hurtado, *Earliest Christian Manuscripts*, 57-58.)

codices,⁸⁹ however, Christianity was perhaps the first group to adopt the codex as the *primary* form of the book. There is some evidence to suggest that the codex as a book form may have originated in Rome. All of the earliest literary evidence concerning the codex comes from Rome⁹⁰ and the monuments and decorations of Rome abound with depictions of codices.⁹¹ All of the earliest physical evidence, however, originates from Egypt.

The codex seems to have begun as a simple notebook. Originally this began as a block of wood (Latin – *caudex*). The wood could then be covered in wax and words could be written and erased with ease. Notes could be scratched on the waxed wood using a stylus – including training exercises (writing the alphabet or simple words), quick drafts of letters or other documents, student notes from their teachers, accounts, lists... Several thin wooden boards could be attached together using leather thongs, creating the codex form.

Later this same construction theory was applied to parchment and papyrus, allowing for more pages than the wooden boards allowed.⁹² A single sheet of papyrus would be folded to create two leaves (also known

⁸⁹ S. Emmel, “The Christian Book in Egypt,” in *The Bible as Book*, J. Sharpe and K. Van Kampen, eds., (London: Oak Knoll, 1998), 37-38.

⁹⁰ Quintilian, Martial, Paul and others all mention or discuss the codex as a book form. All are written from Rome. See, Millard, *Reading and Writing*, 65. Martial is the earliest Latin reference, as he encourages his readers to buy his poems in a parchment codex (*Epigrams*, 1.2.3). On the possibility that the Apostle Paul used parchment notebooks and possibly even made them see, Karl Paul Donfried, “Paul as *Skenopios* and the Use of the Codex in Early Christianity,” in *Paul, Thessalonica, and Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 293-304. It is also instructive that the Greek language lacks a word for this book form, using instead the Latin loan word *membranae*, again suggesting a Roman provenance.

⁹¹ See Loveday Alexander, “Ancient Book Production”, 79-82 and 105-11.

⁹² On the physical characteristics and construction of the codex see especially Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 66-69.

as a folium) or four pages of available writing surface. These leaves could then be combined with other leaves using binding threads. Eventually, when the desired number of leaves had been bound together, the papyrus could be covered with leather or wooden boards for protection.

Early authors note the convenience of the notebook as a book form over against the typical roll. The codex is noted as more compact⁹³ and a useful book form for taking on long journeys.⁹⁴ Despite these advantages, however, the roll remained the dominant form in all but Christian circles until the fourth century.⁹⁵

There has been a large body of literature discussing the possible reasons for the Christian preference for the codex over the roll. Several theories have been forth:⁹⁶

1. *Economics* – It has been argued that since the codex allowed writing on both sides of the page that the codex was as much as 25% cheaper than the roll.⁹⁷ Some argue that early Christianity was composed primarily of the lower and middle classes, so economics could well have been a major factor in their choice for book technology. It should be noted, however, that other economic

⁹³ Martial, *Epigrams*, 14.186.

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, 14.188.

⁹⁵ Only 2 percent of non-Christian papyri from the second century are in the codex form and only 20 percent in the third century, Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 49-52.

⁹⁶ Several of these theories have been modified and adapted from Hurtado's excellent survey of the literature on this discussion (*Early Christian Artifacts*, 43-89.) For more references than are given here see his work and the extensive footnotes provided. Further useful works on this discussion include Colin H. Roberts and T. C. Skeat, *The Birth of the Codex* (London: British Academy, 1983) and Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 49-66.

⁹⁷ T. C. Skeat, "The Length of the Standard Papyrus Roll and the Cost-Advantage of the Codex," in *Collected Biblical Writing*, 65-70. It should be noted that Skeat does not argue that economics alone was the only factor in the preference for the codex.

scribal practices are not employed in Christian literature.

Handwriting is not small. Margins are actually wider than those found in other Greco-Roman literature.⁹⁸ Christian writings tended to use comparatively smaller numbers of lines per page and words per line.⁹⁹ In addition, it should be noted that the codex required additional scribal skill and cost in assembling and binding the codex, so the cost advantage is not as great as first appears.

2. *Pragmatics* – The codex seems like the easier of the two book forms to use. The roll seems unwieldy and cumbersome, especially when attempting to read several passages quickly or to begin reading from the middle of the roll. However, this may not have been the case for the ancient reader accustomed to reading rolls regularly.¹⁰⁰ If the codex was significantly easier to read than the roll, than it would seem that the codex would have caught on quicker in the broader Greco-Roman world, instead of just within Christianity.¹⁰¹
3. *Reference* – It has been suggested by some that the codex was preferred for its ability to offer the advantage of finding particular passages quickly. The codex, then, served as a better reference

⁹⁸ Hurtado, *Earliest Christian Artifacts*, 171. He suggests these wide margins were for aesthetic benefit, as well as for ease of reading, especially in public reading.

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, 172.

¹⁰⁰ See T. C. Skeat, “Two Notes on Papyrus: I, Was Rerolling a Papyrus Roll an Irksome and Time-Consuming Task?” in *Collected Biblical Writings*, 60-63.

¹⁰¹ Hurtado, *Earliest Christian Artifacts*, 66.

tool than the roll. However, the lack of spacing, headings and chapter and verse divisions would not have allowed quick references.¹⁰²

4. *Capacity* – Eric Turner, a leading papyrologist, has argued that “large holding capacity was a prime recommendation for a papyrus codex in its developmental period.”¹⁰³ While the codex does offer the advantage of larger capacity for texts, it must be noted (as above) that Christian texts do not seem overly concerned with other capacity measures – such as small handwriting, line spacing and margins.¹⁰⁴
5. *Portability* – The codex offers the advantage of being a more portable book form. In fact, this advantage has ancient literary support. Martial attempted to promote the codex as a more portable book form among Roman readers.¹⁰⁵ This portability could have been particularly attractive to many of the early, itinerant Christian leaders, leading to its adoption by much of Christianity. However, there is nothing to indicate that any of the early codices represent the codices of early Christian itinerant preachers, in fact, they seem to be codices used in local

¹⁰² Hurtado, *Earliest Christian Artifacts*, 65-66; Roberts and Skeat, *Birth of the Codex*, 50-51.

¹⁰³ Eric G. Turner, *The Typology of the Early Codex* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1977), 95.

¹⁰⁴ Hurtado, *Earliest Christian Artifacts*, 66.

¹⁰⁵ Martial, *Epigrams*, 1.2

communities, such as the wealth of Christian literary remains coming from Oxyrhynchus.¹⁰⁶

6. *Socio-Economics* – G. H. R. Horsley has proposed that Christianity was primarily composed of lower class individuals with limited education. Since the codex was first used as notebooks in primary education and day-to-day notes, they would have been more familiar with this book form.¹⁰⁷ There is some evidence to support this argument. The fact that much of the art depicting the codex appears in the context of works showing middle class tradesmen¹⁰⁸ may suggest a further reason why Christianity was inclined towards the codex. Many of the early Christian leaders came from the middle class trades.¹⁰⁹ It is the middle class tradesmen who were most comfortable with the codex, using it regularly as a notebook to record accounts, make sketches and record rough drafts. While it is purely speculation, it is also likely, that Christianity would have been more open to the use of the codex due to its socio-economic makeup.¹¹⁰ While this may have been a contributing factor, it must be noted that Christianity was, in its

¹⁰⁶ Hurtado, *Earliest Christian Artifacts*, 67.

¹⁰⁷ G. H. R. Horsley, "Classical Manuscripts in Australia and New Zealand and the Early History of the Codex" *Antichthon* 27 (1995): 60-85.

¹⁰⁸ Alexander, "Ancient Book Production", 79-82. The codex/notebook seems to be depicted as one of the "tools of trade" used by these tradesmen.

¹⁰⁹ Not the least of which were Jesus himself (as a craftsman) and Paul (as a leatherworker).

¹¹⁰ Colin Roberts has suggested that "it is likely enough that the fashionable author or discriminating bibliophile would not favor a format that suggested the lecture room or counting house." ("The Codex," 187-188). Christians, on the other hand, may not have had these same inhibitions due to their familiarity through daily use of notebooks in their trades.

earliest form, primarily an urban movement spread across all economic levels.¹¹¹ This argument also fails to account for the fact that Christianity emerged primarily as a Jewish sect and Judaism actually preferred the roll, especially for Scriptures (the exact opposite as we find in Christianity).

7. *Precedence* – It is argued by many that some influential work was circulating in codex form that was significant enough for the rest of the Christian book culture to attempt to imitate. There have been many arguments put forth as to what this precedent-setting work might be: The Gospel of Mark,¹¹² codex of all four gospels,¹¹³ the Pauline corpus,¹¹⁴ scribal notebook evolution.¹¹⁵ There have also been suggestions that an influential center of Christianity that favored the codex was the precedence (Antioch or Jerusalem)¹¹⁶ or that an early influential leader (Paul?) or group of leaders used the codex, thus setting the precedence.¹¹⁷

¹¹¹ See especially, Abraham J. Malherbe, *Social Aspects of Early Christianity* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1977) and Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale, 2003.)

¹¹² Roberts and Skeat, *Birth of the Codex*, 54-57.

¹¹³ Skeat, "The Origin of the Christian Codex", *Collected Writings*, 79-87.

¹¹⁴ Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 58-65.

¹¹⁵ This suggestion argues that scribes recorded the teachings and traditions of Jesus in notebooks, which quickly became a precedent setting practice for the remainder of Christianity. See Graham Stanton, *Jesus and the Gospels* (New York: Cambridge University, 2004), 181.

¹¹⁶ Roberts and Skeat, *Birth of the Codex*, 57-61.

¹¹⁷ Eldon J. Epp, "The Codex and Literacy in Early Christianity and at Oxrynychus: Issues Raised in Harry Y. Gamble's *Books and Readers in the Early Church*," in *Critical Review of Books in Religion 1997*, ed. Charles Prebish (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1998), 20-22. Karl Paul Donfried ("Paul as Skenopoios and the Use of the Codex in Early Christianity," in *Paul, Thessalonica and Early Christianity* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002], 293-304) has offered up the Apostle Paul as this influential leader based on Paul's use of parchment notebooks (2 Timothy 4:13) and the fact that he was a leatherworker, "it is intriguing to think that Paul might have earned his income in the various cities in which he stayed by leather-working in general and in parchment codex production specifically" (p. 302). For

Each of these suggestions to explain the early Christian preference for the codex have both strengths and weaknesses. Certainly Christians must have recognized that their choice for the book form was distinctive. Perhaps this was a contributing factor. Almost certainly the practical advantages and socio-economic factors were also contributing factors that made the move to the codex smoother. Something significant, however, was occurring within Christianity that gave the codex symbolic value for the early Christians. This seems to be the only factor to explain why Christianity adopted the codex so early and the broader world did not, even though the practical advantages applied just as easily to secular literary culture as they did to Christian literary culture. This suggests that there was likely a precedent, of some sort, that demonstrated within Christianity that the codex should be the preferred book form.

It is also instructive to note that the growing preference for the codex in the general Greco-Roman book culture coincides with the growth of Christianity during the first four centuries of the common era. The indication then is that Christianity almost certainly influenced the

multiple reasons Paul favored the codex, his influence and possibly his collection of letters in codex form then influenced the early Christians to favor this book form. In fact, Donfried writes, "It is quite appropriate to speak of the apostle Paul as the most instrumental factor in the shaping of the book as we know it today, that is, in the form of a codex rather than a roll" (p. 304).

overall book culture by at least accelerating the transition from the roll to the codex.

Christian Scribes at Work

The limits of this paper do not allow for a detailed discussion of all the evidence of Christian scribes at work (though it should be noted the evidence is fairly limited). One particularly instructive passage, however, is worthy of brief discussion. This account comes to us from Eusebius as he writes about the mid-third century author Origen, discussing some of the writing practices of this author:

At that time also Origen's commentaries on the divine scriptures had their beginning, at the instigation of Ambrose, who not only plied him with innumerable verbal exhortations and encouragements, but also provided him unstintingly with what was necessary. As [Origen] dictated there were ready at hand more than seven shorthand-writers, who relieved each other at fixed times, and as many copyists, as well as girls trained for beautiful writing; for all of these Ambrose supplied without stint the necessary means.¹¹⁸

This passage shows several scribes in the employ of a single author. Origen had at his disposal seven scribes trained in short-hand. This would allow for rapid dictation on potentially several subjects almost simultaneously. The author in question would dictate the work to the short-hand scribe. After a period of dictation, the scribe could begin to write out the dictation in full, while the author continues to work with another short-hand scribe. After completing the long-hand copy, the scribe would return to the author for corrections or additions. This

¹¹⁸ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 6.23.

would continue until the work was completed. In this manner the author could work on several projects or several sections of a larger project at once.

Origen also had at his disposal seven copyists. These lesser-trained scribes would take the completed works and make copies for dissemination. They could also serve as messengers, readers or copiers of literary works from other authors that Origen had managed to obtain and desired to retain.¹¹⁹

Origen also had the use of calligraphers or “girls trained for beautiful writing.” These calligraphers likely made copies for liturgical or special use, or perhaps copies for patrons or other important individuals. This is the same term used by Constantine in his request of fifty copies of Scripture.¹²⁰

One final piece of data from this passage is the fact that a patron (Ambrose) supplied the needed scribes for the work of Origen. The work of writing was an expensive task, especially to write at a prolific pace as Origen and other church leaders were often known to do. A well-to-do patron could allow the work to progress much more quickly, as the case is here with Origen supplied with at least 16 scribes and perhaps more. In addition to the labor, “Ambrose provided him with what was necessary for his nourishment and that of the stenographers who were assisting

¹¹⁹ For example, Origen acquired Symmachus’ works from Juliana (*Ecclesiastical History*, 6.17).

¹²⁰ Eusebius, *Vita Constantini*, 36.

him, and papyrus and the other costs.”¹²¹ Not an altogether inexpensive gift on behalf of Ambrose. This type of private patronage was essential to not only Christian scholarship, but also for many other scholarly endeavors in the broader Roman world. Scholarship was expensive and did not return financial rewards (not unlike the modern situation), patrons were required to subsidize the process.¹²² The author’s only potential financial benefit from the popularity of his works was the attraction of wealthy patrons who might support future projects.

Eusebius’ comments concerning Ambrose’s provision of multiple scribes has suggested to many the existence (or potential existence) of scriptoria within Christianity during the early centuries. G. Zuntz has argued that the bishopric of Alexandria possessed a scriptorium which was instrumental in copying biblical manuscripts.¹²³ Zuntz, however, has probably placed the scriptoria a bit too early in Christian history. More likely, scriptoria did not begin to appear until Christianity had the political safety and financial resources to undertake such large scribal projects. These circumstances did not appear until the early to mid fourth century and the conversion of Constantine. We then find Eusebius almost certainly managing a scriptorium in his multiple

¹²¹ Epiphanius, *Panarion*, 64.3.5.

¹²² “No author in antiquity had a significant financial interest in the sale of what he or she wrote, for there was no arrangement whereby profits accrued to an author through the enterprise of publishers and booksellers.” (Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 83.)

¹²³ G. Zuntz, *The Text of the Epistles: A Disquisition upon the Corpus Paulinum* (London: Oxford, 1953), 273.

publication projects, not the least of which was the completion of fifty Bibles at the emperor's request.

Conclusion

This paper, as long as it is, has really just begun to touch on the book culture of early Christianity. Literature played such an important role within early Christianity that a brief investigation such as this can hardly do the topic justice. For Christians truly are and always have been a people of the book, using books and writings for sacred writings, belief development, practical living advice, and identity formation.

We have seen that the book culture of early Christianity exhibited both continuity and discontinuity with the surrounding Greco-Roman culture. Christians were similar to the broader Greco-Roman in their choice of language for literature (Greek), materials used (primarily papyrus) and education and literacy levels. The book trade of early Christianity greatly matched that of the broader world by primarily using social networks for publishing and circulating texts. Christianity, however, was probably even more suited for this publishing task because of the existing, extensive social networks already formed through the church structures.

Scribal practices within early Christianity displayed the greatest variance from normal Greco-Roman scribal practices. While scribal

skills (handwriting, errors committed) fall within norms for Christian scribes, Christian scribes were distinctive in their use of abbreviations (for pietistic purposes), readers' markings (for oral delivery) and their chosen preference for the codex as a book form. Christian scribes are distinctive also in that they most often seem to come from users of the text, rather than just servant producers of the text.

Christians used texts to a greater extent than many of their contemporaries and in turn helped transform and shape the way texts were written, copied, circulated and used. The history of the book was forever changed by the innovations of early Christianity. As early Christians were shaped by the culture of the book, the culture of the book was in turn shaped by early Christianity.