

Early Christian Impresarios

By [Eamon Duffy](#)

Christianity and the Transformation of the Book: Origen, Eusebius, and the Library of Caesarea

by Anthony Grafton and Megan Williams

Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 367 pp., \$29.95

The Monk and the Book: Jerome and the Making of Christian Scholarship

by Megan Hale Williams

University of Chicago Press, 315 pp., \$45.00

These two books are built on a single perception. Early Christianity was more than a new religion: it brought with it a revolutionary shift in the information technology of the ancient world. That shift was to have implications for the cultural history of the world over the next two millennia at least as momentous as the invention of the Internet seems likely to have for the future. Like Judaism before it and Islam after it, Christianity is often described as "a religion of the Book." The phrase asserts both an abstraction—the centrality of authoritative sacred texts and their interpretation within the three Abrahamic religions—and also a simple concrete fact—the importance of a material object, the book, in the history and practice of all three traditions.

To modern readers, the phrase is bound to evoke images of the "book" as we know it, the family Bible, say, something printed (or, if ancient, written) on both sides of folded sheets of paper (or parchment), stitched in bundles between protective covers of a thicker and tougher material. But for ancient Israel, as for pagan Greece and Rome, the "book" implied no such thing. Instead, the word first and foremost denoted a literary unit inscribed on a long scroll or roll, formed from glued- or stitched-together membranes (initially of papyrus, later the tougher and more flexible parchment), whose contents were written in parallel columns at right angles to the length of the roll, normally on one side only. And this is the form in which the books of the Hebrew Bible are still read in synagogue worship.

The book roll, which had to be deliberately unfurled to be read, symbolized formality, permanence, and, in general, cultural, literary, or scientific worth. (And would long continue to do so: until 1849 the official file copies of British Acts of Parliament were inscribed on parchment rolls.) By contrast, for the people of the ancient world, writing on flat pages was essentially ephemeral. Students, lawyers, and administrators might jot notes on such pages or bundles of pages, and writers often composed their first drafts on them, but anything of enduring value, and all completed works of literature or science, anything that might be stored in a library, would be copied into a roll. Suetonius thought it an oddity worth recording that Julius Caesar sent his campaign dispatches to the Senate in the form of sheets of papyrus rather than rolls.

None of this is hard to understand. Our modern book form, the codex, in fact evolved

from the ancient equivalent of the stenographer's pad, bundles of wooden tablets linked with string hinges and coated with wax, on which information could be jotted with a stylus (often in shorthand). When the information was no longer needed, the wax could be heated and smoothed, and the tablets reused. The first papyrus and (especially) parchment books of pages were recyclable in just the same way, folded and stitched bundles written on with soluble ink that could be washed off to leave the pages blank again. To inscribe the words of Holy Scripture on such jotting pads would demean its sacred character and authority.

All the more extraordinary, therefore, that from its very first emergence Christianity deliberately chose the form of the codex rather than the roll for its sacred writings. The earliest surviving texts of the gospels and of the Epistles of Saint Paul are, without exception, copied into codices. The Gospel of Saint Mark, usually thought to be the earliest of the four canonical gospels, lacks its original ending, a fact hard to account for except by wear and tear on the final page of the master copy of a papyrus codex, and almost inexplicable if Mark's Gospel had been first issued in the form of a roll, for in that case the missing ending would have been at the inner and best-protected end.

Why should the new religion have adopted this down-market and unfashionable book technology? The codex, it is true, has obvious practical advantages. Being written on both sides of the page, it is more economical than the roll, it can be readily indexed, it can be leafed through quickly to find a particular place, and it is more robustly portable. But these practical advantages, which certainly contributed to its eventual adoption as the normative form of the book, do not adequately explain the early Christians' exclusive preference for the form, even for their copies of the Jewish scriptures, which must of course have been transcribed from rolls. Historians have speculated that *difference* from Judaism may have been the point—that the codex was adopted to distance the emergent Church from its origins within the religion of Israel, or perhaps in an attempt to signal that its foundational texts were indeed a sort of sacred stenography, the living transcript of apostolic experience, taken from the mouths of the first witnesses.

However that may be, until recently surprisingly little has been made of this momentous foundational shift to a new book technology. The history of the early Church has been studied without much reference to the material culture of book production and distribution, and the impact of the physical form of the earliest Christian writings on the evolution of Christian ideas and institutions has been little explored. In *Christianity and the Transformation of the Book*, Anthony Grafton and Megan Williams seek to rectify that omission, by exploring the work of two seminal figures in the history of third- and fourth-century Christianity, Origen of Alexandria and Eusebius of Caesarea, the innovative form of whose writings would profoundly shape the intellectual and material culture of the Roman Empire, soon to be Christianized, and, later, of medieval and early modern Europe.

Origen, born in Egypt toward the end of the second century, was the greatest biblical

scholar of the early Church, and, though posthumously tainted by suspicion of heresy, one of the most influential thinkers in the entire history of Christianity. The product of a persecuted Christian minority (his father was executed for his faith in AD 202), his own religious ardor expressed itself in awesome ascetical feats of fasting and self-denial that earned him the nickname Adamantius, "man of steel." Notoriously, he took literally the New Testament's praise of those who became "eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven" and castrated himself.

His religious zeal was matched by profound learning, not only in the Jewish and Christian scriptures, but in classical philosophy. Indeed, it is central to Grafton and Williams's portrayal of Origen that he is best understood not against the narrow background of official Church institutions, which were still in flux in his lifetime, but as belonging to the cultivated world of the late-classical philosopher. The practice of "philosophy" was a way of life, involving immersion in the composition and copying of texts, and in detailed philosophical, grammatical, and philological commentary on them. Libraries were vital to this process, and were accumulated by the gift, loan, and copying of texts. The scholar was necessarily part of a network of like-minded users and producers of texts, and needed the backing of a wealthy patron to finance the huge costs involved in acquiring and copying them.

Origen taught philosophy as well as Christian doctrine for a time in Alexandria (Grafton and Williams are skeptical of the claim of his biographer Eusebius that he was the official catechist of the diocese) but eventually settled at Caesarea in Palestine, a town with vigorous Jewish and pagan communities, under the patronage of a rich Roman, Ambrose. There they established a scriptorium and staff of scribes, some of whom must have been competent in Hebrew as well as Greek, and built up an extensive working library. Origen devoted himself to teaching and commenting on his basic texts, not primarily the Neoplatonic philosophers in whose works he had been grounded and in which he continued to school his students, but above all the Jewish and Christian scriptures, the fundamental sources for a new Christian "philosophy." In the religious mixing pot of third-century Palestine, pagan, Jewish, and Christian ideas jostled and clashed, and Origen's life's work was to make Christianity, rooted as it was in the "barbarian" world of the Hebrew scriptures, intelligible to itself and to others within the sophisticated third-century Greek intellectual world. He was the pioneering Christian translator between cultures, systematically striving to bring together the apparently incompatible thought-worlds of Moses and Plato, Jerusalem and Athens, and in the process, to vindicate Christian teaching against enemies within and without.

Like most Christians of his time, and like Orthodox Christians even today, Origen read the Old Testament in a Greek translation known as the Sep-tuagint, completed long before the Christian era, and before the normative Hebrew text had been stabilized. The Septuagint, therefore, often differed, sometimes significantly, from the Hebrew versions used by third-century (and modern) Jews. In Isaiah 7:14, for example, the Septuagint translated the Hebrew word *almah*, young woman, with the Greek *parthenos*, virgin, and in that form the text was crucial for Christian belief in and defense of the Virgin Birth. Inevitably, Christians suspected Jews of deliberately corrupting such texts to discredit Christian teaching.

Origen believed passionately in the inspired authority of the Septuagint, but he recognized that Jewish– Christian debate was hampered by the lack of an agreed-upon authoritative text. He set about remedying the situation in an awe-inspiring scholarly project which could only have been conceived in the light of Christian deployment of the codex. Having taught himself Hebrew with the help of local rabbis (the extent of his knowledge is debated), Origen compiled the most famous multivolume book of antiquity, the Hexapla ("Sixfold"). This was a complete edition of the Old Testament in six separate versions, set out in parallel columns across each double opening of a codex, three columns to each single page. On the extreme left was the Hebrew, next to that a phonetic rendering of the Hebrew in Greek letters, next to that a hyperliteral translation of the text into Greek by the Jewish convert Aquila, next to that a more idiomatic version by another Greek Jew, Symmachus, then the Septuagint, and, finally, on the extreme right, another modern Jewish-Greek version by Theodotion.

For poetic books like the Psalms, Origen added still other Greek versions (including an anonymous one he had found buried in a jar, like the Dead Sea Scrolls), the object of the whole exercise being to provide as many interpretative tools for a correct reading of the Septuagint as possible. He also edited the Septuagint text itself, adding symbols to indicate where it differed from the Hebrew, and supplying "missing" material from the best of the other versions. This corrected Septuagint text circulated separately, and was to prove immensely influential for centuries. The Hexapla dealt with a single Hebrew word or short phrase and its Greek cognates, one Hebrew word to a line, thereby inviting a microscopic comparison between the various texts. By Grafton and Williams's computation, the complete text probably occupied up to forty large codices.

It would be hard to exaggerate the revolutionary nature of Origen's project. No other ancient book had looked like this, no other ancient text had been edited with such immense elaboration, and for the first time all the sophistication of Greek philological and grammatical methods were applied to a "barbarian" book. But more than that, Origen's gigantic labors were simultaneously an ardent expression of his religious reverence for every shade of meaning in the words of the sacred text and a standing refutation of fundamentalism. The many-columned Hexapla was a visual monument to the elusiveness of meaning and the impossibility of fixing a single infallible text, and it physically embodied the endless labor of cross- and intercultural translation and interpretation. Origen's own practice as a commentator on scripture followed suit: though he took the Septuagint to be the divinely inspired scripture, he routinely employed what Grafton and Williams, following the scholar Adam Kamesar, call "an exegetical maximalism," commenting on other, differing, versions, Hebrew and Greek, as if they too conveyed divine meaning.

We know the Hexapla mainly from contemporary descriptions of it. Though considered one of the wonders of the scholarly world, it was probably just too big to be copied in its entirety, and although hexaplic texts of individual books of the Bible probably circulated, it and they have perished almost without trace. So far only fragments of two much later versions have been found, the most revealing of them, now in Cambridge, a single opening containing part of the text of Psalm 32, which was rescued in the nineteenth

century from the wastepaper storage room of a medieval Cairo synagogue. Most of Origen's own immense out-put of biblical commentary and doctrinal exposition has similarly perished, the victim of later suspicions of his orthodoxy. But not before they had been endlessly quarried and plagiarized by every other early Christian commentator on scripture: he had established patterns of thought and interpretation that would continue to have an effect for more than a millennium.

Origen's work was perpetuated in Caesarea. Though his books appear to have been dispersed after his death, the Beirut-born priest Pamphilius reestablished a theological school there, and devoted his ample personal fortune to creating a truly great library, the pride of which was the complete Hexapla and a complete collection of Origen's original writings. With the help of one of his own pupils, the Church historian Eusebius, Pamphilius wrote an elaborate defence of Origen's teaching (now mostly lost). After Pamphilius' death by martyrdom in 310, Eusebius, who eventually became bishop of the city, continued to expand the library, and launched a series of scholarly projects in which Origen's intellectual legacy was consolidated and developed.

Eusebius is one of the most remarkable figures in the fourth-century Church: far from heroic (he probably survived the persecution in which his master Pamphilius died by flight, or ignoble conformity), he was the first theorist of the Christianization of the *Pax Romana*: within two years of Pamphilius' death a Christian fellow traveler, Constantine, seized control of the empire, and Christianity became Rome's "most favored religion." Eusebius, a highly successful client of the powerful, would eventually become Constantine's official biographer and panegyrist. He saw in the emergence of a Christian emperor God's providential action: the gospel would march along the roads that imperial power had made. Though a clumsy writer, he was a tireless compiler and editor, and his great *Church History* is a treasure house of otherwise lost documents, not all of which Eusebius himself fully understood. Book Six of the *Church History* contains our fullest information about the life of Origen.

Grafton and Williams describe Eusebius as "a Christian impresario of the Codex," not merely because of his prodigious book-collecting (he built around Pamphilius' collection one of the finest libraries of antiquity, which would remain the greatest treasure of the diocese of Caesarea) but because of his innovations in book *production*. It was to Eusebius that Constantine turned to provide the sacred texts for the great churches he was establishing in the new center of empire at Byzantium, commissioning him to provide, from his own scriptorium or others, fifty great codices of the Bible. Two of these, Grafton and Williams speculate, may in fact survive, Codex Vaticanus (now, as its name implies, in Rome) and Codex Sinaiticus (now divided between libraries in Sinai, London, Leipzig, and St. Petersburg), in which the Septuagint text and the Greek New Testament are laid out, three or four columns to a page, in majestically large "Uncial" script, forming the first surviving Christian "lectern bibles."

Eusebius himself initiated a series of remarkable projects that Grafton and Williams argue were directly inspired by the Hexapla. The most significant of these was his universal chronicle of human history, presented in the form of a set of comparative

chronological tables, laid out across successive openings of a codex in the manner of the Hexapla, and setting key events derived from the records of all the civilizations of the known world alongside the chronology derived from the Bible.

Like earlier chroniclers, Eusebius wrestled with the problems that beset all attempts to reconcile the often legendary histories of the civilizations of the Middle East with a timeline derived from the narratives and genealogies of the Old Testament—for example, he disposed of the apparently immense and, in biblical terms, awkward antiquity of Egyptian civilization by suggesting that several of the dynasties of the Pharaohs had reigned contemporaneously. But where other Christian chronologers, in Eusebius' time and since, have attempted to establish around the Bible's timeline a single universal chronology of human history, Eusebius knew that this simply could not be done. The discrepancies could not all be resolved, and the best one could do was to privilege the biblical timeline, certainly, but then to set the others alongside it for comparison. Far from being a way "to make the ancient past neat and familiar," Eusebius' chronology "became a guide to the cosmopolitan variety of traditions that Christian historiography needed to take into account." His chronological tables were thus "a stunningly original work of scholarship," "history made visible." They would be adapted and updated for the Latin-speaking world by another great "impresario of the codex," Saint Jerome, and in that form would go on being used into modern times. Like the Hexapla, they embodied, a page at a glance, a living sense of the flux and uncertainty of divergent chronologies, and of the irreducible plurality of human history.

Christianity and the Book is a highly enjoyable and successful collaboration between a distinguished senior scholar (Grafton, a specialist in Renaissance cultural history, is chair of the Council of the Humanities and Henry Putnam University Professor of History at Princeton) and a very bright young historian. Drawing on a wealth of recent writing on the cultural setting of early Christianity (much of it inspired by the seminal work of Peter Brown), Grafton and Williams bring their own distinctive insistence on the centrality of innovations in book production and book distribution to the formation of momentous new patterns of thought. Their book is often speculative, and the pluralist values and objectives they attribute to their two heroes are sometimes suspiciously redolent of the twenty-first-century Western academy rather than of the ancient world. But the book succeeds in placing Origen and Eusebius firmly and illuminatingly against a world in which Christianity had not yet triumphed, and they convey vividly the intellectual daring involved in these pioneering attempts to articulate and define Christianity alongside and against the Jewish and the classical worldviews. In the process they provide a reminder—salutary and timely, from a European perspective, in an increasingly aggressive secularist climate—of how much Jewish and Christian thought patterns have contributed to shaping some of the most fundamental assumptions and directions of Western culture.

Megan Williams's first book, *The Monk and the Book*, deals with the career of Saint Jerome, one of the defining figures of Western Christianity. Born in the western Balkans a century after Origen's death and a generation after Constantine's conversion, Jerome was a brilliant intellectual grounded in Latin rhetoric. Chronically quarrelsome, and with a genius for turning friends into enemies second only to his genius as a textual critic and

translator, he was one of the most vivid and influential figures of the fourth and fifth centuries. His turbulent career took him to Asia Minor, Italy (where he served for three years as private secretary to Pope Damasus), Gaul, the Syrian desert, and, finally, Bethlehem, where he established both a convent for women (in which he settled some of the devout and learned Roman ladies whose wealth supported his studies) and a monastery for men, where he devoted himself to a life of startling austerity and to epoch-making work on the Bible.

Jerome was an outstanding biblical commentator whose writings on the Old Testament prophets and on the gospels would shape Latin thought for centuries. But his greatest achievement was a Latin translation of the Bible based not on the Greek of the Septuagint but on profound knowledge of the Hebrew text. Though sharing contemporary Christian suspicion of the Jews, he recognized the primacy of the Hebrew text of the Old Testament, and he incurred accusations of heretical "Judaizing" by insisting on the need for Christians to accept the "Hebrew verities," by which he meant not only the authentic text of the Hebrew Bible but also, on occasion, rabbinic commentary and interpretation.

Enormously indebted to Origen both as an editor and exegete, he nevertheless rejected Origen's doctrinal teaching and, characteristically, campaigned for its condemnation. Jerome insisted on the primary authority of the Old Testament books recognized as canonical by Jews (the Septuagint contained apocryphal books that survive only in Greek and hence were not in the Hebrew canon). In expounding the Bible he gave priority to the literal and historical sense of the Hebrew text over allegorical or spiritual interpretation (which, however, he also valued). These emphases would help separate the thought-world of Latin Christianity from that of the Greek East, always more receptive to the "spiritual" interpretation favored by Origen.

In Renaissance art Jerome is portrayed in two contrasting ways—the learned scholar in his book-filled study, at work on the text of the Bible, and the wild-eyed ascetic, half-naked in the desert, often beating his breast with a stone. Both images capture fundamental aspects of Jerome's career: in the Middle Ages he was considered a model for monks as well as for scholars and theologians. Megan Williams takes the two images as highlighting a troubling inconsistency in Jerome's own self-perception and self-presentation. Placing him, like Origen and Eusebius, whose work he quarried and translated extensively, in the world of the leisured scholar of late antiquity, Williams argues that Jerome had trouble reconciling the call to monasticism with the scholarly work of editor and translator. The monastic heroes of the desert whom Jerome aspired to imitate renounced all possessions, including books, and worked with their hands. He therefore needed a rhetorical frame, even a smokescreen, in which the enormously costly activities of the scholar, with his precious library and his staff of scribes and servants, was presented as a form of painful asceticism, akin to the weaving of rush baskets by which many of the desert monks earned their living.

In one of the most famous of his letters Jerome recounted a terrifying dream, in which he was hauled before the Judgment seat of Christ, and in which the Judge rejected him because he was not a Christian but "a Ciceronian." In the wake of the dream, Jerome claimed to have renounced all his classical learning and his study of literature, and resolved to devote himself purely to work for the gospel. Accordingly, the older Jerome

would present his labors on the text of the Bible not as literary delight (when younger he had praised the style of the biblical writers) but as backbreaking and uncongenial work, wrestling with the truth, in which style and enjoyment were irrelevancies or distractions.

This divide between Jerome the monk and Jerome the scholar, at root an opposition between profane culture and the demands of discipleship, would not, Williams argues, be resolved until later Benedictine monasticism established the congruence of learning and monastic discipline. To highlight Jerome's dilemma, she emphasizes—and as is often the case in books derived from doctoral theses, at times overemphasizes—the gap between appearance and reality in Jerome's career. Since monks repudiated property and luxury, she insists on the contrasting lavish comprehensiveness of Jerome's library at Bethlehem, claiming that he must have owned a copy of the Hexapla (extremely unlikely) and implying that he must have possessed copies of every book he can be shown to have used.

Jerome had Jewish teachers, he dictated most of his writings, and, as his eyesight deteriorated, he needed secretaries even to read to him. Williams suggests that all this, too, places him in a world of moneyed scholarship at odds with his monastic vocation, since all of these people would have had to be paid. There is clearly something in this, and we know that Jerome did in fact pay monks from other communities for copying work: he certainly must have had a significant income from somewhere. But Williams makes rather too much of this point. Jerome himself, as she herself shows, complained of his dependence on (presumably unpaid) monk-secretaries, whose other duties prevented them from giving him the time he needed. Friends and admirers who sought copies of his works were expected to supply scribes and materials themselves. This suggests a less lavish establishment at Bethlehem than Williams argues for, and accordingly a less stark contrast between Jerome's two vocations than she implies.

Nevertheless, she has written a fascinating study, which provides a series of striking insights into the career of one of the most colorful and influential figures in Christian antiquity. Jerome's Latin Bible would become the foundational text for the intellectual development of the West, providing words for the deepest aspirations and most intensely held convictions of an entire civilization. Williams's book does much to illumine the circumstances in which that fundamental text was produced, and reminds us that great ideas, like great people, have particular origins, and their own complex settings.

Start studying Early Christian Persecutions/ Hierarchy. Learn vocabulary, terms and more with flashcards, games and other study tools. The Romans' need to persecute Christians was based on all of these EXCEPT. Click card to see the definition. Tap card to see the definition. The Romans were jealous of the fact that the Christians had the Eucharist. Click again to see the term. Tap again to see the term. The Roman demands of Christians resulted in. Click card to see the definition. The earliest christian artifacts. My main purpose here, however, is not to complain about this but to encourage greater recognition of what these manuscripts have to offer to all of us who are interested in historical questions about early Christianity, whether we are scholars, students, or wider public. Let us begin by considering further their chronological significance. It is instructive to consider early Christian manuscripts in the context of other early physical evidence of Christianity. Early Christianity was more than a new religion: it brought with it a revolutionary shift in the information technology of the ancient world. Grafton and Williams describe Eusebius as a Christian impresario of the Codex, not merely because of his prodigious book-collecting (he built around Pamphilius's collection one of the finest libraries of antiquity, which would remain the greatest treasure of the diocese of Caesarea) but because of his innovations in book production. Early Christianity was predominantly urban; peasants on farms were deeply attached to old ways and followed the paganism favored by most aristocratic landowners. By 400 A.D. some landowners had converted and built churches on their property, providing a benefice for the priest, who might often be one of the magnate's servants. The history of Christianity concerns the Christian religion, Christian countries, and the Church with its various denominations, from the 1st century to the present. Christianity originated with the ministry of Jesus, a Jewish teacher and healer who proclaimed the imminent kingdom of God and was crucified c. AD 30-33 in Jerusalem in the Roman province of Judea. His followers believe that, according to the Gospels, he was the Son of God and that he died for the forgiveness of sins and was raised from