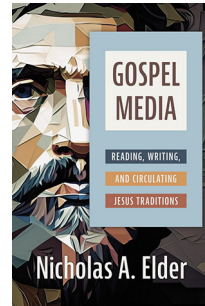


Book Review

Nicholas A. Elder.
Gospel Media: Reading, Writing, and Circulating Jesus Traditions.
Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2024. hb, xvii, 326,
\$49.99, £38.99. ISBN 978-0-8028-7921-9..

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There has been a leveling of scholarly perspectives in modern New Testament studies with regard to the manner in which the gospels were written and circulated. This has led to outdated assumptions concerning the ways in which those in the ancient world composed and published their texts. Nicholas Elder, assistant professor of New Testament at the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary, addresses many of these myths head on in his new book, *Gospel Media*. The central motivation and thesis of the work is to give greater nuance to ancient writing and publication conventions than are often presented by modern scholarship by looking at the evidence anew, which then “colorizes the media in which Jesus was represented” (1). The work is separated into three main parts; reading, writing, and circulating. Parts one (reading) and two (writing) contain three chapters each. Part three (circulating) contains two chapters with a conclusion functioning as a third chapter for that section. Each chapter (except for the final concluding chapter) begins by addressing a common “media myth” with a “media reality” in response.

In chapter one, “Silent and Vocalized Reading,” Elder presents the myth that “[r]eading was always or usually aloud” and responds with the reality that “[l]iterate persons read both silently and aloud” (7).

In the next chapter, “Solitary and Communal Reading,” the author gives a response to the myth that “[t]exts were always or usually engaged in communal reading event,” by stating the reality that “[r]eading was both a communal and solitary affair” (38).

Elder presents, in chapter three, “Reading the Gospels,” the myth that “[e]ach gospel was written to be experienced the same way,” and responds with the reality that “the gospels are different kinds of texts that made for different kinds of reading events” (79).

Ancient writing conventions are discussed in chapter four, “Writing by Hand.” Elder begins the chapter with the myth that “[p]ersons in antiquity did not often compose texts in their own hands,” and responds with the reality that the type of handwriting employed depended upon “the text’s genre and the author’s social context, literacy, and compositional preferences” (125).

Chapter five, “Writing by Mouth,” presents the myth that “[c]omposition always involved dictation, which was an act of freezing an oral discourse in written form,” and responds with the reality that “[c]omposition was an interplay between writing by hand and by mouth” (144).

Elder addresses ancient composition practices in chapter six, “Writing the Gospels.” The author begins the chapter with the myth that “[t]he gospels were all written using the same compositional practices,” and responds with the reality that “[t]he gospels were composed using

a variety of compositional practices” (172).

In chapter seven, “Publication and Circulation,” Elder presents the myth that “[t]exts were distributed following a ‘concentric circles’ model in which the discourse gained more influence and readers as it went systematically through these different social circles,” and responds with the reality that “[t]exts were distributed in a variety of different ways” (211).

The physical format of ancient books, whether roll or codex, is addressed in chapter eight, “Circulating the Gospels.” In this chapter Elder presents the myth that “[t]he gospels were all circulated the same way and in the same physical format, whether it be a codex or a roll,” and responds with the reality that “[t]he gospels . . . were circulated textually in a variety of socially constructed ways and physical forms” (236).

The final chapter summarizes the findings of each section and concludes by asserting that “[t]he gospels were not all read, written, and circulated the same way” (275).

There are a few minor areas in *Gospel Media* that this reviewer will find troubling. A few of the myths come across as overplayed or overemphasized without any acknowledgment given to the nuance presented by the original purveyor of the so-called myth. To give just one example, chapter seven highlights the work of Raymond Starr’s watershed article “The Circulation of Literary Texts in the Ancient World,” which models the Roman social convention of publication in a series of ever widening concentric circles. Elder presents his work as providing more modulation by noting that Starr’s “model does not apply equally to every kind of text” (214). The impression given by Elder is that Starr never addresses these issues, yet there is an entire segment of Starr’s

article in which he discusses ancient works that were released without the author’s consent or knowledge and compositions that were revised after they were released for circulation by the author (“The Circulation,” 218–219). In order to have Starr’s model “complexified” (214), Elder discusses both of these aspects in great detail throughout the remainder of the chapter.

Another issue with which this reviewer disagrees is that Elder makes subtle distinctions between the intended audiences of Mark as contrasted with, say, Matthew. It is argued that this is because Mark is often referred to as “notes” (*hypomnēmata*), the transcribed oral preaching of Peter, in the early Christian writings, thus pointing to an initial limited level of circulation (236–237). The second century doctor, Galen, is referenced as a comparandum for understanding ancient attitudes towards notes as something not meant for publication in contrast to a properly completed book (230). Yet Galen does not appear to make the physical form of the composition, that is, whether “notes” or a “book,” the distinction between a composition meant for private circulation or for publication. When Galen’s *On My Own Books* is given a closer reading, it becomes apparent that it is merely Galen’s purpose rather than the physical form of his compositions that governs whether he intends to publish. For example, Galen describes three compositions as “books” (*biblia*) that he had written specifically to be used by “a fellow student” for his personal use while giving demonstrations and with no thought for publication, not having his name affixed to them (*On My Own Books*, 17–18). This is nearly the same language Galen uses to describe his lecture “notes” (*hypomnēmata*) that were given to friends and pupils for their personal use (*On My Own Books*, 10–11). Using Galen as a source, Elder draws a distinction between

the Greek “*biblos*,” which he translates as a “book” proper, and “*biblia*,” which he translates as “document.” Because Matthew refers to itself as a “book” (*biblos*), and John refers to itself as a “document” (*biblia*), Elder argues that the intended audience and circulation of both Matthew and John must have been different (114–115). Galen uses the term “*biblia*,” however, to refer to all of his compositions, whether intended for publication or not, in his *On My Own Books* (8–10). Therefore, it is not clear how much one can infer from Galen’s use of the terms that describe the physical form of his writings and apply this to the gospels in determining their initial intended audience and breadth of circulation.

Despite the few minor issues discussed above, *Gospel Media* is a work that scholars, teachers, students, and all those interested in the subject should have in their libraries and use in their classrooms. It draws upon many primary sources that are brought to bear on the topics of ancient writing and publishing conventions. Though *Gospel Media* won’t completely replace earlier works such as Harry Gamble’s *Books and Readers in the Early Church*, Elder’s work should certainly be read alongside and in dialogue with many of these classics of the field. *Gospel Media* will likely become the go-to source for understanding the first-century writing and publication conventions.

