

In this week's Readers' Mailbag I deal with a question about how books - including the early Christian Gospels - were "published" in the ancient world. How were they "made public" and distributed in a world that didn't have printing presses and publishers and book stores? Here's the question and my response.

## **QUESTION**

Bart, this is a related but separate question-how would Mark's gospel first have been distributed? I understand that most who read it would be reading copies made by believers (with some adherent errors or in some cases deliberate changes), but at some point there was an original copy. What do we know about how such books got into circulation, so the process of copying and distributing them began? And how would it have differed from, let's say, the histories of Josephus or Tacitus?

## **RESPONSE**

This is an interesting and important question, an area of substantial scholarly research that is for the most part not known among the reading public, who for the most part have never thought about the question. But if it is mentioned to them, they tend to be interested.

For anyone who wants the full scoop, I think the best introduction can be found in Harry Gamble's study, Books and Readers in the Early Church (Yale University Press, 1997). Here's the short version:

Today, of course, there are standard ways of publishing books, but also a lot of variant ways (e.g., self-published books, and e-books, and ... other kinds of books are different from the kinds you would buy in Barnes & Noble). When I write a book, I ...

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