

## **Theological Librarianship at 10: A Long Look Back, a Long Look Forward**

Ten years ago, at the Annual Conference in Ottawa on June 28, 2008, this journal went live at around noon Eastern Daylight Time.<sup>1</sup> Editor David R. Stewart recalled the scene on the occasion of *Theological Librarianship*'s fifth anniversary:

It was during a Town Hall luncheon at the 58th Annual Conference... that the launch of the present publication occurred. There are two things I remember vividly about the occasion:

- a sense of anticipation, goodwill, and enthusiasm
- how in spite of our careful planning, the laptop on which were intending to press the “publish” button had timed-out when the moment of destiny arrived.<sup>2</sup>

This moment was both an end and a beginning.

### **The Birth of the Journal**

Pushing “publish” represented the end of a long period of planning and working and hoping. And it was by no means ATLA's first contribution to the academic discussion of issues surrounding theological librarianship. A festschrift honoring the organization's 50th anniversary appeared in 1996, containing essays about the history of the organization and ones devoted to issues of the field. Editor of the volume (and executive director of ATLA at the time) Albert Hurd wrote that the essays “testify to the diverse interest within the profession and our libraries. Together they portray who we are and what we have been about in practicing our profession.”<sup>3</sup> The 60th anniversary of ATLA was celebrated with the publication of the anthology *A Broadening Conversation*, edited by Melody Layton McMahan and David R. Stewart, which contained curated selections from the previous fifty-nine years of the *Proceedings*.<sup>4</sup>

In 2000, the Publications Interest Group first floated the idea of a journal for the association. As Andy Keck writes in a recent article:

The minutes from the 2000 meeting of ATLA's Publications Interest Group had one group member state that a “journal idea for the society fizzled because it seemed like extra work.” By 2001, the Publications Committee, as it was then called, again brought up the idea of an “online journal” in the context of considering whether some items then appearing in the *Newsletter* might actually form the basis for an “ATLA Quarterly” journal for theological librarianship. The minutes indicate some concern about the supply of articles and the “raised expectations” for a journal as opposed to a newsletter.<sup>5</sup>

In 2002, the Publications Committee proposed the idea of a guide with “a one-time supply of articles and essays to build scholarship in theological librarianship.”<sup>6</sup> Later they proposed an original paper series, which evolved into a proposal for a possible open-access title to be called *The Journal of Theological Bibliography*.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Summary of Proceedings, Sixty-Second Annual Conference of the American Theological Library Association* (2008), 5.

<sup>2</sup> David R. Stewart, “‘Quinquennial’ – Reflecting on TL's Fifth Anniversary,” *Theological Librarianship* 6, no. 2 (July 2013): iii.

<sup>3</sup> Albert E. Hurd, “Preface,” *The American Theological Library Association: Essays in Celebration of the First Fifty Years* (Evanston, Illinois: ATLA, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> Melody Layton McMahan and David R. Stewart, eds., *A Broadening Conversation: Classic Readings in Theological Librarianship* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> Andy Keck, “How Theological Librarianship Came to Be, and Came to Be Open-Access,” *Theological Librarianship* 10, no. 1 (October 2017): 40.

<sup>6</sup> Keck, 40.

<sup>7</sup> Keck, 40.

Meanwhile, members had expressed through surveys their desire for a professional journal devoted to the needs of the association. At the 2006 conference, Lynn Berg of New Brunswick Theological Seminary sponsored a roundtable on behalf of the Publications Committee titled “Development of a Theological Library Journal”; about forty members attended.<sup>8</sup> Ron Crown, who was at that time the editor of the *Journal of Religious and Theological Information*, made a presentation on the low number of contributions by librarians to academic journals — about forty percent of the thirty-two journals he analyzed. Then the participants shared their thoughts:

It was suggested that perhaps an ATLA journal could begin by publishing less often than quarterly, perhaps twice a year. . . . it was important the journal be referred. . . . it should contain a combination of practical as well as scholarly articles. . . . it could include columns or articles from the various groups within the organization. . . . certain components of the Newsletter could be moved to the journal, such as the *Diktuon* column and the reference reviews. . . . it was recommended that the journal be an open-access journal.<sup>9</sup>

The question of how to cultivate writing among members was first and foremost in attendees’ minds:

Ideas presented to encourage and support librarians in publishing included having sessions at the conference devoted to the generation of ideas, sessions where folks could bring in drafts of articles they are working on to get feedback from their colleagues, and establishing a mentoring process.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, in a moment that will bring a smile to anyone who knew Dennis Norlin, the minutes conclude: “Dennis closed out the meeting by expressing ATLA’s support for such a journal and telling us not to worry too much about paying for it.”<sup>11</sup>

The idea was that ATLA would launch both the as-yet-unnamed journal for the association and the *JTB*, but at the same conference it was announced that the *JTB* would be postponed. By November 2006, the decision had been made by the Publications Committee to combine the two ideas into a journal with the following scope:

This open access journal publishes essays, columns, critical reviews, bibliographic essays and peer-reviewed articles on various aspects of theological librarianship and its contribution to theological education.<sup>12</sup>

At the 2007 Annual Conference, a roundtable featuring “lively discussions” was facilitated by the Publications Committee to update everyone on the progress of the journal.<sup>13</sup> The *Proceedings* reported that “judging from how many of the attendees expressed an interest in contributing to the journal in some way, and from the caliber and variety of new ideas brought forward, it is evident that there is a great deal of enthusiasm surrounding this new project.”<sup>14</sup> In her personal reminiscences, Melody Layton McMahon recalled that the journal “went swimmingly from the start.”<sup>15</sup>

## The Life of the Journal

Since David R. Stewart pressed “publish,” *Theological Librarianship* has published twenty issues, counting this one. The twenty issues have contained forty-nine columns, fifty general essays, thirty-eight bibliographic essays, twenty-four peer-reviewed articles, 152 critical reviews, and six special forums (on electronic journals, library renovation, professional development, Catholic library issues, open access, and prison libraries.)

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<sup>8</sup> *Summary of Proceedings, Sixtieth Annual Conference of the American Theological Library Association* (2006), 281-285.

<sup>9</sup> *Summary of Proceedings* (2006), 281.

<sup>10</sup> *Summary of Proceedings* (2006), 281.

<sup>11</sup> *Summary of Proceedings* (2006), 281.

<sup>12</sup> *Summary of Proceedings* (2006), 284; Keck, 40.

<sup>13</sup> *Summary of Proceedings, Sixty-first Annual Conference of the American Theological Library Association* (2007), 231-232.

<sup>14</sup> *Summary of Proceedings* (2007), 232.

<sup>15</sup> Melody Layton McMahon, interview by Barnaby Hughes, July 26, 2018.

The journal's very first issue explained its reason for existence:

At a time like this — when it could readily be argued that there are already too many journals in publication — nobody should launch a new journal without being prepared to offer an explanation. Challenge accepted. *Theological Librarianship: An Online Journal of the American Theological Library Association* has before it some unique opportunities:

- To provide a clearinghouse or place of exchange for best practices within our profession.
- To encourage the writing dimension of our vocation.
- To create a venue for the publication of original research, bibliographic essays, reviews, opinion pieces, etc.<sup>16</sup>

Its guidelines for prospective authors are still salutary reading:

Submissions that most clearly adhere to the published instructions and are submitted in a timely fashion are more likely to receive priority for slots in the peer review process than are those that will obviously require extensive revision. Submission guidelines are not idle musings, but vital directions.<sup>17</sup>

It also included a guide to the composition of bibliographic essays, simultaneously one of the most difficult types of academic writing to compose and one of the most useful for librarians to read.<sup>18</sup> Other essays and articles in that first issue discussed digital repositories, web resources for the study of pseudoepigraphia and of the Middle Ages, Islamic resources, “action research,” accessibility of e-resources, New Testament studies, and using Facebook in libraries. There were five critical reviews.<sup>19</sup> Thus, the journal established at its very beginning consistent trends. There was a focus on talking about issues relevant to the profession; a desire to think through the implications of new technology; and an aim of publishing articles that would appeal to a variety of librarians and come from a variety of sources.<sup>20</sup>

Editorials frequently updated the readers on how many articles had been published and the amazing range of topics they covered. The first scholarly study of the journal's topics appeared recently, and the matter is well worth further exploration.<sup>21</sup> Rereading the journal's past nineteen issues in preparation for this special editorial, my anecdotal experience was one of breadth and variety.

Clicking on a back issue almost at random (8, no. 1), I found that we were concerned there about a culture of writing for the association, about libraries as publishers, about paying tribute to giants in the field, and about archives, hospitality, new trends, community involvement, expertise, ethics, European libraries, New Testament studies, and Adventist research. Plus, we reviewed resources for subject specialties and professional library literature.<sup>22</sup> You can repeat my experiment with another issue — although I warn you that you may end up re-reading entire back issues in the process. (In fact, do: Google Analytics will be pleased.)

The journal also became part of the life of ATLA over its first decade — as befits an organization that has always placed a high value on community. ATLA staff and journal editors reported in at the annual conference on the state of the

<sup>16</sup> Ron Crown and David R. Stewart, “Why Theological Librarianship?” *Theological Librarianship* 1, no. 1 (June 2008): 4.

<sup>17</sup> “A Note to Prospective Authors,” *Theological Librarianship* 1, no. 1 (June 2008): 5.

<sup>18</sup> Beth M. Sheppard, “The Art of the Bibliographic Essay,” *Theological Librarianship* 1, no. 1 (June 2008): 46-48.

<sup>19</sup> See <https://theolib.atla.com/theolib/issue/view/1> (2008).

<sup>20</sup> From the beginning, there was a desire to diversify authors and readership beyond ATLA members and beyond North America. For example, the editorial in *Theological Librarianship* 2, no. 1 (June 2009) makes a strong plea for global contributors. Melody Layton McMahon recalled both the international ambitions of the journal and the ongoing struggle to get people to submit peer-reviewed articles in an interview with Barnaby Hughes, July 26, 2018.

<sup>21</sup> Micah D. Saxton, “A Gentle Introduction to the Art of Topic Modeling Using Python,” *Theological Librarianship* 11, no. 1 (2018): 18-27.

<sup>22</sup> See <https://theolib.atla.com/theolib/issue/view/18> (2015).

journal, and the journal sponsored sessions and workshops dedicated to informing attendees and fostering that culture of writing that the founders had longed for.<sup>23</sup>

It also surveyed authors in 2011 to find out about their experience of the journal:

Whether your submission has been a bibliographic essay, review, column, essay, or peer-reviewed article, it's no exaggeration to say that your work has been the lifeblood of the journal, and we don't take what you have done for granted. With this in mind we have prepared a very simple online survey for all of our contributors to date. And the objective is simple: we want to know what we are doing well, and where we could improve.<sup>24</sup>

A similar survey of readers was done in 2015.<sup>25</sup>

The journal sponsored social events as well. To celebrate its launch in 2008, advisory board members were invited to join that conference's dinner cruise excursion as guests of ATLA.<sup>26</sup> At one point, friends of the journal held an evening social at the conference hotel — with cake.<sup>27</sup> And no one connected to the journal in 2014 can forget an evening spent at Café du Monde eating beignets covered with vast quantities of powdered sugar, courtesy of ATLA!

Of course, the journal went through changes. The founding editors of the journal and of its various sections all eventually rotated off, to be replaced by other dedicated members.<sup>28</sup> The publication schedule never *did* go to quarterly, but the journal altered its biannual timeline twice: first June/December, then July/January, now April/October. Always online and always open access, in 2013 we began to publish in ePub as well as PDF format.

In 2016 the diverse publishing efforts of the association were all collected under the umbrella of the ATLA Publishing Program.<sup>29</sup> This included *Theological Librarianship*, the long-standing *Newsletter* (now in blog format), *Theology Cataloging Bulletin*, the *Proceedings*, and the occasional monograph series that had launched in 2014 after our publishing series in conjunction with Scarecrow Press came to an end. With 11, no. 1 (2018), the journal moved to the current iteration (3.x) of OJS;<sup>30</sup> moving forward, the *Proceedings*, *TCB*, the monograph series, and the new *ATLA Yearbook* will also publish open

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<sup>23</sup> David Stewart noted the growing breadth of ATLA's writing culture in his editorial for vol. 8, no. 1: "At an ATLA conference presentation way back in 2003, I tried to make the case that our vocational community would be well served if more people wrote (and wrote well) about the work we do. Whether that case was persuasive or not I'll leave it for others to judge. But, going on twelve years later, there is a lot more writing about theological librarianship, due in no small part to the existence of 'this here journal.' And I'm more convinced than ever that this is a good thing." ("In Search of a 'Culture of Writing,'" *Theological Librarianship* 8, no. 1 [2015]: iii.) For examples of workshops and updates, see the *Summary of Proceedings* for the 65th conference (2012): 290; and for the 71st conference (2017): 1, 89-90. One also occurred at the 2018 conference, for which the proceedings have not yet been published.

<sup>24</sup> Email message to author, October 9, 2011.

<sup>25</sup> Email message to author, April 20, 2015.

<sup>26</sup> Email message to author, March 20, 2008: "Regarding Ottawa, we have been looking for a space in the conference schedule to acknowledge your contributions to the work of the new journal during this important first year, and have settled on the Thursday evening boat cruise event. You are invited to enjoy the cruise courtesy of the Editorial Board."

<sup>27</sup> Melody Layton McMahon, interview by Barnaby Hughes, July 26, 2018.

<sup>28</sup> A historical list of board members can be viewed at <https://theolib.atla.com/theolib/edboard> and the current board can be viewed at <https://theolib.atla.com/theolib/about/editorialTeam>. Any list runs the risk of leaving people out, but to my knowledge, in alphabetical order, the ATLA staff who have worked directly with the journal in some capacity are Tawny Burgess, Gillian Harrison Cain, Andy Carter, Sara Corkery, and Christine Fruin; the members and others who have served on the editorial board are Richard "Bo" Adams, Jr., Christopher Anderson, Miranda Bennett, Ron Crown, Gary Daught, Suzanne Estelle-Holmer, Barnaby Hughes, Terese Jerose, Andy Keck, Daniel Kolb, Melody Layton McMahon, Keegan Osinski, Beth Sheppard, Joel Schorn, David Stewart, and Jennifer Woodruff Tait.

<sup>29</sup> Miranda H. Bennett, Gary F. Daught, and Suzanne Estelle-Holmer, "A New Era for *Theological Librarianship*," *Theological Librarianship* 9, no. 2 (2016), iii. See also <https://www.atla.com/Members/benefits/Pages/ATLA-Publishing-Program.aspx>, accessed July 25, 2018.

<sup>30</sup> To the great relief of everyone who had struggled with previous iterations!

access through OJS.<sup>31</sup>

Now a coordinating council of the editors of all the ATLA publications, under the supervision of the Member Programs and Scholarly Communications Manager, directs the work of writing in and for the association — work that began long ago with the volunteer Publications Interest Group.<sup>32</sup> As a whole, ATLA Press has this mission:

ATLA Press publishes open access resources that:

- identify major works, issues of contention, and schools of thought that propel research in religion and theology
- develop knowledge and skills in librarianship, pedagogy, research methodology
- represent specialized topics of interest in religion and theology

in order to support:

- professionals engaged in librarianship and scholarly communication advancing scholarship in the theological and religious disciplines, including developing and strengthening connections that lead to innovative solutions for shared challenges and developing increasing capacities to work in a diverse and changing environment
- students, scholars, and information professions in robust scholarly communication in the fields of religion and theology
- students, scholars, and religious professionals in skillfully using information resources to create knowledge, grow in wisdom, and share the results of their research.<sup>33</sup>

## The Future of the Journal

No doubt you've heard the famous proverb about "leavin' off preachin' and goin' to meddlin'." Here is where I leave off writing history and go to remembering, as I was on the journal's advisory board from the beginning.

I remember a time before the journal, as I eagerly awaited the *Newsletter* in my postal mailbox and, eventually, as a PDF, before it evolved into its current attractive website. (Can I admit now, so many years later, that SharePoint sometimes defeated my ability to get onto the website and actually *read* the PDF?) I remember devouring the *Proceedings* when they arrived, and reading the essays in our 50th and 60th anniversary publications with interest. I remember countless emails from the intrepid editorial board keeping the advisory board up to date on the journal's progress toward launch and — once the journal began — letting us know of new developments, challenges, and celebrations.

Sadly, I was not in Ottawa (one of only three annual conferences I've missed since 2001), so I remember neither the boat cruise nor the laptop failing at the crucial moment. But I do remember years of reviewing articles, writing book reviews, attending workshops and roundtables, talking to the editors as they staffed tables in the exhibit hall, and even composing an essay on how to get theological librarians to write.<sup>34</sup>

*Theological Librarianship* at ten is in excellent shape. We have a solid history of publication on many issues relevant to the profession. We have always tried to appeal to a diverse readership and to help librarians get a handle on new trends and developments.<sup>35</sup> Members of the association and many ATLA staff members have given of their time and talents to write, read, edit, proof, and share.

<sup>31</sup> See <https://newsletter.atla.com/2018/2018-proceedings/>, July 31, 2018; <https://newsletter.atla.com/2018/papers-atla2018/>, June 5, 2018; and <https://newsletter.atla.com/2018/openaccess-plan/>, April 2, 2018.

<sup>32</sup> See <https://www.atla.com/Members/divisions/committees/Pages/ATLA-Press-Coordinating-Council.aspx>, accessed July 25, 2018.

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.atla.com/Members/benefits/Pages/ATLA-Publishing-Program.aspx>, accessed July 25, 2018.

<sup>34</sup> "Tales of an Editor: Helping Scholars to Write for the Public Audience," *Theological Librarianship* 9, no. 1 (2016): 33-37.

<sup>35</sup> For example, see Beth Sheppard, "Theological Librarian vs. Machine: Taking on the Amazon Alexa Show (with Some Reflections on the Future of the Profession)," *Theological Librarianship* vol. 10, no. 1 (2017): 8-23.

Having re-read the entire oeuvre of the journal in order to write this history, I will say that probably my favorite title is from the very first issue — Michelle Spomer’s “The Fine Art of Throwing Sheep.”<sup>36</sup> But my favorite essay, if that’s even possible, is probably Melody Layton McMahon’s 2010 piece “Theological Librarianship: An Unapologetic Apology.” Her words on theological librarianship as a vocation — a vocation into which I would fold the culture of writing for librarians the journal has helped develop — spoke to me then and speak for me now:

When I use the term vocation, I mean it not in the ordinary sense of an occupation, but that one is “called” or “summoned.” My vocation was to be a librarian... In 1998, I attended my first American Theological Library Association conference. Though I had been a member for much longer, on attending I knew I had found a spiritual home. Here I found that there were other folks who shared that same sense of vocation.<sup>37</sup>

May *Theological Librarianship* always help us discern our various vocations. I think that what Melody and David wrote about *A Broadening Conversation* describes us, too: “What we have wrought together here is, we believe, a fair and vivid representation of what has always been at the heart of the ATLA experience: good work and good people, engaged in rich conversation around topics that are both timely and timeless.”<sup>38</sup>

Jennifer Woodruff Tait  
Editor-in-Chief

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<sup>36</sup> Michelle Y. Spomer, “The Fine Art of Throwing Sheep: How Facebook Can Contribute to Librarianship and Community in Theological Institutions,” *Theological Librarianship* vol. 1, no. 1 (2008), 10-21.

<sup>37</sup> Melody Layton McMahon, “Theological Librarianship: An Unapologetic Apology,” vol. 3, no. 1 (2010): 7-14.

<sup>38</sup> McMahon and Stewart, “Introduction: Voices From the Attic,” *A Broadening Conversation*, xv.