

Conclusion

70 Years of ABTAPL and into the Future

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As ABTAPL marks its 70th Anniversary, the number 70 is not just a number but it holds rich meaning in both Confucian and Judaeo-Christian traditions.

In Confucian thought, the number 70 symbolises the age of true inner harmony. Confucius famously said in the *Analects of Confucius* (2:4), “At seventy, I could follow the dictates of my own heart; for what I desired no longer overstepped the boundaries of right” (Confucius and Waley 2005, 88). This signifies the attainment of complete moral freedom, where one’s actions naturally align with what is right and appropriate. Age 70 is thus viewed not merely as longevity but as the height of ethical maturity and self-integration.

In Judeo-Christian tradition, 70 carries profound symbolic weight. It represents completeness and the nations of the world, as seen in Genesis 10, which lists 70 descendants of Noah who became the founders of various nations after the flood. The number 70 is derived by counting the individual names of sons, grandsons and great grandsons listed throughout Genesis 10. In Exodus, 70 elders are appointed to assist Moses, representing shared wisdom and leadership (24:1 and 24:9) and the Spirit (Numbers 11:16–17).

It is a symbol of leadership, fullness, and the flowering of character and responsibility. It marks a threshold where deep experience becomes a source of guidance for others and a legacy for the future.

ABTAPL celebrates its 70th anniversary, a remarkable milestone that places it among the oldest theological library associations in the world. Its history predates even that of our European federal association, BETH (Bibliothèques Européennes de Théologie) with their foundation in 1973. Few other associations in our field have endured for so long, withstanding both challenges and triumphs. ABTAPL stands today with a legacy of leadership, resilience, and maturity.

We especially pay tribute to those who have poured their sweat and blood into the life of this association. Without their dedication and sacrifice, this legacy would not have been possible.

Admittedly, I cannot claim that this anniversary celebration will be grander than those of the past, for as we leave the Covid-19 pandemic years behind, we continue to find ourselves swimming against strong currents which call for continued perseverance and innovation by our members. The perseverance and labour of our members in recent years have been no less heroic.

The number of theological institutions is dwindling (James 2023, 24). Where theological libraries do survive, they are often absorbed into broader humanities faculties, losing their distinctive identity and subject expertise in the process (James 2023, 26). Meanwhile, the legacy of colonialism has cast a shadow over many book collections (Green 2022).

This is not a challenge unique to theology. Across the library and information sector, subject specialising is diminishing. Functional specialists such as reader services, digital support, research services, and reference management have gained popularity, understandably, given the demands of today's technological and research environments (Hoodless and Pinfield 2018, 345). However, the value of subject-specific expertise is increasingly overlooked, and our professionalism is often underappreciated. Many of us feel as though we are fighting to preserve our corner.

In spite of all these challenges, we must be cautious not to overgeneralise local trends. While theological librarianship may be in decline in some places, it is thriving in others. My sense of a less bright future for theological libraries is rooted mostly from a Western perspective. In contrast to the Western world, the global picture is far brighter and more hopeful. For example, despite the war in Ukraine, the demand for theological education there remains strong (Riley 2024, 203). As

churches and Christianity continue to find new voices and expressions in the Global South (Zurlo, Johnson, and Crossing 2020) libraries to support theological education are springing up there.

From its inception, ABTAPL has always had an international perspective (Powles 2022, 520). With this mindset, as Chair I have been committed to two clear agendas: open access and greater international engagement – the last of which is enshrined in our 2019 aims:

The aims of the Association shall be: i) to promote the study of library information science especially in the areas of theology, philosophy and cognate subjects; ii) to facilitate the work of theological and/or philosophical libraries and librarians in Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland; iii) to promote professional contacts with similar organisations throughout the world; iv) to advance the education of the public by promoting the work of libraries, especially in the areas of theology and/or philosophy (ABTAPL 2019).

To achieve this, we are taking bold steps towards becoming global citizens with this publication. It is one expression of our vision, documenting our history and present state in an open access format for global readership.

We also hope to make the *ABTAPL Bulletin* openly available through Atla's Open Press platform, making it searchable and accessible worldwide as well as on our current platform via Theology on the Web. Our e-book collection is discoverable. We are also in the process of digitising our archive materials.

To achieve this, we are deepening our collaboration with Atla and BETH on open access initiatives and have extended our partnerships to KTLA (Korean Theological Library Association).

Training remains another key priority. We are currently in discussions with Atla and ANZTLA to collaborate in developing manuals to replicate the *Guidelines for Theological Libraries* (Kerry and Cornell 1999), recognising that our accumulated skills and specialist knowledge can benefit new theological librarians and will continue to offer some online training sessions to BETH European colleagues.

The next decade will be rich with possibilities. Advancements in technology will support our mission and enable us to communicate and collaborate more effectively across borders.

As has always been the case, our history bears witness to it. We approach our future with humility, respect, and cultural sensitivity. This is our strength as an association. This is what sets us apart. And this is what we will continue to cultivate as we support theological libraries around the world to achieve our constitution.

As ABTAPL reaches its 70th anniversary in 2026, we pause to remember and honour the legacy of those who came before us, those whose vision, collegiality, and perseverance shaped ABTAPL into the thriving and collaborative network it is today.

ABTAPL Chairs, 1956–2026

YEAR	NAME	INSTITUTION
1956	Rev. A. Thomas	Dr. Williams' Library
1958	Rev. F. Courtney, S.J.	Heythrop College Library
1959	Mr. R. L. Collison	British Broadcasting Corporation Library
1960	Miss E. M. Edmonston	Sion College Library
1961	Mr. K. Garside	Kings College Library
1966	Rev. F. Courtney, S.J.	Heythrop College Library
1975	John Howard	New College Library, Edinburgh
1983	John Creasey	Dr. Williams' Library
1989	Margaret Ecclestone	Partnership House Library
1992	Judith Powles	Spurgeon's College
2008	Alan Linfield	London School of Theology
2014	Carol Reekie	Cambridge Theological Federation
2018	Rachel Champion	Luther King House
2019	Sally Gibbs	Regents Theological College
2020	Hannie Riley	Wycliffe Hall College

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