

I just finished the seventh edition of my textbook, The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings. I started working on it, for the first edition, in 1993 - so I've been at it for 25 years. Ouch. For this new revision, among other things, I've added an Excursus of particular relevance, on the "Digital Bible," written, luckily for all involved, not by me, but by my scholar-friend Jeff Siker, who has published, just this past year, the definitive book on it.

Here is what he says about it. (He is on the blog, so if anyone has any questions for him about it, or about anything else, ask away!)

The Digital Bible

Jeffrey Siker

The changing technology of writing and reading has always played a major role in the transmission and interpretation of the New Testament, from papyrus rolls to parchment codices to Gutenberg's printing press, and, finally, to our modern digital age. We are still learning how a digital screen, rather than a printed book, affects the way we read and understand. This applies to the Bible more than any other book, since no other has held (and continues to hold) the special place of the Bible within Christian tradition and Western culture in general. Indeed, the very word for "book" in Greek (*biblion*) is the root word for Bible.

Different technologies shape the reading experience in different ways. For example, in the Greco-Roman world, which provided the larger context for the rise of Christianity, only about 10% of the population, mostly in urban areas, knew how to read and write. This means that if the Apostle Paul sent a letter to a church (most likely written on papyrus sheets that were rolled up), it would have had to be read out loud for most people to learn what was in it. The letter would then have to be copied by hand by a scribe for it to circulate to a larger audience (see the discussion in chapter 2). With the advent of the codex (a bound book with writing on both sides of a page), all the writings of the Bible could be collected in a single volume; but in antiquity this was a very expensive and time-consuming undertaking. In the fourth century the emperor Constantine ordered fifty such copies of the Bible to be made for various important churches. Even then, though, there was no standard form of the text, nor was there to be for over a thousand years. Not until the late 15th century, when Gutenberg invented a printing press with movable type, did it become possible to print thousands upon thousands of exact copies of the same biblical text. Different editions of the Bible (mostly the Latin Vulgate, and then German and English versions, among others) kept appearing, making it still difficult for the text to become standardized (that is, there continued to be differences in the wording of the text). Still, this was a vast improvement on the situation before the invention of the printing press. Reading and publishing exploded, and it has been exploding ever since.

The digital age of the computer has brought with it an even more dynamic situation for the Bible. Two technologies, both introduced in 2007, have proved central for digital Bibles: the iPhone with its app store and the Kindle Reader. The most dominant Bible app has been YouVersion, a free program downloaded over 300 million times. It provides the Biblical text in over 1700 versions in more than 1100 languages (and growing), all within a few swipes and taps. The Kindle Reader, in turn, revolutionized the reading of digital books on larger

screens that were easier to read; the Reader can now store thousands of downloaded books.

The digital Bible technology available today allows the text to morph across different forms. Users can read text on screen, listen to audio of the Bible being read, watch a video cartoon of a biblical story, or stream a virtual bible study. Digital Bibles have thus proven to be convenient, portable, and versatile, all while providing a gateway to pursue both more academic and more confessional study of the Bible. And so, the Bible has become a regular source of discussion and reflection on social media of all kinds – whether on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, or any of thousands of blogs.

But with this new technology certain limitations also arise, three of which stand out: fragmentation, superficiality, and distraction. First, rather than appearing as a whole continuous text with a particular shape and form (beginning with Genesis and ending with Revelation), digital Bibles present one page of text at a time, with no real sense of literary context, let alone of where one book stands in relation to another. This can result in a very fragmented understanding of the Bible as a whole. Second, scientists who have studied eye movement during reading have shown that people tend to skim text on digital screens and thus tend not to read as deeply as readers of print text, who retain more content because the eyes slow down. Third, especially on smart phones, digital Bibles compete with a wide range of other programs and apps. Concentration on reading (or listening) becomes difficult when interrupted by a phone call, a text message, a pinged reminder, or any of the other bells and whistles that distract us all the time.

On the other hand, one advantage of digital Bibles is that they allow a user to compare multiple translations quickly. At an even more advanced academic level, scholars who work with the original languages are now able to access digital versions of ancient manuscripts. This, in turn, makes it easier compare the earliest versions of the Bible in their oldest forms. Thus, rather than focusing on producing one composite and, frankly, artificial text of some supposed original text, Digital Humanities opens up the possibilities of examining and analyzing different versions of the biblical text from different times and places. Some scholars are concerned that this will destabilize the biblical text, making it seem disunified rather than a solitary whole. Others claim that the stability and unity of the Bible are not actually inherent in the text but have been imposed on it from the outside (by scholars and other readers).

Digital Bibles are here to stay. They will likely continue to grow in popularity and use, even as the printed Bible continues to be the best-selling book year in and year out. Only time will tell how the advent of newer digital technologies will impact our understanding and use of the Jewish and Christian Scriptures.

For further reading:

Baron, Naomi. *Words Onscreen: The Fate of Reading in a Digital World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Clivaz, Claire ed. *Digital Humanities in Biblical, Early Jewish, and Early Christian Studies*. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2013.

Siker, Jeffrey S. *Liquid Scripture: The Bible in the Digital World*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017.



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