



From scrolls to scrolling: How technology has shaped our Bible reading



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I own a beautiful leather Bible, a gift, but these days I read Scripture from a screen far more often than I do from a book. When I look around my church family on a Sunday morning I am far from unusual in this. We have changed the way we encounter songs and hymns from books to projector screens; we seem to be changing the way we encounter Scripture from books to phone or tablet screens. We might ask whether this matters.

On the one hand, we might assert that it does not on the basis that the words are the same whatever we read them from. It is true that the words are, more or less, the same (I will return to that 'more or less'), but God created the physical universe and calls it very good, and so our relationship to, and use of, physical objects is not merely irrelevant. Physical form can matter and so the technology we use to encounter the biblical text can matter too. The words of Scripture are, of course, the vital thing, but the form the words are delivered in potentially shapes our relationship with the words.

There is a common way of dealing with this point that is mistaken: we find it easy to assume that the new – the iPad – is 'technology', whereas the old – the book – is just natural, and so makes no difference. Of course, this is false: a printed and bound book is as much a reading technology as a touchscreen tablet. We have, in fact, changed reading technologies several times in the history of the Christian church, and each time it has changed our view and use of Scripture.

It may be that 2 Timothy 4.13 is the least preached verse in the whole Pauline corpus.¹ 'When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the *biblia*, and above all the *membranai*.' The two untranslated

words both refer to reading technologies. The NRSV has 'also the books, and above all the parchments' but this is in danger of being misleading. *Biblion* has a root that relates to papyrus, but in general Greek usage refers to any and every document, however it is written, and whatever it is written on. So Paul – I'm not making claims about the authorship of 2 Timothy, but this verse is so personal that I am persuaded of the argument that even if most of the letter is pseudepigraphal, there is a kernel of original material here – Paul is asking for a cloak and some documents he left behind to be sent on to him – but then stresses the importance of his having the *membranai* that are among the documents.

Now, *membrana* means at root 'parchment', i.e. expensive and durable writing material made out of animal skin, as opposed to cheap stuff made out of papyrus; it may be just that, crudely put, Paul wants his hardback books especially because they cost him more money. There is a good argument, however, that *membrana*, although its origins are with parchment, gets used to mean something written in 'codex' form, as opposed to something written in 'scroll' form. A scroll is a long piece of papyrus or parchment that is rolled along to allow bits to be read; a codex is a series of sheets of papyrus or parchment (or even waxed wood) that are bound together at one edge – in our terms, a book. Paul wants all his library sent on, but particularly the books, not the scrolls.

This is interesting because the value is the wrong way up. Scrolls were the hardback books of the day; anything important was written on a scroll; books were jotters for students to practice in. One author recommends composing in a book, because material can be added in

more easily. But, he insists, when the work is finished, it should be copied on to a scroll. So why is Paul so worried about his books?

This gets even more confusing when we realise that this preference for books becomes entrenched in the early Christian community. Our forebears in the faith made a counter-cultural choice about their preferred reading technology; in a world that valued scrolls, they choose to prefer books. The Permanent Display collection of the British Library houses many treasures, including

excluding such books as Wisdom, Tobit, Judith, and Maccabees, but including almost all the church fathers down to Augustine in the fourth century and beyond. He includes Origen, with a bit of a question mark; for some reason he specifically excludes the Shepherd of Hermas. But most early Christian writings are, for Hugh, Scripture, just like Romans and John are Scripture.

Mention of Maccabees and so on might bring to mind a question students sometimes ask when studying the Reformation: what was the canon of the Old Testament before the sixteenth century, the Roman list – with Maccabees, et al. – or the Reformed list, without them? The most historically honest answer is that it was undefined; there was no canonical decision in the Western church. (The Greek church took a decision for the Septuagint, the Greek translation of a selection of Hebrew texts, and so did have a list.) There was a Jewish canon, which the Reformers would later adopt, but the Western Christian church had not made any formal decision. Interestingly, the Jewish canon is, in a sense, defined by reading technologies: our best understanding of the origins of the Hebrew canon turn on modes of storage of scrolls. The books that became regarded as canonical were kept on a different shelf, or in a different room, of the temple or synagogue library. Canonicity as a concept depends, under God, in part on the physicality of modes of reading technology.

What of the reformation commitment to *sola scriptura*? Too often this is talked about as if it was something new, but *sola scriptura* is a thirteenth-century doctrine, developed by Catholic theologians, in part to assert their position against the canon lawyers. Reformed reading of Scripture was indeed different from what had come before, but not because of a commitment to the authority of Scripture, nor even because of a commitment to the sole authority of Scripture. Historians talk about the Reformed commitment to ‘humanistic hermeneutics’. This is a practice of reading whole books in their original languages, rather than focusing on individual sentences, often enough in translation. Another change in reading technology was a significant part of this. When people had only handwritten books, and few of them, it is no surprise that they focused on particular sentences (we know that even the greatest medieval scholars accessed earlier writers through lists of significant sentences). When printed books became available they allowed us and encouraged us to read full texts.

Hugh wrote about three centuries before the Reformation; if we look just a century or so afterwards, the question of canon, which was so fluid for Hugh, had become rigid. I gave a lecture on questions of Scripture and interpretation as part of the celebrations of 400 years of the Baptist movement a few years ago in Oxford. Afterwards someone asked if any early Baptist had questioned the canon, had doubted whether the right books were in our Bibles? I could not think of (and have not since found) an example, and nor could anyone else in the room. Those Baptists were overthrowing the church-state link, rejecting established forms of church government, ignoring the set liturgy, murdering a king

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the Codex Sinaiticus, one of the earliest complete manuscripts of the New Testament. Amongst the many remarkable things about the Codex Sinaiticus is the fact that it is a codex, a book; something that important really should have been a scroll.

Why did early Christians, from Paul down, value books? We could think of various arguments: maybe they were cheaper, or more portable, for instance. Francis Watson argues instead, however, that it was to do with the form of reading technology a book, a codex, offered. We know that the earliest Christians made lists – lists of things Jesus had said; lists of verses in the Hebrew Scriptures that seemed to be prophecies of the life of Jesus, and so on. Books are good for lists; specifically, books are good for lists if you want to be able to look at the list in bits and pieces, not just in sequential order. A scroll is fine to read from item 1 to item 329; if you want to read item 2, then 312, then 154, then 83, then a book is far easier. And so books were good for the sort of material that was most valuable to the early Christians, their lists about the Lord. We might propose that Paul wanted his books particularly because they contained his lists, his crucial links to Jesus.

Whether for this reason or for some other, the Christian church embraced a new form of reading technology, the (handwritten) book. In just a few centuries we forgot that there was ever an option, and books became the only form of reading technology any of us knew. Handwritten books are, however, bulky; a whole Bible would be impossibly bulky. So books were shorter, or came in several parts. This meant that no-one owned a ‘Bible’. Most people were illiterate, of course, but someone who was able to read, and who happened to live somewhere with a library would find that the library contained the books we now call ‘biblical’ and others as well, without any clear division. And so they lacked anything like our developed sense of what is biblical and what is not.

We can see evidence for this in Hugh of St Victor’s *Didascalion*, a standard twelfth-century text, written as a guide to the art of reading for beginning students. The first three books treat reading in general; the latter three the reading of sacred Scripture. Hugh’s list of those books to be considered sacred Scripture is fascinating,

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1. My discussion of this verse owes much to a paper Prof Francis Watson gave at the 2012 Rutherford House Dogmatics Conference, due to be published in the proceedings of that conference.

even; they challenged and questioned everything – why did they not question the canon as well?

The answer lies again in reading technologies. In Hugh's library at St Victor all the biblical books and dozens of others sat on shelves together; there were no hard lines separating one from another. The early Baptists had big black leather printed books with 'Holy Bible' stamped on them in gilt. Even when they were trying to question everything, they were defeated by the givenness of a bookbinding. The invention of the printing press made 'the Bible' a possible object, and once it existed, it could not be questioned. Over two centuries or so, the canonical question had moved from being unimagined to being unimaginable.

Those of us who have grown up with printed Bibles know what 'a Bible' is; the contents are fixed and certain. And the very fixity of the contents – a product, notice, of the new reading technology – changed the way we related to the text again. The history of modern Christianity is in part a history of debates over the minutiae of biblical inspiration: in seventeenth-century Europe a debate arose about Hebrew vowel points. (Hebrew is written without any vowels, and in some cases the choice of vowel can change the meaning quite significantly; long after the Hebrew biblical texts were written, Jewish scribes called the Masoretes developed a system of marks to indicate which vowels should be included, and the question was asked, were these inspired by God, or not?) In the nineteenth century an eccentric Scot in exile in Geneva developed a theory of plenary verbal inspiration, arguing that every word was inspired; in the twentieth century some people in the USA came to the view that God would inspire one translation only in a given language, and so English speakers should read the King James Bible only. In every case, the questions are only imaginable because printing allows a fixed text.

I have a theory that proper fundamentalism depends on the printing press. A fundamentalist attitude to Scripture, that is, relies on the fixity of the printed text; if every Bible (or Qur'an, or whatever) is slightly different, a reader might become mad, bad and dangerous to know in some other direction, but they will never become a fundamentalist; that particular position is impossible if the text is unstable. Electronic Bibles, however, update regularly, correcting errors, or improving versions, and so they are unstable. Steve Jobs might just yet turn out to have killed American fundamentalism!

How will the move to electronic texts change our attitude to Scripture? I think, first, we will be forced to learn again the livingness of the text. A friend of mine, a Presbyterian pastor in the Highlands, is in the habit of reading from his Bible app when he conducts worship; his church uses the NIV. He told me recently of his horror as he began to read in church and realised the words had changed – his app had silently updated from the 1984 NIV to the 2011 NIV. And if that seems like a small thing, recall that this was the update to the gender-inclusive language version, something that conservative Presbyterian churches in the Highlands have not always been known to tolerate.

But to speak of the '1984 NIV' and the '2011 NIV' is still to be stuck in the technology of the printing press; an electronic version can update every week, or every day. A truly digital Bible can embrace every advance in textual scholarship the day it is made, or can review and update one book a month. A natively electronic text will be in a constant state of flux – as unstable as the copied texts that everyone in the Christian world worked with before the fifteenth century. And why stick with the NIV? My laptop app can have several windows open at once – I will often have an English translation, the Greek or Hebrew original, a commentary, and a Greek/Hebrew lexicon in front of me. I can see, immediately, the variations and the disputed translations. Textual

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difficulties can no longer be hidden by the imprimatur of an editorial committee; the artificial neatness imposed by the reading technology of the book will be lost, and we will know once again the fragile living Word with its variant readings and its hard-to-translate sentences.

Of course, going back to scrolling will make it harder to dot around the Scriptures; in my local church one member of our preaching team in particular will often invite us to turn quickly to this text then that one; all of our undergraduates sit there, thumbs flailing wildly, as they try to keep up on screen. This is a loss, perhaps: Paul especially wanted his *membranae*, his books, because scrolling is unwieldy. Is this an argument to resist the changing technology, to stick with books? No; all our various reading technologies have their limitations, and we have always modified and improved the technology to try to overcome the limitations.

The Masoretes decorated their scrolls with numbers and signs, indicating how far through the book we were, how many words, letters even, had passed and how many were to come. When we moved to the book, soon we had tables of correspondences, lists of contents, then chapter numbers and verse numbers and concordances to help us read the books. We invented punctuation. And footnotes. And cross-referencing systems. And ribbons, bound into the spine so we could keep a couple of places open at once. We produced concordances, and synopses. We pimped and modded our Bibles endlessly to make them high-octane performance machines.

I read from a screen because for me, using the app I use (which is powerful; it cost my university a lot of money) the gains outweigh the losses. There are losses, yes, but the app will update next week, and will overcome some of them. The way it updates, the new technology, will shape my engagement with Scripture – just as the printed book I purchased when newly converted in the late 1980s did, and just as the scrolls and codices that Paul poured over in Troas did for him.