

## Chapter 8: Questions and Further Questions

*Academic biblical scholars need to awaken to a range of communicative practices that extends far beyond the print media in which we typically subsist; one might well ask, "If a picture is worth a thousand words, why can't we have more illustrations and fewer multivolume sets in our commentaries?"*

A.K.M. Adam<sup>1</sup>

*Media have the same claim to reality as more tangible cultural artifacts: photographs, films, and computer applications are as real as airplanes and buildings.*

Jay David Bolter & Richard Grusin<sup>2</sup>

To this point, our method has been to start from a cultural feature and move outwards, first describing the digital cultural experience, demonstrating current or potential use of scripture that context, and reflecting on the implications for the nature and authority of scripture. This contextual theological reflection finds its strengths in remaining relevant to the culture addresses and imagining relationships that transcend traditional definitional boundaries. Yet these “probes” may remain unsatisfactory in addressing questions that arise from the categories and language and concerns of biblical and theological scholars. So as we conclude our study we’ll take a brief look at select questions that have found repetition in the current literature on the question of scripture in a digital age. Secondly, we’ll outline additional contextual probes that could equally have found their way into these pages had time and paper allowed. And finally we’ll write concluding thoughts.

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<sup>1</sup> Adam, “This Is Not a Bible,” 4.

<sup>2</sup> Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation*, 19.

## *Questions*

We have completed significant review of related literature in two separate venues: the theologies of scripture and the foundational literature of media ecology. The academic literature that integrates these two fields is brief and exists only in article or paper length treatments. Further, the question itself of scripture in a digital age is not only approached with varying assumptions theologically but similarly varying foundational approaches to media, of which media ecology is only one. Here we look at questions that have surfaced in literature that generally hold a concern for the authority of scripture and at engage (at least in part) a media ecological approach, as defined by citing: McLuhan, Postman, Ong, Carey or proponents of historical epochs of media, (such as Eisenstein or Innis). Particular attention will be paid to two academic symposia convened under the auspices of the American Bible Society, the most recent of which has published papers in 2004.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Direct literature on the topic of scripture in digital culture: Rodney J. Decker, "Communicating the Text in the Postmodern Ethos of Cyberspace: Cautions Regarding the Technology and the Text," in (presented at the Evangelical Theological Society, Eastern Regional Meeting, Meyerstown, PA, 1999); Ess, *Critical Thinking and the Bible in the Age of New Media*; Fortner, "New Paradigms for Bible Study"; Hodgson and Soukup, *From One Medium To Another*; Ben Witherington III, "Hearing the Hum in a Wired World: Preliminary Musings on Virtual Reality and Evangelical Education," in *Critical Thinking and the Bible in the Age of New Media*, ed. Charles Ess, Research Center for Scripture and Media of the American Bible Society (Dallas: University Press of America, 2004), 113-130; Susan Bachman and James Bachman, "Let the Reader Understand: Biblically Disciplined Thought in Light of the Interrogative Model of Reasoning," in *Critical Thinking and the Bible in the Age of New Media*, ed. Charles Ess, Research Center for Scripture and Media of the American Bible Society (Dallas: University Press of America, 2004), 113-130; Phil Mullins, "Media Ecology and the New Literacy," in *From One Medium To Another: Basic Issues For Communicating The Scripture In New Media*, ed. Robert Hodgson and Paul Soukup (New York: American Bible Society, 1997); Talstra, "On Scrolls and Screens"; Michael Palmer, "Scripture Study in the Age of New Media," in *Critical Thinking and the Bible in the Age of New Media*, ed. Charles Ess, Research Center for Scripture and Media of the American Bible Society (Dallas: University Press of America, 2004), 113-130; Fowler, Robert M, "The End of the Bible as We Know It: The Metamorphosis of the Biblical Traditions in the Electronic Age," in *Literary encounters with the reign of God*, ed. Sharon H. Ringe, 2004, 368; Robert Fowler, "The Fate of the Notion of Canon in the Electronic Age," in *Spring 1994 Meeting of the Westar Institute*, 1994, <http://homepages.bw.edu/~rfowler/pubs/canon/index.html>; Adam, "This Is Not a Bible"; Paul A Soukup, "Transforming the Sacred: The American Bible Society New Media Translations Project," *JMR* 3, no. 2 (2004): 101-118.

## **Question 1: Isn't a digital-cultural context inherently disembodied and its theologies susceptible to charges of Gnosticism?**

This question typically appears in the literature in the form of an assertion (or even assumption), with little additional argument to show its validity. Outside academic circles, anecdotal evidence shows popular preachers and writers make use of this argument regularly.<sup>4</sup> But we'll contend with it as articulated in trade publications, such as Concordia Seminary professors Susan and James Bachman's contribution to the American Bible Study Research Center for Scripture and Media 2000 conference, which is representative:

The way in which digital media foster virtual communities is one of the most serious problems facing the church in regard not only to the study of Scripture but also to the life of the Body of Christ. The pagan philosopher Aristotle wisely stressed the significance of *ethos*, personal character, in the rhetoric of human thought. Most Christian communities take seriously Christ's promise to be present among those who together gather in his Name. In the midst of the *ethos* created when people gather around the Word, Christians claim also to experience a real, not virtual, presence of their Lord. If communal wisdom guided by the Holy Spirit is a common life is crucial to right understanding of Scripture, than the ill-defined, relatively anonymous, and individualistic nature of the virtual communities fostered by digital media may work against achieving insight brought by life together in the Body of Christ and hence, against the notion of biblically disciplined thought.<sup>5</sup>

Charles Ess argues in more detail, particularly confronting early arguments by feminist Donna Haraway and others that show enthusiasm for "liberation in cyberspace," ostensibly using the online environment to leave gender bias behind. This is a "Cartesian theology" that promotes a dualism between mind and body that Ess dubs "cyber-gnosticism."<sup>6</sup> Biblical scholar Ben Witherington III shows more enthusiasm for the ideal that Ess rejects, viewing it as a realization

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<sup>4</sup> See for instance the 12 Feb 2009 interview with pastor Shane Higgs and associated feedback on the blog for Christianity Today's Leadership Journal. Shane Higgs and Brandon O'Brien, "Virtual Community and a Pixelated Gospel: Video Ur: Shane Higgs at NPC," *Our of Ur Blog: Christianity Today*, February 12, 2009, [http://blog.christianitytoday.com/outofur/archives/2009/02/video\\_ur\\_shane.html](http://blog.christianitytoday.com/outofur/archives/2009/02/video_ur_shane.html).

<sup>5</sup> Bachman and Bachman, "Let the Reader Understand," 128.

<sup>6</sup> Ess, *Critical Thinking and the Bible in the Age of New Media*, 34.

of “no longer Jew or Greek..slave or free...male or female” (Gal 3.28; Col 3.11), but still worries about misunderstandings that may result from “a disembodied voice.”<sup>7</sup>

The argument as presented fails at three points. First, the description of the digital cultural setting is inaccurate and therefore shifts the criticism to a sandy foundation. As we’ve described in our previous look at social media, online presence is not primarily anonymous. Facebook requires real names, and Amazon.com rewards them. In fact, online social media is rapidly replacing or updating their information systems with increasing ability to model real persons and relationships, carrying information about schools, ethnicity and gender, likes and dislikes, beliefs and group associations. To be fair, some of this scholarly analysis had only the benefit of earlier Internet iterations, some of which did encourage playful pseudonyms.<sup>8</sup> But this was to be expected for a technology in its infancy, a “toy-like” adoption trend. The same criticisms of individualism could be placed here. Early Internet technologies did not employ the same social and group features most sites do now (however this is generous—group conversation technologies via IRC, IM, Listserv, or USENET were integral to early Internet, even before widespread adoption of the WWW protocol, which allowed individual browsing and reading).<sup>9</sup>

But media ecology’s basic insights provide a stronger insight, namely 1) that media are natural extensions of human communicative functioning and 2) that new media do not replace previous media but impact their use. Whether from captivated or naysayer voices, the understanding that online interactions would *replace* rather than *extend* human functions is naive. While Innis, Carey, and McLuhan did show that time and space are collapsed in electric, electronic, and digital culture, human beings don’t use the ability to extend their presence as a

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<sup>7</sup> Witherington III, “Hearing the Hum in a Wired World,” 204.

<sup>8</sup> In 1996 I created a screen name called “raider708” that I used for a number of years to log into chat rooms and bulletin boards. The name had no relationship to my own name or identity—I picked it at random. The number addendum was an old telephone area code.

<sup>9</sup> These acronyms are generally only referred to or written about as abbreviations, but technically represent: IRC = “internet relay chat,” pre-cursor to the “chat room”; IM = “instant messenger,” originally things like ytalk, ICQ, AOL IM but today most commonly integrated into other modules, like Gmail or Facebook; Listserv = “list server,” an old style e-mail distribution group; USENET = “user” + “network”, the precursor to discussion boards.

primarily as a connection with people with whom they have no prior embodied interaction. Put as a picture: while we can imagine there does exist an unshaved internet junkie who lives in dark apartment littered only with pizza boxes and a glowing screen as access to digital friends he has never really seen—this is not how most of use internet social media. Instead, as we’ve previously shown, digital media extend the relationships *we already have*, whether family, friends, or church.<sup>10</sup> The difference is in sensory ratio—frequency of contact, elimination of distance as a barrier, and information cloud updates means that when we see each other in person, we can more deeply talk about “how the interview went” instead of having to ask first, “what’s new?” So we must say the descriptions of digital media as inherently impersonal, anonymous, and individualistic are inaccurate.

Secondly, the analysis of digital media as separating “mind and body” is identically and only fairly applied first to chirographic and print media. Only oral cultures retain a connection between the speech and the speaker. Writing effectively created the mechanism to separate the two, converting thoughts to objects of contemplation. Print intensified the distinction, and widespread literacy created an environmental medium that apparently became so invisible as to fool our scholars into charging the new media with allegations much older than they appear. Scripture in print is certainly from a media perspective, a “disembodied voice” as Witherington III would describe.

But lastly, we find a partial misapplication of the doctrine of the incarnation in these statements. To the extent that Incarnation informs our theological anthropology, we without a doubt gain a view of the body as Creation redeemed—defending against errors which would denigrate the body or see it as a “shell” for the human soul. The Resurrected Christ gives us hope for new life embodied, trapped between the eschatological Now and Forever.

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<sup>10</sup> As I write this, my new niece has recently been born in Washington DC, about 1000 miles away. However, I’ve been able to see her regularly via Skype, a video chat Internet application, which allows me to see her facial expressions, new baby clothes, and smiling new parents.

But this cannot be understood as a mandate for physical contact between believers as embodied any more than it mandates us to have physical contact with Jesus ourselves. *Res ipsa loquitur*—the incarnation of Jesus Christ is mediated to us regardless of whether Scripture is argued to be the very Word of God (So inerrantists) or a witness to the Word (So Barth, et al). In fact, the appeal to the “real, not virtual” presence of Christ via the Holy Spirit that the Bachmans’ make above seems to theologically indistinguishable—what would the *virtual* presence of Christ be like? “Virtual” here is a rhetorical flourish that communicates only disapproval and does distinguish the manner in which Christ’s presence is mediated.

A turn towards digital culture does require real questions, and careful inquiry along these lines promises better results. What does it mean for us that Christ is personally present but physically absent? Can we distinguish theologically between “personal” or “present” and “embodied?” What are the elements that create presence? In our mass society, we cannot privilege physical presence as a reaction to digital change—our bodies are too easily embodied in the Starbucks line or church congregation but hardly present or personal.

We are not arguing for a church that does not have physical proximity. But in view of media that is not impersonal, that extends and does not replace, that carries disembodied characteristics similar to print (the context of scripture for hundreds of years), and the incarnation best seen as it really relates to us: in mediation—we suggest the digital-cultural context of scripture is not inherently Gnostic, and in fact opens up fascinating new lines of inquiry on what it means to relate to each other and an invisible but real God.

**Question 2: Isn’t the concept of scriptural canon overwhelmed (threatened, relegated useless) by the digital context?**

This question could have as easily been posed *from* the context of digital culture; the category of “canon” in the theology of scripture neatly maps onto the cultural characteristic of

*hypertextuality*.<sup>11</sup> (By way of definition, Michael Heim describes hypertextuality as “nonsequential writing with free user movement;” Phil Mullins writes “from a phenomenological perspective, hypertextual artifacts accessed by the computer can be thought of as networks or webs of information.”<sup>12</sup>). But here we’ll address this question as it has been posed in current theological literature:

Much of the hypertext literature argues that canons are destabilized in a hypertextual cultural ecosystem. ... Great and inescapable books, even sacred texts like the Bible, have heretofore depended in part for their status upon the physical discreteness and stolidity of texts (which existed in print culture and its predecessors), upon a weak cultural sense of intertextuality, and upon the self-perceptions, as passive receptors (common in print culture), of those who use them.<sup>13</sup>

Robert Fortner makes much of the user control in a relationship with the text, one unguided by the church where all becomes “equally plausible, useful, and legitimate,” creating an “irrelevance of authority.”<sup>14</sup> Robert Fowler addresses the implications for the scriptural canon most directly, writing in 2004 about the “undoing of the canon and the authority of the Bible.”<sup>15</sup> He claimed that the digital environment undermines canon because 1) the written word is relativized by parallel audio and video 2) digital media are fluid and changing 3) all electronic texts are interconnected, placing no text at the center or the edges and 4) documents themselves do not have distinct beginnings or ends.<sup>16</sup> The situation is not necessarily new to history. Fowler writes,

Walter Ong and others have described how primary oral cultures adroitly slough off old memories that no longer serve useful purposes, thus maintaining

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<sup>11</sup> Although we’ve also touched this in our probes on social media and community midrash, and remix blurring the distinction between author and reader. As well, we should note that canon likely maps onto hypertextuality, but a discussion that began with cultural hypertextuality could also easily expand into recontextualization and meaning making (hermeneutics), analogical interpretation of the text, or further categories.

<sup>12</sup> Mullins, “Media Ecology and the New Literacy,” 305-6.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 320.; His reference to hypertext literature refers to such as Landow or Bolter.

<sup>14</sup> Fortner, “New Paradigms for Bible Study,” 39.

<sup>15</sup> Fowler remarkably has anticipated this questions as much as ten years earlier, presenting the earliest paper I’ve seen on the topic in 1994. See Fowler, “The Fate of the Notion of Canon in the Electronic Age.”

<sup>16</sup> Fowler, Robert M, “The End of the Bible as We Know It: The Metamorphosis of the Biblical Traditions in the Electronic Age,” 354.

homeostasis within the culture. Sloughing off traditions that are not longer relevant or useable is much more difficult, however, once everything is in writing. Writing is a blessing, because it preserves words forever. Writing is also a curse, because it preserves words forever! The biblical traditions have been in written form for two to three thousand years, and it is probably time for a good housecleaning.<sup>17</sup>

The description of the symptoms don't err. We must agree that the fixed canon of scripture is a foreign idea to the digital cultural context (as well as the wider concept of fixed literary canons). There are no voices so far that make any argument other than that the "fixed, authoritative, canonical text simply explodes into the ether."<sup>18</sup> Instead what varies is the theological diagnosis—namely, is this a threat or opportunity for the Christian faith?

Of the voices quoted above who directly have approached this issue, none view the trend in a negative light. Each has foundational assumptions in the liberal or post-liberal theological traditions. However, if our theological pre-commitments are generally evangelical, and the conclusions here are troubling. Given the lack of direct counter-discussion from evangelical sources, we move back to Kevin Vanhoozer's current proposal on the scriptural canon for Christian doctrine. He is contending, not with popular digital culture, but with the post-liberal academic conversation, but we can attempt to appropriate his arguments.

Vanhoozer acknowledges the academic criticisms of the failure of canon as threefold.<sup>19</sup> Historical challenges implicate the messy process of canonization and remaining disagreements among the great traditions. Ideological objections are postmodern in their suspicion of canon as an instrument for power and control and exclusion. Criteriological objections from those like William Abraham say the nature of scripture was never to reveal epistemic norms but be a faith-based means of grace for the church (in parallel with "materials, persons, and practices" of the church).

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 347.

<sup>18</sup> Richard Lanham, *The Electronic Word: Democracy, Technology, and the Arts* as quoted in Ibid., 354.

<sup>19</sup> The following paragraphs follow Vanhoozer, *The Drama Of Doctrine*, 140-6.



Each of these objections can be answered. Historic objections are overdrawn, with a common canonical core accepted by 200CE through today. Ideological objections can be constructively accepted and partially diffused by acknowledging the plurality of voices within the canon, but they are best addressed by viewing canon as a spiritual discipline of *self*-control that does not promote coercive power. And criteriological objections ignore the regular patristic appeals to scripture as norm, as well as establish a false choice between grace and truth. But why is canon important to retain under challenges from both academic voices and the coming popular digital shift?

The problems are ones of authority—where is the divine voice located (who or what speaks for God?)—and identity—how is the church in “relationship to the event that founded it and gave it its name: the gospel of Jesus Christ?”<sup>20</sup> The cultural-linguistic theologies have tried to locate these answers in the language and practices of the church while propositionalists remain tied to ideas and cognitive content. The first is the more promising for a digital venue—the active *filtering community* has already been presented as a context for scripture. But Vanhoozer warns that cultures do not have a stable center, and in fact, postmodern critics can rightly claim that [church] cultures are “as susceptible to deconstruction as texts.”<sup>21</sup> Instead of playing tradition and scripture off each other, however, Vanhoozer’s own formulation binds them together, affirming canon as a “theo-dramatic script” for the church. The “canonical practices” of the church *in the present* “exercise epistemic and existential authority in the life of Christians and the church.”<sup>22</sup>

We’ve already noted the present tense bodes well for a digital culture, and the key of applying Vanhoozer’s insights is not to force a bound set of Scripture such that resistance to hypertextuality is simply commanded against the cultural waterfall. Instead, we invoke *narrative* and *relationship* as a canonical practice. One can’t create a spoof YouTube moment or

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 221.

appreciate the re-mix of content unless one is familiar with the original story. Narrative adaptations of movies, TV shows, and novels appear regularly on the web, each linked through each other for multi-linear perspective. But the narrative core remains—filtering communities do not rate items highly that claim to have a narrative link to something but then don't display the attributes of that very thing.<sup>23</sup> Recall Vanhoozer's suggestions of canonical practices in two categories.<sup>24</sup> *The Practice of Looking: Interpreting With Christ* allows for figural/typological interpretation as a canonical practice in the church—consistent with hypertextual layers that are linked because they relate to a common core. *The Practice of Living: Praying With Christ* emphasizes the relational God as *abba* Father—a personal experience of God that transforms the imagination but has canonical significance, recalling God's transcendence, immanence, and covenantal communication with the reader/prayer. With a digital context that emphasizes interactive relationships through text in a way that print never could, a prayerful experience of hypertextual Scripture works towards retaining its identity.

These suggestions as practices to retain an emphasis on canon in a hypertextual environment are not put forward as solutions, only possibilities. As with every other age, there will be foundational assumptions that are actively countered by the set-apart people of God. This may be one of them.

**Question 3: Does the non-linear information/digital culture degrade our ability to interact with Scripture in a meaningful, scholarly, or critical way?**

This amalgamated question appears in various forms but worries generally that new media reduce the capacity for critical thought, especially in the “child[ren] of the digital generation.”<sup>25</sup> The question seems to be on the lips of anywhere ‘adults’ read literature—*The*

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<sup>23</sup> This scenario actually happens on sites like YouTube, where poorly created knock-offs or even items mis-labeled or titled as something they are not, receive downgrading ratings for the mismatched claim.

<sup>24</sup> Some of this was summarized in Chapter 2. Vanhoozer, *The Drama Of Doctrine*, 220-6.

<sup>25</sup> Palmer, “Scripture Study in the Age of New Media,” 237.

*Atlantic* asked in July/Aug 2008, “Is Google Making Us Stupid? What the Internet is doing to our brains.” Sticking to the concerns of biblical scholars, Rodney Decker complains, “In today’s cultural vortex of rapid technological change, half-truths and outright falsehoods swirl around us, buffeting our common sense while lifting our imaginations to new heights of revelry.”<sup>26</sup> Michael Palmer writes of church Bible studies in his early years, fondly recalling a living room live with personal interaction around the text—the “salient features of [which] ... are threatened and undermined by technological developments in the age of the new digital media.”<sup>27</sup> We briefly address aspects of these claims.

**The Book is integral to Christian thought.** Decker supports the threat from digital media with theological warrant:

The book is linear. ... Christianity, as Judaism before it, is a revealed religion. Its base is in revelation. From the first recorded revelation of God and his will to humanity—inscribed in stone by the finger of God—to the Torah, to the completed OT, to the incarnational revelation of the Son, to the writings which comprise our Greek testament, all assume propositional truth as the essence of communication.

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“The book, that stubbornly unelectric artifact of pure typography, possesses resources conducive to the flourishing of the soul. A thoughtful reading of the printed text orients one to a world of order, meaning, and the possibility of knowing truth.’ Indeed the concept of the book is a theological concept.”<sup>28</sup>

Decker requires us to ask: ‘does Christianity theologically require the book?’ The thrust of his argument is that God’s emphasis in history is on the written, because of its natural capacity to encourage rational thought. Unsurprisingly, media ecologist Neil Postman appears often in the footnotes of this paper. Postman’s pedagogical emphasis on the written word over other visual forms is picked up by Decker, who views the digital threat as yet another prong in the attack of postmodernity. Because our focus is not Postman, space does not allow constructively engaging his entire body of work. But Decker’s argument, as presented, struggles. His approach does not

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<sup>26</sup> Decker, “Communicating the Text in the Postmodern Ethos of Cyberspace.”

<sup>27</sup> Palmer, “Scripture Study in the Age of New Media,” 240.

<sup>28</sup> Decker, “Communicating the Text in the Postmodern Ethos of Cyberspace,” 5-7. The internal quote Decker cites as Groothius, Douglas. *The Soul in Cyber-Space*. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 74

take seriously the history of media, seeing little or no orality in the formation of current form of Christian scriptures, and even if so, unaware of the link between primary and tertiary orality of digital media. Changes in media technologies are “minor” in their effects. Further, his despair of hypertext as arguments presented non-linearly assumes a simple sender-receiver model of communication and with the Author of the Bible as God (surely the role of human authors increases the complexity) and humans as passive recipients that cannot construct meaning outside of the mode of presentation.<sup>29</sup> And finally, Decker’s does not grapple with non-modern/scientific modes of biblical interpretation, showing disdain for pre-Enlightenment study methods. Bible software, “encourages the user to ignore original contexts and be content with mere “pearl stringing” and “catch word” associations that are more akin to some ancient approaches to Scripture than to anything resembling legitimate exegesis.”<sup>30</sup>

**Digital media eliminates human interaction.** Palmer worries that the coming digital generation will not experience living room Bible studies, and links the relational and context with constructive thought. “Instruction by nurturing and mentoring more aptly define traditional Bible study as its best, and these educational strategies are in fact quite conducive to the development of critical thinking.”<sup>31</sup> He agrees that digital technologies can overcome educational models that are overly parochial or indoctrinating, as well as eliminate time and space barriers to wider and higher quality scholarship. But access to information cannot build the wisdom, he argues. The struggle of the argument is the base assumption—he pictures digital media as isolating and as a replacement for human interaction. The technologies of typographic print, paper making and book-binding used print-age Bible studies have become invisible.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 7, 10.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 12. That Decker makes the connection between context-word searches and the Jewish method of “pearl-stringing” scriptures by content is encouraging, but he rejects this method of interpretation. We might wonder how he treats this in examples of New Testament use of the Old Testament, such as Paul’s use of this method in Romans 3.

<sup>31</sup> Palmer, “Scripture Study in the Age of New Media,” 248.

<sup>32</sup> This is not to be uncharitable. In the next immediate section I’ll use a well-crafted question from Palmer. But his wider argument is a good example of some current scholarship that, wholly unaware of media ecological insights, illustrates how the issue of scripture in a digital age can be requires inter-disciplinary insight.

**Information gathering vs. information analysis.** Palmer, however, poses a helpful related issue when he asserts “New media, for all their potential to make available the best and most extensive biblical resources, encourage users to blur the distinction between the act of gathering information and the process of reflectively, contextually making sense of information.”<sup>33</sup> Here he makes use of philosopher Albert Borgmann, who worries that a wealth of available *information* provides the illusion of *knowledge*, creating a “deceptive sense of facility.”<sup>34</sup> Old Testament scholar Eep Talstra makes a similar distinction that valuably makes sense of the roles in the handling of texts (widely conceived): The Scribe (produces or copies), the Librarian (stores or distributes), the Scholar (analyzes), and the Reader (understands and acts).<sup>35</sup> Talstra asserts that digital technologies have easily improved the work of Scribe and Librarian, but have not shown us the capacity for Scholar or Reader—critical thought or interactive formation.<sup>36</sup>

This approach is the most constructive, and some results remain to be seen (Postman may indeed show that in an information world, special educational attention must be given to meaning analysis).<sup>37</sup> But neither Talstra nor Palmer show an awareness that the analytical tasks for the digital generation merge these two functions—Reader (information gathering) and Scholar (information processing)—into one: pattern recognition. While both remain distinct, the digital reader naturally learns to *analyze* trends *as she gathers* information—in an information space, visibility is relevance. Her interaction with Scripture then, might raise questions about the

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<sup>33</sup> Palmer, “Scripture Study in the Age of New Media,” 240.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 244. Citing Albert Borgmann, *Holding On to Reality: The Nature of Information at the Turn of the Millennium*, 1st ed. (University Of Chicago Press, 2000), 209.

<sup>35</sup> Talstra, “On Scrolls and Screens,” 292-5.

<sup>36</sup> We have footnoted in past chapters Talstra’s additional remarkable work using Old Testament textual critical examples to show the blending of the roles in the history of textual transmission/appropriation.

<sup>37</sup> He does, in fact, see the role of public education as reflexive—a “thermostat” for the current culture. Educational institutions should fluidly adjust to the common cultural mores by teaching contrast. See Neil Postman, *Teaching as a Conserving Activity*, 1979. and Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner, *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*, 1971..

traditional process of first understanding the text (“exegesis”) and secondly appropriating the text (“hermeneutics”), but this is to say there are new critical approaches, not that there are none.

**What is the role of the critical function?** We wouldn’t be naturally postmodern in our approach if we didn’t at least briefly question the definition or role of “critical thinking?” This is not to construct something new, but only to call into question simplistic or idealistic views of scholarly/analytical approaches to scripture as highest good. Recent approaches to Scripture have been careful to present humility in this regard. Telford Work reminds us that biblical scholars today must not only choose between recounting biblical history canonically or historically-critically, but within each choose between a myriad of variations. Kenton Sparks, even while defending historical-critical methods to evangelical scholars, takes a pause to write:

I do not believe for a moment that healthy critical theological interpretations of the biblical text necessarily require critical judgments about the text in question. Biblical criticism may answer many legitimate questions about the biblical text, such as who wrote it, when, and under what conditions. But the answers to these critical questions are not nonnegotiable prerequisites of all biblical interpretation. Indeed, if historical criticism were as important as that, no Christians living prior to the modern era could have read the Bible fruitfully. The idea that one must read the Bible critically, which is still popular in some circles, is no more sensible than a claim that only professional musicians can appreciate good music.<sup>38</sup>

### *Ways Forward: Further Contextual Probes*

This project, for time and length, only allowed three probes toward a theology of scripture from the digital cultural context: the collapse of space and time, the social media network, and the practice of remix. The possibilities have just begun here, and we should mention a number of ways that remain mostly unexplored, all of which have likely implications in the nature and authority of scripture:

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<sup>38</sup> Sparks, *God's Word in Human Words*, 168. We’re not trying equate general critical-thinking with historical-critical method, only showing that a variety of approaches can be valuable, and the mistake of privileging one approach can lead us to the mistake that there are no fruitful other approaches to Scripture, or even that other approaches will “destroy” the Christian faith (So Decker).

- **Wiki-Scripture.** A wiki is a collaborative online authoring environment that allows for mass collaborative knowledge management. Distinctly, “the collaborative process is mediated by the content being created - as opposed to being mediated by direct social interaction.” The most popular example for most is Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia which hosts over 13 million articles (only three million in English). Similar wiki-based collaborations exist for theology, such as *Theopedia*<sup>39</sup>. In his book on scripture *The Blue Parakeet*, biblical scholar Scot McKnight uses the provocative image of “wiki-scripture” to describe the collaborative interaction between the church and scripture.<sup>40</sup> Similarly fascinating is Open Source Theology, an experiment in communal contextual theologies.<sup>41</sup> Key questions include the role “the expert” in authoritative knowledge and theological understandings of the church’s relationship to Scripture.
- **Hypertextuality.** While we’ve spent a few pages on the question of canon and hypertextuality, much more could be done from the digital context, using George Landlow’s impressive series of three volumes on the subject: *Hypertext 1.0*, *Hypertext 2.0*, and *Hypertext 3.0*. Digital space is not non-linear as much as it is multi-linear. How does a multi-linear path (perhaps user controlled) through scripture compare to current uses of scripture (likely very well).
- **“Right-click”—drill and depth.** The “right-click” action of current Bible programs encourages access to complex definition and information sources based on a single word. What similarities or differences does this have to print concordances? How does instant recontextualization re-divide the text—and will keyword divisions obsolesce chapter/verse distinctions? Does this perpetuate a subject-object relationship between readers and words? Will tools appear that give semantic priority to sentences as units of meaning?
- **Status/Microblogging/Twitter.** A significant portion of the personal-information matrix is the *microblogging*, a one sentence (140 character) statement that often answers the question, “What am I doing right now?” At a micro-level, this potentially reflects a commodification of the human experience. At the macro-level it becomes a complex seismic detector for cultural memes which forward-thinking journalists are using as a news source.

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<sup>39</sup> Hosted at [www.theopedia.com](http://www.theopedia.com), though the site currently includes less than 2,000 articles.

<sup>40</sup> See Scot McKnight, *The Blue Parakeet: Rethinking How You Read the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008).

<sup>41</sup> See Perriman, “What is open source theology?” at [www.opensourcetheology.net](http://www.opensourcetheology.net). The two objectives of the site are, “To explore and promote the idea of an open-source theology. Is this a viable method for developing an applied, contextualized theology? What sort of rules would be needed? How does it relate to other forms of doing theology? The second objective is to implement the open-source model as part of, and in support of, a renewed mission to the emerging culture. Can we use OST to develop a belief-system - a rationality, a theology, a rhetoric, an ethos, a style - that will give intelligent, convincing, and powerful expression to the gospel within the emerging culture?”

How does the required pattern recognition skills relate to the exegesis of scriptural texts? Because it affirms the relationship between visibility and authority, how does this affect the ability of scripture to speak prophetically in community

- **Keyword search/Google.** Digital natives are already finding page numbers as irrelevant apparatus for locating information, in favor of unique keywords. The issues for scripture are multiple. Chapter and verse seems destined for obsolescence. More importantly is the effect on language, which will drive creative differentiation of within language frameworks—the *unique* is more visible (and therefore more authoritative) than the similar. Unique scriptural words likely become important hermeneutical keys to texts. Will we refer to pericopes as narratives via keywords? (“Turn to the ‘the judge and widow’”). Will texts that show internal contingency gain more visibility over textual coherence?
- **Tagging.** Digital natives struggle with a “either-or” taxonomy for information. This document does not need to be sorted into either this folder or that folder, but because it is digital, may be placed in both. “Tagging” has already replaced information hierarchies on major sites such as Gmail. Implications are far reaching. Does it help our understanding to make a forced choices between genre categories for this text? Does this make us more comfortable with understanding a text as addressing multiple audiences?
- **Pattern recognition.** A flood information forces human perception to resort to pattern recognition to create meaning, filtering and eliminating large amounts of data. But by what criteria? What internal and external characteristics authenticate material? How will the present-orientation relate to authorship and expertise? How do the aesthetic values of the web affect our perceptions of authoritative texts? Does digital culture rehabilitate a “self-authenticating” criteria of authority for scripture?
- **Image.** At the start of our study, we took care to focus on information culture at the expense of image culture—a fundamental digital building block. The American Bible Society studies on new media raise particularly good questions such as, the affect of three-dimensional immersive environments on mental modeling and learning, faithful translation of scriptural narrative to digital video, visual branding for identity, and so on.
- **Global Contexts.** This study, referencing data from the Pew Internet and American Life Project, has remained in context of an emerging American culture. While one surmises some similar contexts might be found elsewhere in the Gutenberg-West, the history of media has several major global variations. For the East (China, Japan, Korea, and so on) the development of logographic (rather than phonetic) signs for language, and the much earlier use of block printing are significant—and digital culture is flourishing. For



the Global South (Africa, South America, and so on), we find mobile phones overtaking areas that never widely installed landline phones—is this a new orality without the residue of print? The potential is significant.

### *The Authority of Presence*

This study has been driven from the inside—a curiosity about how the nature of scripture is being and will be perceived in digital culture. We started with practice and use, and made tentative statements about the nature of scripture. Yet the next step from nature is authority. Suggestions here on the authority of scripture have been found throughout, but tentative and somewhat implicit. This is not least because of the author’s concern to link media effects and authority. While suggestions on the nature of scripture as modified by the medium seem within reach, suggestions on authority seem to overreach unless one subscribes to a hard determinism in effects. However, by way of concluding thoughts, here is a summary thread through the discussion of authority as it relates to what we’ve discussed. From the digital context, there is a link between authority and presence.

Kevin Vanhoozer seeks to hold a high view of canonical authority while praising a turn to practice rather than an abstract or material perspective on scriptural authority. “Canonical practices exercise epistemic and existential authority in the life of Christians and the church,” he writes.<sup>42</sup> In a sea of information, nothing is relevant that is not visible. Ten million hits on a search engine matter only if they are seen. Functionally, what “rises to the top” is what exists. The question on how the canonical scriptures exercise authority is hinged on how the scriptures are made visible or present in the life of the church.

We’ve addressed this when we suggested the church as *filtering community*, that is, the community of “readers” (but also scholars, librarians, and authors!) who decides what does and what does not rise to the top. In this sense the church is prior to scripture not only in canonical

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<sup>42</sup> Vanhoozer, *The Drama Of Doctrine*, 221.

formation, but in the continual making-present of the text in the present, not the past. The church itself can shape this task according to its own bias or sinfulness. Just as, for the history of the church, segments of the church have accused others of “canon within a canon” or giving priority authority to certain texts, so the filtering community easily gives visibility some scripture while allowing other scripture to fall from view.<sup>43</sup> Or the church can fail at the task. To what extent do scientific manuals or online clips of People magazine or home-improvement tips dominate the socially mediated conversation of the church, at the expense of the text?<sup>44</sup>

But is simplistic to leave the statement above that the “church is prior to scripture”—for though it mediates the presence of the text, the presence of text changes the community. Texts that exemplify and command forgiveness not only impact the spiritual formation of the community, but give rise to the virtue of forgiveness in the process of meme selection. The filtering community is the scripture-formed community. And this is consistent with scripture becoming, not a deposit or place, but an *environment*. As an environment of language, scripture gives us shared narrative and shared semiotic pool that is uses to tell stories about and name new things. The authority of the text is as a present pool of resources for cultural description. This is not that different than Stanley Hauerwas’ “story-formed community” that depends on the frequency of re-telling in order to shape identity both corporately and individually.<sup>45</sup> In a digital culture, the present of the text does not require the return to sacred space or liturgy, but brings it to us. It is the environment we live in.

And we interact with this environment. In a culture of digital *remix*, the scripture authors us as we author it. Again, this isn’t to suggest that remixes can stand as identical to the canonical

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<sup>43</sup> Interestingly, this effect, given information technology, in theory could become measureable. For instance, we could examine a filtering community and easily produce a graph that shows how often a text concerning Jesus is floated to the top versus something characteristically Pauline.

<sup>44</sup> Or books *about* the text? Does the Christian bookstore effect—inspirational books as the primary text for the church—become amplified in certain filtering communities?

<sup>45</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, “A Story-Formed Community: Reflections on Watership Down,” in *Community of Character: Towards a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977).

text, but as midrash and torah, stand linked. For a digital native, to remix the text is to learn the text, to integrate the text, to adopt (by adapting) the text, to apply the text, to repeat the text, and to reinforce the visibility of the text. This is epistemic and existential authority. And it depends on the visibility of the text, which cannot be assumed.

For digital culture, the visibility of the text is equivalent to the presence of the text, which makes authoritative interaction with the text possible.

### *Final Words*

What have we done? In a sea of information, it may feel as if we have not set out far past the beach. The original goal was this: “I hope to show that the cultural shift from print media to digital media (and particularly the sub-stream of digital information) first changes the *practices* of the church and its *use* of scripture in new media environments, which therefore cannot do any less but modify the church's perception of the nature (and therefore the authority) of scripture.” In Chapter 1, we set out to build some definitions, “digital native” and “digital immigrant,” “toy, tool, environment,” and the header of contextual theology. Chapter 2 surveyed the history of Christian thought on the doctrines of scripture, providing a pool of resources for further discussion, and suggesting that differing theological formulations don't result from human progression or a change in God's revelation, but shifts in the cultural context. Chapter 3 introduced media ecology as a theory group, with particular attention to Marshall McLuhan and Walter Ong.

Marshall McLuhan arguably spent more of his time insisting that there *was* an unseen effect of media on perception and knowledge than explaining how that effect practically manifested. Like fish in water, he insisted that anti-environments were needed jolt us to our senses. So Chapter 4 asked, “If scripture is not a book, then what is it?” It used a history of

media approach to show the progression of scriptural media through time, and concluded theologically that “scripture is the mediated (that is, in creation) revelation of the incarnation of Jesus Christ and its illocutionary intent in salvation-history.”

Chapters 5-8 were probes from digital culture towards the nature of scripture—each beginning at a ground level of the digital cultural-cultural context. Chapter 5 described the digital native’s collapsed perception of time and space, and suggested that scripture is *present* in orientation. Chapter 6 surveyed social media as a model for a relationship between scripture and the church, defining the church as *filtering community* that is recontextualized to scripture, and suggests new modes of scriptural authority as it discerns and is discerned. And Chapter 7 visits digital remix of scripture as a mode of knowing and identity formation. Finally, Chapter 8 explores several questions from some current academic literature, suggests multiple ways forward, and reviews the thread of authority that has appeared throughout in our discussion on the nature of scripture.

Time will tell whether our explorations here will be cogent for the coming times. The coming members of the church currently text message 4,000 times monthly, use millions of instantly accessible Wikipedia pages, and constantly remix content. What theologies will they generate? The insights of McLuhan and Ong’s media ecology to this point have seemingly had some prophetic value for the beginning of the digital information age. Perhaps these extensions of their words will take us a bit further. And maybe today there is a curious future theologian in Orlando, Florida, riding Spaceship Earth, and wondering what tomorrow holds.