

SCRIPTURE IN A DIGITAL CONTEXT:
EXPLORATIONS IN MEDIA ECOLOGY AND THEOLOGY

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Modern communications have drastically altered the ordinary term of experience and consciousness, the ordinary structures of interest and feeling, the normal sense of being alive, of having social relations
James Carey

Whatever specific changes develop over the years to come, the advent of electronic media will catalyze a complex of circumstances that biblical scholars in the age of printing have successfully avoided so far
A.K.A. Adam

As forms of communication evolve there is a direct relationship to theology
Geraldine E. Forsberg

A theology of Scripture has the power not only to appreciate, defend, and preserve the best of Scripture's uses in the Church (and this would be no small accomplishment), but also to spawn and inform new uses for the Bible in the life of the Church.
Telford Work

Digital culture is upon us and is inducing us to see our world and ourselves in new ways. ... This may be the ultimate democracy, but it jars the sensibility of people who have staked their lives on the certainty of Scripture as a foundation in an otherwise chaotic world, and who have bet their lives on an unquestioned singular story of God's reaching out to his creation to help it recognize a singular truth and, in turn, declare it so. But this is the new culture now under construction, on that—through its metaphorical redefinition of reality—will reconfigure the symbolic world of humankind and the methodology for recognizing truth. Yet it is this new symbolic world that Scripture and those who believe it must address if we are to make the Word of God relevant to humankind.
It is a new Babel.
Robert S. Fortner

In Jesus Christ, there is no distance or separation between the medium and the message: it is the one case where we can say that the medium and the message are fully one and the same.
Marshall McLuhan



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Introduction

It's possible that in fifth grade, I lived every kid's dream. My dad was ordered to the (now dismantled) Orlando Naval Training Station, and my sister and I moved to Florida with gentle expectations of warm weather and pink flamingos. But our first Christmas shattered our easy-kid simplicity. Grandma had bought the family a curious set of four, plastic identification cards. Central Florida was about to teach me a new lesson in dreaming, setting the bar about as high as it goes. Our Walt Disney World annual passes were about to change everything.

It seems likely that kids choose favorite rides ("attractions") at Disney, and while I'd guess Pirates of the Caribbean (*yo-ho yo-ho a pirate's life for me*) and Space Mountain make the top five for most, we were never the quite the typical family. Our library at home reflected my father's education—four masters degrees that somehow bridged that classic combo of theology and nuclear engineering. My mother knew just about everything there was to know about family nutrition and medical care and tended her own book garden at the other end of the house. Bookcases balanced our house like scale weights. Was it any wonder that I deemed EPCOT Center—Disney's brainy educational theme park—as my fifth-grade favorite? And though there were learning pavilions on fossil fuels and Scandinavian culture, my preferred destination was the icon of EPCOT itself—the glittering white globe dubbed as Spaceship Earth.

It wasn't particularly that the Ray Bradbury-conceived sphere was 18-stories high, or that the triangular surface tiles adhere to a tidy geometric example of a *pentakis dodecahedron*. No, I liked the inside. Kids that hadn't visited Disney World sometimes envisioned Spaceship Earth as a giant roller coaster packed with dangerous curves. I knew better. Aside from low lighting, the biggest danger presented by the slow-moving Omnimover System (wheelchair accessible) was being scared of Neolithic history.

That's because our Time Machine (and they *were* time machines) was about to take us on a journey through the history of human communication. Under the narrative care of Walter Cronkite, we were whisked from humid 1989 to the dawn of time, where animatronic cavemen invent spoken language and scrawl on stone walls. Nearby, Pharaoh gives royal-approval to hieroglyphic writing on papyrus, and ship-bound Phoenician traders add phonetic sounds to glyphs and increase their profit margins. Greek actor-philosophers confer on stage, and we can smell the harsh scent of charred ruins as we watch the sacking of Rome and the collapse of ancient communication structures.

And this is how it went—each scene magic and fleeting, timeless and particular. I sat eyes-wide as Islamic scholars discussed astronomy, and a monk sat sleeping in his Scriptorium, as Gutenberg pulled a sheet from his press, and New York newsies pulled papers from their stacks. The telephone and telegraph, radio and TV—I was being introduced to a living storybook that I would practically memorize. And as our journey slid past something they introduced as "fiber-optics," I daydreamed of days where I too would ignore my Mom on video conference, kissing the futuristic robot children nighty-night.

It's been 20 years since my first ride in Spaceship Earth. Much of that time has been far from Orlando—as an Information Technology professional, a campus minister at the University of Illinois Urbana Champaign, and now these few years in academic hiatus. When I arrived in my Chicago masters program, I knew I needed to study theology from the context of my

culture—my real world of instant messaging and digital audio editing. But despite remarkable professors, I struggled to find voices that shared my view of the world-gone-digital. The discovery of “media ecology” as a field of study, with its sensitivities to factors deeply human and technological both—brought a flush of fascination. One library afternoon, while sitting reading a collection of essays on the historiography of communications media, I realized why my heart pounded and I turned pages like a mystery novel. I was re-living the story told by my Omnimover time machine, and reinforcing the suspicion that this might be the most important narrative of human existence.

Except for the *Most* Important story told of human existence, which for me must be the Scriptures—the revealed Word of the life-changing Maker of the Universe. For me, reconciling these two stories became the passion. The largest questions were the ones that I hadn’t even heard yet posed, namely, how does the Bible exist and work in my digitally mediated world? What is the Holy Book in a post-book environment?

It seems likely that masters-degrees kids choose their favorite rides, and this one—the intersection of digital media and Christian theology—will remain so-designated for life. The sphere is certainly big enough.

This is only my first attempt at answering my questions (I pray it won’t be my last), and it is for my former friends and students at the University of Illinois. They barely remember what it was like before Facebook (never mind e-mail). They are true digital natives.

Chris Ridgeway
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