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The Ontology of the Digital Bible: A Theological Critique of Computational Hermeneutics

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ABSTRACT

The digitization of the Bible has marked a pivotal transformation in Christian engagement with the text since the Reformation; however, its theological ramifications remain inadequately explored. The paper is a critical analysis of how computational interfaces, such as the biblical applications to algorithmic study tools, are changing the ontology and hermeneutics of Scripture. Informed by theology, bibliology, media theory, and historical textual analyses, we argue that digital spaces pose a risk to reducing the Bible as a tool of divine interaction to religious information, emphasizing fragmentation over canonical understanding, algorithmic suggestions over ecclesiastical wisdom, and searchability over thoughtful reading. The present paper will analyze case studies of well-known online Bible platforms (YouVersion, Logos, and machine-generated Bible interpretation tools) to show how interface choices (such as isolating verses, hyperlinking structures, and the presence of machine-generated interpretation) reflect certain theological assumptions, which, in most cases, go unchallenged. Such advancements have raised urgent questions about the sacramental character of Scripture, the role of tradition in interpretation, and the nature of revelation in the age of computational mediation. This essay is a critique of technological reductionism and, without lapsing into reactionary technophobia, offers some principles of more authentic digital interaction, such as designs that are contextually sound, reveal algorithmic partiality, and restore contemplative slowness. These considerations complement the discussion at the intersection of digital humanities and theological hermeneutics and provide practical advice on how churches to which the biblical practice turns digital can be guided.

Keywords: Biblical Theology, Computational Hermeneutics, Digital Bible, Media Ecology

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INTRODUCTION

The shift to digital platforms of sacred Scripture previously held in printed codices is what historian Elizabeth Eisenstein (1979) called a communications revolution, similar to the invention of movable type by Gutenberg. According to recent polls, more than 70 percent of all American Bible readers now read digital copies regularly, and apps such as YouVersion have topped 500 million downloads globally (Miles, 2020; Tarquis, 2024). This paradigm change in the manner in which Christians receive and interact with their sacred scriptures has been achieved with very scanty theological speculation on the nature and power of the computational interface to radically transform our perception of the nature and authority of the Bible (Savin-Baden & Reader, 2018; Tari & Revilla, 2025; Waters, 2016). The digital Bible claims to be both similar to and quite different to its print counterparts - it is a tension that requires theological scrutiny (Dyer, 2023; Rakow, 2017).

Modern believers are exposed to Scripture in interfaces created by the technology firms that incorporate specific epistemological foregone conclusions in their designs (Bergmann, 2007; Ugboh, 2023). The bible apps are designed to favor searchability over sequential reading, algorithmic recommendation over reflective exploration and versus canonical context, over modular verses (Carpenter, 2021). These decisions have deep theological consequences that have been scarcely explored in ecclesiastical and scholastic worlds. Theologian John Webster (2003) cautioned, any medium of conveying Scripture also interprets Scripture. The interpretive work of the digital medium is subtle in its creation of user experience design decisions, which influence how the reader navigates and comprehends sacred text, usually without their conscious cognizance (Carpenter, 2021).

This paper will contend that the computational interfaces pose a threat to Scripture by turning it into more of a religious data than an encounter with God, as philosopher Jacques Ellul (1964) predicted: the colonization of the sacred by the technological society. The homogenization of biblical text into database records, the substitution of ecclesial exegesis by algorithms, and the deprivation of materiality in the digital version are all threats to corrupt Christian bibliology. These changes necessitate an immediate theological response as churches become increasingly digital, with a lack of critical assessment of their hermeneutical and spiritual impacts.

The methodological approach synthesizes three disciplinary perspectives: systematic theology, thinking about the nature of Scripture (Barth, 2003; Webster, 2001, 2003); media theory thinking about technological mediation (Ihde, 1990; McLuhan, 1964, 1967); and historical studies of textual transmission (Ong, 1982). This cross-disciplinary approach makes it possible to both critically diagnose and positively offer more faithful digital interactions. Although the analysis is primarily Protestant-oriented, there are significant differences between the Catholic and Orthodox approaches to Scripture and tradition that warrant individual attention (Gilbert et al., 2018).

The most important question to explore in this inquiry is: Does a searchable, hyperlinked Bible continue to mediate a divine presence? Is algorithmic suggestion an alternative or supplement to ecclesial discernment? What are the ways of the restructuring of the canonical

imagination by database logics? These queries inquire into the overlap between technological mediation and theological ontology, which the philosopher Don Ihde (1990) terms the material hermeneutics of technology. The responses carry profound consequences in regard to the way Christian communities guard the Scripture in the digital era.

This study is important because of its timing and urgency. With artificial intelligence producing devotional content and algorithms studying tools replacing laypeople's activity with the Bible, the Church needs theology to assess these changes. The first law of historian of technology, Melvin Kranzberg (1986) tells us is that technology is neither good nor bad; neither neutral nor otherwise. This paper aims to explain the implications of Kranzberg's insight for digital Scripture engagement specifically.

The shortcomings of this non-empirical study cannot be disregarded. Although it draws on existing empirical research on the use of digital Bibles, it does not involve new studies of users. It is still largely theoretical, as it examines the theological consequences of digital forms without quantifying their impact on particular faith communities. The discussion is largely situated within Western Protestant frameworks, where print culture has been predominant. This emphasis risks neglecting the experience of Christians in oral cultures, in post-literate societies, and in global settings where print Bibles were not always available. The paper recognizes that the initial form of Scripture was oral and aural, and that digital forms can, in a sense, recapture aspects lost in the shift to print. Nevertheless, the main emphasis is on the print-to-digital transition, acknowledging it to be just a part of a longer history of technological mediation. This theoretical framework provides the requisite foundation for future empirical and contextual research that may develop from it.

The paper follows the foundations, critique and constructive proposals. The paper identifies and evaluates specific digital Bible phenomena after defining the theological and philosophical frameworks, and recommends principles to be more faithful to the engagement. The emphasis is not on dismissing the digital tools but on promoting their more theologically informed design and application in the Christian community.

CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS

The theological status of Scripture has long been a subject of debate in the Christian tradition, with some common ground forms surfacing across traditions. The Protestant focus on the derivative authority of Scripture, while retaining its distinctive role as a mediator of divine truth, can be found in the formulation of Karl Barth (2004), who introduced Scripture as the witness to revelation. This subtle bibliology creates tension when applied to digital formats, which view biblical texts as data entries in a database of salvation rather than as a single canonical witness.

The theological ontology of Scripture, as put forward by John Webster, can be especially useful in the analysis of the digital format. Webster (2003) asserts that Scripture is not just a textual artefact but a creaturely reality, sanctified, where God speaks. It is possible that this sacramental knowledge criticizes the collapse of the biblical writing to data in the state of

computers. The electronic disposition towards modularization and recombination of verses is a menace to the unity of Scripture as a canonical testament, possibly disempowering its ability to serve what Webster (2001) has termed the embassy of the risen Christ in the life of the Church.

Media theorists offer complementary ways of understanding this transformation. The well-known saying by McLuhan (1964) states that the medium is the message takes on a new meaning when applied to digital Bibles. The replacement of the codex by the database is not merely a technological convenience; it is a paradigm shift in how Scripture operates in a religious sense. The digital interfaces of any digital bible encourage fragmented, broken interactions with the text, whereas printed bibles require sequential and contextual reading.

The post-phenomenology by Don Ihde provides additional insight into the mediation between humans and the world through technologies. The idea of hermeneutic relations presented by Ihde (1990) explains the way in which technologies such as digital Bibles alter and change our interaction with the text. The hermeneutic effects are achieved through particular interface design: search algorithms to rank passages, hyperlink design to imply interpretive relationships, and recommendation engines to plan readings based on computational logic rather than the canonical sequence (Elmo Raj, 2024; Rockwell & Sinclair, 2016).

Historical lenses help us to understand what is at stake in this transition. Walter Ong's (1982) analysis of orality and literacy shows that consciousness itself is transformed by every technological change in communication. The shift from oral performance to handwritten codex to printed book to digital text has altered communities' approach to Scripture. The existing changes might be equally significant for biblical interpretation and devotion, especially in their impact on memory formation and thinking processes.

The printing press analogy is one that warrants special consideration. Although others rejoice in digital tools as the fulfillment of the Reformation's aim to democratize Scripture, this analogy fails to recognize the important distinctions (Laughlin, 2022; Puntel & Sbardelotto, 2020). The continuity of materials and sequence in printed Bibles by Luther can be seen as a continuation of manuscript traditions, but digital formats open up radically new organizational logics (Kelber, 2010). Historian Adrian Johns (1998) warns against such simplistic technological determinism in such comparisons, pointing out that it is not merely that print culture was merely the next phase of scribal culture, but rather that it is a complex transformation that we can learn to apply to digital transitions.

Technological warning frameworks are offered through philosophical criticisms of technology. The technique analysis provided by Ellul (1964) predicts the way in which digital systems could make Scripture the information that is easily handled. The device paradigm developed by Borgmann (1984) can be used to understand how Bible applications can lead to the loss of the disciplined reading habits of formative reading, making Scripture easily accessible without the disciplines that once accompanied its application. These philosophers offer a conceptual means of opposing computational reductionism.

Theological anthropology provides remedies to uncritical technological adoption. Created to meet God with material means, sacraments, the incarnated Word, and embodied

forms of worship, human beings need forms of interaction that are dissuaded by digital interfaces. This materiality should, however, be put in historical perspective. Scripture was initially oral and was performed, listened to, and remembered far more before it was recorded in manuscripts or codices (Ong, 1982). The shift in biblical engagement from orality to literacy, not from print to digital, is the first great change, and it came with its own losses and gains. The Scripture was a communal experience, performed and received orally in oral cultures. Conversely, the print culture fostered silent, personal reading, which, despite its advantages, created new forms of detachment (Kelber, 2010).

The current disapproval of digital formats, therefore, needs to be critiqued very cautiously. It would be historically and theologically incorrect to privilege print as the norm, since throughout most of Christian history, the great majority of believers experienced Scripture not visually but orally and did not have full Bibles until the modern period. In addition, printed Bibles were not available to the majority of Christians before the Reformation and remain inaccessible in many places around the world to this day. It is not that digital formats are leaving behind some imagined print past, but rather that they might reproduce and amplify the most individualising, fragmenting tendencies already in print culture, and in the process may obliterate the communal and embodied aspects that oral performance conserved.

The disappearance of the physical in some types of digital reading, the tact of pages, the bulk of a Bible in the hands, is worth considering, yet so is the possibility of digital audio Bibles reclaiming some of the original oral nature of Scripture. However, even here we must be careful: the vast majority of digital audio applications place a premium on convenience (variable-speed playback, background listening) rather than on the receptivity to detail that oral-based performance traditions demand. It is not a question of whether digital forms are necessarily inferior to print, but whether they can be made to accommodate the full range of embodied, communal, and contemplative practices, so fruitful to faithful engagement with Scripture.

In its focus on the material mediation of the grace of God, the liturgical theology developed by the Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemann (1963) is unexpectedly applicable to this online debate. This mediation initially was in the oral-aural form in the assembled congregation. Likewise, the work by Ong (1982) prompts the reader to remember that every technological change in the world of communication alters consciousness itself; it is just highly crucial to identify what is being acquired and lost in every one of these changes without being nostalgic yet being receptive to the truly formative practices, which digital formats are bound to erode unintentionally.

These theoretical grounds equip us to analyze certain digital phenomena theologically. They provide guidelines for judging the various computational applications that either encourage or discourage the proper use of Scripture as a source of grace. The following part transfers these frames into tangible examples of digital Bible engagement and demonstrates both the opportunities and dangers of this technological revolution.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF DIGITAL BIBLE FORMATS

The YouVersion Bible application is a good demonstration of the opportunities and threats of Scripture engagement online. It is the most popular way many Christians are now exposed to the Bible, with more than 500 million installations worldwide (YouVersion, 2023). The app's design decisions have subtle yet meaningful theological connotations that should be scrutinised thoroughly. The (algorithmically-selected) and push-notified feature of the "Verse of the Day", which effectively repackages Scripture into a devotional sound bite as opposed to a canonical whole, may serve as a reaffirmation of what theologian Eugene Peterson described as a consumer approach to spirituality (Hurtado, 2006).

The search capability essentially transforms the use of Bibles into in requirement for theological investigation. In locations where print Bibles necessitated familiarity with the canonical structure and required reading between verses with their fingers, online search allows them to access each verse directly by searching for a keyword. The price of this convenience is high: the loss of contextual reading, the development of a new normative way of interpretive practice known as "prooftexting". Recent research indicates that print readers read much more context around the verses being searched than digital Bible users, with the average digital reading session containing only 1.3 verses, compared with 5.7 in print reading sessions (Dyer, 2019).

Digital Bibles use hyperlinking structures that present specific interpretive frames that users may not notice. The automatic connection of Romans 3:23 to Psalm 51:5 as a related verse is an algorithmic process making theological judgments about original sin that might not reflect the diversity of the Christian tradition. To make this point clear, this is not the only issue that is specific to digital formats. Cross-references, marginal notes and study aids have always been part of print Bibles, and these also serve to embed theological assumptions (Johns, 1998). The Canones of Eusebius, the marginal notes of the Geneva Bible, and the cross-referencing systems in the Nova Vulgata are all interpretive decisions that influence readers' perceptions of the relationships among biblical texts. In this respect, the digital hyperlinks are the continuation of a long tradition of mediation interpretation.

The threefold difference between digital hyperlinking and not is what it is. First, scale: algorithms provide connections between thousands of things in a second, far more than print cross-references. Second, obscurity: the guidelines for algorithmic relationships are frequently proprietary and not visible to users, whereas print cross-references are usually based on established scholarly or ecclesial traditions whose provenance can be traced. Third, dynamism: digital connections may be modified due to user data, A/B testing, or software updates, and the interpretive framework is constantly in flux, requiring revision beyond the ecclesial framework.

The automated connections pose a basic question: Who determines what a "related verse" is? The interpretive tradition is generally open to printing cross-reference texts in the Bible, whether based on the patristic tradition, the Reformation commentators, or contemporary scholarly consensus. Digital algorithms, in turn, tend to obscure their decision-making processes by invoking technological neutrality. Here, algorithms are theories masquerading as methods, in this instance, theories of what makes good biblical interpretation work and which

run without the accountability mechanisms that historically have attended to print cross-references, as media theorist Underwood (2019) notes.

When Romans 3:23 hypertexts to Psalm 51:5 as a related verse, the algorithm makes theological determinations about original sin that might not reflect the multiplicity of Christian tradition. Such automatic links substitute ecclesial judgment for computational reasoning, risking simplifying theology. These, as the media theorist Underwood (2019) notes, are theories masquerading as practices in this instance, theories of what good biblical interpretation should be.

The social media integration common to Bible apps raises new theological issues. The process of “sharing” individual verses on apps such as Instagram promotes the aestheticization of Scripture, in which visual appeal and conciseness are valued more highly than fidelity to context. This effect is consistent with what media theorist Baudrillard (1988) referred to as the “ecstasy of communication”, the decontextualization of meaning in circulatable fragments which have lost their context and purpose. The theological implications of this transformation of the long-reading into verse-sharing are little discussed.

The metadata tagging systems reveal more ontological changes occurring in digital Bibles. In equating biblical terms such as “agape” or “sabbath” with English terms such as “love” or “rest,” these categories codify specific theological expectations that shape further searches and interpretations. To make this point clear, translation, as such, always entails interpretive decisions. In both print and electronic versions, translation teams make judgments about lexical equivalence that reflect specific theological commitments (Carson, 1998; Nida, 1964). The English translation of *ekklēsia* as "church in the King James Version, rather than "assembly," is an example of ecclesiological assumptions embedded in English-speaking Christianity over centuries. Digital metadata tagging, in this sense, perpetuates rather than brings about the interpretive work of any translation.

The layered character and invisibility of this interpretive work, however, are what make it unique to digital platforms. Print translations display their interpretive choices right on the page; readers are exposed to the rendering they have chosen, and, in case they study the text, they can compare alternatives in the marginal notes or parallel translations. Digital platforms, in contrast, overlay different interpretive systems: the selections of the bottom translation, the classification system of the metadata tags, the weighting of the search algorithm and the association system of the recommendation engine. These other layers work behind the scenes, sometimes without the transparency that is provided by print. A searcher for “love” in a digital Bible might never be aware that the results include all of *agape, phileo, eros, or storge*, or that the tagging system has just broken down the distinctions without warning.

These behind-the-scenes categories dictate search results and study tool outputs in a manner that greatly affects the interpretation but avoids theological criticism. The issue is not, therefore, that digital platforms introduce interpretive bias—all translation introduces interpretive bias—but that they add more layers to interpretations and reduce the transparency of those interpretations. Since translation, as biblical scholar Fee (2002) reminds us, is always

an act of interpretation, the question is whether readers can discern the interpretive decisions made and by whom.

The issue of materiality needs close consideration. The fact that this paper raises issues about the loss of materiality in digital Bible engagement does not imply that materiality is a positive quality or that any type of material mediation is superior to another. Instead, it is a matter of the demise of particular material and embodied practices that have long undergirded devoted practice with Scripture, practices that risk being compromised by digital implementations.

Verbal interaction with Scripture is not material. Oral performance is a different kind of materiality: the embodied presence of the speaker and hearers, the acoustics of the space of the gathering, the rhythm of voice and breath, the communal physical presence of a group of listeners, and the material reality of sound as such. Oral cultures can feel the knowledge as embodied, communal, and event-based, as illustrated by Ong (1982), and there is a kind of materiality beyond the printed page.

The orality-literacy change, however, was not a change of material into immaterial but rather a change of one kind of materiality into another: of communal, aural, embodied presence into individual, visual, portable text. The objections to digital Bibles are not that they are not material; they obviously feature screens, devices, electricity, and physical interactions. Instead, it is feared that the materiality of digital forms, as being screen-based, as individual consumption and as algorithmically mediated, may not be conducive to the same formative practices as the materiality of oral performance or print culture was. In digital forms, there is a chance to have a mixture of both the flaws of orality and of print and retain all the benefits of neither: it is not as communal as oral performance and not as tactile as print.

The physical Bible, a book that has been taken to church, passed through generations, and personally read and written in, has played a significant role in Christian piety in the past. The digital versions, with their infinitely replicable, replaceable files, lack such a sacramental dimension. This does not imply that one cannot be a faithful user of digital Bibles, but that the particular material form influences engagement in a manner that must be purposefully trained to adopt counter-practices. The literature on the materiality of religion by historian David Morgan (2012) indicates that these material aspects are more important than the attention generally given to them, especially in those traditions where the embodied nature of faith is stressed.

Audio Bibles introduce another set of issues, making it harder to criticize the digital forms in a simplistic way. To a great extent, they are a revival of the oral elements of Scripture, possibly reclaiming the auditory elements that have been part of Christian tradition. Audio Bibles are not a marginal option for believers in oral cultures, people with visual impairments, and those living in low-literate communities, but the main form of engagement. This observation dispels any uncritical privileging of the print as the normative form of Scripture.

Nevertheless, it is not merely a question of audio and print, but also of personal and social interaction. When the New Testament says that Scripture is to be read aloud (1 Timothy 4:13; see also Colossians 4:16, 1 Thessalonians 5:27), it assumes a communal situation — the

assembled people listening to the reading. In the early church, oral reading was a collective process, entrenched in the worship, collective interpretation, and discernment. Digital audio Bibles, though, are mainly consumed individually, usually through earbuds in solitude, without the support of the faith community.

Audio Bibles pose another set of considerations, making it more challenging to make simple criticisms of digital formats. In important ways, they are a revival of the oral nature of Scripture, which may restore the aural aspects which have marked much of Christian history. To oral culture believers, the visually impaired, and the community of people with low literacy levels, the audio Bible is not a second-best option but the main form of interaction. This observation questions the uncritical privileging of print as the normative form of Scripture.

But it is not merely a question of audio versus print, but of isolated or collective intervention. In the case of the New Testament teaching that Scripture be read aloud (1 Timothy 4:13; see also Colossians 4:16, 1 Thessalonians 5:27), the context assumes a communal context, i.e. the assembled congregation listening to the text. In the early church, oral reading was a communal practice, a part of worship, collective interpretation and discernment. Contrarily, digital audio Bibles are read more commonly in solitude, usually on earbuds and in seclusion by the faith community.

This is a vital difference between the medium and context. The issue with digital audio Bibles is not that they are based on the audio medium, which can be a faithful recovery of the oral dimensions of Scripture, but that generally they tend to make individual what has in the past been a collective. A listener of an audio Bible in a commute setting in isolation has a fundamentally different experience from a congregation listening to an audio Bible being read in worship, with time to reflect, respond, and share meaning.

The adoption of digital audio Bibles should still be approached with caution. The majority of them value convenience, variable playback speed, background listening, and algorithm-based recommendations rather than the responsive receptivity of listening to oral performance traditions. Scripture was proclaimed publicly in the traditional oral cultures and in the early church, and there was room to think and respond. Digital audio, on the other hand, usually treats listening as a multitasking process to be taken in solitude. The teaching of the apostle Paul that Timothy should devote himself to the public reading of Scripture (1 Timothy 4:13) presupposes a corporate worship and communal making, a situation not mirrored in individual listening on digital devices.

Whether audio is inferior to print is not the question; the question is whether the communal, contemplative, and embodied aspects that oral performance provided on its own can be supported through digital implementations. This would necessitate a shift toward individualized consumption toward designs that enable common listening experiences, collective listening, and assimilation with corporate worship practices.

Cognitive implications of secondary attention when listening to the audio Bible are under-researched yet may be of interest, especially given prior studies that demonstrate differences in comprehension between audio and visual processing (Rogowsky et al., 2016).

However, these results cannot be interpreted as a claim in favour of the superiority of print; instead, they indicate the necessity of deliberate design that facilitates the unique affordances of oral-aural interaction in social situations.

These problems are now being exacerbated by artificial intelligence in new ways. Bible GPT systems purport to be able to "explain" passages in the Bible in an algorithmic manner, with little transparency about their training data or their theological biases. These advancements pose core questions about the connection between divine revelation and machine-learning outputs that many churches have not yet begun to discuss.

The warning issued by the theologian Katherine Sonderegger (2020) has to be unpacked very carefully: Once we entrust interpretation to machines, we are likely to lose the human encounter with the living Word. What is this encounter of a human being? In Christian tradition, the devoted reading of Scripture has never been a process of mining information from a text. Instead, it is a set of practices: prayerful receptivity (*lectio divina*), the practices of discernment in community in the body of Christ, embodied practices of reading and listening, the illumination of the reader by the Holy Spirit and the transformation of the interpreter by the text. According to John Webster (2003), Scripture is not simply a textual artefact but a sanctified creaturely reality by which God speaks, and the human experience of such reality is the experience of the entire person, intellect, will, affections, body and community.

The question is, therefore, whether posing questions to an LLM can be considered such an encounter. On the one hand, it definitely does: a user of an AI application to learn about Scripture is reading the biblical text, but with a computational mediator. The AI is not a text substitution but a mediator that provides interpretations and associations, which can be helpful for comprehension. In this regard, AI tools do not fundamentally distinguish themselves as commentaries, study Bibles, or even talks with a pastor, all of which mediate interpretation.

But there are vast disparities that bear on the nature of the encounter. First, personal aspect: human mediation entails relations, responsibility, and dialogue with a person who herself is being changed by Scripture. There is no such reciprocity with AI mediation. Second, the ecclesial aspect: the classical mediation takes place within the community of faith, which is answerable to tradition and is liable to correction. The AI tools are not subject to ecclesial institutions and have no responsibility to the Church's interpretive tradition. Third, the receptive dimension: Scripture as living Word can only be received in a posture of receptivity and submission to the authority of the text. By contrast, AI tools place the user in a consumer role and the text in a data role that is to be handled, which may promote a posture of mastery over a posture of discipleship.

The danger is not, as such, AI interpretations being incorrect. Any human interpretation is defective, and the engagement type promoted by AI tools can push out the practices that have historically engaged Scripture with its readers and transformed them. When interpretation is turned into a question to be answered, rather than a riddle to be solved, when what is produced by the algorithm is accepted as true without judgment, when the communal aspect of interpretation is taken over by a personal relation to a machine, something vital to the human

experience of the living Word might be lost. This does not imply that AI tools cannot be employed faithfully, but rather that their application must be carefully nurtured with counter-practices that retain the receptive, communal, and transformative aspects of biblical engagement.

The unifying factor in all these instances is the reworking of Scripture as data to be processed rather than as Word to be experienced. This change is similar to what philosopher Michael Polanyi (1958) referred to as the logic of detachment in modern science, the illusion of objective observation that neglects to acknowledge the personal aspect of all knowing. Digital Bible systems threaten to create a parallel illusion of command over the text of Scripture, potentially undermining the receptive stance needed for Christian reading.

What is this illusion of mastery, then? It is the feeling, nurtured by the digital interfaces, that one can command, control, and exhaustively understand Scripture with the help of technology. Several characteristics cause this illusion. First, search: the possibility of finding any verse in a second makes the impression that one owns the text; it is at one's feet. Second, algorithmic suggestions: when an application is recommending related verses or what the Bible says about [topic]. It means that the meaning of the text can be condensed to the retrievable units of information. Third, personalized reading plans: by making it possible to plan, follow, and gamify Bible use, the reader becomes the manager of his consumer-like consumption of spiritual content, rather than a participant in a divine encounter. Fourth, the very exhaustiveness of digital study tools, resources in the original language, commentaries, and dictionaries, all cross-linked and instantly available, can give the sense that, with enough clicking, one can have an exhaustive knowledge and that no mystery remains uncovered.

Such an illusion of mastery is, of course, an illusion. No technological advancement can be used to drain the Scripture, which Christians testify to be the living Word, through which God speaks. This fact is hidden by the digital interface that transforms the text into something transparent, easy to handle, and completely open. Instead of being a mastered text, as theologian Karl Barth (2004) insisted, Scripture is a witness to revelation that masters us. This statement directly contradicts the logic of digital databases.

What, then, is the receptive position threatened by digital systems? In the Christian tradition, Scripture reading has been thought of not as a process of extraction (the reader extracting the information in the text) but as a process of reception (the reader being addressed by God in the text). This welcoming pose takes on multiple dimensions. First, humility: to treat Scripture as an object, subject to be dissected, that is, not to be addressed by the living Word. Second, listening: the process of paying attention to the text before posing questions to it, so that it can dictate the terms of interaction. Third, submission: realizing that the text is in control of the reader and not the reader. Fourth, patience: languishing with the text, letting it take its time working on the reader rather than expecting immediate understanding.

The digital Bible systems, in their construction, lean towards diminishing such dimensions of search and finding, placing the user in the role of an active questioner, and the text in the role of a passive answerer. Listening to patients is replaced by immediate recommendations. Customised plans enable the reader to be in charge of what to read and when

to read it. The interface promotes what could be termed a consumer posture: the user types a query, receives a result, and proceeds to the next query, essentially a rhythm that is antithetical to the receptive posture of lectio divina, which entails slow, repetitive, and prayerful listening.

To be clear, it is not the fact that digital tools make information available. The accessibility is really good, and the democratisation of the Scripture, which the Reformation brought about in the form of print, also threatened the domination of hierarchies. Rather, the accessibility of digital systems in the form of instant, searchable, customizable, algorithmically mediated, and so forth, develops a specific attitude towards the text that cannot be reconciled with the attitude of receptivity. A digital Bible can be read in a receptive stance, but it will need deliberate opposition to the default ways of interacting with the interface. The delusion of mastery is not predetermined, but it is organized in such a way that it is promoted.

TOWARD A THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK FOR DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT

This criticism does not entail giving up on digital tools, but rather developing more informed approaches in their design and use in a way that is more theologically informed. The subsequent principles highlight possible ways ahead that respect the sacredness of Scripture and adopt the possibilities of technology. The initial principle is contextual integrity, which does not undermine the canonical unity that digital interfaces frequently disrespect. Bible apps might fall back to displaying entire chapters instead of individual verses, and search results may show long contexts. Certain experimental interfaces already use context walls, which prevent verse extraction when there is no surrounding text. Awareness of this issue is reflected in Nel (2025).

A second essential principle of faithful digital engagement with Scripture is transparency. Digital Bible sites must reveal the theological suppositions in their algorithms, which translations they prioritize, how “related verses” are determined, what doctrinal viewpoints guide the study notes, and what data are used to drive recommendation engines. Such openness would enable users to evaluate possible biases, as philosopher Shannon Vallor (2016) recommends considering digital systems with “technomoral virtue”.

One possible ally here is the NET Bible (New English Translation), which includes extensive commentary on the textual and interpretive choices made in translating every word. One can observe, e.g., why the translators selected one reading of the Greek text over another, or why an idiomatic translation was chosen. Such transparency cannot remove the interpretive bias, no translation can, but it gives the readers an idea of what decisions were made and why. The NET Bible illustrates that even in print and print-digital hybrid formats, transparency can be achieved.

Online platforms, though, possess features that print editions such as the NET Bible cannot emulate. In concept, they would be able to provide dynamically transparent information: users would be able to view not just translation notes but also the reasoning behind algorithmic suggestions, the criteria for related verses, how search results are ranked, and the theological adherence of content contributors. They might provide users with a choice of interpretive frameworks to prioritize, making comparisons across traditions possible. They might reveal

cases of updates that modify the algorithm's behaviour and the reasons for them.

But most existing digital bible sites do the exact opposite. They are black box, proprietary, opaque, and unaccountable algorithms. When a user submits a search in a Bible app, they do not know whether the results have been filtered, whether specific passages are emphasized or pushed down the list, or what theology influenced the tagging system. The NET Bible model offers an glimpse of what transparency may look like; online platforms have a chance to catch up, but they are still behind.

Such non-disclosure in most existing platforms poses a major ethical and theological issue, especially given the growing influence of these tools in the interpretive practices of millions of believers.

The ethos of slowing down is in opposition to the digital focus on instant access, which tends to disfavour contemplative interaction. Intentional slowing of search results, restrictions on the sharing of verses and interface design that promotes longer reading times might assist in regaining the meditative nature of traditional *lectio divina*. These characteristics are inspired by the slow technology movement (Hallnäs & Redström, 2001) and monastic reading styles that acknowledge the spiritual importance of patient, repetitive reading of sacred texts.

This value echoes more general modern-day criticisms of digital culture. Although not explicitly theological, the writings by Cal Newport on Digital Minimalism (2019) and Slow Productivity (2024) are a statement of a vision for how technology should be used, with intentionality, focus, and depth, rather than being constantly connected and seeking immediate gratification. The theological argument in this case is different and is based, like Scripture, on a grace method and in the disciplines of *lectio divina*. Nevertheless, it concurs with an emerging cultural awareness that not every type of digital interaction is beneficial to human prosperity. The slowness principle is not the nostalgia for rejecting technology but a constructive suggestion for designing interfaces that can assist rather than hinder contemplative engagement.

Other designs show how these principles can be put into operation and suggest the ways towards more theologically sound possibilities. The project *Glossa ordinaria* re-creates medieval marginalia in digital form, providing commentary on Scripture through patristic, rather than algorithmic, suggestions (Güzeldal, 2025). The experiment Bible as Interface investigates tactile digital interfaces that still maintain some form of material interaction through haptics and purposeful interaction design (Hemenway, 2017). These prototypes suggest that digital Bibles need not adhere to existing commercial patterns that prioritise convenience over formation.

Digital Bible development must be guided by ecclesial oversight to create theologically sound versions of the Bible (Elizabeth & Mikaere, 2025; Eskandar, 2024). Instead of entrusting interface decisions purely to tech companies on market grounds, faith communities may create review boards to assess the theological consequences of design decisions. No one “church” can represent all believers, and any effort to establish a single standard of doctrine would be impractical and inappropriate. This proposal does not entail centralized ecclesiastical control over all digital bible platforms, but rather accountability structures indicative of the specific traditions in which the digital tools are applied.

There are several models available. Denominational organizations might develop regulations for the digital materials used in their congregations. Shared values of transparency and design integrity might be achieved through ecumenical partnerships without requiring a standard doctrine. Single platforms might have advisory boards that reflect the theological tradition of the majority of users, so that the design decisions can be answerable to the communities in which they operate. Projects in open source might be designed to be transparent, enabling communities to modify tools to their interpretive traditions.

Such a practice reflects the role of the ancient church in the process of canon-making, not as a single institution which foists its own uniformity on the rest, but as a set of communities together identifying what it means to be a faithful witness. One model in history is the supervision of the Neovulgate project by the Catholic Church (Boulding, 2001), and Protestant traditions contain their models of collaborative discernment (e.g., translation committees representing more than one denomination). It is not uniformity but accountability, then, that digital tools that mediate Scripture be subject to the accountability of the faith communities whose texts they purport to mediate, not to be driven purely by the logic of market metrics and user interaction.

Technological development should be accompanied by educational programs to create digitally literate believers. Educating digital biblical literacy, how to tell when you are an algorithm, how to read in a fragmented interface, how to evaluate AI-generated meanings, etc., should be part of the Christian formation curriculum. Such competencies would supplement the classical training in hermeneutics in the digital era and help avoid the blind acceptance of technologically mediated interpretations.

Individual practices can help alleviate certain risks of the digital world without sacrificing the technological advantages. Periodic fasting from Bible apps to revert to print, mindful opposition to verse mining, and shared, rather than algorithmic, reading schedules are a pragmatic answer rooted in Christian asceticism. These traditions adapt ancient spiritual practices to the digital realm, acknowledging that the use of technology needs as much shaping as the design of technology.

These disciplines must have an assessment aspect. The mere practice of adopting does not make rituals, but formative exercises. Practitioners may ask: Does going back to print change how I tend to the text? Is it fasting on algorithmic recommendations that changes the passages that I read? Does sharing Scripture change my interpretation of Scripture? By posing these questions, the practitioners are invited to pay attention to the impact of various forms of engagement, not to proclaim one form of engagement as superior to the other, but to develop an understanding of how media influence interpretation. Congregations might build such reflection into small-group conversations, having group members reflect on what they observe as they move between print and electronic media, or between personal and shared reading. This assessment aspect converts discipline into habit into purposeful development.

This analysis has highlighted the importance of areas that have received little attention in theological research. The pneumatology of digital reading, as the Holy Spirit is operating in fragmented and continuous texts, must be carefully explored. Equally, the ecclesiology of

algorithmically mediated interpretation, the influence of computational proposals on discernment by a community, requires the consideration of systematic theologians. These questions indicate fertile fields of future theological exploration.

All these proposals point to a digital future of Scripture engagement that does not involve uncritical acceptance or reactionary dismissal of technology. They agree with theologian T.S. Eliot that each technological development is a kind of operation and a surrender (Güzeldal, 2025) that should be carefully discerned. The way forward is not in giving up digital tools but in revisiting them with theological wisdom that recognizes the special place of Scripture as divine revelation.

ECCLESIAL IMPLICATIONS AND COMMUNAL PRACTICE

The digital transformation of Scripture engagement has far-reaching consequences for the Christian community and worship and requires a thorough theological approach. The communal worship is changed by the transition of congregational physical Bibles to personal screens in subtle yet very important ways.

The notion of shared should be distinguished. In certain cultures, a shared family Bible was handed down through generations; names of births, deaths, and marriages were written in it, making it a tangible item that connected family identity over time. Shared in congregational worship were a small number of pew Bibles, or the custom of turning the pages in unison when the Scripture was being read. In both instances, the commonality was not just one of access but of common orientation: a community attending to the same text, in the same translation, at the same time, in a shared material space.

The personalization of screens has two different changes. First, physical individuation: everyone has their own device, which establishes distinct material dynamics compared to the common book. Second, interpretive individuation: congregants could be reading different translations, study notes, and algorithmic suggestions, yet be in the same worship service. A pastor who reads Matthew 5 cannot count on the congregation having the same text, much less the same page layout or verse numbering in every translation.

The problem, however, is not just a matter of individual versus shared, but fracturing common orientation. The feeling of the congregation as one body worshipping the same Word in the same manner may be lost when individual screens provide each worshiper with a customizable version of Scripture. This does not idealize the past, when pew Bibles might have been worn out, lost, or translated in languages that omitted certain parts of the congregation. But it is important to acknowledge that the material practices of common physical books fostered a sense of communal attention that does not necessarily transfer to individualized screens.

The concept of lived religion introduced by historian Robert Orsi (2005) helps us remember that religious meaning is not only created by the official beliefs of believers but also through the material practices of the believers, which are being radically transformed by digital formats. When congregations do not use the physical book collectively during worship, or do

not pass it around, they might be missing something vital about the communal aspect of biblical engagement.

The lectionary, which has been centuries-old in helping the Church navigate Scripture in an inclusive, systematic manner, is especially challenged in the digital era. There is a multiplication of reading plans through digital platforms; however, their nature and origin differ greatly.

Between curated and algorithmically-generated reading plans, it is essential to draw the line. Most online Bible sites feature reading plans developed by biblical experts, pastors, or publishers that provide insightful, theologically knowledgeable guidance. A Len-ten plan edited by a reputable theologian or a chronological plan created by a publishing house does not pose the same concerns as an algorithmically generated plan. Such curated plans can be spiritually directed digitally, providing an organizing structure and wisdom to the reader.

It is not the reading plans that are of concern, but the generation of plans using algorithms that place too much emphasis on personalization and engagement statistics rather than ecclesial wisdom. They can be optimized to retain app users rather than take them through Scripture. They can make recommendations based on passages read by similar users, the most shared content, or content that keeps engagement metrics high. Such requirements have little to do with theological profundity or spiritual growth.

The liturgical scholar Gordon Lathrop (2006) writes that, "The common lectionary helps to unite the Church in all time and space. This connective tissue of Christian identity can be undermined by digital substitutes that put the individual and their own preference above the ecclesial rhythm. But the lectionary itself can also be made more accessible through digital means, providing daily readings, cross-references, and commentary that facilitate the traditional patterns of reading. It is not the digital formats, but the question of whether the logic of them, be it curatorial or algorithmic, can be a faithful engagement.

The digital shift equally influences preaching and biblical interpretation in the local congregations. Pastors are increasingly using digital study aids that generate algorithmic cross-references and word studies, which may replace the conventional processes of theological consideration with computerized results. The threat, as theologian Kevin Vanhoozer (2016) cautions, is that we should leave machines to do our exegetical work. Such a move may result in homogenization of interpretation because pastors in all traditions will be able to access similar digital materials which use similar algorithms.

The challenges of digital adaptation of Christian education programs are similar. Sunday school curricula that used to entail using real physical Bibles now, in most cases, have interactive whiteboards and tablet applications. These technologies provide benefits in engagement, but they might also change the initial approach of children and new believers to Scripture. The idea that Scripture can be treated as a garden to be explored, which the educational theorist Maria Harris (1989) developed, stands in stark contrast to the database model inherent in most digital interfaces.

What, in particular, can be lost in this passage? There are several aspects of formative

experience to consider, beginning with spatial orientation in the text. Training to use a real Bible, to learn that Genesis is at the start, that Psalms are in the middle, and that Revelation is at the end, creates a mental road map of Scripture that cannot be found on the Internet. By growing up with the act of turning pages, a child develops an embodied sense of the structure of the canon that a child searching by keyword may never have.

Second, serendipitous discovery. Physical browsing produces unforeseen discoveries, as one turns a page and finds themselves reading something they were not intending to read. Digital interfaces, on the other hand, provide only what one is searching for or has been algorithmically suggested, which may limit the biblical encounter.

Third, material memory. The tangible book aids memory with spatial indications: "It was at the end of the book, in the right-hand page. Digital text, because it is infinitely reflowable, without location, provides no such spatial reference points. The studies on reading comprehension indicate that spatial memory helps in recalling texts (Mangen & Kuiken, 2014).

Fourth, the common physical orientation of learning communities. And when a Sunday school teacher tells them to “turn to page 472,” the children learn to look together and to be on the same page at the same time. Digital devices, available in various screen sizes, font configurations, and translations, divide this common orientation.

Fifth, the art of patience. Physical Bibles are time-consuming; it takes time to locate a passage, turn the pages, and find the place. Digital interfaces provide immediate access, and, although convenient, can affect the development of patience as a spiritual ability. The time lag of physical navigation in itself is formative, and it instructs care and perseverance.

These do not constitute reasons for avoiding digital tools in Christian teaching. Tablets can provide accessibility, interactivity, and resources that print media cannot. But they are memories that the medium determines the formation of. Teachers must not only enquire whether the children are beginning to study the Scripture, but also how they are beginning to study, and what habits, attitudes, and abilities each mode of study forms. The loss, without questioning, is not merely a shift in format but a possible loss of formative practices which have historically defined biblical literacy and spiritual formation.

Digital changes may be especially destructive to the sacramental imagination of Christian communities. The conventional placement of the physical Bible on the communion table, next to bread and wine, helped physically support the relationship between Word and Sacrament. Digital devices lack this symbolic resonance, which may undermine the theological bond between Scripture and the Eucharist (Cartledge, 2021). The approach of Orthodox theologian John Zizioulas (1985) to “the materiality of communion” implies that there are dire implications of completely digitalizing the material aspect of Scripture engagement.

The digital environment challenges church discipline and pastoral care in a new way. The availability of various Bible versions and interpretations on the Internet can result in what sociologist Christian Smith refers to as a therapeutic moralistic deism, whereby people build their own version of belief out of Internet fragments instead of presenting themselves to the discipline of a canonical whole (Cunningham, 2023; Smith & Denton, 2005). Pastors contend

that they are finding it harder and harder to lead congregants with biblical discernment when online sources are treated as equally authoritative (Johnson, 1996).

Ecclesial unity has both opportunities and challenges arising from the global aspects of digital Bible access. Although digital platforms offer Scripture in hitherto inaccessible languages and locations, they usually do so through interfaces crafted in Silicon Valley that may not honor local traditions of interpretation. The work of mission historian Lamin Sanneh (1989) on vernacular translation reminds us that the process of Bible transmission is never culturally neutral, a point often obscured by digital tools that present themselves as technological universality.

The history of the church provides a good insight into how to make these transitions. An informative example of technological change for theological ends is the early Church's adoption of the codex form (rather than scrolls) for Christian texts. According to historian Larry Hurtado (2006), the codex made it easier to refer to various texts, which facilitated the Christian intertextual interpretation practice. This historical precedent indicates that technological changes may serve good purposes when directed by theological prudence rather than sheer convenience.

Finally, ecclesial consequences of digital Scripture engagement demand a new focus on the social aspects of biblical interpretation. The ancient tradition of *lectio divina* in monasteries, and especially its focus on slow and repetitive reading and collective contemplation, provides a valuable alternative to individualistic digital consumption. According to theologian Enzo Bianchi (2012), the word of God is given to us so that in may be one body by listening. Maintaining this communal aspect in the digital world is one of the most urgent questions of the modern Christian practice.

CONCLUSION

The migration of Scripture to digital platforms presents the Church with both unprecedented opportunities and profound theological challenges that demand careful response. This paper has argued that current computational implementations often reduce the Bible from sacred text to religious data through interface designs that prioritize fragmentation, searchability, and algorithmic interpretation over canonical integrity and contemplative encounter. These developments require theological critique and constructive alternatives that honor Scripture's divine purpose while embracing technological possibilities.

The analysis reveals how digital formats reshape fundamental aspects of biblical engagement in ways that extend beyond practical convenience to ontological significance. The loss of materiality affects sacramental imagination by removing the tactile dimensions of engagement with Scripture. Hyperlinking replaces traditional intertextuality guided by theological reasoning with computational connections determined by algorithms. Search functionality reorients reading from a receptive encounter to an active process of data retrieval, potentially transforming how believers relate to the living Word. These shifts occur subtly through user experience decisions that typically escape theological scrutiny yet have profound implications for Christian practice.

Yet the digital transition also presents opportunities to extend Scripture's accessibility in ways that could honor its theological status if properly guided. Alternative designs that preserve contextual reading, disclose algorithmic assumptions, and encourage contemplative pace suggest more faithful possibilities for digital engagement. These innovations require intentional collaboration between theologians, technologists, and church leaders who together can steward this technological transition with wisdom and discernment.

The Church stands at a critical juncture in its relationship with digital Scripture that will shape generations of biblical interpretation and devotion. As artificial intelligence and augmented reality technologies promise ever more immersive Bible engagement, theological discernment becomes increasingly urgent. The choices made today about how to design, implement, and use digital Bible technologies will have lasting consequences for how future believers encounter and understand sacred Scripture.

This study has intentionally focused on conceptual foundations to establish a framework for subsequent empirical research and practical application. Future studies should build on these theoretical insights with concrete investigations: ethnographic studies of digital Bible users across traditions, psychological research on differences in attention and comprehension across formats, and theological evaluations of AI-generated exegesis in light of church doctrine. These subsequent studies would benefit from the conceptual clarity this paper has sought to provide.

The ultimate question remains how to receive digital Scripture as a genuine means of grace rather than mere information technology. Answering this requires drawing on the deepest wells of Christian tradition while engaging creatively with technological possibilities. As Augustine reminded us in a different context, our hearts are restless until they find their rest in God, whether through codex or touchscreen. The medium matters profoundly precisely because the message matters eternally. This paper seeks to provide theological resources to ensure that our digital engagements with Scripture remain faithful to its divine purpose and power.

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Author contributions

Zakaria: Conceptualisation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Writing – original draft. Ibiang O. Okoi: Formal analysis, Resources, Supervision, Validation, Data curation, Methodology, Visualisation, Writing – review and editing. All authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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The data that support the findings of this study are available in the public domain, primarily consisting of published theological texts, academic literature, and anthropological studies referenced throughout this article. No primary data were generated or analyzed in this study that would require restricted access. All sources used in this research are duly cited in the reference list.

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