

# People of the Screen:

## How Evangelicals Created the Digital Bible and How it Shapes Their Reading of Scripture

John Dyer. *People of the Screen: How Evangelicals Created the Digital Bible and How it Shapes Their Reading of Scripture*. Oxford University Press, 2023. 259pp. \$27. Hardcover. 9780197636350.

John Dyer's stated goal for this book, an adaptation of his Durham University doctoral dissertation, is "to investigate how Bible software changes the way that readers engage the scriptures and what role evangelical programmers have had in that change" (181). The book is successful in the latter task, and it serves as a helpful historical narrative and reference resource for those seeking to trace the development of Bible software, websites, and apps throughout the past few decades. Dyer knows well the community that has revolutionized the way the Bible is read, and he writes clearly about key players and significant moments in the Bible's transition from printed text to digital files accessible on a variety of devices. In his pursuit of the first task, though, an exploration of how new media has influenced the ways Scripture is engaged, Dyer falls short.

The book is divided roughly into three sections. In the first (chaps. 1–3), Dyer lays out the impetus for his study, places his work within the history of media and digital religion studies, and identifies the "evangelical" community that is his focus. In chapter 1, Dyer surveys broad trends in the shift of the Bible to a digital text. Here, he lays out his central argument, "that of all Christian traditions, evangelicals stand apart for their involvement in both the production and consumption of digital Bibles" (3). He strives to demonstrate this statement throughout the book. The introduction also names a second concern, which is largely the focus of chapter 3: "What characteristics of evangelicalism have enabled it to create the most commercially successful and widely used Bible software?" (4).

The second chapter provides methodological background to the study of the intersection of technology and religion. Dyer admits, "If the reader is more interested in beginning to explore evangelicals and software development, this chapter could be skipped" (12), and little of what he introduces in this chapter surfaces later (an exception is his continued return to the idea of social construction of technology [SCOT]). Those who choose not to skip, though, will find a helpful discussion of media studies and the ways shifting technologies influence societies. Drawing upon "classics" like McLuhan, Postman, and Campbell, Dyer lays out general approaches to understanding technology, how religious communities and practices have shaped media, and how media has, in turn, shaped religious communities and practices. The final section of the chapter (24–27) provides a road map to the approach to the rest of the book, so all should read, at a minimum, those pages.

The third chapter is Dyer's consideration of the term "evangelicals" in the title. Included is a helpful overview of past debates over this term and the shifting identities of this community from the 16th through the 21st centuries. Dyer, who identifies himself as "an insider," characterizes evangelicals less by their theological commitments and more by their "posture toward the broader culture" (52). With regard to their work on the digital Bible, Dyer defines evangelicals as operating with "biblically focused, hopeful entrepreneurial pragmatism (HEP)" (56–67), a characteristic he emphasizes throughout the book.

The book's second section (chaps. 4–5) is a narration of the history of the development of Bible software, websites, and apps, organized around the claim that evangelicals' "commitment to the Bible and their HEP outlook on technology led them to dominate the field" (58). In chapter 4, Dyer

divides this history into chronological segments, each characterized by shifting audiences that used new tools and by the various platforms on which the tools have run. Dyer's clear telling of a history confused by different approaches, startups, and mergers demonstrates that the trajectory of development was from specialists (academics and pastors) leaning toward the general Bible-reading public and that evangelical institutions drove most of the innovation.

Whereas the fourth chapter, a high-level narrative of the development of this industry, is about "what happened," the fifth chapter is about "why it happened"—the insiders' story of Bible software. Based on interviews Dyer conducted with individuals who built the systems, the material is drawn from three leading application development companies: Logos Bible Software, Bible Gateway, and YouVersion. The focus falls on what led developers to work on Bible software and how they understood the goals of the tools they are creating. This prompts Dyer to explore the oft-repeated goal of "engagement" in evangelical communities, and to differentiate what it means for each developer or company, in turn helping to highlight the distinctive approaches and business models of these three companies.

In the book's final section (chaps. 6–7), attention shifts from the creators of Bible software to its consumers. These chapters detail reporting from focus groups conducted in three Dallas-area evangelical churches, which explored, through questionnaires and conversations, readers' experiences with the Bible in print and online media, including their note-taking, listening to audio Bibles, and following reading plans. As in previous chapters, Dyer's approach is to report rather than analyze what particular user behavior may mean. At times, he compares his focus group data with related general survey data, but given the rather small and specific population he has interviewed, it is unclear what conclusions could be drawn from his interview data and he provides no guidance. He does aggregate his data into helpful charts, but it is a bit awkward when he refers to colors in parts of his charts while the charts are printed in gray scale (see, e.g., p. 133).

In chapter 7, the author compares the qualitative data gathered from the interviews and self-reporting, summarized in chapter 6, with quantitative data gathered from specific tasks and assessments he gave these same groups. Dyer's participants' performance reflects a general decline in comprehension when moving from print to digital, and he reports interesting distinctions between gender and other demographic categories. Dyer also finds, though, that the functions available only with digital Bibles, such as digital notifications of reading plans or the connection of the text to other information sources, lead to what he considers more engaged reading of the biblical text. He concludes that his focus groups confirm that "evangelical developers have been at least partially successful in changing the behavior of evangelical readers" (179). He notes that readers—at least those he interviewed—feel they have made a trade-off of convenience over quality reading in the selection of Bible software, websites, and apps in place of the printed text. His claims seem reasonable, but given the small sample size of his study, it is hard to know how generalizable the results are.

The book closes with a short set of conclusions (chap. 8) about the history of the digital Bible and the evangelical world it has shaped. Dyer's claims about evangelicals' role in the creation of Bible software, websites, and apps are well-supported. Less convincing are his general conclusions about shifts in evangelicals' reading habits in the digital age, as they are based on findings from the small set of focus groups he convened. Dyer closes with some suggestions for future research (185–186); an appendix enumerating the Bible software, websites, and apps developed since 1982 (189–193); and a robust list of works cited (231–255) that could serve well as a bibliography for this area of research.

There is much to commend this book to readers interested in the recent history of the Bible and its reception. The shift in medium from print to digital is an understudied phenomenon. Dyer's

historical reconstruction of how the field emerged and who the key players were is helpful. To my knowledge, this book offers the most comprehensive narration of such history to date.

As helpful as the narrative history is, throughout my perusal of the book, I found myself wishing the author had turned to analysis, a move beyond mere description that he seems reluctant to make. In the conclusion, Dyer anticipates this critique, stating in defense of the dissertation, “one of the examiners noted that I had not done much theologizing about the digital Bible and the faithful Christian life, and he asked why” (186). Dyer confesses his hesitancy grows out of a sense that evangelicals too often prescribe the actions of others. “Theologizing about the digital Bible,” however, does not have to mean prescribing how someone should read. Instead, it can mean the use of theological categories and language, as well as the history of the church’s navigating new technologies, to consider the potential implications of (some) Christians’ move from being “people of the book” to “people of the screen.” Ironically, the brief bit of prescription the conclusion offers for developers and readers of digital Bibles is advice that, had it been better heeded by the author, would have made the book far stronger: “We readers need to be aware of the ways in which medium and message are inseparable... The new patterns of Bible engagement available to us ... are no more neutral than the advent of the printed Bible several centuries ago” (187). Dyer’s strong literature review early in the book (chap. 2, which he suggests readers could skip!) sets him up well to analyze the assumption that the digital Bible has prompted (or forced?) hermeneutical changes, many of which may be invisible to the reader, but such analysis rarely appears in subsequent pages.

Consider, for example, Dyer’s report that “the adoption of digital Bibles and the process of choosing which medium to use for a set of goals and constraints have, in turn, begun to affect how evangelicals engage and understand scripture” (184). His focus groups reveal that some users find it immediately helpful to have the ability to learn about a word by clicking on it for additional resources, and they find themselves wishing such features existed within their print Bibles. Dyer does not consider, though, the sharp distinction between approaching Scripture as a text to be engaged with immediately available secondary resources rather than as a “strange text” that leaves the reader to determine his or her own meaning in light of personal experience, community, tradition, or encounter with the Spirit, quite apart from a quick check with the “experts.” The fact is that digital tools have removed friction in the process of “learning more,” prompting a hermeneutical shift in many readers. By providing more information at the reader’s fingertips, developers of the digital Bible have presented the text as a puzzle to be solved by looking up words, combining the text with imagery, or (in the case of YouVersion) sharing questions/concerns/notes with other users of the app through social interfaces. Dyer’s role may not be to determine whether the Bible cannot or should not be these things. The book should, though, go beyond reporting the change in behavior and highlight their different hermeneutical visions and the (perhaps invisible) imposition of one over the other through a shift in technology.

This reluctance to move beyond reporting and to engage in theological analysis about newly formed reading practices is consistent with that of the website and app developers Dyer interviewed. The technologists who created these new Bibles offer rather simplistic reflections on the impact of their work on Bible reading, even when Dyer prompts them. For example, when he asks developers if they prefer to read digital or print Bibles, one reports, “I actually feel pity when I see people with paper books,” summarizing the developer’s reasoning that reading print Bibles “might be harmful because it means they cannot get to the ‘truth’ as quickly or as easily as someone with a digital Bible” (93). Neither the developer interviewed nor the author doing the interviewing pauses to consider whether “the truth” is something one can find easily through a well-designed app or a site that provides more historical information.

Theological analysis of what Dyer's investigation uncovers would strengthen the book also in chapter 4, where Dyer asks of the leading companies, "What is the goal of Bible software?" He notes that "in almost all cases, the interviewees' answers included the term 'engagement'" (94). Dyer uses various understandings of this term to differentiate between the companies' approaches. Still, for all, the work of creating the digital Bible is motivated by a desire to grow access to Scripture and to increase the amount of time individuals spend with their eyes on the text. Engagement is a quantifiable metric, and the implication, articulated by several of those interviewed, is that if one looks at Scripture more frequently and for a longer time, one will be a better Christian. As Dyer summarizes, "Bible engagement itself is not the end goal, but a means to the end of 'life change'" (99). Dyer notes that this push for "more scripture" has been part of evangelical movements for centuries. He does not, though, consider this basic connection between more Bible reading and "life change" and whether the quantitative metrics of downloads or time on screen, frequently cited by the purveyors of Bible websites and apps, is a reflection of "engaged" reading, or whether shifting the Biblical text to a digital medium where the reader also sees her email and social media feeds, is actually prompting less "engaged" reading, even as she may be looking at the text more frequently.

A final wish for this book would be the expansion of focus beyond "evangelicals." Such a limitation makes sense for Dyer's argument about the development of the digital Bible, as evangelicals have played an outsized role in this history, and Dyer does an excellent job of explaining why that is. It is less clear, however, why his analysis of reading communities and practices should focus exclusively on evangelicals. In addition, Dyer's laser focus on evangelical individuals and entities, and their theological motivations for creating these tools, precludes him from considering other factors, including financial factors, that have influenced the shape of the Bible in the digital age. In his analysis of the three major software players, Dyer considers their financial models and how they have evolved toward financial sustainability (116–122). He notes, for example, that Bible Gateway has long been supported by "[placing] ads for Christian products around displayed biblical texts" (117). What is lacking, though, is consideration of what type of "Christian products" are being promoted (and this is very interesting to pay attention to) and what impact the presence of such ads has on the Bible reading experience.

Dyer also notes that prominent donors with connections to idiosyncratic theological programs are heavily involved in such projects. Still, he does not consider how the donors' preferences might shape the biblical text and reading experience. For example, he notes that the Green family has been a major force behind the development and growth of YouVersion, but he gives no attention to the implications that may have. Further, he notes in his history section the recent consolidation of Bible websites by large publishers like Zondervan, but he fails to consider the impact the role of the "Big Bible" may have on future Bible project development. While Bible production has always been a business, as the Bible has moved from print to digital, financial incentives and pathways have changed. The reader would have benefited from understanding whether or not Dyer thinks that makes a difference.

Any reviewer can conveniently ask an author for more clarity, as I do here, and so perhaps these suggestions for theological analysis merely point to ways in which Dyer's description invites further conversation. However, in this case, a claim to study "how evangelicals created the digital Bible and how it shapes their reading of scripture"—as the book's subtitle suggests—demands further analysis of reading practices and deeper theological reflection on what technology is doing to change reading practices. Such analysis would surely strengthen the book, but desiderata should not overshadow what Dyer has accomplished in the present volume. Readers interested in the history of the Bible and

its reception, whether generalists or specialists, will benefit from this study that provides a thorough history of the dramatic change in the media of the Bible in the last half-century.

Richard Manly Adams, Jr.

Emory University