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The Canon After Google: Implications of a Digitized and Destabilized Codex

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THE CANON AFTER GOOGLE: IMPLICATIONS OF A DIGITIZED AND DESTABILIZED CODEX
Ched Spellman

Analysis of technological innovation often fails to navigate between the Scylla of overdone alarmism and the Charybdis of uncritical optimism. There is reason to fear both theoretical adversaries, as each one usually militates against an even-handed and cogent analysis of cultural trends and technological paradigm shifts. A remarkable element of the current discussion regarding the changing ways people communicate and interact in our society is how quickly the mode of analysis has needed to move from anticipation to observation. In other words, we are no longer waiting for the advent of a new technological climate just on the horizon but are already partaking in a markedly different manner of cultural expression.

One issue the church would do well to consider as it proclaims “the old, old story” in a world saturated by new media is the effect of this climate on its central text. Indeed, there is a pressing need for the church to think strategically about the way it protects and proclaims the biblical canon.

TECHNOLOGICAL PARADIGM SHIFTS

Though it is probably correct to think of our current shifting context as a unique historical phenomenon, this is by no means the first paradigm shift that has had a direct impact on the biblical text. During the Old Testament period, biblical books were written and transmitted on scrolls. Because it was impractical for a single scroll to contain the full contents of most biblical books, any notion of the biblical text as a whole was by necessity conceptual.¹ As the Hebrew Bible formed, the groupings of Law, Prophets, and Writings became an overarching framework by which to order the biblical material.² Thus, when readers picked up

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¹ John Sailhamer notes that “any talk of a specific shape of the OT canon at that time would necessitate approaching it not in terms of its physical reality, but as a mental construct.” In this setting, an individual reading only a fragment of a text “could have understood it from within the larger context of this mental construct.” *The Meaning of the Pentateuch: Revelation, Composition, and Interpretation* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2009), 211.

² See Stephen G. Dempster, “Torah, Torah, Torah: The Emergence of the Tripartite Canon,” in *Exploring the Origins of the Bible: Canon Formation in Histori-
a portion of a biblical scroll, they had to locate the portion that they were holding conceptually in relation to the other books held sacred.

Around the first century CE, the birth of the codex represents a seismic paradigm shift in the way written material was produced, transmitted, and understood by the typical reader. By at least the fourth century, the entire biblical canon was able to fit on one physical codex, bound together with contextual relationships ordered and solidified. Readers of the canon striving to read individual writings in light of each other were greatly aided by this technological innovation. Though the specific content of the canon varied in different faith communities, it was easier to proclaim the Scriptures as a whole when they were bound together in a single codex. The rise of Gutenberg’s printing press during the Reformation era standardized the book form and allowed for the unprecedented dissemination of published material. This remarkable invention created the text-based culture that has endured for over half a millennium. This set the stage for the eruption of new media.

With the rise of computer technology at the end of the twentieth century, a new way of communicating was born. Though there are many obvious similarities between old and new media, recent developments represent something unique. One obvious feature of this new climate is the digitization of many paper-based formats. The ability to digitize a codex means that the intrinsic connection between a book and the print form, previously understood as inviolable, is weakened. Experimentation with digital manifestations of former staples of the print-based paradigm is common. Increasing numbers of magazines, newspapers, and journals are being offered exclusively online. Though e-books have been on the radar for a number of years, the success of recent e-readers such as Amazon’s Kindle and Apple’s iPad have demonstrated that the practice of reading books electronically is here to stay.

While the digitization of the codex is an important feature of our current climate, the destabilization of texts perhaps best represents the drastic nature of...
the shift. The advent of the search engine revolutionized how many people use the Internet and also modified the way those users access and interact with data. Most text on the Internet is malleable, able to fit into whatever mold the given medium requires. It is no longer necessary to access an entire work or document, as search engine technology enables rapid keyword searching and access to related content via an intricate web of interconnections. As information continues to proliferate, possible intersections of loosely related data on the information superhighway are legion. The movement from text to hypertext thus creates a new technological environment that represents a challenge for readers, including those interacting with the biblical canon.

THE NEED FOR A MENTAL CONSTRUCT

A perennial question in the church and among biblical scholars has been, “What is the canon?” Centuries of debate and discussion have done much to complexify the historiographical account of canon formation but little to eliminate the question once and for all. For Protestants, the canon consists of the sixty-six books contained in the Old and New Testaments. Though there is significant diversity among the documents, the church holds that a unity exists between them that can be viewed from a variety of angles by means of a number of disciplines.

In light of the significant and sweeping technological developments noted above, another question that rises to the surface is, “Where is the canon?” A digitized and destabilized Bible exists in a different way than in a physical codex form. In recent years there has been a trend towards what is called “cloud computing,” a phrase that describes the relationship between users and their data. In this model, users input data to web-based services and then draw it out of “the cloud” whenever they need to access it. Biblical readers who make use of this type of technology likely have also made adjustments to their reading habits. For these users, the biblical text exists in the cloud alongside terabytes of non-related information.

When reading the Bible online or on a mobile device, most of the time there will be rival texts vying for the attention and focus of the reader. The hyper-texted and inter-linked nature of most of the web will require a reader to exercise consistent discipline if he or she desires to read a large portion of text without distraction. Other options are always on offer and only a click away. In this context, the proverb of the day might appear right below your nephew’s birthday pictures, that bit of commentary on the book of Revelation comes just above your friend from high school’s comments on the season finale of LOST, and the Psalm you read a few moments ago gets buried in the Facebook feed just as quick as the embedded You Tube video that played while you were reading it. The lure of the link is a siren song often underestimated by casual users who are sometimes unaware of the lack of focus they devote to sustained reading.

If the codex form is understood as the glue that has held the many books of the canon in a firm contextual relationship, that glue is clearly not as dry as it once was. For an increasing number of people, the Bible as a stable document is being replaced by the Bible as a searchable database. As the primary medium
of accessing the Bible migrates more and more away from the book form, the issues of definition (what?) and location (where?) will need to be addressed with urgency and care.

Among other considerations, one of the ways the church can maintain the integrity of biblical unity is by encouraging and equipping believers to develop an intentional canon consciousness. This task will involve utilizing the concept of the Bible as a whole as a mental construct in the minds of its readers. Armed with a conceptual framework, a reader will be able to understand scattered parts of the biblical story in light of the bigger picture, regardless of the chosen medium. For instance, when an algorithm built into an iPhone devotional reading app generates a daily portion of the biblical text, it will be the task of the reader to contextualize those words in his or her mind. Without some form of mental construct in place, however provisional, the natural tendency to take passages out of context will become the commonplace starting point.

Though the church has always had the responsibility of proclaiming the gospel in light of all of God’s revelation, this practice will become increasingly relevant as technology continues to modify and inform our reading habits. Encouraging believers to think about the textual context of any biblical verse or passage they encounter is one vitally important service the church should continue to render. The development of this type of canon-consciousness can be an effective way to salvage a “whole Bible” interpretive framework in a context that values serendipity over stability. Indeed, adopting an intentional strategy that relates individual biblical passages to one another will enable the church to remain faithful to the comprehensive nature of its central text, even if the people of the book become known as people of the e-book.

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