

OpenTheo

Q&A#28 What Are the Benefits and Dangers of Bible Software?

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Today's question: "Do you use any Bible software (e.g., Logos) to support your studies? Do you have any thoughts on how they might help or hinder our study and perception of the written word?"

Here is the piece I mention on the move from the (vo)codex to the co(in)dex:
<http://booktrades.org/anatomy/vocodex-to-coindex/>.

If you have any questions, you can leave them on my Curious Cat account:
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Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is, do you use any Bible software, for example Logos, to support your studies? Do you have any thoughts on how they might help or hinder our study and perception of the written word? For the last decade or so, I've always used Bible Works. I currently use Bible Works 10.

I've always found it to be very useful and reliable, and at any given time, I'll usually have it open in the background of my screen, and I'll refer to it on a dozen occasions over the course of the day, even when I'm not actually doing any extended study on any particular passage. I find it useful for searching for parallel texts, for finding terms, for working out what terms might mean. It's quite helpful for that.

I've mostly depended upon it for the searches and for the comparisons between different

versions, and for looking at the original text along with modern translations. It's useful for that sort of thing. Very useful.

I've not had sufficient experience with other Bible software. Online, something like net.bible.org, I find very useful. When I don't have access to Bible Works, I'll often use that.

I use Bible Hub and also Bible Gateway online. Those are both very useful, just for convenience of swift reference, and also occasionally for commentaries. How does this affect and maybe hinder our study of perception of the written word? Well, I think it tends to atomise the text.

What Bible software is not usually so good at doing is enabling you to get a grasp of the connections between larger narratives. You can easily study texts and terms and smaller, discrete bits of the text, but it's much more difficult to understand the broader narrative sweep, the literary parallels, the literary structures of texts. For those sorts of purposes, you just need to know the text itself, whether in English or in the original languages.

If you're relying upon the Bible software to give you that, you won't get it from there. One of the problems we have is depending upon - there's always been a danger of relying upon word searches and lexical tools to answer questions that are really questions of context. This is increasingly something that I've become wary of, that there's a certain type of Bible study that narrows down onto little, discrete pieces of data, detached from wider context and from a clear grasp of the narrative structure and the broader symbolic world of the text, and people believing that you can solve everything by breaking it down to these lexical, small lexical chunks, and that you can work things out by parallels on that sort of level and by working out the meanings of terms in that sort of way.

Particularly in the context of the gender debates, this has left us in a situation where so many of our debates hinge upon words, just single words within isolated verses. I think the fact that that has occurred is in no small part a result of the way that we read the text and engage with the text. The more that we depend upon isolated verses and proof texts, the more that we'll argue about these verses in detachment from the broader scope of biblical teaching.

Likewise, the more that we rely upon these tools that are provided by Bible software, the more we are in danger of focusing upon isolated terms, whether that's head or desire, or whether it's something like exercise authority over, or these key terms that are causes of contention within scripture. Within the debates, what happens then is as everything gets broken down to these small little pieces, it actually becomes less clear because the clarity often arises from the context, from the wider realm that comes to bear upon these verses. So when you read these verses, these terms don't occur in abstraction

from anything else.

They occur in a wider context in a broader symbolic world. And when you read them, that will help you to understand them. But if you do not bring that knowledge to them, you'll miss that.

And so without a clear knowledge of the broader narrative and of contexts, which is something that Bible software is not very good at giving you, you will struggle to understand a lot of things within the text. And you'll be more tempted to break things down to smaller and smaller units. And those units actually can often come at the expense of illumination.

Now, the way that we engage with the Bible has changed significantly over the years. There was a recent piece that I read that I thought was very good at expressing this change, talking about the movement in the Middle Ages from what they called the vo-codex to the co-index. And the vo-codex is the book that's designed to be read aloud.

And until the developments of Irish monks became mainstream, and this was around the 10th century or so, Paul Sanger has a book on this called Spaces Between Words. Before that point, you didn't even have spaces between the words in these texts. What you would do is you would have to practice the text in many ways like you'd practice a musical piece for performance, because the text was designed not to be read swiftly.

You didn't have that many texts. And the library of, just to give a sense of this, the library of Bede at Jarrow was just a few hundred years before the year 1400. It was bigger than either the library of Cambridge or Oxford in 1400, and it only had 200 volumes.

So people weren't using a lot of books. And so why would you need to read these books swiftly? Also, these books were designed, for the most part, not to be read swiftly, but to be things that you meditate on, that you chew over, that you hear, that you take in and meditate, that you reflect upon. And as you chew and ruminate over these texts, you begin to notice patterns and details that are hidden within them.

You begin to notice broader structures, and you begin to notice just how dense these texts are, that even simple, seemingly simple narratives have deep structures and mysteries within them. And that's something that you find within the Bible all the time. But we're taught to read quickly.

We're taught to read swiftly. And we're also taught to read primarily with our eyes rather than with our ears. One of the things that the eye does, it can break up a text in a way that the ear does not break up the text to the same extent as the eye breaks up the text.

The eye can spatialise the text and divide it into key units, whereas the ear experiences the text more as a passage through time that it follows and it has to be attentive to. And

so there's a certain sort of hearing that has been displaced as the vocodex was replaced by the coindex. And the coindex is a book that's primarily written for silent reading.

And it's written for study and as such, it has all these navigational tools and markers, whether it's cross references or indices or glossaries or diagrams or whether it's something like chapters and verses. All of these things are designed for the text to be encountered as an object of study by the eye rather than by hearing by the ear. Now, the text heard by the ear is generally heard in community.

It's not an act of private reading. It's an act of communal engagement. It's also something that the unity of the heard word is found in the lectionary or the liturgy of the church.

When we talk about the unity of Scripture, there wasn't, Scripture was not one book in the past. Scripture, there wasn't this pandex that contained all of the books of the Bible as one. There were a few of these texts early on, but they were very rare.

For the most part, you just had separate scrolls or separate codices. And these separate books were encountered as a unity within the life of the worship of the church. So the binding of the Bible is primarily the worship of the church.

And that incidentally can help us to think a bit better about questions of canonicity. But I'll leave that to one side for now. When we're thinking about the vehicle of the text, then, the vehicle of the text is not primarily the book and the binding, although that is part of it, but it's primarily the church.

It's the realm where the text is performed when it's read aloud, the community of its hearing and the community of its production, because these books were generally produced by the church, not by secular scriptoria as they later came to be produced. And so there's a development within the book that occurs even prior to the printing press. The printing press allows for an intensification of this movement from the Bo Codex to the Co Index.

And from the early 13th century onwards, you already have the breaking down of the Bible in various ways. So you have Stephen Langton, Archbishop Stephen Langton, broke the Bible down into chapters. And then Robert Estienne, his New Testament had verses in 1551, I think it's 1571 for the Old Testament.

So these were fairly late developments, but these broke down the text into more and more units. And these units in certain versions of the Bible were almost standalone statements. So each verse is a standalone statement and it tends to break up the unity of the text.

Now, the unity of the text is experienced in different ways. The unity of the text in the past, in the long distance past, was experienced as its unity within the life of the church,

within the lectionary, within the liturgy, etc. It was the text that belonged in that context and within the life of the people of God.

Later on, it became the unity of the text was found in the binding of the book itself that's contained between two covers. And that is the Bible. That is what gives the Bible its unity.

Whereas now I think with Bible software and with the Bible online and other places like that in digital format, the Bible doesn't have the same unity. There's a different sense of the Bible. The Bible is engaged with in a more atomized sense than it would usually be engaged with.

Even the printed Bible, there's a sense of spatiality within it and a difference between things. Whereas the Bible and the movement from one end of the book to another, you even lose that in the digital Bible. There's less of a sense of this is a unified text and there's more sense of discrete units that can be related together.

Now the search functions are fantastic. But if you do not have a sense of the unity of the text, often this can lead you into the trap of thinking that theological questions can be solved with word searches. They seldom can.

Usually you just need to know the broader scope of the text and that is something that you will only really get from hearing the text or reading it in large chunks. Now there have been attempts in recent years to encourage different ways of engaging with the text. So the Reader's Bibles recently have been very helpful.

I have a copy of the ESV Reader's Bible which is, apart from anything else, it's a really attractive series of books. But it's encouraging a different way of engaging with the text without chapters, without verses, without cross references. And it feels more like reading a novel in some respects.

And it also feels a bit disorienting because when you're reading this text there is no, there's not all the markers that you're used to, the sort of mile markers or the references that you'd usually point to as landmarks to say where you are within the text. So rather than saying that you're in Esther chapter 3 verse 2, you have to say exactly what's happened and what's about to happen to get your sense of bearings. And that is actually a pretty good thing.

It challenges you to engage with the Bible in a far more alert fashion, to be aware of the broader patterns of narratives. And it also helps you to realise how often the way of engaging with the text that the digital Bible presents us with is one that makes us blind to the broader scope of the text. And so what the digital Bible or Bible software gives us is a tremendous tool and I would not be without it.

When you think about the amount of time it would have taken to do the sorts of studies

that you can do, searches that you can do in a search in a few minutes and work out all these texts and discover them all, that would take a lot of time in the past, particularly when you think about all the other texts beyond the Bible, the Greek sources and other things like that. The sorts of word searches that you can do now and the degree to which this material is accessible and you can relate different parts to each other, it's remarkable. The amount of work that it has saved scholars is truly immense.

But yet it's not a replacement for knowing the text well as a whole. And so if less you have that knowledge, you'll really struggle. These tools are not going to solve your problems for you.

And often I think people believe that there's a certain type of scholar that believes that every question will be answered if we get more and more into the nitty gritty of the text. But if you do that without having a sense of the broad picture, it's not going to help you. And so this hyper-dependence upon Bible software I think is a problem.

But yet as a tool, it's immensely helpful. And this dependence, this atomisation of the text is something that is more general within Christian circles. It's something seen in promise texts or something seen in proof texts.

It's seen in the way that people break the Bible down and have little sense of the overarching arguments. So there are no verses within Romans, for instance, but these are like islands rising up in a great vast sea of ignorance. If you do not know the argument of Romans as a whole, you'll struggle to understand any of the verses within it well.

And so we need these things, a knowledge of the greater part, the greater whole, to understand the individual parts. And I think Bible software is an incredible aid within that because it enables us to connect the parts far more quickly. But it's not something that will provide you with the tools to do that well.

It's like the internet more generally. The internet is very good for the search tools that it provides. But for the person who's not gained a greater sense of the scope of a discipline and the way things work out and relate to each other from other sources, from reading whole books and from listening to things and from attending to reality, if they lack that, they'll go on the internet and the ability to get atomized data very quickly to bring it up, they'll have little sense of the context and they'll have a great danger of falling into all sorts of traps in their ignorance.

Because even in the past, when you could detach something from its wider body of knowledge, for instance, going into a library and picking up a book and opening up a page on a book and looking at a piece of information, the very act of having to walk through the library to the book that you want, locate it on the shelf and recognize that these books are related to a single subject. All the books around it are related broadly to

a single area of research and that that's embedded within a broader context of research. And then you open up that book and it's a broader argument and the information that you find on the page is part of that broader argument which is in conversation with the books around it.

When we just search for something online in Google Books or something like that, we lose a sense of just how embedded these little bits of information, these little bits of knowledge and truth are within a broader context. And so I think Bible software falls into that more general area of danger. If it's used responsibly, it can be a remarkable tool and I highly recommend it.

If you're not using good Bible software, I would recommend start off with something like net.bible.org. Just as a very beginner, that's something that's useful and then maybe advance to something a bit more technical. But for your primary engagement with the Bible, I would recommend just reading it as a whole, ideally listening to it. That's one of my preferred ways of engaging with the Bible, just listening to vast chunks of the Bible.

Listen to a book in one go and it gives you a greater sense of the whole and then you start to study the details and the details do make more sense when you've got a sense of the bigger picture in which they fit. I hope this helps. If you have any further questions, please leave them on my Curious Cat account.

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Thank you very much and hopefully see you in the next couple of days.