

By Dr. Jay Hallowell

## Digital Bibles: One Step Forward and Two Steps Backward

No one has ever handed me a scroll. I have never unrolled a scroll to find a place in it. Books were invented because they are superior to scrolls.<sup>1</sup> I am really grateful for this technological step forward. It has been a privilege to be born and to live in the age of books and not of scrolls.

Like the step from scrolls to books, the step from books to electronic devices is widely regarded as yet another significant step forward. I agree. I like my electronic devices. I am using one to write this article. Yet, at least for Bible reading, electronic devices are also two steps backward. With digital Bibles, we have gone back to an era where we have to scroll<sup>2</sup> to find a place in a piece of literature such as the book of the prophet Isaiah in the Bible.

I have been using digital Bibles on my Personal Computers (PCs) for nearly 20 years. I appreciate the help that my Bible software provides. I prefer doing my sermon and class preparation, if I need to dig deeply into a specific passage, by using the digital Bibles and Bible software<sup>3</sup> on my office PC rather than using a book-bound printed Bible.

However, even my Notebook PC is too unwieldy, hot, and uncomfortable to use for my daily devotions or quiet times. Therefore, even though I have invested significant amounts of my limited funds into digital Bibles and Bible software for my Notebook PC, I still use printed book-bound Bibles for my quiet times. At least I did so until I was able to get a Tablet PC with a 7-inch screen at a reasonable price in December 2011.<sup>4</sup> In 2012, as an experiment, I used digital Bibles

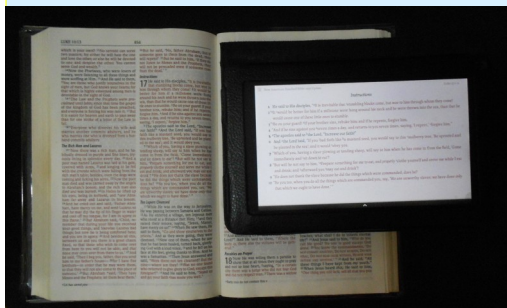
on my Tablet PC for my daily quiet times. Having used the Tablet PC daily for my devotions for more than a year, along with nearly 20 years of experience of Bible study on Desktop PCs and Notebook PCs, I now believe that I can evaluate **the ways that digital Bibles on PCs are a step forward and the ways that they are steps backward.**

The Tablet PC with a 7-inch screen is a very comfortable size. It is smaller and lighter, and thus more comfortable to hold, than either our printed Bibles or a Notebook PC. It starts up quickly, only slightly slower than opening a printed Bible, but much, much faster than my Windows 7 Notebook PC. The screen is backlit, so it is easier to read in a poorly lit room than a printed Bible. Whether travelling or at home, I like the quick, easy access to different Bible translations, the original Biblical languages, dictionaries, word searches, commentaries, and other books on my Tablet PC.<sup>5</sup> I am delighted that such a small Tablet PC allows me to easily use so many resources. The digital Bibles on my Tablet PC are definitely a step forward in these ways, compared to either a printed Bible or the Bibles on my Notebook PC. For study, though, the Bible software on my Notebook or Office PC is still significantly better than either the ones on my Tablet PC or printed editions. These are ways that I consider my digital Bibles to be steps forward.

My digital Bibles are not a step forward in every way, though. Gradually I have become aware of two significant ways that using digital editions of the Bible, compared to using printed Bibles, are steps backward.

He [Jesus] was teaching in their synagogues [throughout Galilee], and everyone praised him. He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. *Unrolling it, he found the place...* (Luke 4:15-17a, NIV, brackets and italics added)

These steps backward are in the areas of **Increased Distraction** and **Out-of-Context Reading**. Let me continue by first discussing the less dangerous of these two steps backward.



### **Increased distraction is a step backward**

Life is full of distractions, even with a printed Bible. All of those distractions — telephones ringing or beeping, seeing or thinking of household and other chores that need to be done, and many others — continue. That is life. My PCs, though, bring me temptations that my ink-and-paper Bibles never brought me. If an internet connection is handy, there is email, sports scores, Facebook status updates, news, and all the distractions of the internet. Even without an Internet connection, my PCs still have as many other distractions — music, videos, novels, biographies, games, apps, documents, etc. — as I load onto them. Using a digital Bible brings me increased dangers of distraction, compared to my printed Bibles. This is a step backward.

### **Out-of-Context reading is a dangerous step backward**

Recently I read a passage from Luke 17 on my Tablet PC in my living room and then studied it later that day on my PC in my office. I knew that Luke had organized this section of his gospel as a travel story. Specifically, it is about Jesus' trip to Jerusalem. This trip begins in Chapter 9 and ends in Chapter 19. I wanted to skim the whole journey, to see my passage in its context. This is vital to Bible reading. Every sentence and paragraph in the Bible is

part of a larger story or larger discussion. My digital Bibles, whether on my Tablet PC or on my PC in my office, failed that day in the task of helping me see this larger but important context. I also wanted to check if there was a parallel to this passage in the other Gospels, another standard step in reading the Gospels. My digital Bibles failed in that task as well. The screens are simply too small.<sup>6</sup> It is too difficult to scroll from one passage to another. I had to pick up a printed Bible in order to get this basic, vital, and necessary contextual information.<sup>7</sup> This is the more serious danger, since reading in context is the most important principle for reading, understanding, and applying the Bible. The return to scrolling is not a step forward. Digital Bibles, like a scroll, show less of the context of a sentence or paragraph than does a printed edition. Thus, Digital Bibles are a dangerous step backward from printed Bibles for reading the Bible in its context.

There are methods, thank God, for overcoming the ways that digital Bibles are steps backward. Let us now look briefly at those methods.

#### **1. Overcoming Increased Distraction**

The tools to overcome the distractions of the devices on which digital Bibles are found are spiritual. These tools include prayer, concentration, cultivating a longer attention span, willpower, and self-discipline. The best 'tool,' though, is the incredible grace of the Triune God. God wants to establish and maintain a relationship with us through the blood of Christ and the Holy Spirit. His grace gives us the overwhelming desire to be with Him. Being able to relate to this gracious, wonderful, and amazing Triune God through His Word makes everything else on our PCs seem empty, meaningless, and of lesser value and interest in comparison.

#### **2. Overcoming Out-of-Context Reading**

I wish I knew how Jesus overcame the danger of Out-of-Context Reading of the Isaiah scroll he used that day in Nazareth. I wonder how he learned to 'see' each passage in its context even though unrolling the scroll only allowed him to literally see a small part of the book at a time. By the time he was 12 Jesus was already known for his good questions and understanding (Luke 2:46-47). At age 30, he knew how to find the passage he needed in the synagogue in Nazareth (Luke 4:15-17a). His teaching and life make it clear that he knew the Old Testament deeply. The only way I know how to gain such an understanding of the Bible is to read whole books of the Bible attentively and meditatively. I will assume that Jesus, like others Jews in his day, learned these good Bible reading habits in a synagogue as a boy and young man.

Reading whole books of the Bible, attentively and meditatively, cannot be done in, for example, five minutes per day. The books are too long. The remarkable Triune God deserves more time than that. He has given us enough time in the day to listen to His voice through His word. We need to develop the habit of doing so. We overcome the dangers of Out-of-Context Reading by consistently reading and listening to the whole Bible.

#### **Conclusion**

God's word is God's word, whether chiselled in stone, handwritten on papyrus or parchment in a scroll, printed in book format, recorded on a CD or in an MP3 file, performed in a video, or digitalized for reading on a cell phone, Tablet PC, or another kind of PC or electronic device. I do not see, though, that digital Bibles should replace printed Bibles. Digital Bibles are two steps backward from printed Bibles. Printed Bibles both cause fewer distractions and better



I am grateful for my devotional experiment with my Tablet PC in 2012. God was still gracious to speak to me through the Digital Bibles there. I will continue to use my Digital Bibles. I will also continue to use my printed Bibles. The Triune God has revealed Himself in the whole Bible. What a privilege it is to get to know God through all that He has revealed!

<sup>1</sup>Scrolls, of course, were invented because they were so much better than stone tablets or potshards. The codex was an invention that bridged the gap between scrolls and books, an advance I will ignore in this article.

<sup>3</sup>For the record, I now use Logos IV (2000–2012) as my main Bible study software. I have tried other Bible software over the decades, but have found Logos to be the best for me. I have Logos IV open now as I write this article.

<sup>5</sup>Logos has provided an app for my Kindle Fire with which I can access the same Bibles and resources I already own and use with Logos IV on my PC.

<sup>7</sup>To be fair, I have seen too many readers of printed Bibles still reading them in ways that are out-of-context and unhealthily selective. It is the habit of reading whole books of the Bible that provides a big enough context for proper understanding of any passage from those books. Print editions do not ensure good Bible reading habits. They just make it easier to do so than using a digital edition does.

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