

Reading Scripture badly: the technological threat to biblical literacy

Murray Hogg

Murray Hogg BEng MDiv MTh is the chair of ISCAST Victoria and Pastor of Camberwell East Baptist Church.

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Introduction

Technological innovation impacts our lives, including the life of faith, in very many ways (Hipps 2009). Of these, I wish to consider one in particular: the impact of new technology on biblical literacy. I will suggest that it is possible that new technology can lead us to read Scripture badly. My intent is neither to denigrate new technology nor to advocate resistance to it. Indeed, I will not even consider whether technological change should be regarded as good or bad. The fact is that technological change is part and parcel of our contemporary social landscape and the questions I am interested in exploring are these: What is the new technology?; What impact does it have on our lives?; and How might we best come to terms with that impact?

The third of these questions can only be answered after we have addressed the first two. If we do not know what the new technology is, if we do not understand its strengths and weaknesses, if we do not grasp its power to impact us, then we surrender ourselves as hostages to fortune. This is no melodramatic claim. The entire point of technology is to change how we live our lives, yet the changes brought by technology are never fully predictable. From this fact arises the 'law of unintended consequences', which suggests that the outcomes of our actions are often such as we did not intend. And my suggestion in this paper is that a wise person will not readily dismiss the possibility that the law of unintended consequences obtains when we apply technology to the reading of Scripture. This is especially so when we look back at history and note that more than once technological advances have been applied to Scripture with revolutionary impact. In the first century Christians adopted the highly convenient codex form as the preferred format for Scripture. In the late Middle Ages the printing press turned out Bibles in hitherto unimaginable numbers. Both innovations impacted the way people read Scripture—the codex, for instance, led to the idea of a fixed order for the biblical books, and thereby helped to set in place the idea of a closed canon of Scripture (Kraft 2000). The printing press made the Bible readily available to anybody who cared to read it, making it a public book, rather than the property of an educated church hierarchy. Here history suggests

that technology has influenced our understanding and use of Scripture, and a wise person will not disregard the possibility that modern technology may well work yet another change. Just what sort of change is the question.

Changing technology and the changing brain

My attention was drawn to this issue by Carr (2008), who reported on the impact of internet usage upon people's ability to read prolonged prose, and to retain what they have read. Although largely anecdotal in nature, Carr's contentions are supported by an increasing scientific literature which suggests that technology is literally altering our brains as they adapt themselves to the kind of reading patterns encouraged by the media of cyberspace.

It transpires that as our society was transformed by the technology of the book, so too were our brains. They restructured themselves to accommodate the sustained, deep, linear thinking which the book encourages. In the book age, our brains were adapted to engage with prolonged written works. Now frequent engagement with the internet results in our brains restructuring themselves to accommodate a different type of reading: one which involves scanning documents for snippets of pertinent information, rapid movement to new subjects when we find something that tweaks our interest, the acceptance of quick answers, even to the most complex questions, answers whose value is determined largely by popularity rather than factuality or fidelity to truth. For such reasons Bauerlein (2008) has suggested that 'online literacy is a lesser kind', whilst renowned educationalist Edward de Bono argues that internet use encourages lazy thinking and leads to a loss of creativity (Connelly 2011).

The issue concerns not just a different way of reading. Our brains themselves are becoming accustomed to an entirely different way of doing things. Indeed, in an age where there is ever increasing acceptance of the idea of brain plasticity—the ability of the brain to continually 'rewire' itself throughout life—Oxford University neuroscientist Susan Greenfield has argued that the internet technology is actually changing the structure of the brain (Derbyshire 2009).¹ We are not merely forgoing the sort of reading the book encourages, we are losing the ability to engage in that sort of reading altogether. The implications for biblical literacy should be easy to see. The Bible is a piece of prolonged writing, and as people lose the capability to engage with prolonged writing, so they lose the capability to engage with the Bible.

1 At the time of writing this paper I could locate no peer-reviewed studies into the neurological effects of internet usage, and it must be noted that Greenfield's claims, in particular, have not gone unchallenged. However, the primary interest here is not neurology but sociology, and in this area the evidence for change is compelling. See, for instance, Greenfield (2009).

The loss of narrative context

But the technological threat to biblical literacy does not end here and there is yet another issue to be addressed. Consider Luke 20:37 in which Jesus refers to 'the account of the bush'. This was a necessary way of referencing passages of Scripture at a time when chapter and verse divisions had not yet been introduced. What this required, of course, was a considerable degree of biblical literacy, which is not required of those who have their bibles so conveniently subdivided. This fact led the Jewish biblical scholar James Kugel to suggest that chapter and verse numbers are the worst technological innovation in the history of the Bible.² Such a claim may surprise us if only because we are so accustomed to this ubiquitous feature of our bibles that we have never stopped to ask after the unintended consequences.

In the same vein, Kugel proposed the computerised concordance as candidate for the second worst technological innovation ever applied to the Bible. I should make clear that I have no idea precisely what Kugel had in mind in making such a claim but I can offer my own observations on the matter. The fact is that for some time it has been recognised that certain ways of approaching the Bible are lacking in sophistication, with the now classical treatment being that of Barr (1996). The most egregious instance is perhaps that of the word study, where a person simply extracts from the Bible all passages containing a particular word and then, through systematic analysis of those passages, claims to have constructed a biblical account of the concept in question. This is even more problematic when a person lacking any solid grasp of the original biblical languages uses lexical aids in the pursuit of such studies. And what is the problem here? Well, precisely that the words and passages in question are being torn from their narrative and linguistic contexts. Henry Neufeld gives an example of just how bad this sort of thing can get when he tells of a chap who translated a passage of Hebrew by taking a Strong's concordance and simply looking up each word one-by-one:

...he had simply looked through the possible translations for each word, and then selected one that he wanted to use. He had combined those English words in the fashion of one putting together a difficult jigsaw puzzle, and then had dealt with minor issues such as verb tenses and the syntax according to the sense that he was looking for. As a result, the verse consisted of a series of words, correct in the sense that they came from a Hebrew/English dictionary, but none of which were actually possible translations in that particular context.

Neufeld 2007

Obviously Barr and Neufeld had in mind the misuse of print media so we should not be too quick to lay blame at the feet of modern technology. The point, rather, is that we should be aware that such problems exist and

² Kugel's remarks referenced here and in the next paragraph were conveyed to me by Old Testament scholar Peter Enns in private conversation.

acknowledge that newer technology makes such practices far easier, and, I dare say, far more tempting.

An even more problematic use of technology is found in the form of 'verse for the day' services. By subscribing to these, one can receive a single biblical verse by e-mail or by SMS. Perhaps those delivered in e-mail form might incorporate links by which one could access more information, but an SMS message to one's mobile phone removes even that possibility. We thus have what must be the ultimate in a context-free reading of scripture. Again, the point is not to suggest that such technology is inherently bad, and one can conceive of arguments in favour of its use. The point, rather, is to remind us that the law of unintended consequences applies to these technological advances and, as we do not have the option of halting or ignoring them, we should therefore do our best to understand them and manage their adoption.

Such issues are not restricted to the reading of the Bible only. Whilst preparing this paper I had a discussion of this issue with a friend who pointed out that he finds problematic the use of projectors in church services. He made the point that prior to the adoption of such technology it was customary for people to use a hymn book during worship. If, then, something in a hymn struck the worshipper as particularly significant, they were able to stop and reflect. With the advent of projectors and the consequent real time update of song lyrics during services, people no longer have this luxury. Projectors certainly have their advantages, but once again we find ourselves confronting the law of unexpected consequences. My friend makes his spiritual home within the Baptist tradition where hymnology has traditionally had a fundamental role in pedagogy and spirituality (Weber 2002). Analogous problems may well arise in other traditions which have historically focused on print media—such as Anglicanism with the Book of Common Prayer.

Concurrent with the adoption of newer technologies, we are also seeing an increased emphasis upon the concept of narrative. This is particularly so amongst the generation who find themselves at the cutting edge of technological adaptation. Here we need to appreciate the enormous cultural transitions which are occurring as a consequence of technological advance. Recently the son of a friend mentioned 'the olden days, before they had computers', and it struck me that there is a generation of young people for whom modern technology is entirely normative. They simply cannot conceive of a world before computers. But even so, they are perhaps sensing that the advent of computer technology is not entirely benign. The desire to make sense of the world, to place one's experience in a broader context, a broader story, is, I think, something which comes to us almost by instinct. Young people are, perhaps, sensing that there is more to life than that which is mediated through a computer screen.

Toward a response: the recovery of narrative

Now, this is encouraging, for in it lies the seed from which the answer to our problem will grow. The difficult part of the task—to instil in people the

idea that story is important—has by whatever means already been done for us and it is quite unnecessary for us to argue for this idea. What matters, rather, is that we provide a story to live by. And as the technological advances cannot be put aside, it follows that we provide this story in such a way that we embrace technology so that it works for us, rather than against us. This will require focused attention on the story we wish to tell, the people to whom we wish to tell it, and the means we wish to use.

Now, the last of these, the means, will by and large be determined by the other two. In the present context the story is that of the Christian gospel and the people we wish to reach are technologically savvy post-moderns. How do we convey the former in such a way that it appeals to the latter? Let me make a few suggestions.

First, I think we cannot overemphasise the need to think and convey our message in terms of story. It is amazing just how many people know bits and pieces of the Bible but have no real idea of the overall narrative. They have the words and paragraphs, but not the story. This is not a particularly religious problem—many people can recognise the odd passage from Shakespeare, but would be utterly lost if pressed to locate it within one of Shakespeare's narratives. As a result they lack the context which would explain why a character said or did such-and-such a thing. Not knowing the big picture, their understanding is disjointed and therefore inadequate. My claim is that this is precisely the situation which increasingly obtains within the Christian community, and that it is a problem that modern technology increasingly compounds. Faced with such a situation, those of us who seek to convey the Christian gospel must do our utmost to paint the big picture, to tell the story, to provide the narrative, awareness of which allows people to arrange the disparate parts.

Second, we need to embrace new technology and make it work for us. This means more than simply using presentation software in church, or setting up an account on a social networking site. What is required is a comprehensive grasp of the technology, understanding both its strengths and weaknesses, understanding the sort of impacts it has, and therefore understanding how it can work for, and also against, whatever it is we are trying to achieve. A rather trivial example can be drawn from those computerised concordances which I earlier criticised for inviting unsophisticated approaches to Biblical interpretation. But the solution to this problem is not to reject the technology, but to improve its use. To make it servant rather than the master of our exegesis. This will require more than just a passing knowledge of the technology. Indeed, the person who is most handicapped here is not the person who rejects use of the technology, nor the person who is fully familiar with it, but the person who is somewhere in the middle, the person who has a little knowledge and for whom, therefore, the technology is a dangerous thing. It turns out that technological literacy is a foremost requirement if we are to retain biblical literacy in a technological age.

But that is only one half of the challenge. Technological literacy must be joined with creativity in the service of biblical literacy so as to help people grasp the big picture, the story, the narrative of the Bible. Here we may look back to a time which faced a similar problem, albeit for quite a different reason. Prior to the invention of the printing press and prior to widespread literacy in Western society, people couldn't read the Bible for themselves and therefore lacked the means to obtain a grasp of either the parts or the whole. What arose in that context was a tremendously creative approach to telling the biblical story—through poetry, song, drama, liturgy, art, and so on. Although some streams of Christian tradition have regarded these art forms with suspicion and their use is somewhat diminished in the contemporary church, they retain tremendous potential to express the Christian story. Faced with the sort of challenges posed by the latest technological advances, I see no reason why we should not reappropriate them in the service of the Gospel.

Conclusions

There is a great deal more to say on this. However, I trust that I have made good on my initial promise neither to denigrate new technology nor to advocate resistance to it. Our task, rather is to understand it sufficiently that we may adopt it as part of a comprehensive approach to presenting the Christian gospel and fostering Christian discipleship. I have suggested that the greatest danger of the new technology is that it risks fragmenting our understanding of the biblical narrative and therefore our aim ought to be to seek ways to retain a focus on the big picture—the narrative, the story of the Bible—so as to provide a context whereby people can locate the various elements of their understanding. Not only may many art forms traditionally used by the Christian church be utilised to this end, the new technology itself has tremendous potential if we determine first to understand it and then to apply it in the service of the gospel with wisdom and creativity. New technology can and does pose a very great threat, not just to biblical literacy, but to literacy of all sorts. But we who believe that technological advance is amongst those good gifts that God gives to his children will not fear the threat for we know that the God who gives us such gifts will also give us the wisdom to use them.

NB: I wish to express my appreciation to CPOSAT editors John Pilbrow and Bruce Craven for bringing the comments of Susan Greenfield to my attention.

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