Chapter 4: The Bible as Medium

Correlations between theology and communications media are nowhere clearer than the study of the Bible itself.
Walter Ong[1]

For the 1800-year reign of literacy, the 400 preceding the advent of electricity were the height of grammar of the linear, sequential, alphabetic method, with grammar and rhetoric subservient to dialectic. This sequential context of harmonious Euclidean, visual space of the moderns changed the conversation. The argument for many changes from "what God said" to "what God wrote."
Daniel Colhour[2]

The evangelical is a person of the book only because he or she is first and foremost a person of the gospel.
Kevin Vanhoozer[3]

Once one begins to study the work of communications historians and media ecologists, it does not take long to see everything around as a medium, an extension of human capacity for work, communication, and communicative work. Technologies that once faded to the background come to the fore—though inevitably not those anyone still speaks of as technology: Twitter—often the subject of coffee shop conversations—is not *environmental* precisely because of this. But phones are rarely noticed. And the most ubiquitous technology of them all, fixed typography, is never spoken of as such. Closely related is the bound book—an innovation that lives on passenger trains and high school classrooms and traditional church pews. Still, if standing in Christian worship leads us to finally realize that the hymn or prayer book is a human-

[1] Ong, *Faith and Contexts, Vol 1*, 1:158.

[2] Charles Ess, *Critical Thinking and the Bible in the Age of New Media*, Research Center for Scripture and Media of the American Bible Society (Dallas: University Press of America, 2004), 189.

[3] Vanhoozer, *The Drama Of Doctrine*, 27.

invented communication medium (in this sense no different than the LCD projector), some resistance still seems to face the next obvious conclusion: the Bible itself is a technology.

For *Bible*, this is a difficult leap to make. The word has two strong associations—both media ecological and theological. In the first place, we know Bible for us means *book*—it always has in English and its root in French (the older Latin and Greek depart from that, we'll get there in a moment). In contemporary English, bible can be used for other bound books too, our mental picture unthinkingly unites the technologies of papermaking, fixed typography, and folio binding. In the second, Bible has the direct theological association with the Word of God, the divine revelation of the Creator to the created. Is it any wonder that these two senses have become entangled, the medium and the message? We see it in large print altar Bibles ($479 REB Lectern Bible with Apocrypha; genuine leather, ribbon markers.[4]), Red Letter Christians,[5] or civil religion's swearing-in ceremony, hand on the Book. We see it each time we quote chapter and verse markers in authoritative tone or teach Christian children to recite the books of the Bible in order. God's Word has become a book.

But theology has good reasons for denying this direct correlation. As media ecology sensitizes us to the medium, our faith requires we understand God's voice as wider than a technology, if for no reason than in the Church's history, the centuries that did *not* have a printed book for scriptures still exceed the years that they have.

It's these insights that lead Bible scholar A.K.A. Adam to imitate Belgian surrealist artist Rene Magritte. Margritte's 1964 work *The Tune and Also the Words* perhaps is better known by its embedded script reading plainly across the bottom: "This is not a pipe" ("Ceci n'est pas une pipe").[6] Above the matter-of-fact phrase is featured an enlarged portrait of a smoking pipe,

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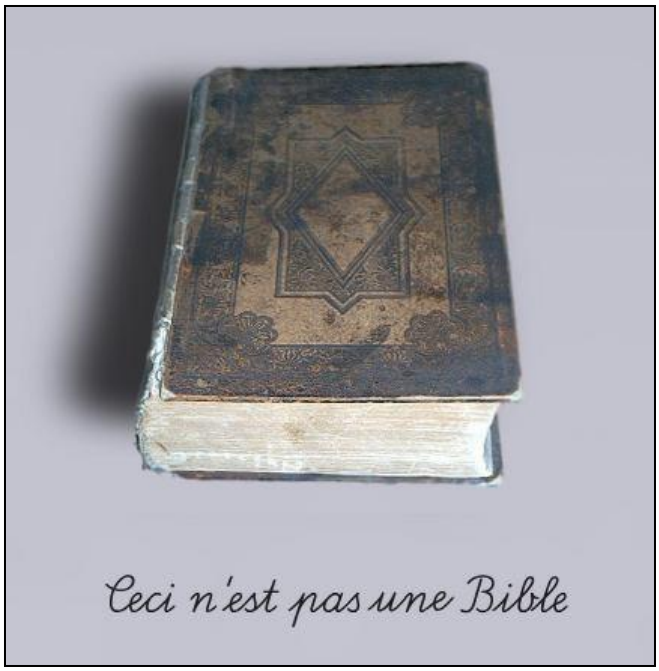
[4] "REB Lectern Bible with Apocrypha," *ChristianBook.com*, n.d., http://www.christianbook.com/Christian/Books/product?item_no=1507308&kw=1507308&en=froogle&p=1013824&cm_mmc=CBDfeeds-_-froogle-_-bibles-_-1507308.

[5] "Red Letter Christians: About Us," *Sojourners*, n.d., http://www.sojo.net/index.cfm?action=about_us.redletterchristians.

[6] Rene Magritte, *The Tune and Also the Words*, Gouache over traces of graphite on cream wove paper, 362 x 548 mm, 1964, The Art Institute of Chicago, http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/119129.

which, of course, is not actually a pipe, but only a gouache painting of one. The semiotic playfulness is what McLuhan would call the construction of an "anti-environment" by an artist that grabs the attention of the otherwise oblivious public. Margrite illustrates how words and images only represent, but are not actually, their objects. Adam, in turn, writes an article "This is Not a Bible," in which he features a photograph of a closed book— presumably the Bible—with



the corresponding text ("Ceci n'est pas une Bible") written below (see Figure 1).[7] Forcing our eyes to what otherwise would fade into the background, he visually makes the point we have described in just an instant, and simultaneously moves us to one of the straightforward driving questions of this study: "If the Scripture is not a book, then what is it?"

[7] A.K.M. Adam, "This Is Not a Bible," in *New Paradigms for Bible Study: The Bible in the Third Millenium*, ed. Robert M. Fowler, Edith Waldvogel Blumhofer, and Fernando F. Segovia (New York: T & T Clark, 2004), 21-47.

FIGURE 1: AKMA'S
"THIS IS NOT A BIBLE"

Scripture in Media History

In our overview of Walter Ong's theories of orality and literacy, we laid out the four key eras in the history of media: oral, chirographic, print, and electronic. Expanding these to include several sub-stages, we attempt an answer the question on what scripture is (or has been) from a media perspective. Put another way, what was the experience of God's Word for the people of God in prior media eras? For illustration sake, it may be helpful to use certain biblical people to represent eras. A chart at the back of the chapter may also be helpful (See Figure 2).

Jacob (Pre/Early-History). By definition, the methods of history prior to the advent of documentation are problematic, and theologically we do not need to say scripture was extant. But the book of Genesis does witness to the personal, special revelation of God to the Patriarchs, in a setting that, in terms of communications media, was set in orality. As Ancient Near East archeological records solidify, the Neolithic appearance of small clay tokens has been taken by Denise Schmandt-Besserat to be the pre-cursor to written language. The system used 1 to 1 correspondence for goods like sheep and units of grain, in an accounting system that over 1,000 years used over 800 universal tokens. Eventually the practice of making impressions of the tokens for records gave way to proto-cuneiform, appearing approximately 3100 BC in the city of Uruk (Biblical: Erech[8]) in Sumer. The primitive writing spread along trade routes to places like Egypt, and Harold Innis says that "thoughts gained lightness" as Egyptians shifted from stone to papyrus in the 5th dynasty (2750-2625 BC).[9] This new literacy was an exclusive skill held by trained scribes, usually trained within the cultic system.[10] And the proportion of semantic to phonetic signs remained complex. For Jacob, clay tokens may have facilitated trade in flocks, but written language didn't exist in his world. God revealed Godself in oral words and physical wrestling under the night sky (Gen 32.30)—the media of the times.

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[8] Andrew Robinson, "The Origins of Writing," in *Communication in History: Technology, Culture, and Society*, ed. David Crowley, 4th ed. (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2002), 36.

[9] Innis, Harold. "Media in Ancient Empires" , 21

[10] Ibid, 26

Josiah (Early Chriographic—1700 - Christ). True alphabetic writing, where single symbols represent single sounds, appear to be emanate from a common source in Sinai from 1700 - 1500 BC, according to Robert K. Logan. Earlier scripts are dated by absence of vowel markings, like Ugaritic cuneiform. The setting, dating, and composition of the Old Testament, especially the Deuteronomic history, is a discussion we are keen to avoid for many reasons, not the least is pleading lack of expertise. Even the specialists disagree on whether the people of God left Egypt in the thirteenth or fifteenth centuries, the realities of the rise of unified Israel, the circumstances around Josiah's reform, or when a list of common texts began to be canonized (The classic critical view sees the Old Testament canon becoming formally coherent over a 500 year period ending at the Council of Jamnia near 100 CE—a view that is not in favor now, with no consensus to replace it[11]). We want to say only that the environment for a YHWH-fearing Israelite was not textual, despite the handwritten documents that had begun to record the oral tradition of God's will. Though a subject of some controversy, literacy rates in ancient Israel were probably similar to surrounding cultures: five to seven percent. This "craft literacy" was likely restricted to the priestly class or scribal culture, and was thought of more as the contemporary reader would think of as digital voice recorder—a means of storing *sound.* "Texts were for the ears rather than the eyes; Isaiah 29.18 predicts a time in which also 'the deaf will hear the words of a scroll [*seper*]', " writes Karel Van De Toorn.[12] The scroll itself returns us to the word Bible, whose ancient Greek antecedent is either *biblos* (βίβλος) or *biblion* (βιβλίον)[13]—words which classics scholar Eric Havelock insists should not be translated "book." Instead they must refer to papyrus itself, or a sheet or scroll of writing, a scroll only being sheets joined in

[11] K. van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 235.

[12] Ibid., 12. Toorn lays out a short argument on literacy rates, arguing that even if rates were somewhat higher, the ability to write a name or read simple things should not be measured equivalently to the ability to write texts, a "high literacy."

[13] Originally the diminutive form in the *attic*, yet the Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (TDNT) says that *koine* uses it independently.

success with gumming.[14] Therefore the lost "book of the Law" presented to King Josiah was actually a scroll (2 Kings 22; *sepher* in the Hebrew) and was read aloud. God's revelation was still mediated by the voice of those priests appointed, and the scrolls were an internal tool for the prophets or priestly classes, with no such thing as a reading public.

Jesus and the early church. A recent popular book entitled "The Bible Jesus Read"[15] is well-titled to pose the question of what the scriptures were to Jesus the Teacher. When Luke tells us in chapter four of Jesus' famous sermon at the synagogue in Nazareth, he seems to think of the scriptures as the Septuagint (LXX), the Greek translation of the Old Testament and apocryphal writings that was produced for created Hellenistic Jews began in the third century—the tradition holds that it was done by a group 72 (or 70) Jewish scholars. This version of the scriptures is the one that Jesus seems to follow when Luke reports the reading from the scroll of Isaiah.[16] Yet the picture is more significantly more complicated.

For one, the LXX wasn't a fixed source in the way we think of contemporary books. "Revisions were constantly being made to the Septuagint," writes Anthony J. Saldarini.[17] And canon wasn't fixed. Larry Heyler explains that that when the Jewish people returned from exile in Babylon (Second Temple Judiasm), the time that Protestants typically think of as the "400 years of silence" between the Old and New Testaments were actually chock full of Jewish writings. Today we call these apocryphal or psuedopigraphal writings, but by the time of Jesus day, they were not particularly sorted out.[18] Van Der Toorm points out that Qumran documents show Enoch and Jubilees as studied with the Prophets.[19]

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[14] David Crowley, *Communication in History: Technology, Culture, and Society (4th Edition)* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2002), 56.

[15] Philip Yancey, *The Bible Jesus Read*, First Edition. (Zondervan Publishing Company, 1999).

[16] John Nolland, *Word Biblical Commentary : Luke 1:1-9:20*, vol. 35 (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 193.

[17] Paul J. ; Harper & Row Achtemeier, *Harper's Bible dictionary*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 925.

[18] Larry Helyer, *Exploring Jewish Literature of the Second Temple period : a guide for New Testament students* (Downers Grove Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 21.

[19] Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible*, 261-3.

But for another, Jesus's sermon likely wasn't in Greek at all, but in two languages.[20] Hebrew was considered the language of the holy documents, and likely his reading was in this. But the Jews after the exile had lost Hebrew as a common tongue, replaced by Aramaic, and scriptures read aloud in the synagogue was likely accompanied by this Aramaic translation—records of which we now have as *targums*—and which have included commentary right in with the text.[21] For Jesus, inheriting the documents and customs of second temple judiasm, the scriptures were a multi-lingual blend of additive witnesses of the history of the people of God—and for his hearers, it was orally proclaimed.

And for the early Christians, the Word of God was the person and work of Jesus Christ, the older scriptures hardly jettisoned, but re-appropriated through a new lens. Kenneth Cragg does not make a new observation when he writes, "Jesus left behind no written record, we are utterly dependent on the hearers."[22] This accumulated record of witness is the lens that the apostles use to refocus on the scriptures. A new Christian in Corinth would have heard Paul write, "For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures,"(1 Cor 15.3) and understood the scriptures to be that of *traditio,* the same scripture Jesus understood scripture—the generational stewardship of the story and the witness of the people of God and the past and present action of God.

And new witness to this story was being written. The setting of the New Testament epistles was the Roman system of roads which allowed swift passage of messengers carrying scrolls. The epistolary form of the New Testament books are not disguised, and Paul's writings were spoken orally to a scribe—using the traditional Hellenistic forms of the day—and then delivered by a trusted messenger, who was charged not only with delivery but speaking the letter aloud.[23] How these written proclamations became designated as scriptural during the first

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[20] Nolland, *Word Biblical Commentary : Luke 1:1-9:20*, 35:194.

[21] Helyer, *Jewish Literature of the Second Temple*, 37.

[22] Kenneth Cragg, "'According to the Scriptures': Literacy and Revelation," in *Ways of Reading the Bible*, ed. Michael Wadsworth, 1981, 26.

[23] Peter T O'Brien, "Letters, Letter Forms," in *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters*, ed. Gerald F. ; Martin Hawthorne, Logos electronic ed. (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 553.

centuries of the church is a thorny question, especially for evangelicals, because it can have the same affect we are hoping to have here—drawing attention to the medium more than the message. Simplistic views have shown to be inaccurate. Craig Allert explains the "binder mentality" of evangelicals like B. B. Warfield, who viewed each new book of scripture as dropped into a three-ring binder as they were finished—completing in 98 CE when the Apostle John finished the book of Revelation.[24] Allert argues that one does not need to cede a high view of scripture while acknowledging that the church has quite definitely not always equated scripture ("authoritative") with canon ("defined collection").[25] Indeed, he convincingly shows that the early church's conception of scripture was "fairly fluid," compiling a list of apostolic fathers that cite what would be considered non-canonical today.[26]

But a common core did exist, and Athanasius is credited as the first to list the twenty-seven books we today consider the New Testament in 367 CE.[27] Yet even so, it is anachronistic to think of the "books" as bound between two covers with a Library of Congress number printed neatly inside. The transition from scrolls to a newer form is just being made.

Augustine (Later Chriographic). St. Augustine's famous search for the spiritual in the midst of pagan education and sexual trysts drove him through Manichaeism, Neoplatonism, and ultimately to his mother Monica's Christianity; she persuaded him to visit a pew in the church of governor-turned-bishop Ambrose of Milan. The famous orator's rhetorical deftness and allegorical exposition of the text was a great influence on Augustine, whose internal conflict culminated in his familiar story of angst and resolution in the garden where a disembodied voice pointed him to the scriptures, saying "take up and read."

Reading itself, as a means of conversion, stands out. It's certain that Augustine did not, as we might picture, take up a Gideon paperback and read silently to himself. Instead, his

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[24] Craig Allert, *A High View of Scripture? : The Authority of the Bible and the Formation of the New Testament Canon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 39.

[25] Following Albert Sundberg. Ibid., 45.

[26] Ibid., 177-88.

[27] In his *Festal Letter* 39. Ibid., 140.

"book" was a collection of Paul's epistles, handwritten, bound into a codex likely made of vellum skins.[28] His reading would have been aloud, speaking the words into the air in order to hear and understand them. He likened the experience to St. Antony hearing spiritually appointed scripture read aloud in church. Augustine became his own lector, reading only a few sentences of Romans that called him to repentance.

In his book *Avatars of the Word: From Papyrus to Cyberspace,*[29] classical studies professor James O'Donnell reminds us that though Augustine left us almost five million written words, he himself probably had access to very little Christian literature other than the "Gospel book" in his church in Hippo.[30] This "Bible" likely uses a new technology: cumbersome scrolls have slowly transitioned to bound codices, which allow non-linear access.[31] In Rome, Cassoidorus views himself as post-exilic Ezra restoring the books of the law in his goal to build a Christian library.[32] And O'Donnell notes that the Latin side of the church only finally places all the books of canon together in a single codex sometime in the sixth century.[33]

But despite such advances, access to collections of books is rare. Literacy itself remains a commodity of the highly educated 5-10% of Roman citizenry.[34] Walter Ong defines this as the period containing both "orality" and "literacy"—transitional orality.

> In an oral culture, experience is intellectualized mnemonically. This is one reason why, for a St. Augustine of Hippo, as for other savants living in a culture that

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[28] Augustine, *The Confessions*, bk. VIII.12

[29] James Joseph O'Donnell, *Avatars of the Word : From Papyrus to Cyberspace* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 34f.

[30] It's not as if libraries hadn't existed, we have neglected to mention one of the first: the famous collection of papyrus scrolls in Alexandria probably begun in the early third century BC. It's destruction by fire or decree is uncertain, but is likely before Augustine.

[31] O'Donnell cites Roberts and Skeat, *The Birth of the Codex* (1983) to note that 90% of the recovered Greek manuscripts from the fifth-century are codices, the transition from rolls apparently happening in the third century.

[32] Born 490; Paul Lejay and Joseph Otten, "Cassiodorus," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 3 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1908), http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/03405c.htm.

[33] James Joseph O'Donnell, "From the Codex Page to the Homepage," in *Communication in History: Technology, Culture, and Society*, ed. David Crowley, 4th ed. (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2002), 303.

[34] John D. Schaeffer, "The Dialectic or Orality and Literacy: The Case of Book 4 of Augustine's De Doctrina Christiana," *PMLA*, no. 111 (1996): 1136. Also citing Catherine Harris.

> knew some literacy but still carried an overwhelmingly massive oral residue, memory bulks so large when he treats of the powers of the mind."[35]

The implication for a member of Augustine's church or beyond is still an ironic blend of textuality and orality. John Schaeffer notes that Augustine is the first to write a rhetorical manual that locates the authority in a text instead of the person:[36]

> The paradox of Christianity in late antiquity is that people were taught to believe in a written teaching that most could not read but only heard. The authority of the written text was conveyed by a living voice, which gave the text an effect far beyond what silent reading affords.[37]

Calvin (Print). Umberto Eco describes the sunlight entering via clear, lead-framed glass as radiant, illuminating carved desks, quiet monks, and heavy parchment in a fictitious medieval scriptorium.[38] The picture of spiritually disciplined copyists is one of the vivid images of script literacy in the 1,000 years that slip past St. Augustine. "The books are registered in order of their acquisition, donation, or entrance within our walls," Eco has the monastic librarian explain, describing a medieval system of knowledge retrieval—sorted not alphabetically or by subject, but only by generationally-descended memory.

The coming technological landmark is the invention of moveable type and block printing, developed separately (the latter being used for stamping playing cards and pictures of saints), but somewhat quickly combined to a mechanical system that replaces religious hand copyists. [39]

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[35] Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 36.

[36] This statement should be understood within the framework classical rhetoric's categories of proof: pathos, ethos, and logos. Conceptually originating with Aristotle, George Kennedy describes logos as "that mode of proof found in argument", pathos as "artistic proof when the minds of the audience are moved to emotion," and ethos as "the personal character of the speaker." The latter is where authority is to be derived, but Augustine rejects this because Christian doctrine places the authority with God. See George A Kennedy, *Classical Rhetoric and Its Christian and Secular Tradition from Ancient to Modern Times*, Rev. Ed. (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 82.

[37] Schaeffer, "The Dialectic or Orality and Literacy: The Case of Book 4 of Augustine's De Doctrina Christiana," 1136.

[38] Umberto Eco, "A Medieval Library," in *Communication in History: Technology, Culture, and Society*, ed. David Crowley, 4th ed. (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2002), 71-74.

[39] Developed separately in the West. In the East as well, although the story is much different: T.F. Carter shows that block printing originated in Japan, the earliest best example approximately 770 CE. T.F. Carter, "The Invention of Printing," in *Communication in History: Technology, Culture, and Society*, ed. David Crowley, 4th ed. (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2002), 90.

Elizabeth Eisenstein explains the paradigm-shifting effects of print, as iconized by the arrival of the Gutenberg Bibles in 1455.[40] *Dissemination* allowed for the travel of popular knowledge, like catechisms, and the accumulation of scholarly works in places aside from their birthplace. *Standardization* includes not only spelling or regular typographic styles like Gothic or Roman print, but even theological knowledge. Erasmus could issue *errata*; Jerome could not. *Reorganization* and cataloguing is invented; though alphabetic order existed in limited forms before print, it was still unfamiliar enough that a 1604 dictionary included a preface explanation that 'A' comes before 'B', and so on. *Quality* of data was increased, actually reversing some of the effects of hand-copied degradation. *Authorship* was born in the modern sense.[41] And *amplification* of popular texts began, repetition reinforcing cultural memory.

As a result, John Calvin was surrounded by books. Trained in Paris in humanities and law, Calvin may have had more than 300 books in his home by the time he was established in Geneva, although it's difficult to count.[42] The question of how Calvin read the scriptures has been studied extensively. His own early writing was in the Latin of the academy, the later French, in which he preached in Geneva and to which he eventually translated some of his earlier commentaries. His Bible use was in both these languages as well as the Greek and Hebrew manuscripts, sometime with Latin printed in parallel.[43] But we who live in print-literate times must guard against employing an anachronistic lens on Calvin's literate habits. For Calvin, the books remained aids for memory and meaning, but the text was not fixed as we would quote scripture today in a "word for word" fashion. Jean-Francois Gilmont shows convincingly that

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[40] The following characteristics follow Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*.; For dating and introduction to Gutenberg Bible, see John W. Carter and Percy H. Muir, eds., *Printing and the Mind of Man*, First Ed. (New York: Holt, Reinhart, and Winston, 1967), 1.

[41] Eisenstein refers to "preservation." The thirteenth century Bonventure wrote of four ways to make a book: as scribe, compiler, commentator, or author, each with increasing level of additions to the original text. Yet notably, Bonventure's "author" is working with a *previous* text—he doesn't conceive of a completely original work! The printing press increased the sense that words could be written down and a true author could be preserved through time. Medieval and prior scholarship would not understand the modern historical-critical concern with identifying an individual original author.

[42] Jean-Francois Gilmont, *John Calvin and the Printed Book*, trans. Karin Maag, Sixteenth Century Essays and Studies 72 (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2005), 139.

[43] Ibid., 145.

even when Calvin is writing a book for replication, he was not concerned to copy from a printed biblical text but would use his own memory for scripture quotations. From 1562 we read:

> For because he is an excellent and widely read man, and all his writings show how familiar he is with Holy Scriptures, he does not always have the books open in front of him when he writes (since he does not need to) put down word for word what he brings in from the Old and New Testaments. It is sufficient that the meaning is so well preserved and the sense of the words so carefully observed.[44]

It is scripture's meaning that is important, not the fixed text. In general, the Reformers embrace the new technology of the printing press, but clearly see it as a tool—a means to spread the gospel for clergy and the learned.[45] Martin Luther was famous for having commented on printing as "God's highest and extremist act of grace, whereby the business of the Gospel is driven forward."[46] He had no reason to complain; between 1517-20, Luther's thirty publications sold well over 300,000 copies.[47]

Later Print (Colonial Christian). Historian Martin Marty says that Puritans were ironic victims of their espousal of common literacy.[48] They intended reading habits to "preserve the world of the past," but the conscientious scripture-reading Christian undercut the community that had originally emphasized the liturgical hearing of the Word. At first reinforcing each other, the coming diversity and pluralism on the American continent degenerated to denominationalism and voluntary, consumer religion.[49]

The explosion of print in the beginning of the nineteenth century shook the culture and Christian experience. Popular print was labeled by an editor of the Christian *American Messenger* as less tolerable than the "plagues of Egypt", or as "stepping stones to hell"—dire

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[44] Ibid.

[45] The non-reading public could look at visual representations of the scriptures such as the *Biblia Pauperum* ("Bible of the Poor") illustrated with ten panels per page and associating new testament scenes with old testament in typological arrangement. A fascinating example of non-linear remix. See Albert C. Labriola and John W. Smeltz, trans., *The Bible of the Poor (Biblia Pauperum): A Facsimile and Edition of the British Library Blockbook C.9 d.2* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1990).

[46] Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*, 304.

[47] Ibid., 303.

[48] Martin Marty, "Protestantism and Capitalism," in *Communication and Change in American Religious History*, ed. Leonard I Sweet (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 97.

[49] Ibid., 104.

warnings in an environment of increased urbanization, market capitalism, and new transportation technologies.[50] But the American Tract Society never mentioned attempts to ban wicked literature, instead choosing to flood the market with their own print products. And their energetic moral-reform crusade and conviction that communication was evangelism drove a key economic decision: printing a supply far greater than original demand in order to give publications away to as many as possible.[51] Scripture for the first time was spread to every household and simultaneously lost all sense of privilege in a flood of printed information.

Electric. We've previously noted the demarcation line of the telegraph, the communications technology for the first time allowed messages to be sent apart from a human messenger. The tie between transportation and communication was severed. Samuel Morse was not the first to tinker with electricity to carry messages, but he developed the first practical way to do it, using his system of code.[52] Demonstrating the invention from the chambers of the United States Supreme Court in May 1844, he tapped out a phrase from Numbers 23:23, "What God hath wrought!" A man of "passionate Christian faith," Morse said he had "baptized the American Telegraph with the name of its author: God.' "[53] The Word of God had been remediated to electricity.

Until this point it's been easier to move between historical figures as examples of those living with scripture in its various mediated forms, but with less distance our memory gets too crowded to pick. And technologies only increase their pace. Less than one year after its invention in 1876, the Sunday School of St. John's Methodist-Episcopal church was sponsoring a demonstration of Alexander Graham Bell's telephone, and early suggested uses included the

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[50] David Paul Nord, "Religious Publishing and the Marketplace," in *Communication and Change in American Religious History*, ed. Leonard I Sweet (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 244.

[51] The *colporteur* system enlisted enthusiastic door-to-door salesmen for bibles and literature to sell or give to families "in need of a volume to guide them to heaven." Businesses later copied the model for sales, and churches retained the model for evangelistic techniques. Ibid., 254.

[52] Standage, "Communication in History," 132.

[53] Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 2007), 3.

transmission of sermons.[54] Still scripture itself remain anchored to the book, now appearing in some alternative English translations to the King James Version, such as the Revised Version of 1881, not to mention the proliferation of the Book of Mormon, an alternative book to The Book.[55]

Electronic/Mass Society. The advent of TV and radio brings images of Bible-waving TV-preachers, and Neil Postman laments the use of God to sell Hebrew National hot dogs. Christians, especially American Protestants, jumped quickly into the new broadcast media. In the 1960s, Oral Roberts would offer to pray healing prayer over people—touching the studio microphone with his hand and instructing listeners to touch their radio.[56] Moody Bible Institute initially denounced the religious use of radio, and then started the influential WMBI, which still broadcasts today.[57] Scripture itself appeared in these forms mostly as preached aloud—sometimes dependant on written text, the form Walter Ong dubbed "secondary orality."

But "mass media" describes print culture as well, where scripture flourished. The 400th anniversary of the Tyndale Bible was celebrated in 1925 with a new English translation running as a syndicated column in the newspaper.[58] And in the 1980s, Bible publishers in the US marketed hundreds of "specialty Bibles targeted with almost surgical precision toward markets such as dieters, newlyweds, mothers, fathers, single parents, adolescents, and those who suffered from drug and alcohol addictions."[59] The Bible became a customizable, own-able, broadcast commodity.

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[54] Fischer, "The Telephone Takes Command," 148.

[55] Charles L. Cohen, "Religion, Print Culture, and the Bible before 1876," in *Religion and the Culture of Print in Modern America*, ed. Charles L. Cohen and Paul S. Boyer, n.d., 7.

[56] David Edwin Harrell Jr., "Oral Roberts: Religious Media Pioneer," in *Communication and Change in American Religious History*, ed. Leonard I Sweet (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 324.

[57] Leonard I Sweet, *Communication and Change in American Religious History* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 58.

[58] Erin A. Smith, "The Religious Book Club: Print Culture, Consumerism, and the Spiritual Life of American Protestants between the Wars," in *Religion and the culture of print in modern America*, ed. Charles Cohen and Paul S. Boyer (Madison Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), 217.

[59] Paul C. Gutjahr, "The Bible-zine Revolve and the Evolution of the Culturally Relevant Bible in America," in *Religion and the culture of print in modern America*, ed. Charles Cohen and Paul S. Boyer (Madison Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), 330.

The summary is this: as we chart the eras of the people of God, we see that that variations in communications media have meant variations in what the Scriptures *were.* Yes, it's fair to say that writing itself has played a majority part in the history of scriptures. But evidence shows that we cannot associate this with the fixity of the printing press and assumptions of mass literacy. The medium and context of their use, *who* used them and *how* they were arranged have changed the perception of scripture through time. Scripture is not a Book.

The Answer of Theology

If Scripture is not a book, then what is it? The theological answer cannot be the answer of media ecology—progressive media through time—but it must take this perspective in view. The insight of media ecology forces two shifts. The shift away from the Holy Book as the only embodiment of the Word of God requires theology to self-examine for vestiges of cultural assumptions that have too narrowly grounded its conception of scripture. And the distance view of media history drives a new formulation of theology that is wide enough to encompass the various incarnations we both see and anticipate in a digital context.

A short reminder is in order. The view that theological formulations must adjust to the cultural milieu is clearly problematic if stretched, potentially forcing complete dependence on a subjective experience of baptized cultural experience. We'll admit that the general approach here is to apply watchful eyes to the experience of culture and busy hands to the theology, but this does not preclude the necessity for theological judgments—there may be corrective and ethical positions to be staked against a culture inevitably tainted under sin. Bevans typology calls this the countercultural model. Can we allow room for this? The answer must be yes, but we will not spend much time in this study. The omission is justifiable for now. We suggest that the efforts along such lines have often forced normative formulations from one context to

another rather than righteousness to a sinful world. Media ecology suggests cultural environments can be difficult to detect. It's even possible that this trend can be traced in studies of media ecologists as well. We are not convinced as Neil Postman is that God has intended print culture for a privileged place in the human experience of revelation (other than the historical place it already occupies).

But that brings us to precisely one of the questions theology must ask, namely: where are the words of God located? Are they located in a medium or are they prior to all media? How does a media history, with the variety it reflects, form our theology of revelation? Do the characteristics of a medium change the relationship of scripture, tradition, reason, and experience? Let's orient our discussion around three important words regarding God's action in the world:

Creation

To begin with Creation is to begin where the scriptures themselves start. (Systematic theologies often begin with God[60] under the implied assumption that what is prior is most important, but this is the approach of philosophy, not narrative, and sterilizes the story[61]). Creation is the creative gift of the triune God of love, and importantly, is the God-sourced environment of the human creature (Gen 2.8). Eden, as emblematic of the created order is encompassing, sustaining, and Adam and Eve are placed there among forests and rivers and creatures as caretakers and interactive partners (Gen 1.29; Gen 2.15) with their environment. We are not told that they have an awareness of created matter outside Eden; they experience their environment with the immediacy of full immersion.[62]

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[60] Or with prolegomena such as epistemology and then God

[61] Ironically this approach or rearranging/recontextualitng would meld with digital culture if it was seen as arising from a local context. See Remix.

[62] Immediacy can be contrasted with hypermediacy, which creates a subject-object distance between the medium the beholder. More on this shortly.

Creation can be understood in partnership with the reversible insight of media ecology that media can not only be studied as environments, but environments can be studied as media. The environment of God's creation, we should say, is an environment of mediation. And if media are themselves extensions of human functioning (including the human function of communication), then we may claim that Creation is an extension—a medium—of God himself. This is not to make an emminationist error that confuses the substance of Creation with the substance of God—we must insist that God is distinct. But it is to say that Creation mediates a real presence of its Creator.

This is not a new claim theologically speaking—"The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork." (Ps 19.1). Paul in Romans 1 writes that the "eternal power and divine nature"—the two qualities that humans tend to doubt: sovereignty and goodness—are seen through the things he has made. The objections to the related theologies of prevenient grace, general revelation, natural revelation or natural theology exist in a variety of forms. Here we will use the reformed category of *common grace*, and in particular we would note Karl Barth, who denies that the created order can be rightly understood apart from the redemptive purposes of God in Christ.[63] Theologian Richard Mouw in *He Shines in All That's Fair* argues gently but persuasively against Barth, emphasizing that God must be able to take delight in the aesthetic and moral qualities of creation (for example: Tiger Woods golf swing or civil rights activists that were not working from inside the Church) beyond salvific categories.[64] This allowance for greater complexity in the divine character in turn allows us to acknowledge God's mediated presence in the greater creation without denying the problem of sin and need of redemption.[65]

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[63] Barth technically will argue as a supralapsarian. Supralapsarians must see the eternal decree of God for election as prior to his decree to creation.

[64] Richard J. Mouw, *He Shines in All That's Fair: Culture and Common Grace* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002).

[65] Mouw's starting position is characterized as infralapsarian, and would view the eternal decree of Creation as prior.

Where are the words of God located? Creation—as an extension of God's presence and nature—becomes the setting. Because God does not create in part, but in whole, these extensions of God's presence and nature become an environment. In fact, creation is the medium of revelation.

Revelation

First we speak of sin. Though we've said that creation exists as mediating environment, the fall of humankind in sin places a rift in the immediacy of creation, creating a self-conscious awareness of the environment which leads to a misunderstanding of the character and person of God. This self-consciousness is the one that forced Adam and Eve to an awareness of themselves and the surfaces of their environment, twin realities that spawn individual and communal aspirations to be like God.[66]

Revelation speaks into this setting, and is distinct from a mediating creation because it is the selected portion of that creation that is communicative in intent. While all creation extends the presence and nature of God, revelation is intentionally communicative. What is it communicating? Revelation is the voice of God that is defined by its setting in salvation-history. To say that God's self-revelation is soteriological is to speak not simply of its content but of its intent. Accordingly, we're uncomfortable letting the "voice" of God sit on its own unless "action" is paired with it. Revelation is the action of God with communicative intent in the medium of Creation.

[66] We can call this hypermediacy—a feature of media that forces the user to deny their immersion and become aware of the mediated environment, like a movie-goer that hears a disturbing noise and suddenly is aware of the chairs and the dark room and popcorn. This forces the media user from the immediate experience of the medium—the story of the movie—to the environment the medium is presented in. I suggest the self-consciousness experienced is language corresponding to individual sin, leading to a need for control and the illusion that God does not truly encounter us directly, while the environment-awareness corresponds to a communal/corporate distancing that post-Enlightenment thinkers have tried to solve with scientific inquiry, an approach to knowledge that is hypermediate in character but cannot explain immediate experience and therefore revelation and has sourced corporate sin.

Here it's helpful to recall Kevin Vanhoozer's use of speech-act theory to speak of the nature of scripture as the locutions of the Father, the illocutionary work of the Son, and the perlocutionary effect of the Holy Spirit. To speak of intent is to speak of the active-intent of the speaker as it is determined by the context of the discourse. The God who reveals is the God who acts. What is the intended action? To perform the restoration of all creation—that is, to restore, redeem, save, make new. Which must lead us to Jesus Christ.

Incarnation

> In Jesus Christ, there is no distance or separation between the medium and the message: it is the one case where we can say that the medium and the message are fully one and the same.[67]

Marshall McLuhan's statement on the incarnation was made in a spoken interview with French-catholic thinker Piere Babin in the 1970s, but was not available in printed English until 1999. Its crucial claim is that God's revelation is perfectly mediated in the creation in the person of Jesus Christ. This is not too far from John of Damascus' defense of icons, which Telford Work reminds us, defended both verbal signs and material signs *because of* the incarnation.[68] Signs—we might say media—extend only the likeness, not the essence of Jesus Christ. Christ himself reveals both the likeness and essence of God.

If scripture is not a book, what is it? *Scripture is the mediated (that is, in creation) revelation of the incarnation of Jesus Christ and its illocutionary intent in salvation-history.*

The claim of creation and revelation together here is important, for it keeps us from making the mistake of privileging a certain media form. For instance, we have already stated McLuhan's observation that the content of each new medium in communications history is the previous medium. This is to say, media become containers for each other: a web page is

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[67] McLuhan, *The Medium and the Light*, 103.
[68] Work, *Living and Active*, 107.

actually a container for fixed print, print is a container for chirography, which is a container for human speech, which contains human thought. If we were to ask our question, "Where are the words of God located?" and find ourselves initially distrustful of digital mediation, we may decide that the words of God, when displayed on a screen, are validated because they display what is also presented in print. But this reasoning must lead us to believe that our print Bible is valid only because it contains the words of the manuscripts, which in turn contain the oral tradition of the community. The search for inspiration is driven to previous media and therefore if taken to its logical end must distrust all mediation of the word of God as less than perfect.

This approach is illustrated by Read Schuchardt, professor of communications, who says:

> While God works in mysterious ways, and does speak through the tongues of men and women, he has never, so far in recorded history, spoken directly through an electronic medium. People throughout history have heard God's voice, and sometimes they have heard it audibly, but they have never to my knowledge received an e-mail from God, a text, or an apparition of his visage on his television. God does not post to YouTube.[69]

But to speak of an audible voice of God as somehow more direct than an e-mail communication is to privilege one mediation over another in the manner we describe above—the quest for the pure medium. This is a false search. Oral/audible communication from God is mediated to begin with, that is to say: God does not have vocal chords. A counter-claim might be made by distinguishing between "direct" or "natural" means versus a technology invented by human beings, but this claim must also fail at two points. The first is simply that this approach must be consistent by placing the technology of the printed book and e-mail on the same plane, something Schudhart will likely be reluctant to do.[70] But secondly, the doctrine of creation in

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[69] *God Does Not Post to YouTube - Dr. Read Schuchardt*, 2009, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DL52fveMhb8&feature=youtube_gdata.

[70] Schuchardt is following Postman—he quotes Postman multiple times in his speech—who will generally privilege the printed word above other forms of God's communication, using the second commandment banning images as part of his argument. God favors linear thought, and sees other media as potentially destructive. In Postman's view, the printing press is the apex of God's revelatory action, while oral revelation pre-press would be building to this, while digital mediation post-press is a disintegration. For reasons stated above, theologically the argument is unconvincing. As an interesting note, it may be possible to argue that Walter Ong saw not print, but orality as a inherently better medium. See discussion in Chapter 5 of the interpretative differences that Postman and Ong make in reading *dabar*.

Scripture gives us warrant to include the technologies and inventions of humanity as part of the building of creation—God's mandate to Adam is to "till the earth." Our extensions are part of the created environment, carrying the creative blessing (and sinful curse) that affects all creation.

The search for the pure or privileged medium, then, is futile. The doctrine of creation saves us from the dead-end to which it leads. And we can claim:

1. God's action in the world is never unmediated, and further
2. God, as Creator, may use any element of this mediated environment to reveal, and indeed has.

The Summary So Far

This is the breaking point in the argument, and we've made some progress. In Chapter 2, we've seen that because theology is faith seeking understanding from a specific context, that theological formulations tend to change because contexts change. We can do this with theologies of scripture through history. In Chapter 3, we introduced media ecology as a field of study that can define cultural contexts by way of their communications technology environments. Layering these two accounts together, we follow Walter Ong's belief that the Bible itself provides a focal point for understanding communications media and the theology. Asking "If Scripture is not a book, then what is it?"—we follow the account of media ecology, which simply shows us how *varied* the medium of Scripture through time has been. Thus our theology is forced to be broad in its account, defining Scripture as "the mediated revelation of the incarnation of Jesus Christ and its illocutionary intent in salvation-history." This allows us to appreciate the Bible as a technology, while freeing us from the view that a book is equivalent to God's Word.

And it gives us the setting to move forward. Chapters 5-8 are unique in their approach. Borrowing method from contextual theology and media ecology, they each begin with one slice of digital culture. They seek first to describe the technology from an insider view, using media ecology's vocabulary. Then they look at the experience or use of Scripture in this cultural environment. And finally they reflect on Scripture, seeking to understand theologically. As McLuhan would remind us, this is a question not of concepts (as thought objects), but percepts (that is, perceptions).

One important consequence of this approach is that it does not begin with academic categories most recently placed on Scripture. Categories and language—like revelation, inspiration, and authority—have the power to frame a discussion in such a way that new categories are missed or rejected. Instead, contextual theologies affirm that language from another context may not be adequate or relevant.[71] They may match; they may only partially overlap, or may even have little in common. Still, this is the language we have, and so these words will appear. But they cannot be seen as an attempt to construct a systematic theology of scripture—a system.

Chapter 5 looks at the collapse of time and space in the experience of digital natives and then asks what the nature of scripture is in this environment. Chapter 6 begins with online social media like Facebook and reflects on the relationship between scripture and the church. And Chapter 7 describes digital remix, and asks what it means to remix scripture.

[71] This is to make a distinction between what is "true" and what is "relevant." For instance: the *filioque* clause of the Nicene Creed caused much consternation for the Church in the fourth through sixth centuries. The theological questions and answers surrounding the debate may remain true until today, but may less theological relevance to our context. Put another way, the church in this century is not asking questions that are primarily concerned with the emanation of the Holy Spirit in relation to the Godhead.

FIGURE 2: SCRIPTURE IN COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY HISTORY

	Oral	Early Chirographic		Later Chriographic	Early Print	Later Print	Electric	Electronic/Mass Society	Digital
People of God	Patriarchs	Sinai and the giving of the Law Post-Exilic Judaism	Jesus and the Early Church	Athanasius, Augustine, Aquinas	Reformers: Luther, Calvin	Puritans John Wesley American Christians	North American Christianity	Global Christianity	Glocal Christianity
Scripture as…	Personal revelation Spoken tradition	scribal recordings community tradition	Second Temple writings Hebrew LXX Aramaic targums Witness about Jesus epistles	NT canon Scrolls transitioning to codex Four-Gospels Codex on pedestal in front of church Pauper's Bible	*Biblia Pauperum* illustrated blockprint (1470) Gutenberg Bible (1455)	Printed for every home King James Version	Electricity—Morse code Revised Version	Broadcast on radio Displayed on a television screen Study Bibles Bibles for target market audiences Revised Standard Version Owned on shelf	Liquid crystal pixels Digitally displayed Copied and pasted Interactive Right-clickable Remixable
Context of Scripture's Use	relationship	gathered people read aloud	rabbis and students memory and midrash Gathered synagogue or house church read aloud	Preached—oral mediation of the text. Represented visually in art	Preached by pastors or scholars Recited in catechism Displayed on stand in church	American Tract Society Family reading	Sunday school Religious societies Civil religion Private reading	Radio and tele-evangelist preaching Personal devotions	Logos/Libronix Bible Gateway Glo Bible Facebook feed LCD screen YouTube mix
Attested in Scripture	Gen 1-11	Deut. History and Prophets	Gospels and Epistles						
Technologies	Tools clay tokens	hieroglyphics phonetic alphabet papyrus parchment (animal skin) scroll	*Pax romana* and roads	vellum codex manuscript	moveable metal type printing press book	mass printing railroad	telegraph telephone phonograph	radio television cable TV VCR	Internet personal computer GPS mobile phones
Year/Time	pre-history	1700 BCE	1st and 2nd centuries CE	3rd to 15th centuries	16th century	17th to 18th centuries	19th century	20th century	21st century
Ong	orality	Literacy. (craft literacy, transitional orality, oral residue)					Secondary Orality		Tertiary Orality