The A.S. Peake Memorial Lecture 2010
From Transmission to TXT –
The Bible in a Digital Age

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Peake's one-volume commentary was, in his own words, 'designed to put before the reader in a simple form, without technicalities, the generally accepted results of Biblical criticism, Interpretation, History and theology'.[2]

In this, it could be argued, Peake was no different from the authors of many hundreds of websites, dedicated to the Bible and biblical studies, that have sprung up on the internet during the last 20 years. The production medium is different, but the principal purpose is the same – to assist in the understanding, appreciation and communication of Scripture by providing supplementary material which can illuminate the biblical text. The nature of internet communications makes this task significantly easier than it ever has been before. The comparatively vulgar speed and ease with which a new online expansive alternative to Peake's commentary can be created by someone with considerably less scholarship and biblical knowledge than Peake should, however, raise suspicions concerning the presupposed neutrality and insignificance of the medium. Online Bible and biblical studies sites may provide identical or similar content, and may even mimic the appearance and structure of their hardcopy cousins, but they are not the same: 'There are inherent characteristics in the very medium that do affect both what can be communicated and how it is communicated. Technology is not neutral.'[3]

In the course of this lecture I will outline the movement from the oral text to the physical text of the Bible in order to establish a link between the medium of communication and scriptural theology, drawing heavily on the work of Professor Walter J. Ong and his seminal work, *Orality and Literacy*.[4] The movement from the physical text to the virtual text will then be explored in more detail to prove that cyberspace does more than provide an alternative means of accessing and studying Scripture. This information will then be used to formulate a tentative answer to the question as to whether or not the digital and online availability of the text of the Bible has enhanced or endangered the reception of Scripture as the Word of God for a needy world.

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From the oral to the physical text

Much of the Bible was originally transmitted orally. Before the existence of the text, the word of God needed to be mediated to someone via another person, who had to be close enough to be able to be heard. The corollary of this was that it was presumed that the word could not be received in solitude. The initial encounter with Scripture was dependent on the presence of at least one other human being willing to mediate it. The authority of the words that were spoken reflected, at least in part, the authority of the mediator entrusted with the task of communicating them. In practice, the word tended to be spoken, by someone 'authorized' to do so, to whole communities rather than to individuals and as such assisted in the formation of social and cultural identity. Oral transmission stressed and facilitated the relational and communal nature of the word of God for the people of God.

The transformation of the word of God from the spoken to the written word altered this relationship by permitting an element of anonymity and individuality to exist which had been almost impossible before. Time and space could and often did separate the speaker of the word and the recipient. The word could be read and studied in private, without requiring the presence of another – the text itself became the significant other. The creation of sacred texts from oral narratives fixed the word into a mode of communication which could be consulted, interpreted and interrogated in ways that simply were not possible before. The opportunity of doing so encouraged the desire to do so.

There is considerable evidence that oral and written cultures existed side by side, both in the ancient world and later throughout Christendom. Even in manuscript format,[5] however, the Bible was still very expensive to reproduce. This, coupled with the fact that literacy levels in the western world remained very low until the advent of the printing press, meant that the Bible fell naturally under the guardianship and authority of the Church. Clerics, monks and scholars oversaw its collation into canonical form, its reproduction as text and its oral communication to the rest of the world.

The Bible's intrinsic authority as the word of God accordingly became linked to the Church's authority – as those who mediated the word through their ability to reproduce the text accurately, speak it clearly and interpret it faithfully according to tradition. Similarly, the sacred nature of the Bible as the received word of God was supported and enhanced by the sacred space where the text was read and the very real 'otherness' of the written word for most (illiterate) people, especially when presented in the form of a beautifully illustrated manuscript.

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Until well after the advent of the printing press, the general population in most towns and cities could only receive and be enabled to understand the text of the Bible through the spoken word; via the liturgy and the public readings of the gospel in Church. The authoritative, interpretative and communicative monopoly of the institutional Church could not be broken until a significant number of printed Bibles had been distributed. This paved the way for alternative understandings of the nature and meaning of Scripture to be developed and disseminated. The success of the cry 'Sola Scriptura', with its implicit theology of the self-authenticating nature of Scripture, would not have been possible without the growing primacy of the written word over the spoken. The Reformation was fuelled by the ability of those with texts, both sacred and otherwise, to critique the Church and the Bible based on what they themselves had read, rather than on what they had been told. This ability to critique what was previously deemed so authoritative was assisted by the transformation of human consciousness brought about by increased literacy,[6] and by the specific ability of text to disembody the information it contains, a process that continues past the transition from oral to text.

From the physical to the virtual text

In spite of the prevalence of the written word, in books, newsprint, hoardings, forms and so on, reading aloud was still common in the mid-twentieth century. Textbooks in school and storybooks at home all tended to be read by one individual to a gathered group until the advent of radio and TV encouraged people to gather around boxes instead of people.[7] It is now possible to recognize that the dislocation of community and the communication of information, so characteristic of the internet, did not happen accidentally. It developed out of the processes introduced by the media types preceding it, in particular television. Television was the analogue precursor to the World Wide Web and, as such, bridges the transition from the written text to the digital online text and txt. Digital television makes this evident by blurring the distinction between broadcast and online media. Television is frequently watched online, and similarly, the World Wide Web and email can now be accessed from a television set. As Groothius notes, 'The introduction of new technologies reflects previous philosophical trends, reinforces these trends in novel ways, and sparks the creation of new ideas and patterns of culture.'[8] To appreciate fully the transition from text to txt, therefore, an appraisal of some of the characteristics of television which affect the transmission and reception of information is necessary.

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To begin with, television is an audio-visual medium in which sound is subordinate to image. Similarly, in spite of the fact that most of the information communicated by television is still dependent on the written word, (e.g. the teleprompter or script), text, like sound is subordinated to image. Text and sound, either in isolation, or more frequently in combination, are present on TV merely to clarify, enhance or otherwise serve the message being communicated by image on the screen. Image is everything.

Consequently, the manner in which information is communicated on television is never purely factual. The sequences of images chosen to accompany information that is still primarily text-based significantly adds or subtracts from the bare content; a characteristic of television that is often exploited. Television is not a neutral medium. Those who create and plan the programmes and programme schedules are aware of this and utilize it to gain and hold their audiences. Information on television is thus presented in as entertaining and visual a manner as possible. Nowhere is this more evident than in broadcasts of elections or government budgets where statistical or textual information is translated and presented as animated graphs and charts, as though the numbers themselves are insufficient.

The problem with this is not that entertainment is wrong *per se*, but it is surely wrong for all information to be considered entertainment. Information on everything, from famine and war to the latest breakthrough in washing powder or Christmas mass from St Peter's in Rome, is subordinated to the need to keep the audience informed, 'entertained' and engaged. In the words of the late Neil Postman: 'Our television set keeps us in constant communication with the world, but it does so with a face whose smiling countenance is unalterable . . . Entertainment is the supra-ideology of all discourse on television.'[9] The requirement for programmes to be entertaining necessitates the suppression of certain content. The viewer is only exposed to as much information as the producer thinks they can bear. Consequently, television producers not only dictate how information is presented, but how much of it is shown. Conversely, this subtly but effectively trains viewers in what it is reasonable to expect in terms of information and is linked to the decreasing concentration span of the younger generation.

The control of information leads to television behaving like a comic book or serial novel. It is an episodic linear medium in which each episode of a story is intended to be viewed in linear sequence. It is, however, a fractured episodic medium in which story and chapter are often so clearly defined and self-contained that the concept of a 'whole' is rendered less important. This allows television to present information in small pre-

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defined, often seemingly unrelated, subject and time slices. An hour of the News may be preceded by a 10-minute cartoon, and followed by a 30-minute sport's quiz; all interspersed with 3- or 5-minute advert breaks. Within each timed information slot, the content is further divided into 'scenes', in much the same way as a play is. Sequences of images, snippets of dialogue, are linked together – often by an anchorman, creating a sense of movement and interaction as an aid to retaining interest and attention. According to Postman, television thus created a 'peek-a-boo' world: a world in which people and events pop into view for just a moment, only to vanish again:

> It is a world without much coherence or sense; a world that does not ask us, indeed does not permit us to do anything; a world that is, like the child's game of peek-a-boo entirely self contained. But like peek-a-boo, it is also endlessly entertaining. Of course there is nothing wrong with playing peek-a-boo. And there is nothing wrong with entertainment. As some psychiatrist once put it, we all build castles in the air. The problems come when we try to live in them.[10]

Unfortunately, most people are not aware that they *are* living in such a world; such is the power of the medium.
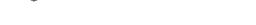
Ultimately, television extends both the range and the expectations of visual communication outside of that which is usually physically possible for most individuals and thereby disembodies information far more than had been possible by the written text alone. Someone who has never left their local community can nonetheless 'see' and 'experience' people, parts of the world and even the solar system via television from the comfort of their own living space. In many ways this has helped to make the world a smaller place. Television increased the awareness of the diversity of humanity whilst at the same time subliminally homogenizing it.

The fact that television imparts information using images drawn from the real world as seen through the lens of a camera and the imaginary world of the artist, as well as via computer-generated animation or images, is seemingly irrelevant. Dinosaurs are thus made to walk again, and Herod's temple can be seen in all its early glory: television makes it possible for the viewer to transcend both real time and physical space and enter into a virtual or imaginary world in order to receive certain information. But as Postman goes on to note:

> There is no more disturbing consequence of the electronic and graphic revolution than this: that the world as given to us through television

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seems natural, not bizarre . . . We have so thoroughly accepted its definition of truth, knowledge and reality that irrelevance seems to us to be filled with import, and incoherence seems eminently sane.[11]

The success of 'interactive' television programmes, such as *Strictly Come Dancing* or *Britain's Got Talent*, suggests that television is able to generate something akin to the personal and communal relationships arising out of oral communication whilst still giving primacy to the visual. The extent to which people become addicted to soaps or reality TV programmes, and the very real affection that is often showered on media personalities, suggests that the fictional world of TV can and does become thoroughly integrated into the real world at an emotional and relational level, if only subliminally. This is in spite of the fact that most viewers know at one level that the characters in soaps are not real and that there is something completely artificial about the so-called 'reality' they are being shown. This impacts significantly on the relationship between the transmission and reception of information. The more 'personable' and better known a newsreader is, the more the viewer is likely to 'trust' the information that they communicate, even though the newsreader has little or no control over the content of the bulletin.

Each of these characteristics continues to be extended by ongoing developments in television, radio, telecommunications, digital media and the World Wide Web. Collectively, these things are referred to as 'cyberspace', a compound neologism formed out of cybernetics (defined as 'the study of the communication and manipulation of information in service of the control and guidance of biological, physical, or chemical energy systems'[12]) and space.[13] Cyberspace is the 'place' where human communication and computer systems meet or, in Michael Heim's words, 'the juncture of digital information and human perception'.[14] It is the virtual space where digital media is stored and interacted with. Cyberspace has both public and private areas, and access to material or information can be selectively restricted in a variety of ways. It exists independently from the equipment used to access or navigate it.

The foundations of cyberspace began in the 1960s as a network of American government computers. In spite of the fact that it allowed for multiple concurrent readers, it was a highly linear text-based system. The earliest online data formats mimicked a page of text and conformed to the same linear expectations implicit in a book. They tended to be harder to read and often provided no means of navigating through the data other than forward a page at a time. Returning to a previous page often meant having

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to return to the beginning first, and starting again. Cross-referencing was almost impossible. All of that changed with the advent of hypertext. Hypertext can be thought of simply as an interactive form of cross-referencing. It creates a link between the location of one component of cyberspace (e.g. a word in a text file, a snippet of sound or an image) to the location of another in such a way that when the link is selected, the visitor is immediately transported to that location to be given access to that component. Hypertext therefore assists in the navigation of cyberspace and can be used to manipulate movement from one site to another, or from item to item.
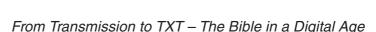
The technological advances needed to improve the quality of television and radio went hand in hand with those needed to improve the access and usability of the expanding cyberspace. Both were driven by the demand for better and faster processing of images rather than of text. Cyberspace grew slowly but steadily, as universities and other educational bodies linked their internal networks to it. It was not until it was opened for private funding and commercial development in the mid-1990s, however, that cyberspace proper came into existence.

From its conception, cyberspace was designed to facilitate community networks. It enabled researchers and scholars to work together on the same idea, the same text, the same problem. It provided a means of sharing ideas and resources with anyone who had access to that particular community. Initially, the community was closed by virtue of the technology needed to access it and the nature of the data being shared. In the twenty-first century, technology is no longer a hindrance, and more and more data is now in the public domain. Everything, from government statistics and census data through to glimpses of far-off galaxies as seen through the lens of the Hubble Telescope, can be viewed, and in some instances interacted with via cyberspace. Changes in technology mean that this data is now portable and can be accessed whilst on a train, in an office, sat at home or even in an aeroplane. Network communities have expanded into alternative realities such as second life, where it is possible to shop, buy real estate, go to church or university, relax in a virtual bar and meet new people, and even get married! Visitors to cyberspace have grown accustomed to the need to adopt virtual realities with usernames and passwords, avatars and lcons replacing Christian names and surnames, photos and initials. Few Christians give any thought to the moral or religious implications of their own presence in cyberspace, even if they are aware of the many opportunities cyberspace affords for mission.

Christians were amongst the first to exploit the potential of new media for mass communication as well as targeted audiences. Before ebay, Yahoo

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or even Google existed, Bible study sites were already making the text of the Bible freely available, along with the texts of many commentaries, and other supplementary books, sermons and Bible study notes. Bible Gateway,[15] for example, was formed as early as 1993 by Nick Hengeveld and claims to be 'the oldest major on-line Bible site on the Internet'.[16] As another site – Bible.org – discovered in 1995, however, there are problems as well as opportunities associated with the new media, most of which are inherited from the social, pedagogical and epistemological changes first introduced by television.

Like its predecessor, cyberspace has evolved to be increasingly multi-media and audiovisual. Many sites now provide an audio component which allows the site to be heard as well as seen in several different languages. The audio component is not considered an essential, however, and sound is very definitely subordinate to image. In most instances, this is also true of the text which sites are primarily designed to mediate. The digital text of the Bible, for example, is now invariably accompanied by a variety of images, ranging from pictures of Bibles, adverts for tours to Israel or church furniture to pop-up pictures of scrolls, biblical characters or other items chosen to complement or in some other way inform the text. Very few sites provide a means of turning these images off.

Sites funded by advertisements face many of the same problems as commercial television channels. In particular they need to generate a loyal following or audience to generate revenue. The pressure to be 'entertaining' is almost as intense for self-funded sites, however, as the motivation for attracting visitors and maintaining a readership base is seldom purely fiscal. Those who create religious sites tend to do so to promote faith or a particular theology or reading of the Scriptures.[17] The available topics and cross-references, articles and supplementary material accompanying the biblical text on Christian religious sites, for example, all betray a theological or denominational bias. Whether in response to some perceived divine imperative or for fiscal reasons, therefore, religious sites still suffer from the same lack of neutrality in the presentation of information as television channels do. There is no 'plain' or 'unadorned' truth on the internet.

The means of attracting and retaining a visitor base to a site is greater now than it has ever been, thanks to an ever-increasing range of multi-media or digital components which can be linked to a site or a text via hypertext. Visitors can be actively encouraged to 'explore' the text by means of these links and so spend longer on the site than they otherwise might have. In the case of Bible.org, for example, biblical texts are interactively linked to a wide range of supplementary components, including images of

modern or classical paintings and the lyrics of hymns. From these components the reader is just one more link away from viewing other religious art by the same artist or hymns by the same composer. Such links are all designed to enhance the visitor's experience of using the site. Even the site housing the Codex Sinaiticus uses the strap line 'experience the oldest Bible' rather than just 'read' the oldest Bible.[18]

As with television, trying to entertain as well as inform visitors generally increases the degree to which the linear nature of text is fractured. On most sites, links are now provided at the level of individual words that can be searched for with (or more generally without) reference to context. Each word has its own intrinsic 'entertainment' value and can be used to navigate through the text and associated complementary material as though the original authorial intent is of no consequence. On some sites, adverts for books or related articles spring into view in pop-up windows whenever key texts are selected in a digital equivalent of the peek-a-boo world of television. On other sites the texts of cross-references may hover over the cursor or menu items light up in an attempt to entice the visitor to take a short detour in their exploration of the particular chapter and verse.

The reader is repeatedly invited to move away from the text itself in order to explore it further. As with television, the limitations normally imposed by time or distance are transcended in the virtual world to bring the physical and geographical world associated with a text 'alive'. Texts are linked to maps or recent satellite images and the opportunity exists to take a virtual sightseeing tour of the area in question. In the same way, traditional limitations of text, i.e. language and interpretation are transcended by the global nature of the internet and online translation facilities which make it possible to access countless versions of the same text. One consequence of this for Scripture is that authorized and non-authorized versions of the Bible sit side by side on many sites with very little distinction made between them and frequently nothing immediately obvious to alert the reader to the origin of the text. The reader is free to choose which text they want to read as well as how they want to read it. There is no means of dictating what is accessed or in what sequence if the content is open-source. The same equipment can be used to view the text of the Bible or the Qur'an one moment and internet pornography the next.

This freedom to participate and explore cyberspace has stretched the boundaries of what is understood by copyright and ownership. There is a growing assumption that most information, TV programmes, texts, films, newspapers and music should be available either free or for a nominal charge somewhere in cyberspace. The assumption is, of course, false. As

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the creators of many religious sites have discovered, the Bible, or rather certain modern translations of it, are protected by copyright and it is illegal to reproduce their content in any way – including online – without consent. The development of the second generation of web applications, such as Facebook, SharePoint, Digit and Twitter, with their increased opportunities for community building and participation, nonetheless continue to foster the assumption that most content should be free by nurturing a culture of information sharing and exchange in cyberspace. Verses of the NIV are regularly copied from biblical sites and then tweeted, used as status updates in Facebook, or sent as SMS texts to phones, the perpetrator undoubtedly unaware that they are committing an illegal act.[19] The inability to obtain a web licence for the text it wanted to use persuaded Bible.org to invest in the development of an entirely new translation which is now available called the Net.bible. They have taken an alternative approach to ownership issues by copyrighting the environment used to read and interact with the Net Bible rather than the text of the Net.bible itself which can be downloaded and copied.[20]

Special interest community forums, blogs, social media sites, chat rooms, email and internet user groups frequently encourage people to copy and share 'digital' information as well as create new content. Perhaps the best-known example of a cyberspace collaborative community content creation site is Wikipedia – the online encyclopaedia to which anyone can contribute and edit. The same technology and approach is now being used to develop alternative versions of the Bible, such as the Wiki-Bible[21] or the more bizarre LoLcat Bible.[22]

Evidently, cyberspace is more than another place in which to access and study the text of the Bible. Several completely new translations of the Bible have been created in it as well as innumerable diverse communities of scholarship and discourse, all actively engaging with the text. Given the increasingly popularity of cyberspace,[23] and its expansion into every sphere of life including the Church, it would be foolhardy to presume that the shift from the physical text to the virtual text will be any less significant for theology and doctrine of Scripture as the shift from orality to written text was, and still is. In Ong's opinion, the orality-literacy polarities are particularly acute in the Christian tradition: 'Jesus as the Son of God is also the Word of God – the Word of the Father. But Scripture has God as author as no other writing does. In what way are the two senses of God's 'Word' related to one another and to human beings in history? The growth of cyberspace', Ong concludes, 'poses this question more acutely than ever before.'[24]

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In what follows therefore, I begin the task of engaging theologically with the characteristics of the virtual word – by which I mean the Bible as it is experienced and used in cyberspace, in order to make a tentative answer to the question 'has the digital and online availability of the text of the Bible enhanced or endangered the reception of Scripture as the word of God for a needy world?'

Towards a theology of the virtual word

The Bible is the word of God. It is the word of God when it is spoken, and when it is read. It remains the word of God when people interact with it in cyberspace. Whether it exists orally, physically or virtually, the word of God reveals and communicates the truth of the Living Word.
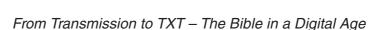
'In the Beginning was the word.' It is often presumed that there is an intentional orality in this opening verse of John's Gospel. Yet the Gospel does not speak of a word that is spoken. Instead the Gospel focuses on a Word that became flesh and dwelt among us – a Word made visible. Throughout the Gospel, primacy is repeatedly given to the visual rather than the oral nature of the Word's presence in the World. The importance of seeing and recognizing the living Word is stressed: 'Sir – we want to see Jesus.'

The authority of the Word rests on its ability to communicate the word of God so that God's truth can be seen and recognized. The way in which Scripture is mediated can and does affect that ability, and hence impinge on that authority. A chained Bible, for example, contains the words of Scripture, but lacks the authority of the word of God, because it is prevented from revealing the living Word and mediating God's grace. Any theology of the virtual word must therefore question the extent to which cyberspace is able to mediate God's grace and reveal God's truth.

It is evident from our earlier exploration that the text of the Bible is seldom presented as 'bare text' in cyberspace. It is frequently accompanied by images and soundtracks, as well as articles and reference texts. The use of images to make the text appear 'attractive' is reminiscent of the early illustrated Bibles. Digital images are, however, no more costly to publish than a digital text is, regardless of how many colours are needed, which perhaps leads to a tendency to over-illustrate the text. Similarly, good study Bibles typically include maps and illustrative articles by leading scholars as well as shorter concordances. The difference between the virtual word and a good study Bible is primarily the range of information that it is possible to access, and the ease with which it can be accessed. Few people are able to afford or house the number of reference texts that can be consulted

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in cyberspace. Likewise, readers are far more likely to look up a reference if all it entails is a single click of a mouse rather than thumbing through the back of the book or searching in another text entirely.

Hypertext links can be both dynamic or static, they can be changed with time or according to specific criteria. A dynamic hypertext version of the Bible could, for example, be linked where appropriate not just to reference texts but to media news broadcasts, Twitter lists and current affairs' digests, enabling Scripture effectively to re-envision the world of the reader by making them conscious of how everything is interrelated.

The virtual word has the potential to reveal the truth of the living word in ways that have never been possible before because of the limitations imposed by physicality. The living word addresses the whole world through the Word, not just individuals, and the virtual word, via its ubiquity and seemingly endless connectivity, models that mode of address. Regardless of how intangible cyberspace may seem, it is visited by billions of people every day, and millions, who would never dream of consulting a Bible in the 'real' world are now experiencing their first encounter with the word of God online. One popular, searchable Bible site, Bible Gateway[25] receives over 5.5 million unique visitors each month. Visitors to such sites are forming their own opinions and interpretations of the text which they read, based on the content that they are able to explore and the online discussions they read and in which they participate. As has been mentioned, the characteristics of cyberspace encourage the understanding of the Bible as an 'open' and highly accessible text rather than a fixed, closed or static document. Consequently, many approach the virtual word not as a text with a single absolute meaning or purpose, but as what Kathryn Tanner identifies as a 'Popular Text'.[26]

Popular texts do not insist that they be read on their own terms; they do not establish terms. They provide no clear instruction about how they should be read; the reader is at liberty to decide how they will read and relate to them. The virtual word makes it easier to recognize that Scripture is being read as a popular text. As a popular text it builds on the Reformation challenge concerning the authority of Scripture by being largely outside of the direct control of both the ecclesial and scholarly worlds. Tanner observes that the authority of a popular text is different from that which is normally accredited to classical texts. The respect of a popular text derives from its ability to be useful for everyday life rather than from its complexity or difficulty. There are no formal prerequisites for making sense of a popular text – such texts are popular precisely because they talk about life in a way that already makes sense to the reader. Tanner refers to

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Augustine's insistence that the Bible is not a difficult text but one whose style makes it accessible to all:

> Those clear truths it contains it speaks without subterfuge, like an old friend, to the hearts of learned and unlearned alike. But even the truths which it hides in mysteries are not couched in such lofty style that a slow, uncultivated mind would not dare to approach them, as a poor man does not approach a rich one.[27]
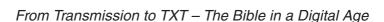
Just because the virtual word is being read as a popular text does not make the word a popular text, however, and Tanner is the first to admit that there is a serious theological problem inherent in this approach. Popular texts 'depend in a strong sense on their readers for any production of a definite sense. No sharp distinction is shown between such texts and the discursive productions of their readers; those productions seem a continuation of the text at a similar level of value.' This problem is exacerbated in cyberspace where the boundary between the text of the Bible and the text of ancillary documents is not physically defined and is less easy to recognize. Readers are moved so quickly and seamlessly from the verse or chapter to the words of a hymn or doctrinal statement that the reader could be forgiven for assuming that they possess the same intrinsic spiritual and authoritative value.

As Tanner observes, popular reading gives no special respect to the text *qua* isolated object of value, as if it were some aesthetic object embodying universal values of truth and beauty that raised it above the messy, transient particularities of everyday life. This makes it difficult for some to hold on to the sacred, otherness of the text as the word of God. The fact that the virtual word can be read online, searched and even edited in the same way as thousands of other digital texts, makes it difficult to recognize as uniquely authoritative or revealing.

These issues are compounded by the epistemological problems posed by the deconstructuralist nature of cyberspace. When every word has independent meaning which can be used to link it to alternative readings and interpretations, it becomes increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to hear a sentence, let alone a story in full. Hypertext constantly shifts the focus of the reader away from the text that they are reading, on to ever new sources of related information. The reader seldom questions the link, but simply presupposes that it has been provided to 'add' to the value of what is being read. This presupposition is an implicit statement of the compiler's belief in the intrinsic worth of a text. The extent to which a text is linked to other content may therefore be perceived negatively as well as positively. Links

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away from the text can suggest that the text is somehow incomplete on its own. Links within the text can hint at the degree of internal coherence, whilst external links to the text can suggest both popularity and the extent to which the text is relevant to the wider world.

Whilst it is possible for internal links and links away from the text to be controlled by the publisher of the site, it is not possible to control links to a site in the same way. The use of Scripture as a reference text has increased because of the ease with which websites can now link directly to the text of the Bible, or simply copy the text as needed. This is not necessarily positive. It encourages the use of Scripture as a 'proof text' to support everything from homophobia to child beating. Whilst it has always been possible for verses of Scripture to be read out of context and abused in this fashion, it is, once again, the ease with which this can now be done which makes the difference.

Cyberspace allows the reader access to an astonishing range of information in a variety of formats. The simple acquisition of information, however, is not the same as knowledge. People do not become better Christians because they know how many kings ruled over Israel, or what plants are named in the Bible or what the population is now of the island where Paul was shipwrecked. There is a very real danger of the virtual word blinding its reader with information rather than opening the reader's eyes to the truth. The revelation of Christ as the Word of God is not dependent on how much information about the Bible and its world the reader has amassed, but by the Spirit of God who leads us into all truth.

Conclusion

The word of God is a gift of grace that reveals God's truth and mediates an awareness of God's presence. As a gift of grace it cannot be owned or commanded, but can be received or refused. God's grace can be resisted, and there will always be those who choose not to respond to the word, regardless of how it is communicated. History teaches us that the greater the availability of the word, the greater the determination of some to resist or seek to contain its power.

But the word cannot be contained or constrained by humanity, it is God's word, and God continues to speak and make Christ visible in every time and place. There is nowhere that humans can go where God is not, neither in the heavens above, or the earth below, or even in that intangible realm of cyberspace. The Word is present wherever two or three are gathered together. But that gathering need not be a localized gathering. It is the relationship that is constitutive, not the physical presence.

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The Body of Christ is a dispersed body, which repeatedly resists contraction to either location or time. It is nonetheless a connected body, a relational body which existed before and after the physical body dwelt among us. The virtual word models that relationality and liberates the authority implicit within it, allowing the word to speak for itself.

The expanse of cyberspace mocks the audacity of humanity to claim authority over the word. Once the word became virtual it demonstrated its power to transcend the chains that keep sScripture confined, including the canon, the lectionary and the pseudo sacramentality or religiosity which attempt to dictate its meaning and value. The authority of Scripture is not dependent on those who publish, translate and explain it. Neither is it dependent on the meaning-makers, on those who proclaim it, analyze it and authorize it. The authority of Scripture derives solely from its relationship to God and its ability to mediate that relationship to others.

In the light of the above, has the virtual Word **enhanced or endangered** the reception of Scripture as the Word of God for a needy world? It would be all too easy and very ecclesiological to say that the virtual word has endangered the reception of Scripture as the word of God for a needy world, not least because the virtual word is still only accessible for those who can afford the equipment to access it. The digital divide becomes life-threatening as we move more and more into a world where what you know is more important than who you know. The city of London has more domain names than the whole of Africa. Control of access, either by cost or by physical restrictions, makes cyberspace a political space, where many of the injustices perpetrated by the West on a developing world are mirrored. But these problems are not created by the virtual word, they are merely one dimension of the world into which the virtual word is visible and present.

It is the idea that the virtual word can and does communicate Scripture as God's word that poses the most problems for the Church. God's word is not easily separated from the control of the Church which, even following the Reformation, is still reluctant to accept that it is God who defines and authorizes what is and what is not God's word. The study of God's word, the numerous means by which we seek to clarify, understand and determine the 'truth' of the text, mistakenly leads to the assumption that there is a single 'truth' for every time and place which cannot be revealed without the aid of historical, theological, linguistic, hermeneutical, structural, ethical and social exegesis of the text. Biblical scholars and the Church have been inclined to teach that there is a right and a wrong way to read Scripture. The Church claims ownership of the word – the Bible is

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the Christian Scripture in the same way that the Qur'an is the Scripture of Islam. As its 'owners', the Church attempts to safeguard the validity and authority of the text by insisting that the Church alone is uniquely qualified to determine what the text means and how it should be read. The openness of the virtual word endangers the reception of this ecclesiological text, as the word of God for a needy world, by challenging the exclusivity of its interpretation; authorized texts are set alongside other less ecclesiologically sanctioned texts where they can be compared and proclaimed as being of equal worth.

There is statistical evidence to show that those seeking answers to the events of 9/11 turned to Scripture. The increase in unique visitors to biblical sites immediately following this tragedy was marked. The fact that there has been no significant drop-off since suggests that what was found was not only sufficient for the time, but actively encouraged the practice of engaging with the virtual word in times of need. The use of Twitter to support those campaigning for fair elections in Iraq, or Facebook to promote Christian Aid, complements the number of Christians blogging about world events, politics, culture, education and everyday living. All frequently quote and link to the virtual word, demonstrating the relevance of the word to the events of today, and at the same time expanding the network of relationships which keeps the word present and authoritative. Such actions enhance the reception of Scripture as God's word for a needy word, both by keeping Scripture part of the ongoing discussion of current affairs in the history of humanity, and by claiming for it a consensual authoritative status. Texts that are misquoted are invariably corrected by the community of readers, as are dubious interpretations derived by proof texting. Those who need the word of God, and who seek it in cyberspace, actively participate in the discovery of a consensus meaning. In so doing there is room for the Spirit to work to mediate truth, in the relationships that are formed and in the word being discussed. These conversations around the word are transformative of cyberspace and demonstrate that the virtual word does indeed have the power to create the biblical world.

> The young Karl Barth, laboring between his identification with the oppressed workers of his congregation, the spectacle of liberal Europe's self destruction, and his obligation to preach and preach and keep on preaching, and to do it from the Bible, discovered that the Bible opens into a world of its own and that however surprising and upsetting the discovery, *that* is the *real* world.[28]

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Biblical scholars, ministers and bishops might not like it, but the real world of the Bible now encompasses the virtual world – and there is no-where we can go where the Word is not.

Notes

1 Angela Shier-Jones is a Presbyter in the Kingston upon Thames Circuit and a former Consultant in Information Technology.
2 A.S. Peake as quoted in Matthew Black (ed.) *Peake's Commentary on the Bible*, (Routledge London, 1990), p. x.
3 Rodney J. Decker, *Communicating the text in the Postmodern Ethos of Cyberspace: Cautions regarding the technology and the text.* Published at http://faculty.bbc.edu/rdecker/documents/commtext.pdf, June 2010.
4 Walter J. Ong, *Orality and literacy: the Technologizing of the Word*, Routledge, 2004.
5 A detailed exploration of the importance of the transformation from scroll to book or folio format to the development of biblical studies and scriptural theology unfortunately lies outside of the scope of this lecture. It is nonetheless worth noting that it is a further example of how a change in medium can directly and significantly affect the message.
6 See Ong, *Orality and literacy.*
7 Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, p. 154.
8 Groothuis, *The Soul in Cyber-Space*,p. 23.
9 Neil Postman, *Amusing ourselves to death. Penguin Books, 1985, p.87.*
10 Postman, *Amusing ourselves to death,* p. 77.
11 Postman, *Amusing ourselves to death.* P. 79.
12 Frederick Adams, 'Cybernetics', *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. Robert Audi (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 173–174.
13 The term cyberspace was first used in 1984 by the fiction writer William Gibson in his novel *Neuromancer.*
14 Michael Heim *The metaphysics of virtual reality.* Oxford University Press US, 1994.
15 http://www.biblegateway.com
16 See http://www.internetdynamics.com/pub/vc/bibles.html
17 This is true of both evangelical and liberal sites although it tends to be more evident in the sites belonging to the evangelical Christian community.
18 http://codexsinaiticus.org/en/, June 2010.
19 Part of the Copyright notice for the NIV contains the words: 'These Scriptures have been made available on the Internet for your personal use only. Any other use including, but not limited to, copying or re-posting the Scripture on the Internet is prohibited.' The NRSV web usage policy states that although posting the lectionary readings for a single week is within the Gratis Use Policy, most other online uses of the lectionary texts exceed the policy and will require a licence. See http://www.biblegateway.com/versions/New-International-Version-NIV-Bible/#copy and http://www.nrsv.net/contact/licensing-permissions
20 see http://net.bible.org/bible.php
21 Wiki Bible is a wikiproject to create an original, open content translation of the source text of the Bible that will be in the Public Domain- it can be found at http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Bible_(Wikisource)

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22 http://www.lolcatbible.com/index.php?title=Main_Page June 2010.
23 The number of users of the internet has grown by almost 400 per cent in the last 10 years alone. See http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm
24 Ong, *Orality and Literacy,* p. 175.
25 Located at http://www.biblegateway.com.
26 Kathryn Tanner, 'Scripture as Popular Text', *Modern Theology* 14, no. 2 (4, 1998): pp. 279–98.
27 Augustine, *Epistles* 137.18, trans. by Auerbach, 'Sermo', p. 50.
28 Robert W Jenson, 'Scripture's Authority in the Church', in Davis, Ellen F., and Richard B. Hays. *The art of reading Scripture*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2003. p. 37.