

HARD-COPY BIBLES AREN'T JUST NOSTALGIC

Judges

Wesley Hill¹

As I prepare to begin my tenth year as a seminary professor, I'm going to begin the biblical capstone class I'll be teaching by recommending that my students consider taking up a habit they're likely unfamiliar with: bringing an actual, physical, printed-and-bound Bible to class.

My reason for the recommendation isn't just about nostalgia, though I did grow up carrying a Bible to church each Sunday. The first Bible I recall as being "my Bible" (the possessive pronoun being a piece of Christian-speak that seems to have burrowed its way into the instinctive vocabulary of the faithful) was the *Youthwalk* edition of the New International Version, given to me by my parents while I was still in middle school.

I liked the swath of deep purple that stood out on the cover, but I don't recall reading it much, aside from thumbing through it to find isolated verses, old favorites that I had already memorized or gathered that I ought to have memorized.

It wasn't until I was in high school, when I acquired a faux-leather-bound study edition of the New King James Version, that I started reading larger chunks of Scripture, often while sitting at church when I grew bored with the sermon. That's how I learned my way around the Bible, stringing the verse-pearls I already knew onto a more extensive narrative, historical, and theological thread.

It was while reading that study edition—which featured those little half-moon indentations at the start of each biblical book, facilitating the easy flipping back and forth between books for cross-referencing—that I first began to get an inkling of why Alan Jacobs has called the codex—the form of a published Bible that the early church of the second, third, and fourth centuries quickly came to prefer over scrolls—"the technology of typology."

I wouldn't have been able to put it that way at the time, but I was learning by experience what early biblical interpreters apparently understood and prized: Having a Bible with stacked pages bound together on one side, rather than one long sheet wrapped up to look like a piece of piping, made it possible to examine a section of the Old Testament in its context on the entire page and compare it simultaneously with a section of the New, also in its wider setting.

Handling a physical Bible taught me, at a subconscious level, to read Scripture as a canon, a library of books whose disparate voices could be heard as if they were speaking with and alongside one another about the same subject matter.

So I won't just be recommending hard copies of the Bible because I want to relive my youth: I want my students to become better readers of the whole Bible, letting its words ricochet off one another and lead them, ping by contrapuntal ping, through a canon-wide romp (which is why I'll also be recommending a bound paper copy with a good cross-reference system in its footnotes or center column, such as this NRSV or the ESV personal reference Bible).

There are many wonderful electronic Bibles to choose from these



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days (I use the ESV's beautiful app on a daily basis). But in 2021 I'm still wary, as Jacobs said he was in 2001, "of making use of an electronic version of the scroll cabinets firmly rejected by the early church." I wouldn't want to be without my Accordance software and other apps, but it's worth recognizing that when we use tools like these, we are in certain respects returning to the scrolls that the first Christian theologians, for reasons properly theological and hermeneutical, displaced with the codex.

But there's one more reason I'll be recommending hard-copy Bible toting to my students, and that's because I want them to think about what practices they'd like to commend to those under their care once they've graduated and become pastors and preachers themselves. Choosing a medium for our Bible reading isn't only about us; it's about what sorts of attitudes and postures we'd like to encourage in our churches.

The technological critic L. M. Sacasas (who recently had a stimulating conversation with Ezra Klein) has assembled a set of questions each of us might ask ourselves when we consider our relationship to various technologies and devices. The questions range from fairly straightforward (How will the use of this technology affect how I relate to other people?) to more philosophically complex (Does this technology automate or outsource labor or responsibilities that are morally essential?).

At least one of the questions strikes me as especially pertinent to our encounter with the Bible: "What practices will the use of this technology displace?" In other words, what might we lose—and what might we (tacitly) encourage others to lose, forget, or marginalize—if we give up the habit of reading paper-and-binding Bibles? Those of us charged with the care of souls might meditate for a long time on the question.

Ten years ago, the Episcopal priest Fleming Rutledge, not thinking primarily of the classroom but of the gathered congregation on Sunday mornings, wrote about her frustration with the fashion in many Episcopal churches of printing each Sunday's lectionary readings in the bulletin. Such a practice ensures that churchgoers won't feel the need to bring along their Bibles or reach for the ones (sometimes) available in the pew racks in front of them. (It might also be that it discourages them—helpfully—from reaching for their smartphones, but that'll be for another piece.)

"When everyone is reading from a printed sheet," Rutledge says in her book *And God Spoke to Abraham*, "no one is learning where in the Bible the passage is located, or how it is linked to what comes before it and after it." She continues in this vein for a while, with her characteristically delightful pugnacity:

A whole generation of churchgoers is being raised with no sense of actually handling the Bible, of finding the passage and reading it in its sequence. The large Bibles on the lecterns are sitting unused, their pages gathering dust; some have been removed altogether. The wonderful sight of the reader mounting up to the lectern and turning the pages to find the place is seldom seen today in Episcopal churches; the readers come up with flimsy little pieces of paper which for the most part will be left in the pew or thrown away.

If you go on and read the subsequent sermons, you'll find asides such as, "Now notice v. 4 ... But that's also what we see in the next chapter ..." and so on. The gospel that she finds in the Bible's textual details was enough enticement for this reader, at least, to keep an open Bible on my lap as I read the sermons, my eye toggling between her words and the pages of Scripture.

I hope what I offer my students in class provides the same enticement. And I hope they'll pass it along to the Bible-reading Christians whom they'll nurture in turn.