

Review

Dyer, John. *People of the Screen: How Evangelicals Created the Digital Bible and How It Shapes Their Reading of Scripture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023. 259 pp. ISBN 9780197636350.

By Kajle Radbourne, MDiv

A theologian by training and a web developer by vocation, John Dyer has spent his career at the intersection of Scripture and software, most recently as a professor and administrator at Dallas Theological Seminary. *People of the Screen: How Evangelicals Created the Digital Bible and How It Shapes Their Reading of Scripture* (Oxford University Press, 2023) is the fruit of that dual vantage point. Dyer draws on historical research as well as interviews and surveys of Bible app users and developers to examine the rise of digital Bible tools and the theological assumptions embedded in their design are quietly shaping the way millions of Christians read (and do not read) the Bible.

The book is organized into eight chapters that move from theoretical groundwork to historical survey to original empirical research. Dyer opens by introducing two key analytical frameworks that orient the whole study. The first is the Social Construction of Technology (SCOT), which argues that technologies are not neutral tools but are shaped by the values, assumptions, and goals of the communities that develop them. It is here that Dyer points out the overwhelming influence of evangelicals in the digital Bible industry with each major development in the space being led by evangelicals. As a result, Dyer sees these tools being shaped by what he calls Hopeful Entrepreneurial Pragmatism (HEP), his term for the characteristically evangelical disposition toward technology: an optimistic, can-do confidence that new tools can and should be harnessed for the spread of Scripture. Together, these frameworks set up the book's central question: if evangelical assumptions shaped the design of digital Bibles, what kind of reading do those Bibles quietly encourage?

The middle chapters trace the history of Bible software across four waves of development, from early desktop programs in the 1980s through the explosion of smartphone apps. Here Dyer introduces one of the book's most illuminating observations: that across companies as different as Logos, Bible Gateway, and YouVersion, a single word functions as the shared goal of digital Bible development: *engagement*. Every platform wants users to engage with Scripture. Yet what counts as engagement, how it is measured, and what it is assumed to produce varies considerably depending on each company's theological convictions and business model. A canonical software suite aimed at seminarians (such as Logos) and a free

app sustained by donor goodwill (such as YouVersion) will make very different design decisions, even when both are sincerely motivated by the same goal.

This tension comes into sharpest focus in chapters six and seven, where Dyer presents original research into how evangelical readers use digital Bibles in practice. He profiles a range of reader types and documents real patterns of use, including a phenomenon he calls *ambient listening*, in which users play Scripture as continuous audio while going about their daily routines, much like background music. For developers operating with a maximalist view of engagement, this counts as a win; any contact with the biblical text is understood as inherently beneficial. Dyer neither dismisses nor affirms this practice, leaving the reader with the question of whether all engagement is, in fact, equal.

People of the Screen is a genuinely valuable contribution to a conversation that is still in its early stages. Dyer's use of SCOT is particularly effective: it gives him a solid framework for resisting the temptation (common in evangelical writing on technology) to treat digital tools as either straightforwardly good or straightforwardly threatening. The result is a study that feels grounded rather than polemical, and that will be useful to researchers, church leaders, and developers alike.

The book's most suggestive finding, however, may be one that Dyer himself does not press as hard as the material invites. Dyer refers to researchers indicating that, “[D]igital Bible users tend to share Bible verses that are consistent with Christian Smith’s moralist therapeutic deism (MTD) ... rather than theologically oriented passages.”¹ This is worth pausing over. While wrongly emphasized readings like MTD can occur with any text, a printed Bible carries with it an implicit context: the reader can see that Jeremiah 29:11 sits inside a narrative of despair, that the Psalms are a varied and sometimes raw collection, that the prophets require patience. Digital Bibles, by contrast, tend to present the text as a reservoir of extractable wisdom (verses that float free of their literary and historical surroundings). The decontextualization is not incidental; it is, in part, a design outcome. And it maps directly onto a longstanding weakness in evangelical Bible culture that Dyer identifies but stops short of naming as sharply as he might.

This restraint is perhaps deliberate. Dyer writes as an insider (a developer and a theologian) and his tone throughout is measured and charitable. Readers looking for a prophetic critique of digital Bible culture will need to look elsewhere, or read between the lines. What Dyer does offer, and does exceptionally well, is the diagnostic groundwork that any such critique would need to stand on. By naming the assumptions, tracing the history, and documenting the actual habits of real readers, he has given the church a clearer picture of where it stands. That is no small thing.

¹ Pg 114.

People of the Screen combines historical reflection with original empirical research to give a fuller picture of both the creators and the users of digital Bibles than has previously been available. Pastors, educators, and ministry technologists can all read it with profit, each finding material relevant to their own corner of the question. For those who lead communities where digital Bibles are simply assumed (which is to say, nearly every evangelical church in the West) this book offers an important invitation to reflect on what those tools are quietly doing to the way Scripture is encountered, interpreted, and shared. It is not a book that tells you what to do. It is a book that helps you see more clearly.

Kajle Radbourne, MDiv, is Assistant Director of Operations and Innovation and Academic Mentor at Northwest Baptist Seminary.

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