


# The hermeneutical challenge of reading digital biblical texts in Africa

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This article explores the hermeneutical challenges and possibilities of reading digital biblical texts (*Biblia Digitalia*) in Africa, building upon Mazamisa's concept of *dialectica reconciliae*. The shift from printed Bibles to *Biblia Digitalia* is the third major transformation in media technology, following the transitions from orality to literacy and from scrolls to codices. This digital shift presents both opportunities and challenges, including the potential for a de facto digital canon, the influence of algorithmic curation and the blurring of boundaries between the text and the reader. The article proposes several avenues for African scholarship, including the creation of open-source online commentaries, increased online availability of African biblical scholarship, intentional engagement with international platforms from an African hermeneutical perspective and critical awareness of the algorithms that govern online content.

**Contribution:** The article emphasises the need for a balanced and contextually relevant approach to interpreting digital biblical texts in Africa.

**Keywords:** Hermeneutics; biblical interpretation; digital media; Mazamisa; African biblical interpretation; algorithmic mediation; media shifts.

## Introduction

Since Mazamisa's proposal of a *dialectica reconciliae* (dialectic of reconciliation), which combines exegesis and hermeneutic in his 1987 dissertation,<sup>1</sup> the proliferation of digital technologies has fundamentally transformed biblical reading practices, introducing new hermeneutical challenges. In line with the focus of this volume on the relationship between the text and the reader, this article will focus specifically on the dynamic relationship between the reader and the digital biblical texts – *Biblia Digitalia* – within the different interpretive horizons that shape our understanding of the New Testament in Africa.

*Biblia Digitalia* is a Latin neologism for 'Digital Bible' that encompasses various digital manifestations of scripture that includes software programmes that provide biblical texts with search functions, multiple translations and study tools; digital scholarly editions of the biblical text with critical apparatus and textual variants; online interactive Bible that allow for communal reading, annotation and discussion, and technical interfaces that allow developers to incorporate biblical content into various applications. The term *Biblia Digitalia* intentionally blends a classical language ('*Biblia*' being the plural form of 'book' in Latin, traditionally used for the Bible) with a reference to modern technology (*Digitalia*), to reflect the intersection of ancient sacred texts with contemporary digital culture. As a concept, it is useful for examining how digital mediation transforms scriptural engagement and interpretive practices. *Biblia Digitalia* represents not just the technical transformation of biblical texts into digital formats but also the broader hermeneutical, social and theological implications of this transformation. The latter is important because the transformation of the Bible into *Biblia Digitalia* from its initial hand-scribed forms and later printed editions marks a profound shift in how individuals and communities engage with it as sacred text.<sup>2</sup> These shifts, propelled by relentless technological advancements and ever-changing cultural practices, has not only reshaped the landscape of biblical studies but also significantly impacted religious life.

1. Mazamisa's *dialectica reconciliae* approach sought to facilitate a conversation between various approaches available for the interpretation of biblical texts in the 1980s (Hombana 2024a:8). When he wrote his dissertation, structuralists were demanding exegesis, while the liberationists were placing more emphasis on reader response approaches. It was also a time when hermeneutics increasingly gained ascendancy over exegesis.

2. It has, for example, resulted in new phenomena such as 'liquid scripture' and bible 'mash-ups'. According to Siker (2017:11), 'liquid scripture' describes how the digital Bible can become diluted or fragmented, losing its fixed and tangible form. Bible 'mash-ups' refers to the personalised versions of the Bible that readers create by combining (remixing) different translations and snippets of the biblical texts in their engagement with *Biblia Digitalia*.

**Note:** The manuscript is a contribution to the themed collection titled 'Honouring Prof Welile Mazamisa: The reader, the text and two horizons', under the expert guidance of guest editors Dr Mphumezi Hombana, Mr Otto Makalima, Prof. Dion Forster and Dr Mzukisi Falemi. This article was republished with the updated spelling of the guest editor's name, Dion Forster. This does not alter the study's findings of significance or overall interpretation of the study's results. The publisher apologises for any inconvenience caused.

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The current shift in how the Bible is read has already impacted African readers whether they be scholars, clergy or laity. It can be expected that its impact will continue to increase in view of the proliferation of smartphones in the continent, which will facilitate better access to *Biblica Digitalia*.<sup>3</sup> It is therefore important for African scholars to reflect on the impact of *Biblica Digitalia* on the relationship between texts and readers. This article will therefore first examine the effects of previous shifts in media technology before considering the ways in which electronic devices mediate, disrupt and recontextualise biblical interpretation, thereby challenging traditional modes of textual engagement. In line with the work of Mazamisa, the article will ask if these innovations can overcome the gap he identified between biblical readers from the North and the South.<sup>4</sup>

## The shift to *Biblica Digitalia*

In the Early Church, most believers had no direct access to written texts because of limited manuscript availability and therefore engaged with the biblical text primarily through its oral transmission, which emphasised recitation and memorisation. Access to these texts however, expanded significantly through three pivotal shifts in media technology that each profoundly transformed scriptural engagement (Dyer 2023:2).<sup>5</sup>

The first shift was from the media of scrolls to codices that occurred when early Christianity adopted the codex format for their sacred texts in the 1st century. Despite an initial reluctance to use codices for sacred texts, Christians found that it offered numerous practical advantages that include improved navigation, greater content capacity and enhanced portability. In adopting the media technology of codices, they also introduced innovations of their own such as visual elements, columnar layouts, annotations and proto-chapter divisions. The adoption of the codex fundamentally transformed how Christian scriptures were interpreted in

that authority migrated from individual writings to the collected whole (τὰ βιβλία).<sup>6</sup> The codex format thus not merely facilitated a material evolution but also a theological reconceptualisation, as the physical binding of texts into a single volume reinforced their perception as being a unified divine revelation rather than discrete spiritual writings (Siker 2017:28). This sacralisation of the Bible as being a cohesive entity gained momentum in the aftermath of Constantine's Edict of Milan in 313 CE, which first legitimised Christianity and subsequently elevated it to the empire's preferred religion. Bible ownership, however, remained limited because of the high production costs of codices with the result that access to the Bible was mainly restricted to ordained clergy.

The second shift in media technology was from handwritten manuscripts to printed manuscripts that occurred with the invention of the printing press in the 15th century. Its invention enabled major cultural transformations including the Scientific Revolution and Protestant Reformation. Printers also introduced innovations that reshaped biblical engagement, notably Robert Estienne's (also known as Robert Stephanus in Latin) 1551 chapter-verse system, which rapidly became universal (Ehrman 2000:444). The transition from handwritten manuscripts to printed texts also revolutionised biblical interpretation in several profound ways (Siker 2017:32). Firstly, the printing press enabled standardisation of the Latin Vulgate, establishing a level of textual stability that handwritten reproduction could never achieve. Secondly, the printing press' capacity for mass production dramatically accelerated bible dissemination while significantly reducing production costs and time (Siker 2017:32). This technological advancement extended biblical access beyond ecclesiastical institutions to affluent individuals throughout Europe who desired personal scriptural engagement. Thirdly, the emergence of vernacular bible translations from Latin within Lutheranism significantly broadened the potential readership of biblical texts. During the European Middle Ages, bible access was restricted by Latin literacy requirements, with uneducated Christians therefore engaging scripture primarily through oral means or visual representations in church architecture and stained glass (Hildebrandt, Barentsen & De Kock 2021:167). The advent of biblical translation movements, however, transformed this mediated relationship. Coinciding with the printing press, and the Reformation's theological emphasis on scripture as central to faith, it enabled the establishment of personal bible reading as a cornerstone of Protestant spirituality for the first time, transitioning the interaction of readers with the biblical texts from being a predominantly communal, memory-based engagement to increasingly individualised, text-centred practices. Fourthly, and perhaps most consequentially, the Gutenberg revolution precipitated a fundamental cultural transformation – shifting European society from one centred on visual imagery to one oriented around the printed word (Siker 2017:32).

3. The dramatic expansion of digital connectivity in Africa represents a significant technological transformation of the continent. By 2020, Africa reached approximately 590 million Internet users, although its 47% penetration rate remained globally lowest. Mobile telephony experienced even more remarkable growth, expanding from merely 87 million subscriptions in 2005 to over 800 million by 2019, with some nations exceeding 100% penetration. This substantial proliferation of information and communication technologies is reshaping Africa's political, economic, social and cultural landscapes (Amir Anwar & Graham 2022:1).

4. Mazamisa in undertaking his reading of Luke 10:25–37 intentionally differentiated himself from theologians from the North by identifying as a reader and theologian from the South. 'South' being an ideological presupposition rather than a geographical one that differs from that of the so-called 'reader from the North'. Northern readers of the parable of the good Samaritan, for example, tend to identify with the charitable Samaritan in the parable, while Southern readers as victims of oppression instead identifies with the wounded stranger (Hombana 2024a:5).

5. The shift from orality to textuality with the creation of the biblical texts was in itself an important transformation. Textuality overcame oral fragility by fixing words permanently, preventing them from being forgotten. This shift transformed speech from transient oral-aural communication to a more enduring form. However, writing introduced a communication medium accessible primarily to privileged groups – the wealthy, officials and clergy – while most people remained familiar only with oral traditions (Mazamisa 1991:71–72). Even for those who are literate, textuality presents hermeneutical challenges. For black biblical scholars, for example, engaging with textuality represents a resocialisation process that separates them from their oral tradition background. Through this process, they develop new identities within a literary universe of discourse, essentially moving from orality to literacy. Mazamisa argues that black biblical scholars have therefore largely overlooked orality's role in biblical hermeneutics by adopting the approaches of the Enlightenment when conducting textual interpretation (Mazamisa 1991:72).

6. In response to an earlier draft of this chapter, Prof Cilliers Breytenbach observed that the shift of authority from individual documents to collections in early Christianity began with the initial Pauline collections in the early to mid-2nd century CE. Marcion of Sinope initiated this transformative shift in early Christian textual authority by assembling the first known canon of Paul's letters around 140 CE. His and other's compilations created a new interpretive framework within a larger collection, effectively elevating them from occasional correspondence to authoritative scripture (Hart, 2020: 34–69).

As was the case with the media shift from scrolls to codices, the media shift to printed books did not merely facilitate a material evolution but also a theological reconceptualisation in that printed Bible's binding, typography, pagination and layout began to function as hermeneutically significant paratexts<sup>7</sup> that suggest literary unity, potentially obscuring that these diverse documents were written across a millennium by authors who never envisioned their works appearing in such a collection (Mann 2020:249). The theological reconceptualisation of the authority of individual writings being based on their inclusion into a single volume solidified the perception of them being a unified divine revelation, with a specific literary structure, rather than discrete spiritual writings that was first initiated by the shift from scrolls to codices.

The third transformation in media technology is the contemporary shift from printed Bibles to *Biblia Digitalia* (Dyer 2023:2). The genesis of *Biblia Digitalia* can be traced back to the early 1980s with the introduction of Verse Search, the first commercial digital Bible by Bible Research Systems that enabled users to conduct word searches within digitised biblical text. It was soon followed by programmes such as Online Bible, Bible Reader, WORD Search, and The Perfect Word that all contributed to this burgeoning field (Siker 2017:49). These early software tools represented a significant leap forward, offering capabilities linked to digital texts of the Bible that were previously unimaginable with print editions. The later advent of the Internet and mobile technologies triggered an exponential growth in the reach and availability of the digital Bible. YouVersion Bible App, a prominent platform, has for example already been downloaded more than 380 million times by the second decade of the present millennium (Mann 2020:247). The proliferation of *Biblia Digitalia* has enabled the dissemination of the Bible in regions where physical copies were scarce or in languages previously unavailable. The integration of biblical studies with digital humanities has further revolutionised how scholars engage with biblical texts and related materials. Projects such as the Codex Sinaiticus Project, for example, provided online access to digitised versions of ancient manuscripts, enabling researchers to study these primary sources remotely.<sup>8</sup> Such initiatives have opened new avenues for textual criticism, historical analysis and comparative studies for African scholars who in the past had to undertake advanced studies in Europe.

The transformation of the Bible from printed editions into *Biblia Digitalia* marks a profound shift in how individuals and communities engage with it as sacred text. This evolution has not only reshaped the landscape of biblical studies but also

significantly impacted religious life. While there is much to celebrate, the shift from print to digital has also led to a transformation in the very nature of the biblical texts and how they are read that have dramatically changed the relationship between texts and readers. Digital interfaces, for example, introduce new mechanisms of religious authority. Algorithmic recommendations, user-generated commentaries and crowd-sourced interpretations to name a few of these mechanisms also challenge traditional approaches to biblical interpretation. This shift presents African readers of the biblical text with unique opportunities and challenges.

## The impact of *Biblia Digitalia*

It is apparent from the three shifts in media technology in history that it has both stimulated innovations in how biblical texts are read and how they are viewed theologically by readers. It can thus be expected that the current shift in media technology will have a similar effect. It is therefore important to briefly examine the impact of the *Biblia Digitalia* on readers in greater detail.

### The phenomenological transformation of reading

Texts are, according to Anderson (2020:1), 'always embodied in particular material forms, which emerge in specific times and places, and such embodiment necessarily has implications for the use and reception of these texts.' Scrolls, codices and digital devices are not simply receptacles in which texts are housed. The emergence of *Biblia Digitalia* therefore represents a profound phenomenological transformation in biblical engagement that have fundamentally altered the lived experience and consciousness of readers through novel multisensory, immersive interactions that reconstruct traditional textual practices. This phenomenological transformation must, as indicated earlier, be understood as a further step in the evolution of the embodied engagement with scripture that has taken place throughout Christian history. The availability of printed Bible, for example, represented a profound transformation in how the divine presence was perceived. While Catholicism emphasised the physicality of the Eucharist – with bread and cup embodying Christ's literal body and blood – some Protestant traditions according to Siker (2017:33) redirected this materiality towards the Bible itself. For these Protestants, the printed scripture became the tangible manifestation of divine revelation, with God's words, Christ's teachings and apostolic witness 'enfleshed' on the printed page. The physical book emerged as a substantial, concrete approximation of the Word's incarnation – a genuine divine presence. The Bible as physical object hereby acquired a hyper authorised status. An interesting example of this hyper authorised status is given by Dillon (2020:161–162) in her reflection on the anxiety expressed by women about drawing illustrations in their printed Bibles when journaling. The unintended consequence of giving the printed Bible a hyper authorised status demonstrates how technological developments in textual media profoundly influence the phenomenological engagement with biblical texts, theological reflection and religious practice.

7.Paratext according to Gérard Genette (1997:1) refers to all the elements that accompany a primary text, serving to present it to readers and shape its reception. These elements – such as titles, author names, prefaces, illustrations and book design elements – that are not necessarily part of the main text itself frame and mediate it. These accompanying features make the text 'present' in the world and influence how it is consumed and interpreted. Paratexts function as a boundary zone that readers must cross to engage with the main text, providing context and guiding interpretation. They can be particularly revealing when comparing different versions or formats of a text, such as print versus digital presentations (Mann 2020:248).

8.For the New Testament, the New Testament Virtual Manuscript Room of The Institute for New Testament Textual Research (INTF) is a vital source. The task of the INTF is 'to research the textual history of the New Testament and to reconstruct its Greek initial text on the basis of the entire manuscript tradition, the early translations and patristic citations' (<https://www.uni-muenster.de/INTF/en/index.html>).



The contemporary shift to *Biblia Digitalia*, that is at present emerging, has again fundamentally altered the embodied experience of biblical engagement. Its digital paratext – generated by authors, developers, editors, and publishers – encompasses interface elements, text layout and functionality. Unlike print media, users can however manipulate certain paratextual features in real-time (fonts, spacing, removing or showing verse numbers) while others remain contingent upon the user's technical environment (operating system, hardware specifications) (Mann 2020:252). Unlike physical codices with their tactile properties, *Biblia Digitalia* exist as 'ephemeral, scrollable interfaces' (Siker 2017:62). Its boundary paratexts have thus become less obvious (Mann 2020:252–254). The physicality of scripture – its weight, marginalia and personal annotations – is replaced by a weightless, infinitely reproducible digital text, resulting in readers' diminished grasp of biblical 'geography' – the structural landscape and spatial relationships within the text. The screen mediates reading through backlit displays and touch interactions, transforming reading from a contemplative, linear practice into a fragmented, interrupt-driven interaction (Baron 2016:173–174). This phenomenological transformation results in what Siker (2017:5) terms 'liquid scripture', wherein the transition from tangible codex to digital format dissolves not only physical presence but also the textual environment itself.<sup>9</sup> The distinct boundaries that traditionally shaped interpretation grow increasingly indistinct (e.g., between the Old Testament and the New Testament), creating an amorphous textual field where traditional interpretive landmarks fade from view. This transition has fundamentally altered textual engagement patterns.

While screen-based scripture offers practical advantages – searchability, instant navigation and multilingual access – questions persist about engagement quality in that critics argue that print fosters deeper comprehension while digital formats encourage superficial interaction (Baron 2016:165). Screen reading activates information retrieval skills – skimming for salient facts – often at the expense of narrative comprehension (Phillips 2018:405). Digital media consumption also appears to have diminished the capacity for sustained concentration on extended texts. The skimming technique that dominates screen reading has furthermore been observed to alter cognitive processes through physical and functional changes to the brain. Some researchers have in this regard identified a fundamental perceptual shift – from auditory-rational to visual-aesthetic world engagement – termed the 'iconic turn', which transforms the reading process itself (Hildebrandt et al. 2021:169–170). These distinct brain activation patterns help to explain the experiential differences between digital and physical bible engagement, potentially influencing comprehension depth, retention and overall relationship to sacred text. Neural patterning research further substantiates the qualitative difference between digital and physical reading modalities. Experiments indicate that engaging with texts 'under glass' activates different neural

pathways than material texts, suggesting that the medium itself – not merely the content – shapes cognitive processing (Phillips 2018:406).

It should be noticed that unlike with previous media transitions where new technologies completely displaced their predecessors, contemporary scripture engagement is characterised by the integration of media formats. In contrast to the previous shifts in media technology that resulted in that adaptation of media technology that was easily distinguishable from what was displaced, the shift to *Biblia Digitalia* is emerging in a more subtle manner. Readers, instead of discarding older media technology now engage with scripture across print, digital and audio platforms simultaneously, creating a hybrid approach where formats coexist, serving different purposes within individual practice. This multimedia convergence creates the possibility for new hermeneutical approaches that were impractical in single-medium environments (Dyer 2023:7). The abundance of digital aids and commentaries may however possibly overwhelm users, potentially overshadowing the biblical text itself.

### A shift to non-linear reading and interpretation

As indicated earlier, the emergence of *Biblia Digitalia* has fundamentally transformed the linear, sequential text established by the codices into a hypertext characterised by a net-like, dynamic organisation (Hildebrandt et al. 2021:168). This shift represents more than a mere format change; it constitutes a fundamental reconceptualisation of how scripture is structured and accessed.

Firstly, the *Biblia Digitalia* has changed how readers search for passages in that they can by using the search function of digital platforms rapidly locate specific passages. Without physically navigating through pages, readers however lose access to unconscious reading strategies that aid comprehensive understanding. *Biblia Digitalia* subtly alters readers' perception of biblical structure. While print Bibles encourage sequential, narrative-based reading that preserves contextual integrity and theological progression digital interfaces fundamentally disrupt this approach through its verse-by-verse display, instant cross-referencing and sophisticated search functionalities. This technological shift enables readers to navigate scripture non-sequentially – jumping between disparate texts with unprecedented ease while potentially sacrificing narrative context and theological continuity. The resulting atomisation transforms scripture from a cohesive narrative into a collection of discrete, decontextualised fragments.

Secondly, *Biblia Digitalia*, while offering convenient search functionality, have compromised readers' understanding of canonical arrangement. It may even have diminished the very notion of canonicity (Mann 2020:260–261). The physical act of navigating through printed pages – which implicitly reinforces canonical sequence – disappears when the Bible becomes merely another downloaded text (Siker 2017:64). The *Biblia Digitalia* thus embodies a paradoxical

<sup>9</sup> Readers also according to Siker (2017:11) create bible 'mash-ups' in that they create personalised versions of the Bible by remixing different translations and snippets in their engagement with the digital Bible.

quality – simultaneously enhancing interconnectivity while dissolving structural boundaries. This tension between integration and fragmentation represents a fundamental challenge to traditional hermeneutical approaches that presuppose sequential reading and canonical consciousness.

Thirdly, Biblica Digitalia have revolutionised interpretive practices through key technological innovations that fundamentally alter reader's relationship with biblical knowledge. Instantaneous word searches facilitate comparative analysis that reveals patterns and connections previously inaccessible through sequential reading alone. Cross-referencing algorithms generate entirely new networks of biblical meaning through hyperlinks and algorithmic associations. Where print Bibles might have marginal cross-references, digital interfaces generate complex webs of connection. A single verse can instantly link to linguistic analyses, historical contexts, theological commentaries and related scriptural passages. These hyperlinks implicitly prioritise particular reading methodologies – whether thematic, lexical or sequential – creating new cognitive frameworks that influence interpretive outcomes. These new frameworks create interpretive pathways that wouldn't naturally emerge in traditional reading, potentially generating novel hermeneutical insights but also risking intellectual superficiality.

Fourthly, Apps embed devotional messages, personal reflections, and contextual explanations directly alongside scriptural text. This integration dilutes the traditional distinction between primary text and secondary interpretation.

Fifthly, Biblica Digitalia represents more than mere format changes – the fragmented, non-sequential engagement with digital text also alters how readers comprehend and retain textual information, particularly when engaging with complex or extended narratives such as those found in scripture (Hildebrandt et al. 2021:169–170). In this regard, Siker (2017:13) has advanced the axiom that the increasing sophistication in text production technologies correlates directly with diminishing reliance on human memory. Throughout history, humans have progressively exported memories onto external storage media – evolving from cuneiform tablets to digital devices – while simultaneously reducing their capacity to internally store the narratives these texts contain. This externalisation process raises critical questions about reader's relationship with outsourced biblical knowledge. When scripture primarily exists in digital form, it is a question if believers truly engage with and internalise content, potentially transforming them into less 'biblical people' (Phillips 2018:406).<sup>10</sup> As readers increasingly engage with scripture through hypermediated interfaces, the very concept of 'biblical literacy' may require redefinition to accommodate these emerging reading practices that privilege associative thinking over linear progression.

10. Legitimate concerns exist regarding long-term preservation – technological obsolescence and funding discontinuities threaten digital collections in ways that don't affect physical materials. These vulnerabilities suggest reconsidering our preservation strategies, potentially favouring decentralised production of high-resolution physical facsimiles rather than relying exclusively on centralised digital repositories. This hybrid approach might better balance accessibility with stability, ensuring scholarly access persists regardless of technological or institutional changes (Phillips 2018:408).

## The influence of algorithmically mediated interpretative practices

The digital interface of the *Biblia Digitalia* has in view of the above-mentioned emerged as a new hermeneutical actor. Far from being a transparent window to scripture, the interface of *Biblia Digitalia* actively shapes its interpretation through its architectural design and interactive elements. Interface components function as interpretive agents that guide, constrain and enable specific approaches to textual engagement.

Biblica Digitalia offer unprecedented opportunities for personalisation and customisation, catering to individual preferences and spiritual needs. For example, Biblica Digitalia offer personalised reading plans tailored to individual interests, spiritual goals, and time constraints. This personalisation enhances the user experience, making the Bible more accessible and relevant to individual lives. Algorithms furthermore curate these individual engagements based on user history and preferences, to generate unique interpretive trajectories for each reader (Siker 2017:64). This individualisation challenges communal hermeneutical traditions founded on shared interpretive frameworks, potentially fragmenting the existing interpretive consensuses. While social media has thus fostered a democratisation of biblical interpretation, empowering individuals to share insights and interpretations, it has also paradoxically often fragmented interpretive communities.

Behind the veneer of direct scriptural access algorithms establish new iterations of interpretive authority through invisible filtering, prioritisation and contextualisation processes that subtly but powerfully shape biblical interpretation. This shaping is at times deliberate. Contrary to narratives of passive technological adoption, Dyer (2023:3) has, for example, argued that evangelical technologists and ministry leaders were active architects of digital scriptural platforms. From the late 1990s through the early 2000s, these innovators (Techno-Evangelicals) conceptualised digital interfaces not merely as neutral transmission mechanisms but as dynamic missional technologies. As such it had four theological purposes: enhancing biblical literacy through accessible scholarly tools, democratising scriptural access by removing traditional barriers of expertise and geography, facilitating personalised spiritual formation through customisable interfaces and extending evangelical theological frameworks globally while maintaining doctrinal integrity. Through this lens, digital technologies are not merely neutral tools for Techno-Evangelicals but sacred instruments that serve God's mission by making biblical engagement more accessible, personalised and widespread across previously unreached populations and contexts.

The pre-packaged interpretive lenses of Biblica Digitalia potentially reduce critical engagement and theological complexity to consumable, bite-sized content. Daily devotionals, shareable quotes and algorithmically curated reading plans reduce complex theological passages to motivational memes.

This algorithmic curation prioritises engagement and emotional resonance over theological depth, fundamentally altering scripture's cultural and religious function (Siker 2017:206–208). This digital dissemination raises critical questions about what biblical content enters the public domain and how sharing patterns may establish an unofficial digital canon. The Christian Outreach in the Digital Environment Centre's ComRes analysis of the most frequently tweeted bible verses across multiple years reveals a significant shift in usage patterns. Their data demonstrate an evolution from predominantly propositional texts (statements of doctrine or belief) towards therapeutic texts (passages offering comfort, encouragement or personal well-being) (Phillips 2018:408). This trend suggests *Biblica Digitalia* engagement increasingly prioritises content serving immediate emotional and psychological needs rather than complex theological frameworks. There is, for example, evidence that rather than deriving religious practice from established doctrinal frameworks or institutional norms, contemporary youth increasingly evaluate religious content based on its functional utility for personal development and individual circumstances. This represents a significant shift from authority-based to utility-based religious engagement.<sup>11</sup> The selective engagement with *Biblica Digitalia* also potentially creates a de facto digital canon – a subset of biblical texts receiving disproportionate circulation and attention in online spaces. This emergent digital canon has the potential to reflect contemporary values and concerns more than traditional ecclesiastical determinations of textual importance, potentially reshaping how newer generations understand the Bible's core message and purpose.

All engagements with the *Biblica Digitalia* are, however, not necessarily negative in nature. Recent research reveals evolving attitudes towards the Bible among digital millennials. While the Christian Outreach in the Digital Environment Centre's ComRes survey in the United Kingdom (UK) found general indifference, with 'don't know' being the predominant response when participants were presented with positive and negative bible associations – four of the five most common other responses were notably positive. This represents a significant contrast to Field's (2014) earlier findings, which documented predominantly negative perceptions, with 55% of respondents characterising the Bible as 'difficult', 22% as 'boring', and many considering it 'insignificant' – even 'less important than a daily newspaper' (Field 2014:516). This apparent shift suggests either changing attitudes or different methodological approaches to measuring biblical perception. The persistence of indifference alongside positive associations indicates a complex relationship between digital natives and scripture – neither wholesale rejection nor enthusiastic embrace, but rather a nuanced ambivalence that includes potential openness alongside disengagement (Phillips 2018:405).

11. One way to understand this shift is through the use of the concept of 'Moralistic-Therapeutic Deism' (MTD), introduced in the study *Soul Searching*, to characterise this phenomenon among American teenagers. The MTD transforms traditional theistic understanding into a needs-based relationship where God functions primarily as an on-demand therapist. This conceptualisation positions the divine as a resource to be activated selectively according to personal requirements rather than as a consistent presence with comprehensive authority over life. The deity becomes compartmentalised – available for consultation during difficulties but exercising minimal influence on daily existence or decision-making (Hildebrandt et al. 2021:171).

## The democratisation and balkanisation of research

*Biblica Digitalia* simultaneously democratise and balkanise access to sources needed for academic research. There is no doubt that digital technologies have democratised academic biblical scholarship, making specialised commentaries, linguistic tools and historical resources available beyond traditional institutional boundaries while dissolving longstanding educational barriers. Anyone with Internet can now instantly access multiple translations, scholarly commentaries and interpretive resources previously available only to well-sourced theologians. Rather than restricting access to important manuscripts such as Codex Sinaiticus to a few scholars, digital technology democratises engagement with these historical texts.<sup>12</sup> This democratisation leverages expertise from leading scholars to create an unprecedented connection between the ancient text and contemporary audiences. It will also change how scholars conduct research on the biblical texts. Allen (2020:183–184) has in this regard suggested that *Biblica Digitalia* will enable researchers to reconnect manuscripts' expressive and paratextual features with their textual characteristics, creating representations organised around a more 'decentralized conception of representing the tradition writ large' rather than around the idea of an 'original' or 'initial' text. This approach conceptualises biblical manuscripts as embodied textual objects where form and content are inseparable. Scholarship thus has the opportunity to return to a philological sensitivity recognising each witness's inherent material value with the ability to access comprehensive data through hyperlinks, to perceive the interrelationships between text and artefact, and form and content. *Biblica Digitalia* will thus, according to Allen (2020:182–185), provide scholars unique access to information marginalised in traditional print editions, enhancing both historical-critical analysis and reception history. *Biblica Digitalia* used as dynamic tools for scholarship and not just digitised texts can thus help scholars better understand the complex relationships between textual production, transmission, exegesis and reception history.

The digital age has also witnessed the integration of the Bible with various social media platforms, fostering community engagement among non-academic readers. YouVersion, BibleGateway, and Logos exemplify bible engagement programmes that offer social media sharing, community bible plans and supplementary study modules. The technological infrastructure of the digital age, when used responsibly, has the potential to democratise theological discourse through decentralised communication channels. This technological democratisation has created unprecedented opportunities for advancing African biblical interpretation, hermeneutics and theological perspectives.

12. The Codex Sinaiticus Project represents an international collaborative effort that presents the manuscript in digital form, making them globally accessible for the first time (Phillips 2018:407).



*Biblia Digitalia*, however, do not just democratise access. It can also balkanise it as the complex architecture of algorithmic mediation of *Biblia Digitalia* introduces sophisticated mechanisms of epistemic control. Search algorithms subtly prioritise dominant theological traditions in information retrieval while recommendation systems direct users towards established perspectives rather than emerging contextual interpretations. These technological infrastructures often reproduce colonial knowledge structures through seemingly neutral design decisions that privilege certain forms of theological discourse over others. The sophisticated nature of these digital epistemological hierarchies presents unique challenges for liberation hermeneutics precisely because they operate beneath the surface of conscious engagement. Unlike traditional institutional barriers that were explicitly visible and therefore contestable, algorithmic mediation functions through seemingly neutral technical processes that obscure their embedded values and assumptions. This technological opacity requires new forms of critical engagement that can identify and resist the subtle ways in which digital platforms may reinscribe colonial knowledge structures. The algorithmic curation of biblical content can also create interpretive echo chambers (Phillips 2018:407). It should also be observed that Africa faces significant infrastructure challenges in accessing *Biblia Digitalia* including limited availability of electricity, inadequate internet networks and low digital literacy levels in many regions.

## Conclusion

As stated in the introduction, Mazamisa's groundbreaking work on contextual biblical hermeneutics occurred before the full potential of *Biblia Digitalia* became evident. There is no doubt that its emergence has fundamentally reconfigured the landscape of theological discourse, necessitating a critical reassessment of his dialectic of reconciliation in the *Biblia Digitalia* age because the latter presents a hermeneutical paradox for liberation-oriented methodologies within African contexts. In short, an expanded *dialectica reconciliae* is needed that is methodologically and hermeneutically balanced while giving an authentic African interpretation of biblical texts.

Firstly, it should be recognised that the advent of *Biblia Digitalia* offers Africa the opportunity to leap-frog current obstacles in access to resources, dissemination of knowledge and participation in global discussions on the meaning of the Bible. It should therefore embrace *Biblia Digitalia* as it has done with other innovations enabled by digital technologies.<sup>13</sup>

Secondly, African scholars should consider creating an online open-source commentary series based on the collaboration between academics who are members of the different scholarly societies of Africa, along with different churches.

13. One example of Africa's ability to embrace digital technology and to innovate is M-Pesa's emergence in 2007 through Safaricom Kenya that has resulted in widespread mobile money adoption continent-wide. By 2018, Africa contributed approximately 45.6% of the global mobile money market (Amir Anwar & Graham 2022:25).

They should also collaborate to make as much of their peer-reviewed studies available online. Research that is at present only available in print should be scanned and placed online. An example of this is the journal *Scriptura*, where Mazamisa served on the editorial board until his death (Hombana 2024b:2). This will provide a diversity of African perspectives and allow previously marginalised academic communities to participate in the broader academic conversations. There is thus need for established scholarly guilds such as the Institute for the Study of the Sacred Texts in Africa (ISSTA) and the New Testament Society of Southern Africa to liaison with each other. Both have journals (the *E-Journal of Religion* or *EJR* of ISSTA and *Neotestamentica* of the New Testament Society of Southern Africa [NTSSA]) and ISSTA already seeks to publish scholarly books online in different series. There is thus a solid base to build on.

Thirdly, scholars should be encouraged to intentionally engage interpretive existing online communities from the perspective of the South and an African Hermeneutic perspective. Multilingual platforms can challenge the hegemony of European languages in biblical scholarship while artificial intelligence (AI) can also be used to translate academic sources into vernacular languages. These translations can bridge the Francophone and Anglophone divide evident in African scholarship. Used wisely, online *Biblia Digitalia* produced by Africans can become a tool for decolonial theological biblical engagement that transcend geographical limitations.

Fourthly, while engaging with international platforms, African readers should observe the algorithms that govern them. While they can, as above-stated, provide marginalised voices with the opportunity to participate in global conversations, the sophisticated algorithmic mediation of content that readers are presented with by search engines can also potentially reinscribe colonial knowledge hierarchies. The challenge thus lies in developing contextually relevant digital strategies that leverage technological affordances for advancing African oriented interpretive approaches while resisting algorithmic re-marginalisation through active engagement with technological design and implementation. Countering epistemological colonisation<sup>14</sup> requires not only theological sophistication from African scholars but also technological literacy with which to critically engage the platforms through which contemporary theological discourse increasingly occurs. The future of liberation hermeneutics in the algorithmic age depends on the development of critically aware, contextually responsive digital theological strategies that centre African perspectives within technological frameworks.

Fifthly, as the Bible becomes increasingly liquid, the theological training and education of scholars, clergy and laity will become even more important. The development of the following key hermeneutical frames will be crucial: (1) a historical consciousness (the awareness that the

14. The development of indigenous digital hermeneutical infrastructures that encode African epistemological frameworks into their technological architecture represents a proactive approach to digital hermeneutics.

biblical text were written in specific historical contexts that differ from our own and often even from that they describe); (2) an understanding of the literary structure of individual texts and their intertextual relations; (3) an awareness of the canonical frame of these texts that are important for ecclesial readings of the biblical text; and (4) a deep understanding of the communal epistemologies characteristic of many African theological traditions that should inform the contextual reading of the Bible.

With the advent of *Biblia Digitalia*, the time has come for African scholars to build on Mazamisa's pioneering work and develop a new *dialectica reconciliae* that incorporates different methodologies and technologies in an African hermeneutic that enables the South to interpret the Bible in a contextually relevant manner and to participate in the global reflection on its meaning.

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