



# Social Media and Online Scripture

By David Dault

In First Corinthians, the Apostle Paul proclaims, “I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some” (1 Cor 9:22). If the history of American Bible publishing over the last thirty years was in need of a motto, this might well be the one to pick. The explosion of print Bibles, in all shapes, colors, sizes, and versions, has truly been remarkable and unprecedented. From the basic hotel Gideon’s to the flashy, glossy-papered girl’s *Revolve BibleZine*, the Bible (not exactly a slow seller to begin with) has undergone a revolution of availability and audience appeal, a trend that has only increased momentum with the turn of the millennium.

This explosion in the world of print media, of course, is only the tip of the iceberg. For generations now the Bible and its stories and characters have been translated into various media, with film and voice recordings leading the charge for the Greatest Generation, and the Boomers following suit with the rise of video technology, where interactive CD-ROMs offered expanded and enhanced Bible experiences for the reader wishing to learn more about the geography of the Holy Land or the latest archaeological evidence discovered about ancient Israel or the ministries of the Disciples. Bible publishers and laypersons with a heart to spread the gospel have very often embraced these new technologies, using their novelty and attractiveness as a means to evangelize.

With the first generations raised with the World Wide Web,

we saw, for the first time in the past four hundred years, a shift away from the dominance of print culture. The promise was that, for the first time, our experience with information would become truly interactive, allowing the reader to contribute as much (or even more) to the experience of reading as the writer.

For most of the Web’s infancy and adolescence, however, the promised breaking down of the barriers did not occur. Content was pretty much static, and flowed in a one-way line from producer to consumer, just like the old days of print. Not surprisingly, the first Bible sites on the Web consisted of static pages with little more than a smorgasbord of version choices and a searchable database of scriptural terms. While these sites were attractive and useful to believers, there was little there to attract interested nonbelievers, nor was there good reason to return to the site unless you had something you wanted to look up.

With the rise of social media in the first decade of the 21st century, we are at last seeing the beginnings of the revolution in interactivity that was promised to us at the dawn of the Internet Age. As in generations past, those with a heart for evangelism are at the cutting edge of this new media. The recent advancements in Web technology and culture are allowing readers to interact with Scripture in radically new ways. The face-to-face Bible studies of old are moving into virtual spaces online. Savvy “evangelpreneurs” are increasingly using the marketing tactics of the

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business world to plant and grow new ministries, and social media is giving them tools to make Paul's call to become "all things to all people" a reality.

The success of a website often depends on the generation of continually fresh content. This model initially proved especially difficult for Scripture-themed websites, as there is not much call for innovation with regard to the basic texts of the Bible. The desire to maintain integrity to the text worked against the need for constantly updated content.

The social media model, however, is changing this dynamic. As its name would suggest, social media is generated almost wholly by the user for the benefit of other users. Blogs, for example, allow and encourage frequent updates, and have been used as a forum for ongoing meditations on Scripture or for a running Bible commentary or as a journal of reflections as readers work through the lectionary. At an even more interactive level, comment threads and online forums allow the development of long threads of debate over interpretation and application of difficult passages to daily life.

There are numerous Bible websites, of course, and even some of the longtime leaders in online Scripture are adding more social aspects to their sites—the expansive Bible Gateway, for example, and some of the translation-specific sites. Here I will discuss just two major experiments in the next generation of online Scripture, designed to emphasize the interactive aspects of these new social media paradigms: the Tagged Tanakh ([www.taggedtanakh.org](http://www.taggedtanakh.org)), affiliated with the Jewish Publication Society, and YouVersion ([www.youversion.com](http://www.youversion.com)), affiliated with LifeChurch.tv.

## Tagged Tanakh

The site bills itself as "collaborative platform" on which the Torah, Prophets, and Writings can be "cross-referenced, annotated, and connected—tagged—to other forms of media." After a free sign-up, I am looking at "my page." Most of the main page is taken up with "My Feeds," consisting of a long list of snippets of the most recent comments left by other users.

I look at the list and feel a bit confused. No snippet gives me enough information to really orient myself. I click on the "Books" tab, which brings up a box listing both books and chapters for clicking. Picking one at random, I arrive at the text, with a sidebar that reads "tag cloud," but there are no tags yet. A few other random clicks show that some pages are more tagged than others. I try typing a few terms in the search window, with mixed results. Language from the Bible itself yields results, but searching on topical or controversial terms does not.

This demonstrates one of the immediate downsides to social media. Since the majority of content is generated from within the community of users, a relatively young site like Tagged Tanakh can suffer at first from too little content, or a disorganized mish-mash of content. While it is certainly an attractive site for doing research on Tanakh and Haftorah texts, the site's opaque functionality will not keep users coming back. Not, at least, until it has generated a critical mass of tags and searchable content.

For pastors with an interest in Judaism or interfaith dialogue, or who wish to reconnect to the Old Testament in a fresh way, the Tagged Tanakh will prove a valuable resource. To utilize the site effectively, however, pastors will need to invest some time with the discussions around specific texts. For example, if a pastor was preparing a sermon and wanted to get feedback about an interpretation of a passage, he or she could start a thread, linked



specifically to the passage. There are clearly several users with dedication to the site and its growth, so there's a guarantee to get some feedback pretty quickly.

The site moderators also promise that more features will be coming online in the future, including interactive maps, a linked and searchable version in Hebrew, and even instructional video games. The site is not there yet, but it will definitely be worth keeping an eye on in the months to come.

## YouVersion

In contrast to the minimal instruction I received from my sign-up with Tagged Tanakh, upon activating my YouVersion account I immediately get an email with a list of suggestions for how to get started and what to do next, with options ranging from updating my user profile to downloading a mobile phone app to instructions for contributing my own comments and content. The site is inviting and easy to use. It is clear that the folks at LifeChurch.tv have put a lot of thought into their platform, and they seem eager to have pastors and congregations use the tools at YouVersion in creative and novel ways to spread the gospel.

The "Bible database" aspect is still present, of course. YouVersion boasts over fifty different versions of the Bible available (twenty of those in English). In contrast to older-generation sites, YouVersion is geared to take the Scriptures and make them viral. The "Mobile" tab on the top navigation reveals a "BibleApp" reader available for all the major networked platforms, including the iPad, iPhone, BlackBerry, and Android phones. Apple's iTunes store lists it as one of the top ten all-time best-selling apps for both the iPad and iPhone. By all measures, the platform is a success. In a little over a year, the BibleApp tool has logged over five billion minutes of usage, according to the YouVersion blog.

Furthermore, it is immediately clear that BibleApp is designed from the ground up to be a powerful tool for social-media evangelism. "USE THE BIBLE APP IN CHURCH," the page tells me, "Interact with church services and conferences . . . Just tap the 'Live' icon in the dock at the bottom when attending a church service or event where YouVersion Live is being used. Take notes, respond to polls, answer questions, tweet about the event, and more!"

YouVersion is much more than a searchable Bible database. It is an entire platform for interaction with Scripture, complete with the ability to join multiple Bible studies online. Moreover,



## Conclusion

If YouVersion is any indication, the benefits of social media for getting people to interact with and around Scripture are myriad. As my experience with Tagged Tanakh shows, however, we are still in a transitional phase between the older paradigms of static, “search-the Bible” sites and the exciting possibilities and flexibility offered by the new models. For laypersons who desire a closer connection to the Bible, it is now as close as the mobile phone in their pocket. For pastors who want to follow Paul’s example of “all things for all people,” social media has a distinct advantage over earlier models, which could only offer “some things.” The secret of social media is that, as “all people” become involved, they generate their own “all things” to keep them engaged and coming back. □



David Dault is Assistant Professor of Catholic Studies at Christian Brothers University in Memphis, Tenn., and serves on the board of the Society for Comparative Research on Iconic and Performative Texts [SCRIPT]. His book, *The Accessorized Bible: The Rise of “Designer” Scripture*, is forthcoming from Yale University Press. You can keep up with his research into the history and intrigue of Bible publishing at <http://MaterialScripture.blogspot.com>.

the uses are not only interactive but open-ended and easily improvised and expandable—the very essence of social media.

This flexibility would be advantageous to pastors who want to incorporate some of the benefits of social media into their ministry without having to master the art of programming mobile phone apps or setting up dynamic websites. The site is vibrant, has a robust set of features, and a large and growing community of dedicated users. It is proof positive for the growing success of social media across the Church landscape.

# From Connection to Communion

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This time in our society is unlike any other. People can communicate any time of the day from just about anywhere without actually speaking face to face, news breaks around the world in a matter of seconds, and favorite TV shows can be viewed on demand. We are, simultaneously, people of connection and isolation. As Christians, how do our faith and personal ministry register in this culture?

Millennial, blogger, and pastor Adam Thomas invites us to explore this question with his unique, personal, and often humorous insight. A self-proclaimed nerd, Thomas notes, “[The Internet] has added a new dimension to our lives; we are physical, emotional, spiritual, and now virtual people. But I believe that God continues to move through every facet of our existence, and that makes us new kinds of followers. We are digital disciples.”

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