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Accordance Bible Software in Reading and Teaching:

The Difference a Digital Text Makes

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This brief study addresses two interrelated questions. First, what are the similarities and differences between the reading/interpretation and teaching/preaching of, 1) printed Bibles, and 2) the digital texts in Accordance Bible software?  And, second, what are the implications of these similarities and differences for theological education?

To help address these questions, an online survey with ten questions was posted to a user discussion board on the Accordance Bible website, and to "the wall" of the Accordance page on the Facebook social-networking website. There were sixty-one responses during one week in April 2011.  The responses are provided below.  The author of this survey conducted and published a similar study of another brand of Bible software last year (Weaver, 2010).

Question 1: On average, how many hours per week do you spend reading and studying the Bible?  Response: 29.5% spend more than 20 hours; 32.8% spend more than 10 hours; 18.0% spend 5-10 hours; 18.0% spend 1-5 hours; 1.6% spend less than 1 hour.

Question 2: What portion of this time is with Accordance as your primary tool for Bible reading and study?  Response: 8.2% of respondents primarily use Accordance 100% of the time; 49.2% use it 75-100% of the time; 21.3% use it 25-75% of the time; 21.3% use it 1-25% of the time; and 0% use it 0% of the time.

Question 3: What do you use most regularly for your reading of the Bible?  Response: 37.7% use a printed Bible; 45.9% use Accordance; 4.9% use another software or web application on a desktop or laptop; 6.6% use a software or application on a mobile device; 4.9% use something else.

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Question 4: To what extent has the digital nature of the texts in Accordance changed your practices of reading and interpreting the Bible? Response: 1.6% reported no change; 16.4% reported little change; 26.2% reported some change; 41.0% reported much change; 14.8% reported total change.

Survey participants were also asked to describe the changes caused by the digital texts in Accordance. One question asked about the most significant changes to reading, interpretation, teaching, and preaching that resulted from regular use of Accordance. The most commonly observed change was the greater convenience for reading multiple translations, accessing the original language texts, and looking up the meaning of Greek and Hebrew words in electronic lexicons that are part of Accordance. A number of respondents observed that the digital texts in Accordance were allowing greater insights, including knowledge of ancient languages and geographical locations. Others observed that quicker access to Biblical passages left more time for rumination and reflection on the meaning of the text. Some participants highlighted the ability to save and retrieve context specific and expansive notes in the software in connection to the biblical text. Another convenience repeatedly mentioned was the ability to use Accordance on iPhones and iPads. One respondent observed: "My iPhone is now my public reading or preaching text." Another respondent commented on the program's ability to turn any original language or translated text into spoken speech, and how this can be used to create audio files in iTunes, which can be listened to while on the go.

Question 5: To what extent has the digital nature of the texts in Accordance changed your methods of teaching or preaching? Response: 8.5% reported no change; 20.3% reported little change; 28.8% reported some change; 22% reported much change; 6.8% reported total change; 13.6% reported that the question was not applicable.

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The changes to teaching included the classroom display of electronic maps, timelines, texts, and apparatuses, with one professor observing that Accordance is a primary source for his research and writing. One teacher observes: "Students can see the techniques and tools I use to inform biblical inquiry. The large graph libraries add multimedia to my lectures." Some participants observed that the digital Bible promoted life-long learning by enabling interaction with the Biblical languages, e.g.: "Without Accordance, I believe I would have slipped into the habit of doing what is most comfortable by only reading my English Bible, as is the case for many of my close friends after graduating from seminary."

Question 6: To what extent has the digital nature of texts in Accordance changed for you the nature of the Biblical text? Response: 30.0% of participants reported no change; 26.7% reported little change; 20.0% reported some change; 16.7% reported much change; 6.7% reported total change.

Participants were also asked about the most important differences between the digital texts in Accordance and printed biblical texts. Many of the responses to this question focused on the difference in the accessibility of the two types of media, with the digital serving as a more "immediate gateway" to multiple biblical texts and contextual sources related to reading and interpretation of the biblical text. Some respondents observed the "non-divided nature of studying on a computer," without the need for different printed books, and the ability to study biblical content within broader context of scripture. Some observed that the convenience of resources in Accordance keeps them from "losing lines of thought while looking for information." From a different perspective, a significant number or respondents found the printed Bibles more conducive to the contextualization of a passage, observing how "digital texts fragment the reading experience," and "feel fragmentary due to the layout." A similar difference was seen in

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the ability of difference respondents *to focus* on digital and printed texts, with some

acknowledging the relative ease of focusing on the printed Bible, and difficultly with focusing on

the Biblical text in Accordance – "I find myself distracted from reading the text itself and

wanting to study at a much more atomistic level, which is not something I want to do regularly"

A significant number of the written responses asserted, however, that there was no substantial

difference between the printed and digital texts.

Question 7: Do you think the digital nature of Accordance should change the way that

biblical interpretation is taught in the churches and seminaries? Responses: 52.5% of participants

responded "yes."  47.5% of participants responded "no."

Participants were also asked to explain their response to the question of whether or not

the digital nature of Accordance should change how Biblical interpretation is taught in the

churches and seminaries. A number of respondents affirmed that pedagogical approaches should

change because Accordance could make exegetical practices more transparent to students in the

act of teaching and demonstration, e.g., "Accordance should allow students to see and interactive

style of exegesis, where the professor/pastor can demonstrate how s/he solves issues and

questions.  That is different from the old static approach."  In a similar vein, other participant

observed that Accordance should lead churches and seminaries to extend "professional ways" of

interpreting texts to a broader number of individuals by virtue of the hyperlinked texts and tools.

Another respondent observed that notes and written assignments from introductory bible classes

would profitably be written in the notes fields of Accordance for future use, rather than sitting

unused in a dusty closet after graduation.

The cost saving and timesaving of Accordance over corresponding printed texts were

seen as two important factors in their potential for broader use.  Participants in the survey also

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stated that the availability and functionality of the original language digital texts should lead seminaries to be even more demanding in their requirements and standards for learning Hebrew and Greek, and interpreting Biblical texts in the original languages.  Many respondents dissented, and in various ways stated that a difference in exegetical tools (e.g., an Bible software) should not significantly change methods of biblical interpretation.

The results of this preliminary survey are indicative of the need for further analysis of the readership of digital texts of the Bible, both in comparative perspective (e.g., among printed and other digital tools), and in theological perspective (e.g., implications for exegetical and other theological practices).  Of special significance for educational technologies is the now documented expectation that seminary and university instructors will utilize Bible software and other digital tools to facilitate a more interactive and dynamic approach to teaching methods of biblical interpretation.

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References

Weaver, John B. (2010). BibleWorks in Reading and Teaching: The Difference a Digital Text

Makes. *Proceedings of the American Theological Library Association*, 64.