

# The Bible as Augmented Reality: Beginning a Conversation.<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

This paper explores the notion of the Bible as 'augmented reality', a phrase used to refer to the addition of a layer of digital data superimposed upon our normal field of vision. We look at some points of contact between this notion and that of the Bible as the Church's book and a light for its life. We then turn to various reference points for thinking through this image more widely, in literature, theology, and philosophy. A final section considers initial areas for further exploration in developing the image, as one among many useful ways of thinking about the Bible in today's world.

**Key Words:** Bible; Augmented Reality; Metaphor; Spectacles; Construal.

## **The Bible as Augmented Reality: A Research Idea**

### *1. What is Augmented Reality?*

Augmented Reality (AR) is the addition of a layer of digital data on top of information received through normal biological data receptors. Or in lay terms: a digital layer superimposed over what we normally see. We might think of AR as the digital equivalent of spectacles. Spectacles enhance or augment the biological

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<sup>1</sup> This paper grew out of an idea by Pete Phillips as he worked on some of the possibilities opened up by thinking about Augmented Reality. Richard Briggs offered some responses at a seminar held by CODEC at St John's College, Durham, in May 2011, and the ensuing discussion and further reflection has led to the present article. We have allowed some aspects of the oral presentation format to remain. It will be clear which sections come from which author initially, but we have worked through the whole paper together.

function of the eye. To some extent they superimpose a layer onto optical vision and seek to enhance what we can normally see. Spectacles add to what we can do normally.

Of course, at present, spectacles are passive objects which sit on the end of the nose and do their job. But what if spectacles could also operate as screens? What if we could develop the technology that allows us to see digital images superimposed onto the world we see? What if, as I look around the class, I could see in my glasses the names of my students, marks for their last assignments, their current Facebook status, and so on? Or, to take it outside, what if I asked Google to do a route from where I am to the station and it was able to superimpose that route onto where I was looking? Or if I wanted to find somewhere to eat nearby and it was able to list a series of adverts of cafés and restaurants in the area and then graphically demonstrate this by distributing those adverts in different parts of my spectacles/screen.

It might sound like something that would drive us all mad, but that is because we are not used to such a use of spectacles. Such technology is already available to specialist users such as the military, and AR is already available to anyone through the iPhone and other smartphones – through Apps such as *Layar*, *Acrossair*, *Aurasma* and similar – and elements of AR are gradually penetrating more areas of the social media and digital worlds. The technology to turn ordinary glasses into miniature displays is not far off, and then the next step will be the move on to contact lenses. Google has suggested that cranial implant linked directly to the optic nerve could be available within a decade, fusing your brain to google. Humanity would become instantly cyborgian. Quite a few of us would regard that as a retrograde step and a number of authors have already explored the dystopic nature of it.<sup>2</sup>

So, that's AR.

## 2. How Might this Concept Help us to Understand the Bible?

What I would like to suggest here is that the Bible could be seen as an Augmented Reality layer for human life. After all, the Bible itself talks of the role of Scripture in comparable terms. So, in Psalm 119 the author talks of the Bible as 'a lamp to my feet and a light to my path' (Ps. 119.105). In other words, the Bible should be seen as something that supplements our normal optical and kinaesthetic ability. Of course, the Psalm is talking metaphorically. But only just. The whole Psalm is filled with images and ideas of how the word and the study of the word has a real effect upon the life of its author. Meditation on the word, obedience to the word, adherence to its principles and teachings ... these all result in a real life effect. For the author of the

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<sup>2</sup> For example, the satirical novel by M.T. Anderson, *Feed* (Cambridge, MA: Candlewick, 2002); Elaine Graham, 'In Whose Image: Representations of Technology and the Ends of Humanity', *Ecotheology* 11 (2006), 159–182 and "'Nietzsche gets a Modem": Transhumanism and the Technological Sublime', *Literature and Theology* 16 (2002), 65–80; Steve Fuller, *Humanity 2.0* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

Psalm, the word of God – the study of it and meditation on it – all augment the reality of his experience in a physical way.

In the Johannine literature, as in the rest of the Bible, the concepts of the divine word, life and light are fused together. The word brings illumination not only through the written word but most clearly in the revelation of the Word become flesh in Jesus Christ. This imagery seems to weave together illumination, Torah and Wisdom themes from the Old Testament.<sup>3</sup>

In 2 Timothy, Paul talks of the way in which the Bible has guided his young protégé throughout his life (2 Tim. 3). The Holy Scriptures<sup>4</sup> have given him all he needs to be wise for salvation. Indeed, Paul goes on to say how those Scriptures are useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training. In other words, they provide a layer of supplementary information for the reader.

How supplementary that layer is is a point worthy of further discussion. In articles on the educative effect of Luke-Acts, Loveday Alexander has explored the educative role of the biblical text.<sup>5</sup> She argues that the text was being used, especially in Luke, to provide a new Christian cultural classic which would replace the foundational texts of the Greco-Roman world. In other words, the Scriptures were to be the new Homer, or the new Virgil. That also seems to be the understanding of the Scriptures in Psalm 119, as well as in Josiah's reforms (2 Kgs 22–23), and in the New Testament.

The Scriptures, then, should not be seen as something superficial but as a foundational text. Does this fit with Augmented Reality at all? Is it not demeaning to Scripture to suggest that Scripture augments reality and is therefore, perhaps, outside of reality? I don't think so. The concept of AR means that what we normally perceive is amended by a supplementary layer of information. Our view of the street is transformed by supplementary notices, or our reading of a text is supplemented by hyperlinks. Just like spectacles. What we normally perceive does not have that information stamped on it. Likewise, despite the significance of the notion of general revelation in Rom. 1.19–20, what we normally perceive through biological sensory perception does not include biblical direction or information. In order to receive that information we need to add a further layer onto who we are and what we perceive. The very fact that we need the Bible itself to receive life and illumination would suggest that the created world – what we see – does not provide us with the

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<sup>3</sup> See for instance, James Charlesworth and Michael Daise (eds.), *Light in a Spotless Mirror* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press, 2003); John Painter *et al.* (eds.), *Word, Theology and Community in John* (St Louis: Chalice Press, 2002); Craig Koester, *The Word of Life: A Theology of John's Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> Whatever this phrase refers to precisely in 2 Tim. 3 is not made clear, but it is at least the Old Testament and, by Paul's reference in the previous verse, may include some elements of the New Testament texts as well – possibly his letters and some form of gospel.

<sup>5</sup> Loveday Alexander, 'God's Frozen Word: Canonicity and the Dilemmas of Biblical Studies Today', *Expository Times* 117 (2006), 237–242, and "'This is that': The Authority of Scripture in the Acts of the Apostles', *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 25 (2004), 189–204.

knowledge of God needed for full understanding. The Bible is essential to us but ultimately supplemental to created phenomena.

Interestingly, the Bible itself comments on the use of paraphernalia to enhance the reception of the word. For example we are told to bind it to us and to put it on our doorposts and gates (Deut. 6.8). In other words, as well as the internalisation of the text (radically in the case of Ezekiel who is told to 'eat this scroll'<sup>6</sup>), we are to have external symbolic references back to that text. This seems to imply the need to have visible reminders of what the Bible is telling us – an Augmented Reality layer.

In this way, the concept of the Bible as an Augmented Reality layer is not a degradation of the role of the Bible within the life of the Christian, but a contemporary metaphor foreshadowed in the Bible's own teaching about itself. We are called to follow the Bible's teaching and that means an internalisation of the text. One of the big problems of the late twentieth / early twenty-first century seems to be that the public has ample access to the external text but fails to integrate that text into their lives or to internalise it. Moreover we are encouraged, in the Church, to internalise the text and to become 'biblical people' – people of the book – perhaps even people of one book, as Wesley famously suggested. But at the same time, surveys demonstrate that the Church is not much further on than the rest of society in attempting to internalise this text.<sup>7</sup>

The concept of the Bible as an Augmented Reality layer offers a new, contemporary image or metaphor for the use of the Bible within the contemporary Church and world. However, it does not offer a cure for biblical illiteracy. What it could provide is a model for effective discipleship and the effective creation of virtuous readers. In other words, in encouraging people to augment their sensory perception with a biblical layer, two things need to happen:

1. People must become acquainted with that layer.
2. People must see the need to apply the Bible to their world – to grapple with the question of why they should live biblically in a digital world.

The former is possible through increasing impetus in engaging with the Bible in a digital world.<sup>8</sup> However, there must be all manner of ways in which both Church and Academy seek to increase biblical literacy. At present, it would seem that biblical literacy is declining rapidly and any attempt to limit that decline is sporadic. The latter is about persuading people of the contemporary usefulness of the biblical

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<sup>6</sup> This image is explored in Eugene H. Peterson, *Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> E.g. the National Biblical Literacy Survey, CODEC, Durham University, September 2009; or 21<sup>st</sup> Century Evangelicals, Evangelical Alliance UK, 2011

<sup>8</sup> The social media world is full of initiatives attempting to do this. CODEC has been at the forefront of the work offering popular Bible-based materials online through 'BigBible', <http://www.bigbible.org.uk> (28 June 2012), 'BigRead2011' and 'BigRead2012', <http://bigbible.org.uk/big-read/bigread12/> (28 June 2012), 'Biblefresh', <http://www.biblefresh.com> (28 June 2012), and so forth.

text in a post-historical-critical world. That is a task where there is still much to be done, and we need all the help we can get. The use of Augmented Reality as a metaphor offers a new tool to aid in the process.

The Bible as AR also helps us to think about the whole concept of the filters that we already apply to our lives – commercialism, corporatism, entertainment culture, celebrity, and many others. By seeing the world through biblical eyes, might we not offer a new perspective on what we are already doing? A reawakening of a biblical world view could see a new appreciation for the social outworking of the Bible and a readjustment of our cultural preferences/inclinations.

The idea of 'Bible as AR' began life as a metaphor for a youth group. The question is whether it can then become more than a simplistic metaphor. Whether, in fact, it becomes an updating of the Bible's own self-perception and a deeper appreciation of what the Bible means in a postmodern, technological world. When the time comes for us to put in our Augmented Reality contact lenses and be hooked up to Google Online, would it be a better thing indeed for Christians to see the world through a biblical lens?

### **The Bible as Augmented Reality: Some Reference Points**

Like all good metaphors, saying that the Bible is Augmented Reality is a wonderfully thought-provoking image. How might one develop it and how does it relate to some of the many other images and conceptualities with which people discuss both Scripture and the world in which we live? In this section of the paper we proceed by way of considering three reference points across a wide range of disciplines.

#### *1. The End of Mr Y*

A first reference point for our discussion is Scarlett Thomas' novel, *The End of Mr Y*.<sup>9</sup> Here the main protagonist, Ariel Manto, discovers a book (called 'The End of Mr Y') which allows access to another world (called the 'troposphere') in which, just as the Augmented Reality discussion suggests, her vision is overlaid with menu options and extra data about all that she sees. It is a world which refigures time and distance, and even in the end the nature of human experience. The heroine's name is so unlikely that it is clearly an anagram, and in fact it can be rearranged both as 'I am not real' or 'no material' – either possibility fits with the observation that in the end she is in pursuit of a disembodied form of existence. Thomas' plot in fact pushes towards a rehearsal of the fall of a new Adam and a new Eve in the new disembodied world, which is surely a theologically significant way of looking at the possibilities of Augmented Reality. For the purposes of what we are discussing, though, it is simply interesting to note that the access point to the 'troposphere' is an old-fashioned, three-dimensional, paper-and-ink book. Could the Bible be our 'End of Mr Y' text – an entry point into the 'troposphere'?

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<sup>9</sup> Scarlett Thomas, *The End of Mr. Y* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2006).

## 2. On Spectacles

A second reference point comes from near the beginning of Calvin's *Institutes*.<sup>10</sup> Calvin did indeed famously suggest that Scripture serves as the pair of spectacles through which we see God:

For as the aged, or those whose sight is defective, when any book, however fair, is set before them, though they perceive that there is something written, are scarcely able to make out two consecutive words, but, when aided by glasses, begin to read distinctly, so Scripture, gathering together the impressions of Deity, which, till then, lay confused in their minds, dissipates the darkness, and shows us the true God clearly.<sup>11</sup>

This is not quite the same as saying that one sees the world, as if Scripture were understood to be throwing into sharp relief the blurred perceptions of the everyday, but clearly it is a comparable dynamic.

Of course, since the rise of Nietzschean suspicion, the image has been more or less inverted. These days one is more likely to read in introductory hermeneutics textbooks that the world and culture in which we live serve as the spectacles through which we view Scripture. Arguably that remains a peculiarly modern conception of the interpretative task. In that modern picture, the Bible is an inert text to which we come, with our questions, presuppositions, prejudices and so forth, and we address it. But the image of the Bible as Augmented Reality could be a possibility which combines the best of both options. On the one hand it returns us to the notion of the Bible as a dynamic and active text which (perhaps counter-intuitively) Calvin's image is a little more open to. It's not that Calvin is postmodern ... by no means! But his conception of Scripture is that it serves as our guiding way of looking at what is before us. At the same time, Scripture remains open to our own study as we revisit it to consider anew its own perspectives on such matters as how we live and how we rightly interpret the world around us. We may note here Michael Legaspi's profound study of *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies*, where he notes that 'Instead of looking *through* the Bible in order to understand *the truth about the world*, eighteenth-century scholars looked directly at the text, endeavoring to find new, ever more satisfactory frames of cultural and historical reference by which to understand *the meaning of the text*.'<sup>12</sup> The Bible as Augmented Reality recovers this traditional perspective alongside retaining what works in more modern paradigms.

## 3. The Construction of Social Reality

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<sup>10</sup> Admittedly this may be a first for juxtaposing Calvin and postmodern fantasy.

<sup>11</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (London: James Clarke, 1962), 1.6.1.

<sup>12</sup> Michael C. Legaspi, *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 26.

A third reference point comes from the fields of philosophy and the sociology of knowledge. In their celebrated 1967 book, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann talked of *The Social Construction of Reality*.<sup>13</sup> Loosely deployed, such language seems to run counter to many basic ideas about the world we live in, which in some sense seems to be simply 'there', and it has facilitated in part some of the postmodernism which has grown up since that time. But a far from postmodern version of this way of thinking exists, and it is found in John Searle's less well-known but perhaps altogether more remarkable book, *The Construction of Social Reality*.<sup>14</sup>

Searle contended that the kind of reality that most affects us is social reality. It is the reality that relates to our everyday experiences of people, of social conventions, and of the way human life is organised. In the end we do not need to resolve the other questions about 'the social construction of reality' because Searle helps us to focus more precisely on where the conversation really matters. In one delightful passage early in the book he writes:

I go into a café in Paris and sit in a chair at a table. The waiter comes and I utter a fragment of a French sentence. I say, '*un demi, Munich, à pression, s'il vous plait.*' The waiter brings the beer and I drink it. I leave some money on the table and leave. An innocent scene, but its metaphysical complexity is truly staggering, and its complexity would have taken Kant's breath away if he had ever bothered to think about such things.<sup>15</sup>

The key mechanism which Searle offers for understanding social reality is in fact construal. In the formula he offers: 'X counts as Y in context C'.<sup>16</sup> This handing over of coins buys me this drink in this building at such-and-such a time. What this lays open, in turn, is the chance to explore what factors contribute to our building up social reality in the way we do, or to put it differently, what value judgments underlie the conventions we work with everyday.

For Christians, the Bible contributes profoundly to our grasp of social reality. It sets the context and offers us ways of naming the key elements that go to make it up. There is therefore no 'Scripture-neutral' way of assessing reality. Thus to see the Bible as Augmented Reality makes perfect sense in this perspective, and helps us to imagine how we can think through the building blocks of our social reality in ways shaped by Scripture.

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<sup>13</sup> Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality. A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (London: Penguin, 1967).

<sup>14</sup> John R. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (London: Penguin, 1995). See now also his *Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilization* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). Our discussion here draws upon ways of understanding Searle's work on construal which are described and discussed in Richard S. Briggs, *Words in Action: Speech Act Theory and Biblical Interpretation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001), 105–43.

<sup>15</sup> Searle, *Construction*, 3.

<sup>16</sup> Searle, *Construction*, 28.

## The Bible as Augmented Reality: The Shape of the Conversation

As we begin to explore this image, several points come into focus. We conclude with a brief consideration of four of them.

First, it is clear from initial conversations around the concept of the Bible as AR, that a number of people are challenged by the concept of reality that it suggests. In other words, some reactions to the concept are almost neo-Platonic: surely the Bible is reality and everything else is a mirage. If the Bible is simply like spectacles (however technologically advanced) does this mean that someone with perfect vision could do without it in order to live within the world. This paper seeks to affirm the foundational nature of the biblical text. The word of God is light and life and wisdom. However, the Bible is itself created. The word of God comes to us in creation. It needs to do so because we live in a world estranged from God and his ways – a fallen creation. To suggest that someone with perfect vision could read the world and receive light and life without the text would suggest that such a person could live outside of the consequences of the Fall. No such person exists. The Bible therefore comes to us as an element of the created order which offers guidance and illumination and even foundational understanding of all that is around us. It is like the air we breathe.

Secondly, the Bible is open to many construals and conceptualisations. Walter Brueggemann once described the effect of putting all its texts together into one unruly canonical collection as being like throwing vegetables on to the ‘compost pile’. One cannot predict how they will subsequently grow and gradually merge into the pile. So biblical texts ‘mutate’ in strange ways as they moulder together on the canonical compost pile.<sup>17</sup> As such, all the ways we interpret the text also combine together. If this image helps, then we can make use of it alongside many other images, while obviously not thinking that this image is the one to make sense of all others. Likewise we think that the Bible as Augmented Reality is one helpful conceptuality, but not because it necessarily improves upon or does away with the need for many others. It opens up one way of thinking particularly well: the Bible as a kind of overlay on our field of vision. It is not obvious that all the ways in which Augmented Reality works are relevant to our discussion of the Bible. And some are really matters of practicality. How would the Bible be fed into our field of vision? TV programmes like *Torchwood* have already imagined contact lenses with computer feeds for text input to enable undercover work. The technology will be upon us soon, and will develop so fast that, however we first experience it, it will soon seem completely out of date. The practical point is simply that we will experience many such developments ... so how can we factor the content of Scripture into them?

Thirdly, and on a related point, it is clear that once Scripture is being fed in as an Augmented Reality layer, in the manner of a google map or whatever, then all the familiar questions of how Scripture is being interpreted and understood reappear in

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<sup>17</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Bible and the Postmodern Imagination. Texts Under Negotiation* (London: SCM, 1993), 61–62.



this new guise. Who organises the ways in which particular passages or verses of Scripture are processed as relating to particular situations or options facing the Christian? In discussion of this paper at a seminar presentation it became clear that many people were concerned with the potential for the abuse of Scripture in such situations, or at least the manipulation of other people through the way in which it is used to augment reality. We share that concern. However, it could never be part of any proposal such as this that we are suggesting we have found a *solution* to the questions of how we guard against the twisting or manipulating of Scripture. No transposition of Scripture into any new media will resolve this issue – it will simply force it to reappear in some new form. We will still need all the same old ways of learning to sift wise from unwise uses of Scripture, constructive from destructive uses of Scripture, and so on. This is not a proposal about a new hermeneutical setting that safeguards us from the misuse of Scripture, but rather about a new context in which all the old hermeneutical questions remain, but are deployed in a language and idiom appropriate to the digital world of today (or tomorrow).

Finally, the concept of the Bible as AR could have profound effects upon our ethical approach to the world in which we live. One of the presenting issues in 2012 is the rising unease with our inherited Western consensus regarding economics, politics and engagement. A re-appraisal of the importance and relevance of the biblical text within these conversations offers the chance to raise issues of social acceptance and open hospitality. Texts such as Isaiah 58, Mic. 6.8 and Luke 4 have important things to say to our contemporary situation, challenging and refuting some of our current assumptions. In such a situation, a relevant new way of looking at the role of the Bible as offering a new way of interacting with our contemporary society is surely no bad thing.

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