

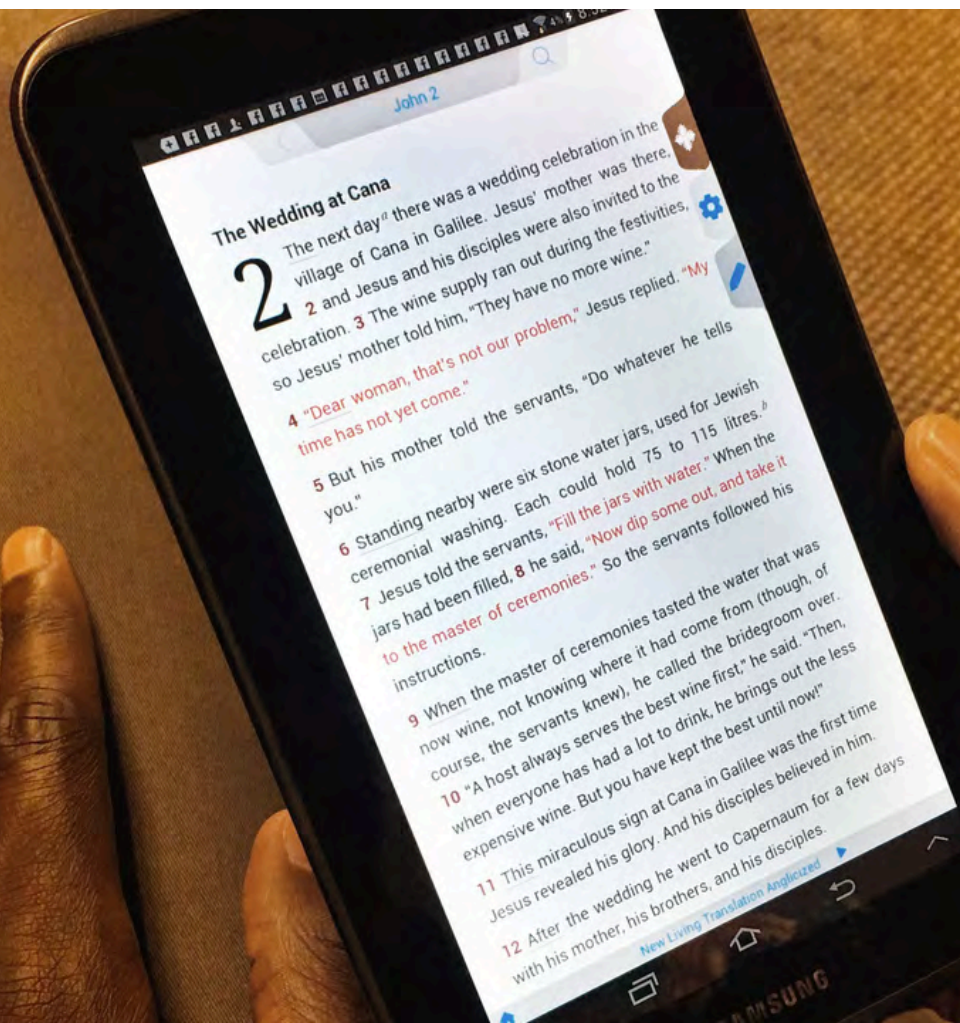
# AFRICAN PARADIGM SHIFTS

## Bible Engagement and Discipleship in Africa: Are we on the right track?

### Questions and Ideas from 30 Years of Work in Africa

#### ARTICLE 5

#### THE RACE IS ON TO REACH THE WORLD THROUGH DIGITAL BIBLES! BUT IS IT THE RIGHT RACE?



“...THE PHYSICAL SENSATION OF A  
PRINT BOOK CHANGES THE WHOLE  
EXPERIENCE OF READING.”

– Matthew Elliott, PhD

# THE RACE IS ON TO REACH THE WORLD THROUGH DIGITAL BIBLES! BUT IS IT THE RIGHT RACE?

When digital books were first introduced, publishers feared paper books might be replaced in the same way digital music replaced cassette tapes. But something very different happened. While music sounds the same no matter what it is stored on, the physical sensation of a print book changes the whole experience of reading.

Although many people enjoy reading eBooks when they have limited space for books, few read eBooks exclusively. There is some evidence that people are less likely to read eBooks even after buying them. Many early adopters of eBooks have gone back to reading on paper, and eBook market share and revenue have decreased from their pandemic high.

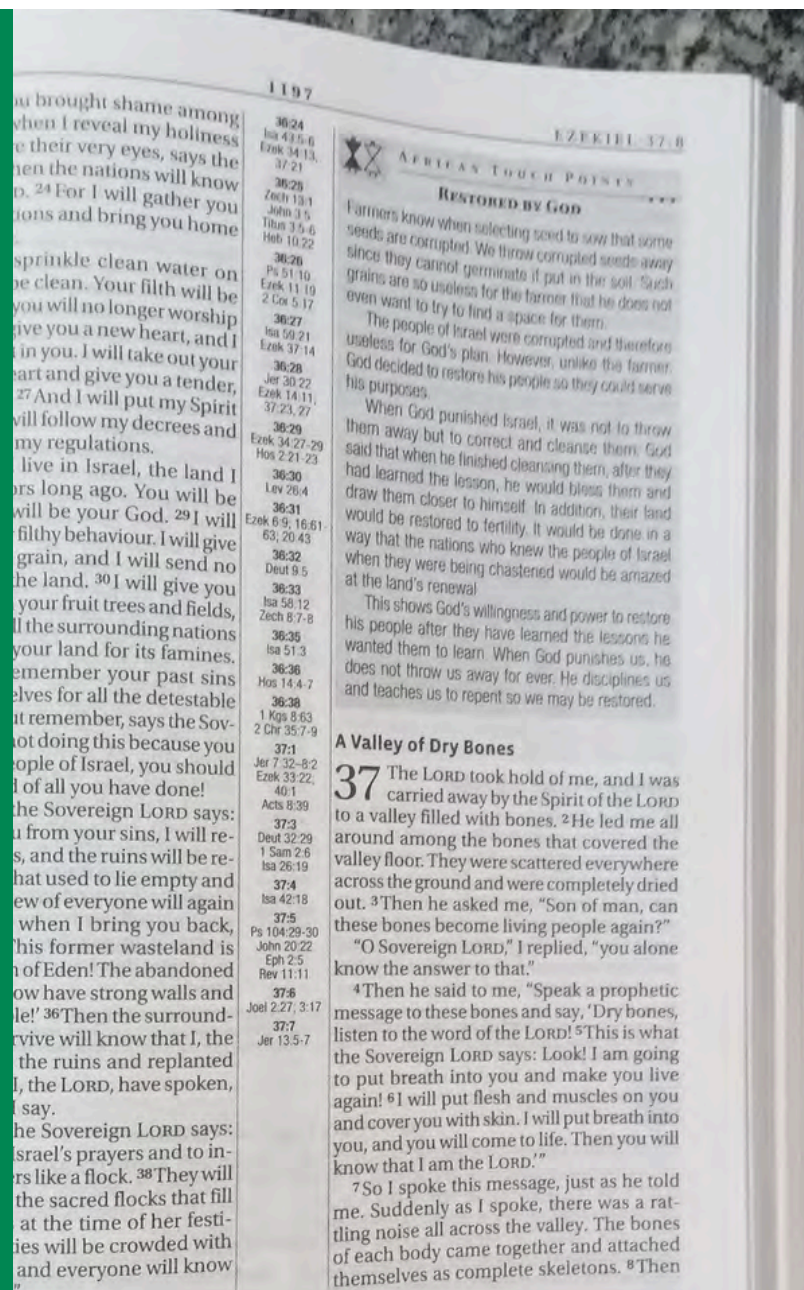
(<https://www.statista.com/statistics/426799/e-book-unit-sales-usa/>)

When you read a book, turn a page, underline, or highlight a sentence, your bodily engagement helps your brain connect with the book's information. When you read a paper book you read more deeply, understand more holistically, and take in long arguments more fully.

(See the 2022 revision of *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to our Brain*; Nicholas Carr and "Reading on Paper Versus Screens What's the Difference?")

Brain science suggests that iPhones and eBooks cannot take the place of books. God made our bodies and minds as an intricately connected system.

We affirm that eBooks, education by digital means, and digital Bibles are important. These tools give people more and better access to God's Word. Oasis offers our books and Bibles in every digital format we can!



Donor communities like phone and eLearning Bibles because they are cost-effective, and app activity can be measured. You can tell if users downloaded books, and often how they read them. This information is gold for building metrics, ROI reports, and impact statements. But just because these tools help inform donors doesn't mean they help Africans.

Research suggests that people who read the Bible on their phones likely don't read as deeply as those who read paper Bibles. They can easily be pulled away from time with God by apps, notifications, and other distractions.



**In addition, here are more considerations:**

- We should promote dignity. As a Christian in North America, we desire our child, our grandchild, and our loved ones to have a precious Bible by their bedside that they can meditate on and read deeply in contrast to the rush and hurry of the always-on digital world. We should want the same for Africans.
- We know that social media and video game addictions harm us and damage the minds and mental health of our youth. Do we want to drive people in other countries toward a device that already does so much harm?
- In times of persecution and social media censorship, governments cannot turn off physical Bibles.
- Millions of African students study the Bible in classrooms that have strict no-phone rules. As a textbook, the Bible must be a physical book to receive approval from African departments of education.
- Many Africans cannot afford a smartphone, but a print Bible can be purchased for only \$5. Furthermore, data is expensive and few Africans use data-heavy apps that may work poorly on available infrastructure.
- Many people in Africa lack access to reliable electricity. Times when the power goes out might be when they need access to the Bible most.
- Most African pastors and Christian leaders cannot afford a tablet or a computer. It's extremely difficult to prepare teaching and sermons exclusively from a phone.

A printed Bible is still an important way to slowly and deeply meditate on God's Word and receive spiritual nourishment. Print books work for our minds and bodies in ways that digital books don't.

Still, eBooks and Bible apps are part of the answer. As a scholar with a PhD in the New Testament, I use my Bible app in church to read the original Greek. I am glad we have invested in creating such useful ministry tools. But funding phone Bibles at the expense of paper Bibles is misguided.

It's a little ironic that a series about new methods for empowering African discipleship argues for greater emphasis on printing old-fashioned paper books. But maybe we need to discover anew the power of the printed page.

Want to continue in your discovery of Christianity in Africa? **Check out our free ministry resources.**

Interested in becoming a partner in the growth that's already happening in Africa? **Equip a local pastor here.**

This is a free resource courtesy of Oasis International. Oasis is devoted to satisfying Africa's thirst for God's Word.



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