IN PRAISE OF PAPER BIBLES

Posted on January 30, 2019 by Eddie

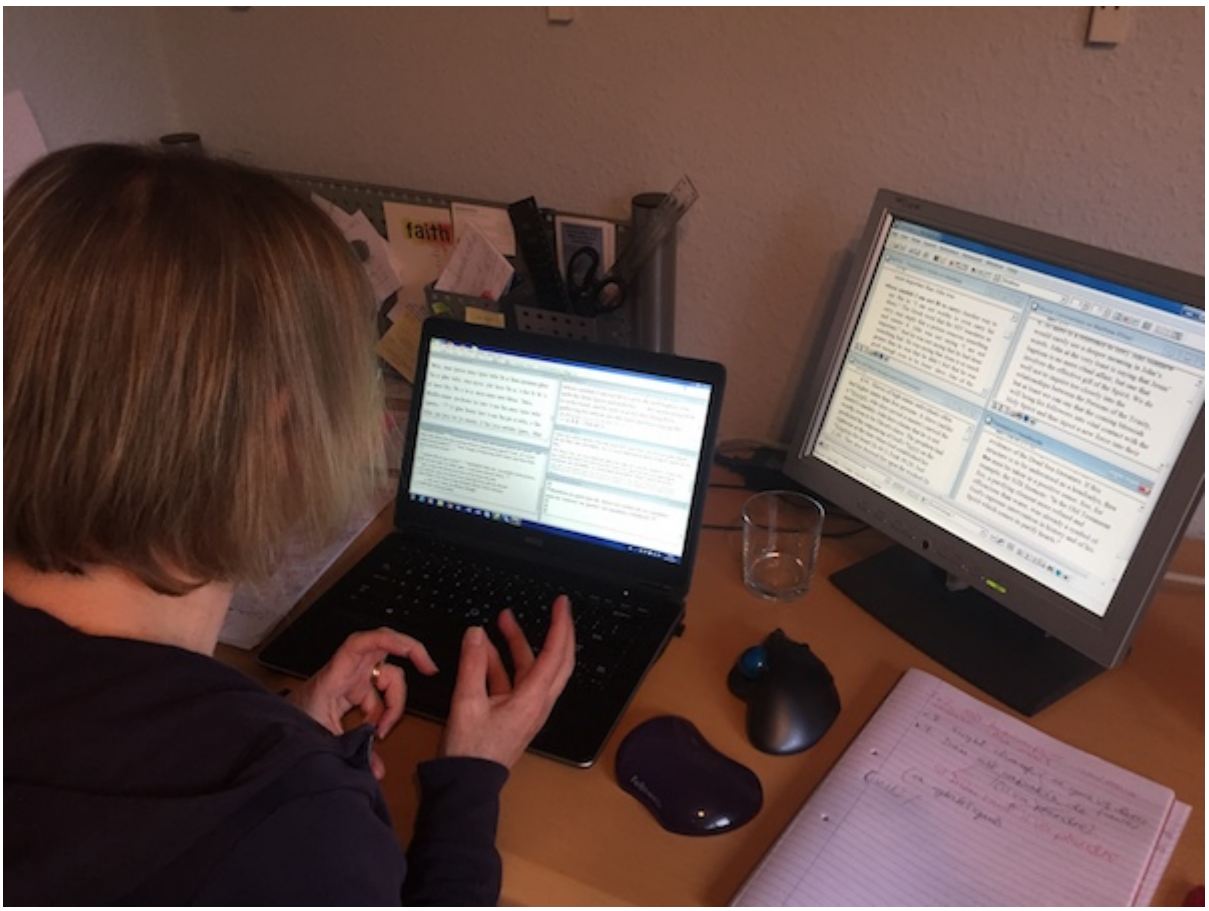
I can't listen to twenty-year-old cassettes, but I can still read a 500-year-old Bible. Some technologies are more durable than others.
Category: Observations

I've got lots of Bibles on my shelves but, if the truth be told, I don't often open them. For the most part, I read the Bible on my phone using an app or on my laptop using BibleGateway. Using a digital Bible gives me access to different English translations, some translation guides and the Greek text of the New Testament (I don't read Hebrew). It is also far easier to find texts; where exactly is Zephaniah?

For me, the choice of a digital Bible is one of convenience. For others, it's a more serious issue. There are places in the world, where carrying a paper Bible would get you into serious trouble, whereas having an app on your phone is far more discrete and safe. Audio Bibles and videos such as the Jesus Film can be a great help for people who don't read or who prefer to learn aurally or visually.

However, there is an issue with digital Bibles. We used to have a big box of cassettes, but I think we may have lost them a house move or two ago, in any case, we don't have a cassette player, nor do we have a Video player. We do have a big box of CDs, but we didn't unpack them when we moved house a couple of years ago. We store all the music from our CDs on our home network and we have access to vast amounts of other music from a streaming service. Today's cutting edge technology is tomorrow's box in the attic.

When we first started work on the Kouya language, we used a twin floppy Toshiba laptop. It had what was called a CGA screen and it took a lot of work to get the non-standard characters to show up. We eventually moved on to a laptop with a hard-drive (a whole 40 MB) and a VGA screen, which made writing Kouya far easier. We had an early desktop publishing system, which worked with MS-DOS and allowed us to produce Kouya calendars and booklets. Eventually, MS-Word and the arrival of Windows revolutionised our work. However, virtually every piece of Kouya literature we produced, many of the academic articles and draft papers that we wrote are on media or in digital formats that we can't read anymore. Thankfully, the New Testament is available in formats that can still be read, though whether that will still be the case in twenty years is open to question.



Sue with numerous translations in different languages open on her screens.

A few years ago, I had the privilege of seeing the Wycliffe Bible in Hereford Cathedral library. Hundreds of years after it was first produced, I can still read it. Paper books are a remarkably durable technology. Digital systems are wonderful; they give you access to huge amounts of literature at the click of a mouse or the touch of a screen. I dread to think how many more bookshelves we'd need if all of our digital resources were actually printed out! However, digital resources are unreliable. Phones run out of battery, the internet goes down and formats change, rendering valuable resources useless. However, print books go on and on for years, decades even centuries or millennia. I love my digital Bible and my eReader, but they will never replace paper books entirely.

It is appropriate at this point to give a shout out to Mission Assist who do a great job typing up Bibles in minority languages so that they can be reprinted, when their original format can't be read by modern technology.