

# Biblical Narrative in a Century of Newspapers

## *A Digitized Past Pointing to the Future?*

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Recent decades have seen numerous studies on the afterlife of biblical texts in Western cultures.<sup>2</sup> What is still missing, is a macroscopic view based on comprehensive data rather than on examples and episodes.<sup>3</sup> With the ongoing digitization of books and newspapers, macroscopic studies are becoming possible. Many historians use digital source materials.<sup>4</sup> However, for

<sup>1</sup> This essay is based on my honorary doctoral lecture, Lund University, Faculty of Theology, 30 May 2024. Adjustments had to be made due to technical requirements. Many thanks to Research Librarian Lars G. Johnsen, DH-Lab at the National Library of Norway, for his technically skilled and utterly friendly assistance in the preparation of data for this lecture! Thanks also to professors Knut Lundby and Trygve E. Wyller, Oslo and professor Kåre Berge, Bergen, for reading the manuscript and offering valuable comments.

<sup>2</sup> There are several handbooks, lexica, and monograph series on this topic. For an introduction to the field, see Emma England and William John Lyons (eds.), *Reception History and Biblical Studies: Theory and Practice*, London 2015, <https://doi.org/10.5040/9780567665393>.

<sup>3</sup> My use of the word macroscope is inspired by Henrik G. Bastiansen, *Når fortiden blir digital: Medier, kilder og historie i digitaliseringens tid*, Oslo 2023, 155f. He borrowed it from Shawn Graham et al., *Exploring Big Historical Data: The Historian's Macroscope*, London 2015, <https://doi.org/10.1142/p981>, who introduced this concept as description for historical studies using digital archives as a device “for looking at the very big...”.

<sup>4</sup> Full discussion in Bastiansen, *Når fortiden blir digital*, chapter 3. See further entries in Bunout et al., *Digitised Newspapers – A New Eldorado for Historians?*, Luxembourg 2023; Adrian Bingham, “The Digitization of Newspaper Archives: Opportunities and Challenges for Historians”, *20th Century British History* 21:2 (2010), 225–31, <https://doi.org/10.1093/tcbh/hwq007>; Bob Nicholson, “The Digital Turn: Exploring the Methodological Possibilities of Digital Newspaper Archives”, *Media History* 19:1 (2013), 59–73, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13688804.2012.752963>; Huub Wijffes, “Digital Humanities and Media History: A Challenge for Historical Newspaper Research”, *Tijdschrift voor Mediageschiedenis* 20:1 (2017), 4, <https://doi.org/10.18146/2213-7653.2017.277>; Marcel Broersma & Frank Harbers, “Exploring Machine

practical and legal reasons there has been a lack of commonly accessible archives for the full 20th century.<sup>5</sup> The National Library of Norway (NLN) recently completed digitising every book and newspaper published in Norwegian since 1814.<sup>6</sup> The library provides online access to the collection, and their DH-Lab provides apps for analysis.

What follows here reflects my attempt to inquire the NLN newspaper repository about the space of biblical narrative in Norwegian public discourse in the 20th century. This is work in progress, and many questions remain open. Nevertheless, a macroscopic perspective reveals unfamiliar facets of the phenomenon of the Bible and its roles in society. This could, as I shall argue, make us reconsider the discipline of Biblical Studies.

## Challenges for Digital Research

There are serious challenges involved in researching digital archives.<sup>7</sup> The ma-

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Learning to Study the Long-Term Transformation of News: Digital Newspaper Archives, Journalism History, and Algorithmic Transparency”, *Digital Journalism* 6:9 (2018), 1150–1164, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2018.1513337>; Stephen Robertson, “The Properties of Digital History”, *History and Theory* 61:4 (2022), 86–106, <https://doi.org/10.1111/hith.12286>; Heidi Hakkarainen, “The Cultivation of Emotions in the Press: Searching for ‘Education of the Heart’ in German-Language Digital Newspaper Collections”, *Media History* 28:4 (2022), 456–81, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13688804.2021.2013182>. For exploration of biblical materials in digitised newspapers, see Lincoln A. Mullen’s *America’s Public Bible: A Commentary*, Stanford 2022, <https://americaspublicbible.supdigital.org/#toc> [accessed on 16 March 2024]. And further, Silje Marie Hirsch, “Mellom bibel og menneskerettigheter: En studie av Vårt Land og Dagens vinkling av Palestina/Israel-konflikten” [diss.], Oslo 2005; Leonard Greenspoon, “How American Newspaper Comic Strips Portray God, Angels, and Humans”, in *The Oxford Handbook of the Bible and American Popular Culture*, eds. Dan W. Clanton & Terry R. Clark, Oxford 2020, 399–413, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhpb/9780190461416.013.24>; Hanna Liljefors, “Att vara ‘gammaltestamentlig’: Tillskrivna betydelser till ordet ‘gammaltestamentlig’ i svenska dagstidningar 1987–2017”, *Svensk Exegetisk Årsbok* 87 (2022) 259–81; Hanna Liljefors, *Hebreiska bibeln debatterad: En receptionskritisk studie av diskurser om “Gamla testamentet” i svenska dagstidningar 1987–2017*, Skellefteå 2022; Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, “Plowshare: The Career of a Biblical Allusion in the New York Times, 1940–1990”, *Biblical Interpretation* 30:4 (2022), 460–85, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15685152-20211566>.

5 For instance, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers* holds selected newspaper pages from the period 1756–1963. It currently holds a total of 21.4 million newspaper pages. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/about/> [accessed on 10 May 2024].

6 Cf. Bastiansen, *Når fortiden blir digital*, chapter 1. Digitizing the entire archive, the NLN avoided problems of selection policy (cf. Giorgia Tolfo et al., “Hunting for Treasure: Living with Machines and the British Library Newspaper Collection”, in *Digitised Newspapers – A New Eldorado for Historians? Reflections on Tools, Methods and Epistemology*, eds. Estelle Bunout et al., 27–33, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110729214-002>). The NLN repository is not strictly speaking “complete”. National law, first passed in 1815, required that every print issue over a certain size must be deposited in the national collection. Smaller prints were not collected, and not every publication was, in fact, deposited. Still, for practical purposes, NLN offers a repository for the complete printed heritage in Norway for the 20th century. At the time of writing (May 2024), the newspaper repository holds around 5 million newspapers and a total of 138.8 billion tokens (words and other discrete text units).

7 See Bastiansen, *Når fortiden blir digital*, chapters 2 and 4, and excellent discussions

teriality and the historical contexts of the newspapers are lost. The repository becomes its own context, defined by digitizing strategies and re-structured in each case by queries and algorithms. The distinction between the canon and the archive breaks down, and yet, a certain weight is easily conferred upon machine-generated excerpts from the archive.<sup>8</sup> Having computers assist in the reading of text, one cannot trust the result to be intuitively understandable.<sup>9</sup> Adding to this, there is a high degree of linguistic diversity in the newspapers.<sup>10</sup> And there are the unavoidable errors with Optional Character and Layout Recognition (OCR and OLR).<sup>11</sup>

Adding to all this, newspaper texts are not innocent data neutrally mirroring their own time. They were produced by editors, reporters, and columnists with agendas. They were published in newspapers with political and social profiles and with obligations to their markets. Newspaper texts were framed in an industry that had its own ethos and professional practices.<sup>12</sup>

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in Estelle Bunout et al. (eds.), *Digitised Newspapers – A New Eldorado for Historians? Reflections on Tools, Methods and Epistemology*, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110729214>, and in Gabriele Balbi et al. (eds.) *Digital Roots: Historicizing Media and Communication Concepts of the Digital Age*, Berlin 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110740202>. See also David Deacon, “Yesterday’s Papers and Today’s Technology: Digital Newspaper Archives and ‘Push Button’ Content Analysis”, *European Journal of Communication* 22:1 (2007), 5–25, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323107073743>; Nicholson, “The Digital Turn”; Johan Jarlbrink & Pelle Snickars, “Cultural Heritage as Digital Noise: 19th Century Newspapers in the Digital Archive”, *Journal of Documentation* 73:6 (2017), 1228–43, <https://doi.org/10.1108/jd-09-2016-0106>.

8 For this distinction, see Aleida Assmann, “Canon and Archive”, in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, eds. Astrid Erll & Ansgar Nünning, Berlin 2008, 97–107, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110207262.2.97>; Aleida Assmann, “The Religious Roots of Cultural Memory”, *Norsk Teologisk Tidsskrift* 109 (2008), 270–90, <https://doi.org/10.18261/issn1504-2979-2008-04-02>.

9 See Nanna Bonde Thylstrup et al., “Big Data as Uncertain Archives”, in *Uncertain Archives: Critical Keywords for Big Data*, Cambridge 2021, 14–51, <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/12236.003.0002>. In the current case, machine-assisted interpretation was particularly challenged by polysemy and homonyms in Norwegian language, and by personal names.

10 Norwegian has two official languages, and both were subject to official reforms. Local newspapers could use archaic and dialect forms not found in any public dictionary. For a discussion of linguistic problems, see Claudia Resch, “Volltextoptimierung für die historische Wiener Zeitung”, in *Digitised Newspapers – A New Eldorado for Historians? Reflections on Tools, Methods and Epistemology*, eds. Estelle Bunout et al., 99–106, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110729214-005>.

11 OCR: optional character recognition; OLR: optional layout recognition. For discussion, see Jørgen Burchardt, “Are Searches in OCR-Generated Archives Trustworthy?”, *Jahrbuch für Wirtschaftsgeschichte* 64:1 (2003), 31–54, <https://doi.org/10.1515/jbwg-2023-0003>. Jarlbrink & Snickars, “Cultural Heritage as Digital Noise”; Andrew J. Toget, “Mapping Texts: Examining the Effects of OCR Noise on Historical Newspaper Collections”, in *Digitised Newspapers – A New Eldorado for Historians? Reflections on Tools, Methods and Epistemology*, eds. Estelle Bunout et al., 47–66, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110729214-003>.

12 For this investigation, one important practice is the distribution of radio and TV program charts from the Norwegian News Agency (NTB) to all Norwegian newspapers. The

Finally, repository statistics count words only. The numbers do not reflect a newspaper's print run, distribution, or social and political standing. Statistics are always hard to interpret. In this case some of the graphs present relative numbers, others absolute figures.<sup>13</sup> In a best-case scenario, the graphs below indicate trends mirrored in the repository. The Ngram graphs are produced by the NLN website, with search arguments devised by me. The statistics for the ten narratives are all mine, and I describe those more in detail below.

## The Norwegian Press in the 20th Century

My interpretation of the statistics relies on historical knowledge about the Norwegian press.<sup>14</sup> Figure 1 gives a glimpse of that history, simultaneously illustrating my use of Ngram statistics.

The search corpus for figure 1 is the newspaper repository. Search arguments are rendered on the top; in this case, Norwegian words for the Parliament (with spelling variations). If my search arguments in the following use capital letters, the search is case sensitive – this is not. NLN Ngrams provide relative numbers: number of hits relative to the total number of words for each year. So, this graph indicates shifts in how intensely the newspapers reported on institutional political life, measured on the Parliament. These shifts are linked to the history of the Norwegian press:

- The politically engaged press came late in Norway as compared to Sweden and Denmark. By the early 1900's, many newspapers were politically affiliated, they were in the process of being industrialized, and

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contents of these charts are the same in most newspapers, and very many of our hits occur in these charts – one hit for every single newspaper edition.

13 As a framework for evaluating the absolute numbers below, the actual number of newspapers at each time is important: In 1918 there were 218 newspapers. By 1940, there were 260, many of which were stopped by the Nazi government. During the post-war years the Parliament reorganized the newspaper industry, see Guri Hjeltnes, *Avisoppgjøret etter 1945*, Oslo 1990. However, recovery took time. By 1992 there were 195 Norwegian newspapers. The all-high post-war number was 230 newspapers in 2014 – that is still 30 papers less than in 1940. In 2018 there were 223 newspapers. (See <https://www.forskning.no/media-medievitenskap-ntb/forsker-avviser-avisdod-i-norge/1334405> [accessed on 27 March 2024]). Norway avoided the international trend of “newspapers death” due to the Norwegian state support for newspapers from 1969, see Karl Erik Gustafsson, “Nordisk dagspresstruktur i slutet av 1980-talet”, *MedieKultur* 7:16 (1991), 1. Cf. <https://www.forskning.no/media-medievitenskap-ntb/forsker-avviser-avisdod-i-norge/1334405> [published on 9 May 2016, accessed on 7 May 2024].

14 I conduct what Kergomard calls a ‘hybrid’ research project working towards a multi-perspective, iterative research process, see Zoé Kergomard, “A Source Like Any Other? Including Digitised Newspapers in a Hybrid Research Project”, in *Digitised Newspapers – A New Eldorado for Historians? Reflections on Tools, Methods and Epistemology*, eds. Estelle Bunout et al., 368–373, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110729214-016>.

their number grew as their political significance increased.<sup>15</sup> In this period, political reporting intensified, partly as a reflection of the dissolution of the union with Sweden in 1905.

- The Second World War Nazi regime was a disaster to Norwegian politics and media alike. The Parliament was closed. Newspapers were heavily controlled; many were shut down.<sup>16</sup> The graph shows a drastic fall in references to the Parliament.
- After the war, the Parliament reorganized the press, and things slowly normalized during the 1950's and 60's. Most newspapers at the time were officially associated to political parties.
- TV was introduced in 1960, and by 1970 it had become the leading mass medium. In response, the press developed new types of material, less focused on breaking news, more on feature reports, human touch, celebrities, and "slow" news.<sup>17</sup>
- Newspapers started cutting their ties to the political parties, and the state gradually removed the radio and TV monopolies.<sup>18</sup> From the 1980's Norway developed independent media and a free media market.<sup>19</sup> The 1980's also saw changes in newspaper ownership structure, which had editorial consequences.<sup>20</sup> The graph for these years shows how the percentage of reports on institutional politics fell again.<sup>21</sup>
- By 2000, the coming of the internet and the new social media started changing the media landscape. My inquiry stops there, for now.<sup>22</sup>

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15 See Hans Fredrik Dahl, *A History of the Norwegian Press 1660–2015*, Basingstoke 2016, 56–73; Rune Ottosen et al, *Norsk pressehistorie*, Oslo 2012, 52–59; Henrik G. Bastiansen & Hans Fredrik Dahl, *Norsk mediehistorie*, Oslo 2019, chapter 3, esp. 137–140.

16 Dahl, *A History of the Norwegian Press 1660–2015*, 126–146. The post-war period is covered in Hjeltne, *Avisoppgjøret etter 1945*. See also Dahl, *ibid.*, 147–183.

17 Henrik G. Bastiansen, *Da avisene møtte TV: Partipressen, politikken og fjernsynet 1960–1972*, Oslo 2006; cf. Knut Lundby, *Religion i medienes grep: Medialisering i Norge*, Oslo 2021, 33–35.

18 Lundby, *Religion i medienes grep*, 63–67. For a brief history of the state broadcasting corporation, NRK, see: <https://snl.no/NRK#:~:text=NRK%20ble%20etablert%20i%201933,tilllegg%20til%20en%20rekke%20n%C3%A5r%20kanaler> [accessed on 11 May 2024].

19 This happened in a process from around 1960 to 1990, see Bastiansen, *Da avisene møtte TV*; Ottosen et al., *Norsk pressehistorie*, 140–150, 164–184; Bastiansen & Dahl, *Norsk mediehistorie*, 399–415.

20 Cf. Bastiansen & Dahl, *Norsk mediehistorie*, 477–485.

21 Research on Swedish newspapers in the same period indicates that the concept "political" may simultaneously have broadened, so that many reports on "political" issues did not explicitly mention the Parliament, see Fredrik Norén et al., "The Transformation of 'the Political' in Post-War Sweden", in *Digitised Newspapers – A New Eldorado for Historians? Reflections on Tools, Methods and Epistemology*, eds. Estelle Bunout et al., 411–35, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110729214-019>.

22 For a summary of the period after 2000, see Lundby, *Religion i medienes grep*, 115–118. These years saw a massive increase in digital newspaper publications, and audiences shifting

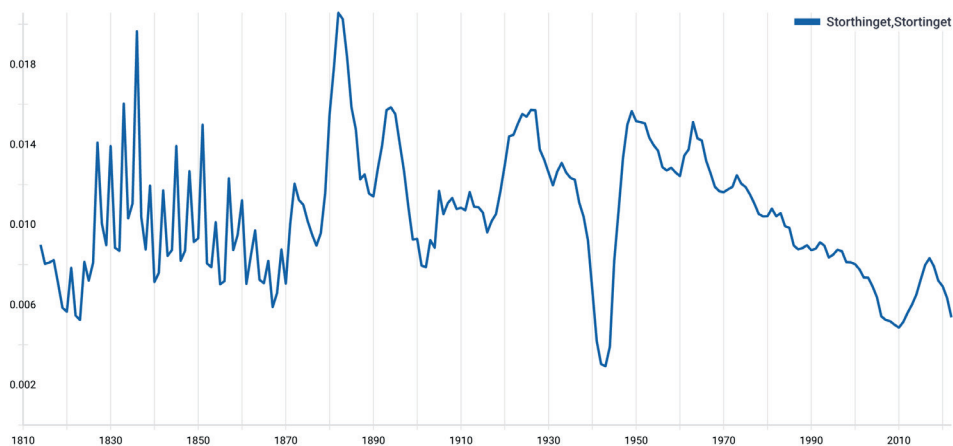


Figure 1. Ngram showing hits for the Parliament.\*

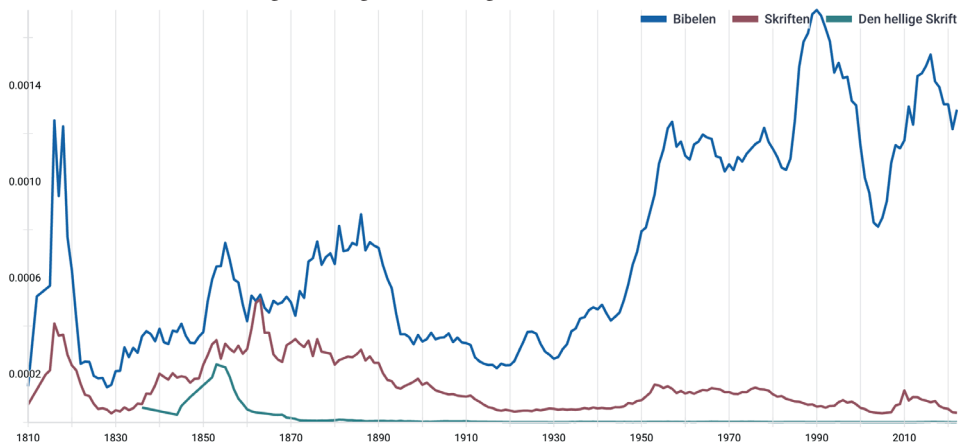


Figure 2. Ngram showing hits for words for the Bible.

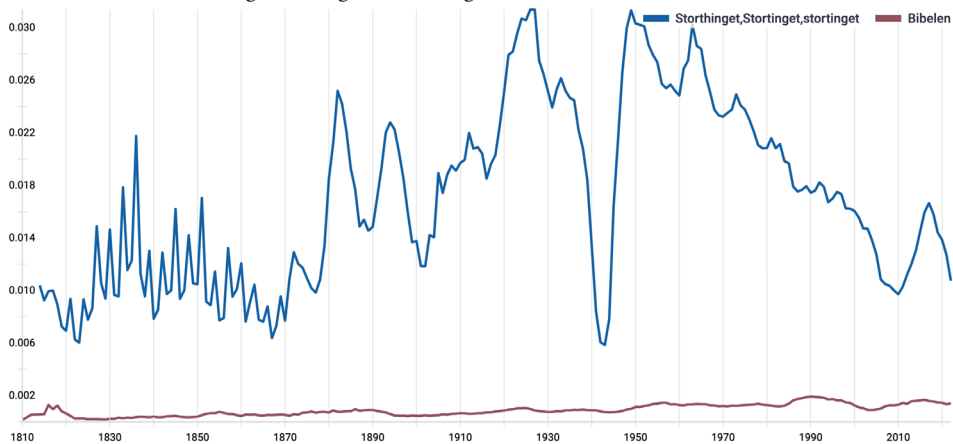


Figure 3. Ngram showing hits for the Parliament and the Bible.



## Bible on the Rise?

Does the NLN repository offer a window to the space of Old Testament narratives in public discourse of a Nordic state in this century of secularization? Let me start with another Ngram (figure 2). Search arguments are the most frequent words referring to the Bible in the Norwegian language in the period. The graph shows a steep increase. Remembering that numbers are tentative,<sup>23</sup> the increase in frequency of the Norwegian word “Bibelen” from the bottom point in the 1910’s to the peak around 1990 is some 680 percent.<sup>24</sup>

To provide a sense of proportion and context, consider figure 3, plotting hits for the Bible along with hits for the Parliament. Clearly, despite the increase, Norwegian newspapers were not flooded with references to the Bible. In the 2000’s, the papers used the word “Bibelen” about as frequently as they used the words fruit (“frukt”) or bridge (“bru”).<sup>25</sup>

Figure 4 shows the frequency of “Bibelen” in all Norwegian books: This graph shows a more conservative growth, with a low point again around 1910 and an increase of some 150 percent to around 1970. It confirms a certain growth in the public interest for the Bible. It also speaks to the nature of the newspaper repository as more exposed to change, in part probably because of the newspapers’ tighter connections to popular discourse in various media.

Before addressing the increase in references to the Bible, consider figure 5, which is charting words for sport, family, and health. It gives an idea of the change in newspaper editorial policies from around 1980. New topics took over newspaper space. Practically all newspapers of the period pursued a double intention: To maintain a critical social and political journalism alongside popularizing contents, what has been called “newspaper schizophrenia”.<sup>26</sup> Political analysts, especially on the left, tended to see this as decay. Analysts writing from within the inside of the media industry often present it as the result of empowerment of the newspaper audience.<sup>27</sup>

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from printed to digital newspaper reading. Some newspapers became all-digital, while some printed papers, while publishing printed and additional news online. Digital newspapers are not included in the NLN repository used here.

23 The Ngram graphs provide accurate relative numbers. Uncertainty relates to OCR errors, hyphens in printed papers, etc.

24 The bottom point is 1917, counting 0.00022 percent, the top is 1990, counting 0.0015 percent.

25 During the period 1860–2010, hits for “Bibelen” grew to outnumber hits for the name Ibsen, the family name of the playwright and a few other notabilities (Lillebil, Tancred, & Sigurd Ibsen), also used to name streets, buildings, etc.

26 Ottosen et al., *Norsk pressehistorie*, 174–176.

27 Ottosen et al., *Norsk pressehistorie*, 176–184; Øystein Sande, *Lesernærhet i en norsk lokalavis: En avishistorisk studie av Drammens Tidende og Buskeruds Blads nærhet til sine lesere*,

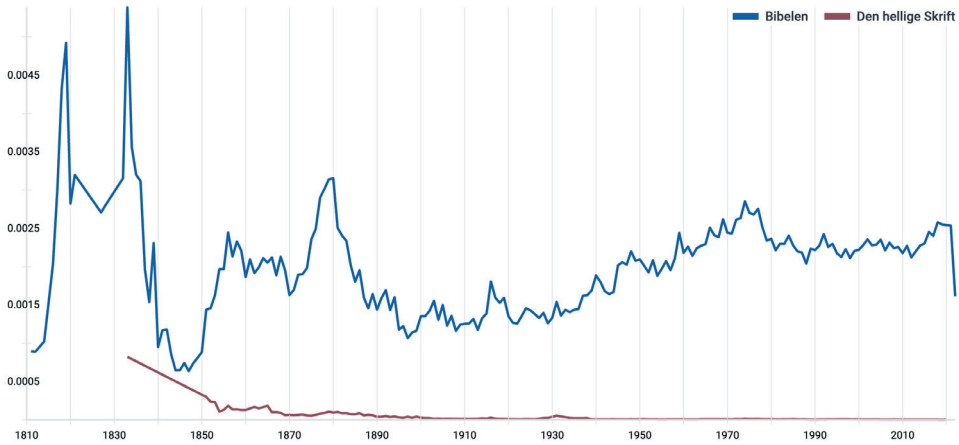


Figure 4. Ngram showing hits for the Bible in the repository of books, not newspapers.

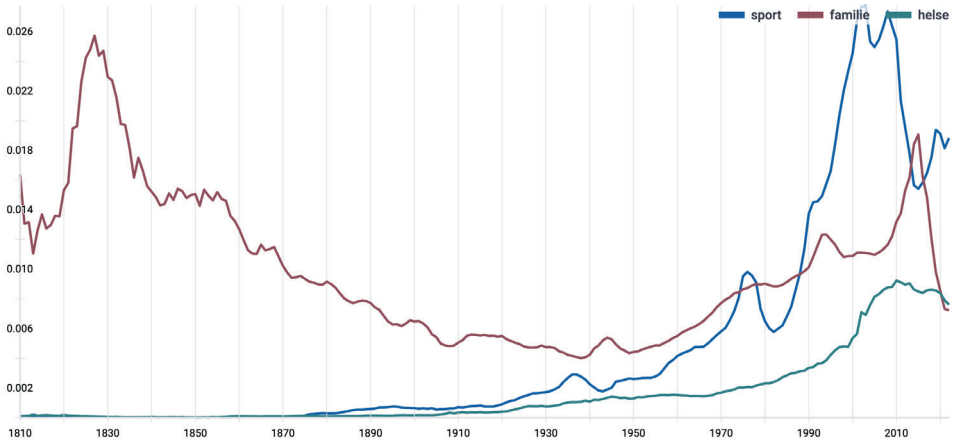


Figure 5. Ngram showing hits for sport, family, and health.

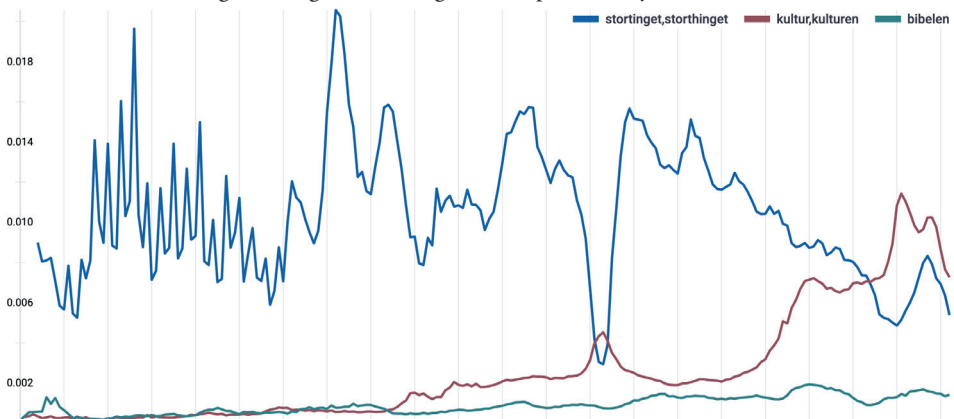


Figure 6. Ngram showing hits for the Parliament, culture, and the Bible.



Figure 6 shows that “culture” is among the words that take over newspaper space from official politics. The profile for “the Bible” is somewhat like that of “culture”. However, the graph for the Bible starts to increase earlier, and it does not explode in the 1980’s and onwards. So, is the increased interest in the Bible part of the popularization of the press and its turn towards cultural news? To help answer that question, I investigate newspaper texts reflecting specific biblical narratives.

## Ten Narratives

The following argument relies on reflections of biblical narratives in Norwegian newspapers, not formal quotations.<sup>28</sup> So far, it was possible to perform a reasonably good machine-assisted reading for ten narratives: Adam and Eve (Genesis 2–3), Cain and Abel (Genesis 4), Noah and the Ark (Genesis 6–9), The Tower of Babylon (Genesis 11), Abraham and Isaac (Genesis 22), Joseph and his brethren (Genesis 37–50), Moses and the Israelites passing through the Red Sea (Exodus 14), Moses and the tablets of the law (Exodus 20, cf. Exodus 32–33), David and Goliath (1 Samuel 17), David and Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11).

Biblical stories in media texts were identified using keywords and Boolean search. As search arguments, I combined names of story characters (omitting Norwegian personal names) plus characteristic verbs and nouns (in both official languages and with relevant spelling variations). Search arguments were harvested from the repository – and repeatedly tested there. Hits were checked against images of the original newspapers.<sup>29</sup>

Hits for these ten narratives occur in different kinds of media texts. There are stories on cinema, concerts, and novels. There are columns debating religious, political and other issues. There are numerous hits in program charts for radio and TV. There are reflections of biblical tropes in passing, for instance for rhetorical purposes. There are ads referring to biblical names and stories, there are entries in crosswords, and so on. All such cases are important for charting how Norwegian newspapers reflect the cultural space of biblical narrative, but they are important in different ways. A simple

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Volda 1994. Cf. Bastiansen & Dahl, *Norsk mediehistorie*, 365–68 for a similar dynamic in the TV medium.

<sup>28</sup> This differs from the strategy in America’s Public Bible. My checking the hits found that people cite biblical stories from memory, which produces much variation. Key narrative motives seem to be safer identifiers.

<sup>29</sup> These procedures resemble those described by Sarah Oberbichler & Eva Pfanzelter, “Tracing Discourses in Digital Newspaper Collections: A Contribution to Digital Hermeneutics while Investigating ‘Return Migration’ in Historical Press Coverage”, in *Digitised Newspapers – A New Eldorado for Historians? Reflections on Tools, Methods and Epistemology*, eds. Estelle Bunout et al., 125–52, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110729214-007>. I encountered many of the same challenges (see 135–139, 141–145).

statistic of all occurrences is not very helpful. I aimed to get a better grasp of different kinds of reflections of these narratives.

A search for key narrative motives identifies only a small portion of all media texts actually reflecting knowledge of biblical narratives. In particular, charts for TV and Radio programs, or ads for cinema, would often use only a shorthand identification, like “Adam and Eve”. Therefore, in the case of novels, films, and TV and radio broadcasts, as well as in ecclesial contexts, I assume that the occurrence of a shorthand implies some kind of use of the biblical story. Hence, I count these as narrative too, even though the narrative is only implicit in the newspaper texts. The statistics for these different types of use are certainly not complete – and probably cannot be. But they are comprehensive enough to indicate trends throughout the century. Statistics had to be construed differently for each biblical story, which means that they are consistent for each narrative over time, but not between the narratives.<sup>30</sup>

I attempted to identify the use of biblical references for business purposes. This proved to be hard. Such use often occurs in ads, which are difficult to identify and to analyse.<sup>31</sup> Statistics for this category, therefore, is more illustrative – for now.

## Findings

The full statistics for the ten stories (figure 7) are found online.<sup>32</sup> These provide absolute numbers, not relative figures, like the Ngrams. The ten stories have different profiles. Some are more frequent than others. The statistics for them all increase over the century, but some increase well before the popularization of the press discussed above. Some narratives peak with specific TV transmissions (like the Moses narratives), some are frequent even in the early part of the century (like the Tower of Babel or Abraham and Isaac). Take the story of Noah and the Ark (figure 7c) as an example for how to read these statistics:

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<sup>30</sup> Full queries used in the identification of corpuses and concordances are too large to be printed here – several of them surpass the length of an A4 page of 12-point text with single line space.

<sup>31</sup> Only typography identifies a text as an ad. The OLR of the NLN repository is poor for ads, and there is no genre classification available. For general challenges in analysing ads in newspaper repositories, see Melvin Wevers, “Mining Historical Advertisements in Digitised Newspapers”, in *Digitised Newspapers – A New Eldorado for Historians? Reflections on Tools, Methods and Epistemology*, eds. Estelle Bunout et al., 227–52, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110729214-011>.

<sup>32</sup> Figure 7: <https://journals.lub.lu.se/index.php/STK/stordalen2025>.

- First, I have been able to classify only a portion of the total number of texts referring to this biblical motif, and I would wish to improve upon my criteria. Many media texts mention, “Noah” and “Ark” only in passing, as a token with no identifiable connection to the original narrative. These texts cannot be classified. So, there is a body of unclassified references behind these numbers. The statistics indicate trends, not the full picture.
- Like many of the ten stories, Noah and the Ark peaks between 1970 and 1990. For most of the biblical narratives, hits in the 1970’s to 90’s reflect their use in films, books, and TV and radio transmissions. For Noah and the Ark, the program charts were particularly problematic: Programs were named Noah’s Ark without having anything to do with the biblical story.
- This is one of the few business-friendly biblical narratives. Around 1930, media texts report on a zoo on the steam ship “Noah’s Ark”, which produced early hits in the business segment for this narrative.
- For most of the ten narratives, newspapers scarcely reflect their use in ecclesial settings. For the Noah story, there are some hits. These mostly refer to one specific musical performed by children’s choirs around the country.<sup>33</sup>

Taken together, the statistics of the ten stories confirm that substantial parts of the increase in references to “Bibelen” was, indeed, related to the popularization of the Norwegian press. There are stories on Charlton Heston as Moses, Jane Seymour as Bathsheba, or on Thomas Mann and his massive novel on Joseph. Identical TV program charts were printed in all newspapers, thus producing many hits – one reason why I identify these separately.<sup>34</sup>

This presence of biblical narratives in cultural products illustrates the complexity of secularization in Scandinavia, which is now generally recognized.<sup>35</sup> In the 20th century the public influence and media visibility of official religion decreased, ties between the folk church and the state loosened, and church membership and participation waned.<sup>36</sup> But it was still profitable

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<sup>33</sup> Even though the text was on the preaching lectionary at two occasions, I found few reflections of that. My impression is that when newspapers reported on church-related activities, they rarely included references to the biblical texts at play.

<sup>34</sup> On the influence of TV upon the newspapers more in general, see instructively Bastiansen, *Da avisene møtte TV*.

<sup>35</sup> See for instance Pål Kjetil Botvar & Ulla Schmidt (eds.), *Religion i dagens Norge: Mellom sekularisering og sakralisering*, Oslo 2010 (for Norway) and David Thurfjell, *Det gudlösa folket: De postkristna svenskarna och religionen*, Stockholm 2019 (for Sweden).

<sup>36</sup> For the drop in church membership and participation, see the official statistics for 2015 through 2023 at <https://www.ssb.no/statbank/table/12025/> [accessed on 10 May 2024].

to use motives from biblical narratives for trading in newspapers and in cultural and other commodities. This indicates a space for these narratives in public discourse that was relatively independent from their use in official church settings.

The impact of the tabloidization of the newspapers is not the only trend visible in the material. For one thing, the statistics indicate that Bathsheba caught public attention long before the eras of the TV and the tabloid press. Also, there are consistent thematic patterns: “Adam and Eve” has a constant presence in the newspapers. References to this story are often made in the context of sexuality and family life. During the period of political tension of official languages in Norway, the story of the Tower of Babel was often used for rhetorical purposes. The phrase “David and Goliath” names the success of the underdog, and it is a favourite in modern sport journalism. But one fifth of its 5,500 occurrences fall prior to the introduction of the TV in 1960 – and that is more than the total number of hits for this phrase in all TV and radio program charts throughout the repository. So, the popularization of the Norwegian press does not alone explain the presence of biblical narrative in Norwegian newspapers. For a fuller picture we recur to certain aspects of Norwegian cultural history.

### **Biblical Narrative, Public Education, and Everyday Language**

In contrast to New Testament narratives, stories from the Old Testament were obviously brought to the public not mainly by the church, but by the public school. The Church of Norway rarely read Old Testament texts until 1977, and even then, they were only occasionally set for preaching.<sup>37</sup> Snippets of Old Testament texts were found in the catechism. Allusions to Old Testament narratives are rich in hymns and in church art, of course, but these are more indirect and were likely not major sources for public knowledge about Old Testament stories in the 20th century.

The public school made extensive use of Old Testament narratives. In the 1820's and 30's, it was no longer desirable for the Norwegian state to provide confessional education in Christianity.<sup>38</sup> The catechism was removed as

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37 Passages from the Old Testament were not read during service in Nordic state churches at all until 1887, and regular use of Old Testament readings first occurred in the Church of Norway lectionary in 1977 (see Helge Fæhn, “Tekstenes tale i gudstjenesten”, in *Bibelen i Norge*, eds. Magne Sæbø, et al., Oslo 1991, 99–114; Terje Stordalen, “Det gamle testamentet i Den norske kirkes prekener”, *Luthersk Kirketidende* 157:15 (2022), 448–51). Other denominations used Old Testament passages more intensively, and so did Sunday schools, bible groups, and mission organizations within the majority church, but these had less public attention.

38 See Brynjar Haraldsø, “Bibelen i skolen”, i *Bibelen i Norge*, eds. Magne Sæbø, et al., Oslo 1991, 195–217.

public-school curriculum, and the then recently introduced university topic Bible history became the basis for an historicist and modernist recap of a selection of biblical stories to be read in the public school. Particularly influential was one textbook, officially approved in 1858, and printed in well over three million copies up to 1965.<sup>39</sup> The pedagogical program of this book was to use biblical stories for building character and reflecting on fundamental aspects of human life. Bible history remained in the public-school curriculum until the 1970's (formally restructured in 1977).<sup>40</sup>

Before the organization of a common public school (1739–1860) one important arena for religious learning was the family household, especially in the peasant countryside. One important means for transmission of knowledge were biblical narratives cast in rhyme and sung at social gatherings. State and church notabilities composed such texts already in the 17th century.<sup>41</sup> So, the Bible history curriculum introduced in the early 1800's did, in fact, build on a long tradition.

Possibly as the effect of this long history of private and public learning, some biblical narratives seem to have an almost unconscious presence in 20th century newspaper texts: Some newspaper texts leave the impression that biblical phrases like “Adam and Eve” or “David and Goliath” had developed a conventional sense independently from the respective narratives. People knew and used their meaning without apparently intending to evoke the narrative contexts.

Incidentally, the public school dropped teaching Bible history in the very period when references to the Bible started peaking in Norwegian newspapers. In the same period, the church started reading Old Testament passages in mess. However, the latter probably did not have a great influence on the space for biblical narrative in public discourse.<sup>42</sup> For the last some third of the century, therefore, the main agents conveying knowledge of Old Tes-

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39 See Volrath Vogt, *Bibelhistorie med Lidt af Kirkens Historie*, Kristiania 1858; Volrath Vogt, *Bibelhistorie for folkeskolen*, Oslo 1965. Population in Norway surpassed 3 million in 1942 (see [https://snl.no/Norges\\_befolkning#:~:text=Av%20Geir%20Thorsn%C3%A6s.&text=Norges%20befolkning%20passerte%20tre%20millioner,inkludert%20Svalbard%20og%20Jan%20Mayen](https://snl.no/Norges_befolkning#:~:text=Av%20Geir%20Thorsn%C3%A6s.&text=Norges%20befolkning%20passerte%20tre%20millioner,inkludert%20Svalbard%20og%20Jan%20Mayen) [accessed on 8 May 2024]).

40 See Bente Afset, “Bibelkunnskap – over og ut? En refleksjon over bibelkunnskapens verdi for allmenndannelsen”, in *Møter og mangfold: Religion og kultur i historie, samtid og skole*, eds. Hildegunn Valen Kleive, & Knut-Willy Sæther, Oslo 2022, 269–87. Some biblical narratives remained on the curriculum, but a different pedagogical purpose.

41 Further details in Stordalen [forthcoming], “Biblical Narratives in the Digital Newspaper Archive: Whose Bible Is It Anyway?”.

42 Tore Witsø Rafoss, *Nordmenns Bibelbruk*, Oslo 2017, indicates that active church participation and individual Bible reading presently applies to less than 15 percent of the population.

tament narrative to the Norwegian public were the cultural sector and the mass media.

In sum, the space of biblical stories in newspaper discourse was greatly influenced by the popularization of the press. This popularization opened for reporting on the ongoing use of biblical narratives in cultural productions. It also unmasked reflections of a deeper historical influence of biblical language and stories in Norwegian culture, especially fostered through the public school.

## What Is Next?

In addition to expanding and improving upon the above analysis, how could we develop this macroscopic study further?

### *The Late 20th and Early 21st Century*

An obvious first step would be to look at the impact of digital media at the end of the 20th century and beyond. Most graphs for biblical themes in the newspapers have a dip in this period. Is this due to a statistical issue with the repository?<sup>43</sup> Are biblical texts fading out of public discourse? Or do biblical motives perhaps migrate from newspapers to digital and other media? What are the relations and interactions between conventional newspapers and the social media in their use of biblical narratives? To answer such questions, the research needs to include born-digital materials and use different research methods.

### *Profiling Norway's Public Bible*

Studying 19th and early 20th century American Newspapers, *America's Public Bible* charts what biblical passages were quoted, and when. It identifies occasions and incidents that brought biblical verses to the press.<sup>44</sup> Doing the same in my material would show to what extent public use of the Bible emphasizes different stories than does the church – and for different reasons. The public Bible likely has its own profile, and documenting the specifics could be an interesting task.

## How Does the Public Bible Work?

More importantly, biblical narrative seems to “work” differently in newspapers than in church.<sup>45</sup> I would like to see in-depth qualitative studies for

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43 The tendency seems to apply to much more than biblical narratives in the repository, and the NLN is considering the possibility that recently altered procedures for entering newspapers texts into the repository may have affected the statistics.

44 Mullen, *America's Public Bible: A Commentary*.

45 For the notion of “how a Bible works”, I rely on Brian Malley, *How The Bible Works*:



instance of how media texts use biblical narratives rhetorically, and for what purposes. What do media texts imply about the standing of biblical narrative with the audience? How would newspaper texts influence the sense of biblical narratives in other discourse?

At this point, let us consider a few examples illustrating the wide diversity at play in the repository. In 1999 the small newspaper *Vestnytt* printed a review of Dreamworks' animation film *Prince of Egypt*.<sup>46</sup> Commenting on the value of the (originally biblical) story, the article emphasizes its ability to fascinate and entertain. Issues like the inspiration, historicity, authorship, or dating of the biblical text – themes that are conventionally discussed in theological settings – seem beyond the point for this newspaper text. (It assumes that the story has been read for three thousand years.)

The major newspaper *Dagbladet* in 1922 brought a verbatim rendition of a debate in the Norwegian Parliament where the MP Ivarsson from the conservative party used the story of the Tower of Babel in a debate on language politics.<sup>47</sup> His interpretation of the story hardly reflected official ecclesial readings, but it conveyed a sort of “weak belief”: Ivarsson implied that this story adequately names disadvantages of linguistic plurality. He also seems to think that the audience would recognize this, which lends rhetorical force to the argument.

Some 15 years later, on the 50'th anniversary of the Eiffel Tower, the same story, was evoked in the same newspaper to praise Eiffel's achievements.<sup>48</sup> In this text, any sense of the biblical narrative seems lost. “The Tower of Babel” seems to mean “an impressive tower”, or perhaps “a great tower from the past”. The phrase has a useful, slightly accentuated, illustrative force.

The last example, also from *Dagbladet*, is an ad printed in 2004.<sup>49</sup> The four short lines announce a “Serious Swingers” club named Club Adam and Eve. The ad plays on a prominent theme in common reception of the story, but it does so in an ironic and subversive way. It may be taken to confirm that the biblical narrative says something significant about sexuality. But it ridicules the perception of the story in Christian moral. The institution ordering the ad, the swinger's club, would not be religious by any common definition.<sup>50</sup> Neither would the practices of the institution – although some

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*An Anthropological Study of Evangelical Biblicism*, Walnut Creek 2004.

46 *Vestnytt*, 22 January 1999, 12: “For three thousand years people have been fascinated by the story about the Hebrew baby adopted by the ruler of Egypt, in order as an adult man to free the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt” (my translation).

47 *Dagbladet*, 4 May 1933, 6: “If everyone were allowed to use their own dialect, there would occur a Babylonian confusion” (my translation).

48 *Dagbladet*, 18 April 1939, 3.

49 *Dagbladet*, 8 May 2004, 43.

50 There are serious problems in defining “religion” and in using it as an analytical

might see them as in some sense spiritual. These practices are, however, related to the making of individual identity. As such, this use of the story does perhaps reflect the pedagogical program of the Bible history curriculum. If so, the biblical story is used for non-orthodox reflection and understanding.

These examples show how biblical narratives in newspapers may carry notions of lean validity, argumentative or illustrative force, or serve as means for thinking. Along with the presence of “unconscious” biblical narratives (above), this raises the question of how users of media texts might have conceived of biblical stories in the newspapers. Did they perceive them as expressions of religion, or belief? Or perhaps they saw them as cultural heritage – or simply as elements of common language?

### Bible, Newspapers, and Canonical Power

Knut Lundby, expert on religion in Norwegian media, shows how the mediation of religion incurs changes in that which is being mediated. The media amplify and profile certain aspects, frame material in specific ways and generate change in how people perform and organize their religion.<sup>51</sup> A similar study of the mediatization of Biblical narrative would be a desirable next step. I assume it would be very different from studies of the mediatization of religion. For one thing, unlike organized religion, no organization or group can legitimately claim exclusive ownership and custody over biblical narratives. Also, stakeholders involved in the circulation of biblical narrative are spread across the perceived religious–secular divide, located on many levels of society, and some with considerable popular appeal and cultural and social capital. The exchange of social and cultural power for biblical narratives in Norwegian newspapers is different from that of religion in the same media.

To frame these dimensions of mediatization, I suggest seeing biblical narratives as a sort of classic. Classics and standards crystallize in many sectors of human life: There are curricula of education, classics in music, rules for painting, collections of best practices, conventions for proper behaviour, and so on. These phenomena can be explored through Pierre Bourdieu’s

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concept, see recently Jayne Svenungsson, “The Return of Religion or the End of Religion? On the Need to Rethink Religion as a Category of Social and Political Life”, *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 46:7 (2020), 785–809, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453719896384> (with all the classical philosophical and critical literature). As argued by Michael Stausberg & Mark Q. Gardiner (“Definition”, in *The Oxford Handbook of the Study of Religion*, eds. Michael Stausberg & Steven Engler, Oxford 2017, 9–32, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198729570.013.1>) a tentative definition is nevertheless required when encountering phenomena that lie on the border of what is commonly recognized as religion. I use the word in this pragmatic sense.

<sup>51</sup> Lundby, *Religion i medienes grep*, 22–24, 203–207 (with earlier literature), and on a more practical note Paul Long et al., *Media Studies: Texts, Productions and Context*, Harlow 2021, chapter 3.

(1939–2002) theory of fields, capital, and habitus.<sup>52</sup> Like John Guillory, I would apply them also to processes of formal canonization.<sup>53</sup> The roles of biblical stories in Norwegian newspapers are subject to the kind of forces that crystallized canons of religious scripture. The canons are different, of course, but their social dynamics are comparable.

Importantly, a canon is never simply a collection of text, musical scores, or paintings. For a collection to work as a canon there must be canonical institutions, commentary, interpreters, believers, and practices. Together they form canonical processes that crystallize standard themes and topics, forms, habits, attitudes, and memory. All these interact in continuously producing the canonicity of the canon. They are part of what I call a canonical ecology. In my study of the early Hebrew canon of literature, I found that two distinct canonical ecologies existed in symbiotic existence, claiming different significance and performing different use of one and the same canonical collection.<sup>54</sup>

Biblical narratives in newspapers have a different canonical ecology than the same narratives have in church. Newspapers convey a public Bible that has its own set of institutions, commentators, themes, memories, practices, and so on. That ecology involves educational and cultural institutions, publishers, authors, musicians, critics, reporters. Its basis – the audience, or the canonical community – is made up of the people in the target groups or markets for these institutions.

Time is ripe for a critical inquiry of this ecology of the public Bible. Who does it serve? What are its purposes, values, and effects? What is the flow of cultural capital propelled with the use of biblical narrative? To take one example: My studies of the canonical ecology of the Bible at the universi-

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52 See esp. Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge 1977; Pierre Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital”, in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John G. Richardson, New York 1986, 241–58; Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, Cambridge 1993.

53 John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*, Chicago 1993, applies Bourdieu to his analysis of the canon of English literature in higher education.

54 For all this, see Terje Stordalen, “The Production of Authority in Levantine Scriptural Ecologies: An Example of Accumulative Cultural Production”, in *Levantine Entanglements: Cultural Productions, Long-term Changes and Globalizations in the Eastern Mediterranean*, eds. Terje Stordalen & Øystein S. LaBianca, London 2021, 322–72; Terje Stordalen & Saphinaz Naguib, “Time, Media, Space: Perspectives on the Ecology of Collective Remembering”, in *The Formative Past and the Formation of the Future: Collective Remembering and Identity Formation*, eds. Terje Stordalen & Saphinaz Naguib, Oslo 2015, 17–37; Terje Stordalen, “Kanon og kanonisk kommentar”, *Teologisk Tidsskrift* 1 (2012), 122–37. My fundamental approach owes much to Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *What Is Scripture? A Comparative Approach*, Minneapolis 1993; cf. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, “The True Meaning of Scripture: An Empirical Historian’s Nonreductionist Interpretation of the Qur’an”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 11 (1980), 487–505.

ty shows that interpreters with institutional (i.e. canonical) power tend to mask the impact of their own interpretation. They focus on the text rather than on, say, their own positionality. Presumably, this lends more credibility to their interpretation. I expect to find much of the same both in newspaper texts on biblical themes and in cultural products inspired by biblical motifs.

Another important dimension is what agency is left to the audiences, the canonical community. Evidently, the canonical ecology of the public Bible has strong global agents, and a loose local organization. Does this threaten to remove connections between interpretations of biblical narratives and people's actual lives, thus setting biblical narrative on a "road to nowhere"? Or do newspaper coverage of global impulses perhaps work in the opposite direction?<sup>55</sup>

It is also time for inquiring about relations between the ecologies of the public and the ecclesial bibles. What are their differences and similarities? Do they influence each other? Do they compete or are they living in symbiosis?

### **Configuring Biblical Studies at the University**

Returning to the repository, figure 8 shows that the church (no capital) is losing newspaper attention in a sequence broadly parallel with that of the parliament (also no capital). This reflects the orientation of newspapers away from official institutions towards popular themes and human touch – a common result of the popularization of the press.

Simultaneously, as seen in figure 9, the graphs for the Church (now with a capital) and the Bible (also with a capital) crossed each other around 1985. Other ways of configuring this Ngram search would give other graphs. This is not a simple truth about the relative standing of the church and the Bible in Norwegian public discourse. But it is an indication of tendencies in an ongoing process.

This must have implications for how to configure the university subject of Biblical Studies. The university has always had some kind of social contract with society. Universities must, of course, exercise academic freedom in the way they format and perform research. But areas for research are selected in a complex interplay with society. It is, for instance, evident that the topic of Biblical Studies would not have been on the university curriculum without the intense use of biblical texts in church and society throughout the history of the university. Changes in the actual use and perception of biblical narratives in society, therefore, is relevant to how the university con-

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<sup>55</sup> David Goodhart, *The Road to Somewhere: The Populist Revolt and the Future of Politics*, London 2017.

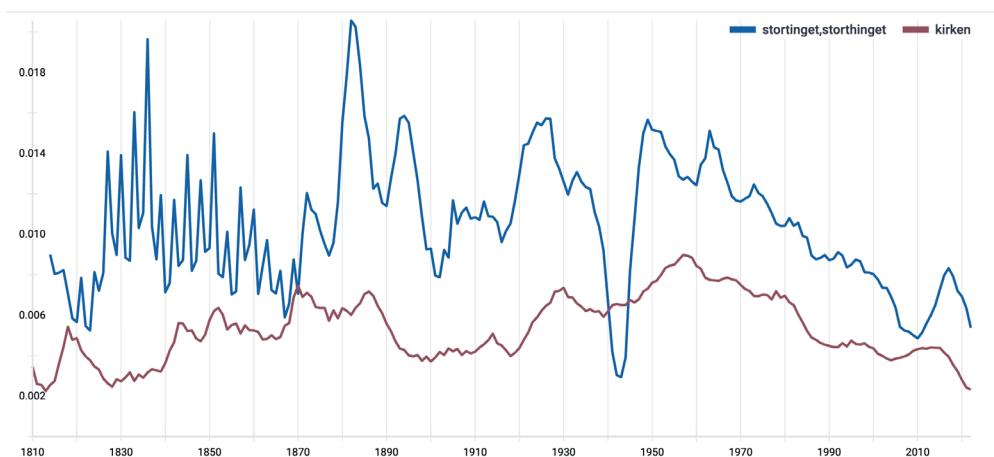


Figure 8. Ngram showing hits for the Parliament and the Church (case insensitive).

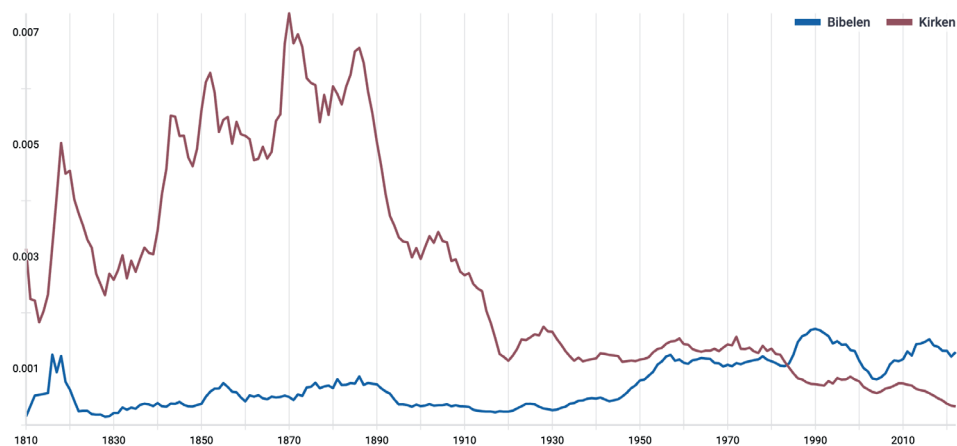


Fig. 9. Ngram showing hits for the church and the Bible (case sensitive).

*\*All Ngram:s produced by the National Library of Norway website.*

figures its research on the Bible. One cannot simply rely on past formats of knowledge and research.

Conventional Biblical Studies see the Bible as “naturally” belonging in religious discourse. If, indeed, a significant and increasing part of public discourse on biblical texts occurs in other keys, that cannot be irrelevant for how we construe our discipline. If there is an unconscious presence of biblical narratives in language, if these stories are seen as means of communication rather than authority, we need to understand what that means. Biblical studies need to operate in cross-disciplinary fields, addressing also media, culture, or politics. This reorientation is beginning to take place in international research, but not in a programmatic and systematic way – and it is usually not implemented in the curricula. We are going to have to travel a long way yet to be able to stand up to these challenges. ▲

#### SUMMARY

This essay gives a macroscopic view of the space of biblical narrative in Norwegian newspaper discourse in the 20th century. The digital repository of the National Library of Norway (NLN) gives access to all Norwegian Newspapers printed since 1814. A so-called Ngram search in this repository shows that newspaper references to the Bible increased drastically during the 20th century, with a peak in the 1990's, featuring almost seven times more hits than in the 1910's. One reason for this increase was the change of newspaper editorial policy after radio and TV became mass media. The newspapers started reporting more “slow news”, and the frequency of biblical references is much higher in this material. Cultural products, like novels, films, and especially TV programs, contributed massively to the increase. Concentrating on tracing ten biblical narratives, the essay shows that references to individual stories could peak in different decades. It also asks what societal segment newspapers mirror when referring to biblical stories. It turns out that use of biblical stories in the cultural sector is the most important. Some stories appear in advertising etc. from business life. Very few references to biblical narratives in ecclesial use are found in the newspapers. The findings illustrate the presence of a “public Bible” and the complexity of secularization in Scandinavia. They also open new questions concerning the study of reception of biblical narratives and, indeed, the study of the Bible in the university.