

Practical Bible Study Tools

Study Bibles © 2007 Scott L. Engle

If you are in the market for a study Bible, I recommend the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) as the translation. There are now several NRSV study Bibles, three of which are available with and without the Apocrypha. (The Apocrypha is a set of Jewish writings from the period between the Old and New Testaments. They can be very helpful in understanding Jesus' world.)

In most of these study Bibles, the study notes are principally oriented to explaining the historical and cultural context of biblical passages, rather than offering a theological interpretation of them. However, The New Interpreters' Bible has a lot of theological content. The Spiritual Formation Bible is oriented to high-level overviews and reading for spiritual/theological insights. A caution: it is all too natural for us to begin to see the theology of the notes' authors as our own, giving it an undue authority. The Scofield and Ryrie study Bibles are examples of study Bibles with a theological mission and I don't recommend either.

- The Access Bible: An ecumenical learning resource for people of faith, 1999, Oxford University Press. This is my recommended entry-level study Bible. The book introductions are not at all intimidating and the study notes are largely embedded in the text. This study bible also includes a simple glossary of key biblical terms, maps, tables of weights and measures (what is a cubit?!), and a concise concordance. (A concordance shows the various verse locations for key words in the Bible. For example, the concordance in this study Bible includes six verses where the word "help" can be found.)
- The Renovare Spiritual Formation Bible, 2005, Harper San Francisco. This is an excellent reading Bible, filled with comments and supplements aimed at helping the reader engage Scripture for spiritual development. It is not really a study Bible in that it has very limited study helps and crossreferences. This one makes an excellent supplement to a study Bible.
- The New Interpreter's Study Bible, 2003, Abingdon Press. This is my recommended mid-level study Bible. It is stuffed with study notes that are written with a pastoral orientation, rather than strictly scholarly. It also has a number of brief essays (called "excurses") that are part of the study notes. There are also six general articles on interpretation of the Bible. There is a glossary, chronology tables, and a full set of color maps. Though there were (are?) plans for this to be published in paperback, it is currently available only in leather and hardcover bindings. It is about \$30 at Amazon in the hardback. This Bible is published only with the Apocrypha.
- The HarperCollins Study Bible, Revised Edition, 2006, HarperCollins. This is another excellent study Bible and the one I use the most. It has the most extensive study notes, all of which are found at the bottom of the page. It is mostly oriented to historical, cultural, and literary context. Like all study Bibles it has useful introductions to each book. Be sure to get the revised edition (2006) as it has a concise concordance. This Bible has the usual maps and timelines.
- The New Oxford Annotated Bible, Third Edition, 2001, Oxford University Press. The study notes are extensive and are embedded in book outlines at the bottom of each page. There is an index to the study materials (notes and essays), as well as a concise concordance and maps. This Bible also contains several essays on topics ranging from the history of the Bible's development to important cultural contexts of the Bible. There are also various timelines, tables of weights and measures, and more of the usual.

The Basics

A good Bible dictionary is probably the single most helpful tool. I'd suggest the Harper-Collins Bible Dictionary, edited by Paul Achtemeier, 1996. This is a 1250 page volume with more than 3,700 entries. It also provides a useful set of maps. This dictionary is probably the most used single volume in my library. Your second purchase ought to be a good Bible atlas, as it helps to clear up a lot of confusion. The IVP Atlas of

Bible History is excellent as is the Holman Bible Atlas. I use both.

Another basic tool is a concordance. A Bible concordance lists all the words in the bible in alphabetical order and provides the chapter and verse location of each occurrence of each word. As you can imagine, an unabridged concordance is a big book! Fortunately, an abridged version is suitable for nearly all purposes. If you purchase one, be sure to purchase one that is based on the translation you use most often for study, e.g., the NRSV or NIV or NASB. Bear in mind that a concordance has to be used thoughtfully, in that many English words are synonyms and they will all be listed under a single heading. If you use the NRSV, you can pick up John Kohlenberger's *The Concise Concordance to the NRSV*, 1993, Oxford Press.

Very Helpful

Closing the cultural distance between biblical times and our times can be very difficult, but it is absolutely critical to useful bible study. The entire Bible is culturally conditioned and our understanding is much richer when we know more about the cultural, historical, geographical, and literary context of each book and passage. I've found a commentary that goes through the Bible, passage by passage, giving the layperson important cultural background. For example, when Jesus told his disciples not to pray like the pagans (Matthew 6:7-8), it is very helpful to know how the pagans did pray. Or, why did Paul expect Corinthian women to cover their heads? This commentary is in two volumes: *The IVP Bible Background Commentary, Old Testament*, by Walton, Matthews, and Cavalas, 2000, Intervarsity Press. *The IVP Bible Background Commentary, New Testament*, by Craig Keener, 1993, Intervarsity Press.

The NIV Archeological Study Bible is also filled with lots on helpful and interesting information, photos, and maps. The publishers call it an illustrated walk through biblical history and culture and it comes close to that. Also helpful is a one-volume commentary on the Bible. A commentary will give you an overview of a chapter-by-chapter discussion of each book. I'd suggest the Harper-Collins Bible Commentary, the companion volume to the Harper-Collins Bible Dictionary. The New Bible Commentary is also helpful.

One of the difficulties in Bible study is figuring out how to pronounce all those strange names and words in the Bible. If you'd like some help with this, I suggest *The HarperCollins Bible Pronunciation Guide*, 1989, HarperCollins Publishers. This slim volume also contains non-biblical terms that are important in the study of the Bible.

Helpful

Learning something about the Hebrew and Greek words that underlie our English translations can enrich your bible study. Though in-depth study can be difficult without knowledge of the original languages, various tools can help the layperson tackle fruitful word studies. The best starting point is Mounce's *Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, 2006, Zondervan. It is actually several dictionaries in a single volume. The Scripture index is very helpful and there are many insights packed into the word discussions.

Where to find these books

Some of the recommended study Bibles can be found at Cokesbury.com or at Amazon.com.

QUESTIONS?

Contact Pastor Debbie Lyons ... Debbie.a.lyons@gmail.com