

Using Bible Commentaries

Bible commentaries try to clarify the meaning of biblical texts by providing relevant background information and by discussing issues involved in interpreting those texts. In a sense, a commentary is a digest of information that might be found more completely in other works: historical, geographical, and archaeological data; linguistic, text critical, and literary comments; summaries of debate and discussion over the interpretation of a text; contemporary application of a text; and more. Because so much is gathered in one place, commentaries are handy. But because they are digests rather than full accounts of relevant information, they are not suitable substitutes for complete exegetical research when that is required.

Issues That Affect a Commentary's Usefulness

Extensiveness. Commentaries come in all sizes, from one-volume commentaries on the whole Bible to multiple volumes about a single book of the Bible. Each type has its place, but clearly those that are longer allow for fuller discussions of the issues surrounding any particular passage. One-volume commentaries can be helpful for quick, superficial reference. Multi-volume works are better for more in-depth study.

Audience. Commentaries are written to help a variety of readerships. Some are directed principally to scholars, others to preachers, and yet others to lay readers. These distinctions are not absolute, of course, but they will heavily influence the tone of the commentaries.

Emphasis. Closely related to the concern above, commentaries have different major emphases as they choose which materials to include or to leave out. Some commentaries are technical exegetical works which deal in detail with a variety of textual, linguistic, historical, and other issues. The Hermeneia series is a state-of-the-art example of this type. Other commentaries are "homiletical" or "expository" commentaries intended to provide to preachers richer helps and suggestions about how to present a text. The Interpretation commentary series is a recent example. Another group of commentaries take a more devotional direction, as in The Daily Study Bible. Your purpose as a reader will help determine which type of commentary will be most useful to you.

Theological outlook. Commentaries are written by scholars, preachers, and others who have particular theological viewpoints, and we should expect that those viewpoints will, to some degree, color the selection and discussion of materials in the commentaries. For a balanced view, students should choose to read discussions from varied outlooks and to try to look behind the conclusions offered to the reasons why each commentator has come to those conclusions. Careful reading should reveal not only the central issues but also the major evidence and arguments involved in those issues.

Date. Scholars have been writing commentaries on the Bible for many centuries. Some of the classic volumes still have valuable insights, but students should also be sure to look to current volumes which have the benefit of recent discoveries in textual, linguistic, historical, and archaeological studies. They also benefit from contemporary interpretations of theology and culture as they try to apply the biblical text to our time.

Some relatively recent commentary series that can be helpful to students include:

The Anchor Bible

The Broadman Bible Commentary

The Expositors Bible

Hermeneia

Interpretation

New International Commentary on Old (New) Testament

The New Century Bible Commentary

The New Interpreters Bible

The Old Testament Library

Word Biblical Commentary

and others