

Choosing Commentaries

Bible students will wish to get hold of sound commentaries to assist their background understanding of any scripture; of necessity, many of these will be purchased to cover all their requirements. However, it is wise to understand the different purposes of commentators in order to get what you really need; too many folk end up with countless books they never use. This paper aims to help you make sensible choices.

Commentaries

Commentaries are written by many types of people according to their abilities and professions; some will be very technical and dry while others will be very encouraging and warm. It is important to understand the types that abound and get what you really need for the purpose in hand. There is no point in wasting a great deal of money for something that is not suited to your requirements and that you never use. Sometimes the least popular commentaries are the most helpful for ministry.

There are many fashionable commentaries that are faithful to the text and easy to read but will be of little use to the serious student. The concern of the serious student is to really understand what the text is actually saying; this is called 'exegesis'. Most commentators don't concentrate on this but rather focus on their explanation. Often comments will be a personal interpretation based upon something that the text does not say. This is called eisegesis; reading something into the text that isn't there.

Worse still, many books elucidate the scriptural material under view with comments based upon a wrong understanding of the underlying Greek text. Often folk will make prolific and glorious statements that sound fine but have not a single ounce of support from the text itself, often wrongly defining words. Another mistake is when commentators expound a text in a way that contradicts general Biblical doctrine (the analogy of the faith) or denies the attributes of God. There is no point in using even famous commentaries if the flowery reveries of the writer are not going to help you understand the text, but lead you astray.

Types of commentary

Here I will define what I believe to be the main variations in Bible commentaries. I am not saying that one type is better or worse than another, merely that you must get what it is that you want for your studying. Some commentaries also fall into more than one category and the examples given are only my subjective viewpoint.

Devotional

This is the most popular form of commentary. It is where a pastor-teacher applies his experience to a certain book or passage and draws out from the text practical doctrines that arise. He does this in a warm and encouraging style to edify readers. He may make some exegesis but his main concern is only mildly expositional, but primarily shedding light on the passage in order to exhort and encourage. There are not many devotional commentaries on books like Ecclesiastes, Lamentations or Jeremiah.

This form of work is justifiably popular because all of us need encouragement, from time to time, that involves no hard work. It is where we allow the scriptures to refresh us as applied by the ministry of a pastor. There may be the occasional technical explanation, but the chief purpose is to keep things simple and edify.

Benefits

Devotional commentaries are very helpful when written by good pastors. Some of the most inspiring books have been devotional commentaries by men greatly gifted by God in pastoral application.

Drawbacks

While very encouraging, such works are rarely any use in Bible study. They will not help the student in drawing out deep information to help him exegete the passages under view.

Examples

Probably the most popular devotional commentary is that of Matthew Henry, although much of the New Testament was not written by him. It is warm, evangelical and sound, rarely failing to encourage. Richard Sibbes on *The Bruised Reed* (a favourite of Martyn Lloyd-Jones). The commentaries of FB Meyer. J Douglas MacMillan on Psalm 23 (*The Lord My Shepherd*, Banner of Truth) is a classic case of a simple devotional commentary that impart grace to the weary soul. The writer was once a shepherd himself and draws out the Biblical analogy perfectly.

Analytical

This is the technical sort of commentary which will particularly concentrate upon understanding what the original languages mean, chiefly in terms of grammar. This is broken down into:

- Morphology – derivation of words.
- Semantics - meaning of words.
- Syntax – formation of words into sentences.

By properly understanding these language disciplines, the student can properly ascertain what a given passage really means. It is astounding how often poor commentaries give an ‘exposition’ which is based upon a word that is not even in the original text at all, or which confounds the meaning of the original words.

Some commentaries in this section are not really exegetical, but just technical observations about the original words. They don’t concentrate on the overall sense of the verse (but do offer many helpful hints); rather they explain the grammar of the main Greek words on which the sense of the verse must be understood. Such are the notes on the Greek NT made by AT Robertson [*Word Pictures in the Greek New Testament* (1934), Broadman Press], Ralph Earle [*Word Meanings in the New Testament*, Baker (1982)] or MR Vincent [*Word Studies in the New Testament*, MacDonald (1888)]. A much older version of this was Bengel’s, *New Testament Word Studies*.

Other technical commentaries used to be called ‘critical’; in literary terms this does not mean ‘disparaging’ but: evaluative, analytical, interpretative, expository or explanatory. Their exegesis of the text is to establish what the verse really means; so there will be much analysis of Greek and Hebrew words. However, they do not concentrate solely on words, but on establishing the sense of each verse. This will also involve some historical and cultural investigation into the writer’s purpose, style and contemporary situation. Such works do not apply much practical application to the text, but are focused on identifying the meaning. You could call this an exegetical commentary.

The serious Bible student needs this sort of commentary more than any other. This is what will help him mine the truth; he can then make his own devotions based on the truth he discovers for himself instead of letting others do his devotion for him.

Benefits

These help the student to understand what the text really means by explaining the meaning of the original words and establishing what the verses meant to the original hearer.

Drawbacks

They can be very dry, while some can be hard to follow if the Greek and Hebrew texts are printed without transliteration. Often written for academics, there may be much use of jargon making the comments hard to understand to novices.

Examples

Alford's Greek Testament. Bloomfield's Greek Testament. Keil & Delitzsch on the Old Testament. *A Critical & Exegetical Commentary on Romans*, CEB Cranfield, T & T Clark Ltd (1975). *A Critical & Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, JG Murphy, T & T Clark. *The Interpretation of the NT*, RCH Lenski, Augsburg. FL Godet on *Romans, I Corinthians, John and Luke*. John Eadie on Thessalonians, Philippians, Ephesians and Colossians.

Theological

These are primarily written to establish doctrine. As a result they will also interact with erroneous doctrinal application from the passage under view. On occasion this may ensue in lengthy theological argumentation which is of little value to the modern student; but, on the other hand, there are times when this debate is extremely useful. Consequently, these commentaries are often very technical and may be off-putting for young students.

Usually, the purpose is to ascertain the chief doctrines that are expounded in a certain book, or series of books. They don't pretend to be a full analysis and interpretation of the whole book, but are isolating the key doctrinal features that emerge. Certain Biblical books concentrate upon major theological issues so this type of study is valuable. For example: Romans expounds the Gospel; Leviticus concerns holiness and fellowship with God; Revelation opens up the sovereign purpose of God in history while Ephesians explains the union of Christ with the church and its effects.

Sometimes one doctrinal subject may be the basis of analysing a certain book, such as examining the concept of evangelism in Acts, or of atonement in Leviticus. Peripheral studies are thus ignored or subsumed into the overriding purpose of the book and, thus, this work is not of general value for exegesis or exposition, but only regarding the doctrine under examination.

Benefits

These help to establish a good doctrinal understanding set within the foundation of scripture. They can open up new areas of divine revelation to the student not noticed before.

Drawbacks

They can be too technical or too obscure for many.

Examples

Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts, Ed. I Howard Marshall & David Peterson, Eerdmans (1998). *Theology of the Old Testament*, G Oehler, Zondervan. *Christology of the OT*, EW Hengstenberg, Macdonald. *Sacrificial Worship in the OT*, JH Kurtz, T & T Clark.

Expositional

This is the section that contains the most commentaries and it is probably the section that is most useful to the average student. Works of this type are essentially about establishing what the text means and then interpreting it to the reader with doctrinal and practical application. The best ones will start from the Greek text, establish what it means and then draw out an interpretation followed by application.

With a good exposition you will also get separate sections on background historical and cultural information, the date of composition, a biography of the author, identification of the purpose of the writer and summary of his arguments.

Benefits

These are the best works to understand the Biblical book under review.

Drawbacks

None! While there may be a more superficial examination of the original languages, or less analysis of doctrinal themes, good expository commentaries will at least explain the basics, while drawing out clear interpretations based upon good exegesis; to say nothing of pastoral application.

Examples

We could list hundreds in this category. A few at random include: Albert Barnes' *Notes*, on the NT and some OT books. Expositions by AW Pink, e.g. on *John* and *Hebrews*. C Hodge on *Romans*, *1 & 2 Corinthians* and *Ephesians*. JA Alexander on *Isaiah* and *Acts*. EJ Young on *Daniel*. CH Spurgeon on the Psalms (*The Treasury of David*).

Sermons

This is a very mixed bag indeed. Some works in this category are very good and useful, while others (even by some famous authors) are very prolix, dense, tedious and with little modern application. The problem is that they are sermons, not works of analysis and exegesis. Thus there can be long discussions in sermon form with little technical explanation to support them. The gift God gave the man was to edify the people he spoke to and, even with editing, they are best read as sermons but not as tools for study.

Benefits

These can be read as literature for relaxation.

Drawbacks

They are often poor for analytical study.

Examples

DM Lloyd-Jones on *Romans* and *Ephesians*. H Hoeksema on *Romans* (despite being sermons and thus not broken down into sub-titles, this work is excellent). Calvin on *Ephesians* & *Genesis*.

Combination

To some degree the best expositional commentaries are a combination of several factors, but some works aspire to excel in all the critical, expositional, cultural, historical, analytical, theological and application categories. Consequently, some of these types of productions are very large and can be dense.

Benefits

If good, this will give all the things that a student needs (but none are perfect and the student always needs corroboration).

Drawbacks

In seeking to hit all these targets, some works become lukewarm on all and not efficient in any.

Examples

A Commentary, Critical, Experimental, and Practical, on the Old and New Testaments, Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown. This is a favourite of mine and is extremely useful as a first stop. *Analytical Exposition of Romans*, John Brown, Tentmaker Pub. William Hendricksen, *NT Commentary*, Banner of Truth. John Gill, *Commentary on the Bible*.

Conclusion

The differences between commentaries can be seen in this review. Students, thus, ought to be careful in their choice of commentary and buy what they really need. Also it must be remembered that just because a certain series is popular, it does not mean that all the individual commentaries in it are worthy. Very often older commentaries are of more use than modern ones. Full use should be made of the Internet where many valuable commentaries can be downloaded in one form or another and investigated before buying in print form. A number of good commentaries can be downloaded free from e-sword. CD ROMs of many good commentaries can be found on AGES software, which also distributes whole sets on CD of the following writer's works: John Owen, John Calvin, AW Pink, John Gill and others.

Here is a list of some of my favourite commentaries. One should also consult Charles Spurgeon's list in his book *Commenting and Commentaries*, which can also be found on the Internet, which covers the best commentaries up to his time (late 19th century).

Whole Bible

Matthew Poole; Matthew Henry; Jamieson, Fausset and Brown; John Gill; the Geneva Series (Banner of Truth); Calvin's Commentaries.

Old Testament

Keil & Delitzsch (very technical); Bible Student's Commentary (*Korte Verklaring*).

New Testament

Barnes' Notes; William Hendriksen; RCH Lenski; NICNT; Alford's Greek NT.

Anything by: John Eadie; JA Alexander; Charles Hodge; AW Pink; CG Findlay; JL Godet; Patrick Fairbairn; J Lightfoot; HC Leupold; WG Blaikie; EJ Young; James Murphy.

This is just an arbitrary selection; if I were to list what I consider to be the best individual commentaries we would need many more pages. Spurgeon's list is a good place to start and some of these works can be found cheaply in second-hand bookshops.

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