

How to Study the Bible

Unit 6: Commentaries – Lesson 1: Pros and Cons

Course Goal: To equip the believer to “Rightly divide the Word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15).

At the conclusion of this lesson, the believer should be able to:

- Know when to use an ancient Hebrew or Church Father commentary
- Understand the various types of Reformer or contemporary commentaries
- Know when to use a Reformer or contemporary commentary

A Brief Review

We have been introduced to how to study the Bible by using various tools:

- Bibliology: the doctrines of Scripture (general rules, guidelines, and parameters)
- Observation: the local, book, author, testament, and overall biblical contexts
- Setting: the extra-biblical context (geographical, historical, religious, political, etc.)
- Grammar: word studies (translations, interpretations, concordance, lexicons, etc.)
- Theological context: topic studies (the passage should conform to a systematic theology)
- Genre: various literary styles assist in discovering the originally intended meaning

Commentaries

Now we embark on investigating what other scholars conclude after they have used some or all of the steps we have investigated so far.

What is a commentary? A bible commentary is a series of notes on a passage demonstrating the exegetical process and conclusions of a specific author or group of authors. A good commentary includes a proper use of historical background, language, theology and genre information to defend whatever assertions are made regarding the text. A Biblically-sound commentary will quote its sources and reasoning when proposing an exegesis. Warning: It is extremely dangerous to trust only one commentator, especially if he/she claims to have the sole exegesis of a passage. This is how many cults and false religions have started. In fact, using commentary alone, without employing the previous steps of this class, is also an unwise method of exegesis, akin to arriving at a construction site with only one tool.

1. Ancient Commentaries

a. Ancient Hebrew commentaries give the advantage of possibly helping to discover the intended meaning of an Old Testament passage. After all, how better to understand how the intended audience understood a passage than to read their commentary on it. However, we must also remember that commentaries are not inspired, and the human writer, therefore, may not possess the meaning intended by the human and Divine authors.

- Mishna: The first major written redaction (combination of multiple source texts) of the Jewish oral traditions known as the "Oral Torah". It is also the first major work of Rabbinic literature. It was redacted at the beginning of the third century CE in a time when, according to the Talmud, the persecution of the Jews and the passage of time raised the possibility that the details of the oral traditions of the Pharisees from the Second Temple period (536 BCE – 70 CE) would be forgotten.

- Midrash: This type of exegesis is dated back to Ezra, who “had set his heart to study (לדַרְשׁוֹ) the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach his statutes and ordinances in Israel” (Ezra 7:10). When the exiles returned from Babylonia, they accepted the Torah as their sole authority, and it became necessary to interpret the law in terms of the specifics of new situations. The word “midrash” occurs only twice in the OT, such as the midrash of the prophet Iddo (2 Chron 13:22).

- Talmud: This term is used here to designate the entire body of literature exclusive of the Midrash. The Talmud includes the Mishnah and Gemara. Some Talmudic authors were extremely radical, and expressed freely their opinions on important problems of Bible criticism, such as on the integrity of the text, on doubtful authorship, etc. An Amora’ of the 3rd century AD held the

opinion that the story of Job is purely fictitious, both as to the name of the hero and as to his fate. Therefore, be cautious when using these for assistance. These were not inspired men. Although the actual recording of the oral tradition happened over a period from roughly AD 100 to AD 500, the Talmud undoubtedly contains many of the teachings and discussions about the meaning of Scripture that were prevalent at the time of Yeshua.

b. Ancient Roman commentaries give the advantage of possibly helping to discover the intended meaning of a New Testament passage. The best sources of these are the Church Fathers (second, third, and fourth century AD bishops of Roman cities), who did not write to merely comment on their exegesis, but who were often defending the new faith from multiple heresies.

- The Apostolic Fathers (majority either knew an Apostle or the student of an Apostle)
- Aurelius Augustinus, Bishop of Hippo, 354-430 AD (sometimes used by Reformation thinkers)

2. Contemporary Commentaries

a. Technical commentaries assume that the reader has a certain level of academic training in areas of Greek, Hebrew, Theology and historical studies. This kind of commentary takes little for granted and strives to demonstrate in great detail the exegetical process.

b. Pastoral commentaries assume that the reader is well studied in the word of God and is desiring to provide helpful information regarding context, language and theology for the purpose of teaching, preaching or moderating a bible study. This kind of commentary is less focused on demonstrating the exegetical process as it is focused on offering necessary or unique insight into a passage.

c. Devotional commentaries aim at the every-day church goer who desires to ensure that they are properly understanding the context of a passage of scripture. This kind of commentary is not focused on demonstrating an exegetical process. Rather, it aims to help the reader properly understand the context of the passage via summary and build a bridge to a contemporary context. (Most full-Bible commentaries or study bible commentaries fall into this category)

3. How to Choose a Good Commentary

- Research the author
- Consider the date (The more recent, the better...in most but not all cases.)
- Consider the publisher
- www.bestcommentaries.com