



STATEMENT DB-135

HOW TO CHOOSE A STUDY BIBLE

by John R. Kohlenberger III

Overwhelmed by the number of choices in today's glutted study Bible market? Let an expert on the subject guide you through the maze.

The designation "study Bible" can refer to two things. In some contexts it refers to the translation itself, to a version of the Bible suitable for study. More often, however, it refers to a translation plus a set of features designed to help one read and study the text.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF STUDY BIBLES The Sixteenth through Nineteenth Centuries

The first English translations were study Bibles in both senses. Translators sought to create a version that could be studied by the masses. They wanted to take the text from the tight grip of academics and clerics and put it in the language of the people. They also wanted to provide guidance to their readers with explanatory notes and cross references.

These early study materials were often as polemic as informative. William Tyndale was strangled to death and burned at the stake for the crimes of translating the Bible into English and of challenging the teachings of the Roman Catholic church in his notes. This pattern continued in all Protestant Bible translations of the sixteenth century. The Geneva Bible of 1560, for example, promoted the Reformed doctrines of John Calvin and criticized all contrary systems. At Revelation 9:11 "the Angel of the bottomless pit" is identified as "Antichrist the Pope, king of hypocrites and Satan's ambassador."

Small wonder that the first English translation by Roman Catholics, the Rheims New Testament of 1582, would seem somewhat defensive at this point: "Others have explained these *locusts*, in a most absurd, fanciful, and ridiculous manner: they make *Abaddon* the Pope, and the *locusts* to be friars mendicant, etc. Here it is thought proper, not to enter into any controversy upon that subject, as the inventors of the fancies have been already answered, and fully refuted by many controvertists." The Rheims New Testament also shot back at Protestants and their translations, explaining that it had been developed "with the object of healthfully counteracting the corruptions whereby the heretics have so long lamentably deluded almost the whole of our countrymen."

No fewer than 10 translations of the English Bible appeared between Tyndale's New Testament of 1525 and the turn of the century. The English Bible had seen at least 278 settings and printings in 75 years. No wonder when a new translation was proposed to King James I in 1604, Bishop Richard Bancroft commented that "if every man's humour were followed, there would be no end of translating."¹ James, however, was intrigued by the proposal from Puritan

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John Reynolds, especially because the translation would not have notes. The king detested the notes in the Geneva Bible, especially when they commended characters for choosing to obey God rather than human monarchs, as at Exodus 1:19. With James's approval and patronage the work pressed ahead and the new, nonannotated version was published in 1611. Though received with mixed reviews, this version soon became so popular that all previous translations were eventually put out of print. The version of 1611 began three centuries of its near monopoly as *the* English Bible.

The Twentieth Century

The end of the KJV's monopoly was signaled by the British Revised Version of 1881–85 and the American Standard Version of 1901. Shortly thereafter, two distinct study systems emerged that would start a new trend in Bible presentation. Frank Charles Thompson introduced his Marginal Chain-Reference Bible in 1908 and the following year saw the publication of C. I. Scofield's The Scofield Reference Bible. Thompson provided the model of a study system that was doctrinally objective, while Scofield presented a specific system of interpretation in his notes. Most modern study Bibles fall into one or the other category established by these pioneering works.

The 1970s and early 1980s saw an explosion of English Bible translations. The boom continued in 1995 with the appearance of the New International Reader's Version, the Contemporary English Version, and God's Word. The real noise in the nineties, however, is coming from new study Bibles. Not only are there updated editions of Thompson and Scofield, there are their modern heirs: objectively oriented systems such as The New Open Bible, and doctrinally oriented systems such as The Ryrie Study Bible, The Wesley Bible, and The New Geneva Bible.

Tyndale House introduced The Life Application Bible in 1987 and with it a significant new trend of needs-oriented Bibles. So strong was the response to Zondervan's NIV Women's Devotional Bible in 1990 that it was immediately followed by NIV Devotional Bibles for men, couples, and seniors. Thomas Nelson's Serenity: A Companion for 12-Step Recovery (1990) was matched by Zondervan's NIV Recovery Bible and Tyndale's The Life Recovery Bible. Established devotionals or study booklet series were adapted and presented as study Bibles in such works as The NIV Serendipity Bible for Study Groups (Zondervan, 1989), The International Inductive Study Bible (Harvest, 1992), The Experiencing God Bible (Broadman & Holman, 1993), and The New Daily Walk Bible (Tyndale, 1995).

Because the Bible-buying public seems to have a bottomless appetite for new editions of the Bible, and because Bible typesetting is a much faster process than ever before, Bible publishers are now issuing new Bibles almost at the pace that they issue new books. Gone are the days when a Thompson or a Scofield spent decades developing study systems. Bibles are now being created to catch trends or to associate with the name of a major personality, such as Max Lucado's Inspirational Study Bible (Word, 1995) or the forthcoming Promise-Keeper's Bible.

One could be cynical and critical of the Christian publishing industry for such "felt-needs" Bible publishing. Such products, however, are indeed meeting needs. Craig Featherstone, director of marketing for Thomas Nelson Bibles, uses the model of the Sunday school: as there are different class options for different age groups, different needs, and different interests, so there are different study Bibles.

This historical overview may help explain the incredible proliferation of study Bibles. But it does not explain how to evaluate a particular edition for personal use. To provide guidance in this regard, this article will first survey the range of features that can be found in a study Bible, and then examine specific features of several classic and recent editions. Finally, the article will provide a list of questions one can ask to narrow one's choices to the best possible volume.

A Survey of Major Features

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In the following survey, features that provide explanations are labeled "subjective" because the explanation is subject to the interpreter's point of view. Features that direct one into and within the text are labeled "objective" because they allow the text to speak for itself.

Of course, there can be objectivity in interpretation and subjectivity in the selection of texts. Still, I believe this broad categorization is useful to differentiate between study systems that instruct one what to believe and those that take one to the text so one can make up one's own mind. A study Bible that is primarily objective in its features can be used by anyone, regardless of theological affiliation. On the other hand, a study Bible that is primarily subjective is most useful to someone who agrees with the interpreter — and can even be offensive to someone who does not.

The Translation Proper

The single most important feature of a study Bible is its text — its translation — because the most important activity in studying the Bible is *reading* it. In the nineties, all the best-selling translations have a wide variety of study systems, sizes, and bindings, although not every study system is available in a variety of translations.

Introductions and Outlines

Introductions usually inform one as to the author, readers, date, origin, and content of a book or section of the Bible; outlines display the contents of a book. Introductions and outlines differ in thoroughness and length, but introductions can also differ in perspective.

Those written by conservative scholars take the Bible's self-witness at face value. They agree that Moses wrote all or most of the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible), that Paul wrote 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, and that Peter wrote 2 Peter because the books themselves say so. Most nonconservative or liberal scholars, however, use criteria other than the text of the Bible to evaluate its statements and claims. Thus, most liberal scholars believe that a series of editors wrote the Pentateuch, that a disciple or disciples of Paul wrote the Pastoral Epistles, and that 2 Peter was written a good half-century after Peter's death. As a result, the introductions might be the first place to check to discern whether a study Bible takes a conservative or liberal interpretive perspective.

Cross-References

One of the most useful features of a study Bible for analyzing the biblical text is its reference system. Cross-references link verses and passages on the basis of similar words, phrases, and concepts. Cross-references are usually found in a column beside the text, as in *The Harper Study Bible*; between two columns of text, as in *The NIV Study Bible*; or in the notes, as in *The Companion Bible*. The most specific reference system is in the *Thompson Chain-Reference Bible*, which identifies the topic that is referenced, keys it to a numbered topical index, and sends the reader to the next verse in its chain of references.

Notes

Much of the time, notes simply illuminate the text with definitions of obscure or meaningful words, explanations of customs, cross-references to similar passages, enlightenment from historical background, and similar objective information. As in the case of introductions, the notes often betray an alignment with a particular theological or critical approach to the text.

The notes of the New Jerusalem and New American Bibles, for example, are noticeably Catholic in certain texts. Scofield and Ryrie are both conservative and dispensational. The New Oxford Annotated Bible and The HarperCollins Study Bible take a liberal/critical approach. Dake is pentecostal.

These theological positions can determine the tone and volume of the notes. The Catholic study Bibles tend to emphasize the historical dogmas of the church at key texts such as Matthew 16:17-19. Scofield and Ryrie emphasize distinctions between Israel and the church and literal fulfillment of prophecy (e.g., Acts 15:15-17). The New Geneva Bible takes a nondispensational approach at these texts. Notes in liberal study Bibles often counter the literal understanding of the text (e.g., Josh. 10:11) and point out stories and events they feel are contradictory or fabricated (e.g., Judg. 1; 1 Chron. 21). Pentecostal and charismatic writers give extra attention to texts dealing with healing and spiritual gifts (e.g., Matt. 8:17; Acts 2).

Concordance and Index

As the cross reference system connects key words, phrases, and concepts through the biblical text, the index or concordance lists such connections in a section separate from the text. In function, an index and concordance are about the same. A concordance, however, is more specific in that it deals only with specific words, while an index can deal both with specific words and with general subjects and concepts.

Dictionary

A Bible dictionary, like an English dictionary, defines key technical words of the text. Like an encyclopedia, however, it goes beyond definition to give explanatory articles about Bible people, places, events, and subjects. Its information is drawn primarily from the biblical text and is often supplemented by historical, archaeological, and other biblical reference works.

Maps

Just about every Bible in print has a set of maps bound into it. More recent editions, such as the NIV Study Bible and The Word in Life Study Bible, have dozens of in-text maps detailing locations and movements in the biblical narrative. Many sets of maps are indexed so that countries, cities, and natural landmarks can be easily located.

Charts and Other Illustrations

Charts gather and display biblical and historical data in a more visual form. The Thompson Chain-Reference Bible was one of the first to make extensive use of charts in outlining biblical history, character studies, and topical information. The New Open Bible and The Word in Life Study Bible use charts to diagram and summarize the contents of each book of the Bible. The NIV Study Bible has three dozen charts that gather biblical materials and integrate them with historical and cultural information.

Special Essays and Articles

Most study Bibles have special articles on such subjects as how to understand the Bible, outlines of biblical history and archaeology, theological themes, the history of Bible translation, and so on. One can almost evaluate the articles in a study Bible by its table of contents. The titles and number of pages alone may reveal how useful they are and how often one might consult them. Some are so brief or general that one may read them only once or never at all.

Harmony of the Gospels and Old Testament History

Many study Bibles organize the events of the Gospels into a roughly chronological outline, showing both the parallels and unique accounts of each. This parallel outline is called a harmony, usually presented in the subheads of the biblical text or as a separate feature. Some more recent study Bibles, such as The NIV Study Bible, do the same for OT parallels.

A SURVEY MAJOR STUDY BIBLES² Objectively Oriented Study Bibles

Dickson New Analytical Study Bible (World, 1931; [9th] Revised Edition, 1973) KJV

The Dickson New Analytical Study Bible has about 800 pages of well-designed helps. A general introduction to the Bible and a 184-page Bible dictionary precede the text. Each book has an introduction and an analytical chart, followed by a discussion of that book's outstanding facts. The volume concludes with, among other features, a 42-page topical Bible and a 117-page concordance. A 17,000-entry general index ties together all of these features.

New Open Bible (Nelson, 1975; Expanded Edition, 1990) KJV, NASB, NKJV

The major features of the New Open Bible are its "Biblical Cyclopaedia Index" (a 300-page topical Bible/concordance), lengthy book introductions and outlines, "Christian Life Study Outlines" in the NT, and concordance. Alternate translations and cross references are given at the end of each verse, though the space limitations of this format result in a rather small reference system. Other features include an outline harmony of the Gospels and articles on biblical backgrounds. Expanded editions in 1983, 1985, and 1990 have lengthened book introductions with analytical charts to illustrate their outlines, a 24-page "Visual Survey of the Bible," and 40 pages of key word studies. Because of its variety of features and its availability in three major translations, the New Open Bible is very popular among evangelicals.

Thompson Chain-Reference Bible (Kirkbride, 1908; 5th Improved Edition, 1988) KJV, NIV, NASB, NKJV

The heart of this work is its unique chain-reference system. Thompson developed a "Chain Index" of more than 4,000 biblical subjects that forms a 196-page "Topical Bible and Dictionary" (KJV edition) immediately following the biblical text. Then, rather than simply sprinkling the margins with cross-references, he lists the specific topics in each verse with their index number, and often identifies the next biblical reference in the chain. By turning to the numbered topic in the back or following the references through the text, one is led in a well-organized thematic study.

This Bible also contains more than 50 additional features in its eight "departments," including introductions and outlines of each book, character studies, dozens of historical and topical charts and diagrams, an archaeological dictionary, and a concordance, all of which are keyed by number to the text and index. Because of its valuable reference system and its availability in four of the top five translations, the Thompson Chain-Reference Bible remains a popular choice.

Subjectively Oriented Study Bibles— *Conservative:Dispensational*

Companion Bible (1910; Kregel reprint, 1990) KJV

Originally published in six volumes, this massive work of more than 2,150 pages contains reams of valuable, though sometimes eccentric, study helps. Each book is introduced and outlined, but each section and paragraph is also outlined in further detail in the notes that parallel the text. The notes themselves contain explanatory, topical,

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linguistic, and historical insights and are keyed to detailed studies in the 198 appendices that follow the text. The writer, E. W. Bullinger, is known for his ultradispensational teaching in other writings, but in the Companion Bible his dispensationalism is limited to the book introductions and appendices and is hardly more radical than Scofield or Ryrie.

Ryrie Study Bible (Moody, 1976 [NT], 1978; Expanded Edition, 1994) KJV, NASB, NIV

The Ryrie Study Bible can be characterized as the Scofield Reference Bible for the end of the twentieth century. Though Ryrie is an advocate of dispensationalism like Scofield, he does not promote it as emphatically. Notes contain explanatory, historical, and cultural information as well as doctrinal insights. The expanded editions of 1994 incorporated additional notes and many in-text graphics and maps to the classic text. Unique to this study Bible is its 22-page "Synopsis of Bible Doctrine," which outlines major elements of theology and lists the interpretations of several major systems at each point. Available in three of the top five translations, the Ryrie Study Bible has a strong following among evangelicals.

Scofield Reference Bible (Oxford, 1909, 1917) and **New Scofield Reference Bible** (Oxford, 1967) KJV, NIV, NASB, NKJV

Perhaps no study Bible has been so widely used or so strongly criticized as the Scofield Reference Bible. Its wide use results from its excellent organization, its high view of the inspiration and unity of Scripture, and its interpretive scheme. The interpretive scheme, dispensationalism, has also generated most of its criticism. Critics of dispensationalism feel it cuts the Bible into too many pieces, teaches different ways of salvation, and wrongly expects a literal future fulfillment of prophecies relating to Israel. Nonetheless, Scofield retains a strong following among conservative evangelicals.

Conservative: *Evangelical*

Disciple's Study Bible (Broadman & Holman, 1988) NIV

The notes and essays of this study edition are exclusively theological, developing 27 major doctrines (e.g., God, salvation, Christian ethics) throughout the notes. Essays summarize the history of doctrines, with bibliographies for further study and an index to all the notes, and offer practical "Life Helps." Among the doctrinally oriented Study Bibles, the Disciple's Study Bible is one of the most thorough.

Harper Study Bible (Zondervan, 1964; revised 1985, 1991) NASB, NRSV

Harold Lindsell edited the original RSV edition in 1964 and the NASB in 1985; the NRSV edition was edited by Verlyn Verbrugge. Book introductions precede the text, as do general outlines which are expanded in detail in the text itself. References are in a single side column, and explanatory, historical, and theological comments are in notes at the bottom of the page. These notes are indexed by subject. One of the few evangelical study Bibles currently available in the NRSV, the Harper Study Bible remains a useful resource.

Hebrew-Greek Key Study Bible (AMG/Baker, 1984) KJV, NASB

Spiros Zodhiates's Hebrew-Greek Key Study Bible attempts to communicate insights from the original languages to the English reader. Several key words in each verse are underlined and footnoted according to Strong's numbering system. Strong's Hebrew and Greek dictionaries are reproduced in the back of the Bible. Zodhiates has also included three major features of his own. First, 170 pages of similarly numbered "Lexical Aids" expand on Strong's definitions of key words. Second, he has noted key aspects of Greek grammar with a system of abbreviations. Third, he has provided explanatory notes for difficult and important passages. The NIV edition planned for 1996 will contain a more up-to-date analysis of the NIV and the original languages and completely new dictionaries.

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Life Application Bible (Tyndale, 1987, 1993) KJV, LB, NIV, NKJV, NRSV

In addition to its application emphasis, this trend-setting volume has much explanatory and historical information in its introductions, charts, maps, and character studies, and thus should not be overlooked as a research-oriented study Bible. Its materials were generated by Youth for Christ under the general editorship of Bruce B. Barton, with more than a dozen theological reviewers from well-known evangelical institutions. Because of its practical features and its availability in five of the top ten translations, the Life Application Bible is currently one of the best-selling study Bibles on the market.

New Student Bible (Zondervan, 1986, 1992) KJV, NIV, NRSV

Originally intended for youth, this easy-to-use study edition has been purchased by millions of adults for their own use. Designed by Philip Yancey and Tim Stafford to provide easy access and useful insights to beginning readers, the New Student Bible starts with a "3-Track Plan for Reading the Bible." Track one introduces the Bible with two-week, one-chapter-a-day reading guides to the Life of Jesus, the life of Paul, and the Old Testament. Track 2 samples every book of the Bible, 186 chapters in six months. Track 3 is a three-year, whole Bible reading schedule. Introductions attempt to capture the essence of each book in contemporary terms and images. Almost every page of the text has at least one boxed explanatory comment or life-related insight to give meaning and momentum to daily Bible reading. These materials are indexed in a 30-page Subject Guide at the end of the book.

NIV Study Bible (Zondervan, 1985, 1995) NIV

The NIV Study Bible, as the name implies, was created specifically for this version. Edited by Kenneth L. Barker, its 44 contributors (37 of whom were NIV translators) represent a wide denominational spectrum of international evangelicalism. A unique feature of this Bible is that the contributors represent no exclusive theological alignment. The notes often present more than one possible understanding. An example is Revelation 20:2, where three major perspectives on the millennium are summarized, as opposed to Ryrie and Scofield, which are exclusively premillennial. The 1995 revision enhanced the readability and graphics and added some notes. The Concordia Self-Study Bible (Concordia, 1986) is a specialized edition with additional materials from a conservative Lutheran perspective. Because of the thoroughness and quality of its features, the NIV Study Bible has sold nearly three million copies and is this writer's preferred choice.

The Quest Study Bible (Zondervan, 1994) NIV

Christianity Today provided the materials for this unique study Bible. Its notes are in a question-answer format. The questions were drawn from a survey of more than 1,000 people; the answers were provided by more than 100 contributors under the editorship of Marshall Shelley. These notes are also indexed by subject. Key biblical and theological terms, like grace, parable, and soul are flagged with a raised ^D to indicate they are defined in the concise dictionary. The Quest Study Bible can be recommended to and used by Christians as well as seekers.

Word in Life Study Bible ([NT] Nelson, 1993) NKJV, NRSV

This seeks to be a "user-friendly" study Bible with its extensive use of boxed and shaded graphics, articles, maps, and line drawings in a two-color presentation. Its study features and the biblical text are both indexed for more systematic study. The quantity of its features and its generous type size are underlined by the fact that the NT alone fills more than 1,000 pages.

Conservative: Pentecostal / Charismatic

Dake's Annotated Reference Bible (Dake, 1961 [NT], 1963) KJV

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Dake's is the product of 43 years of study and is one of the few study Bibles that has more words in its helps than in the Bible. Most of Finis Jennings Dake's materials are set in two columns that appear on each page beside the two columns of biblical text. His introduction claims 500,000 cross-references, 35,000 notes and comments, 8,000 outlines, and 2,000 illustrations. Many of these materials are lists of observations from the text, but much is interpretive, with emphasis on prophecy, healing, and the miraculous.

This work contains a great deal that is speculative and unorthodox, such as Dake's belief in God's "spirit body" with "bodily parts" that "goes from place to place" (pp. 96-97 [NT]), his strong teaching on racial segregation (e.g., pp. 148 [OT] and 159 [NT]), and his dogmatism on just about every subject he addresses. The Dake's study Bible cannot be recommended to journal readers, charismatic or not.

Full Life Study Bible (Zondervan, 1992) KJV, NIV

Primarily the work of Donald C. Stamps and J. Wesley Adams, with nine editorial advisors, this study Bible represents the mainstream of modern charismatic theology. A system of icons in the margins highlights themes of interest, such as the baptism of the Holy Spirit, gifts, healing, and faith that moves mountains. Seventy-three essays expand on key concepts as well as the editors' personal emphases. For example, three of the essays argue strongly that all positive references to wine in the Bible refer to unfermented grape juice and that all Christians are required to abstain from alcohol. The Full Life Study Bible is the most moderate of the charismatic study Bibles and can be recommended to journal readers.

Spirit-Filled Life Bible (Nelson, 1991) KJV, NKJV

The Spirit-Filled Life Bible is the product of 67 contributors, many of them high-profile pastors such as Jack Hayford (general editor), Frederick Price, and Oral Roberts. In addition to book introductions and textual notes, "Kingdom Dynamics" discuss 22 major topics — such as evangelism, seed faith, prosperity, gifts, and healing — at 350 texts. "Word Wealth" studies offer 550 brief Greek and Hebrew word studies, indexed to Strong's numbering system. "Truth in Action" sections stress personal application at the end of each book. The notes and topical studies show both continuities and contrasts within charismatic theology. At Malachi 3:8-12, for example, the cautious notes by John Louwse contrast to the Kingdom Dynamics by Frederick Price, who states that if one does not tithe properly one is robbing God, and the "law of God cannot work on your behalf." The reader is thus cautioned that this study Bible contains both moderate charismatic theology and more extreme "word-of-faith" elements.

The Word Study Bible (Harrison House, 1990) KJV

The Word Study Bible is a two-column, red-letter text edition of the KJV with a reference system of 12 topics of primary interest to the charismatic movement. Relevant verses are identified with a symbol, but have no further explanation. All references are listed in a topical concordance. Each topic is summarized in an eight-page article by a well-known author, such as Kenneth Hagin on faith, Kenneth Copeland on prosperity, and Marilyn Hickey on victorious living. Because this work represents the "health and wealth" or "word-of-faith" perspective of the charismatic movement, it cannot be recommended to journal readers.³

Conservative: Reformed

New Geneva Study Bible (Nelson, 1994) NKJV

Consciously titled after the influential, Calvinistic Geneva Bible, this work is subtitled "Bringing the Light of the Reformation to Scripture." Fifty-five scholars under general editor R. C. Sproul contributed to its contents. Its informative notes are supplemented by nearly 100 theological essays, 61 maps, and 47 charts. Its theological orientation is Reformed and Calvinistic, but its materials recognize a range of understanding within that tradition. The introduction to Revelation, for example, summarizes the three major millennial perspectives without stating that

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any one position is *the* Reformed position. This new volume should be well received and widely circulated within the Reformed community.

Conservative: Wesleyan / Holiness

The Wesley Bible (Nelson, 1990) NKJV

This work is the modern heir to John Wesley's Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament (1755) and claims to be the only study Bible written from a Wesleyan-Arminian perspective since Wesley's Notes. Annotations provide general explanations, promote Wesleyan theology, and emphasize holy living. Fifty-five "Focus Notes" expand on various topics, such as "Two Kinds of Sin" and "The Terminology of Entire Sanctification." Forty-seven maps, 51 charts, 16 essays, and a concordance round out the major features of this volume.

Nonconservative: Mainline Protestant

Because the following resources do not approach the biblical text from a conservative or orthodox perspective, they cannot be recommended to journal readers as a primary study Bible. They are included in this article for the sake of thoroughness.

Cambridge Annotated Study Bible (Cambridge, 1993) NRSV

The Cambridge Annotated Study Bible is primarily the work of Howard Clark Kee, a New Testament scholar, with contributions by Richard L. Jeske. One hundred pages of general essays and book introductions precede 1,065 pages of biblical text (without Apocrypha) and annotations. The notes summarize sections and paragraphs of biblical texts. The cross-reference system is separated, but is not dramatically larger than the references offered in the notes of the editions below. Unique to this volume is a 65-page glossary, combining the features of a Bible dictionary and subject index. A Gospel harmony and eight color maps complete the features.

HarperCollins Study Bible (HarperCollins, 1993) NRSV

The HarperCollins Study Bible devotes 2,388 pages to biblical text (including Apocrypha) and study helps. The 61 contributors represent Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish perspectives and are all members of the Society of Biblical Literature. Three of the four associate editors and nine of the contributors are female. The book introductions and annotations share a modern critical perspective with the Oxford and Cambridge editions. Comments attempt to explain the text in light of modern linguistic and archaeological research without a theological bias; however, the authors do regularly point out what they consider to be errors and inconsistencies (see the introduction to Exodus and notes at Josh. 11:22; 1 Sam. 2:1). The notes are the most voluminous of the three and also contain 19 in-text maps, 25 charts, 16 color maps, and an index.

New Oxford Annotated Bible (Oxford, 1977, 1991) NRSV

This is the revised and enlarged edition of the Oxford Annotated Bible (1962, 1973, 1977), widely used in mainline Protestant and Roman Catholic churches and a standard textbook in colleges, seminaries, and divinity schools for three decades. It enjoys the prestige of having been coedited by Bruce M. Metzger, chairperson of the NRSV Bible Committee. Some 2,081 pages are devoted to the Bible, Apocrypha, and study helps from 36 contributors. Features include two-dozen essays, introductions and annotations to each book of the Bible and Apocrypha, 16 full-color maps, and indexes to annotations and maps. Available with and without Apocrypha, it is the standard nonconservative edition of the NRSV.

Oxford Study Bible (Oxford, 1992) REB

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This volume is a revision and update of the Oxford Study Edition of the New English Bible (Oxford, 1976). Editor M. Jack Suggs served as NT editor to both works. Nineteen articles by 20 contributors fill 197 pages. Each book in each section has its own brief introduction, summarizing its contents and the scholarly consensus as to author, date, and setting. Brief annotations, containing commentary and cross-references, are at the bottom of the page. A 21-page index to people, places, and themes in the Bible follows. Fourteen Oxford Bible maps round out the features.

Nonconservative: *Roman Catholic*

The following three study Bibles are post-Vatican II in scholarship and thus are very similar in perspective to the mainline Protestant Bibles above, and thus cannot be recommended to journal readers. Unique is their Catholic distinctive, which is often brought out in the annotations to the NAB and NJB.

The Catholic Study Bible (Oxford, 1990) NAB

Thirteen scholars, including general editor Donald Senior, contributed to the 577 pages of "Reading Guides" that precede the text. These contain brief academic introductions and section-by-section surveys of each book of the Bible, with bibliographies for further reading.

The Catholic Bible: Personal Study Edition (Oxford, 1995) NAB

Most of the features of this work build on The Catholic Study Bible and are presented as "Reading Guides" to the books of the Bible in the first 497 pages of the book. These introduce the sections and books of the Bible, expand on special themes, define terms, and ask study questions. It was edited by Jean Marie Hiesberger with four contributors, three editorial advisors, and three educational advisors.

New Jerusalem Bible (Doubleday, 1966, 1985)

The NJB and the Jerusalem Bible it replaced were both translations and study Bibles from their beginning, featuring introductions, cross-references, and annotations. These materials were produced by the Ecole Biblique in Jerusalem. Each section of the Bible (e.g., Pentateuch, Prophets, Gospels) is given its own broad introduction. Specific book introductions are also a part of this general literary and historical treatment. The cross-references and notes, however, are more numerous and more thorough. The notes occasionally have a distinct Catholic flavor (e.g., p. 1969), but for the most part represent a widely acceptable critical approach.

HOW TO CHOOSE A STUDY BIBLE

Determine the Translation

The most important decision to make when choosing a Bible is selecting a translation. If a particular translation is preferred, one's choices in study Bibles are narrowed to a handful. On the other hand, if one cannot decide between two or three translations, the study edition itself may settle the issue.

Since the mid 1980s, the NIV has been the best-selling English Bible in the US; together the NIV and the KJV account for as much as 60 percent of Bible sales.⁴ Most major study Bibles are available in one or both of these versions. Also in the top 10, with study editions recommended to journal readers, are the NKJV, NRSV, and NASB.⁵ All of these versions are dependable and useful for serious study and personal devotions.

Study Bibles Reviewed in This Article

(* not recommended to journal readers)

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I. Subjectively Oriented

A. Conservative: Dispensational

1. **Companion Bible** (Kregel) KJV
2. **Ryrie Study Bible** (Moody, Expanded Editions) KJV, NASB, NIV
3. **Scofield Reference Bible** (Oxford) KJV
4. **New Scofield Reference Bible** (Oxford) KJV, NIV, (World) NASB, (Nelson) NKJV

B. Conservative: Evangelical

1. **Disciple's Study Bible** (Broadman & Holman) NIV
2. **Harper Study Bible** (Zondervan) NASB, NRSV
3. **Hebrew-Greek Key Study Bible** (AMG) KJV, NASB
4. **Life Application Bible** (Tyndale) KJV, LB, NIV, NKJV, NRSV
5. **New Student Bible** (Zondervan) KJV, NIV, NRSV
6. **NIV Study Bible** (Zondervan) NIV
7. **The Quest Study Bible** (Zondervan) NIV
8. **Word In Life Study Bible** ([NT] Nelson) NKJV, NRSV

C. Conservative: Pentecostal / Charismatic

1. * **Dake's Annotated Reference Bible** (Dake) KJV
2. **Full Life Study Bible** (Zondervan) KJV, NIV
3. **Spirit-Filled Life Bible** (Nelson) KJV, NKJV
4. * **The Word Study Bible** (Harrison House) KJV

D. Conservative: Reformed

New Geneva Study Bible (Nelson) NKJV

E. Conservative: Wesleyan / Holiness

The Wesley Bible (Nelson) NKJV

F. Nonconservative: Mainline Protestant

1. * **Cambridge Annotated Study Bible** (Cambridge) NRSV
2. * **HarperCollins Study Bible** (HarperCollins) NRSV
3. * **New Oxford Annotated Bible** (Oxford) NRSV
4. * **Oxford Study Bible** (Oxford) REB

G. Nonconservative: Roman Catholic

1. * **The Catholic Bible: Personal Study Edition** (Oxford) NAB
2. * **The Catholic Study Bible** (Oxford) NAB
3. * **New Jerusalem Bible** (Doubleday)

II. Objectively Oriented

A. **Dickson New Analytical Study Bible** (World) KJV

B. **New Open Bible** (Nelson, Expanded Edition) KJV, NASB, NKJV

C. **Thompson Chain-Reference Bible** (Kirkbride) KJV, NIV, NASB, NKJV

Determine Your Approach

New students of the Bible or those who simply want help to understand what they read may prefer an edition that majors in annotations to the text, listed in section I (to the right of this page) on subjectively oriented study Bibles. The first choice one must make relates to general theological orientation: conservative, nonconservative, or Catholic. If one chooses a conservative orientation (as the journal recommends), one's second choice may involve a more specific theological alignment. Experienced students or those who want to dig for their own answers can skip to section II on objectively oriented study Bibles.

Make Comparisons; Make Your Choice

Once one finds the subdivision of the category that most appeals to one's research needs, all that remains is to compare the various offerings in that subdivision to find the most useful study system. One's final choice is aesthetic and utilitarian: binding and color. One may choose a paperback or cloth edition, usually under \$40, before committing to a genuine leather, lifetime Bible that can set one back as much as \$100.

John R. Kohlenberger III is the author or co-editor of 25 biblical reference books including *Words about the Word: A Guide to Choosing and Using Your Bible* (Zondervan), *All about Bibles* (Oxford University Press), and *The NIV Exhaustive Concordance* (Zondervan).

NOTES

¹F.F. Bruce, *The History of the Bible in English* (New York: Oxford, 1978), 96.

²Bible version abbreviations used in this article: KJV (King James Version); LB (Living Bible); NAB (New American Bible); NASB (New American Standard Bible); NIV (New International Version); NKJV (New King James Version); NRSV (New Revised Standard Version); REB (Revised English Bible); and RSV (Revised Standard Version).

³For a comprehensive Christian critique of word-of-faith theology, see Hank Hanegraaff, *Christianity in Crisis* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1993).

⁴This is based on actual sales statistics published by Spring Arbor Distributors, the largest distributor of Christian books to the retail trade, and monthly sales statistics gathered and published by *Bookstore Journal*, the official publication of the Christian Booksellers Association.

⁵Also in the top 10 are the LB and The Message, neither of which should be used for study; the NAB, which is not available in the study format that can be recommended to JOURNAL readers; and the New Century Version, which is not yet available in a full-featured Study Bible.