

## Special Section: Understanding Scripture

### Dave's Top 10 Bible Reference Tools

#### A guide to establishing a Bible reference library

By David W. Henderson

Do you ever find yourself looking at the mounds of massive reference books at your local Christian bookstore and thinking that maybe something along the lines of *Life's Little Instruction Book* is more your speed?

As soon as you hear the words “reference works,” does your face twist into a grimace, and captivating titles like these begin to scroll across your mind?

*The Bible: A Syllable-by-Syllable Commentary in 37 Volumes*, by Oh Soo Long

*Livestock Holding Structures in the Ru Ral Ur Ben Tell*

*Excavations: The Untold Story*, by Doug Aroundalot

*All the Rodents of the Bible*, by I. N. Joy Ratz

*The Use of the Article “An” in Ezekiel 8–10 and Its Redemptive-Historical Significance*, by

Arendt I. Bright

*Ancient Ugaritic Made Easy*, by Hugh Cares

Or this bestseller . . .

*The Sea of Galilee and the Bermuda Triangle: Is There A Connection?* by U. F. Ozareel

Definitely not something you'd ever want to pull off a shelf, let alone own.

The task of wading your way through the slough of Bible study resource materials can be overwhelming. Concordances, grammars, lexicons, atlases, commentaries—what are these things?

Well, I'm here to help you make your way through this maze of thick books with odd-sounding titles. Here is my list of the Top 10 Basic Bible Reference Tools That No Student of the Bible Would Want to Be Without.

I've listed these in order of importance. If you're building a basic library of tools to help you better study the Bible, start with the first one, and then work your way down.

“And the number one basic Bible reference tool that no student of the Bible would want to be without is . . .”

#### 1. A good translation of the Bible with basic study tools

A good translation is marked by three things: It faithfully translates the original languages, it reflects the basic intent of the whole of the Scriptures (sound theology), and it is easy to read and understand. The best of these are the *New International Version*, and the *Good News* translation, followed closely by the *New Revised Standard Version*.

When you purchase a Bible, make sure you get a version that includes a concordance (a list of key words in the Bible and where to find them), a cross-reference system (a way of finding other verses on the same topic), and maps. Bibles that include these are often called “reference

editions.”

Study Bibles have become very popular, and many of them, like the *NIV Study Bible*, are great tools and an excellent investment—but only if you don’t fall into letting the commentary on the bottom of the page do your thinking for you. The *International Inductive Study Bible* and the *Quest Study Bible* hold a lot of appeal for me for this reason.

## 2. A Bible dictionary or encyclopedia

Apart from the Bible there is no other book more important or valuable. Here’s why. First, you can look up unfamiliar places or people and get a summary of their significance. But you can also use a Bible dictionary to find valuable information about the setting, authorship, and content of a book you want to study. And a Bible dictionary can be used to look up crucial words and phrases like “grace” or “wrath,” letting you find out what the word means and what makes it so important in biblical writing. I recommend the one-volume *New Bible Dictionary* (IVP), the two-volume *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, or—my favorite—the inviting three-part *Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Tyndale).

## 3. Books that teach you how to study the Bible effectively

How do you make sense of a passage? Where do you start, and where do you go from there? A couple of books are great investments in this area. My first choice would be Fee and Stuart’s *How to Read the Bible for All It’s Worth* (Zondervan). It is indispensable, both for its basic study principles and for its excellent explanation of how to approach the different kinds of literature—such as parables or poetry—that you find in the Bible. A similar overview work that holds a lot of promise is Mickelsen’s *Understanding Scripture* (Hendrickson).

Also valuable are two books that teach the inductive Bible study method, either of which would be worthwhile to own and use: Kay Arthur’s *How to Study Your Bible*, (Harvest House) and *Observe, Interpret, Apply* (Victor) by Hans Finzel. Finally, Dave Veerman’s *How to Apply the Bible* (Tyndale) is a helpful tool for that difficult final step of bringing the truth home to our hearts and lives.

## 4. Books that give general background about life in the biblical world

The more we can know what life was like in Bible times, the more we can understand clearly what the Bible meant when it was written, and the more faithfully we can apply it. What was daily life like back then? What did a typical person spend his life doing? What were the influences that shaped him?

Here are several books that will help you answer those questions. Keener’s *Bible Background Commentary for the New Testament* (IVP) provides cultural, political, and religious background in a particularly helpful verse-by-verse format. Other books give a more topical picture of life in biblical times, dealing with issues like warfare, home life, dress, and the like. I have enjoyed Thompson’s *Handbook of Life in Bible Times* (IVP)—if you can only purchase one book, that’s my recommendation—as well as Edersheim’s classic *Sketches of Jewish Social Life* (Eerdmans) and *Daily Life in the Time of Jesus* (Servant) by Daniel-Rops. Also worth a look is Pilch and Malina’s *Biblical Social Values and Their Meaning* (Hendrickson), which gives an intriguing comparison between the values of today’s western world and those in biblical times.

## 5. Other helpful translations of the Bible

Comparing different translations is a great way of getting a sense of the Bible’s original

languages. By reading different translations side by side you'll find not only the places where there is agreement among scholars about what the Greek or Hebrew means, but also those places where there is a range of possible meanings. Beyond that, you'll see different ways that translators attempt to go from Middle Eastern idiom to contemporary western ways of expression. This can really help you get to the heart of what a passage is saying.

I recommend having a copy of each of the three versions I list in point one. In addition, I'd also encourage the purchase of two other versions, the *New American Standard* version (so faithful in its word-for-word translation that it can be almost wooden) and Eugene Peterson's enormously engaging *The Message* (a translation of the New Testament that uses a much more informal phrase-by-phrase approach).

While the *King James Version* is generally accurate, and certainly both beautiful and theologically sound, I discourage its use for study because of its 350-year-old vocabulary.

## **6. Additional basic reference helps: a complete concordance and a cross-reference tool**

Eventually, in order to really pursue a topic in the Bible, it is helpful to go beyond the basic reference tools that are included in the back of your Bible. Kohlenberger and Goodrick have developed a great tool, *The NIV Exhaustive Concordance* (Zondervan), which lists every use of every word in the Bible, allowing you to do thorough word studies. To pursue an idea or a theme (rather than a specific word), either the *Thompson Chain-Reference Bible* or *Nave's NIV Topical Bible* would be a good investment.

## **7. A systematic biblical theology**

When you're studying a specific passage, it is always helpful to see how what it teaches fits with the rest of what the Bible says on the same topic. Over the ages theologians have worked to sum up what the whole Bible teaches on topics like sin, the work of Jesus on the cross, end times, and so on. These compilations are called systematic (in other words, topical) theologies. Hands down, the best of these is Millard Erickson's *Christian Theology* (Baker).

## **8. Special tools to help you make sense of the Old Testament**

A good atlas is especially valuable in helping you follow the flow of battle accounts, trace the wanderings of the Israelites, or keep up with the ever-changing borders of Judah and Israel. I would recommend either the *Atlas of the Bible* (Facts on File) by Rogerson, or *Rasmussen's Zondervan NIV Atlas of the Bible*. Pfeiffer's *Old Testament History* (Baker) is also a helpful tool, providing an overall framework for OT events that can help you better follow the stop-rewind-fast-forward layout of the Bible.

## **9. Language tools**

Eventually students of the Bible want to know more about the languages that stand behind our English translations. If you're looking for a less expensive and simpler method to learn about the use and meaning of important words in the original languages, Kohlenberger's *Exhaustive Concordance* (mentioned in 6 above) can be paired up nicely with Richard's *Expository Dictionary of Bible Words* (Zondervan)—my choice—or *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Revell) by Vine, Unger, and White.

For the more serious student, I recommend the great set of reference works developed by Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study New Testament and Old Testament* (*NASB*)

(AMG). Using these you can easily find out the specific Greek or Hebrew words in the passage you're studying. From there you can go to Brown's three-volume *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* ([Zondervan](#)) or Zodhiates's single volume *Complete Word Study Dictionary* (AMG) to find out the meaning of NT words, and to the two-volume *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* [Moody](#) by Harris, Archer, and Waltke for words from the OT.

## 10. Commentaries

In my opinion, the best route is to purchase one or two good commentaries each time you come to a new book you want to study. Excellent commentaries—like the *New International Commentary* series ([Eerdmans](#)) and those published by Word, [IVP](#), and [Tyndale](#)—abound. Doug Stuart's *Guide to Selecting Bible Commentaries* (currently out of print), regularly updated to include new releases, is a great help here! One- or two-volume commentaries are generally too brief to be of much help, but two nice exceptions are the *New Bible Commentary* ([IVP](#)) and the *NIV Bible Commentary* ([Zondervan](#)). Also a great help is the *New Bible Companion* ([Tyndale](#)) by Hughes and Laney, providing nice overviews and ready background materials for each book of the Bible. If you are eager to get a complete commentary set, I think the *Expositor's Bible Commentary* ([Zondervan](#)) is probably the best of the bunch for your money.

## Other Resources

Some of you may be interested in knowing what Bible reference works might be available on computer. For that I'd point you to Jeffrey Hsu's *Computer Bible Study* ([Word](#)), an updated look at what is out there on CD-ROM and disks.

To locate any of the resources mentioned in this article, contact your local Christian bookstore.

One other hot tip: get on the mailing list of [Christian Book Distributors](#). They sell the very best reference works—including virtually all of the ones cited here—at ridiculously low prices. They also have a technical assistance team that will go out of their way to answer your questions. Their number is (508) 977-5000.

Happy studying. Oh, and make sure you pick up that gem on the Bermuda Triangle, would you?



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People would be surprised to know that despite Colorado winters, Dave wears shorts and drives with his sunroof open year-round.