

Session 8

Bible study tools

In this section we introduce a number of Bible reading and study tools which are available to help us read and understand the Bible. These range from simple tools like Bible dictionaries to more complicated tools such as concordances and lexicons.

Bible dictionaries and encyclopedias

Dictionaries of the Bible give information about a wide range of Bible subjects arranged alphabetically. Suppose you just read about King Darius in Daniel and you want to know more about him. Your Bible dictionary will have an article about Darius including the verses you have just read and other Bible references. It will probably introduce information from history and archaeology as well.

A Bible encyclopedia is similar except it usually has more detailed articles about more subjects and is published in several volumes.

Remember that dictionaries and encyclopedias are the work of uninspired men and women commenting about inspired Scripture passages. Such reference books are very useful, but they should always be read carefully with an eye toward scepticism. Verify or disprove what they suggest for yourself, from the Scriptures.

Case study: 1 Kings 15:9–14

Use a Bible dictionary, footnotes and/or cross-references to answer the following questions.

1. What was an Asherah pole?
2. Where was the Kidron Valley?
3. What were “high places”?
4. What other Bible passages record the reign of Asa?
5. How can we explain the apparent contradiction between 1 Kings 15:14 and 2 Chronicles 14:3?
6. What lessons are there for us in this passage?

Commentaries

A commentary is a book which follows the Bible order exactly, and adds comment on the interpretation of the text, historical details, etc., as it proceeds. Commentaries are certainly helpful in finding out how other people have understood the Bible. There are many commentaries available on the Bible from single books to sets of commentaries each consisting of many volumes.

When a passage is unclear to us, and following cross-references or words in a concordance has not shed any light on the passage, it is sometimes useful to consult a commentary to see how other Bible readers have interpreted the passage.

Example: Matthew 11:28–30

Jesus said:

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

From the Bible Background Commentary:

When a man carried a yoke he would carry it on his shoulders (cf., e.g., Jer 27:2); Judaism applied this image of subjection to obedience. Jewish people spoke of carrying the yoke of God’s law and the yoke of his kingdom, which one accepted by acknowledging that God was one and by keeping his commandments. Matthew intends Jesus’ words about rest as a contrast with Pharisaic Sabbath rules.

From the Tyndale New Testament Commentaries:

The yoke was sometimes in the Old Testament a symbol of oppression (Isa. 9:4; 58:6; Jer. 27–28), but was also used in a good sense of the service of God (Jer. 2:20; Lam. 3:27). Later it came to be used commonly in Jewish writings for obedience to the law—the ‘yoke of the law’ is one every Jew should be proud to carry. Such a yoke should not be oppressive, for after all the function of a yoke is to make a burden easier to carry. But . . . the law itself had become a burden, and a new yoke was needed to lighten the load. Jesus’ yoke is *easy*, not because it makes lighter demands, but because it represents entering a disciple-relationship with one who is *gentle and lowly in heart*. . . This attractive aspect of Jesus is a vital counterbalance to the sterner side seen in Matthew 7:13–27; 10:34–39; etc. To emphasise either to the exclusion of the other is to miss the real Jesus.

Concordances

A concordance is simply an alphabetic list of all the different words that occur in a book and where they are to be found. For many years, Bible students have used Bible concordances. These large books are invaluable for serious study. With an exhaustive concordance to the Bible version you read, it is possible to locate any verse in the Bible provided you can remember at least one key word of the verse.

They are also useful in performing word studies. For example, if you are studying Abraham, a concordance will help you find all the passages in the Bible where Abraham is mentioned.

The most useful concordances are “exhaustive”. That is, they contain *every* word in the Bible. Non-exhaustive concordances contain a selection of the most important words. Some Bibles contain a limited concordance as an appendix.

Concordance exercises
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Find references to God as a “Rock” in the Psalms.2. Where is the quotation “they shall run and not grow weary, they shall walk and not grow faint”?3. Find references to the “Son of Man” in the gospels.

Topical Bibles

A Topical Bible lists Bible passages relevant to themes. You can look up subjects such as “money”, “covenant”, “adultery”, “elders”, etc. Unlike a concordance, the passages listed do not necessarily contain the key word.

For example, one Topical Bible contains the following entry.

<p>Money</p> <p> blessings of Pr 3:2,10; 10:15,22; Ecc 10:19; Lk 16:9.</p> <p> dangers of 1Ki 9:4–5; Mk 4:19; 10:21; Lk 12:33.</p> <p> love of Pr 23:4; Ecc 5:10; Ac 5:1</p> <p> true wealth Lk 16:11; 2Co 6:10</p> <p> using religion for 2Ki 5:26; Eze 13:19; 2Co 2:17; 11:7</p> <p> and the wicked Ps 49; 73:18–20; Isa 53:9.</p>

Lexicons

A Bible lexicon is an extended dictionary of the Greek words used in the New Testament or the Hebrew words used in the Old Testament. It is an alphabetical arrangement of the words with their definitions and a discussion on how they are used in Scripture.

The principal use of a lexicon is for understanding the precise meaning of a word. It also provides insight into how the given word is used elsewhere in Scripture.

Exercise: Satan

1. What word is translated “Satan” in the Old Testament?
2. How else is this word translated?
3. How does this help explain the apparent contradiction between 1 Chronicles 21:1 and 2 Samuel 24:1?

Case study: John 21:15–17

When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?” “Yes Lord”, he said, “you know that I love you”. Jesus said, “Feed my lambs.” Again Jesus said, “Simon son of John, do you truly love me?” He answered, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” Jesus said “Take care of my sheep.” The third time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, “Do you love me?” He said “Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Feed my sheep.”

Two different words are used for ‘love’ in this passage. Jesus uses one and Peter another. Looking it up in Strong’s Concordance we see that Jesus uses word 25 and Peter uses word 5368. The lexicon at the back of the concordance gives the words and their meanings:

25. ἀγαπάω agapaō, ag-ap-ah'-o; to love (in a social or moral sense):—(be-) love (-ed.). Comp. 5368.

5368. φιλέω philēō, fil'-eh'-o; to be a friend to (fond of [an individual or an object]), i.e. have affection for (denoting personal attachment, as a matter of sentiment or feeling; while 25 is wider, embracing espec. the judgment and the deliberate assent of the will as a matter of principle, duty and propriety: the former being chiefly of the heart and the latter of the head); spec. to kiss (as mark of tenderness):—kiss, love.

The first word involves a deeper, self-sacrificing love. The second is more of a friendly affection. Jesus was asking Peter whether he really loved him in the sense of being prepared to sacrifice his own desires. Peter was only prepared to say that he felt love for Jesus. A week or so before this conversation, Peter felt his life was threatened and to save himself he had denied he knew Jesus (see Luke 22:54–62). So now he was not prepared to say he was ready to love Jesus in the deeper sense because he felt he had previously let Jesus down.

Without knowing the Greek words translated “love” in this passage, the meaning of the conversation would be unclear.

