I. WHAT IS A COMMENTARY?

In its most basic sense, a commentary simply makes comments on a text. In the best commentaries, these comments are not random or impressionistic statements that may or may not have a legitimate connection with the meaning of the text at hand. Rather, they focus on the text, and on making the text’s meaning more clear.

Commentaries do this by using different tools. The first step is determining which text is to be clarified. Many commentators provide their own original translation and textual notes, which explain which ancient versions are being followed. Others use an established English translation as the basis for their comments. The commentaries by Woudstra, Butler, Boling, Freedman, and Nelson mentioned below provide an original translation, while the others use an existing translation. The best commentators always refer to the original languages in their research, however, and all 13 works evaluated below do this. Expositors whose Hebrew is weak, or who do not know Hebrew, should not despair. All the commentaries recommended below can be used profitably even without such a knowledge; most of them refer to technical details in footnotes, endnotes, or special sections, and, when Hebrew is included in the text, it is usually transliterated into Roman characters and translated into English.

Good commentaries orient readers to the manifold settings of the text. These include historical, archaeological, literary, and theological settings, at least. Knowing about the historical context of the events written about in a text, and what light archaeological excavations might have shed on them, is important for an expositor in establishing a proper framework for interpretation. An expositor should also have confidence in the historical accuracy of the text, and attention to the historical context can help in this regard, as well. The literary and theological settings of the text concern how it fits in with the message of other Biblical books and the major theological motifs of the Bible, and the best commentaries include attention to these, as well.

Good commentaries then take readers through each passage, digging deep into the content of the chapters, paragraphs, and verses. They explain the meanings of the words, phrases, clauses, sentences, and paragraphs, and follow the flow of logic in the text. They take readers back and forth between the “forest” and the “trees,” giving proper attention (1) to the broad sweep of the large literary units and the theological messages at this level and (2) to the details of the individual words and phrases. Such commentaries also show how each of two levels interacts with the other.

In many places, texts prove difficult to understand and interpretations vary. The best commentaries discuss these issues, including at least the major alternative interpretations, and then lead readers to a reasoned conclusion.
Commentaries can be broadly divided into three types: exegetical, homiletical, and devotional. “Exegesis” can be defined as “the practice of and the set of procedures for discovering the author’s intended meaning,”¹ and I have been describing exegetical commentaries in the remarks above. Homiletical (or “preaching”) commentaries are much more self-consciously focused upon making relevant applications of the text to the modern, contemporary world, and they commonly refer to events, ideas, and movements in contemporary culture. As such, they often have an immediate relevance, but they also can become outdated quickly as the culture changes. Most such commentaries are weak concerning the exposition of the text’s meaning, compared to exegetical commentaries. Devotional commentaries are often similar, but their focus usually is more individualistic. Often, they are very impressionistic, commenting at random on individual verses or portions of verses, but paying little or no attention to their contexts.

I recommend that pastors use exegetical commentaries in their sermon preparation. If pastors learn well the message of the text, then many relevant applications should naturally come to mind. Pastors will naturally know their own congregations and immediate cultures much better than most commentators, and so they can easily apply the truths and principles derived from a detailed exegesis of the text to their own context. If homiletical commentaries are used, I recommend they be used where their strengths lie: in bringing in relevant illustrations and making proper application. However, careful expositors—having worked in depth on the text and consulted a few good exegetical commentaries to flesh out their exposition (see below, on “How to Use a Commentary”)—will not need to rely on a homiletical commentary’s attempts at exegesis, which are almost always weaker than the exegetical commentaries at this point. Furthermore, expositors will be in a good position to evaluate a commentary’s success at making proper application, that is, application that faithfully arises from the text at hand. Many points made in application of Biblical truths to modern-day are certainly true, but in too many cases, these points are not supported by the texts appealed to. Expositors firmly rooted in the text itself, supported by a few, judiciously selected chosen commentaries, will be well equipped to make proper and relevant application of the Scriptures to the audiences they minister to.

II. HOW TO USE A COMMENTARY

Caution: Even the best commentaries can be dangerous to expositors’ spiritual health and exegetical skills. Why is this? Because, if they become a substitute for the Bible itself, then expositors have abdicated their awesome responsibility of “rightly dividing the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15). They have closed their minds to the riches of the Scriptures and have settled for a pale imitation, someone’s words about Scripture.

The temptation all too often for expositors is to read the Scripture text through once or twice and then hurry to the commentaries for their insights into the text. The sermon or the lesson becomes a compilation of miscellaneous comments about what different commentators think.

¹ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., Toward an Exegetical Theology (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 47.
Far better for the expositor to translate the text for himself or herself, to mull over and over again the nuances and flow of thought in the text, reading the original text and the translation 15–20 times. For those without knowledge of the original language, far better to read the text in two or three English translations 15–20 times, and then to devote most of the remaining time—before the actual crafting of the sermon—to identifying the key sentences in each paragraph, key words and thoughts, the flow of ideas, and so forth. After extensive interaction such as this, many questions and problems will have answered themselves, and the expositor will have had the joy of discovery and the internalizing of the truths of the text in a way that would not be possible by merely perusing various commentaries.

Then, a few commentaries can be consulted in order to shed light on remaining knotty questions, historical context, literary and theological contexts, and possible textual difficulties. Good commentaries contain a wealth of such information. However, expositors do not need a commentary to help them state the obvious, such as “This is what verse 2 says.” Expositors should develop their own exegetical skills so that they can use commentaries in those places where they can truly be helpful, and keep from developing an unhealthy dependency on them. Commentaries should be tools of exegesis, not crutches.2

III. EXEGETICAL COMMENTARIES ON JOSHUA

The best and most important exegetical commentaries on the book of Joshua available to date are evaluated below. Not all of these are recommended for purchase, but they all are important works in standard commentary series, and pastors and students will be well served by at least knowing about each one, the approaches each one takes, and its strengths and weaknesses.3 All can be consulted with profit.

I recommend that pastors practice expository preaching through books of the Bible (or portions of books, if the books are extraordinarily lengthy) as their primary approach

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2 I hold this point so dearly that, for years, I have required certain seminary classes to write detailed exegetical papers on certain passages without the use of a commentary at all (except for help on the historical context). It is perhaps an extreme measure, but it forces students to read the text on its own terms and to develop their exegetical skills.

3 The list below includes the most important exegetical and critical commentaries in print today. Two evangelical series currently in progress, in which the Joshua commentary has not yet appeared, are Hendrickson’s New International Biblical Commentary and Zondervan’s NIV Application Commentary. The former is a series of short paperbacks aimed at pastors and informed laypeople and contains many good exegetical insights. It is generally conservative in approach and the needs of the Church are kept in view. The latter is a series of lengthier books on each Biblical book, divided into three sections: (1) “Original Meaning,” (2) “Bridging Contexts,” and (3) “Contemporary Significance.” Its format self-consciously pushes the reader into making significant application today of the timeless principles in the text. On the evidence of already-available volumes in these two series, I would expect that the forthcoming Joshua volumes would serve pastors and students very well. A third series in progress (in which the Joshua commentary has not appeared) is Abingdon’s New Interpreter’s Bible, representing the latest in non-evangelical scholarship (although one or two evangelicals have written for it). This is aimed at pastors, as well, and it includes exposition and application sections. Another non-evangelical commentary is Westminster John Knox Interpretation series, aimed at pastors; the Joshua commentary is being written by P. Kyle McCarter.
to preaching. With this approach, preachers and congregations can be immersed in the overall message of a book in its context, along the lines suggested above, and not just isolated verses or passages.

If this is done, then expositors can build up their libraries of commentaries in a systematic way, as they preach or teach through different books. I recommend that an expositor should own 3–5 commentaries on any given book that will be preached or taught in any depth. In the evaluation below, I have identified the top three commentaries on Joshua, and I strongly recommend expositors to purchase all three if they plan to preach or teach in any depth through Joshua. I have also provided evaluations for another nine (plus one). My criteria for evaluation include a commentary’s thoroughness, attention to the text’s message as we have it, evangelical stance, and all-round usefulness for preaching.

A. THE TOP THREE COMMENTARIES ON JOSHUA


This is the best commentary on Joshua today, all things considered, including length and price. In its short scope (320 small-sized pages), it accomplishes far more than almost any other commentary, including much longer ones, and it is without question the best all-round treatment of the book. Hess is conservative and evangelical in his approach, and his comments consistently defend the reliability of the text and the historicity of the events described in it. Nearly every page bristles with valuable exegetical insights, and he interacts well with the very latest scholarship. Hess does not waste a word: practically every sentence is pregnant with an awareness of many issues at hand—literary, archaeological, historical, theological. An added bonus is Hess’ consistent attention to New Testament themes that arise out of the material at hand in Joshua, one of the few commentaries on Joshua to do so. Indispensable.


Woudstra, a conservative evangelical, is clearly committed to the authority and integrity of the book of Joshua, and his commentary focuses on its literary and theological distinctives and message. Woudstra is very sensitive to small nuances in the text missed by many commentators. He intentionally focuses his attention on literary, as opposed to historical and archaeological, matters, but his is one of the very best commentaries on the text of Joshua. Essential reading.


This is the most detailed commentary all-round on Joshua, and it belongs in every minister’s library alongside the two above. Butler gives a good original translation and excellent textual notes. He then proceeds with insightful comments about the text’s form and structure, verse-by-verse comments, and helpful theological reflections. The work’s major flaw is its too-easy acceptance of higher-critical orthodoxy concerning the history
of traditions and sources that supposedly went into the composition of the book, so it
must be used with some caution. Nevertheless, it is a valuable work, with many
exceptional comments about text, grammar, and theology. Good, all-round treatment.

An added bonus is that Butler has written a short (124 pages), lay-level work culled
from his in-depth work on Joshua, entitled *Understanding the Basic Themes of Joshua*
(Word, 1991). Here he develops the themes in more depth than in the commentary, and
he does not get into the less-helpful critical approaches visible at times in the
commentary.

B. THE BEST OF THE REST (arranged alphabetically)

**EVANGELICAL COMMENTARIES**

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.

This was Calvin’s last written work. In November 1563, he indicated that he was
working on this commentary, but he was no further than chapter 3. Within six months he
was dead, and the commentary, astonishingly, completed! It consistently engages the text
and is filled with many good insights, even for today. A classic.

(5) Goslinga, C. J. *Joshua, Judges, Ruth*. Bible Student’s Commentary. Grand

Zondervan’s Bible Student’s Commentary translates a standard Dutch evangelical
commentary from the early and mid-20th century. Goslinga’s strengths are in the area of
an exegetical consideration of the text from a conservative perspective. Not much is here,
however, that cannot be found in other, better conservative works, such as Hess,
Woudstra, or Keil.


In this volume, Keil displays his characteristic masterful eye toward grammatical
and theological insights into the text of Joshua. This work is dated in terms of its
interaction with current scholarship, but it will never be out of date in terms of its
exegetical insights. Keil was a reliably conservative German scholar at a time when most
German scholarship was radically liberal. (This is part of the Keil and Delitzsch Old
Testament commentary series that is still being reprinted today, which I highly
recommend.) An excellent tool.


This is a reliably conservative commentary in a good evangelical series. It does a
commendable job of exegesis for the short space allotted, and it includes textual and
grammatical notes in separate sections for those interested in pursuing such matters. Its
main strength is the series in which it appears, which has such outstanding treatments as
John Sailhamer on Genesis, Walter Kaiser on Exodus, Ronald Youngblood on 1–2
Samuel, Donald Carson on Matthew, and Richard Longenecker on Acts. It does not achieve the consistent excellence of these or of some of the works above on Joshua, but its series is worthy of being in every pastor’s library and it merits consultation.

NON-EVANGELICAL COMMENTARIES


The 110-page introduction was written by Wright before his death in 1974, and the commentary proper was written by his student, Boling. It is more properly a translation with notes than a commentary. Its strengths include Boling’s original translation, his textual notes, and especially his general “Notes,” which include grammatical, historical, and other comments on almost every verse in the book. Boling is a master of detail and combines a good eye for grammatical insight with a wide knowledge of archaeological setting. His commentary stands in the mainstream of higher-critical orthodoxy on matters of historicity and reliability of the text, but it is the best of the non-evangelical commentaries nevertheless.


This is a lay-level Jewish commentary that includes the Hebrew text, an English translation, and an exposition from a self-consciously Jewish perspective. It is especially valuable because of its many citations of rabbinic interpretations unavailable elsewhere.


The series in which this commentary is found is a popular one in Great Britain, aimed at pastors, based on critical methodologies. Gray is a competent exegete, but his space limitations are severe and he does not make the best use of the space alloted. He believes that the book of Joshua preserves only a kernel of historical truth and that most of the book was created whole-cloth at a much later time, to address cultic concerns of that time.


Hamlin’s short work is unique among those presented here in that it is written by someone with extensive experience living in the Third World. His commentary—as does every commentary in its series—makes a serious attempt at bridging the gap between the ancient world of Joshua and the modern day, from a liberationist and Third-World perspective. Evangelicals will not find his views on the historicity of the book’s events very compatible with theirs. However, Hamlin challenges readers to think about the text and the world in ways that none of the other commentaries here do.

This replaces the commentary by J. A. Soggin, which bears the same title in the same series (1972). It is a far better commentary than Soggin’s, which had as a major concern the isolating of hypothetical, pre-canonical literary or traditional strands that might have been used in the composition of Joshua, and very little concern to explicate the meaning of the present text. Nelson’s work still operates within a higher-critical framework, devoting considerable attention to reconstructing the sources behind the text and to recovering a hypothetical original. And, Nelson is very skeptical concerning the actual occurrence of most of the events in the book. But, his work pays much more attention than did Soggin’s to matters of the message of the text in its received form, and he makes many very useful and insightful comments.

C. “LAGNIAPPE”


Having moved recently to the city of New Orleans, I have discovered a term commonly used here, “Lagniappe,” which means something extra thrown in at no additional cost. In this spirit, I make so bold as to offer my own commentary on Joshua as an addition to the list above (it is scheduled for publication in late 1998 or early 1999). This work is a detailed exegetical treatment attempting to explicate the meaning of the text of Joshua. It takes a text-focused approach, which is to say that the grammar and syntax of the text are of primary importance. Historical and archaeological questions are treated in the introduction, several excursuses, and in the footnotes, while the text of the commentary focuses on the Biblical text. Modern literary and linguistic theory are used to uncover the meaning of Joshua more than in most of the works above. This commentary (and the NAC series in general) is aimed at pastors and students.