

Session 7

Bible study tools

In this section we introduce a number of Bible 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 computer software.

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. A Bible dictionary will have an entry 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 Bible passages. Such reference books are very useful, but they should always be used carefully. Check what they suggest for yourself, from the Scriptures.

Recommended dictionaries and encyclopedias

- ▶ *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, by Trent C Butler.
- ▶ *New Bible Dictionary*, ed. Howard Marshall.
- ▶ *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (6 volumes), ed. David Freedman.
- ▶ *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (4 volumes), ed. Geoffrey Bromiley.

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. What lessons are there for us in this passage?

Commentaries

A commentary is a book which follows the Bible order exactly, and adds comments 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 large multi-volume sets.

When a passage is unclear, a good practice is to first look up the associated cross-references. If that does not help, then 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.

Recommended commentaries

- ▶ *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*, by John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, Mark W. Chavalas.
- ▶ *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, by Craig S Keener.
- ▶ *Zondervan NIV Bible Commentary*, by Kenneth Barker and John R Kohlenberger.
- ▶ *Daily Study Bible, New Testament* (17 volumes), by William Barclay.
- ▶ *Tyndale Commentaries* (47 volumes).

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.

Recommended concordances

For the KJV:

- *Strongest Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, by James Strong, John R Kohlenberger and James A Swanson.
- *Young's Analytical Concordance to the Bible* by Robert Young.

For the NIV:

- *NIV Exhaustive Concordance*, by Edward W Goodrick and John R Kohlenberger.

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

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.

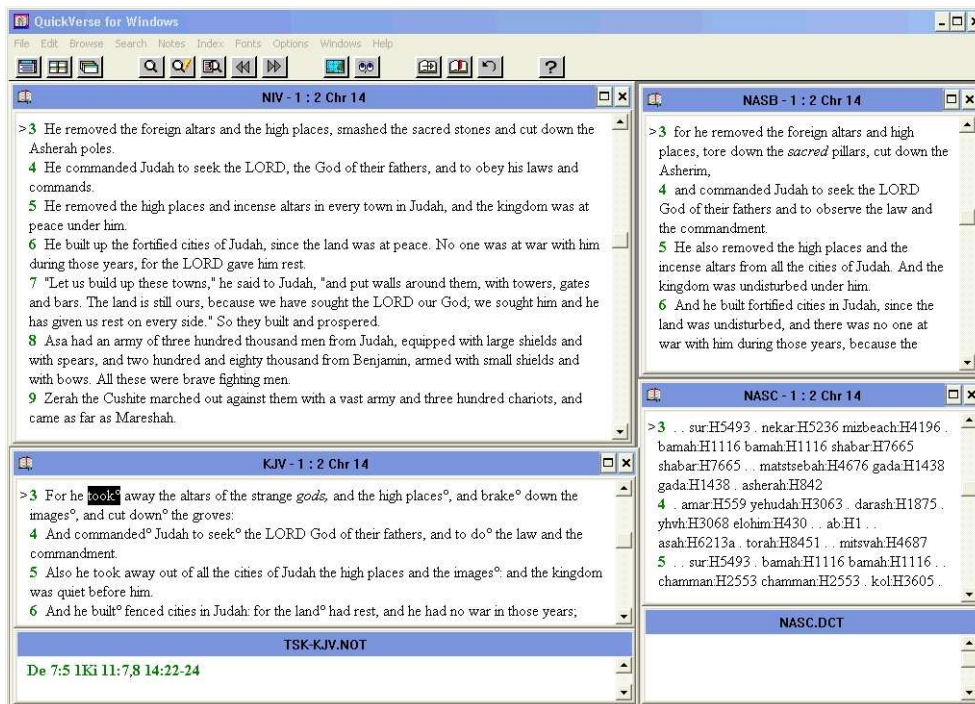
Computer Bibles

There are many software packages which include the text of the entire Bible, often in several different versions. They also enable fast searching for words or phrases. For example, the concordance exercise above asked you to find occurrences of the phrase “Son of Man”. This is difficult using a printed concordance but very easy using a computer concordance because it allows searching for the whole phrase rather than individual words.

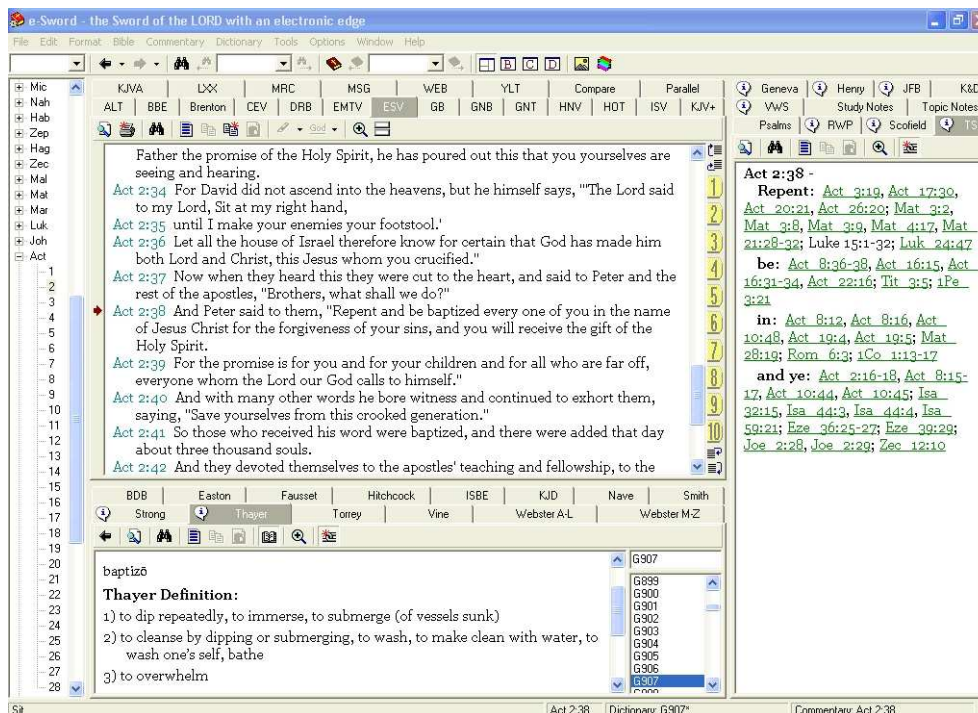
Some computer Bibles also contain lexicons and it is possible to find where the underlying Greek and Hebrew words have been used even when they have been translated differently in different places.

The larger Bible software packages include other Bible study tools such as Bible dictionaries, atlases and commentaries which are all linked together.

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.



Screenshot of Quickverse, a commercial Bible software package. The same passage is shown in several different versions.



Screenshot of E-sword, a freeware Bible software package. The dictionary in the bottom panel shows the meaning of the Greek word. The panel at the side shows some other relevant cross-references.

Web resources

The following web sites contain useful materials to assist with Bible reading and study.

- <http://www.biblegateway.com/>
Lots of Bible versions in lots of different languages.
- <http://www.e-sword.net/>
Download the e-sword software including many different Bible versions, dictionaries, etc.
- <http://www.bible.org/netbible/>
The New English Translation of the Bible including many helpful translation notes. You can also download a copy for your own computer.
- <http://www.bible-history.com/isbe/>
The on-line International Standard Bible Encyclopedia
- <http://www.thechristadelphians.org/btcd/>
Bible Truth CD. Lots of useful tools and information.
- http://www.ccel.org/contrib/exec_outlines/links.htm
A large collection of useful links to Bible resources on the web.

Homework

1. Continue with the Bible Reading Planner. Make sure you write down your questions about anything you don't understand.
2. Try and find all the verses that refer to baptism in the book of Acts. (Hint: there are 23). You will probably need to use a concordance and/or cross-references.
3. Summarise what these baptisms have in common.

Further reading

- *Exploring the Bible* by Harry Whittaker.
- *How to study the Bible for yourself* by Tim Lahaye.

Ask the presenter if you wish to borrow a copy of either of these books.