

A Guide to using a Bible Commentary

Please note: This guide should be used to familiarise yourself with this writing style. You may find some customisation is necessary to achieve the outcomes for your assessments. Please be sure to read your assignment question carefully, along with any provided documentation in that assignment.

A Bible commentary is a resource written by biblical scholars that explains the historical, literary, and theological meaning of biblical texts. Students use commentaries to investigate and analyse biblical texts and in order to support interpretation in academic assignments.

When will you use a Bible commentary

It is a standard expectation in tertiary biblical and theological studies to use Bible commentaries when completing assignments that involve exegetical work or any form of biblical interpretation. Commentaries help you understand the historical context, literary features, and theological themes of a passage, which strengthens the depth and accuracy of your analysis. Whether you are preparing an exegetical essay, writing a sermon, or engaging in close study of a biblical text for another assessment, consulting reputable commentaries is an essential part of the research process.

Types of Bible Commentaries

Bible commentaries come in a range of forms, each designed to serve different approaches to interpreting biblical texts.

- **Single volume commentary:** Covers the whole Bible and provides brief explanations
- **Book level commentary:** Focusses on one biblical book – or part of a biblical book - in depth.
- **Technical / academic commentary:** Uses original language, provides detailed scholarship. E.g., Word Biblical Commentary; Anchor Yale Bible Commentary
- **Pastoral / devotional commentary:** Less technical, focusses on meaning for faith and life. E.g., NIV Application Commentary; Tyndale Commentaries.
- **Contextual commentary:** Written from a particular cultural or social perspective. E.g., Global Bible Commentary; Women’s Bible Commentary; Asia Bible commentary series; Earth Bible commentary.

Bible commentaries represent varied publishing priorities, theological perspectives and audiences. For example, some cater for academic readers whereas others

serve a lay audience. Some emphasise practical application of biblical texts for a modern world, whereas others may be more interested in matters of translation and language.

How to choose a commentary

- Match the commentary to the level and type of assignment. For example, a sermon series may benefit from using commentaries that provide practical application whereas an exegetical essay may require language and verse analysis.
- Choose commentaries from reputable academic series.
- Look for commentaries that reflect diverse perspectives (cultural, historical, theological) to provide depth to your research.
- Do not use online blogs, informal websites or outdated commentaries – such as the Matthew Henry Commentary dated early 18th C – as these sources do not reflect current scholarship and are not suitable for academic study.

What counts as a scholarly commentary?

Peer reviewed or academically published, written by recognised biblical scholars. Scholarly resources provide references and interact with current scholarship. They are usually published by academic presses or established commentary series. Use the 'peer review' filter in your library searches.

Examples of reputable commentary series

- Word Biblical Commentary (WBC)
- Anchor Yale Bible Commentary (AYBC)
- New International Commentary on the Old/ New Testament (NICOT/ NICNT)
- Tyndale Commentaries (TOTC/ TNTC)
- International Critical Commentary (ICC)
- New International Version Application Commentary (NIVAC)

Using a Bible commentary

Each commentary will be structured and organised according to the publishing requirements. Many will provide the introductory comments on matters of translation, historical background (authorship, dating, composition), literary structure of the book, major theological themes at the beginning of the commentary and then more specific comments and analysis on the passage and verses (word studies, literary context, specific historical references, theological meaning).

1. **Read the biblical passage** first to form your own observations.
2. **Consult the introduction** of the commentary (authorship, date, themes).
3. **Find the section on your passage**—note chapter/verse divisions.
4. Identify the type of information provided:

- Historical background
 - Literary structure
 - Language or translation issues
 - Theological insights
5. **Take notes in your own words** rather than copying. Commentaries should inform, not replace, your own analysis.
 6. **Compare more than one commentary** if required. Scholars do not always agree so it is useful to compare perspectives.
 7. **Cite the commentary correctly** in the required referencing style (include publisher and series).

Where to locate commentaries

If you are looking for commentaries in a physical library, they can sometimes be organised by series or by the biblical book section of the library. The classification depends on the library.

Digital versions of commentaries can be searched for by using key words such as the biblical book (e.g., “Isaiah commentary”) or series. You can narrow down your search by clicking the ‘E-book’ option or ‘Available online’ and filtering for more recent versions.

Sample of how to use a commentary in an assignment

Turabian Style

Brueggemann considers Isaiah 42:10-13 to be “a characteristic hymn in Israel.”¹ Blenkinsopp further suggests that this passage begins with a “psalm like invocation.”² The emphasis on praise within the text is also noted by Goldingay, who identifies this as a central feature of the passage.³

APA Style

Brueggemann (1998) considers Isaiah 42:10-13 to be “a characteristic hymn in Israel” (p. 45). Blenkinsopp (2002) further suggests that this passage begins with a “psalm like invocation” (p. 214). The emphasis on praise within the text is also noted as a central feature of the passage (Goldingay, 2014, p. 235).

Referencing commentaries

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66*, Westminster Bible Companion (Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 45. [Note in this example, there is no abbreviation available in the SBL style guide; the Word Biblical Commentary is abbreviated to WBC so it would be confusing to use this]

² Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40-55*, AYBC Vol 19A (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 214. [In this example note that the volume number follows the abbreviated series title].

³ John Goldingay and David Payne, *Isaiah 40-55: A critical and exegetical commentary Volume 1 ICC* (Bloomsbury, 2014), 235. [Note in this example the volume is part of the title]

Use the style required for your course of study. For in-depth commentary referencing, follow the SBL Style Guide.

Turabian Style

Footnote

First name Surname, *Book Title*, Series Abbreviation or name (Publisher, year), page.

For example:

¹ John Goldingay and David Payne, *Isaiah 40-55: A critical and exegetical commentary Volume 1*, ICC (Bloomsbury, 2014), 214.

Bibliography

Surname, First initial. *Book Title*. Series full name. Publisher, year.

APA Style

In-text citation

Text (author's surname, year, p. x).

Reference

Author's Surname, Author's initial(s). (Date of publication). *Title of Book: Subtitle of book*. Series. Publisher.