

Basic Reference Commentary Set

There are many commentaries on the shelves of my local bookstore. The problem is that they are not all on the shelves in my home. I cannot purchase them all at once, and I am guessing that you cannot either. While there are many commentary bibliographies and purchasing guides, I could not find any that guided me to the books I should purchase first.

I also hate shelling out \$40-\$60 only to find out that a book is not engaging or an author has an idiosyncratic point of view. I bet you do too. That is why you need this list. This list answers the question, “If can only buy one right now, which should it be?”

If you follow the list, you will end up with a 52 volume eclectic biblical commentary comprised of the best of contemporary evangelical scholarship. Not everyone will agree with all of my selections. That is fine by me; I am self-constrained by the purpose and criteria detailed below. However, I will say this: you will not regret owning any of these commentaries.

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The Purpose:

- To provide a list of the one safe, scholarly, and satisfying biblical commentary for each book of the Bible.

Every pastor should have a ready reference commentary for basic bible study. One or two volume commentaries are great for beginning Sunday school teachers, but are not sufficient for an educated ministry leader. You should have at least one volume for each book of the Bible to which you can refer for educated answers to questions that pop up in the regular ebb and flow of ministry.

Each of the following commentaries is selected as a good first commentary. This list evaluates current selections and determines which volumes best fit the criteria below. These selections are “safe” in that you can basically trust the theology of the author – they are more like conversations with friends than critical debates. They are scholarly in their evaluation and presentation – the list assumes some theological education on the part of the reader. They are satisfying because the authors selected are those that give a balanced presentation of viewpoints and provide a reasonable defense of their own.

This is not a list of the “best” commentaries. “Best” is determined by usefulness. Serious exegetical work in 1 Corinthians requires Thiselton (NIGTC). But Thiselton is so complex as to be less useful for normal pastoral requirements – like personal Bible study, a Sunday school lesson, or to make sure you are correctly applying a Corinthian citation in a sermon from Galatians. For this, you need the best book you can get that will constrain itself to what you most likely need to know (though every book on this list is technical enough to aid in sermon preparation). Your first 1 Corinthians commentary should be Garland (BECNT). When you decide to preach through 1 Corinthians, you need to purchase Thiselton (and a few others). Until then, Garland is a better choice for what you need. Thus, Garland is the “best” for a beginning reference commentary set.

The Criteria:

Sure, anyone can give you advice – but how are they deciding what to recommend to you? This list states and follows the criteria below. Where I “flex the rules,” I tell you so in the annotations. The guidelines for selections are:

- Evangelical, Conservative while providing reasonable arguments for positions.
- Evidence of scholarly competence.
- Current – nothing prior to 1985.
- Interested in helping the reader comprehend the meaning of the text as we have it.
- Lucid, engaging prose.
- Good technical / expositional balance (“semi-technical”), Good footnote balance.
- Helpful to a pastor’s study. Useful for preaching and teaching. This does not mean that I select commentaries that do the “application” for me. I choose commentaries that help me understand the meaning of the text in such a way that *I* can confidently shape my sermon/lesson and apply the text to my congregation (and most often, to me).
- Good commentaries (for this list) strike an engaging balance among grammatical explanation, contextual meaning, and biblical theology.

The List:

- A collection of the best *first* commentaries for each book of the Bible.
- The list does not detail all the evangelical commentaries. It suggests one per biblical book. As you build your library, acquiring several commentaries per book for their points of view and different emphases is helpful.
- For each biblical book, I consulted bibliographies, reference lists, and book reviews to find 3-5 conservative, scholarly, and respected commentaries. After reading the prefaces and introductions, I randomly selected three scriptural passages and compared the corresponding treatments in each commentary. I then looked at how each handled the controversial issues or passages in the biblical book. Applying the criteria above, I selected the volume that would be most beneficial if I only had one.
- Sometimes other books are referenced in the annotations. These are either because they were especially good as alternates or a surprisingly poor fit for the list.
- The list does not cover entries in small volume commentary sets. These sets, like the *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, can be useful, but are often shorter treatments than a full length book. The quality of any one entry in the series can also vary widely.
- Sometimes a note is given about a forthcoming book. This indicates that an author has agreed to write the commentary. Could be soon, could be ten years – don’t wait for it. Check to see if it is available and compare it with the recommendation. Otherwise, get the recommended choice.

Terms:

- **Academic** – more concerned with the disputes among scholars than with the interpretation of the text.
- **Cogent** – presents convincing arguments.
- **Conservative / Evangelical** – scholarship that initially trusts the text.
- **Critical** – demonstrates more of an interest in documentary sources and alternative historical reconstructions than with the interpretation of (and submission to) the present text.
- **Engaging** – reads well, you don't fall asleep, you want to read what the author has written.
- **Erudite** – scholarly, learned, demonstrates knowledge of available literature.
- **Expositional** – concerned with application or biblical doctrine.
- **Lucid** – clear and understandable.
- **Technical** – concerned with linguistics, translation, variants, and scholarly opinions.
- **Useful** – helpful in sermon or lesson preparation, or generally answers questions I actually have about the text.

Commentary Series:

- **BECNT** – Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Baker)
A technical series. A new series, so all are current. Good at academic survey and evangelical exposition. Author's translation with some notes. Can be heavy reading at times.
- **BST** – Bible Speaks Today (IVP)
A popular level expository series that is not usually technical enough to be considered for this list.
- **NAC** – New American Standard (Broadman & Holman)
A good semi-technical series with commitment to the truthfulness of Scripture and theological exposition. The best volumes are outstanding with the best exposition / scholarly footnoting balance. The worst volumes merely repeat the text. Uses the NIV.
- **NCBC** – New Century Bible Commentary (Eerdmans, Sheffield)
A little published series based on the RSV. Strives for non-exhaustive learned exposition, semi-technical. Several volumes are worth having if you find them used/paperback.

Commentary Series, Cont.

- **NIBCOT** – New International Bible Commentary on the Old Testament (Hendrickson)
A moderately critical expositional series. A few are worth having second-hand.
- **NICNT** – New International Commentary on the New Testament (Eerdmans)
- **NICOT** – New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Eerdmans)
NICNT and NICOT are both technical/academic series. Author’s translation. They are generally solid. The best are engaging and helpful. The worst are too critical with the text and soft on authorship. These are usually my favorites on the Old Testament.
- **NIGTC** – New International Greek Testament Commentary (Eerdmans)
A very technical series. Author’s translation. Most useful in translation work, though some are lucid enough to be useful generally.
- **NIVAC** – New International Version Application Commentary (Zondervan)
Decidedly non-technical. Focus is on the contemporary application of the message of the text. Quality varies considerably from volume to volume. NIV based.
- **PNTC** – Pillar New Testament Commentary (Eerdmans)
A new series committed to the final form of the text and unwilling to waste time arguing about it. A good semi-technical series with expository insights. No translation provided. These are usually my personal favorites for the New Testament.
- **TOTC** – Tyndale Old Testament Commentary (IVP)
A series of small paperback volumes designed for pastoral exposition. Some of them are semi-technical enough to be considered for this list.
- **WBC** – Word Biblical Commentary (Word, Thomas Nelson)
Academically focused series. The word “evangelical” has a wide range of meaning for these editors. The conservative volumes are usually very good. The others are not very useful for the purposes of this list. Author’s translation with notes.

Old Testament – Pentateuch

Genesis □□□

Mathews, Kenneth. NAC, 2 vols. (1a, 1b). *Genesis 1-11:26. Genesis 11:27-50:26.* (Broadman & Holman, 1996, 2005).

This is one of my favorite commentaries and is a model for the selection criteria above. Evangelical, scholarly, accessible, and complete without becoming overwhelming. This is a standard by which other commentaries may be judged. Victor Hamilton (NICOT, 2vols, 1990, 1995) is also good, but Mathews is great and more current.

Exodus □□□

Stuart, Douglas. NAC (2). *Exodus.* (Broadman & Holman, 2006).

Conservative, semi-technical. Stuart strikes an expert balance between commentary proper and scholastic footnoting. Engaging and erudite, the best commentary on Exodus.

Leviticus □□□

Wenham, Gordon. NICOT. *The Book of Leviticus.* (Eerdmans, 1979).

Wenham is best for this list even if it breaks the age limit – it is cogent and useful. Rooker (NAC, 2000) is a good second for the relationship to biblical theology. Hartley (WBC, 1992) is also good for thoughtfulness.

Numbers □□□

Cole, Dennis. NAC (3b). *Numbers.* (Broadman & Holman, 2000)

Cole is semi-technical exposition. Ashley (NICOT, 1993) is semi-expositional technical. They are about the same for this list. You would be happy with either one.

Deuteronomy □□□

Merrill, Eugene. NAC (4). *Deuteronomy.* (Broadman & Holman, 1994).

Conservative and current. Craigie (NICOT, 1976) would also be nice to have.

Old Testament – History

Joshua □□□

Howard, David. NAC (5). *Joshua.* (Broadman & Holman, 1998).

Howard is a solid mix of lucidity, scholarship, and exposition. Hess (TOTC, 1996) is also insightful with more ANE background and would also be nice to have.

Judges □□□

Block, Daniel. NAC (6). *Judges, Ruth.* (Broadman & Holman, 1999).

Block is a good commentary writer. This volume is great on Judges and good on Ruth.

Ruth □□□

Block, Daniel. NAC (6). *Judges, Ruth.* (Broadman & Holman, 1999).

Bush (WBC, 1996) is useful for literary features, but it is quite technical, and you already own Block.

1 & 2 Samuel □□□

Bergen, Robert. NAC (7). *1, 2 Samuel*. (Broadman & Holman, 1996).

A solid, semi-technical exposition, though at points Bergen seems constrained by the NAC limitations.

1 & 2 Kings □□□

House, Paul. NAC (8). *1, 2 Kings*. (Broadman & Holman, 1995).

House is good. More useful and a bit more conservative than Provan (NIBCOT, 1995).

1 & 2 Chronicles □□□

Selman, Martin. TOTC, 2 vols. *1 Chronicles. 2 Chronicles*. (Inter-Varsity Press, 1994, 1994).

Selman's volumes, though small, are insightful and useful. Moreover, they are concerned with meaning rather than synoptic analysis (though it is utilized). Braun and Dillard (WBC, 1986, 1987) are too critical and academic to be enjoyable (or sometimes useful). I look forward to a forthcoming NICOT entry.

Ezra, Nehemiah □□□

Breneman, Mervin. NAC (10). *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*. (Broadman & Holman, 1993).

Breneman is a good summary of generally held conservative positions. Fensham (NICOT, 1982) is a bit better with background, but is dated. NICOT has an updated entry in the works. Get NAC now and look at new NICOT when available.

Esther □□□

Jobs, Karen. NIVAC. *Esther*. (Zondervan, 1999).

This is the only NIVAC on the list. Bush (WBC, 1996) is too critical and academic to make the list. Jobs is clearly informed by the scholarship, but is fully focused on explaining and applying the literary themes of the book. Use the more traditional commentary in Breneman (above, but not sufficient by itself) with Jobs and you'll be fine. NICOT also has a volume forthcoming.

Old Testament – Wisdom**Job** □□□

Hartley, John. NICOT. *The Book of Job*. (Eerdmans, 1988).

Alden (NAC, 1994) runs a very close second, but this list is about selecting one book and Hartley's engaging scholarship and reasonable presentation edge it to the fore.

Psalms □□□

Craigie, Peter. WBC (19). *Psalms 1-50*. (Word, 1983).

Tate, Marvin. WBC (20). *Psalms 51-100*. (Word, 1990).

Allen, Leslie. WBC (21). *Psalms 101-150*, Rev. Ed. (Thomas Nelson, 2002).

These are the only generally conservative commentaries that seriously engage the history, theology, and scholarship regarding the Psalms. Wilcock (BST, 2 vols., 2001) is interesting for canonical considerations but is not technical enough for this list. One volume commentaries are expected from the NICOT and NAC.

Proverbs □□□

Waltke, Bruce. NICOT, 2 vols. *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1-15. The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 16-31.* (Eerdmans, 2004).

This is a magisterial treatment of Proverbs from an established conservative OT scholar dealing with both unit meaning and overall structure. This is the best commentary on Proverbs.

Ecclesiastes □□□

Garrett, Duane. NAC (14). *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs.* (Broadman & Holman, 1993).

Longman (NICOT, 1997) is useful, but his three tiers of meaning approach to Ecclesiastes colors his interpretation in too many places. Provan (NIVAC, 2001) is provocative and insightful, but too harsh and political to make the list. Garrett is good and wins by default (plus you get a good second commentary on Proverbs).

Song of Songs □□□

Garrett, Duane. WBC (23b). *Song of Songs / Lamentations.* (Thomas Nelson, 2004).

Outstanding. Engaging, cogent, erudite, technical, expositional, and useful. This will become the commentary of record on Songs. (Paul House authors Lamentations.)

Old Testament – Prophets**Isaiah** □□□

Oswalt, John. NICOT, 2 vols. *The Book of Isaiah.* (Eerdmans, 1986, 1998).

Oswalt is the recognized evangelical work of choice. I also highly recommend Motyer's *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (IVP, 1993 – not the abridged 1999 version).

Jeremiah □□□

Huey, F. B. NAC (16). *Jeremiah, Lamentations.* (Broadman & Holman, 1993).

Huey is a good reference volume with an eye toward exposition of individual passages. The two WBC (26, 1991; 27, 1995) volumes are very good for literary insights and historical background. The second (27 – Keown, Scalise, Smothers) is quite good, but the first (26 – Craigie, Kelley, Drinkard) lacks commitment to the final form of the text. Thompson (NICOT, 1980) is dated in places, but still useful for historical background. Glynn reports Scalise (whose WBC section is very good) is working on a replacement volume for NICOT. Get Huey until Scalise appears. Get the WBC volumes before preaching through the whole book.

Lamentations □□□

House, Paul. WBC (23b). *Song of Songs / Lamentations.* (Thomas Nelson, 2004).

House will tell you everything technical and academic you ever wanted to know about Lamentations, but is not as useful expositionally. Since you will purchase this volume for Song of Songs (authored by Garrett), use it with a popular commentary like Walter Kaiser's very good *A Biblical Approach to Personal Suffering* (Moody, 1982) and you'll be set. Huey (NAC, 1993) is mostly an add-on to his Jeremiah commentary.

Ezekiel □ □ □

Block, Daniel. NICOT, 2 vols. *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 1-24. The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 25-48.* (Eerdmans, 1997, 1998).

This is one of the best modern commentaries on any biblical book. It is engaging, insightful, scholarly, complete, and useful. Pricey, yes, but worth it. You may never need another commentary on Ezekiel.

Daniel □ □ □

Baldwin, Joyce. TOTC. *Daniel: An Introduction and Commentary.* (IVP, 1978).

Conservative scholarship, amillennial. Insightful and erudite, if dated. Miller (NAC, 1994) is a dispensational choice, but Baldwin is stronger in most areas. Goldingay (WBC, 1989) is more critical. Watch with hope for a forthcoming NICOT volume.

Old Testament – Minor (Shorter) Prophets

Commentaries on the minor prophets present a challenge for the list since most of them group several of these prophetic books together, essentially creating small-volume sets. Since the focus of the list is which book to purchase first, the list presents the following to provide the best initial coverage from an eclectic collection.

Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah □ □ □

Stuart, Douglas. WBC (31). *Hosea-Jonah.* (Word, 1987).

Conservative scholarship with useful insights. Emphasis on the covenant. I think Garrett (NAC, 1997) is better on Hosea and Joel and is worth purchasing.

Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah □ □ □

Barker, Kenneth and Waylon Bailey. NAC (20). *Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah.* (Broadman & Holman, 1998).

Bailey is very good on Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah. Barker's Micah is a bonus. Robertson (NICOT, 1990) is rhetorically useful.

Haggai, Malachi □ □ □

Taylor, Richard and E. Ray Clendenen. NAC (21a). *Haggai, Malachi.* (Broadman & Holman, 2004).

Evangelical, useful expositions. Verhoef (NICOT, 1987) is also good (especially on Haggai), but more academic.

Zechariah □ □ □

Webb, Barry. BST. *The Message of Zechariah: Your Kingdom Come.* (IVP, 2003).

There are no current, conservative, book-length, technical treatments of Zechariah. NICOT has one in the works, but until it arrives Webb provides a conversational treatment of the book focused on evangelical theology.

New Testament - Gospels

Matthew □ □ □

Blomberg, Craig. NAC (22). *Matthew*. (Broadman & Holman, 1992).

Blomberg is a model of what the NAC desires to accomplish and easily fits the list. If entries in small volume sets were eligible, then Carson's "Matthew" in the *Expositor's Bible Commentary* (8) would have made the list.

Mark □ □ □

Edwards, James. PNTC. *The Gospel According to Mark*. (Eerdmans, 2002).

Edwards approaches Mark as Mark and does not get bogged down in synoptic arguments. He pays particular attention to contextual meaning via "sandwiches" as literary conventions with theological purposes.

Luke □ □ □

Stein, Robert. NAC (24). *Luke*. (Broadman & Holman, 1993).

Stein is an expert on Luke and goes beyond NAC expectations with his 3-part analysis of each passage. Bock (BECNT, 1994, 1996) is great, but expensive (2 vols.) and much more than you need until you decide to preach through.

John □ □ □

Carson, D. A. PNTC. *The Gospel of John*. (Eerdmans, 1991).

Despite recent competition, I still think Carson is the best "I've only got one" book for John. Clear with characteristic Carson meticulousness. Kostenberger (BECNT, 2005) is good on survey, but not as engaging. Blomberg (IVP, 2002) is worth a look.

New Testament - History

Acts □ □ □

Polhill, John. NAC (26). *Acts*. (Broadman & Holman, 1992).

Polhill is an Acts workhorse and will serve you well. Even so, there are so many facets to Acts that a 2nd commentary is also good. Carson recommends Witherington (Eerdmans, 1997). Glynn reports Bock will arrive in 2008 (BECNT).

New Testament – Epistles of Paul

Romans □ □ □

Moo, Douglas. NICNT. *The Epistle to the Romans*. (Eerdmans, 1996).

Schreiner (BECNT, 1998) is a very close second, but consensus seems to be that Moo has an edge. Get them both when you can.

1 Corinthians □ □ □

Garland, David. BECNT. *1 Corinthians*. (Baker, 2003).

Garland's is a strong work and the best fit for the list. Thiselton (NIGTC, 2000) and maybe Fee (NICNT, 1987) would be helpful later.

2 Corinthians □ □ □

Garland, David. NAC (29). *2 Corinthians*. (Broadman & Holman, 1999).

An excellent commentary in the top ranks of the NAC. Insightful and engaging with good ties to biblical theology.

Galatians □ □ □

Longenecker, Richard. WBC (41). *Galatians*. (Word, 1990).

A bit more technical and academic than I like. Nevertheless, Longenecker is the best fit for the other list criteria. Within the format, he does an admirable job of getting to meaning and his introduction is very good. George (NAC, 1994) has a powerful presentation, but gets so bogged down in systematic theology that you sometimes forget you are reading a commentary on Galatians. It would be a worthwhile 2nd addition.

Ephesians □ □ □

O'Brien, Peter. PNTC. *The Letter to the Ephesians*. (Eerdmans, 1999).

This is the best commentary on Ephesians.

Philippians □ □ □

Silva, Moises. BECNT. *Philippians*, 2nd ed. (Baker, 1992).

This was a tough one, because O'Brien (NIGTC, 1991) is so good. If you like the technical, get O'Brien; but everyone would benefit from Silva, so he makes the list.

Colossians, Philemon □ □ □

O'Brien, Peter. WBC (44). *Colossians, Philemon*. (Word, 1982).

A tad old, but O'Brien is very good and is concerned with contextual meaning. No other work is yet as good for our purposes.

1 & 2 Thessalonians □ □ □

Green, Gene. PNTC. *The Letters to the Thessalonians*. (Eerdmans, 2002).

This is a compact, learned, and useful treatment of the two letters. Wanamaker (NIGTC, 1990) is good, but more technical and older.

1 & 2 Timothy, Titus □ □ □

Mounce, William. WBC (46). *Pastoral Epistles*. (Thomas Nelson, 2000).

An excellent conservative exposition. Pauline authorship, complementarian. Clear, cogent, constructive.

New Testament – General Epistles

Hebrews □□□

Lane, William. WBC, 2 vols. (47a, 47b). *Hebrews*. (Word, 1991).

Lane seems to be the best at addressing the various facets of Hebrews. Glynn reports Carson (BECNT) and O'Brien (PNTC) are forthcoming. They would be worth the wait.

James □□□

Moo, Douglas. PNTC. *The Letter of James*. (Eerdmans, 2000).

This is a good entry in the Pillar series. Moo is level headed and seeks the wisdom James offers. Plus, it is from the guy who wrote the Romans commentary, so no “conflict.”

1 Peter, 2 Peter, Jude □□□

Schreiner, Thomas. NAC (37). *1, 2 Peter, Jude*. (Broadman & Holman, 2003).

Another fine example of what the NAC should be. Good semi-technical, good expositional uses. Though other promising commentaries will be available soon, get Schreiner first and add others as you need them later.

1, 2, 3 John □□□

Akin, Daniel. NAC (38). *1, 2, 3 John*. (Broadman & Holman, 2001).

Akin is a good semi-technical commentary with a real commitment to exposition. Colin Kruse (PNTC, 2000) is another choice.

New Testament – Revelation

Revelation □□□

Mounce, Robert. NICNT. *The Book of Revelation*, rev. ed. (Eerdmans, 1997)

Obviously, your preference here will depend on your theology. Mounce is very clear with a good understanding of apocalyptic genre and a cautious premillennial hermeneutic. Osbourne (BECNT, 2002) is also good for survey of views. Beale (NIGTC, 1999) is solid, technical, amillennial. Start with Mounce and then add others as you figure out what you are doing. Watch for Patterson (NAC) and Carson (PNTC replacement), both forthcoming.

Other Resources

Small Volume Sets

Barker, Kenneth and John Kohlenberger, eds. *Zondervan NIV Bible Commentary*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994).

Zondervan took the 12-volume *Expositor's Bible Commentary* and removed the footnotes, academic discussion, and technical prose. They have published the abridgement with different names and covers over the last several years, but have not altered the content. If you find a book from Zondervan claiming to be an abridgement of the *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, then you have it. This is a nice resource you can find used for \$20 each.

Graebelein, Frank E., ed. *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1976-1992).

A remarkable set of shorter commentaries covering the whole of Scripture. Since Zondervan is in the process of updating the volumes, the entire original set can be purchased online for \$100 or less – an outstanding opportunity.

McComiskey, Thomas, ed. *The Minor Prophets*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1992-1998).

This multiple-author set covers the twelve shorter OT prophetic books. Most of the entries are helpful, though some are more critical. Volume 3 is particularly strong. Usually sold as a set.

Library Building Resources

Carson, D.A. *New Testament Commentary Survey*, 5th ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001).

Carson is good because he comments on each book and gives you a good feel for the academic/technical/expositional focus of the authors. I would use this in the library or wait to purchase the 6th ed.

Glynn, John. *Commentary and Reference Survey: A Comprehensive Guide to Biblical and Theological Resources*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2003).

My list is all about the starter reference commentary set. Glynn is an outstanding resource to add commentaries and build the rest of your theological library. It is well worth the \$10. Buy it, mark it, highlight it, use it.

Professors – Professors get tired of students always asking them for commentary recommendations. So, some have put together their own lists. Do not be afraid to ask if a favorite instructor has a personal bibliography. These are good because they are usually only the most useful of the many commentaries for each book.

The surveys by Carson and Glynn were helpful in creating this list. I am also indebted to publicly available lists from Danny Akin (*Building a Theological Library*) and Daniel Block (*Building an Old Testament Library*, 2002), as well as a New Testament list Tom Schreiner gives to his students.