

## Topic: When & how to use a Bible Commentary

[Jinsi ya: Kutumia fafanuzi za Biblia \(part 1\) – what to do before you turning to a commentary](#)

[Jinsi ya: Kutumia fafanuzi za Biblia \(part 2\) – recommended commentaries](#)

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### What is a Commentary?

- a set of explanatory or critical notes on a text.
- an expression of opinions or offering of explanations about an event or situation.
- a written explanation or criticism or illustration that is added to a book or other textual material

### What is a Bible Commentary?

A Bible Commentary is a book that contains comments (observations) on the biblical text.

-a series of comments, explanations, or annotations:

-it serves to illustrate a point, prompt a realization, or exemplify

#### There are different types of commentaries depending on:

- i) levels of difficulty-
  - a) Full Technical/Critical
    - have very detailed and technical discussions
    - assume the reader knows the original biblical languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek) to some extent
    - Mostly used by Scholars, seminary students, and pastors with some language training.
    - e.g. International Critical Commentary, the Word Biblical Commentary, the New International Greek Testament Commentary, and the Anchor Bible Commentary.
  - b) "Semi-technical"- based on a particular English translation for the entire series
    - e.g. the New International Commentary on the New Testament and the New American Commentary.
- ii) target audiences
  - a) "Pulpit" commentaries
    - Help pastors
    - give insights for application
    - e.g. Preacher's Commentary Series and the Pillar New Testament Commentary
  - b) General readers' commentaries
    - can be used by all levels of people
- iii) emphases
  - Expository**= exposition of the text
  - **Applicatory**= applicatory focus
  - **Classical**= the theological meaning of the text
  - **Devotional**= Focus on edification rather than critical or controversial issues
  - **Homiletical**= more sermonic in style

- iv) Lengths.
  - One volume on whole Bible
  - Looking at a single book or group of books

### **When to use a Bible commentary**

*After engaging the text thoroughly*

The temptation to get to the Commentary after reading the text is high. Don't let the commentaries do the thinking for you. Engage the text. Ask questions like;

- What is the author saying?
- Why does he say it like this?
- Why does he say it like this in this context?
- What did it mean to the first readers?
- What does it mean now?
- What should I do about it?
- What pictures is he using?

“Commentaries are works of men. While commentators may help you see the text in accurate perspective, it is your task to conclude what the text is saying. You should not let commentators dictate to you what the text means.”<sup>1</sup>

Have your own reflections.

Make personal discoveries

### **How to use Bible Commentaries**

1. *Use them to help you understand grammar and syntax*  
Some of the more technical commentaries can help you translate difficult parts of the passage, or perhaps highlight grammatical and syntax issues that help to uncover a text's meaning and message.
  - Brief history of interpretation which can help us to see and consider other options beyond our own framework.
  - Connections within the Book
2. *To get theological meanings and implications* – Commentaries help bring out the theology of the text and connect it with the theology of the rest of the Bible
  - The Bible is one Book with one message
  - But beware of commentaries that get several pages of theology out of every word or sub-clause of the text - may end up exalting the commentator as superior
  - safe to take a reasonable portion, show how the parts contribute to the working of the whole and then show the one or two big theological points the author is trying to get across.
3. *To understand the historical background* – The Bible is not abstract philosophy – it is a historical narrative based in the real world.

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<sup>1</sup> [W E Berkleys, 'The Use of Commentaries,' The Expository Files.](#)

- helps us to understand how the ancient world looked and worked.
- But beware of speculative reconstructions and extra-biblical material ends up determining the Bible meaning

**4. *To get a suggested range of appropriate applications***

- draw out present day significance.
- To avoid immediate relevance
- But remember you understand your audience better than the commentator

**5. *Expression***

- help you find the best words and phrases to express what you have found in the text. Sometimes a good commentator will explain a passage so clearly or concisely or powerfully that you want to use his actual words.
- If you do so give him /her credit by name (not steal their words).
- But avoid sounding Intellectual by quoting lots of clever books and clever words

**6. *Highlight unasked questions and answer unanswered questions***

When I read a commentary I often find questions raised that I had not even considered, forcing me back to the text.

It may be that at the end of all your exegetical labor that you still don't have an answer to a question. That's when reading a number of commentaries can help you better understand the options and arguments and help you to come to a decision.

**7. *Use them to find opposing arguments and conclusions***

As it's often helpful to listen to the other side of an interpretive debate, make sure you consult commentators who state the other positions fairly, or best of all, read the opposing commentators to help you sharpen your own conclusions or change them.

**8. *Use them to find other passages that are related to the text of study***

Commentaries will often provide cross-references or even brief expositions of other passages that have a bearing on this one.

**Remember;**

**1. *Use recommended commentaries***

Ask pastors and professors for their recommendations on various books. Weigh the recommendations. Just because a *Word Series*' commentary on one book is good does not guarantee that they are all good. [Various lists are available online.](#)

Spurgeon: "The best commentators are those who have written upon only one book. Few men can comment eminently well upon the whole Bible."

**2. *Use them discriminately***

Eventually you will get to know the particular theological biases and prejudices in certain commentaries and certain series. As long as you keep these in mind, you can filter out the bones and take the meat. Separate facts from opinion.

**3. *Use them independently***

Don't become wholly dependent upon commentaries; not even upon one commentator or series of commentaries. We don't want to belittle commentaries but we don't want to be bullied by them either. Have confidence in your own prayerful Spirit-led exegesis.

**4. *Use them for appropriate tasks***

Commentaries vary in size, detail, level, and theological basis; they also have different roles in the exegetical process as highlighted earlier.

“It seems odd, that certain men who talk so much of what the Holy Spirit reveals to themselves, should think so little of what he has revealed to others...”

**References**

1. W Hall Harris III, Using commentaries in Bible study
2. [David Murray, How to use Bible commentaries, HeadHeartHand.org](#)