

# Evaluating Commentaries on Joshua

David M. Howard, Jr.

**David M. Howard, Jr.** is Professor of Old Testament at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, a post he assumed after teaching at Bethel Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota and at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois. His works include *An Introduction to the Old Testament Historical Books* (Moody Press) and numerous scholarly articles.

## 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 clear.

Commentaries achieve this goal 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 written 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 thirteen works evaluated below do this. Expositors whose Hebrew skills are 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 the historical context of the events dis-

cussed in a text and what light archaeological excavations might 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 with the message of other biblical books and the major theological motifs of the Bible.

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 to the broad sweep of the large literary units and the theological messages at this level and also 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,"<sup>1</sup> and I have been describing exegetical commentaries in the

preceding remarks. 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. If homiletical commentaries are used, I recommend they be used to suggest relevant illustrations and make proper application. Careful expositors, however, 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 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 are certainly true, but in too many cases these points are not supported by the texts cited. Expositors firmly rooted in the text itself, supported by a few, high-quality commentaries, will be equipped to make proper and relevant application of the scriptures to their intended audiences.

## **How to Use a Commentary**

Even the best commentaries can be dangerous to expositors’ spiritual health and exegetical skills. Why is this? If commentaries become a substitute for the Bible itself, then expositors have abdicated their awesome responsibility of “rightly dividing the word of truth” (2 Ti 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 text once or twice and then hurry to the commentaries for their insights into the text. The sermon or lesson becomes a compilation of miscellaneous comments about what different commentators think.

It is far better for the expositor to read the text 15–20 times, and then devote a large portion of time to identifying the key sentences in each paragraph, key words and thoughts, the flow of ideas, and so forth. After such extensive interaction, many questions and problems will have answered themselves, and the expositor will have had the joy of discovery and 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, such as 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 two says.” Expositors should develop their own exegetical skills so that they can use commentaries in those places where they can truly be helpful, which will keep from

developing an unhealthy dependency on them. Commentaries should be tools of exegesis, not crutches.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Value of Exegetical Commentaries**

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, the approaches each takes, and each's strengths and weaknesses.<sup>3</sup> All can be consulted with profit.

I recommend that pastors preach positionally through entire books of the Bible (or portions of books, if the books are extraordinarily lengthy) as their primary approach 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 introduced to isolated verses or passages.

If this process is followed, then expositors can build their libraries of commentaries in a systematic way as they preach or teach through different books. I recommend that an expositor should own three to five 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 purchase all three if they plan to preach or teach through Joshua in any depth. I have also provided evaluations for another ten. My criteria for evaluation include a commentary's thoroughness, attention to the text's message, evangelical stance, and general usefulness for preaching.

### **The Best Commentaries on Joshua**

(1) Hess, Richard S. *Joshua: An Introduction and Commentary. Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996.*

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 overall 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 latest scholarship. Practically every sentence is pregnant with an awareness of the literary, archaeological, historical, and theological issues at hand. 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.

(2) Woudstra, Marten H. *The Book of Joshua. New International Commentary on the Old Testament. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981.*

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 upon literary, as opposed to historical and archaeological, matters, but his is one of the very best commentaries on the text of Joshua.

(3) *Butler, Trent C. Joshua. Word Biblical Commentary 7. Waco, TX: Word, 1983.*

This is the most detailed commentary 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 offers 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.

An added bonus is that Butler has written a short (124 pages), lay-level work taken 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.

### **Recommended Evangelical Commentaries on Joshua (Listed Alphabetically)**

*Calvin, John. Commentaries on the Book of Joshua. Trans. Henry Beveridge. 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.

*Goslinga, C. J. Joshua, Judges, Ruth.*

*Bible Student's Commentary. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986.*

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 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.

*Keil, C. F. "The Book of Joshua." Commentary on the Old Testament: Volume 2. 1863. Rpt. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975.*

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 reliable, conservative German scholar at a time when most German scholarship was radically liberal.

*Madvig, Donald F. "Joshua." Expositor's Bible Commentary: Volume 3. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992, 237-371.*

This is a solid conservative commentary in a good evangelical series. It offers a commendable 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 works 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 other works on Joshua, but this series is worthy of inclusion in every pastor's library.

**Recommended  
Non-Evangelical Commentaries  
(Listed Alphabetically)**

*Boling, Robert G. and G. Ernest Wright. Joshua: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary. Anchor Bible 6. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1982.*

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 settings. 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.

*Freedman, H. "Joshua: Introduction and Commentary," in A. Cohen, ed., Joshua and Judges. Soncino Books of the Bible. London: Soncino, 1950.*

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.

*Gray, John. Joshua, Judges, Ruth. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. New Century Bible Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986.*

The series in which this commentary appears is popular in Great Britain. It is aimed at pastors and 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 allotted. He believes that the book of Joshua preserves only a kernel of historical truth and that most of the book was written at a much later time to address cultic concerns of that time.

*Hamlin, E. John. Inheriting the Land. International Theological Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983.*

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 current 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 no other commentary does.

*Nelson, Richard D. Joshua: A Commentary. Old Testament Library. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1997.*

This volume 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 had 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. Nelson

is also very skeptical concerning the actual occurrence of most of the events in the book. 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.

### "Lagniappe"

Howard, David M., Jr. *Joshua. New American Commentary 5.* Nashville: Broadman & Holman, forthcoming.

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 am so bold as to offer my own commentary on Joshua as an addition to the list above. 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 theories 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.

### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward an Exegetical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981) 47.

<sup>2</sup>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.

<sup>3</sup>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* (J. Gordon Harris) and Zondervan's *NIV Application Commentary* (Robert L. Hubbard, Jr.). 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: "Original Meaning," "Bridging Contexts," and "Contemporary Significance." Its format self-consciously pushes the reader into making significant application of the timeless principles in the text. Both forthcoming Joshua volumes promise to serve pastors and students very well. Non-evangelical series currently in progress include Westminster/John Knox's *Interpretation* series, Abingdon's *New Interpreter's Bible*, Fortress' *Hermeneia* series, and Michael Glazier's *Berit Olam* series. The *Interpretation* series is theological and pastoral in its approach, but the Joshua commentary is at present unassigned. The *New Interpreter's Bible* is aimed at pastors as well, and it includes exposition and application sections. One or two evangelicals have written for this series, but the Joshua commentary is by Robert B. Coote, who is well-known for his ex-

treme skepticism concerning the historical veracity of the Biblical text, particularly during the period covered by the book of Joshua. The *Hermeneia* series consists of extremely lengthy and technical commentaries, with the Joshua volume being written by P. Kyle McCarter, Jr. Michael Glazier's series, the title of which means "an eternal covenant," focuses especially upon literary approaches to the text. The Joshua commentary is being written by L. Daniel Hawk.