

Dennis, Lane T., ed.

The ESV Study Bible, English Standard Version

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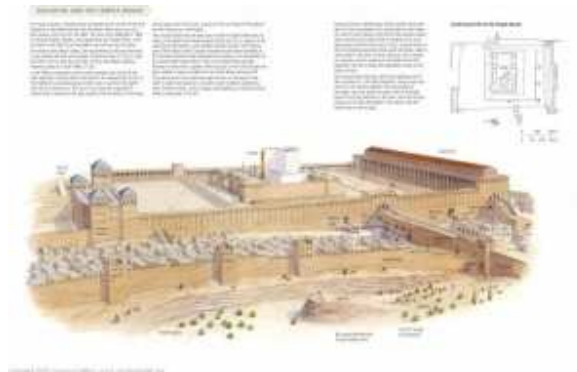
Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth
New Jersey

Having worked with the ESV Study Bible (hereafter ESVSB) for about two weeks now I have to say that I'm both impressed and disappointed. There was a lot of buzz surrounding the ESVSB in the blogosphere with some people touting it as being the greatest study Bible ever produced, even before its release! This of course creates a level of expectation and when that's not met it leaves one less impressed than they might have been had nobody said anything in the first place. Having said that, I want to comment on what I perceive to be the ESVSB's strengths and its weaknesses.

Aesthetically this Bible is magnificent! In all honesty this is the nicest looking study Bible I've ever seen. Whereas I commended the NLT SB for having a "simple and straightforward" look I have to commend the ESVSB for having a classy and elegant look. For starters the main text is in a single column format which is nice and the lettering is all black (i.e., the words of Christ are not in red). I don't mind red lettering but a lot of Bible readers do so they'll be especially pleased with this feature. There are marginal notes for cross referencing and while I personally prefer center-column notes I realize that this is not possible when the text is in a single column format. The study notes are in a double column format and appear in a smaller font beneath the main text. The editors explain this choice saying:

The difference in font sizes serves to remind readers that the words of the Bible itself are infinitely more valuable than the words of the notes. (9)

I quite agree! That said, I still think that the notes are a good size because I can read them while sitting up straight with the Bible on my lap (and my eyesight has been failing over the years). Also impressive was the tasteful and sparse use of color. The text and notes appear in black and white with occasional beige highlighting for section headings in the introductions and articles, as well as some outlining features in the notes and charts, but the maps and illustrations appear in full color. Below are two examples:



Golgotha and the Temple Mount (2066-67)



Table of Nations (67)

Other strengths include the introductory articles and book introductions. Much like the NLTBSB, the ESVSB went above and beyond the usual 1-2 paragraph book introductions in providing 2 page (e.g. Habakkuk) to 10 page (e.g. Revelation) introductions that provide the following information:

- Author and Title
- Date
- Theme
- Purpose, Occasion, and Background
- Key Themes History of Salvation Summary
- Literary Features
- Timeline
- Outline

These are the basic features in almost every book introduction but certain books include even more information! In addition to the book introductions there are number of

introductory articles (19 total!) for the Old and New Testaments as well as the intertestamental period. And on top of these nineteen articles is another 100+ pages of articles in the back of the Bible! Suffice it to say that the ESVSB is packed with information.

But like any study Bible the usefulness and accuracy of the information provided varies. Fellow blogger Iyov offered some criticism¹ of the article entitled “The Bible and Contemporary Judaism” (2623-25) back in September at which time he found the scholarship lacking. My Arminian sensibilities were offended by the article on “Salvation” (2531) in which Eric Thoennes explains that regeneration precedes faith saying:

God’s calling produces *regeneration*, which is the miraculous work of the Holy Spirit in which a spiritually dead person is made alive in Christ . . . The revived heart *repents* and trusts Christ in *saving faith* as the only source of *justification*. (2531)

While I think it fair to criticize this for being unbiblical, I don’t know that it’s fair to criticize its appearance in this particular study Bible given that its doctrinal perspective is stated as being “*that of classic evangelical orthodoxy, in the historic stream of the Reformation.*” (10) This of course is what those with Calvinistic leanings believe the Bible to teach, and this is a Bible that leans towards Calvinism.

I very much appreciated the amount of space that was devoted to the doctrine of the Trinity and Christology with articles on “What It Means to Know God” (2509-10); “The Character of God” (2510-13); “The Trinity” (2513-15); “The Person of Christ” (2515-19); “The Holy Spirit” (2520-22); and finally “The Work of Christ” (2522-26). The Bible as well as Church history (e.g., the Trinitarian & Christological controversies) are referenced throughout these articles and they sketch an overall accurate picture of the doctrine and events that contributed to its formation. I did take issue with the article on the Trinity once it came to the “practical implications of the Trinity,” specifically implication #4 which says: “*The Trinity provides the ultimate model for relationships within the body of Christ and marriage (1 Cor. 11:3; 12:4-6; Eph. 4:4-7).*” (2515) My discontent with dragging the Trinity into the gender debate is well documented so I won’t go into it here.

The notes are a different issue and this is really where my disappointment comes in. For example, in surveying the notes to John’s Prologue (Jo. 1:1-18) I noticed that there was no mention made that the prologue may have been added after the completion of the Gospel to serve as an outline of sorts. There was also no mention made that many scholars believe this to have been an early Christian hymn or creed/confession. Strangely, this information was also absent from the book’s introduction.

¹ <http://voiceofiyov.blogspot.com/2008/09/esv-study-bibles-pseudo-scholarship-on.html>

Sticking with John's Gospel for a moment, in an extensive note on John 1:1 Köstenberger paradoxically provides both too much yet not enough information which will result in most reader's being either confused or falsely confident. He says:

From the Patristic period (Arius, c. a.d. 256–336) until the present day (Jehovah's Witnesses), some have claimed that "the Word was God" merely identifies Jesus as *a* god rather than identifying Jesus as *God*, because the Greek word for God, *Theos*, is not preceded by a definite article. However, in Greek grammar, Colwell's Rule indicates that the translation "a god" is not required, for lack of an article does not necessarily indicate indefiniteness ("a god") but rather specifies that a given term ("God") is the predicate nominative of a definite subject ("the Word"). (2019)

This provides more information than necessary in appealing to Colwell's rule, yet not enough because he doesn't give the reader any information on exactly what Colwell's rule is, how it works, where it can be found, or criticisms of/arguments against it. I can imagine it now, a Jehovah's Witness will come knocking one Saturday morning and a ESVSB user will want to debate them on the translation of John 1:1. When they appeal to Colwell's rule in the course of conversation they might feel extremely confident, until the knowledgeable (or unknowing) JW asks them exactly what that is or why they should consider it. I think Köstenberger could have done much better here.

As I said earlier, I can't really criticize this study Bible for having a Calvinist bent since that's its stated doctrinal perspective, but when they do seek to present alternative interpretations of passages they don't really seem to give the full picture or best arguments set forth by those who hold these other views. The Hebrews "warning passages" are a prime example. I'd prefer that no mention was made to alternative interpretations rather than insufficient reference. But this is really the main problem with producing a study Bible that's theologically driven; whether the notes are accurate or not, there's always going to be readers that disagree due to differing theologies. This is an area where I believe the NLTSB has the advantage over the ESVSB.

I want to end this review on a positive note and speak of the online ESVSB. In a word it's GREAT! It contains the full ESV text (which is searchable), all of the translation and study notes, cross references, articles, charts, pictures, and maps (which I utilized above). Perhaps the best feature is the ability to compose your own notes and highlight the Bible's text. You can even listen to the Bible read aloud if you don't feel like making your eyes work. Below is a screen shot so you can see some of the features.

The screenshot shows the ESV Study Bible website interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with 'ESV STUDY BIBLE' and 'ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION' on the left, and 'account', 'sign out', and 'help' on the right. Below this is a search bar containing 'John 1'. The main content area is divided into three columns. The left column, titled 'My Notes', contains a list of notes for John 1:1-51. The middle column, titled 'John 1', shows the text of the Gospel of John with numbered study notes (1-11) and a section header 'The Word Became Flesh'. The right column, titled 'ESV Study Bible Notes', provides an introduction to John and detailed commentary on John 1:1-18 and John 1:3.

I've promised this Bible to my mother upon the completion of my review but because I have online access to all of the content I'm not as distraught as I would be otherwise. And it is with the confidence that my mother will grow in her understanding of the word, but also with the caveat not to believe everything that she reads, that I'll present her with this Bible.

It's tough to rate this one because of my theological perspective; as a non-Calvinist I disagree with so much of the commentary, but I recognize that Calvinists will find this to be the best study Bible they've ever encountered. It's a beautiful Bible but it's usefulness isn't determined by its aesthetic appeal. I think that the book introductions and other introductory articles are extremely helpful. I think there is much worth reading in the end-of-Bible articles as well. The concordance and daily Bible reading plan are also a plus, but sadly it lacks a dictionary. While I certainly cannot agree with C. J. Mahaney who said, "*I can't imagine a greater gift to the body of Christ,*"² I can agree that this would make a great gift to your friend or family member who has Reformed leanings. I think that those of Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, or Arminian persuasions will find themselves quite frustrated at times. At the end of the day I have no hope that what I perceive to be its deficiencies will ever improve given the intended audience and underlying doctrinal perspective.

² I think it would be fair to say that the Holy Spirit is a greater gift to the body of Christ, as is salvation, faith, grace, etc.