Reflections on Writing Bible Commentaries

Writing Commentaries

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1. The Task of Commentating

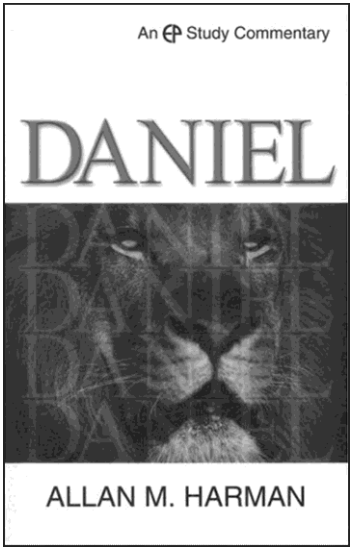
The task of writing commentaries is not just something that scholars do in preparing material to be published. Rather, it is a task for all of us who prepare notes on biblical passages, whether this is for personal devotions, for sermons, for use in teaching Sunday School or Bible classes, or to help translators with their task. A commentary is the presentation of relevant remarks to elucidate the biblical text. It is to try and make plain what is there in the Scripture, not to introduce new ideas that do not have a basis in the text. The technical word "exegesis" that is often used simply means to draw out the meaning of the passage. The term "exposition" is frequently almost identical with "exegesis", though perhaps used more of expounding the Scripture in a public setting such as a church service.

2. Preparation for the Task

Two important things are essential before we begin the task of commenting on Scripture. The first is that it requires true spirituality. The Bible itself teaches that the things of the Spirit are only known with the aid of God's Spirit. Scripture passages such Romans 8 or 1 Corinthians 2 point to the relationship between being indwelt by the Holy Spirit and understanding the rev-

elation God has given of Himself. The sinful mind is hostile to God, it does not submit to God's law, and therefore cannot please God (Rom. 8:7-8). On the other hand, true believers have received the gift of the Holy Spirit and by that same Spirit they are able to understand what God has freely given us (1 Cor. 2:12).

Many people do write on Scripture without possessing genuine spirituality. That is one reason why so much false teaching can be propagated, because these writers are still blind to spiritual truths. While a commentary by a writer who does not uphold the inspiration of the Scriptures may contain things that are correct, their overall approach is marred by their lack of spiritual perception. Young believers in particular need to exercise care in the books they use for preparation of studies and talks.



The second prerequisite flows from the first one. We need to acknowledge our need of divine help in understanding the Word of God, and this is expressed in our seeking God's aid in prayer as we approach His revelation in the Bible. It is surprising that many books on biblical interpretation (hermeneutics) omit this vital step in exegesis. By praying for assistance as we approach the Bible, we are confessing that our minds are blind to spiritual truth without the work of the Holy Spirit and that spiritual perception must come from God Himself. We are to pray like the psalmist: "Do good to your servant, and I will live; I will obey your word. Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law. I am a stranger on earth; do not hide your commands from me" (Ps. 119:17-19).

3. Translation of the Text

While scholars may turn to the Hebrew and Greek texts of the Bible, most Christians open up a Bible in their own language. The whole Bible is now available in over one thousand five hundred languages, with portions in a further two thousand. We should use one translation (or version, to use a synonym) for our regular Bible reading. It should be the translation we use day by day in our personal devotions and study; it helps to always use the same copy of it so that we become thoroughly familiar with it and its layout. This is the version we will memorise, either by deliberate action or simply because we read the same one time and time again. It is best to obtain one that has no notes attached to it as those notes can often be taken to be as authoritative as the text itself. There is a place for Bibles with notes but not for our basic reading of the text.

Choosing a version

How do we choose one version over another one? For 250 years after the Authorised Version (the King James Version) was published, it was almost the only English text used. However, now we have a multiplicity of translations in varied formats. We should pick one that uses the language that is current, as using archaic language does not help us to understand the text nor does it assist in the proclamation of the gospel. However, a place does exist for some more unusual words to occur, and poetry in particular often uses words that are not in our everyday conversation. The principle has to be that the Bible should be available to us in our own language and has to speak to us in contemporary idiom. In English, several reliable modern translations are available. Of them, the New King James Version is virtually the Authorised Version updated by changing to modern pronouns ("you") and omitting the older verb endings. The New International Version (NIV) is a fresh translation and is widely used. The English Standard Version (ESV) is a revision of the Revised Standard Version, a translation in direct continuity from the King James Version.

Mini-commentaries

It is also important to recognise that every translation is a mini-commentary on Scripture. That is to say, every translator of Scripture has to make a decision regarding the meaning of any particular verse. While in practice many translations will be identical for the same verse, yet it can mean that quite diverse interpretations can occur. Sometimes these will be noted in the margin or by a footnote. One example can be given. A literal translation of 2 Timothy 1:12 reads: "But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed and I am persuaded that he is able to guard my deposit against that day." This raises the question: Is Paul speaking about something he has given to God (his soul), or something that God has given to him (the Gospel)? While the traditional interpretation is that Paul is referring to his soul, yet the use of the same word "deposit" just two verses later to mean "the Gospel" suggests that is also the meaning in verse 12. This is the interpretation given in the footnote of the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) and in the text of the English Standard Version (ESV): "what has been entrusted to me".

When we have read the translation of the passage we are to comment on in our regular version, we should then turn to a couple of other versions to see if there is any noticeable difference between them. If there is, we may need to do some more checking to see how the variation in translation is going to make a difference to our interpretation of the passage.

4. Preparing a Commentary

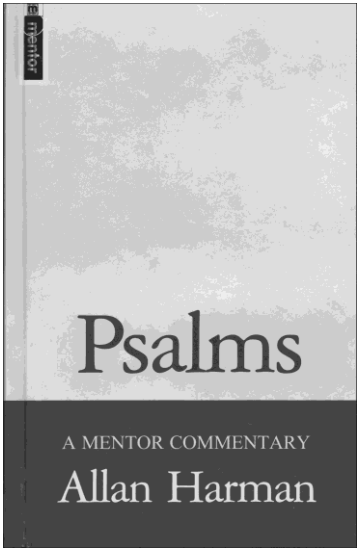
There are two kinds of commentaries. The first is an academic commentary. This is normally based on the original text, whether Hebrew or Greek,

but it may be a discussion in English developed from an understanding of the original text. These discussions may be technical in content and deal with points of grammar or lexicography (the study of the derivation or meaning of words). This task is an important one, because we are dealing with an inspired text and need to know accurately what it says.

But far more common is a commentary written for devotional or pastoral purposes. Many of us write notes for our own personal use, while others do so because we are teaching or preaching from a passage. Our aim is to provide enough material to explain the meaning of the text we have in front of us.

Beginning the task

How then do we start? First, we begin with the English text of the passage. It is good to read it through several times, including doing so aloud. Then we note down words about which we are unsure, or phrases about which we will need elucidation. It often assists to jot down in a single statement what we believe the teaching of the passage is.



The first place to look for help in elucidating the meaning is not to commentaries but rather to Bible dictionaries. They will help us with individual words but also assist us in placing the passage in a particular geographical or historical setting. Many Bibles also have good maps that help with matters relating to place names or with general questions of geographical location.

Before we turn to any commentaries, we should make the effort to understand the passage for ourselves. If we go to commentaries too soon in our preparation, what we read will mould both our thinking and our wording. We need to wrestle with Scripture ourselves and have come to grips with its teaching before we look at what additional information is available.

Getting help from existing commentaries

Why then go to commentaries? There are two main reasons. The first is to make sure that our interpretation falls within the general scope of interpretation. The Christian church has a long history of comment on Scripture, and we should not disregard it. What others have said about a passage is not the same as the Scripture itself, but checking in this way is a safeguard against very aberrant interpretations.

Commentaries also serves another purpose. They provide additional information of which we are unaware. We cannot possibly know everything

about a particular passage, and therefore additional assistance comes from commentaries we have available to us. Not everything that we read needs to be incorporated into our own notes. We must be selective, include only ideas that supplement what we have already written, and do so normally in our own words. Quotations are best avoided in spoken presentations, though putting them in our own notes may serve as a reminder of ideas that can be developed in our own words when speaking.

When it comes to looking at commentaries, where do we start? I normally suggest that we start with the briefest ones. Many people have a study Bible, and it often has good introductory articles on the biblical books as well as notes on the text. One volume commentaries, such as *The New Bible Commentary Revised*, or *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, or the *Evangelical Commentary on the Bible*, are good starting points. Following that, it is good to look at somewhat larger commentaries, such as the two-volume *Zondervan NIV Commentary* or individual books in the Tyndale Series, before going on to books in other series, such as the *Welwyn* and *Study* series of Evangelical Press, the *Focus* series of Christian Focus Publications, or the *Let's Learn* series of the Banner of Truth.

Setting the passage in its biblical context

Another task that needs to be done is to consider how the passage we are working on fits into the development of biblical theology. God's revelation was given progressively over centuries, and any passage must be placed in its own context. This will often mean considering how the teaching in a passage has already been set out in the biblical books and also how it links in with later revelation, especially New Testament teaching. The subject matter of biblical theology is exactly the same as that which is covered in systematic theology. What is different is the method of approach. In biblical theology, the historical development of doctrine is primary, while in systematic theology, it is set out in logical statements depending on the precise topic under review.

5. Application

The significance of the teaching of any passage of Scripture is not the primary concern when working out its meaning, unless, of course, it is a passage that has clear practical concerns. In general, though, it is good after we have completed our study of a passage and written our notes (our "commentary") to ask the question: What significance does this passage have for me/us? Since all Scripture is God-breathed, it "is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16). The teaching of Scripture that we have written about in our notes has practical implications. Those implications should flow naturally from our exegesis of the passage.

6. Practical Hints

While at times we have little warning that we are being called upon to speak or lead a Bible study, if we know well in advance we should do our preparation in good time. This means we are not under undue pressure to complete the task, and we have the opportunity to review what we have prepared or to add to it. Time for reflection will increase our understanding of the passage and also our ability to explain it to others.

We all have preferences in the way we make notes about the Bible. Some prefer to use a wide margin Bible, recording comments opposite verses in the printed text. Others have ways of actually marking the text. A danger exists that what we found when we first studied a passage – and marked in our Bible – may lock us into a particular interpretation with the same early viewpoint being "frozen" in our thinking. Our own techniques can at times enslave us to a certain mode of interpretation.

All the study we do in preparing commentaries on biblical passages deserves to be kept for future occasions. Hence it is helpful to do this work on the same size of paper so that it can be neatly preserved or on a computer from where it can be retrieved at a later occasion. Full notes are not necessary – only sufficient words to indicate clearly the meaning. For preparation for speaking engagements, it is good to record other details, such as the biblical readings and the hymns to be used.

A final comment needs to be made. At times Bible study and preparation of notes on Scripture can become wearisome as we toil away at our task. It may even seem to be as dry as dust. But remember this: we are working with gold dust! God has given to us His revelation in an inspired written form. As Christians we have to search the Scripture, and our prayerful study of it brings forth the riches it contains.

For further reading:

Nigel Beynon and Andrew Sach, *Dig Deeper! Tools to unearth the Bible's treasure* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2005).

Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993).

Alan Stibbs, *Understanding God's Word*, revised by David and Clare Wenham (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1976).