

# Revisiting Commentaries on Joshua

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In 1998, I published a survey of a dozen of the best exegetical commentaries on the book of Joshua in the *SBJT*, in conjunction with having completed my own commentary on the book in the New American Commentary series (NAC).<sup>1</sup> I have now completed a comprehensive revision of that commentary for a new series, the Christian Standard Commentary (CSC),<sup>2</sup> and so I am delighted that Stephen Wellum, editor of *SBJT*, has agreed to let me revisit that survey again in these pages.

In the original survey, I first addressed what a commentary is, how best to use one, and how to go about building a library of commentaries on any given biblical book, and I reproduce much of that discussion here (though in expanded and reorganized fashion). I then selected the twelve best exegetical commentaries that in my judgment would help pastors, students, and well-motivated laypeople to mine the riches of the biblical text of Joshua. This time around, I do the same, keeping some from the original survey and adding others. I again select the dozen best—my own opinion, so *caveat lector!* (“let the reader beware!”). In this survey, I have limited myself to commentaries published in the last thirty years, with one significant exception.<sup>3</sup>

## 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 given text, and on clarifying the text's meaning.

Commentaries do this 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 by Butler, Dozeman, Goldingay, Nelson, Pitkänen, and Woudstra mentioned below each 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 the works evaluated below do this. Expositors whose Hebrew is weak, or who do not know Hebrew at all, 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 about the historical context of the events written about in a text, and what light archaeological excavations might have 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 in with the message of other biblical books and the major theological motifs of the Bible, including the NT, and the best commentaries include attention to these, as well.

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 (1) to the broad sweep of the large literary units and the theological messages at this level and (2) to the details of the individual words and phrases. Such commentaries also show how the two levels interact with each 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,” and I have been describing exegetical commentaries in the remarks above. 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 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 teaching and sermon preparation. If pastors learn well the message of the text, then many relevant applications should naturally come to mind. Pastors will naturally know their own congregations and immediate cultures much better than most commentators, and so they can easily apply the truths and principles derived from a detailed exegesis of the text to their own context. If homiletical commentaries are used, I recommend they be used where their strengths lie: in bringing in relevant illustrations and making proper application.

However, careful expositors—having worked in depth on the text themselves and consulted a few good exegetical commentaries to flesh out their exposition (see below, on “How to Use a Commentary”)—will not need to rely on a homiletical commentary’s attempts at exegesis, which are almost always weaker than exegetical commentaries at this point.

Furthermore, having done their own in-depth study of the text, expositors 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.

Oftentimes, points that many preachers and teachers try to make in applying biblical truths to the modern day will certainly be true—but in too many cases, these points are not supported by the texts appealed to. Expositors firmly rooted in the text itself, supported by a few, judiciously selected commentaries, will be well equipped to make proper and relevant application of the Scriptures to the audiences they minister to.

### **HOW TO USE A COMMENTARY**

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

Far better for the expositor to translate the text for himself or herself, to mull over and over again the nuances and flow of thought in the text, reading the original text and their translation 15–20 times. For those without knowledge of the original language, far better to work in a similar manner: read the text in two or three English translations 15–20 times, and then to devote most of the remaining time—before the actual crafting of the lesson or the sermon—to identifying the key sentences in each paragraph, key words and thoughts, the flow of ideas, and so forth. Being saturated with the text after multiple readings is essential for faithful, godly preaching and teaching.

After extensive interaction such as this, 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, 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 2 says.” Expositors should develop their own exegetical skills so that they can use commentaries in those places where they can truly be helpful, and keep from developing an unhealthy dependency on them. Commentaries should be *tools* of exegesis, not *crutches*.

I recommend, therefore, that pastors practice expository teaching and preaching through books of the Bible (or portions of books, if the books are extraordinarily lengthy) as their primary approach. With such an approach, pastors and congregations can be immersed in the overall message of a book in its context, along the lines suggested above, and not just isolated verses or passages.

## **HOW TO BUILD A GOOD LIBRARY OF COMMENTARIES**

Most seminary students and pastors can recall seeing their own professors’ or pastors’ libraries, beholding with a sense of awe the thousands of volumes therein, and wondering how they will ever be able to build such a library of their own. The publishing options have exploded since I began graduate studies in the mid-1970s, including many great new evangelical publishers and commentary series. If a person had unlimited financial resources — and shelf space in one’s house! — one could easily accumulate several dozen multi-volume commentary sets, many of them composed of 30–40 stand-alone volumes (the NAC, for example, runs to forty-five hefty volumes!).

So what is the average student or pastor with more limited resources to do? In recent years, there has also been an explosion of online resources, including many blogs and self-published resources, and the temptation can be to rely primarily on these. I urge caution with this type of resource, however, since most of them are not vetted at all by editors or scholars who know the field well (though of course many bloggers are established scholars themselves whose online work *can* be trusted).

But many respected academic resources, including commentaries, are also available online directly through their publishers (for a purchase price) or through established Bible software resources such as Logos or Accordance. Usually individual commentaries, and commentary series, are available as modules in these platforms, frequently at more affordable prices than stand-alone hard copies would be.

I recommend that every student and pastor should have at least one multi-volume commentary set in their library, whether in Logos/Accordance or in hard copy. Some of the non-technical works I mention below are in relatively affordable series that can be good starter sets.

Beyond this, I recommend that expositors should make it a goal eventually to own several commentaries on any given book. This can easily be done by scheduling preaching or teaching series through their preferred book and purchasing 3–5 commentaries on that book at that time. If they do this, then expositors can build up their libraries of commentaries over time, in a systematic way, as they preach or teach through different books.

For the book of Joshua, there should be plenty to choose from in the list below.

### **EXEGETICAL COMMENTARIES ON JOSHUA**

The dozen (plus one) best and most important exegetical commentaries on the book of Joshua published in the last thirty years 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 one, the approaches each one takes, and its strengths and weaknesses. All can be consulted with profit.

Six of the twelve below are technical commentaries, exploring all manner of issues in depth, but they can nevertheless very useful in a variety of ways: those by Butler, Dozeman, Goldingay, Nelson, Pitkänen, and Woudstra. Six are less technical and yet will serve the needs of most pastors and teachers very well: those by Coleson, Dallaire, Firth, Hess, Lennox, and Reimer. The list includes four that I recommended in 1998 (Butler, Hess, Nelson, Woudstra) and eight published since then. All are from the last thirty years, save one (Woudstra, 1981).

My criteria for evaluation include a commentary's thoroughness, attention to the text's message as we have it, evangelical (or non-evangelical) stance, and all-round usefulness for preaching and teaching.

### **TOP TWELVE COMMENTARIES ON JOSHUA (PLUS ONE)**

1. Butler, Trent C. *Joshua 1–12, Joshua 13–24*. Word Biblical Commentary 7A and 7B. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014, 923 pp.

This is a thoroughgoing revision, updating, and greatly expanded edition of the author's 1983 one-volume offering in the Word series. It is the most detailed commentary all-round on Joshua (along with Thomas Dozeman's), consistent with the Word series in which it is located. Butler gives a good original translation and excellent textual notes. He then proceeds with insightful comments about the text's form and structure, verse-by-verse comments, and helpful theological reflections. Butler demonstrates an encyclopedic knowledge of the literature on Joshua and delves deeply into any issue one can think of. 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. In the revision, Butler addresses critics who pointed this out in the first edition, but mostly, he doubles down on his original arguments, so it must be used with some caution. Nevertheless, it is a valuable work, with many exceptional comments about text, grammar, and theology. Good, all-round treatment.

2. Coleson, Joseph. "Joshua," pp. 1–183 in P. W. Comfort, *et al.*, eds., *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary*. Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2012, 183 pp.

A very readable, brief commentary in the Cornerstone series, a solidly evangelical series based on the New Living Translation (NLT). It includes the text of the NLT, followed by limited but useful technical notes and helpful commentary on each section of the book. It has no footnotes but includes a seven-page bibliography at the end. A helpful, entry-level contribution.

3. Dallaire, Hélène, “Joshua,” pp. 815–1042 in T. Longman III and David E. Garland, eds., *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Revised Edition*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012, 228 pp.

A strength of this work is the series in which it is located, the Expositor’s Bible Commentary (EBC), edited by Tremper Longman and David Garland, a 2010s revision of the highly regarded evangelical series from the 1970–80s, edited by Frank Gaebelein, both based on the New International Version (NIV). Dallaire’s work is consistently irenic; on controversial issues (e.g., date of the Exodus or the destruction of the Canaanites), she surveys the main options in a fair manner and then cautiously states her agreement with this or that position. Her work is fairly brief in its treatments of individual texts (e.g., only two pages on the much-discussed sun-and-moon passage of Josh 10:12–14). She is at her best in the Introduction, where she introduces the book well, laying out all the major issues for interpreters to be apprised of in order to best understand the book.

4. Dozeman, Thomas B. *Joshua 1–12, Joshua 13–24*. Anchor Yale Bible 6B and 6C. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015, 2023, 1040 pp.

This work stands as the most comprehensive of all Joshua commentaries (along with Trent Butler’s), as is the trend toward monumental tomes in the Anchor Yale Bible series (e.g., it includes 66 and 45-page bibliographies in the two volumes). Dozeman is firmly situated in the critical tradition prevalent today, especially viewing the book of Joshua through the lens of violence, i.e., that it is a mostly negative book whose “colonialist” and “genocidal” message must be rejected in the modern day.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, Dozeman’s translation, textual notes, attention to central themes and literary structure for each section, and his exegetical work are second to none, and certainly worth consulting for such questions.<sup>5</sup>

5. Firth, David G. *Joshua*. Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary. Bellingham: Lexham Academic, 2021, 425 pp.

Firth, an Australian evangelical, has written an excellent commentary in a new evangelical series whose distinguishing feature is “its orientation toward Christian proclamation,” based on the Christian Standard Bible (CSB). Although it is not a “technical” commentary in the strict sense—

the pages are not cluttered with endless footnotes or in-depth discussions of minutiae—it is refreshingly comprehensive in its exegesis and attention to theological issues. Firth regularly gives attention to “bridges” between Joshua and the NT and also the modern day. It is an insightful, readable, and very helpful work.

6. Goldingay, John. *Joshua*. Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Historical Books. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2023, 507 pp.

This is a solid work by a British evangelical in a new, in-depth evangelical series. Each section provides an “Overview” of the text at hand, Goldingay’s own translation and textual notes, followed by “Interpretation” and “Theological Reflections” sections. Goldingay has consistently good exegetical insights, and often comments with his signature cheeky, easy-to-read style. He does not ignore difficult modern-day issues: for example, he interacts with modern, postcolonial readings of the text, but consistently affirms what the book itself affirms, that God is over all and sometimes works in ways that we might not prefer or understand. A very insightful work.

7. Hess, Richard S. *Joshua: An Introduction and Commentary*. Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries. Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996, 320 pp.

This remains one of the best commentaries on Joshua today, despite its being three decades old now. Its series, the Tyndale OT series, is reliably evangelical and readily accessible to pastors and laypeople alike, based on the NIV (though the NIV text is not included in the commentary itself). In its short scope (320 small-sized pages), Hess’s work accomplishes far more than most other commentaries, including much longer ones, and it is without question the best value for the money. 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 very latest scholarship as of 1996. Hess does not waste a word: practically every sentence is pregnant with an awareness of many issues at hand—literary, archaeological, historical, theological. An added bonus is Hess’s consistent attention to NT themes that arise out of the material at hand in Joshua, one of the few commentaries on Joshua to do so. Indispensable.

8. Lennox, Stephen J. *Joshua: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*. New Beacon Bible Commentary. Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 2015, 303 pp.

A very accessible work in a series devoted to “the best scholarship in the Wesleyan theological tradition,” though there is little distinctively “Wesleyan” in this particular volume; it takes a firmly evangelical stance throughout. Working with the NIV (not included in the text), Lennox provides a helpful introduction, followed by paragraph-by-paragraph commentary divided into three parts: “Behind the Text,” “In the Text,” and “From the Text,” representing introductory matters, commentary proper, and modern-day trajectories, respectively. A brief, but very helpful work.

9. Nelson, Richard D. *Joshua: A Commentary*. Old Testament Library. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1997, 310 pp.

This slim volume is one of the best mainstream critical commentaries, still useful after three decades. Nelson provides his own translation, textual notes, and extensive exegetical notes. He is no evangelical; he operates within a higher-critical framework, devoting considerable attention to reconstructing the hypothetical sources behind the text, and he is very skeptical concerning the actual historicity of most of the events in the book (though he does not engage with recent, trendy issues such as postcolonialism). On the positive side, this work helpfully pays much attention to matters of the message of the text in its received form, and it makes many very useful and insightful comments.

10. Pitkänen, Pekka M. A. *Joshua*. Apollos Old Testament Commentary 6. Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2010, 454 pp.

This is an in-depth work in a broadly evangelical series aimed at providing “not only tools of excellence for the academy, but also tools of function for the pulpit,” and it accomplishes its aims well. Pitkänen provides his own original translation, textual notes, background information, along with detailed exegetical notes. These are followed by discussions of modern-day concerns arising from the text, and as such, will serve pastors and teachers well.

11. Reimer, David. “Joshua,” pp. 311 – 508 in I. M. Duguid, J. M. Hamilton, Jr., and J. Sklar, eds., *ESV Expository Commentary: Vol. 2: Deuteronomy–Ruth*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2021, 198 pp.

This is a fine contribution in a solid new evangelical series from a Reformed perspective, based on the English Standard Version (ESV). The author is conversant with current trends in Joshua studies and consistently affirms orthodox positions, but with a minimal amount of jargon or excessive footnoting. An especially helpful feature of the work is the “Response” after every section, where issues of application and theology are dealt with, including regular attention to NT trajectories.

12. Woudstra, Marten H. *The Book of Joshua*. New International Commentary on the Old Testament. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981, 396 pp.

The NICOT series has long stood as the gold standard of in-depth, evangelical series, and Woudstra is an excellent representative of that series. He 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 provides his own translation, and he is very sensitive to small nuances in the text missed by many commentators. He intentionally focuses his attention on literary, as opposed to historical and archaeological, matters, but his is one of the very best commentaries on the *text* of Joshua. It has remained the most detailed evangelical commentary for four decades—until the appearance of Pitkänen’s, Goldingay’s, and my own—and is still essential reading.

13. Howard, David M., Jr. *Joshua*. Christian Standard Commentary 6 (Nashville: Holman Reference, 2026), 688 pp.

I make so bold as to include my own commentary as a “bonus” selection, to be published in 2026. It is a revision of my 1998 volume in the NAC series, based on the NIV. The NAC series has established itself alongside the NICOT series as the most in-depth evangelical commentary series, and the CSC continues in that tradition, using the CSB as its base text. My primary aim here (as it was in the first edition) has been to attempt an in-depth exegesis of each passage in the body of the commentary; matters of

background, archaeology, apologetics, and the like are mainly found in the Introduction, in footnotes, and in several excurses. One special new feature is the “Biblical-Theological Reflections” after every chapter, where I have attempted to integrate each chapter’s messages and themes with larger themes in biblical theology, including looking at the NT more frequently than I had in the first edition; this is in keeping with the stated goals and approach of the CSC, which I applaud.

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- <sup>1</sup> David M. Howard, Jr., “Evaluating Commentaries on Joshua,” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 2.3 (Fall 1998), 4–10; idem, *Joshua*, New American Commentary 5 (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1998).
  - <sup>2</sup> David M. Howard, Jr., *Joshua*, Christian Standard Commentary 6 (Nashville: Holman Reference, 2026).
  - <sup>3</sup> This is not by any means to say that older commentaries have no value; they do, of course. Two of the best classics by orthodox scholars are those by John Calvin (*Commentaries on the Book of Joshua* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.]), which he completed in six months, shortly before his death in 1564—a monumental achievement; and C. F. Keil (*The Book of Joshua* [Commentary on the Old Testament (by Keil and Delitzsch)] [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975 reprint (1863 original)]). Keil was a conservative German scholar whose exegetical insights are still valuable today, as are Calvin’s.
  - <sup>4</sup> “Postcolonialist” and feminist interpretations predominate in critical biblical scholarship today. Perhaps this is best illustrated in Carolyn Sharp’s recent commentary, where she acknowledges her debt to “the pantheon of feminist and postcolonial biblical scholars.” Her discussion of “Joshua and the Rhetoric of Violence” begins “Joshua is a genocidal and colonizing text” (see Carolyn J. Sharp, *Joshua*, Smith and Helwys Bible Commentary [Macon, GA: Smith and Helwys, 2019], 44–53; quote from p. 44); her next section is entitled “Postcolonial Resistance” (pp. 53–7). Such views also tend to lead organically to biases against the modern-day state of Israel, seen in such works as Rachel Havrelock, *The Joshua Generation: Israeli Occupation and the Bible* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).
  - <sup>5</sup> Dozeman’s is a replacement in the Anchor Bible series of the still-helpful commentary by Robert G. Boling and G. Ernest Wright, *Joshua* (Anchor Bible 6; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1982).