

Oxford Biblical Studies Online (OBSO)

Oxford Biblical Studies Online (OBSO) (<http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com>.) Price available on request. Accessed April 3rd, 2009.

Oxford University Press's newest online product, *Oxford Biblical Studies Online*, contains three main categories of materials: Bible texts, reference materials, and images and maps. According to *OBSO*'s FAQ page, both the scope and the intended audience are fairly broad. The materials have been assembled to satisfy "a wide range of research and study activities," which should be useful to students, faculty, and clergy members. The Bibles are the *New Oxford Annotated Bible*, the *Oxford Study Bible*, the *Jewish Study Bible*, the *Catholic Study Bible*, the *Access Bible*, and the *Authorized King James Version with Apocrypha*. The six Bibles represent five translations: two New Revised Standard Versions, plus one each of the Revised English Bible, the TANAKH, the New American Bible, and the King James Version. Two concise concordances are included, one for the NRSV and one for the NAB. Besides the concordances, Sparks's *Apocryphal Old Testament*, Elliot's *Apocryphal New Testament*, and the *Oxford Bible Commentary* are listed under the heading "other Bible texts."

Of the nine reference sources, six are not already available as part of *Oxford Reference Online: How to Read the Bible*, the *Oxford Handbook of Biblical Studies*, the *Oxford History of the Biblical World*, the *Oxford Illustrated History of the Bible*, the *Oxford Bible Atlas*, and the *Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East*. The *Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls* is otherwise only available as an Oxford Digital Reference Shelf title. The maps and images collection is generated from either the Bible texts or the reference sources included in the database.

The collection is rather modest in size compared to Oxford's other online products. *Oxford Reference Online Premium*, for example, contains over 175 titles, and *Oxford Scholarship Online*'s title count for the religion collection is approaching five hundred titles. The closest equivalent Oxford collection in terms of scope and audience is *Oxford Islamic Studies Online*, which includes a selection of reference materials as well as Qur'an translations and a concordance, plus extensive primary source material. Given the title list for *OBSO*, it is fair to assume that it is intended to provide basic reference materials rather than the extensive reference materials on all subjects in *Oxford Reference Online*, or the more advanced scholarly works available in *Oxford Scholarship Online*. Oxford's FAQ for the *OBSO* is unclear about what further resources might be added at a later date, although it does indicate that articles from the forthcoming *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible* will be published in updates to the *OBSO*.

The site offers five main sections: Search, Browse, Bible Texts, Timelines, and Tools & Resources. Both the Search and the Browse functions highlight the availability of images and maps in the database. The Main Search includes a full-text keyword search, with the option of including or excluding the Bible texts, and the results set includes tabs to separate the search results by reference materials, Bible texts, or images and maps. The results list sorts by relevance, which worked well for the references—for instance, search results for a keyword search for "Levites" lists the entries for Levites at the top—but not so well for the Bible texts. Changing the sorting order to alphabetical after the search resulted in the concordance entries being listed alphabetically, but the hits for the Bible versions were still in random order. It would have been helpful for the search results for the Bible texts to be listed alphabetically by

the title of the book of the Bible, for instance. There is an option to refine results by categories such as “Geography” or “Law and Politics,” but this option only applies to the reference materials, not the Bible texts; using this option will always return zero results on the search tab for the Bible texts.

There is an Advanced Bible search, but it does not have the search options usually associated with an advanced search, such as subject terms. The Advanced Bible search allows searching by content type, Bible section, or within select Bible texts. The search results for the Advanced Bible search appeared to be identical to those from the Main Search. Perhaps, generating search result screens that are uniform is thought to be helpful. However, it could be confusing for users to see a References tab, since the references that are being referred to in this case are being drawn from the works in the Bible texts and the commentary from the Bible versions, rather than from the reference materials. Also, the refine results option still appeared at the left-hand side of the screen, even though using this option to search the Bible texts always returned no results.

Like the Main Search, the Advanced Bible search did not provide any method for sorting the results into book-of-the-bible order. The inability to sort by this method compares unfavorably with free online sources such as Biblegateway.com, which is essentially an online concordance, and is capable of presenting search results for any word or phrase in book order.

Considering that a search for “Levites” produced 483 hits, the lack of a useful sorting feature is a problem; changing the sorting order from “relevance” to “alphabetical” after the search still did not generate an alphabetical list. The only way to generate a list of search results for a search of the Bible texts in any discernible order is to limit the search to one of the concordances.

Limiting the Advanced Bible search by section category could be problematic as well, since patrons would need to know the relationship among the terms Old Testament, Hebrew Bible, and Apocrypha. The help screens did not provide definitions of the section categories. Since limiting a search by either Old Testament or Hebrew Bible will return results from all the Bibles, and the search results are in no discernible order, beginning students will have trouble figuring out why they would get different search results based on this limit. For instance, a keyword search for “Jerusalem” limited to Hebrew Bible returned 1280 hits, and the same search limited to Old Testament returned 1301 hits.

The Browse function includes a tab to browse all the entries in the reference works alphabetically, with the result that some terms, such as “Babylon,” are listed several times in the browsing list. The tab for the Browse function for the Bible texts points to the titles of the works in this category, which can then be browsed by table of contents. So, for the Bible texts, the Browse function is virtually identical to the Bible Texts section.

The main features of the Bible Texts section are the side-by-side commentary and comparison with another text. Comparing one text with another will result in a split screen within the browser, with the first Bible version on the left, and the second Bible version on the right, along with a tab for the commentary from the second Bible version. No more than two texts can be compared at one time, and only one of the texts can have a tab for the commentary. The side-by-side commentary provides the same split screen as the compare with another text feature, except that the texts on both sides of the screen are the same, allowing the user to toggle to the commentary on the right-hand side of the screen. It is also possible to compare one of the six Bible versions to the *Oxford Bible Commentary*, in which case the commentary will appear on the right-hand side of the screen.

The remaining features, the Timeline and the Tools & Resources, would need to be more robust to be useful. For instance, some of the “learn more” links on the Timeline jumped to an appropriate reference article—but some, like “Shishak I invades Palestine,” jumped to a general article on Egypt. The Tools & Resources section seemed rather thin; for instance, a table of weights and measures could easily be found elsewhere online. Other features, such as the Bible Verse Lookup, are also freely available elsewhere online.

Compared to Oxford’s other online products, *OBSO* did not stand up well in terms either of content or searching capability. *Oxford Scholarship Online*, as already noted, has a larger collection of religion texts, and would likely be more useful to advanced students. Beginning students would most likely be able to get sufficient general reference material from *Oxford Reference Online*, since it contains a number of reference works comparable to the titles included in *OBSO*. The search features for the Bible texts in *OBSO* are problematic for both beginning and advanced students. Students who want to compare Bible translations can access many more Bible versions for free at websites such as Biblegateway.com, so the side-by-side comparison feature of *OBSO* would only be useful if one of Oxford’s translations was the assigned text for the student’s class. The dearth of Bible commentary content in *OBSO* is a further severe limitation, and this is all the more regrettable since librarians are eager to have an online database that includes better resources of this type. For graduate students, the product does not fill a specific need that would not be better served by resources such as Bible software or Biblical studies e-book collections, and the inability to sort the Bible texts search results by book order is a serious drawback for all students.

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