

Going a Step Beyond—Websites with More than Just Bibles

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There are numerous websites that offer a variety of Bible versions or links to Bible versions. In particular, Look Higher! (<http://lookhigher.net/>), Bible Readers Museum (<http://www.biblereadersmuseum.com/>), Online Translations of the Bible (<http://rockhay.tripod.com/worship/translat.htm/>), and Netvouz (www.netvouz.com/BibleCollector) represent four sites that offer hundreds of modern as well as out of print and hard to find English Bible versions. These sites are highly recommended for the quantity and selection of Bibles that they include. The library linking to these sites would provide patrons with Bibles in multiple modern foreign languages, paraphrases, older public domain texts, and even a variety of more current translations. They also offer a few exegetical aids or helpful links, but their bread and butter emphasis rests on the breadth of available Bibles.

Going a step beyond this type of web resource, though, there is another category of online Bible sites whose value lies in the variety of tools presented in addition to the Bible versions that they list. The focus of this essay is an evaluation of a handful of the more popular websites that fall into this area. The sites selected for inclusion in this treatment were drawn from a wide range of theological perspectives, have interfaces and navigation schemes that are easy for users to grasp, are rarely subject to server crashes or down time due to extensive upgrades, and are updated regularly.

The first site worthy of mention is the Online Bible (<http://www.onlinebible.net/>). It offers over forty English Bibles and another twenty-five non-English Bibles on its pages, all of which may be downloaded. Larry Pierce, who has a Brethren background and is from Winterbourne, Ontario, Canada, manages the multi-use site. Included are easily available (old) commentaries such as Matthew Henry and *Barnes' Notes*, and about one hundred books. Some are solid, practical, timeless offerings such as Schaff's *History of the Christian Church* and A. T. Robertson's *Word Pictures*. Many of the books underscore Pierce's interests in young earth creationism (Ken Ham, Henry Morris) and Reformed views (Gill, Bunyan, Spurgeon, Pink). But there is some balance with a few books on Arminius and John Wesley as well as dispensational books alongside preterist interpretations of Revelation. To his credit, Pierce allows users to send in their favorites, and thus another few hundred online books are accessible, ranging far and wide with regard to theology and usefulness. The target audience is "pastors, theology students, and devoted Christians."¹ This is a non-profit site freely available to anyone surfing the web. In all, the site boasts that over nine hundred modules can be downloaded.

The Bible Gateway (<http://www.biblegateway.com/>) is another worthy site and offers easy access to over one hundred Bible versions, many of them non-English versions. Most of the English versions are recent major editions, but a few oddities are included, such as dispensationalist founder John Nelson Darby's Bible from the late nineteenth century and Pentecostal Annie Cressman's *Worldwide English New Testament* from 1969. The Bible Gateway was first started in 1993 by Nick Hengeveld who was attending Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, at the time. In 1995, he became the first webmaster at what is now <http://www.gospel.com/>. He brought the Bible Gateway with him, and it has become a favorite site for many Christians. The Bible Gateway team continues to add new translations, languages, and functionality to the site. There is a tutorial available so users can negotiate

¹ Taken from an interview with Larry Pierce found at <http://www.online-bible.com/larry.html/>.

the site effectively. Bible societies such as Biblica and The Lockman Foundation contribute their resources.² The *Bible Gateway* is advertiser-friendly for a fee, but does not overly intrude when searching the site. It also has a general store for users to purchase items. This is a multi-faceted site where users can click on a passage, key word, topical index, or Bible versions. Despite its impressive selection of scripture, it is of interest for this essay due to its large “additional resources” section. This area of the site includes Bible reading plans, newsletters (verse for the day, men or women of the Bible, etc.), mobile Bible gateway, audio Bible, e-books (which are non-English Bibles supplied from Biblica), old dictionaries (Easton, Smith, and Hitchcock), and old commentaries such as Matthew Henry, John Gill, B. W. Johnson, J. Vernon McGee, John Wesley, and Darby. However, a highly valuable link is the IVP New Testament Commentaries. Unlike the Online Bible, this site is geared for lay Christians. Nonetheless, students and scholars will find useful materials. From a scholar’s perspective, the IVP New Testament commentaries and non-English Bibles (close to forty languages) are the most valuable tools on this site. Indeed, the IVP commentaries are the only online commentaries that follow modern historical critical methods. For this alone, the site stands out from the rest.

One more Internet resource that is worthy of a second look is Study Light (<http://www.studylight.org/>). Study Light proffers several online Bible helps, including forty English translations, along with some oldies that are not found elsewhere. According to materials published on their webpage, “StudyLight.org is a Christ-centered, Bible-based Internet ministry which is not a part of any one church group or denomination.”³ The rest of their statement of faith reveals a broad, evangelical, strongly Trinitarian statement of faith. The breadth of resources is good but follows the common characteristic for all of these sites of utilizing much older tools. There are three encyclopedias, the most recent being the original 1915 edition of *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*. There are more dictionaries offered here than in The Bible Gateway, but again all are old. However, the one-volume *Baker Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology* from 1996 is click-worthy. Commentaries reflect the same approach, offering helps from centuries past, but David Guzik, a Calvary Chapel pastor, provides his pastor-friendly commentaries. A Google search will also bring up a related site published by the same group that may be found at <http://adserver.studylight.org/>. This resource adds even more dictionaries, commentaries, and original language helps than are found on its parent site. Interestingly, the Google tag titles it the “New” Bible Gateway, perhaps in competition of the Bible Gateway above. Study Light, therefore, offers more of the same older sources than Bible Gateway, but includes more original language helps along with a few more recent dictionaries.

Search God’s Word (<http://www.searchgodsword.org/>) is the fourth resource to consider. This website is a ministry of Heartlight, and contains twenty English translations. Similar to the other Bible study tool sites, there are numerous other helps such as commentaries, dictionaries, encyclopedias, and lexicons, but again they are all quite old. This resource has a few downsides in comparison with those previously mentioned. For instance, the navigation for this site is more difficult. Also, the advertisements hit the user immediately and must be clicked away to begin negotiating the site, but they do not go away and pop up elsewhere. As a mixed blessing, users may receive a free copy of *Tortured for Christ*, but if you already possess a copy, then you are plagued throughout your

² Biblica (<http://www.biblica.com>) was founded in 1809 as the New York Bible Society, then changed its name to the International Bible Society in 1983, and then merged with Send the Light to become Biblica in 2009. It is headquartered in Colorado Springs, Colorado. Its major publication is the *New International Version*. The Lockman Foundation (<http://lockman.org>) originated in 1942 in La Habra, California, where its offices remain today. Its major publications include the *Amplified Bible* and the *New American Standard Bible*.

³ See <http://www.studylight.org/info/statementoffaith.html>.

search session with this intrusive advertisement. This site is supported largely by two Church of Christ churches in Abilene and Austin, Texas, and is geared for daily living for Christians. Despite the drawbacks to this online resource, research-minded users will find the history tab as one of the features that allow this site to stand out from other similar sites. *Today in Christian History*, *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, *Early Church Fathers*, *Works of Josephus*, and *Creeks and Confessions* are the highlights of Heartlight.

Bible Study Tools (<http://biblestudytools.com/>) is one more excellent site and presents online surfers with thirty English translations. Like the other sites, it adds old helps in the areas of commentaries, concordances, interlinears, encyclopedias, and dictionaries. It looks very much like the Study Light site above in layout and design, and because it includes the same resources. One of the few “new” sources is the *Baker Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*. One section is titled “Pastor Resources,” and includes sermons, illustrations, and articles. Thus, more than other sites listed in this essay, Bible Study Tools produces a strong “pastor-friendly” appeal, and surfers can use the search box to find sermons on Bible passages or topics. Bible Study Tools is a part of the humongous Salem Web Network of faith-based online resources that is centered in Richmond, Virginia.⁴ Nonetheless, apart from its value for the sermon library and illustration bank, it does not offer as many Bible study resources when compared to the other sites.

A smaller but refreshingly helpful resource, The Blue Letter Bible (<http://www.blueletterbible.org/>), offers eighteen English translations to commence immediate Bible study. The site follows the familiar opening pages of the Bible Gateway, Heartlight, and Study Light. The tools are conveniently listed on the left, and advertisers do not interfere too much with negotiating the site. There is a bookstore but it plainly states that sales go toward missions. There are many more modern commentaries available, yet they are not necessarily scholarly, but rather preacher-friendly. Thus, balanced with Matthew Henry and Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown are Guzik, Stedman, Walvoord, Hoekstra, and Bowman. These are preacher-friendly, practical commentaries, not deeply textual offerings. Another feature that sets this site apart is the numerous FAQ helps from Don Stewart—not the prosperity gospel televangelist, but instead the apologist with the same name. Yet this Don Stewart still gives away the background of the founders of the site. The charismatic-friendly, dispensational Calvary Chapel is represented freely throughout. This includes Stedman and Stewart, and Chuck Smith among many others. Chuck Missler, who many consider extremist on certain issues, is another co-founder. Overall, then, though there are many helpful tools for conservative Christians on this site, readers should be aware of their theological views.

Online Bible resources frequently tend to be more conservative in orientation, and that is true of the next resource under consideration. Olive Tree Bible Software (<http://olivetree.com/>) includes access to close to twenty English Bible versions, but they are not as conveniently located when compared to other sites. The reason for this is that although Olive Tree offers several free helps, they are in business, and they want to sell their wares rather than be simply a Bible study tool research site. Based out of Spokane, Washington, this site reminds me of Logos (<http://logosbiblesoftware.com/>) resources in that many people have been able to make a life ministry in providing their services. The products are clearly geared for the evangelical, conservative, and tech-friendly audience. Olive Tree has copyrighted the phrase, “The Bible in the palm of your hands,” and BibleReader is one of its trademarks. In short, unlike other sites, this resource recognizes the formatting issues that are necessary for handheld computing devices rather than merely designing for the laptop or PC. For users who do not intend to buy anything, there are still numerous freebies available. Click on “free items” and a few hundred e-books, sermon books, and Bibles

⁴ See “Salem Web Network” at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Salem_Web_Network.

are ready to be accessed. However, to pay for a download of what is free elsewhere and ancient (e.g., *Ironside's Commentaries*) just for mobile use may be necessary today, but I will patiently wait for such ancient sources to be free in the palm of my hands.

A worthwhile site produced by scholars for lay people is The Unbound Bible (<http://unbound.biola.edu/>). Professors and others connected with Biola University in La Mirada, California, conceived this site with an emphasis upon “free.” The opening page is user friendly and ready for a parallel Bible research. Easy to click headings are at the top of the page and offer such items as Bible reading plans, FAQs, and links to other sites like Bible Gateway, Biblica, and American Bible Society helps. The Unbound Bible also offers study tools, but these are quite limited both in number and variety in regard to some types of materials when compared to the other sites mentioned in this essay. For example, Matthew Henry is the solitary commentary offered. Yet a few other helps deserve mention. For instance, this site includes a lexical Greek parser, and maps and charts of the Bible and Paul’s journeys that similar sites do not offer. Finally, one link provides the *Marathi New Testament*, a translation into an Indian dialect that could serve sixty-eight million readers. Therefore, this site limits itself more toward online parallel Bible research, yet does this well.

The Online Parallel Bible Project is managed by John Isett, based out of Glassport, Pennsylvania. The project as a whole actually started as an umbrella under which a family of sites was developed. The project began in 2004 as <http://bible.cc>, which provided a parallel, verse by verse view of eight translations. Soon, many new tools were developed to support the parallel site. These began as separate sites, but feedback led them to develop a single integrated platform. Thus, in 2007, several sites were integrated to form <http://biblos.com>, and there are now thirty-five English translations ready to be used. True, the same old Bible study tools remain at work here. But the value of this one is that on one page a link to a Bible passage allows users to scroll down to see all the commentaries in lieu of clicking each time for each individual tool. Another benefit of Isett’s work is his interest in multi-language helps ranging from Greek to Peshitta to modern languages, a total of forty-eight languages in all. This project is privately owned and supported for the express purpose of sharing Bible study tools online. Most of the work is done by volunteers with an interest in using their technological skills to this end. Their statement of faith is conservative and evangelical. Their threefold mission is to 1) increase the visibility and accessibility of the Scriptures online; 2) provide free access to Bible study tools in many languages; and 3) promote the Gospel of Christ through the learning, study, and application of God’s word.⁵ This site is one to keep an eye on. I look forward to checking up on its progress.

Finally, I left my personal favorite until last. The New Testament Gateway (<http://www.ntgateway.com/>) is scholar Mark Goodacre’s highly useful website.⁶ Yes, it includes information and links on English Bible versions along with other Bible study helps listed elsewhere in this essay. What sets this website apart is its value for scholarly research. The opening webpage listed above proudly claims it as “the award winning web directory of internet resources on the New Testament. Browse or search annotated links on everything connected with the academic study of the New Testament and Christian Origins.” Thus, Bible students, seminary students, pastors, and interested laypeople will receive much from this site. But the site is scholar-produced and scholar-friendly, and the assumed audience

⁵ Taken from <http://biblos.com/about.htm>.

⁶ There is an Old Testament Gateway out of Australia. It is newer but shows promise. It is not as yet on the same scholarly level as New Testament Gateway. Readers are invited to check it out at <http://www.otgateway.com/>. Another site that does not exactly fit the category of this bibliographic essay yet is still valuable to spend time with is Michael Marlowe’s Bible Researcher site (<http://www.bible-researcher.com/>). It is filled with wondrous helps that revolve mainly on English Bible translations and translation theory.

will know the original languages and critical issues that are currently being debated. One will find (annotated) bibliographies, language helps, books, discussion forums, journals, and e-lists as well as the latest dialogue on the Historical Jesus, the Synoptic Problem, and critical issues in Johannine and Pauline studies. This rich library of resources is ready for clicking. There are blogs, societies, and course materials. As a New Testament professor, this is one of the most significant resources available to do my scholarly work.

This survey of going beyond online Bibles is certainly not exhaustive but representative of what is available. For example, many utilize a wide variety of tools for busy Christians, yet end up inflicting the perpetuation of old, uncritical resources upon the next generation of Bible students. You can pay for recent sources, and Olive Tree is one site that will help you find them. Refreshingly, The Bible Gateway has IVP New Testament commentaries for free. Recent Bible translations are available in print and also online. It would be wondrously helpful if publishers could speed up the waiting period between print and website for resources that are not Bible translations. Specifically, modern commentaries, histories, dictionaries, encyclopedias, and lexicons are poorly represented online. For scholars, the New Testament Gateway is a site for regular viewing. A final caveat is the reminder for readers to look closely at who is behind the site. Most appeal to conservative Christians. Hidden in the site, however, are theological choices, most notably centered on young earth creationism links, dispensational premillennialism, and Reformed theology. Users must demand more from themselves when assessing these sites, and should always make use of multiple sites for balance.

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