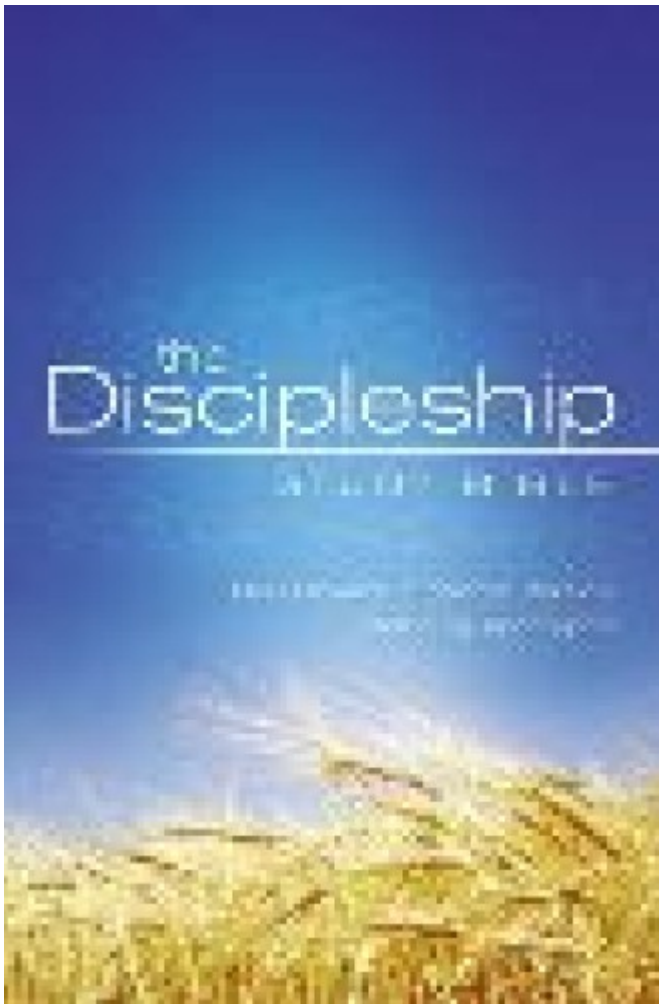


The Discipleship Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version Including Apocrypha

reviewed by [James C. Howell](#) in the [October 21, 2008](#) issue

In Review



The Discipleship Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version Including Apocrypha

Bruce C. Birch, Brian K. Blount, Thomas G. Long, Gail R. O'Day and W. Sibley Towner, eds.

Westminster John Knox

Recently I browsed the front end of the religion section in my neighborhood bookstore, and I found dozens of Bibles: teen Bibles, “practical” Bibles, a travel Bible, a “businessman’s” Bible, Bibles narrated by great actors and captured on CD. I didn’t even open *The Mother’s Bible*, although I wondered if fathers like me could make sense of these maternally oriented scriptures. So what is a reviewer to say about a discipleship Bible? It’s a Bible, it’s God’s Word, I hope that it sells in the millions and that discipleship happens as a result.

As much as I believe in the raw, compelling power of the Bible straight up, I know that my parishioners need help. Like the Ethiopian eunuch, they can read the Bible, but then they wonder, “How can I understand unless someone guides me?” (Acts 8:31).

Westminster John Knox has published a Bible with a great company of guides—scholars with solid reputations for both their technical craft and their theological passion. The *Discipleship Study Bible* provides quality introductions to each biblical book, running footnotes, maps, a chronology and even a concordance. The very title of this Bible is promising. Bruce Birch, writing on behalf of the editors, declares that their intention is to “help readers recognize that Christian faith makes claims upon every aspect of our lives, both as persons and communities of faith. The notes will invite the reader to see, in the biblical witness, God’s invitation to live faithfully and redemptively in the world.”

On the other hand, the term *discipleship*, much in vogue, worries me a little. Popular usage seems to suggest that discipleship is something we do; it’s about us, our spirituality, our act of following. I wouldn’t argue with those who feel that no term better characterizes the Christian life, but in a more profound way, the Bible isn’t about us. It’s about God. The *DSB* isn’t wrong to ask in its explanatory notes on the parable of the sower (Mark 4), “What kind of soil are you?” But then we miss the true surprise in Jesus’ story, which is the crazed, profligate way the sower flings the seed. Like God, the sower doesn’t spare seed or sow it only in places likely to yield growth. The parable at a higher level is about the heart of God, just as the Bible as a whole is about God before it is about us and our act of following. Could there be a “Praising Study Bible” or a “Theologically Awestruck Bible”?

How well does the *DSB* achieve its stated purpose? After sampling a few dozen texts, I asked some of my church members—teachers, veteran Bible readers and neophytes—to take the Bible for a few days, then share their thoughts. We agree: the *DSB*, not surprisingly, is uneven, and not merely because different writers cover different books of the Bible. One text may be covered well and insightfully and, probably because of economy of space, the next passage may not be commented on at all. I asked two laypeople to name passages they wonder about or really adore and would like to explore. One mentioned “that place in Peter where Jesus descends into hell,” and the other claimed Jeremiah 29:11 as her all-time favorite verse. As luck would have it, the *DSB* says nothing at all about either. Then a third passage was mentioned: Isaiah 7:14. The *DSB* footnote is comparatively full, translating *Immanuel*, mentioning God’s intent to reassure Ahaz, and pointing out that *virgin* came from the Septuagint. All of this is true, but an untrained lay reader would be left totally buffaloed by this information.

At times the notes are historically or critically explanatory, while at other times they contain a theological reflection or even a call to life change. I would say that the balance between these is as good as in any study Bible I’ve sampled. However, scholarly jargon does creep in, and the laypeople I asked regarded the comments as a bit thin: too brief to explain much or to prompt anything that might pass for discipleship. Consider the Isaiah 53 passage that mystified the Ethiopian eunuch. We may imagine that Philip’s comments soared higher than those in the *DSB*, whose footnotes on this text are up to snuff from a historical-critical perspective but do not lure us into the marrow of God’s lowly, suffering redemption of us confused mortals.

A scholarly footnote apparatus can prod readers into a more faithful apprehension of a text and guard against self-indulgent modernization of scripture, but one would expect that the historical comments in a discipleship Bible would take readers somewhere that matters. The comment on Isaiah 12:2 states that the verse’s language “is consistent with the enthronement Psalms . . . emanating from the New Year’s festival.” This may be historically accurate and even mildly interesting, but the comment would dizzy many Bible students.

Many texts are deftly handled. I turned to Revelation 13:18, expecting an analysis of numerology and the identification of 666 as Nero. But in the *DSB* we find something better: “The number 666 may have suggested a particular individual to John’s original readers, but decoding this number is not the point. The challenge for faithful discipleship is to recognize the face of evil in the everyday and to resist its pull.”

Quite a few debatable interpretive slants appear. The footnote to Romans 1:26 is as follows: “Paul probably assumes that all homosexuality activity is wrong, but he mentions it mainly to illustrate how false religion leads to false living. Modern debates on the topic should not overlook the apostle’s assertions that sin is universal and that the chief duty of Christians is not to condemn their neighbors but to love them.”

Some of the laypeople I invited to help me review the *DSB* already owned another study Bible, and they indicated that they would keep what they had and not buy this one. I asked why. The answers were often utterly practical in nature. A couple of folks really like the *NIV Study Bible*, whose charts and maps are scattered throughout the book, appearing where they are pertinent. The *DSB*, on the other hand, is a sea of words, with everything other than the notes segregated from the text itself. But a man who didn’t own a study Bible asked if he could keep the one I loaned him.

Perhaps it’s impossible to cover historical issues with any facility in a study Bible and then to press further for something meaningfully called discipleship. But maybe the thinness of the *DSB* is its greatest virtue. A lean commentary might drive the reader back to the text, and it is the text that gives life—to echo Luther, it is the text that can still be the swaddling clothes in which Christ is laid. Discipleship might happen only when we read the Bible itself with just a little bit of help. Then we have to learn to walk on our own.