

BOOK REVIEWS

The ESV Study Bible. Wheaton: Crossway Bibles, 2008, 2,752 pp., \$49.95.

The first printing of the *ESV Study Bible* (henceforth *ESVSB*) sold out before the 100,000 volumes arrived from the printer. Six months after being released in mid-October 2008, Crossway had printed 300,000 copies. An impressive list of evangelical pastors and teachers enthusiastically endorse the *ESVSB*, but the main reason it is so popular is its outstanding quality. Here are some of its key features:

1. Ninety-five evangelical Christian scholars contributed to the *ESVSB*, including Wayne Grudem (general editor), J. I. Packer (theological editor), C. John Collins (OT editor), Thomas R. Schreiner (NT editor), Darrell L. Bock, Mark Dever, Simon J. Gathercole, Grant R. Osborne, John Oswalt, John Piper, Daniel B. Wallace, Bruce A. Ware, Gordon J. Wenham, Peter J. Williams, Robert W. Yarbrough, and many more.

2. The 20,000 notes are clear, concise, and exegetically and theologically informed. They introduce each book of the Bible and then fill about one fourth of each page in the OT and one half in the NT.

3. Seventy articles scattered throughout the volume (including over 160 pages in the back) supply informed summaries of different sections of Scripture, OT and NT theology, systematic theology, Second Temple Judaism, ethics, hermeneutics, canon, textual issues, archaeology, original languages, historical theology (including world religions and cults), and salvation history. They could easily be published separately as a 700-page book.

4. Enhancing the learning process are over forty all-new engaging illustrations (e.g. the tabernacle, temple, and Jerusalem), 200 charts (e.g. genealogies in Genesis 5, the kings during the divided kingdom, Zechariah's visions, and NT timelines), and 200 full-color maps (e.g. possible exodus routes and the allotment of land during the conquest of Canaan).

5. Adjacent to the ESV text are 80,000 cross-references (identical to other editions of the ESV), and the concordance lists 3,178 words and 14,161 verses.

6. The printed text and format are clear and readable: the cross-references are in the gutter, the ESV text is in a single column printed according to genre (e.g. paragraphs for prose) in a 9-point Lexicon font, and the notes occur in two columns in a 7.25-point Frutiger font.

7. The paper quality and Smyth-sewn binding are superb for each available edition: hardcover, TruTone, bonded leather, genuine leather, and premium calfskin.

8. An online version, available free with any purchase of a print edition, has many additional features and resources, including audio narration of the whole Bible and the ability for the user to take notes. (For samples, videos, and more, see www.esvstudybible.org.)

The *ESVSB*'s doctrinal perspective "is that of classic evangelical orthodoxy, in the historic stream of the Reformation" (p. 10). It affirms the Bible's inerrancy and seeks "to represent fairly the various evangelical positions on disputed topics such as baptism, the Lord's Supper, spiritual gifts, the future of ethnic Israel, and questions concerning the millennium and other events connected with the time of Christ's return" (p. 11).

Some controversial passages evenhandedly present major views without clearly favoring one (e.g. Ezekiel 40–48; Dan 9:24–27; 1 Cor 11:24; 13:8; 2 Thess 2:5–7; 1 Tim 2:4; Heb 6:4–8; 1 Pet 3:19; the book of Revelation). Here is a sampling of how the *ESVSB* handles some controversial issues (including when it does favor a particular view):

- Genesis 1–2 neither requires nor precludes an ordinary-day interpretation.
- Gen 6:17 is possibly a local flood.
- Both the early and late dates for the exodus are viable options.
- Pharaoh is responsible for his hardened heart, but the Lord's sovereign hand ultimately governs the hardening (Exod 4:21; etc.).
- Both the single and double fulfillment views of Isa 7:14 are viable options.
- In Jer 31:35–37, "the new covenant" will never cease (the *ESV* translation says "the offspring of Israel" will never cease), and God will never "cast off the Israel of this new covenant" (the *ESV* translation says that God will never "cast off all the offspring of Israel").
- Peter is "the rock" in Matt 16:18.
- In Matthew 24–25, Jesus "apparently intertwines prophecy concerning the destruction of Jerusalem and his second coming."
- John 6:40 "implies that no true believer will ever lose his or her salvation."
- The miracle of tongues fulfills Joel 2:28–32, "though not all of it was yet fulfilled" (Acts 2:14–21).
- "In the early church, baptism was probably by immersion, at least as a general rule, though Christians dispute whether such a practice must always be followed literally today" (Rom 6:4).
- Salvation "is not ultimately based on human free will or effort but depends entirely on God's merciful will" (Rom 9:16).
- Rom 11:26 refers to "the salvation of the end-time generation of the Jewish people in the future."
- Paul teaches that men and women are equal in dignity and essence but distinct in their roles (e.g. 1 Cor 11:7–9, 14; 14:34–35; Gal 3:28; Eph 5:22–33; 1 Tim 2:12–13).
- NT prophecy "can have mistakes and must be tested or evaluated" (1 Cor 12:10).
- "The Israel of God" (Gal 6:16) refers to "the believing children of Abraham (3:7, 29) who belong to 'Jerusalem above' (4:26–27)."
- Regeneration logically precedes faith (Eph 2:5; 1 John 5:1).
- "The best explanation" for the Colossian heresy "is that it comes from the context of the local Jewish and pagan folk belief."
- The verb "to meet" in 1 Thess 4:17 "may indicate that the subsequent movement of the saints after meeting Christ 'in the air' conforms to Christ's direction, thus in a downward motion toward the earth." This suggests a post-tribulational view, but the notes do not explain the major rapture views (though the introduction to Revelation does).
- Good works are the necessary result of justification (Jas 2:14–26).
- "Jesus' sacrifice is offered and made available to everyone in 'the whole world,' not just to John and his current readers" (1 John 2:2).
- Genuine Christians "have been so transformed that they cannot live in a pattern of continual sin—though this does not mean that Christians are ever completely free from sin in this life" (1 John 3:9–10).

A note of warning is in order: there is no substitute for the primary text. As with any study Bible, people may make at least two serious errors with the *ESVSB*: (1) they

may use the notes as a crutch or shortcut instead of wrestling with the text itself; and (2) they may conflate the authority of the God-breathed text with the notes. The *ESVSB* explicitly warns readers of these perils (p. 9) and will serve the church to the glory of God when readers use the tool properly.

No other study Bible matches the *ESVSB* in quantity or quality. The 4.2-pound tome is "equivalent to a 20-volume Bible resource library" (p. 9), and it accomplishes its mission "to understand the Bible in a deeper way." I have already recommended it several times to non-Christians who are exploring Christianity, and I joyfully gave seven *ESVSBs* to family members last Christmas. It is difficult to think of a better comprehensive tool that benefits non-Christians, young Christians, and mature Christians.

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