



Some Thoughts on Scripture Study Software

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General Overview

The landscape

So you want to use your computer for Bible study. Great idea...if you do it right! Terrible idea...if you do it wrong. You need first to understand that not all software is created equal. This is true for *all* software, not just Scripture Study Software (SSS). Just because something is “on the computer” does not mean that it is better than something that is not digital. Nor that it is really a good solution for you. Let us begin by looking at what the current Scripture Study Software landscape looks like. What kind of Scripture Study Software is out there?

Functionality Levels

- **Level One - Bible Texts:** The simplest kind of software contains the Bible text, usually at least the KJV, but often with a choice of other translations as well. These programs will usually offer a search facility, allowing you to search for a given passage (e.g., “John 3:16” or “Psalm 23”), or for a particular word or phrase (e.g., “haste” or “fullness of time”). The passage that is found can usually be selected, copied, and then pasted into word

processing software that you might be using for a presentation, lesson, or sermon. This is what the very first SSS programs offered, and this is as far as some of them go today. This basic functionality is good, *often* much faster than turning to a passage, and *always* faster than using a concordance, with the added benefit of being able to transfer the text for use in another document.

- **Level Two - Bible Texts, plus various study helps:** This kind of software is nearly identical to the first, but along with the Bible text(s) available, the authors have included other Bible study aids, such as dictionaries and commentaries. The ability to look at a word in, for example the KJV, and to see the corresponding Strong's Concordance number is common at this level.
- **Level Three - Bible Texts, plus various study helps, plus much more:** This kind adds more of the same kind of material, but adds "under the hood" functionality that the casual user might otherwise miss. This extra functionality can include items such as:
 - A. Clicking on a word in the Bible text to open up a separate window with an article about the word or a more comprehensive dictionary, lexicon, or concordance entry for it;
 - B. Seeing the corresponding Greek or Hebrew word;
 - C. Displaying the same passage in parallel translations;
 - D. Situating events on a timeline or a map;
 - E. Parsing and even diagramming the text;
 - F. Building a customized concordance, with graphs, for a given word or phrase;
 - G. Customized, more complex searches;
 - H. Custom/personal notes or outlines for selected texts;

- I. Diagramming sentences in Greek or Hebrew;
- J. And much more!

Source and Price Levels

This refers to whether the software is *public domain*, *shareware*, or *commercial*. The price of Scripture Study Software ranges from zero to hundreds and even thousands of dollars.

- **Free / open source:** This software is usually developed by an individual or a small team of volunteers, and made available for free download. Improvements and bug fixes depend on how much time the author(s) can put into the project. It offers basic functionality, but will not generally offer the high end functionality described above. The user interface can range from abysmal to very good. The interface of some open source software rivals that of some commercial packages. Although some free software offers a long list of available helps and texts, the list is often populated by older public domain items. Copyright owners rarely give permission for their text to be included in free software. This is why you will not find, as of this writing, a free software tool that includes the NIV text. The copyright holder does not grant permission for that. On the other hand, the owners of the ESV seem to delight in making their translation available, and a growing number of tools, free and otherwise, now include it.
- **Nearly free:** This software generally comes from an individual (or group) who considers that he cannot afford to give away his product, but does not want the burden of maintaining a costly package for which customers might have higher expectations. He charges what most would consider a more reasonable price.
- **Not free at all:** These are full commercial packages from companies that expect to make a profit. Some Bible students are put off by the thoughts of

a company making a profit on software, without understanding that every reference book they will ever consult on any shelf in any library also came from a company expecting to make a profit. Baker, Eerdmans, Zondervan, IVP, Randal House, and others all must find a way to make a sufficient profit for them to continue their work. We can imagine the kind of books we would have if we only selected books offered for free or nearly free! We should not be surprised then to find that most of the best Scripture Study Software is commercial in nature.

Platforms

Does it matter?

The platform generally refers to the operating system (or *OS*) that the software needs in order to run. The famous “*I’m a PC...and I’m a Mac*” commercials illustrated the way most people understand this. Scripture Study Software always needs *something* on which to run. The three major platforms of interest to most Bible students are: PC/Windows, MacOSX, Linux, and/or a mobile system, such as iOS or Android.

In one sense the choice of the operating system does *not* matter, in that all the major systems have software for reading and studying the Bible. If it is a choice between *something* and *nothing*, then any OS will do.

On the other hand, the OS matters a great deal, because the OS will frame your entire experience for everything else you do with your computer. In addition, most Scripture Study Software is available only on the platform(s) which the developers have chosen to support.

Computers rapidly become obsolete or troublesome, especially the budget priced models many churches and pastors seem to prefer! In addition, the system software itself will require periodic upgrading. Unless you have a compelling reason otherwise, you may find it wise to choose your Scripture

Study Software tool, and then choose the operating system or platform that supports *it*, rather than the other way around.

Today's platforms

- **Windows:** This is the PC most people envision when they hear “computer.” Its strengths (lots of people around to work on it) and weaknesses (lots of things for them to work on!) are well-known. Earlier versions of Windows had many headaches that people just assumed were normal for computers. However, a more recent version, Windows 7, shows marked improvement in stability and security, for most people. Windows 8, however, has received less enthusiasm from the general public.

- **MacOSX:** This is not the old classic Macintosh operating system. This is an Apple interface built on a solid UNIX-compliant base. Its strengths are the interface, user experience, stability and security. Most people consider that the major weakness for the MacOS is price. It is true that you will not find any \$399 Mac laptops at Office Depot or Staples. On the other hand, Macs tend to use higher quality components and last longer. Various studies comparing PCs and Macs of similar configuration using *similar quality components* (such as one might find in a Sony Vaio, for example) generally show them neck and neck for price.

- **Linux:** You can think of this as a sort of UNIX clone. It is usually free, and there are a variety of flavors and interfaces available. Linux was long known for requiring very savvy users who were not afraid to use a command line interface (typing text commands rather than pointing and clicking) to get things properly configured. The Linux community has worked hard on this, and some more recent distributions of Linux offer a much better experience for the less tech

savvy user. One disadvantage of Linux is that as of this writing little or no commercial software for studying Scripture is available.

- **Mobile:** The explosion in the mobile market really makes it a separate platform. Windows tablets, iOS devices (iPhones/iPads), and Android phones/tablets form a separate but growing market for Scripture Study Software. Generally, the same types of divisions that we see in the desktop/laptop market exist in the mobile market.

Current Favorites

Free software:

- **Bible Explorer** (<http://www.bible-explorer.com/>) exists as a free downloadable product and as a commercial boxed product. For a long time it was Mac only, but it now offers a free Mac beta version for download. It offers a large assortment of reference tools from commercial publishers, generally for *purchase*, not free.

- **BibleTime** (<http://www.bibletime.info/index.html>) is another open source project available for a number of platforms. It is a relative newcomer, but users may want to investigate it further.

- **e-Sword** is a common favorite (<http://www.e-sword.net/index.html>) for free PC-based software. Its author, Rick Myers, traces its beginning back to 2000. It has added features and users, and counted 2,500,000 free downloads in 2009. The program is free, as are many of the downloadable resources. At the same time, a number of the downloadable resources must be purchased before they can be downloaded, such as the NIV module. The application is Windows only, but it is also available live via a web browser, at <http://live.e-sword.net/>, designed for any computing device with a web browser -- Mac, Linux, PC, or mobile.

- **MacSword** (<http://www.macsword.com/>) is the site for the Mac version of the SWORD project described elsewhere in this section.

- **The Online Bible** (<http://www.onlinebible.net/>) has for a long time been Windows based, but a Mac version is available that will run the modules. Some modules are free and some are commercial, but the basic package is free. Their site also offers a page of interesting links to other Bible resources: <http://www.onlinebible.net/links.html>.

- **The SWORD Project** (<http://www.crosswire.org/index.jsp>) from CrossWire.org is available for Mac, Windows, Linux, mobile platforms and web access. It offers a good assortment of free modules, but little is available from current commercial publishers. It offers an interesting selection of foreign language Bible texts.

- **TheWord** (<http://www.theword.gr/index.php?home&l=english>) is another Windows only program. The basic program is free, but many of the modules the student might want to add require purchase.

Commercial

- **Accordance** (<http://www.accordancebible.com/>) is certainly the premier Scripture Study Software package on the Mac. It is also now available for Windows and for iOS. Their iPhone/iPad version does *not* require repurchase of the modules the user already has! Accordance offers functionality as good as or better than any product on the market. The basic bundles are reasonably priced. In addition, upgrade pricing for bundles and modules is equitable. If a user buys a Basic bundle and later wants to upgrade it to say an Intermediate bundle, he only pays the difference in price between the two bundles, not the difference in price for each additional module included in the bundle. *They routinely offer discounts to students and ministers, and offer free video podcasts that demonstrate the many different things the pastor or student can*

do with the software. They also sponsor free regional workshops for users. Their ordering staff and tech support are very helpful and responsive.

- **BibleWorks** (<http://www.bibleworks.com/>) is Windows only, and maintains a good following among many Bible students. It offers good functionality in a decent Windows interface. It is not at all free, but may be a good value nonetheless considering its capabilities.

- **Gramcord** (<http://www.gramcord.org/index.htm>) offers scholarly Greek and Hebrew software. Serious scholars would be interested, but most local church pastors will look for a broader offering. Nonetheless, you need to be aware of it.

- **Laridian** (<http://www.laridian.com/>) is a well-known name in the *mobile* market, where it continues to thrive. It has recently branched out into the Windows market as well.

- **Logos** (<http://www.logos.com/>) is one of the more extensive (and some would say, expensive) commercial packages available. Windows-only for a long time, it has recently re-entered the MacOS market, to generally favorable reviews. It also has versions available for iPhone and iPad. Interested users should consult the lists and comparisons available on the Logos site to determine what is available at what price.

- **Olive Tree** (<http://www.olivetree.com/>) is another mobile giant, and definitely worth checking out for the mobile user.

- **QuickVerse** (<http://www.quickverse.com/shopfiles/default.asp>) has been around for a long time, with frequent updates, and is available for Mac or PC. Its most recent version claims links to Facebook, Twitter, and so forth.

Tips

What should the student or pastor who has not already made a firm choice or commitment in this area do? What should he look (out) for?

Determine *what you really want to do* with Scripture Study Software. Let your need drive the choice of software tool, not the other way around. Of course the beginner in this area may not really know what he wants to do until he has used some of the software already!

Nevertheless, **list** the things you *think* you want to do:

- Look up passages
- Look up words or phrases
- Look for some help with the originals, at least a link with Strong's notes, for example
- Compare the same text in multiple translations
- Incorporate maps, timelines, commentaries
- Incorporate personal notes
- Transfer text into other programs for presentations, sermons, lessons, etc.
- ???

Arrange the items on your list with the most important item at the top, and the least important items at the bottom. Use this version of the list to help you when examining a given piece of software.

Try the free programs or free trial versions to see which one seems to work out the best in real life. Screenshots available on a publisher's website can be helpful, but nothing beats trying the program out for yourself. Ask yourself some of the following questions:

- How easy is it to install this software?
- What kind of problems did I run into?

- If I had problems, how responsive was the publisher's tech support?
- How easy will it be to expand this software?

If the publisher for an application in which you are interested makes one available, **browse** the user forums. Do they rave about the program, or rage against poor tech support? What kinds of functionality have they been requesting for a long time that just does not seem to arrive (and how important is that to you)?

Think long term. You will not be able to purchase your *book* library all at once. You build it over time. The same will be true for your software library. Look for a program that allows you to add over time as your needs require and your resources permit. Be careful in this area. You want to make sure that if a publisher upgrades a program to the point that all the extra modules *also* require updating, that the extra updating is not at extra cost. This sounds so simple. Who would not do that? You would be surprised. You want to make sure that your investment does not get frozen in time because of some publisher's "gotcha" in upgrade pricing!

In thinking long term, you may want to consider long term use of study notes. When you make that first study note on that first passage for the first time in your software, it will not seem like much. Imagine however how things will be in five, ten, or fifteen years of ministry if you have faithfully noted your thoughts, questions, and observations in your software. More passages that you consult will already have some thought of yours already there, something you may have forgotten over the years but that comes in very handy all of a sudden.

What about mobile devices? How important is it to have the same modules available on your smartphone or iPad that you have on your computer? Or do you just want a basic Bible text with you at all times, but not necessarily all the functionality of your desktop or laptop?

Learn good computer hygiene! Keep up with your installation CD/DVD/serial numbers! Use **up-to-date** anti-virus software, especially on Windows. Keep backups. Remember, there are two basic kinds of computer users: those who have needed a good backup, and those who will!

Take the time to master the software tool you finally choose. Watch online tutorials, learn keyboard shortcuts, and so forth, especially if it is a commercial product. Why spend your limited resources on a tool that you will only use halfway? You would not buy a car and then never use it in the rain because you could not be bothered to learn how to turn on the wipers! *Learn how to operate your software effectively -- it is simply good stewardship of the time and money God entrusts to you.*

Remember why you use the software, never letting the tool, no matter how good it is, dazzle you more than what you find in the Word. This is one reason why I get picky about the interface. I want a program that “gets out of the way” so that I can build my study around the Word, not around the software program.

Be thankful for the time in which we live -- when so much help is available for getting into God’s Word in ways previous generations would never have believed. Remember that much is required of those to whom much has been given. May the resources and functionality available to us enable us to be more **effective** servants of God, not merely more technically savvy servants.

A closing personal word

These are just a few brief thoughts on the subject. It would be easy to come up with enough material to fill an entire book, but I have tried to hit some of the basics and more important issues. The list of available software is *far* from complete! A simple Google or Bing or Yahoo! search will come up with much more. I have tried to stay more with the tried and true items with which I or people with whom I associate have had personal experience. I have no axe to

grind either way, however, and recognize that people for a variety of reasons will prefer one item over another in any area of life. I have personally used Olive Tree and Laridian products on mobile devices, and The Online Bible on both Windows and Mac, and found them all worthwhile. I have friends who seem to enjoy BibleWorks, for example. I have also used items from the SWORD project (Crosswire.org), and even created some of my own modules for them. In summary, I would say that Logos, Accordance, and to a lesser extent BibleWorks, occupy the top rung, offering excellent levels of functionality.

For many years I shied away from anything that cost more than a few dollars! Just a few years ago, however, I made the plunge and bought a bundle from Accordance, and have never regretted it. I was ready to buy a particular configuration for a certain price, and the phone ordering staff pointed out that I could get what I wanted for less money by configuring the bundle differently. Their sales and support staff have been helpful, responsive, and competent. The program gets out of the way to let me focus on the Word, keeping its power hidden away until I need it. My only regret with it is that I wish I had been using the product for years already so that I would have a good supply of personal notes!

Finally, I will repeat the caution to let the software tool you choose remain just that -- a *tool*. You are the craftsman, and a good craftsman must learn to use his tools wisely and effectively. A craftsman's work is seen not in the tools on his workbench, but in what he creates with them. Your worth as a craftsman of the Word will be seen not in your selection of software tool(s), but in the sermons and lessons you prepare and in the lives of people the Holy Spirit will be able to change through your work. They will not care what software tool you use, or even if you use one at all. Use whatever helps you do the best job you can reasonably do as a student of the Word, and then use it for all it is worth!

Resources

Below is a list of Internet resources you may find helpful:

• Free or low cost software:

- Bible Explorer: <http://www.bible-explorer.com/>
- Bible Time: <http://www.bibletime.info/index.html>
- E-Sword: <http://www.e-sword.net/index.html>
- E-Sword Live: <http://live.e-sword.net>
- MacSword: <http://www.macsword.com/>
- The Online Bible: <http://www.onlinebible.net/>
- The Sword Project: <http://www.crosswire.org/index.jsp>
- TheWord: <http://www.theword.gr/index.php?home&l=english>

• Commercial Software:

- Accordance: <http://www.accordancebible.com/>
- BibleWorks: <http://www.bibleworks.com/>
- Gramcord: <http://www.gramcord.org/index.htm>
- Laridian: <http://www.laridian.com/>
- Logos: <http://www.logos.com/>
- Olive Tree: <http://www.olivetree.com/>
- QuickVerse: <http://www.quickverse.com/shopfiles/default.asp>

• Online Resources:

- Bible Gateway: <http://www.biblegateway.com>
- Bible Study Tools: <http://www.biblestudytools.com>
- Blue Letter Bible: <http://www.blueletterbible.org/index.cfm>
- e-Sword.net: <http://beta.e-sword.net>
- Kairos Journal: <http://www.kairosjournal.org.uk>

- King James Bible free, in mp3: <http://www.audiotreasure.com>
- King James Bible Society: <http://www.kingjamesbiblesociety.org>
- The NET Bible: <http://www.netbible.com>
- Tyndale House Biblical Weblinks (very thorough and scholarly):
<https://sites.google.com/site/biblicalweblinks/online-journals>
- The Unbound Bible: <http://unbound.biola.edu>