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An Appraisal of the ESV Study Bible

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“AN APPRAISAL OF THE *ESV STUDY BIBLE*”

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I. AN EMBARRASSING ITEM

Several days after obtaining a copy of the *English Standard Version Study Bible* © 2008 I was preparing to teach a Sunday School class on Nahum. I was displeased to discover a serious mistake in the new reference Bible. The note on Nahum 1:1 (p. 1712) states, “The name **Nineveh** occurs again only in Neh. [sic] 2:8 and 3:7.” Of course, those verses in Nehemiah have nothing to do with Nineveh. The reference should have been “Nah.,” not “Neh.” It is hard to fathom proof readers and multiple layers of editors allowing what should have been noticed as an obvious mistake to go so readily into print.

II. SOME BASIC ITEMS

On a more positive note, I am much impressed by the 200+ maps, 40+ fine illustrations, and 200+ charts that decorate the *ESV Study Bible*'s pages. These demonstrate extremely fine workmanship, all are new, and all are produced in color. The charts on pp. 1612-13 showing the Seleucids and Ptolemys, and then the Maccabean line are very helpful. The six maps in Daniel showing the four kingdoms and the Maccabean period are also impressive. All maps are colorful, clear, uncluttered, and easy to read. Christ's life and the journeys of Paul are also well illustrated geographically. There is a multi-page “Intertestamental Events Timeline” and a two-page chart of the Herodian dynasty, and much much more that is fascinating to find and explore. Following the text of Revelation there are 161 pages of well written articles about biblical

doctrine, ethics, interpretation, how to read the Bible, the canon, manuscripts, archaeology, NT use of the OT, world religions, cults, and the history of salvation in the OT. Following these articles is an 80 page three column concordance, a Bible reading chart, and 17 additional large full color maps. The *ESV Study Bible* is truly an encyclopedic resource.

The contributors to the study Bible are also an impressive lot. All six on the Editorial Oversight Committee are ETS members. Of the 34 OT study note contributors less than half, only 16, were ETS members during the year of publication. However, 14 of the 19 study note contributors to the NT were ETS members during the same period. Interestingly, more than one third of the OT contributors reside outside the USA. Only a few of the 50+ note contributors have terminal degrees from evangelical institutions, and only four of such institutions uphold biblical inerrancy.

III. DATING SCHEMES, SOME SHOWING CONTRADICTIONS

I was impressed by the introductions to each of the Pauline epistles. They read like something out of Thiessen, Tenney, or Gromacki for their consistency in conservative dating and their support of Pauline authorship over against destructive critical arguments. Galatians was pegged at AD 48; the Thessalonian epistles between AD 49-51; the Corinthian correspondence between AD 53-56; Romans at AD 57; the four church epistles from Rome in AD 62; the two early Pastorals between AD 62-64; and 2 Tim between AD 64-67.

However, the figures used for NT dating ran into an obvious snag beginning with the note on pp. 1809-10 that declared the evidence for Christ's death and resurrection at AD 33 to be stronger than that for a date of AD 30. This was not good enough though, and the note continued that "because the date of A.D. 30 is held by a number of respected NT scholars, both dates are included in the various chronologies herein" (p. 1810). But, both dates cannot be correct, and in

fact forces the reader to notice contradictions in the resulting charts and further discussion. For example, the chart on p. 2100 for Acts 9 gives Jesus' death/resurrection as AD 30/33 (either/or). But Paul is "present at Stephen's stoning" in AD 31-34, and Paul is converted in AD "33/34*," the asterisk denoting "approximate date." Then the First Missionary Journey is given as AD 46-47, with no hedging or "approximately." The problem is obvious when one sees Paul's second visit to Jerusalem, the so-called famine visit, listed as AD 44-47* (approximately). But if Jesus rose from the dead in AD 33, the suggested preferred date, then how soon was Paul converted after that? The chart shows AD 33/34* (approximate). But if *either one* of those dates is the case, the timing of the First Missionary Journey conflicts with the Famine Visit of Acts 11. Gal 2:1, and the study Bible note, say Paul went up to Jerusalem by revelation 14 years after his conversion. That would make the Famine Visit in either AD 47 or 48. In fact, the Gal 2:1 study note says the Famine Visit was c. AD 47. This conflicts totally with the chart on p. 2100 that has the First Journey beginning in AD 46 and occurring *after* the Famine Visit. It is hard enough to be consistent with one set of dates, but the attempt to reconcile two sets of either/ors is shown to be more than difficult.

The *ESV Study Bible* has similar problems with chronology in the OT. On p. 39, I was displeased but not surprised to see that "(Moses lived in the 1500s or 1300s)." Is one of those dates better attested, or shall it be another either/or episode? The key sticking point for chronology in the Pentateuch is the date of Israel's exodus from Egypt, and naturally, Moses must be there. Will it be 1446 BC, or 1260 BC? Prior to the exodus the patriarchal times culminate with the entrance of Jacob and his family into Egypt. The *ESV Study Bible* offers some very precise dates for the Patriarchs. On p. 72, a map is titled "Abram Travels to Canaan" with the date of c. 2091 BC. The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is said to be c. 2067 BC

(p. 82). The “Journeys to Paddan-Aram” map gives a date of c. 2026 BC (p. 90). Joseph is said to be sold into Egypt in c. 1900 BC (p. 115). In fact, the caption by the map on p. 118 that also gives c. 1900 BC, adds “Joseph arrived in Egypt during the reign of the Twelfth Dynasty, arguably the zenith of Egypt’s power.” But perhaps the Genesis note contributor, Desmond Alexander, did not agree with, or did not write that caption. On p. 39, he says that Joseph’s rise in Egypt “is quite feasible in the era of the Hyksos (Semitic rulers of Egypt, c. 1600 B.C.).” So which is it? Was Joseph’s rise closer to 1900 BC, or to 1600 BC?

Now, if one is going to work from fairly precise dates prior to the exodus, the key determinate for the date of the exodus must be how long Israel stayed in Egypt before leaving. Of course, Exod 12:40-41 give that time as 430 years. Subtract 430 years from c. 1900 BC and you get c. 1470. Amazingly, however, there is not a word at Exod 12:40-41 that comments on the idea that Israel’s stay in Egypt was 430 years. Instead, the reader is offered this bit of bifurcation in the introduction to Exodus. On p. 140, Kenneth Harris says,

. . . some scholars, working from the figure of 480 years (1 Kings 6:1) for the time since the exodus to Solomon’s fourth year (c. 966 B.C.), calculate a date of c. 1446 B.C. for Israel’s departure from Egypt. Others, because Exodus 1:11 depicts Israel working on a city called Raamses, argue that this points to the exodus occurring during the reign of Raamses II in Egypt (c. 1279-1213 B.C.), possibly around the year 1260 B.C.

Whatever the date of the exodus, the question is not necessarily about whether the numbers given in the OT are reliable but rather about trying to understand their function according to the conventions by which an author in the ancient Near Eastern context would have used them. Any attempt to determine the date of the exodus necessarily includes the interpretation of both the references in the OT and the relevant records and artifacts from surrounding nations in the ancient Near East.

Incredibly, three pages later, there appears a map, “The Journey to Mount Sinai 1446/1260 B.C.” Is this another either/or? If the 1446 BC date is followed, then the patriarchal dates given in Genesis in the *ESV Study Bible* can stand. However, if the 1260 BC date is correct,

then according to this study Bible, Israel arrived in Egypt c. 1900 BC, and left about 640 years later. Why are Exod 12:40-41 basically ignored? Because those verses plainly say, “The time that the people of Israel lived in Egypt was 430 years. At the end of 430 years, on that very day, all the hosts of the LORD went out from the land of Egypt.” I am aware that some try to shorten Israel’s time in Egypt from 430 to 215 years, but it is rare indeed to hold an early entrance and then a very, very late exodus some 640 years later. But that is precisely what the *ESV Study Bible* does by giving credence to a 1260 BC date for the exodus in its either/or displays. Even the note on Gen 15:13-14 referring to Abram’s descendants being afflicted in “a land that is not theirs” and after 400 years coming out with great possessions shows this conflict. Alexander says this promise “was fulfilled 600 to 800 years later at the time of the exodus” (p. 77). That little compromise is to accommodate the late date of the exodus.

The next inconsistency in dating comes on the heels of the exodus. Joshua is not touted as the author of the book that bears his name. He is a protagonist, but in the mere four lines that feature the date, it says, “A number of features point to a date of origin in the late second millennium B.C.” (p. 389). Interpreted, that means Joshua was not written in the 14th century BC, but later, after the time of Joshua. However, the Jews are given credit for believing that Joshua wrote the book apart from the account of his own death. But on p. 392, a map of the conquests under Joshua is titled, “The Setting of Joshua c. 1400 B.C.” How can we speak of a setting of 1400 BC, 40 years after the exodus, when we are told the exodus could have been in 1260 B.C.? Should it not read, “The Setting of Joshua c. 1400/1220 B.C.”? But in that case, after the conquest and the death of Joshua, we would be down into the 1100s BC before hearing of the first of the judges.

Now when “Jephthah Defeats the Ammonites c. 1078 B.C.” (p. 459), the *ESV Study Bible* note for Jud 11:26 reads,

If the exodus took place c. 1440 B.C. (the “early date”), with the conquest of Palestine beginning about 1400, then Jephthah’s speech would fall around 1106 B.C. (However, “300 years” may be a round number giving an approximate date.) If the exodus took place c. 1260 B.C. (the “late date”), then Jephthah’s number is either inaccurate or a generalization indicating simply seven or eight generations (See note on 1 Kings 6:1).

Unfortunately, the 1 Kgs 6:1 note will not clear the picture for many devout laymen who have studied the Bible for years. That note offers a symbolical interpretation of the 480 years between the exodus and Solomon’s fourth year as king in support of a 1260 BC date for the exodus. It says,

Taken at face value, the figure of 480 years would support the traditional “early date” for the exodus, c. 1446 B.C. On the other hand, if one allows for some symbolism in understanding the 480-year figure (e.g., supposing it to result from 12 generations, with a generation taken symbolically to be 40 years, although it is actually about 25), one would arrive at a “late” date for the exodus of about 1260 B.C. (which some feel allows for greater agreement with Egyptian history).

Now the average layman reading this note might think, “Well, I never considered allowing for symbolism there. That makes a lot of sense now, and this new understanding might also fit better with Egyptian history.” In fact, our devoted layman might now be ready to “allow for some symbolism” in a few more places, like in interpreting the 12,000 from each of the twelve tribes of Israel in Rev 7:1-8. But that will come later.

IV. QUESTIONS OF AUTHORSHIP

The Book of Genesis is the Bible’s seed plot. Genesis is foundational. But the *ESV Study Bible’s* treatment of the authorship of this important book leaves much to be desired. The note writer, Thomas Desmond Alexander, is nebulous about Mosaic authorship in the few lines he pens on the topic. He says that Genesis “contains post-Mosaic elements, such as the place

names ‘Dan’ and ‘Ur of the Chaldees’” and “that the Hebrew of Genesis has been modernized somewhat” (p. 39). Few would disagree with that. But throughout his notes it is hard to find a single time where he actually affirms that Moses wrote *any* of Genesis. Instead he uses terminology like the author, the writer, the narrator, and God. Though Alexander carefully nuances his notes, he is more explicit in other writings.¹ What of the more than a dozen times the OT refers to Moses as the author of the Pentateuch and of Christ’s claim that “he wrote of me” (John 5:46)? What precisely was “all the law that Moses my servant commanded . . . this Book of the Law” carried by Joshua over the Jordan (Josh 1:7-8)?

The *ESV Study Bible* points out that the authorship of Job is not only anonymous, but that it was probably written either during or after Judah’s exile in Babylon. Of course the setting seems to be in the patriarchal period. The introduction to Job strangely notes that “The prophet Ezekiel mentions Job along with Noah and Daniel, and this seems to imply that he took Job as a real person” (p. 871). Funny, I have always thought of Job as a real person also.

¹ In a 2003 article, “Authorship of the Pentateuch,” Alexander claims the books of Genesis to Kings were probably given their present shape shortly after 561 B.C.,” and that “while the process by which these books were compiled remains obscure, they were probably written to give hope to those affected by the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple . . .” (p. 70). The Pentateuch “is an edited work and not a piece of literature that was penned *ab initio* by one individual. Various factors indicate strongly that the Pentateuch was created through a process involving the editing of already existing materials, regardless of whether the editor was Moses or someone else” (p. 62). The use of *toledoths* “suggests that they may have been used by the book’s editor to give it a distinctive structure” (p. 63). He continues “it seems only reasonable to assume that one person was not responsible for composing everything” (p. 63). He also writes, “Accepting that the Pentateuch is a literary collage, the question of the date of final editing becomes even more complex, for editing allows for the possibility that different parts may have been composed over a wide range of time and by different writers” (p. 63). See T. D. Alexander, “Authorship of the Pentateuch” in T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker, eds., *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003).

In his *A Literary Analysis of the Abraham Narrative in Genesis* (The Queen’s University of Belfast, 1982), Alexander holds that “the name Yahweh was inserted into the text by a later editor who desired to identify the God of the Patriarchs as the God who later revealed himself to Moses as Yahweh” (p. 284). He claims that “the presence of the divine epithet Yahweh in the text [of Gen 11:27-15:11] . . . is due to the work of a Yahwistic editor” (p. 291). In this entire volume Moses is never mentioned as author. In his *Abraham in the Negev: A source-critical investigation of Genesis 20:1-22:19* (Carlisle, Cumbria, UK: Paternoster, 1997), Alexander says, “After evaluating afresh the relevant evidence it seems likely that the Abraham narrative, as we now have it, comes not from the Priestly writer, but rather from an author/redactor who for the present can be thought of as the Yahwist of the Documentary Hypothesis” (p. 125).

The authorship of Ecclesiastes is left hanging in the *ESV Study Bible*. Solomon is given short shrift while the arguments against Solomon are enumerated. The conclusion: “it is best simply to recognize that some interpreters have concluded the author was Solomon, while others think it was some other writer later than Solomon” (p. 1193). Regarding the Song of Solomon, we learn that “it is not entirely certain that Solomon wrote the book,” but “one can still argue that the book was written during Solomon’s reign” (p. 1211). A paragraph begins, “Jews and Christians have traditionally” believed Solomon wrote Canticles, but the **very next** sentence continues, “However, there are several reasons to hesitate on that matter” (p. 1211). What follows are a plethora of reasons to discredit the traditional Jewish and Christian understanding. Critical viewpoints seem to take center stage.

It is refreshing that the unity of authorship for Isaiah is strongly supported and that critical ideas there are given the short shrift and the reasons for unity are more fully expounded (pp. 1233-34). As a point of interest, perhaps the longest note on any *single* verse in the *ESV Study Bible* is on Isa 7:14. It has 83 lines!

The authorship and dating of the General Epistles raised some interesting questions. Why does David Chapman say that “Hebrews was almost certainly written in the first century and probably before A.D. 70”? Does he have some doubts as to that possibility? Does he believe there is a chance Hebrews was written after the first century? His wording gives the reader pause and some uncertainty. Why not say, “Hebrews was no doubt written in the first century”? This is especially so when Chapman says the author mentions knowing Timothy, a first century character, and that Hebrews has influence on “*I Clement* (written c. A.D. 96).” Then again, the chart on p. 2359 has the letter written (60-70*), indicating approximate date.

Chapman does, however, have a nice note on four main views of the falling away of Heb 6:4-8, without taking any sides.

Grant Osborne, however, is quite dogmatic on the authorship of James. It is by James the Just. Period. No mention of other Jameses needed. But the very first words of Osborne's initial note are objectionable. About the "twelve tribes" he says, "Jesus chose 12 disciples to signify the **twelve tribes** and thus to identify the church as the new Israel (see note of Matt. 10:1) James implies that the true Israel is now also dispersed (away from its heavenly homeland) . . ." (p. 2391). The Matt 10:1 note says, "Twelve. Probably reflective of the 12 tribes of Israel and symbolic of the continuity of God's plan of salvation" (p. 1839). But Matt 19:28 says the twelve disciples "will sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel." The note on Matt 19:28 is too nebulous to be helpful. It adds, "In this new world, the twelve apostles (except for Judas, see Acts 1:12-26) will participate in the final establishment of the kingdom of God on the earth" (p. 1862). Participate? Kingdom? Why not explain thrones, judging, and their relationship to the twelve tribes of Israel? Answer—the *ESV Study Bible*, in general, espouses a covenant approach whereby Israel is replaced by the church.

V. INTERPRETATIONAL ISSUES

One of the most interesting interpretational problems in Job is the identification of the sons of God in Job 1:6 and 2:1 and the place where they meet. The note by Kenneth Harris boldly states that the sons of God "refers to heavenly beings gathered before God like a council before a king" (p. 874). That is a popular viewpoint, but not the only one. There is no mention of heaven anywhere in the context, and the sons of God could just as easily be people on earth in a religious relationship with God meeting together to worship him. The whole concept of Satan appearing in heaven also presents difficulties. Jude 6 and 2 Pet 2:4 tell us that Satan was

banished from heaven and cast down to Tartarus where he, and his cohorts, are bound with chains of darkness. Tartarus is a sphere of habitation and activity infinitely below the former abode from which there is neither escape nor return to the former abode. Satan's activities are confined to the area surrounding this earth. The *ESV Study Bible* also cannot rely on Gen 6:2, 4 to establish that the sons of God are angels, because there the note says their identity "is uncertain," though three views are given (p. 61). However, Doug Oss, in his comment on Jude 6, notes that some scholars believe there were angels in Gen 6.

In Gen 16:13 Moses plainly declared that the one who spoke to Hagar was "the LORD," Yahweh. Alexander, however, asserts that "Hagar is impressed by the perceptiveness of God as revealed through his angel-messenger" (p. 79). His note teaches a finite angel representative view rather than the deity of the Messenger. A similar view is taught in Num 22 when the messenger is said to represent "the manifestation of the presence and authority of the Lord himself" (p. 302). The note on Exod 3, the burning bush passage, describes the angel of the LORD "as acting or speaking in a manner that suggests he is more than simply an angel or messenger and that he is closely identified with God himself" (p. 148). The more extensive note on Judg 2:1 takes an either/or position that he could be a created angel messenger "or a theophany of the Lord himself" (p. 441). But strangely, there is no comment in Judg 6 (p. 449), on the times where, for example, it says, "the LORD turned to him and said." I believe these notes could be stronger and clearer to express the deity of the Messenger of the LORD.

Some interesting views arise in the Petrine epistles notes. The chart on p. 2404 says, "Peter goes to Rome (50-54*)," "Peter writes first letter, from Rome (62-63*)," and "Peter, after writing second letter is martyred in Rome (64-67*)" all approximate dates. Strange how Paul in Romans greets many obscure believers, but omits Peter! Actually, Peter never says he writes

from Rome. He says he writes from Babylon. But the *ESV Study Bible* note on p. 2401 explains, “The reference to Babylon in 5:13 is almost certainly a reference to Rome, leading one to conclude that Peter wrote the letter from Rome.” However, note contributor Thomas Schreiner gives no specific reasons why Babylon means Rome, except that Rome would be the city in Peter’s day that “represents a center of earthly power opposed to God” (p. 2413).

Another view is offered, and then withdrawn. Schreiner initially says, “Peter may have used a secretary, named Silvanus (cf. note on 1 Pet. 5:12).” But the note on 5:12 discounts this entirely (p. 2413). Instead, almost incredibly, Doug Oss and Schreiner, who both contribute notes to 2 Peter, say that “Peter may have used a secretary to help write this second letter” (p. 2415). I guess one could surmise that any NT author “may have used a secretary to help write” his book, but there is not a shred of evidence to suggest such anymore than there is to posit the case for 2 Pet.

I thought it strange for a chart to assert that “Peter, probably using Jude as a source, writes his second letter (64-67*)” (p. 2448). More often, I believe, 2 Pet is considered forecasting coming apostasy, whereas Jude’s warning is that it is present. Although scholarly consensus is that 2 Pet is later than and dependent upon Jude, the opposite position has also been forcefully argued, especially by conservatives.²

VI. UNNECESSARY SYMBOLIC INTERPRETATION

The *ESV Study Bible*’s introductory notes for the book of Revelation give the different types of interpretation that have been used to explain the visions of the Apocalypse. However, what is promoted is a heavy use of symbolic interpretation that voids the book of many things taken for granted by dispensationalists. The temple of Rev 11 is not on earth and not Jewish. It

² T. Callan, “Use of the Letter of Jude by the Second Letter of Peter,” *Biblica* 85 (2004):42-64; but see Theodor Zahn, *Introduction to the New Testament*, II, 265-7.

is the church (p. 2478). The time expressions such as 42 months and 1260 days are not literal, but are “symbolizing the brevity of the church’s suffering” (p. 2478). The beast and false prophet are “not particular individuals but corrupt human institutions” (p. 2492). The drying up of the Euphrates River in Rev 16:12 “symbolizes God’s removal of restraint on Satan’s capacity to assemble a global conspiracy against the church” (p. 2486). The binding of Satan for 1,000 years in Rev 20 “symbolizes God’s restriction of Satan’s ability to inflict harm for a long but limited era” (p. 2492). Both the saints and the lost will be judged *together* at the Great White Throne (p. 2493). Strangely, it is asserted that the woman of Rev 12:1 “symbolizes Israel” (p. 2479, but this is confuted with a comment on 12:14 that the woman represents the “church” and “the saints” (p. 2480). The 144,000 of Rev 7:4-8 are not Israelites at all, but “have symbolic significance, representing the church” and “are not Jacob’s sons” (p. 2473). Even the number 144,000 cannot be taken literally, but “suggests symbolism.” “Although portrayed as celibate males, the 144,000 (Rev. 14:3) signify believers of both sexes” (p. 2483). In Rev 21:1 “**The sea was no more** does not mean there will be no bodies of water in the new earth (cf. 21:6; 22:1-2) but refers to the source of earthly rebellion, chaos, and danger” (p. 2495).

VII. THE RAPTURE QUESTION

Those who distinguish the rapture of the church from the revelation of Christ, the glorious second coming, might be concerned with the *ESV Study Bible* notes. Key rapture passages such as John 14:3, 1 Cor 15:51, Phil 3:20-21, Col 3:4, 1 Thess 4:14-17, and 1 John 3:2 are not so distinguished, or else ignored. Instead, certain all-purpose phrases like “the return of Christ” and “the second coming” are ever present in various explanations. One will not find a note on a particular verse giving any credence to a rapture that is distinct from the return of Christ. In fact, this message is so overwhelming that it is suggested that the wording of 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” (p. 2310). The same uniform terminology is also used in Matt 24:28-30. Rev 3:10 is said not to imply that believers will be removed from the world (p. 2468). The note on John 5:28-29 says, “Jesus affirms the resurrection on the last day” (p. 2032), and the resurrection of Rev 20:12 is said to “include both God’s saints . . . and the beast’s worshipers” (p. 2493). This teaches one general resurrection.

The concerted viewpoint given throughout the notes is to see the rapture and the second coming as one unified, single event. A new Christian with the *ESV Study Bible* as his first study Bible would not be inclined by the notes to believe in a Pretribulational rapture. However, Postmils and Amils should have no trouble with these views.

VIII. THE CREATION AND FLOOD ACCOUNTS

The notes on the creation account, (pp. 43-44), suggest that the “days” of Genesis could mean about anything. They might be ordinary calendar days, long ages, analogical days, or just a literary framework. In fact, Gen 1:1 might not even be part of the creative week (p. 49). But how can the latter be true since Exod 20:11 clearly states that God made everything in six days. Gen 1:1 speaks of the creation of the expanse of the heavens, and of the earth itself. For this very reason, I believe it is wrong to say that Gen. 1:1 may speak of a creation “sometime before the first day” (p. 49).

Sadly, the *ESV Study Bible* promotes the view that Noah’s flood was *not* necessarily *global*, but could have been just *local*. Desmond Alexander, the Genesis note contributor, says the text “does not exclude such a possibility” (p. 62). Additionally, he says, “Although God intends the flood to destroy every person and his remarks have a strong universal emphasis, this

in itself does not necessarily mean that the flood had to cover the whole earth” (p. 62).

Alexander’s logic falters when he asserts, “Indeed, Genesis implies that prior to the Tower of Babel incident (see 11:1-9), people had not yet spread throughout the earth” (p. 62), and then tries to apply that idea to the time *before* the flood. After well over 1500 years of early earth history prior to the flood, it would be hard to prove that some humans, and the earth’s land animals and birds, had not spread beyond the reaches of a large local flood. Then again, what kind of logic can have water extend above all the high mountains, in just one area, and keep a large ark afloat for the better part of a year? Doesn’t water run downhill?

IX. ISRAEL REPLACED BY THE CHURCH?

Are there no unconditional promises in God’s Word? Why does Alexander in Genesis speak of “God’s conditional promise in 12:2” (p. 77)? If *ever* God made an unconditional promise, it was to Abram in Gen 12:1-2. God promised to bless Abram in various ways without any preconditions. The Sinaitic covenant, however, is different. It is completely conditional.

The note on the New Covenant of Jer 31:31-34 (p. 1431), asks whether this covenant focuses on “ethnic Israel or on a redefined Israel (the Jewish-Gentile church)?” but leaves the issue unresolved, saying it resembles the “all Israel” reference in Rom 11:26.³ Ezek 36:22-32 speak in unconditional terms similar to the New Covenant of Jer 31. There God twice promises to regather Israel from the nations and to restore them to their “own land” (v. 24). “You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God,” says God in v. 28. But the study note for vv.28-30 claims, “The restoration of the people to the land is symbolic” of being in the presence of God (p. 1558). In Ezek 37:22 God says, “And I

³ Interestingly, the note on Rom 11:26 holds that “all Israel will be saved” refers to ethnic Israel at the end of history (p. 2177). This is refreshing, but the note is almost out of character with the many others that spiritualize promises to Israel.

will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel.” It is hard to justify symbolism in those words.

The *ESV* translation of Gal 6:16 distinguishes between the church and “the Israel of God.” But the note tries to reverse this, pointing out that “‘And’ (Gk. *kai*) can also mean ‘even,’ in which case Paul would be equating the church with ‘the Israel of God’” (p. 2256). The notes on Rev 12 also combine Israel and the church. First the woman is said to symbolize Israel (vv. 1-2), but then she is “God’s people” (v. 6) and finally God’s “church” (v. 14; pp. 2479-80).

X. SOME NT TEXTUAL CRITICAL MATTERS

The *ESV Study Bible* notes on textual problems in the NT often begin with the phrase, “The earliest and best manuscripts” (p. 2588). Double brackets surround Mark 16:9-20 and John 7:53-8:11 with statements that these passages are not Scripture. However, Mark 7:16, Mark 9:44 and 46, John 5:4, Acts 8:37, and many others, are missing from the translation entirely.⁴ Even though the two previous large Gospel passages are printed in the text with double brackets, inconsistently, these others and many more verses are not printed in the text at all. But unfortunately, the unsuspecting layman will be fooled by the notes. For instance, the note for Mark 7:16 says, “Some manuscripts add verse 16” (p. 1907). From one point of view that statement could be technically correct. But the whole truth is that of Gk MSS, just two of the 4th century from Egypt, one of the 5th century, two from the 8th through 9th centuries, and thirteen late ones do not have verse 16. All other Gk MSS contain Mark 7:16, including one 4th- two 5th-, and two 6th-century MSS, seven others from the 7th through 9th centuries, and also more than 1600

⁴ Missing entirely from the *ESV* are Matt 6:13b; 12:47; 17:21; 18:11; 23:14; Mark 11:26; 15:28; Luke 17:36; 23:17; Acts 15:34; 24:6b-8a; 28:29; and Rom 16:24. Even the verse numbers are omitted from the *ESV* text. Interestingly, Matt 21:44; and Luke 22:20; 24:12 and 24:40 appear in the *ESV* text, though omitted from the *RSV*. Strangely, no note mentions why the “heavenly witnesses” passage of 1 John 5:7b-8a, does not appear in the *ESV*. The *TNIV Study Bible* has a helpful note on this passage, and the *Nelson Study Bible* acknowledges the textual problem.

later MSS, plus the early and geographically widespread areas indicated by the OL, Vg, Syriac, Coptic (part), Armenian, Ethiopic, and Georgian versions.

In the genealogical king list of Matt 1:7, the *ESV* replaces the name of King Asa with Asaph, and the note surmises that “*Asaph* is probably an alternate spelling for *Asa*” (p. 1820). Similarly, in Matt 1:10 the *ESV* has the name Amos in place of King Amon, with the same suggestion that “*Amos* is probably an alternate spelling for *Amon*” (p. 1820). This highly unlikely explanation lacks factual support.⁵ It is better to admit that the Asaph and Amos MSS have faulty readings at this point and to retain the reading of the great majority of texts that have the correct names of King Asa and King Amon.

XI. OTHER INTERESTING ISSUES

The next few paragraphs contain some minor but interesting items. The Col 2:17 note says, “It is debated whether the Sabbaths in question included the regular seventh-day rest of the fourth commandment, or were only the special Sabbaths of the Jewish festal calendar” (p. 2297). Which is it? Are all Sabbaths abolished by Christ’s death on the cross, or are we still to observe the weekly Sabbath? This indecision might make a Seventh-day Adventist more open to using the *ESV Study Bible*.

The Decapolis is mentioned in only three NT verses. The only helpful note on this region comes at Matt 4:25. It explains that this Gk word means “ten cities” described as “the Roman and generally Gentile district to the south and east of the Sea of Galilee” (p. 1827), but the accompanying map shows only four cities in a partial drawing of the district.

⁵ Some critics believe the few Gk MSS with Asaph and Amos show that Matthew made a mistake rather than using an “alternate spelling.” Singular and otherwise minority variations in the Göttingen LXX series demonstrate that scribes, not authors, were sometimes susceptible to confusing the names of Asa and Amon. If Asaph was so common an alternate name for Asa, then why does only one MS out of 50 OT passages evidence such a change (N* in 1 Kgs 15:33; but later corrected)? Of all the occurrences of Asaph in the LXX, only once is it changed to Asa in 2 Chr 29:13 by B, Vaticanus. This is more indicative of scribal confusion and not a recognizable pattern of acceptable name variation.

2 Thess 2:3-4 speaks of “the man of lawlessness,” “the son of destruction” who “sits in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God.” The note reads, “The **temple of** God has been variously interpreted as the church, the heavenly temple, the Jerusalem temple, and a metaphor for supreme blasphemous arrogance modeled on the activities of Antiochus IV Epiphanes Whatever the meaning, the context seems to indicate a concrete and observable act of defiance against God” (p. 2318). I do not believe it is helpful to give several views, some of which seem irrelevant, and then just say—whatever. The note for 2 Thess 2:7 says, “Scholarly theories on the identity of this restrainer include the Roman Empire/emperor, the Holy Spirit, and the archangel Michael.” The note contributor then supports the Michael theory. This seems strange.

The notes on Lev 18:22, Lev 20:13, Rom 1:26-27, 1 Cor 6:9-10, and 1 Tim 1:10 are all strongly against all homosexual conduct. The note on the Rom 1:26-27 states, “Paul follows the OT and Jewish tradition in seeing all homosexual relationships as sinful” (p. 2159).

Divorce and remarriage are permitted for sexual immorality or desertion, according to the note on 1 Cor. 7:15, (p. 2200), and the ethical comments on pp. 2545-47. The rationale is carefully worded and reasoned. The note on 1 Tim 3:2 seems to say that a second marriage, even if after a divorce, would not bar a man from being a pastor (p. 2329).

The incident of the rich man and Lazarus is taken to be a “parable” (p. 1991). There is no mention as to what an “elect angel” is in 1 Tim 5:21. The note on Titus 2:13 strongly points to the deity of Christ (p. 2350). The note on 1 Pet 3:19 gives three good reasons of support for Christ preaching through Noah, but also that Christ triumphing over fallen angels from Gen 6 would just as well fit “best with the rest of Scripture and with historic orthodox Christian doctrine” (p. 2410). Only the second chance view is rejected.

XII. A FINAL ASSESSMENT

The *ESV Study Bible* is a very fine piece of work. It weighs 3 lbs. 15.8 ozs., and has more than 2750 pages (about 300 more than either the *TNIV* or the *Nelson* study Bibles). Most of its material will be helpful for a seasoned believer, but I would not recommend it for a new Christian or one not completely grounded in his theology. It gives various views on many issues. However, the notes frequently support beliefs at odds with traditional understandings, especially for a dispensationalist. This is seen in a wide open view of the days of creation, the allowance of a local rather than a universal flood, support for the late date of the exodus, critical views about some authorship questions, textual critical views that omit many individual verses, including two large NT passages, an overgenerous use of symbolic interpretation, a confusion of the church with Israel (replacement theology), a fusion of the rapture with the glorious second coming, and a host of other eschatological disputes. Still, there is much to learn from this work, and it should remain a treasured item for those who use the *ESV* text.