

The Essential Bible Companion: Key Insights for Reading God's Word. By John H. Walton, Mark L. Strauss and Ted Cooper, Jr. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006, 150 pp., \$14.99.

As designed, *The Essential Bible Companion* is an elementary introduction to each individual book of the Bible. This will be beneficial for a beginning Bible reader, for Sunday school teachers aiming to give a 45-minute synopsis of a book, and it may be effectively used in an undergraduate Bible Survey course. Like the Testaments the authors seek to summarize, there is great continuity between the OT and NT sections of the book. Most of the books in the Old and New Testaments are summarized on two pages in an easy-to-use fashion (some of the OT Prophetic books are combined and Revelation gets 4 pages). The summary of each book approximates the first page of an average study Bible: it includes key concepts, purpose statements, and information regarding dating. It goes beyond many study Bibles in that it is considerably more user-friendly with colorful maps, enjoyable pictures, and helpful timelines. For the Gospels, the book gives brief, but helpful, 3 or 4 point outlines. Unfortunately, this practice is limited to the Gospels; brief outlines for the rest of the biblical books would have contributed greatly to the design of this Bible companion.

While continuity assists aesthetically and pedagogically, there is—again like the two Testaments themselves—some discontinuity between the Old and New Testament sections of the book. Although this discontinuity in no way hinders its readability, it does make evident some omissions that might have been helpfully added. The Old Testament section has “Key Concepts,” “Key Terms,” and “Key Teachings about God.” But the NT section seems to combine all of these into the much shorter “Key Themes.” Arguably, this is easier to do for the NT books, but, I think, it would not have been overly difficult to do for the Old also, and would have shortened things considerably. Furthermore, “Key Terms” that are in the OT section are also spelled out in the glossary and therefore could have simply been listed (without definition) for reference in the glossary. I also see little value in the “People to know” section; significant names were generally mentioned already in the “Purpose” overview. Space saved in these areas could have been used to include brief outlines and helpful information on matters of special introduction (e.g., possible authorship or recipients) which may have helped with understanding the “purpose,” subtly assisting the reader to determine a book’s purpose for himself. One thing I did enjoy was Walton’s selection of “key verses” (although Gen 3:15 and Psalm 1 were conspicuously absent). These verses could be easily memorized and supplement well Cooper’s *The Bible in 90 Days*.

The New Testament was more profitably organized, removing the key concepts, words, people and teaching and replacing it with “key themes,” “summary overview,” “authorship information,” and “interesting facts.” The “Overview” is just 1-3 sentences summarizing the book. This is tremendously helpful for the beginning reader. The “Interesting Facts” sections were indeed always interesting and included information like the deaths of Paul and Peter, comments on Gnosticism, famous passages like the armor of God and the second coming and inner-biblical connections. It was informative and made the whole read more enjoyable.

My small organizational criticisms should in no way take away from the substantial benefits of the book. *The Essential Bible Companion* should be commended as a helpful aid for foundational study of the Bible.

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