

Studying the Bible for free

Bible software has come a long way. Twenty years ago I never dreamed I would spend much of my working day in front of a computer and that the computer would become my primary tool for studying the Bible. Bible software tools have reduced our study time by providing easy access to our favourite resources. It is now possible to search through hundreds of books and journals without leaving your desk. This article focuses on two areas – free Bible software and internet-based Bible study.

Bible software features

Standard features in all Bible software include:

Multiple texts – Current Bible software has the ability to display multiple Bible versions together. This enables users

to read and compare different translations. Most software today provides far more versions of the Bible than users will ever need. This includes a number of English versions, both modern and older, and also original language versions. The older versions are usually available for free but some of the new copyrighted translations, such as the *New American Standard Bible* (NASB), require the payment of a royalty. The King James Version or the NASB keyed to Strong's numbers are essential in most Bible software as the "glue" that links all the various lexicons and dictionaries. An extensive range of foreign language versions is also available for most Bible software.

Verse look-up – Verse look-up is a basic but important function of Bible software. Users need to be

able to jump to a particular verse or passage quickly and easily. Most Bible software today allows users to look up and display verses almost instantaneously.

Search Capabilities – Good Bible software should be able to complete simple word searches, phrase searches, and complex searches. A simple word search involves looking up a single word.

A phrase search involves looking for several words that occur together. For instance a phrase search for "Son of God" would search for all the occurrences of the phrase "Son of

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God" whereas a simple search for "Son" "God" would find all the verses with the words "Son" and/or "God" in them. Complex searching allows for searching of various word patterns. For instance doing a complex search on "right" allows words such as "right", "righteous", "righteousness" and "unrighteous" to be found.

Boolean searching using the logical operators AND, OR and NOT is often possible. Boolean searches can be a challenge to get right but are very helpful when searching for a particular idea. Most software also provides the ability to search on a Strong's number and some can provide simple morphological searching if the right modules have been installed.

Reference tools – There is a growing list of good reference

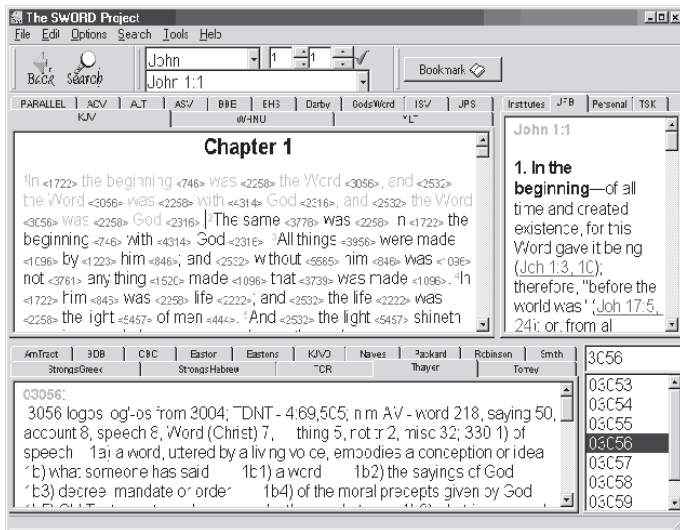
tools now available with Bible software. These include lexicons, Bible dictionaries, commentaries and topic and cross-referencing tools. The free and internet software below all provide a variety of helpful reference tools. However, the tools provided are unfortunately usually older ones available in the public domain. Lexical tools such as Thayers, Brown-Driver-Briggs and Vines are excellent but do not contain the scholarship, research and thinking that is in newer works. It is the same with commentaries and dictionaries. Books such as *International Standard Bible*

Encyclopaedia and Matthew Henry's *Commentary on the Whole Bible* are good tools but they no longer reflect the current thinking of contemporary Biblical scholars. This is the major distinction between free packages and

more expensive Bible study software.

Other features – Bible software also provides a variety of other features which includes daily devotional readings, Bible reading plans, the ability to make your own personal note files, bookmark certain passages for future reference, create a verse list on a particular topic and so on.

Usability – A good Bible programme must be easy to use. The user interface needs to be simple and uncluttered, all major features should be accessible with mouse click or menu selection. All resource tools, Bibles, commentaries and dictionaries must be easy to find and simple to operate or most people will not use them. A good Bible programme must also be fast. The days of starting a search and going for a



Sword

coffee have gone.

Free Bible software

Very good Bible study software can be downloaded from the internet. Most of these packages are available for free, although some copyrighted modules require registration. The software is very powerful and offers features that a couple of years ago would have only been available in the most advanced Bible study software. Three of the best examples are Sword, e-Sword and the Online Bible.

Sword – Sword is produced by the Crosswire Bible Society (www.crosswire.org). Sword is open-source software, meaning that the software and source code is available for free under the GNU General Public License. Other well-

known products that use this licensing method include OpenOffice Office Suite (www.openoffice.org), the Mozilla Web suite and the Linux Operating System (www.linux.org). Sword is easy to use and has very good features. The list of Bibles and other resources is comprehensive and continues to grow. Versions of Sword are available for Windows, Linux, MacOSX and various PDAs. Simple, phrase, complex, Strong number, basic morphological, and limited Boolean searches are also available. Searching is of average speed although for some reason especially slow when searching through the KJV text. The Sword for Windows user interface is easy to use. The screen is divided into three sections. The top left contains the Bible texts. The top right contains tools, such as commentaries, referenced by a Bible passage. The bottom section contains results, such as dictionaries, referenced by individual words. These three sections can be resized to suit user

preferences. The interface contains easy access to all necessary features but is not as nice to look at or easy to use as many Windows programmes. Tabbed browsing makes it simple to view different Bible versions. Other

resources such as dictionaries and commentaries are easy to use and linked to the appropriate verses.

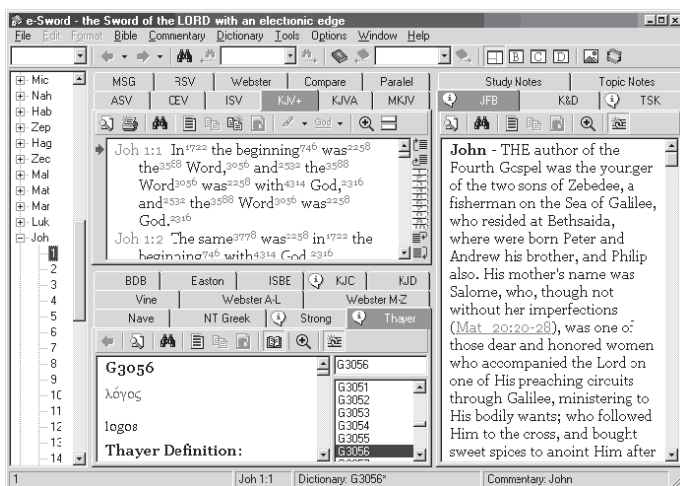
Sword also includes a daily devotional and a number of reference books such as the works of Josephus and Calvin's *Institutes*. Sword is an excellent product and will continue to improve as the development community works on the software and adds new resources.

e-Sword – e-Sword (www.e-sword.net) is produced by Rick Meyers and copyright of all the software and modules is held by him. All the software, except for certain copyrighted content, is available for free. The best feature of this product is its ease of use.

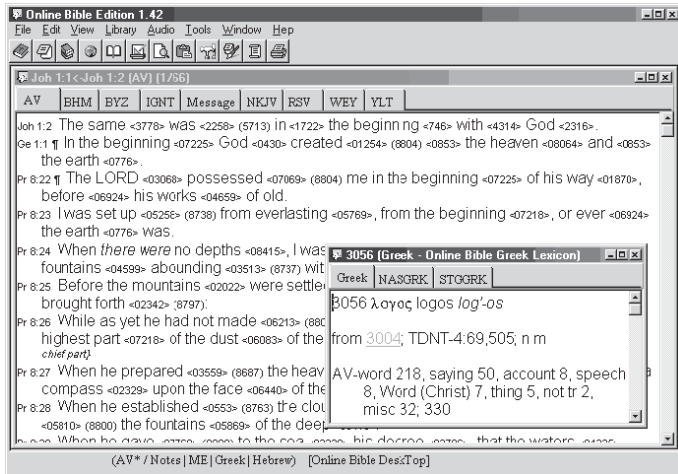
“The best feature of this product is its ease of use. The screen is simply laid out and all features are accessible. Most users find that they can use e-Sword with little or no training.”

The screen is simply laid out and all features are accessible. Most users find that they can use e-Sword with little or no training. By default, the screen is laid out in three sections in a similar way to Sword. Clicking on an icon changes the screen layout to focus on the Bible texts, the commentaries, or the dictionary tools. The various texts can be viewed by clicking on the appropriate tag. The search features allow simple, phrase, complex, Boolean and Strong's searching. Searching is easy and it is very fast.

e-Sword is an excellent product that combines ease of use with powerful features. e-Sword also provides a good range of biblical texts. Bible versions such as *The Message* and the *Contemporary*



e-Sword



Online Bible

English Version (CEV) are normally only available as extra, for charge, texts in most Bible software but are included for free in e-Sword. e-Sword also includes a daily Bible reading planner, a prayer diary, a devotional and a number of graphics such as maps and charts.

Online Bible – It seems that Online Bible (www.onlinebible.net) has been around forever. In fact it began in 1987 and for many years Online Bible was the default standard Bible software. The basic version is available for download on the internet or low-cost CD-ROMS can be purchased from a number of suppliers throughout the world. The software is copyrighted although free use is given excepted for copyrighted books. The Online Bible uses multiple windows to display the

intuitive as either Sword or e-Sword, after a little use and customisation it becomes very easy to use. The search features allow simple, phrase, complex, Boolean and Strong's searching. Searching is easy and it is very fast.

The Online Bible is a good, easy to use Bible package. In some ways it appears to be a little tired in its look and feel. It is not as user friendly as most packages now available but with a little practise it becomes easy to use and provides good Bible study features.

The following table provides of summary of the key features of the Bible Study software that were tested.

Internet study tools

There are a number of very good Bible study websites on the internet.

These sites provide access to a variety of Bible study resources ... The tools are all easy to use because they work through a web browser although this does take a little getting used to. The major drawback with this approach to Bible study is that a good internet connection is required. A dial-up connection will work – but performance can be a little slow – a high-speed connection is ideal.

The Bible Tool – The Bible Tool is a joint project of the Crosswire Bible Society (the authors of the Sword Project), the Society for Biblical Literature (SBL) and the United Bible Society (UBS). The Bible Tool site provides access to most of the tools that are available through Crosswire – dozens of Bible versions and a number of

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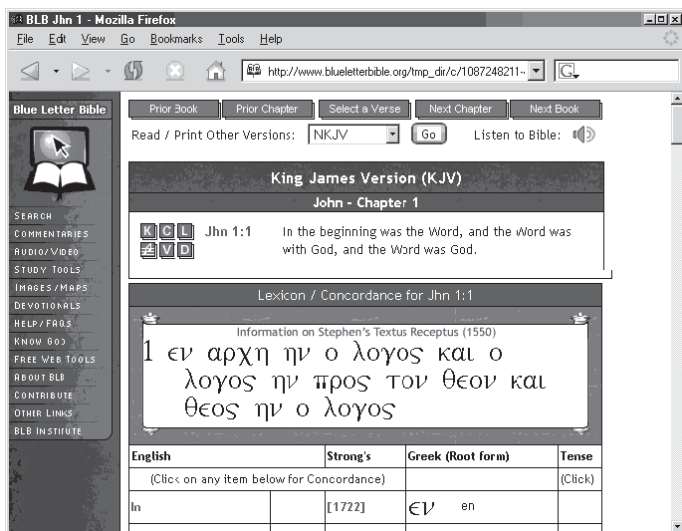
commentaries, dictionaries and other tools. The interface is simple and easy to use. Tabbed pages provide access to the resources with hypertext links providing text selection. The searching provides simple, phrase and complex searching although Strong's and morphological searching are not yet available. Limited customisation is available enabling users to retain some settings such as the default Bible version and commentary. The Bible Tool is already powerful and easy to use. As the technology continues to develop it will become even more useful.

Blue Letter Bible – The Blue Letter



The Bible Tool

The tools are all easy to use



Blue Letter Bible

Bible is produced by a non-profit Christian Ministry called Sowing Circle. Blue Letter Bible provides a clean, easy to use interface allowing users to quickly look up verses or search for key words. It is based on the KJV of the Bible but a variety of other versions can also be displayed. It allows simple, phrase, complex and Strong's numbers searching. Icons provide access to cross reference tools, lexical information, various commentaries, multiple Bible versions, dictionaries and even audio, video, and graphics.

One unique feature of Blue Letter Bible is that it provides a number of contemporary preachers and teachers in the list of commentaries on each verse. This includes audio and video resources

features.

Crosswalk Online Study Bible –

The Crosswalk site is another site produced by a non-profit Christian organisation. The Crosswalk Online Study Bible is well laid out and easy to use. Verse look-up and word search can be completed quickly using a number of different Bible versions. The “Study Tools” feature provides links to a variety of appropriate lexicons, commentaries and dictionaries. A drop-down menu offers access to a variety of Bible versions, both new and old. Interlinear versions of both the Old and New Testament are also available. Simple, phrase, complex and Strong's number searching is

as well as textual ones. The interface is very graphical and there are numerous audio and video resources making this website slow with a dial-up connection. This is a very good site with some innovative

very easy to use and the resources available are comprehensive. The only disappointment is that the site also contains advertisements and shopping carts. The following table provides of summary of the key features of the Bible Study websites that were tested.

Conclusion

All of the tools tested are very good. They all have strengths and weakness but none disappoint. All of the Bible study tools provide access to numerous resources including different Bible versions, lexical works, commentaries and dictionaries. All are all easy to use, have powerful search features and cost little or nothing. The two problems are the lack of up to date resources and that original biblical language tools are weak. While most of the products do provide the ability to display original languages and usually do lexical work based on Strong's numbering they do not provide the ability to search on lemmas or complex morphology – for many this is not a problem, but for some it will be a major restriction.

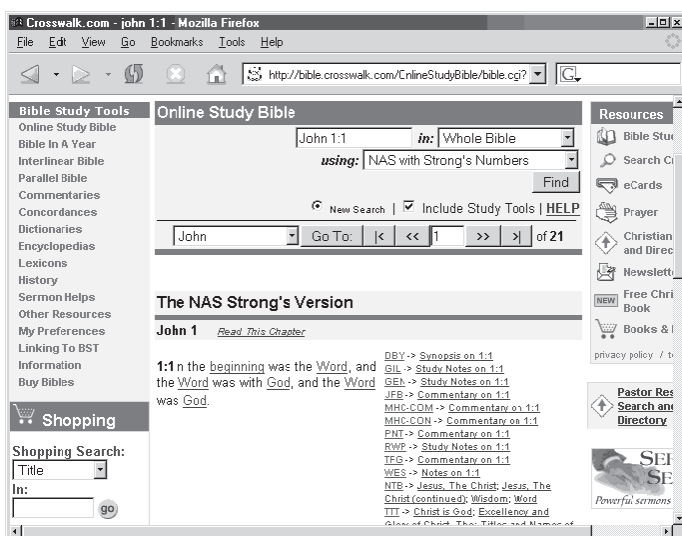
Over the next couple of years expect to see major developments in the web-based tools. These will be refined and additional features added. As more and more users get high-speed internet access these tools will grow in popularity.

Are these free Bible study tool worth using? Most definitely. Will these tools provide the average student of the Bible what they need? Without a doubt. Will these Bible study tools provide the tools for serious students of the Bible? Probably not – yet!

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provided and easy to use. A variety of other tools such as Bible reading plans and devotionals are also available.

Of the three websites viewed, this is the most useable. It is extremely well laid out,



Crosswalk

BIBLE STUDY SOFTWARE – FEATURE SUMMARY

FEATURE	Sword	e-Sword	Online Bible
Package details			
Website	www.crosswire.org	www.e-sword.net	www.onlinebible.net
Version tested	1.5.6	7.1.0	1.42
Platforms	Windows, MacOS, Linux	Windows	Windows, MacOS
Bible Texts			
English	AKJV, ALT, ASV, BBE, Darby, Douay, EMTV, GodsWord, HNV, ISV, JPS, KJ21*, KJV, LITV, MKJV, N27U4*, NAB*, NASB*, NCV*, NIV*, NJB*, NKJV*, NLT*, NRSV*, Phillips*, RKJNT, RSV, RWebster, TEV*, TMB*, Twenty, Tyndale, WEB, Webster, Weymouth, YLT	ALT, AMP*, ASV, BBE, CEV, Darby, Douay, EMTV, ESV, GB, GodsWord, HNV, ISV, KJV, LITV, Message, MKJV, MRC, NASB*, TEV, WEB, Webster, Weymouth, YLT	ASV, BBE, Darby, Douay, GodsWord, IGNT, JPS, KJV, Message*, NASB*, NIV*, NKJV*, NLT*, NRSV*, RWebster, Tyndale, Webster, Weymouth, YLT
Original language	BHS, Byz, LXX, N27U4*, TR, Tisch, WHNU	BHS, Byz, LXX, N27U4*, TR, WHNU	BHS, Byz, LXX, TR, WHNU
Other language	Various	Various	Various
Search			
Simple	Yes	Yes	Yes
Complex	Yes	Yes	Yes
Phrase	Yes	Yes	Yes
Boolean	Limited	Yes	Yes
Strong's	Yes	Yes	Yes
Morphology	Limited	No	Limited
Tools			
Lexicons	OLBGrk*, OLBHeb*, Strong's Greek, Strong's Hebrew	BDB, Strong's Greek, Strong's Hebrew, Thayers, Word*	OLBGrk, OLBHeb, Strong's Greek, Strong's Hebrew
Commentaries	Abbott, Barnes, Clarke, DTN, Family, Geneva, Gill, JFB, Lightfoot, Luther, MHC, MHCC, PNT, RWP, Scofield, Spurious, TDavid, TFG, TSK, Wesley	Barnes, Clarke, Geneva, Gill, JFB, KD, MHC, MHCC, PNT, RWP, Scofield, TDavid, TSK, Vincent, Wesley	Barnes, Broadus, Family, Geneva, JFB, MHCC, Newell, PNT, RWP, Scofield, TDavid, TFG, TSK
Dictionaries	AmTract, CBC, Easton, Hitchcock, ISBE, KJD, Nave, SAOA, Smith, TCR, Torrey, WebstersDict	CBC, Easton, Fausett, Hitchcock, ISBE, KJD, Nave, Smith, Torrey, Vines, WebstersDict	Easton, Nave, TCR, Torrey
Usability			
Interface	Graphical Tabbed	Graphical Tabbed	Graphical Tabbed
Intuitive	Average	Excellent	Average
Verse lookup speed	Fast	Fast	Fast
Search speed	Average	Fast	Fast
Ease of use	Average	Excellent	Average
Other features			
Other resources	Devotionals	Daily reading plans, devotionals, maps and charts. Prayer diary	Devotionals, maps and charts

* indicates other resources than can be purchased and unlocked

INTERNET STUDY TOOLS – FEATURE SUMMARY			
FEATURE	The Bible Tool	Blue Letter Bible	Crosswalk
Package details			
Website	www.thebibletool.com	www.blueletterbible.org	http://bible.crosswalk.com
Platforms	Web browser-based Any computer system	Web browser-based Any computer system	Web browser-based Any computer system
Bible Texts			
English	AKJV, ALT, ASV, BBE, Darby, Douay, EMTV, GodsWord, HNV, ISV, JPS, KJV, LITV, MKJV, NASB, RKJNT, RSV, RWebster, TEV, Twenty, Tyndale, WEB, Webster, Weymouth, YLT	ASV, Darby, HNV, KJV, NASB, NLT, NKJV, RSV, Webster, YLT	ASV, BBE, CJB, Darby, Douay, GodsWord, Holman, HNV, KJV, Message, NASB, NCV, NKJV, NLT, NRSV, RSV, TEV, TMB, WEB, Webster, Weymouth, YLT
Original language	BHS, Byz, LXX, TR , Tisch, WHNU	BHS, LXX, TR	BHS, WHNU
Other language	Various		
Search			
Simple	Yes	Yes	Yes
Complex	Yes	Yes	No
Phrase	Yes	Yes	Yes
Boolean	Yes	Yes	Yes
Strong's	No	Yes	Yes
Morphology	No	No	No
Tools			
Lexicons	OLBGrk, OLBHeb, Strong's Greek, Strong's Hebrew	Strong's Greek, Strong's Hebrew	NTG, OTH, Strong's Greek, Strong's Hebrew
Commentaries	Barnes, Clarke, DTN, Family, Geneva, Gill, JFB, Lightfoot, Luther, MHC, MHCC, PNT, RWP, Scofield, Spurious, TDavid, TFG, TSK, Wesley	JFB, Lightfoot, MHC Various commentaries from contemporary preachers e.g. Chuck Smith, Ray Stedman	DTN, Geneva, Gill, JFB, MHC, MHCC, PNT, RWP, Scofield, TDavid, TFG, Wesley
Dictionaries	AmTract, CBC, Easton, Hitchcock, ISBE, KJD, Nave, Packard, SAOA, Smith, TCR, Torrey, WebstersDict	CBC, Eastons, Hitchcock, Naves, Torrey, TSK, Vines	BED, CBC, Hitchcock, KJD, Nave, Smith, Torrey, TSK
Usability			
Interface	Graphical Hypertext links	Graphical, Icons, Drop-down menus	Graphical Drop-down menus Hypertext links
Intuitive	Average	Average	Excellent
Verse lookup speed	Good – but depends on internet connection	Good – but depends on internet connection	Good – but depends on internet connection
Search speed	Good – but depends on internet connection	Good – but depends on internet connection	Good – but depends on internet connection
Other features			
Other resources	Devotionals, various Christian works	Audio, devotionals, hymns, images, maps, video	Devotionals, other Christian resources (on other parts of Crosswalk website)