

Dissecting the Bible

A concordance is a key aid when studying the Bible. After a brief overview of the history of concordances, Neil Rees explains how computer technology has aided the production of concordances in languages that would not have had the resources to produce them a few years ago.



Neil Rees

Neil Rees works for Bible Society and is part of the Linguistic Computing team. He specialises in concordances and research into the biblical canon.

Completing a Bible translation in a new language is a very important event for the church in that place, and has an impact on the whole community. The new translation is often the first major text to be published in that language. For ministers and church members alike a new translation is a voyage of discovery, as they seek to understand what God is saying to them in their language through his Scripture. Second only to the translation itself, an effective concordance for that Bible translation is the key resource in most contexts. Finding your way around the Bible can be daunting and challenging without the help of a concordance, which lists the important narratives and other key areas of the text indexed by the key words that most closely represent the themes of the text. Concordances facilitate not only the finding of Scripture passages, thus enabling them to be read in context, but also enable more comprehensive consideration of any topic throughout the Scriptures.

So translations are enhanced by concordances.

As we will see, the publication of concordances of the Bible in English has a long history. Over the centuries these concordances have helped make the King James and other versions of the Bible accessible for all. Until recently, however, new translations of Scripture into other languages rarely came with any study aids. But using technology developed at British & Foreign Bible Society, it is now possible to compile a concordance to new translation in a matter of a few months.

A brief history of concordances

The idea of the concordance first came from the Jewish Masoretes about the tenth century AD, at Tiberias in the holy land and also at Sura in Babylonia. They made word lists and tables at the end of the Hebrew Scriptures called the 'Masora'. The first concordance is often quoted as that to the Latin Vulgate Bible, compiled by Hugh of St Cher (c. 1200 – c.1263) a French Dominican cardinal and biblical commentator. He employed 500 monks to assist him in creating the *Concordantiae Sacrorum Bibliorum*. It contained no quotations, and was purely an index to passages where a word was found. It was of little service to preachers, therefore, in order to make it more useful, between 1250 and 1252 three English Dominicans added the complete quotations of the passages indicated.

The first concordance to the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) was started in 1438 by Rabbi Mordecai Nathan. He completed it ten years later in 1448. Henry Stephens published a concordance to the Greek New Testament in 1599, and in 1602 Conrad Kircher's concordance of the Septuagint was available in print.

Famous concordances to the Bible in English

The earliest concordances in English were published in the middle of the sixteenth century. The first was a concordance to the New Testament Thomas Gybson published in London in 1535. The first concordance to the entire Bible in English was produced in 1550 by John Marbeck, but it did not list the verse numbers.

Marbeck is better known as a composer and organist at the Royal Chapel in Windsor. He had been working on

his concordance for several years when, in March 1543, he was arrested and charged with heresy because he possessed writings against fundamental Catholic beliefs. He was sentenced to burn at the stake but was later pardoned through the intervention of Bishop Gardiner of Winchester. Marbeck never completed his original concordance of the English Bible because it was seized by the authorities and destroyed. However, on his release Marbeck began the work again, and in 1550, under Edward VI, it was published in abbreviated form.

In 1737 Alexander Cruden (1699-1770), a London bookseller, born and educated in Aberdeen, published the first edition of his *Complete Concordance to the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament*.¹ In April 1735 Cruden had obtained the title of bookseller to the Queen. Seeing a gap in the market, he decided to make an exhaustive concordance to all the words in the King James Version. He made an alphabetical list of all the

a Greek and Hebrew concordance. The most convenient of these is Robert Young's *Analytical Concordance to the Bible*, which was first published in Edinburgh in 1879. It improved on Cruden's by indicating the Hebrew, Chaldaic, or Greek origin of the words translated into English, and it distinguished the various meanings that may underlie the same word.

More comprehensive still and different in plan to Young's Concordance is *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, which was first published in 1890. This work was constructed under the direction of Dr James Strong (1822–1894). Appearing to the right of each reference is a number which references a word in the original languages, and this number references a word in a dictionary. These have become known as the 'Strong's numbers'. This allows the user of the concordance to look up the meaning of the original language word in the associated dictionary in the back. The concordance thereby indicates how the original language word was translated into the English word in the KJV Bible. Other concordances to other translations make use of these Strong's numbers.

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Notes

1. Cruden's Concordance remains in print and is still used and loved by Christians around the world.

2. J Keay, *Alexander the Corrector: The Tormented Genius whose Cruden's Concordance Unwrote the Bible* (New York: Overlook Press, 2005).

3. JA Gere and J Sparrow (eds), *Geoffrey Madan's Notebooks* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 16.

4. *Mynegair i'r Beibl Cymraeg Newydd* (eds OE Evans & D Robinson; Cardiff: Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru/University of Wales Press, 1998).

5. *Biblijos Konkordancija* see <http://www.biblijosdraugija.lt/index.php?mid=naujienos>

6. <http://www.biblija.net>

7. <http://www.biblesociety.org.uk>

words found in the Bible, giving the book, chapter and verse for each occurrence.

Cruden worked from 7 am to 1 am every day. After 26 years an edition of the concordance was dedicated to King George III and presented to him in person on the 21st December 1761. The King awarded Cruden £100 for his efforts. After another 8 years of perfection another edition was published in 1769, which included references to all the words in the Apocrypha.

Despite his success, Cruden was institutionalised a number of times on the grounds of insanity² – it was believed that his obsession had driven him mad. Although a remarkable feat, the concordance was not entirely without error. The Times recorded that Cruden left out Buz (brother of Huz) and Sneeze (put under Neeze).³

Cruden's concordance was very popular and many concordances followed that were really abbreviations of his work, notably a *Condensed Cruden* edited by Rev John Eadie, who was from Glasgow. Eadie realised that most people did not want an exhaustive concordance. Instead they wanted something smaller and easier to use. He therefore set about the difficult task of abbreviating Cruden's concordance to sell as a smaller book. The aim was to produce something that, as the Introduction to the concordance states, 'may be especially serviceable to ministers, preachers, and students in travelling, when they cannot conveniently carry a larger Concordance with them.' The project was a success and the 50th edition was published in 1875.

Cruden's undoubtedly set the tone for future concordances. His work has only been superseded by more comprehensive tomes that combine English with

Concordances today

These days concordances fall into a number of different types, distinguished by their method of compilation and content or by the manner in which that content is presented to the reader. Exhaustive concordances include every reference to every book of the Bible. These are huge books. In reality 'semi-exhaustive' concordances are more useful. They index the references to the most useful words of a Bible, omitting references to conjunctions such as 'and' and 'with' or articles such as 'the' and 'a' that are not likely to be consulted.

A third type, more useful to the typical Bible reader, is a 'back of the Bible' concordance, printed like an index at the back of the Bible, where an editor has selected the most important references to the most important words that will help the user find key verses in the Bible. Such concordances point the user to the key verses of Scripture where the word or concept in question is found. They are likely to concentrate on areas where the word occurs more frequently as these are likely to be most helpful to the user. It is less likely to include isolated references unless these are likely to have a particular theological significance for the reader. The method of compilation is to select the key verses throughout Scripture, as defined by the target culture, and provide a means of indexing them by the words within them most likely to be considered key by the reader.

Using computer technology

Recent developments in computer software mean we can efficiently compile accurate concordances by using automated processes. British & Foreign Bible Society in the UK has developed a system to allow an existing concordance to the Bible to be used as a model for a similar concordance in another language. What

used to take many years now takes just a few months. For example a comprehensive concordance to Y Beibl Cymraeg Newydd (New Welsh Bible) was produced in 1998 by the British & Foreign Bible Society.⁴

The majority of the world's Bible translation community, and most translation agencies, use a software platform called Paratext, which is a translation editing program. An associated product called Concordance Builder helps Bible translation agencies to easily create a concordance to an existing translation. The program takes an existing model concordance in one language, and derives a concordance in another target language from it. A number of well-respected existing concordance models are included with the program. The Bible in whatever language includes the same stories in the same verses, so by taking a concordance in one language the program can use statistical analysis to derive the most likely equivalent word in a new translation. This is not strictly translation but a process called 'glossing'. This inherits all the work previously done on deciding which the most important terms are, and which the most important references are for them. Glossing works extremely well and can even identify synonyms, and automatically allocate 'see also' words where the target language uses more than one word for the model word.

Running Concordance Builder creates a rough cut of a concordance in a matter of minutes, leaving an editor to tidy up the results. There will also be a period of reviewing the results, during which the editors can consider the work and make whatever changes are needed to reflect their requirements before it is typeset. This will include cross-referencing, explanatory notes and other additional materials such as the preliminary pages and titles.

With the reduction in time taken to compile a concordance has come a similar reduction in cost. First editions of new translations can now be printed with concordances at very little cost and great benefit to readers. In the last few years concordances have been created for English (UK & US), Spanish, Swahili, Latvian, Russian, Portuguese (Brazil & Europe), Albanian, Solomon Islands Pidgin, Burmese languages, Tzotzil, Quechua, Ayamará, Kinyarwanda (Rwandan), and Chichewa. The system has also been released generally to the Bible translation community and is now in use worldwide, for example in New Zealand they are currently producing a concordance in Maori.

In many countries where a concordance does not exist in the local language, Christians will buy a Bible concordance in another language they know, look up the words they want and then look up those references in the Bible in their own language. The large Russian semi-exhaustive *Symphonia* concordance developed by the Institute for Bible Translation (IBT), Licht im Osten and the British & Foreign Bible Society, and subsequently licensed to the Russian Bible Society, has been very successful. It has also been used by Christians in other countries where Russian was used, for example in Latvia and Lithuania where many Christians often

know Russian in addition to their own local languages. In January 2011 both the Latvian and Lithuanian⁵ Bible Societies printed semi-exhaustive concordances based upon their own local translations.

New media

Of course, not everyone uses a printed Bible these days. There is growing community of worldwide Bible users who go online via a mobile or hand-held device such as a mobile phone, iPhone or Kindle for the Scriptures. Such users will do an online search rather than use a concordance. We therefore have to adapt to this new media and some concordances have therefore been put online (e.g. <http://bfbs.biblesocieties.org/> for the Welsh Bible).

However, we need to develop systems to improve online Bible searches. Online searching may seem an improvement but in reality searching a common

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word will return all the entries of a word, whereas a concordance can return just those entries already predetermined to be the most useful. Moreover some online search systems do not distinguish between homonyms where a word such as 'ark' may have two or more meanings (in this case a boat or a covenant box), whereas a good concordance will have made this distinction. No online Bible search system can currently disambiguate different meanings of words with the same spelling, and first return those that are in a concordance (i.e. the most useful) and then the rest. However, United Bible Societies are working on a system to overcome this by matching against existing concordances the words that a search returns.

An existing system developed by the Slovenian Bible Society lets you search the Bible in many European languages.⁶ Currently some English Bibles can be searched from the Bible Society website,⁷ but the plan is to roll out a new system for use by any Bible Society in the world, to cover their own local languages. This will not completely replace printed Bibles and concordances, but will additionally allow access to the Scriptures via the internet.

Conclusion

A concordance of the Bible continues to be an indispensable help to every student of the Bible. Recent technological developments mean an increasing number of concordances are being produced efficiently and quickly in languages that would not have had the resources to produce them a few years ago. But such developments also present new challenges as a growing number of people use new media to access Scripture.