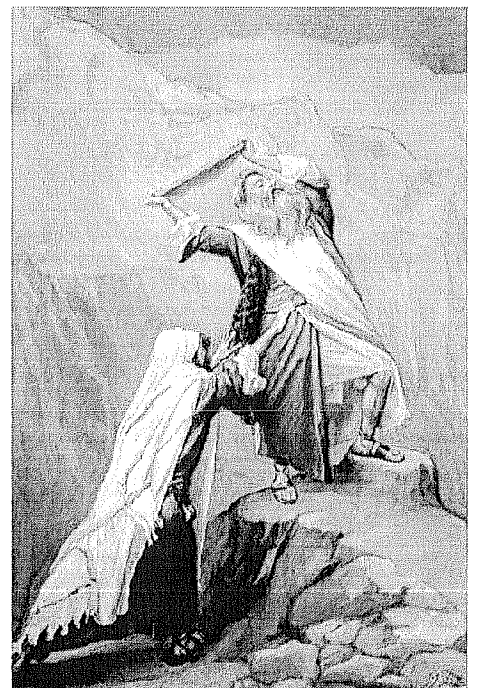


עֲשׂוֹת סְפָרִים הַרְבֵּה אֵין קֵץ

“Of Making Many Books There is No End”
A History of *The People's Bible*

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עֲשׂוֹת סְפָרִים הַרְבֵּה אֵין קֵץ

In Ecclesiastes 12:12 Qoheleth the Teacher makes an apt observation: "Of making many books there is no end." If this was true in Qoheleth's day, when books were laboriously copied by hand, it is truer in the age of the word processor and the printing press. The vast amount of literature that is published every year adds to Qoheleth's endless stream of books. Much of it is religious. What should the discerning Christian pick up and what should he let float downstream?

An obvious keeper is *The People's Bible*, a series of commentaries that deserves to line the shelves of every church library in the Wisconsin Synod. This paper will describe the origin and writing of *The People's Bible* from the perspective of its authors.¹

When Carl Mischke became president of the Wisconsin Synod in 1979, he made the production of Christian literature a priority. He was concerned that the Synod's publishing endeavors were not expanding in proportion to the Synod's growth.

The paucity of Wisconsin Synod literature was partly due to an overdependence on materials from Concordia Publishing House before the split with the Missouri Synod.² Another factor was the hesitancy of Wisconsin Synod theologians to publish anything after the Protestant Controversy and the *Gutachten* debacle of the late 1920s. They feared that their writings would become authoritative declarations that people would use to settle problems rather than thinking through the issues themselves. That fear stayed their pens.³

President Mischke asked the Commission on Christian Literature to address this problem. The Commission's purpose was to work with Northwestern Publishing House to plan and publish

¹ To write this paper I sent a request via email to every *People's Bible* author I could find contact information for. If the man responded and agreed to help, I then sent him a series of questions to answer. Appendix A is a copy of those questions. I also interviewed two of the authors and received a letter from another. In this way I received information from eighteen of the thirty-four authors.

² Mark Braun, email interview by author, 13 November 2008.

³ "As a result we had a couple generations of really excellent men who weren't encouraged to write" (Harlyn Kuschel, personal interview by author, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, 19 November 2008).

more Christian literature. Professor David Kuske of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary was the Commission's chairman.⁴ Pastor Mentor Kujath was the Publishing House's chief editor.

They began by seeking direction from the members of the Wisconsin Synod. Pastor Kujath took a six-month sabbatical to survey the Synod's laity and called workers regarding their Christian literature needs. The survey indicated that there was a desire for something that better explained the books of the Bible, especially for the laity.

There was a need for such a work. "At that time the only Lutheran Bible Commentary written specifically for laymen was the four-volume *Popular Commentary of the Bible*, a CPH publication authored by Professor Paul Kretzmann of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis."⁵ The unwieldy size of those books and their dated language were a turn off for the average lay person.

A subcommittee of the Commission was asked to develop something based on that need, and their recommendation, after some fine-tuning, led to *The People's Bible* commentaries.⁶ In a 1980 resolution of the Commission on Christian Literature *The People's Bible* was born.

The Publishing House needed a subsidy of about five thousand dollars per volume to get the project off the ground. By a fortunate coincidence the Commission on Christian Literature's annual budget was roughly five thousand dollars. The Commission planned to dedicate their budget for two years to produce the first two volumes.

⁴ The historical information on the origins of *The People's Bible* comes largely from David Kuske (email interview by author, 12 November 2008) and Hartyn Kuschel, to whom the author is indebted for their thorough recollections. Kuschel was on the committee that approved the project.

⁵ John Jeske, letter to author, 26 November 2008.

⁶ The idea of a commentary for the laity on the entire Bible was not a new idea in the Wisconsin Synod. In the 1970s the Board for Parish Education of the South Atlantic District led a proposal to the Synod in convention. This proposal called for ten printed items to aid home missions, one of which was a laymen's commentary on the entire Bible. John Lawrenz, who was the chairman of that Board for Parish Education, relates how the Synod did not do much with the idea initially. Thankfully, the idea was too good to simply disappear.

However, the Synodical Council had to approve the plan before anything could be done. *The People's Bible* was a tough sell. The project was obviously a massive undertaking, and some of the Synod's leaders were skeptical. "Comments were made that this would never fly since only a few dedicated lay people would buy books like this and that this was a waste of good money."⁷ Others wondered whether the Wisconsin Synod had enough talent for such a task.

The Synodical Council finally approved the project when the Commission on Christian Literature agreed to conduct a test run. They would publish two volumes of *The People's Bible* to see if anyone would buy them; if those two books did not sell, they would not continue the project. To reduce the cost of those initial volumes Professor Kuske volunteered to write one for free. He convinced Professor Ernst Wendland to do the same.⁸

For their commentaries both chose books they had taught during a recent Summer Quarter: Professor Kuske wrote on Thessalonians, and Professor Wendland wrote on Exodus. They finished writing them within nine months of taking the assignment.⁹

As the Publishing House was in the process of producing the books, the Synod's treasurer "refused to release the ten thousand dollars to NPH since he had been told that this was not a legitimate expenditure."¹⁰ Professor Kuske had to meet with a number of people to resolve the issue, and the Publishing House eventually received the money and published the books.

In order to break even on the project the Publishing House needed to sell five thousand copies of each commentary. Moreover, the future of *The People's Bible* also depended on

⁷ David Kuske.

⁸ "He and I both received a payment of several hundred dollars for doing the writing once *The People's Bible* really got going" (Kuske).

⁹ According to John Braun (email interview by author, 14 November 2008), Ernst Wendland holds the record for fastest completion of the assignment. Harlyn Kuschel remarks that "to this day Kuske and Wendland are still known to be able to get quality stuff out in a hurry." John Lawrenz wrote his volume in six weeks, but he had held the assignment for several years before he wrote it.

¹⁰ David Kuske.

selling that many copies. After all, a popular commentary should be popular; if the books did not sell, the series would die.

Thessalonians and *Exodus* were popular, however, and after ten months they had sold five thousand copies each. This surprised not only those who thought that *The People's Bible* was a foolish idea, but also those in the Commission on Christian Literature. "Though we on the CCL believed in the project, we were also surprised how quickly the number five thousand was reached."¹¹ Because of their popularity, *The People's Bible* series could continue.

Roland Cap Ehlke was the General Editor of the series.¹² The chairmen of the Seminary's Old and New Testament departments, John Jeske and Armin Panning, served as the series' Old and New Testament editors. This collaboration with the Seminary safeguarded the doctrinal integrity and scriptural accuracy of the commentaries.

These editors helped plan the series with the Publishing House and the Commission on Christian Literature. It was agreed from the start that the authors had to be pastors or professors with at least five years in the ministry who had also maintained their skills in the original languages of Scripture. "We did not want 'second-handers' writing the volumes of *The People's Bible*."¹³

It is significant that parish pastors, and not just professors, wrote *The People's Bible*. This sets it apart from other commentaries, which are written almost exclusively by professional scholars. It is a testament to the Wisconsin Synod that its clergy is scholarly enough to study Scripture on the basis of its original languages. It is a testament to Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary

¹¹ David Kuske.

¹² "Cap was always an excellent writer and I knew he had a clear, simple, expressive style of writing. I remember thinking at the time that if anyone in our Synod had the gifts to see this project through, it was Cap" (John Mittelstaedt, email interview by author, 19 November 2008).

¹³ John Jeske.

that its faculty is practical enough to write commentaries for lay people.¹⁴ May the Synod never lose either of those blessings or cease to thank God for them.

Both Jeske and Panning were asked to compile lists of possible writers for the commentaries. The editorial staff at Northwestern Publishing House contacted the prospective writers.¹⁵ Some men were obvious choices. "If a man taught a particular Bible book in a Northwestern College or Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary classroom, he was a logical choice to author that particular *People's Bible* volume."¹⁶ Others were not as obvious. The majority of the authors contacted for this paper were surprised that they were asked to write a commentary.

A few of the men were able to choose which book they wrote on.¹⁷ The rest had their book assigned. The three series editors of *The People's Bible* contributed,¹⁸ as well as other Northwestern Publishing House editors who were former pastors and professors.¹⁹ With two exceptions, all the authors were members of the Wisconsin Synod.²⁰

The commentaries were not to be ponderous tomes or to contain technical jargon.²¹ Because their intended audience was laypeople with a basic knowledge of Scripture, the

¹⁴ "Our seminary professors are still very much in touch with laypeople; they are very pastoral" (H. Kuschel).

¹⁵ Mentor Kujath and Roland Ehke contacted the authors through a letter.

¹⁶ John Jeske.

¹⁷ Of those contacted for this paper Mark Braun, John Lawrenz, and John Braun chose which books to write on.

¹⁸ Armin Panning's remark on this is interesting: "Being on the editorial board I really had to be willing to do myself what we were asking of others. So I volunteered to write one of the New Testament commentaries" (email interview by author, 21 November 2008). This was obviously the thinking of Jeske and Ehke as well. All three of those men wrote two volumes for *The People's Bible*. When John Braun came to NPH in 1994 and helped complete the project, he also wrote two volumes.

¹⁹ These included Gary Baumler, G.J. Albrecht, Roland Cap Ehke, and John Braun.

²⁰ Two volumes were written by Evangelical Lutheran Synod professors: Rudolph Honsey (*Job*) and Adolph Harstad (*Joshua*).

²¹ "We were urged not to use any technical terms at all. 'Keep it simple' was almost a mantra. I remember early on we were even discouraged from citing cross-references. I don't think any of the authors (including me) conformed too much to that suggestion" (Panning).

commentaries had to offer clear and concise exposition and application in contemporary English.

The books were designed to be compact and easy to navigate. Each volume would contain the complete NIV text along with the commentary. Most importantly, each volume would point its readers to their Savior. "These are the Scriptures that testify about me" (John 5:39).

The three series editors initially planned *The People's Bible* to consist of thirty-seven volumes published over a ten-year period. They wanted to release four volumes each year; two Old Testament volumes and two New Testament. That did not happen. *The People's Bible* actually took eighteen years to complete (1984-2002) and is forty-one volumes long.²² "Because many of our authors were busy men with demanding schedules, we could not meet our hoped-for deadline."²³

The editors intended to give each author at least two years to complete their commentary. The deadlines were staggered over the projected ten-year span of the project. An author had more or less time depending on when he was contacted and when his book was due. While a few of the authors had no problems meeting their deadlines, most could not meet them. The editors graciously gave extensions as needed.²⁴

The authors contacted for this paper agree that the crush of time is what made writing for *The People's Bible* most difficult. Writing a book is an intimidating task, let alone one "that

²² Consult Appendix B of this paper to see when each volume was published. It was always part of the editors' plan to combine some books of the Bible into a single volume. However, when several authors realized that they could not fit all their material into one volume and still do justice to that particular book, they expanded that volume into two (so *Psalms I and II*; *1 Chronicles* and *2 Chronicles*; *Isaiah 1-39* and *Isaiah 40-66*).

²³ John Jeske.

²⁴ "You couldn't have worked with better editors" (Paul Wendland, personal interview by author, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, 19 November 2008).

would probably be used by multitudes of pastors and lay people for generations, inside and outside our church body."²⁵

Each author began by working with their text in its original language to some degree; the amount of time spent with the original depended on the author's situation. Obviously professors who taught exegetical courses on their book had a leg up over parish pastors.²⁶ However, painstaking word by word exegesis was not necessary for this assignment. "Because this was a commentary for laypeople the encouragement was to work with the NIV text so that the focus would be there and not on linguistics."²⁷ If an author did not read the entire text in the original, he at least worked through its problematic portions, especially if the NIV had a gnarly or inaccurate translation.

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary teaches "an exegetical method that aims to leave exegetes minimally dependent on commentaries, but to think that nobody can help you with wider insights or correction and adjustment of dubious conclusions borders on arrogance."²⁸ Thus the authors made judicious use of other commentaries in their work. For some, consulting other commentaries underscored how important their work was.²⁹ Many books of the Bible had no good, conservative commentaries written on them.

²⁵ Wayne Mueller, email interview by author, 12 November 2008.

²⁶ The Commission on Christian Literature provided preaching help for the pastors who wrote commentaries, since, unlike the professors, they did not have the summers free to dedicate to their project. Not having to prepare a sermon opened up time for writing. In addition, Professor Kuske arranged for the Seminary to provide lodging and a workspace in the Seminary library for authors during Summer Quarter; though Harlyn Kuschel thinks that he is the only author who took advantage of that offer.

²⁷ Kieth Kuschel, email interview by author, 13 November 2008. This does not deny the fact that "there is no substitute for original translation as a first step; that's where the spirit and tone of the book come through most clearly" (Adolph Harstad, email interview by author, 12 November 2008). Also, most of the authors initially read through their book in multiple English translations, which is a useful way to begin any text study.

²⁸ Armin Panning.

²⁹ "I learned of what little comfort scholarly commentaries give, far too technical" (David Gosdeck, email interview by author, 12 November 2008).

Some of the parish pastors found that the best way to work on the project was to depart from the pericope and preach through their assigned book.³⁰ Others taught Bible studies on it. These were wise ideas because writing for *The People's Bible* is similar to preparing a sermon or Bible study. Many of the authors commented that writing their commentary was like writing a sermon. These methods also allowed the authors to receive feedback and encouragement from their congregations.

The editors also offered encouragement. They asked the authors to submit a sample chapter to them so that they could provide feedback and direction. Beyond that the composition of a commentary was a solitary ordeal. Contact with the editors came in the form of phone calls, usually once a year, inquiring about the author's progress. This was "no doubt encouraging, but also somewhat disconcerting for people behind in meeting their project deadlines."³¹

In addition to deadlines the Publishing House provided other guidelines. They offered parameters for the length of the books but were not rigid in their requirements. They also made a style guide for the series. Finally, they stressed that the purpose of the series was to help the laity; their exposition should be clear, but their application was most important.

Although each author had his own method of studying and writing, only a few could regularly schedule time every week to complete their project.³² The rest needed large chunks of uninterrupted time where they had nothing else to work on. For some this meant asking their congregation for permission to dedicate a majority of their time to the project. Others were blessed by calls to be professors, which provided more time in the summer for writing. All but a

³⁰ "I took massive notes for each sermon, much more than I would need, and then kept the notes and the sermon. Later I tied it all together in book form" (Hartyn Kuschel). "This seemed to me to be the best way to approach my study and to play to my strengths as a pastor rather than an academic professor" (John Mittelstaedt, email interview by author, 19 November 2008).

³¹ Armin Panning.

³² Pastor Victor Prange and Pastor Kieth Kuschel especially went about their projects in a very mechanical way. Prange taught Luke in Bible class for a year and then wrote his commentary in about three months. Kuschel wrote a section of his commentary on Ezekiel every week for his Bible class to read and discuss; it took him two years to complete the commentary.

few finished their commentaries; some volumes had to be reassigned because the original author could not complete the project.³³

The authors sent their completed manuscripts to the series editors. Their job was to read every manuscript and call attention to statements that needed clarification or were theologically dubious. The authors made the necessary changes and that manuscript was then worked over by two staff editors at the Publishing House.³⁴ It took about a year to publish the books after the manuscript was submitted.

The Commission on Christian Literature received a gift to finance the artwork for *The People's Bible*. They wanted a contemporary style for its cover art and illustrations. Yet as a subcommittee worked on suggestions for the art, a maverick Publishing House editor used the money to purchase artwork without approval from the Commission or the Publishing House. He bought plates of biblical illustrations by the French artist James Tissot (1836-1902), giving the series the opposite style that the Commission wanted, but they had to use that artwork because the money was gone.³⁵ Dr. John Lawrenz made the maps for several volumes, and Publishing House staff artists produced the remaining illustrations and maps.

The People's Bible was well received. Many of the volumes went through multiple printings to meet the demand. As the series neared completion in 2000, the Publishing House issued a redesigned edition with a green cover and new artwork. Moreover, Concordia

³³ Reassignments were rare because extensions were so freely given. The volume on the General Epistles was reassigned because its original author, John Trapp, "abruptly left the WELS ministry under a cloud and had to be replaced" (Mark Jeske, email interview by author, 13 November 2008). The volume on Isaiah was reassigned because the original author "could not complete his task for a number of reasons, including the press of other responsibilities" (John Braun). The volumes on Romans and John were reassigned for similar reasons.

³⁴ "My impression is that they did consistently careful work. In the case of my own two manuscripts, I agreed with virtually every suggestion they made. They improved my manuscript" (Armin Panning). The other authors concur that, when they read their published volume, they hear their own voice; little was changed. Also, for the record, Panning notes that the authors turned in very little theologically dubious material.

³⁵ Kuske calls Tissot's artwork "the most disappointing part of the series for me." Panning thinks that it "made the volumes look dated from the start." Neither named the editor who bought the artwork. Of the authors contacted for this paper, only one liked Tissot's artwork; the rest either did not like it or did not care about how the books looked. Most prefer the style and artwork of the second edition.

Publishing House purchased the printing rights to *The People's Bible* on the condition that they would not change a single word in any of the commentaries.³⁶

The popularity and usefulness of *The People's Bible* vindicates the years each man put into writing his commentary.³⁷ Not only did they grow spiritually, but countless others have also reaped the benefits of their labor. The authors know because their readers have told them so. "The Lord times it. He waits for a day when you feel utterly worthless and haven't accomplished anything, and then someone sends you a letter or an email that says, 'Thank you.'"³⁸ That makes the struggle worthwhile. The authors worked on their commentaries for years, a few for a decade.³⁹ They labored to express and apply the sublime truths of Scripture as clearly as possible. They were conscious of the fact that their books would continue to preach long after they were gone.

"Of making of many books there is no end." *The People's Bible* demonstrates that the Wisconsin Synod is capable of adding to Qoheleth's endless stream of books, but not with the *dreck* or theologically vacant material that is so rampant today. It was the most ambitious publication project the Synod had ever attempted, and it was followed by more. It shows how serious the Synod is about putting Scripture into the hands of God's people.⁴⁰ Most importantly, it shows the Synod's dedication to leading people to their Savior.

³⁶ "Our work was highly respected by many (not all) of the professors, pastors and students whom I met in graduate school at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, who knew about the project" (Mark Braun).

³⁷ The authors were not in it for the money. This author did not directly ask how much they were paid, but in the course of his interviews with Harlyn Kuschel and Paul Wendland the topic came up. Kuschel recalls getting two hundred and fifty dollars for his book, and Wendland thinks he got a thousand dollars, though he is not certain. The authors received no royalties either; when they handed in their manuscript it became the property of Northwestern Publishing house. However, they did receive another check when Concordia bought the rights to publish the series.

³⁸ Paul Wendland.

³⁹ Understandably the assignment became a source of guilt for many of the authors.

⁴⁰ The fact that the entire series has been translated into Spanish and that numerous volumes have been translated into the native languages of some of the Synod's other foreign mission fields also testifies to this.

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Appendix A – Questions for People's Bible Authors

Thank you for answering these questions for me; I appreciate your effort and your time. Please type your answers next to or under the questions, and feel free to make them as brief or as long as you like. If a question is unclear, send me an email about it and I will clarify.

A. Preliminary Questions

- 1) Were you involved with the development or origin of the People's Bible series? If so, could you comment on it? If not, what do you know about it?
- 2) Why were you asked to write a People's Bible? Who asked you? When were you asked? Did you pick the book of the Bible you wrote on, or was it assigned?
- 3) How much time were you given to write the book? In addition to the formal deadline you were given, what deadlines did you give to yourself?
- 4) While all pastors are interested in and love Scripture, did you have a special interest in or love for the book of the Bible you were asked to write on? If so, when did it begin? Also, was the language your book of the Bible was written in the one you were most proficient in?

B. Questions on Studying your book of the Bible

- 1) How did you begin your study? How often did you fit study for this project into your daily schedule?
- 2) Could you briefly describe your study process? That is, was it done by painstaking, word for word exegesis, or something else? How often did you consult other commentators? How did you use the Lutheran Confessions?
- 3) What role did other pastors or professors play in your study? (encouragement, help with difficult questions, etc.)
- 4) Did you finish all your studying before you wrote the book, or did you do them in tandem?
- 5) You obviously learned much that you did not previously know as you studied, but do you think that you discovered something no other commentator knew? (structural phenomena, unique insights, etc.)
- 6) How many times do you estimate that you read your book of the Bible while you studied it for this project? (cover to cover in the original and English)
- 7) What was the most difficult part of studying a book of the Bible in order to write a commentary on it? The easiest?

C. Questions about Writing your People's Bible

- 1) How much of what you learned in your study did you have to leave out as you wrote? For that matter, how much of what you wanted to write did you leave out?
- 2) What parameters did NPH set for your book, if any? (i.e., its length, how technical it could be, etc.)
- 3) What role did other pastors or professors play while you wrote? (i.e., a sounding board for ideas, proof readers, encouragement, etc.)
- 4) What was the most difficult part of writing a popular commentary? The easiest?

- 5) Do you like the cover and interior illustrations that accompany your book (assuming that you did not pick them)?

D. Questions on the Aftermath of writing a People's Bible

- 1) Did you meet your deadlines (formal and self-imposed)? Did you spend more time writing or studying?
- 2) How did you find the time for such a massive project?
- 3) Are you pleased with your finished product?
- 4) Do you ever read the People's Bible that you wrote? Do you read the People's Bibles that others have written?
- 5) After the book was written, did you find that passages from that book of the Bible were the first to come to mind when you needed passages for something?
- 6) In addition to writing a People's Bible, did you do anything else for the project? If so, could you please describe what you did (if you haven't somewhere else in this questionnaire)?
- 7) What was the greatest benefit of writing a People's Bible?
- 8) If there was something I didn't cover in these questions that you feel should be said, please share it below. Thank you.

Appendix B – Publishing Dates of *The People's Bible*

1984

Exodus (Ernst H. Wendland)
Thessalonians (David P. Kuske*)

1985

Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther (John F. Brug*)
Daniel (John C. Jeske*)

1986

Ezekiel (Kieth B. Kuschel*)
Philippians, Colossians, Philemon (Harlyn J. Kuschel*)
Hebrews (Richard E. Lauersdorf)

1987

Obadiah, Jonah, Micah (Cyril W. Spaude)
1 Corinthians (Carleton A. Toppe)

1988

Leviticus (Mark J. Lenz)
Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs (Roland Cap Ehlke)
Acts (Richard D. Balge*)
Luke (Victor H. Prange*)
Mark (Harold E. Wicke)

1989

Psalms I (John F. Brug*)
Psalms II (John F. Brug*)
Hosea, Joel, Amos (Paul E. Eickmann)

1990

Numbers (Paul W. Kuske)
Kings (Arno J. Wolfgramm)

1991

Joshua (Adolph L. Harstad*)
Genesis (John C. Jeske*)
1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus (Armin W. Schuetze)
Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi (Eric S. Hartzell)

1992

Job (Rudolph E. Honsey)
Proverbs (Roland Cap Ehlke)
2 Corinthians (David J. Valleskey*)

1993

Deuteronomy (Mark E. Braun*)
Samuel (John R. Mittelstaedt*)

1994

1 Chronicles (Paul O. Wendland*)
Jeremiah, Lamentations (David M. Gosdeck*)

1996

Matthew (G.J. Albrecht / M.J. Albrecht)
Revelation (Wayne Mueller*)

1997

Judges, Ruth (John C. Lawrenz*)
Galatians, Ephesians (Armin J. Panning*)
John (Gary P. Baumler)

1998

2 Chronicles (Paul O. Wendland*)

1999

Romans (Armin J. Panning*)

2000

Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah (James J. Westendorf)
Isaiah 1-39 (John A. Braun*)

2001

Isaiah 40-66 (John A. Braun*)

2002

James; 1,2 Peter; 1,2,3 John; Jude (Mark A. Jeske*)

* indicates an author who contributed information for this paper