

The Baker Illustrated Bible Dictionary

Tremper Longman III, ed. *The Baker Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2013. 1767 pp. \$39.99. Hardcover. ISBN: 9780801012976.

The Baker Illustrated Bible Dictionary (BIBD) is self-described as “a comprehensive, ready reference to Bible subjects” (back cover). The book is bound as a hardcover with a thumb index, sewn binding, and heavyweight glossy paper that supports crisp, colorful illustrations, charts, photos, and maps. The 2011 revision of the New International Version forms the basis for most article headings and biblical citations, but, as indicated in the preface, multiple versions are cited throughout, and there are articles on some of the more “obscure terms” used in the King James Version (vii). Articles cover topics expected in a Bible dictionary: introductions to books of the Bible; biblical persons, places, and things; and doctrinal concepts such as grace or forgiveness. The dictionary also contains entries on pertinent extra-biblical terms and topics (e.g., Apostolic Fathers, Dead Sea Scrolls, Josephus, Philo Judaeus, Pseudepigrapha, Q, Qumran, Talmud, Targum).

The preface implies that the dictionary’s target audience is primarily laypeople interested in learning more for the sake of studying the Bible. “This dictionary is a helpful resource to support everyday Bible reading as well as to prepare for group Bible studies or to follow up on sermons, and for many other reasons” (vii).

The breadth of coverage for this dictionary is its primary strength. Introductions to each book and genre of the Bible will provide an excellent contextual framework for anyone studying Scripture devotionally. Articles on persons, places, and things will provide clarification to the curious reader. The extra-biblical topics mentioned above, such as “Q” or the “Dead Sea Scrolls,” often make their way into popular media coverage of the Bible. Thus, the *BIBD* would also serve the layperson watching the latest sensational History Channel special on the Bible.

While not written as a devotional work by any means, devotional pay-offs abound throughout the volume. This reviewer was particularly struck by this assertion: “The Beatitudes introduce a new reality to those who respond to the kingdom offered by Jesus. They present a radical reversal for the downtrodden: the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, and the persecuted” (180).

Articles are clearly written at a level that is, for the most part, approachable to the layperson, and even those articles that are written with a greater degree of complexity can provide a payoff to the reader who is willing to patiently wade through some complex language. For instance, the article on “Grace” (698-700) begins:

Grace is the nucleus, the critical core element, of the redemptive and sanctifying work of the triune God detailed throughout the entire canon of Scripture. The variegated expressions of grace are rooted in the person and work of God, so that his graciousness and favor effectively demonstrated in every aspect of the created realm glorify him as they are shared and enjoyed with one another (698).

While the opening paragraph brings together some complex topics in very succinct wording, the brevity makes the statement quite complex. That being said, the reader who is willing to push through the opening of the article is introduced to a biblical doctrine that is shown to begin at creation and continue on through the history of Israel and the church. Over half the article is devoted to “grace” in the Old Testament! After reading the article, there would be little doubt as to what is meant by “variegated expressions of grace.”

The dictionary contains a few entries that would seem beyond the grasp of most laypeople. For instance, the article on “Hebrew Language” (756-758) contains an excellent discussion of the history, grammar, and syntax of biblical Hebrew, but most of the discussion would prove too detailed for the average layperson. In contrast, however, the article on “Greek Language” (705-707), while technical, could be very helpful to the layperson with access to an interlinear or basic Bible software that provides grammatical information. The stress of this particular article is on the function of different

inflections (and all of the attendant ambiguities). The dictionary provides this helpful caution: “It cannot be overstated that grammar is always secondary to context. Thus, one should not seek to find too much meaning in the form of a word, or the meaning in the form of a word, or the meaning of a word, without contextual warrant” (706).

Among the most striking features of this dictionary are the over four hundred colorful illustrations, tables, charts, and maps provided throughout. Artwork depicting biblical scenes decorates the pages, while images of archaeological sites, artifacts, and models help transport the reader into the land of the Bible. Maps help clarify geographical locations. The illustrations help elucidate the content of relevant articles; however, cross references to various images may have been helpful, as many of the images could have illustrated multiple articles.

In general, cross referencing could have improved the usefulness of this dictionary considerably. Different synonymous article headings do provide cross referencing. For example, the entry on “Abode of the Dead” (10) references entries on “Death; Grave; Hades; Hell; Pit; Sheol.” It would have been helpful at least to highlight those terms in any article that were headwords of other articles, if not provide a list of relevant articles and/or illustrations at the end of each article. The dictionary could have been improved considerably with the addition of scriptural and topical indexes. Of course, any editor seeking to provide such a work in an affordable format is faced with making hard decisions on what to include.

While not explicitly a “confessional” work, the *BIBD* does claim to contain “5,000 articles by leading evangelical scholars” (back cover). An examination of some of the articles reveals that the authors do represent a diversity of perspectives within the Evangelical tradition. For instance, the article on “Isaiah, Book of” (862-867) contains a lengthy discussion of the authorship of Isaiah. The author does state both sides of the argument regarding the unity of the book, but explicitly comes out in favor of a “First,” “Second,” and “Third Isaiah” (864) and structures the discussion of the book’s content around these sections. While the author ultimately concludes that “involvement of multiple authors in the composition of Isaiah does not undermine its authority as Scripture” (864), the conclusions reached would raise an eyebrow or two among some Evangelicals. In comparison, the article on “Daniel, Book of” (399-401) is brief, and does not cover much of the evidence for or against an early date for the book’s composition. The article concludes that “It seems best to side with the traditional understanding of the book of Daniel as having been written early and reflecting an accurate depiction of Daniel’s life” (p 399), thus revealing a traditional Evangelical slant. Other articles reveal a broadly Evangelical framework of interpretation as well. The discussion of “Homosexuality” (796-799) takes a decidedly conservative interpretation of relevant biblical passages, while the discussion of women in church government in the article on “Women” (1721-1725) leaves debatable conclusions up to the reader.

Overall, *The Baker Illustrated Bible Dictionary* lives up to its aim to provide a layperson with “a comprehensive, ready reference to Bible subjects.” While some of the entries are complex, perseverance in reading will be rewarded. The dictionary would provide a good resource to a Sunday school teacher, small group leader, or any interested lay person. The lack of indexes and cross references make the dictionary slightly less useful, but the illustrations and quality of articles make it a worthy purchase for a layperson’s personal library, a church library, or a public library. Theological libraries that seek to serve the needs of the laity would benefit from this volume, but the brevity of the articles and the lack of relevant bibliographies would make the volume less useful to theological students and scholars.

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