

## *Dictionary of the Bible and Western Culture*

**Mary Ann Beavis and Michael J. Gilmour. *Dictionary of the Bible and Western Culture*. Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2012. 620 pp. Hardcover. \$100.00. ISBN: 9781907534799.**

*The Dictionary of the Bible and Western Culture (DBWC)* is a stand-alone reference work that seeks to bridge the gap that often separates the related fields of biblical studies and the humanities (primarily art and literature). This chasm exists, in part, because so much of the language and thought of the historical Western intellectual tradition is mined from a book, the Bible, whose narrative, prose, and poetry find an increasingly diminished role in the vernacular and literacy of the post-Christian West. The editors are well suited for this project. In addition to teaching at the University of Saskatchewan, Mary Ann Beavis has published in the area of New Testament studies with an interest in popular culture, best demonstrated by her founding and continued editorship of the *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*. Michael Gilmour's resume is similar to that of his co-editor; he began in more traditional New Testament studies, but his interest in the intersection of religious studies and popular culture is best illustrated in his books on Bob Dylan (*The Gospel According to Bob Dylan: The Old, Old Story for Modern Times*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011, and *Tangled Up in the Bible: Bob Dylan and Scripture*, New York: Continuum, 2004).

Beavis and Gilmour have invited a broad range of two hundred scholars to compose brief entries that do much more than simply acquaint readers with the information of the Bible, like a basic Bible encyclopedia or dictionary. Instead, this volume aids scholars and students who are conversant with the Western artistic and intellectual tradition, yet lacking any specialized training in biblical studies (vii). The volume's 1,000 signed entries treat a person, place, idea, phrase, or concept from the Bible and describe its relevance within the Jewish-Christian canon and tradition, and also the way the broader culture has received it and used it for any number of artistic and literary purposes.

To illustrate the layout of each entry, consider the treatment of the word "Gentiles." The first paragraph includes a brief Hebrew/Greek word study, followed by a survey of its use in biblical texts. The second paragraph analyzes the concept of being a Gentile and its usage in religious communities such as the Mormons or Jehovah's Witnesses, who use the term not to denote non-Jewishness but instead have re-purposed it to describe anyone outside their faith tradition. Finally, the third paragraph includes references to being Gentile in popular media, such as the sitcom *Curb Your Enthusiasm* and the music of Weird Al Yankovic. This three-step treatment that moves from the biblical to the historical to the contemporary is rather typical in *DBWC*.

The variety of the entries is very broad. There are entries that one would expect because of their origin in Scripture: "My brother's keeper," "Salt of the earth," "Hem of his garment," and "Jot or tittle." Some others cover items found in the Bible because they are common, but not because they are particular to the Bible, such as "Fire," "Hunger," or "Apple." The aim, then, is not so much to acquaint the reader with the thing, but instead to explain how it is used in the Bible. In this way, some of the entries seem to be asking the question of how the Bible includes material of its ancient setting, not the question of how Western culture has appropriated concepts and images of the Bible. Finally, some entries, such as "Wise as serpents," deal very little with the phrase's original import, instead focusing exclusively on ways that the concept has been employed in popular culture through movies such as *Evan Almighty* or *Legally Blonde 2*.

One point where the entries vary relates to the incorporation of the interpretive tradition of a word/idea. For example, the entry for "Providence" includes a discussion of four major positions: Calvinism, Arminianism, Molinism, and Open Theism. The same is true in the entry on the "Lord's Supper," which treats significant historical positions. The entry on "Election," however, primarily connects the biblical idea to recent popular culture references (including Chaim Potok),

but does not delve into the tangled debates on the issue within the Jewish and Christian tradition. So, a few articles reflect an imbalance; some focus on the reception of the idea within the traditional orthodoxy, liturgy, and ethics of the Western church, while others pay less attention to that aspect and concentrate on the text's reception of the text in media, film, and music.

Another place where there is some inconsistency is with the *Recommended Reading* section that comes at the end of some entries. First, recommended texts are not always listed. This is not typically problematic, but is somewhat strange for a resource that celebrates the significance of these ideas in the Western tradition (often literary). Some omissions are understandable. It is unclear how much secondary literature exists on "Joseph of Arimathea." But to make no recommendations for readings on "Justification" seems unfortunate, since there are many, even among relative bestsellers (N.T. Wright, *Justification*, IVP Academic, 2009). Also, some recommended readings seem out of place. One example is that the only recommended text on the "Holy Spirit" is Raymond Brown's 1966 Anchor Bible commentary on John's Gospel.

This volume is a solid addition to the emerging field of the reception history of the Bible. This might especially be true for scholars and libraries that lack the budget to acquire the *Encyclopedia of the Bible and its Reception (EBR)*. This volume is a smaller entry point into the realm of reception history than *EBR*, but for a much more modest price.

How much the volume will benefit the intended audience (those without backgrounds in biblical studies) remains to be seen. But the book would be a great addition to the library of a preacher or teacher who is always looking for vivid illustrations about the people, places, and ideas of the Bible. This volume is full of references that even the most serious reader or movie buff would struggle to surface; it would make a great addition to the reference collection of a seminary library. And one can easily imagine a reference librarian reaching for this volume to help a patron who asks about a phrase from the Bible. Overall, the *Dictionary of the Bible and Western Culture* deserves consideration for the way it seeks to connect the world of the Bible with the world of today by considering the cultural artifacts that bridge those two spheres.

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