

Dictionary of Major Biblical Interpreters

Donald K. McKim, ed. *Dictionary of Major Biblical Interpreters*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007. 1106 pp. \$45.00. Cloth. ISBN: 9780830829279.

Under a slightly different title, Donald McKim and a covey of contributors have produced an update of McKim's 1998 *Historical Handbook of Major Biblical Interpreters*. The *Dictionary* is significantly expanded with about 130 new entries and double the number of contributors in the earlier edition. The entries continue to include biographical sketches of each exegete, descriptions of his or her work, and an assessment of his or her significance along with bibliographies listing primary sources ("Works") and secondary sources ("Studies"). (Many of the secondary sources are more general and do not deal with the subject of the entry directly.) The work contains the standard but welcome "how to use" section, list of abbreviations, and list of contributors (indicating affiliation and entries for which each contributor is responsible). Indexes are provided for persons, subjects, and articles.

In the first edition (the *Historical Handbook*) the articles were divided into time periods, each with an introductory essay. In the *Dictionary* all of the essays are gathered to the front of the volume followed by the articles in alphabetical order. While the articles in the *Handbook* were in alphabetical order within each time period, at least there was some general sense of where each exegete fell along the timeline. Even lacking any sort of expressed temporal relationship within each period, the keeping of the former arrangement might have helped contextualize a given exegete to some extent especially for those new to the name.

McKim points out in the preface that two of the six introductory essays ("Biblical Interpretation in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries" and "Biblical Interpretation in Europe in the Twentieth Century") were expanded by one scholar for the *Dictionary*. The others appear to have been carried over from the *Handbook* with slight editing for clarification and the occasional updated citation in the bibliographies at the end of each essay. Some of these cited works, of course, were published after the first edition, such as the *Handbook of Patristic Exegesis*, and some that were published prior to the first edition have been added.

The first occurrence in each essay of a named interpreter represented by an article is marked with an asterisk, but, as in the *Handbook*, not every individual mentioned has a corresponding article. Examples range from Apollinarius of Laodicea ("...condemned for heresy in the last decade of his life, [and] was the most celebrated interpreter of Scripture at Antioch when Jerome enrolled among his students in 374" (10)) to Burton Mack, John Dominic Crossan, and Marcus Borg, who, among others, set forth "major positions" (98) in the Jesus of history discussions (though Robert W. Funk, the founder of the Jesus Seminar, is included). One wonders at the exclusion of these other "celebrated" and "major" figures.

Such questions regarding the selection of which exegetes to include and which to exclude continue in the current revision. "Major," of course, is a relative term. McKim certainly admits in the Preface that there are individuals who could and should have been included but for the limitations of space. Perhaps in response to reviewers of the first edition, McKim has added new entries for many of the interpreters whose exclusion they criticized. This

includes a wink, if not a nod, toward the East with entries for Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory of Nazianzus. The entries otherwise remain overwhelmingly Western.

It was noted in reviews of the first edition that there was a temporal skewing toward the inclusion of figures from the last 300 years, and this continues among the new entries in the second edition. Two-thirds (about 90) of the new entries are from the 18th century forward.

If one were to look to this IVP publication for a generous selection of evangelicals (however one might want to define “evangelical”), it is certainly to be found, but there are still notable gaps. In comparing, for example, the present publication with Elwell and Weaver’s *Bible Interpreters of the 20th Century: A Selection of Evangelical Voices*, a volume of similar format, one finds that a majority of these selected voices (twenty-five out of thirty-five) fail to appear in the *Dictionary*. These omissions include well-known interpreters such as Gordon Fee and N. T. Wright.

McKim has noted in the prefaces to both editions the lack of entries for women and for those who are not Western, white males. While it might be true that the predominance of writings in the area of biblical interpretation have come from the latter group, one must question why McKim admitted to this shortcoming the first time around but did so little to remedy the situation when the opportunity presented itself. There are, for example, a number of representatives from the neglected perspectives mentioned right in the introductory essays. Some of these might have been included at least to take a step toward greater inclusivity.

To suggest an approach that could have been taken, one notes what J. W. Rogerson has to say about Patrick Fairbairn, whose entry is new to the present volume: Despite asserting that claims doubting Fairbairn’s brilliance and originality did not do him justice, Rogerson goes on to say, “Yet it appears that Fairbairn did not exercise any great influence outside his immediate circle ... and one looks in vain in the biographies of English church leaders of the nineteenth century for references to him” (431-432). No doubt Fairbairn did some good work, which is mentioned in his entry, but does he qualify as a major biblical interpreter? Rather than add an entry in which the contributor comes to such less than glowing conclusions about his subject, why not include someone such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who “adumbrated the beginning of feminist biblical interpretation in the twentieth century” (98)?

McKim might also have considered an entry for Gustavo Gutiérrez (who is not mentioned in the *Dictionary* at all) to the extent that what Jeffrey Siker says in *Scripture and Ethics: Twentieth Century Portraits* is true: “For Gutiérrez, the Bible is the ‘word of God’ that provides a fundamental orientation for all Christian action and reflection, and as such the Bible is indispensable for Christians as a source of revelation about God and humanity. Given the central place that Gutiérrez assigns to reflection on the Bible, it is somewhat surprising that so little attention has been directed at Gutiérrez’s use(s) of the Bible” (126). There is no precisely settling a question of who is a major interpreter of Scripture, but it seems that there is plenty of opportunity (which, again, McKim acknowledges) to broaden the perspective of a volume such as this. Given that this volume could be the most ambitious work of its kind in English, some broadening of perspective would be valuable for, if not owed to, students of biblical studies.

Each of the entries, of course, has its own style and approach. Some, like the entry for Luther, are almost purely descriptive (though critical of some interpretations of Luther); other articles offer more criticism. It behooves the reader to ask questions of the entries, including the Luther article. As general as it is (and must be to cover a

figure such as Luther in eight pages), moments arise when it is necessary to ask questions. One of these occurs at the point where Kenneth Hagen, the author of the Luther entry, says, in the context of the question of whether Luther marked the beginning of modern methods of biblical interpretation, that “Luther did not superimpose his agenda onto Scripture; he took out and applied the message of Scripture as he claimed to do and thus was consistent with the grammar and vocabulary of Scripture” (689-690). There are some potentially broad statements being made here, and one must at least seek some clarification. There are no directly critical works in the Luther bibliography (and one must draw the line somewhere), but there was certainly no lack of material to draw from regarding Luther’s interpretation of the Bible. The relatively recent and significant one begun by E. P. Sanders and others representing the “new perspective” on Paul comes to mind.

The *Dictionary* is strongly recommended for any researcher with an interest in the history of biblical interpretation.

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