

The Blackwell Companion to the Theologians

Ian S. Markham, ed. *The Blackwell Companion to the Theologians*. West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009. 2 vols: 944 pp. \$350.00. Hardcover. ISBN: 9781405135078 (set).

The *Blackwell Companion to the Theologians* is written as an introduction to the world of theology and theologians. It provides insight regarding how various theologians developed their perceptions about life, humanity, and God, which thus shaped their theological underpinnings.

The *Companion* is dedicated to Christian theology. The term “Christian,” however, is used in the broadest sense. Markham defines this as “a world where the disclosure of God in Jesus is in some way (and as you will discover the ways are various) a revelation to humanity about God” (I, xii). This definition allows the *Companion* to cover a broad range of Christian theologians and theological positions, including Augustine, John Calvin, Martin Luther King, Paul Tillich, James Cone, liberal theology, and feminist theology, just to name a few.

The primary purpose of the *Companion* is to introduce the world of theology to a thoughtful and interested reader. However, the selection of theologians and the means by which they are approached has been shaped with a particular audience in mind, a collegiate student taking introductory courses in theology. The *Companion* intends to provide the reader with a brief survey of the life of the theologian, a description of their theology, and a brief discussion of their significance.

The *Companion* is arranged chronologically and alphabetically. It is broken up into five sections: “Early Centuries,” “Middle Ages,” “Reformation Period,” “Enlightenment and Modern Period,” and “Twentieth Century to the Present.” In each section, theologians are arranged alphabetically. This chronological/alphabetical style is worth commending. Markham clearly has the interest of the reader in mind when choosing this format. It is likely that an introductory theology student will only be interested in one chronological period at a time. This format allows all the articles of interest to be in one area instead of sporadically spread over the two volumes.

The article length varies dramatically. Longer articles range from twenty to twenty-five pages, such as the article on “Vatican II” and the article on “Boethius.” Many shorter articles are four to five pages, such as the ones on “James Cone” and “James Packer.” The editor notes, that with some exceptions, articles in the later periods are intentionally shorter than those in the earlier periods. Markham justifies this by stating that “modernity has had such a dramatic impact on the sheer variety of approaches that one needed more (and therefore shorter) articles for this period” (I, xiv).

Overall, the *Companion* is an excellent resource. It provides information unparalleled in other resources. Two things make it unique: the variety of theologians covered and the depth of the articles. For example, the *Companion* provides an article on the “Synoptic Evangelists” (the authors of the Synoptic Gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke). When thinking about theology, one typically does not consider the theological approach of the Synoptic Gospels. However, Leslie Houlden, the author of this article, provides an excellent survey of the theological premises that lie behind the compositions of these three gospels.

Another excellent example showing the variety of theology covered is the survey of “Black Theology.” In ten pages, Ian Markham, the author of this article, gives a brief history and some insight as to how and why Black Theology developed, and in particular touches how Black Theology has followed the cultural and social development in the United States. Markham argues, very convincingly, that the existence of Black Theology and segregation counters the Christian gospel.

Even though the articles have a central focus there is some variance in style. One example is seen in the two articles on Donald and John Baillie. The first article on “Donald Baillie” is a standard article. Donald Baillie, raised in the Calvinist tradition, was a Scottish theologian, ecumenist, and a Church of Scotland minister. George Newlands, the author of both of these articles, give some background on Donald Baillie and then discusses how his ministry and writings impacted the theological development of the church.

The second article on “John Baillie,” however, does not go into the background like the former article does. Since Donald and John Baillie were brothers they shared much of the same background. John Baillie contributed to the theological development of the Church of Scotland, much like his brother, Donald. In spite of the brothers’ similarity, the style in which Newlands covers these theologians differs. Newlands discusses the theological contributions of John Baillie by discussing his various works. This provides a bibliographic survey of John Baillie’s various writings and how they assisted in the development of theology. In order for the reader to fully understand the impact these brothers had upon theology, one would need to read both articles. The article on John Baillie does not allude to its dependence on the article on Donald Baillie. While this variance of style does enrich one’s understanding when reading both articles, it may frustrate the individual who only wants to know about one of the Baillie brothers.

With only one exception, the article on “Maximos the Confessor,” the contributors of these articles assume that the reader is only familiar with English. When the contributors make reference to another language, they translate it. Although some elements of a language are typically lost in translation, these translations are a strength for the *Companion* because it remains readable to its target audience: a collegiate student taking introductory courses in theology.

Because the articles are composed by a variety of authors, the bibliographies differ dramatically. While the content in these articles is excellent, there are times when the bibliographies are found wanting. This is unfortunate because at times, individuals like to look further into a topic, and a bibliography is useful. In the *Companion*, there are a handful of articles that either do not have a bibliography (“Augustine of Hippo,” “Philip Melancton”) or that have a very limited bibliography (“The Cappadocians,” “Maximos the Confessor,” “Origen,” “The Reformation”). However, there are other articles with extensive bibliographies (“Ephrem the Syrian,” “Bonaventure,” “Hans Urs von Balthasar,” “Gottfried Thomasius”). Some contain only primary sources (“Paul Tillich,” “Elizabeth A. Johnson,” “Colin Gunton”), and others divide their bibliography into primary and secondary sources (“Reinhold Niebuhr,” “Hans Frei,” “Boethius,” “Jurgen Moltmann”). Some consistency among bibliographies would seem to be warranted.

An element that easily compensates for the bibliographic diversity is the *Companion’s* uniqueness. There are several books that define and give references to various theological movements and theologians. For example, *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought* provides articles on Augustine, Martin Luther, Karl Rahner, and other major theological influences. However, the *Companion* covers a wider range of theology including the “Synoptic Evangelists,” “C. S. Lewis,” and “Martin Luther King, Jr.” This breadth makes the *Companion* stand out from other resources.

The *Companion* does a wonderful job of making most of the articles readable in one sitting. In that one sitting, the article describes what makes this individual stand out as a theologian, providing enough information to grasp the context and content of a theologian. The article on “Karl Barth” is an excellent example of this. In eight pages, Stephen H. Webb, the contributor of this article, eloquently shows how the context of the time (the mid-1930s when Hitler was on the rise in Germany) dramatically affected Barth’s theology and thus led to his role in the development of the Confessing church.

Theology is rarely on neutral ground. In light of this, Markham has selected contributors that represent a wide range of scholarship (from doctoral candidates to professor emeriti), denominations (from Congregational to Seventh-Day Adventist), and geography (four of six continents are represented). This diversity allows for a wide range of ecumenical insight which adds immensely to the value of the *Companion*.

While the author states that his audience is collegiate students in an introductory theology course, I believe that the audience of this work is much broader. The *Companion* would make an excellent addition to any theological library. Its content has scholarly depth and covers a wide range of theologians who have impacted the Christian faith to some degree or another. While other works do cover various theologians and their contributions, the *Companion* is unique in that it covers a variety of individuals, some of whom many would not label as theologians, but have made substantial theological contributions. It stands out as an excellent resource for anyone interested in the development of theology.

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