

BOOK REVIEW

Stanley E. Porter (ed.), *Dictionary of Biblical Criticism and Interpretation* (London/New York: Routledge, 2007). xii + 406 pp. Hdbk. US\$200.00.

The *Dictionary of Biblical Criticism and Interpretation* is a compilation of articles written by an impressive array of biblical scholars from several continents—a fact about which Porter fittingly comments in the preface of the volume: ‘One of the results of this has been the ability to benefit from a variety of perspectives reflective of the places in which these scholars do their critical work’ (p. vii).

In the introduction to the volume, Porter briefly discusses several positive and negative consequences of living in ‘a highly self-conscious and methodologically reflective age’ (p. 1). He notes on the positive side that methodological scrutiny has resulted in (a) the development of ‘new’ methods and/or the refinement of methods already in practice (i.e. making them ‘critically aware’ [p. 1]); (b) the establishment of ‘bodies of critical interpretation’ (p. 2) as opposed to a few pockets of people practicing certain critical methods; (c) the ‘more traditional critical methods—e.g. the so-called historical-critical method—were forced to defend their territory if they wished to retain advocates’ (p. 2) besides those who have invested the majority of their careers in those methods; and (d) some of the lines that in the past have typically segregated biblical studies from other disciplines—and even segregated biblical studies itself!—have been blurred ‘so that there is much more mingling of methods and interpretive models’ (p. 2).

Porter also notes a number of negative consequences of living in an age of methodological scrutiny. He uses each of these consequences to prepare readers for the purpose(s) of the *Dictionary*. First, the discipline of biblical studies has become fragmented by the development of more critical methods. This makes it very difficult—more likely, *impossible*—for any given interpreter to understand (let alone master) the range of approaches that is now available for use. Often this consequence

results, says Porter, in ‘the sometimes unconscious (though sometimes explicit) belief that those critical methods that have not been mastered are in some way inherently inferior to those that have been learned’ (p. 2). Thus, scholarly work often continues to contribute to the fragmentation of the discipline, either because scholars utilize only the ‘main-stream’ critical methods or only some single ‘newer’ critical method. A second disadvantage Porter gives is that ‘a sense of the history of interpretation has been lost’ (p. 2). He continues, ‘[I]n recent times, with the development of new and competing models of interpretation, it has become increasingly easy to see past interpreters as simply artifacts, and their interpretation as antiquated and irrelevant’ (p. 2). A final consequence listed by Porter (he admits that neither of his lists of positives or negatives is exhaustive) ‘is the difficulty in arriving at anything that resembles definitive or normative interpretations’, assuming, in light of what Porter calls the ‘critical postmodern terrain’, such is even possible and/or desirable (p. 2). It is not Porter’s intent to make a case in this context for definitive or normative interpretations; rather, his point is to lament the erosion of common ground for discussion between ‘competing interpreters’ (p. 2). Such lack of discussion ‘make[s] it difficult to evaluate individual interpretations and even more difficult to know whether there is any kind of development in levels of understanding’ (p. 2), whether of the Bible or of the discipline of hermeneutics itself.

At least one purpose, then, of the *Dictionary* is to help biblical interpreters ‘overcome the kind of contemporary critical introspection that results in failure to contextualize the contemporary within the broader sweep of history’ (p. 2). Porter is clear that the *Dictionary* is not meant to provide articles that are ‘definitive in any absolute or encompassing sense’; rather, it is meant to serve as a ‘means of access’ (p. 2) by giving ‘historical and methodological introductions’ to a selection of interpreters and interpretive methods that ‘captures the state of play in biblical criticism and interpretation at the turn of the twentieth to the twenty-first centuries’ (p. 3).

In terms of the general purpose noted in the previous paragraph, this volume is a definite step in the right direction. One daunting task of a work such as this is choosing which interpreters, methodologies, and critical issues should be included between its covers. In terms of interpreters, some are obvious candidates for inclusion in a work such as this, including the following, who are, to the editor’s credit, included in

the *Dictionary*: W.M.L. de Wette, Friedrich Schleiermacher, F.C. Baur, Adolf von Harnack, Albert Schweitzer, Adolf Deissmann, and Rudolf Bultmann. However, there are a number of other interpreters that one might expect to have an entry in the *Dictionary*, who surprisingly do not (some of these appear in discussions of specific critical methodologies, but do not have their own entry): J.S. Semler, Hermann Gunkel, Martin Dibelius, K.L. Schmidt, and Hans Conzelmann, to name a few. That said, Porter appears to have expected this sort of criticism: ‘I apologize...if you think that your favorite biblical scholar...should have been included but was not’ (p. vii). Obviously, not every biblical scholar can be included in a work dubbed ‘dictionary’, or it would cease to be such. That said, it seems to me that some of the space (if space was the issue) in the volume occupied by current biblical scholars whose impact on the discipline has yet to be fully gauged should have been given to past critics whose work has been acknowledged to have had a lasting impact on the discipline (e.g. Dibelius, Conzelmann). Some of the contemporary biblical scholars (still alive and contributing to the discipline at the time of the volume’s publication) deemed worthy of an entry include: James Barr, Walter Brueggemann, James D.G. Dunn, Martin Hengel, Walter Kaiser, Jr, Bruce M. Metzger, C.F.D. Moule, and Anthony C. Thiselton. As with the list above, more names could be added here; several that immediately come to mind are C.K. Barrett, R.T. France, I.H. Marshall and R.P. Martin.

In terms of critical methodologies, the *Dictionary* provides an excellent array of articles. The following significant criticisms or methodologies have entries and are representative of what is covered in this volume: Canonical Criticism (both Childs’s and Sanders’s approaches), Existential Hermeneutics, Feminist Interpretation, Form Criticism, Formalist (New Critical) Interpretation, Liberation Theological Interpretation (Latin America), Linguistic Criticism, Liturgical Interpretation, Narrative Criticism, New Hermeneutic, New Historicism, New Rhetoric, Reader-oriented Approaches, Redaction Criticism, Rhetorical Criticism, Social-Scientific Approaches, Source Criticism, Structuralism, Tradition-Historical Interpretation, and others.

To conclude, I would like to call attention to several specific entries in the *Dictionary* that are generally worthy of applause: Early Church Interpretation (Richard N. Longenecker), Enlightenment Period (Colin Brown), Middle Ages (C. Mark Steinacher), Post-Enlightenment Criticism (John Rogerson), and Twentieth Century Interpretation (James

Alfred Loader and Oda Wischmeyer). Each of these entries provides an excellent overview of the key people, movements, and interpretive methods for their respective periods. Taken together, these entries provide a concise, yet complete, diachronic view of the history of interpretation. Each of these authors is to be commended for the work on these articles, and the editor of the *Dictionary* is to be commended for including them. These articles play a significant role in providing a description of the broader sweep of the history of interpretation that allows biblical scholars to contextualize critical methods of biblical interpretation. It might have been beneficial to collate these articles into a single introduction to the *Dictionary* as a way of providing a context for understanding the entries to follow.

The truth is that any book of this kind will not please every reader. Many—including myself—will wonder why certain entries were added while others were left out. However, I heartily endorse endeavors such as this, and I specifically endorse this *Dictionary* for providing a means of maintaining not only a view of the history of interpretation but also a glimpse at where the discipline may be going.

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