

Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics

Joel B. Green, ed. *Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011. 889 pp. \$59.99. Hardcover. ISBN: 080103406X.

As general editor Joel B. Green of Fuller Seminary notes in his introduction, while the disciplines of biblical studies and Christian ethics have not always paid consistent attention to one another, the past several decades have been a period of increased cross-fertilization resulting in the production of a large and diverse literature. A single-volume work attempting to cover such expansive conceptual territory will have to be very judicious indeed in its selection and treatment of potentially relevant topics. Given its North American, broadly evangelical readership—aiming to be of use to “students, pastors, and scholars” so that the light of God’s word “may be restored in the church”—this Baker Academic volume generally succeeds in offering clear, concise, and fair introductory treatments of a broad range of often complex and contested biblical and ethical subjects (2).

In addition to Green’s introduction, the *Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics (DSE)* commences with three essays that attempt to frame the approaches taken by the entries to follow. “Ethics in Scripture,” by Allen Verhey of Duke Divinity School, provides an overview of how ethical concerns figure in various sections of the scriptures. While helpful in marking out some of the Bible’s more prominent ethical themes, it gives short shrift to those texts not included in the Protestant canon. Charles H. Cosgrove, Professor of New Testament Studies and Christian Ethics at Northern Seminary, surveys the conventionally demarcated eras of church history (Patristic, Medieval, Reformation, Modern), deftly summarizing the contributions of some better-known figures and works within each era to the questions and tasks of ethics. His paragraphs on the modern period will be particularly significant for beginning students or for strong partisans of any single branch of the Christian family, outlining as they do key reasons for the sometimes chilly, sometimes stormy, relations between biblical studies and ethics.

The third and probably most important introductory essay is by Bruce H. Birch of Wesley Theological Seminary. Birch offers some perspective on the challenging matter of method in both biblical studies and ethics: how might the historical and cultural contexts of the scriptures influence contemporary readings and uses of them? What are the roles of canon, ecclesial tradition, and intellectual heritage in the understanding of both Bible and ethics? How do various conceptions of moral agency inform ethics? How do notions of scriptural authority influence all of these? The goal of a work like *DSE* is mainly to help frame, rather than answer, these kinds of questions, and the introductory essays are reasonably successful in sketching the broadest contours of their respective areas of concern. One shortcoming is the very limited attention given to contemporary developments in critical theory, which have profoundly influenced, at times significantly redefining, both biblical studies and ethics.

The perspective of individual entries builds upon the framework of these introductory essays. One group focuses on the relationship between ethics and scripture, in particular the “modes of moral reasoning” and hermeneutical strategies that shape that relationship (3). Examples of this type include “Liberationist Ethics,” “Creation Ethics,” “Legalism,” and “Anglican Ethics and Moral Theology.” As the last example indicates, treatments of various denominational and church traditions fall into this category.

A second group addresses the scriptural elements, and there are entries for biblical books, as well as particularly important passages (e.g., “Sermon on the Mount”) and related texts such as the “Dead Sea Scrolls” and “Apostolic Fathers.” The working definition of scripture across the entries would seem to be, therefore, broader than that of the introductory essays in their treatment of apocryphal and deuterocanonical materials. This type of entry also includes themes such as “Powers and Principalities,” “Covenant,” “Collection for the Saints,” and “Holiness Code.”

The third grouping is comprised of ethical issues of importance within a range of Christian perspectives. Among these are standard topics such as “Euthanasia,” “Birth Control,” “Capital Punishment,” and “Just-War Theory,” as well as more recent additions to the ethical lexicon such as “Artificial Intelligence,” “Urbanization,” “Bioethics,” “Gender,” “Terrorism,” “Disability and Handicap,” and “Economic Development.” Extremely broad themes like “Food,” “Play,” “Resistance Movements,” and “Individualism” are treated in their Christian ethical aspects. Entries such as “Poetic Discourse and Ethics,” “Public Theology and Ethics,” and the significance of Sartre’s “Dirty Hands” as an exemplary portrayal of “tragic” ethical dilemmas, while more diffuse, spice up *DSE* with their treatment of harder to define phenomena.

Given the volume’s three foci and limitations of space, most of the entries manage a “Goldilocks standard”—neither too broad nor too granular, the kind of windshield tour treatment one rightly expects from such a resource. Most of the entries are one to two pages, with a number of entries on major biblical or ethical leitmotifs running somewhat longer. Cross-references connect entries on related topics, and a substantial scripture index rounds out the volume. A tool like this is meant to serve as an entry point, and a reader can therefore also justifiably expect a substantial bibliography for each entry. Unfortunately, however, this is not always the case with *DSE*. Moreover, several entries are clearly the précis of an author’s particular perspective, more homily than the resolution-resisting map projected in Green’s introduction. Amid the many genuinely helpful descriptive entries, there can occasionally be heard the unmistakable scrape of an ax being ground.

Because so many of the thorniest, most divisive issues in North American politics and culture in some way relate to the themes treated by *DSE*, its appearance will be welcomed by those hoping to better understand the legitimate variety of interpretations among individuals and groups all claiming the adjective “Christian.” Because so many areas of vociferous disagreement hinge precisely on the (often unacknowledged) differences in assumption, method, and framework, the work will be of use to a range of readers, but perhaps particularly those in both educational and ministerial contexts where a sense of the variety within the Christian family can be lost amid institutional and doctrinal uniformity.

The *DSE*’s usefulness is further constrained by its overwhelmingly North American, Protestant emphasis. While this may be primarily a function of marketing or curricular niche, its broader appeal suffers greatly from having so few Roman Catholic and Orthodox contributors, and it contains almost nothing about the many African, Asian, Latin American, and Oceanian Christian traditions—that is, the vast majority of the world’s current Christian population. (That said, it does reasonably well in avoiding many obvious shibboleths of “conservative” or “liberal” infighting in the U.S., as with topics like “Economic Justice” or “Aliens, Immigration, and Refugees”.) While it would be naïve to expect a single volume trying to cover so much ground to be all to things to all people, the reader perhaps cannot be blamed for wishing the *DSE* had been at least a few more things to a few more people.

The extent to which God’s word is, as the introduction suggests, in need of being “restored” can be debated; indeed, such debate is at the heart of many of the issues and tensions this volume attempts to describe. That there is a pressing need for considerably more light (and, correspondingly, less heat) among those claiming allegiance

to that word is beyond dispute. While less broad and inclusive than many readers might prefer, this volume will no doubt be of use in both college and seminary, alongside more and less ecumenically minded counterparts, in mapping out and shedding light upon difficult, sometimes treacherous, scriptural and ethical terrain.

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