

Oxford Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation

Steven L. McKenzie, ed. *Oxford Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. 2 vols: 1164 pp. \$295.00 Hardcover. ISBN: 0199832269.

The Oxford Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation focuses on several methodological approaches to biblical interpretation that have been or are currently being used in biblical scholarship. The purpose of the two-volume reference set, as stated by editor Steven L. McKenzie, is “to exclude topics on biblical books, scholars’ biographies, and the like and to focus on interpretive approaches” (xix). To that end this two-volume work achieves its goal. The work contains a little over one hundred articles that cover a wide variety of topics, all of which have to do with some theoretical and methodological aspect of biblical interpretation. Few of the article topics will be completely unfamiliar to anyone with a basic understanding of the discipline of biblical studies.

Due to the length and style of each entry, they would most appropriately be called essays rather than encyclopedia articles. Furthermore, it perhaps would have been more accurate to call this a collection of essays rather than an encyclopedia since the collection is by no means comprehensive. In many ways this collection of essays has an eclectic feel to it. For example, there is little justification for the inclusion of some more minor approaches to biblical interpretation (like the wonderful essay on Trauma Theory) and the conspicuous absence of other, more significant, ones (such as neither a mention of the Princeton School of interpretation nor an article on biblical theology). In addition, a few of the essays seem to be mistitled. For example, the entry entitled “Asian American Biblical Interpretation” does not mention a single South or Southeast Asian biblical scholar and thus should more appropriately be entitled “East Asian American Biblical Interpretation.” Also somewhat unusual is the inclusion of articles on Assyriology and Ugaritology. While both of these essays cover important topics in biblical studies, they present a decidedly historical approach to biblical studies rather than a contemporary methodological approach (as the vast majority of the essays do), thus adding to the eclectic nature of the collection. It is not clear to the reviewer if the articles as a whole should be understood as an historical overview of select methodological approaches or as a discussion of current methodologies with their respective advocates and results. McKenzie acknowledges this unevenness in the preface, but this acknowledgement does little to explain it, and as a result it does limit the encyclopedia’s overall usefulness as a reference work. In other words, it seems at times that this collection of essays struggles with an overall cohesive theme or purpose.

These weaknesses — which do not doom the work, in light of the essays’ high quality (see below) — do present a challenge in identifying to whom exactly this reference work might be best suited. Undergraduates and those generally unfamiliar with the topics will likely find the essays instructive even if they might have to struggle through unfamiliar jargon. There is, however, the likelihood of confusion for these undergraduates because of the small number of articles, which may implicitly suggest a narrowness that does not really exist in biblical studies. While the hundred-page index in the second volume is a gold mine of cross referencing, the novice researcher is likely to miss this wonderful resource. On the other end of the spectrum, biblical scholars will most certainly appreciate the quality and summative nature of the essays, but will likely struggle to appropriate the material into any of their research. The essays, while informative, are likely to be too cursory for more than a “refresher” on a particular method. For whom then would this particular resource be most appropriate? It is likely that it would be most valuable for graduate students, especially those in seminaries. Master of Divinity students taking hermeneutical or biblical courses, for example, would likely find it to be of great value, since each essay covers many of the important scholars and includes titles of many significant books and journals. Likely the survey quality in the essays will help graduate students with their research and will also help to launch them into further valuable resources for each approach. The same articles that would be overwhelming to undergraduates and underwhelming to established scholars will be of great use to divinity students or other graduate students taking graduate level Bible courses.

To put this resource in a more positive light, it is important to note that these volumes are a wonderful resource for students looking for introductory essays on biblical interpretation topics that they are unlikely to find in any other resource. Standard Bible encyclopedias such as the *Anchor Bible Dictionary* or the *New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* do not offer the same type of introduction to these topics nor do they have the detailed bibliographies that this resource offers. Furthermore, the fact that many of these articles have been written by leading proponents of their respective topics gives the reader an opportunity to hear firsthand the strengths of these different methods. That being said, librarians would do well to advertise this resource to their faculty if they would like to promote the encyclopedia's use since many of the articles would likely prove great supplementary reading in many hermeneutics and biblical classes.

Several essays are worth noting. Susan Niditch's article on "Folklore and Biblical Interpretation" offers an excellent overview of the topic of biblical interpretation through the lens of folklore studies. Her article covers not only the key ideas and theorists, but also is loaded with great examples so that the reader can associate the concepts with actual texts that might benefit from the method. Walter Kaiser's article on "Evangelical Interpretation" masterfully explains the history and (more significantly) the theological motivations for Evangelical interpretations of the Bible. This article succinctly covers a huge body of literature in a way that even the most novice graduate student will be able to appreciate. Kenton Sparks's summary of "Form Criticism" fills a gap in reference survey material with his contribution that carefully explains the elements of this particular interpretive approach. The same can be said of John Christopher Thomas's "Pentecostal Interpretation," as he surveys the growing corpus of Pentecostal biblical scholarship. Finally, it would be remiss not to mention David Penchansky's delightful essay on "Deconstruction." Not only does Penchansky bring out the most important elements of the method, he skillfully weaves them into conversation with key biblical texts. His essay's first subheading, "In the Beginning was Derrida," brought a smile to this reviewer's face, as did some of the last lines of his essay, which serve as a good summary for the entire encyclopedia: "Does deconstruction let in the cold? Should we protect our children from it? Does it bring chaos? First one must question the division of hot and cold. One person's soul-paralyzing cold is another's fresh air" (204).

What does this resource do? It does a lot and also not too much. It clearly is a valuable resource for theological libraries to acquire, but likely its use will be based largely on the recommendation of those who can point learners to its essays. It is unlikely that its title's promise will do this alone, but for those to whom the covers are peeled back it will be of great benefit.

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