

*Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. Edited by Chad Brand, Charles Draper, and Archie England. Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2003.

The cover of this dictionary promises the reader “The Complete Guide to Everything You Need to Know About The Bible.” On over 1700 pages, this revised, updated, and expanded version of the *Holman Bible Dictionary* includes over 700 full-color photos, illustrations, charts, and maps. In what follows I will briefly discuss or list what I consider to be the most valuable contributions, as well as point out certain weaknesses, though no doubt the selections will reveal my particular interests and biases.

To begin with, a word of praise is due the large number of pictures, maps, and charts included in the HIBD. These are simply and consistently first-rate and attain to a very high standard of excellence. The range of topics covered is impressive as well. Timely entries include those on abortion, AIDS, and nuclear weapons. Other interesting choices of subjects are: career decisions; conflict, interpersonal; conscientious objectors; conservatism; and peer pressure (to name but a few).

Perhaps the most fascinating pieces are the entries on cosmetics; gestures; library (a must for book lovers); ships, sailors, navigation (an extensive piece); and writing. The entry on insects leaves no stone unturned in its search for “biblical” species of this kind. An outstanding discussion of what is and is not meant by the priesthood of believers is found in the entry by that title.

Other excellent contributions are those on Acts; Old and New Testament apocrypha; archaeology and biblical study; the atonement; baptism (to be administered as soon as one is saved); bishop (though see comment below); commerce and economic life; conversion (only through the power of God’s grace and the calling of the Holy Spirit); Crete; crucifixion; Dead Sea Scrolls; diseases; election; eschatology (with appropriate comments regarding annihilationism); games; God; gospel; infant baptism; Israel, spiritual (Gal 6:16 referring to all believers); Jesus, ministry of; Jude; law; music, instruments, dancing; mystery (brief, but competent); only begotten (arguing for “unique” as a more proper rendering); Paul; Pentateuch; pseudonymity; Revelation, book of; rivers; temple of Jerusalem; theology, biblical (a very fine overview); unpardonable sin; weights and measures; worship; and woman.

The entry on the beatitudes may have benefited from a more overt comparison between the Matthean and Lukan versions. The article on bishop should probably have been subsumed under the rubric “overseer,” a separate entry that is broader in nature. At the very least there should be a cross-reference to “bishop” at “overseer.” My only quibble with the (otherwise very fine) entry on Christ is that the account of Jesus’ walking on the water in John 6 is probably not a Johannine sign (as is noted in the entry on sign, signs in John are not necessarily miraculous in nature). The piece on chronology is quite balanced, though it should be observed that there is no credible early evidence that Tiberius co-ruled with Augustus, so that a crucifixion date of A.D. 33 for Jesus is preferable (this has implications for the time line at the beginning of the volume as well).

In the entry on Christmas it may have been helpful to include information on what is a more likely time of year for Jesus’ birth. The (very fine) piece on church appropriately highlights the need for regenerate church membership, though unfortunately omits reference to church members’ obligation to submit to and obey church leaders. The entry on covenant lists the covenant of redemption as the first covenant while acknowledging that the term “covenant” is not used for this arrangement in Scripture. Indeed, the biblical basis for this alleged covenant between God the Father and Jesus the Son to redeem fallen humanity is a bit thin.

The piece on deacon, while competent overall, has some problems in the discussion of deaconesses. The reference to 1 Tim 2:1 should be 1 Tim 2:12. “Arguments for the latter” should be “arguments for the former.” The sequence as it currently stands is the reverse of what it should be and is bound to prove confusing. Also, argument (3) against deaconesses, i.e. that “their” is not required to make the passage refer to wives, while technically true, fails to mention that the absence of a possessive pronoun in 1 Tim 3:11 leaves the statement ambiguous if wives are in view, an ambiguity which could have easily been removed by adding “their.” Argument (4), moreover, that while deacons do not teach, they do exercise authority (which is inappropriate for women) neglects to consider that the underlying Greek term *diakonos* means “servant,” so that serving as *diakonos* would not necessarily have entailed the exercise of authority.

The entry “descent into Hades” just lists a variety of options with no attempt at adjudication, a procedure that will prove of limited usefulness for those looking for more explicit guidance. This is especially the case since the entry on spirits in prison is rather one-sided, with one of the two major interpretive options being glibly dismissed at the very outset.

The piece on John’s Gospel divides the Gospel between 11 and 12 when the obvious major break is between chapters 12 and 13 (though John 11–12 does occupy a bridge function). The background is identified as a combination of synagogue expulsions at the time of writing—in keeping with to the “Johannine community hypothesis,” which has recently received its fair share of criticism—and the threat of docetism. At best, this is imbalanced, since other factors—such as the Gentile mission and the demise of the Jerusalem temple—probably played a part as well.

The entry on the last supper is all too brief. There is a bit more material at “Lord’s Supper,” though no cross-reference is provided at “last supper” (there should be). Only two short paragraphs are devoted to “New Testament,” and only one longer paragraph to “Old Testament.” To be helpful, these entries should have been expanded. The very brief entry on Paraclete has no discussion of possible backgrounds of the expression.

On a more general note, the allotment of space seems at times disproportionate. For example, John’s letters cover an (excellent) five pages, while the entry on John’s Gospel has only two (though this is comparable to the other Gospels). Two pages are devoted to the inspiration of Scripture (including inerrancy, which, incidentally, is not listed separately—it should be, with a cross-reference to inspiration), which compares unfavorably to the four full pages on insects (to give but one random example).

Overall, there is much helpful material in this volume, though (as is probably inevitable) contributions are a bit uneven. Southern Baptists will be particularly interested in the contributions of some of the most prominent leaders in the denomination, including Drs. Patterson, Mohler, Akin, and others. More academically inclined readers may want to consult the recent series of dictionaries published by InterVarsity Press on Jesus and the Gospels, Paul, the rest of the New Testament, and the New Testament background, though there the stance toward Scripture is at times more critical. On background issues, Zondervan’s recent four-volume dictionary will prove to be helpful as well.

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