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Review: Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible

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Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible. 2 vols. Edited by Walter A. Elwell. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988, 2210 pp., \$79.95.

Qoheleth wisely said, "The making of many books is endless, and excessive devotion is wearying" (Eccl 12:12). Were he around today, he could easily be referring to the virtual mountain of recently-published Biblical and theological reference works.

This flooding of the market means that up-to-date resource material is readily available. But it also means that it is difficult to justify the publication of yet another work in an already saturated field.

Frankly it was with such an attitude that I initially approached the volumes under review (hereafter *BEB*). As good a reputation as Elwell and Baker brought to such a project, it seemed unlikely that they could make any significant, fresh contribution to the Bible dictionary/encyclopedia genre.

After several months of continual referencing for research (and considerable reading for pleasure), however, the critical gaze gave way to an appreciative eye. *BEB* made friends with me the old-fashioned way: It earned my respect.

Admittedly other readers may reasonably see fit to view *BEB* with similar skepticism. Certainly it is proper to do so, especially considering the significant financial investment involved. After all, most evangelical scholars and students already possess several (if not most) of the new-generation resources.

Yet in my estimation *BEB* is, substantially, something "new under the sun" (Eccl 1:9). It is both high-quality and innovative, moderately meaty in content, yet eminently readable and usable from a stylistic standpoint. *BEB* is deserving of a spot on the bookshelf of many exegetes and expositors (preferably a high-traffic spot), though it does not plumb the scholarly depths desired by the specialist.

Are such words hype or short-sighted euphoria? Not when a publisher and editorial team sets ambitious and worthy goals and achieves them. Especially not when some of those goals seem almost mutually exclusive.

For example, *BEB* aims to present fairly comprehensive, up-to-date entries (within space limits, of course) that communicate in "simple, everyday language" (pp. v-vi). That is no small order and one that could only be achieved by "a lengthy series of both writing and editorial steps" (p. vii). So far-reaching was this multiple-phase process that many articles are not attributed, being "the joint product of several writers and editors" (p. vii).

Granted that such an approach runs the considerable risk of sacrificing content on the altar of communication. But extensive perusal and considerable closer reading indicates that in the vast bulk of cases all that has been sacrificed is (usually unnecessarily) technical or complex vocabulary and expression. That small loss to the specialist is more than compensated for by the gain of greatly heightened understanding by the nonspecialist.

Several other distinctive features of *BEB* are noteworthy: (1) The articles on each Bible book contain not just introductory material and outlines but also (mildly interpretive) running "mini-commentaries" (pp. v-vi). Such guided overview is frequently all that is needed for other than close, technical study. (2) Besides the excellent normal fare on history, geography, archeology, customs and culture, considerable space has been allotted to the treatment of Biblical theology and current scholarly opinion, dealing with both specific subjects and various methodologies (e.g. R. Yarbrough's balanced discussion of redaction criticism, pp. 1825-1827). (3) Over thirty "omnibus articles" (p. vi) dot the *BEB* landscape, pulling together many potential small entries under one umbrella heading (e.g. "animals," which spans from "adder" to "worm" with "leviathan" and "lion" in the middle, pp. 91-

115; or "trades and occupations," treating "ambassador" to "writer" with "merchant" and "musician" midcourse, pp. 2083-2093). (4) For visual learners and those seeking to communicate truth in succinct form, *BEB* is a gold mine of maps, charts, and various other kinds of illustrations (note e.g. how the extensive portrayal of ancient coinage on pp. 488-490 enhances H. Perkins' entry on "coins," pp. 485-495).

On the other side of the ledger, the criticisms are relatively few, though worth stating: (1) In the hurry to get the review edition out there were quite a number of typographical errors, which hopefully will be remedied in the second printing. (2) Beyond the editorial decision to leave many articles unsigned (see above), a long list of additional entries was mistakenly left anonymous, and some writers' names were left out of the list of contributors. That, says the publisher, will be "up to speed" for the next printing. (3) Whether by oversight or space limitations (two volumes versus the four-volume revised *ISBE* or the five-volume *ZPEB* and the projected five-volume *Anchor Bible Dictionary*), some highly significant subjects are not treated at all. For starters, the omission of the important emerging disciplines of discourse analysis and rhetorical criticism, as well as the age-long imperative of the great commission, are loud silences. (4) Frequently the entry bibliographies are very brief or nonexistent.

All in all, in a project handling from Aaron to Zuzim these are few quibbles indeed. Thus I again enthusiastically endorse *BEB*. Besides veteran editor Elwell, the immensely capable board of associate editors (the late P. C. Craigie, J. D. Douglas, R. Guelich, R. K. Harrison, and T. E. McComiskey) and the over 175 contributing writers, a veritable "Who's Who" (from R. Alden to R. Youngblood), should all be congratulated for their achievement.

Time will tell the tale of the ongoing impact of a work like *BEB*, of course. But Baker has set a pace and perhaps an agenda that future basic- to middle-level Bible reference works will be hard pressed to equal and surpass.

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Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible. By Leland Ryken. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987, 382 pp., \$15.95 paper. *Words of Life: A Literary Introduction to the New Testament.* By Leland Ryken. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987, 182 pp., \$11.95 paper.

For those interested in the study of the Bible from the standpoint of literary analysis Ryken needs little introduction. He has written extensively in this field over the last fifteen years, authoring and editing a number of books and articles.

These two new titles were written as companion volumes. Together they constitute a complete revision of his earlier work, *The Literature of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), and develop and illustrate the principles introduced in his *How to Read the Bible as Literature and Get More Out of It* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984). This latter, very useful little book was primarily theoretical (self-described as a "grammar of literary forms and techniques"), containing relatively few examples from Scripture. The volumes under review are an expansion of *How to Read the Bible*, covering the same ground but in more detail and providing a wealth of Biblical examples for each literary category or convention he discusses.

Words of Delight focuses primarily though not exclusively on literary features in the OT. It is divided into three major sections: Biblical narrative, Biblical poetry, and other Biblical literary forms (encomium, proverb, satire, drama), concluding