

Important reference work offers good overview of interpretive options

Dictionary of Christianity and Science: The definitive reference for the intersection of Christian faith and contemporary science

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With a slightly self-congratulatory name, the *Dictionary of Christianity and Science* claims to be ‘the definitive reference for the intersection of Christian faith and contemporary science’ in its subtitle. The book is hardback, but has a glued binding that does not look like it would survive heavy use.

Given that Zondervan is a mainstream publisher not known for being overly conservative, the book does a surprisingly good job in offering a good overview of the various interpretive positions in certain areas.

Format

The *Dictionary of Christianity and Science* features short articles on people and subjects that are relevant to the discussion of Christianity and Science. This includes people from church history and the founders of various types of science, modern figures in the religion/science discussion, scientific concepts such as ‘natural selection’, and theological concepts such as ‘resurrection’.

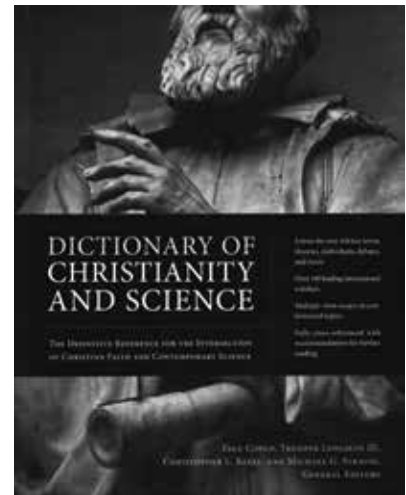
Some particularly controversial topics feature multiple articles by authors from various viewpoints. For instance, the ‘first couple’ view of Adam and Eve is presented by Todd Beale, who holds that view (p. 19ff), and the ‘representative couple’ view of Adam and Eve is presented by Tremper Longman, who holds that view (p. 23ff). While the depth of the discussion is limited by the constraints of the format, the condensed overviews are a helpful starting point, and each article contains references and recommended reading for those who wish to go further.

One weakness of this format is that it makes the various options seem equally viable from a biblical point of view, when this is clearly not the case. So, while it is a helpful starting point, discernment is needed (as with all such resources). But it is refreshing to see an attempt to fairly represent creationists without caricaturing the viewpoint as literalistic and antiscience.

Dictionary entries on ‘Days of Creation’

It is obviously impossible to give a thorough review of every relevant entry in such a large volume, but the three entries on ‘Days of Creation’ are a good representative example. The first entry is ‘Days of Creation (24-hour day view)’ which argues, “the predominant view until recently has been that the creation days were 24 hours” (p. 158). It critiques the Day–Age view and Framework Hypothesis.

The second entry, on the Day–Age view, argues that the creation days were “six long but finite time periods”



(p. 162). Most young-earth creationists would be aware of the arguments put forward in the entry, including that “the events of day 6 require a long time” (p. 162), “God’s days need not be the same as our days” (p. 163), and “Bloodshed before Adam’s sin does not alter the atonement doctrine” (p. 163).

The ‘Framework Hypothesis’ entry argues that when Scripture is interpreted within its literary and cultural context it becomes clear that a literalistic interpretation is not what was intended. It argues “The New Testament writers did not interpret Genesis, let alone read it, ‘literally’. They treated its stories archetypically and symbolically, as illustrations to help explain Jesus and the Gospel” (p. 165). It goes on to interpret what happened during the six days of creation.

While the last two entries contain much that biblical creationists would disagree with, having the three entries, written by adherents to the various views, is useful.

Elements to appreciate

It shows integrity that the compromising editors invited young-earth creationists to write regarding their views, including Todd Beale, Marcus Ross, and others. This means that there are good biblical creationist articles on

the Genesis Flood (pp. 305–309) and other topics. Even when evolutionists are writing on topics where creationists would disagree, for instance Darrel R. Falk writing about *Archaeopteryx*, there is an effort to accurately represent the belief of biblical creationists with minimal polemic (pp. 46–47). Significantly, the different views are usually given equal amounts of space.

The *Dictionary* also helps to dispel some common myths regarding Christianity’s interaction with science. For instance, the article on Giordano Bruno (p. 75–76) dispels the myth that he was burned for being a Copernican, and correctly states that he was executed for his heretical philosophy as “Bruno’s books provided ample evidence of heterodoxy for the inquisition to pick over” (p. 76).

Elements that could have been better

Above I noted that the editors did a creditable job to make sure that biblical creationists and other views were adequately represented, including having them author articles about young-earth creationism. But this ends up being incomplete, because articles on scientific concepts like the Cambrian Explosion (pp. 78–79) are authored by evolutionists, while creationists would have a significantly different view. In other words, creationists have a different interpretation of the scientific facts, not just the biblical concepts where they were invited to contribute. And even where the author attempts to be fair to opponents of evolution, sometimes the presentation of the creationist view is simplistic (though this could also be an effect of length restrictions), as in the article on evolution and probability (pp. 243–245).

Notable places where creationists were not given an article include the problem of evil section (where theistic evolutionists and progressive

creationists were given articles, pp. 220–226). Also, while there was a uniformitarianism article by a uniformitarian geologist, there was not a corresponding catastrophism entry.

Odd decisions

There are a few places where the *Dictionary* makes odd choices regarding what to cover or what position to take on a subject. The article on extraterrestrial life, for example, is vaguely optimistic about the eventual discovery of life on other planets, and argues, “the thesis that humans have a central place in God’s plan for earth history does not imply that humans have a central place in God’s plan for *cosmic* history” (p. 269).

Given this perspective on extra-terrestrial life, it is unsurprising that it takes a similar positive stance on panspermia, saying that it is a ‘viable theory’ and that “the fossil record and the appearance of novel DNA on Earth throughout its history could arguably be due to contamination from meteoritic cyanobacteria rather than DE [Darwinian evolution]” (p. 503). This article is useful in that it illustrates the lengths to which one will go to avoid accepting the biblical account of creation, and that it has nothing to do with following the scientific evidence.

Given the absence of any other articles on medieval relics, the inclusion of the one on the Shroud of Turin is odd, especially given the absolute lack of any sort of skepticism about its authenticity. Gary Habermas notes that the wounds represented on the Shroud bear striking resemblance to Christ’s, and that early images of Christ bear resemblance to the image on the Shroud (p. 630). However, even the most incompetent forger would make an effort for his forgery to bear resemblance to Christ’s popularly accepted likeness and for the wounds to match up with the biblical account. Given the evidence for a possible

method of producing the Shroud image with medieval technology, it is shocking that the authors of the article judged its readers as being so gullible.

Gary Habermas also contributed the entry on ‘near-death experiences’, and once again showed a lack of discernment in his interaction with this phenomenon. He claims that it is a powerful argument against naturalism and “may provide pastoral or other practical considerations regarding at least the existence of life after death” (p. 475). He also says:

“Near-death experiences certainly raise some difficult questions for believers. Most people who have NDEs report chiefly positive experiences, even if they are atheists or members of another religion. Moreover, the common interpretation drawn by many seems to be some sort of syncretistic universalism, with all religions providing ways to God. Occultic connections also emerge here and there. If NDEs are well evidenced, what should be concluded concerning these various conundrums?” (p. 475).

These are really good questions to ask; unfortunately, he does not answer them. Rather, he says that we should focus on the parts of NDEs that can be verified, such as people recounting what happened to them when there was no heartbeat or measurable brain activity.

A useful resource to be used with discernment

There are many elements to appreciate about the *Dictionary of Christianity and Science*, even though there are some questionable elements which require it to be used with discernment. It will doubtless become a standard introductory resource on the topic.