

Using Bible Dictionaries

The Usefulness of Bible Dictionaries

Bible dictionaries and encyclopedias are useful and versatile Bible study tools. They include articles on persons, places, objects, customs, history, particular books of the Bible, biblical themes, theological and interpretive issues about the Bible, and much more. Because they provide such a bountiful variety of information, Bible dictionaries are great as a quick reference on topics that puzzle you.

A good Bible dictionary will also refer you to related topics in the dictionary itself and to books and articles where you can find more information about the topic. Be sure to look for the particular way any given dictionary suggests cross-reference articles, and look for bibliographies at the end of articles. Such helps are part of the reason why this can be a good place for you to get a quick overview of and beginning on a more detailed study project.

Factors that Influence a Dictionary's Usefulness

Extensiveness. Bible dictionaries and encyclopedias may be one-volume or multi-volume works. The longer dictionaries can allow more space for the treatment of each topic so are likely to give you a more thorough discussion than one-volume works. The type you choose may depend on your study need.

Date. More recent Bible dictionaries have the advantage of including up-to-date information based on continuing work in archaeology, history, biblical research, and more. Though some of the "classic" dictionaries are still available (sometimes revised a bit, often in paperback or even on the Web), dictionaries from the last 20 years or so will be more reliably helpful.

Perspective. Even though dictionaries are reference works, the articles in Bible dictionaries are written and edited by persons who have a particular point of view. They are not purely objective. That in itself is not wicked, but it should put you on guard against relying on only one source. It is wise, instead, to read articles by persons with different points of view in order to get a more balanced understanding. Of course, the issue of perspective is more relevant to some topics than to others. (Most good dictionaries will tell you who wrote the individual articles as well as who edited the work as a whole.)

Quality and extent of illustrations and other helps. Some dictionaries have outstanding illustrations, color and black-and-white photos, charts, and other helps. Others have similar helps, but they may be few or be poorly reproduced. (Fuzzy photos make me mad. With modern printing methods, there is no excuse for ugly illustrations!)

Some even include a scripture index and other indices. Such thoughtful attention to helps can improve the dictionary's usefulness.

Some Dictionaries in the MLRC

Achtemeier, Paul J., ed. Harper's Bible Dictionary. Ref/BS/440/.H237/1985

Bromiley, Geoffrey W., ed. International Standard Bible Encyclopedia [4 vol.]. Ref/BS/440/.I6/1979

Buttrick, George Arthur, ed. The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible [4 vol. + supplement]. Ref/BS/440/.I63

Douglas, J. D., rev. ed. The New International Dictionary of the Bible. Ref/BS/440/.N44/1987

Elwell, Walter A., ed. Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible [2 vol.]. Ref/BS/440/.B26/1988

Freedman, David Noel, ed. The Anchor Bible Dictionary [6 vol.]. Ref/BS/440/.A54/1992

Myers, Allen C., rev. ed. The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary. Ref/BS/440/.G7613/1987

Wigoder, Geoffrey, ed. The Illustrated Dictionary and Concordance of the Bible. Ref/BS/440/.I36/1986

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