

BOOK REVIEW

E. Randolph Richards and Joseph R. Dodson. *A Little Book for New Bible Scholars: Why and How to Study the Bible*. Little Books Series. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2017. 126 pp. Pbk. ISBN 978-0-8308-5170-6. \$9.00.

To those embarking on a program in biblical studies, what are the essential words of wisdom that need to be shared? How does one go about equipping and encouraging those with a passion for the Scriptures to effectively engage in formal Bible study? *A Little Book for New Bible Scholars: Why and How to Study the Bible* was specifically designed to offer just such assistance. The book is a brief, entry-level introduction to the subject and is written by two capable scholars.

E. Randolph Richards (PhD, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary) is dean and professor of biblical studies in the School of Ministry at Palm Beach Atlantic University. He is the author and coauthor of several books with InterVarsity Press. Joseph R. Dodson (PhD, University of Aberdeen) is associate professor of biblical studies at Ouachita Baptist University and is the author of *The “Powers” of Personification: Rhetorical Purpose in the Book of Wisdom and the Letter to the Romans* (BZNW 161. Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008), among other works.

A Little Book for New Scholars offers the beginning student a wealth of good advice concerning one's entry into academic biblical study, including ample nuggets of wisdom from both Old and New Testament experts and clear warnings concerning potential pitfalls. This book truly “invites young scholars to roll up their sleeves and dig into the complex, captivating world of the Bible” (back cover).

In addition to a short preface and introduction and a somewhat lengthier conclusion, the volume consists of nine chapters,

many of which are often pithily named, such as “Fall in Love,” “More Stuff, Less Fluff,” “Hold your Horses!” “Keep the Main Thing the Main Thing,” and “Don’t Play Marbles with Diamonds.” Each chapter contains a short conclusion and a small blurb (or two) in framed text from a variety of scholars within the disciplines of both Classics and Old and New Testament. These “asides” contain numerous admonitions, stories, personal reflections, and other observations that vary in length from a single sentence to full paragraphs. Though the book as a whole is able to be read in a very short time, the insights are often quite profound.

While it is unnecessary in a review such as this to delineate at length the full contents of the volume, it remains prudent to offer a few snippets from the text itself. The introduction of the book claims that it has been written

for those who desire to go beyond the beaten path to pursue biblical studies, whether it is in college, seminary, or an advanced church program. We hope to show you that biblical studies is a noble calling—that it can enable you all the more to act justly, love mercy, and to walk humbly before the Lord. Moreover, we want to show you that biblical studies can help us understand the gospel of Jesus Christ more fully so that we can teach it in our churches more effectively (15).

This eye to both the ‘pew and the pulpit’ remains consistent throughout the rest of the book, including many of the contributions that are made via the guest scholars in the framed sections. For instance, Preben Vang, New Testament scholar, writes “we do Greek on Monday because we have to preach next Sunday” (58). In fact, the authors go so far as to write

completing a major in biblical studies makes you not so much a Bible expert as much as a lifelong Bible student. We chafe at part of our book’s title—Bible *Scholars*—but we didn’t know how else to term it. Even though both of your authors have completed PhDs in biblical studies, we remain always and forever *students* of the Bible. There is so much yet to learn and we have an ever-increasing hunger to learn it, not to mention a matching desire to see it faithfully applied to our lives and churches (15–16, emphasis original).

Elsewhere, Richards and Dodson state: “what a shame to spend so much time preparing to teach the Bible that we never actually get around to teaching the Bible. For some the Ivory Tower has a siren’s call that’s deadly. We don’t crash on the rocks, but we never leave the tower” (104).

It should also be noted that the authors confront and challenge numerous instances of how “bad exegesis can hurt people” and can lead to “dangerous conclusions” (50). Some examples include slavery and racism, homophobia, and misogyny. In chapter 8 of the book, the authors argue that biblical studies is an “equal opportunity vocation,” and state: “This chapter is written for our black, Hispanic, Asian, and female readers—Bible scholars whose voices are so needed in our field” (79). Within this chapter Richards and Dodson assert: “We encourage female, black, Hispanic, and non-Western scholars to step up and do the hard work of biblical studies. We are *not* suggesting that somehow you haven’t or that somehow you must do more than others” (79, emphasis original).

Certain headings and subheadings that appear within this chapter include “don’t label or limit yourself,” “step up to the plate,” and “don’t give up when I’m a jerk,” the latter of which also includes an explicit caveat wherein the authors state that “sometimes white male scholars like us can be jerks. (We may even have stated some things in this chapter in insensitive ways —forgive us.)” (87).

Given the above, it seems quite odd that there seems to be a ‘heavy-handedness’ in terms of the sheer number of Caucasian persons, mostly Indo-European and North American, who actually contributed comments in the framed texts that exist throughout the book. Alongside this, there also seems to be a disproportionate and disappointingly high number of males as well. To be clear, only three (!) females are explicitly represented in the entire book (out of twenty total) with respect to the framed, highlighted texts, two from the New Testament (Madison Pierce and Beverly Roberts Gaventa) and one from the Old Testament (Beth Stovell). Although Lynn Cohick does offer some notable comments, as do Kathy Maxwell and Carla S. Works, among others, surely readers would have desired and have appreciated hearing

from a more global, international, and gender-inclusive audience. This is also not to mention the imbalanced number of New Testament scholars in the final selection of persons whose words appear in a framed, highlighted blurb. Given that the name of the book is *A Little Book for New Bible Scholars* (rather than *A Little Book for New New Testament Scholars*) this is indeed quite unfortunate.

On the plus side, however, the book itself is quite well written and highly engaging. There is also a fair amount of entertainment value in the stories and personal examples that are shared, along with ample nuance and insight into the text within its original historical (and literary) context, that should keep its target audience consistently turning pages. The resources that are listed in the footnotes are all quite commendable and would well serve the reader to peruse at length and glean from.

Despite these commendations, however, and though it is not in keeping with the series as a whole, I believe that it would have behooved the authors to have included some sort of “recommended resources” or “for further reading” section and to have engaged with a number of key works that also seem to be in alignment with the vision and purpose of *A Little Book for New Bible Scholars*, as a number of comparable titles are notably absent.

To conclude, despite the above shortcomings, Richards and Dodson are to be commended on the successful presentation of their main thesis, namely that we should be “scuba divers and not just snorkelers” in the sea of Scripture (108–9). As such, if you are thinking about or are currently and actively pursuing scholarship in the field of biblical studies, this book will both help and encourage you. Its primary audience will mainly be beginning academic students and, possibly, mentors/advisors of academic research students.

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