

BOOK REVIEWS

Abraham, William J, and James E. Kirby, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Methodist Studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. xvii+761 pp. Hardcover, \$150.00.

A brief overview of earlier Wesley/Methodist publication enterprises serves to place the *Oxford Handbook of Methodist Studies* in perspective. In the mid-twentieth century, Albert C. Outler of Southern Methodist University realized that while much attention had been paid to Wesley as a revivalist and spiritual leader, little attention had been paid to his theological writing. Consequently he edited *John Wesley*, a 516-page groundbreaking study of Wesley's theological work, which was published in 1964 in the *Oxford Library of Protestant Thought* series. At the outset it was questioned whether this was appropriate to *Protestant Thought*, but the study lit a candle and became the most frequently republished volume.

In 1960, led by Outler, then considered to be "the most influential Methodist theologian of the twentieth century"(595), Frank Baker, Robert Cushman, and a network of scholars in the United States and the United Kingdom organized the Wesley Works Editorial Project. Publication of the scholarly *Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* was commenced in the mid-1970s, and sixteen highly esteemed volumes of the proposed thirty-five have been published.

The *Handbook* marks the third great venture in the publication of Wesley/Methodist studies. The use of *Methodist* rather than *Wesley* in the title is significant. Whereas the two previous publishing ventures focus specifically on the work of the Wesleys, *Methodist* indicates a broader and more inclusive approach. Building upon the work of a large body of Methodist scholars over the past fifty years, the *Handbook*, composed of forty-three chapters organized in six sections, portrays a comprehensive view of Methodism in historical, contemporary, and global perspectives.

The first and longest section, Part 1, with eleven chapters, is devoted to a portrayal of the history of the development of Methodism from its early beginnings to a large international community of denominations. The concern at the outset is to provide a clear and balanced picture of the thought and work of the Wesley brothers and the foundation they laid for an expanding Christian community. It progresses to a portrayal of the establishment of Methodism in America under the leadership of Francis Asbury. Inspired by the vision "to reform the nation and spread scriptural holiness over these lands" (213), it grew rapidly. "By 1850, one third of all churchgoers in the United States were Methodists" (432). By the early twentieth century, Methodism had grown into "the largest cluster of Protestant denominations in North America with the largest mission force" (432). Sections on relationships with the United Brethren Church, the growth of African-American Methodism, and the rise of Pentecostalism are included in the *Handbook*.

The five chapters in Part 2 on “Ecclesial Forms and Structures” are devoted to the study of forms of ministry ranging from itinerancy to episcopacy, and to the “transformation of personal lives and the reconstruction of society” (200). The section on the status and functions of lay elders and their relationship to ordained ministers (270-273) is of interest to Seventh-day Adventists, inasmuch as this pattern of lay ministry was adopted by the emerging Adventist Church. Of similar interest is the section on the ordination of women (272-273). Helpful suggestions are made on prayer, on searching the Scriptures, and on the celebration of the Lord’s Supper in chapter 16, “Means of Grace.”

Part 3 is composed of five chapters on the fundamental dimensions of worship and the functions of the minister. The introductory chapter draws on the experience of Wesley, who “mined the liturgical riches of the early church for practices not found in Anglicanism,” (298) and who developed the love feast as an experience of spiritual fellowship and joy in the Lord. The chapter on “Music and Hymnody” points to the significance of congregational singing as a heartwarming experience and as a means of implanting the fundamentals of belief in the mind. The section concludes with a chapter on the shape and development of Methodist preaching and an appeal for more consistent use of the whole Bible in sermon construction. Interestingly, three of these five chapters are written by women.

The six chapters in Part 4, “Spiritual Experiences, Evangelism, Mission, and Ecumenism,” contain a wealth of practical material. The personal spiritual experience of the Wesleys and Phoebe Palmer is described, and attention is paid to the transforming power of a personal encounter with God and its significance in the rapid expansion of Methodism. Ways of witnessing are suggested in the context of “an emerging post-modern and post-Christendom culture in which there is widespread ignorance of the gospel story” (427). Commencing with Wesley’s famous statement “I look upon all the world as my parish” and moving forward to the affirmation “The World Forever Our Parish” (432) at the 1990 conference, an excellent survey is presented of the great Methodist missionary movement. It covers some of its leaders and their aims and achievements, the global spread of Methodism, and selected contemporary challenges.

Wesley’s contribution to Western theological thought stands out clearly in the nine essays on “Theology” in Part 5. The chapter titles read like an outline of the basic themes of systematic theology. Commencing with a chapter on “Scripture and Revelation,” the “connection between knowledge and life” (489) is described and also the fourfold foundation of Wesley’s theology: revelation, reason, tradition, and experience, subsequently called the Wesleyan quadrilateral. The Trinity is dealt with not merely as an academic doctrine, but as it relates to “all Christian faith, life and practice” (505). Chapters on original sin, the Wesleyan doctrine of redemptive

grace, Christology, Christian perfection, and predestination clearly define Methodist doctrine and the relationship between theological belief and the Christian life. The points at which Methodist Arminianism differs from classical Protestantism are also indicated. These include Wesley's rejection of the Augustinian doctrine of original guilt and the doctrine of predestination, his affirmation of freedom of the will, and the threefold doctrine of grace as prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying. The chapters on Christian perfection and assurance present Wesley's doctrine as a "robust vision of human happiness" (588).

The chapters in Part 6 on "Ethics and Politics" focus as much on the practical Christian life, "the essential connection between happiness and holiness" (635), as on broader church polity. The Wesleyan foundations of several of the major issues in moral theology are considered. The final chapter on "Methodism and Culture" commences with a quotation from Andrew Walls: "Expressions of the Christian religion are both heavily conditioned by their circumstances and powerfully capable of transforming their settings" (712). Bebbington transposes this into a threefold model and applies it to Methodism: (1) Methodists have "often adapted to their surrounding culture," (2) "have frequently challenged the stance of their contemporaries," and (3) "have repeatedly been a creative element in societies they have inhabited" (712-713). This epitomizes the essential character of Methodism, and this chapter serves to consolidate many of the issues in the history of Methodism portrayed in the *Handbook*.

The editors—William Abraham, Albert C. Outler Professor of Wesleyan Studies at Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University; and James Kirby, Professor of Church History at the same institution—have rendered a signal service in the publication of the *Handbook*. Never before has there been a single volume that grants the reader such extensive and detailed coverage of practically every dimension of Methodism from its inception under the Wesleys to its growth into one of the largest Protestant international families of denominations. The list of forty-four contributing authors reads like a Who's Who of contemporary Wesleyan/Methodist scholars, and a survey of the table of contents provides a conceptive view of almost every dimension of Methodism. Adventism arose in the later years of the Second Great Awakening, during which many of the revivalist leaders leaned strongly toward a theological Arminianism. A number of the early Adventist members and leaders had been Methodists and, not surprisingly, much about Adventism reflects its Methodist/Arminian theological and practical heritage. Thus *The Oxford Handbook of Methodist Studies* can be useful in many ways in courses in which this heritage is examined.

There is a long list of "References" at the end of each chapter, and most have a shorter list titled "Suggested Reading." There is a single thirty-two-

page "Index" that provides access to practically every event, person, feature, and publication referenced in the *Handbook*.

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RUSSELL L. STAPLES

Alter, Robert. *The Wisdom Books: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes: A Translation with Commentary*. New York: W. W. Norton. xvii + 394 pp. Hardcover, \$35.00.

The author of a significant number of books, including *The Art of Biblical Poetry* and *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, Robert Alter currently serves as the Class of 1937 Professor of Hebrew and Comparative Literature at the University of California, Berkeley. The current work, *The Wisdom Books*, is the latest installment of his well-known series of original translations of OT books. The book is a hybrid between a traditional commentary and a translation. It differs from traditional commentaries in that it does not delve into technical issues such as literary structure and linguistic minutiae or issues such as date and provenance that are usually treated extensively in commentaries. Rather, it focuses on the theological and linguistic features of the biblical text that shape Alter's translation.

The introductions to each of the biblical books (Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes) begin with brief overviews and then proceed to a lively, readable translation of each of the books that attempts to retain as nearly as possible the poetic nature of the books, while remaining faithful to the Hebrew text. Along with the translation, Alter provides running commentary, though it is not verse-by-verse as is found in most modern commentaries. Instead, he comments on words and phrases that he has translated differently from the norm or that have particular interest to the literary and theological flow of the book. He often points to inter- and intratextual parallels that help the reader to understand the greater context of OT wisdom literature.

Alter relies primarily on his own expertise in Biblical Hebrew, though he notes in the introduction that it has been checked for form and content by scholars in the field. The book lacks footnotes and has only a brief bibliography, both of which would have been beneficial for the reader who would like to explore differing opinions or to know who influenced Alter. He does, however, refer to various scholars from time to time in the commentary and notes the work of Michael V. Fox in the introduction to the section on Proverbs.

The primary strength of this work is that it gives readers a fresh, accurate translation of OT wisdom literature. Alter truly is a master at translation, which this work demonstrates well. The commentary is also well done. While it leaves many things unsaid that a traditional commentary would normally cover, it brings to light significant aspects of the language and theology of the texts. For example, Alter interprets Job as a frame story (chaps. 1-2, and 42)