

Book Review

Dictionary of Daily Life in Biblical and Post-Biblical Antiquity

Edited by Edwin M. Yamauchi and Marvin R. Wilson (Hendrickson, 2014-2017)

REVIEWED BY MOLLY KATE BRANNOCK

The four-volume *Dictionary of Daily Life in Biblical and Post-Biblical Antiquity* (DDL) provides a well-rounded overview of life not only across time periods but also across the several cultures of the biblical world. Thirty-three scholars, including editors Edwin M. Yamauchi (Professor Emeritus of History at Miami University) and Marvin R. Wilson (Professor of Biblical and Theological Studies at Gordon College), have contributed to the DDL. Readers of *Priscilla Papers* will tend to regret that only three of these contributors are women (Rozenn Bailleul-LeSuer, Robin Gallaher Branch, and Laura A. Dunn). The selection of articles and the information included in them is broad and balanced; nevertheless, a broader diversity of authorship could make the study richer. All contributors are reputable scholars and have provided high quality and up-to-date information.

Before proceeding with a summary of some of the content, it is encouraging to note that DDL recently became available in a one-volume, 2000-page edition, thus making it more affordable (about \$65). In addition, several of the lengthy articles are available as inexpensive individual Kindle downloads (e.g., “Abortion,” “Adoption,” “Adultery,” “Contraception and Control of Births,” “Hair,” “Infanticide and Exposure,” “Inheritance,” “Marriage,” “Purity and Impurity,” “Same-Sex Relations,” “Widows and Orphans”).

The extensive variety of topics brings the time period to life. The articles were chosen “based on the Human Relations Area Files, an anthropological grid of human society, which would systematically and comparatively survey different aspects of culture” (Introduction, see also <http://hraf.yale.edu>). As a result, the categories addressed are more extensive than similar reference works. Because DDL covers features of everyday life, the subject matter is relatable to our own everyday lives as well. Though we are far removed from the time period, we share many of their basic human needs and interests, such as relationships, health care, and entertainment. Included are a considerable number of topics that the average Bible student, or even scholar, would not typically encounter, such as laundry and men’s beards.

It should be noted that this sociological (rather than theological or even historical) categorizing results in the absence of some articles that would be expected by those of us accustomed to Bible dictionaries. For example, an article on women as prophets, or even on prophecy in general, is absent. We should keep in mind, therefore, that the purpose of the DDL is significantly different, for example, from the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Baker, 2001) or the *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Eerdmans, 2000)—both of which include substantial articles on prophecy and thus mention women who were biblical prophets. But neither of these reference works includes an entry on rape, for example (as the DDL does). The topic of abortion serves as an illustration of the nature of the DDL. Its entry is about abortion in the ancient Near East and the Greco-Roman empire. The article on abortion in

the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, in contrast, discusses evangelical views of abortion in the modern world. In short, we need to take seriously the title, and therefore the nature, of the DDL and thus accept both its benefits and its limitations.

The purpose of this review is to narrow the topic to how women’s daily lives are addressed. Most of the research about women is related to marriage and motherhood. We learn in DDL, for example, that Augustine defined marriage as follows: “But there is no matrimony where motherhood is prevented: for then there is no wife’ (*Man.* 18).” That is to say, the main purpose of a wife is to reproduce, whereas the husband is not held to the same standard (Vol. 1, 365). This double standard is bothersome to those who value egalitarian marriage, and we learn in other sections how married couples conducted their relationship when reproduction was not central. For example, when a woman in Egypt did not bear children she still was a mother to the children that slave women bore for her husband (Vol. 2, 118).

It is enlightening to learn how and if women ended marriages. Based on biblical examples of divorce, “it was only the husband’s prerogative to divorce his wife” (Vol. 2, 113). In Greece, however, when a husband failed to act on this prerogative, a wife could legally invoke the privilege of a close relative, such as her father, in order to leave an unhealthy marriage (Vol. 2, 118-19).

“Childbearing” and other articles related to motherhood span the four volumes. We learn, for example, that in some cultures, including much of the Greco-Roman world, people believed the gods punished women with sterility (Vol. 1, 284). The OT alludes to this belief and also to purity laws concerning a woman who has conceived: “A woman who bore a son was unclean for 40 days, while one who bore a daughter was unclean for 80 days (Lev 12)” (Vol. 1, 281). Not only was the mother unclean for a significant amount of time for a natural biological process, but she was twice as unclean if she bore a girl. Up to twenty percent of women who gave birth did not live to abide by purity laws because they died in childbirth—statistics that we do not learn in scripture itself (Vol. 1, 284). Of the babies who survived, only half lived past five years old (Vol. 1, 285). It is sobering to read that an act that brings life—life which bears the image of God—has been viewed with such negative connotations.

Women who nursed their babies not only benefited from the nutrients they were giving their children but also benefited from this natural form of contraception that lasted a few years while they were nursing (Vol. 3, 459). This was one way in which women often had control over their reproductive systems. Women typically nursed their children by themselves because only royal families and others with considerable money could afford a wet nurse (Vol. 3, 461, 464). Utilizing a wet nurse was also less common among Jewish women (Vol. 3, 474-75). Recalling that the title of the DDL mentions “post-biblical antiquity,” we are not surprised to find, still in the context of nursing, noteworthy

mention of the early Christian martyr, Perpetua, whose diary is still available today: “One of the most dramatic and authentic stories of martyrdom is that of Perpetua, a young noblewoman who, when she was martyred, was twenty-two years of age and a nursing mother” (Vol. 3, 479). Even something as natural and basic as feeding a child can enlighten us to the significance of women in church history.

Reading about certain social constructs from biblical antiquity can be distressing. Such cases include the powerless state of orphans and many widows. However, we learn from a variety of biblical and extra-biblical documents how communities and laws supported (or did not support) women. The Levirate marriage law in the OT, for example, provided a woman with a husband and children if she became a widow before having a child (Vol. 4, 419). The Code of Hammurabi protected a widow by giving her what is beneficial from the late husband’s estate as well as benefits from the current husband’s estate (Vol. 4, 423). Widows in Greece retained power in the only realm where women could have power, the household (Vol. 4, 425).

In addition to family matters, *DDL* is also helpful regarding women’s education. We learn, for example, that Musonius Rufus was an egalitarian activist in Rome in the first century AD, particularly regarding equal educational opportunities (Vol. 2, 270). He is significant because women’s education typically “stopped at puberty so that they could prepare for marriage, with the exception of girls from noble families, who could be privately tutored” (Vol. 2, 248). Education for females growing up in Sparta

included athletics, in hopes of building strength for motherhood (Vol. 2, 259).

The numerous articles are manageable in length while also providing impressive detail. The length of the articles varies, but most range from ten to thirty pages. The articles address the OT and NT, the Jewish and Christian faiths, and the overlapping Ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman worlds.

Color photographs enhance the end of each volume, documenting archaeological finds that relate to the subjects in the book. For example, archaeological excavations from the ancient Near East show that “all the graves of women contained the remains of cosmetic preparations” (Vol. 1, 368). In the early church, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, and Jerome warned against the use of cosmetics as being sinful (Vol. 1, 372).

The extensive table of contents will surely point the reader in the direction of almost any question about antiquity, including various matters pertaining to the lives of women in the cultures of the biblical and early post-biblical eras.

MOLLY KATE BRANNOCK is an alumna of Milligan College and a graduate student at Emmanuel Christian Seminary, both in eastern Tennessee. Her academic interests include New Testament studies and biblical languages. Molly Kate has roots in both the United Methodist Church and the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ.

