The Bible and Mental Health: Towards a Biblical Theology of Mental Health

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The Bible and Mental Health is a multi-authored work edited by Christopher C. H. Cook and Isabelle Hamley. Cook is a psychiatrist who has authored, edited, and co-edited extensively in spirituality, theology, and mental health. He has served as President of the British Association for the Study of Spirituality, Executive Editor of the Journal for the Study of Spirituality, and Chair of the Executive Committee of the Special Interest Group in Spirituality & Psychiatry. In 2020, he received the Canterbury Cross for his interdisciplinary work on theology and psychiatry. In 2021, the American Psychiatric Association awarded Cook the Oskar Pfister Award for his work on psychiatry and religion. Isabelle Hamley is Secretary for Theology and Ecumenical Relations and Theological Adviser to the House of Bishops. She has held posts as Chaplain to the Archbishop of Canterbury, taught Biblical Studies and Practical Theology at St John’s College, Nottingham, and served as a parish vicar. Her research interests include integrating theology, ministry, and social engagement.

The Bible and Mental Health brings together an eminent list of contributors, including Walter Bruggeman, John Swinton, Paula Gooder, and Joanna Collicutt. The text is part of the continued collaboration between mental health and faith practitioners. It interprets the ongoing discourse in the field of mental health and faith through the lens of Scripture. Thereby helping church leaders and mental health practitioners better understand their patients and integrate faith-based intervention into their practices.

The text contains fifteen chapters, divided into three sections. Section one looks at modern conceptions of humanity within scriptural contexts. The section begins by reflecting on how Scripture and humans use
narratives to construct meaning and identity. The section explores what it means to be human and healthy in a non-perfect world in the light of Scripture. Although the section recognizes areas of overlap between the biblical world and our own, it teaches readers to be careful not to project today’s worldview (including today’s psychological theories) onto the biblical context and vice versa.

Section two examines specific biblical texts and how they can help readers understand mental health. Many of the texts in this section are from the Old Testament. The main emphasis is that human struggle and survival, in which pain and oppression were ever-present, shaped the Old Testament. Therefore, the Old Testament is a collection of reflections and responses as the authors sought to find meaning amid the trauma. The correlation between the Old Testament and the contemporary context is that life is not always easy; it is sometimes difficult to find meaning, understand, and respond to the reality of pain. Section three is more practically focused. The first two chapters explore how Scripture impacts and shapes the experience of church members with mental health difficulties. The third chapter in this section focuses on communal habits and formation in the face of trauma. The last chapter considers how Scripture reshapes our understanding of the nature and value of resilience.

The writing style is an engaging blend of scholarly thoroughness and easy reading. The breadth of scholarship provides readers with fresh insight and understanding into the engagement between mental health and faith within the context of Scripture and its implications for the contemporary context. *The Bible and Mental Health* demonstrates the value of interdisciplinary dialogue by contributing toward the continued collaboration between mental health and faith practitioners. To this point, the text performs remarkably well.

Scholarly voices from the Pentecostal (i.e., Spirit-empowered) community are missing from the engagement. Since Pentecostalism is a distinct Christian tradition with its own contexts, theologies, and ways of interpreting the Bible, one wonders how a Pentecostal reading of some biblical texts might have added value to the conversation (at least so far as this journal’s readers might be concerned). That is not to say that the book
does not add value to Pentecostal thinking. The book reminds readers that the human condition is lived within the boundaries of frailty and hope. Considering that the Pentecostal community is sometimes critiqued as being too otherworldly and holding to an over-realized eschatology, this book can balance such an over-emphasis.

*The Bible and Mental Health* is one of those books where the introduction and the conclusion so thoroughly summarize the contents that readers could easily read the introduction and conclusion without reading any of the chapters and still obtain a thorough understanding of the book. Some people may see this as a disadvantage. However, this may attract busy mental health practitioners who need a comprehensive summary before diving into any particular chapter topic. Each chapter is illuminative and provides an excellent entry point and good discussion. The text is well-referenced with many citations, so the reader can easily go deeper if they wish. Overall, *The Bible and Mental Health* will help readers think about Scripture, the people they encounter, and how they can apply Scripture to bear on the fullness of human experience.

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