

Gareth Lee Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (NICNT) (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2012).

Cockerill introduces readers to the Letter to the Hebrews by first describing its environment and its message. He asserts that the anonymous 'Pastor' who wrote Hebrews wrote a sermon whose message drew from the Old Testament (including the Torah and Joshua through Nehemiah) and at the same time was effectively structured so as to result in the desired response-outcome from his audience.

He draws attention to the contribution of recent scholarship's interest in the oral character of the letter, suggesting that

It seems most likely that the pastor's concern that his hearers rely on Christ rather than take refuge in the synagogue or maintain vestigial Jewish religious practices was part, but not all, of his reason for composing this sermon labeled "To the Hebrews" (p. 22).

Cockerill is not imprecise in his investigation of these introductory matters, spending 81 pages in total on them.

But he is no mere antiquarian- his exposition of the Letter itself is brilliantly done and the text is not left to languish in a dusty cabinet under glass for the curious only. I'll illustrate by means of two key passages: 6:4-8 and 10:26-31.

Of 6:4-8 in general he comments

Verses 4-8 vigorously reinforces the exhortation in vv. 1-3 by showing the dire consequences of refusal to "go on to maturity" ... The pastor would not be issuing this warning had his hearers come to this terrible end. His exhortation is not counsel of despair but a timely wake-up call... The warning in 10:26-31 concludes the pastor's teaching on this subject... (p. 268).

On vv. 4-5 –

One Greek article joins five aorist subjunctive participles in a unified description of those for whom repentance is impossible... "Those who have once been enlightened" is a reference to conversion... "Once" anticipates the impossibility of the apostate's re-conversion by hinting at the irrepeatability of this event... (pp. 268-269).

On v. 6-

The final aorist participle introduces an abrupt and shocking change by describing the same people who have been genuinely converted as having "fallen away". Thus it is

evident why the pastor has used the third person plural of general description instead of addressing his hearers with the personal “you” or embracing them in an inclusive “we”. While they have experienced the salvation described by the first four participles, they may yet escape the fate of those described by the fifth as having “fallen away” ... The pastor is not referring to sin in general but to a repudiation of Christ and surrender of one’s confession that sunders all connection with him... By “crucifying” Christ “again” these apostates have not subjected Christ to renewed suffering, but they have severed themselves from what Christ accomplished “once for all”. ... Where, now, [then] can they go for deliverance? ... His words are a warning to believers of every age pressured by rejection from the unbelieving world and enticed by its offer of immediate, though temporary, gratification (p. 273-277).

On vv. 7-8 –

How right it is for God to expect faithful obedience in response to his grace... The pastor has brought his hearers from the freshness of rain, at the beginning of v. 7, to the heat of judgment. Here he concludes his warning. ... The more immersed one is in the language of Scripture, the more one will be aroused to alarm and challenged to obedience by the pastor’s warning against squandered grace (pp.277-279).

This demonstrates fairly accurately the character of Cockerill’s exegesis. He shows readers patient enough to follow his carefully executed explanation how the language and grammar of the Letter are aimed quite specifically at the fulfillment of the text’s purpose. Furthermore, he does it in such a way that the interested student doesn’t lose the plot.

When he arrives at his exposition of 10:26-31, it has taken him to page 481 to get there. The level of scholarship, the mastery of the social-context and the language of the Epistle which C. demonstrates are simply mind-numbing. It is plainly obvious that the commentary in hand is the fruit of a lifetime (or perhaps two) or careful research.

Of 10:26-31 he notes

While this warning passage reminds us of 6:4-8, it plays a significantly different role. That earlier warning was tailored to rouse the hearers from lethargy so that they would grasp the pastor’s teaching on Christ’s high priesthood. The pastor has now instructed them in the full sufficiency of their High Priest (p. 482).

Specifically, of 10:26a, -

All who have listened to the pastor’s message recognize the danger of persisting in that now-willful neglect of what Christ has provided (p. 485).

Of 26b-27 –

The pastor describes the terrible loss suffered by those who repudiate Christ. For them “there n longer remains a sacrifice for sin” ... [because] his self-offering alone provides release from sin and access to God... [Quoting] Johnson ... “Those who fear God through obedience need fear nothing else (13:6) but those who do not must fear an awesome judge because they have become his ‘enemies’” (pp. 485-487).

On vv. 28-29 –

The pastor shocked his hearers when he spoke of one who “has trampled” the exalted Son of God. He increased the voltage when he described this person as having considered the very “blood” of Christ by which he had been “sanctified” as “common” or “unclean”... It is misleading to take the aorist participles we have translated “has trampled,” “has considered,” and “has insulted” as summarizing a persistent attitude. They describe the climax to which uncorrected laxity and neglect of God’s provision in Christ will lead (pp. 491).

And finally, on v. 30-

God’s vindicating his own will mean judgment on those who have severed their relationship with his people by turning from Christ (p. 493).

The entire volume is exemplary. From the first to the last there is literally something to learn on every page. It is, at this point, impossible to pile up adjectives of praise which would be excessive ‘overkill’, so I’ll restrict myself to this: if commentaries on Hebrews were blockbuster movies, this one would be ‘The Avengers’. Not only is Cockerill able to explain the simplest passages, he is more than adept at explaining even the most complex and controversial, as the excerpts above show clearly.

None less than I. Howard Marshall has written (on the dust jacket)

"It is no easy task to write a replacement for the work of such a scholar as F. F. Bruce on so demanding a book as Hebrews, but Cockerill amply justifies the trust placed in him by the editor of this series. In particular the attention that Cockerill pays to the author's use of the Old Testament and to the book's structure takes readers beyond Bruce's work. The exposition of the letter is profound and practical and yet so clearly presented that preachers will be particularly grateful for this volume."

He’s right- but not wholly. His suggestion that preachers will be grateful for the clarity of the volume sounds more than a little demeaning to preachers, as though they weren’t capable of grasping complexity. I would rephrase his last sentence thusly-

The exposition of the letter is profound and practical and yet so clearly presented that Professors lacking Christian faith will be particularly grateful for this volume.

After all, as Cockerill shows magnificently (though not explicitly), the Letter to the Hebrews is best understood by those who share the author's faith. Hence, those outside the 'hermeneutical circle' (thank you, Karl Barth) will need all the help they can get if they hope to comprehend the Letter. It's that help which Cockerill offers.

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