

LBTB Faculty Publications and Presentations

Fall 1984

Review: The Letter to the Hebrews

James A. Freerksen

Liberty University, jafreerk@liberty.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/lts_fac_pubs

Recommended Citation

Freerksen, James A., "Review: The Letter to the Hebrews" (1984). *LBTB Faculty Publications and Presentations*. 149.

https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/lts_fac_pubs/149

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Crossing. It has been accepted for inclusion in LBTB Faculty Publications and Presentations by an authorized administrator of Scholars Crossing. For more information, please contact scholarlycommunications@liberty.edu.

been pointed out by several others that Beker fails to see the apocalyptic dimension of Galatians. While many will not accept some of Beker's conclusions, his work is a significant contribution to Pauline studies and especially welcomed by those seeking a Pauline "center" (Käsemann = justification by faith; Martin = reconciliation; Gaffin = resurrection). Beker cautions us, however, that it is futile to search for a center in a single word or phrase. When we speak of a center, we must realize that we are seeking a "framework or driving force in Paul."

The strengths of the work are many. In addition to helping move Pauline studies away from the Bultmann-dominated realm of the past half century, Beker wrestles with development in Pauline thought and concludes, to my (partial) satisfaction, that it is contextual in nature. This, as opposed to modification in Pauline thinking, especially when it is understood radically and not just in a sense of maturation, is a very positive step.

Another important element in Beker's work is his ability to define salvation in Paul in corporate as well as individual terms. Of course, if one accepts Ephesians as Pauline, as I do, then Eph 2:11ff. is a wonderful picture of the corporate nature of salvation as well.

The book is divided into four major sections: (1) An introduction to Paul and the character of his thought; (2) the contingency of the gospel as explained through the contextual theology of Romans and Galatians; (3) the coherence of the gospel as explained through the concepts of apocalyptic theology and the resurrection of Christ; and (4) a concluding summary of the triumph of God in Paul's writings. There is little question that this work will become a major volume in Pauline studies and that it will find its way into many classes of Pauline theology as a primary or secondary textbook. It is heartily recommended, especially for those seeking to grapple with the idea of "the center" in Pauline theology.

DAVID S. DOCKERY
BROOKLYN, NY

Reconciliation: A Study of Paul's Theology, by Ralph P. Martin. New Foundations Theological Library. Atlanta: John Knox, 1981. Pp. 262. Paper. \$11.95.

John Knox Press has assembled a fine array of scholars to write the various works in their New Foundations Theological Library, edited by Peter Toon. The most recent contribution in this series is the work by Ralph Martin, *Reconciliation*.

The book is an attempt to locate the center of Pauline thought by locating an idea or term capable of uniting in its scope the diverse expressions of NT theology which is able "to provide a synthetic formulation of the Christian message that will be true to as much of the New Testament data as a human construction can frame." The basis of this work began in a series of articles published in the *Expository Times* in 1979 and 1980.

Martin seems aware of some of the dangers involved in this type of work, most notably the tendency to force an idea or framework onto Paul's thought in an artificial manner. While seemingly aware of this possibility, Martin does not avoid the pitfall. His work is a marvelous picture of exegesis and exegetical method, but his conclusions are questionable (as compared with J. C. Beker's; see my review of *Paul the Apostle*).

Martin rejects Ephesians as Pauline, which is unfortunate for the defense of his case. Basically Martin works with 2 Cor 5:18-21; Col 1:15-20, and Rom 5:1-11, and considers Eph 2:12-19 from a deutero-Pauline perspective. For all of Martin's breadth of research and insight in biblical and theological method as well as the fine treatment of the term "reconciliation" (the author's main point is to demonstrate that reconciliation is the center of Pauline thought), his conclusion is unsatisfactory.

The strength of Martin's work is that it does bring to the forefront a new understanding and importance of reconciliation in Paul's theology. Martin contends that the text reflects Paul's use and reworking of pre-Pauline traditions so that thus constructed in the Pauline explanations of the term, they become the basis of the fullest sense of Paul's gospel as proclaimed to the Gentiles.

It is difficult to see how Martin could attempt to make reconciliation the thematic center for Paul when there are so few occurrences of the idea in Paul's writings. For instance, it is obvious to most that the central aspect of Rom 5:1-11 is justification and not reconciliation. If anything, reconciliation, in this text at least, is a subpoint in Paul's overall discussion. That being the case, it would seem that justification is a more appropriate center. This illustration alone points up some of the shortcomings of attempting to provide a framework or center for the broad and complex theology of the apostle to the Gentiles. This does not mean that such a pursuit is not useful, but is an appropriate warning against arbitrary and artificial impositions on the Pauline writings or the NT in general for that matter. While this review has been critical of Martin's attempt, the book is still worthwhile reading and is a significant contribution to contemporary Pauline studies. The work is valuable for reading if for no other reason than providing a model in exegetical method and theological trajectory.

DAVID DOCKERY
BROOKLYN, NY

The Letter to the Hebrews, by Donald Guthrie. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983. Pp. 281. \$4.95. Paper.

Recently, replacement volumes in the Tyndale New Testament Commentary series have appeared, updating its scholarship. This work by a competent, British scholar is one such volume. The Tyndale commentaries provide a verse-by-verse analysis designed for any diligent student of the Bible. Like others in the series, this commentary is not technical; technical matters are generally restricted to the extensive introduction or to the sparse footnotes. A

knowledge of Greek is unnecessary to use this work, but Greek words are transliterated and incorporated where helpful to the discussion.

Guthrie's 50-page introduction does justice to the background matters, considering the conciseness of the entire volume. Though the topics are discussed in the light of current, critical scholarship, the author adheres to traditional views concerning purpose, date, and authorship. Regarding authorship, Guthrie follows the consensus of NT scholarship which rejects Pauline authorship. His aim is to demonstrate the unacceptability of Pauline authorship and to present other meaningful possibilities.

Without making overly dogmatic statements involving Heb 6:4-6, Guthrie presents the common views but gives preference to the idea that this is a hypothetical situation. On p. 145 he writes:

The writer appears to be reflecting on a hypothetical case, although in the nature of the whole argument it must be supposed that it was a real possibility. The intention is clearly not to give a dissertation on the nature of grace, but to give a warning in the strongest possible terms. The whole passage is viewed from the side of man's responsibilities and must accordingly be regarded as limited.

His comments on Heb 6:9 (pp. 146-47) further demonstrate his views (cf. also pp. 219-20).

Guthrie has not sought to be original in his interpretation. The book's strength lies in its clear analysis of the text and its summarization of other interpretations. Dollar for dollar, no set of commentaries surpasses the value of the Tyndale series; this latest volume deserves the same praise.

JAMES A. FREERKSEN
LIBERTY BAPTIST COLLEGE
LYNCHBURG, VA

Christian Theology, Vol. I, by Millard J. Erickson. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983. Pp. 477. \$19.95.

For many years the trilogy, *Readings in Christian Theology*, edited by Millard Erickson, has been standard reading at many evangelical colleges and seminaries in order to expose the student to a variety of viewpoints related to different issues in the field of theology. Now Erickson, Professor of Theology at Bethel Seminary, has completed the first of a projected three-volume set in systematic theology. It is current and orthodox, comprehensive, yet readable. It is a volume (and hopefully a set) that will belong in the personal library of every evangelical pastor, teacher, and student. We can only trust that Erickson will be able to finish the remaining two volumes with the same degree of excellence.

The introductory section deals with the relation of theology to philosophy, biblical criticism, and current language and semantic studies. He also includes a section on a definition of theology and the simultaneous need and problem involved in contemporizing or contextualizing theology for our day. In this he opts for restating the classical themes of systematic theology without becoming overly creative so as not to overstep biblical revelation. He understands the difference between doctrine and theology and recognizes the need of permanence.

Part Two concerns God and his revelation. He opts for the terms "universal revelation" and "particular revelation" instead of general and specific revelation, although he does use the terms synonymously. The discussion of general revelation and personal responsibility is very helpful. He opts for a "both/and" answer to the question of personal or propositional revelation. There is a helpful survey of the different approaches to inspiration, and he maintains that verbal inspiration is the consistent position. This is followed by an outline of various approaches to inerrancy and authority. He shows that evangelicals generally fall into three camps: absolute inerrancy, full inerrancy, or limited inerrancy. He distinguishes himself from Lindsell (absolute) and Fuller (limited) and opts with Nicole for "full" inerrancy, which he believes takes into account the phenomenological language of Scripture more consistently than does "absolute" inerrancy. However, his view of full inerrancy may not sufficiently express all necessary nuances articulated by the 1978 Chicago Statement. Chapter 11 on biblical authority is outstanding.

The next section discusses the person of God: "What is God like?" He chooses majesty as "center" when dealing with the attributes. He suggests that this, rather than "glory," is a more appropriate way of describing God's greatness. His discussion of the categories of greatness and goodness are generally satisfying, depending on how one views the wrath of God in terms of his attributes. The discussion of the Trinity is helpful reading, with good illustrations and sermonic material.

Section Four probably contains the discussions which will be most sensitive in evangelical circles (although the definition of inerrancy will be controversial in some places). The chapter which discusses God's plan (traditionally under the topic of decrees) is very helpful in distinguishing viewpoints. Erickson opts for a moderately Calvinistic model that will probably be satisfying to most. His effort to correlate human freedom and sovereignty is certainly valiant, even if unsatisfying for some. I found it very helpful indeed.

The chapter on "God's Originating Work: Creation" finds Erickson opting for a day-age theory. He believes that the Hebrew word "day" can mean a period or long period of time, though he offers no evidence for this in the context of Genesis 1. There is a discussion of *בְּרָא* which differs from some previously-held positions in conservative circles. He rejects the flood theory on the one hand (although he is apparently unaware of such works as Whitcomb and Morris, *The Genesis Flood*, 1961), and macroevolutionism on the other. This position will be unsettling for many, as it is for this reviewer, although it is very widely held in American evangelicalism.

The discussion of the problem of evil, God's providence, and the work of angels, the devil, and demons is very complete. The discussion on the problem of evil will help many a struggling student, not to mention some professors. Without question, the author is well acquainted with the territory.

Erickson's volume is a welcome addition to the field of systematic theology. It is neither faddist nor overly innovative. It is biblical and classical in its treatment of the major issues. It provides a good survey of the historical material without being cumbersome. The volume is certainly worth the price. Every student will find this *must* reading.

DAVID S. DOCKERY
BROOKLYN, NY