“In Many and Various Ways”: Theological Interpretation of Hebrews in the Modern Period

Craig R. Koester

Introduction

Theological interpretation involves asking what a biblical text says about God, human beings, and the world in which human beings live. As interpreters explore such theological questions, many help readers to see the Bible’s value for modern readers, since they take up perennial issues of faith and life. Historical criticism presses in the opposite direction. Ulrich Luz has noted that one of historical criticism’s primary tasks is to “distance the text from the interpreter and make it alien by putting it back into its own period.”¹ In the case of Hebrews, that effort has perhaps been all too successful. Hebrews’ discussion of the Aaronic priesthood, Melchizedek, and blood sacrifice has been found to be quite alien to the concerns of modern readers, at least those in the West. Given that profound sense of distance, why should people continue reading Hebrews at all? For readers asking that question, historical criticism may seem to offer little help.

But Luz also observed that historical criticism has a second function, which is to “make the interpreters aware of their own preunderstanding.” The sense of historical distance should “teach them something about themselves,” calling attention to the worldview that they bring to their encounter with the text.² In this role of promoting self-understanding, historical criticism has been less successful. Luz proposes that here is where the history of a biblical text’s reception or influence (Wirkungsgeschichte) comes in. By considering how interpreters in the past engaged the text, contemporary interpreters become aware of ways in which their own assumptions differ from those of their predecessors. The process calls interpreters to consider who they are and who they might become through their engagement with the text.³

¹ Ulrich Luz, Matthew 1–7 (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 63.
² Ibid.
Such investigation is promising for those with theological interests. When reading scholarship on Hebrews from past generations, I am intrigued with the extent to which theological perspectives are at work, even in studies that use the methods of historical criticism. Debates may concern the literary shape of Hebrews and the function of the book in its ancient setting, yet the differences among interpreters are not limited to those questions. In their proposals we can see various theological paradigms at work, and points of disagreement may reflect the way those paradigms operate. Here I will consider three groups of interpreters: Anglo-American, German, and French. Each reflects a different theological tradition: Reformed, Lutheran, and Roman Catholic respectively. I will focus on major studies of Hebrews that were done far enough in the past for us to have some critical distance from them, and yet recently enough that we still feel their influence.

The question I will ask each interpreter is this: What is Hebrews about? One could respond by simply outlining the contents of the book: Hebrews is about the angelic adoration of the Son of God in heaven and the rebellion of the wilderness generation on earth. It depicts the tabernacle on a cosmic scale and traces Christ’s ascent beyond the curtain, where he intercedes on behalf of others. Hebrews is about the new covenant and the epic story of faith, ranging from Abraham and Sarah to Moses and the martyrs, to the stadium where the writer’s own generation must run the race that is set before them. But responding in this way only invites another question: What is all that about? To develop a sense of the whole, interpreters must place certain themes in the foreground and allow others to recede. They must assign some sections a leading part and give others supporting roles—and in the process their own theological perspectives come into play.

When we explore these dynamics, we can bring the historical-critical questions full circle. Interpreters often ask about the traditions that informed the author of Hebrews and about the historical context in which the author of Hebrews worked. Here we shall address those same questions to the interpreters themselves. We shall ask about the theological traditions that shaped their readings of the text and about the impact of the historical contexts in which they worked.

Clark, 2012), 1–32. The essays in that volume explore interpretations of Hebrews from antiquity to the modern period.