Hagner, Donald A.

Encountering the Book of Hebrews: An Exposition


Moschos Goutzioudis
K. Demertzi 26, 54632
Thessaloniki, Greece

It is particularly pleasant to see scientific books that are addressed to college and university students by such scholars as Donald A. Hagner. The book belongs in the Encountering Biblical Studies series, which has published some volumes of undergraduate-level texts from an evangelical point of view. It is very important to publish such books that are pedagogically oriented, written with collegians in mind. Before I read the book I wondered why an author who has already published a good commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews in 1990 would publish a new one. Hagner emphasizes that the present book is completely independent from his first commentary and that is not a commentary, but rather an exposition. The second impression was that the new book was particularly thin (213 pages) as a commentary on Hebrews. However, Hagner’s aim now is not to give a detailed verse-by-verse commentary, like those that we are used to seeing in such a New Testament document, but a guide book for students to assist them in their encounter with Hebrews. This axiom should be taken into consideration in order not to misjudge Hagner’s book.

Inside the book are plenty of illustrations—photographs, figures, tables, and charts that help readers to understand basic meanings and theological ideas. Sidebars and excurses exploring exegetical ethical and theological issues can be found as well. Throughout the exposition, chapter outlines and objectives are presented at the opening of each chapter.
and study questions at the end of it. All these help readers to focus on the important matters. There is also a glossary of key terms and a selective bibliography in the last pages. Words that appear in bold type can be found in the glossary, and this is proven very helpful on a practical level.

Considering the content of the book, the first nineteen pages represent an introduction to the epistle. Then follows the heart of the book: the exposition of the thirteen chapters of the text of Hebrews. Finally there is a five-page excursus. In the introduction Hagner discusses briefly all the issues concerning the remaining problems of research in Hebrews, such as author, receivers, date and place of composition, literary genre, structure, and the like. The starting point, presented under the headline “The Origin and the Setting of Hebrews,” is the problem of the unknown author of the epistle. The document, according to Hagner, is more a homiletic treatise than an epistle, a thesis that nowadays is widely accepted by New Testament scholars. As for the author’s identity, although a variety of suggestions are considered, Hagner prefers to say only that he was a Jew. Then we read that the readers were probably Jewish Christians who seem to have been attracted back to their Judaism, but as for the place they lived, while this remains uncertain, we find a preference for Rome. I must comment here that the above view is held by the majority of modern scholars, who prefer to locate the recipient community somewhere in Italy or in Rome. Also, the statement in page 26, that is referred to the recipients sounds very interesting, as the argument of the letter is capable indeed of a wider application and the document is profitable for both Jewish and Gentile Christians. As for the time of composition of Hebrews, Hagner adopts a date in the 60s and one just prior to the beginning of Nero’s persecution.

Readers can find in these introductory pages of the book a preference for the existence of midrashic interpretation within the text. This feature still provokes debates among modern interpreters, who view it as a method that was adopted by the author of Hebrews in order to explain the Old Testament passages. The suggestions that the literary genre of Hebrews is much more a homily or sermon than a typical letter and about the last chapter of the text belonging to the original body are in agreement with the majority of scholars. Moreover, there is information about the ideological background, the use of the Old Testament by the author of Hebrews, the christological exposition, and the problem of anti-Semitism. The major part of the book is the chapter-by-chapter exposition, where students will find useful charts, topics, and questions to explore. Finally there is an excursus dealing with the entry of Hebrews into the New Testament canon. Hagner preferred to place this section, which in many commentaries is found in the introduction, at the end of his book, providing the students with all the data about the first evidence of Hebrews in other literature and the acceptance of its canonicity in the East and the West. There is also a brief reference to the situation of Hebrews’ treatment during the Middle
Ages until 1534. In short, the book will be for New Testament students a fine guide to the Epistle to the Hebrews and its theology.