Schenck, Kenneth

_Understanding the Book of Hebrews: The Story Behind the Sermon_


Moschos Goutzioudis
Thessaloniki, Greece 54632

The book is not a new commentary on the book of Hebrews but a representation of the epistle’s complex argument in terms of the salvation history that it describes. In its 144 pages we find a synoptic presentation by a unique way of the basic theological themes that appear in the text of the Epistle to the Hebrews. Although he purposely writes for a popular audience, Schenck does not exempt himself from scholarly techniques and methods. His work is addressed mainly for college and seminary students.

We can observe that the book is divided into six main sections, with a brief introduction and conclusion. The first five focus on theological issues. In the last pages the reader finds three indexes: a Scripture and ancient source index, a scholars index, and a subject index. There is also a useful glossary and bibliography after the endnotes. Inside the book there are figures and charts that could help readers to understand technical terms and theological ideas. Another useful tool is the placement of the definitions of basic theological ideas or biblical passages near the main body of the page. Throughout the text boldfaced words alert the reader that a term is represented in the glossary. The format of the text rightfully encourages students to examine blocks of material before analyzing verses and dissecting words.

Unlike most books, Schenck deals with the most important problems of Hebrews that still exist in the modern research and debates scholars, not in the introduction of his work, but...
in the last chapter, which surveys the situation of the audience. Moving on to historical issues, the author begins his discussion with the place of origin of Hebrews and ends with the kind of persecution the community of believers had experienced. In his attempt to prove his thesis, Schenck mentions the writing of Dio Cassius, Seneca, and Juvenal. Although one can disagree with the shape of the map and where some of the texts are placed in relation to others, it is extraordinarily useful as a place to start or a point of reference. In this part there are also references to other modern scholars who have argued similar or different positions about the same subjects.

Like other interpreters of Hebrews, Schenck rightly points out that the genre of Hebrews is sermonic, but he does not mention with what kind of rhetorical fashion the book was structured, which would enable one to talk about audience rather than recipients. He acknowledges the difficulties we have with Hebrews and makes his own suggestions. The theme of hardship and persecution also influences his discussion of the date of composition. Hebrews, according to Schenck, was addressed to a predominantly Gentile church in Rome during the earlier part of Domitian’s reign (81–96 C.E.). Schenck understands that Hebrews was addressed to a group of readers who were tired and discouraged (12:12), with some drifting away from the community (10:25).

Many elements of Schenck’s argumentation here are not likely to find broad acceptance. The rhetoric of the text shows, according to this study, a character of Gentile Christianity in Rome in the late first century. The surprise for me here was that, although most scholars picture a Jewish Christian audience, Schenck prefers a different view. Like Origen, as for the author and the place where he was, Schenck offers no opinion of his own. The rest of the unresolved problems of Hebrews are not discussed in the book.

My first comment is that is particularly pleasant to see this little book (144 pages in length) for Hebrews because, although is not a commentary, it refers to all the basic trends that modern research of Hebrews has accepted. Second, Schenck covers the majority of the subjects that are found in the biblical text. While Schenck’s writing ability makes his work not boring, I think that the representation of the epistle’s complex argument in terms of the salvation story will be difficult for a college student to follow. Although one can disagree with Schenck’s dates and theories and where some of the texts are placed in relation to others, it is extraordinarily useful as a place to start. At the same time, this study can best be read alongside other, more detailed studies on Hebrews, since students interested in more thorough discussion of matters such as authorship, form, and setting will need to look elsewhere. Similarly, those looking for treatment of specific details will often have to find help in other sources.
The book is a valuable general resource book. Schenck has succeeded in producing a work that distills much from the world of academics and presents it in an accessible format that will both engage and assist the nonspecialist reader.