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978-0-521-35748-7 - The Theology of the Letter to the Hebrews

Barnabas Lindars

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The Letter to the Hebrews contains the most important explanation of the sacrificial death of Christ in the New Testament. In this book, which is intended for both students and general readers, Barnabas Lindars explains the circumstances in which Hebrews was written, and expounds the writer's argument at length. At each stage of the survey, the writer's ideas are related to the main topics of New Testament theology. Special attention is paid to the rhetorical style of Hebrews, which marks it out as having been written in response to an urgent practical situation. The concluding chapters show the place of Hebrews in the context of the development of early Christianity, and indicate the lasting value of Hebrews for theology today.

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NEW TESTAMENT THEOLOGY

General Editor: Professor J. D. G. Dunn,
Department of Theology, University of Durham

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This series provides a programmatic survey of the individual writings of the New Testament. It aims to remedy the deficiency of available published material, which has tended to concentrate on historical, textual, grammatical, and literary issues at the expense of the theology, or to lose distinctive emphases of individual writings in systematised studies of 'The Theology of Paul' and the like. New Testament specialists here write at greater length than is usually possible in the introductions to commentaries or as part of other New Testament theologies, and explore the theological themes and issues of their chosen books without being tied to a commentary format, or to a thematic structure drawn from elsewhere. When complete, the series will cover all the New Testament writings, and will thus provide an attractive, and timely, range of texts around which courses can be developed.

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THE THEOLOGY OF THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS

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Editor's preface

Although the New Testament is usually taught within Departments or Schools or Faculties of Theology/Divinity/Religion, theological study of the individual New Testament writings is often minimal or at best patchy. The reasons for this are not hard to discern.

For one thing, the traditional style of studying a New Testament document is by means of straight exegesis, often verse by verse. Theological concerns jostle with interesting historical, textual, grammatical and literary issues, often at the cost of the theological. Such exegesis is usually very time-consuming, so that only one or two key writings can be treated in any depth within a crowded three-year syllabus.

For another, there is a marked lack of suitable textbooks round which courses could be developed. Commentaries are likely to lose theological comment within a mass of other detail in the same way as exegetical lectures. The section on the theology of a document in the Introduction to a commentary is often very brief and may do little more than pick out elements within the writing under a sequence of headings drawn from systematic theology. Excursuses usually deal with only one or two selected topics. Likewise larger works on New Testament Theology usually treat Paul's letters as a whole and, having devoted the great bulk of their space to Jesus, Paul and John, can spare only a few pages for others.

In consequence, there is little incentive on the part of teacher or student to engage with a particular New Testament document, and students have to be content with a general overview, at best complemented by in-depth study of (parts of) two or

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EDITOR'S PREFACE

three New Testament writings. A serious corollary to this is the degree to which students are thereby incapacitated in the task of integrating their New Testament study with the rest of their Theology or Religion courses, since often they are capable only of drawing on the general overview or on a sequence of particular verses treated atomistically. The growing importance of a literary-critical approach to individual documents simply highlights the present deficiencies even more. Having been given little experience in handling individual New Testament writings as such at a theological level, most students are very ill prepared to develop a properly integrated literary and theological response to particular texts. Ordinands too need more help than they currently receive from textbooks, so that their preaching from particular passages may be better informed theologically.

There is need therefore for a series to bridge the gap between too brief introduction and too full a commentary where theological discussion is lost among too many other concerns. It is our aim to provide such a series. That is, a series where New Testament specialists are able to write at greater length on the theology of individual writings than is usually possible in the introductions to commentaries or as part of New Testament Theologies, and to explore the theological themes and issues of these writings without being tied to a commentary format or to a thematic structure provided from elsewhere. The volumes seek both to describe each document's theology, and to engage theologically with it, noting also its canonical context and any specific influence it may have had on the history of Christian faith and life. They are directed at those who already have one or two years of full-time New Testament and theological study behind them.

James D. G. Dunn
University of Durham

Preface

The Letter to the Hebrews is so obviously full of theology that the main problem is not how to dig it out, but how to present it in an assimilable form. In preparing this book I considered the possibility of a systematic treatment, dealing with all the standard topics of theology in a logical order. I decided against this on the grounds that the theology of Hebrews is related to a sustained argument, which runs through the letter from start to finish. This argument is not a theological treatise, but an urgent address to the original readers, who are on the brink of taking action which their leaders regard as nothing short of apostasy. The author uses his considerable rhetorical skill as a writer to persuade them to change their minds. Consequently his theology is liable to be misrepresented if it is detached from the context in which it is used. I have therefore adhered closely to the order of the text, except that Hebrews 13, which provides the clues for understanding the situation of the readers, is dealt with at the beginning.

This explains why the subjects are taken in a seemingly illogical order, why some subjects receive what may be regarded as disproportionate attention, and some subjects little or no attention at all. Thus there is no section on the doctrine of God in Hebrews. This is because Hebrews takes for granted the monotheistic idea of God common to Judaism and earliest Christianity. Special features of his doctrine of God are covered by what is said in the sections on christology and the Holy Spirit. Those who wish to follow up particular aspects of the theology of Hebrews should consult the index of subjects.

It will already be apparent that the designation 'Hebrews' is

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used in more than one way in this book. Very often it means the letter itself, and so is referred to by the pronoun 'it'. But it is also used to denote the author, because the true name of the author is unknown. In this case the pronoun is 'he'. The masculine pronoun is used for convenience, and does not preclude the possibility that the letter was written by a woman. This allows for a little ambiguity, for example the theology of Hebrews means both the theology of the author and the theology which is contained in the letter. Of course there is no real difference between them. In addition 'the Hebrews church' and 'the Hebrews community' mean the people to whom the letter is addressed regardless of any theory of their identity. In all three usages 'Hebrews' always has the plural form, though it is treated as singular. In other words it is just a name for the author, the letter and the receiving community. The use of it in these ways does not imply any particular theory about why or how 'To the Hebrews' became attached to the letter as its heading in the manuscripts.

It has been a pleasure to write this book, because Hebrews is so interesting and inspiring. Approaching it with an eye to the rhetorical effects helped to bring out the author's personality and to reveal a far more attractive personality than one may expect at first glance. Hebrews is rather like the prophet Ezekiel. He appears strange and impersonal and distant at first, but closer acquaintance shows him to be a deeply caring person with a strong pastoral sense. In fact Hebrews' concept of the pastoral character of priesthood is one of the points of lasting value in this very distinctive New Testament writing.

This book began as a series of lectures to a small but enthusiastic class of Extra-Mural Studies in Manchester, and I am grateful to the students for the encouragement of their response.

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AV	Authorised Version
B	Codex Vaticanus (fourth century)
BAG	W. Bauer, W. F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich, <i>A Greek–English Lexicon of the New Testament</i> (Cambridge, 1952)
<i>Barn.</i>	<i>Epistle of Barnabas</i>
CD	The Damascus Document from the Cairo Genizah
1 <i>Clem.</i>	The genuine <i>Epistle of Clement</i> of Rome
Clement, <i>Strom.</i>	The <i>Stromateis</i> (miscellanies) of Clement of Alexandria
D	Codex Bezae (fifth century). D* = first hand of D
d	Latin side of Codex Bezae (Old Latin text)
Epiphanius, <i>Pan.</i>	Epiphanius, <i>Against all the Heresies</i>
Euseb., <i>H.E.</i>	Eusebius, <i>Ecclesiastical History</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
Josephus, <i>Ant. War.</i>	Josephus, <i>Antiquities of the Jews Jewish War</i>
<i>JTS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i> (new series)
<i>Jub.</i>	<i>Book of Jubilees</i>
Justin, I <i>Ap.</i>	Justin Martyr, <i>First Apology</i>
LXX	The Septuagint (Greek) version of the OT
MM	J. H. Moulton and G. Milligan, <i>The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament</i> (London, 1914–29)

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

MS(S)	Manuscript(s)
NEB	New English Bible
<i>NovT</i>	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
<i>NRT</i>	<i>Nouvelle Revue Théologique</i>
NT	New Testament
<i>NTS</i>	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
OT	Old Testament
P	ninth-century Greek MS
P ⁴⁶	Papyrus Chester Beatty II (about AD 200), the oldest MS containing Hebrews
Philo, <i>de Ebr.</i>	Philo Judaeus, <i>On the Drunkenness of Noah</i>
<i>Leg. All.</i>	<i>Allegory of the Laws</i>
<i>de Migr. Abr.</i>	<i>On the Migration of Abraham</i>
<i>Quaest. in Gen.</i>	<i>Questions on Genesis</i>
1Q, 4Q, 5Q, 11Q	Document from Qumran Cave 1, Cave 4, etc., followed by name or number of the document
1QS	The Manual of Discipline from Cave 1
1QS ^a	The Messianic Rule appended to 1QS
4QpIsa ^d	Fourth fragment of commentary on Isaiah from Cave 4
<i>RB</i>	<i>Revue Biblique</i>
RSV	Revised Standard Version
RSVm	Revised Standard Version margin
<i>RQ</i>	<i>Revue de Qumran</i>
RV	Revised Version
s.v.	sub voce
sy ^{(p).h}	Syriac version. (p) = the reading in question is partly supported by the Syriac Peshitta. h = Harkleian Syriac
<i>TDNT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i> , ed. G. Kittel and G. Friedrich, trans. G. W. Bromiley (9 vols., Grand Rapids, 1964–74).
UBS	United Bible Societies' text of the Greek NT
1739	tenth-century Greek MS