

*The Letter*  
*to the*  
**HEBREWS**

PETER T. O'BRIEN

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*For Peter and Christine*

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### *Editor's Preface*

Commentaries have specific aims, and this series is no exception. Designed for serious pastors and teachers of the Bible, the Pillar commentaries seek above all to make clear the text of Scripture as we have it. The scholars writing these volumes interact with the most important informed contemporary debate, but avoid getting mired in undue technical detail. Their ideal is a blend of rigorous exegesis and exposition, with an eye alert both to biblical theology and the contemporary relevance of the Bible, without confusing the commentary and the sermon.

The rationale for this approach is that the vision of “objective scholarship” (a vain chimera) may actually be profane. God stands over against us; we do not stand in judgment of him. When God speaks to us through his Word, those who profess to know him must respond in an appropriate way, and that is certainly different from a stance in which the scholar projects an image of autonomous distance. Yet this is no surreptitious appeal for uncontrolled subjectivity. The writers of this series aim for an evenhanded openness to the text that is the best kind of “objectivity” of all.

If the text is God's Word, it is appropriate that we respond with reverence, a certain fear, a holy joy, a questing obedience. These values should be reflected in the way Christians write. With these values in place, the Pillar commentaries will be warmly welcomed not only by pastors, teachers, and students, but by general readers as well.

With his many years of service as scholar, missionary, and long-time lecturer at Moore

Theological College, Peter O'Brien has earned a reputation that is well-nigh unique. It is the combination of virtues that is compelling: great care in handling the Scriptures, fairness in dealing with the views of others, a characteristic understatement combined with a passion for the centrality of the gospel, and, uniting all the rest, a gentleness of spirit that has captured the minds and hearts of colleagues, friends, and several decades of students. In the cutthroat world of scholarship it is difficult to find someone who will say a bad word about Peter O'Brien.

Among commentary readers Dr. O'Brien is doubtless best known for his commentaries on Paul's prison epistles, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians. The volume on Ephesians, of course, is published in the Pillar series, and it has become one of the "standard" works on that letter, not least for those preparing to teach and preach the text. Here Dr. O'Brien branches outside the Pauline corpus. The most recent six years of his life have been devoted to Hebrews, a book not always easy to understand but demonstrably important for Christians who want to know how first-century believers read the old covenant Scriptures. Such inquiry is the first step in building up a profoundly biblical theology, a profoundly canonical theology. It would be difficult to find a more helpful guide than Dr. O'Brien, or a guide better endowed with his combination of competence and genial wisdom. It is a pleasure to commend this work by a dear friend.

D. A. CARSON

## *Author's Preface*

My first serious encounter with the Letter to the Hebrews occurred in a missionary context some years ago when I was invited to teach this 'word of exhortation' to a senior class of theological students. It proved to be a rewarding experience—even a spiritual milestone—though I suspect that my teaching in that cross-cultural context left much to be desired. Not long afterwards, I found myself in the classroom of Professor F. F. Bruce at the University of Manchester, where he lectured on Hebrews, having written his New International Commentary on the letter some years earlier.

This amazing 'word of exhortation' in the New Testament, which has come down to us as a letter from the beginning, has fascinated, challenged, probed, and encouraged me since those early classes. It was a delight, therefore, to be asked to prepare the Pillar

New Testament Commentary on it, and thus to study this portion of God's word in a fresh way. I am grateful to Don Carson for his invitation, his continued friendship and encouragement, as well as his perceptive suggestions as the editor of this series.

I am aware of my great debt to those who have gone before me in the task of seeking to expound this magnificent New Testament document. As I wrestled with it I felt like a small child standing on the shoulders of giants. The commentaries of John Calvin, F. F. Bruce, H. W. Attridge, W. L. Lane, P. Ellingworth, C. R. Koester, and L. T. Johnson, to name just a few, have been my constant companions, while many others have been within easy reach on the shelves of my study. Special mention should be made of George H. Guthrie, whose range of insightful writings on Hebrews has been of considerable influence on my thinking. If it is true to say that, throughout periods of Christian history, the Letter to the Hebrews has been neglected, then in the last few years there has been an amazing output of literature on this important New Testament document. One might almost say that 'a cottage industry' has sprung up, in which monographs, articles, and commentaries at different levels have been produced. I have learned much from them, and while my primary task has been to explain, as best I can, the meaning of God's word, the creative and insightful results that have been harvested from this recent research have profoundly assisted me in this joyful endeavour.

It has not been possible to take into account significant material on Hebrews that has appeared after the submission of this work for publication. Also, for reasons of space I have not included in the Introduction any treatment of the letter's major theological themes. I hope to address these issues in a forthcoming volume on the theology of Hebrews.

My thanks are due also to successive classes of Moore College students who have interacted, questioned, and challenged me in the classroom as we have studied the Greek text of Hebrews together. The commentary is better as a result of this bracing fellowship, though the blemishes that remain are entirely my responsibility.

Without the generous provisions of study leave that Moore College arranges for its faculty members, it would not have been possible to complete this commentary. The Principal, John Woodhouse, and the College Board have been a constant support during the past six years, while my faculty colleagues have often taken on responsibilities in order to lighten my tasks.

Mary, my wife of forty-six years, has continued to be a wonderful encouragement. Her confident intercessions before the throne of grace have indeed led to divine mercy

and grace helping us in our times of need.

*Soli Deo Gloria!*

PETER T. O'BRIEN

## Introduction

Hebrews is a magnificent New Testament document. It is carefully constructed and beautifully written, theologically profound and powerfully argued. It challenges our understanding of reality and makes us ‘ponder a world in which the unseen is more real, more powerful, and more attractive than that which can be seen and touched and counted’.<sup>1</sup> The letter that wonderfully portrays Jesus as Son of God and great high priest, who is both human and divine, the crucified and exalted one, also makes stringent demands on its readers in relation to Christian discipleship. It summons believers, just as it did the first listeners, to ‘unqualified commitment, unflagging perseverance and a willingness to suffer’ for one’s faith.<sup>2</sup>

For contemporary readers, however, Hebrews is one of the most difficult New Testament books to understand,<sup>3</sup> and as a result it has often been neglected. Old Testament quotations and allusions abound while details about Israel’s priesthood and sacrificial system dominate much of the book. Many of the author’s arguments employ typological similarities that are difficult to grasp—for example, between old and new, temporal and eternal, or earthly and heavenly (note the comparison between Christ and Melchizedek in [Heb. 7](#)). Further, although the arguments seem to be based on careful reasoning, they are often detailed and extensive, so that it is difficult to see how the author moves from one argument or stage to the next. The insertion of repeated exhortations seems, initially at least, to interrupt the overall flow of the discourse.<sup>4</sup> At a personal level, Christians throughout history have been unsettled by the warning passages of the book ([2:1-4](#); [3:7-4:11](#); [6:4-8](#); [10:26-31](#); [12:25-29](#)) since they seem to contradict assurances and promises elsewhere, and suggest that believers can ‘fall away’ from Christ.

Other features make Hebrews a difficult and challenging document. It is grouped

<sup>1</sup> So Johnson, 1. According to Raymond Brown, Hebrews is one of ‘the most impressive works’ in the New Testament. ‘Consciously rhetorical, carefully constructed, ably written in quality Greek, and passionately appreciative of Christ, Heb[rews] offers an exceptional number of unforgettable insights that have shaped subsequent Christianity’ (*An Introduction to the New Testament* [New York: Doubleday, 1997], 683).

<sup>2</sup> Johnson, 2.

<sup>3</sup> Attridge, 1, thinks that although Hebrews is ‘the most elegant and sophisticated’, it is ‘perhaps the most enigmatic, text of first-century Christianity’.

<sup>4</sup> See D. A. Hagner, *Encountering the Book of Hebrews: An Exposition* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 20.

among the letters of the New Testament, but its form initially suggests that it is not a letter. It begins without an opening prayer for grace or peace, and there is no introductory thanksgiving or blessing. Unlike other letters in the New Testament (except 1 John) and many epistles of the Graeco-Roman period, its author does not identify himself or the people addressed. Instead, Hebrews opens with a majestic sentence celebrating the dignity of the Son of God, through whom God has spoken his final word in these last days (1:1-2). On the other hand, the document ends like a letter, with its benediction, personal remarks, and final farewell (Heb. 13:20-25). The author speaks of his discourse as ‘a word of exhortation’ (13:22). But what is meant by this? Is it a homily or a series of homilies that has been written as a rather anomalous letter?

Further, Hebrews remains elusive because its setting in life is uncertain. We do not know who wrote the book, the location and date of its composition, or the situation of those addressed. Although there has been an amazing increase in knowledge about the Graeco-Roman and Jewish cultures in recent decades, so that we are better placed than previous generations, many of these questions cannot be answered with certainty.

## I. AUTHORSHIP AND CANONICITY<sup>5</sup>

Hebrews is an anonymous document although it was first received and read as a letter of the apostle Paul. It has come down to us under the title ‘To [the] Hebrews’ (*pros Hebraious*), and was included among Paul’s letters, appearing after Romans in the earliest extant text of Paul (P<sup>46</sup>), about A.D. 200. This clearly reflects the conviction of the Eastern church, especially because of the assessment of several notable Alexandrian scholars, Clement (c. A.D. 150-215) and Origen (185-253), who nevertheless recognized the difficulties associated with this view. Origen found the ideas but not the language Pauline; after acknowledging either Clement or Luke as possible authors, he confessed: ‘But who wrote the epistle, in truth God knows’.<sup>6</sup>

In the Western church, Pauline authorship was resisted until the latter half of the fourth century, even though the earliest attested use of Hebrews suggests a Pauline connection. *1 Clement*, which was sent from Rome to Corinth in the late first or early sec-

<sup>5</sup> On the history of interpretation and influence of Hebrews, see Koester, 19-63. Note also F. F. Bruce, ‘“To the Hebrews”: A Document of Roman Christianity?’ in *ANRW*, ed. H. Temporini and W. Haase, Vol. II.25.4 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1987), 3496-3521, esp. 3496-3499.

<sup>6</sup> Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.25.14.

ond century, makes use of the ideas and distinctive language of Hebrews; it weaves material from Hebrews into a plea for discipline within the Corinthian church.<sup>7</sup> But the Muratorian Canon, Irenaeus, and Hippolytus of Rome all agree that Paul was not the author. Tertullian insisted that Hebrews had more authority than the *Shepherd of Hermas* because of the eminence of its author, whom he identifies as Barnabas. When Eusebius wrote (c. 325), many in Rome still did not consider Hebrews to be Pauline.

The Trinitarian controversies in the fourth and fifth centuries led to positions that shaped the reading of Hebrews for later interpretation. In the West, writers who used Hebrews to combat Arianism helped popularise the notion that it was a letter of Paul. But Jerome and Augustine shifted opinion somewhat in the West. The former recognized the important view of the Eastern churches but acknowledged that many in the West still had doubts about the Pauline authorship of Hebrews. He concluded, however, that it does not matter who the author really was, since the work is ‘honored daily by being read in the churches’.<sup>8</sup> In his early writings Augustine identified Paul as the author, and used Hebrews to demonstrate his understanding of human sin in disputes with the Pelagians.<sup>9</sup> Later, perhaps due to the influence of Jerome, Augustine refrained from identifying Paul as the author, but he included Hebrews among the church’s authoritative Scriptures, and this view was followed by others. Western synods preserved some distinction between Hebrews and the generally recognized Pauline letters. The Synod of Hippo (A.D. 393) and the Third Synod of Carthage (397) wrote, ‘Of Paul the apostle, thirteen epistles; of the same to the Hebrews, one’. The Sixth Synod of Carthage (419) ascribed fourteen letters to Paul. On the whole, the Pauline authorship of Hebrews was affirmed in the West, although many learned commentators raised doubts about this.<sup>10</sup>

Hebrews’ canonical status was not challenged during the Middle Ages, despite continuing doubt regarding its authorship.<sup>11</sup> At the Reformation questions concerning the

<sup>7</sup>Note the striking similarities between *Heb. 1:1–14; 2:17–18; 4:14–16* and *1 Clement 36:1–5*.

<sup>8</sup>Jerome, *Epistle 129.3*; note D. A. Carson and D. J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 601.

<sup>9</sup>Augustine, *NPNF*<sup>1</sup>, 5.34; cited by Koester, 27 n. 29 (note his discussion and further references).

<sup>10</sup>D. A. Hagner, *Encountering the Book of Hebrews*, 191–195, esp. 195, suggests that ‘the direct apostolic authorship, in this case by Paul, was not an absolute requirement for the acceptance of Hebrews as authoritative and canonical. What seems to have been required as a minimum was apostolic association—that is, that the author had been a member of the larger apostolic circle’.

authorship and authority of Hebrews were reopened, particularly by humanist scholars.<sup>12</sup> The textual basis for the many debates shifted from the Latin Vulgate to the Greek text, and as scholars explored the meaning of Greek terms they began to ask questions about the relationship of Hebrews to the wider cultural and religious environment of the ancient world, questions that would be important for historical-critical study of Hebrews in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. On the authorship question, Luther said in his preface that Hebrews was ‘the work of an able and learned man, a disciple of the apostles’. Later he suggested Apollos. Although he called Hebrews ‘a marvellously fine epistle’, he insisted that ‘we cannot put it on the same level with the apostolic epistles’.<sup>13</sup> Reformed scholars accepted the canonical status of Hebrews, but their views on authorship varied. Calvin recognized the common objections to Pauline authorship and (on [Heb. 13:23](#)) argued for Clement of Rome or Luke. However, he said, ‘I class it without hesitation among the apostolical writings’.<sup>14</sup> Zwingli simply affirmed the traditional view of Pauline authorship, while Bullinger repeated traditional arguments for this position. The Council of Trent insisted that there were fourteen Pauline letters, including Hebrews, but few Catholic scholars would advocate this today. So, although the issue of the Pauline authorship of Hebrews was reopened in the sixteenth century, the traditional view remained common until intensive historical investigation overturned it in the nineteenth century.<sup>15</sup>

The number of suggestions as to who was the author of Hebrews is considerable, but we limit our discussion to the following:

<sup>11</sup> See Hugo of St. Victor, *Didascalicon* 4.2–6.

<sup>12</sup> See Koester, 33–40.

<sup>13</sup> *LuthW* 35:395; cited by Koester, 35.

<sup>14</sup> Calvin, 1.

<sup>15</sup> Note the discussion of Koester, 41–46.