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**Gordon, Robert P.**

*Hebrews*

Readings: A New Biblical Commentary

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Herbert W. Bateman, IV  
Grace College and Seminary  
Winona Lake, IN 46590

Robert Gordon is Regius Professor of Hebrew at the University of Cambridge and Fellow of St. Catharine's College, Cambridge. The series, *Readings: A New Biblical Commentary*, aspires to engage the Greek text and to keep interaction with secondary literature under strict control (p. 7). Gordon therefore explains, "The modest bibliography at the end [25 authors, 30 sources] exceeds my reading for this commentary but includes those books and articles that I have at one time or another found helpful" (p. 7). Thus, using his "trustworthy UBS 3rd ed.," Gordon provides us with his understanding of Hebrews. Although the text of the more recent edition remains unchanged, I was left wondering why Gordon did not use the UBS 4th ed.

The book has an introduction and fourteen chapters of commentary. The introduction (pp. 11–35) is divided into seven sections and serves to establish Gordon's historical (sections 1, 2, 5, 6), literary (sections 3, 4), and interpretive (section 7) perspectives for the Book of Hebrews. The importance of the introduction cannot be overstated because it is here that Gordon's "angle" on Hebrews is presented, which is often further developed in the commentary.

Concerning historical issues, section one is entitled "Who are these people?" Like Origen, Gordon offers no opinion of his own, though he does argue that the author was not female, not Paul, and probably not Apollos (pp. 11–12, 144). As far as the recipients of Hebrews are concerned, Gordon confesses that there is "no overwhelming evidence of

a Jewish matrix for the addressees.” Nevertheless, he suggests that “the Jewish–Christian explanation seems to find regular confirmation in the text” (2:15, 11:13–16). Section two is entitled “What is the Problem?” Although he admits that a general problem of spiritual apathy is addressed throughout Hebrews, Gordon more pointedly believes that “the community had problems in maintaining their original confession of Jesus as the ‘Son of God’” (2:1, 3:12, 6:6, 10:29; pp. 14–15). He offers three “anterior conditions” that contributed to this general problem: the problem of the delayed parousia, the lack of charismatic phenomena, and the effect of hardship and persecution on the community (pp. 15–19).

The latter condition is not only the most convincingly developed in the commentary, it is the best well-reasoned contribution of the commentary. This theme of hardship and persecution also influences his discussion of “Date of Composition” in section six. Assuming a Roman destination, Gordon’s reading of the internal evidence leads him to conclude that the date of composition merits a pre-70 C.E. dating (pp. 29–33). Three lines of internal evidence are expanded in the commentary: the present existence of the temple (“there *are* priests” in 8:4, *palaioumenon* and the use of *aphanismou* in 8:13); the apparent forms of persecution alluded to in 10:32-34; and the author’s theme concerning the defiance of death (2:15; 5:7; chp. 11; 12:1-4). The latter two serve to support a time period prior to the Neronian martyrdoms beginning in the mid-60s C.E.

Finally, section five (“Hebrews and Judaism,” pp. 24–29) explains that Hebrews’ comparative manner of speaking (i.e., the use of ‘better’), its high regard of the Old Testament to describe “a major new religious and spiritual initiative” (via Jer 31, pp. 93–94; Ps 40, p. 111–12, 113–14), as well as the author’s arguing from within Judaism’s faith continuum with his ‘in-house’ criticism of Judaism is evidence of the book’s supersessionism. Although he does not like the terminology, Gordon does not deny the charge that Hebrews is supersessionist. “*Hebrews*,” he says, “is exemplary as a supersessionist text for the way in which it argues its case without rancour or abuse.” Taking this idea a step further, he says, “One good reason for not being defensive on behalf of Hebrews in this matter of supersessionism is that *both* Judaism and Christianity are supersessionist in relation to the Old Testament” (p. 28).

Concerning literary issues, Gordon immediately engages the issue of genre. Prior to his discussion of the matter in section four (“Communicating the Message,” pp. 22–24), Gordon renders Hebrews “a letter” (p. 11, 12, 14), contends “the homily analogy (is) in danger of being overworked” (p. 12; pp. 22-23, 173), and later interprets Hebrews 13:23 to be the “equivalent of the ‘pen and ink’ references in the shorter Johannine letters (2 Jn 12; 3 Jn 13-14)” (p. 175). Section four more pointedly attends to three other issues of communication: Gordon concedes that the type of rhetoric “cannot so easily be pigeon-holed” (p. 22); he affirms the importance of the LXX to Hebrews (p. 23), which he faithfully reinforces throughout the commentary; and he suggests that the “interweaving

of text and interpretation reminds us of the *peshet* method used in the Qumran biblical commentaries” (p. 24; pp. 49, 60).

In section three (“The Message,” pp. 19–22), Gordon addresses a threefold literary issue of Hebrews. According to Gordon, the author of Hebrews believes that “the Old Testament writings look forward to a new era to be inaugurated by someone capable of delivering what the religion of the older covenant of Moses could only prefigure” (1:1–4, 3:1–6, 10:26–31), expresses his conviction that Christ’s high-priestly role is sufficient for the believer (chs. 9–10), and wants to assure Jewish-Christians who seem to suffer from cultic deprivation by referring to the things they “have” in Christ (3:7–4:11, 14; 8:1; 10:34; 12:1; 13:10, 14).

The final issue addressed is “Inclusive Language.” Gordon rightly argues that the rendering of *adelphoi* as “brothers” (3:1, 12; 10:19; 13:22) is less accurate than the expanded “brothers and sisters” of more recent versions. In addition to his line of arguments in section seven (pp. 33–34), Gordon identifies the many ways the author of Hebrews refers to these Jewish-Christians readers (p. 102). In evaluating Gordon’s introduction (excluding his discussion of authorship and his belief that Hebrews is an epistle), his historical, literary, and interpretive discussions are well argued, textually supported, and often times further developed in his commentary.

Concerning the commentary, every chapter begins with a concise and well-focused “Introductory Comment.” Chapters seldom lack in detailed discussions of key structural markers; clear presentations of the major OT citations, OT historical events, and OT theological themes; good interaction with significant 2nd temple theological themes and texts; and regular interactions with various English translations of Hebrews. Due to the aspirations of the series and the nature of Hebrews, the commentary understandably makes several assumptions. It assumes that the reader is conversant with Greek grammar, syntax, and LXX interpretive issues; aware of OT history and OT theological concepts; and familiar with 2nd temple history, literature, and theological developments. Although infrequent, allusions to commentaries are identified in parentheses. In fact, Gordon’s commentary reads like a *critical* exposition of Hebrews without notes. The lack of elaborate footnotes may be refreshing to some readers, but for others, the lack of further amplification of an issue may leave them wanting.

No doubt due to length restrictions, each of the fourteen chapters of commentary (pp. 37–175) averages 12 pages in length. The shortest chapters are 5 pages long (“Hebrews 4.14–5:10: The Great High Priest,” “Hebrews 5.11–6.8: Obstacles to Progress,” and “Hebrews 6.9–20: Inheriting the Promises”). The longest chapter is 20 pages (“Hebrews 11: Witnesses to Faith”) followed by two 14-page chapters (“Hebrews 12: Journey’s End,” and “Hebrews 13: Continuity amidst Change”). Thus the commentary presumes that the reader is familiar with *peshet* method (pp. 24, 49, 60) versus *Peshet* texts (p. 126);

acquainted with typology (pp. 24-25), *gezerah shavah* (p. 62), *sensus plenior* (p. 75) and intertextual issues (p. 94); and able to discern “the more developed forms of dispensationalism that make sharp distinctions between Israel and the church and their respective destinies” (p. 147, perhaps 155). Although Gordon confesses: “I am no expert on Hebrews but I am, in the postmodern way, an expert on my own understanding of Hebrews, and very willing to sail (for a while) under a postmodern flag of convenience” (p. 7), his commentary is a suggested read for pastors and graduate students familiar with Hebrews.