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Die Theologie des Hebräerbriefs: Ihre Verankerung in der Situation des Verfassers und seiner Leser

Erwin Buck

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Although it will need to be supplemented in places, Tuckett's book deserves to be considered as a text for introducing students to methods of interpreting the New Testament.

Carol Schlueter
Waterloo Lutheran Seminary

Die Theologie des Hebräerbriefes: Ihre Verankerung in der Situation des Verfassers und seiner Leser

Mathias Rissi

Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1987

What meaning one detects in any given document depends in large measure on how one reconstructs the setting in which that document originated and what one considers to be the issue which that document intended to address. It is precisely at this point that Mathias Rissi offers new possibilities for reading the Letter to the Hebrews. As the subtitle of Rissi's book indicates, he intends to let his understanding of the theology of Hebrews be informed by a careful reassessment of the situation which prompted the author of Hebrews to take up the pen.

General consensus has it that Hebrews was intended to encourage a second or third generation faith community which experienced the typical problems of tiredness. It has become customary to regard 12:12 ("lift your drooping hands...") as the theme verse, directed to Christians suffering from burnout or just plain laziness.

Rissi reconstructs the situation quite differently. Hebrews addressed a problem very similar to that which Paul encountered in Corinth, argues Rissi. As in Corinth, so here the powerful charismatic experiences which had accompanied the profuse outpouring of the Holy Spirit, had given rise to spiritual elitism.

Rissi is convinced that Hebrews addressed not a congregation as a whole, but a smaller holier-than-thou group which had largely withdrawn from that congregation and now stood aloof from it. This inference Rissi draws from the comment that only "some" neglect the participation in the public worship of the community (10:25), and from the observation that the author asks these particular members to pass his greetings on to "all your leaders and all the saints" (13:24). When the author of Hebrews exhorts his readers to strive for peace (12:14) and not to neglect the needs of the community (13:16), to "lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees" (12:12), he is not addressing a congregation which had become tired, but an enclave of readers who had become spiritually arrogant.

The members of the conventicle had begun to feel that they already possessed all that God had to offer them. Hope had become an empty

concept. They were no longer eager to hear the word. Faith for them had become an internal, privatistic matter. They no longer felt any deep responsibility for each other or for the congregation as a whole. They had even begun to feel that nothing worthwhile could be gained by attending the public worship services of the community.

Consequently, the writer of Hebrews must remind his readers that their glorious experiences are only preliminary, and that they must live in hope, in anticipation of greater things to come (12:14). They have not yet arrived; they are still on the way. Little wonder, then, that in Hebrews faith sometimes takes on the connotation of perseverance (10:36), and unbelief can be synonymous with lack of perseverance (3:12, 19). The author evidently feels strongly that the readers need endurance, perseverance, courage to run the race, and discipline (12:1-11).

In keeping with this, Hebrews presents a Christology which heavily underscores the significance of the incarnation. The high priest is a human being, a brother (5:1-3). Christ practiced obedience (5:8). The death of Jesus outside of the city becomes an exhortation to the readers to leave the camp and to suffer for him outside. The "perfection" of Christ is three times specifically connected with his suffering and death (2:10; 5:9; 7:28). The author insists that the exalted Christ must be understood as the suffering and crucified one. Christ is the mediator precisely because of his *death* (7:22-26; 9:15; 12:24). The writer of Hebrews, like Paul in his Corinthian correspondence, opposes a theology of glory with a theology of the cross. The access to God through the curtain in the sanctuary has been made possible by Jesus precisely "through his flesh" (10:20).

Rissi accomplishes his reconstruction of the *Sitz im Leben* of Hebrews by way of a careful distinction between *traditional* and *redactional* statements in the document. For example, by identifying 1:14-2:4 as a redactional interpolation by the author of Hebrews, the principal theme of the meditation is subtly shifted from an adoration of the majesty of Christ to the awesome obligation to *listen* to the message of such an exalted Lord (51). Hebrews thus does not present a high Christology, but on the contrary, *critiques* such a Christology.

Similarly, Rissi argues that 11:13-16 must be a redactional interpretive comment. "These all died in faith, not having received what was promised, but having seen it and greeted it from afar. . . , they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one." With these words the author wants to alert the spiritually self-satisfied readers who cherish their present *status quo* and no longer eagerly look forward to a "better country".

Rissi argues that three of the key passages in Hebrews (6:4-6; 10:26-31; 12:12-17) are widely misunderstood and misused. In Rissi's opinion the apostasy here spoken of has nothing to do with moral defects of any sort, or with a denial of the faith, but is to be seen as a reference to the chief problem of the readers, namely their unwillingness to be receptive to the theology of the cross which emphasises the earthly life and the death of the Christ, the true high priest. The author of Hebrews must remind

his readers that the new covenant has been mediated by the sacrificial blood, the "blood of the covenant" (9:20; 10:29; 13:20) of the Son of God. Evidently the Hebrews did not want to hear such a theology of the cross. The writer warns them that once ears are closed, there no longer is any possibility for communication or for repentance.

This is a brilliantly conceived thesis. Whether it has been convincingly established, however, remains open to question. The reconstruction of supposed confessional formulas and hymns which were then redacted by the author of Hebrews is not always persuasive (see e.g., 66f., 86f.), and in the opinion of this reviewer the polemic against spiritual elitism is not sufficiently pronounced in Hebrews to establish the thesis that Hebrews is intended chiefly to address the problem of spiritual arrogance.

However, Rissi has offered stimulating new possibilities for entering into the "theological meditations" which make up this document. Rissi's book deserves careful attention. If Rissi has reconstructed the situation accurately, Hebrews is yet another document (besides Paul's Corinthian correspondence, the Gospel of Mark and the Johannine literature) which attests to the prevalence of *Schwärmer*-theology in the early church and testifies to the consistency with which such a theology was opposed by the representatives of what has become orthodox Christianity. The implications for theology and ministry today are obvious.

Erwin Buck
Lutheran Theological Seminary

Devotional Theology: Meditations on Christian Existence

Egil Grislis

Bristol, Indiana: Wyndham Hall Press, 1987

Egil Grislis' book is a fine example of the second naiveté (a term coined by Paul Ricoeur of the University of Chicago). Grislis has experienced the hell of war, listened to detractors of the faith, studied the texts with scholarly diligence, examined the history of the church with all its battles, boils, and small bursts of heroic faith, and has emerged as one who confesses "I believe".

In chapter nine "Tragedy and Grace in the Baltic" he recalls the deportation of 470,000 countrymen and women to Siberia, a horrible journey in overcrowded freight cars. Many did not survive the trip and the corpse of a close relative of his was discovered alongside the tracks in Latvia. He recalls a Lutheran pastor who was in solitary confinement for eight years and "kept his faith, sanity and kindness". Some lost their faith like the man who eluded the police but discovered upon his return that his wife