

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Book Critique

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Hebrews

by

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Introduction

With his book, *Four Views on the Warning Passages in Hebrews*, Herbert Bateman has taken on a fascinating challenge; to have four different authors write their interpretations on the warning passages in Hebrews, as well as provide written responses to each of the views presented. Each of the contributors are expert in their fields and in Hebrews itself, lending itself to a very scholarly approach to the subject.

Summary

Before getting to the authors and their presentations, Bateman defines for the scope of this book the warning passages as Hebrews 2:1-4; 3:7-4:13; 5:11-6:12; 10:19-39; and 12:14-29.¹ In addition, Bateman lays out some of the challenges in studying Hebrews and interpreting this book; the author is unknown, its occasion for writing is unknown, the destination uncertain, and the exact definition of where the warning passages begin and end are debated. Perhaps more significantly, as a book it forces the reader and believers in general to deal with the topic of eternal security. Are these passages warning people who have not yet become saved about losing their opportunity? Or are they in fact warnings to believers that they could lose their salvation? Without the book of Hebrews, the topic would seem to be much more cut and dried.

¹ Herbert Bateman IV, ed., *Four Views On the Warning Passages in Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic & Professional, 2007), location 138.

Through the selection of four scholars, Bateman has presented two Arminian views and two Calvinist interpretations of the warning passages:

- A classical Arminian view presented by Grant R. Osborne.
- A Wesleyan Arminian view presented by Gareth Lee Cockerill.
- A classical Reformed view presented by Buist M. Fanning.
- A moderate Reformed view presented by Randall C. Gleason.

Osborne leads the way with the first presentation, working his way through the five passages from a classical Arminian view, in other words, a view that sees free will playing a vital role in the salvation of man.

The handling of the issue of election feels in some ways like playing word games; man chooses God, God has foreknowledge and knows who will choose Him, therefore He elects them before they choose Him based on the reality that they will choose Him, so while God chooses them before they are even conceived, their free will in choosing Him is still assured.² Then again, this response is based on a very linear approach to time, while in truth God's interaction with time could be very different than our limited, linear minds and concepts.

In the end, Osborne feels the best conclusion he can come to, as a classical Arminian is that the apostasy warned of in Hebrews is something possible for true believers to commit.³ He also understands apostasy to be an unforgivable sin that cannot be undone; once committed there

² Ibid., location 523.

³ Ibid., location 874.

is no coming back, and as such results in the loss of salvation and the consequence of eternal judgment and punishment.

From there Bateman moves on to the classical Reformed view as presented by Buist M. Fanning. As a Calvinist, Fanning approaches Hebrews with a view on God's sovereignty in all areas, including salvation. One of the hallmarks of such a stance is the view of the perseverance of salvation, however, Fanning opens his presentation by noting his personal approach defines perseverance as the continuous operation of the Holy Spirit in the believer to the very end, not the work of man.⁴

One of the things Fanning calls into question is the idea that salvation is based on or is only obtained through human continuation of faith. If it is, then salvation could be lost by the interruption of that faith. However, his contention is that the scriptures speaking of salvation do not qualify themselves in this way.⁵ Salvation is instead achieved through God's continued work, not man's, and His fidelity is assured.

In light of this, Fanning believes the warnings in Hebrews are "intended to urge the readers to maintain faith in Christ's high priestly work, not to provoke fear that they may lose their standing with God."⁶ It is not about testing their faith, however, he feels that those who commit this kind of apostasy reveal their lack of salvation to begin with – and the author of Hebrews wants the believers to understand just how serious the consequences of not being saved

4 Ibid., location 1241.

5 Ibid., location 1480.

6 Ibid., location 1602.

is, to challenge them to continue to endure and demonstrate their salvation to the world around them.

His conclusion is a challenging one, especially in light of his earlier comments that indicate these passages are written to the saved. Is he then believing these warnings do not apply to them at all given their salvation and he views these warnings as the author's attempt to communicate the seriousness of what the consequences are for the lost? Like Osborne's presentation, there are weaknesses and strengths to this stance.

Cockerill presents a Wesleyan Arminian view. He acknowledges the challenges already mentioned, as well as points out that for a Calvinist the thought of losing salvation is incompatible with their beliefs, but not only that, the idea that comes across in Hebrews that once salvation is lost it is lost for good is also incompatible with a traditional Arminian view that would hold that salvation could be restored even after having lost it.⁷

For Cockerill, the warning passages are not the focus of Hebrews, but instead a small piece of a larger pastoral strategy. He contends that the recipients are being encouraged to perseverance in faith while living in a challenging time of persecution. With such external pressures coming against them, the temptation to slide back or fall away from God would increase, and the author is warning them against that.

⁷ Ibid., location 1939.

While he takes the warnings at face value, and as such, they are warnings of the loss of salvation, Cockerill takes an interesting stance on them. For him, Hebrews is focused on urging the readers to persevere in faith. The warnings were not given to create fear, rather with the Old Testament examples given, apostates are not interested in repenting and the author warns the readers from going down that path.⁸ Ultimately, Cockerill contends that the author believes that people are either headed to God, or away from God – there is no standing still. While the reader may focus on the severity of the consequence, in reality it highlights the magnitude of the reward offered in the opposite direction.

Finally, Randall C. Gleason presents the fourth view, a moderate Reformed view on the warning passages. He seems to lead off in a significantly different direction than the other three authors, suggesting that, as is usually accepted, the recipients were Jewish Christians. However, he suggests that the letter was written before the destruction of Jerusalem, the apostasy is the rejection of Christ by the rest of the Jewish nation, and the impending judgment was the destruction that happened in 70AD.⁹

As a Calvinist, Gleason sees clear promises of a salvation that is forever, and is guaranteed.¹⁰ He sees the letter as one of encouragement, challenging the believers to continue in the pursuit of Christlikeness. It is a call to reflection, to assess where they are pointed in their faith. Gleason is convinced that his approach creates a better chance at reconciling the seeming conflict even within Hebrews over the security of salvation. If indeed it was a warning of, what

8 Ibid., location 2203.

9 Ibid., location 2611.

10 Ibid., location 2915.

was then, the coming destruction at the hands of the Romans - historically the pattern God used to pass judgment on His people when they stopped following Him, then the issue of whether or not salvation is able to be lost is no longer a part of the debate.

Conclusion

The task of picking a view I agree with is a challenging one. I tend to lean towards Calvinism in general when it comes to salvation, with an emphasis on the security of salvation. As such, Fanning's writing lines up the most with my personal understanding of the scriptures. My understanding is that it is clear in other places of the scripture that salvation is not lost, therefore, Hebrews seemingly conflicting views on that subject within the book have to be explained elsewhere in scripture where it is more plain. My assumption then is that God is more than I can possibly understand with my finite limitations; as scripture, Hebrews is not in conflict with itself or the rest of scriptures, however, it may be beyond my ability to fully explain or understand.

Having said that, I am very intrigued by Gleason's presentation and wish to explore it further. In many ways, I find myself hoping that his explanation is the best possibility, but as this was the first time I have been exposed to this viewpoint, it seems rash to accept it without further study.

Ultimately, the Arminian views seem the weakest to me. As I suggested earlier, it often times feels like word games to me to try and rationalize Hebrews to fit a free will understanding of the scriptures. Since the two seem incompatible, great leaps have to be made to rationalize the

two, which seems impractical to me. At the same time, I have thought for some time that neither Arminians nor Calvinists have a complete understanding of the scriptures. There are too many scriptures supporting either view to be able to say one is definitively wrong – somehow, what seems mutually exclusive to us in our limited human thinking is not so exclusive in God's view. There is most likely more overlap between the two extremes than any of us would be comfortable admitting.

The book itself is a challenging one. It is well written, thoroughly researched, and heavy on theology. It is not written for the casual reader. It certainly felt over my head most of the time I spent reading it. The target audience seems to be the heavily educated ministry leader or professor. With frequent references to the Greek, the assumption being that the reader is familiar with it, as well as the academic presentation, it is not a casual read. As such it is incredible strong; however, it could also be considered a weakness in that a wider audience would probably be overwhelmed by it. It is almost necessary to have a dictionary handy, and the scriptures open nearby as the writers assume a high level of familiarity with the Bible in their readers and often times simply refer to passages rather than include them in full.

In conclusion, Bateman has put together a powerful resource on the warning passages of Hebrews. He has collected some of the biggest names in Hebrews scholarship to make their varying cases for how to interpret them, and has also used their expertise to critique each other's work, much to the benefit of the reader. It is certainly a resource I will be revisiting in the years to come as I continue studying Hebrews.