Book Review: Hebrews and Divine Speech

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The book of Hebrews opens with a majestic declaration. The God who spoke “in many times and in many ways” in the past has now “spoken in a son.” In a revision of his 2010 Cambridge University dissertation, Jonathan Griffiths seeks to grapple with the impact and significance of this revelatory claim. In particular, Griffiths asks, what does the writer mean when he says that God speaks, and how does this theology of divine speech relate to the rest of Hebrews?

Griffiths pursues his study along several distinct lines of inquiry. His primary focus is on the theology of God’s speech in Hebrews. One feature of this discussion is whether there is a *logos* Christology at work in Hebrews, where Jesus is identified as the “word of God” incarnate (see esp. pp. 42–48). Griffiths argues that while many texts in Hebrews imply this connection (e.g., Heb 1:1–2; 4:12–13; 11:3), the writer “stops short of making an explicit affirmation of that kind” (p. 162). Rather, throughout Hebrews, “the Son’s person and work are presented as the means by which God has spoken his eschatological word” (p. 162). Griffiths concludes that while Hebrews is not dependent on Philo or too closely aligned to the thinking of John’s Gospel, Hebrews does contain a “discernible and sustained ‘word’ Christology” (p. 162).

In pursuing this theology of divine speech, Griffiths limits the scope of his investigation to the key terms λόγος and ῥῆμα (both of which are usually translated as “word”). In doing so, Griffiths seeks to allow the details of the text to shape the contours of his theological conclusions about the nature and function of God’s speech. These criteria also narrow the focus of the study to the manageable scope of the eight passages in Hebrews that feature these key terms. Framed by an orienting introduction and conclusion, the bulk of the work consists of eight chapters devoted to the following passages: Hebrews 1:1–4 on God’s speech “in” his son (ch. 2); 2:1–4 on God’s spoken salvation (ch. 3); 4:2–16 on God’s living word (ch. 4); 5:11–6:12 on the form and expected effect of God’s word (ch. 5); 6:13–7:28 on God’s spoken and effective oath (ch. 6); 11:3 on God’s word of creation (ch. 7); 12:18–29 on God’s saving and judging word from Zion (ch. 8); and 13:7, 17, and 22 on God’s word in relation to the community’s leaders (ch. 9).

In each chapter, Griffiths briefly exegetes the given unit, analyzes the use of the key words, and then considers their contribution to a theology of divine speech. Though a narrow focus on key terms can fall prey to the vagaries of word-studies, Griffiths intentionally keeps his eye on the broader discourse context and the relationship between words and concepts (see pp. 7–27). His limited scope also allows him to keep his treatments of each passage succinct and building toward his theological conclusions.

From these exegetical investigations, Griffiths observes that in Hebrews the term λόγος does not directly “identify” Jesus as the divine word, but rather the writer uses this word with “almost complete consistency to identify forms of divine speech” (p. 162). The term ῥῆμα, too, is used exclusively to denote some type of divine discourse (Heb 1:3, 6:5, 11:3, 12:19). Sharing a similar but distinctive function in the writer’s strategy, these two words complement each other with λόγος emphasizing the message communicated and ῥῆμα highlighting the experience and physical manifestation of God’s speech (see pp. 62–63, 126–30, 140–41).
According to Griffiths, whenever the writer uses λόγος in a phrase, “it serves to identify the speech form that it modifies as divine speech and to draw attention to its character as such” (p. 163). A theological implication from this conclusion is that, in Hebrews, to encounter the divine word “entails an encounter with Christ” and access to “the reality of salvation” (p. 165). Conversely, this encounter can also be an occasion for judgment (see esp. the analysis of Heb 12:18–29 on pp. 131–52). Thus, Griffiths here demonstrates that the book’s theology of God’s speech relates directly to the primary purpose of the epistolary sermon, namely, to exhort the hearers to “Press on!”

After considering the theology of divine speech in Hebrews and working through the relevant uses of λόγος and ῥῆμα, Griffiths considers the relationship between God’s word and the writer’s word of exhortation. Does the writer of Hebrews consider his homily “to the Hebrews” to be included in the category of divine speech? In other words, does the writer consider his words to his hearers to be part of God’s word to his people? With the appropriate nuance, Griffiths answers in the affirmative. Because of the careful way that the writer characterizes God’s speech in Hebrews, Griffiths insists, the phrase “word of exhortation” (Heb 13:22, τοῦ λόγου τῆς παρακλήσεως) is a critical feature of his compositional strategy and loaded with theological freight. Indeed, Griffiths argues that his analysis “raises the possibility that the writer wishes to signal that his own discourse forms part of the complex of divine speech presented in Hebrews” (p. 163). From this perspective, this word of exhortation represents the speech of God himself (see also Griffiths’s treatment of Heb 4:13 and 5:11).

Because of its character as a divine word of exhortation, too, Hebrews embodies a sense of urgency and authority. This divine word is also a contemporary word. Through the Old Testament Scriptures, the writer insists, God still speaks to his people. For Griffiths, the writer furthers this theological connection by locating his own written sermon within the long line of divine discourse found in the biblical canon. As Griffiths articulates, “in the moment of the delivery of the Hebrews sermon, the writer is himself the exhorter, and it is to him that they are listening ‘today’” (p. 165). Arguing that the ambiguity of Heb 12:25 is intentional (i.e. who is the one speaking?), Griffiths contends that the writer “wishes to imply that as the addressees hear his sermon, they are hearing God’s voice” (p. 165). Accordingly, those who hear Hebrews spoken “today” are also forced to respond to God’s word “today” (see pp. 55–60, 79–89). In this light, the writer “clearly holds high expectations for the effectiveness of preaching the divine word” (p. 167).

Griffiths’s argument here has substantial implications for the doctrine of revelation and Scripture. If Griffith’s basic analysis is correct, then Hebrews represents an instance within the New Testament where a biblical author himself conceives of his writing not only as the “word of man” but as the very “word of God.” This volume, then, will be a strategic resource for those searching for signs of a canon-consciousness among the New Testament writers and also for those striving to find fresh ways of formulating a high view of Scripture.

In sum, Griffiths’s study of the theology of God’s speech in Hebrews has a clear structure, a manageable scope, and produces measured but meaningful conclusions. Further, he keeps his analysis rooted in specific passages in Hebrews but also branches out to the theological forests of Christology, soteriology, and bibliography. These features make Griffiths’s volume a fruitful contribution to Hebrews studies, New Testament theology, and theological interpretation.

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