
THOUGHTS ON USING OWEN ON HEBREWS

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I have come to suspect that there are many pastors who have purchased John Owen's seven-volume commentary on Hebrews¹ who had high hopes of using these volumes while preaching through the Epistle, only to be daunted by the size of the work, the weight of the material, and the breadth of the subject matter. The temptation to let these volumes collect dust on the shelves or to sell them second-hand in order to buy something else becomes too strong for some. Not so for one great preacher who knew their worth. C. H. Spurgeon wrote concerning this set,

Out of scores of commendations of this colossal work we select but one. Dr Chalmers pronounced it 'a work of gigantic strength as well as gigantic size; and he who hath mastered it is very little short, both in respect to the doctrinal and practical of Christianity, of being an erudite and accomplished theologian.'

Here are some thoughts on why pastors should invest their precious time on this commentary and a few tips on how to use Owen's volumes profitably.

Why Study Owen on Hebrews?

1. Simply the best

This commentary contains some of the most mature thinking of one of the greatest theologians of the Christian church. The commentary was published in parts between 1668 and 1684. Owen died in 1683, and all of his major well-known works were published prior to or during this time. The Hebrews volumes are permeated with the mature

¹ Published by the Trust, John Owen's *Commentary on Hebrews* (7-vol. set) is available for £95/\$159.

thought and piety of a lifetime of labour in word and doctrine, and represent the best Owen had to offer.

2. Profound exegesis

This work is marked by profound exegesis of Scripture. Among the English Puritans Owen practically stands in a category of his own when it comes to the exegesis of the text of Scripture. This is not limited to his profound exposition of the Greek text of Hebrews. Owen provides detailed expositions of many other biblical passages, particularly from the Old Testament, which are extremely valuable in their own right. He possessed a rare mastery of both Testaments in their original languages. More will be said about this later.

3. Profound theology

This treatise is filled with profound and practical theology. By drawing ‘good and necessary consequences’ (see *Westminster Confession of Faith* 1.6) from the text in hand, Owen explores virtually the entire realm of Christian theology in the context of sound exegesis and exposition. This is evident on every page, but the preliminary ‘exercitations’ are of particular value. His theological introduction to the Epistle (‘Concerning the Epistle to the Hebrews’) will be of great help to those who want to understand the significance of the book within the canon of Scripture. His treatments of such themes as the Messiah, the Jewish church, and the priestly office of Christ, are valuable in their own right. Lastly, Owen’s ‘Day of Sacred Rest’ is more than a profound analysis of the Sabbath, since it unfolds more clearly than anywhere else in his writings his covenant theology, and the relation between the Mosaic Covenant and the Covenant of Works.

4. Worship in Scripture

As a whole, Owen’s treatment of Hebrews serves as a comparison and contrast between Old and New Testament worship. This is a recurring theme throughout the work, but is particularly evident in his exposition of chapter 12, in which he sets forth the glory and simplicity of New Testament worship. His comments on Hebrews 7:1 and 7:7 include a significant treatment of the role of ordained ministers in corporate worship, and the history and significance of benedictions.

How to Use Owen on Hebrews

1. Use the careful expositions presented at the introduction of each particular text. Owen's theological and practical analyses are often so lengthy that, though always profitable, they are unmanageable for the rigours of a weekly preaching schedule. For example, he wrote 84 pages of closely printed text on Hebrews 1:1-2. However, at the beginning of his treatment of each verse, Owen provided an analysis of all Greek terms and phrases in the passage. His analyses rival most other commentaries in skill and precision. In addition to this feature, Owen began each new chapter of Hebrews with an insightful survey of its scope.

2. Skim through lengthy sections, giving careful attention to discussions that seem most likely to expound important doctrines and applications that you intend to include in your preaching. 'The Summary of Doctrinal and Practical Observations, Drawn from the Exposition of the Epistle', found at the end of volume 2, was designed to assist you in doing this. This last exercitation is Owen's analysis of his own work. Verse by verse and section by section, it provides an overview of what you will find under the exposition of any given text in the Epistle. This will enable you to have the whole work before you at a glance and to plan ahead for subjects that might be of particular interest.

3. Read and digest a little at a time. In spite of what the size of the work may suggest, Owen is dense and often brief. There is more profit to be found in five pages of Owen than in five volumes by other writers on the same subjects. Many have noted that Owen is difficult to read, but I have never met anyone who, having taken the time read Owen, felt that their efforts had been wasted.

4. Plan ahead in your reading. Preaching requires more than the fruits of weekly preparation. Every sermon reflects the preacher as a man and betrays the extent to which he is growing in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour. The preacher's prayerful reading beyond the confines of his weekly sermon preparation shall, in large measure, determine how profitable he will be in his weekly preparation. Look at your text well in advance, determine what portions of Owen will most likely bring the greatest profit to your own soul, and devour them early.

5. Use the Scripture index in volume 7. The value of the Hebrews set for preaching is not limited to preaching through the Epistle to the

Hebrews. For example, when preparing a sermon on Haggai 2:6-7 (on the 'shaking' of heaven and earth) I gained more profit from Owen's exposition of this passage in his work on Hebrews than from most of my commentaries on Haggai. Owen's expository skills are evident throughout his works, yet his expositions of various texts in his work on Hebrews stand out for their depth and precision. In one seminary, Owen's exposition of Isaiah 7:10-16 (the 'virgin birth' prophecy) was required reading for a Hebrew exegesis paper! Index 1 at the end of volume 7 is true to its title: 'Passages of Scripture Explained'.

The industrious and disciplined student who will steadily work through all 7 volumes of Owen on Hebrews will bring forth the fruit of such labour even to old age. However, even if you cannot read these volumes from cover to cover, do not allow them to collect dust on the shelf, and by no means sell them! If you do not own this set, save your pennies until you can afford it, or sell something else in order to obtain it! However, there is no virtue in owning Owen unless you are prepared to get stuck in. 'In all labour there is profit, but idle chatter leads only to poverty' (*Prov. 14:23*).
