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## **BOOK REVIEW**

**Joseph Pathrapankal, *The New and the Living Way: Meditations on the Letter to the Hebrews*, Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 2012. pp. XI + 136, ISBN 978-81-7086-645-9**

The People of God in the changing and challenging circumstances of our contemporary society is in search for meaning in their Christian life. In general, the profound insights of the authors of the Sacred Scripture in the various books do not seem to enlighten the readers for a challenging Christian life. The thorough meditative reading of many of the books of the Sacred Scripture which will lead to an intelligent and deeper understanding of them is yet to take place in the field of biblical scholarship. In this context, *The New and the Living Way, Meditations on the Letter to the Hebrews* by the renowned biblical scholar Dr Joseph Pathrapankal is a unique and timely contribution to biblical hermeneutics.

The Letter to the Hebrews stands out as a unique literature in the realm of the biblical scholarship. It is considered as a 'word of exhortation' (*logos tes parakleseos*) or a 'sermon' rather than a letter written by an unknown but committed and responsible Christian leader to a group of Christians who were in danger of giving up their Christian commitment to make them firm in their faith. The Letter to the Hebrews is also a rich source for understanding the deeper dimensions of Christian priesthood. The pilgrim aspect of Christian life also gets many parallel thoughts from the Letter to the Hebrews, where the Christian community is presented as a community on the move. According to Dr Pathrapankal, the main idea that prompted the author of this work was that Jesus Christ is the High Priest of the new people of God, the new and the living way on which the readers are to keep on walking so that they reach the goal of their pilgrimage. The Christian life today, is not far away from the experience of the First and early Second century Christians. Pathrapankal observes that there prevails a feeling among the Christians that they are exhausted in living the Christian faith. They today need a lot of encouragement

and persuasion, assistance and acceptance. These were the concerns which prompted the present author to venture on a spiritual and homiletic reading of the Letter to the Hebrews. In this attempt he has succeeded authentically and admirably.

Dr Pathrapankal's work is subtitled as *Meditations on the Letter to the Hebrews*. But this work is neither a pious and spiritual meditation nor a purely scientific theological treatise. In fact the author has beautifully blended these two aspects in this book and thus presents before the readers the rich and deep dimensions of the Word of God that invites the readers towards an authentic Christian life. The 134 page long book is divided into fifteen chapters and the first chapter on "The Challenges of Christian Discipleship" sets the tone of the book by analyzing the contemporary situation of the world which is undergoing fast changes and by introducing the meditative reflections in the following chapters of the book as something meant to "awaken our sense of commitment to Christ and make him the 'pioneer and perfecter of our salvation' " (Heb 12:1-2). The remaining chapters of the book are profound theological meditations by the author on the key themes and passages of the Letter to the Hebrews. Here, he is helping the readers to delve deep into the meaning of the text in their pastoral and spiritual context.

In the second chapter, where the author deals with the theme of the revelation of God through His Son (1:1-4), he is presenting the Son as the revealer of the Father and also his specific role to play both in the cosmological order and in the soteriological realm. He narrates the nine roles the Son has played in the cosmic realm. After analyzing each of these nine roles, Dr Pathrapankal observes that the whole theology of the letter to the Hebrews moves around this historic revelation of God, in and through his Son. The third chapter is a meditation on "A body you have prepared for me (10:5-10)" where the author of the letter makes Christ speak about his coming into the world with a body prepared for him by God. After making a detailed presentation of both the Old Testament and the New Testament understanding of the body and the world, Dr Pathrapankal reflects how Jesus positively wanted to make this total dedication and self offering of his body a significant and ever living reality for the future life of his church.

The fourth chapter deals with the stark reality of the humanity of Jesus, which was subject to temptations and suffering. According to Dr Pathrapankal, only people who have passed through trials and

temptations can have the basic quality of altruism which adds beauty to human behaviour. In the fifth chapter he deals with one of the most emotionally charged and touching passages in the New Testament about the earthly ministry of Jesus which we have in Heb 5:7-10. After making a detailed survey of the OT and NT understanding of the meaning and mystery of suffering and relating it with the reflection of the author of Hebrews, Dr Pathrapankal concludes that the process of suffering is a process of maturing that leads the disciple of Christ to the ultimate meaning of life. Glory through suffering, life through death is the hallmark of Christian life. The sixth chapter is an appraisal of the attempt of the author of the Hebrews to present Christ as a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God. Pathrapankal observes that the ordained priests need to be imitators of Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd who knew the people, loved them and cared for them.

The seventh chapter with the title, "Surrounded by a Cloud of Witnesses," is an attempt to show how the author of the Letter is trying to depict the great ancestors of Israel who stand forth as role models for the readers in the pilgrimage of faith. Eighth chapter presents Christ as the "pioneer and perfecter of our faith (Heb 12:1-2). The author of Hebrews, observes Dr Pathrapankal, is concentrating here on the divine and the human aspects of the person of Christ, and thereby invites the readers to develop a personal and intimate relationship towards this unique and universal trail-blazer and goal-setter of human history. The ninth chapter is a meditation on Christian discipleship and its close relationship to Christian discipline. "A disciple without discipline is a contradiction in terms," observes Dr Pathrapankal. In the tenth chapter, he examines the exhortation of the author to "wake up and march forward."

The meditation on "He suffered outside the Gate" in the eleventh chapter focuses on the suffering of Jesus outside the city gate of Jerusalem. Reflecting on this statement of the author of the letter, Dr Pathrapankal makes it clear that today our challenge is to face the question regarding our own religious identity. In the twelfth chapter titled, "There is no Permanent City here on Earth (13:14)," Pathrapankal is giving some hermeneutical clues to clarify how there occurred a kind of negative attitude towards life and world. He goes further to state that this negative outlook towards life and the world is not at all a biblical contribution. The thirteenth chapter is a profound reflection on the word of God and it narrates how the author of the letter has given a challenging insight into the word of

God in order to make the readers aware of the power of this word. Dr Pathrapankal opines that the same word of God has to guide the Church in its encounter with culture and also in interreligious dialogue. The concluding chapter of the book is an attempt from the part of the author to meditate upon Jesus Christ as the new and the living way. He observes that the author of the letter presents Jesus as someone who has fully identified himself with the way. Accepting Jesus as “the new and living way” by accepting the message of Jesus is not changing from religion to another, but it is a question of new reality, new conviction and a new commitment.

This meditation on the Letter to the Hebrews by Dr Joseph Pathrapnakal is a collection of profound and powerful reflections on authentic Christian life. The readers of this book will have an experience of a pilgrimage of faith. He has beautifully prepared each reflection of this book in such a manner that gives a background setting of each theme in a systematic manner. Both the OT understanding and the teachings and works of Jesus on each theme set up the tone of each meditation. At the same time he has carefully avoided all the technical details in such a way that it helps an easy reflective reading of the book. As he mentions in the last chapter of the book, the inspired word of God should become an inspiring word of God for all those who encounter it in the concrete context of their life. Definitely, this book will work as a catalyst for such a transformation. Pathrapankal has succeeded in translating the message of a first century work formulated in the context of an early Christian community that was undergoing a crisis of faith and commitment to Christian values into the present world which faces a similar situation. His half a century long work in biblical scholarship and priestly experience has contributed yet another remarkable book that will inspire the people of God, “the pilgrim community.”

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