

On the Cloud of Unknowing

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For use with Lesson One of the 2017–2018 PW/*Horizons* Bible study, *Cloud of Witnesses: The Community of Christ in Hebrews* by Melissa Bane Sevier



Scripture: Genesis 13:24; 1:26–27; Hebrews 1:1–4; 4:14–5:10; Genesis 14:18–20; Hebrews 7:26–28

When I was a new professor and saw seminary students raising their hands, I had stage fright over whether I might manage a decent response to what might come out of their mouths. Thinking this young audience knew more than they did, I was embarrassed by the many times each week when all I could say was, “I don’t know.” I learned to add, “. . . but I will find out for you,” or even, as I became canner about questions that were off point, “Why don’t you look into that and report back to us?”

I quickly learned to sort my ignorance into three categories: (1) things nobody knows; (2) things someone somewhere knows, in some subspecialty that is not my own, that could be ferreted out with a little spot research; and (3) things I should know and will know next time. I learned to face even that last category with humility.

Realizing these distinctions helped me relax when hands shot up in class. Nearly every question allowed me to test my power to clarify what I did know, my curiosity to find out something a student had lighted on that I had never wondered, or my modesty before my own or our entire profession’s ignorance. Each question became a challenge to explore scripture more thoughtfully.

As Melissa Bane Sevier explains in Lesson One, much basic information surrounding the origin of the book of Hebrews is simply unavailable, and was unavailable even to early readers. We do not know who wrote it, or where, or when, or for what specific audience. We cannot even clearly say what kind of writing it is. This is disorienting. But anyone who has

studied the Bible knows that such mysteries are common to nearly all of scripture. None of it was passed down with the publication details we expect today. Even attributions of authorship conferred by tradition are often suspect. But the attribution process suggests that our ancestors too felt uncomfortable leaving biblical books anonymous and offered their best guesses.

This is not to say, of course, that the Bible lacks human authors writing in definite times and places to intended audiences. But it is to say that people didn’t have the same assumptions of ownership that we do today. Now copyrights are carefully protected, and people who use the words of others without giving credit are accused of plagiarism.

But it wasn’t like this back then. Manuscripts were handwritten, not printed. This meant there were few copies available and those few copies were quite expensive. More importantly, it meant that a work may have become more widely shared than the author intended. When readers desired to share the writing, they obviously couldn’t photocopy or even print it. Rather, a scribe would transcribe it by hand. Everything copied was subject to alteration at the copyist’s discretion, or even subject to being joined to other writings in various collections. So what was preserved passed very quickly from the original writer’s control into control by the various religious communities that preserved it. We might think of what happens today to recipes we receive and pass on, or to policy manuals in a workplace that are updated over time. In addition, what we call scripture is not merely one body of writings, but rather the preserved remainder of all the many writings produced in ancient Judah and the ancient church—a relatively tiny portion that was deemed momentous enough to be transmitted

from one generation to the next and finally canonized as scripture. If new sayings today can pass from one person to another to another in a matter of months, to the point that no one knows where they originated, we can imagine a book like Hebrews losing all authorial information as it passed through Christian hands for several decades, from its moment of origin to its acceptance as part of an entirely new book we now call the New Testament.

Given that we don't know the author's name or biography, we might ask how much this matters. It's not just about satisfying curiosity, after all. I remember one student in particular who deeply prized his mental image of Moses sitting down to compose the book of Genesis (a notion of authorship the book doesn't share, but centuries of tradition have promoted). He also valued seeing in his mind's eye King David at his desk writing Psalms, perhaps even reflecting upon the many ups and downs of his tumultuous life as he did so, King Solomon imparting wisdom through Proverbs, and so on. For this student, these books took on life as he imagined historic figures, whose names he knew, penning their pages and sharing their faith journeys.

This poor student spent his semester of introduction to the Hebrew Bible good-naturedly groaning every time one of his assumptions was dispelled. The pain was real—he had to let go of a mental image that had helped him connect to what he read and heard. But the willingness to let go was real, too. Because each time he recognized that Moses, David, Solomon and a few others did not shoulder the Bible alone, but instead were being remembered by what

Hebrews calls a “great cloud of witnesses,” his awareness of the shared and communal nature of life before God grew—even the life of the Bible itself. The author of Hebrews was likewise forced to give up on telling the whole story of faith's forebears, saying, “Time would fail me to tell” of a long list of named ancestors and an even longer list of those remaining nameless (Heb. 11:32). In the end, it's not because there is too little to tell, but because there is too much, that everything isn't known.

In the 14th century, a Christian mystic (whose name likewise remains unknown) composed a book about contemplative prayer called *The Cloud of Unknowing*. In it, the writer advised seeking God not by means of information about the divine, but through contemplation—an intense openness to a God who cannot be grasped by thought, but only loved. This work did not become well known for two centuries and was not published until 1877. But it eventually became a key precursor for Christian meditation practices today.

The Bible is distinguished from God by its actual but often unknown human, historical origins. But the phrase this medieval writer used to describe the context in which God may be sought, “the cloud of unknowing,” is an apt one for scripture, too. We can often learn much more *from* the Bible—and from practicing what scripture commends—than we can learn *about* it.

So as we set aside a distinct picture of the author of Hebrews, we clear the way to imagine the world as this early Christian imagined it—built on the foundation of Jesus Christ.

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1. Describe your understanding of the authorship of such important biblical books as Genesis, Psalms, and Hebrews. How does not knowing the authors' names affect your reading of them?
 2. 1 Corinthians 13:12 speaks of knowing *in part*, even as we are fully known (by God). What does it mean that God knows us in ways that we do not know God?

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