

## READING THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS

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Tom Thatcher  
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READING THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS  
A Resource for Students

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*Edited by*

Eric F. Mason

and

Kevin B. McCrudden

Society of Biblical Literature  
Atlanta

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Eric F. Mason  
Kevin B. McCrudden



## ABBREVIATIONS

### GREEK AND LATIN SOURCES

Aelius Theon	
<i>Progym.</i>	<i>Progymnasmata</i>
Albinus	
<i>Epit.</i>	<i>Handbook of Platonism</i>
Apollonius of Tyana	
<i>Ep.</i>	<i>Letters</i>
Aristotle	
<i>Eth. nic.</i>	<i>Nichomachean Ethics</i>
<i>Rhet.</i>	<i>Rhetoric</i>
Athanasius	
<i>C. Ar.</i>	<i>Orations against the Arians</i>
Augustine	
<i>Conf.</i>	<i>Confessions</i>
Barn.	<i>Barnabas</i>
Cicero	
<i>De or.</i>	<i>De oratore</i>
<i>Div.</i>	<i>De divinatione</i>
<i>Flac.</i>	<i>Pro Flacco</i>
<i>Inv.</i>	<i>De inventione rhetorica</i>
<i>Nat. d.</i>	<i>De natura deorum</i>
<i>Off.</i>	<i>De officiis</i>
<i>Part. or.</i>	<i>Partitiones oratoriae</i>
<i>Quint. Fratr.</i>	<i>Epistulae ad Quintum fratrem</i>
Clement of Alexandria	
<i>Ecl.</i>	<i>Extracts from the Prophets</i>
<i>Quis div.</i>	<i>Salvation of the Rich</i>
<i>Strom.</i>	<i>Miscellanies</i>

Cyril of Alexandria	
<i>Adv. Nest.</i>	<i>Against Nestorius</i>
Demosthenes	
1–2 <i>Aristog.</i>	1–2 <i>Against Aristogeiton</i>
1–3 [4] <i>Philip.</i>	1–4 <i>Philippic</i>
<i>Cor.</i>	<i>On the Crown</i>
<i>Exord.</i>	<i>Exordia</i>
Dio Chrysostom	
<i>Or.</i>	<i>Discourses</i>
Dionysius of Halicarnassus	
1–2 <i>Amm.</i>	<i>Epistula ad Ammaeum i–ii</i>
Epictetus	
<i>Diatr.</i>	<i>Diatribai (Dissertationes)</i>
Euripides	
<i>Herc. fur.</i>	<i>Madness of Hercules</i>
Eusebius	
<i>Praep. ev.</i>	<i>Preparation for the Gospel</i>
Herodotus	
<i>Hist.</i>	<i>Histories</i>
Hesiod	
<i>Theog.</i>	<i>Theogony</i>
Irenaeus	
<i>Haer.</i>	<i>Against Heresies</i>
Isocrates	
<i>Hel. enc.</i>	<i>Helenaecomium (Or. 10)</i>
John Chrysostom	
<i>Hom. Heb.</i>	<i>Homiliae in epistulam ad Hebraeos</i>
Josephus	
<i>Ag. Ap.</i>	<i>Against Apion</i>
<i>Ant.</i>	<i>Antiquities</i>
<i>J.W.</i>	<i>Jewish War</i>
Justin	
<i>Dial.</i>	<i>Dialogue with Trypho</i>
Lucian	
<i>Merc. cond.</i>	<i>Salaried Posts in Great Houses</i>
<i>Philops.</i>	<i>The Lover of Lies</i>
<i>Sacr.</i>	<i>Sacrifices</i>
Marcus Aurelius	<i>Meditations</i>

Maximus of Tyre	
<i>Diss.</i>	<i>Dissertationis</i>
Origen	
<i>Cels.</i>	<i>Against Celsus</i>
<i>Hom. Exod.</i>	<i>Homiliae in Exodum</i>
Philo	
<i>Abr.</i>	<i>On the Life of Abraham</i>
<i>Aet.</i>	<i>On the Eternity of the World</i>
<i>Cher.</i>	<i>On the Cherubim</i>
<i>Conf.</i>	<i>On the Confusion of Tongues</i>
<i>Congr.</i>	<i>On the Preliminary Studies</i>
<i>Contempl.</i>	<i>On the Contemplative Life</i>
<i>Decal.</i>	<i>On the Decalogue</i>
<i>Deus</i>	<i>That God is Unchangeable</i>
<i>Ebr.</i>	<i>On Drunkenness</i>
<i>Gig.</i>	<i>On Giants</i>
<i>Her.</i>	<i>Who Is the Heir?</i>
<i>Hypoth.</i>	<i>Hypothetica</i>
<i>Ios.</i>	<i>On the Life of Joseph</i>
<i>Leg.</i>	<i>Allegorical Interpretation</i>
<i>Legat.</i>	<i>On the Embassy to Gaius</i>
<i>Migr.</i>	<i>On the Migration of Abraham</i>
<i>Mos.</i>	<i>The Life of Moses</i>
<i>Opif.</i>	<i>On the Creation of the World</i>
<i>Plant.</i>	<i>On Planting</i>
<i>Post.</i>	<i>On the Posterity of Cain</i>
<i>Praem.</i>	<i>On Rewards and Punishments</i>
<i>Prob.</i>	<i>That Every Good Person is Free</i>
<i>Prov.</i>	<i>On Providence</i>
<i>QE</i>	<i>Questions and Answers on Exodus</i>
<i>QG</i>	<i>Questions and Answers on Genesis</i>
<i>Sacr.</i>	<i>On the Sacrifices of Cain and Abel</i>
<i>Somn.</i>	<i>On Dreams</i>
<i>Spec.</i>	<i>On the Special Laws</i>
Philostratos	
<i>Ep.</i>	<i>Epistulae</i>
<i>Gymn.</i>	<i>De gymnastica</i>
<i>Vit. Apoll.</i>	<i>Vita Apollonii</i>

## Pindar

*Nem.*                                 *Nemean Odes*

## Plato

*Leg.*                                 *Laws*  
*Phaed.*                             *Phaedo*  
*Phaedr.*                           *Phaedrus*  
*Resp.*                               *Republic*  
*Tim.*                                *Timaeus*

## Pliny the Younger

*Ep.*                                    *Epistulae*

## Plutarch [and Pseudo-Plutarch]

*Cat. Maj.*                         *Cato the Elder*  
*Def. orac.*                        *De defectu oraculorum*  
*E Delph.*                         *De E apud Delphos*  
*Exil.*                                *De exilio*  
*Frat. amor.*                     *De fraterno amore*  
*Garr.*                                *De garrulitate*  
*Is. Os.*                             *De Iside et Osiride*  
[*Lib. ed.*]                         *De liberis educandis*  
*Mor.*                                 *Moralia*  
*Quaest. conv.*                 *Quaestionum convivialum libri IX*  
*Sept. sap. conv.*               *Septem sapientium convivium*  
*Sol.*                                 *Solon*  
*Superst.*                         *De superstitione*

## Quintilian

*Inst.*                                 *Institutio oratoria*

## Rhetorica ad Herennium

*Rhet. Her.*                        *Rhetorica ad Herennium*

## Seneca

*Ben.*                                 *De beneficiis*  
*Ira*                                    *De Ira*  
*Prov.*                                *De providentia*

## Strabo

*Geogr.*                             *Geography*

## Suetonius

*Claud.*                             *Divus Claudius*  
*Nero*                                 *Nero*

## Tacitus

*Ann.*                                 *Annales*

<i>Hist.</i>	<i>Historiae</i>
Tertullian	
<i>Marc.</i>	<i>Against Marcion</i>
Theodore of Mopsuestia	
<i>Cat. hom.</i>	<i>Catachetical Homily</i>
Theophrastus	
<i>Char.</i>	<i>Characteres</i>
Xenophon	
<i>Cyr.</i>	<i>Cyropaedia</i>
<i>Mem.</i>	<i>Memorabilia</i>

## DEAD SEA SCROLLS

DJD(J)	Discoveries in the Judaean Desert (of Jordan)
ar	Aramaic
CD	Damascus Document (versions A and B from the Cairo Genizah)
1QapGen	Genesis Apocryphon
1QpHab	Peshar Habakkuk
1QM	War Scroll
1QS	Rule of the Community
1QSa	Rule of the Congregation
1QSb	Rule of the Blessings
1QpPs	Peshar Psalms
4Q174	Florilegium
4Q175	Testimonia
4Q177	Catena manuscript a
4Q255–264	Rule of the Community
4Q266–273	Damascus Document
4Q285	War Rule
4QMMT (394–399)	MMT (“Some of the Works of the Law”)
4Q400–407	Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice
4Q491–496	War Scroll
4Q543–549	Visions of Amram
5Q11	Rule of the Community
5Q12	Damascus Document
6Q15	Damascus Document
11Q13	Melchizedek
11Q14	War Rule

11Q17	Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice
11Q29	Rule of the Community?
Mas1k	Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice (found at Masada)

## PSEUDEPIGRAPHIA

1 En.	1 Enoch
Jub.	Jubilees

## RABBINIC LITERATURE

b.	Babylonian Talmud
B. Qam.	Bava Qamma
Ber.	Berakot
Gen. Rab.	Genesis Rabbah
m.	Mishnah
Meg.	Megillah
Pesiq. Rab.	Pesiqta Rabbati
Roš. Haš.	Roš Haššanah
Šabb.	Šabbat
Sanh.	Sanhedrin
Sukkah	Sukkah
t.	Tosefta
Ta'an.	Ta'anit
y.	Jerusalem Talmud

## OTHER

ANF	<i>Ante-Nicene Fathers</i> . Edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. 10 vols. Repr., Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994. [orig. 1885–1887]
BDAG	Bauer, W., F. W. Danker, W. F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich. <i>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> . 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.
BiPa	Biblia Patristica. Index des citations et allusions bibliques dans la littérature. Paris, 1975–
ca.	circa

KJV	King James Version
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
LXX	Septuagint
LW	<i>Luther's Works</i> . American Edition. Edited by Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehman. 55 vols. Philadelphia: Muehlenberg and Fortress; St. Louis: Concordia, 1955–1986.
MT	Masoretic Text
NAB	New American Bible
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NLT	New Living Translation
NPNF 1	<i>The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers</i> , series 1. Edited by Philip Schaff. 14 vols. Repr., Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994. [orig. 1886–1889]
NPNF 2	<i>The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers</i> , series 2. Edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. 14 vols. Repr., Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994. [orig. 1890]
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
OG	Old Greek
RSV	Revised Standard Version
SIG	<i>Sylloge inscriptionum graecarum</i> . Edited by W. Dittenberger. 4 vols. 3rd ed. Leipzig, 1915–1924.
s.v.	<i>sub verbo</i> (“under the word”)
TDNT	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i> . Edited by G. Kittel and G. Friedrich. Translated by G. W. Bromiley. 10 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–1976.
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament





## INTRODUCTION

*Eric F. Mason*

The title of this book is *Reading the Epistle to the Hebrews: A Resource for Students*, and the phrases on both sides of the colon are vital to convey the intent for this volume. This is a book about the Epistle to the Hebrews, which has been called “the Cinderella” of New Testament studies (Guthrie 2004, 414; following McCullough 1994, 66). This designation accurately reflects the explosion of interest in the book in recent decades—since the publication in 1989 of Harold W. Attridge’s landmark commentary in the Hermeneia series—after years of relative neglect. For centuries, most interpreters assumed Paul was the author; once scholarship rejected that traditional identification, the anonymous author of Hebrews was essentially sidelined as eccentric and rarely included in discussions of profound early Christian voices. Rudolf Bultmann virtually ignored the book, for example, in his classic *Theology of the New Testament* in the mid-twentieth century (1951–1955). In recent years, however, Hebrews has reemerged as a text of significant interest, so much so that now many would affirm Frank J. Matera’s assessment that the author is “one of the great theologians of the New Testament ... equal in theological stature” with those of the Pauline and Johannine traditions (Matera 2007, 333).

Most of the contributors to the present volume are recognized specialists on the study of Hebrews, as a perusal of the volume’s bibliography will demonstrate. Others have not normally published on Hebrews but bring particular expertise from another field or discipline to the study of this text, thereby enriching this collection with contents ranging beyond the topics normally addressed in academic biblical studies. Together these essays examine numerous important issues for reading Hebrews, such as the author’s conceptual influences and engagement with Scripture and other traditions, the book’s structure, its major theological themes, emerging interpretative methods for engaging the text, and the use of

Hebrews (both positively and negatively) by subsequent generations of readers.

Our assumption is that most readers of this book will study it alongside a standard commentary. As such, rather than seeking to duplicate what those volumes do best (treatment of standard issues such as authorship, date, and so forth, plus detailed exegesis of the biblical text), our focus has been to provide extended discussions of important issues that go beyond what is feasible in a typical commentary. Our hope is that readers will find the chapters in this book both illuminating and provocative as they ponder Hebrews in the company of our contributors.

This leads naturally to consideration of the second half of this book's title: "a resource for students." Our contributors have been charged not just to write chapters that engage the best of contemporary scholarship on Hebrews but to do so with the needs and concerns of student readers at the forefront. We have sought to write with an advanced undergraduate readership in mind, but also in ways that will be beneficial for more advanced students in seminary or graduate school and indeed for any educated reader studying Hebrews for the first time. This means we have been intentional about defining specialized terminology, providing relevant historical and cultural background information, and explaining tenets of the methodologies we utilize. While Hebrews is the subject of several very readable introductory commentaries and handbooks written by esteemed scholars (including some excellent volumes by contributors to this book), we are aware of no other student-oriented book on Hebrews that addresses the breadth of issues with the range of perspectives that the present volume offers. We trust that students and other readers of Hebrews will find the essays here to be understandable, instructive, and enlightening.

\* \* \*

Hebrews is a difficult, mysterious, and sometimes even cryptic book, elements that have contributed both to its neglect and appeal. We cannot know the identity of its author, though (despite early reservations in the West) from the fourth through sixteenth centuries interpreters overwhelmingly assumed it was Paul until Erasmus and Martin Luther reopened the question (for an excellent survey of the history of interpretation of Hebrews, see Koester 2001, 19–63). Other suggestions by ancient and modern readers have included Barnabas, Apollos, and even Priscilla;

extensive arguments for Luke (Allen 2010) and a Pauline pseudepigrapher (Rothschild 2009) have recently appeared. Most contemporary scholars, however, concede that we cannot know the author's personal identity but that we can discern several things about him from the text. His heartfelt, pastoral "word of exhortation" (13:22) was preserved as a letter (albeit one lacking a typical epistolary beginning) but exhibits fine homiletic qualities. He wrote eloquent Greek, normally described as the most refined in the New Testament (see Trotter 1997, 163–84, for a very accessible survey of the author's literary sophistication and style), and he was equally comfortable with the canons of Greek rhetoric and the *middot* of Second Temple period Jewish exegetical traditions. This resulted in sometimes complex, often creative, and always profound interpretations of the Septuagint as he urged his audience to remain faithful to its Christian commitment in the midst of adversity in the latter part of the first century C.E.

We do not know exactly what sort of issues the audience faced, and even among the contributors to this volume explanations will differ. Formerly most interpreters assumed that the recipients were Jewish Christians who struggled over the relationship between their heritage and their faith in Jesus, thus they were either hesitant to break away from the synagogue or else inclined to return. Such interpretations have deep roots in tradition, in part due to the heavy use of sacrificial and priestly imagery in the book, and this contributed both to the title later added to the book ("To the Hebrews") and the assumption among many early readers that it was intended for the Jerusalem church. Increasingly, however, modern interpreters argue that nothing in Hebrews demands a reading so dependent on Jewish ethnicity; instead, the problem is discouragement and apathy in the midst of withering social opposition and (sometimes) persecution. Still, however, scholarly reconstructions of the precise setting continue to vary. Regardless, almost all interpreters now agree that the text was sent to friends still in Rome ("those from Italy send you greetings," 13:24).

Detailed consideration of these matters need not detain us here because such things are covered in significant detail in most critical commentaries. Instead, as noted above, the purpose of this volume is to examine major issues for interpretation of Hebrews that go beyond the scope of the typical commentary yet are vital for beginning readers of the text. Our subjects may be grouped in five categories: issues of conceptual and historical background, structure of the text, emerging methodological approaches, major theological issues, and reception history.

## CONCEPTUAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The question of the conceptual background that most influenced the author of Hebrews is one with a long history of discussion, and virtually any commentary includes some discussion of three major proposals: Middle Platonic thought (especially as represented by Philo of Alexandria), Palestinian Judaism, or Gnosticism. While the latter of these has largely been abandoned in recent decades, especially in English-language scholarship, one still finds ardent defenses for the other two suggestions, unfortunately often couched in either-or terms. Both remaining options, however, largely still concern the Jewish context of the author, whether more akin to the Platonizing Judaism of Philo of Alexandria or more Palestinian strains as represented by the Qumran sectarians and other apocalyptic groups. More recently, a number of interpreters have begun to consider how interpretation of Hebrews is impacted when read explicitly as a text addressed to a Roman audience.

Four essays in this volume address issues related to the conceptual and historical backgrounds of Hebrews. While each contributor considers these questions from a different perspective, all four agree that the author of Hebrews draws on a rich and varied font of traditions.

In “Hebrews among Greeks and Romans,” Patrick Gray addresses the fundamental question of “why it is necessary to know anything about Greece or Rome in a letter to ‘Hebrews.’” Gray explains that, regardless of the ethnicity of the recipients of the book, they lived in the Greco-Roman world, and “several aspects of the argument of Hebrews stand out more vividly when viewed against the background of Greek and Roman culture.” Gray provides a lucid consideration of numerous issues, including language and rhetoric, philosophy, causes of and responses to persecution, understandings of brotherly love, imagery from athletics, political discourse, and conceptions of sacrifice. Throughout he demonstrates how an understanding of the Greco-Roman world illuminates interpretation of Hebrews—and thus also how both the author and his audience were immersed in the broader culture of their era.

The next chapter, by James W. Thompson, is titled “What Has Middle Platonism to Do with Hebrews?” and addresses more specifically the influence of philosophical thought on the book’s author. Thompson observes that in the early centuries of the church both critics and proponents of Christianity noted numerous “irreconcilable differences” between Platonism and Christianity, including the eschatological expectations of the

latter, yet Christian thinkers frequently “employed Platonic language and categories in varying degrees to explain Christian beliefs.” The question of whether the author of Hebrews also drew upon Middle Platonic philosophical thought remains debated, but Thompson provides a careful, articulate defense of that position. He first offers a very helpful survey of Middle Platonic thought, especially as expressed by its Jewish proponent Philo. Thompson then considers key passages in Hebrews and explains how the author utilized philosophical thought and language in his argumentation. He concludes that, while the author of Hebrews was not a thoroughgoing Platonist, nevertheless, “like the Christian theologians who came after him, he employed Platonic assumptions for his own pastoral purposes.”

Eric F. Mason addresses another major suggestion for the conceptual background of Hebrews in “Cosmology, Messianism, and Melchizedek: Apocalyptic Jewish Traditions and Hebrews.” Like Thompson, Mason argues that the author of Hebrews utilized ideas from a number of traditions, both philosophical and eschatological. But just as some interpreters deny the presence of Middle Platonism in Hebrews, others reject the idea that the book has parallels with ideas expressed in apocalyptic Jewish traditions like those reflected in the Dead Sea Scrolls. Mason surveys the complicated history of attempts to relate the Scrolls to Hebrews, then cautiously considers similarities in three areas: cosmology, particularly conceptions of the heavenly sanctuary and divine throne; messianism, especially ideas about a messianic priest; and Melchizedek, specifically interpretations that portray him as a heavenly, angelic figure. In each case, Mason notes both similarities and differences in Hebrews and the Qumran texts, but he concludes that “these points of contact establish the importance of understanding the broader Second Temple Jewish context for reading this epistle.”

David M. Moffitt considers the author’s Jewish context in a different way in “The Interpretation of Scripture in the Epistle to the Hebrews.” Moffitt sets two major goals for his investigation: to survey issues important for understanding how the author interprets Scripture, and to analyze selected examples of his exegesis that indicate something of his conception of Scripture. Moffitt undertakes the first of these by explaining the nature of the biblical text (the Septuagint) utilized by the author of Hebrews—in the process providing a very helpful primer on textual criticism—then discussing several important Jewish interpretative techniques known from the Dead Sea Scrolls and rabbinic literature. Next, he makes his way through key passages in Hebrews, explaining how the author deals

with biblical citations and how such compares with techniques current in contemporary Judaism. Throughout his discussion Moffitt reflects recent scholarship on Hebrews' methods of biblical interpretation (especially that of Susan Docherty 2009). He concludes that the author of Hebrews considers Scripture "a repository of divine speech," words "living and active" that speak "about Jesus, the Son, and the community that confesses Jesus' name." Drawing on contemporary exegetical methods, he can recast "scriptural words in new ways," yet "the words themselves also place constraints on him" that demand careful attention.

### STRUCTURE OF THE TEXT

Interpreters of Hebrews have long struggled to explain how the book is structured. Still there is no consensus, though the five-part outline proposed by Albert Vanhoye (1976 [first ed. 1963]), arranged concentrically around a central emphasis on sacrifice in 5:11–10:39, has been especially influential. Normally interpreters have sought to organize the book in a linear fashion based on verbal or thematic cues in the text, but others have utilized insights from disciplines such as discourse analysis with varying results (Guthrie 1994; Westfall 2005). The book's sermon qualities have prompted still other scholars to analyze the book in light of rhetorical or homiletical models, and two chapters here explore such possibilities from very different perspectives.

Craig R. Koester, in "Hebrews, Rhetoric, and the Future of Humanity," notes that consideration of the structure of Hebrews is vital because "the way that interpreters perceive the book's structure reflects the way they understand its message." He argues that the book is best understood when considered through the lens of Greco-Roman rhetoric. Koester provides an introduction to the canons of classical rhetoric while presenting Hebrews as a text with an exordium (1:1–2:4), a proposition (2:5–9), three series of arguments (2:10–12:27), a peroration (12:28–13:21), and an epistolary postscript (13:22–25). Throughout he illustrates his approach with copious examples from classical literature and explains how each section of the text would function to appeal to the audience. Also, he interacts with other scholars' suggestions about the book's structure and features. He concludes that the author, addressing "a Christian community in decline ... focused his speech on the way that the hope of inheriting glory in God's kingdom seemed to be contradicted by the inglorious experience of Christian life in the world." The author assures his audience

that God is faithful and that the ministry of Jesus ensures the fulfillment of their promised inheritance.

In the next chapter, “Hebrews, Homiletics, and Liturgical Scripture Interpretation,” Gabriella Gelardini offers an alternative approach. She observes that the author of Hebrews makes extensive use of biblical quotations but varies the methodology and concentration of citations from section to section in the book, a technique most closely paralleled in synagogue homilies. Gelardini provides a very helpful introduction to ancient synagogue practices, architecture, and liturgy before turning to describe the nature of and expectations for synagogue homilies. In her reading, the key biblical passages undergirding the homily we now call Hebrews were Exod 31:18–32:35 (the Torah text, or *sidrah*, with the theme of covenant breaking) and Jer 31:31–34 (the related reading from the Prophets, the *haphtarah*, on covenant renewal). The overall structure is that of a three-part *petichta* homily with elaborate expectations for the use of scriptural citations in each section. Gelardini asserts that the key texts from Exodus and Jeremiah were paired in the reconstructed ancient Jewish “triennial reading cycle between the two fast days from Tammuz 17 and Av 9,” the former commemorating the destruction of the law tablets by Moses in response to the golden calf incident and the latter the rebellion at Kadesh-barnea. Both also were associated with the destruction of the First Temple by the Babylonians, with Tisha be-Av also related to the fall of the Second Temple and the failure of the Bar Kokhba revolt. As the lowest points on the Jewish calendar, they are “shadow images” of its highest point, Yom Kippur, and this explains the importance of the Day of Atonement rite for the author of Hebrews.

#### EMERGING METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES

Recent decades in biblical scholarship have been marked by the emergence of new methodologies beyond the traditional historical-critical modes that have long characterized academic biblical studies. Hebrews has not normally been a prominent text under consideration by practitioners of new approaches, especially compared to the attention received by other New Testament texts such as the Gospels and Pauline Epistles, but that does not mean it is not fertile ground for such investigations.

One might argue that social-scientific interpretation of the New Testament no longer is an “emerging” field, but analyses of Hebrews remain few, and there is much internal debate among practitioners about the

proper appropriation of such techniques for biblical interpretation. (For Hebrews, see especially deSilva 2008 [orig. 1995] and 2000, both examples of sociorhetorical interpretation, and the rather different approach of Whitlark 2008.) Jerome H. Neyrey, a veteran social-scientific interpreter who earlier examined Jesus' role in the Gospel of John using the model of a "broker" (Neyrey 2007), analyzes Hebrews' portrait of Jesus as priest in "Jesus the Broker in Hebrews: Insights from the Social Sciences." Neyrey explains the importance of patron-client relationships in the ancient Mediterranean world and the vital role played by brokers, go-betweens who "bring the client's needs to the attention of the patron, as well as the benefactions of the patron to the clients." Next he considers the presentation of Jesus as priest/broker in Hebrews through the lens of five questions: How does one become a broker? What makes one successful? What does one broker? Why a broker, and why this one? What tariff does a broker receive? In the course of his discussion, Neyrey also considers how Hebrews presents Jesus as priest in ways akin to the ancient rhetorical categories students learned in *progymnasmata* exercises.

Kenneth Schenck considers a different emerging methodology in "Hebrews as the Re-presentation of a Story: A Narrative Approach to Hebrews." Others have applied this approach to study of New Testament letters—most notably Richard Hays (2002 [orig. 1983]) on Galatians—with the assumption that Paul "was arguing with his opponents *over a story*"; such a foundational narrative understanding of the gospel and its implications included various elements both shared and disputed by the apostle and his detractors. Schenck surveys the application of literary criticism to the New Testament in recent decades and considers critiques of the approaches used by Hays and others, then asserts that the author of Hebrews also has in mind a story that undergirds his message in the epistle. Schenck rejects the idea that Hebrews was written to Jewish Christians "tempted to return to mainstream Judaism and its Levitical means of atonement" in the years before the destruction of the temple. Instead, he argues that the author of Hebrews offers consolation after the destruction of the temple in 70 C.E. to Christian believers of any ethnicity who might question their faith in the aftermath of that event. In order to do this, the author draws upon a shared body of assumptions from the biblical "story" he shares with the recipients and re-presents them in "a radical reinterpretation of key events in the common Christian-Jewish story." This motive explains the author's significant interest in things and ideas such as sanctuaries, atonement, exaltation, and priesthood. As such, "the author



builds on the audience's current understanding and common Christian traditions and re-presents them in striking terms."

#### MAJOR THEOLOGICAL ISSUES

Hebrews is a profoundly theological book, and as noted earlier the significance of this has been increasingly recognized in recent decades. Frank J. Matera offers an overview of the theology of the book in "The Theology of the Epistle to the Hebrews." Matera notes that "the task of New Testament theology is to provide a thick and rich description of the theology in the New Testament so that what was written in the past will have meaning and relevance for the future," yet this task is difficult because the New Testament texts were not intended as theological treatises. Nevertheless, they are steeped in religious thought, and one may consider their contents using classic theological categories, provided that one remains cognizant of the original nature of the texts under discussion. Matera finds in Hebrews "the most systematic presentation of the person and work of Jesus in the New Testament" but also challenges, including its distinctive presentation of Jesus as priest, its emphasis on Jesus' death but relative silence on the resurrection and parousia, and its self-description as a "word of exhortation." Matera explicates the theology of the book in three parts: consideration of its doctrinal exposition (chiefly on the person and work of Christ) and its moral exhortation (especially concerning what one may know of the audience and their hope for the future), then reflections on the significance of Hebrews' theology for contemporary Christian faith and thought.

Next, Kevin B. McCrudden explores more specifically a particular theological issue in Hebrews in "The Concept of Perfection in the Epistle to the Hebrews." Perfection terminology occurs eighteen times in Hebrews, yet McCrudden notes that it is difficult to ascertain exactly how the author understands this idea. He undertakes his investigation with "the methodological assumption that a larger narrative world or theological story informs this ancient sermon," one very comprehensible to an ancient audience but likely "profoundly alien" to modern readers. He proceeds to explain this story, particularly with respect to the role that perfection plays in the "human career" of Jesus, and finds many parallels between Hebrews and the *kenōsis* hymn in Phil 2:6–11. Also, McCrudden draws links between the perfection of Jesus and the perfection of his faithful people. He concludes, "while the event of Jesus' exaltation comprises one aspect of what Jesus' perfection means for the author of Hebrews, the personal faithful-

ness of Jesus also plays a significant role in the perfecting of the Son as eternal high priest.” Likewise, “the faithful ultimately experience perfection in the age to come,” yet “even now . . . perfection understood as communion with God is an experiential reality that has been made possible through the personal sacrifice of Jesus that cleanses the believer from within.”

#### RECEPTION HISTORY

Traditionally Hebrews has been overshadowed by other New Testament books in the history of Christian thought, especially the Gospels and Pauline Epistles (even though it was long considered among the latter). Nevertheless, Hebrews has had considerable influence in certain ways. Sometimes this has been positive, as in the development of key christological doctrines, and at other times it has been negative, as when read as a text espousing Christian supersessionism. Also, Hebrews has been used in varying ways in the history of Christian worship. Three chapters in this last major section of the book explore these varied topics.

Rowan A. Greer, author of a classic volume on patristic interpretation of Hebrews (Greer 1973), examines the use of Hebrews in christological controversies in “The Jesus of Hebrews and the Christ of Chalcedon.” After considering broadly the use of Scripture by early Christian interpreters, he turns to consider two difficulties for understanding the identity of Christ posed by Hebrews: “If Christ is ‘the exact imprint of God’s very being,’ does this mean that he is divine in such a way as not to compromise monotheism? Further, if Christ is divine, why would he need to ‘learn obedience by what he suffered’? Indeed, how could a divine being possibly suffer at all?” Greer finds these two issues respectively at the heart of two crucial debates in early Christianity, the Arian controversy and the resulting Nicene Creed (381 c.e.), with Athanasius of Alexandria and Theodore of Mopsuestia offering opposing arguments, and the fifth-century Nestorian controversy, prompted by the Trinitarian affirmations in the creed and now engaged by Cyril of Alexandria and Nestorius. Greer carefully considers the issues in both debates and the use of Scripture by each of the four proponents. Greer concludes, “Describing some of the interpretations of Hebrews put forth during the period of the first four general councils underlines the importance of the theological frameworks that shape them. Nevertheless, all the interpreters claim that their presupposed frameworks spring from Scripture. If we take these claims seriously, there is a circularity or reciprocity binding exegesis and

theology together.” With this he offers a challenge to the assumptions of modern biblical interpreters as well.

Alan C. Mitchell then considers a very different history of interpreting Hebrews in “‘A Sacrifice of Praise’: Does Hebrews Promote Supersessionism?” Mitchell notes that, “from the second century C.E., Christians have used [Hebrews] to promote the view that Christianity, according to God’s plan, had replaced Judaism,” and he concedes that much in Hebrews can be read in that light. He cautions against such interpretations that may promote anti-Semitism, however, especially in light of the Holocaust. Mitchell argues that “Hebrews itself is not inherently supersessionist,” despite the long history of interpretation otherwise. He offers a definition of supersessionism and surveys its various expressions, examines three key passages in Hebrews (7:1–12; 8:8–13; 10:1–10) often read to support that view, and offers a different approach to the book that avoids such conclusions. The context of the book of Hebrews itself is a major factor for Mitchell’s argument: the New Testament books were written “before Christianity had split definitely from Judaism. When one understands the rich variegation of Judaism in the first century C.E. and the processes of self-definition each of the various Jewish sects undertook, then texts that appear as polemical need not be seen as anti-Semitic or supersessionist.” Instead, they are documents of intra-Jewish debate, even if addressed to Gentiles who have attached themselves to this Jewish messianic movement.

Finally, Mark A. Torgerson approaches the traditional interpretation of Hebrews from yet a third perspective, that of a liturgist examining the history of Christian worship. In “Hebrews in the Worship Life of the Church: A Historical Survey,” Torgerson considers how Hebrews has been utilized in multiple aspects of ecclesial life, including preaching, baptism, Eucharist, ordered ministry, lectionaries, hymnody, service books, and visual art. He includes copious examples documenting the role of Hebrews in each of these areas, drawing from a diverse range of Christian traditions both ancient and modern. Torgerson notes that Hebrews “has occupied a unique niche” in Christian worship life: “Though the Epistle to the Hebrews has not had a large role to play in the development and practice of Christian worship, it has remained an enduring source of inspiration and theological interpretation.” Perhaps more surprising, Torgerson illustrates that the influence of Hebrews in Christian worship has risen in recent years in many circles, especially when gauged by its increased presence in lectionary cycles.

Given his instrumental role in the present wave of interest in Hebrews, it is only appropriate that the volume's epilogue is penned by Harold W. Attridge. Attridge offers trenchant comments on each essay, reflecting both on their individual contributions and the questions they raise for future study. He especially notes the "intertexts" considered by each contributor, evaluating how they approach Hebrews in relation to other ancient literature and ideas. He writes, "Their use of these various lenses through which to read Hebrews is a marvelous illustration of the challenges inherent in making sense of this biblical book." Elsewhere he states that this volume's essays "should certainly serve to engage a new generation of students" of Hebrews. If so, the goals inherent in both phrases of the book's title will be fulfilled.