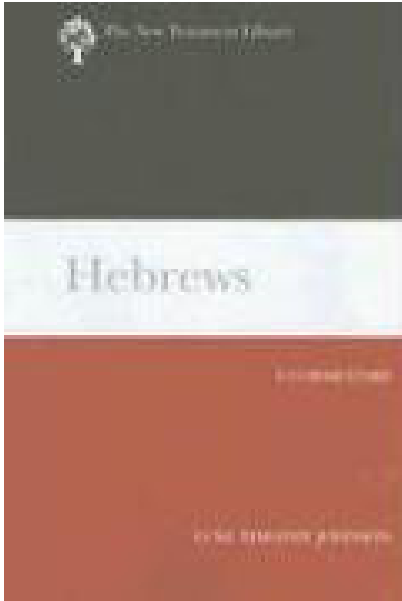


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Johnson, Luke Timothy

Hebrews: A Commentary

New Testament Library

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This commentary is a welcome contribution to recent literature on Hebrews. Substantial in content and readable in form, it will help a wide range of readers appreciate the message and artistry of this challenging New Testament book. The opening lines of Johnson's introduction strike an important tone, pointing out that the unnamed author of Hebrews summons people to a vision of reality and a committed faith that is at once distinctive, attractive, and disturbing. In the pages of Hebrews, modern readers find a world that is very different from the one that is familiar to them. It is a world in which the unseen is more real and attractive than that which can be seen and touched. "In a word, Hebrews proposes as real a world that most of us consider imaginary" (2). Moreover, Hebrews stretches readers' perspectives with a Christology that is replete with tensions between Jesus' humanity and divinity, his crucifixion and exaltation. In the portrayal of Christ as high priest, the author invokes notions of sacrifice that will seem alien to many people today. To follow the Christ depicted in Hebrews means embarking on a course that requires endurance and a willingness to suffer for the sake of the faith. Entering into full maturity as God's children means being transformed by the suffering that comes from obedience, following the path of Jesus.

After sketching a helpful survey of Hebrews' place in the Christian tradition, Johnson turns to the literary shape of the book. He notes the high quality of the book's Greek and its pervasive use of metaphor. The center around which many of the leading metaphors revolve is the idea that life is a journey toward a destination, that is, a pilgrimage. This central idea is reflected in the many expressions for calling readers to move forward, to avoid falling away, to draw near the throne of grace, to run the race with perseverance, and to approach Mount Zion. Johnson rightly notes that Hebrews is a written text that has an oral character, so that interpreters do well to think of its audience as listeners more than readers.

On the disputed question of Hebrews' structure, Johnson notes several different approaches, some working mainly with subject matter, others with aspects of the form, and others with rhetorical arrangement. Rather than making a particular understanding of structure a major element, the body of the commentary traces the general flow of the book, exploring how one section leads into the next. The advantage of this approach is that, given the lack of consensus on Hebrews' structure, it may be prudent not to tie interpretation too closely to any one outline. The drawback is that this makes it more difficult to see how the parts relate to the whole or to distinguish the main points of the book's argument from its subpoints. Johnson gives greater attention to the internal mode of argumentation. For him, the pattern of comparison (*synkrisis*) establishes the basic shape of Hebrews. Comparing Christ to the angels, Moses, Aaron, and other figures from Israel's history points to the consummate quality of what the gospel offers.

In terms of historical setting, Johnson recognizes that the identity of Hebrews' author remains unknown. Although positing a relatively early date of composition (A.D. 50–70), he understands that those addressed by the book have been Christians for some time, have experienced suffering because of their faith, and are showing signs of disaffection. Although many interpreters have suggested that the addressees were being drawn away from Christianity to Judaism, Johnson rightly points out that this seems unlikely. Their disaffection seems to emerge from their negative experience as Christians rather than from a positive attraction to the synagogue. Recognizing this means that Hebrews can best be read as an argument for renewed Christian commitment rather than an argument against Judaism.

In an excursus Johnson takes up the sensitive question of supersessionism more directly. Hebrews is sometimes understood to argue for the superiority of Christianity to Judaism with the implication that Christians have now taken the place of Jews as the people of God. Johnson argues that this is not the case. Despite the argument that aspects of the Mosaic covenant have been set aside, Hebrews affirms the ongoing place of the promises

God made to Abraham. Hebrews speaks about the way God's will is carried out in and through Jesus, but the author does not disparage the Jewish community of his own time.

The commentary helpfully draws on a range of ancient sources to help elucidate the text. Since Hebrews' language and imagery reflect Greco-Roman culture, Jewish tradition, and early Christian teaching, elucidating the text requires attention to a wide range of sources. A long-disputed point in the interpretation of Hebrews concerns the extent to which it reflects the Platonic distinction between the noumenal world above and the phenomenal world below, with earthly realities serving as shadows and copies of the heavenly archetypes. Scholars who associate Hebrews with Platonism have usually assumed that the unnamed author presents the gospel message in the philosophical thought forms appropriate to his Greco-Roman context. Those who distance Hebrews from Platonism have often argued that such an appropriation of philosophical categories might signal a departure from the earlier Christian tradition. Johnson finds it helpful to read Hebrews in connection with the philosophical tradition, noting that Jewish authors such as Philo also used philosophical categories when interpreting Israel's tradition.

Theologically, Johnson gives special attention to several themes when commenting on the text. The first is the centrality of the living God who speaks a living word. Although God is identified as the principal speaker in Hebrews' memorable opening lines, interpreters have often overlooked the role of God in Hebrews' argument, generally focusing on Christology instead. Giving due attention to God, however, enriches our understanding of the text. Noting recent work on Hebrews' use of the Old Testament, Johnson also points out the ways in which Scripture addresses readers directly as a living word, rather than serving only as a repository of words from the past. Second, his comments recognize the book's multifaceted portrait of Christ. Although Hebrews is best known for its presentation of Christ as high priest, it also depicts him as the Son of God, heir, pioneer, perfecter, and sanctifier, among other things, offering readers a rich and complex sense of his identity and role. Third, the book calls readers to a path of discipleship that is characterized by perseverance through suffering. A remarkable collection of images is used to depict the Christian life, including those drawn from athletics, education, and the heroes and heroines of Israel's past.

The greatest barrier that many modern readers of Hebrews face is the strangeness of the book. Johnson consistently keeps the modern reader in mind, sometimes explaining some of the book's peculiarities and sometimes allowing them to challenge readers to go beyond their ordinary modes of perception. This highly useable commentary will find an appreciative audience among scholars, pastors, and students.