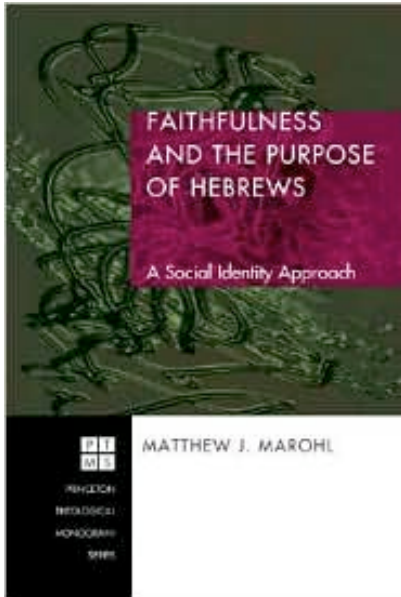


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Marohl, Matthew J.

Faithfulness and the Purpose of Hebrews: A Social Identity Approach

Princeton Theological Monographs

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Matthew Marohl, who teaches New Testament as associated faculty at Augustina College in Rock Island, Illinois, applies social-identity theory to the text of Hebrews in *Faithfulness and the Purpose of Hebrews: A Social Identity Approach*. Students of the letter to the Hebrews and the use of social-scientific approaches will welcome another contribution in this area. Perhaps not as revolutionary as claimed by the author, the methodology utilized contributes to the ongoing dialogue concerning the purpose of Hebrews and the identity of its audience.

In chapters 1 and 2, Marohl critiques historical-critical investigations for examining the identity of the addressees and the purpose of Hebrews. He describes eight common proposals concerning the identity of the addressees of Hebrews and four common proposals concerning the purpose of Hebrews. In evaluating the proposals, Marohl describes the interconnectedness between the addressees and the purpose of Hebrews. Next he offers a critical examination of the categorization process of historical criticism. The problem he extracts from this process is that of an inadequate conceptual framework for understanding identity.

Next, Marohl offers an overview of social-identity theory that not only provides insight into the social-categorization process but also describes how social groups form and maintain identity. As part of the broader understanding of social categorization, Marohl defines social identity, the role of social comparison in identity formation and maintenance, the function of time within social identity, and the nature of outgroups according to social-identity theory.

By way of considering the culture of the first-century Mediterranean world, Marohl discusses the nature of the addressees' intergroup behavior in chapter 4. He then moves from describing the competitive nature of the addressees' collectivist behavior to postulating a key theory that poses a present temporal orientation as part of the addressees' worldview. Temporal orientation forms an essential part of Marohl's working approach to applying social-identity theory to the text of Hebrews.

Group boundaries as a main theme in Hebrews is discussed in chapter 5. The text is read within the parameters of social-identity theory. In applying these parameters—social categorization among them—Marohl argues that the addressees of Hebrews viewed their own identity in terms of faithfulness.

In chapter 6 Marohl ascribes a comparative ideology to the addressees of Hebrews. Faithfulness as a theme is expressed through comparisons in Hebrews. Jesus' faithfulness first is compared to the faithfulness of Moses. Marohl argues that Jesus is presented as the prototype of faithfulness. Likewise, he writes, "while the addressees and the 'great cloud' are faithful, their faithfulness is understood only in relation to the prototypical faithfulness of Jesus" (148).

In chapter 7 temporal orientation is explored further in light of social-identity theory. With regard to their concept of time, "the addressees [of Hebrews] understood Jesus and the 'great cloud of witnesses' to have been antecedents to their faithfulness" (179). In conjunction with considering the role of the forthcoming, foresight, and imaginary time, along with these antecedents, Marohl concludes that the addressees are encouraged to look back in order to "run their race" (180).

Marohl completes his project in chapter 8 by concluding that the addressees either had or were at risk of having a negative social identity. This negative social identity was countered with social creativity. Marohl concludes: "The author compared the faithfulness of the addressees with the unfaithfulness of a symbolic outgroup in order to encourage a positive social identity" (182). Furthermore, he proposes that "the purpose of the text was to provide internal constraints limiting the addressees' desire for social mobility" (192).

When reading the first two chapters of *Faithfulness and the Purpose of Hebrews: A Social Identity Approach*, one might be confused as to the true purpose of this monograph. In the introduction Marohl claims that the aim of this project is “to provide fresh answers” (xi) to the questions concerning the addressees and the purpose of the text of Hebrews. Certainly Marohl’s enthusiasm regarding this aim is displayed throughout the project. However, one might detect a similar passion in disproving or disqualifying what he calls a historical-critical investigation into these questions. Thus one is left to wonder if the aim is to answer the questions posed or to use the thesis as a case study to legitimate a crusade against a particular interpretive method. Other forms of interpretive criticism—rhetorical criticism, reader-response criticism, and so on—do not seem to fall prey to a similar treatment. In all, Marohl claims in his concluding chapter that “the various conclusions made regarding the identity of the addressees are the products of an inappropriate methodology” (183).

With regard to a review of literature, Marohl correctly mentions the work by Iutisone Salevao, *Legitimation in the Letter to the Hebrews: The Construction and Maintenance of a Symbolic Universe* (JSNTSup; Sheffield Academic Press, 2002). However, he does not engage a work published in the same year in the same series: Richard W. Johnson, *Going Outside the Camp: The Sociological Function of the Levitical Critique in the Epistle to the Hebrews*. In his work Johnson examines implicit sociological data in the text to the Hebrews and locates the implicit society within the larger Greco-Roman world. Johnson introduces the concept of an ideal community and certainly considers intergroup dynamics based on the group’s self-understanding. Thus, though indeed the idea of a symbolic outgroup may be novel (118), the idea of comparison and positive and negative group identity appeared prior to Marohl’s project.

Marohl tenaciously walks the reader step by step through his project. In his endeavor, the text of Hebrews forms a major part of substantiating his claims. Marohl is to be applauded for staying close to the text. One element of weakness, however, is that several subtheses, which in turn are to substantiate one another, such as intergroup behavior (88), allocentric behavior (102), negative social identity (185), and low identification with the Christ movement (187), are validated by the same limited number of verses in the text of Hebrews: 3:13; 10:24; 12:13. In addition, one might wonder at times if observations can have other explanations such as genre-related or rhetoric-related clarifications.

Overall, Marohl does a thorough job. Some elements appear missing, such as a full consideration of the “greater than the angels” statement in his treatment of comparisons. How would this have contributed to Marohl’s thesis?

With a social-identity approach as a central focus, Marohl tries to stick closely to a single methodology. However, he does flirt with a mixed approach when bringing in David DeSilva's work in sociorhetorical analysis when it befits his argument. This mixed approach shows the strength of an eclectic approach, if not the need to look beyond a mere social-identity approach. Much of what Marohl attempts to accomplish with social categorization and ingroup and outgroup models has been attempted by other biblical scholars with the help of applying social-science theories such as labeling and deviance models, anthropological models such as group-grid readings, and so on. Perhaps an ongoing conversation with these methodologies will further solidify Marohl's work and contribute to an ongoing dialogue concerning the purpose of Hebrews. For those interested in such a dialogue, as well as for those interested in social-identity methodology, this book is a welcome addition to the library shelf.