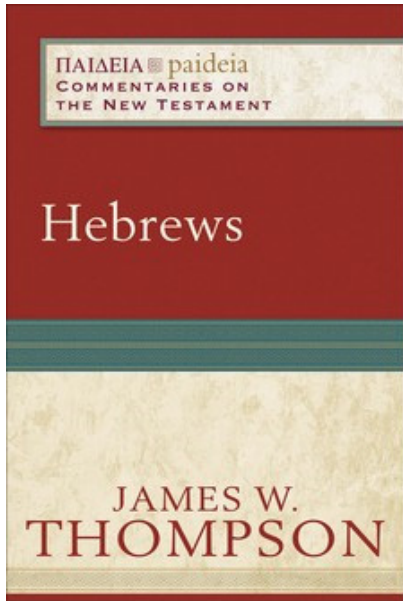


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Thompson, James W.

Hebrews

Paideia: Commentaries on the New Testament

Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008. Pp. xviii + 328. Paper.
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Veteran Hebrews' commentator James W. Thompson unlocks the secrets of Hebrews in this excellent commentary, part of the Paideia series from Baker Academic. The aim of the series is to comment on the canonical form of the book under consideration, with special attention to its theology and its literary, cultural, and social settings. Unlike many commentary series, Paideia does not offer a verse-by-verse exposition of the text. Rather, the textual units are commented on as literary and sense units, in order to help the reader grasp the flow of the book's narrative or argument. Each section of the text under study is organized under three headings: "Introductory Matters"; "Tracing the Train of Thought"; and "Theological Issues." The audience of the series is students, ranging from upper-divisional undergraduates to M.A. students in religion. Who better to write on what is perhaps the most difficult New Testament book to understand than this accomplished scholar and teacher? This commentary is so well done that even experts in the field can benefit from reading it.

A clearly written introduction discusses the usual matters that readers should be familiar with in order to understand the form and function of a biblical book, as well as its origin, destination, and themes. After discussing the usual option for the identity of the author of Hebrews, Thompson joins the growing consensus of scholars who see it as an anonymous

text. Still, we can know a lot about the author from Hebrews itself. On the basis of a masculine participle in Heb 11:32, the author was most likely a male, from the second generation of Christians, who omits autobiographical comments but still identifies with the community to whom he writes. He was not part of the community's leadership, although he was familiar with its leaders. Relying on the authority of Scripture, he does not offer his own authority in support of the argument he makes throughout Hebrews. Finally, the author is a well-educated and refined writer familiar with sophisticated rhetorical technique and conversant with Greek philosophy. The author's thought world lies between the world of Scripture and that of Greek philosophy.

Audience and date cannot be determined and need not be for the purpose of the commentary, which is mainly interested in the issues that the author confronts. "To the Hebrews" does not identify the ethnic make-up of the audience because it is probably based on an inference from the contents of the book. Hebrews itself provides clues about the situation of the readers, who are Christians who suffered the effects of converting to Christianity with the support of the community to offset the hardships they endured in those days. Now they are flagging in their commitment and have grown sluggish, hence the many exhortations "to hold fast" and "to remain confident" that they will complete the journey that they began at their conversions. The presentation of Jesus who endured shame and suffering also supports the readers in their similar experiences. After an initial fervor, they have begun to question whether it was worthwhile for them to have endured the shame, suffering, and alienation that they have been through.

Regarding the genre of Hebrews, Thompson does not consider it a letter or an epistle. Neither does he favor seeing it as a synagogue homily, since features identified in Hebrews in support of that form also show up in Greek speeches. Rather, Hebrews attends to rhetorical concerns for the "necessary," the "appropriate," and the "impossible," sometimes shared by Greek orators. Along with more recent commentators, Thompson treats Hebrews as a homily in a distinctive genre that exhibits elements of epideictic and deliberative rhetoric, insofar as it "contains both praise for the work of Christ and a call for action by the readers."

One of the most vexing problems an interpreter encounters in Hebrews is how the homily is structured. Many different structures have been proposed over the years. Some commentators identify in Hebrews a thematic structure based on the author's organizing ideas. Others favor nonthematic structures that may be literary or rhetorical, where the latter sometimes rely on ancient rhetorical handbooks. More recent structural analysis has turned to discourse analysis. Thompson prefers a rhetorical structure in three parts that build on the one proposed by Wilhelm Nauck supplemented with features of Aristotelian rhetoric.

In Thompson's treatment of structure, the reader finds one of the rare ambiguities in this commentary. On the basis of the Aristotelian rhetorical features Thompson identifies in Hebrews, he locates the homily's "center of gravity" in its final section of exhortations in 10:32–13:35, rather than in the exposition of the high-priestly work of Jesus, which other commentators take to be the "center" of the homily's argument found between 8:1 and 10:18. For Thompson, the call to endure in 10:32–13:35 forms the Aristotelian *peroratio* or summation of the case. It is not clear whether Thompson is equating the term "center of gravity" with "central argument" or if he simply means that the weight of the author's argument resides in 10:32–13:35. Since he is shifting the attention from the author's focus on Jesus' high-priestly ministry, one might reasonably assume that he has replaced what others see as the homily's "central argument" with his "center of gravity." Rhetorical structures, of course, differ from one commentator to another. Several others opt for a much shorter *peroratio* in 12:28–13:21. Another problem arising from Thompson's structural suggestions is that chapter 11 contains a fair amount of exposition, even if it does have a hortatory function. How that might act as part of the homily's summation in warning and exhortations is not readily apparent, especially since other commentators would not include this material in the *peroratio*.

Given the debate over the structure of Hebrews, these matters should not distract from the overall excellence of Thompson's commentary. One especially notable feature that has become standard in more recent commentaries is how to address the supersessionist interpretations of Hebrews through the centuries. Here Thompson is very clear to show that Hebrews itself need not be supersessionist and ought not to be read in light of subsequent, regrettable Christian interpretation of it. He is careful to point out that the author of Hebrews is not engaged in direct polemic against Judaism but rather adopts a pastoral approach to reassuring his readers of the strength of their own confession. His purpose is not to denigrate Judaism but to exhort and encourage his audience of the need to stay the course that they had begun in the past, in order to see it to its completion in the future.

Thompson's masterful commentary on Hebrews will be a boon to students, preachers, and experts alike. Its clear, readable style, accompanied by a wealth of sidebars and charts, makes one of the most obscure books of the New Testament easily accessible. His exposition of Hebrews places the homily's theological meaning firmly within its ancient social and cultural context, serving as a reminder even in our own day that these spheres need not be kept separate and distinct but can beneficially inform one another.