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The Epistle
to the Hebrews
and Christian
Theology



Richard Bauckham
Daniel R. Driver
Trevor A. Hart
Nathan MacDonald
editors

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The Epistle to the Hebrews and Christian Theology

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John Dunnill
Murdoch University
Murdoch, Australia

This substantial collection of essays represents the proceedings of the second triennial conference on Scripture and Theology held at the University of St. Andrew's in 2006. Like the previous and subsequent conferences, on John's Gospel and Genesis, respectively, it aimed to bring together systematic theologians with biblical scholars around a theologically interesting text. It seems that most if not all of the contributors would allow themselves to be described as "Christian theologians," at least for the purposes of this project, with its aim to foster reintegration of the key subdisciplines of theology.

The separation of biblical studies from Christian theology has not, of course, come about by accident, but as part of a modern attempt to let biblical texts yield their own meaning, rather than be exemplars of Christian dogma, and one may suspect that (for good or ill) this attempt at reintegration serves a theological agenda, to demonstrate, or at least investigate, whether it is now time to reverse this trend.

One may suspect, too, that there is a hope that, when such a group gathers around such a task, it will be seen to be practicing an integrated approach to scripture such as is often canvassed under the label "theological interpretation." If so, that hope is disappointed, as the variety of approaches evidenced here is quite large, and the difference between biblical

and nonbiblical scholars, as they read this text, is very visible. Biblical scholars, perhaps predictably, dominate proceedings, contributing three quarters of the twenty-six essays, but systematic theologians are well represented, and there are also essays here by experts in church history, Jewish thought, and science. Twelve of the essays are substantial in length (fifteen pages or longer), many of them by well-known names in the field; there is a great deal of interest in the shorter papers, too.

The essays are gathered under seven themes. “The Christology of Hebrews” is rightly given pride of place, and this group contains four of the book’s twelve substantial essays. Can the Christ of the creeds be found in Hebrews, or must it be read into this letter? Richard Bauckham argues, in line with his other writings on New Testament Christology, that the book is not interested in questions about “ontology” but presents a “Christology of divine identity” that holds together in one person the divine attributes expounded in the prologue and the human “sharing” necessary for the freeing of humankind from the limits of mortality. New Testament Christology is therefore compatible with credal orthodoxy, but this text should not be read as if it were conceived in the ontological terms of patristic debates. Bruce McCormack approaches the question from the other end and finds that the Chalcedonian debate itself is centered, not on the question of divine and human “natures,” but on the unity of Christ in the person of the Logos. Consequently, any supposedly historical exegesis that finds “antinomies” and “fissures” between the divine and human in the Christ of Hebrews is unwittingly injecting into a unified theology a patristic perception of a duality of natures.

Harold Attridge, whose commentary is the work under criticism at this point, forebears to respond to this matter but sets the christological question in the context of the largeness of the letter’s concept of God. But the issue surfaces again in John Webster’s essay, where both James Dunn and George Caird are criticized for their refusal to allow Hebrews to say, or mean, what it says, that the human Jesus of 5:5–10 is also the preexistent divine Son active in creation (1:1–4). For Webster, the letter is “an exercise in pastoral eschatology” (72), and he focuses on the exordium (1:1–4) to show that it does not offer dogmatic “ornamentation” detached from the purpose of the letter but lays out the ground for that pastoral eschatology: “Only because the revelation and the sacrifice are metaphysically determinative of the community’s life does it make sense to exhort its members to resist their own drift” (73).

Three essays address “the problem of Hebrews’ cosmology.” John Polkinghorne, writing under the title “A Scientist Looks at the Epistle to the Hebrews,” demonstrates that the distance between “Platonic” theology and “Aristotelian” science has to be questioned and that in the light of quantum physics a relational understanding of matter can be found in scientific cosmology as well as in Hebrews—or at least that a “consonant relationship”

(121) can be found between them. Edward Adams counters the view that Hebrews is “Platonist” and therefore “world-negating” by arguing that the appearance of Platonic dualism in the letter is really neither dualistic nor Platonic. What Hebrews exhibits is a duality of the earthly and the heavenly grounded in a Septuagintal doctrine of the world’s good creation by God and looking toward the world’s renewal as “the city that is to come” (13:14). Terry Wright asks how it is that the Son “sustains all things by his all-powerful word” (1:3) and finds lacking Pannenberg’s reading of this as a doctrine of continuous creation. Instead, he argues that for Hebrews, as for Leviticus, what needs to be sustained is not the world in separation from God but the world in relationship with God its creator, and for this the key locus is the ritual of the Day of Atonement fulfilled by the Son when he “made purification for sins” (1:4).

There is a large-scale debate about supersessionism as a further “problem” in Hebrews, the difficulty of reading it today without embarrassment at its anti-Judaism. Richard Hays argues robustly that this is a misreading and that the letter’s claims for a distinctive act and revelation in Jesus (a “new covenantalism,” 155) do not entail rejection of Judaism but point, from within Judaism, to the possibility of a new and transforming encounter with God. In responses, Oskar Skarsaune questions whether any ancient Christian text is guilty of the kind of “supersessionism” avoided by modern sensibilities, while Mark D. Nanos argues that the letter, by its existence, undermines its own claim to represent a new covenant in which there is a knowledge of God so direct (8:11) that no “word of exhortation” is needed. The other essays in this section are really about how Hebrews makes positive use of Jewish materials in presenting its christological case. Morna Hooker offers a magisterial analysis of Hebrews as an example of New Testament theology, a homiletic exposition of the Christian kerygma that can be paralleled with Paul’s. Nehemia Polen confronts the fact that Hebrews takes us back into the world of Leviticus and its sacrificial system and, far from dismissing it, demonstrates its power in mediating an understanding the holiness of God in relation to humankind.

On the topic of soteriology, Stephen Holmes sets the letter in the context of modern systematic reflections on the role of models and metaphors in generating soteriologies that are necessarily plural without being relatives. He asks: Does the dependence of Hebrews on imagery of sacrifice harness it to a (now) dead metaphor, or are sacrifice and priesthood “divinely revealed explanatory systems which get to the heart of the matter” (248)? I. Howard Marshall presents a wide-ranging analysis of the scope and character of salvation in the letter.

On the related question of “Hebrews in the modern world,” Douglas Farrow counters the view that Hebrews is irrelevant, and its fascination with the obscure figure of Melchizedek the best sign of its irrelevance; he argues that thinking of Jesus as the priest-king

Melchizedek encapsulates his challenge to all priesthoods and all kingship. Edison M. Kalengyo, on a different tack, shows how very familiar Hebrews seems to those, like the Ganda of Uganda, for whom sacrificial practice remains a living reality; he argues for the need to use Hebrews in developing an “inculturated eucharistic sacrifice” (318) that will capture the hearts and minds of the Ganda.

Two essays about “the theology of scripture” both employ speech-act theory to draw out what is only implicit in the text. For Ken Schenck, “scripture” in Hebrews is really an “ongoing speaking” (322), and the letter offers an “eschatological hermeneutic” (336) that finds, in the narratives especially, divine words pointing to Christ and the readers’ situation. For Daniel Treier, the focus falls on the way the speaking is received, through the appeal of imagery to the senses, but mostly to the need for “hearing hearts” (344) and the development of an “eschatological imagination” (349) capable of looking forward to God in the light of the past.

The collection ends with a team reflection on “The Call to Faith” in Hebr 11, seven short pieces each examining an individual or group named in this catalogue of heroes. Walter Moberly presents a theological reading of the section on Abel (11:4–6 with 12:24) as itself a theological reading of the Genesis narrative and demonstrates both the letter’s and his own freedom to read with and against the text. Markus Bockmuehl explores the theological dimension of Abraham in 11:8–22: the positive account of the faith of Israel, which looks forward to Christ, anticipated in the Akedah. Nathan MacDonald discusses the way writers from Justin to John Owen have handled the intrusion of “the reproach of Christ” into the narrative of Moses’ faith (11:26), and notes the surprising reluctance of Christian writers before the Reformation to colonize the Old Testament by finding Christ there. Carl Mosser reflects on the puzzling appearance of Rahab at the structural center of the chapter as an example to the readers of a person of active faith who is willing, for God’s sake, to be placed “outside the camp.” Loveday Alexander, tackling the catalogue of martyrs and prophets in 11:32–40, provides a double reading of the text, in its own day and today; she shows how, despite modern ambivalence, the martyr is a deeply inspiring model even for now. Mariam J. Karnell explores fruitfully the connection between faith and hope both in this chapter and in Jas 1–2. Lastly, Ben Witherington, in the text of a sermon preached at the conference, explores the open character of New Testament eschatology as exhibited in Hebrews: “God has revealed enough of the future to give us hope, but not so much that we do not need to live by faith” (436).

This is a very rich collection, full of exegetical insight and provocative theological reflection. The interaction across disciplinary lines has once again proved fruitful. But what kind of activity is this?

John Webster, in his essay, tackles the methodological question head on, maintaining that there is something called “theological interpretation” but that it is neither “seeking a particular kind of content” (presumably a description of Hebrews as an example of “New Testament theology,” as in the essays by Attridge, Marshall, Hooker, and others) nor practicing “one particular exegetical method” (as illustrated, presumably, by the integrative explorations of Bauckham, McCormack, Hays, Adams, Holmes, and others). Instead, for him it is exegesis grounded in a particular doctrine of scripture as divine communication, characterized by a reverence appropriate to such an object (69–70). The exegetical task is therefore to “pay closer attention to what we have heard” (2:1). My reading is that, although by no means all the writers would agree to Webster’s definition of the theological process, there is in this collection a sense of shared attentiveness to this ancient document that, with its obscurity and its power, continues to search the heart and mind of the searcher.

This reviewer was not overjoyed to find his name misspelled in the index, but in general the standard of production is extremely high. Altogether it deserves to be widely read in many corners of the theological community.