The several differences between this commentator and the reviewer offer an unusual chance for a hermeneutical encounter. The commentary I was invited to review is written by an American scholar, doctrinally Reformed, who addresses preachers and teachers of his church, combining biblical Christology, redemptive history, and contemporary practice, all in an emphatic and empathic way. For my part, I have been socialized in the rather dispassionate traditions of European historical criticism. I take interest in the historical matrix of the letter to the Hebrews. Nevertheless, as a theologian and a Roman Catholic priest, I also stress Hebrews’ christological meaning and look for ways to discuss it in modern contexts of both pastoral ministry and hermeneutical reflection. Such differences between author and reviewer may be exegetically productive.

Given the appreciation that John Calvin showed toward Hebrews, in particular for its explications on the priesthood of Christ and its Christ-centered dealing with the Old Testament, one may wonder how this epistle could fall into neglect in the proclamation and life of Reformed churches, as Richard B. Gaffin Jr. deplores on the book jacket. At any rate, Phillips, who has also written a commentary on the prophet Zechariah in the same series, does a lot to fill this gap. The commentary is directed to a popular audience. Its explanatory style is influenced by the pulpit and is aimed to influence the pulpit. Like
the series in which it appears, it is explicitly committed to the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms, promising nevertheless to treat carefully significant “exegetical and theological difficulties, along with such historical and cultural background as is relevant to the text” (xii).

Phillips divides the text of Hebrews into five sections: (1) “The Supremacy of Christ” (1:1–3:6); (2) “Warnings against Falling Away” (3:7–6:20); (3) “Our Great High Priest” (7:1–10:18); (4) “Exhortations to and Examples of Faith” (10:19–12:3); (5) “Concluding Exhortations” (12:4–13:25). These sections are treated in fifty-seven chapters, each of which explains what might be called a pericope, although Phillips never offers any literary or rhetorical criteria to substantiate his divisions of the text. Each chapter of the commentary is divided into several subchapters, which have sometimes an exegetical (e.g., 301: “The Superiority of Christ’s Blood”), sometimes a pastoral (e.g., 80: “Able to Help”), and sometimes a polemical (e.g., 167: “Rome’s Teaching of Infused Righteousness”) focus. Phillips gives no verse-by-verse explanations but explores each passage as a theological unit.

The historical background of Hebrews is provided in the first subchapter of the explanation of Heb 1:1–2 (6–9): the letter was written by an unknown apostolic leader to Jewish Christians who were facing persecution, perhaps in Rome on the eve of the Neronian persecution. In any case, Hebrews was written before the Second Temple was destroyed in 70 C.E. and was aimed at keeping its discouraged addressees from returning to Judaism. Phillips does not pay attention to scholarly objections to these views (cf. 3:12; 6:1), and the suppositions he allows are at best uncertain. Hebrews, for instance, does not “speak of the temple rituals as a present reality” (8) but of the rituals of the holy tent of Israel’s desert time as a biblical reality. Phillips’s explanatory interest, however, pursues the contemporary situation of his intended readers. Whereas Reformed theologians and preachers are often quoted, and even more so Calvin, only few contemporary exegetes are named. Marked by vivid illustrations, metaphors, and examples and by direct address, Phillips’s explanations build many bridges between the biblical text and the presumably typical situation, experiences, and problems of a contemporary Reformed evangelical Christian. Focal points of this largely homiletic interpretation include the sovereignty of the Word of God, the atonement at the cross, the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ, the gains and hardships of faith, the predestination and the perseverance of the saints, the enticement and awfulness of sin, and eternal damnation. There can be little doubt that there are many intersections between the original text and this commentary’s interpretation, especially in the field of soteriology. The agenda, however, is set by the interpreter’s preconceptions, not by the text. At the end of the day, the author of Hebrews himself looks like a contemporary Reformed evangelical Christian.
Several of the more noteworthy points in the commentary may now be considered briefly. According to Phillips, the author of Hebrews viewed Judaism as a “now obsolete religion” (288), “set aside as a valid way to God and to salvation” (278). Phillips regards the Roman Catholic Church as the best contemporary stand-in for Judaism. Both religions share an unjustified trust in outward mechanisms instead of divine grace, thereby corrupting the way of salvation “by worldliness and human reasoning” (266; see also 164–65, 167–69, 201, 224, 240, 265–67, 270–71, 581, 602–4). As one of the purported “unbelieving priests” unmasked by Phillips both in Judaism and in the Catholic Church (604), I felt a bit uneasy about this parallelism, all the more so since Judaism has, as Phillips tells us, filed a petition for divorce from God (see 276–77). On the other hand, perhaps a Christian today should consider it an honor to fall under the same caricature as his elder Jewish siblings. More concerning is the case of, let us say, a Reformed child who is brought up with the teaching about hell that Phillips takes from Heb 10:26–31 (see 369–72). The author is not prepared to allow for the “annihilation” of sinners but insists on interpreting literally the eternally burning fire of hell, not even tolerating its temperature being turned down. His theological argument for this position is less than compelling: “if a loving God is able to send the devil into perpetual suffering, then he is capable of doing the same to sinful human beings” (371). After all, “God is not a humanist” (474). Nor is Phillips.

This commentary is marked by a mixture of exegetical observation, learned information, homiletic application, and spiritual devotion. Thus, almost any potential interest seems to be addressed. Under closer examination, however, this mixture, notwithstanding its particular denominational character, turns out to be the Achilles’ heel of the book’s conceptual framework. First of all, I cannot help feeling embarrassed by the author’s “published worship.” The first duty of a commentator is to be a reader. In the mode of praying, moralizing, warning, and rejoicing, this author undauntedly claims insights into God’s perspective, and his explanation of Hebrews seems to offer a welcome opportunity for him to share them with his fellow Christians. The posing of questions is the piety of reason, however. There are too many answers in the form of spiritual outbursts in this book, but far too few questions and too little thoughtfulness. Claiming to be on the inspired side of things does not make a book inspiring. Even more serious is the mixed character of interpretation and application. The text does not receive its due because it is anachronistically projected into modern problems; the readers do not receive their due because they find themselves within a coordinate system made up of selectively interpreted biblical texts and Reformed convictions and with little opportunity to reflect on their real life, experience, and reason. The author’s summation of half-truths does not lead to full truth but to confusion.

Could the hermeneutical chance I have noted above be taken? Unfortunately, only in a negative way. I am normally inclined to opt for the strengthening of the theological
aspects in biblical interpretation and the denominational aspects in the history of reception, but after having read this sort of denominational commentary I will be more cautious with regard to cognitive self-sufficiency. Perhaps from reading this book I have received a taste of what that Christianity might be that Richard Dawkins is warning of, and certainly I have learned more than ever why historical criticism is an important form of theological enlightenment.

To summarize, potential readers who feel themselves committed to the Westminster Convention may be reassured that this commentary, I have no doubt, is loyal to its Reformed traditions, that it passionately communicates an evangelical approach, and that it probably will meet their pastoral and spiritual expectations. To such readers, but to no one else, this commentary may be helpful. A commentary should, at its best, be a dialogue between an individual, a historically unmistakable text, and the present reader with his or her own unmistakable horizon of understanding. The hodgepodge of dogma, piety, practical application, and exegesis enshrined in this commentary offers no such dialogue, but instead imposes a self-affirming monologue.