Almost twenty-five years ago William L. Lane observed in his two-volume commentary on Hebrews that the letter “is a delight for the person who enjoys puzzles. Its form is unusual, its setting in life is uncertain, and its argument is unfamiliar. It invites engagement in the task of defining the undefined” (Hebrews, WBC 47A [Dallas: Word, 1991], xlvii). In this new study on the background of Hebrews, Jason Whitlark, Associate Professor of New Testament at Baylor University, sets out to unravel the complexities of the letter, especially with regard to its purpose and ideological setting. Informed by the recent trend of empire studies conducted by James C. Scott, Richard A. Horsley, and others, Whitlark argues that the Letter to the Hebrews has been written to challenge the pressures and temptations of first-century Roman power. The implied audience is in danger of compromising its faith in Jesus and falling back into their “pagan” lifestyle because of the pressures of opposition and persecution and because of the attractions of a culture steeped in an honor and shame ideology. Hence, the famous chapters 6 and 10 are to be taken not as warnings against a defection to Judaism but against a relapse into the pagan imperial context of the audience. The traditional objection that pagans would not understand the references to the Old Testament traditions of the priesthood, the Levitical ceremonies, and the typological reading of Scripture loses much of its power when it is realized that pagans would appreciate priestly ceremonies (as, e.g., the highly popular
mystery cults of the time with their sacred rites and magical texts attest) and, when confronted with a new religion, would do all their best to understand the ins and outs of their newly found religious home. Evidently, Gentile Christians could familiarize themselves with the Jewish Scriptures and the details of Mosaic regulations and priestly rituals as much as Christians of a Jewish provenance.

This study is a school example of scholarly work at its best: its aim is well-defined, its presuppositions are clear, and its method is lucid and sound (and its conclusions, I might add, are convincing). It is a well-written book with helpful summaries at the appropriate places. In the introduction Whitlark neatly spells out three assumptions that guide his research: the letter was destined for an audience in Rome (4–8), it was composed during the Flavian period, more specifically between 79 and 82 CE (8–12), and it was addressed to a predominantly gentile Christian audience (12–16). Methodologically, Whitlark seeks to work from a sociological model inspired by Charles Talbert’s “reading with the authorial audience” (17) and by the reader-response theories of Peter J. Rabbinowitz and Hans Robert Jauss (17, citing, however, only one article by Jauss and ignoring Jauss’s major publications). The aim, then, is to understand Hebrews as shaped by the rhetorical expectations (cf. Jauss’s notion of “horizon of expectation”) of the primary audience living under Rome’s imperial rule.

Chapter 2 (“The Rhetoric of Resistance”) contains a very useful introduction to the ancient rhetorical strategy of “figured speech” (21–48), an introduction that will also be useful for the study of other New Testament writings. According to Quintilian, figured speech “leaves the reader himself to guess what the speaker has not mentioned” (22) and therefore requires an attentive reader to constantly fill in “blanks.” The rhetorical handbooks of Greco-Roman antiquity distinguish three types of figured speech: ἐμφάσις (implication, when the speaker implies more than is explicitly stated, not to be confused with the modern notion of emphasis, which underlines what is already explicit), (2) πλάγιον (deflection, when a covert aim underlies an overt objective), and ἐναντία (irony, when the speaker intends the opposite of what is said). In all cases figured speech leaves something important unsaid, either for the sake of propriety (that is, not to offend someone else) or for caution and safety, especially so in a society that was plagued by political informers and spies, as was abundantly the case in ancient Rome. Figured speech, then, turns out to be an apt vehicle to critique the universality of Roman rule, and this is at least one of the aims of Hebrews, according to Whitlark: “The circumstances that the author of Hebrews sought to address required propriety and especially caution…. He offers oblique, or indirect critiques of his audience’s imperial context” (47). Usually an argument based on silence is not very convincing; here it is completely different.
All this becomes clear in the warning against idolatry—the struggle between the living God and the dumb Roman idols (ch. 3)—and the author’s focus on a better hope (ch. 4). The Christian hope entails a better οἰκοθένη (78–86), a better πατρίς (86–93), and a κατάπαυσις free of works (93–98). Against the claim of the eternity of the City and its emperor and the universality of Roman rule, the Christian hope looks forward to an eternal city, “the city that is to come,” the heavenly Jerusalem: “here we have no lasting city” (Heb 13:14a). The expectation of the eternal city and its eternal ruler helps to focus the readers on the superiority of Jesus and the salvation he is to secure (ch. 5).

Chapter 6 shows how the confession of Jesus’s defeat of the devil (= the one who has the power of death) serves as an oblique critique of Roman imperial power. While the Roman empire ruled by the threat of death, Jesus liberates from the fear of death by virtue of his heavenly enthronement and, having been tested himself, is now able to help those who are being tested (2:18).

In chapter 7 Whitlark argues that Jesus is being compared to Hercules, the most popular hero in the Greco-Roman world. The proverbial twelve labors of Hercules and the tradition of his apotheosis all add to the implied contrast that is being made between Jesus and Hercules. The repercussions in the first reception can hardly be missed: “More than Hercules is here.”

Chapter 8 is on “Resisting Imperial Claims: Answering the Theodical Challenge of Flavian Triumph.” Here Whitlark shows how the author answers the (acclaimed) Flavian victory by reasserting God’s sovereignty by means of syncrisy (comparison): reasoning from the overt contrast between the old covenant and the new, readers will be able to draw conclusions pertinent to their own situation: “Hebrews, in its presentation of the superiority of the new covenant over the old, diminishes the claims of Roman power for beleaguered Christians (whether Jew or Gentile) who had to respond to the same derision of God as did non-Christian Jews in Flavian Rome” (186). In the final chapter (ch. 9), the conclusions are summarized and put in a larger perspective. The back matter contains a fine sixteen-page bibliography (200–215) and indices of references (216–28) and authors (229–32).

All in all, I find this a highly plausible and convincing argument, which, I think, probably also works for 1 Peter, which (in my view, at least) is also written in a Roman context during the Flavian period to a predominantly gentile audience under the pressure of opposition and persecution.

A few questions remain. How is the title “to the Hebrews” to be explained? As a corollary to the conclusions, it must be the result of a gross misunderstanding of the letter’s
purpose. Or is it? Further, what about the clear Jewish elements in the letter, such as the rabbinic midrashic technique in 10:5–39, the traditions about Melchizedek, and other such typically Jewish elements which go beyond knowledge of the Greek scriptures? Would the author expect a predominantly gentile audience to be able to appreciate them? These questions are, of course, of minor significance and can be answered. In no way do they devalue the conclusions of this important work. Despite the high price of the book, it is all worth it!