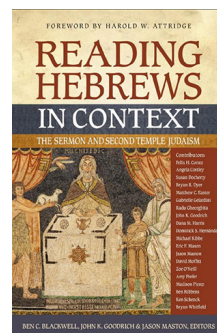


## Book Review

Ben C. Blackwell, John K. Goodrich, and Jason Maston (eds.).  
*Reading Hebrews in Context:  
The Sermon and Second Temple Judaism.*  
Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2023.  
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Hebrews has undergone something of a resurgence in recent scholarship. It's not so long ago that it was numbered among the New Testament's 'muted voices',<sup>1</sup> but a recent rise in publications focussing on the text suggests this is increasingly not the case. And with good reason. It is, "one of the most intriguing documents in the New Testament, distinctive in its rhetorical style, its interpretation of Israel's Scriptures, and its presentation of the significance of Christ and his death," as Harold Attridge notes in the foreword to the present volume (p. xiii).

However, Hebrews' appeal does not diminish the fact that it is a difficult text. I sympathise with students who begin with every good intention and struggle to make it beyond the barrage of technical language and obscure vocabulary that comprises the exordium of Heb. 1.1-4. One of Hebrews' idiosyncrasies is that it often seems to operate within a different thought-world than other New Testament authors. To this end, when teaching Hebrews, I often find myself talking about the texts behind Hebrews, as much as Hebrews itself. Grasping the content of Hebrews, in other words, requires guiding

students through Second Temple Jewish texts with which they are often unfamiliar.

How grateful I am, then, to have this volume that brings Hebrews clearly into dialogue with these texts behind the text. Aimed at undergraduates and students unfamiliar with Hebrews, this volume follows the approach taken in the parallel volumes on Romans, Mark, and Revelation by pairing a key portion of Hebrews with a notable parallel text that illustrates the thought-world Hebrews inhabit. The aim is to allow scholars to demonstrate where and how Hebrews builds upon certain predecessors, and where it differs. In doing so, students gain an appreciation of the nuances missed in a superficial reading of Hebrews and are introduced to important texts from its wider Second Temple milieu.

Each chapter, then, sees a scholar discussing a potential influence upon the text and then, in turn, examining a specific portion of Hebrews in light of this given influence. So, for example, Chapter 1 sees Angela Costley bringing the thought of Philo of Alexandria to bear upon Heb. 1.1-4; Chapter 2 has Félix H. Cortez bringing 4 Ezra into dialogue with Heb. 2.1-9; and so on. (I won't repeat the full list of texts here; this can be gleaned quickly enough from the table of contents). Each chapter also concludes with a bibliography pointing students to further resources for study.

In the introduction to the volume, the editors

1 This phrase is taken from the title of Katherine M. Hockey, Madison N. Pierce, and Francis Watson (eds.), *Muted Voices of the New Testament: Readings in the Catholic Epistles and Hebrews* (LNTS 587; London: T&T Clark, 2017).

clearly and concisely offer an overview of the key themes, debates, and figures in both Hebrews scholarship and study of Second Temple Judaism. This gives students the framework to make sense of the parallel pairing of texts that comprise the main body of the volume. The work also concludes with a helpful glossary of key terms and figures, alongside indices for passages, subjects, and authors. (Words that appear in the glossary also helpfully appear in bold in the main body of the text).

Most chapters discuss a text from Hebrews in conversation with texts from two primary sources: Philo and the Dead Sea Scrolls. Helpfully, the editors of the volume offer a clear overview of the methodological problems arising from attempts to discern influence of these corpora upon Hebrews. For example, when introducing Philo of Alexandria, the seminal works of Spicq and Williamson are summarised with concision (pp. 4-7). Happily, readers rightly cautious of parallelomania in biblical scholarship need not be worried by this approach; the contributors are judicious in teasing out similarities between texts and are quick to highlight where potential influences have been overplayed. Angela Costley, for example, rightly concludes (pp. 29-30) that Philonic thought is unlikely to be behind the Christological claims of Heb. 1.3-4. Similarly, Gabriella Gelardini notes (pp. 174) a shared hermeneutical approach employed in Philo and Heb. 13.1-25 but is equally keen to stress their points of divergence in how this approach is employed by the respective authors. Where influence is more clearly ascribed to a parallel text – for example, in Matthew Easter’s claim that Heb. 11-12 “likely parallels” 2 Macc. 6-7 (p. 144) – the case is made carefully and without hyperbole.

There is much to praise about this volume.

The list of contributors itself is worth noting. The volume includes scholars who have long shaped Hebrews scholarship (Susan Docherty, Kenneth Schenck, David Moffitt) alongside those who will surely guide the field’s future (Madison Pierce, Angela Costley, Zoe O’Neill). As such, the collection of essays not only reflects the best of where Hebrews scholarship has come from, but likely also the best of where it is headed. In other words, rather than a staid introduction, the volume brings students into a field that is genuinely alive with the possibility of future work. Students are invited into an ongoing conversation, not merely given a summary of past insights. In this respect, the editors are to be commended for their choice of contributors.

I am, rather unusually, reluctant to single out any particular contributions to the volume. Happily, this is because the chapters are uniformly of a high standard. Each chapter offers a different perspective on how Hebrews is to be read in its literary and theological context and, subsequently, the work as a whole would suffer were any of them omitted. To highlight a handful of works at the expense of others would, I think, do a disservice to those whose work have contributed to a genuinely consistent level of quality throughout the volume.

Finally, and most significantly, this introduction offers real insight into *how* to study Hebrews as much as anything else. Moreover, it does this not through overly technical methodological content, but through showing scholars in the process of discussing parallel texts and the insights they glean from the actual application of this approach. More than an introduction to Hebrews, the volume serves as an introduction in how to study Hebrews. In other words, the contributions herein don’t merely tell students what Hebrews is about but invite them and equip them to

answer such issues for themselves. Scholarship is as much about asking better questions than it is about finding answers. This collection of essays enables and encourages students to ask better questions.

There is very little to detract from the book. An overly critical reader might find issues: Georg Gäbel and R.B. Jamieson's important works on the cultic thought of Hebrews are hardly mentioned, for example. (Jamieson is mentioned once; Gäbel not at all). Elsewhere, some might find German scholarship more broadly to be slightly underrepresented. (Reference to Erich Grässer's work, for example, is absent). But these would be disingenuous criticisms given the volume's intended readership. In an introduction such as this, brevity and clarity trump comprehensiveness; to expect this volume to instill doctoral-level knowledge of

contemporary Hebrews scholarship would be unreasonable. Anything teachers find lacking in the volume (like the above examples), could easily be supplemented in a classroom setting if necessary. This volume is clear regarding its intended readership and it meets the needs of that readership well.

I can't recommend this book highly enough. If you are engaged in either the study or teaching of Hebrews, it is simply an essential purchase. It combines a breadth of scholarly contributions, clarity of purpose and content, and approach that forms students into patterns of scholarly thinking, rather than merely bombarding them with information. I can think of no better introduction to a difficult text undergoing a scholarly renaissance. It is the book I wish had existed as a student; I am grateful to have it as a teacher.

