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Hebrews

Contemporary Methods – New Insights

Edited by

Gabriella Gelardini



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FOREWORD

Despite generations of learned commentators, the Epistle to the Hebrews remains an object of fascination for students of the origins of Christianity. Some of that fascination arises from the complexity of the work itself, with its elaborate, sustained, dare I say “metaphorical” treatment of the death of Christ, its rich but often subtle vocabulary, and its complex intertextual relations with the sacred scriptures of Israel and the literature of Second Temple Judaism. While the text is intricate, its contemporary readership has become more complex as well. Rhetorical and sociological analyses of early Christian texts and communities, building on traditional literary and historical criticism, have increased in complexity and sophistication. As interpreters generally have become sensitive to the political commitments of ancient texts and their postmodern readers, new questions and perspectives have emerged. At the same time, readers committed to a Christian stance in the contemporary world have turned with renewed enthusiasm to the movement’s earliest voices. Scholarship on the New Testament thus continues to evolve, influenced by trends in the humanities generally and by efforts to find new ways to appropriate Scripture for contemporary religious life. It is no surprise then that scholarship on the Epistle to the Hebrews has also continued to develop.

When I set out to write a commentary on this most intriguing epistle some twenty years ago, the major issues had been stable for a generation or so. Most scholars had long since ceased to worry about Pauline authorship, but debates still raged about the dating of the epistle and its relations with other ancient sources, the Dead Sea Scrolls and Philo marking the ends of the usual spectrum, although “Gnostic” texts still appeared on the horizon of some scholarly analyses. Debate also continued about the character of the addressees. Were they Jews to be converted or saved from “relapsing” to Judaism? Or were they Gentiles whose faith needed to be strengthened in the face of persecution, or were they something in between? Questions redolent of the history of ideas still were prominent. What world of thought or imagination did it come from—Jewish apocalyptic, Greek philosophy, odd mythology? Some new analytical methods were just capturing the attention of exegetes. The