

# HEBREWS



WISDOM COMMENTARY

Volume 54

# Hebrews

Mary Ann Beavis and  
HyeRan Kim-Cragg

Linda Maloney

*Volume Editor*

Barbara E. Reid, OP

*General Editor*



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# Abbreviations

1 En.	1 Enoch
11Q13	Melchizedek Scroll from Qumran Cave 11
<i>Ant.</i>	Flavius Josephus, <i>Jewish Antiquities</i>
AB	Anchor Bible
<i>Abr.</i>	<i>De Abrahamo</i>
<i>AsJT</i>	<i>Asia Journal of Theology</i>
<i>Ann.</i>	Tacitus, <i>Annals</i>
ANTC	Abingdon New Testament Commentaries
<i>Antichr.</i>	Hippolytus, <i>On the Antichrist</i>
<i>Apol.</i>	<i>Apologia</i>
As. Mos.	Assumption of Moses
ASV	American Standard Version
AV	Authorized Version
<i>B.J.</i>	Flavius Josephus, <i>Bellum Judaicum</i>
BA	<i>Biblical Archaeologist</i>
BDAG	Walter Bauer, W. F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich (3rd ed., rev. by F. W. Danker), <i>Greek–English Lexicon of the NT</i>
BibInt	Biblical Interpretation Series
<i>BSac</i>	<i>Bibliotheca Sacra</i>

<i>BTB</i>	<i>Biblical Theology Bulletin</i>
<i>CBQ</i>	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
<i>CBQMS</i>	Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series
<i>CEB</i>	Common English Bible
<i>Cherabim</i>	Philo, <i>On the Cherubim</i>
<i>CSCA</i>	Centre for the Study of Christianity in Asia
<i>EAPR</i>	<i>East Asian Pastoral Review</i>
<i>Ebr.</i>	Philo, <i>De Ebrietate</i>
<i>Ep.</i>	Pliny, <i>Epistles</i>
<i>FCB</i>	Feminist Companion to the Bible
<i>FCNTECW</i>	Feminist Companion to the New Testament and Early Christian Writings
<i>Fr. Matt.</i>	Origen, <i>Fragments on Matthew</i>
<i>FemT</i>	<i>Feminist Theology</i>
<i>GIPS</i>	Gender Issues in Philippine Society
<i>Haer.</i>	<i>Adversus Haereses</i>
<i>HTR</i>	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
<i>HUCA</i>	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
<i>IFRT</i>	Institute of Formation and Religious Studies
<i>IFT</i>	Introductions in Feminist Theology
<i>IG</i>	<i>Image and Gender</i>
<i>IO</i>	<i>Institutio Oratoria</i>
<i>JFSR</i>	<i>Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion</i>
<i>JSNTSup</i>	Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series
<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
<i>JSOTSup</i>	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series
<i>JSP</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha</i>
<i>JSQ</i>	<i>Jewish Studies Quarterly</i>
<i>Jub.</i>	Jubilees

LCR	<i>Lutheran Church Review</i>
<i>Leg. All.</i>	<i>Legum allegoriae</i>
LNTS	Library of New Testament Studies
LP	<i>Living Pulpit</i>
LXX	Septuagint
Mart. Isa.	Martyrdom of Isaiah
Meg.	Megillah
Midr.	Midrash
<i>MJTM</i>	<i>McMaster Journal of Theology and Ministry</i>
<i>Mos.</i>	<i>De Vita Mosis</i>
MS	Maryhill Studies
MT	Masoretic Text
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NCV	New Century Version
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
NIV	New International Version
NJB	New Jerusalem Bible
NLV	New Life Version
NRM	New Religious Movement
NTL	New Testament Library
NTS	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
OQR	<i>Oberlin Quarterly Review</i>
RBS	Resources for Biblical Study
<i>ResQ</i>	<i>Restoration Quarterly</i>
<i>RevExp</i>	<i>Review and Expositor</i>
RWS	<i>Review of Women's Studies</i>
SBL	Society of Biblical Literature
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SBLSymS	Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series
SemeiaSt	Semeia Studies

<i>SJT</i>	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
SNTSMS	Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas Monograph Series
SP	Sacra Pagina
StPatr	Studia Patristica
<i>Spec.</i>	<i>De specialibus legibus</i>
T.Ab.	Testament of Abraham
<i>TBT</i>	<i>The Bible Today</i>
T.Levi	Testament of Levi
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UPIC	University Parish International Community

## *Contributors*

Marie Annharte Baker is a First Nations poet, essayist, and activist in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada.

Dr. Mary Ann Beavis is professor in the Department of Religion and Culture, St. Thomas More College, University of Saskatchewan. She is the author of many articles and several books in the subject areas of biblical studies and religious studies.

Rev. Dr. HyeRan Kim-Cragg is Lydia Gruchy Professor of Pastoral Studies, St. Andrew's College, University of Saskatchewan. She is the author of many articles and several books in the subject areas of religious education and worship.

Rev. Dr. Nancy Calvert-Koyzis is currently manager of supportive care at the Dr. Bob Kemp Hospice in Hamilton, Ontario. She taught for over twenty years, full-time and part-time, at colleges, universities, and theological colleges. She is the author or editor of three books and many articles in the area of biblical studies.

Dr. Ma. Maricel S. Ibita earned her doctorate from the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium. Her publications and research interests on the Bible employ historical-critical method, literary analysis, approaches that use human sciences, and contextual approaches. She brings this expertise along with her advocacy for justice, peace, and integrity of creation as she returns to her home country, the Philippines.

Dr. Ma. Marilou S. Ibita is a postdoctoral researcher at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (Leuven, Belgium) and a guest lecturer at the Institute of Formation and Religious Studies (Quezon City, Philippines). Her research interests include, among others, New Testament hermeneutics, hospitality and meals in the New Testament, and the role of the Bible in popular culture and religious education.

Dr. Justin Jaron Lewis is associate professor in the Department of Religion and Judaic Studies Program, University of Manitoba. He is the author of *Imagining Holiness: Classic Hasidic Tales in Modern Times* (McGill-Queens University Press, 2009) and other work on Jewish storytelling and imaginative interpretation of Scripture.

## Foreword

# *“Come Eat of My Bread . . . and Walk in the Ways of Wisdom”*

*Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza  
Harvard University Divinity School*

Jewish feminist writer Asphodel Long has likened the Bible to a magnificent garden of brilliant plants, some flowering, some fruiting, some in seed, some in bud, shaded by trees of age old, luxurious growth. Yet in the very soil which gives it life the poison has been inserted. . . . This poison is that of misogyny, the hatred of women, half the human race.<sup>1</sup>

To see Scripture as such a beautiful garden containing poisonous ivy requires that one identify and name this poison and place on all biblical texts the label “Caution! Could be dangerous to your health and survival!” As critical feminist interpretation for well-being this Wisdom Commentary seeks to elaborate the beauty and fecundity of this Scripture-garden

1. Asphodel Long, *In a Chariot Drawn by Lions: The Search for the Female in the Deity* (London: Women’s Press, 1992), 195.

and at the same time points to the harm it can do when one submits to its world of vision. Thus, feminist biblical interpretation engages two seemingly contradictory insights: The Bible is written in kyriocentric (i.e., lord/master/father/husband-elite male) language, originated in the patri-kyriarchal cultures of antiquity, and has functioned to inculcate misogynist mind-sets and oppressive values. At the same time it also asserts that the Bible as Sacred Scripture has functioned to inspire and authorize wo/men<sup>2</sup> in our struggles against dehumanizing oppression. The hermeneutical lens of wisdom/Wisdom empowers the commentary writers to do so.

In biblical as well as in contemporary religious discourse the word *wisdom* has a double meaning: It can either refer to the quality of life and of people and/or it can refer to a figuration of the Divine. Wisdom in both senses of the word is not a prerogative of the biblical traditions but is found in the imagination and writings of all known religions. Wisdom is transcultural, international, and interreligious. Wisdom is practical knowledge gained through experience and daily living as well as through the study of creation and human nature. Both word meanings, that of capability (wisdom) and that of female personification (Wisdom), are crucial for this Wisdom Commentary series that seeks to enable biblical readers to become critical subjects of interpretation.

Wisdom is a state of the human mind and spirit characterized by deep understanding and profound insight. It is elaborated as a quality possessed by the sages but also treasured as folk wisdom and wit. Wisdom is the power of discernment, deeper understanding, and creativity; it is the ability to move and to dance, to make the connections, to savor life, and to learn from experience. Wisdom is intelligence shaped by experience and sharpened by critical analysis. It is the ability to make sound choices and incisive decisions. Its root meaning comes to the fore in its Latin form *sapientia*, which is derived from the verb *sapere*, to taste and to savor something. Hence, this series of commentaries invites readers to taste, to evaluate, and to imagine.

In the figure of *Chokmah-Sophia-Sapientia-Wisdom*, ancient Jewish scriptures seek to hold together belief in the “one” G\*d<sup>3</sup> of Israel with both masculine and feminine language and metaphors of the Divine.

2. I use wo/man, s/he, fe/male and not the grammatical standard “man” as inclusive terms and make this visible by adding /.

3. I use the \* asterisk in order to alert readers to a problem to explore and think about.

In distinction to traditional Scripture reading, which is often individualistic and privatized, the practice and space of Wisdom commentary is public. Wisdom's spiraling presence (*Shekinah*) is global, embracing all creation. Her voice is a public, radical democratic voice rather than a "feminine," privatized one. To become one of Her justice-seeking friends, one needs to imagine the work of this feminist commentary series as the spiraling circle dance of wisdom/Wisdom.<sup>4</sup> To imagine the feminist work of this commentary series as a Spirit/spiritual intellectual movement in the open space of wisdom/Wisdom who calls readers to critically analyze, debate, and reimagine biblical texts and their commentaries as wisdom/Wisdom texts inspired by visions of justice and well-being for everyone and everything. Wisdom-Sophia-imagination engenders a different understanding of Jesus and the movement around him. It understands him as the child and prophet of Divine Wisdom and as Wisdom herself instead of imagining him as ruling King and Lord who has only subalterns but not friends. To approach the N\*T<sup>5</sup> and the whole Bible as Wisdom's invitation of cosmic dimensions means to acknowledge its multivalence and its openness to change. As bread—not stone.

In short, this commentary series is inspired by the feminist vision of the open cosmic house of Divine Wisdom-Sophia as it is found in biblical Wisdom literatures, which include the N\*T:

Wisdom has built Her house  
 She has set up Her seven pillars . . .  
 She has mixed Her wine,  
 She also has set Her table.  
 She has sent out Her wo/men ministers  
 to call from the highest places in the town . . .  
 "Come eat of my bread  
 and drink of the wine I have mixed.  
 Leave immaturity, and live,  
 And walk in the way of Wisdom." (Prov 9:1-3, 5-6)

4. I have elaborated such a Wisdom dance in terms of biblical hermeneutics in my book *Wisdom Ways*. Its seven steps are a hermeneutics of experience, of domination, of suspicion, of evaluation, of remembering or historical reconstruction, of imagination, and of transformation. However, such Wisdom strategies of meaning making are not restricted to the Bible. Rather, I have used them in workshops in Brazil and Ecuador to explore the workings of power, Condomblé, Christology, imagining a the\*logical wo/men's center, or engaging the national icon of Mary.

5. See the discussion about nomenclature of the two testaments in the introduction, pages xxxii–xxxiii.



## Editor's Introduction to Wisdom Commentary

### *“She Is a Breath of the Power of God” (Wis 7:25)*

*Barbara E. Reid, OP*

*General Editor*

Wisdom Commentary is the first series to offer detailed feminist interpretation of every book of the Bible. The fruit of collaborative work by an ecumenical and interreligious team of scholars, the volumes provide serious, scholarly engagement with the whole biblical text, not only those texts that explicitly mention women. The series is intended for clergy, teachers, ministers, and all serious students of the Bible. Designed to be both accessible and informed by the various approaches of biblical scholarship, it pays particular attention to the world in front of the text, that is, how the text is heard and appropriated. At the same time, this series aims to be faithful to the ancient text and its earliest audiences; thus the volumes also explicate the worlds behind the text and within it. While issues of gender are primary in this project, the volumes also address the intersecting issues of power, authority, ethnicity, race, class, and religious belief and practice. The fifty-eight volumes include the books regarded as canonical by Jews (i.e., the Tanakh); Protestants (the “Hebrew Bible” and the New Testament); and Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Eastern Orthodox Communion (i.e.,

Tobit, Judith, 1 and 2 Maccabees, Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach/Ecclesiasticus, Baruch, including the Letter of Jeremiah, the additions to Esther, and Susanna and Bel and the Dragon in Daniel).

## **A Symphony of Diverse Voices**

Included in the Wisdom Commentary series are voices from scholars of many different religious traditions, of diverse ages, differing sexual identities, and varying cultural, racial, ethnic, and social contexts. Some have been pioneers in feminist biblical interpretation; others are newer contributors from a younger generation. A further distinctive feature of this series is that each volume incorporates voices other than that of the lead author(s). These voices appear alongside the commentary of the lead author(s), in the grayscale inserts. At times, a contributor may offer an alternative interpretation or a critique of the position taken by the lead author(s). At other times, she or he may offer a complementary interpretation from a different cultural context or subject position. Occasionally, portions of previously published material bring in other views. The diverse voices are not intended to be contestants in a debate or a cacophony of discordant notes. The multiple voices reflect that there is no single definitive feminist interpretation of a text. In addition, they show the importance of subject position in the process of interpretation. In this regard, the Wisdom Commentary series takes inspiration from the Talmud and from *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (ed. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss; New York: Women of Reform Judaism, Federation of Temple Sisterhood, 2008), in which many voices, even conflicting ones, are included and not harmonized.

Contributors include biblical scholars, theologians, and readers of Scripture from outside the scholarly and religious guilds. At times, their comments pertain to a particular text. In some instances they address a theme or topic that arises from the text.

Another feature that highlights the collaborative nature of feminist biblical interpretation is that a number of the volumes have two lead authors who have worked in tandem from the inception of the project and whose voices interweave throughout the commentary.

## **Woman Wisdom**

The title, Wisdom Commentary, reflects both the importance to feminists of the figure of Woman Wisdom in the Scriptures and the distinct

wisdom that feminist women and men bring to the interpretive process. In the Scriptures, Woman Wisdom appears as "a breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty" (Wis 7:25), who was present and active in fashioning all that exists (Prov 8:22-31; Wis 8:6). She is a spirit who pervades and penetrates all things (Wis 7:22-23), and she provides guidance and nourishment at her all-inclusive table (Prov 9:1-5). In both postexilic biblical and nonbiblical Jewish sources, Woman Wisdom is often equated with Torah, e.g., Sir 24:23-34; Bar 3:9-4:4; 38:2; 46:4-5; 2 Bar 48:33, 36; 4 Ezra 5:9-10; 13:55; 14:40; 1 Enoch 42.

The New Testament frequently portrays Jesus as Wisdom incarnate. He invites his followers, "take my yoke upon you and learn from me" (Matt 11:29), just as Ben Sira advises, "put your neck under her [Wisdom's] yoke and let your souls receive instruction" (Sir 51:26). Just as Wisdom experiences rejection (Prov 1:23-25; Sir 15:7-8; Wis 10:3; Bar 3:12), so too does Jesus (Mark 8:31; John 1:10-11). Only some accept his invitation to his all-inclusive banquet (Matt 22:1-14; Luke 14:15-24; compare Prov 1:20-21; 9:3-5). Yet, "wisdom is vindicated by her deeds" (Matt 11:19, speaking of Jesus and John the Baptist; in the Lucan parallel at 7:35 they are called "wisdom's children"). There are numerous parallels between what is said of Wisdom and of the *Logos* in the Prologue of the Fourth Gospel (John 1:1-18). These are only a few of many examples. This female embodiment of divine presence and power is an apt image to guide the work of this series.

## Feminism

There are many different understandings of the term "feminism." The various meanings, aims, and methods have developed exponentially in recent decades. Feminism is a perspective and a movement that springs from a recognition of inequities toward women, and it advocates for changes in whatever structures prevent full human flourishing. Three waves of feminism in the United States are commonly recognized. The first, arising in the mid-nineteenth century and lasting into the early twentieth, was sparked by women's efforts to be involved in the public sphere and to win the right to vote. In the 1960s and 1970s, the second wave focused on civil rights and equality for women. With the third wave, from the 1980s forward, came global feminism and the emphasis on the contextual nature of interpretation. As feminism has matured, it has recognized that inequities based on gender are interwoven with power imbalances based on race, class, ethnicity, religion, sexual identity, physical ability, and a host of other social markers.

## Feminist Women and Men

Men who choose to identify with and partner with feminist women in the work of deconstructing systems of domination and building structures of equality are rightly regarded as feminists. Some men readily identify with experiences of women who are discriminated against on the basis of sex/gender, having themselves had comparable experiences; others who may not have faced direct discrimination or stereotyping recognize that inequity and problematic characterization still occur, and they seek correction. This series is pleased to include feminist men both as lead authors and as contributing voices.

## Feminist Biblical Interpretation

Women interpreting the Bible from the lenses of their own experience is nothing new. Throughout the ages women have recounted the biblical stories, teaching them to their children and others, all the while interpreting them afresh for their time and circumstances.<sup>1</sup> Following is a very brief sketch of select foremothers who laid the groundwork for contemporary feminist biblical interpretation.

One of the earliest known Christian women who challenged patriarchal interpretations of Scripture was a consecrated virgin named Helie, who lived in the second century CE. When she refused to marry, her parents brought her before a judge, who quoted to her Paul's admonition, "It is better to marry than to be aflame with passion" (1 Cor 7:9). In response, Helie first acknowledges that this is what Scripture says, but then she retorts, "but not for everyone, that is, not for holy virgins."<sup>2</sup> She is one of the first to question the notion that a text has one meaning that is applicable in all situations.

A Jewish woman who also lived in the second century CE, Beruriah, is said to have had "profound knowledge of biblical exegesis and out-

1. For fuller treatments of this history, see chap. 7, "One Thousand Years of Feminist Bible Criticism," in Gerda Lerner, *Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-Seventy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 138–66; Susanne Scholz, "From the 'Woman's Bible' to the 'Women's Bible,' The History of Feminist Approaches to the Hebrew Bible," in *Introducing the Women's Hebrew Bible*, IFT 13 (New York: T & T Clark, 2007), 12–32; Marion Ann Taylor and Agnes Choi, eds., *Handbook of Women Biblical Interpreters: A Historical and Biographical Guide* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012).

2. Madrid, Escorial MS, a II 9, f. 90 v., as cited in Lerner, *Feminist Consciousness*, 140.

standing intelligence."<sup>3</sup> One story preserved in the Talmud (b. Berachot 10a) tells of how she challenged her husband, Rabbi Meir, when he prayed for the destruction of a sinner. Proffering an alternate interpretation, she argued that Psalm 104:35 advocated praying for the destruction of sin, not the sinner.

In medieval times the first written commentaries on Scripture from a critical feminist point of view emerge. While others may have been produced and passed on orally, they are for the most part lost to us now. Among the earliest preserved feminist writings are those of Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), German writer, mystic, and abbess of a Benedictine monastery. She reinterpreted the Genesis narratives in a way that presented women and men as complementary and interdependent. She frequently wrote about feminine aspects of the Divine.<sup>4</sup> Along with other women mystics of the time, such as Julian of Norwich (1342–ca. 1416), she spoke authoritatively from her personal experiences of God's revelation in prayer.

In this era, women were also among the scribes who copied biblical manuscripts. Notable among them is Paula Dei Mansi of Verona, from a distinguished family of Jewish scribes. In 1288, she translated from Hebrew into Italian a collection of Bible commentaries written by her father and added her own explanations.<sup>5</sup>

Another pioneer, Christine de Pizan (1365–ca.1430), was a French court writer and prolific poet. She used allegory and common sense to subvert misogynist readings of Scripture and celebrated the accomplishments of female biblical figures to argue for women's active roles in building society.<sup>6</sup>

By the seventeenth century, there were women who asserted that the biblical text needs to be understood and interpreted in its historical context. For example, Rachel Speght (1597–ca.1630), a Calvinist English poet, elaborates on the historical situation in first-century Corinth that prompted Paul to say, "It is well for a man not to touch a woman" (1 Cor 7:1). Her aim

3. See Judith R. Baskin, "Women and Post-Biblical Commentary," in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, ed. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss (New York: Women of Reform Judaism, Federation of Temple Sisterhood, 2008), xlix–lv, here lii.

4. Hildegard of Bingen, *De Operatione Dei*, 1.4.100; PL 197:885bc, as cited in Lerner, *Feminist Consciousness*, 142–43. See also Barbara Newman, *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard's Theology of the Feminine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

5. Emily Taitz, Sondra Henry, Cheryl Tallan, eds., *JPS Guide to Jewish Women 600 B.C.E.–1900 C.E.* (Philadelphia: JPS, 2003), 110–11.

6. See further Taylor and Choi, *Handbook of Women Biblical Interpreters*, 127–32.

was to show that the biblical texts should not be applied in a literal fashion to all times and circumstances. Similarly, Margaret Fell (1614–1702), one of the founders of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain, addressed the Pauline prohibitions against women speaking in church by insisting that they do not have universal validity. Rather, they need to be understood in their historical context, as addressed to a local church in particular time-bound circumstances.<sup>7</sup>

Along with analyzing the historical context of the biblical writings, women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries began to attend to misogynistic interpretations based on faulty translations. One of the first to do so was British feminist Mary Astell (1666–1731).<sup>8</sup> In the United States, the Grimké sisters, Sarah (1792–1873) and Angelina (1805–1879), Quaker women from a slaveholding family in South Carolina, learned biblical Greek and Hebrew so that they could interpret the Bible for themselves. They were prompted to do so after men sought to silence them from speaking out against slavery and for women's rights by claiming that the Bible (e.g., 1 Cor 14:34) prevented women from speaking in public.<sup>9</sup> Another prominent abolitionist, Sojourner Truth (ca. 1797–1883), a former slave, quoted the Bible liberally in her speeches<sup>10</sup> and in so doing challenged cultural assumptions and biblical interpretations that undergird gender inequities.

Another monumental work that emerged in nineteenth-century England was that of Jewish theologian Grace Aguilar (1816–1847), *The Women of Israel*,<sup>11</sup> published in 1845. Aguilar's approach was to make connections between the biblical women and contemporary Jewish women's concerns. She aimed to counter the widespread notion that women were degraded in Jewish law and that only in Christianity were women's

7. Her major work, *Women's Speaking Justified, Proved and Allowed by the Scriptures*, published in London in 1667, gave a systematic feminist reading of all biblical texts pertaining to women.

8. Mary Astell, *Some Reflections upon Marriage* (New York: Source Book Press, 1970, reprint of the 1730 edition; earliest edition of this work is 1700), 103–4.

9. See further Sarah Grimké, *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of Woman* (Boston: Isaac Knapp, 1838).

10. See, for example, her most famous speech, "Ain't I a Woman?," delivered in 1851 at the Ohio Women's Rights Convention in Akron, OH; <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/sojtruth-woman.asp>.

11. The full title is *The Women of Israel or Characters and Sketches from the Holy Scriptures and Jewish History Illustrative of the Past History, Present Duty, and Future Destiny of the Hebrew Females, as Based on the Word of God*.

dignity and value upheld. Her intent was to help Jewish women find strength and encouragement by seeing the evidence of God's compassionate love in the history of every woman in the Bible. While not a full commentary on the Bible, Aguilar's work stands out for its comprehensive treatment of every female biblical character, including even the most obscure references.<sup>12</sup>

The first person to produce a full-blown feminist commentary on the Bible was Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815–1902). A leading proponent in the United States for women's right to vote, she found that whenever women tried to make inroads into politics, education, or the work world, the Bible was quoted against them. Along with a team of like-minded women, she produced her own commentary on every text of the Bible that concerned women. Her pioneering two-volume project, *The Woman's Bible*, published in 1895 and 1898, urges women to recognize that texts that degrade women come from the men who wrote the texts, not from God, and to use their common sense to rethink what has been presented to them as sacred.

Nearly a century later, *The Women's Bible Commentary*, edited by Sharon Ringe and Carol Newsom (Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), appeared. This one-volume commentary features North American feminist scholarship on each book of the Protestant canon. Like Cady Stanton's commentary, it does not contain comments on every section of the biblical text but only on those passages deemed relevant to women. It was revised and expanded in 1998 to include the Apocrypha/Deuterocanonical books, and the contributors to this new volume reflect the global face of contemporary feminist scholarship. The revisions made in the third edition, which appeared in 2012, represent the profound advances in feminist biblical scholarship and include newer voices. In both the second and third editions, *The* has been dropped from the title.

Also appearing at the centennial of Cady Stanton's *The Woman's Bible* were two volumes edited by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza with the assistance of Shelly Matthews. The first, *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Introduction* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), charts a comprehensive approach to feminist interpretation from ecumenical, interreligious, and multicultural perspectives. The second volume, published in 1994, provides critical feminist commentary on each book of the New Testament

12. See further Eskenazi and Weiss, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, xxxviii; Taylor and Choi, *Handbook of Women Biblical Interpreters*, 31–37.

as well as on three books of Jewish Pseudepigrapha and eleven other early Christian writings.

In Europe, similar endeavors have been undertaken, such as the one-volume *Kompendium Feministische Bibelauslegung*, edited by Luise Schottroff and Marie-Theres Wacker (Gütersloh, Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2007), featuring German feminist biblical interpretation of each book of the Bible, along with apocryphal books, and several extrabiblical writings. This work, now in its third edition, has recently been translated into English.<sup>13</sup> A multivolume project, *The Bible and Women: An Encyclopaedia of Exegesis and Cultural History*, edited by Irmtraud Fischer, Adriana Valerio, Mercedes Navarro Puerto, and Christiana de Groot, is currently in production. This project presents a history of the reception of the Bible as embedded in Western cultural history and focuses particularly on gender-relevant biblical themes, biblical female characters, and women recipients of the Bible. The volumes are published in English, Spanish, Italian, and German.<sup>14</sup>

Another groundbreaking work is the collection *The Feminist Companion to the Bible Series*, edited by Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993–2001). To date, nineteen volumes of commentaries on the Old Testament have been published, with more in production. The parallel series, *Feminist Companion to the New Testament and Early Christian Writings*, edited by Amy-Jill Levine with Marianne Blickenstaff and Maria Mayo Robbins (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001–2009), contains thirteen volumes with one more planned. These two series are not full commentaries on the biblical books but comprise collected essays on discrete biblical texts.

Works by individual feminist biblical scholars in all parts of the world abound, and they are now too numerous to list in this introduction. Feminist biblical interpretation has reached a level of maturity that now makes possible a commentary series on every book of the Bible. In recent decades, women have had greater access to formal theological education, have been able to learn critical analytical tools, have put their own in-

13. *Feminist Biblical Interpretation: A Compendium of Critical Commentary on the Books of the Bible and Related Literature*, trans. Lisa E. Dahill, Everett R. Kalin, Nancy Lukens, Linda M. Maloney, Barbara Rumscheidt, Martin Rumscheidt, and Tina Steiner (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012).

14. The first volume, on the Torah, appeared in Spanish in 2009, in German and Italian in 2010, and in English in 2011 (Atlanta, GA: SBL). For further information, see <http://www.bibleandwomen.org>.

terpretations into writing, and have developed new methods of biblical interpretation. Until recent decades the work of feminist biblical interpreters was largely unknown, both to other women and to their brothers in the synagogue, church, and academy. Feminists now have taken their place in the professional world of biblical scholars, where they build on the work of their foremothers and connect with one another across the globe in ways not previously possible. In a few short decades, feminist biblical criticism has become an integral part of the academy.

## Methodologies

Feminist biblical scholars use a variety of methods and often employ a number of them together.<sup>15</sup> In the Wisdom Commentary series, the authors will explain their understanding of feminism and the feminist reading strategies used in their commentary. Each volume treats the biblical text in blocks of material, not an analysis verse by verse. The entire text is considered, not only those passages that feature female characters or that speak specifically about women. When women are not apparent in the narrative, feminist lenses are used to analyze the dynamics in the text between male characters, the models of power, binary ways of thinking, and dynamics of imperialism. Attention is given to how the whole text functions and how it was and is heard, both in its original context and today. Issues of particular concern to women—e.g., poverty, food, health, the environment, water—come to the fore.

One of the approaches used by early feminists and still popular today is to lift up the overlooked and forgotten stories of women in the Bible. Studies of women in each of the Testaments have been done, and there are also studies on women in particular biblical books.<sup>16</sup> Feminists

15. See the seventeen essays in Caroline Vander Stichele and Todd Penner, eds., *Her Master's Tools? Feminist and Postcolonial Engagements of Historical-Critical Discourse* (Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2005), which show the complementarity of various approaches.

16. See, e.g., Alice Bach, ed., *Women in the Hebrew Bible: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1998); Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible* (New York: Schocken, 2002); Carol Meyers, Toni Craven, and Ross S. Kraemer, *Women in Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000); Irene Nowell, *Women in the Old Testament* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1997); Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, *Just Wives? Stories of Power and Survival in the Old Testament and Today* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2003); Mary Ann Getty-Sullivan, *Women in the New Testament* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001); Bonnie Thurston, *Women in the New Testament* (New York: Crossroad, 1998).

recognize that the examples of biblical characters can be both empowering and problematic. The point of the feminist enterprise is not to serve as an apologetic for women; it is rather, in part, to recover women's history and literary roles in all their complexity and to learn from that recovery.

Retrieving the submerged history of biblical women is a crucial step for constructing the story of the past so as to lead to liberative possibilities for the present and future. There are, however, some pitfalls to this approach. Sometimes depictions of biblical women have been naïve and romantic. Some commentators exalt the virtues of both biblical and contemporary women and paint women as superior to men. Such reverse discrimination inhibits movement toward equality for all. In addition, some feminists challenge the idea that one can "pluck positive images out of an admittedly androcentric text, separating literary characterizations from the androcentric interests they were created to serve."<sup>17</sup> Still other feminists find these images to have enormous value.

One other danger with seeking the submerged history of women is the tendency for Christian feminists to paint Jesus and even Paul as liberators of women in a way that demonizes Judaism.<sup>18</sup> *Wisdom Commentary* aims to enhance understanding of Jesus as well as Paul as Jews of their day and to forge solidarity among Jewish and Christian feminists.

Feminist scholars who use historical-critical methods analyze the world behind the text; they seek to understand the historical context from which the text emerged and the circumstances of the communities to whom it was addressed. In bringing feminist lenses to this approach, the aim is not to impose modern expectations on ancient cultures but to unmask the ways that ideologically problematic mind-sets that produced the ancient texts are still promulgated through the text. Feminist biblical scholars aim not only to deconstruct but also to reclaim and reconstruct biblical history as women's history, in which women were central and

17. Cheryl Exum, "Second Thoughts about Secondary Characters: Women in Exodus 1.8–2.10," in *A Feminist Companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy*, FCB 6 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 75–97, here 76.

18. See Judith Plaskow, "Anti-Judaism in Feminist Christian Interpretation," in *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Introduction* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 1:117–29; Amy-Jill Levine, "The New Testament and Anti-Judaism," in *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 87–117.

active agents in creating religious heritage.<sup>19</sup> A further step is to construct meaning for contemporary women and men in a liberative movement toward transformation of social, political, economic, and religious structures.<sup>20</sup> In recent years, some feminists have embraced new historicism, which accents the creative role of the interpreter in any construction of history and exposes the power struggles to which the text witnesses.<sup>21</sup>

Literary critics analyze the world of the text: its form, language patterns, and rhetorical function.<sup>22</sup> They do not attempt to separate layers of tradition and redaction but focus on the text holistically, as it is in its present form. They examine how meaning is created in the interaction between the text and its reader in multiple contexts. Within the arena of literary approaches are reader-oriented approaches, narrative, rhetorical, structuralist, post-structuralist, deconstructive, ideological, autobiographical, and performance criticism.<sup>23</sup> Narrative critics study the interrelation

19. See, for example, Phyllis A. Bird, *Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities: Women and Gender in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997); Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1984); Ross Shepard Kraemer and Mary Rose D'Angelo, eds., *Women and Christian Origins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

20. See, e.g., Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture*, rev. ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), whose aim is to engage in biblical interpretation not only for intellectual enlightenment but, even more important, for personal and communal transformation. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (*Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001]) envisions the work of feminist biblical interpretation as a dance of Wisdom that consists of seven steps that interweave in spiral movements toward liberation, the final one being transformative action for change.

21. See Gina Hens Piazza, *The New Historicism*, Guides to Biblical Scholarship, Old Testament Series (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002).

22. Phyllis Trible was among the first to employ this method with texts from Genesis and Ruth in her groundbreaking book *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, *Overtures to Biblical Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978). Another pioneer in feminist literary criticism is Mieke Bal (*Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987]). For surveys of recent developments in literary methods, see Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); Janice Capel Anderson and Stephen D. Moore, eds., *Mark and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008).

23. See, e.g., J. Cheryl Exum and David J. A. Clines, eds., *The New Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1993); Edgar V. McKnight and Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, eds., *The New Literary Criticism and the New Testament* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1994).

among author, text, and audience through investigation of settings, both spatial and temporal; characters; plot; and narrative techniques (e.g., irony, parody, intertextual allusions). Reader-response critics attend to the impact that the text has on the reader or hearer. They recognize that when a text is detrimental toward women there is the choice either to affirm the text or to read against the grain toward a liberative end. Rhetorical criticism analyzes the style of argumentation and attends to how the author is attempting to shape the thinking or actions of the hearer. Structuralist critics analyze the complex patterns of binary oppositions in the text to derive its meaning.<sup>24</sup> Post-structuralist approaches challenge the notion that there are fixed meanings to any biblical text or that there is one universal truth. They engage in close readings of the text and often engage in intertextual analysis.<sup>25</sup> Within this approach is deconstructionist criticism, which views the text as a site of conflict, with competing narratives. The interpreter aims to expose the fault lines and overturn and reconfigure binaries by elevating the underling of a pair and foregrounding it.<sup>26</sup> Feminists also use other postmodern approaches, such as ideological and autobiographical criticism. The former analyzes the system of ideas that underlies the power and values concealed in the text as well as that of the interpreter.<sup>27</sup> The latter involves deliberate self-disclosure while reading the text as a critical exegete.<sup>28</sup> Performance criticism attends to how the text was passed on orally, usually in communal settings, and

24. See, e.g., David Jobling, *The Sense of Biblical Narrative: Three Structural Analyses in the Old Testament*, JSOTSup 7 (Sheffield: Sheffield University, 1978).

25. See, e.g., Stephen D. Moore, *Poststructuralism and the New Testament: Derrida and Foucault at the Foot of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994); *The Bible in Theory: Critical and Postcritical Essays* (Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2010); Yvonne Sherwood, *A Biblical Text and Its Afterlives: The Survival of Jonah in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

26. David Penchansky, "Deconstruction," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Steven McKenzie (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 196–205. See, for example, Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, *Gender, Power, and Promise: The Subject of the Bible's First Story* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1993); David Rutledge, *Reading Marginally: Feminism, Deconstruction and the Bible*, BibInt 21 (Leiden: Brill, 1996).

27. See Tina Pippin, ed., *Ideological Criticism of Biblical Texts: Semeia* 59 (1992); Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London: Verso, 2007).

28. See, e.g., Ingrid Rose Kitzberger, ed., *Autobiographical Biblical Interpretation: Between Text and Self* (Leiden: Deo, 2002); P. J. W. Schutte, "When They, We, and the Passive Become I—Introducing Autobiographical Biblical Criticism," *HTS Theologisches Studien / Theological Studies* vol. 61 (2005): 401–16.

to the verbal and nonverbal interactions between the performer and the audience.<sup>29</sup>

From the beginning, feminists have understood that interpreting the Bible is an act of power. In recent decades, feminist biblical scholars have developed hermeneutical theories of the ethics and politics of biblical interpretation to challenge the claims to value neutrality of most academic biblical scholarship. Feminist biblical scholars have also turned their attention to how some biblical writings were shaped by the power of empire and how this still shapes readers' self-understandings today. They have developed hermeneutical approaches that reveal, critique, and evaluate the interactions depicted in the text against the context of empire, and they consider implications for contemporary contexts.<sup>30</sup> Feminists also analyze the dynamics of colonization and the mentalities of colonized peoples in the exercise of biblical interpretation. As Kwok Pui-lan explains, "A post-colonial feminist interpretation of the Bible needs to investigate the deployment of gender in the narration of identity, the negotiation of power differentials between the colonizers and the colonized, and the reinforcement of patriarchal control over spheres where these elites could exercise control."<sup>31</sup> Methods and models from sociology and cultural anthropology are used by feminists to investigate women's everyday lives, their experiences of marriage, childrearing, labor, money, illness, etc.<sup>32</sup>

29. See, e.g., Holly Hearon and Philip Ruge-Jones, eds., *The Bible in Ancient and Modern Media: Story and Performance* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009).

30. E.g., Gale Yee, ed., *Judges and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995); Warren Carter, *The Gospel of Matthew in Its Roman Imperial Context* (London: T & T Clark, 2005); *The Roman Empire and the New Testament: An Essential Guide* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2006); Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Power of the Word: Scripture and the Rhetoric of Empire* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007); Judith E. McKinlay, *Reframing Her: Biblical Women in Postcolonial Focus* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2004).

31. Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 9. See also Musa W. Dube, ed., *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice, 2000); Cristl M. Maier and Carolyn J. Sharp, *Prophecy and Power: Jeremiah in Feminist and Postcolonial Perspective* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

32. See, for example, Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Luise Schottroff, *Lydia's Impatient Sisters: A Feminist Social History of Early Christianity*, trans. Barbara and Martin Rumscheidt (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1995); Susan Niditch, "My Brother Esau Is a Hairy Man": *Hair and Identity in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

As feminists have examined the construction of gender from varying cultural perspectives, they have become ever more cognizant that the way gender roles are defined within differing cultures varies radically. As Mary Ann Tolbert observes, "Attempts to isolate some universal role that cross-culturally defines 'woman' have run into contradictory evidence at every turn."<sup>33</sup> Some women have coined new terms to highlight the particularities of their socio-cultural context. Many African American feminists, for example, call themselves *womanists* to draw attention to the double oppression of racism and sexism they experience.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, many US Hispanic feminists speak of themselves as *mujeristas* (*mujer* is Spanish for "woman").<sup>35</sup> Others prefer to be called "Latina feminists."<sup>36</sup> Both groups emphasize that the context for their theologizing is *mestizaje* and *mulatez* (racial and cultural mixture), done *en conjunto* (in community), with *lo cotidiano* (everyday lived experience) of Hispanic women as starting points for theological reflection and the encounter with the divine. Intercultural analysis has become an indispensable tool for working toward justice for women at the global level.<sup>37</sup>

Some feminists are among those who have developed lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) interpretation. This approach focuses on issues of sexual identity and uses various reading strategies. Some point out the ways in which categories that emerged in recent centuries are applied anachronistically to biblical texts to make modern-day judgments. Others show how the Bible is silent on contemporary issues about

33. Mary Ann Tolbert, "Social, Sociological, and Anthropological Methods," in *Searching the Scriptures*, 1:255–71, here 265.

34. Alice Walker coined the term (*In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* [New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1967, 1983]). See also Katie G. Cannon, "The Emergence of Black Feminist Consciousness," in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Letty M. Russell (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), 30–40; Nyasha Junior, "Womanist Biblical Interpretation," in *Engaging the Bible in a Gendered World: An Introduction to Feminist Biblical Interpretation in Honor of Katharine Doob Sakenfeld*, ed. Linda Day and Carolyn Pressler (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 37–46; Renita Weems, *Just a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women's Relationships in the Bible* (San Diego: Lura Media, 1988).

35. Ada María Isasi-Díaz (*Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-first Century* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996]) is credited with coining the term.

36. E.g., María Pilar Aquino, Daisy L. Machado, and Jeanette Rodríguez, eds., *A Reader in Latina Feminist Theology* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002).

37. See, e.g., María Pilar Aquino and María José Rosado-Nunes, eds., *Feminist Intercultural Theology: Latina Explorations for a Just World*, Studies in Latino/a Catholicism (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007).

sexual identity. Still others examine same-sex relationships in the Bible by figures such as Ruth and Naomi or David and Jonathan. In recent years, queer theory has emerged; it emphasizes the blurriness of boundaries not just of sexual identity but also of gender roles. Queer critics often focus on texts in which figures transgress what is traditionally considered proper gender behavior.<sup>38</sup>

Feminists also recognize that the struggle for women's equality and dignity is intimately connected with the struggle for respect for Earth and for the whole of the cosmos. Ecofeminists interpret Scripture in ways that highlight the link between human domination of nature and male subjugation of women. They show how anthropocentric ways of interpreting the Bible have overlooked or dismissed Earth and Earth community. They invite readers to identify not only with human characters in the biblical narrative but also with other Earth creatures and domains of nature, especially those that are the object of injustice. Some use creative imagination to retrieve the interests of Earth implicit in the narrative and enable Earth to speak.<sup>39</sup>

## Biblical Authority

By the late nineteenth century, some feminists, such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, began to question openly whether the Bible could continue to be regarded as authoritative for women. They viewed the Bible itself as the source of women's oppression, and some rejected its sacred origin and saving claims. Some decided that the Bible and the religious traditions that enshrine it are too thoroughly saturated with androcentrism and patriarchy to be redeemable.<sup>40</sup>

38. See, e.g., Bernadette J. Brooten, *Love between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Mary Rose D'Angelo, "Women Partners in the New Testament," *JFSR* 6 (1990): 65–86; Deirdre J. Good, "Reading Strategies for Biblical Passages on Same-Sex Relations," *Theology and Sexuality* 7 (1997): 70–82; Deryn Guest, *When Deborah Met Jael: Lesbian Feminist Hermeneutics* (London: SCM, 2011); Teresa Hornsby and Ken Stone, eds., *Bible Trouble: Queer Readings at the Boundaries of Biblical Scholarship* (Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2011).

39. E.g., Norman C. Habel and Peter Trudinger, *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics*, SBLSymS 46 (Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2008); Mary Judith Ress, *Ecofeminism in Latin America, Women from the Margins* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006).

40. E.g., Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: A Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (London: The Women's Press, 1986).

In the Wisdom Commentary series, questions such as these may be raised, but the aim of this series is not to lead readers to reject the authority of the biblical text. Rather, the aim is to promote better understanding of the contexts from which the text arose and of the rhetorical effects it has on women and men in contemporary contexts. Such understanding can lead to a deepening of faith, with the Bible serving as an aid to bring flourishing of life.

## Language for God

Because of the ways in which the term “God” has been used to symbolize the divine in predominantly male, patriarchal, and monarchical modes, feminists have designed new ways of speaking of the divine. Some have called attention to the inadequacy of the term *God* by trying to visually destabilize our ways of thinking and speaking of the divine. Rosemary Radford Ruether proposed *God/ess*, as an unpronounceable term pointing to the unnameable understanding of the divine that transcends patriarchal limitations.<sup>41</sup> Some have followed traditional Jewish practice, writing *G-d*. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has adopted *G\*d*.<sup>42</sup> Others draw on the biblical tradition to mine female and non-gender-specific metaphors and symbols.<sup>43</sup> In Wisdom Commentary, there is not one standard way of expressing the divine; each author will use her or his preferred ways. The one exception is that when the tetragrammaton, YHWH, the name revealed to Moses in Exodus 3:14, is used, it will be without vowels, respecting the Jewish custom of avoiding pronouncing the divine name out of reverence.

## Nomenclature for the Two Testaments

In recent decades, some biblical scholars have begun to call the two Testaments of the Bible by names other than the traditional nomencla-

41. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1983).

42. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet; Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 191 n. 3.

43. E.g., Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987); Catherine LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991); Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992). See further Elizabeth A. Johnson, “God,” in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, 128–30.

ture: Old and New Testament. Some regard "Old" as derogatory, implying that it is no longer relevant or that it has been superseded. Consequently, terms like Hebrew Bible, First Testament, and Jewish Scriptures and, correspondingly, Christian Scriptures or Second Testament have come into use. There are a number of difficulties with these designations. The term "Hebrew Bible" does not take into account that parts of the Old Testament are written not in Hebrew but in Aramaic.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, for Roman Catholics, Anglicans, and Eastern Orthodox believers, the Old Testament includes books written in Greek—the Deuterocanonical books, considered Apocrypha by Protestants. The term "Jewish Scriptures" is inadequate because these books are also sacred to Christians. Conversely, "Christian Scriptures" is not an accurate designation for the New Testament, since the Old Testament is also part of the Christian Scriptures. Using "First and Second Testament" also has difficulties, in that it can imply a hierarchy and a value judgment.<sup>45</sup> Jews generally use the term Tanakh, an acronym for Torah (Pentateuch), Nevi'im (Prophets), and Ketuvim (Writings).

In Wisdom Commentary, if authors choose to use a designation other than Tanakh, Old Testament, and New Testament, they will explain how they mean the term.

## Translation

Modern feminist scholars recognize the complexities connected with biblical translation, as they have delved into questions about philosophy of language, how meanings are produced, and how they are culturally situated. Today it is evident that simply translating into gender-neutral formulations cannot address all the challenges presented by androcentric texts. Efforts at feminist translation must also deal with issues around authority and canonicity.<sup>46</sup>

Because of these complexities, the editors of Wisdom Commentary series have chosen to use an existing translation, the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), which is provided for easy reference at the top of each page of commentary. The NRSV was produced by a team of ecumenical and interreligious scholars, is a fairly literal translation, and uses

44. Gen 31:47; Jer 10:11; Ezra 4:7–6:18; 7:12–26; Dan 2:4–7:28.

45. See Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew*, 193–99.

46. Elizabeth Castelli, "Les Belles Infidèles/Fidelity or Feminism? The Meanings of Feminist Biblical Translation," in *Searching the Scriptures*, 1:189–204, here 190.

inclusive language for human beings. Brief discussions about problematic translations appear in the inserts labeled “Translation Matters.” When more detailed discussions are available, these will be indicated in footnotes. In the commentary, wherever Hebrew or Greek words are used, English translation is provided. In cases where a wordplay is involved, transliteration is provided to enable understanding.

## Art and Poetry

Artistic expression in poetry, music, sculpture, painting, and various other modes is very important to feminist interpretation. Where possible, art and poetry is included in the print volumes of the series. In a number of instances, these are original works created for this project. Regrettably, copyright and production costs prohibit the inclusion of color photographs and other artistic work. It is our hope that the web version will allow a greater collection of such resources.

## Glossary

Because there are a number of excellent readily-available resources that provide definitions and concise explanations of terms used in feminist theological and biblical studies, this series will not include a glossary. We refer you to works such as *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, edited by Letty M. Russell with J. Shannon Clarkson (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), and volume 1 of *Searching the Scriptures*, edited by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza with the assistance of Shelly Matthews (New York: Crossroad, 1992). Individual authors in the Wisdom Commentary series will define the way they are using terms that may be unfamiliar.

## Bibliography

Because bibliographies are quickly outdated and because the space is limited, only a list of Works Cited is included in the print volumes. A comprehensive bibliography for each volume is posted on a dedicated website and is updated regularly.

The link for this volume is: [wisdomcommentary.org](http://wisdomcommentary.org).

## **A Concluding Word**

In just a few short decades, feminist biblical studies has grown exponentially, both in the methods that have been developed and in the number of scholars who have embraced it. We realize that this series is limited and will soon need to be revised and updated. It is our hope that *Wisdom Commentary*, by making the best of current feminist biblical scholarship available in an accessible format to ministers, preachers, teachers, scholars, and students, will aid all readers in their advancement toward God's vision of dignity, equality, and justice for all.



## Authors' Introduction

# *Searching for Sophia*

In *Searching the Scriptures*, a pioneering feminist commentary on early christian writings, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza classes Hebrews, with other New Testament (NT) epistolary literature, among the “submerged traditions of Sophia.”<sup>1</sup> This classification is not necessarily reflected in the commentaries on the letters, but it relates to her metaphor for Scripture as the house of Sophia, divine Wisdom:

It is the open, cosmic house of divine Wisdom. Her dwelling of cosmic dimensions has no walls; she permeates the whole world. Her inviting table, with the bread of sustenance and the wine of celebration, is set between seven cosmic pillars that allow the spirit of fresh air to blow where it will. This image does not allow for an understanding of canonical authority as exclusive and commanding. Rather, it grasps the original Latin meaning of *augere/auctoritas* as nurturing creativity, flowering growth, and enhancing enrichment. Biblical authority should foster such creativity, strength, and freedom.<sup>2</sup>

Nonetheless, in feminist theological/theological discourse, personified Wisdom as a female God-figure is, as Silvia Schroer notes, not “a priori

1. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, ed., *Searching the Scriptures*, vol. 2: *A Feminist Commentary* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), vi–vii.

2. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “Transgressing Canonical Boundaries,” in *Searching the Scriptures*, 2:11.

. . . a viable theological option.”<sup>3</sup> Athalya Brenner observes that the prominence of personified Sophia in the Wisdom corpus (especially Proverbs, Wisdom, and Sirach) can be viewed in two ways: as a manifestation of male constructions of women and femininity, or as “suppressed, submerged or silenced traces of women’s traditions.”<sup>4</sup> In Christian feminist theology, Elizabeth A. Johnson has shown in her book *She Who Is* that the biblical image of Wisdom, personified as Mother-Sophia, Christ-Sophia, and Spirit-Sophia, provides a rich vein of female God-language for feminist theological reflection, grounded in both Scripture and tradition.<sup>5</sup> The Wisdom literature in particular portrays Sophia as:

- a unique manifestation of the divine image (Wis 7:25-26)
- a preexistent mediator of creation (Prov 8:22-31; Wis 7:22; 8:6)
- the one who orders and sustains creation and good governance among human beings (Wis 8:1; Prov 8:15)
- a redeemer whose saving deeds are apparent throughout history (Wis 10:1–19:17)
- an all-pervading spirit who holds the universe together (Wis 7:22-23) and inspires “friends of God and prophets” (Wis 7:27)
- one who accompanies human beings through hard times (Wis 10:17-18)
- one who imparts the divine gift of life (Prov 8:35; Wis 8:5), who enlightens, nourishes, teaches, and guides (Prov 9:5)
- one who judges wrongdoing (Prov 1:20-33) and triumphs over evil (Wis 7:29-30)
- one who dwells with Israel (Sir 24:8, 10-12) and embodies Torah (Sir 24:23; Bar 3:37)

The NT Scriptures associate the Wisdom tradition with their own experience of Jesus:

- The Pauline tradition calls Jesus the power of God and the Wisdom of God (1 Cor 1:22-24); the mediator of creation (1 Cor 8:6); and the image of the invisible One and the firstborn of creation (Col 1:15).

3. Silvia Schroer, “The Book of Sophia,” in *Searching the Scriptures*, 2:19.

4. Athalya Brenner, ed., *A Feminist Companion to Wisdom Literature* FCB 9 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 13.

5. Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1996).

- Luke portrays Jesus as a child of Sophia who justifies her and is rejected by Jewish authorities (7:35; see also *1 Enoch* 4:1-2).
- Matthew portrays Jesus as an embodiment of Sophia who speaks her words and performs her deeds (11:28-30; see also *Sir* 6:23-31) and who is rejected in Jerusalem (Matt 23:37-39).
- John, especially, is “suffused with wisdom themes. Seeking and finding, feeding and nourishing, revealing and enlightening, giving life, making people friends of God, shining as light in the darkness, being the way, the truth, and the life: these are but some of the ways Jesus embodies *Sophia's* roles and is interpreted as Wisdom herself.”<sup>6</sup>

The above summary of the scriptural portrayal of Sophia is based on an essay by Elizabeth Johnson, but she mentions Hebrews only in passing.<sup>7</sup> One of the major tasks of this commentary will be to excavate the sophiology of Hebrews by uncovering its foundations in Jewish Wisdom literature and by recovering the implications of this submerged Wisdom discourse for the feminist theological appreciation—and critique—of Hebrews. It will also seek to examine this biblical text from liturgical, postcolonial, and theological perspectives by strengthening interdisciplinary approaches in keeping with the mandate of the Wisdom Commentary Series. It is hoped that such an examination will offer food for thought, promote change in the pastoral and liturgical traditions of the church, and encourage the growth of faith communities.

## Hebrews and Wisdom

Hebrews shows an extensive knowledge of the Jewish Scriptures, with many quotations and allusions to books from the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings.<sup>8</sup> Arguably, however, the Jewish Scripture with which Hebrews has the most affinities is the deuterocanonical book of Wisdom (or Wisdom of Solomon). Scholars often regard both Wisdom and Hebrews as influenced by the Hellenistic Jewish form of scriptural interpretation informed by Greek philosophy and associated with Alexandria and its

6. Elizabeth A. Johnson, “Wisdom Was Made Flesh and Pitched Her Tent Among Us,” in *Reconstructing the Christ Symbol: Essays in Feminist Christology*, ed. Maryanne Stevens (New York: Paulist Press, 1993; repr. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2004), 95–117, at 104.

7. *Ibid.*, 103, on Heb 1:3.

8. See Harold Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), 23–27.

most prolific practitioner, Philo Judaeus. While the Alexandrian origin of Wisdom is a near-consensus view,<sup>9</sup> the connection of Hebrews with the “Alexandrian school” is less certain. However, as James Thompson notes:

Since the seventeenth century, scholars have noticed the affinities between the argument of Hebrews and the biblical expositions of Philo of Alexandria (ca. 20 BC–AD 40), who consistently employed Platonic categories in his interpretation of the OT, maintaining that the Greek sages were indebted to the Pentateuch for their wisdom.<sup>10</sup>

Martin Luther’s frequently cited suggestion that Hebrews was written by Paul’s Alexandrian associate Apollos<sup>11</sup> has been favored by some contemporary scholars “because of his Alexandrian background, his connection to the Pauline circle, and his reputation as a powerful preacher whose style could be distinguished from Paul’s.”<sup>12</sup>

Hebrews never quotes the book of Wisdom, but the words of Wisdom’s Sophia aretology (7:22–8:1) are paraphrased in the prologue:

He [Jesus] is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. (Heb 1:3)

She [Wisdom] is a reflection of the eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness. . . . She reaches mightily from one end of the earth to the other, and she orders all things well. (Wis 7:26; 8:1)

Like Sophia, Christ, the “word” of God, is a mediator of creation (Heb 1:2; Wis 7:22–8:1), enthroned with God (Heb 1:3; 12:2; Wis 9:4, 10), a savior and leader of the people of God (Heb 7:25; 12:2; Wis 10:1–11:14).

In her commentary on the book of Wisdom, Silvia Schroer calls Sophia “a divine agent of salvation and leader of the exodus,”<sup>13</sup> which well describes Jesus in Hebrews, who leads the faithful from the earthly Sinai

9. See Schroer, “Book of Sophia,” 21.

10. James W. Thompson, *Hebrews*, Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 23–24. The reference is to Ceslas Spicq, *L’Épître aux Hébreux* (Paris: Lecoffre, 1952).

11. See Acts 18:24; 19:1; 1 Cor 1:12; 3:4, 5, 6, 22; 4:6; 16:12; Titus 3:13.

12. Alan C. Mitchell, *Hebrews*, SP 13 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009), 4; supporters of this view include Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 11; Donald A. Hagner, *Encountering the Book of Hebrews: An Exposition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 23; and Victor C. Pfitzner, *Hebrews*, ANTC (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1977), 26.

13. Schroer, “Book of Sophia,” 33.

to the heavenly Zion (Heb 12:18-24). Other points of resemblance between Hebrews and Wisdom include the following:

- belief in the Greek concept of the immortality of the soul for the righteous (Wis 1:13; 3:4; 5:15; 6:18-19; Heb 5:9; 9:12, 15), combined with the Jewish notion of judgment (Wis 3:18; 4:20-5:8; Heb 6:2; 9:27; 10:27, 29, 30; 12:23; 13:4)
- preference for the permanent and divine over the impermanent and earthly (Wis 5:9-14; Heb 12:25-29)
- notion of the earthly temple as a reflection of the heavenly tabernacle (Wis 9:8; Heb 8:2, 5; 9:8, 11; 13:10)
- emphasis on the exodus narrative (Wis 10-19; Heb 3:1-19; 11:23-27)
- notion of covenants with the ancestors (Wis 12:21; 18:22; Heb 8:6, 10; 10:16)
- catalogue of heroes of sacred history (Wis 10-19; Heb 11)
- use of athletic metaphors (Wis 4:2; Heb 5:13-14;<sup>14</sup> 12:1-4)
- use of nautical images (Wis 5:10; 14:1-7; see also 10:4; Heb 2:1; 6:19)
- use of language of *paideia* (instruction/discipline) with regard to moral and spiritual development (Wis 3:11; 6:17; Heb 5:11-14)
- metaphor of word of God as a sword (Wis 18:15-16; Heb 4:12)

Schroer describes Wisdom as expressing “an internal posture of distance toward current attitudes to life in their cultural environment . . . and a strong orientation toward the divine or heavenly world and order of things that could be experienced in the past and present and was accepted as a certainty for the future.”<sup>15</sup> Overall, this view also applies well to the worldview of Hebrews. While these similarities do not prove that the author of Hebrews used Wisdom as a source, they do indicate that the two documents originated within the intellectual milieu of the kind of Hellenistic philosophical Judaism associated with Alexandria in the first centuries BCE (Wisdom) and CE (Hebrews).

Hebrews also has affinities with other Scriptures in the Wisdom tradition, e.g., the portrayal of Jesus-Word/Wisdom as God’s firstborn child

14. See Thompson, *Hebrews*, 131.

15. Schroer, “Book of Sophia,” 28.

(Heb 1:5, 10; see also Prov 8:22-23; Sir 24:5) and as heavenly priest (Heb 4:14; 5:6, 10; 7:17, 24, 26; 8:1; 9:7, 11; 10:21; see also Sir 24:10). As Cynthia Briggs Kittredge notes, Hebrews shares with the Wisdom tradition “the interpretation of human suffering as the discipline of God, characteristic of Proverbs and other wisdom literature,”<sup>16</sup> and, in general, Hebrews has affinities “with both apocalyptic and wisdom perspectives.”<sup>17</sup>

Despite the similarities between Hebrews and the book of Wisdom in particular, and the Wisdom tradition in general, the presence of Sophia is indeed, as Schüssler Fiorenza puts it, “submerged” throughout the discourse. The feminine-gendered term “wisdom” (σοφία) is never used; like the Gospel of John, whose Christology is informed by the attributes of divine Wisdom, the author of Hebrews portrays Christ as the grammatically neuter “word” (ῥῆμα; John: λόγος) to express Jesus’ relationship to God (Heb 1:3).<sup>18</sup> Adele Reinhartz’s remarks about the Johannine prologue’s use of *logos* could equally well be applied to Hebrews: “When the ungendered [non-personified] Logos becomes further defined in relation to God, it becomes not female Sophia but the male Son of God.”<sup>19</sup> It is notable that although Jesus is sometimes portrayed as possessing wisdom, or as a prophet or even an incarnation of divine Wisdom elsewhere in the NT,<sup>20</sup> neither John nor Hebrews uses the term “wisdom” (σοφία) at all.

Whether or not the absence of the term “wisdom” in Hebrews is due to a deliberate choice on the part of the author to portray Christ in exclusively masculine terms is impossible to say. Despite this, as noted above, from beginning to end Hebrews contains multiple (and often muted) resonances with the book of Wisdom/Sophia, and with the broader Wisdom tradition, that will be brought to the surface throughout the commentary. Thus, like the Wisdom discourse of ancient Israel, He-

16. Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, “Hebrews,” in *Searching the Scriptures*, 2:428–54, at 447.

17. *Ibid.*, 430. The only extended treatment of Hebrews and Wisdom from a decidedly non-feminist perspective is Kenneth Schenk, *Understanding the Book of Hebrews: The Story Behind the Sermon* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005). For further discussion, see Mary Ann Beavis, “Hebrews and Wisdom,” in *Mark, Manuscripts, and Monotheism: Essays in Honor of Larry W. Hurtado*, ed. Chris Keith and Dieter T. Roth (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 201–18.

18. Adele Reinhartz, “The Gospel of John,” in *Searching the Scriptures*, 2:564–65.

19. *Ibid.*, 565.

20. E.g., Matt 11:19, 29-30; 12:42; 23:27-28; Mark 6:2; Luke 2:40, 52; 7:35; 11:31, 49; 13:34; 1 Cor 1:24, 30.

brews is “marked by androcentric translation, composition, selection, and projection”<sup>21</sup> and is not intrinsically amenable to the promotion of feminist, or even proto-feminist, interests. The audible, if muted, voice of Sophia in Hebrews attests, however, to the endurance of “an attempt on the part of wisdom circles in the postexilic period to speak to Israel through the image of a woman, and so to relate the image of God to new experiences and to the daily life of Israel in the period of rebuilding after the exile”<sup>22</sup>—an effort analogous to Hebrews’ attempt to inspire a discouraged and (from the author’s perspective) wavering community.<sup>23</sup>

## Feminist Interpretation

To date only a few chapter-length feminist commentaries on Hebrews have been published.<sup>24</sup> Mary Rose D’Angelo sees Hebrews as offering little edification to first-century women readers and even less to modern feminists, with its gender-exclusive language, the emphasis on Christ’s suffering, the allegory of the high priesthood of Christ as “the deed of the high priest on the Day of Atonement, a deed reserved not only to men but to a single man,” and the arguments for the superiority of Christ’s priesthood to the Levitical priesthood, which have often been used to fuel anti-Judaism.<sup>25</sup> She does, however, suggest some ways in which Hebrews serves as a resource for feminist theology and for “the feminist critique of later Christian theology.”<sup>26</sup> The heroes list in Heb 11 portrays the witnesses as part of a community of faith that encompasses the reader/audience. Hebrews emphasizes Jesus’ humanity (2:11-18; 5:7)

21. Schroer, “Book of Sophia,” 19.

22. Ibid.

23. See, for example, Heb 2:1; 6:1-12; 10:25; 12:1-2.

24. Mary Rose D’Angelo, “Hebrews,” in *The Women’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (London: SPCK; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 364–67; Kittredge, “Hebrews.” Unfortunately, at the time of writing in 2011–12, the third edition of *Women’s Bible Commentary*, edited by Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe, and Jacqueline E. Lapsley (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2012), had not been published. Another relevant contribution in a one-volume feminist commentary that was unavailable at the time of writing is Ulrike Wagener, “Hebrews: Strangers in the World,” in *Feminist Biblical Interpretation: A Compendium of Critical Commentary on the Books of the Bible and Related Literature*, ed. Luise Schottruff, Marie-Theres Wacker, and Martin Rumscheidt (Grand Rapids, MI, and Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2012), 857–69.

25. D’Angelo, “Hebrews,” 366.

26. Ibid., 367.

as well as grounding its Christology “in philosophical terms that originated as descriptions of Wisdom/Sophia, identifying her as a philosophical creator goddess (Wisdom Sol. 7:22-27).”<sup>27</sup> The image of Christ’s Melchizedekian priesthood and the comparison of Christ to the high priest provide a model of ministry that transcends criteria of race, class, and gender and raises questions about the ecclesiastical propagation of priestly castes.<sup>28</sup> D’Angelo notes the focus of ancient sacrifice on communion with God, as opposed to blood and death, and concludes:

Hebrews’ vision of Christian life as a journey of transformation toward communion offers a starting point for rethinking its message. . . . A feminist reading must reject the demand for submission to suffering, but can look to Jesus’ pioneering passage and the “cloud of witnesses” (12:1) as an invitation to revere and remember the suffering of the oppressed who died without having received the promise and as a call to open for all the oppressed a new and living way.<sup>29</sup>

Kittredge makes many of the same points as D’Angelo, e.g., the potential for anti-Jewish interpretation, the communitarian orientation of the discourse, and the dangers inherent in a theology of suffering.<sup>30</sup> She gives more attention than D’Angelo does to the hypothesis that Hebrews was written by Priscilla (first suggested by Adolf von Harnack and revived by Ruth Hoppin; see the section on authorship below),<sup>31</sup> concluding that although the author cannot be identified with certainty, “As an anonymous work, the Epistle to the Hebrews is one of the early Christian works for which female authorship is a possibility.”<sup>32</sup> She concludes by noting that Hebrews does not draw attention to the author and that the author does not claim authority over the addressees, or over anyone at all,<sup>33</sup> from a feminist perspective, this is an appealing lack of authoritarianism.<sup>34</sup>

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid.

29. Ibid.

30. Kittredge, “Hebrews,” 438, 439–40, 447–48.

31. Ibid., 431–34; see also D’Angelo, “Hebrews,” 365.

32. Kittredge, “Hebrews,” 433.

33. Ibid., 450.

34. In addition to these two brief feminist commentaries, the contributions by Pamela Eisenbaum and Ruth Hoppin to the *Feminist Companion to the Catholic Epistles and Hebrews*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine, FCNTECW 8 (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2004), 127–46, 147–70, are discussed below.

These contributions to the feminist reception of Hebrews are valuable but few, leaving ample space for further commentary. Since this work is a comprehensive commentary on the entire discourse, no single “feminist method” will suffice. Alice Ogden Bellis defines feminism broadly as “the conviction that women are fully human and thus entitled to equal rights and privileges, and the critique of patriarchy that flows from this conviction.”<sup>35</sup> Following from this, feminist biblical interpretation can be defined very simply as a method of interpretation of biblical texts that *presupposes* women’s full humanity and equality (the equality of all human beings), *recognizes and celebrates* biblical traditions and interpretations that support these values, and *critiques* biblical traditions and interpretations that imply that women and other marginalized people are inferior socially, intellectually, morally, or spiritually.

The critical aspect of feminist interpretation is often described as a “hermeneutic of suspicion,” that is, a perspective that “scrutinizes the presuppositions and interests of interpreters” (i.e., “traditional” understandings of the Bible) as well as “the androcentric [male-centered] strategies of the biblical text itself.”<sup>36</sup> In other words, feminist interpreters recognize that the biblical texts were (mostly) written by men and that historically the “authoritative” interpreters of the Bible have been men; therefore it can be assumed that, to some extent, the Bible—and the way it is interpreted—is affected by male/patriarchal bias (it is androcentric). Feminist interpretation is gynocentric (“woman-centered”) as opposed to androcentric. Further, Bellis identifies six areas of feminist interpretation of the Bible:<sup>37</sup>

1. investigations of the status and role of women in biblical times
2. the rediscovery and reassessment of overlooked biblical traditions about women
3. the reassessment of well-known biblical texts relating to women
4. the discovery of female images of the divine in the biblical texts
5. the reassessment of translation principles relating to women’s concerns

35. Alice Ogden Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes: Women’s Stories in the Hebrew Bible* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 229.

36. *Ibid.*, 23.

37. *Ibid.*, 119.

6. explorations of the history of the cultural reception and appropriation of biblical texts about women, e.g., in art, cinema, literature, and music

To this list should be added the critique of biblical passages and interpretations that have been used to limit, dominate, or oppress women and other marginalized people, animals, and nature. In addition to the attempt to hear the muted voice of Sophia in Hebrews through the echoes of the Wisdom tradition throughout the discourse (no. 4 above), the following pages will engage to some extent with the perspectives outlined above, all of which are well-established approaches to feminist exegesis that have not, to date, figured significantly in the interpretation of Hebrews.

Feminism in general, and feminist biblical interpretation in particular, has been critiqued for its white, Eurocentric (and often America-centric) presuppositions, including the assumption that “women” are an undifferentiated class of persons who share common interests, experiences, and forms of oppression and marginalization, irrespective of factors such as race, class, sexual orientation, health, age, and economic status.<sup>38</sup> Further, Schüssler Fiorenza warns that “feminist discourses must also take care not to portray one group of women—for example, lesbians—as a monolithic, essentialist, and undifferentiated group with no competing interests, values, and conflicts.”<sup>39</sup> In keeping with the mandate of the Wisdom Commentary Series, this volume engages multiple feminist voices from different social, geographical, and religious locations. Co-authors Mary Ann Beavis and HyeRan Kim-Cragg provide a feminist exegetical voice (Beavis) and a postcolonial feminist critique from a Korean-Canadian perspective (Kim-Cragg), in which Kim-Cragg’s expertise in pastoral theology of worship and religious education figures significantly. Contributing authors include the Filipina biblical scholars Ma. Maricel Ibita, a Hebrew Bible scholar, and her sister Ma. Marilou Ibita, a scholar of the Christian Testament. Justin Jaron Lewis is a Jewish studies scholar with a focus on the storytelling imagination. First Nations poet Marie Annharte Baker is an essayist and cultural activist. And Nancy Calvert Koyzis contributes her expertise in proto-feminist historical biblical interpretation. With the exception of the Ibita sisters, the authors are located in Canada. In addition, this commentary has bene-

38. See Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, ed., *Searching the Scriptures*, vol. 1: *A Feminist Introduction* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 16–21.

39. *Ibid.*, 21.

fited from a series of feminist Bible studies on Hebrews, coordinated by the coauthors with a Saskatoon-based interdenominational feminist Christian organization, the Friends of Sophia.

## **A Multiauthored, Multicultural, Multidisciplinary Approach**

### *Coauthor*

The most distinctive contribution that HyeRan Kim-Cragg brings to this commentary is a voice of a practical/pastoral theologian whose main teaching areas are worship and religious education and the interplay between these two disciplines. In order to fully accomplish the goals of this groundbreaking multivolume commentary and accommodate the anticipated audience of this work—which includes preachers, teachers, pastors, ministers, seminarians, and serious students of the Bible—the study of Hebrews must be approached with a view to practical, pastoral, pedagogical, and theological issues rather than solely to biblical scholarship and hermeneutical issues and problems.

Although there are not many liturgical scholars who have explored Hebrews from the perspectives of liturgical studies or liturgical feminist studies, the need and the connection are obvious, given that Hebrews is considered “an anonymous early Christian sermon.”<sup>40</sup> Frequent uses of paraenesis from the beginning (1:5-14; 2:1-4) through the end (13:22), with ethical exhortation and encouragement, are sufficient evidence that interpretation of Hebrews requires a pastoral and homiletic approach. It is not hard to find other examples. The liturgical dimensions of the text are exemplified in the description of Jesus as the high priest and in the discussion of the roles of sacrificial rituals. The hymn-like introduction of the text in Heb 1–2 is another example of a liturgical dimension. The reference to an anointing (1:5-7) is a further instance in which a sacramental liturgical theology comes to the fore. In sacramental terms, themes related to sacrificial rituals (6:12-20) can be connected to the practice of baptism as well as to the meaning of *anamnesis* in Eucharist. Finally, Hebrews was the inspiration for an early Christian liturgical prayer that appeals to the earthly and incarnate Christ, who took on human flesh for the sake of the world as mediator and high priest. (See comment on Heb 10:19-20.)

40. Kittredge, “Hebrews,” 428.

Similarly, there are few religious educators who have explored and employed Hebrews in their teaching or biblical pedagogy. Nevertheless, the concept of vocation, as a crucial topic of pastoral theology, is found in Heb 3:5, where Moses and Jesus are juxtaposed and the meanings of “servant” and “apostle” are delineated. The meaning of the Sabbath as conveyed in Heb 4:4 can also offer some informative teaching material, especially on how the practice of Sabbath is related to ritual, our human act of praise and thanksgiving. While certain passages in Hebrews need to be critically examined in relation to their apparent justification of child abuse and physical punishment of children (11:7; 12:11), there are also instructive references that can be developed in a positive educational way. References to *paideia* regarding the moral education of children (Heb 5:13) and parent-child relationships (Heb 11:23, 24; 12:10) may hold insights for contemporary religious education. At the same time the ancient understanding of *paideia* can be enhanced by scholarship on the history of education. These are only a few examples.

The second methodological perspective employed in this commentary is a postcolonial approach. It is virtually impossible to define what postcolonial biblical criticism is or does in a monolithic manner, yet R. S. Sugirtharajah, one of the most prolific postcolonial biblical scholars to date, proposes a manageable summary: “What postcolonialism does is to enable us to question the totalizing tendencies of European reading practices and interpret the texts on our own terms and read them from our specific locations.”<sup>41</sup> Elsewhere he writes: “What post-colonial criticism will do is to bring out to the front . . . marginal elements in the texts, and in the process subvert the traditional meaning.”<sup>42</sup> Musa W. Dube, another leading postcolonial scholar, states the goal of postcolonial biblical criticism more bluntly: it is to “know why the biblical text and its Western readers were instruments of imperialism. . . . [G]iven the role of the Bible in facilitating imperialism, how should we read the Bible as postcolonial subjects?”<sup>43</sup> As a feminist scholar from Botswana, Africa, she asks why, according to a traditional story, “when the white man came to our country he had the Bible and we had the land. The white man

41. R. S. Sugirtharajah, ed., *The Postcolonial Bible, The Bible and Postcolonialism 1* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 16.

42. R. S. Sugirtharajah, “From Orientalist to Post-Colonial: Notes on Reading Practices,” *AsJT* 10 (1996): 25.

43. Musa W. Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2000), 4.

said to us, 'let us pray.' After the prayer, the white man had the land and we had the Bible."<sup>44</sup> She presses the issue further by asking how we can work together toward "arresting patriarchy and imperialism" without saving one at the expense of the other, by showing "how the West, the Bible, and imperialism are interconnected."<sup>45</sup>

While postcolonial discourse and scholarship, beginning with Edward Said's *Orientalism* in 1978, became established in other disciplines such as literary criticism and cultural studies, postcolonial biblical criticism only began to make headway in the 1990s. Other theological disciplines have followed. Kwok Pui-lan, a leading postcolonial feminist theologian who has urged other scholars to engage in postcolonial discourse, makes this point: "While biblical and religious scholars have deployed postcolonial theory to scrutinize their respective disciplines, theologians, with a few exceptions, have scarcely paid any attention to this burgeoning field."<sup>46</sup>

In the foreword to Michael N. Jagessar and Stephen Burns's *Christian Worship: Postcolonial Perspectives*, Jione Havea lifts up Kwok's exhortation by commenting: "Christian worship and postcolonial modes of thinking are unlikely companions, so attempting to relate and interweave them would be similar to putting a ceramic bowl with a clay vessel in the same sack."<sup>47</sup> In this regard, the voice of a nonbiblical scholar who attempts to bring postcolonial perspectives into the conversation can be heard as dissenting and strange, standing apart from the dominant place of Western biblical scholarship. Nevertheless, this kind of challenge is rightly encouraged in the present commentary, which affirms "the importance of subject position in the process of interpretation."<sup>48</sup> This unfamiliar voice, speaking to and about Hebrews, is echoed in the multiple voices of postcolonial scholars, in heterogeneous manners, in a way that destabilizes the homogeneous hegemony of Western scholarship and the authority of male-dominated biblical interpretation. The reader may find that this voice is so fused with the others that it is hard to distinguish them. Care and attentiveness on the part of the reader will, however,

44. *Ibid.*, 3.

45. *Ibid.*, 42.

46. Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 6.

47. Michael N. Jagessar and Stephen Burns, *Christian Worship: Postcolonial Perspectives* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2001), vi.

48. Barbara E. Reid, "Editor's Introduction to Wisdom Commentary," xviii above.

make it possible to hear the postcolonial voice and discern its insights and limits.

For more than twenty years biblical studies have been informed by and have employed postcolonial approaches. Nevertheless, very few biblical scholars have attempted to interpret Hebrews from postcolonial perspectives. Thus, the attempt here can be regarded as a unique contribution to an evolving interpretive discussion. Readers of this commentary are encouraged to take the conversation between Hebrews and postcolonial points of view further. To employ another metaphor: we might see this commentary and the thoughts and conversations it engenders as the first trimester of a pregnancy, a new life that is starting to form and take shape in the womb but is not yet fully developed. While much growth is required, and labor is also needed to bring it to birth, we are cognizant of how critical this formative stage is for the well-being of the new life. So it is that in this beginning much is at stake, and we will have to dedicate some effort and love to nurture it well.

Jeremy H. Punt from South Africa, one of the very few to embark on the endeavor to apply postcolonial insights to the letter to the Hebrews, provides a rationale for why it is worth pursuing this conversation: "Hebrews is often accorded a marginal status (due to the particular style, imagery and the anonymous nature of the authorship) in the broader canonical context. . . . Such marginality would in itself call for postcolonial investigation."<sup>49</sup> Feminist biblical scholars agree with his view of the marginality of Hebrews due to the distinctive voice found in it.<sup>50</sup>

Another thing that attracts postcolonial thinkers to Hebrews is its unfamiliar language and certain thought patterns that move beyond a polemic or a set interpretation that represents conventional views and instead advance a perspective "that builds on the traditions for those able to move to greater insight."<sup>51</sup> For example, the dualistic notion of purity that is often deployed by patriarchy in a way that designates women's bodies as unclean and inferior can be overturned by using the theology of Hebrews that views purity as sanctification. (For a discussion of this, see the comment on Heb 1:4.)

49. Jeremy H. Punt, "The Letter to the Hebrews," in *A Postcolonial Commentary on the New Testament Writings*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia and R. S. Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and Postcolonialism* 13 (London: T & T Clark, 2007), 338–68, at 338.

50. Kittredge, "Hebrews," 429.

51. Luke T. Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 417.

Picking up on insights in Ronald Williamson's work,<sup>52</sup> Punt argues that some of the content of Hebrews that seems irrelevant to modern readers, such as references to sacrificial practices, actually continues to have value in the twenty-first-century context.<sup>53</sup> They can be used as tools for enhancing a non-Western (even decolonizing) reading of the Bible, lifting up the location of the reader, which is key to a postcolonial biblical criticism.<sup>54</sup>

The postcolonial approach is crucial to feminist biblical and theological interpretation as well. Our feminist lens should be brought to focus on the dynamics in the text, disclosing the binary ways of thinking and imperialist attitudes that are a crucial part of postcolonial approaches. Susanne Scholz puts it this way: "Postcolonial feminist studies also reinforce the early feminist conviction that it is not enough to study the Bible only for academic purposes. They promote biblical exegesis to foster political, economic, and social change in women's lives [and in other marginalized lives]."<sup>55</sup> In fact, our feminist interpretation in the West must include coming to terms with our complacency with respect to the ongoing worldwide effects of the colonial era. Others are calling us to extend the scope of our biblical and theological studies beyond the history of textual traditions or the theological doctrine embedded in the biblical texts to "include issues of domination, Western expansion, and its ideological manifestations, as central forces in defining biblical scholarship."<sup>56</sup>

There have been constructive attempts by several postcolonial feminist scholars to correlate the biblical women who are treated as the "Other" with modern women who are also being "othered" by the history and effects of colonialism. Their work will be introduced in the section on Heb 11, where Rahab is cited as a hero(ine) of faith. Other women, including Hagar in relation to Sarah, and Pharaoh's daughter, will also be discussed in this light. Furthermore, throughout the commentary those women who have been victimized by colonial militarism, including the

52. See, e.g., Ronald Williamson, "The Background of the Epistle to the Hebrews," *ExpTim* 87 (1975-76): 232-36.

53. Punt, "Hebrews," 347.

54. HyeRan Kim-Cragg, *Story and Song: A Postcolonial Interplay between Christian Education and Worship* (New York: Peter Lang, 2012), 33-35.

55. Susanne Scholz, *Introducing the Women's Hebrew Bible* (London: T & T Clark, 2007), 101.

56. R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 74.

comfort women of Korea and other Asian countries, will be lifted up. One may hear the echoes of these women's voices talking back to the ancient biblical women and vice versa.

Finally, a significant perspective employed here is Asian North American approaches to reading the Bible and ways of doing theology. This is also a valuable contribution to the commentary as a whole and to Hebrews in particular. While the guidelines of the Wisdom Commentary clearly identify the audience as primarily First World readers, the authors are encouraged to give particular attention to imbalances in power, class, and race. Kim-Cragg's multiple identities as a woman, a diaspora Korean married to a Caucasian person living in Canada, a mother of two biracial children, a clergywoman in a liberal denomination that operates within and privileges white Anglo-Eurocentric norms in practices and decision making, to name a few relevant examples, have been key in shaping her perspective on the text. These identities allow her to explore issues connected to being between different cultures while often forcing her to cross many borders and boundaries. Elsewhere she has explored and articulated these particular personal, therefore political, identities to raise the issue of how our identities matter in feminist thinking and feminist praxis.<sup>57</sup> Therefore, she welcomes and appreciates Liturgical Press's willingness to include voices from many parts of the globe while strongly encouraging the authors to incorporate diverse voices and differing interpretations from around the world, showing the importance of social location in the process of interpretation and that there is no one definitive feminist interpretation of a text.

One of the most recent readings of the Bible from Asian North American perspectives is found in the work of Tat-siong Benny Liew.<sup>58</sup> His approach is particularly helpful for achieving the purpose of our commentary in terms of advancing multicultural and postcolonial methodologies. Pondering the importance of Asian American biblical hermeneutics, Liew concludes:

57. HyeRan Kim-Cragg, "Becoming a Feminist Christian: A Korean-Canadian Perspective," in *My Red Couch: And Other Stories on Seeking a Feminist Faith*, ed. Claire Bischoff and Rachel Gaffron (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2005), 183–89; HyeRan Kim-Cragg, "Between and Beyond Asian-ness: A Voice of a Postcolonial Hybrid Korean-Canadian in the Diaspora," in *What Young Asian Theologians Are Thinking*, ed. Leow Theng Huat, The CSCA Christianity in Southeast Asia Series (Singapore: Asian Theological College, 2014).

58. Tat-siong Benny Liew, *What Is Asian American Biblical Hermeneutics? Reading the New Testament* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008), x, xii.

Asian American communities and Bible-reading communities, despite the “race-of-heathens” construction, are not only *not* mutually exclusive but also actively overlapping. . . . Assembling the Bible and Asian America, in other words, is an intentional attempt to appropriate a cultural canon in order to re-create and transform multiple cultures through a form of multicultural critique. . . . The Bible is particularly good for this purpose . . . because it is a collection of texts that was first written by the colonized but then has become instrumental for colonization.<sup>59</sup>

Liew’s approach is also compatible with the overall intention of the Wisdom Commentary when it seeks to disclose the intertwined relationships of gender at the center of the analysis of power, authority, ethnicity, race, and class. For example, the reading of an abusive rhetorical pattern in Hebrews (6:9-10; 12:4) overlaps with a culturally conscious and informative critique of the teaching of Confucianism in Korea, “the Way of Three Obediences,” which reinforces the subordination of women. Other culturally embedded concepts including *han* and *jeong* will also be examined as a crucial part of an Asian (and particularly Korean) North American biblical hermeneutic. Such intertextual and intercultural readings of the Bible by Asian North Americans can appropriate the intended meanings of the homilist toward re-creating these meanings for the sake of the well-being of women and their respective communities. Such a connection also successfully demonstrates how gender as the center of analysis is closely intertwined with power, authority, culture, and class. (For a further discussion on this matter, see the comment at 10:19-34.)

As far as Asian North American ways of doing theology are concerned, especially liturgical theology, there are abundant resources in the letter to the Hebrews. The practice of ancestral veneration prevalent in East Asian culture, shaped and influenced by Confucianism, sheds light on the ideas of the communion of saints, the pioneers of faith, and the cloud of witnesses (Heb 12:1-2). Here the deep wisdom of another cultural tradition is brought to bear on a Western text. Theological debates around the truth of a syncretistic versus an exclusivist Christian theology can be critically examined in this way. The Jewish traditional experience of the wilderness, articulated in Heb 3, illuminates Jewish women’s ritual of communal singing and dancing under the moon and a similar ancient ritual practiced today by Korean women called *Ganggangsullae*, which can be interpreted as a feminist reconstruction. In the same vein of crossing religious and

59. *Ibid.*, x, xii.

cultural boundaries, the symbolic gesture of veiling by Muslim women will be examined in the discussion of the tabernacle and the veil between the outer room and the holy of holies (9:11). Again, one may see how gender intersects with religion, culture, and sexuality.

The other major theme that underlies Asian North American approaches is diaspora identity. Kim-Cragg's own experience of being part of the Korean diaspora in Canada is reflected in and affirmed by the homilist, who explicitly and implicitly (through the journeys of Noah, Abraham, and Moses) paints a picture of life in the diaspora for his audience, "strangers and foreigners on the earth" (11:13). The homilist's emphasis on the ethnic implication of "hospitality," a theme of Heb 13, finds resonances in diaspora identity as well.

### *Contributing Voices*

Ma. Maricel Ibita explores the biblical social value of "group orientation" in Heb 10 from the standpoint of an Asian and a Filipina doctoral researcher of Scriptures in a European university. Because of her experience as a teacher of biblical-theological courses in seminaries and schools in the Philippines and a church-based nongovernmental organization worker, her investigation of "Christ's sacrifice for all" for this Wisdom Commentary leads to four important outcomes, both for her personally and for the interpretation of Hebrews. First, it shows another perspective on Hebrews by investigating a facet of its biblical social background. Second, this entry point from a patriarchal culture leads to a more profound understanding of the need for interpreting the Scriptures from feminist perspectives, especially those theologically revered texts that negatively impact women. Third, it results in a keener perception of how Wisdom is present and incarnated in today's world through the many women we meet, read about, and share our voice with. Finally, it helped Ma. Maricel to integrate in and outside of herself her own passion for studying the Scriptures and today's pressing concerns for women, justice, peace, and integrity of creation.

The contributing voice of Ma. Marilou Ibita expresses her interest in highlighting marginal characters in the biblical text.<sup>60</sup> Since the homily

60. See Ma. Marilou S. Ibita, "Fostering Narrative Approaches to Scripture in Asia: The Primary Task of Explicit Recognition," *EAPR* 46 (2009): 124–41, at 130–31, where she discusses the importance of the messages and the challenges that minor characters play in the biblical stories.

speaks scantily of women, she reminds us once again of the women characters evoked by Heb 13:2: "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it." Using a narrative approach,<sup>61</sup> particularly characterization, she rereads the roles of the women characters brought to mind by this hospitality command. She explores the characters from a postcolonial and liberationist perspective as she relates the role of the biblical characters to the roles of a particular group of present-day readers: Filipina domestic workers. As a biblical student in Louvain, Belgium, she had the opportunity to accompany a Filipino/a migrant workers' Charismatic prayer group by means of Bible study and Bible sharing. Some of them work as domestic helpers in different parts of Belgium. Her contribution is an attempt to provide an echo of their voices.

As a contributor to this commentary, Justin Jaron Lewis speaks as a Jew. An ordained rabbi and a professor of Jewish Studies, he reads Hebrews in the light of Jewish teachings and sacred texts. Hebrews' faith in Jesus is not his, but its longing for connection with the Shekinah, the Divine Presence, is. His perspective is also that of a feminist man. There is no contradiction here: feminism is liberating for men as well as for women, breaking down oppressive structures that trap those who are assigned power as well as those who are not. And he speaks as a former Christian, having left the church in his late teens and found his way into Judaism in his mid-twenties, that is, in the midpoint of his life so far. His outlook on life and texts remains grounded in that of his parents, Jack Lewis, of blessed memory, a Quaker and scholar of English literature, and feminist Catholic scholar and activist Gertrud Jaron Lewis.

Nancy Calvert-Koyzis explores the proto-feminist writings of women in previous eras as a Christian New Testament scholar and Presbyterian minister who has taught in universities and seminaries both full time and as a sessional for many years. Her educational journey began in Christian communities that used the Bible to keep women in their place and forbade them from having leadership roles in the church and in society. As she furthered her education, she began to realize that she had not been told the whole story: she was not among the first women who questioned traditional male authority. In fact, women had been writing

61. See, for example, Kenneth Schenck, "Hebrews as the Re-presentation of a Story: A Narrative Approach to Hebrews," in *Reading the Epistle to the Hebrews: A Resource for Students*, ed. Eric F. Mason and Kevin B. McCrudden, RBS 66 (Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2011), 171–88.

about this for centuries, only their voices had not been remembered or heeded. As she learned more about the important contributions of these women she joined Marion Taylor and Heather Weir who endeavored to make the works of these proto-feminist women biblical interpreters known. Proto-feminists' contributions to Hebrews are only the tip of the iceberg, yet they provide an important glimpse into the significant body of literature that exists, offering us the opportunity to see ourselves in a long line of female feminist interpreters.

In a commentary written primarily by Canadian prairie authors (Beavis, Kim-Cragg, Lewis, Annharte) on an authoritative text that is part of a Christian tradition deeply implicated in the colonization, oppression, and cultural genocide of First Nations, it is important to acknowledge that Scripture, and its use as an instrument of imperialism, is subject to postcolonial critique in the local context of "this place": Saskatchewan and Manitoba.<sup>62</sup> Marie Annharte Baker (aka Annharte) is an Anishinabe grandmother and writer. *Indigena Awry* is her most recent poetry book.<sup>63</sup> In 2000, before she became a grandmother, she wrote "Circling Back Grandma-To-Be Writing" predicting her current life:

Someday, I will be a grandmother. I carefully pick out my grey hairs and lace them on my nearby cactus plant. She is holding them until I am more ready to be a granny. All I do is dress rehearsal. I am just practicing to teach another crop of Indigena. I want to share some of the struggle to be a writer because it is a mysterious process that unfolds before me.

To become middle-aged Anishinabe woman has meant that I have fought most of the way. I wanted to be sure that the next generation is not fed the lies of concocted history of our people. I am Indigenous writer because I am conscious of fighting not only to express my own thoughts but to allow the voices of our ancestors to be heard.

We are at that critical time, as we take back our power as Indigenous women. Cosmetic change or inclusion of culture is not enough. We need a complete return to the healing role of the women's societies. The women's circle is a basic healing group, if the women that take on the responsibility to recognize more than "new age" conventions. I pack a crystal like anyone might do these days.

62. See Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert, eds., *Reading from this Place: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

63. Marie Annharte Baker, *Indigena Awry* (Vancouver, BC: New Star Books, 2012).

Our reliance on superstition is trendy. Even if I chose to learn about women healing, I'd find it difficult to find a teacher that has not been influenced by the mass-market spirituality industry. I too have magical beliefs. I actually believe in the occasion of our women being honest with each other and themselves. If women across generations share experience, a more true traditional teaching would occur. Most of what is counselling and therapy is an attempt on the part of an individual woman to rid herself of what society has injected into her mind about having an inferior status in life. The woman's power is best known in the circle.<sup>64</sup>

Annharte's contribution to this commentary consists of thirteen pieces, one written for each chapter of Hebrews, with the overall title "Our Stories Are Our Scripture." These do not comment directly on the text of Hebrews, but, as the title of the collection implies, the connection is more conceptual: in response to a Christian Scripture in thirteen chapters, she has written poetic versions of Aboriginal Scriptures, that is, traditional sacred stories, in thirteen poems. Her poems provide a witty and profound counterpoint to the many voices—proto-feminist, feminist, postcolonial, Jewish—that resonate throughout the commentary. Readers are challenged to make their own connections—or disconnects—between the text of Hebrews and the resistant voice of Annharte, which, as Michael J. Gilmour observes of Cree poet Bernice Louise Halfe, implicitly "simultaneously criticizes colonial religion while articulating an entirely different system of belief."<sup>65</sup> The presence of Annharte's poems, based on multiple First Nations traditions, acknowledges the fact that every land is a holy land. On a continent dominated by postcolonial Christianity, the stories counted as sacred by the majority are conveyed by Scriptures grounded in the land of Israel. Most of us living in the Canadian Prairie region of Turtle Island do not know the sacred stories, ceremonies, places, and languages indigenous to this sacred, native land.

In a multiauthored, multicultural commentary such as this one there will inevitably be differences of perspective, style, opinion, and

64. Marie Annharte Baker, *Imprint and Casualties: Poets on Women and Language, Reinventing Memory*, ed. Anne Burke, Readings from the Living Archives of the Feminist Caucus of the League of Canadian Poets, vol. 2 (Fredericton, NB: Broken Jaw Press, 2000), 133–36.

65. See Michael J. Gilmour, "Confronting Colonial Religion and the Anxiety of Influence in Louise Bernice Halfe's *Blue Marrow*," in *Feminist Theology with a Canadian Accent: Canadian Perspectives on Contextual Feminist Theology*, ed. Mary Ann Beavis, Elaine Guillemin, and Barbara Pell (Ottawa: Novalis, 2008), 371–91, at 373.

interpretation—and sometimes even disagreement—among the contributors. The contributions of the various authors appear in different forms and formats: those of the coauthors are mostly interwoven into the main text, while others are highlighted in text boxes, sidebars, and interpretive essays. Although the contributions of the seven authors involved in the project came together in an extraordinarily harmonious process, there will at times be interpretations that are at odds with each other. Rather than attempting to smooth over the (few) disagreements, we have allowed these differing perspectives to remain open for the reader to ponder.

## Authorship

Although the author of Hebrews is anonymous, in the Christian canon it has traditionally been classed as one of the letters of Paul. James Thompson notes:

In Alexandria, where Hebrews was most influential, church leaders attributed the work to Paul and attempted to explain the anonymity of the book. Pantaenus (d. ca. AD 190) suggested that Paul omitted his name because of modesty (Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 6.14.4), while Clement of Alexandria suggested that Paul omitted his name because as the apostle to the Gentiles, he would evoke suspicion among Jewish listeners (Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 6.14.3).<sup>66</sup>

The stylistic and doctrinal differences between Hebrews and the Pauline letters were, however, apparent to some ancient readers. Clement of Alexandria explained the sophisticated Greek style of Hebrews by suggesting that Paul had written the document in Hebrew and Luke had translated it into Greek.<sup>67</sup> Although Origen, also an Alexandrian, sometimes referred to it as a letter of Paul,<sup>68</sup> his famous remark that only God knows who wrote the epistle is frequently cited.<sup>69</sup>

Although the consensus of critical scholarship is that Hebrews was not written by Paul, the book does contain elements reminiscent of the Pauline literature, e.g., the doctrine of Christ as the mediator of creation (Heb 1:1-4; 1 Cor 8:6), the pattern of humiliation-exaltation (Heb 2:9;

66. Thompson, *Hebrews*, 4; on Alexandrian affinities with Hebrews, see Craig R. Koester, *Hebrews*, AB 36 (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 20–21.

67. Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 6.14.2.

68. *On First Principles* 1.1; *Commentary on John* 2.72.

69. Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 6.24.11–14.

Rom 8:3, 34; Phil 2:5-11); the image of a new covenant that supplants the Mosaic order (Heb 7:19; 8:6-13; 2 Cor 3:1-18); the personal greetings and admonitions in Heb 13:16-25, including the mention of Timothy (see comment on these verses).<sup>70</sup> These Pauline echoes have prompted scholars to suggest one or another companion of Paul as candidates for authorship: Apollos, the eloquent Alexandrian Jewish-Christian<sup>71</sup> and coworker of Paul (Acts 18:24; 1 Cor 3:5-6; 16:12); Barnabas, a Jewish Cypriot of Levitical descent (Acts 4:36), also a companion of Paul (Acts 13:2-15:35); and Silas, a colleague of Timothy and of Paul (Heb 13:23; see also Acts 17:14-15; 18:5; 2 Cor 1:19; 1 Thess 1:1; 2 Thess 1:1).<sup>72</sup> None of these suggestions have received wide acceptance.

From a feminist standpoint the most interesting suggestion regarding the authorship of Hebrews is the Priscilla hypothesis, which, as noted above, was originally formulated by Adolf von Harnack and has been strongly championed more recently by Ruth Hoppin.<sup>73</sup> A missionary colleague of Paul, Priscilla/Prisca, along with her husband Aquila, is said to have instructed the educated Alexandrian Apollos (Acts 18:26). Priscilla and Aquila hosted a house-church in Rome (Rom 16:3-5; see also Heb 13:24) and knew Timothy (2 Tim 4:19); in addition to Rome, they are associated with Ephesus and Corinth (Acts 18-19; Rom 16:3-6, 21; 2 Tim 4:19; see also Heb 13:23). Harnack argues that Hebrews' use of pronouns points to the presence of more than one author, noting that the author's favorite pronoun is "we"; usually the authorial "we" is inclusive of the audience, but there is a distinction between "we" and "you" in passages where the audience is being praised or rebuked.<sup>74</sup> The

70. See also Koester, *Hebrews*, 52-53.

71. Since the term "Christian" was not commonly used in the first century (in the NT it is found only in Acts 11:26; 26:28; and 1 Pet 4:16, referring to followers of Christ, not to devotees of a religion), and "Christianity" did not exist as a religion, the term "christian" will be used henceforth with reference to the earliest members of the kingdom of God movement, including the author and audience of Hebrews. (See also Jane D. Schaberg, "Magdalene christianity," in *On the Cutting Edge: The Study of Women in Biblical Worlds*, ed. Jane D. Schaberg, Alice Bach, and Esther Fuchs [New York: Continuum, 2003], 193-220.) "Christian" and "Christianity" will be used to refer to the world religion that developed in subsequent centuries.

72. See Koester, *Hebrews*, 44.

73. Adolf von Harnack, "The Authorship of the Epistle to the Hebrews," *LCR* 19 (1900): 448-71; Ruth Hoppin, *Priscilla's Letter: Finding the Author of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Fort Bragg, CA: Lost Coast Press, 1997).

74. Harnack, "Hebrews," 455-56.

authorial “I” is used only in Heb 11:32 and 13:19, 22, 23. The marital relationship between Priscilla and Aquila would explain this use of pronouns, and why their names were eliminated from the document. Although in the NT Priscilla is usually mentioned before her husband because she was probably of higher social standing than Aquila,<sup>75</sup> authorship, or coauthorship, by a prominent female would discredit the writing:

Paul already was not favorable to the teaching of women [I Cor. 14:34f], but yielded to certain exceptions as his judgment of Prisca further shows [I Cor. 11:5 and Phil. 4:2f]. In the next era probably in consequence of disagreeable experiences they were much more rigoristic. The conflict which was taken up against women teaching in the church—the author of the “Acta Pauli” forms an exception, and which continued until the beginning of the third century, needs not be mentioned here; only recall I Tim. 21: “But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority of the man, but to be in silence. \* \* \* But she shall be saved in child-bearing.”<sup>76</sup>

Cynthia Briggs Kittredge offers further evidence for the denigration of women’s teaching, even in documents written by women: the female author of the *Letter of Mary the Proselyte to Ignatius* ends with a disclaimer that she does not write to instruct the bishop; Didymus the Blind extends the ban on women’s teaching to women’s authoritative writing (*On the Trinity* 3.41.3).<sup>77</sup>

In addition to the evidence offered by Harnack, Hoppin detects a “feminine voice” in Hebrews, evidenced by, e.g., the inclusion of women in the list of heroes of faith in Heb 11; the reference to the moral education of children (Heb 5:13); the reference to parent-child relationships (Heb 11:23, 24; 12:10); and the empathetic depiction of the humanity and suffering of Christ (Heb 5:2, 7; 12:2, 3, 18).<sup>78</sup> Hoppin’s claims that Hebrews evidences a “feminine psychological profile” and that Priscilla was a Roman from a patrician family who married a Jewish freedman<sup>79</sup> are generally regarded as the least persuasive of her arguments.<sup>80</sup>

75. *Ibid.*, 464.

76. *Ibid.*, 468.

77. Kittredge, “Hebrews,” 433.

78. Ruth Hoppin, “Priscilla’s Letter,” in *Catholic Epistles and Hebrews*, 153–59.

79. *Ibid.*, 167–70.

80. E.g., D’Angelo, “Hebrews,” 365; Mitchell, *Hebrews*, 5.

Among recent commentators, Kittredge is notable for maintaining that Priscilla, or another educated and prominent woman, is a viable candidate for the authorship of Hebrews.<sup>81</sup> Although most ancient people were illiterate, and more men than women were educated, there is ample evidence that some women were educated and wrote letters, poetry, and philosophy.<sup>82</sup> Among the Therapeutai/Therapeutrides, a Jewish contemplative sect located near Alexandria, both women and men studied Scripture and composed commentaries, hymns, and songs;<sup>83</sup> early Christian works by women include the diary of Perpetua (ca. 203 CE) and the books of oracles of the Montanist prophets Priscilla and Maximilla.<sup>84</sup> Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes has adduced extensive evidence of women's texts embedded in the Jewish Scriptures, e.g., songs, wisdom speeches, warning speeches, prophecies, laments, and prayers.<sup>85</sup>

Although female authorship is appealing from a feminist standpoint, and should not be ruled out—as Virginia Woolf famously remarked, throughout history “anonymous” has often been a woman—there is no unequivocal evidence for Hebrews' authorship. Nevertheless, one hint that has not been heeded, except by Harnack and Hoppin, is the homilist's preference for the authorial “we.” While the proponents of the Priscilla hypothesis regard this as evidence of Aquila's (secondary) contribution, a more plausible, and eminently feasible, reason for the “we” is that, as is the case with several of Paul's letters, more than one author contributed to the composition,<sup>86</sup> or that a single author was writing on behalf of a community to which she or he belonged. (See also the comment on 13:18-25.) A more collective understanding of authorship incorporating

81. Kittredge, “Hebrews,” 433.

82. Ibid., 432, citing Jane McIntosh Snyder, *The Woman and the Lyre: Women Writers in Classical Greece and Rome* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989). On ancient women's letter-writing, see Roger S. Bagnall and Raffaella Cribiore, with Evie Ahtaridis, *Women's Letters from Ancient Egypt, 300 BC–800 AD* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006).

83. Philo, *On the Contemplative Life*, 87–89.

84. Kittredge, “Hebrews,” 433; for further examples of female authorship of early Christian and Jewish writings, see Ross S. Kraemer, *Her Share of the Blessings: Women's Religions among Pagans, Jews, and Christians in the Greco-Roman World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 221–42.

85. Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes, “Traces of Women's Texts in the Hebrew Bible,” in *On Gendering Texts: Female and Male Voices in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes and Athalya Brenner (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 17–112.

86. See also 2 Cor 1:1; Phil 1:1; Col 1:1; 1 Thess 1:1; 2 Thess 1:1.

both men's and women's voices would be consistent with Kittredge's observation that "this early Christian sermon does not draw attention to its author at all. No claim to authority over the congregation is ever made, and there is no attempt to assert one position above that of the community."<sup>87</sup> Although this commentary favors the hypothesis of collective authorship, for purposes of convenience the term "the homilist" will be used to denote the author(s) throughout (see section on Literary Genre below).

*Letter from an Early Christian Woman (ca. 340–350 CE)*

This letter, originally written in Greek, was composed in Egypt by a woman called Valeria to the monk Papnouthis to request his prayers for healing:

To Apa Papnouthis the most honored and Christ-bearing and adorned with every virtue, (from) Valeria, greetings in Christ.

I ask and beg you, most honored father, to ask for me a kindness for Christ that I might obtain healing. I believe that in this way I might obtain healing through your prayers, for revelations of ascetics and worshipers are manifested.

For I am afflicted by a great disease of terrible shortage of breath. I have believed and believe that if you pray on my behalf I will receive healing. I beg of God, I beg also of you, remember me in your holy prayer. Even if in body I have not come to your feet, in spirit I have come to your feet. I greet my daughters, and remember them in your holy prayer, Bassiane and Theokleia. My husband greets you greatly, and pray for him. My whole house also greets you. I pray for your health, most honored father.

(Source: Letter 87, quoted in Bagnall and Cibiore, *Women's Letters*.)

Mary Ann Beavis

## Date and Place of Composition

The earliest extra-biblical author to quote Hebrews is Clement of Rome, whose letter to the Corinthians (1 Clement) is dated to 96 CE. Craig Koester lists the most prominent similarities between the two documents:<sup>88</sup>

Jesus is one "who, being the reflection [of] God's majesty is greater than angels to the extent that he has inherited a more excellent name"

87. Kittredge, "Hebrews," 450.

88. Koester, *Hebrews*, 22 n. 7.

(1 *Clem.* 36:2/Heb 1:2-4). Jesus is the “high priest of our sufferings” and “helper in our weakness” (1 *Clem.* 36:1; Heb 1:2-4; 4:14-16). There are quotations of Pss 2:7-8; 104:4; 110:1 in 1 *Clem.* 36 and Heb 1:5-13. Both authors list examples of Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Rahab, and those who went about “in the skins of sheep and goats” (1 *Clem.* 9:3-10; 12:1-3; 17:1/Heb 11). Both exhort listeners to hasten toward their goal with eyes fixed upon God (1 *Clem.* 19:2/Heb 12:1), caution that God searches people (1 *Clem.* 21:9/Heb 4:12), say that it is impossible for God to lie (1 *Clem.* 27:2/Heb 6:18), recall that Moses was faithful in God’s house (1 *Clem.* 43:1/Heb 3:5), quote Prov 3:12 (1 *Clem.* 56:4/Heb 12:6), and identify God as the master or father of spirits (1 *Clem.* 64:1/Heb 12:9).

Although these similarities could be explained with reference to a common source, most scholars maintain that 1 Clement drew from Hebrews.<sup>89</sup> This implies that Hebrews was composed before 96 CE, that it was known both in Rome and in Corinth, and that by Clement’s time it had circulated long enough to garner quasi-scriptural status (see also 2 Pet 3:15-16), probably for several decades. The homilist’s argument that Christ’s high priesthood in the heavenly sanctuary has rendered the Jewish cult obsolete might point to a date after the destruction of Jerusalem (70 CE); however, since Hebrews never refers to the Jerusalem temple, but only to the tabernacle of the wilderness wandering,<sup>90</sup> this connection cannot be made with certainty. Although the homilist refers to the activities of the priesthood in the present tense,<sup>91</sup> as Thompson notes, “writers spoke of the cultic activities in the present tense after the destruction of the temple (Josephus, *Ant.* 3.151-224).”<sup>92</sup>

In addition to the Roman connection with 1 Clement, the epistolary postscript contains a greeting by “those from Italy” relayed by the homilist to the addressees (Heb 13:24), which could mean either that a group of expatriate Italians was greeting their acquaintances back home or that a home community in Italy was addressing compatriots who had settled elsewhere. The former interpretation is generally preferred by commentators.<sup>93</sup> Although in antiquity the term “Italy” referred to the entire Italian peninsula, the only known church community there in the

89. *Ibid.*, 22.

90. Heb 8:2, 5; 9:2, 3, 6, 8, 11, 21; 13:10.

91. E.g., Heb 8:4; 13:11.

92. Thompson, *Hebrews*, 7.

93. For examples, see Attridge, *Hebrews*, 410 n. 84; Attridge himself prefers this construal.

first century was in Rome.<sup>94</sup> Even if, as suggested in the commentary on Heb 13:24, the epistolary postscript was added to the body of Hebrews to align it with the Pauline tradition, the mention of Italy may contain a recollection of the original destination of the homily.

## Audience and Circumstances of Writing

From its thematic and scriptural content, early interpreters deduced that Hebrews was addressed to believers located in Jerusalem or its environs, thus the appellation *To the Hebrews*.<sup>95</sup> Some modern commentators argue similarly that Hebrews was addressed to Jewish Christians who were in danger of rejecting Christ.<sup>96</sup> The “Judaism” of Hebrews is scriptural, however, focused on Moses and the exodus, the wilderness tabernacle, and the rituals associated with it, not on the socio-religious realities of first-century Jewish life. Moreover, Paul and other teachers use Jewish themes, techniques, and Scriptures in their letters to predominantly Gentile communities,<sup>97</sup> and, as Galatians demonstrates, Gentile Christians could be attracted to Jewish practices, while a Jew like Paul could vigorously contest them (see also Phil 3:2). The homilist’s intent was not to argue for the superiority of “Christianity” over “Judaism” but to interpret the community’s experience of salvation history in light of the Jewish Scriptures as mediated through the Septuagint (LXX). Unfortunately, these kinds of arguments have subsequently figured in Christian anti-Judaism, and consequently must be read with caution. (See also the comment on Heb 2:5-18 and the section on Hebrews, Anti-Judaism, and Supersessionism below.)

Another hypothesis is that Hebrews was written in the aftermath of the Roman siege of Jerusalem in order to explain the destruction of the temple and the cessation of the sacrificial cult.<sup>98</sup> This suggestion does not do much to illumine the ethnic identity of the addressees, since both Jewish and

94. Charles H. Miller, “Italy,” *Harper’s Bible Dictionary*, ed. Paul J. Achtemeier (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1985), 438.

95. E.g., Severian of Gabala, *Fragments on the Epistle to the Hebrews Prologue*; Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Fragments on the Epistle to the Hebrews*; both authors attribute the epistle’s anonymity to Jewish suspicion of Paul.

96. For examples, see Attridge, *Hebrews*, 11 n. 85; also Iutisone Saleveo, *Legitimation in the Letter to the Hebrews: The Construction and Maintenance of a Symbolic Universe*, JSNTSup 219 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 28–30.

97. E.g., Gal; 1–2 Cor; see also Attridge, *Hebrews*, 12.

98. Marie Isaacs, *Sacred Space: An Approach to the Theology of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, JSNTSup 73 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992), 67.

Gentile Christians were no doubt dismayed by the events of the Jewish War (66–70 CE). Further, Hebrews' consistent use of "tabernacle" (σκηνή) rather than "temple" (ἱερόν) militates against this interpretation. The homilist's only reference to Jerusalem is to the heavenly Zion (Heb 12:22), which is contrasted not with the earthly city, as might be expected if its destruction were at issue, but with the earthly Mount Sinai (12:18–21).

Most commentators judiciously opt for a mixed audience of Jewish and Gentile Christians, a description that would fit a Roman Christian audience or even a group of Romans, like Priscilla and Aquila, expelled from Rome by Claudius in 49 CE (Acts 18:2).<sup>99</sup> The exhortations addressed to the audience refer to a community that in the past had eagerly received spiritual enlightenment (Heb 6:4; see also 10:32) from their leaders (13:7) and had a powerful experience of the age to come (6:5). Subsequently they had suffered imprisonment, seizure of property, and other trials (10:32–34; 12:4–11), although none had actually been martyred (12:4). Some were still in prison (13:3). While in the past the community had retained their solidarity (6:10; 10:32–34), more recently they have lost their fervor (2:1; 3:12; 4:11; 6:11; 10:25, 35), neglecting even to meet together (10:25). In response, the homilist urges them to emulate the endurance of Jesus and the faithful heroes of old (11:1–13:6), since salvation is near (12:22–24).

Several scholars have interpreted the situation of Hebrews in social-scientific terms, e.g., as the experience of a new religious movement undergoing social alienation and public shame,<sup>100</sup> struggling to establish boundaries between the nascent Christian confession and Jewish faith,<sup>101</sup> or to create an ideal society in opposition to the Levitical regime of Second Temple Judaism.<sup>102</sup> From a feminist standpoint it should be noted that women are often attracted by the acceptance, promises, and opportunities offered by new religious movements (NRMs)—e.g., gender egalitarianism, leadership, missionary activity, spiritual status—only to be relegated to traditional gender roles as the sect seeks broader social acceptance, or simply to reassert male prestige.<sup>103</sup> If ancient Christian

99. Jews were allowed by Nero to return to the city in 54 CE, and the Neronian persecution of Christians after the great fire of Rome in 64 CE is well documented.

100. David A. deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Epistle "to the Hebrews"* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000).

101. Saleveo, *Legitimation*.

102. Richard W. Johnson, *Going Outside the Camp: The Sociological Function of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, JSNTSup 209 (London and New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001).

103. Kraemer, *Her Share of the Blessings*, 146, 154.

communities followed the pattern of some contemporary NRMs, women may have made up a majority of converts,<sup>104</sup> a fact obscured in the NT by the Greek preference for the masculine grammatical form (the audience is characteristically addressed as “brothers”) and a cultural predisposition to conceal women’s presence. This is especially true in societies where familial honor (in this case, the surrogate family of the *ekklēsia*) depends on the “shame” of its female members by demanding that women adhere to sexually discreet behavior, spatial segregation, and deferral to male authority (see Heb 13:4). For women, a religious system that exhorts its members to eschew public honor and embrace the shame of suffering (see also Heb 10:36-39; 12:7-12) may strategically valorize “feminine” qualities for men, but it does not necessarily liberate women.

### *Socio-Economic Context*

Although Hebrews does not explicitly discuss the socio-economic context and circumstances of writing, David A. deSilva has shown that the discourse contains enough clues for a plausible reconstruction. In contrast to the stereotype that sectarian groups tend to be of lower-class origins, the high literary quality of the homily suggests that both author and audience were not only literate but highly educated, “capable of attending meaningfully to such language and syntax (much freer and independent of word order than other NT texts).” Some members of the community had possessions worth confiscating (Heb 10:34). Moreover, “community members are capable of charitable activity and

hospitality (13:2; 10:33b-34a; 13:16) and even appear to need warnings against overambition, both with regard to possessions (13:5) and status (13:14).”<sup>105</sup> That is, at least some of the addressees were people with social status and property to lose, or to renounce voluntarily. Perhaps this is part of the reason why the homilist is so determined to check perceived “denominationalizing tendencies” among the addressees, i.e., the tendency of sectarian groups to adapt to the norms of the broader society in order to avoid conflict: “But we are not among those who shrink back and so are lost, but among those who have faith and so are saved” (10:39). In socio-economic terms, some community members seem to have had much to gain in terms of wealth,

104. Elizabeth Puttick, “Women in New Religious Movements,” in *New Religious Movements: Challenge and Response*, ed. Bryan Wilson and Jamie Cresswell (New York: Routledge, 1999), 143–45; see also, e.g., Origen, *Against Celsus* 3.10, 44, 49, 55, 56.

105. DeSilva, “Hebrews,” 6.

status, and security if they abandon their faith and return to their former lives:

Such members have experienced the loss of property and status without yet receiving the promised rewards of the sect and so are growing disillusioned with the sect's promise to provide. . . . The community members have been becoming increasingly interested in regaining a place of honor and prestige in the larger society, of enjoying the fruits of a peaceful and nourishing relationship within the sociocultural environment in place of the hostile relationship which characterized the earlier years of the sectarian movement.

As deSilva notes, the homilist's portrayal of salvation in terms of "inheritance" (Heb 6:12; 9:15) and "property" (10:34) would be particularly relevant to people whose belongings had been, or were in danger of being, confiscated. In contrast, lower-status members might benefit more from sectarian membership in terms of recognition within the community and economic support in times of need.

In gendered terms, loss of "honor and prestige" would be more acutely felt by men than by women, since according to Greco-Roman cultural norms men were associated with the public sphere of "honor" and women with the domestic sphere of "shame," interpreted as sexual propriety and modesty. Female members' vulnerability to external criticism of their sexual behavior in the context of the fictive family offered by the community might, however, make them more inclined to eschew meetings and conform to the expectations of their biological families, or be pressured by relatives to leave the sect in order to restore the family honor. The strong advocacy of marriage and marital faithfulness and the stern warnings against adultery and fornication (Heb 13:4) may be the author's attempt to address women members' reputational concerns in the face of external, or even familial, accusations of immorality.

(Source: Quotations are from David A. deSilva, "The Epistle to the Hebrews in Social-Scientific Perspective," *ResQ* 36 [1994]: 1-21.)

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## Genre and Cultural Milieu

As discussed above, Hebrews is literarily and culturally most closely aligned with the form of Hellenistic Judaism associated with Alexandria, particularly with the book of Wisdom and the works of Philo. The

similarities between Hebrews and Wisdom have been enumerated above. With respect to Philo, Thompson notes:

Philo and Hebrews share not only the insistence of the two levels of reality derived from the Platonic tradition; they also cite numerous passages (e.g., Gen 2:2; Exod 25:40; Josh 1:5; Prov 3:11-14) in ways found only in their writings. . . . By far the most remarkable parallel is the way Heb 13:5 splices together Josh 1:5; Deut 31:8; and possibly Gen 28:15 in the same way that Philo does (*Confusion* 66 . . .). Furthermore, as Spicq (1952, 1:39–91) has shown, the two writers share a common vocabulary, mode of exegesis, and major themes. Philo's description of the *logos* employs vocabulary that resembles the christological language of Heb 1:1-4 (see also *Creation* 146; *Cherubim* 127; *Worse* 83). The two writers employ similar arguments to indicate the ineffectiveness of Levitical sacrifices (Heb 9:1-10; 10:1-18; *Moses* 2.107; *Spec. Laws* 1.257–261). Both Philo and the author of Hebrews present lists of examples (Heb 11; Philo, *Virtues* 198–225).<sup>106</sup>

The author's Platonic worldview is best illustrated by the contrast between the heavenly sanctuary and the earthly tabernacle, in which the wilderness tent and its accoutrements were merely "the sketches of the heavenly things" (Heb 9:23). Consistent with Platonic doctrine, the earthly is a transitory reflection of the heavenly ("ideal"), eternal and unchanging. Hebrews also makes extensive use of typological interpretation, however, a sort of historicized Platonism in which persons, places, and events in Scripture are seen as "types" or prefigurations of the new era inaugurated by Christ. For Hebrews, the present reality (antitype) is superior to the type, e.g., Christ is superior to Moses; the priesthood of Christ is better than the Levitical priesthood; the sacrifice of Christ is more effectual than the Levitical sacrifices; the new covenant is better than the old covenant. Thus typological exegesis enables the author to claim both continuity and discontinuity with the sacred history.<sup>107</sup> These features do not necessarily mean that the homilist was from Alexandria, but they do show that she or he was familiar with Alexandrian Jewish modes of exegesis.

Generically, Hebrews is most often identified as having affinities with Hellenistic synagogal homilies because of the reference to the

106. Thompson, *Hebrews*, 24.

107. See Mary Ann Beavis, "A Study of the Relation of the Old and New Covenants in the Epistle to the Hebrews, in the Light of Scholarship 1938–1980" (MA thesis, University of Manitoba, 1981).

document as a “word of exhortation” (13:22), a term used in Acts 13:15 to refer to Paul’s sermon in the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch.<sup>108</sup> In view of Hebrews’ homiletic writing (or speaking) style, which makes extensive use of the Hebrew Scriptures and their distinctively Hellenistic-Christian interpretations, one may agree with George Buchanan’s generic identification of Hebrews as a “homiletical midrash.”<sup>109</sup> Jeremy H. Punt points out that this view of Hebrews would encourage a sense of freedom for modern readers to explore “more adequate ways of doing theology through Jesus Christ.”<sup>110</sup>

### Hebrews and Gnosticism

In scholarship, “Gnosticism” has become an umbrella term for a variety of forms of early Christian mysticism, dated to the second century and later, that share doctrines of salvation through enlightenment or knowledge (γνῶσις), a disdain for the material over against the spiritual, and cosmological systems in which the task of the enlightened soul after death is to ascend through the heavenly spheres, which are ruled by hostile powers, to the ultimate divine above.

#### *A Homiletical Fragment in the Book of Susanna*

Lawrence Wills (“Sermon,” 293–94) sees a homiletical application appended to the Old Greek version of the book of Susanna:

And the whole assembly shouted for the youth, how out of their own mouths he had established them both as false witnesses by their own admission. And as the law states explicitly, they did to them just as they had wickedly intended against their sister. . . . And guiltless blood was saved that day. For this reason youths are beloved by Iakob, because of their simplicity. And as for us, let us watch out for young able sons. For youths will be pious, and a spirit of knowledge and understanding shall be with them forever and ever.  
(*Susanna* 60–61, NETS 1990)

He also identifies the digression on the evils of idolatry in Wis 13–15 as belonging to the homiletical genre.

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108. For other biblical and extra-biblical examples, see Kenneth Wills, “The Form of the Sermon in Hellenistic Judaism and Early Christianity,” *HTR* 77 (1984): 277–99.

109. George W. Buchanan, *To the Hebrews: Translation, Comment, and Conclusions* (New York: Doubleday, 1972), xix.

110. Punt, “Hebrews,” 349.

Gnosticism has features feminists might find attractive: the notion of the divine spark within; evidence of women as leaders and teachers in some forms of Gnosticism; theological creativity; the prominent role of women in some Gnostic texts; and the presence of female deities in some Gnostic theologies.<sup>111</sup> Other aspects are less appealing: negativity toward the body and matter, birth and death, and biological femaleness; the interpretation of Sophia as a fallen divinity responsible for the generation of the ignorant creator of the material realm; the otherworldly orientation; spiritual elitism; and the tendency to anti-Judaism. The docetic Christology associated with Gnosticism, in which Christ is seen as a heavenly, spiritual being who only appeared to be human, is at odds with Hebrews' emphasis on Jesus' human suffering and compassion for others (e.g., Heb 2:14-18; 4:15; 5:7-8).

### *The Repentance of Sophia*

The Gnostic *Pistis Sophia* ("Faith-Wisdom"; second/third century CE) describes the divine female aeon Sophia as having fallen from the Pleroma (divine fullness) into the material realm. There she repents of her rebellion and is saved by the redeemer Christ. In this excerpt Martha recites and interprets a psalm of repentance uttered by Sophia, and her insight is praised by Jesus:

Before Jesus had finished speaking, Martha came forward, she prostrated herself at his feet, she kissed them. She cried out, she wept aloud in humility, saying, "My Lord, have mercy on me, and be compassionate towards me, and allow me to say the interpretation of the repentance

which the Pistis Sophia said." Jesus gave Martha his hand, he said to her, "Blessed is every man [*sic*] who humbles himself, for to him will mercy be given. Now at this time, Martha, thou art blessed. Nevertheless, give now the interpretation of the thought of the repentance of the Pistis Sophia." Martha answered and said to Jesus in the midst of the disciples: "Concerning the repentance which the Pistis Sophia said, O my Lord Jesus, thy light power which was in David once prophesied in the sixty-ninth Psalm, saying . . .

This now is the interpretation of the third repentance which the Pistis Sophia said, singing praises to the height." When Jesus

111. See Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Random House, 1979), 48-49; Karen King, ed., *Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1988).

heard Martha saying these words, he said, "Excellent, Martha, and well done." (*Pistis Sophia* 1.38-39, trans. Violet MacDermot, *The Fall of Sophia: A Gnostic Text on the Redemption of Universal Consciousness* [Great Barrington, MA: Lindisfarne, 2001].)

The fall of Sophia can be interpreted as an allegory of the descent of the divine spark into matter, and its salvation through enlightenment. (See MacDermot, *Fall of Sophia*, chap. 1.)

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The most notable scholar to make a connection between Hebrews and  $\gamma\nu\omega\sigma\iota\varsigma$  is Ernst Käsemann, who, as an anti-Nazi dissident in a German prison in 1937, wrote the first draft of *The Wandering People of God*. He found inspiration in Hebrews' image of the faithful journey through a hostile world on the way to a better homeland: "By describing the church as the new people of God on its wandering through the wilderness, following the Pioneer and Perfecter of faith, I of course had in mind the radical Confessing Church which resisted the tyranny in Germany, and which had to be summoned to patience so that it could continue its way through endless wastes."<sup>112</sup> Käsemann connected this motif with the "Gnostic myth" of the "redeemed redeemer," interpreting the Jesus of Hebrews as a Gnostic redeemer sent from the immaterial realm to the material world to deliver the souls of the enlightened from bondage and lead them to the ultimate heaven. Käsemann's work was, however, published before the discovery of the Gnostic library of Nag Hammadi (1946) and depended on the subsequently discredited notion of Gnosticism as a pre-Christian religion that early Christians took over and applied to Christ.<sup>113</sup> The Gnostic hypothesis has not met with much acceptance, but Käsemann's emphasis on the pilgrimage motif in Hebrews is considered to be of abiding exegetical and theological value.

## Structure

Hebrews, like other ancient homilies, alternates between scriptural/doctrinal exposition and exhortation, *paraenesis* in Greek. This structure in Hebrews can be outlined as follows:

112. Ernst Käsemann, *The Wandering People of God: An Investigation of the Letter to the Hebrews* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1984).

113. See Daniel J. Harrington, *What Are They Saying about the Letter to the Hebrews?* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2005), 68; Koester, *Hebrews*, 60–61.

**Prologue:** The Divine Word/Wisdom (1:1-4)

**Exposition:** The Mediation of Christ Is Better Than the Mediation of Angels (1:5-14)

**Paraenesis:** Ethical Implications (2:1-4)

**Exposition** (cont.): The Mediation of Christ Is Better Than the Mediation of Angels (2:5-18)

**Exposition:** The Mediation of Christ Is Better Than the Mediation of Moses (3:1-6)

**Paraenesis:** Warning against Disobedience (3:7-19)

**Exposition:** Mediator of a Better Rest (4:1-16)

**Exposition:** The Basis of Christ's High Priesthood (5:1-10)

**Paraenesis:** Perfecting Faith (5:11-6:20)

**Exposition:** The High Priesthood of Christ (7:1-28)

**Exposition:** The New Covenant Mediated by Jesus (8:1-10:18)

**Paraenesis:** Persisting in Faith (10:19-39); Heroes of Faith (11:1-40); Ethical Implications of the Pilgrimage of Faith (12:1-29)

**Final Exhortations:** (1) Teachings on Relationships within the Community (13:1-6); (2) Warnings against False Teachings (13:7-17); (3) Personal Requests from the Author(s) (13:18-21); (4) Epistolary Postscript (13:22-25)

Although Christian interpretation of Scripture has tended to focus on doctrine, for Hebrews the applications of the expository sections to the lives of the audience are of great importance, as illustrated by the lengthy paraenetic sections (especially Heb 5:1-6:20; 10:1-12:29; 13:1-17).

## Major Themes

The marginal status of Hebrews, in terms of texts that are relatively unknown to ordinary readers compared to other epistles, has been identified as an entrance point for a postcolonial conversation with Hebrews. This status does not mean that none of the text is well received by modern readers. In fact, Heb 11:1—"Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen"—is still memorized by many ordinary readers and praised by scholars in liturgical studies.<sup>114</sup>

114. Todd Johnson, ed., *The Conviction of Things Not Seen: Worship and Ministry in the 21st Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2002).

Faith, the central theme of the book, can be articulated by the following three subthemes, all beginning with *p*: pilgrimage, persistence, and perfecter of faith. The three themes are interconnected. Before we move on to articulate these *p* themes, it should be noted that the list of eight themes below ought not to be understood as separate entities. In fact, the themes are so interrelated that they may seem redundant. For example, the high priesthood of Christ cannot be fully understood apart from sacrifice, while sacrifice is tied to the new covenant, which is then related to worship as paying respect to God, an activity that is not possible without the covenant with God, who is in relation with the people.

Throughout the commentary we should keep in mind that the separate ideas cannot be analyzed in a totally linear or isolated manner but rather must be approached in "uncentred, pluralistic, and multifarious" ways.<sup>115</sup> Such approaches are integral to postcolonial, multicultural, and multidisciplinary approaches, all of which are employed in this commentary. Attending to the connections and the overlapping aspects within and between the themes will enable us to illuminate new insights into Sophia, our major goal in writing this book.

### *The Pilgrimage of Faith*

As noted above, the motif of the pilgrimage of faith toward the heavenly Jerusalem pervades Hebrews from chapter 3 through chapter 12. The imperfect "rest" of the earthly territory promised in the exodus and conquest is contrasted with the eternal Sabbath of the heavenly realm (Heb 3:7–4:11). The hoped-for destination of the faithful is the celestial city of Jerusalem/Zion (11:10, 16; 12:22; 13:14), contrasted with the earthly Sinai (12:18–24). Although Moses and the institutions of the "old covenant" serve as a negative foil for the new order inaugurated by the "pioneer" Jesus (6:20; 12:2), Moses and other Israelite women and men are regarded as sharing the faith of the christian community, who will be "perfected" together with them (11:1–40). As noted earlier, Hebrews' celebration of past heroes of faith is similar to passages in the Jewish Wisdom literature (Wis 10–19; Sir 44–50), although, unlike Wisdom and Sirach, the homilist includes heroines as well as heroes.

115. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), 12.

This pilgrimage of faith is particularly important in the postcolonial reality in which diaspora identity is becoming a norm for many people. Punt puts it this way: “The centrality of the diaspora theme in Hebrews cannot be underestimated, particularly amid our renewed awareness of liminality of human existence in the globalizing village of a new millennium. . . . In ch. 4 the exodus theme is developed with the image of the people of God in diaspora, in the desert and underway with a *pistei* (in faith) attitude to the promised land (*katapausis*).”<sup>116</sup> (For a further discussion of liminality in the context of Asian North American scholarship, see the comment on Heb 11:1-40 below.)

In light of cultic practices, the fact that the homilist prefers the tabernacle to the temple as the locus of God’s dwelling in Israel is significant. The detailed description of the tabernacle’s structure and contents, in which it is termed “the Holy of Holies” (Heb 9:4), containing “the golden altar of incense” (see also Exod 30:1-16), affirms the pilgrim identity of the people of the new covenant. For the homilist it is in the liminal places between earthly and heavenly sanctuaries that Christians are called to a life of faith. God, who made the new covenant with this people, is thus the guiding Wisdom, the Spirit who accompanies them on their pilgrimage journey. (For further discussion of this, see the comment on Heb 8–10 below.)

### *The Persistence of Faith*

Along with the pilgrimage of faith, which orients believers toward the future, persistence of faith is a theme that brings to mind the present, the realities the audience of Hebrews faced in their daily lives. As noted above, it is obvious that the audience for this homiletic epistle was dealing with hardships, including imprisonment (Heb 10:34) and martyrdom for their faith, as many early Christians did; thus pastoral advice encouraged them to meet together (10:25) and to work in solidarity with others (6:10). Along with the exhortations to remember Jesus’ suffering and to continue in the way of faith, this may seem helpful. The rhetoric of endurance in faith can, however, serve to perpetuate unjust practices imposed on those who already suffer enough and can romanticize suffering and discrimination. For example, the view of Jesus as model and exemplar who endured pain and persecution is closely related to the view of God as parent (father) who disciplines his children. “The interpretation

116. Punt, “Hebrews,” 353–54.

of human suffering as the discipline of God . . . has had pastoral and theological effects that feminists find unacceptable," as Cynthia Briggs Kittredge observes.<sup>117</sup> Both Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, interpreted as divinely sanctioned child abuse, and the example of Rahab, which seems to justify the conquest of Canaan, call for attention and proper theological discussion from a pastoral-theological as well as a postcolonial feminist standpoint, a challenge to which this commentary attempts to respond in the following chapters.

### *The Perfecter of Faith*

Jesus Christ as the ultimate example, the perfecter of faith to be imitated by the whole community, is found throughout Hebrews from the beginning, as God made "the pioneer of their salvation perfect" (2:10), to the end, with "Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith" (12:2). Here the term "perfecter" (τελειότης) is not used to claim his supremacy, a sole authority, but to point to his quality of "being helper, and as *perfecter*, making perfection possible . . . for human beings through his death."<sup>118</sup> To put this in another way, the homilist paints a picture of the humanness of Jesus as the one who became "like his brothers and sisters in every respect" (2:17); the focus is not so much on the "perfect" Jesus but on his example for the community. (For a further discussion on this, especially with regard to disability, see the comment on Heb 5–7.) This Christology of humility and the pastoral sensitivity of the homilist are strongly revealed within the context of persecution and hardship with which the audience of Hebrews was living.

Pedagogically speaking, the idea of "perfecter" is closely related to the understanding of Jesus as a model of faith who teaches by example. A discussion of *paideia* (Heb 5:12; 12:5-11), therefore, involves an understanding that education is not a simple acquisition of knowledge or technique but a lifelong practice for the formation of the whole person that is to be cultivated and taught by example in and through the community.

### *The High Priesthood of Christ*

Hebrews' distinctive christological contribution is the doctrine of the high priesthood of Christ. As noted earlier, Sir 24:9-10 comes close to

117. Kittredge, "Hebrews," 447.

118. Punt, "Hebrews," 353.

Hebrews' portrayal of Christ's priesthood: "In the holy tent I [Wisdom] ministered before him, and so I was established in Zion. Thus in the beloved city he gave me a resting place, and in Jerusalem was my domain." While for Sirach heavenly Wisdom ministers through the priesthood in Jerusalem, for Hebrews Christ-Sophia entered the heavenly tent/tabernacle once to offer the definitive sacrifice of his own blood (Heb 7:27; 9:12, 26; 10:1), contrasted with the animals offered yearly by the high priest on the Day of Atonement (9:7-8; 10:2). In Hebrews' typological interpretation the Levitical priesthood is a negative foil for Christ, whose priesthood is positively correlated with the obscure biblical figure of Melchizedek, king of Salem (traditionally identified with Jerusalem), whose priestly "order" Jesus fulfills.<sup>119</sup> For the homilist, Jesus' non-Levitical lineage—he is "descended from Judah" (7:14)—implies that he must belong to a priestly genealogy; he is "a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek" (7:17), as prophesied by his ancestor David, also of the "house of Judah" (Ps 110:4; see also Heb 8:8). (On the feminist implications of the priesthood motif, see the comments on Heb 5–7.)

### *The Earthly Servant Christ*

No one would argue against the statement that Hebrews has a high Christology. Influenced by the popular Platonist thought of the day and, perhaps, by proto-Gnosticism, the homilist sees Christ as a heavenly, spiritual being, and this vision is obvious and explicit in the text. One may also find, however, a juxtaposed vision of Jesus as an earthly and material being who is in the long line of prophets, priests, and kings, especially Melchizedek, an unconventional figure whose family origin is in question. This seems, on the one hand, to detach him from the material world in order to foreshadow Jesus' eternal and spiritual priesthood. On the other hand, it may be viewed as the homilist's intention to proclaim a paradoxical message that a new world (not an otherworldly realm or a place beyond this world) has come into existence through Jesus.

The following narrative can be found in Hebrews: Christ the earthly servant, whose power lies in a subversive ability to disrupt the traditional order or a conventional sense of power, has come to break down a patriarchal priestly regime that serves the privileged chosen class (e.g., the

119. Gen 14:18; Ps 110:4; Heb 5:6, 10; 6:20; 7:1, 10, 11, 15, 17.

Levitical priesthood). Punt asks: "Can the priesthood of Jesus function as a liberating symbol, breaking through privileged and hegemonic systems insisted upon by religious orthodoxies?"<sup>120</sup> The earthly Christ is a priest who has compassion for others (Heb 2:14-18; 4:15), offers prayers and supplications for the sake of the community (5:7-8), and shows his solidarity with the community (1:11-12). The emphasis on the earthly nature of Jesus Christ gives the concept of perfection (τελειωθείς), a political, perhaps revolutionary aspect. This fullness (being complete), though, includes vulnerability and disability as well as strength and capability. In fact, the consensus that Hebrews expresses a "high Christology" in which the "divinity of Christ" is emphasized may result from the over-literalization of the highly allusive and metaphorical language of the discourse. From the homilist's perspective, what Christ does "for us" (the audience) through his life and death is more important than ontological formulations regarding Jesus' relationship to the divine nature; doctrine is always subordinate to paraenesis. For a further discussion of this Christology in light of διδασχί ("teaching") and τελειωθείς ("perfection"), see the comment on Heb 5-7 below.

### *Sacrifice and Atonement*

Due to its focus on priesthood, tabernacle, and sacrifice, Hebrews is particularly implicated in the Christian doctrine of atonement, a theological model that interprets the death of Jesus as a sacrifice offered in order to atone for the sins of others.<sup>121</sup> Some contemporary Christians, and especially feminist theologians, are highly critical of atonement theology for several reasons: it suggests that God is a sadistic deity who requires blood and death in order to be satisfied; it requires slaughter and so is inherently violent; it pictures God as a harsh patriarch who demands the death of his son so that others might live; and the concept of vicarious atonement, in which an innocent victim suffers and dies for the salvation of others, is incomprehensible in the postmodern world. For specifically feminist critiques of atonement theology, see the comment on Heb 5:8.<sup>122</sup>

120. Punt, "Hebrews," 352.

121. See Christian Eberhart, *The Sacrifice of Jesus: Understanding Atonement Biblically* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 1-11, 111-13.

122. Eberhart, *Sacrifice*, 5-7.

*Hildegard of Bingen*

Kristin De Troyer cites the medieval mystic Hildegard of Bingen's song, "Voice of the Blood," as integrating the culturally fabricated oppositions between God and creation, holiness and everyday life:

O redness of blood,  
 who have flowed down  
 from that height  
 which divinely touched:  
 you are the flower  
 that the winter of the ser-  
 pent's breath  
 never withered.

De Troyer explains: "In this text, heaven and earth seem connected through the blood. The text can be read as transcendence touching upon immanence. I, however, also read the text as referring purely to female blood that gives life. Female blood flows down and is the flower out of which life

comes forth. When blood is giving life, death cannot touch. Blood is 'divinely touched.' It is intimately connected with holiness." De Troyer hypothesizes that in ancient Israelite religion women were marginal to the sacrificial cult because women's blood loss in childbirth—by participating in the giving of life, a divine prerogative—was perceived as impinging on the power of God. (Source: Kristin De Troyer, "Preface," *Wholly Woman, Holy Blood: A Feminist Critique of Purity and Impurity*, ed. Kristin De Troyer, Judith A. Herbert, Judith Ann Johnson, and Anne-Marie Korte [Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003], ix–x; Kristin De Troyer, "Blood: A Threat to Holiness or [Another] Holiness?," in *Wholly Woman, Holy Blood*, 45–64, at 56–57.)

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Christian Eberhart has shown that distaste for atonement theology is often grounded in misconceptions about the ancient Jewish sacrificial system, which is understood as inherently violent because it involved slaughter and supposedly required divine appeasement through bloodshed and the suffering of innocent animals.<sup>123</sup> In response to such critiques, he offers the following observations:

1. Although the slaughter of animals was part of some Israelite/Judean sacrificial rituals, the *killing* of the animals had no special or constitutive significance for sacrifice: "Cultic blood application rituals do not enact vicarious death but *consecrate through the animal's life*,

123. Eberhart, *Sacrifice*, 5–6.

which is in its blood."<sup>124</sup> Moreover, the cereal offering ritual, which operated without an animal victim, illustrates that neither suffering nor death was intrinsic to the functionality of sacrifice.<sup>125</sup>

2. Sacrifice was not concerned with divine appeasement, but the various rituals were conceived "as ways of *approaching the sanctuary* with the goal of *encountering and communicating with God*. In addition, sacrifices are means of *cultic purification and consecration* (expiation)."<sup>126</sup> Here purification/expiation does not refer to moral or physical cleansing but to the worshiper's fitness to approach the divine (see also Heb 12:22-24).

The ancient Israelite/Jewish understanding of sacrifice (from the Latin *sacrificio*, "to make holy") is very much at variance with the modern understandings of the term that connect sacrifice with suffering, loss, and violence.<sup>127</sup> While it cannot be denied that the sacrificial cult of ancient Israel—like the sacrificial rituals of other Ancient Near Eastern/Mediterranean cultures—involved killing, modern industrialized forms of animal slaughter are much less humane.

The sacrifice/atonement model of salvation is one metaphor among many used by Christians to explicate the meaning of the killing of God's son through crucifixion. In its historical reality, crucifixion was not an atoning sacrifice or any other kind of religious ritual but a brutal and painful form of execution reserved for lower-class and political criminals. Other Christian soteriological metaphors, borrowed from secular life, include such notions as martyrdom, redemption from slavery, ransom from sin, penal substitution, and the satisfaction of divine honor, which tend to be collapsed with the atonement model in popular theology.<sup>128</sup> It is understandable that generations of theologians, including the homilist, have used metaphors from their various religious, historical, and cultural contexts to explicate the meaning of the death of Jesus. Considering the violent and painful nature of crucifixion, it would have been natural for the homilist to associate suffering with Jesus' death (Heb 2:9). Hebrews does not, however, interpret Jesus' suffering as salvific in itself; for the homilist, that suffering enabled Jesus to sympathize in solidarity

124. *Ibid.*, 132. Italics in the original.

125. *Ibid.*

126. *Ibid.* Italics in the original.

127. *Ibid.*, 13–14.

128. See also *ibid.*, 123–30, 133.

with other human beings (2:18) and, less appealingly in feminist terms (but consistent with ancient pedagogical theory), to learn obedience and self-discipline (2:10; 5:8), qualities commended to the audience (10:32, 34; 13:17). In relation to Jesus as comforter and advocate for those who suffer, the Johannine concept of the Paraclete can be helpful in understanding the homilist's exhortation to the community to "provoke one another to love and good deeds" (Heb 10:24), receiving the "spirit of grace" (10:29) that is at work in community. For further discussion, see the comment on Heb 10:19-34.

From another perspective, Punt observes, "A Christological appropriation of the Yom Kippur [as a day of repentance] ritual allows one, for example, to de-emphasize Christ's death as 'atoning sacrifice' in favour of viewing it as 'a covenant inaugurating event.'"<sup>129</sup> A call for true worship and the abolition of the hegemony of the institutionalized priesthood along with the end of the sacrificial system can be understood as an argument against the apostolic *kerygma* of the sacrificial death of Christ.<sup>130</sup> In feminist terms, rather than attempting to rehabilitate atonement theology, it is preferable to focus on Jesus' living proclamation of the reign of God instead of fixating on his suffering and death.

### *Sacrifice, Priesthood, and Patriarchy*

A much-quoted anthropological theory that connects blood sacrifice, priesthood, and patriarchy is Nancy Jay's *Throughout Your Generations Forever: Sacrifice, Religion, and Patriarchy*. Jay found a commonality in various religions in which blood sacrifice features prominently: the priests who perform such sacrifices are overwhelmingly male, and fertile women are barred from direct participation in sacrificial rituals due to the ritual impurity

conferred on them by patriarchal views of menstruation and childbirth, occasions of women's loss of blood. Jay theorizes that such sacrificial systems are designed to legitimize patrilineal descent by creating a form of fatherly lineage that is sealed by ritual and not by biology alone. Unlike the bloodshed of menstruation and birth, which is natural and uncontrollable, killing can be regulated:

The only action that is as serious as giving birth, which can act as a counter-balance to it, is killing. This

129. Punt, "Hebrews," 358.

130. Barnabas Lindars, "The Rhetorical Structure of Hebrews," *NTS* 35 (1989): 405-6.

is one way to interpret the common sacrificial metaphors of birth and rebirth, or birth done better, on purpose and on a more spiritual, more exalted level than mothers do it. . . .

Unlike childbirth, sacrificial killing is deliberate, purposeful, "rational" action, under perfect control. Both birth and killing are acts of power, but sacrificial ideology commonly construes childbirth as the quintessence of vulnerability, passivity, and powerless suffering.

Pamela Eisenbaum reads Hebrews through the lens of Jay's theory that sacrifice is a means of establishing patriarchal bloodlines; thus the themes of sonship, high priesthood, and sacrifice are essential to Hebrews' argument:

Ritual sacrifices enable participants to be part of a "ritually defined social order, enduring continuously through time, that birth and death (continually changing the membership of the 'eternal' lineage) and all other threats of social chaos may be overcome."

. . . . The establishment of a ritually defined social order is the overarching purpose of Christ's sacrifice in Hebrews. . . . Just as Jesus once humbled himself to commune in human form

with his "brothers" (2.10-18), his followers can now join in his exalted, divine, eternal lineage and the promised inheritance that goes with it.

That is, the son's sacrificial death has enabled believers to become "brothers" with Christ in the divine patrilineage, to transcend the contingency of having been "born of woman" (see also Job 14:1). In this view, however, it could be argued that the women of the homilist's audience would become honorary "sons" and heirs, and thus grafted onto the priestly lineage of Christ.

(Source: Nancy Jay, *Throughout Your Generations Forever: Sacrifice, Religion, and Paternity* [Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992]; Nancy Jay, "Sacrifice as Remedy for Having Been Born of a Woman," in *Immaculate and Powerful: The Female in Social Image and Social Reality*, ed. Clarissa W. Atkinson, et al. [Boston: Beacon, 1985]; repr. in *Women, Gender, Religion: A Reader*, ed. Elizabeth A. Castelli, et al. [New York: Palgrave, 2001], 174-94, at 182; Pamela Eisenbaum, "Father and Son: The Christology of Hebrews in Patrilineal Perspective," in *Feminist Companion to the Catholic Epistles and Hebrews*, 127-46, at 146, citing Jay, *Generations*, 31.)

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*Covenant*

Although other NT documents speak of the new order initiated by Christ as a “new covenant,”<sup>131</sup> Hebrews’ treatment of the prophecy of Jer 31:31-34 (Heb 8:8-13; 10:16-17) is unique. Arguably, although the term “covenant” is not explicitly mentioned until Heb 7:22, the theme undergirds the entire argument of the homily. The term “covenant” (διαθήκη) that dominates Heb 8:1–10:18 is used seventeen times in Hebrews, roughly half of the NT occurrences of the term. The frequent use of this concept does not imply that certain groups of people are barred from participation in the new covenant but rather that they are free to embrace any community committed to it. Punt argues, however, that the covenant metaphor for the people of God, like the appeal to the household (οἶκος) of Christ or the gospel symbolism of the church as a boat or ship,<sup>132</sup> can conjure up dangerous images of colonialism in which those in the “houseboat” (or covenant) claim to be the legitimate people of God who can, therefore, sail off to conquer (to civilize) “lesser” humans.<sup>133</sup> For a further discussion of the concept of covenant in the light of insights from Korean and Chinese culture and linguistics, as well as Hebrew concepts (“blessing,” ברכה and “firstborn,” בכור), see the comment on Heb 8–10 below.

Whereas the “old covenant” was mediated through angels by God’s servant Moses (Heb 1–3), the “new covenant” is mediated by the messiah Jesus, son of God (Heb 3:1-6; 2 Sam 7:1-17; 1 Chr 17:1-15), and made with the “house of Judah” (Heb 8:8; Jer 31:31), to which Jesus belongs (Heb 7:14). The Mosaic covenant was ratified with animal blood, but the new covenant has been ratified by the blood/death of Christ (9:12, 13, 19). While the priests of the old covenant share Levitical ancestry (7:5, 9, 11), the priesthood of Jesus belongs to the everlasting “order of Melchizedek.”<sup>134</sup> The Mosaic covenant is conditional on the righteousness of Israel,<sup>135</sup> but the new covenant is promissory and eternal (Heb 8:6; 13:20). Under the old covenant the Levitical sacrifices take place continually in the earthly tabernacle/temple (9:6), but the sacrifice of Christ took place “once for all” in the heavenly sanctuary (7:27; 8:2; 9:11,

131. Luke 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25; 2 Cor 3:6; see also Gal 4:24.

132. See George Ferguson, *Signs & Symbols in Christian Art* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), 180–81.

133. Punt, “Hebrews,” 354.

134. Heb 5:6, 10; 6:20; 7:1, 15, 17; Ps 110:4.

135. Exod 34:6-9; Jer 31:31-33; 34:18-22; Ezek 16:59-63.

12; 10:10). The Mosaic covenant is associated with the earthly Sinai, but the new covenant is associated with the heavenly Zion (12:18-24).

As noted above, in general the conception of salvation history in terms of covenants with the ancestors is shared by Hebrews and the Wisdom tradition.<sup>136</sup> More specifically, the terms in which Hebrews describes the "new covenant" resemble the characteristics of the covenant with David and his descendants, which is based on Judean lineage, is promissory rather than conditional, and, like the Davidic covenant, is eternal.<sup>137</sup> For further discussion of the continuity between the Davidic covenant and the new covenant of Hebrews, see the comment on 8:1-10:18 below.

### *True Worship: A Call for Practice*

While Hebrews is charged with the offense of supersessionism, and rightly so, the homilist puts a strong emphasis on the renewal of the religious cult, the practice of worship. It is clear that Jewish worship practice and priestly hierarchy, as understood by the homilist, were resistant to openness or change. The homilist's emphasis on obedience rather than sacrifice (Heb 10:1-18),<sup>138</sup> seemingly unnecessary in light of Jesus' "once for all" sacrifice (7:27; 8:2; 9:11), should be read over against this conservative religious context. The central point is found in Heb 7, where Jesus is praised as belonging to the high priesthood "according to the order of Melchizedek," a theme that can be regarded as a main focus of the letter. This unique order of priesthood is used to argue for a new covenant based on the faithfulness and commitment of a community called to practice true worship as they "consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds" by "meet[ing] together" (10:24-25), a basic and primary act of worship. Also, the emphasis on the close relationship between faith and life, which almost echoes the message of James, should be understood in light of worship, as they practice this "new and living way" by developing a kind of muscle memory, a habit (Heb 10:25). For a further discussion of these themes, see the comment on Heb 5-7 below. As mentioned earlier, faith is one of the most important themes in Hebrews. For the homilist, however, faith is neither a doctrinal matter nor a speculative abstract one. It is, rather, a matter of

136. Wis 12:21; 18:22; Sir 17:12; Heb 8:6, 10; 10:16.

137. Heb 13:20; 2 Chr 21:7; 23:3; Ps 89:3; Isa 55:3; Jer 33:21; Sir 45:31; 47:11; see also 1 Kgs 8:25; 9:5; 2 Kgs 8:19; 2 Chr 1:9; 6:16; 1 Macc 2:57.

138. Punt, "Hebrews," 358.

reality and of sanctification. The themes of perfecter of faith, elaborated further in the examples of faith (12:1-12) and of Christ the earthly servant, point to the theme of sanctification, where the homilist advises believers to cultivate and nurture a mature faith in God through Jesus Christ (5:11-6:8).

## Hebrews, Supersessionism, and Anti-Judaism

Daniel J. Harrington observes that an open question with respect to Hebrews is “the significance of Hebrews for Christian-Jewish relations (supersessionist or not?).”<sup>139</sup> Indeed, the homilist’s contrasts between Christ and Moses, the earthly tabernacle and the heavenly tabernacle, Levitical priesthood and priesthood of Christ, old covenant and new covenant, earthly Sinai and heavenly Zion have led some scholars to regard Hebrews as supersessionist, i.e., as teaching that Christianity supersedes and abolishes Judaism.<sup>140</sup> Conversely, as Richard B. Hayes observes, “Hebrews nowhere speaks of Jews and gentiles, nowhere gives evidence of controversies over circumcision or food laws, criticizes nothing in the Mosaic Torah except for the Levitical sacrificial cult, and contains no polemic against Jews or Jewish leaders. . . . Nowhere does Hebrews suggest that the Jewish people have been replaced by a new and different people of God.”<sup>141</sup> Thus to call Hebrews “supersessionist” may be an anachronistic imposition of later Christian doctrines onto the text.

Nonetheless, although there was no such thing as “Christianity” as a religion separate from “Judaism” in Hebrews’ time,<sup>142</sup> the charge of supersessionism is warranted to the extent that Hebrews sees the new covenant as superseding and replacing the cultic institutions of the Mosaic order. Within its historical context, however, the homilist worships the Jewish God, makes extensive use of Jewish Scriptures and methods

139. Harrington, *Hebrews*, 88.

140. Terence L. Donaldson, *Jews and Anti-Judaism in the New Testament* (London: SPCK, 2010), 143; see also 20; Pamela Eisenbaum, “Hebrews,” *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 406-26; see also the essays in Richard Bauckham, et al., eds., *The Epistle to the Hebrews and Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI, and Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2009), esp. 151-228.

141. Richard B. Hayes, “‘Here We Have No Lasting City’: New Covenantalism in Hebrews,” in Bauckham, *Hebrews and Christian Theology*, 151-73, at 154.

142. See Pamela Eisenbaum, *Paul Was Not a Christian: The Original Message of a Misunderstood Apostle* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2009), 5-9.

of interpretation, and shares an eschatological orientation and messianic hope with other "Judaisms" of the first century.<sup>143</sup> In fact, Eisenbaum's observations regarding the essential Jewishness of Paul could equally well be applied to Hebrews:

Paul's letters would have been regarded as Jewish by other Jews of the time, including Pharisees. . . . In the context of the first century . . . Paul's belief in Jesus did not make him less Jewish. Belief in a messianic savior figure is a very Jewish idea, as can be demonstrated by a historical analogy. Only a half century after Paul wrote his letters, R. Akiba, one of the most revered of all rabbis of antiquity, believed that the Messiah had come in his day, only his name was not Jesus, it was Bar Kokhba. Not all Jews thought Bar Kokhba was the Messiah at the time, and after Bar Kokhba failed in his revolt against the Romans and died, it became clear that R. Akiba had been wrong. But R. Akiba has never been judged a heretic, and his teachings continue to this day to be authoritative because they are preserved in the Mishnah and the Talmud. Thus, Paul's belief in Jesus would not have branded him a heretic—a pain in the neck perhaps, but not a heretic.<sup>144</sup>

Like Paul, the homilist regarded the messiah, Jesus, and his salvific acts as the fulfillment or "perfecting" of the history of Israel. Similarly, the homilist's critique of the Levitical priesthood and tabernacle fits within the range of ancient Jewish criticisms of, and alternatives to, the temple regime in Jerusalem and with Philo of Alexandria's preference for spiritual offerings over literal sacrifice.<sup>145</sup> In fact, as Shaye J. D. Cohen notes, "a common feature of Jewish sectarianism is the polemic against the Temple of Jerusalem: its precincts are impure, its cult profane, and its priests illegitimate."<sup>146</sup> As noted above, however, to the extent that Hebrews as Christian Scripture has figured in the history of Christian anti-Judaism<sup>147</sup> it must be interpreted with care, and anti-Jewish interpretations of Hebrews must be vigorously repudiated.

143. See also *ibid.*, 67–115.

144. *Ibid.*, 8.

145. Timothy Scott Wardle, "Continuity and Discontinuity: The Temple and Early Christian Identity" (PhD diss., Duke University, 2008); Eisenbaum, *Paul*, 71–72; James W. Thompson, *The Beginnings of Christian Philosophy: The Epistle to the Hebrews*, CBQMS 13 (Washington, DC: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1982), 113–15.

146. Shaye J. D. Cohen, "The Significance of Yavneh: Pharisees, Rabbis, and the End of Jewish Sectarianism," *HUCA* 55 (1984): 27–53, at 43.

147. See also Hayes, "No Lasting City," 154–55.

*Philo of Alexandria on Temple  
and Sacrifice*

Although Philo respected the sacrificial regime of the Jerusalem temple, he regarded material sacrifices with some reservations.<sup>148</sup> Philo explains the allegorical meaning of the whole burnt offering in terms of his gendered—and sexist—anthropology (or more accurately, zoology):

“And then let the whole victim be given to the fire of the altar of God, having become many things instead of one, and one instead of many.” These things, then, are comprehended in express words of command. But there is another meaning figuratively concealed under the enigmatical expressions. And the words employed are visible symbols of what is invisible and uncertain. Now the victim which is to be sacrificed as a whole burnt offering must be a male, because a male is both more akin to domination than a female and more nearly related to the efficient cause; for the female is imperfect, subject, seen more as the passive than as the active partner. And since the elements of which our soul consists are two in number, the rational and the irrational part, the

rational part belongs to the male sex, being the inheritance of intellect and reason; but the irrational part belongs to the sex of woman, which is the lot also of the outward senses. And the mind is in every respect superior to the outward sense, as the man is to the woman; who, when he is without blemish and purified with the proper purifications, namely, the perfect virtues, is himself the most holy sacrifice, being wholly and in all respects pleasing to God. (*On the Special Laws* XXXVII.199–201)

Philo’s view of the Jerusalem temple as a reflection of the heavenly sanctuary is reminiscent of Hebrews:

We ought to look upon the universal world as the highest and truest temple of God, having for its most holy place that most sacred part of the essence of all existing things, namely, the heaven; and for ornaments, the stars; and for priests, the subordinate ministers of his power, namely, the angels, incorporeal souls, not beings compounded of irrational and rational natures, such as our bodies are, but such as have the irrational parts wholly cut out, being absolutely and

148. Thompson, *Beginnings*, 113.

wholly intellectual, pure reasonings, resembling the unit. But the other temple is made with hands; for it was desirable not to cut short the impulses of men who were eager to bring in contributions for the objects of piety, and desirous either to show their gratitude by sacrifices for such good fortune as had befallen them, or else to implore pardon and forgiveness for whatever errors they might have committed. He moreover foresaw that there could not be any great number of temples built

either in many different places, or in the same place, thinking it fitting that as God is one, his temple also should be one. (*On the Special Laws* I, XII.66-67)

Similarly, the book of Wisdom describes the temple as a "copy of the holy tent" that God prepared "from the beginning" (9:8), in accordance with the Sophia who sits by the divine throne (9:4).

(*Source: The Works of Philo, Complete and Unabridged*, trans. C.D. Yonge, new ed. [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993], 540.)

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## Interpretive Essay: Proto-feminist Interpretations of Hebrews

While many scholars see feminist biblical scholarship as a movement that began in the mid-to-late twentieth century, approaches to biblical texts that can be labeled as "proto-feminist" certainly occurred much earlier. For example, in mid-nineteenth-century America, Antoinette Brown Blackwell argued against oppressive interpretations of 1 Tim 2:11-12 ("Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent") and 1 Cor 14:34-35 ("Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent") in an article published in *Oberlin Quarterly Review*.<sup>149</sup> Exegetical arguments similar to Brown Blackwell's are found in feminist interpretations one hundred years later, but no one referenced Brown

149. Beth Bidlack, "Antoinette Brown Blackwell: Pioneering Exegete and Congregational Minister," in *Strangely Familiar: Protofeminist Interpretations of Patriarchal Biblical Texts*, ed. Nancy Calvert-Koyzis and Heather Weir (Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2009), 151-70; Antoinette L. Brown, "Exegesis of 1 Corinthians, XIV., 34, 35; and 1 Timothy II., 11, 12," *OQR* 4 (1849): 358-73.

Blackwell's work.<sup>150</sup> My intention here is not to recount and analyze Brown Blackwell's arguments but to provide an example of how proto-feminist voices have been lost through the centuries. Gerda Lerner summarizes it well when she states, "Over and over again, individual women criticized and re-interpreted the core biblical texts not knowing that other women before them had already done so. In fact, present day feminist Bible criticism is going over the same territory and using the very same arguments used for centuries by other women engaged in the same endeavor."<sup>151</sup>

In the case of Hebrews, proto-feminist voices are not easy to find. Nevertheless, we may have to look no further than the author of the epistle who, as is argued above, could be a collection of individuals including women, perhaps including Priscilla. Whatever the case, the homilist of Hebrews may be called "proto-feminist" by virtue of the inclusion of women in the list of heroes of the faith in Heb 11. For example, the homilist names Rahab (11:31) as one who "by faith" was a heroine. Another possible example of a heroine of faith is found in Heb 11:11. The Greek text states, Πίστει καὶ αὐτῇ Σάρρα στεῖρα δύναμιν εἰς καταβολὴν σπέρματος ἔλαβεν καὶ παρὰ καιρὸν ἡλικίας, ἐπεὶ πιστὸν ἠγήσατο τὸν ἐπαγγελιάμενον. This can be translated as "by faith Sarah herself, though barren, received power to conceive, even when she was too old, because she considered him faithful who had promised," as in the footnote for the verse in the NRSV. In the main text, the NRSV translates the verse as referring to Abraham as the subject, thus downgrading Sarah's role: "By faith he received the power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised." Ruth Hoppin argues that the proper translation is in the footnote. When the phrase "received power to conceive" (δύναμιν εἰς καταβολὴν σπέρματος ἔλαβεν) is translated in the NRSV as "received power of procreation," it enables Abraham to be made the subject of the verse. She also notes that the phrase παρὰ καιρὸν ἡλικίας or "past the age of fertility" is rendered "too old," although several manu-

150. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her, A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, 10th ann. Ed. (New York: Crossroad, 1988; 1998), 230–31; Craig Keener, *Paul, Women and Wives: Marriage and Women's Ministry in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1992).

151. Gerda Lerner, "One Thousand Years of Feminist Biblical Criticism," in *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen Seventy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 166.

scripts include “for childbearing” and others have the phrase “she gave birth.”<sup>152</sup> On the other hand, the editorial committee of the United Bible Societies’ Greek New Testament recognized that δύναμιν εἰς καταβολὴν σπέρματος ἔλαβεν as “regularly used of the male, not the female in conceiving” in Greek and so understood the words καὶ αὐτῇ Σάρρα στείρα as being a gloss that “somehow got in to the text.”<sup>153</sup>

Even the mention of Rahab and Sarah renders the Hebrews’ homilist’s list of heroes of the faith as a kind of proto-feminist; as Hoppin states, “the author was familiar with the roll call of heroes of faith in Ecclesiasticus in the Septuagint, following right along with the mention of Enoch, Noah, Abraham and Moses. However, while Sirach names Abraham he does not name Sarah; he extols Joshua but does not name Rahab [Sir 44:1–50:24]. By contrast the author of Hebrews alludes to Joshua without naming him, then names Rahab instead.”<sup>154</sup>

Other examples of heroines of the faith in Heb 11 may include Judith who “won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war” and “put foreign armies to flight.”<sup>155</sup> Clement of Rome identified Judith with the “valiant ones of Heb. 11:34” (1 Clem. 55.3-5).<sup>156</sup> Clement also identifies Esther as a valiant model of faith, perhaps as the one who “escaped the edge of the sword” (Heb 11:34; Esth 4:11; 5:1-2).<sup>157</sup> The “women who received their dead by resurrection” (Heb 11:35), presumably referring either to the widow of Zeraphath (1 Kgs 17:17-24) or the Shunammite woman (2 Kgs 4:25-37). The woman described as “tortured, refusing to accept release, on order to obtain a better resurrection” may refer to the mother of the seven sons in 2 Macc 5:27 and 6:12–7:42 whose sons were tortured but proclaimed a better resurrection to come. Thus the homilist of Hebrews interweaves salvation history with women as examples of the faith, and as Hoppin states, “through the eyes of the writer we see women in the world, as agents of salvation, worthy of emulation.”<sup>158</sup>

152. Ruth Hoppin, “Priscilla’s Letter,” 154–55.

153. See the reasons for the NRSV translation in Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1994), 602.

154. Hoppin, “Priscilla’s Letter,” 155.

155. *Ibid.*

156. *Ibid.*, 155–56; see James Rendel Harris, “Sidelights on the Authorship of the Epistle to the Hebrews,” in *Sidelights on New Testament Research Lecture V* (London: The Kingsgate Press, James Clarke & Co., 1908), 169–71.

157. Hoppin, “Priscilla’s Letter,” 156.

158. *Ibid.*

Another voice worth listening to is English commentator Gracilla Boddington (1801–87) who published under her initials, G.B. She was born March 27, 1801, to Benjamin Boddington (1773–1853) and his wife, Grace (d. Feb. 10, 1812). Her brother, Thomas, became an Anglican priest, which suggests that the family was well educated. She lived primarily Titley, Herefordshire, and never married. During a career of over forty years, Boddington published multiple volumes on every book in the New Testament in addition to four other books. Her purpose was to write for the common person, using “simple and familiar language.”<sup>159</sup>

Although her viewpoint on a woman’s place was traditional, including the belief that a wife must be subject to husband, writing and publishing commentaries “was not socially acceptable for a woman of this period. Nevertheless her work was well received, as evidenced by the reprinting of a number of her works during her own lifetime.”<sup>160</sup> In her volume, *St. Paul’s Epistle to the Hebrews Explained in Simple and Familiar Language*, Boddington also writes of Sarah, much like Ruth Hoppin does. She includes Sarah among the “patriarchs and prophets” who “had faith in God’s word, and because of it, He gave her strength to become a mother, when otherwise she was too old. She considered that He, who had made the promise, would certainly be faithful to his word.”<sup>161</sup> In Boddington’s work Sarah remains the subject who, through her faith, gives birth despite her advancing years.

Later proto-feminist voices included that of Englishwoman Elizabeth Rundle Charles (1828–96). Rundle Charles, born in Devon, was the only child of John Rundle, a Member of Parliament, and his wife, Barbara Gill. Educated at home, Rundle Charles eventually authored dozens of books and was known throughout England for her literary works and her talents as a linguist, poet, painter, and musician.<sup>162</sup>

In her book *Within the Veil: Studies in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, we find some glimmerings of proto-feminist ideas.<sup>163</sup> For example, when discuss-

159. Agnes Choi, “Gracilla Boddington (1801–1887),” *Handbook of Women Biblical Interpreters: A Historical and Biographical Guide*, ed. Marion Taylor and Agnes Choi (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 164–65, at 164.

160. *Ibid.*, 164–65.

161. G.B. (Gracilla Boddington), *St. Paul’s Epistle to the Hebrews: Explained in Simple and Familiar Language* (London: James Nisbet, 1846), 148.

162. Marion Ann Taylor and Heather E. Weir, eds., *Let Her Speak for Herself: Nineteenth-Century Women Writing on Women in Genesis* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006), 77–78.

163. Elizabeth Rundle Charles, *Within the Veil: Studies in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (London: SPCK, 1891).

ing Jewish temple ritual, she describes the “barriers” between Gentiles, women, men, and priests. About the women she states, “Next, the court of the women: where so many of the gracious words of the Saviour were spoken, where He observed the widow putting in her two mites. Beyond that no woman might pass, not even the Blessed mother of Jesus, except when she came with her humble offering of the two turtle doves for the infant Christ, her ‘firstborn son.’”<sup>164</sup> For Rundle Charles, these barriers were based on the “fact of sin.” The ritual of the temple and its environment proclaimed the wall of separation between humanity and God and the evil that separated humanity and God: “The ritual made no attempt to remove the barriers or rend the veils. The barriers and veils represented a reality, and the ritual was a shadow and could not annul realities; nor could its sacrifices, which were its dispensation of grace, really cleanse from sin.”<sup>165</sup> For Rundle Charles, the remedy for the barriers was in “God Himself” and the barriers were in “man.” This remedy was the sacrifice of God’s son, who, when he cried out “It is finished . . . the barriers had no existence; they were shadows vanished away. They existed no longer.”<sup>166</sup>

For Rundle Charles, the death of Jesus on the cross rent the veil of the Holy of Holies, which meant that religious barriers between class, humanity, and nations vanished, becoming “mere obsolete walls meaning nothing.” She continues: “Religious barriers between Jew and Gentile, ‘there is neither Jew nor Greek’; religious barriers between man and woman, ‘there is neither male nor female’; barriers between class and class, ‘there is neither bond nor free’; ‘all are one in Christ Jesus.’”

Rundle Charles, then, uses her theological arguments to show that in her view men and women are equal before God; the old barriers have been broken down. She also combines a concern for the equality of women with a concern for barriers between nations and classes. In these ways she provides the beginnings of a proto-feminist template in which she is concerned not only with the equality of women but with the disparities between classes as well.<sup>167</sup>

One other element of Rundle Charles’s work might be considered as proto-feminist, at least in her context and milieu. Unlike many of her female compatriots, Rundle Charles had been given an excellent educa-

164. *Ibid.*, 49.

165. *Ibid.*, 48.

166. *Ibid.*, 51.

167. For example, see Leslie McCall, “The Complexity of Intersectionality,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 30 (Spring 2005): 1771–1800.

tion. Generally, nineteenth-century women thought of themselves as the “angel in the house” and were prepared for a life of service to others. Among middle-class women, of which Rundle Charles was a member, the “image of being delicate, of not being able to handle difficult decisions and of having an inferior intellect was cultivated.”<sup>168</sup> Yet women were seen as responsible for the education and moral formation of children.<sup>169</sup> This was different from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when men were entrusted with shaping the character of children along with providing moral and religious guidance.

As a member of this new generation of women charged with educating her children, Rundle Charles was interested in how Hebrews could be used for moral and religious instruction for the young. In *Within the Veil*, Rundle Charles interprets Heb 12:3-11, which addresses the children of God who are trained and chastened after the example of Christ, as referring to the training of Christians. For her, the passage speaks of the Christian life as a life of “education and of sacrifice.” She continues, “The word tendered ‘chastening,’ extends, no doubt, in other directions, meaning the whole of education, the bringing out of capacities and training of faculties, with the culture which is the result.”<sup>170</sup> As she writes about this education, it is clear that it is not only for men but also for women, herself included:

For the education is home-education. The Master is the Father, which assures us that the highest end of the training will never be lost sight of, that the mere learning of a certain number of lessons, acquiring of a certain amount of knowledge, or achieving a certain amount of successes, will never be substituted for the developing and perfecting, correcting and competing of the whole being, the education of the son.<sup>171</sup>

It is clear from the rest of the chapter that Rundle Charles’s use of the term “son” refers to both men and women who, here, should have equal access to knowledge and success.

Although they lived in a different time and were only beginning to address overwhelmingly patriarchal interpretations of the Bible, these women incrementally deconstructed those interpretations and replaced

168. Christiana de Groot and Marino Ann Taylor, eds., *Recovering Nineteenth-Century Women Interpreters of the Bible*, SemeiaSt 38 (Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2007), 4.

169. *Ibid.*, 5.

170. Rundle Charles, *Within the Veil*, 89.

171. *Ibid.*, 95.

them with interpretations in which women were granted power and opportunity. While it is unfortunate that most members of the academy were not familiar with their contributions in previous decades, through an understanding of their contributions today we can understand ourselves as joining a long, historical line of female interpreters and draw strength from them and their proto-feminist interpretations.

*Nancy Calvert Koyzis*



## Hebrews 1–2

# *Discovering Wisdom*

### Prologue (Heb 1:1-4)

The Hebrews prologue or exordium (Heb 1:1-4) is actually one complex, hymn-like sentence (see also Col 1:15-20; John 1:1-4), beginning with a series of alliterations featuring the letter *pi* (πολυμερῶς, πολυτρόπως, πάλαι, πατράσιν, προφήταις), whose effect is lost in most English translations. (The wordplay would be better captured by something like: “In the past, polyphonically and polymorphically God spoke to the progenitors through the prophets.”) There are many hymn-like texts in the Bible. Some, especially in the Hebrew Bible, were sung before they were written down for liturgical use. For example, the creation story in the first chapter of Genesis could have been sung, with “and there was evening and there was morning” functioning like a refrain.<sup>1</sup> Miriam’s song in Exod 15:20-21 is another example; it is regarded as one of the earliest songs in Scripture (see also Judg 5:1-31; Jdt 16:1-17).<sup>2</sup> This sung narrative has captivated the imagination of generations, not to mention the interest of scholarship in many different fields, including women’s performance genre and feminist ethnomusicology.<sup>3</sup> There are also hymnic

1. John L. Bell, *The Singing Thing: A Case for Congregational Song* (Chicago: GIA Publications, 2000), 49–52.

2. Hans-Ruedi Weber, *Experiments with Bible Study* (Geneva: WCC, 1981), 33–34.

3. Carol Meyers, “Of Drums and Damsels: Women’s Performance in Ancient Israel,” *BA* 54 (1991): 16–27.

## Heb 1:1-4

<sup>1</sup>Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, <sup>2</sup>but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. <sup>3</sup>He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, <sup>4</sup>having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

passages in the New Testament, e.g., Col 1:15-20 and Phil 2:6-11. The purpose of such a carefully written and constructed opening was to capture the attention of the audience and to emphasize the importance of the theme of the homily, which is spelled out here: the contrast between the past, partial prophetic message and the present perfection embodied in the son. The author does not self-identify here or elsewhere in the letter, relying on the rhetorical quality of the discourse to persuade the audience rather than on personal authority or reputation.

Charles L. Bartow advocates this rhetorical approach to preaching to contemporary church leaders, seeing the homily as "*actio divina*," a flesh-and-blood, oral-aural, face-to-face speech event.<sup>4</sup> What is important is not so much the position or the ecclesial authority of the preacher but her or his physicality embodied in the performative character and aural nature of the event. Bartow goes on to say that "the stance of the lector (or preacher or priest as lector) . . . is, or ought to be, a stance of humility." When homily as "living speech" is "undertaken as an act of sacred attentiveness," the preacher is called to be humbly attentive to the written texts and the hearers.<sup>5</sup> In this regard, the author of Hebrews seems to fulfill this role in taking a stance of humility and attentiveness. The author is writing "against the grain" of a culture in which antiquity was respected and novelty, especially in religion, was suspect. Thus the new, definitive revelation "spoken" in "a son" is portrayed as the eschatological completion of manifold divine revelations to "the fathers" (translated in the NRSV inclusively as "the ancestors") through the prophets—in the context of Hebrews, a category encompassing the Jewish Scriptures as a whole.

4. Charles Bartow, *God's Human Speech: A Practical Theology of Proclamation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 3, 36–37.

5. Charles Bartow, "Performance Study in Service to the Spoken Word in Worship," in *Performance in Preaching: Bringing the Sermon to Life*, ed. Jana Childers and Clayton J. Schmit (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 211–23, at 221.

From a feminist standpoint the centrality of sonship, with the son portrayed as the male “heir of all things,” is problematic in that it functions within a patrilineal legal system in which sons inherit the paternal estate.<sup>6</sup> The only explicit stipulation in Torah referring to inheritance rights, however, speaks of a case in which daughters, not sons, are at issue. This is the story of the daughters of Zelophehad. During the wilderness wanderings of the children of Israel, the father dies, leaving five daughters and no sons to inherit his legacy:

Moses brought their case before the LORD. And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: “The daughters of Zelophehad are right in what they are saying; you shall indeed let them possess an inheritance among their father’s brothers and pass the inheritance of their father on to them. You shall also say to the Israelites, ‘If a man dies, and has no son, then you shall pass his inheritance on to his daughter. If he has no daughter, then you shall give his inheritance to his brothers. If he has no brothers, then you shall give his inheritance to his father’s brothers. And if his father has no brothers, then you shall give his inheritance to the nearest kinsman of his clan, and he shall possess it. It shall be for the Israelites a statute and ordinance, as the LORD commanded Moses.’” (Num 27:5-11)

### *Daughters and Inheritance in Judaism*

The interpretation of the law with regard to women’s inheritance has changed over time, as illustrated by the story of the daughters of Zelophehad:

Jewish law originally excluded daughters from inheritance rights when sons survived. The Sages modified these laws by providing for the maintenance of the widow and daughters of the deceased. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Moses Isserles

permitted fathers to give their daughters a gift of half of their sons’ share in their estate. . . . According to a *takkanah* (enactment) of the chief rabbinate of Palestine in 1943, in Israel daughters inherit on an equal footing with sons.

(Source: The Rabbinical Assembly, the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, *Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary* [New York: JPS, 2001], 926, note on Num 27:1.)

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6. Pamela Eisenbaum, “Father and Son: The Christology of Hebrews in Patrilineal Perspective,” in *A Feminist Companion to the Catholic Epistles and Hebrews*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine with Maria Mayo Robbins, FCNTECW 8 (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2004), 127–47.

While this legislation shows a clear preference for sons and brothers, daughters of sonless families are preferred as heirs over their uncles and male cousins. In Hebrews, the son's inheritance of "all things" is presented as highly desirable and appropriate, but women are included (11:11, 31, 35; see also 13:4)—albeit sparingly—among ancient heroes of faith perfected together with "us" (11:39-40).

From a postcolonial perspective it is not only the preference for the male heir that poses a problem; Jesus, the Son of God as "heir of all things," is also problematic. The Christian universal standard has been to convert "inferior" and "uncivilized" others to Christianity by Western imperial and "civilizing" missions and even to conquer and colonize them. An intertextual reading is helpful here. One such is found in the Gospel of Matthew: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations" (Matt 28:18b-19a). It is a well-researched claim that this text was not written by the original author (evangelist) but was added by a scribe in a later century. We could contend, therefore, that we can discount this verse. We cannot afford to do so, however, because it has played such a huge role in the history of Christianity and was used incessantly as propaganda in "civilizing" evangelism and converting others to Christianity throughout the millennia, particularly in recent centuries. If Matthew was written among colonized Jews within the Roman Empire, such an authoritative claim might have provided confidence and courage for those colonized to fight for their right to worship and maintain their religious and cultural identity. This kind of universal, totalizing power over "all authority and all nations," however, also sets forth an agenda that justifies the imposition of a single perspective on other nations and other religions.<sup>7</sup>

The wording of Heb 1:3a is generally regarded as a paraphrase of Wis 7:26: "For she is a reflection [*ἀπαύγασμα*] of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness." Similarly for Hebrews, the son, like Wisdom/Sophia, is a "reflection" (*ἀπαύγασμα*) of God's radiance and the imprint of the divine essence/reality, who "sustains all things" (Heb 1:3).<sup>8</sup> Jesus was often interpreted as a prophet or

7. Musa W. Dube, "Go Therefore and Make Disciples of All Nations (Matt. 28:19a): A Postcolonial Perspective on Biblical Criticism and Pedagogy," in *Teaching the Bible: The Discourse and Politics of Biblical Pedagogy*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), 224-46, at 230.

8. See also Wis 7:24, where Sophia "because of her pureness pervades and penetrates all things"; 8:27, where "she renews all things"; and 8:1b, where "she orders all things well."

embodiment of Sophia by early christians.<sup>9</sup> But Hebrews submerges the origins of this christological language in the Wisdom tradition by never explicitly referring to Woman Wisdom/Sophia.

The statement that the son is the “reflection” of the divine radiance (δόξης) and the “imprint” (χαρακτήρ) of God’s essence is also reminiscent of God’s creation of humanity—male and female—in the divine image (κατ’ εικόνα) and likeness (καθ’ ὁμοίωσιν) (Gen 1:27 LXX). The term translated as “word” (ῥῆμα) is used similarly to John’s λόγος, which figures in another famous prologue where the masculine Word substitutes for the feminine Wisdom (John 1:1-5). In Hebrews the noun ῥῆμα is neuter and refers to “God’s mighty creative word.”<sup>10</sup> See also Wis 8:1: “She reaches mightily from one end of the earth to the other, and she orders all things well.” The son, the divine utterance spoken in “these last days,” differs from Wisdom in that the status of the son is not grounded in creation but is inherited through his having “made purification of sins” and his enthronement by God. That is, the son’s participation in the prerogatives of Wisdom is eschatological, not ontological, and imparted by virtue of his saving activity. The son thus can be interpreted as one of the “holy souls,” “friends of God and prophets” imbued with Wisdom in every generation: “for God loves nothing so much as the person who lives with Wisdom” (Wis 7:27b-28). The Alexandrian theologian Clement (ca. 150–215) recognizes the Sophia Christology inherent in Heb 1:1 when he writes:

Christ is called Wisdom by all the prophets. This is he who is the teacher of all created beings, the fellow counselor of God who foreknew all things; and he from above, from the first foundation of the world, “in many and various ways” trains and perfects; hence it is rightly said, “Call no one your teacher on earth.” . . . With reason, therefore, the apostle has called the wisdom of God “manifold,” and it has manifested its power “in many and various ways”—by art, by knowledge, by faith, by prophecy—for our benefit. “All wisdom is from the Lord and is with him for ever, as says the Wisdom of Jesus (*Stromateis* 1.4).<sup>11</sup>

The notice in Heb 1:4 that the son has inherited a name better (κρείττων) than the angels is developed in the first main section of the homily,

9. E.g., 1 Cor 1:22-24; 8:6; Col 1:15; Luke 7:35; Matt 11:2, 5, 19, 25-27, 28-30; 23:37-39. See Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1996).

10. BDAG 905.

11. Unless otherwise indicated, translations of ancient commentaries on Hebrews are from Erik M. Heen and Philip D. W. Krey, eds., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament X* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005), here at 6.

*Katherine Bushnell on Heb 1:3*

The American Katherine M. Bushnell was a medical doctor, activist, missionary, and self-taught scholar of Hebrew and Greek. One of her many accomplishments was the writing of *God's Word to Women: One Hundred Bible Studies on Woman's Place in the Divine Economy*, published in the early 1920s. Although it reflects some of the biases and prejudices of her time, this book is a precursor of the feminist biblical scholarship that emerged later in the twentieth century. In her commentary on 1 Tim 1:15 she uses Heb 1:3 to develop her argument for women's full participation in ministry: "Poor, fallen sinful man does not bear God's image and likeness simply because he is *male!* God is not male or female, so that one *sex* bears His image more than the other. It is the glorified Jesus Christ who bears that image and manifests his glory (Heb. 1:3)." (Source: Katherine M. Bushnell, *God's Word to Women: One Hundred Bible Studies on Woman's Place in the Divine Economy* [Mossville, IL: God's Word to Women Publishers, n.d.], 114).

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*A Jewish Perspective (Heb 1:1-2)*

Hebrews 1:1-3 praises Jesus as the revelation of God and the one through whom all has been created. In later Jewish tradition, these roles are fulfilled by the Torah. The rabbis understand the divine Wisdom (Sophia) who speaks of her role in creation (e.g., Prov 8:22-36) as the Torah, often personified in powerful female terms. "God consulted with the Torah and created the world, as it is written, 'I have good advice and sound wisdom; I have insight, I have strength'" (*Midrash Tanḥuma, Bereshith 1*, citing Prov 8:14).

Actively engaging with the Torah—that is, studying and interpreting the Pentateuch, the rest of Scripture, and the developing oral and written traditions of the rabbis—thus becomes a Jewish way of experiencing divine revelation. Reading holy texts with close attention and discovering new insights in them, individuals and communities come "to know the One who spoke the world into being" (*Sifre Deuteronomy, Ekev 49*).

The homilist of Hebrews engages in this kind of study constantly, quoting and

1:5–2:18. The notion that Sophia and her ways are "better than" or "superior to" foolishness, lack of understanding (Sir 41:8), human strength (Wis 6:1; Eccl 9:16), precious objects (Prov 8:11; 16:16), weapons of war (Eccl 9:18), etc., is a rhetorical topic ubiquitous in the Wisdom literature. This feature of Wisdom discourse informs the many uses of "better" in Hebrews, the first of which is the assertion of the son's superiority to the angels in 1:4; see also Wis 7:29: "She is more beautiful than

*A Jewish Perspective—cont'd*

creatively interpreting verse after verse of Scripture. Paradoxically, however, this is done with the purpose of arguing for Jesus, not Torah, as the way to know God. But how does one actively engage with Jesus? I see no answer to this question in Hebrews, only an exhortation to faith. As a Jewish reader I am more seduced by the energy and playfulness of the Torah study in Hebrews than by the passive allegiance to Jesus that the homilist apparently wants it to lead to.

*Justin Jaron Lewis*

*Our Stories Are Our Scripture  
For Hebrews 1*

**Wabang**<sup>16</sup>

Jaguar purry growl jungle sun  
spears foliage spots fur  
Sister mother auntie jaguar  
waits in shade liminal souls  
Father and son hunt in parallel  
alignments it is safe to say  
Unison presents possibilities no  
differences same as exist  
Stars on rosette back night  
traveller shimmers in  
darkness  
Next day Indigenous  
Shamanism emerges now  
prophetic

*Annharte*

the sun, and excels every constellation of the stars. Compared with the light she is superior."<sup>12</sup>

The mention of "purification for sins" (v. 3) draws attention to how liturgy is "interpreter of the texts."<sup>13</sup> Cleansing from sins is one of the most powerful meanings of baptism. Cleansing in the baptismal sense involves both outward washing and inward cleansing (10:22). Along with the practice of anointing with oil (1:9), the act of washing in baptism is closely related to forgiveness of sins. The inward cleansing signified in this rite addresses consciousness of injustice resulting from conversion and leading to sanctification. Feminist liturgical scholar Heather Elkins writes, "Purification in this sense means getting our hands dirty as we assist in God's act."<sup>14</sup> Such a blurring of the line of cleanness and uncleanness is a helpful

12. See also Heb 6:9; 7:7, 19, 22; 8:6; 9:23; 10:34; 11:16, 35, 40; 12:24.

13. Marjorie Procter-Smith, "Feminist Interpretation and Liturgical Proclamation," in *Searching the Scriptures*, vol. 1: *A Feminist Introduction*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 313–25, at 319.

14. Heather Murray Elkins, *Worshipping Women: Re-Forming God's People for Praise* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1994), 44.

16. "Tomorrow" (Ojibwe).

feminist approach when women's bodies and experiences are associated with uncleanness while purity becomes a domain of male hierarchy that seeks to justify the oppression of women and devalue women's ordinary work.

### **Exposition: The Mediation of Christ Is Better Than the Mediation of Angels (Heb 1:5–2:18)**

The argument of Hebrews is based on a series of comparisons of the son (identified for the first time as Jesus in Heb 2:9) and his significance in salvation history, based on scriptural exposition and intercalated with relatively brief, but significant, subsections of related paraenesis (ethical exhortation and encouragement). The first main section of the homily begins with a series of seven scriptural quotations demonstrating the son's superiority to angels (1:5-14), followed by ethical implications for the addressees (2:1-4), after which the exposition of the topic resumes (2:5-18). Hebrews' insistence that the son is better than angels seems odd to contemporary readers; why would such a comparison be so important to the homilist? In the Second Temple Judaism of the time, speculation about angels played a significant role, especially in apocalyptic prophecy.<sup>16</sup> The law of Moses (in the terminology of Hebrews, the "old covenant"; see also Heb 8:8-13) contains legislation stipulating that the sacrificial worship of Israel is to be carried out by the Levitical priesthood, which, for Hebrews, is less effectual than the perfected heavenly high priesthood of Christ (7:15–9:14). Thus the homilist lays the foundation for the argument that Jesus the son is superior to Moses the servant, that the high priesthood of Christ is superior to the Levitical priesthood, and that the new covenant is better than the old. The homilist argues that the Israelite institutions are grounded in a law mediated by angels through a servant of God, whereas the new revelation is mediated by the son and heir of God.

The catena ("chain") of seven scriptural quotations in Heb 1:5-14 begins and ends with rhetorical questions premised on the conclusion that the son is superior to the angels: "For to which of the angels did God ever say . . . ? Are not all angels spirits in the divine service, sent to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?" (1:5a, 14). The choice of seven proof texts (inserted between vv. 5a and 14) reflects the Jewish

17. James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 2:925–27.

## Heb 1:5–2:18

- <sup>5</sup>For to which of the angels did  
 God ever say,  
 “You are my Son;  
 today I have begotten you”?  
 Or again,  
 “I will be his Father,  
 and he will be my Son”?
- <sup>6</sup>And again, when he brings the  
 firstborn into the world, he  
 says,  
 “Let all God’s angels worship  
 him.”
- <sup>7</sup>Of the angels he says,  
 “He makes his angels winds,  
 and his servants flames  
 of fire.”
- <sup>8</sup>But of the Son he says,  
 “Your throne, O God, is forever  
 and ever,  
 and the righteous scepter is  
 the scepter of your  
 kingdom.
- <sup>9</sup>You have loved righteousness  
 and hated wickedness;  
 therefore God, your God,  
 has anointed you  
 with the oil of gladness  
 beyond your  
 companions.”
- <sup>10</sup>And,  
 “In the beginning, Lord, you  
 founded the earth,

notion of seven as the number of perfection or completion.<sup>17</sup> Apart from 2 Sam 7:14, a messianic oracle, all the proofs in the catena are from the Psalms, associated with the ancestor of the messiah, David, interpreted to support the exalted status of the messiah, Jesus. Brief quotations from scriptural sources are marshaled to make the author’s case.

In Heb 1:5a, to establish the sonship of the messiah Jesus, the homilist uses Ps 2:7, “You are my son, today I have begotten/given birth to you,” an Israelite enthronement hymn portraying the Davidic king of Israel as the adopted son of ΥΗΩΗ. The verb usually translated “begotten” (γενένηκά) can mean either to beget when used of men or to give birth to when used of women (see also Heb 11:23). In one Korean translation of the word “begotten,” God is clearly a mother who is “giving birth to” her son (Korean Revised Version, 1961). But God is paradoxically presented as a father in the next part of the verse: “I will be his Father, and he will be my Son” (v. 5b). We could argue that God is mother and father at the same time; thus God is the parent of all people in the world. We can even go on to claim that God is beyond humanly constructed binary gender. Clement of Alexandria acknowledges the gender ambiguity of this language of “begetting” when he observes: “God himself is love.

17. E.g., Gen 1:1–2:4; 29:15–30; Lev 25:2–7; Ps 12:6; Matt 18:21–22; Acts 6:1–6; Rev 2–3.

*Heb 1:5–2:18 (cont.)*

<p>and the heavens are the work of your hands; <sup>11</sup>they will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like clothing; <sup>12</sup>like a cloak you will roll them up, and like clothing they will be changed. But you are the same, and your years will never end.” <sup>13</sup>But to which of the angels has he ever said,</p>	<p>“Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet”? <sup>14</sup>Are not all angels spirits in the divine service, sent to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation? <sup>2:1</sup>Therefore we must pay greater attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it. <sup>2</sup>For if the message declared through angels was valid, and every transgression or disobedience received a just penalty, <sup>3</sup>how can we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? It was declared at first through the Lord, and it was at-</p>
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And out of love for us became feminine. In his ineffable essence he is Father. In his compassion to us he became Mother. The father by loving became feminine, and the great proof of this is whom he begot of himself. And the fruit brought forth by love is love.”<sup>18</sup>

The homilist turns to the dominant metaphor of God as father and the anointed king/messiah as son in this second quotation: “I will be his Father, and he will be my Son” (Heb 1:5b//2 Sam 7:14), from an oracle in which God promises an eternal covenant with David and his descendants (2 Sam 7:4-17), a promise that Jesus, as Davidic messiah (Heb 7:14), fulfills. The gender blurring returns in Heb 1:6a, however, when the homilist introduces the quotation of Ps 96:7 (LXX; 97:7 MT; see also Deut 32:43 LXX)—“and let all God’s angels worship him”—with the gloss: “And again, when he brings his firstborn into the world,” imaging God in the role of mother or midwife in the context of the royal adoption. The Scriptures often invoke the image of God as midwife who assists in the birth of people<sup>19</sup> and at the birth of the cosmos.<sup>20</sup> In particular, Heb 1:6a

18. *Who Is the Rich Man That Shall Be Saved*, 37. Quoted in April De Conick, *Holy Misogyny: Why the Sex and Gender Conflicts in the Early Church Still Matter* (New York: Continuum, 2001), 32.

19. E.g., Pss 22:9-10a; 71:6; Isa 66:9; Job 10:18; Gal 1:15.

20. E.g., Job 38:7-9. See Don C. Benjamin, “Israel’s God: Mother and Midwife,” *BTB* 19 (1989): 115–20; Juliana M. Claassens, “Rupturing God-Language: The Metaphor

tested to us by those who heard him,  
<sup>4</sup>while God added his testimony by  
 signs and wonders and various mira-  
 cles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit, dis-  
 tributed according to his will.

<sup>5</sup>Now God did not subject the com-  
 ing world, about which we are speak-  
 ing, to angels. <sup>6</sup>But someone has  
 testified somewhere,

“What are human beings that you  
 are mindful of them,  
 or mortals, that you care for  
 them?”

<sup>7</sup>You have made them for a little  
 while lower than the angels;

you have crowned them with  
 glory and honor,  
<sup>8</sup>subjecting all things under  
 their feet.”

Now in subjecting all things to them,  
 God left nothing outside their control. As  
 it is, we do not yet see everything in  
 subjection to them, <sup>9</sup>but we do see  
 Jesus, who for a little while was made  
 lower than the angels, now crowned  
 with glory and honor because of the suf-  
 fering of death, so that by the grace of  
 God he might taste death for everyone.

<sup>10</sup>It was fitting that God, for whom  
 and through whom all things exist, in

and Job 10:18 use similar language (εισαγάγη; ἐξήγαγε) to refer to God’s  
 “bringing forth” the newborn from the womb. The homilist continues  
 with a quotation from Ps 97:7 LXX (Heb 1:6b), which alters the Hebrew  
 wording “all the gods bow down before him” to “let all God’s angels  
 worship him,” imaging the homage due to the newly born/adopted  
 royal child. Next, Ps 104:4 (Heb 1:7) is marshaled to demonstrate that  
 the angels—demoted from deities (אלוהים) to messengers (ἄγγελοι) by the  
 LXX—are simply “winds” (πνεύματα; usually translated, as in the NRSV,  
 as “spirits”) and “servants flames of fire,” like the created elements, as  
 opposed to the divinely begotten/born son.

The first part of this catena in Heb 1:5-7 evokes the baptism of Jesus.  
 The scene of “Let all God’s angels worship him” (1:6) can resonate with  
 or can easily be seen as a dramatic stage for the story in the Gospel of  
 Mark of “the heaven torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on  
 him” (Mark 1:10). The reference to angels as spirits, messengers, or  
 winds, and flames of fire in Hebrews is further illuminated in the de-  
 scriptions of the baptizing Spirit as water and a dove in all four gospels.

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of God as Midwife in Psalm 22,” <http://home.nwciowa.edu/wacome/ClaassensBakhtin2005.pdf>, accessed July 15, 2015; Juliana M. Claassens, “Praying from the Depths of the Deep: Remembering the Image of God as Midwife in Psalm 71,” *RevExp* 104 (2007): 761–75.

*Heb 1:5–2:18 (cont.)*

bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings. <sup>11</sup>For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters, <sup>12</sup>saying,

“I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters,  
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you.”

<sup>13</sup>And again,

“I will put my trust in him.”

And again,

“Here am I and the children whom God has given me.”

<sup>14</sup>Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, <sup>15</sup>and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. <sup>16</sup>For it is clear that he did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham. <sup>17</sup>Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. <sup>18</sup>Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.

Though the “likening of the spirit to a dove is notoriously obscure,” the linkage between this particular text in Mark and the text of Ps 2:7, cited in Heb 1:5, is well supported by the Ancient Near Eastern legend that features the descent of a dove on an elect person.<sup>21</sup> Such biblical cross-references strengthen the liturgical theology of baptism. This includes five meanings rooted in the NT: union with Jesus Christ, incorporation into the church, new birth, forgiveness of sin, and reception of the Holy Spirit.<sup>22</sup> At least two themes resonate with the hymnic catena here: purification from sin (1:3) and the reception of the Spirit (1:7).

We could even suggest that the most obvious intertextual reading lies in the trinitarian baptismal formula—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—in Heb 1:5-7, though some argue that this passage does not contain any trinitarian formulas.<sup>23</sup> The gender exclusivity of the baptismal formula is challenged not only in biblical scholarship but also in pastoral and liturgical studies. If one of the central meanings of baptism is the conversion to new life, a masculine formula of baptism contradicts itself

21. Mary Ann Beavis, *Mark* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 37.

22. James F. White, *Introduction to Christian Worship*, 3rd ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2000), 218.

23. Fred B. Craddock, “The Letter to the Hebrews,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1998), 12:1–173, at 12.

and is inadequate because it reflects and reinforces “old ways of patriarchy.”<sup>24</sup> A suggested solution to the problem of the androcentric liturgical language of baptism includes creating a nonsexist, inclusive, and emancipatory language so that the vision of baptism as the *birthright* of radical social equality can be lived out. Aidan Kavanagh well sums up the blurring of gender and social boundaries that is deeply rooted and embedded in the theology of baptism:

Baptism in its fullness is the primary liminal experience during which the Church is shaped each paschal season into a *communitas* of equals in one Body of neither Jew nor Greek, master nor slave, male nor female, and is prepared to receive fresh and new God’s grace in Jesus the Anointed One now become life-giving Spirit.<sup>25</sup>

More recently, other feminists and queer theologians have explored baptism as a gender-blurring act in light of Gal 3:27-28. Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood invite us to the following thought:

Galatians 3:27-28, a text which suggested to [such women as Thecla, Prisca, and Maximilla] that once the distinctions and divisions of class, race and gender were overcome they were free to embrace their divine natures. . . . In taking seriously the message of equality of the Christian gospel, they queered gender-performance in order to find a way of living the radical equality they professed to believe. . . . Women who break out from the norm in any age face the threat of physical violence. . . . and their way of remaining safe was to keep transgressing the norm. . . . These women were not all transsexual but they did push the gender boundaries very hard in order to create space in which to flourish.<sup>26</sup>

In Heb 1:8-13 the homilist turns from proof texts demonstrating the inferiority of the angels to the son and quotes psalms interpreted as addressed directly to the son. Hebrews 1:8-9 quotes Ps 45:6-7 (LXX), in its original context a hymn praising the enthronement of the Davidic king who will rule righteously and in accordance with Torah. The king is addressed in highly exalted terms as “god” (ὁ θεός) in his role as adopted

24. Ruth Duck, *Gender and the Name of God: The Trinitarian Baptismal Formula* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1991), 4.

25. Marjorie Procter-Smith, *In Her Own Rite: Constructing Feminist Liturgical Tradition* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1990), 146, quoting Aidan Kavanagh, *The Shape of Baptism: The Rite of Christian Initiation* (New York: Pueblo, 1978), 200. Emphasis in original.

26. Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood, *Controversies in Feminist Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2007), 21.

son of the deity, and as God's anointed (ἐχρίσεν) "with the oil of gladness beyond your companions." For Hebrews, God's son the messiah ("anointed"), as heir of the eternal covenant with David (2 Sam 7:4-17; see also Heb 1:5b), inherits the divine title from his royal ancestors.<sup>27</sup> Again, these verses demonstrate Hebrews' Jewishness, as well as tensions with modern Jewish practices. On the one hand, Jesus as the anointed one is in line with the anointing of David; on the other hand, he inaugurates the new covenant that supersedes the faulty old one (Heb 8:7). This tension between continuity and discontinuity is kept alive throughout Hebrews. The tension is critical insofar as Christian tradition has either demonized Judaism as bad or patronized it as a wounded religion. In modern terms, it is important to recognize Christianity as in solidarity with Judaism and yet to acknowledge that the two religions are different and distinctive.

The next three verses (Heb 1:10-12) quote Ps 102:25-27, which contrasts the eternity of God with the transitoriness of God's creation, the earth and its inhabitants ("they will perish, but you remain"). Unlike Ps 45:6-7, which uses a divine title to address the human king/messiah, the quotation from Ps 102 is directly addressed to God (κύριε or "lord"), in the Bible a title that can be applied to a high-status human being or to God. But again the homilist applies the language of divinity to the son ("In the beginning, Lord, you founded the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands"), whose sovereignty extends from the creation to its dissolution ("like a cloak you will roll them up, and like clothing they will be changed"). Again the powers of divine Sophia, "the fashioner of all things" (Wis 7:22; 8:6), created at the beginning (Prov 8:22), renewing all things (Wis 7:27), and ultimately prevailing (Wis 7:29-30), are attributed to the messianic son, addressed as Lord. As the patron of Israelite kingship and the source of messianic rule, Sophia is the source of upright and lawful governance: "By me kings reign, and rulers decree what is just" (Prov 8:15).

In the final two verses of the catena (Heb 1:13-14) the homilist returns to the theme of the superiority of the son to the angels with a rhetorical question that parallels the one that introduces it: "To which of the angels has he [God] ever said . . . ?" (1:13; see also 1:5). Here, the proof text is from Ps 110:1, a coronation psalm alluded to elsewhere in the NT (Matt

27. For other biblical examples of human beings designated "god," see Exod 7:1; Ps 82:6; John 10:34-35; see also Mary Rose D'Angelo, *Moses in the Letter to the Hebrews*, SBLDS 42 (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1979), 10.

22:43-44; Mark 12:36; Luke 20:42-43; Acts 2:34-35)<sup>28</sup> and in Hebrews (5:6; 7:17; 10:13). Here the sonship of the messiah is portrayed in terms of his divine co-regency (“sit at my right hand”) and eschatological victory (“until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet”), a warlike sentiment that can be translated into more peaceable sophiological terms, “against wisdom evil does not prevail” (Wis 7:30b). The author concludes Heb 1 with a reminder of the lesser status of the angels (“ministering πνεύματα”) relative not to the son but to humanity, “for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation” (Heb 1:14). Throughout Hebrews the solidarity of the son with other human beings is emphasized; like the son, all believers are “heirs to the promise” (6:17; 11:9) of the God who brings “many children” to glory (2:10; 12:5, 7).

### *A Jewish Perspective* (Heb 1:5-14)

Hebrews 1:5-14 is the first of many passages in this book that are in the vein of Jewish midrash, a genre in which verses of Scripture are quoted, interwoven, and interpreted with imaginative freedom. While midrash often cites scriptural verses as “proof texts,” the proofs have a tendency to be unconvincing to anyone who does not already accept the desired conclusion.<sup>30</sup> This is my issue as a Jewish reader of this midrashic passage: why would I understand these verses as referring to Jesus?

The explanation in this commentary is helpful: verses about David or David’s descendants are understood as applying to the Messiah, “son of David.” Therefore, if the reader has already accepted Jesus as the Messiah, many of these citations become convincing.

Even so, the verses from Ps 97 about angels worshiping God and from Ps 102 about God creating the world seem out of place. They are not about David or his descendants but unambiguously about the Creator. This would be no objection for a reader who already accepts Jesus as God; but why would a reader holding

28. See Herbert W. Bateman IV, “Psalm 110:1 and the New Testament,” *BSac* 149, no. 596 (1992): 438–53.

30. See Tirzah Meacham’s critique of rabbinic legal midrash in “Legal-Religious Status of the Jewish Female,” *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*, ed. Paula Hyman and Dalia Ofer (March 1, 2009), Jewish Women’s Archive, <http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/legal-religious-status-of-jewish-female>, accessed July 15, 2015.

that belief need to be convinced that Jesus is greater than the angels? I am left puzzled.

If the text is identifying Jesus, a male human being, with the Creator, this is of course problematic from Jewish and feminist perspectives. While the preponderance of biblical and Jewish imagery for God is male, there are exceptions, including some of the “Sophia” passages mentioned in this commentary. The exceptions gave medieval Jewish theologians resources

with which to imagine God as abstract and ungendered, as did Maimonides, or as manifested in vividly masculine, feminine, and genderqueer ways, as did the Kabbalists. Today, Jews of all genders and sexualities are drawing on, and expanding, these insights. This would be more difficult if Jewish tradition had accepted the man Jesus as a uniquely true embodiment of the divine.

*Justin Jaron Lewis*

### **Paraenesis: Ethical Implications (Heb 2:1-4)**

As a skilled preacher, the homilist shifts from exposition to exhortation, drawing out the implications of scriptural interpretation in the previous verses for the lives of the audience, who, as argued in our introduction, the author sees as in danger of losing their faith in the face of hardship, persecution, and the delay of the parousia.<sup>30</sup> This crisis of loss of faith is coming not only from an external force but also from internal factors. The delay of the second coming of Christ exposed people to demoralizing chaos (10:25, 35-39). The author’s attention to liturgical life should be viewed from the perspective of this internal crisis. An urge to repent through confession (3:1; 4:14; 10:23) is well grounded in this sense. The external force of the crisis in this community may include Jewish Christians returning to Judaism.<sup>31</sup> The argument of the superiority of the son over the law (Torah) indirectly alluded to in Heb 2:2, discussed below, would be persuasive for those who are tempted to go back to their previous religion. It should be noted, however, that the perceived connection between the son and the law lends weight to the exhortation not to neglect the Jewish heritage (2:3).

The thin line between maintaining and denouncing Jewish tradition is crossed and recrossed many times in this letter and is a theme woven

30. E.g., Heb 6:4-6; 10:19-39; 12:3-12.

31. Craddock, “Letter to the Hebrews,” 9.

through the text. Throughout the exhortation the homilist uses the inclusive first-person plural rather than accusing the audience (“you,” plural) of straying: “therefore we must pay greater attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it . . . how can we escape if we neglect . . . it was attested to us . . .” (Heb 2:1-4). The term “drift away” (παραρῶμεν) suggests the sea voyage metaphor often used in early christian literature to describe the life of faith (see also Heb 6:19), e.g., in Origen’s writing:

For as many as are in the little ship of faith are sailing with the Lord; as many as are in the bark of the holy church will voyage with the Lord across this wavetossed life; though the Lord himself may sleep in holy quiet, he is but watching your patience and endurance: looking forward to the repentance, and to the conversion of those who have sinned.<sup>32</sup>

Such multisensory metaphors can be further explored as “feminist amplification of liturgical proclamation,”<sup>33</sup> in which the text does not simply and solely function as the word of God but fully embodies human experience and agency of repentance, renewal, and transformation.

Hebrews 2:2 alludes to a tradition according to which Torah (“the word declared through angels”) was not revealed directly to Moses but was mediated to him by angels, a belief taken for granted by other NT authors (see also Gal 3:19; Acts 7:53).<sup>34</sup> In Jewish literature the angels’ role at Sinai does not vitiate the status of Torah; in Acts the delivery of the law by angels marks its exalted status. In contrast, here the homilist uses a typical Jewish argument from lesser to greater to establish the superiority of the salvation mediated by the son to the law mediated by angels: the involvement of the angels points to the law’s lesser status relative to the new revelation mediated by the son, who has entered the heavenly sanctuary to appear before God (Heb 9:15, 24). Although the “salvation” (σωτηρία) offered through the son is greater than that of the law, the former was legally “valid” (βέβαιος) in that it stipulated just penalties for “every transgression or disobedience” (2:2). Although the homilist implies that even greater punishment will ensue if believers are neglectful of their heritage, the emphasis is on the promise of salvation (2:3a), defined by

32. Origen, *Fr. Matt.* 3.3; see also Hippolytus, *Antichr.* 59. Quoted in Thomas C. Oden and Christopher A. Hall, eds., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, Mark II* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998), 60.

33. Procter-Smith, “Feminist Interpretation,” 323.

34. For Jewish examples, see Harold Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), 65 n. 28.

Gail Paterson Corrington as “safety, security, and well-being, procured by the agency of a deity who can overcome the hostile cosmic forces that produce in individuals feelings of helplessness and powerlessness.”<sup>35</sup> This salvation (similar to the biblical concept of *shalōm*) is established and confirmed not by events in the sacred past of Israel but by recent events: “It was declared at first by the Lord [Jesus], . . . while God added his testimony by signs and wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit, distributed according to his will” (2:3b-4). Despite the high status attributed to the son by the homilist, the origin in God of the signs, wonders, and miracles, here probably referring to the wondrous deeds done by Jesus and his disciples,<sup>36</sup> points to the theocentric (God-centered) focus of Hebrews; the source of the son’s power, as also that of all the faithful, is “the gifts of the Holy Spirit” (Heb 2:4).<sup>37</sup>

### **Exposition: The Mediation of Christ Is Better Than the Mediation of Angels (Heb 2:5-18)**

In the remainder of this section of the homily the author works out the implications of the scriptural proofs presented in Heb 1:5-14 and prepares the ground for the subsequent arguments that the son is superior to Moses (3:1-4:13), that the high priesthood of the messiah (“Christ”) is better than the Levitical priesthood (5:1-7:28), and that the new covenant surpasses the old (8:1-10:18). Throughout, the pattern of good (law delivered through angels) to better (salvation wrought by the son) holds; as James W. Thompson notes: “Comparison (Greek *synkresis*) was . . . a common rhetorical device designed, not for polemical purposes, but to demonstrate the greatness of the speaker’s subject (Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1.9.39). Exercises in *synkresis* were a common feature in rhetorical education. Thus the author’s comparisons reflect not a polemic against Judaism but his desire to demonstrate the greatness of the Christian revelation.”<sup>38</sup>

The author’s intent was not to demonstrate the superiority of Christianity to Judaism but to interpret the ongoing process of revelation grounded in the Jewish Scriptures, in the events of Jesus’ life, and in the

35. Gail Patterson Corrington, “The Milk of Salvation: Redemption by the Mother in Late Antiquity and Early Christianity,” *HTR* 4 (1989): 393-420, at 397.

36. E.g., Mark 6:2; Matt 11:20-23; 13:54, 58; Luke 10:13; Acts 4:30; 5:12; 14:3; 15:12.

37. See also Heb 6:4; 1 Cor 12:28-29; Gal 3:5.

38. James W. Thompson, *Hebrews*, Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 36.

experience of the community. This does not obviate Christian responsibility for the anti-Judaism that Hebrews may subsequently have been used to foster. Insofar as the homilist portrays the old covenant (the law of Moses) as obsolete and the new covenant (salvation through Christ) as replacing it, Hebrews is supersessionist, i.e., it maintains that the church has superseded Israel. As Terence Donaldson notes, “To the extent that the intended readership of the epistle included or consisted of Gentiles, its supersessionism could easily slide over into anti-Judaism.”<sup>39</sup> Similarly, the christian community represented in the letter might have struggled with establishing their identity as Gentile christian, both seeking to preserve their Jewish inheritance and, on the other hand, relegating parts of this tradition to the past (Heb 8:8-13). One can understand that in this precarious context such an authoritative Christ-centered vision might be necessary for such minority groups as a survival strategy. This view has been used, however, to justify anti-Semitism in that Christ replaces a Judaism that is consumed in the fire of God (12:29).<sup>40</sup> This becomes clear when the homily speaks of “the imperfect copies of the instruments and procedures for approaching God and gaining right relationship with him in historical Israel.”<sup>41</sup> Such anti-Jewish attitudes as a springboard for the formation of Christianity might be unavoidably inherent in Hebrews. What is argued here is not that the text of Hebrews itself is false or written to attack Judaism but that its use by subsequent generations of readers and interpreters inevitably contributed to solidifying and sustaining Western Christian imperialism against Jewish and non-Western Christian people.

In Heb 2:5-9 the author picks up the thread of the exposition by answering the rhetorical questions of 1:13-14: God did not subordinate the age to come—a commonplace Jewish expression for the messianic era<sup>42</sup>—to angels but, as attested by Scripture, to humanity. The passage from Ps 8:4-6 quoted in Heb 2:6-8 uses the terms “human being” (ἄνθρωπος)

39. Terence L. Donaldson, *Jews and Anti-Judaism in the New Testament* (London: SPCK, 2010), 143.

40. Mary Rose D’Angelo, “Hebrews,” in *The Women’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 364–67, at 366.

41. Howard Clark Kee, “The Formation of Christian Communities,” *The Cambridge Companion to the Bible*, ed. Bruce Chilton, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 481–682, at 596–98.

42. E.g., Dan 7:18, 27; 1 En. 71:15; 2 Esd 7:50; 8:1; Sib. Or. 3:608-23; As. Mos. 7–9.

and “son of man” (υἱὸς ἀνθρώπου<sup>43</sup>) as synonymous, a nuance captured by the NRSV: “What are human beings that you are mindful of them, or mortals, that you care for them?” The son, a human being, is portrayed in solidarity with humanity, who have been made “a little” or “for a little while” (βραχύ) lower than the angels, although humanity is destined, collectively with the son, to be “crowned . . . with glory and honor, subjecting all things under their feet” (2:7-8a; see also 1:13). The homilist admits that “we” (inclusive of both author and addressees) do not yet see the fulfillment of this promise of human exaltation over creation (v. 8b) But Jesus, mentioned by name for the first time in v. 9, was briefly made lower than the angels in fulfillment of the Scripture but now is exalted, paradoxically through his undergoing death, the common lot of humanity. Commentators differ as to whether the wording of v. 9b should be rendered “so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone” (NRSV) or “apart from God he might taste death for everyone,” due to a minority textual variant that substitutes χωρίς (“apart from”) for χάριτι (“by the grace of”). Most translations follow the majority reading χάριτι, perhaps best rendered by the biblical term “lovingkindness” (Hebrew, רַחֲמִים). Jesus, the human son, in solidarity with other human beings, partook in death, an act the author presents as in accordance with God’s care for humanity. This part of Hebrews reveals its beauty and complexity in the way it maintains a tension between an angelic otherworldly eschatological Christology and a human down-to-earth incarnational Christology, speaking of the one who was “made lower than angels” and “became as we are.”

*Our Stories Are Our Scripture  
For Hebrews 2*

***Original Bear Upon***

Bears counsel with Earthmaker  
as eldest admits not being  
Worthy of first choice so it is  
told each decline to youngest  
Brother who will bear out or  
bear witness very bearable

He would bear out or bear  
witness to bear tough challenge  
Clan destiny is to soldier protect  
then gather healing roots  
Upon walk through village  
during optimum hibernation  
stage

*Annharte*

43. See, e.g., NIV, ASV, AV, NLT, NASB.

### TRANSLATION MATTERS

Hebrews 2:6-7 quotes Ps 8:4-8, a hymn extolling God's creation and the human role as caretakers of the earth (see also Gen 1:28). The Authorized (King James) Version famously translates Heb 2:6 as "What is man that thou art mindful of him, or the son of man, that thou visitest him?" In the NRSV the verse reads: "What are human beings, that you are mindful of them, or mortals, that you care for them?" In Greek the words rendered "man" (AV)/"human beings" (NRSV) and "son of man" (AV)/"mortals" (NRSV) are *ἄνθρωπος* and *υἱὸς ἀνθρώπου*. While the Greek terms are both singular, their meanings are collective in both Greek and Hebrew, referring to all humankind.<sup>44</sup> The traditional (AV) translation interprets *ἄνθρωπος* and *υἱὸς ἀνθρώπου* christologically, as referring to Jesus the human son of man ("child of humanity" or "human one"), a meaning no doubt given to the terms by the homilist because of their frequent use in the gospels to refer to Jesus. The collective interpretation of the terms in the NRSV highlights the solidarity between Jesus the "human one" and all of humankind.

*Mary Ann Beavis*

### TRANSLATION MATTERS: ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE

Hebrews 2:6-9 quotes Scripture with a strikingly cheeky introductory phrase, "someone has testified somewhere." Since the verses quoted are from a well-known psalm ascribed to David, it is not as if there would be any doubt as to whom or where they are from. I do not recall encountering such a phrase in Jewish texts, although the spirit of playful mystification is familiar.

The quotation from Ps 8 this leads into, and the midrashic interpretation that follows, is obscured by the NRSV translation (and here I disagree with the present commentary as well). Following a laudable agenda of removing masculine bias, the NRSV has "human beings" and "mortals" in the plural. But the KJV "man" and "son of man," in the singular, better reflect the Greek text and the original Hebrew language of the psalm, as well as what Hebrews does with it. A common technique of midrash is to ignore contextual meaning in favor of a hyperliteral reading, and this is what Hebrews is doing. In the psalm itself the singular words *אנוש* and *בן אדם* certainly refer to humanity as a whole, but Hebrews takes them "literally," in the singular, and reads them as pointing to Jesus, "the Son of Man." So every "them" in the NRSV translation of Heb 2:7-8 should actually be a "him." The psalmist exalted humanity as a whole; the homilist, only Jesus.

Continuing the midrashic approach, the homilist reimagines the psalmist's notion that human beings are, spatially or hierarchically, "a little lower than the angels," as a temporal claim that "Jesus . . . for a little while was made lower than the angels."

*Justin Jaron Lewis*

44. See also Pamela Eisenbaum, "Hebrews," in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 406–26, at 408.

The exaltation of humanity promised in the Scriptures is elaborated upon in Heb 2:10-18, bolstered by proof texts from Ps 22:22 and Isa 8:17-18. As a human being, Jesus, who as “pioneer [forerunner] of salvation” appointed by the God “for whom and through whom all things exist,” leads many children to glory (Heb 2:10), “for the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one source” (2:11a). The NRSV renders the term here translated “from one source” as “from one Father,” but the Greek term is simply ἐξ ἑνός, “from one,” most likely referring to the divine source of all creation but possibly to the common ancestor, Abraham (see also 2:16), or to the primal human, Adam.<sup>45</sup> Again, the Psalmist’s words are placed on the lips of Jesus: “I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you” (Heb 2:12; Ps 22:22), underscoring the kinship between Jesus and his human family, the ἐκκλησία, often translated as “church” (NRSV: “congregation”). The homilist marshals brief excerpts from Isaiah—“I will put my trust in him [God]” (Isa 8:17b) and “Here I am and the children

God has given me” (Isa 8:18a)—to broaden the familial language from brother-sister to parent-children (τὰ παιδιά; Heb 2:13).

As a human child of God, Jesus shared in the “blood and flesh” of the human family to overcome the “power” (κράτος) of death by sharing in death (Heb 2:14) to liberate humanity from the fear of death (2:15). The reference in v. 14 to “the devil” (τὸν διάβολον) as the one with the power of death is usually explained as a biblical convention,<sup>46</sup> but it is rather jarring in a document in which the devil (or Satan) is not referred to elsewhere. Perhaps in the context of this section, where the “testing” (πειρασθεῖς) of Jesus enables him to help those who are

***Katherine Bushnell on Heb 1:13***

In her christological reading of Gen 3:15, Katherine Bushnell describes the kinship of believers as “children of the kingdom”: “the children of God are, by faith in Jesus Christ, also called the *children* of Christ,—Heb. 2:13: and *the seed* of Christ in Isa. 53:10. But since Christ is the Seed of the woman . . . all believers are, through Christ, the seed of the woman also.” Here the evangelical Bushnell is not referring to Jesus as a child of Mary, but as the offspring of Eve who redeems humankind. (Source: Bushnell, *God’s Word to Women*, 353.)

*Mary Ann Beavis*

45. See Alan C. Mitchell, *Hebrews*, SP 13 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009), 74.

46. E.g., Attridge, *Hebrews*, 92; Thompson, *Hebrews*, 75; see also Wis 2:24a: “through the devil’s envy death entered the world.”

“tested” (πειραζόμενοις) (2:18), the synoptic “temptation narratives” are in view.<sup>47</sup> Jesus’ kinship is thus not with angels but with the offspring of Abraham (2:16). Here Abraham is probably conceived as the ancestor of Israel, but with his wives Sarah, Hagar, and Keturah he is ancestor of many nations (Gen 25:1-6, 12-18). The next verse (Heb 2:17) announces the unique christological theme highlighted in the central section of the homily (4:14–5:10; 6:20–7:28; 9:1–10:18), the high priesthood of the messiah, the one whose suffering enables him to identify with the sufferings of “those who are being tested” (2:18), the homilist and the addressees.

Although they are not directly cited, the argument of this section is grounded in the biblical creation accounts, especially as filtered through the Wisdom tradition. The homilist reassures the community that, like their brother Jesus, they reflect the image of God (Heb 1:3; see also Gen 1:27) and will share in Jesus’ destiny, which includes death (Heb 2:14-18; see also Gen 3:19), glorification (Heb 2:6-9), and even immortality (Heb 1:8-12; see also Wis 2:23: “for God created us for incorruption [‘immortality’], and made us in the image of his own eternity”). In the world to come (Heb 2:5) the primal relationship between humanity and the new creation will be restored.<sup>48</sup>

There is a parallel here between the community addressed by the homilist and the audience of the Priestly (P) creation account (Gen 1:1–2:4a) as reconstructed by Alice Laffey.<sup>49</sup> Laffey suggests that P was composed for the returning exiles of Judah, who felt out of control and abandoned by God due to the hardships they faced in their devastated homeland. In this situation, the Judean settlers needed to be reassured: “Those whose consciousness is pervaded by their powerlessness as a conquered people do have power, a God-given power to use what they need of creation, a power they have in common with, to the same extent as, their conquerors. They are okay—they share in relationship with creation, similar to their conquerors; they are okay—animals are not their superiors.”<sup>50</sup>

47. See also Mark 1:12-13; Matt 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13; see also Heb 5:7.

48. See also Gen 1:26, 28, where humanity is given “rule” (LXX: ἀρχέτωσαν, ἄρχετε) over creation, and the reference to the “subjection” of “all things” to humanity in Heb 2:8.

49. Alice Laffey, “The Priestly Creation Narrative: Goodness and Interdependence,” in *Earth, Wind, and Fire: Biblical and Theological Perspectives on Creation*, ed. Carol J. Dempsey and Mary Margaret Pazdan (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004), 24–34.

50. *Ibid.*, 29.

Laffey further proposes that “the dominion directed in Genesis 1:26, 28 of human beings over other elements of creation was not originally meant to be interpreted as humans over other living things, but rather as human beings on an equal footing with all of creation.”<sup>51</sup> Like the Priestly author, the homilist assures the wavering community that they, like Jesus, are made in the divine image, positively related to the whole of creation: “despite their recent history and current situation, *really* good.” In parallel with the language of the “subjection” of creation (Heb 2:8; see also Ps 8:6), the homilist, like P, “does not necessarily intend to imply that humankind, made in the image of God and possessing dominion over other living things, is consequently superior.”<sup>52</sup>

While Laffey makes a convincing argument for the author’s intention to empower the intended hearers, Christians in the West, shaped by European civilization, cannot afford to ignore the dangerous implications of the wording of this text, in particular the assertion that humans are given the authority to “rule” over creation. Among the figures who played a role in the beginnings of modern civilization, Francis Bacon clearly found the domination of nature and women by men a logical implication of scientific civilization and Enlightenment. For Bacon, reason, the noble and autonomous virtue humans seek to achieve, belongs only to men. Men, he said, must unlock the secrets of nature and gain control over “her” in order to attain the goal of becoming “Men of Reason.” The rationale behind such control is that the Man of Reason is strong, forceful, potent, and masculine as God intended him to be and therefore cannot be subordinated to nature, which is supposed to be weak, docile, impotent, and feminine. The exploitation of nature is endorsed by God, the omnipotent and omnipresent ruler of all. Bacon writes: “For you [European noblemen] have but to follow and as it were hound nature in her wanderings, and you will be able, when you like, to lead and drive her afterwards to the same place again. . . . Neither ought a man to make scruple of entering and penetrating into these holes and corners, when the inquisition of truth is his sole object.”<sup>53</sup>

Mary Grey makes the brilliant point that in the quotation above the language of discovering nature’s secrets is similar to the religious lan-

51. *Ibid.*, 29–30.

52. *Ibid.*, 31.

53. Francis Bacon, “De Dignitate et Augmentis Scientiarum,” in *The Philosophical Works of Francis Bacon*, ed. John M. Robertson (London: Routledge; New York: Dutton, 1905), 413–638, at 428.

guage used during the inquisition's witch hunts.<sup>54</sup> Not only were nature and women linked, but verbal and visual images of the inquisition were put into use for the exploitation of nature and oppression of women in Bacon's discourse. Violence (even torture) was encouraged in the name of discovering nature's secrets and saving people from the wicked witches. Subordination of anything weak and feminine was also justified for the sake of attaining to the status of Man of Reason.

By fully and faithfully exposing the Western colonial European and anthropocentric theology influenced by the biblical text and its patriarchal interpretation, one may begin to fully appreciate the insight from the Wisdom tradition in which domination is the least of Sophia's desires. The human mandate for creation, especially as presented in the image of divine Sophia (Prov 8:27-31; Wis 7:17-22), implies responsibility rather than domination. As Elizabeth A. Johnson puts it, the interest of Wisdom discourse

lies in the right order of creation and it focuses often and intensely on human life in the context of an interrelated natural world, both ideally forming a harmonious whole. . . . Interpreting the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus by means of the wisdom tradition orients Christology beyond the human world, to the ecology of the earth and, indeed, to the universe, a vital move in this era of planetary crisis.<sup>55</sup>

The implicit Wisdom Christology of Hebrews intensifies the identification of God, Jesus, humanity, and creation: "reaching out to the world, forming the beloved community, forever drawing near and passing by."<sup>56</sup>

### **Interpretive Essay: Jesus as High Priest and Sacrifice: A Jewish Perspective**

Hebrews 2:17 introduces the image of Jesus as both high priest and sacrifice. As noted in the introduction to this commentary, it is not clear whether Hebrews was written before or after the Roman destruction of the temple and occupation of Jerusalem in 70 CE, which brought the

54. Mary Grey, *Sacred Longings: The Ecological Spirit and Global Culture* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 14–15.

55. Elizabeth A. Johnson, "Wisdom Was Made Flesh and Pitched Her Tent Among Us," in *Reconstructing the Christ Symbol: Essays in Feminist Christology*, ed. Maryanne Stevens (New York: Paulist Press, 1993; repr. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2004), 95–117, at 113.

56. *Ibid.*, 102.

sacrificial service of the Jewish priests to an end. Hebrews itself seems to point in different directions—sometimes it refers to the high priests in the past tense, sometimes in the present; sometimes it refers to the tent-like sanctuary described in the book of Exodus, as if the Jerusalem temple of wood and stone were irrelevant, at other times to a changing succession of high priests, as in the actual temple.

It is easiest for me to imagine Hebrews as written post-destruction. If so, it can be seen as responding to a question that likely preoccupied the Jews of the time and certainly exercised the rabbis of the next several centuries: in the absence of the temple, the home of the Shekinah (Divine Presence), and the קורבנות (*qorbanot*, “sacrifices,” from a Hebrew root connoting “drawing near”): how can we draw near to the Divine?

In later Jewish tradition, quite a number of ritual and ethical actions are seen as acceptable equivalents of the *qorbanot*: study of the scriptural instructions for sacrifices; liturgical prayers conducted at the times of the temple service; eating accompanied by appropriate blessings (echoing the eating of sacrificed meat by priests and their families); fasting (which diminishes one’s own blood and fat as if it were being sacrificed); acts of love and kindness (praised by the prophets of Israel as superior to sacrifices). Poignantly, the liturgy for the circumcision of a baby boy equates that ancient blood ritual too with a sacrifice.

For Jewish women, there have traditionally been three commandments that were their particular responsibility. Each of these “women’s commandments” can be seen as linked to the temple and its sacrificial service. *Niddah* (נידה), the set of rules surrounding menstruation, is the only area of traditional Jewish life in which ritual purity remains a major concern: after her menstrual period and a count of several additional days, a married woman immerses in a מקוה, a ritual pool, and returns to a state of purity. When the temple was standing, however, ritual purity was required of anyone entering it, and a pilgrim would immerse in a מקוה before entering the temple precincts; many of these pools can be seen in the archaeological excavations around the Temple Mount. Women are also commanded to remove חלה, a portion of dough, when baking bread; this is “a donation to the LORD,” commanded in Num 15:18-21. In ancient times this portion of dough would be given to a כהן (priest) but since the destruction of the temple it is simply burned. A popular women’s prayer in the Yiddish vernacular of Eastern European Jewry, written by Sarah bas Tovim in the eighteenth century and often reprinted, asks God that

“my *hallah* be accepted like a sacrifice [קורבן *qorban*] on the altar.”<sup>57</sup> The third “women’s commandment” is to kindle lights at the beginning of the Sabbath and holy days. The same Yiddish prayer asks that the fulfillment of this commandment “be accepted like the commandment fulfilled by the High Priest when he kindled the lights in the dear Temple . . . and as the light of the olive oil which burned in the Temple and never went out”<sup>58</sup> (Exod 27:20-21; Lev 24:1-4). Thus Jewish tradition offers men and women many equivalents of the missing temple and *qorbanot*. Yet the fact that there are so many of these “equivalents” perhaps suggests an enduring anxiety that none of them quite satisfies.

On the other hand, in our own time few Jews are preoccupied by the absence of the temple with its sacrifices. The radical view of Maimonides (1135–1204) that God, who is properly approached through prayer or intellectual contemplation, only commanded sacrifices because that was the accepted mode of worship in ancient times has come to seem self-evident to many. While the Temple Mount in Jerusalem has been claimed by Israel since 1967, successive Israeli governments have left it in the hands of the Muslim custodians of the mosques located there. Only a fringe minority among Israeli Jews have advocated that steps be taken to rebuild the temple on its ancient site; most seek a sense of nearness to the Shekinah in other ways.

The bold argument of Hebrews, then, that Jesus takes the place of the entire sacrificial system is unlikely to have much purchase among Jews today, just as it probably has little resonance for today’s Christians. Yet, it points back to a time of unity between believers in the God of Israel, whether “Jews” or “Christians”: a time of shared desire for nearness to the Divine Presence, and shared anxiety over how this could be possible in the aftermath of destruction.

Justin Jaron Lewis

57. Tracy Guren Klirs et al., *The Merit of Our Mothers: A Bilingual Anthology of Jewish Women’s Prayers* (Cincinnati, OH: Hebrew Union College Press, 1992), 19. On Sarah bas Tovim and her prayers, see Chava Weissler, *Voices of the Matriarchs: Listening to the Prayers of Early Modern Jewish Women* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 126–46.

58. Klirs, *Merit of Our Mothers*, 21.