



Reviews

STRANGERS ON THE EARTH: PHILOSOPHY AND RHETORIC IN HEBREWS
by James W. Thompson, *Cascade Books*, Eugene, Oregon, 2020, pp. vii + 191,
\$25.00, pbk

Our knowledge of the rhetorical techniques of the ancient world has been applied to all of the epistles found in the New Testament, but none are more suited to such a study than the *Letter to the Hebrews*. It is impossible to read the Epistle even in translation, let alone in the original Greek – strikingly good literary Greek compared to much of the rest of the New Testament – without becoming aware that the author has consciously embraced rhetorical practices he must have been taught, and have honed, within the Hellenistic culture of the Eastern part of the Roman Empire. *Hebrews* is manifestly a text intended to move an audience: to convince them of certain religious truths and to exhort them on the basis of those truths to certain attitudes and forms of behaviour. It describes itself, indeed, as a ‘word of exhortation’ (*logou tes parakleseos*, 13.22).

In order to achieve its intended effect, the Epistle must not only move by rhetorical effect but also convince by reasoned argument. Indeed, the reader cannot fail to notice the way in which *Hebrews* moves back and forth between passages of paraenetic exhortation and sections of theological exposition. It is appropriate, therefore, that James W. Thomson has sought to bring together the study of the rhetorical techniques of the Epistle with a trenchant defence of his long-standing position that *Hebrews*’ argumentation depends upon a fundamentally Middle Platonic world-view. The philosophical presuppositions that the text seems to expect its audience to hold, and the presumed effectiveness upon that audience of certain rhetorical tropes, may be seen as the warp and weft of the Epistle.

The present volume is, it should be noted, a collection of essays most of which have appeared previously elsewhere, though as I have indicated their assembly into this book is both appropriate and helpful. Despite, or perhaps even because of, the inevitable moments of repetition that one would not expect to find in a monograph, *Strangers on the Earth* would serve extremely well as an introduction to the intellectual world within which *Hebrews* is moving. Thomson has a lively awareness, which he communicates with a beguiling mixture of clarity and enthusiasm, of the otherness of that world, one in which it may be taken for granted, for example, that the old is better than the new (whereas in our world we are

constantly being invited to see ‘new and improved’ as essentially tautologous), that unity is always superior to diversity, and of course that there exists a level of reality of which the stuff of this world is a mere shadow or reflection. Readers of this journal will no doubt recognise these concepts as a watered-down, perhaps slightly vague sort of Platonism, and Thomson, like many, is convinced that such ideas were so ubiquitous in the first century AD that they were, so to speak, in the air breathed by author and audience of *Hebrews* alike. He goes a good deal further than pre-suppose, however, tracing convincing trajectories of thought in regard to concepts of (among other things) necessity and possibility, the one and the many, the visible and the invisible, from Plato through Plotinus and Philo to Clement of Alexandria, passing through *Hebrews*, in such a way that one is not asked to accept direct dependence so much as to recognise that the Epistle is participating in a particular conversation based upon a number of shared understandings.

Historically, the assertion that *Hebrews* is indeed a participant in a Greek philosophical conversation has been controversial – and Thomson offers an essay exploring the history of this debate – largely because it appears to sever the Epistle from the Jewishness its name implies. More recently it has been recognised, however, that this is largely a false dichotomy: it is not just that Judaism even in Palestine itself was quite thoroughly Hellenised by the time of Christ, but that there are particular affinities between the modes of thought of Greek philosophy and those found in the Old Testament itself. For example, if one is asked to choose whether *Hebrews*’ portrayal of heaven as the realm of the invisible, intangible realities for which human beings thirst is the inheritance of Plato or that of Jewish apocalyptic one can quite reasonably respond that it is manifestly both.

Occasionally Thomson forgets the lesson that he himself is teaching. I write here as one with an axe to grind, since I have written on typological exegesis in *Hebrews*, and Thomson rejects the term ‘typology’ in favour of the more self-consciously rhetorical ‘*synkrisis*’, wherein a comparison is established between two things (persons, events, phenomena or whatever) in order to show the superiority of one by means of the similarity of both. I have suggested elsewhere that this is precisely what typological readings sometimes do, not just in the New Testament and later Christian literature but in the Old Testament itself. One may suppose that in pretty much any human culture, not just that of the Greek-speaking ancient world, people have been capable of noticing that two things are alike, but nevertheless one is better.

This is, however, a very small niggle. For readers looking for a way into *Hebrews*’ seemingly obscure argumentation, for those looking to deepen their understanding of particular philosophical themes, or indeed for those with an interest in *Hebrews*’ ecclesiology, its relationship to Paul, or its influence on the theology of the Greek fathers, this book offers myriad insights and an impressive taste of Thomson’s deep erudition, and it

deserves a place in the collection of every New Testament scholar and every preacher.

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THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF RUSSIAN RELIGIOUS THOUGHT edited by Caryl Emerson, George Pattison and Randall A. Poole, *Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2020, pp. 752, £110.00, hbk*

In his remarkable book *Russia under Western Eyes. From the Bronze Horseman to the Lenin Mausoleum* (1999) Martin Malia shows how the West's view of Russia, either demonized or idealized, is less revealing of Russia than of the internal demons and ideals of the West itself. Indeed, the West often projects its own questions on Russia. The contrary is also true.

The *Oxford Handbook of Russian Religious Thought* is precisely based on the idea that 'whether we think of 'Russia' and 'the West' in terms of ontological opposition or of convergent and overlapping traditions, a deeper understanding and appreciation of Russia remains an important task for contemporary humanities scholarship' (p.xxii). As its introduction makes clear, the volume is neither a book on Russian Orthodoxy nor on religions in Russia, but on how writers (novelists, poets, literary critics), artists (musicians, painters, iconographers, film makers), and thinkers (philosophers, theologians) have echoed the religious question – a question ubiquitous in Russian culture.

Part I of the *Handbook* sets the historical backgrounds and contexts, which were not only the framework, but also, very often, the object of Russian religious thought: Christianity in Rus' and Muscovy (David Goldfrank), the Orthodox Church and religious life in imperial Russia (Nadieszda Kizenko) and in Revolutionary Russia (Vera Shevzov). A chapter on Russian religious life in the Soviet era (Zoe Knox) shows the diversity of religious experiences during the time of persecution.

Part II is dedicated to the nineteenth century, a period in which Russian religious thought develops its own distinctive cultural form. Essays are presented on Orthodox theology as developed by Metropolitan Filaret Drozdov (Oleg V. Bychkov), and in the context of the ecclesiastical academies (Patrick Lally Michelson), which became centres of Russian theological renewal. Besides these Church representatives are presented three currents that would mark the entire history of Russian thought: westernisers and slavophiles (G. M Hamburg and Randall A. Poole), but also nihilists (Victoria Frede). This part also offers reflections on the religious thought of the novelists Dostoevsky (George Pattison) and Tolstoy