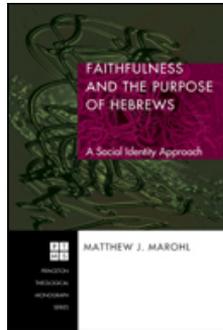


○ **REVIEW OF MATTHEW J. MAROHL,  
***FAITHFULNESS AND THE PURPOSE OF  
 HEBREWS: A SOCIAL IDENTITY APPROACH***  
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In *Faithfulness and the Purpose of Hebrews*, Matt Marohl presents a published version of his doctoral dissertation, written under the direction of Philip Esler at St. Andrews University. Marohl's aim is to 'provide fresh answers' to the question of the addressees and purpose of the letter to the Hebrews 'by employing... social identity theory' (xi). After a brief description of Henri Tajfel's theory of social categorisation, Marohl notes that the 'historical-critical method for examining identity is one of social categorization' (xii). Yet, the historical-critical method tends to use modern categories that were not shared by those who wrote and first read/heard these texts. Marohl maintains, therefore, that interpreters need to ask 'what categories did the addressees use to simplify and systematize their environment?' (xiv) He proposes that the use of 'social identity theory integrated with a working model of present temporal orientation' will help provide a fresh understanding of the addressees and purpose of Hebrews.

In chapter one, Marohl summarises the major approaches that scholars have used to determine the addressees of Hebrews. He suggests that one reason the addressees of Hebrews have remained elusive is that scholars have employed an inadequate conceptual framework. In order to determine the addressees of Hebrews, he argues that scholars must answer two questions; '[f]irst, how did social groups in the first-century Mediterranean world create and maintain identity? Second, what social categories were employed by the author and the addressees of Hebrews?' (36) After surveying almost 200 interpreters from a 150 year period who categorise the addressees as (1) 'Jewish Christian,' (2) 'Gentile Christians,' (3) both 'Jewish' and 'Gentile' 'Christians,' (4) A group related to the Essenes, (5) Samaritan 'Christians,' (6) Ebionite 'Christians,' (7) 'non-Christians,' and (8) 'Christians,' Marohl identifies the inadequate conceptual framework employed in each of these studies; namely the categories 'Jewish,' 'Gentile' and 'Christian,' which produce inadequate results. While some have noted the 'us/them' distinction in early Christian literature

– notably Collins and Freyne – few have attempted to develop a theory of group identity that helps explain this distinction.

In chapter two, Marohl addresses the question of the purpose of Hebrews. He comments, '[s]ince the purpose of the text is often based upon an interpreter's understanding of the identity of the addressees and their social context, a problematic conception of identity will produce a problematic conception of the purpose of the text,' yet 'when an appropriate conceptual framework is employed in the discussion of identity, the text proves to yield important information concerning both the identity of the addressees and the purpose of Hebrews' (37). Marohl then outlines the traditional approach for determining the purpose of a text as well as the four most common theories regarding the purpose of Hebrews: (1) Comparison and Superiority, (2) Doctrinal Problems, (3) Attempting to Strengthen addressees faith, and (4) Apostasy back into 'Judaism.' Like studies of the addressees of Hebrews, studies of the letters' purpose employ an inadequate conceptual framework which leads to a wide variety of results. Marohl argues that employing an appropriate conceptualisation of identity will lead interpreters to a new understanding of both the addressees and the purpose of the text.

Marohl begins to develop his own conceptual framework for understanding Hebrews in chapter three by introducing readers to Social Identity Theory. Marohl's thorough overview of Social Identity Theory is rooted within the questions and crisis of social psychology. He covers the development of Social Identity Theory and recent advances in the theory that make it more applicable to his argument. For example, Marohl points to Hinkle's and Brown's 1990 study that sets limits on the use of Social Identity Theory, namely that groups must exist within a collectivist and comparative culture. Further, he offers a fine description of culture and cross-cultural analysis and developments that relate Social Identity Theory to time. In chapter four, Marohl addresses the use of Social Identity Theory on first century C.E. Mediterranean texts by relating collectivism, comparison, and temporal orientation to the ancient Mediterranean.

Chapters five through eight employ the approach outlined in chapter two to the letter to the Hebrews. In chapter five Marohl argues correctly that the addressees understood themselves as a distinct social group noting the use of 'us' and 'them' throughout the letter. He further notes that the author relates both the ingroup ('us') and the outgroup ('them') to faith; the ingroup is 'faithful' and the outgroup is 'unfaithful.' His conclusion to the identity of the addressees is 'We are the faithful' (124). In chapter six Marohl examines the comparison of Moses and Jesus in terms of a shared life story and prototypicality, concluding that the author of Hebrews integrates the addressees and Jesus into a shared life story (narrative) in which Jesus is prototypical of their shared common identity, faithfulness. Chapter seven articulates the relationship between the letter to the Hebrews and the temporal orientation of the addressees by briefly reviewing time in Hebrews and the theory of present temporal orientation. This temporal orientation of the author and addressees results in their reliance upon the past (which provides examples of faithfulness and faithlessness) in anticipation of their future. In the eighth and final chapter, Marohl argues that the purpose of Hebrews is best understood in terms of social creativity in response to the crisis of the addressees shared negative social identity. By limiting the addressees possibility for social mobility, urging them not to 'fall away,' the author offers social creativity in the form of a symbolic outgroup (a term the reader has encountered earlier in Marohl's work) with whom the addressees are to compare themselves, namely the unfaithful.

*Faithfulness and the Purpose of Hebrews* is a well-written piece of scholarship in which Matt Marohl employs various facets of Social Identity Theory to arrive at a new interpretation of the addressees of Hebrews, the problem they faced, and the solution offered by the author. Marohl has clearly articulated the basic tenants of Social Identity Theory well and has convincingly related them to the text of Hebrews. I have no major disagreements with the argument. Rather, I will make only a few small observations:

1. A minor quibble that is likely not the fault of the author, namely, the lack of an index, which would make selected topics in the study more readily available.
2. I was a bit disappointed with the lack of engagement with Greco-Roman Literature. I think Marohl could have strengthened his case - especially in relation to collectivism, comparison, temporal orientation – by demonstrating how these elements were present in other first century C.E. texts.
3. I was a bit puzzled by the placement of theoretical material on prototypes and narrative (chapter six) and social mobility and creativity (chapter eight). Would not these discussions have been better introduced in relation to the theory in chapter three? By at least introducing them there, the reader would be able to make much needed connections between the theory and the text of Hebrews earlier. For example, in the final chapter, Marohl discusses how the author encouraged social creativity by creating a symbolic outgroup with whom the addressees were to compare themselves (p. 190). This discussion would have fit nicely with Social Identity Theory in chapter three and would have, perhaps, made the connection with a symbolic outgroup much earlier.
4. There is another theoretical matter, namely the absence of methodological discussion of boundaries. Marohl introduces the notion of boundaries on page 119 without engaging with theories related to boundary and boundary crossing. Among others, the work of Mary Douglas on the issue would have been a helpful resource.
5. I wonder if this study would benefit from considering the possibility of ethnic identity in the text. It is true that such has been the focus of commentators in recent history and Social Identity Theory provides a fresh approach. But perhaps in concentrating on ‘faithfulness’ and ‘unfaithfulness’ to the neglect of ethnicity, this study misses an important facet of identity among the early Christ followers, namely identity as either a Judean Christ follower or a non-Judean Christ follower. Certainly this aspect of identity was not completely absent in the letter to the Hebrews.
6. Finally, what factor does genre play in this interpretation? Much has been written about Hebrews as a homily rather than an epistle yet genre is not addressed in the present study. How would Hebrews as a homily relate to what Marohl calls the ‘shared life story’ or narrative in the text? In addition, would greater engagement with narrative theory help in this regard?

In spite of these comments, Marohl’s book is an interesting and convincing analysis of Hebrews in light of various facets of Social Identity Theory. Those working on issues of identity in early Christianity in general as well as those working on Hebrews should not neglect this important work. Students and scholars alike will find this study insightful, readable, and reliable.