

REVIEW

Lloyd Kim

*Polemic in the Book of Hebrews:
Anti-Judaism, Anti-Semitism, or Supersessionism?*
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The new perspective(s) on Paul and other critical reexaminations of traditional antisemitic, anti-Judaic, and supersessionist interpretations of New Testament texts have, since the latter half of the twentieth century, focused on the Pauline epistles and the gospels. The fruits of such rereadings have been monumental in generating new understandings of the Jewish identity of several of the authors and of concepts like Law, justification, and gentile mission. However, one text that has not figured as largely in these conversations is the Epistle to the Hebrews. In his book, *Polemic in the Book of Hebrews*, Lloyd Kim sets out to help amend this imbalance. His goal, simply put, is “to determine whether the epistle to the Hebrews is anti-Semitic, anti-Judaic or supersessionistic, and if so, to what extent” (p. 1).

In chapter one, Kim reviews prior scholarship on the epistle. Though Hebrews has not figured as largely in critical reexaminations, it has garnered some attention. Kim observes that most of the verdicts of possible antisemitism, anti-Judaism, or supersessionism have found the epistle unquestionably guilty (p. 8-16). In chapter two, Kim explains his approach to Hebrews: the socio-rhetorical method, which “combines the use of social-scientific approaches with analysis of how a text uses subjects and topics to communicate thoughts, arguments, speeches, etc.” (p. 43). This method, he believes, addresses best the variegated aspects of the text. It is also a more conservative hermeneutic—reflecting Kim’s denominational affiliation with the Presbyterian Church in America—and he

prefers historical-grammatical methods (e.g., attention to grammar, genre, perspicuity, inerrancy, historical-cultural background, etc.) over historical-critical methods (though, of course, the methods do share some similarities).

In chapter three, Kim begins applying his method, analyzing the social context of Hebrews. He assumes the epistle was written before the Jerusalem Temple's destruction (pre-70 CE). Though Hebrews contains intense language against the Levitical priesthood, Mosaic Covenant, and Levitical sacrifices, the author adamantly maintains his community's biblical roots. Kim argues that Hebrews is speaking to a sect *within* Judaism, a group discerning its own distinct identity in light of Christ's revelation (p. 51-52). This sect is also facing an issue of backsliding, with some members feeling tempted to return to the "dominant form of Judaism" (p. 60). Pressure to do so appears to have derived from non-Jewish persecution; though, Kim believes Jews also persecuted *and* attempted to persuade this "wayward" sect to return. To address these issues, the author of Hebrews adopts a countercultural rhetoric, a mode designed to promote the superiority of a subgroup within the majority (p. 51-58). Hebrews, thus, is following a structure/anti-structure model, a procedure that forms a new identity over against the old. The desired outcome is "reintegration" into the dominant society, after the latter eventually will have conformed to the views of the sect (p. 59).

In the last three chapters, Kim focuses on what he considers the three most polemical passages in Hebrews, dedicating one chapter each to the priesthood (7:1-19), the covenant (8:1-13), and sacrifice (10:1-10), respectively. Each chapter follows a similar pattern: a survey of Second Temple Jewish literature on the topic of the passage, an analysis of the passage's socio-rhetorical function, and an assessment of the level of antisemitism, anti-Judaism, or supersessionism present in the passage. From Kim's survey of Second Temple literature, he argues that Hebrews is not unique in criticizing the priesthood, covenant, and sacrifices. However, there *is* a major difference. The other Second Temple writings generally held these institutions

as integral to Jewish identity; their criticisms centered only on corruption and misuses (pp. 80, 119-21, 139-42). In contradistinction, while Hebrews holds the institutions as integral, it argues that their manifestations (Levitical and Mosaic) are ineffective; thus, God has instituted three eternal and superior “fulfillments”: Jesus as high priest (pp. 98-99), a new covenant (p. 146), and Jesus’ final sacrifice (pp. 195-96).

The balance Hebrews strikes between “continuity” and “discontinuity” with the Jewish tradition leads Kim to conclude that the epistle is *not* antisemitic; such an accusation is anachronistic and fails to account for the author’s own Jewish identity (pp. 94-95, 142, 192). But Kim does view the epistle as anti-Jewish and supersessionist, with qualifications. It is anti-Jewish to the extent that it reflects intra-Jewish theological disagreements (interestingly, Kim defines anti-Judaism as any “theological disagreement” between Jews, or between Jews and Jewish-Christians or Gentiles [p. 2]); it is supersessionist to the extent that Jesus *fulfills* the three institutions. However, Kim says, one must realize the author is writing specifically *to* Jews. There is no rejection of the Jewish people or these institutions (pp. 197-201). Indeed, “Because of God’s great love for his people, he has provided a superior way by which his people can draw near to him” (p. 201).

Kim’s book is well-organized and lucid (though a reader without a strong background in rhetorical studies might be overwhelmed with his terminology). Kim boldly addresses the polemical language of the epistle and does not attempt to downplay its supersessionist language through acrobatic exegesis that fails to do full justice to the language of the text. Rather, with passages like 8:13, Kim underscores the polemic content, while situating it in its social context (pp. 144-45). In this way, Kim casts the epistle as an intra-Jewish argument, produced by a Jewish-Christian sect affirming its own Jewish identity amidst a real threat of backsliding from belief in Christ. The reason for polemics now becomes clearer.

While Kim's socio-rhetorical approach offers many insights, Kim appears to elide two important issues. First, Kim adopts a pre-70 date for the text without any explicit or critical justification why he prefers this to a post-70 date. For a text so focused on Temple ritual, a late (i.e. post-destruction) date might offer new angles for understanding the polemics and supersessionism. Second, Kim perhaps too hastily rejects any Platonic influence on the text, and provides only a minimal discussion of why he does (p. 174). The possibility of such influence might lend further insight into why the author devalues the Levitical and Mosaic institutions, and perhaps help illuminate how and why the author believes Christ supersedes them.

Overall, Kim has performed a crucial task of explicating three of the most problematic passages in Jewish-Christian relations. He gives a compelling argument for their (qualified) anti-Judaic and supersessionist aspects. In doing so, whether intentionally or not, he also lays before Christians an extremely difficult problem. Hebrews presents *the* superior way *for* Jews, namely, faith in Christ. For modern opponents of supersessionism who do not believe that God has rejected Jews who do not accept Christ, however, Hebrews offers little guidance.