

Rowan A. Greer. *The Captain of Our Salvation: A Study in the Patristic Exegesis of Hebrews*. Beiträge zur Geschichte der Biblischen Exegese 15. Tübingen, Germany: J.C.B. Mohr, 1973. Pp. 371. Hardback. \$96. ISBN 978-3-16-134822-8.

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Rowan Greer has produced a formidable work combining multiple disciplines: New Testament literature, early Christian theology and hermeneutics, and early Christian history. To date, no other work has matched its content nor research. That is, since Greer's work in 1973, there has been no other work on the reception of Hebrews in Patristic Exegesis. The immediate value is found within Greer's ability to interact with a broad textual tradition of early Christian literature and a critical analysis of interpretive and theological traditions.

Thesis and Methodology

Greer's work is an analysis of Patristic exegesis of Hebrews beginning with Origen (late 2nd–3rd cent.) and ending with Cyril of Alexandria and Nestorius (5th cent.). So, Greer observes interpretive patterns of Hebrews in the Alexandrian and Antiochian tradition, while also observing the important role of Hebrews in Arian, Nestorian, and other Christological controversies. He examines how (1) Origen, (2) Athanasius, Arius and the Cappadocians, (3) Eustace and Diodore, (4) Theodore, (5) Chrysostom and Theodoret, and (6) Cyril and Nestorius had hermeneutical and theological patterns when using Hebrews.¹

Rather than developing “one” primary, controlling thesis, Greer identifies three questions at the outset and seeks to answer only one. In this way, multiple “mini”-theses, if you will, emerge. He asks the following three questions:

1. Have the Fathers understood Scripture?
2. What is their understanding of Scripture?

¹As Joseph Kelly rightly points out, Greer attempts to provide all substantial interaction with the book of Hebrews as mentioned by these Fathers. Joseph F. Kelly, “The Captain of Our Salvation: A Study in the Patristic Exegesis of Hebrews,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 93, no. 2 (1974): 318.

3. What method do they use in interpreting Scripture?²

Greer is primarily answering the second question and assumes Maurice Wiles method.³ Here, studying patristic exegesis is purely descriptive. Therefore, the overarching thesis, as a result of the research question, is “theological principles largely explain exegetical results in the patristic period.”⁴ That is, theological commitments control *types* of questions asked when approaching Scripture and these commitments will produce certain interpretive traditions. Therefore, Greer identifies systemic theological presuppositions of various early interpreters and identifies how theological commitments produce exegetical decisions in early traditions.

The Role of Hebrews in Early Christological Debates

Stemming from this research question and the larger “controlling” idea, smaller arguments soon develop. Beginning with Origen, Greer argues, “It is difficult to speak of any fixed tradition of exegesis before Origen as to find any systematic presentation of the results of theological reflection during the first two centuries of this era.”⁵ Origen’s commentary on Hebrews, regrettably, is no longer extant. So, in order to observe interpretive patterns and construct a theological vision of Hebrews, one must analyze Origen’s other commentaries and works that largely interact with Hebrews (cf. Commentaries on Exodus, Numbers, Leviticus, Joshua, John, and *De Principiis*). After analyzing the literal and typological interpretations of assorted Hebrews texts, Greer concludes how Origen lacked a specific Christological interpretation anticipating the subsequent debates on the two natures of Christ.⁶ Moreover, portions of interpretive ambiguity have anachronistically been applied to Origen, reflective of later heretics.⁷ However, some interpretive patterns find continuity with Athanasius, Cyril, and other orthodox patterns.

²Rowan A. Greer, *The Captain of Our Salvation: A Study in the Patristic Exegesis of Hebrews*, Beiträge Zur Geschichte Der Biblischen Exegese 15 (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 1973), 4.

³Greer, *Captain of Our Salvation*, 3. Greer, however, provides no footnotes or references to pursue further regarding to Maurice Wiles. .

⁴Greer, *Captain of Our Salvation*, 5.

⁵Greer, *Captain of Our Salvation*, 7.

⁶Greer, *Captain of Our Salvation*, 64.

⁷Greer, *Captain of Our Salvation*, 64.

In the ensuing Arian Controversy, Hebrews played a prominent role in defining the nature of the trinity as having three *hypostasis* yet possessing one *ousia*. But as Greer continues to develop his argument, it is here that the relationship between theology and exegesis begin to take shape. Athanasius and other Cappadocian exegetical patterns reflect questions posed by Arians. That is, the current controversy over the generation of the Son governed types of exegetical decisions and questions given by Athanasius and Cappadoican interpreters.⁸ For example, these theological traditions controlled exegetical decision when interpreting *ὑποστάσεως* in Heb 1:3.

Similar exegetical discussion and Christological controversies are developed through the rest of the book. Eustace and Diodore reflect a theological tradition of Hebrews, though no Christological development was noted.⁹ Moreover, Greer shows how Theodore's theological vision produces exegetical patterns.¹⁰ Chrysostom, however, is an "anti-intellectual" and regards "theological controversies with the same disdain he accorded ecclesiastical politics."¹¹ He identifies which Hebrews texts are applied to the divinity and humanity of Christ, and in some places, detracts from Antiochian interpretive traditions.¹² Theodoret, on the other hand, stands in contrast to that of Athanasius and Cyril by distinguishing two era's of the Word's existence and insisting on two natures of Jesus under one title, Christ.¹³ Lastly, Greer describes the Nestorian development of the two unions (divine and humanity) are united in *prosopon* (appearance) but not in *ousia* (being).¹⁴ Cyril, in retort, assumes the previous Alexandrian traditions and unity of natures in reference to *ousia*.¹⁵ These questions and theological traditions affected, for both parties, certain exegetical traditions when approaching Hebrews.

⁸Greer, *Captain of Our Salvation*, 126.

⁹Greer, *Captain of Our Salvation*, 174.

¹⁰Greer, *Captain of Our Salvation*, 224.

¹¹Greer, *Captain of Our Salvation*, 265.

¹²Greer, *Captain of Our Salvation*, 291.

¹³Greer, *Captain of Our Salvation*, 305.

¹⁴Greer, *Captain of Our Salvation*, 314.

¹⁵Greer, *Captain of Our Salvation*, 354.

Greer, ultimately, contends well for his thesis. The information he provides does lend proof and validation to his thesis: the role of theology acts as an interpretive influence upon exegetical decisions. But subsidiary “theses” also find their way into the overall argument. First, there is a distinction, according to Greer, between Antiochene and Alexandrian traditions. However, this may be due to certain Christological heresies both parties were engaging. Moreover, Greer argues for the possibility of a third interpretive tradition, Cappadocian exegesis.¹⁶ Second, he highlights how Hebrews took a formidable position in the Christological controversies, not only the “eternal-generation” discussion, but also the unity of Christ’s nature. Third, Greer proves how each individual father has a unique theological framework, some maintaining continuity and discontinuity with other fathers in the same interpretive tradition.

Brief Evaluation

Two portions of Greer’s argument prove highly valuable. First, Greer handles multiple texts and the narrative history of early Christian literature extremely well. Patristic and early Christian origins scholars have the difficult task of mastering the narrative history, the theological and literary arguments of selected thinkers, simultaneously evaluating multiple authors, and navigating the literature of modern critics and scholars, as well as New Testament literature. Greer accomplished nearly all of these while maintaining a rich and developed argument throughout the entirety of the monograph.

Second, Greer mines interpretive patterns on the book of Hebrews in patristic exegesis. For any Hebrews scholar, this source must be picked up with regularity. It must be incorporated into one’s understanding of early exegetical patterns among Christian thinkers as well as early interpretations of Hebrews. Hebrews 1:3 is engaged with regularity: ὅς ὢν ἀπαύγασμα τῆς δόξης καὶ χαρακτήρ τῆς ὑποστάσεως αὐτοῦ. Arians, Alexandrians, and others have different interpretive traditions of Heb 1:3 about the nature of Christ. Second, questions about the suffering of Jesus is also reflected in early interpretive patterns of Heb 2:9–18. How can a being, with a united divine and human nature, experience suffering. It’s understandable to see *how* Christological debates arose. Humans suffer, but how can the divine suffer? Third, especially in modern Hebrews scholarship, David Moffitt has argued for a post-resurrection priesthood whereby the atonement is not enacted at the cross, but

¹⁶Greer, *Captain of Our Salvation*, 356.

enacted after resurrection in the post-ascension state.¹⁷ Theodoret's comments on Heb 3:1 and other passages relating to the Christ's priesthood argues for something different. So, Greer's work helps this modern discussion. "Theodoret maintains the application of Christ's priesthood to the humanity."¹⁸

I do, however, have a few critiques of Greer's work. First, Greer's text is more than patristic exegesis of Hebrews. His thesis does not solely focus on Hebrews. It is, first and foremost, a study of the relationship of theology and exegetical decisions within the multi-variegated discussions of early Christological formation. In this way, he uses Hebrews, theological frameworks pertinent to some fathers, and the narrative history of the Christological debates as the vehicle to engage the relationship between tradition and Scripture. So my critique predominantly appeals to change the title of the book, not the internal thesis and argument.¹⁹

Greer's Final Two Reflections

Greer finishes his work with two reflections beyond the scope of his thesis and his primary arguments. First, "how should one study the Fathers?"²⁰ He reflects upon his experience with modern, secondary literature and how they are predominantly concerned with judging the "orthodoxy" of early Christian texts. This could be a bit anachronistic in that the Fathers are trying to narrow down orthodox beliefs. "But surely a more important part of the historian's task," argues Greer, "is to examine each man's thought in its own terms and against the background of its own time."²¹

¹⁷David M. Moffitt, *Atonement and the Logic of Resurrection in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Supplements to Novum Testamentum 141 (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2013).

¹⁸Greer, *Captain of Our Salvation*, 299.

¹⁹Kelly also adds a critique for engaging the canonicity of Hebrews. I find this to be an unfair critique because this was never part of any questions Greer posed. Moreover, Greer was not engaged in canonicity debates. Kelly, "Captain of Our Salvation," 318; Swetnam also critiques Greer for the length. I don't fully agree with Swetnam because of (1) the amount of data Greer has to engage and (2) Greer is attempting to deal adequately with debates. I think the length is fine and this does not need to be a valide critique. James Swetnam, "The Captain of Our Salvation: A Study in the Patristic Exegesis of Hebrews," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (1974): 402.

²⁰Greer, *Captain of Our Salvation*, 358.

²¹Greer, *Captain of Our Salvation*, 358.

Greer's second reflection is evaluating the role of theology in the exegesis of Scripture.²² I think what Greer is also asking by this question includes the role of tradition too.²³ He reflects on modern hermeneutics, in 1973, and how scholars are predominantly concerned about "historical or linguistic exegesis of Scripture."²⁴ Greer shows early signs of frustration at the modernist endeavor and desire for some form of theological readings. Coming into our post-modern era (at times post-postmodern discussions), *Theological-Interpretation of Scripture* has blossomed as a critical discipline desiring to read the Scriptures theologically with a traditional *regula fidei*.²⁵ His concerns, in my estimation, have blossomed into a scholarly discipline.

Conclusion

The Captain of Our Salvation is a work I will frequently visit. It's research and handling of ancient texts proves valuable for multiple *types* of students. It will, no doubt, aid the early historian, New Testament interpreters, or early Christian origin scholars.

²²Greer, *Captain of Our Salvation*, 358.

²³Also identified by Margaret A. Schatkin, "The Captain of Our Salvation: A Study in the Patristic Exegesis of Hebrews," *Theological Studies* 37, no. 2 (1976): 331.

²⁴Greer, *Captain of Our Salvation*, 358; James Swetnam critic of Greer's book is absolutely reflective of Greer's concern with modern hermeneutical approaches. According to Swetnam, principle of analogy has to correspond and become subservient to the historical-critical method. Swetnam, "Captain of Our Salvation," 402.

²⁵J. Todd Billings, *The Word of God for the People of God: An Entryway to the Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2010).