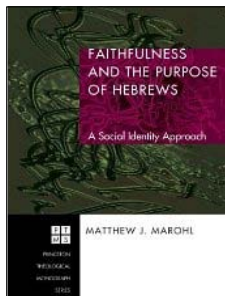


# FAITHFULNESS AND THE INTERPRETATION OF IDENTITY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

## Book Title:

Faithfulness and the purpose of *Hebrews*: A social identity approach

## Book Cover:



## Author:

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## Review Title:

Faithfulness and the interpretation of identity in the New Testament

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Who were the addressees of the *Letter to the Hebrews* in the Christian New Testament? This is the question Matthew Marohl attempts to answer in his publication, in the *Princeton Theological Monograph Series*, titled *Faithfulness and the purpose of Hebrews*. Marohl teaches the New Testament scripture at the Augusta College.

In this book, he uses a sociological tool, namely *the categories of social identity theory*, to assist him in finding the answer. He argues that the addressees arranged the world into two groups: 'us' and 'them.' They (the addressees) understood their group, the 'us,' to be the 'faithful' ones. They understood 'them' (a symbolic out-group of 'all others') to be the 'unfaithful' ones. Faithfulness, then, is the primary identity descriptor for the addressees and plays an essential role throughout the text.

He asks the next question that follows logically from the previous one: if the faithful ones identified themselves with Jesus, how did the addressees understand the faithfulness of Jesus? His hypothesis is that the author of *Hebrews* described the faithfulness of Jesus as 'prototypical'. The faithfulness of all others is described in relation to Jesus' faith and together they are integrated into an ongoing narrative of faithfulness.

Marohl's book is divided into eight chapters. In chapter two he presents a thorough overview of social identity theory and in chapter six he employs two areas of social identity theory, namely the theory of shared life stories and the theory of prototypicality to the text. By applying these two areas, he invites the reader to understand the author's use of comparison and his emphasis on the faithfulness of Jesus.

This book does not belong to the typical genre of a commentary. Marohl uses a fresh approach to solve old and existing problems. By using social identity theory and a model of present temporal orientation to provide the conceptual framework within which to understand the identity of the addressees of *Hebrews* and the purpose of the text, he offers a different angle of approach to the problem and had been the topic of many studies and debates in the past.

Interdisciplinary projects, such as those used by Marohl in this book, are rarely imagined in the early stages of the development of such theories; subsequent projects can be informative beyond the boundaries and limitations of both New Testament interpretation and social identity theory.

By utilising a model of present temporal orientation, Marohl interprets the dynamic relationship between the 'antecedent' faithfulness of many witnesses and the 'forthcoming' promised rest of the addressees. The addressees of *Hebrews* were encouraged to 'understand their futures by looking to the past.'

When, at the end, he answers the question with regard to the text's purpose, he concludes that groups with a negative social identity have two broad options: social mobility or social change. The author of *Hebrews* provides internal constraints that are meant to prevent social mobility. The author utilises social creativity (an aspect of social change) to provide a positive social identity for the addressees. They are the faithful ones, in their being that, they imitate Jesus.

New Testament scholars will find the content of this book useful. It will also introduce them to a theory that they can perhaps apply to other texts with positive results. ■