I want to begin by expressing my thanks to both Professor Rüpke and Professor Maier for taking up the challenge of reading Hebrews in relation to what, following Clifford Geertz, we might call the “thick description” of the political-religious context of first-century Rome. Both of these papers move us far beyond generalities about the “Greco-Roman world” as a general “background” for the so-called Epistle to the Hebrews. Both of these papers, moreover, also take seriously the much-neglected task of the interpretation of Hebrews and its theology with attention to a specific social-historical context and ask how Hebrews is responding to the religious expressions and practices of the Roman world. It is, in my view, crucial to indicate what a monumental scholarly step this work is in relation to Hebrews, when it is indeed quite a common step for many other New Testament texts contemporary with Hebrews. And I must also say how gratifying and motivating to hear from both Professors Rüpke and Maier their appreciation of and concurrence (for the most part) with my own work on reading Hebrews within the cultural repertoire of the city of Rome in the Flavian period. Thank you. I would note, however, that I have extended this approach considerably beyond the article on Hebrews and the Flavian triumph—in a series of mostly unpublished papers presented in various SBL sessions and other settings—in way that may intersect with some of the areas raised in these two presentations.
I turn first to Professor Rüpke’s paper. In inviting Professor Rüpke, the organizers of this session were setting up an experiment: what would an expert in Roman religion—not someone who is an expert in Hebrews—observe in Hebrews? That is, if we take Hebrews seriously as a first-century Roman religious text—albeit one deeply saturated with the scriptures of Israel—what features emerge? And what features of Roman religion emerge? Professor Rüpke’s eyes, trained in Roman religion, are drawn to the portrayal of priesthood in Hebrews, and he argues the thesis that Hebrews “paints the image of heavenly Jesus as a priest who is in concurrence [competition] with the supreme priest embodied by the earthly emperor—and, of course, winning.” I appreciate how, in developing this argument, Rüpke points to what is innovative in the reigns of Titus and Domitian, namely, their stress on the office, public activity, and visibility of the office of pontifex maximus. His emphasis on the religious presence of the emperor himself in the city of Rome, visible as close to or among the gods, is helpful if we are to think in terms of the visibility of imperium (in all its religious dimensions) in the cityscape of Rome. The portrayal of Jesus in Hebrews as a “great high priest” makes the divine enthronement of Jesus visible within the sacral geography of Hebrews. I agree strongly with Rüpke, moreover, that “the image of Jesus’ priesthood is informed by contemporary institutions as much as by Scripture” and that this portrayal is a reaction to the religious-political context of the Flavian period. I must say that if, as Rüpke indicates at the end of his paper, that is our turn to dissuade him of his hypothesis, I am not the one to do it—since on the whole I say “yes” to this hypothesis and wish rather to develop it further. I would perhaps also push Rüpke to reconsider his “late Flavian/Domitianic” context in favor of a context in the early eighties CE, in response to the apotheosis of Titus.
I think that Rüpke is right to draw our attention to this matter of visibility and priesthood in the Flavian period. Hebrews likewise works with the register of sight, drawing the hearers’ gaze to Jesus: in Heb 2:9, “. . . but we see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death.” I have argued elsewhere that at key moments, Hebrews directs its audience’s gaze to the figure of Jesus in order to shape an ethical response to the imperial ideology displayed in the monuments of the city. ¹ Sight and intentional gaze are accordingly crucial capacities to be cultivated by the audience and through the orientations advocated by this text. I argue that, just as sight functions as the means of access to the social memory constructed through and in the monumental displays of Flavian Rome, so too for the Epistle to the Hebrews what is seen and interpreted through the lens of the text becomes a memory predominant for the users and producers of this discourse. To this we should now add the visibility of the person of the Flavian emperor (whether Titus or Domitian) in the religious landscape of the city of Rome. I think here of Paul Zanker’s arguments regarding the visibility of Domitian in the central niche of the monumental imperial dining room in his palace on the Palatine, appearing as a god in his temple. ² But I think also of the depiction of the divinized Titus borne up on eagle’s wings in the central position of the Arch of Titus.


² Paul Zanker, Die Apotheose der römischen Kaiser: Ritual und städtische Bühne (Themen 80; Munich: Carl Friedrich von Siemens Stiftung, 2004).
The Arch of Titus, erected after the death of Titus, is properly regarded not as a triumphal arch, but rather as a consecration arch, celebrating the apotheosis of Titus. This depiction gathers up the already visible status and offices of the living Titus as first-born son sharing in the imperium of his Father, as ruler/“king,” and—as Rüpke points out—pontifex maximus. The depiction of the apotheosis transfers these modes of visibility into the divine realm, located unequivocally among the gods. Jesus, in Hebrews, similarly moves into the heavens, seated at the right hand of God, sharing in divine rule—and does so as son and great high priest; he is “made visible” through the rhetoric of Hebrews in this place of enthronement. And indeed it is by keeping an eye on this Jesus as he traverses the path into the heavenly realm and is thus visible in heaven that the inscribed audience is able to continue in solidarity and likewise to enter the heavenly realm. It is on the basis of such connections and others that I am more persuaded by a very early Domitianic date for Hebrews, shortly after the death and apotheosis of Titus. What is at stake, however, in Hebrews in this religious-political context is precisely the basis for such apotheosis of son, ruler, and pontifex maximus: that is, what are the excellent deeds and benefactions made available through this figure? And, perhaps more importantly, how do they make visible his loyalty (πίστις, fides) and rhetorically draw forth the loyalty of hearers (or we might say, the viewers) of the text?

I turn now to Professor Maier’s paper, again with thanks and appreciation. Again, in so many ways, he has drawn our attention to the visibility of imperium, especially in Roman sacrificial iconography and to the sacral landscape of the city of Rome. This paper works very well in tandem with Professor Rüpke’s, especially in attending to the

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3 Michael Pfanner, Der Titusbogen (Beiträge zur Erschliessung hellenistischer und kaiserzeitlicher Skulptur und Architektur; Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 1983), 99.
Flavian “rejuvenated imperial repertoire of sacrifice, the renovation and repair of
temples,” and the imperial self-representation of their sacral selves iconographically as
the “backdrop” for the language of Hebrews. Rüpke’s paper would push the question
further to ask what is the Flavian initiative or the Flavian innovation that is not simply the
renewal of the Augustan repertoire. This emphasis on the innovative is crucial for
understanding the distinctive response of Hebrews.

An important theme running throughout Professor Maier’s paper is that of visual
semantics, although he does not develop it in great depth. It is signaled first by his
reference to A. J. Boyle’s phrase, “a Flavian semiotic disturbance to the monumental text
of a pre-existing city” (p. 7) and further hinted at by his mentions of the “discourse” of
imperial iconography. In many ways, moreover, Professor Maier’s paper attempts to
teach us how to read the imperial iconography and thus in turn to gain a refurbished
reading of Hebrews. The conclusion of the paper, with its fascinating turn toward the
postcolonial, emphasizes the potential of Hebrews as a kind of “double narrative”
containing the gathering of foreign tongues meeting on alien soil and yet also speaking a
grammar of civic assent. There is considerable potential here, some of which I have
already developed elsewhere, but especially in my article “Wily, Wise, and Worldly:
Instruction and the Formation of Character in the Epistle to the Hebrews” in the volume
*The Changing Face of Judaism, Christianity and Other Greco-Roman Religions in
Antiquity.*

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4 Ellen Bradshaw Aitken, “Wily, Wise, and Worldly: Instruction and the Formation of
Character in the Epistle to the Hebrews” in Ian Henderson and Gerbern S. Oegema, eds.,
*The Changing Face of Judaism, Christianity and Other Greco-Roman Religions in*
The work to be done here in relating imperial iconography focuses on “reading practices”: What are the reading practices proper to the reading of monuments and other artifacts, the “reading” of rituals (both what they make visible and what they hide), and the reading of texts such as Hebrews? How do you see what cannot be seen (as is the case with the apotheosis of Jesus)? How do you learn to “see” in a mode of resistance, that is, to see another meaning in the iconography and rituals? And what reading practices with regard to the text of Hebrews and the scriptures of Israel cultivate such capacities on the part of the audience?

To turn back to the question of apotheosis: by what reading practices (of monuments, rituals or texts) is apotheosis seen both for what it is and for it is not? What are the practices proper to recognizing religious presence—most particularly in the city of Rome, as the city is reshaped and reinscribed by the Flavian emperors? And how does Hebrews work to cultivate a very particular recognition of religious presence in Jesus and to enable continual gaze upon this “ἀρχήν ἡγοῦσιν καὶ κομπλετὴς τῆς της αὐθεντου” (Heb 12:2)?

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