

## EXCHANGING FAVOR FOR WRATH: APOSTASY IN HEBREWS AND PATRON–CLIENT RELATIONSHIPS

DAVID A. deSILVA

Ashland Theological Seminary, Ashland, OH 44805

The letter to the Hebrews has long troubled theologians and lay students with its severe statements about the impossibility of restoration after “falling away” (6:6) and “willful sin” (10:26). William Tyndale spent the greater part of his prologue to Hebrews explaining how these two passages concur with the rest of the scriptural witness; J. Héring softens the force of the passage by stressing that it is the “impossibility of *repenting* which is being affirmed, and it is not a question of knowing whether fresh forgiveness can be obtained if one does repent”; Harold W. Attridge allows the threat to stand in all its force, but then critiques the author for falling short of the gospel message in that he “unjustifiably limits the gracious mercy of God.”<sup>1</sup> These severe passages, however, are part of a continuum of dangers facing the addressees which can be traced throughout the letter. In the author’s interpretation of the situation, some are in danger of “drifting away” (2:1), of “falling short” (4:1; 12:15), of “shrinking back” (10:39), each of which leads to a situation as dangerous as the “falling away” or “willful persistence in sin” resulting in permanent exclusion. The purpose of this paper is not to solve the centuries-old theological problem but to probe the social and cultural background of the letter in order to arrive at a clearer understanding of what sort of behavior the author regards as, in effect, unforgivable, and what rationale stands behind his appraisal. The particular aspect of the first-century Mediterranean environment that provides an intriguing set of considerations in this regard is the system of patronage and clientage so prevalent in that world.

<sup>1</sup> J. Héring, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (London: Epworth, 1970) 43; Harold W. Attridge, *Hebrews* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989) 172.

## I. Patronage in the Ancient Mediterranean World

The ancient Mediterranean world has been accurately described as a patronal society, in which the giving and receiving of benefactions is “the practice that constitutes the chief bond of human society” (Seneca, *De Benef.* 1.4.2). It is a description that continues to be applied to the Mediterranean societies of today, a testimony to the depth to which this practice was infused in those cultures.<sup>2</sup> This patronal society was supported by an infrastructure of networks of allegiance and favor, whether between equals (who called each other “friends,” and for whom the dictum “friends possess all things in common” held true) or unequals (the patron–client relationship, where the language of friendship was, however, also commonly employed).<sup>3</sup> R. P. Saller observes that “precise evaluation and exact repayment of debt was rarely possible in the realm of day-to-day social favors.”<sup>4</sup> The quotation from Seneca above supports Saller’s conclusion that it is precisely this imprecision in accountability that led these relationships to be ongoing, almost interminable. Mutual bonds of favor and the accompanying bonds of indebtedness provided the glue that maintained social cohesion.<sup>5</sup> In such a society, gratitude would be an essential virtue, and ingratitude indeed the “cardinal social and political sin.”<sup>6</sup>

Patrons gave access to goods, entertainment, and advancement. One who received such a benefit accepted the obligation to “publicize the favor and his gratitude for it,” thus contributing to the patron’s reputation.<sup>7</sup> The client also owed services to the patron and could be called upon to perform most any

<sup>2</sup> See John Davis, *The People of the Mediterranean: An Essay in Comparative Social Anthropology* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977) 146: “From the wholesale market in Athens to the desert of Western Cyrenaica, to the plains of south-eastern Portugal, men take up postures of subordination in order to gain access to resources—to market expertise, to water, to dried milk from welfare agencies. Submission to a patron is commoner and more widespread in the Mediterranean than bureaucracy, or fascism, or communism, or any varieties of democracy: it can exist without any of them, and co-exists with all of them.”

<sup>3</sup> R. P. Saller notes the strong reluctance of writers (e.g., Seneca, Tacitus, Pliny the Younger, Suetonius, and Fronto) to designate themselves as *patrones* and their clients as *clientes*, preferring the ambiguous term *amici*, which did not draw attention to the socially inferior status of the client (*Imperial Patronage under the Early Empire* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982] 8–11).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>5</sup> See John Dominic Crossan’s observation that “the web of patronage and clientage, with accounts that could never be exactly balanced because they could never be precisely computed, was the dynamic morality that held society together” (*The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* [San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991] 65).

<sup>6</sup> Frederick W. Danker, *Benefactor: An Epigraphic Study of a Graeco-Roman and New Testament Semantic Field* (St. Louis, MO: Clayton Publishing House, 1982) 436. So also Saller, *Patronage*, 14: “Nothing was baser than an *ingratus amicus*, and ingratitude was seen as just cause for the breaking off of *amicitia*” (cf. Seneca, *De Benef.* 7.31.1).

<sup>7</sup> Saller, *Patronage*, 10.

task,<sup>8</sup> thus contributing to the patron's power. A third figure in this network of patronage has been called the "broker," a term introduced into the discussion by Jeremy Boissevain: "Persons who dispense first-order resources [e.g., land, jobs, and the like] may be called patrons. Those who dispense second-order resources [i.e., strategic contacts or access to patrons] are brokers."<sup>9</sup> The term may seem modern, impersonal, and therefore inappropriate, but one must imagine the same personal relationship and duty between broker and client as between patron and client. Indeed, the "broker" is not a third entity *sui generis*, but rather a "client [or friend] to a patron and . . . patron to a client."<sup>10</sup>

The institution of brokerage, far from being a modern imposition on patronal society, is exceedingly well documented in the letters of Pliny the Younger, Cicero, and Fronto.<sup>11</sup> Brokerage is an expectation among political figures. Sophocles (*Oed. Tyr.* 771–74) provides an early literary example of this in Creon's defense against Oedipus's charge of conspiracy to usurp the kingship:

I am welcome everywhere; every man salutes me,  
And those who want your favor seek my ear,  
Since I know how to manage what they ask.

Creon enjoys the salutation of a patron, but his chief benefaction is access to Oedipus and favor from the king. Many of Pliny's letters to Trajan document the former's attempts to gain imperial *beneficia* for his own friends and clients. Particularly informative is *Ep.* 10.4, in which Pliny seeks from Trajan the grant of senatorial office for Vocomius Romanus.<sup>12</sup> He addresses Trajan clearly as a client addressing his patron and proceeds to ask a favor for Romanus. Pliny's character is offered as a guarantee of his client's character, and Trajan's assessment of the second-hand client is inseparable from his assessment of Pliny—indeed, Trajan's "favorable judgment" of Pliny (not Romanus) is the basis for Trajan's granting of this favor.<sup>13</sup> Pliny's repeated attempts (*Ep.* 10.5–7, 10) to gain from Trajan a grant of Roman citizenship for his masseur, Harpocras, outlines a similar structure of relationships, wherein Pliny affords Harpocras

<sup>8</sup> Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 74–75.

<sup>9</sup> Jeremy Boissevain, *Friends of Friends* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974) 148.

<sup>10</sup> Crossan, *Jesus*, 60; see also Davis, *People*, 134: "Characteristically, men are clients to those above them, while at the same time they patronise their inferiors."

<sup>11</sup> G. E. M. de Ste. Croix cites numerous examples from these authors ("Suffragium: From Vote to Patronage," *British Journal of Sociology* 5 [1954] 33–48).

<sup>12</sup> Barbara Levick, *The Government of the Roman Empire: A Sourcebook* (London: Croom Helm, 1985) 141.

<sup>13</sup> Such considerations in the patron–client exchange have an obvious corollary in the church's Christology and soteriology, wherein God, the patron, regards Christ's clients (i.e., the Christians) not as their lives merit but according to the merit of Christ.

access to the emperor, the fount of patronage, which he would never have enjoyed otherwise.

The correspondence of Fronto and Marcus Aurelius also abounds with examples of brokering by both parties. In *Ad M. Caes.* 3.2, the young Aurelius Caesar seeks favor for his friend Herodes Atticus from Fronto, before whom Atticus is shortly scheduled to appear in a legal case. What is particularly interesting to note in these letters is the way that indebtedness remains within each patron-client (or “friend-to-friend”) relationship. Atticus will be indebted to Marcus, who in turn will be indebted to Fronto; similarly, in our earlier example, Voconius will be indebted to Pliny, who will in turn be indebted further to Trajan.<sup>14</sup> The broker, or mediator, at the same time incurs a debt and increases his own honor through the indebtedness of his or her client. Brokerage occurs also between friends and associates in private life. A familiar example appears in Paul’s letter to Philemon, in which the apostle seeks to gain forgiveness for Onesimus, appealing to his convert on the basis of friendship: “So if you consider me your partner (κοινωνόν), welcome him as you would welcome me” (v. 17).

## II. Jesus as Patron and Broker

Given the prevalence and embeddedness of the system of patronage in the Mediterranean world, it is fitting that Jesus should be regarded as the patron of the Christian community. This is another expression of a wider tendency to conceptualize human-divine relationships by means of the language of patronage, seen, for example, in traditional Roman religion and in the adoption of “patron deities” by individuals and collectives (e.g., guilds or cities).<sup>15</sup> The exalted status enjoyed by Jesus (which the author develops at great length and detail through dwelling on Jesus’ sonship, priestly status, and session at God’s right hand) carries the promise of great benefaction and advantage for those who make themselves clients of the Son.

The author’s language emphasizes the patronal role of Jesus: he “helps (ἐπιλαμβάνεται) the descendants of Abraham” (2:16) and comes “to the aid (βοηθῆσαι) of those who are tempted” (2:18). He is thus the one to whom Christians are to look to supply what is wanting in their own resources, which places him in the role of the patron, who provided assistance in many forms to clients. Christians, indeed, have been brought into God’s household (3:6) through their clientage to the Son, thus under God’s protection and provision.

<sup>14</sup> See also Saller, *Patronage*, 75 n. 194: “That the mediators would have received the credit and gratitude from the ultimate recipient of the favor is clear from the last sentence of Pliny, *Ep.* 3.8, where Pliny secures a tribunate for Suetonius who passes it on to a relative, with the result that the relative is indebted to Suetonius who is in turn indebted to Pliny.”

<sup>15</sup> See Saller, *Patronage*, 23.

The author speaks of Christ's death in terms of the numerous benefits this selfless act brings to those committed to Jesus, a fact that also develops the honor of Jesus.<sup>16</sup> His death became a tasting of death "on behalf of all (ὕπὲρ παντός)" by God's favor (χάριτι θεοῦ, 2:9). Christ's victorious defeat of the "one who held the power of death" delivered "those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives" (2:14–15). The benefit of Christ's death most emphasized by the author of Hebrews, however, derives from Jesus' appointment as "high priest after the order of Melchizedek," through which consecration to priestly office "he became to all who obey him the cause of eternal salvation" (5:9). In this capacity, Jesus affords access to God. He is the broker, the mediator (μεσίτης, 8:6; 9:15; 12:24), who secures favor from God on behalf of those who have committed themselves to Jesus as client dependents.<sup>17</sup>

Jesus provides the second-order resource of access to God as μισθοποδότης ("rewarder"), allowing his clients, formerly separated from God by their sins, to approach God as their patron rather than the judge of those who have affronted God through disobedience (cf. 10:30–31). Access to God as patron and protector was a familiar topos of philosophical literature. Epictetus, for example, speaks of the search for the best patron under whose aegis to travel through life—one who could provide security against all assaults and on whom one could rely utterly not only for today but also for tomorrow (*Diss.* 4.1.91–98). His search leads finally and only to God: "Thus [the searcher] reflects and comes to the thought that, if he attach himself to God, he will pass through the world in safety."<sup>18</sup> Christianity, to use the expression of Barbara Levick, "gave access . . . through an incorruptible intermediary, to a reliable authority, an important offering indeed in a patronal society."<sup>19</sup> The discursive sections of Hebrews, which consist largely of comparisons between Jesus, the angels, Moses, and, centrally, the levitical priesthood, seek to demonstrate the supreme efficacy of Jesus' brokerage of God's favor and his certain provision of access to the presence of the Divine Patron.

### *Jesus as Son: A Better Mediator than God's Servants*

The emphasis placed by the author of Hebrews on Jesus' "sonship" has

<sup>16</sup> Cf. *Rhet. ad Her.* 3.7.14, in which an element of the encomium is to answer the question, "If he is dead, what sort of death did he die, and what sort of consequences followed upon it?" Giving one's life to secure benefits for others led to a most honored remembrance, as for the soldiers praised in Pericles' Funeral Oration.

<sup>17</sup> The basic meaning of μεσίτης as "one who establishes a relation which would not otherwise exist" (A. Oepke, "μεσίτης," *TDNT* 4.601) demonstrates the suitability of this term as a Greek equivalent of what Boissvain called a "broker" in patron-client relations.

<sup>18</sup> Cited in Levick, *Government of the Roman Empire*, 150.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

itself important implications for Jesus' efficacy as a mediator of God's *beneficia*. In his attempt to discover "who possessed *gratia*" in the Roman imperial world—that is, who was in a position to provide access to imperial *beneficia*—Saller points first to the imperial household: "When sons and grandsons existed, they and their friends were always natural candidates for the emperor's beneficence."<sup>20</sup> The close relatives of the emperor, especially his sons, were sought after as mediators of the emperor's favor: their close, familial relationship to the patron of the empire gave great hope of success. Saller points to the "two *commendationes* which Fronto sent to Marcus, requesting help in securing *beneficia* from [Antoninus] Pius for clients" (i.e., *Ad M. Caes.* 5.34, 37).<sup>21</sup> He concludes that "proximity (physical and emotional) was a critical factor in determining the channels through which imperial *beneficia* flowed."<sup>22</sup> Thus, when the author of Hebrews presents Jesus as "Son" in 1:2 and constructs his comparison of Jesus with the angels in 1:4–14, his aim appears to be to emphasize the greater proximity of Jesus to God as mediator of divine favor. The angels, also familiar to the first-century Judeans and Christians as mediator figures, are strictly a second order of brokers when compared to the Son.

G. E. M. de Ste. Croix notes that any member of a great person's extended household could serve as a broker of that great person's favor. The list includes

his friends, who had the ear of the great man; their friends, even, at only one further remove; even the personal slaves of the great man, who often, for the humble client, could procure or withhold audience with the patron—all these satellites shone with various degrees of reflected glory and were well worth courting.<sup>23</sup>

Throughout Hebrews, one finds members of God's extended household at various degrees of remove contrasted with Jesus, the Son. The angels are God's servants, who are sent out to serve God's clients (i.e., "those who are about to inherit salvation," 1:14); Moses is a faithful, and hence trusted, servant in God's house (3:2). As a valued servant in the household, Moses would provide a certain level of access to the patron of the house, namely, God. The author stresses, however, that the believers have gained the Son as their patron and broker of God's favor: their access to favor is assured by the mediation of the one who stands in such close proximity to God that he bears "the reflected radiance of God's glory" (1:3). The author makes clear that Jesus' glory outshines that of the angels (1:5) and of Moses (3:3) on account of Jesus' closer proximity (i.e., relationship) to God, and hence Jesus provides greater surety of success in his brokerage.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Saller, *Patronage*, 59 (emphasis mine).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>23</sup> De Ste. Croix, "Suffragium," 41.

<sup>24</sup> T. H. Olbricht has recently suggested, based on a comparison with Isocrates' *Evagoras*,

*Jesus as Priest: The Efficacious Μεσίτης*

The heart of the letter (7:1–10:18) is devoted to a lengthy argument which stresses that the benefit of such access to God cannot be attained through the mediation (brokerage) of the levitical priesthood. As with the earlier comparisons with Moses and the angels, this comparison continues to enhance Jesus' honor,<sup>25</sup> but it is also calculated to heighten the value of Jesus' mediation of divine favor for the community. The choice of the levitical priests as the point of comparison continues the author's interest in contrasting Jesus' efficacy as mediator with established figures in the history of revelation and does not necessitate the supposition of a situation where the congregation is feeling a strong attraction to Judaism.<sup>26</sup> Within the scriptural tradition and the practice of Second Temple Judaism, the levitical priesthood figures prominently in its claim to broker access to God. The author therefore increases the value of Christ's mediation by showing the limitations and ineffectiveness of the only alternative sanctioned by scriptural tradition.

The author criticizes the levitical priesthood because of the severe limitations it placed on access to God. This was demonstrated spatially in the layout of the tabernacle: the people remained in the outer courts; the priests could go only as far as the holy place; and the high priest alone enjoyed face-to-face access to the Divine Patron (9:1–3, 6–7). This access, however, was further limited temporally; on only one day out of the liturgical year could the high priest enter the holy of holies to engage in this face-to-face audience (9:7). The levitical priesthood was unable to broaden access to God, for, our author argues, it could not take away the sins which stained the conscience and prevented the people from looking to God with confidence for benefaction (9:9; 10:1–4). The conscience (συνείδησις) bears an "internal witness" to the fact that "defilement extends to the heart and mind."<sup>27</sup> An imperfect conscience, mindful of the affronts given to God, cannot stand before God in expectation of a benefit but only in expectation of judgment and wrath. "Perfection" of conscience entails a decisive purgation of sins, such that the breach in the divine-human relation-

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that the author's comparison of Jesus with the angels serves to highlight his "descent" (as a standard subheading of *encomia*) from a superior rather than an inferior divine being ("Hebrews as Amplification," in *Rhetoric and the New Testament* [ed. S. E. Porter and T. H. Olbricht; JSNTSup 90; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993] 379). While intriguing, this hypothesis does not capture the force of the declaration of Jesus as Son in a patronal culture and also stands against the author's clear intention in every other comparison to show that Jesus' mediation is superior to the mediation provided by the law, given by Moses (through angels), or the Temple priesthood.

<sup>25</sup> Thus also Olbricht, "Amplification," 375, 377.

<sup>26</sup> See W. G. McCown, "Ο ΛΟΓΟΣ ΤΗΣ ΠΑΡΑΚΛΗΣΕΩΣ: The Nature and Function of the Hortatory Sections in the Epistle to the Hebrews" (Ph.D. diss., Union Theological Seminary, Virginia, 1970) 266.

<sup>27</sup> William L. Lane, *Hebrews 9–13* (WBC; Dallas: Word, 1991) 225.

ship is sealed and the possibility of favor restored.<sup>28</sup> The offering for sin on Yom Kippur, far from removing the obstacle that stands in the way of forming a patron-client relationship with God, calls attention to the obstacle, providing only a reminder (ἀνάμνησις) of sins (10:3).

The author dwells on the failure of the levitical priests in order to exalt Christ's success and to stress the uniqueness of the benefit made available by him to those committing themselves to him. Hence he underscores also the folly of relinquishing such an irreplaceable yet necessary gift by not continuing in loyalty and gratitude toward Christ. As Attridge comments, the author's "basic interest is to establish the significance of Christ for the present and future of his addressees by indicating the superiority of the Son to any other agent of God's purposes."<sup>29</sup> Christ alone is the effective broker of access to God as benefactor. After Christ's death, there is the "introduction of a better hope through which we draw near to God," which necessitates the "setting aside of the former commandment because of weakness and uselessness" (7:18-19). This gives Jesus a claim to the greatest honor, gratitude, and loyalty. Before Christ's ministry, one only had recourse to the ineffective priests established by the law; now after his death there is the possibility of unrestricted access to God following the perfection of the worshipers who draw near through Christ.<sup>30</sup> The "second order resource" of direct access to God would have been especially valued in a patronal culture where "face-to-face contact" with the patron was of special importance, giving one a greater hope of making a successful suit.<sup>31</sup>

Jesus makes this available through his superior priestly mediation, or brokerage, in matters divine. The author claims that Jesus has made the necessary purification for sins. Through the "sacrifice of himself" Jesus has decisively "put away sin" (9:26) and "obtained eternal redemption" (9:12; cf. also 1:3 and 2:17). Jesus' sacrifice, offered once for all (10:12), provides the cleansing that the consciences of the worshipers required, such that they might have confidence before God and assurance of divine favor:

For if the sprinkling of defiled persons with the blood of goats and bulls and with the ashes of a heifer sanctifies for the purification of the flesh, how much

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 224.

<sup>29</sup> Attridge, *Hebrews*, 55.

<sup>30</sup> The author of Hebrews has thus provided yet another component of the encomium in his discussion of Jesus' ministry, as Quintilian (*Inst. Orat.* 7.10) prescribes: "There is a greater variety required in the praise of men. In the first place there is a distinction to be made as regards time between the period in which the objects of our praise lived and the time preceding their birth; and further, in the case of the dead, we must also distinguish the period following their death." This "before and after" aspect is forcefully expressed in such passages as 7:18-19 and 11:39-40: "And all these, though well attested by their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had foreseen something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect."

<sup>31</sup> Saller, *Patronage*, 61.



more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify your conscience from dead works to serve the living God. (9:14)

Again, this perfection indicates the removal of sin. The author himself explicates his claim that “by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified” (10:14) by referring to the promise in Jeremiah 31 that “their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more” (10:17). This proves for the author that Jesus’ sacrifice has effected the final purification of sins which leaves neither remembrance of sins (before God or in the conscience of the worshiper) nor the need for any further offering for sin. Only those who have been “perfected” stand beyond the need for future sacrifices. In Wis 4:10–13, *τελειωθείς* (“having been perfected,” 4:13) appears to be functionally equivalent to, and defined by, *εὐάρεστος θεῷ γενόμενος* (“having become pleasing to God,” 4:10). Similarly, Jesus’ sacrifice restores favor to the relationship of God and human beings, who now may stand before God as pleasing to God, and hence may stand in expectation of God’s patronage.

Jesus has, through the veil of his flesh (10:20), entered the heavenly sanctuary to stand perpetually before God. According to the author of Hebrews, he has gone in before God as mediator on our behalf and thus encounters the worshipers as broker of God’s benefactions. “For Christ has entered, not into a sanctuary made with hands, a copy of the true one, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf” (9:24). Jesus’ offering of himself makes him the “mediator of a new covenant” (9:15), who fills this role precisely “in order that those who have been called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred which redeems them from the transgressions under the first covenant” (9:15). The “promise” is a key term encapsulating the manifold benefactions gained through Jesus’ brokerage (mediation).

Jesus does not, like the levitical high priest, enter the sanctuary only once annually, but rather stands there continually, having passed into the true sanctuary of heaven. Further, he does not enter there on behalf of his clients who wait outside without access to God. Rather, Jesus’ passage into the heavenly sanctuary opens up the way for believers to know and approach God as benefactor and patron.<sup>32</sup> Jesus has entered “as a forerunner for us” (6:20), as the author envisions the consummation of the Christian pilgrimage to be entrance into the rest of the city of God, the heavenly homeland (11:14; 13:14). Such final access, however, follows upon the access that can be enjoyed now in this life:

<sup>32</sup> See Danker, *Benefactor*, 319. Discussing Luke 18:18–30, Danker writes: “To know God is to recognize him as the Chief Benefactor, who will bestow ‘treasure in heaven’ on those who share their treasure on earth.”

Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace (τῷ θρόνῳ τῆς χάριτος), that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need (ἵνα λάβωμεν ἔλεος καὶ χάριν εὐρωμεν εἰς εὐκαιρον βοήθειαν, 4:14–16; cf. 10:19–22).

The mediation of Jesus allows his followers to draw near to God, looking to God as their benefactor. The “priestly” or “religious” tone of this central section of Hebrews should not obscure the fact that divine–human relationships are still being conceptualized in terms of patron–client relations. First, as was noted earlier, there was a widespread tendency to use existing social and political structures to give shape to beliefs about the divine and how one might relate to the divine. Second, the larger argument of Hebrews makes it clear that what is at stake is access to God’s favor and benefits.

### *Χάρις and Patronage*

A term of central importance for discourse about patronage is *χάρις*, equivalent to the Latin *gratia*, which covers a comparable range of meaning.<sup>33</sup> This term dominates an important transitional section of Hebrews, namely, 4:14–16.<sup>34</sup> Heb 4:16 twice employs the noun *χάρις*: once to describe the “throne” (referring by metonymy to the One seated upon the throne), once to describe the expected result of such an approach. Usually translated as “grace,” classical and Hellenistic Greek authors place this word squarely within the social-semantic field of patronage and clientage. Aristotle, for example, defines *χάρις* as the disposition of a benefactor, “the feeling in accordance with which one who has it is said to render a service to one who needs it, not in return for something nor in the interest of him who renders it, but in that of the recipient” (*Rhet.* 2.7.2). The word was, however, multivalent, being used also to refer to the proper return for a benefit, namely, gratitude, as in Dio, *Orat.* 31.37:

For what is more sacred than honour or gratitude? (τί γάρ ἐστιν ἱερώτερον τιμῆς ἢ χάριτος;) Do you not know that the majority of men regard the Graces as goddesses? Therefore, if anyone mutilates their statues or overturns their altars, you hold this man guilty of impiety; but if injury or ruin is done to that very *grace* (*χάρις*) from which these goddesses have derived their name (*Χάριτες*) by anyone’s performing a *gracious* act in a way that is

<sup>33</sup> See Saller, *Patronage*, 21.

<sup>34</sup> The structural importance of this passage as both conclusion to the previous argument and introduction to the central argument has been carefully demonstrated by G. H. Guthrie in his published dissertation, *The Structure of Hebrews: A Text-Linguistic Analysis* (Leiden: Brill, 1994) 79–82, 103, 144.

not right, but in an ignoble, illiberal, and crafty manner showing rank ingratitude (*ἀχαριστῶν*) to his benefactors, can we say that such a man has sense and is more intelligent than his fellows?

Finally, it may refer to the actual gift or benefit conferred, as in 2 Cor 8:19, where Paul speaks of the “generous gift” he is administering (i.e., the collection for the church in Jerusalem). The claim of Malina and Rohrbaugh that, “in the New Testament, the language of grace is the language of patronage,”<sup>35</sup> is a quite welcome observation, placing the nebulous and indefinite term “grace” into a definite social and lexical province of meaning.<sup>36</sup>

Jesus’ gift of access to God (4:14–16) affords the community access to resources for endurance in faith so that they may receive the benefactions promised for the future, to be awarded before God’s court at the end of the age. The believers may draw near to God and expect to “receive mercy and find favor”—that is, the disposition of God to give assistance—“to help in time of need” (4:16). Such access would be expected to engender confidence in the believers, giving them a hopeful orientation toward the world. Aristotle again provides a definition: “Confidence (*θαρρεῖν*) is the contrary of fear and that which gives confidence of that which causes fear, so that the hope of what is salutary is accompanied by an impression that it is quite near at hand, while the things to be feared are either non-existent or far off” (*Rhet.* 2.5.16). Through Jesus, the believers are brought into the presence of God, near to One who has the will and power to provide help.<sup>37</sup> Thus, the believer has become a client of God and may enjoy the confidence that accompanies the nearness of such help. In emphasizing this benefit won by Christ for his clients, the author has moved into the topic of security, according to the author of the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* the other component of “advantage” and goal of deliberative oratory (together with honor).<sup>38</sup> Their allegiance to Christ gives them access to the resources that will help them in the face of the exigencies of their life as Christians in society.

According to the author of Hebrews, the relationship of human beings with their God takes a decisive turn in the ministry of Jesus. Under the old covenant and its ineffective brokers of divine favor, the people stand in fear of God and cannot approach to stand in God’s presence. Under the new and better covenant, of which Christ is the mediator (*κρείττονος διαθήκης μεσίτης*,

<sup>35</sup> Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Commentary*, 75.

<sup>36</sup> See also Danker, *Benefactor*, 437–38, on 2 Corinthians 8; also p. 451 on Gal 2:21.

<sup>37</sup> See Aristotle, *Rhet.* 2.5.17: People may be made to feel confident “if remedies are possible, if there are means of help, either great or numerous, or both.”

<sup>38</sup> *Rhet. ad Her.* 3.2.3: “Advantage in political deliberation has two aspects: Security and Honour (*tutam, honestam*). To consider Security is to provide some plan or other for ensuring the avoidance of a present or imminent danger.”

8:6), the believers find not fear but confidence to approach boldly, encouraged by the angels and souls of the righteous praising the benefactor:

For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers entreat that no further messages be spoken to them. For they could not endure the order that was given, "If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned." Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear." But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and to a judge who is God of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant (διαθήκης νέας μεσίτη), and to the sprinkled blood that speaks more graciously than the blood of Abel. (12:18–24)

Apart from Jesus, there is no such access to χάρις, such that the hearers are powerfully motivated to remain loyal to their patron in order to retain the benefits of his brokerage. Schweizer's striking statement thus appears to have considerable merit: "the sacrifice on the cross opens to the new High Priest the way to heaven. Strictly speaking the cross is therefore not the saving event itself, but the act that makes the saving event possible."<sup>39</sup> The cross represents the sacrifice offered by the mediator of the new covenant, which is a part of the larger picture of Christ as priest, where Jesus' saving power is most clearly located for the author of Hebrews.

Jesus' death inaugurated the new covenant, the goal of which is to cause "those who have been called" to receive the "promise of an eternal inheritance" (9:14). Those who exhibit faith and perseverance "inherit the promises" (6:12), which entails "salvation" (σωτηρία, 1:14), and "reward" (μισθαποδοσία, 10:35). The content of this future benefit includes the promise of honor and the possession of that which inspires respect, as Jesus leads the "many children to glory (πολλοὺς υἱοὺς εἰς δόξαν ἀγαγόντα)" (2:10). The believers hope for the "better and lasting possessions" (10:34) for which they willingly suffered the loss of their worldly possessions, and to which their faith gives them a "title-deed."<sup>40</sup>

<sup>39</sup> E. Schweizer, *Lordship and Discipleship* (SBT 28; Naperville, IL: Allenson, 1960) 72.

<sup>40</sup> D. R. Worley, Jr., argues that the definition of "faith" in 11:1 answers directly to the believers' loss of property in 10:34 as a result of their loyalty to Christ and the Christian group ("God's Faithfulness to Promise: The Hortatory Use of Commissive Language in Hebrews" [Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1981]). He cites papyri where ὑπόστασις is roughly equal to ὑπαρξίς (e.g., *POxy.* 2.237 p. 176, in which ὑπόστασις appears to mean a property statement or title deed) ("Faithfulness," 87). He suggests that the author of Hebrews may use ὑπόστασις in the sense of title deed in 11:1, linking his discussion of faith with 10:32–36 and the Christians' loss of property (and therefore abuse of their ὑποστάσεις—title deeds) (*ibid.*, 90–91). Based on the even wider occurrence of ὑπόστασις in papyri as a "bid," Worley favors this translation for "faith" in 11:1, yielding the following sense: "Your property was confiscated. It went for the highest bid (ὑπόστασις). But remember

They will be given a place in the “rest” (κατάπαυσις) promised by God (4:8–9), citizenship in the city that God has prepared (11:16; 13:14), and a share in the “unshakable kingdom” (12:28).

### III. The Proper Response to One’s Benefactor

The author reminds his audience at length of the uniqueness and magnitude of Jesus’ benefits in order to motivate them to make a proper response. This entails, first, the demonstration of respect for the benefactor, acting in such a way as to enhance his honor—certainly avoiding any course of action that would bring him into dishonor, which would lead to the clients’ exchanging favor for wrath, χάρις for ὀργή.<sup>41</sup> Honor from those benefited was the return expected for patronage. Frederick W. Danker, for example, cites a letter of Gnaeus Arrius Cornelius Proculus stating that “generous people are deserving of honor.”<sup>42</sup> Aristotle states that “honour is the due reward of virtue and beneficence (τῆς μὲν γὰρ ἀρετῆς καὶ τῆς εὐεργεσίας ἡ τιμὴ γέρας)” (*Eth. Nic.* 1163b1–5). One party would enjoy the benefit; the other the “prestige” that came from “the ability to confer services which were highly valued and could not be remunerated.”<sup>43</sup> The client worked off his debt “by showing respect for the benefactor.” The client was expected to return this gift of honor not only in his or her own demeanor and actions, but in public testimony to the benefactor:

The greater the favour, the more earnestly must we express ourselves, resorting to such compliments as: . . . “I shall never be able to repay you my gratitude, but, at any rate, I shall not cease from declaring everywhere that I am unable to repay it.” (Seneca, *De Benef.* 2.24.2)

Let us show how grateful we are for the blessing that has come to us by pouring forth our feelings, and let us bear witness to them (*testemur*), not merely in the hearing of the giver, but everywhere. (Seneca, *De Benef.* 2.22.1)

The second essential element of a proper response is gratitude, which signifies more than a subjective feeling. Seneca writes:

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that you have claim to a far better possession. Faith is your bid which guarantees your claim to the things you hope for” (ibid., 92).

<sup>41</sup> This expression is taken from Clement of Alexandria’s *Exhortatio* 9: “Look to the threatening! Look to the exhortation! Look to the punishment! Why, then, should we any longer change grace into wrath, and not receive the word with open ears, and entertain God as a guest in pure spirits? For great is the grace of His promise, ‘if to-day we hear His voice.’”

<sup>42</sup> Danker, *Benefactor*, 436; see also Saller, who points to the widespread evidence of inscriptions attesting to the public demonstration of perpetual gratitude on the part of those who had received the favors of both men and women who were well-placed in Roman or provincial society (*Patronage*, 10).

<sup>43</sup> J. D. M. Derrett, *Jesus’s Audience: The Social and Psychological Environment in which He Worked* (New York: Seabury, 1974) 41.

No man can be grateful unless he has learned to scorn the things which drive the common herd to distraction; if you wish to make a return for a favour, you must be willing to go into exile, or to pour forth your blood, or to undergo poverty, or, . . . even to let your very innocence be stained and exposed to shameful slanders. (*Ep. Mor.* 81.27)

Gratitude such as Seneca describes involves an intense loyalty to the person from whom one has received beneficence, such that one would place a greater value on service to the benefactor than on one's place in one's homeland, one's physical well-being, one's wealth, and one's reputation. The bond between client and patron, or, one should add, between friends who share mutual beneficence, is thus truly the strongest bond in Greco-Roman society. Where the sanctity of gratitude is maintained,<sup>44</sup> it becomes the one support that remains after all other values and valuables have crumbled—truly the cement of society which Crossan and others have claimed it to be. Such, the author of Hebrews claims, is the gratitude, the loyalty, that is due the Benefactor and Broker of God's favor, Jesus. When the author concludes his exhortation in 12:28, he stresses this second sense of χάρις: ἔχωμεν χάριν, "let us show gratitude." Saller notes that such *amicitia*—indeed whether between equals or inequals—"was supposed to be founded on virtue (especially *fides*)."<sup>45</sup> It is this *fides*, or πίστις, to which the author of Hebrews enjoins his readers through both negative and positive models, through warnings and exhortations.

#### IV. The Danger of Violating the Bond of Patronage

The severity of the author's warnings stems from his perception that at least some believers are in danger of making an improper response, indeed of violating the sacred bond of the patron-client relationship. They are in danger of outraging the Son of God, of relinquishing their enjoyment of present benefits (e.g., access to God) and hope of future benefits (e.g., entering the promised rest) in favor of provoking God's anger, bringing upon their own heads God's satisfaction for the affronts to his honor. They are in danger of encountering God as judge and avenger, of receiving punishment, and hence disgrace, before his court at his coming, when every enemy will be subjected to Christ. Turning away from the discursive sections that develop the comparison of Jesus with other mediator figures in the Jewish tradition, we look now to the hortatory sections, in which the author expatiates on the ill consequences that will attend the violation of the patron-client bond through distrust and improper evaluation of the divine *beneficia* and urges them through repeated warnings to consider the honor due their benefactor, lest his injured dignity seek satisfaction upon them.

<sup>44</sup> One may here recall Dio, *Orat.* 31.37: "For what is more sacred than honour or gratitude (τί γάρ ἐστιν ἱερώτερον τιμῆς ἢ χάριτος)?"

<sup>45</sup> Saller, *Patronage*, 12–13.

*The Pattern of Distrust:  
The Wilderness Generation*

Πίστις appears as one of the more prominent virtues upheld and urged by the author of Hebrews. It is central to the main body of exhortation in 10:32–12:3 and represents the stance that the author most desires his hearers to embrace. Πίστις forms a contrastive pair with ἀπιστία, which appears as the fatal flaw (coupled with ἀπειθεία) of the wilderness generation, developed in the author's first extended *exemplum* in 3:1–4:11. The importance of this early example derives from the later, extensive, and positive portrayal of the virtue of πίστις, for which the wilderness generation serves as a foil. The addressees are urged not to repeat the folly of their spiritual ancestors, who provoked their benefactor to anger (3:10–11) through their distrust in God's goodwill and ability on the very eve of God's deliverance of the promised land into their possession. Here the author has in mind the events of Numbers 14: the echoes in the Psalm of the events related in Exodus are muted in the LXX translation. Whereas the MT of the Psalm directs the reader to the complaints of the wilderness generation over the lack of water at Massah and Meribah (Exod 17:1–7 and Num 20:2–13), while also alluding to the oath made by God in Num 14:21–23 in the wake of the rebellion, in the LXX the Hebrew place-names have been translated such that the whole passage now refers to the single episode contained in Numbers 14, namely, the people's refusal to take the land as God commanded on account of their fear of the inhabitants.<sup>46</sup>

Despite God's continued provision from the deliverance from Egypt to the threshold of Canaan, the Israelites refused to go forward in faith. The πίστις word group involves trust or reliability: in common Greek usage, πίστις refers both to the responsibility accepted by another to discharge some duty or provide some service and the affirmation of the reliability of that other by the person who awaits the fulfillment of the obligation.<sup>47</sup> πιστός describes the person

<sup>46</sup> That the author of Hebrews has this chapter chiefly in mind is demonstrated by several parallels. One would expect the oath of Num 14:21–23, referred to in the psalm (v. 11), to be mentioned by the author in his discussion (3:18). He also speaks of the "corpses" which fell in the wilderness (ὧν τὰ κώλα ἔπεσεν ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ, 3:17), a direct reference to Num 14:29: "your dead bodies shall fall in this wilderness (ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ ταύτῃ πεσεῖται τὰ κώλα ὑμῶν)." Possibly the author has in mind also Num 14:31–32, where this phrase is repeated in connection with the people's low evaluation of the prize they were abandoning. Finally, while the psalm speaks of the people's having experienced God's benefits for forty years, after which God becomes angered with their persistent lack of trust (καὶ εἶδον τὰ ἔργα μου τεσσαράκοντα ἔτη: διὸ προσώχθισα τῇ γενεᾷ ταύτῃ, Ps 95:9–10; Heb 3:9–10), the author of Hebrews (3:17) reverts to the original details of the Numbers narrative, in which God declares that the people shall know his anger for forty years (Num 14:34).

<sup>47</sup> For example, Dio of Prusa delivers an oration on ἀπιστία (*Orat.* 74) in which he recommends distrust of other people as a path to safety in human affairs. The companion oration, περὶ πίστεως, speaks of the burdens of being entrusted with some charge or responsibility. Danker catalogues several inscriptions in which πίστις refers to "that which is entrusted," such that "faith is

who may be relied on to carry out the obligation, who is “trustworthy.” Ἀπιστία may either signify the untrustworthiness of a base person or the feeling that ascribed unreliability to another, such that one neither entrusts that other with something nor trusts that other to fulfill an obligation.

A closer examination of the situation of the wilderness generation reveals the basic patron–client structure, and the fulfillment of obligations, underlying the narrative. God has undertaken an obligation to bring the people into the land that God promised to give them and had provided many proofs of reliability (καὶ εἶδον τὰ ἔργα μου, Heb 3:9). In light of the spies’ report concerning the might of the native inhabitants of the land, however, they wavered in their trust, that is, doubted whether or not God would be able to fulfill his obligation (Num 13:31–14:4). Indeed, they ascribe to their Patron the base motive of treachery—bringing them to this place to die (Num 14:3)—and abandon the prospects of the promise being fulfilled by setting in motion a plan to return to Egypt (Num 14:4), thus negating all the benefits God had already given them. They completely negate the validity of God’s promise: “our children will become a prey” (Num 14:3, 31). Such distrust is interpreted by God as a test of God’s reliability and ability to provide, which is nothing less than a challenge to the Benefactor, all the more inappropriate given the number of tests God had allowed in order to stimulate trust (πίστις).<sup>48</sup>

Distrust derives from a value judgment, specifically a low estimation of the honor and ability of the person whom one distrusts. Distrust is the proper response to base persons, οἱ πονηροί.<sup>49</sup> Thus, the wilderness generation’s response of ἀπιστία enacts a negative value judgment on God and insults their patron, who alone is truly “good” (ἀγαθός). The narrative in Numbers explicitly links distrust and the provocation that arises from contempt: “And the LORD said to Moses, ‘How long will this people despise me? And how long will they not believe in me (ἕως τίνος παροξύνει με ὁ λαός οὗτος καὶ ἕως τίνος οὐ πιστεύουσίν μοι), in spite of all the signs which I have wrought among them?’” (14:11).<sup>50</sup> Insofar as they withdrew their trust from their benefactor, they

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required by the one who awaits fulfillment of the obligation that has been accepted by another” (*Benefactor*, 352–53).

<sup>48</sup> Distrust and challenging God are linked also in Wis 1:2: “God is found by those who do not put him to the test, and manifests himself to those who do not distrust him (ὅτι εὕρισκεται τοῖς μὴ περιάρζουσιν αὐτὸν ἐμφανίζεται δὲ τοῖς μὴ ἀπιστοῦσιν αὐτῷ).”

<sup>49</sup> Pseudo-Isocrates advises his young friend thus concerning trust: “Consider that you owe it to yourself no less to mistrust bad men than to put your trust in the good (προσῆκειν ἡγοῦ τοῖς πονηροῖς ἀπιστεῖν, ὡς περ τοῖς χρηστοῖς πιστεύειν)” (*Ad Demonicum* 22).

<sup>50</sup> The verb παροξύνω, often translated as “to urge, prick or spur on” or “to provoke, irritate, excite” (LSJ), carries definite connotations of contempt, such that the provocation would spring from the understanding that one has been slighted or insulted. This is most clear in LXX Ps 73:10 and 18, where παροξύνω is set in parallel phrases with the verbs ὀνειδίζει and ὀνειδίσαι, and the object of the verb is God’s “name.” A name, as receptacle of honor, is provoked only after and as a



declared God to be unreliable and unable to fulfill the obligation God had assumed in their behalf; they declared God to be base, and so repaid their proven benefactor with flagrant contempt and disobedience, thereby rejecting the right and authority of the patron to command obedience (an expected return for receiving benefits).

God's response is one of "wrath" or "anger" (διὸ προσώχθισα τῇ γενεᾷ ταύτῃ, Heb 3:10) toward those who have been disobedient, who have trampled the promise and faltered in their trust. Anger, according to Aristotle (*Rhet.* 2.2.1), is aroused in response to a violation of the honor to which one believes oneself entitled: "Let us then define anger (ὀργή) as a longing, accompanied by pain, for a real or apparent revenge (τιμωρία) for a real or apparent slight (ὀλιγωρία)."<sup>51</sup> He notes among various sorts of slighting that people "are angry at slights from those by whom they think they have a right to expect to be well treated; such are those on whom they have conferred or are conferring benefits (εὖ πεποίηκεν ἢ ποιεῖ) . . . and all those whom they desire, or did desire, to benefit" (*Rhet.* 2.2.8). This well describes the situation in Numbers 14. God's every act in the narrative has been to bring the people from a wretched into an enviable state, leading them from slavery to a land for their own possession. Those whom he desired to benefit, however, returned insult for favor, slighting God through their distrust of God's good will and ability.<sup>52</sup>

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consequence of being despised or regarded with less honor than appropriate for the repute of the name. The action that is provoked will seek to restore the honor of that name. In LXX Ps 106:11, παρώξυναν is set in a phrase parallel to παρεπύκρναναν, the objects of the verbs being the "words of God" and the "counsel of the Most High." A similar usage appears in LXX Isa 5:24: "They have not desired the law of the Lord Sabaoth, but have despised the oracle of the Holy One of Israel (οὐ γὰρ ἠθέλησαν τὸν νόμον κυρίου σαβαωθ, ἀλλὰ τὸ λόγιον τοῦ ἁγίου Ἰσραὴλ παρώξυναν)." Words, advice, and laws are disregarded, even despised, but not provoked. To despise a person of honor, however, will provoke a response in defense of his or her honor. Finally, the verb is used to express the effect of Israel's idolatry upon the one true God. In Isa 65:1-7, God's appeal to the Israelites is continually rejected while the people reach out to idols. Their spurning of God and adoration of other objects of worship, which amount to insults against God, constitutes a provocation of God: "I spread out my hands all the day to a disobedient and hostile people (λαὸν ἀπειθοῦντα καὶ ἀντιλέγοντα), who walk in a way that is not good, following their own devices; a people who provoke me to my face continually (ὁ λαὸς οὗτος ὁ παροξύνων με ἐναντίον ἐμοῦ διὰ παντός), sacrificing in gardens and burning incense upon bricks; . . . because they burned incense upon the mountains and reviled me (ὤνειδίσάν με) upon the hills, I will measure into their bosom payment for their former doings." Thus, when the wilderness generation is said to have provoked God (Num 14:11), the source of this provocation is the people's choice of a course of action that displayed contempt for God.

<sup>51</sup> Thus Bruce Malina and Jerome Neyrey are correct to include "nouns such as vengeance, wrath, anger" among "perceptions of being challenged or shamed" ("Honor and Shame in Luke-Acts: Pivotal Values of the Mediterranean World," in *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation* [ed. J. Neyrey; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991] 46).

<sup>52</sup> Again according to Aristotle, "slighting (ὀλιγωρία) is an actualization of opinion (δόξα) in regard to something which appears valueless (μηδενὸς ἀξίον). . . . Now there are three kinds of

The result of God's wrath is the people's irrevocable loss of access to the promised benefit. It is specifically out of God's anger that God swears the oath that excludes the rebellious generation from the promised land (3:11): "As I swore in my wrath, 'They shall not enter my rest' (ὡς ὤμοσα ἐν τῇ ὀργῇ μου: Εἰ εἰσελεύσονται εἰς τὴν κατάπαυσίν μου)." The author of Hebrews ascribes this loss explicitly to disobedience and distrust (3:18–19): "And to whom did he swear that they should never enter his rest, but to those who were disobedient (τοῖς ἀπειθήσασιν)? So we see that they were unable to enter because of distrust (δι' ἀπιστίαν)."

Numbers records an abortive attempt on the part of the people to recover the benefit they had forfeited. Moses' report of God's response to their distrust left them in mourning. When they realized their loss, they sought to regain their inheritance (Num 14:40–45):

And they rose early in the morning, and went up to the heights of the hill country, saying, "See, we are here, we will go up to the place which the LORD has promised; for we have sinned." But Moses said, "Why now are you transgressing the command of the LORD, for that will not succeed? Do not go up lest you be struck down before your enemies, for the LORD is not among you. For there the Amalekites and the Canaanites are before you, and you shall fall by the sword; because you have turned back from following the LORD, the LORD will not be with you."

A secondary negative example of the impossibility of a return to favor, that is, to the hope of the benefits that were once spurned, appears in the author's recollection of Esau, who is permanently barred from his birthright once he trades it away (12:17). Esau's downfall is that he has no regard for God's promises and benefactions, represented here by his birthright as a son of Isaac, the son of Abraham. His incorrect evaluation manifests "a decisive contempt for the gifts of God."<sup>53</sup> These examples give force to the author's warnings about the impossibility of restoration and have clearly been chosen on account of the proximity to exclusion in which some among the community now find themselves. The believers themselves are faced with the threat that, once they turn away from Christ and bring him dishonor, there is no repentance, no sacrifice, that can restore their standing in God's favor (6:6; 10:26).

The wilderness generation stands as an "example of disobedience" (4:11),

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slight: disdain (καταφρόνησις), spitefulness, and insult (ὕβρις). . . . He who disdains, slights, since men disdain those things which they consider valueless and slight what is of no account (ὃ τε γὰρ καταφρονῶν ὀλιγορεῖ· ὅσα γὰρ οἴονται μηδενὸς ἄξια, τούτων καταφρονοῦσιν, τῶν δὲ μηδενὸς ἄξιων ὀλιγοροῦσιν)" (*Rhet.* 2.2.4). The relation between distrust and forming a negative value judgment of a person's character and worth has already been explored. When a person of merit (e.g., the divine benefactor) is judged unreliable and untrustworthy, no small slight has been made.

<sup>53</sup> Lane, *Hebrews* 9–13, 488.

into whose pattern some of the addressees are in danger of falling. The distrust (ἀπιστία) of the wilderness generation stands in stark contrast to the trust (πίστις) exemplified by the people of faith in Hebrews 11. Indeed, faith in chap. 11 is defined specifically within the context of patron–client relationships: “without faith it is impossible to please God (χωρίς δὲ πίστεως ἀδύνατον εὐαρεσθῆσαι). For whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him (πιστεῦσαι γὰρ δεῖ τὸν προσερχόμενον τῷ θεῷ ὅτι ἔστιν καὶ τοῖς ἐκζητοῦσιν αὐτὸν μισθαποδότης γίνεταί).” That is, faith looks to God as benefactor with unwavering trust, and, further, faith perseveres in that commitment to the patron and in the course that leads to the reception of the benefaction.<sup>54</sup> In the example of the wilderness generation, one finds a picture of a group brought to the very border of their promised inheritance, who at the last panic in the face of their estimation of the native inhabitants and withdraw their trust from God. They choose to act with fear and respect for the people over whom God had promised to give them victory, rather than in fear and respect for the God who promised them a lasting inheritance. *Mutatis mutandis*, this may well describe the situation of the addressees as perceived by the author. Having endured a period of wandering, as it were, in which they experienced the world’s rejection and still held onto God’s promise (10:32–34), some of the believers are wavering in their commitment at the very time when they are closer than ever to attaining what was promised. Some stand in danger of falling into distrust, of disobeying God by not continuing to assemble together to worship (10:25) and by dissociating from those in need (13:3), of regarding more the opinion and hostility of society than of the God who promises them an unshakable kingdom.<sup>55</sup>

### *Warnings against Dishonoring the Divine Patron and Broker*

Perceiving that the Christian community stands on the verge of dishonoring God in a manner similar to the wilderness generation and Esau, the author makes the addressees aware of the danger through a number of stern warnings designed to arouse fear and dread in the hearers of the consequences of pursuing a course that would provoke their patron. These warnings, while calling for and advising against certain actions, also aim at appealing to the emotions of the hearers and are thus an important part of the argument from *pathos*, an essential component of persuasion for the classical rhetorical theorists. The admonitions that are most crucial to this study appear in 6:4–8 and 10:26–31, for these

<sup>54</sup> See Derrett, *Jesus’s Audience*, 44, in which the author defines faith as “unquestioning expectation of a benefit from Yahweh.”

<sup>55</sup> For an extended discussion of these aspects of the author’s agenda in Hebrews, see D. A. deSilva, “Despising Shame: A Cultural-Anthropological Investigation of the Epistle to the Hebrews,” *JBL* 113 (1994) 439–61.

explicitly draw on topics of patronage and the proper return for benefactions. The warnings appearing in 2:1–4; 3:12; 4:1; 10:35–38; and 12:15, while of secondary importance, also reflect the author's interest in drawing the addressees' attention to the honor of Christ and the favor of God, both of which stand to be violated should the community show a lack of πίστις.

Following the initial presentation of Jesus and declaration of his dignity as the Son, in whom God now speaks, the author offers this exhortation (2:1–4):

Therefore we must pay the closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it (Διὰ τοῦτο δεῖ περισσοτέρως προσέχειν ἡμᾶς τοῖς ἀκουσθεῖσιν, μήποτε παραρυσώμεν). For if the message declared by angels was valid and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation (πὼς ἡμεῖς ἐκφευξόμεθα τηλικαύτης ἀμελήσαντες σωτηρίας)? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard him, while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his own will.

The introduction of this passage with the logical connector Διὰ τοῦτο commands attention. It suggests that this warning against “drifting away” from the message, and so “neglecting so great a salvation,” is the goal of the preceding section.<sup>56</sup> In 1:5–14, the author demonstrated at length that the dignity of the Son surpassed that of the angels. In this warning, he first notes that every act of willful neglect against the message delivered by angels (i.e., the Torah) received the punishment that justice demanded. That is, the honor of the angels could be restored—and it was necessary that it should be restored—only by means of the punishment of those who had shown them contempt. A greater punishment, however, must await those who “neglect so great a salvation” as was gained by the Son for his clients at such cost to himself.<sup>57</sup>

Dwelling on the honor of Christ in 1:1–14, therefore, enhances the severity of the insult offered to Christ where his message and gift are neglected. Inherent in the participle ἀμελήσαντες is the notion of showing contempt for the thing “neglected.” Thus, both F. Delitzsch and G. Lünemann, commenting on this verse, offer a word indicating contempt as a synonym of “neglect.”<sup>58</sup>

<sup>56</sup> This connection has been noted before by authors such as Olbricht (“Amplification,” 377); since his interest remains in the rhetorical features of the text, however, he does not attempt to offer an explanation for how this serves the larger “rhetorical agenda” of Hebrews with regard to patronage and clientage.

<sup>57</sup> The author of Hebrews is not reticent to detail this cost. Salvation was gained at the cost of “enduring a cross” and the disgrace attached to it (12:2; 13:12)—that is, nothing short of Jesus' own life (2:9; 9:12, 26; 10:10).

<sup>58</sup> F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (2 vols.; Edinburgh: Clark, 1871, 1872) 1.97: “how shall we escape . . . if we shall have neglected or despised so great a salvation?”; cf. G. Lünemann, *Kritisch-exegetischer Handbuch über den Hebräerbrief* (MeyerK 13; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1878) ad loc.

Perhaps this semantic relation is best demonstrated in a passage from Epictetus (*Diss.* 4.10.14), in which the philosopher expresses his hope that he will die while occupied with tending his moral faculty, so that he may make the claim before God: “the faculties which I received from Thee to enable me to understand Thy governance and to follow it, these I have not neglected (τούτων οὐκ ἠμέλησα); I have not dishonoured Thee (οὐ κατήσχυνά σε) as far as in me lay.” Neglect for God’s gifts and revelation parallels dishonoring God. To show such neglect toward the promise of the gospel, and hence to affront the bearer of that message, would put one in greater danger than those who transgressed the Torah.

The second warning is built around the example of the wilderness generation, which in Psalm 95 is held up as a negative paradigm to each successive generation of worshipers. The danger facing the community is the possibility of apostasy, a choice that would follow from a faltering trust: “Take care, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart (καρδία πονηρὰ ἀπιστίας), leading you to fall away (ἀποστήναι) from the living God” (Heb 3:12). According to Danker, this καρδία πονηρὰ is a “base heart,” which is “the root of a wicked life.” Such a heart is neither capable of virtue “nor of recognizing it in others.”<sup>59</sup> Hence the person having such a heart would not recognize the trustworthiness of the God who gives such great promises in Christ and, distrusting God, would outrage the deity. The author intimates that some of the addressees may be in danger of “turning from the living God.” This phrase contains allusions to Jewish and Christian missionary language, particularly with regard to the implicit distinction between the one, true, and “living” God and the many false, lifeless idols.<sup>60</sup> Since a great obstacle to the addressees’ regaining their standing in society is their avoidance of all idolatrous activities, the author may be afraid that some of the members, desiring to reduce tension between them and the unbelieving society, are considering a return to engagement in the worship of idols, which formed a prominent part of most every civic, social, economic, and political activity.

In light of the fate of the wilderness generation, who acted out their disregard for God through distrust and disobedience, the author, in an obvious appeal to their emotions, calls the addressees to be afraid (4:1): “Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest remains, let us fear lest any of you be judged to have fallen short (Φοβηθῶμεν οὖν, μήποτε καταλειπομένης ἐπαγγελίας εἰσελθεῖν εἰς τὴν κατάπαυσιν αὐτοῦ δοκῇ τις ἐξ ὑμῶν ὑστερηκέναι).” What causes fear is the presence of a highly valued good, referred to by the catchword “rest,” from which a person may be excluded because of a lack of trust (4:2–3). The author hopes that by inciting a deep dread of provoking the

<sup>59</sup> Danker, *Benefactor*, 318.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. 1 Thess 1:9: “how you turned to God from idols, to serve a true and living God (θεῷ ζῶντι).”

benefactor through distrust, the wavering among the addressees will be motivated to confirm their endurance in hope and trust in God. To “fall away” would be to dishonor God, and, as Calvin comments, “too late will be their groans at the last, who slight the grace offered now.”<sup>61</sup>

Perhaps one of the most troublesome passages in the history of theological interpretation appears in 6:4–8, which constitutes a third section of strong admonition:

For it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they then commit apostasy (παραπεσόντας), since they crucify the Son of God on their own account and hold him up to contempt (ἀνασταυροῦντας ἑαυτοῖς τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ παραδειγματίζοντας). For land which has drunk the rain that often falls upon it, and brings forth vegetation useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed; its end is to be burned.

While the author quickly encourages his audience after delivering these dire warnings that such could never be their fate, his words cannot have failed to have their impact (as they have upon generation after generation of readers). Indeed, by again arousing fear of the dread consequences of falling away, he helps assure that the faltering among the congregation will find the resources to persevere.

The author claims, however, no more than what was required by the Greco-Roman ethos, as expressed, for example, in Dio, *Orat.* 31.65: “those who insult their benefactors will by nobody be esteemed to deserve a favour (τοὺς δὲ ὑβρίζοντας εἰς τοὺς εὐεργέτας οὐδεὶς κρινεῖ χάριτος ἀξίους).” This lies behind both troublesome passages with which this study began. Heb 6:4–6 contrasts the benefits that have been enjoyed by the believer (6:4–5) and are full of promise for the future perfection of the gifts, with the strikingly inappropriate response of “turning away” from the one who has gained these gifts for the believer and “holding [him] up to public scorn.”<sup>62</sup> The one who does not persevere in trust enacts contempt for the gifts gained at such cost to the patron and shows a striking lack of gratitude, spurning the benefactor, after which there is no restoration. The one who “shrinks back unto destruction” (10:39), in refusing to endure what is required to keep these benefits, has esteemed them too lightly. The agricultural maxim that follows this warning is actually quite apt. Rain is regarded as a benefaction of God (cf. Matt 5:45b), which here looks for a proper return. God’s gifts are to bring forth gratitude and loyalty toward

<sup>61</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (London: Cornish, 1842) 35.

<sup>62</sup> See H. Schlier, “Παραδειγματίζω,” *TDNT* 2.32.

God as well as useful fruits for the fellow believers (e.g., the acts of service and love commended and recommended in 6:10). Such a response will lead to the consummation of blessing. The improper response of breaking with the benefactor—indeed, bringing dishonor to the name of the benefactor—leads to the curse and the fire, that is, exclusion from the promise and exposure to the anger of the judge.

The admonition of 10:26–31 presents the same severe result in even more heightened tone, seeking to augment the hearers' fear:

For if we sin deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful prospect of judgment, and a fury of fire which will consume the adversaries (φοβερά δέ τις ἐκδοχή κρίσεως καὶ πυρὸς ζῆλος ἐσθίειν μέλλοντος τοὺς ὑπεναντίους). A man who has violated the law of Moses dies without mercy at the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much worse punishment do you think will be deserved by the man who has spurned the Son of God, and profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and outraged the Spirit of grace (πόσῳ δοκεῖτε χειρόνος ἀξιωθήσεται τιμωρίας ὁ τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ θεοῦ καταπατήσας καὶ τὸ αἷμα τῆς διαθήκης κοινὸν ἡγησάμενος, ἐν ᾧ ἡγιασθη, καὶ τὸ πνεῦμα τῆς χάριτος ἐνουβρίσας)? For we know him who said, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay." And again, "The Lord will judge his people." It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God (φοβερόν τὸ ἐμπεσεῖν εἰς χεῖρας θεοῦ ζῶντος).

The passage compares infraction against the Mosaic covenant with transgression of the new covenant—the "willful sin" of 10:26, a deliberate violation of the loyalty due the patron, who has struck up a better alliance with the people. Just as the dignity of Christ exceeds that of Moses (cf. 3:1–6), so violations of that dignity will incur a greater punishment than even the "death without mercy" that fell upon those who disregarded Torah.<sup>63</sup> This willful sin, a challenge to the honor of Christ, will lead to τιμωρία, which Aulus Gellius specifically links to the preservation of "the dignity and prestige of the one who is sinned against . . . lest the omission of punishment bring him into contempt and diminish the esteem in which he is held" (*Attic Nights* 7.14.2–4).

The one who assaults the honor of Christ, who should rather enhance the honor of the patron, becomes the target for divine satisfaction, the restoration of the honor of the Son. The one who fails to persevere in loyalty and obedience to Jesus manifests disregard for the gifts of God and for the patron–client relationship with God through Jesus. Thus, the one who continues in sin (i.e., aban-

<sup>63</sup> See Héring, *Hebrews*, 94: "If rebellion against the Law of Moses entailed in certain cases capital punishment, those who show contempt for Christ must expect the worst for stronger reasons. It is another example of the well-known argument *a minore ad maius*, very much in vogue among the Rabbis, and which had already been used in 2:2 in order to give an almost identical proof."

dons the people of God, cf. 11:25–26) “has regarded as profane the blood of the covenant with which he or she was sanctified,” the blood by which he or she has been given access to God as patron. The one who falters in trust and perseverance “has outraged the Spirit of grace (τὸ πνεῦμα τῆς χάριτος ἐνυβρίσας).” Ceslaus Spicq comments that “one could not make a more striking contrast than between ὑβρις and χάρις,”<sup>64</sup> and indeed meeting favor and the promise of benefaction with insult is at once highly inappropriate and foolish. Dio expresses society’s condemnation of such a return, going so far as to call it “impiety (ἀσέβεια)”: “But to commit an outrage against good men who have been the benefactors of the state (εὐεργέτας ὑβρίζειν), to annul the honours given them and to blot out their remembrance, I for my part do not see how that could be otherwise termed.” Those who turn thus from God’s beneficence in Christ encounter God no longer as favorable patron, but as judge and avenger: “For we know him who said, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay.’ And again, ‘The Lord will judge his people.’” The threefold challenge to God invites God’s response as vindicator of the honor of the Son and the worth of the gifts that have been scorned.<sup>65</sup>

The author has designed these passages to lead the hearers to a feeling of deep dread, which he underscores explicitly in his text. He openly exhorts the addressees to “be afraid” (4:1); he claims that nothing remains for the apostate but “a fearful (φοβερὰ) prospect of judgment” (10:27), who will learn what a “fearful thing (φοβερόν)” it is “to fall into the hands of the living God” (10:31). The passage forms a climax to the part of the argument from *pathos* which builds upon the “fear” of the audience. Aristotle defines fear (φόβος) as “a painful or troubled feeling caused by the impression of an imminent evil (κακοῦ) that causes destruction or pain” (*Rhet.* 2.5.1). The author has provided the prerequisite for fear in his depiction of the coming of God as judge and avenger. Aristotle suggests that fear can be aroused also by signs of impending danger, such as the “enmity and anger (ὀργή) of those able to injure us in any way . . . and outraged virtue (ἀρετὴ ὑβριζομένη) when it has power, for it is evident that it always desires satisfaction” (*Rhet.* 2.5.3, 5). In showing contempt for the Son of God, one knowingly incurs the wrath (ὀργή) of God, as anger is the expected response to a slight (all the more when one is slighted by those whom one desired to benefit). Fear is again heightened by the declaration of the impossibility of restoration (10:26), for after rejecting the brokerage of Jesus there remains no mediator who can regain God’s favor for the transgressor.<sup>66</sup>

Having aroused such fear in his audience, he has prepared and motivated

<sup>64</sup> Ceslaus Spicq, *L’Épître aux Hébreux* (2 vols; Paris: Gabalda, 1953) 2.325.

<sup>65</sup> See O. Michel, *Der Brief an die Hebräer* (MeyerK 13; 12th ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1960) 236: “Diese dreifach Schmähung des ‘Sohnes Gottes’ wird als eine Herausforderung Gottes geschildert (I Kor 10:22).”

<sup>66</sup> Cf. Aristotle, *Rhet.* 2.5.12: Fear is aroused “also when there is no possibility of help or it is not easy to obtain.”



them to consider how to avoid the course of action that would offer such an affront to God and turn beneficence into anger. It is at this point that he reminds them of their former display of loyalty to Christ and to one another (10:32–34), and the trust and hope they showed as their status and property in the world were stripped from them. Such a stance manifested the “boldness” or “confidence” (*παρρησία*) that springs from commitment to the benefactor and to attaining the reward God promised. The admonition of 10:35 urges the addressees to hold on to precisely this stance as the means to retain the favor of the benefactor and cautions against “shrinking back” as the act that would cause the loss of that favor:

Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward (*μη ἀποβάλητε οὖν τὴν παρρησίαν ὑμῶν, ἥτις ἔχει μεγάλην μισθοδοσίαν*). For you have need of endurance, so that you may do the will of God and receive what is promised. “For yet a little while (*ἔτι γὰρ μικρὸν ὅσον ὅσον*), and the coming one shall come and shall not tarry (*ὁ ἐρχόμενος ἔξει καὶ οὐ χρονίσει*); but my righteous one shall live by trusting (*ἐκ πίστεως*), and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him (*ἐὰν ὑποστειλῆται, οὐκ εὐδοκεῖ ἡ ψυχὴ μου ἐν αὐτῷ*).” But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and keep their souls (*ἡμεῖς δὲ οὐκ ἐσμὲν ὑποστολῆς εἰς ἀπώλειαν ἀλλὰ πίστεως εἰς περιποίησιν ψυχῆς*, 10:35–39).

Throwing away their *παρρησία* and the reward that attaches to it would be to refuse the gifts of the benefactor, and hence to “do him despite.” “Shrinking back” recalls the sin of the wilderness generation, who displayed their distrust of God and their disobedience by not pressing on in the journey to which God called them, but rather by seeking to turn back at the very threshold of the consummation of their hope and God’s beneficence. For the addressees to shrink back now, that is, to seek to reacquire their place in the worldly homeland and ease the tension between their unbelieving neighbors and themselves, would mean that they would have “come short” of entering the promised rest (4:1) and, indeed, would have fallen short of what God’s beneficence promised. This is poignantly phrased in 12:15: *ἐπισκοποῦντες μή τις ὑστερῶν ἀπὸ τῆς χάριτος τοῦ θεοῦ*, “see to it that no one falls short of God’s favor.” To fall short of God’s favor, however, means for those who have already experienced God’s beneficence, “who have tasted the heavenly gift” (6:4–5), to fall into God’s anger.

## V. Conclusions

The author’s attitudes concerning apostasy are firmly rooted in the socio-cultural values and expectations of the Mediterranean. When one is taken into a patron–client relationship, one inherits a set of obligations that the virtuous person will dutifully perform. Accepting a benefit obligates one to show loyalty

to the giver. Thus Danker writes: "That receipt of benefits from a head of state puts one under obligation and loyalty, is well understood in antiquity."<sup>67</sup> To violate these obligations by returning insult and ingratitude to one's benefactor was to vitiate a sacred bond that could not be restored. Such a spurning of the debt one owed one's patron, which amounted to contempt both for the gifts and the giver, constituted a grave affront to the honor of the benefactor and called for satisfaction. To ignore or pass over such a violation of a privileged, intimate bond would be not an act of favor or "grace" but a violation of one's own honor and worth. In the case of the Christian abandoning his or her commitment to Jesus, the stakes are higher than in any other patron-client bond. Apostasy—whether the public denial or quiet drifting away—offers a grave affront to the only means of access (i.e., broker) to God as patron and benefactor, thus causing the offender to fall back into an adversarial relationship with God, the natural state before Jesus' mediation. The author calls for nothing more from the addressees than that they live out in their relationship with God and Christ the most basic virtues of Greco-Roman society, namely, the demonstration of proper honor and gratitude. As the foregoing study has endeavored to demonstrate, both the didactic and hortatory sections of the letter serve this agenda.

Any assessment of the theological meaning of the author's statements about the limits of God's mercy and the possibility of falling into irrevocable exclusion from God must also recognize the function of these statements within the author's rhetorical strategy—particularly as part of an appeal to the hearers' emotions. The author addresses believers who may be wavering but have not yet succumbed to the pressures to withdraw completely from Christian fellowship (10:25), from service to publicly marginalized brothers and sisters (10:33; 13:3), and from allegiance to Jesus. Statements about the impossibility of being brought back into the sphere of grace—that is, back into a patron-client bond with God through Jesus—serve the purpose of motivating the addressees to persevere in trust and obedience, so as to continue to enjoy God's beneficence and, at the last, to enjoy the greatest gift of a place in the heavenly, eternal realm. Those who enjoy the privilege of being brought into the household of God might do well to have fear of violating that bond, if such fear will help keep them firm in their commitment and hope. To apply the author's restrictions to those who, having once abandoned their faith, now seek restoration, goes beyond the original application of the text and mistakes an argument from *pathos* for an argument from *logos*. It is a warning to insiders, those who have gained access to the favor and gifts of God, poised sharply to keep them loyal clients; the author might have sought a model other than the patron-client relationship for those who, having fallen from favor, sought readmittance with a penitent heart.

<sup>67</sup> Danker, *Benefactor*, 450.