

## HEBREWS 6:4-8: A SOCIO-RHETORICAL INVESTIGATION (PART 1)

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### Summary

*Socio-rhetorical interpretation pursues a richly textured exegesis of Scripture through co-ordinating multiple methods of reading and investigating texts. This interpretive model is put to the test as it is applied to Hebrews 6:4-8. In this, the first instalment of a two-part article, Hebrews 6:4-8 is analysed within the contexts of classical rhetoric, Jewish and Graeco-Roman intertexture, and prominent aspects of the first-century social and cultural environment. This passage presents an argument 'from the contrary' supporting the author's deliberative agenda of promoting commitment to Jesus and fellow believers, drawing heavily on the social codes of patronage obligations as well as a wide spectrum of intertextual resources. Perseverance is shown to be the only just and expedient course of action, since it alone preserves obligations of gratitude. Part 2 of this article (to appear in Tyndale Bulletin 50.2) will examine the ideology promoted within the passage and how it contributes to the author's rhetorical goals. A final section will attempt to answer the questions raised by the investigation of the social context of ancient patronage for the appropriateness of such ideological constructs as 'eternal security' or 'unpardonable sin' when applied in an absolute sense to the dynamic relationship between God and God's clients.*

### I. Introduction

Two important trends have emerged within biblical scholarship during the past three decades. The first involves a willingness—indeed a determined effort—to explore methodological approaches to interpreting a text drawn from disciplines other than 'religion'. This has led biblical scholars to learn from literary critics, rhetoricians (ancient and modern), sociologists, anthropologists, and to use the insights of colleagues in other disciplines to formulate new strategies

for reading a text from Scripture.<sup>1</sup> The second involves the increased specialisation, the narrowing of one's field of expertise which such exponential expansion has necessitated. This latter trend has had some untoward side effects, the most deleterious being the lack of communication now within the guild between those scholars who work at 'literary' interpretations and those who do 'social-scientific' criticism of the Bible, and so on.

Vernon Robbins has developed socio-rhetorical interpretation, what he calls an 'interpretative analytic', to capitalise on the benefits of the former trend and to minimise the myopia which has crept in as a result of the second trend.<sup>2</sup> Socio-rhetorical interpretation attempts to set the work of specialised interpretation and analysis within the larger picture of what avenues of investigation are possible and active within the guild. In so doing, it promotes conversation and co-operation between scholars performing specialised work, who are thus invited to locate their own work in relation to the work of other specialists. Moreover, it invites a single interpreter to engage the text from a number of different approaches, so that the interpreter may uncover how literary, rhetorical, social, cultural, intertextual, and ideological dimensions of the text work together, reinforce one another, interpret one another, or perhaps even work counter to one another. While no one practitioner is expected to perform a complete socio-rhetorical interpretation of a text, by working at several components at once an interpreter may arrive at a more richly textured interpretation as well as enhance interdisciplinary conversation about the text.

The test of a method, or an 'interpretative analytic', is whether or not it actually results in additional (and reliable) insights into the ancient text. With regard to socio-rhetorical interpretation in particular, one is especially interested to learn whether the whole is more than the sum of its parts. Does it avoid pitfalls associated with more limited avenues of interpretation? Does it provide a mechanism for critiquing other interpretations fairly as well as critiquing one's own interpretation? Does it open up the text in fuller, richer ways than previous investigations have?

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<sup>1</sup> See the analytical review of research which makes up a sizeable portion of V. Robbins, *The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse: Rhetoric, Society, and Ideology* (London: Routledge, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> Robbins, *Tapestry*; *idem.*, *Exploring the Texture of Texts: A Guide to Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity, 1996).

The only way to answer these questions is through a test of the interpretative analytic at work. I have chosen Hebrews 6:4-8 as a promising passage with which to test Robbins' vehicle for exegesis. This passage has been mercilessly overworked in the history of interpretation.<sup>3</sup> Can socio-rhetorical interpretation add anything to this overdrawn conversation, or perhaps even offer helpful critique of the conversation as it has been carried out so far? Many interpreters are driven to treat this passage as either a 'problem passage' or crux for a specific theological or ideological conviction. Socio-rhetorical interpretation may offer an approach which will help interpreters become more aware of how their own ideological commitments affect, and in many cases determine, their reading of this text. The attention to cultural and social contexts required for fully-developed socio-rhetorical interpretation, moreover, may help us reconsider whether theological constructs like 'eternal security' or attempts to delineate from this text the boundaries of God's grace are really the most text-centred ways in which to approach and appropriate this passage.<sup>4</sup>

## II. What is socio-rhetorical interpretation?

Socio-rhetorical interpretation co-ordinates multiple approaches to reading a text into an integrated method. The method begins with the

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<sup>3</sup> In addition to treatment in commentaries, many articles have been written addressing this text: R.C. Gleason, 'The Old Testament Background of the Warning in Hebrews 6:4-8', *Bib Sac* 155 (1998) 62-91; W. Grudem, 'Perseverance of the Saints: A Case Study from Hebrews 6:4-8 and Other Warning Passages in Hebrews', *The Grace of God, the Bondage of the Will* (ed. T.R. Schreiner and B. Ware; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995) 133-82; P.E. Hughes, 'Hebrews 6:4-6 and the Peril of Apostasy', *WTJ* 35 (1973) 137-55; I.H. Marshall, 'The Problem of Apostasy in the New Testament', *PersRelSt* 14 (1987) 65-80; S. McKnight, 'The Warning Passages of Hebrews: A Formal Analysis and Theological Conclusions', *TrinJ* 13 (1992) 21-59; A. Mugridge, 'Warnings in the Epistle to the Hebrews', *RefThRev* 46 (1987) 74-82; T.K. Oberholtzer, 'The Thorn-Infested Ground in Hebrews 6:4-12', *Bib Sac* 145 (1988) 319-28; W.S. Sailer, 'Hebrews Six: An Irony or Continuing Embarrassment?' *EJ* 3 (1985) 79-88; V.G. Verbrugge, 'Toward a New Interpretation of Hebrews 6:4-6', *CalThJ* 15 (1980) 61-73.

<sup>4</sup> P. Ellingworth (*Commentary on Hebrews* [NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993] 317) presents a brief but apt critique of this persistent problem: 'These difficult verses have from early times...been distorted by undue assimilation to other texts...and still more by doctrinal speculation and the requirements of church discipline. It is therefore especially important to apply normal exegetical methods as strictly as possible, looking first at the text itself, its immediate context, and related texts (notably 10:26-28), and only then at the wider implications of the passage.'

understanding that texts speak within contexts. As one discovers the contexts within which the text was written and read, and adds these dimensions to the reading of the text, the closer one approaches the full meaning and impact of the text within a particular setting (in the exegetical enterprise, usually the setting of the first hearers and readers). Robbins has codified contexts for reading under five categories: inner-texture, inter-texture, social and cultural texture, ideological texture, and sacred texture. Within each of these, one will find recognisable aspects of other exegetical disciplines. The poetry of the method is in the integration and dialogue created between these approaches.

Inner-texture takes the interpreter into areas regularly associated with literary and rhetorical analysis. One looks for clues within the text itself for units of narrative or thought (opening-middle-closing texture), repetition of morphemes, words, or synonyms indicating the themes or interests of the passage (repetitive texture), movement within a story or argument (progressive texture), and the way in which a passage seeks to be persuasive (argumentative texture). This can be further expanded through attention to the evocative power of a text in a number of arenas usually missed by those who are focused on intellectual content alone (aesthetic or sensory texture).

Inter-texture calls the reader to look for other ‘texts’ which are at work in the primary text. Most modern readers of the New Testament (whether academicians or pastors and lay leaders) will be accustomed to investigating ‘oral-scribal’ texture in a very basic sense (looking for quotations within a New Testament text of a passage from the Hebrew Scriptures). Robbins’ discussion of intertexture introduces us to the complexity and richness of a fuller view of intertexture. The interpreter is called to look for recitation (verbal quoting, often with some significant modifications of the original), recontextualisation (using verbal echoes from a traditional text in a new setting without indicating a quotation), and reconfiguration (the patterning of larger narratives after traditional ones). The interpreter is called, in this enterprise, not to limit herself or himself to Hebrew Scriptural intertexts, but to explore the full range of Jewish and Graeco-Roman texts which might be in dialogue with the passage or book under investigation.

But written ‘texts’ are not the only meaningful source of intertexture. Exploration of the biblical text is enriched as we explore both the cultural intertexture—i.e. the allusions to or echoes of cultural phenomena such as the message of Stoic and Cynic preachers,

Roman imperial ideology, Graeco-Roman theorists on education—and the social intertexture—i.e. the social roles, codes, and institutions which make up the everyday context of the readers (e.g. honour, patronage, army, athletic competitions, etc.). Finally, historical intertexture enters the investigation as the interpreter looks for references or allusions to the fabric of historical events and data.

Social and cultural texture leads the investigator to focus on the social world of the readers of a particular text and how that text locates them in and moves them to respond to that world. Here Robbins finds it helpful to consider the work of sociologists such as Bryan Wilson, who has classified the types of responses of a sect to the larger society (conversionist, introversionist, reformist, etc.), and to determine what types of response to the society are present in, or motivated by, a text. Within this texture one is also invited to explore the ‘cultural location’ of an author by examining the relationship of the values prioritised by that author to the values of other groups and of the dominant culture. Here again the cultural scripts of the first-century Mediterranean world appear, as the interpreter is asked to explore how honour, purity, kinship, and patronage codes are operative in the text, and how these scripts contribute to the shaping of the readers’/hearers’ responses in the world.

The fourth texture, ideological texture, asks the investigator first to look at his or her own convictions and commitments concerning the text and the world. Why is the investigator looking at this text? What does he or she believe about the text itself, and how do these beliefs shape the way he or she will (even, can) read the text? How does the interpreter’s social location affect his or her interpretation? It is imperative for the interpreter to conduct such self-examination (and to examine the ideologies of the interpreters he or she reads) in order to understand what he or she brings to the text and how the ideology operates in limiting and guiding what reading will be possible for the interpreter. Second, the interpreter is challenged to uncover the ideology of the author. How does the author develop his or her authority to instruct the readers/hearers? How does the author lead the addressees to move in the direction favoured by the author? This calls the interpreter to read the author as shaping reality rather than merely mirroring reality, and to inquire into the interests which motivate and effects which follow such shaping.

Sacred texture focuses the interpreter on the discourse about God and the sacred in a text. Perhaps the most important effect of including this chapter is to remind the interpreter that sacred texture

emerges through the study of the other textures. Most interpreters deal primarily or exclusively with this last texture, resulting in a ‘disembodiment of their sacred texture from the realities of living in the world’.<sup>5</sup> This is a useful caveat, showing how attention to the disciplines of exegesis reward even the busiest pastor, who must communicate the message of the text to ‘the realities of living in the world’.

In the investigation of each texture, it is imperative that the image of the tapestry (textures intertwined, braided, woven together) not be lost. An integrated interpretation must invite dialogue between the textures. If practised in this mutually-informing way, attention to the various textures will result in a finely nuanced reading of the text. Because the interpreter remains aware of the many contexts in which one must read a text to arrive at a rich, full interpretation, the reading will not tend toward the reductionism of any single method (e.g. too narrow a focus on the lexical, the literary, the social, and so forth).<sup>6</sup>

In the pages which follow, I will attempt to bring as many of the resources in the repertoire of socio-rhetorical to bear on this text as will be fruitful, focusing primarily on argumentative texture, a variety of intertextures, social texture, and ideology within the text and other interpretations. Rather than present my findings under the separate headings of each texture (which would follow the *via inventionis*),<sup>7</sup> I will attempt to draw these textures together into a more integrated reading of the text which will display the richness of the kind of reading enabled by Robbins’ interpretative analytic.

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<sup>5</sup> Robbins, *Exploring*, 130.

<sup>6</sup> This is a serious flaw in the recent article by R. Gleason, who wants to ‘move the discussion back to an Old Testament perspective, which seems appropriate because of the Hebrew audience and distinctly Jewish ethos of the epistle’ (‘The Old Testament Background’, 64-65). He objects, for example, to my ‘emphasis on the sociocultural environment of the Mediterranean region’ as threatening to ‘overshadow the more significant Old Testament background of this epistle’ (‘Old Testament Background’, 63, n. 4). Socio-rhetorical interpretation undermines the myth that backgrounds are in competition with one another (something which scholars, who tend to approach interpretation as a competition, perpetuate), and seeks rather to understand how the many contexts which shape the lives of an ancient author and audience inform and shape their communication in the written text.

<sup>7</sup> For those wishing to see the method at work step-by-step, see Robbins, *Tapestry*, 65-91, 120-42, 176-89, 220-35; D.A. deSilva, ‘A Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation of Revelation 14:6-13: A Call to Act Justly toward the Just and Judging God’, *BBR* 9 (1999).

### III. The rhetorical setting of Hebrews 6:4-8

Scholars frequently attempt to say too much about the unknown addressees of this potentially-misnamed letter. A text which itself gives no solid indication of authorship, addressees, date, or location has led to a plethora of very precise, complex, and frequently incompatible reconstructions of these subjects.<sup>8</sup> For the purposes of this article, I will neither attempt to critique these reconstructions (save for one persistent aspect below) nor offer an overly-drawn picture from my own imagination.<sup>9</sup> J.M.G. Barclay suggests that reliable mirror-reading places the greatest weight on elements of the addressees' situation that appear repeatedly throughout the letter.<sup>10</sup> In Hebrews, this is immediately apparent. The author returns frequently to the issue of persevering in active commitment to the Christian minority group versus withdrawing from such commitment. Should the hearers press on in active obedience to the word they have received (2:1; 3:6, 13-14; 4:11, 14, 16; 6:1, 11; 10:22-24, 39; 12:1, 7, 28; 13:1, 13, 15-16), or will they cease investing in the Christian group for the sake of temporal release from social tension and ostracisation (2:1, 3; 3:12; 4:1; 6:4; 10:25, 29, 35, 39; 12:15-17, 25)? The author of Hebrews seeks to promote the former course of action, and to dissuade any whose commitment to that course is in question

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<sup>8</sup> Compare the detailed scenario promoted in G.W. Buchanan (*To The Hebrews*; AB; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1972), involving disappointed pilgrims in Jerusalem, with that developed by W.L. Lane (*Hebrews 1-8*; WBC; Dallas: Word, 1991), pointing to Jewish Christians recently returned to Rome after the edict of Claudius was rescinded. Lane's reconstruction is especially well-argued, but the compounding of 'ifs' within that reconstruction leaves it as only one possible scenario. Many commentators, however, are appropriately more reserved in their reconstructions (cf. H.W. Attridge, *Hebrews* [Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989] 9-13; V.C. Pfitzner, *Hebrews* [ANTC; Nashville: Abingdon, 1998] 28-30).

<sup>9</sup> A thorough critique of several prominent opinions and a constructive case for my view on the addressees will appear in the introduction of my *Perserverance in Gratitude: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Letter 'to the Hebrews'* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, forthcoming). On the matter of the socio-economic level of the addressees of Hebrews, see my 'The Epistle to the Hebrews in Social-Scientific Perspective', *RQ* 36 (1984) 1-21, especially 2-6.

<sup>10</sup> J.M.G. Barclay, 'Mirror-Reading a Polemical Letter: Galatians as a Test Case' (*JSNT* 31 [1987] 73-93) 84-85. This article is required reading for scholars working at discerning the situation addressed by a letter. Barclay addresses the pitfalls of undue selectivity, over-interpretation, missing the strategic distortion of one's opponents which is part and parcel of polemics, and undue attachment to key words (like 'knowledge', leading almost automatically to the affirmation of Gnostics at the gate). He then proposes a sound methodology for discovering and weighing the data which a letter can provide concerning the situation it addresses.

from choosing (or drifting into) the latter course. Everything in the sermon serves this overarching goal.

One other word on the subject of the addressees needs to be mentioned here. It is by no means necessary to conclude that they are entirely or even predominantly Jewish Christians. The arguments advanced in support of this theory are all specious. Many scholars point to the author's use of the Old Testament (and the presumption of a familiarity with the Old Testament) as evidence for a Jewish audience,<sup>11</sup> but the equally complex and broad-ranging citation of the Old Testament in Galatians and 1 Peter (both documents probably, and the former certainly, written for Gentile Christians) renders this argument questionable. Those socialised into the Christian movement were socialised into the world of those sacred texts—Gentile and Jew! The Old Testament was the basis for the early church's teaching, catechism, and preaching, so it should not surprise us that an author could assume that Gentile believers would have a high degree of familiarity with those texts (see 1 Cor. 10:1-13 for a stellar example of how allusive Paul could be, expecting Gentile believers to understand the references). Some authors take the lack of a reference to circumcision to rule out a Gentile audience, but this is based on the presupposition that Judaising is the presenting problem (and a specific form of Judaising, namely the same form which cropped up in Galatia). Proving the obsolescence of the Old Covenant is no more meaningful to Jewish Christians than Gentile Christians—for all members of the new sect, Jew or Gentile, the validity of the parent religion *must* be de-legitimated. Käsemann's contention in this regard remains valid, though too often ignored.<sup>12</sup>

Retaining the hypothesis of a Jewish Christian audience (even a Palestinian audience, taking mirror-reading to increasingly tenuous levels) is itself problematic. A recent study by R. Gleason, however, reveals a related problem in terms of the faulty assessment of the significance of delineating an audience as 'Jewish-Christian'. Gleason draws a sharp distinction between 'Graeco-Roman' culture and 'the sociocultural environment of the Mediterranean region' and what he calls 'the Hebrew culture of the recipients'.<sup>13</sup> When 'Hebrew culture', however, involves reading the LXX instead of (and frequently in opposition to or ignorance of) the MT, one begins to wonder if the

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<sup>11</sup> Gleason ('Background', 67) advances this and the following two arguments.

<sup>12</sup> E. Käsemann, *The Wandering People of God: An Investigation of the Letter to the Hebrews* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1954) 24-25.

<sup>13</sup> Gleason, 'Background', 63-64.



term is at all meaningful. Martin Hengel, moreover, had shown more than twenty years ago the high degree of permeability between Jewish and Hellenistic culture, such that maintaining such artificial boundaries around ‘Hebrew culture’ now can be nothing more than an attempt to preserve the supposed ‘purity’ of Jewish thought from the ‘contamination’ of Graeco-Roman (i.e. pagan) thought.<sup>14</sup> In short, it serves a modern ideology rather than displaying historical complexity. Moreover, delimiting patronage as a ‘Graeco-Roman situation’ which somehow does not apply in Palestine simply belies the ancient evidence (e.g. Lk. 7:2-5; 14:12-14; 16:9 for examples of the ethos of reciprocity among friends and social unequals at work on what purports to be Palestinian soil). Positing a Jewish or even Palestinian audience for the sermon ‘to the Hebrews’ should not therefore lead an interpreter to assume that the audience lived in a hermetically-sealed environment of Old Testament texts without intertestamental developments, without a substantial share in the universal culture of hellenism, and without influence by ideas contained in Graeco-Roman texts.

#### **IV. Hebrews 6:4-6: An argument from the topic of the impossible**

The reader is confronted with the argumentative texture of this passage from the opening phrase, ‘For it is impossible’ (Ἀδύνατον γάρ). The whole sentence employs the topic of the ‘impossible’ (one of the topics common to all genres of rhetoric; cf. Aristotle, *Rh.* 2.19) in order to provide a rationale to support the course of action proposed in 6:1-3. The ‘for’ shows the enthymematic nature of 6:1-6.<sup>15</sup> The

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<sup>14</sup> M. Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977); *Jews, Greeks, Barbarians: Aspects of the Hellenization of Judaism in the Pre-Christian Period* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980).

<sup>15</sup> There appears to be some lack of clarity on this point even in the best of commentaries. Attridge (*Hebrews*, 167), for example, rightly argues that Heb. 6:4-6 is not the rationale narrowly for the clause ‘if God permits’, but rather applies more broadly to 6:1: ‘The author will “move on” (6:10) because, while apostates cannot be restored, his community can be renewed.’ This leaves the connection, however, vague at best. Pfitzner (*Hebrews*, 98) comments that ‘the particle “for” in 6:4a links verses 4-6 with the claim that only the teaching about Christ provides a foundation for repentance and faith (v. 1)’. This casts a wrong emphasis on 6:1 (which is not a doctrinal claim but an exhortation to move on to completion), obscuring the relationship between 6:4-6 and 6:1 as a supporting argument ‘from the contrary’. Ellingworth (*Hebrews*, 318) correctly observes that 6:4-6 provides

author has just urged the hearers to move on to ‘perfection’, to the completion of that enterprise which began with their elementary socialisation into the values and world view of the Christian culture (6:1-3). 6:4-6 seeks to support this exhortation by an examination of the contrary course of action,<sup>16</sup> namely ‘falling away’. The author strategically moves the audience to see no middle ground between pressing on to the goal and falling away (or falling short, shrinking back, or drifting off). It remains for us to discover, however, the inner logic of this statement of the impossible. The agricultural metaphor of 6:7-8 illustrates rather than demonstrates the argument from the contrary. It presents an analogy which helps guide the hearer to an understanding of why restoration of the one who falls away (instead of accepting the author’s advice and maintaining commitment to the group) should be impossible. One of the questions we must ask, then, is whether or not there is socio-cultural information available to the audience which would allow them to accept this ‘impossibility’ as true, as a given? How would they hear this argument, and within what contexts would the argument be persuasive to the hearers?

The next facet of the text that strikes the reader is the string of participles which give shape to an unspecified group of people. This is an instance of repetitive texture which is frequently noted by investigators.<sup>17</sup> The debate often hinges, however, on the attempt to determine whether or not this group of people has experienced ‘salvation’ or not.<sup>18</sup> Are they ‘saved’ individuals who then ‘lose’ their salvation, or are they merely semi-converts who fall away, so that the doctrine of ‘eternal security’ is not impugned by this passage? This debate demonstrates the ways in which the ideology of interpreters may override the ideology of the author of the text, constructing a foreign framework which inevitably distorts the author’s meaning. The author of Hebrews does not operate with the theology of Ephesians, where ‘being saved’ is spoken of as a past fact, much less with a complex theology of the stages of salvation constructed from a harmonisation of Romans and John. Here the ideological

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the motivation to move forward (although he limits this to passing ‘on to mature teaching’).

<sup>16</sup> The argument from the contrary was a basic building block of demonstration, being incorporated into the training of the young as part of the *progymnasmata*, specifically in the exercise called ‘elaboration of the *chreia*’. See the text of Theon in R.F. Hock and E.N. O’Neil, *The Chreia in Ancient Rhetoric. I. The Progymnasmata* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1986) 176-77.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, 142.

<sup>18</sup> See the review of this debate in Gleason, ‘Old Testament Background’, 69-71.

presupposition that ‘any interpretation is unscriptural if it conflicts with scripture’<sup>19</sup> prevents us from allowing the author of Hebrews to conceptualise the work of God or the life of the believer any differently from his more popular colleagues in the New Testament. The result is that the construct which is called ‘God’s revealed plan of salvation’ (the synthesis of the more popular texts like John, Romans, and Ephesians)<sup>20</sup> wins out over anything that the author of Hebrews might have to say about that plan. The dominance of the interpreter’s ideology is especially apparent in such expositions, since no attempt is ever made to adjust the ‘plan’ to the expressions of Hebrews, but always the reverse.

Are the people described in 6:4-5 ‘saved’ individuals in the estimation of the author of Hebrews? They cannot be, since ‘salvation’ is, for this author, the deliverance and reward that awaits the faithful at the return of Christ. Those who have trusted God’s promise and Jesus’ mediation are ‘those who are about to inherit salvation’, a deliverance (‘salvation’) which comes at Christ’s second coming (9:28), a deliverance (‘salvation’) thus comparable to that enjoyed by Noah (11:7). Noah was not saved when he began to build the ark; he was saved when he finished, stocked, and boarded the ark (and, even more especially, when he found himself still alive after the flood). The deliverance offered by the Son is indeed ‘eternal’ (5:9), but this ‘eternal salvation’ is what the obedient believers look forward to inheriting and enjoying, specifically on the Day when the Son comes to judge the world and reward his junior sisters and brothers who have maintained their trust in and loyalty toward him in a hostile world.<sup>21</sup> ‘Eternal salvation’ only becomes the ‘eternal security’ of those who have been saved after one had decided that the formulations of Ephesians are more important to one’s ideology than Hebrews.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> J.B. Rowell, ‘Exposition of Hebrews Six’ (*BibSac* 94 [1937] 321-42) 321. What Rowell admits explicitly as a ‘necessary postulate in all Bible exegesis’ many more recent scholars exercise implicitly. For an astounding example, see Oberholtzer, ‘Thorn-Infested Ground’, 328: ‘The inheritance cannot be soteriological, for eternal salvation is by grace through faith.’ Eph. 2:6 thus not only determined what ‘eternal salvation’ means in Heb. 5:9 (contra Heb. 1:14; 9:28; 11:7) but also determines what ‘inheriting the promises’ can and cannot mean.

<sup>20</sup> Rowell, ‘Exposition’, 329.

<sup>21</sup> The author of Hebrews is not alone in considering ‘salvation’ as something which lies ahead of the believer. 1 Peter (1:5, 9-10; 2:3) also retains the more thoroughly ‘eschatological’ use of this concept.

<sup>22</sup> As in Gleason, ‘Old Testament Background’, 90 (and n. 91). This conviction that ‘salvation’ is a past experience for the believer (and so must also be thus in

If the author would not characterise the people described in 6:4-5 as 'saved' (or 'unsaved' for that matter), how does he present them, and how would the hearers view them? They are people who have received God's gifts, who have been benefited by God's generosity (God's 'grace', meaning God's favourable disposition to give benefits).<sup>23</sup> These gifts are described in terms which are informed by oral-scribal intertexture with Jewish Scriptures as well as Jewish and Christian cultural intertexture.<sup>24</sup>

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Hebrews) even leads him to claim that 'the author assured his readers that they *had* received "a kingdom which cannot be shaken" (12:28), thus suggesting their eternal state was not in question' (emphasis mine). In 12:28, however, the author urges the hearers to 'show gratitude' since 'we are receiving an unshakable kingdom'. Moreover, the response of gratitude is motivated by the claim that 'our God is a consuming fire', suggesting that the author's interest in assurance is not as great as Gleason's. See also Oberholtzer, 'Thorn-Infested Ground', 326, 328, for uses of the phrase 'eternal salvation' which align not with Hebrews but rather a theological presupposition.

<sup>23</sup> For more information on this aspect of the cultural environment of the ancient Mediterranean, see D.A. deSilva, *4 Maccabees* (GAP; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998) 127-33; *Despising Shame: Honour Discourse and Community Maintenance in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (SBLDS 152; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995) 226-44, 272-75. Essential works in this area include R.P. Saller, *Personal Patronage under the Early Empire* (Cambridge: CUP, 1982); F. W. Danker, *Benefactor: Epigraphic Study of a Graeco-Roman and New Testament Semantic Field* (St. Louis, MO: Clayton Publishing House, 1982).

<sup>24</sup> Gleason's chief point is that the episode of Kadesh-barnea, the negative example expounded in Heb. 3:7-4:11, is the principal background for Heb. 6:4-6 ('Old Testament Background', 64, 66, 72-91). He argues that the plural substantival participles in 6:4-6 have the wilderness generation (also described by substantival participles in 3:10-11, 16-19; 4:2, 6) as their 'antecedents'. This sort of linkage is peculiarly specious. Would the substantival participle in 6:12 also apply to the wilderness generation? He considers the experience described in 6:4-6 to apply both to the addressees and to the wilderness generation (much of this is forced—for example, suggesting that 'being enlightened' corresponds to the pillar of fire). The enterprise is, in one sense, certain to succeed since the author of Hebrews has already in 3:7-4:11 established the situation of some of the addressees as precariously close to that of the wilderness generation. It is precisely this correspondence drawn in 3:7-4:11, however, which makes me question the usefulness of insisting (where the author does not insist) that it be carried over into 6:4-8. I would have taken the appearance of the phrase 'crucifying the Son of God' to be a decisive piece of internal evidence against forcing this 'background', but Gleason sees in the shift from aorist participles to present participles justification to read the aorist participles as applying to both past generation and present addressees and present participles as pertaining to the present audience only. This ignores, of course, the fact that in non-indicative moods aspect, and not time, is the pertinent feature of tenses. The obligations of clients, moreover, serve as a common denominator between the failure of the wilderness generation at Kadesh-barnea and the danger of apostasy in the addressees' situation. See deSilva, 'Exchanging Favor for Wrath', 105-109.

The subjects of 6:4-5 were ‘enlightened’ (φωτισθέντας), a word which, together with other words using the root φωτ-, are common terms for reception of the message of the gospel and its positive effects on the hearers in Christian culture (Jn. 1:9; 1 Cor. 4:5; 2 Cor. 4:4-6; Eph. 1:18; 2 Tim. 1:10; 1 Pet. 2:9; 2 Pet. 1:10).<sup>25</sup> This represents a distinctive advantage over those who remain ‘in the dark’ about the requirements of God and the future of the world. Paul, for example, could encourage the believers in Thessalonica that their reception of the gospel gave them ‘insider knowledge’ which enabled them to live wisely in light of God’s coming judgement, while all their neighbours continued to pursue foolishly the course that would result in destruction and loss (1 Thes. 5:1-8). Psalm 34 (LXX Ps. 33) may be informing the author, as both this verb and the next (γευσσάμενός) appear together in LXX Psalm 33:6, 8: ‘Draw near to God and be enlightened... Taste and see that the LORD is good (φωτίσθητε... γεύσασθε)’.<sup>26</sup> It is noteworthy that both the Psalm and Hebrews seek to promote continued hope in God, fear of the Lord, and obedience to God by means of this image of tasting God’s goodness, which takes the specific form of being ‘rescued’ or delivered from peril and having the assurance of enjoying ‘every good thing’ (i.e. enjoying God’s protection and patronage: LXX Ps. 33:4-7, 11).

Reference to receipt of a gift (‘the heavenly gift’) takes us even more directly into the social intertexture of patron-client scripts. Where a gift is bestowed and received, an obligation is incurred by the recipient. A primary resource for entering into the cultural context of patronage is Seneca, *De beneficiis*. A repeated emphasis of this work is that the social order only works as long as people honour their reciprocal obligations to one another. Graeco-Roman mythology depicts this using the image of the three Graces dancing hand-in-hand in a circle:

There is one for bestowing a benefit, one for receiving it, and a third for returning it... Why do the sisters hand in hand dance in a ring which returns upon itself? For the reason that a benefit passing in its course from hand to hand returns nevertheless to the giver; the beauty of the whole is destroyed

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<sup>25</sup> Attridge, *Hebrews*, 169; Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, 141.

<sup>26</sup> Another connection with this psalm appears in Heb. 12:14, where ‘pursue peace’ has long been observed to reflect Ps. 34:16 (LXX 33:15): ‘seek out peace and pursue it.’ The author thus appears to have been thoroughly familiar with this psalm, as would be expected since the psalter was hymnbook (and frequent source for moral exhortation) for both synagogue and church.

if the course in anywhere broken, and it has most beauty if it is continuous and maintains an uninterrupted succession (Seneca, *Ben.* 1.3.2-3).

For Seneca, accepting a gift means accepting an obligation to the giver at the same time: ‘the giving of a benefit is a social act, it wins the goodwill of someone, it lays someone under obligation’ (5.11.5); ‘the man who intends to be grateful, immediately while he is receiving, should turn his thought to repaying’ (2.25.3). Patronage creates relationships, with reciprocal obligations and duties including loyalty: ‘a benefit is a common bond and binds two persons together’ (6.41.2).<sup>27</sup> Violation of this bond was considered an act of sacrilege, an act contrary to the demands of justice (Seneca, *Ben.* 1.4.4; Dio *Or.* 31.37).<sup>28</sup> The author’s discussion of the ways in which the subjects of 6:4-5 have been benefited is setting up certain expectations concerning their response.

‘Becoming sharers of the Holy Spirit’ refers to one of the principal benefactions of God for the early church. Reception of the Holy Spirit as part of the experience of conversion was prominent in early Christian culture (Gal. 3:1-5; 4:1-7; 2 Cor. 1:22; 5:5; Jn. 14:15-17; 16:13-15; Acts 10:44-48; 11:15-18). It could signify God’s adoption of the believer (Gal. 4:1-7), God’s consecration of the Gentile sinner while still a Gentile (Acts 10:44-48; 11:15-18; Gal. 3:1-5), and God’s assurance of the future benefit of eschatological salvation (2 Cor. 1:22; 5:5). Whatever its particular significance for this community, there can be little doubt that it was regarded as a significant

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<sup>27</sup> Social inferiors who received benefits would repay their benefactors by honouring them, increasing their fame or reputation (see Seneca, *Ben.* 2.22.1; 2.24.2), providing services, and remaining loyal to the benefactor. Aristotle (*Eth. Nic.* 1163b1-5) captures the essence of this exchange: ‘Both parties should receive a larger share from the friendship, but not a larger share of the same thing: the superior should receive the larger share of honour, the needy one the larger share of profit; for honour is the due reward of virtue and beneficence, while need obtains the aid it requires in pecuniary gain.’ Seneca (*Ep.* 81.27) stresses the importance of loyalty, particularly when association with a particular benefactor brought hostility: ‘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.’ For more on the components of gratitude, see Danker, *Benefactor*, 436-86.

<sup>28</sup> Such an ethos was also at home in ancient Israelite culture, as Ps. 116:12-19 dramatically demonstrates: ‘What shall I render to the LORD for all His benefits to me?’ (NASV). The answer involves, for the psalmist, honouring God through public praise, sacrifices of gratitude, and the public testimony to God’s benefits which ‘paying vows’ conveyed.

benefaction from God (cf. Lk. 11:13, where this is elevated, in contrast to the more general Mt. 7:11, as the most important of ‘good things’ that God could impart to those who ask).

This group has ‘tasted the good word of God’ (καλὸν γευσσάμενους θεοῦ ῥῆμα), a phrase possibly informed by Joshua 21:45; 23:15, which speak of Israel hearing ‘the good words’ (τὰ ῥήματα τὰ καλὰ) of God, there signifying the promises of God (as opposed to τὰ ῥήματα τὰ πονηρά, the curses). Here the connotation of ‘promise’ is strengthened by the focus on the quality of those ‘powers’ or ‘wonders’ which the addressees have experienced as belonging and pointing to the ‘coming age’,<sup>29</sup> that essential aspect of Jewish and Christian cosmology. The ‘powers of the coming age’ recalls the addressees’ own experience of the divine confirmation of the ‘good word’ which was proclaimed to them (2:2-4), a widespread feature of early Christian proclamation and conversion (1 Cor. 2:1-5; Gal. 3:1-5).

The subjects of 6:4-5 are clearly described in terms of the reception of benefits. They have been graced by God in this variety of ways, being granted great privileges and promises, as well as proofs of their patron’s good will toward them. The repetitive use of the plural participles to designate these people at once creates the impression of the wide variety of benefits they have enjoyed as well as the rich supply of those benefits. Repetitive texture here serves to underscore the extent of God’s generosity toward them—the care and persistence with which God has cultivated their gratitude—and hence to amplify the disgrace and injustice of shirking the obligations of the patron-client bond that God’s generosity has created. The social context of the expectations of reciprocity (patronage) will take us far toward understanding the logic of the ‘impossibility’ being posited by the author here and illustrated by 6:7-8: it is impossible to restore unto repentance those who, having enjoyed such gifts and foretastes of gifts yet to come, then act as if the gifts and promises are not worth the effort and temporal cost of keeping them, because by such action they heap public disgrace on the one by whose mediation these gifts and promises were conferred.

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<sup>29</sup> Thus F.B. Craddock, ‘Letter to the Hebrews’ (L. Keck, *et al.*, *The New Interpreter’s Bible* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1998] 12.1-174) 75; Attridge, *Hebrews*, 170. W. Lane (*Hebrews 1-8* [WBC; Waco: Word, 1991] 133 n. ‘u’ and 144), misses the significance of this intertextuality and proposes a translation of ‘goodness of God’s word’, despite the fact that ‘good’ grammatically qualifies ‘word’, defining the nature of the word received by the addressees as assurance and promise.

The final participle which rounds out the description of the subjects of this ‘case study’ presents an unexpected outcome. Those who have enjoyed the very great privileges, gifts, and promises of 6:4-5—who have been granted every incentive and resource to remain connected with the giver of such gifts—should never ‘fall away’ (6:6). Elsewhere in the letter this course is depicted as ‘neglecting such a great deliverance’ (2:2), ‘turning away from the living God’ (which entails distrust toward God, 3:12), ‘shrinking back’ instead of manifesting trust (10:38-39), ‘falling short of God’s gift’ (12:15), and ‘selling [one’s] birthright for a single meal’ (12:17). We learn from this larger context that the motivation which might induce some to ‘fall away’ is an unwillingness to endure society’s hostility and to continue without society’s approval and gifts (10:32-36; 12:1-11). Peace with the host society could be purchased at the price of open association with the Christian group (10:25). ‘Falling away’ here is not the result of some unavoidable misfortune: it is the enactment of a value judgement which sets more store in society’s friendship than God’s beneficence.<sup>30</sup>

Because of this value judgement, this conscious choice of friendship with the society and rejection of one’s obligations toward God, ‘falling away’ can be further described as ‘crucifying the Son of God to oneself’ and ‘holding him up to public shame’.<sup>31</sup> This also becomes the rationale for the impossibility of renewing such people to repentance. In their slight regard for God’s gifts and promises, they have made the vicious response of offering insult to their benefactor. This was widely recognised as an unjust act which merited opprobrium, provoking the injured party to seek satisfaction and to exclude the offender from future favor. Seneca, for example, writes that ‘not to return gratitude for benefits is a disgrace, and the whole world counts it as such’ (*Ben.* 3.1.1). The ingrate, while not punished by law, is punished by the public court of opinion and by his own awareness of being branded as ungrateful:

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<sup>30</sup> Both Hughes (*Hebrews*, 218, n. 68) and Lane assert that the aorist tense of the participle ‘indicates a decisive moment of commitment to apostasy’ (Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, 142). This is problematic not only in the weight it puts on the significance of the aorist (‘undefined’) tense (see F. Stagg, ‘The Abused Aorist’, *JBL* 91 [1972] 222-31) but also in running counter to other images which the author of Hebrews uses for the same action, many of which suggest not a ‘moment of decision’ but a process of ‘drifting away’ (2:1, for example; see also 3:13 for ‘hardening’, and 4:1 and 12:15 for simply ‘falling short’ for the goal, none of which suggest the ‘decisive moment’).

<sup>31</sup> Cf. H. Schlier, ‘Παραδειγματίζω’, *TDNT* 2:32.



‘What, then’, you say, ‘shall the ingrate go unpunished?’... Do you imagine that qualities that are loathed do go unpunished, or that there is any punishment greater than public hate? The penalty of the ingrate is that he does not dare to accept a benefit from any man, that he does not dare to give one to any man, that he is a mark, or at least thinks he is a mark, for all eyes, that he has lost all perception of a most desirable and pleasant experience (3.17.1-2).

Dio Chrysostom, the orator and philosopher from Prusa, also writes at length about the disgrace of insulting rather than honoring one’s benefactors. Those who act so as to honour their benefactors ‘all people regard as worthy of favor’ (*Or.* 31.7), but ‘those who insult their benefactors will by nobody be esteemed to deserve a favour’ (31.65). Just as a person refuses to have dealings twice with a dishonest merchant, or to entrust a second deposit to someone who has lost the first one, so also the person who acts ungratefully should expect to be excluded from future favours (31.38, 65).

The people who reject their obligation to show honour, loyalty, and obedience to their patron when the cost of such witness and loyalty becomes too high are thus charged in Hebrews with bringing public shame on the patron, making a mockery of his beneficial death as they cut themselves off from the Son of God.<sup>32</sup> Because the author has spent considerable space developing the honour and authority of the Son in Hebrews 1:1-14; 2:5-9 (and continues to do so throughout the letter), offering an affront to this Son is a dangerous course of action. The Son occupies the most exalted position in the Jewish and Christian cosmos; he awaits the subjection of all his enemies and promises to return as judge. Those who ‘crucify the Son of God’ will not merely lose a reward, but will become the objects of divine vengeance.<sup>33</sup> Hebrews 6:8 hints at this, but 10:26-31 will make it explicit. The honour of the Son, assaulted by the disloyal clients, will be restored through the punishment of those who have made themselves the Son’s enemies by their poor evaluation of temporary versus eternal advantage.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> The closest and most illuminating parallel for the expression ‘to crucify to oneself’ appears in Gal. 6:14, where Paul uses the figure as an expression of breaking off all ties between himself and the world.

<sup>33</sup> John Calvin affirms the appropriateness of this divine response: ‘For it is unworthy of God to hold up his Son to scorn by pardoning them that abandon him’ (*Calvin’s Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* [London: Cornish & Co., 1842] 66).

<sup>34</sup> Punishment is frequently understood in the ancient world as the means by which the honour of the injured or affronted party is restored. Thus Aulus Gellius (*Attic Nights* 7.14.2-4) writes: ‘κόλασις or νοουθεσία is the infliction of punishment for the purpose of correction and reformation, in order that one who

The addressees, themselves familiar with the reciprocal expectations and obligations of patrons and clients, will therefore understand and accept the ‘impossibility’ advanced by the author. It is unlikely that they would have inquired into the psychological state of the fallen one to explain the impossibility of renewing such a one to repentance (as does Philo, *Spec. Leg.* 1.58).<sup>35</sup> The other instance of repentance in Hebrews (12:16-17) clarifies that the author does not have in mind an emotional experience or human act at all, for Esau ‘repented’ of his decision in those terms. The point there is that, despite how sorry he was, however much he upbraided himself, the decision was made and the die was cast. After spurning God’s gifts for temporal safety and approval, there is no expectation of a second chance at those gifts. After defecting from the relationship, the ungrateful clients could not expect to be able to begin that journey to God’s promised inheritances again.<sup>36</sup> μετάνοια was the first word

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has done wrong thoughtlessly may become more careful and scrupulous. The second is called τιμωρία... That reason for punishment exists when the dignity and prestige of the one who is sinned against must be maintained, lest the omission of punishment bring him into contempt and diminish the esteem in which he is held; and therefore they think that was given a name derived from the preservation of honour (τιμή). Aristotle (*Rh.* 1.10.17) also attests to this: ‘There is a difference between revenge and punishment (τιμωρία and κόλασις); the latter is inflicted in the interest of the sufferer [ostensibly for improvement?], the former in the interest of him who inflicts it, that he may obtain satisfaction.’

<sup>35</sup> It is possible that the author conceives of repentance itself as a gift of God (so Lane, *Hebrews* 1-8, 142). Philo understands repentance as something which God can prevent: *Leg. All.* 3.213: ‘Many souls have desired to repent and not been permitted by God to do so’ (cited in Attridge, *Hebrews*, 168, n. 25). Wis. 12:10 also speaks of repentance as an opportunity allowed by God: the Canaanites were judged ‘little by little’ to give them this space for repentance (ἐδίδους τόπον μετανοίας”; cf. Heb. 12:16). Is. 6:9-10, while not using the term ‘repentance’, speaks of God deliberately blocking repentance until judgement is executed upon the sinners. One may also recall ‘early narratives about Pharaoh and the sons of Eli, which speak of God deliberately blocking their repentance (Ex. 7:3f.; 8:28; 10:1; 11:10; 1 Sa. 2:25)’ (J. Milgrom, *Leviticus I-XVI* [AB; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1991] 375). Repentance is something God can grant or withhold. It is widely seen in Jewish culture as a gift, not a given: those who make ill use of the gift the first time can by no means count on a second opportunity to receive and use the gift. If the author of Hebrews shares this view, ‘repentance’ would mean more a welcoming back into favour than the internal experience of feeling guilty or the change of mind which ‘repentance’ signifies for so many today (again, given Esau’s experience of great sorrow and regret without it effecting ‘repentance’).

<sup>36</sup> T.G. Long (*Hebrews* [Interpretation; Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1997] 73) imaginatively suggests that ‘when the Preacher says that restoration is “impossible”, he is...pointing to the actual and sad experience of his own church.... They found that no amount of pleading and praying, working and worrying, could bring these people back into the community. Speaking realistically, for all practical purposes it was impossible to restore them to the fold’. Long thus implicitly

encountered in the author's description of the addressees' 'foundation' in 6:1-3, the starting place of this journey where they went from being God's enemies to God's beneficiaries. That precious gift of a first repentance must itself be valued and preserved intact.

It is also unlikely that they would have introduced a distinction here between what is impossible for human beings and what is impossible for God.<sup>37</sup> Rather, they would understand that such an affront to God as their Patron would result in their exclusion from future favor (starting with the favor of a return to favor). Dishonouring the Son, they should expect to find themselves among the 'enemies' whose subjection is awaited (1:13; 10:12-13, 27).<sup>38</sup> The lack of a subject for the infinitive in this sentence would not have invited them to supply one, but rather made the impossibility all the more absolute and stark.

## **V. Hebrews 6:7-8: A supporting argument from analogy**

The author of Hebrews supports his exhortation to remain committed to the Christian group, its values, and its confession ('to be borne along to perfection', 6:1) with an argument from the contrary, explicating the disgrace of, and danger which follows, the alternative

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supports the softening of 'impossible' to *difficile* (found in the late fifth-century Latin manuscript d). The impossibility is practical, not theoretical. Not only would this be out of keeping with the author's other three uses of 'it is impossible' (6:18; 10:4; 11:6) and the rhetorical context of the topic of the 'impossible' (Aristotle, *Rh.* 2.19), it neglects the internal logic which explains the 'impossible' in 6:4-8. Long is correct to observe, however, that the author is not making a statement about limitations on God's favour. Attridge's unwillingness to assume any qualification to this impossibility remains the strongest reading (*Hebrews*, 167).

<sup>37</sup> As does Oberholtzer, 'Thorn-Infested Ground', 323: 'Since God is sovereign and is able to do as He pleases in human affairs, it is incorrect to assume that God is the subject of the infinitive.' Reading in a subject which the author has left unspecified is dubious enough; using a theological datum derived from other texts to limit how this text may be read is even more problematic.

<sup>38</sup> W. Lane (*Hebrews 1-8*, 142) interprets 6:4-6 thus: 'The ἀδύνατον... expresses an impossibility because the apostate repudiates the only basis on which repentance can be extended.' This seems to make the warning less serious than the author intends, for if it were simply a matter of a right appreciation of Christ's redemptive work, the apostate surely could have a change of mind (as did Esau, Heb. 12:17). What Esau did not have, and what the author threatens that the addressees would not have, is a second chance *tout court*. The reason for this is to be found in their flagrant display of ingratitude for the gift the first time around. The one who 'falls away', who chooses society's approval and gifts over God's, wilfully alienated himself or herself from the divine Patron.

course ('falling away', 6:6). Now he reinforces the argument from the contrary with an illustration from agriculture. The ground which makes a fair return for the gift of rain received a blessing from God;<sup>39</sup> the ground which returns 'thorns and thistles' for that gift is 'rejected' and ends up burned.

Interpreters have frequently searched out the Old Testament oral-scribal intertexture which might inform this illustration. Isaiah 5:1-7 is prominent in this discussion, whether as a possible resonance,<sup>40</sup> a text for general comparison of the use of the metaphor,<sup>41</sup> or as the specific source for Hebrews 6:7-8.<sup>42</sup> The parallels between the two texts, however, are not so close as to suggest oral-scribal recitation, so that Verbrugge's more extreme position must be rejected.<sup>43</sup> Hebrews 6:7-8 speaks not of vines or grapes (a major feature of Is. 5:1-7 and other illustrations which can rightly be said to *depend* on this text, e.g. Mt. 21:33-43), but rather vegetation in general. It is thorns and thistles, not sour grapes, that brings about the destruction of the ground. Moreover, the production of thorns and thistles are the cause of the cursing or burning in Hebrews 6:8, but the result of the divine verdict in Isaiah 5:6.<sup>44</sup>

That being said, however, the similarities between the dynamics of Isaiah 5:1-7 and Hebrews 6:7-8 are worth noting. The Isaiah text is informative as a similar employment of an agricultural imagery to illustrate failure to respond appropriately to divine patronage. Isaiah speaks of the investment of time, resources and energy spent by God on God's people (the vineyard). All of this effort was spent in expectation of the production of good grapes, but instead it produced bad grapes. The vineyard-dresser's response of destruction of the vineyard is radical and final (it is certainly more appropriate at the level of interpretation than as a practical procedure for viticulture).

<sup>39</sup> On rain as a gift of God, see also Mt. 5:44-48; Seneca, *Ben.* 7.31.4.

<sup>40</sup> Craddock, 'Hebrews', 76.

<sup>41</sup> Attridge, *Hebrews*, 172, n. 69.

<sup>42</sup> V.G. Verbrugge, 'Towards a New Interpretation of Hebrews 6:4-6', *CTJ* 15 (1980) 61-73.

<sup>43</sup> This novel solution has been aptly critiqued by Attridge, *Hebrews*, 172, n. 69. Verbrugge's suggestion that Heb. 6:4-6 refers to the effects of communal apostasy rather than the individual apostate is likewise specious, foundering on the observation that the author is precisely concerned with 'each one' of the congregation (3:12; 4:1; 10:25; 12:15).

<sup>44</sup> κατάρσας...ἀκάνθας καὶ τριβόλους suggests oral-scribal intertexture with Gn. 3:17-18. Here also, however, the order of events (bearing of thorns and cursing) is reversed. The author incorporates the image so as to reinforce the notion of curse without asking that his analogy be read closely in light of the Genesis episode.

God's care and tending of Israel led naturally to God's expectation of a harvest of justice. Isaiah claims, however, that Israel did not make the proper return to God for God's benefits. Instead, Israel's response offended and affronted the God who commanded justice among God's people. Such a disobedient response would call down God's punishment, specifically the cessation of God's protection, tending, and other benefactions. God tends God's people with the anticipation of a crop of righteousness and justice—this is the return or yield God expects for God's troubles. Instead, violence and oppression spring up and God destroys the community that has brought forth so noxious a return.

Resonances with Graeco-Roman literature have been, not surprisingly, largely neglected. One of the virtues of socio-rhetorical interpretation, however, is its emphasis on the value of both Jewish and Graeco-Roman texts and culture as resources which inform early Christian culture,<sup>45</sup> a movement which had its start in the Roman province of Judea and the thoroughly Hellenized Galilee ('of the Gentiles' in Mt. 4:15), and which spread through the urban centres of the Greek and Roman world. J.W. Thompson seeks to read 6:7-8 as an echo of agricultural metaphors in Philo regarding education and cultivating knowledge of virtue (especially in *de Agricultura* 9-18).<sup>46</sup> The context of Hebrews 5:11-14 would certainly invite an interpretation of Hebrews 6:7-8 in terms of Graeco-Roman theory of education, were it not for the intervention of 6:4-6, which moves the audience from the realm of education to the sphere of reciprocity, giving no indication that one should read 6:7-8 in terms of the former discussion rather than the immediate one.

Just as agriculture provided analogies for education in the Graeco-Roman world, so it also provided illustrations for patronage. Agricultural images are used frequently by Seneca in his discussion of reciprocity. The first cause of the degradation of the system of reciprocity is that

we do not pick out those who are worthy of receiving our gifts;... we do not sow seed in worn out and unproductive soil; but our benefits we give, or rather throw, away without any discrimination (*Ben.* 1.1.2).

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<sup>45</sup> Robbins, *Tapestry*, 99, 232-35.

<sup>46</sup> *The Beginnings of Early Christian Philosophy* (CBQMS 13; Washington, DC: CBA, 1982) 37-38. For a fruitful use of Graeco-Roman agricultural metaphors for education in the interpretation of the parable of the sower, see B.L. Mack, *A Myth of Innocence: Mark and Christian Origins* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) 155-60; B.L. Mack and V.K. Robbins, *Patterns of Persuasion in the Gospels* (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge, 1989) 145-60.

This first agricultural metaphor speaks about the quality of the recipient using the analogy of sowing seeds on appropriate soil, namely soil that will produce a good crop rather than prove ‘worn out and unproductive soil’. The same thought is captured later (4.8.2): ‘we ought to take care to select those to whom we would give benefits, since even the farmer does not commit his seeds to sand’. While Seneca cautions the potential benefactor to choose well the soil in which he or she will plant his or her gifts, ‘we never wait for absolute certainty [concerning whether or not a recipient will prove grateful], since the discovery of truth is difficult, but follow the path that probable truth shows. All the business of life proceeds in this way. It is thus that we sow...for who will promise to the sower a harvest?’ (4.33.1-2). The benefactor thus gives with the hope of a harvest of gratitude, but without the certainty of such a harvest. Finally, Seneca advises that a single gift may be insufficient to cultivate a client or friend:

The farmer will lose all that he has sown if he ends his labours with putting in the seed; it is only after much care that crops are brought to their yield; nothing that is not encouraged by constant cultivation from the first day to the last ever reaches the stage of fruit. In the case of benefits the same rule holds (2.11.4-5).

These examples from Seneca and Isaiah suggest that an agricultural illustration would be quite appropriate to reinforcing some point about fulfilling the obligations of reciprocity (without suggesting that either Seneca or Isaiah has served as a direct source here). As Hebrews 6:4-6 has articulated a scenario involving patron-client roles and expectations, so the illustration of Hebrews 6:7-8 is likely to be heard by the recipients within that same sphere. The author of Hebrews uses the metaphor to remind the hearers of God’s expectation of a fair return for the experience of God’s benefits enumerated in Hebrews 6:4-5. The question facing the audience is, what kind of beneficiaries will the addressees prove to be—base or honourable, ungrateful or reliable? Will they prove to be fruitful soil, and receive the greater gifts yet to come as fit recipients of God’s ongoing favor, or will they prove to be bad soil which produces plants unpleasant and even hurtful? Moreover, Seneca’s insight into how clients and friends must be cultivated by ongoing nurture and several gifts suggests that the enumeration of benefits in 6:4-5 could create the impression that God has carefully cultivated these beneficiaries, has acted in every way as a thoughtful patron zealous to establish a firm bond between himself

and the clients. Ingratitude would be all the more base, all the more unjust, and all the more dangerous.

This illustration employs another unmistakable element of intertexture involving the opposition of blessing and cursing (εὐλογίας...καὶ κατάρας), although it is difficult to determine whether the author uses oral-scribal intertexture with a particular text or relies on a more general cultural knowledge of the significance of ‘curse’ and ‘blessing’ in the context of the covenant articulated in Deuteronomy and literature influenced by Deuteronomy. Craddock and Attridge point to Deuteronomy 11:26-28 as an informative parallel.<sup>47</sup> Attridge also suggests Malachi 2:2. Both of these texts, upon further examination, show close connections with the language and intention of Hebrews, suggesting that the author’s goals are richly informed by these texts.

By incorporating LXX Psalm 95:7-11 into his sermon (Heb. 3:7-11), the author has recited and recontextualised a text which itself recontextualises Deuteronomy 11:26-28:

I place before you today (σήμερον) blessing and curse (εὐλογίαν καὶ κατάραν): the blessing if you hear (ἐὰν ἀκούσητε) the commands of the Lord your God which I am commanding you today (σήμερον), and the curses (τὰς κατάρας) if you do not hear (ἐὰν μὴ ἀκούσατε) the commands of the Lord your God, as many as I command you today (σήμερον), and if you wander (πλανηθῆτε) from the way (ἀπὸ τῆς ὁδοῦ) which I commanded you, going off to serve other gods whom you did not know (οὐκ οἴδατε).<sup>48</sup>

The emphasis on ‘today’ and ‘hearing’ in Hebrews, introduced directly by the recitation of Psalm 95, begins to spin a web of resonances with the Deuteronomy text which the Psalm has itself recontextualised in its liturgical application of the paradigm of the wilderness generation to new generations of Israelites. The psalmist cries out, ‘If today (σήμερον) you hear his voice (ἐὰν...ἀκούσατε), do not harden your hearts’ or follow the example of those who ‘are always wandering (πλανῶνται)’ and ‘have not known (οὐκ ἔγνωσαν) my ways (τὰς ὁδούς μου)’.

This web of resonances is now advanced by the author of Hebrews in the alternation of ‘blessing’ and ‘curse’, different results determined in Hebrews as in Deuteronomy by the kind of crop which those taken into God’s covenant produce. In Hebrews, as in Deuteronomy, it concerns mainly loyalty and obedience toward the

<sup>47</sup> Craddock, ‘Hebrews’, 78; Attridge, *Hebrews*, 173, n. 90.

<sup>48</sup> The same points of connection are present in LXX Dt. 28:1-2, 15.

divine Patron as opposed to apostasy.<sup>49</sup> The covenantal associations of the terms, therefore, reinforce reading the passage in the context of patron-client obligations and ‘rules’.

The author’s decision to end his illustration of the fate of soil which makes a bad return for God’s blessings with ‘burning’ does not leave much hope for ‘new growth’ and replanting, even if that is a known practice for soil renewal in the ancient world. ‘Burning’ is a common image for God’s punishment of the unrighteous. Craddock looks to the effects and presentation of other ‘fires’ in Hebrews (notably 10:27, but also 12:25-29), arguing cogently against the possibility that this burning seeks to restore or renew the soil.<sup>50</sup> This argument is strengthened as we become aware of how this author is informed by Deuteronomy 29. Hebrews 12:15 quite directly recontextualises Deuteronomy 29:17,<sup>51</sup> revealing that the author carries the latter text in mind as he formulates his sermon. The conclusion of the passage from Deuteronomy which the author uses at 12:15 speaks of the burning of the land of those who do not keep the covenant, such that later generations, seeing the land burned over (*katakekaumevnon*, Dt. 29:22), have a perpetual reminder of the punishment that awaits those who break God’s covenant (Dt. 29:21-26). Informed thus thoroughly by the Deuteronomic conception of covenant blessing and curse, and by the use of agricultural language (metaphorical, as in 29:17, and real, as in 29:22; 11:11), the author gives every hint of conceptualising this ‘fire’ as God’s judgement rather than some form of ‘temporal discipline’.<sup>52</sup> The example of Esau

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<sup>49</sup> Mal. 2:2, like Ps. 95, also shows its dependence on Deuteronomy, but it is useful to our investigation of Hebrews on account of the echoes which it adds: ‘if you do not hear (ἐὰν μὴ ἀκούσητε) and if you do not set your heart (τὴν καρδίαν ὑμῶν) to give honour to my name...I will send upon you the curse (τὴν καῶραν) and I will curse your blessing (τὴν εὐλογίαν).’ The point of contact here is the requirement that God’s clients set their hearts on bringing honour to God’s name, which contrasts sharply with the results of apostasy as delineated in Heb. 6:6 and 10:29, both of which depict ‘shrinking away’ or ‘drifting’ from commitment as a gross assault on the honour of the benefactor.

<sup>50</sup> Craddock, ‘Hebrews’, 76; Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, 143.

<sup>51</sup> Heb. 12:15: μή τις ῥίζα πικρίας ἄνω φύουσα ἐνοχλῆ; LXX Dt. 29:17: μή τις ἐστὶν ἐν ὑμῖν ῥίζα ἄνω φύουσα ἐν χολῆ καὶ πικρίᾳ.

<sup>52</sup> Oberholtzer (‘Thorn-Infested Ground’, 319, 324-26) attempts to establish this fire as ‘temporal discipline’, ‘divine discipline in this life and...loss of future rewards in the millennium’ but not the eternal reward of heaven. Oberholtzer’s article is an extreme example of what will happen when a synthetic, theological construct is used as the mould and template within which Hebrews must be read. The first glaring difficulty is the imposition of a foreign eschatological scheme on Hebrews, namely the idea of a ‘millennial kingdom’, which in the New Testament is a clear feature only of Revelation’s eschatology. Should we assume that the



(12:16-17) reinforces this point,<sup>53</sup> namely that thinking little enough of God's gifts and promises to give them up for the sake of easing temporary discomfort or tension proves one to be an ungrateful client, who should expect only punishment and exclusion from favour.<sup>54</sup> Those who seek to read this, then, as an extreme but still salutary treatment of the soil are going well beyond the author's use of the metaphor, violating the point he is trying to make (a point which is clarified by 12:16-17, which certainly brooks no thoughts of renewal), and defusing the effect he hopes to have on the emotions of the hearers.

Part 2 of this study will appear in the next issue of *Tyndale Bulletin* (November 1999).

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author of Hebrews, although he writes before John, nevertheless shared all elements of John's eschatology (really, dispensational eschatology)? The distinctive eschatology of Hebrews is thus sacrificed to the theological construct.

The second glaring difficulty is the way in which Oberholtzer argues in favour of 'temporal discipline' over simple 'judgement'. According to him, 'the Old Testament cursings were temporal, not soteriological in nature and did not result in eternal damnation' ('Thorn-Infested Ground', 325). This creates, however, a false dichotomy within the Pentateuch, which itself makes no distinction between 'soteriology' and temporal rewards and curses simply because it envisions only temporal rewards and curses. The notion of some 'eternal' or otherworldly reward or punishment is a later development within Judaism. Ultimately, once again, it is Ephesians which carries the day: 'Believers' soteriological status is settled on the basis of grace through faith alone (Eph. 2:8-10; Tit. 3:3-7). They will never be judged to determine their eternal destiny (Jn. 5:19-29; Rom. 3:21-30; 8:1 [*et al.*])' ('Thorn-Infested Ground', 326). Again it is the conviction that all Scriptural texts share a uniform frame of reference, and the unadmitted privileging of certain texts over other texts, which determines in advance what the author of Hebrews is or is not permitted to say. Rather than seek clarification from within the text of Hebrews, the voice of Hebrews is overridden by other New Testament voices for the sake of harmonisation.

Reading the burning in Heb. 6:8 as 'temporal discipline', moreover, leads repeatedly to a misreading of Heb. 12:5-11 in this article ('Thorn-Infested Ground', 325, 326). Heb. 12:5-11 does not regard the suffering of believers as punishment for their sins. The suffering which the author interprets there as educative is the hostility of non-Christians, and the passage serves to insulate the believers against that hostility by interpreting it as a sign of sonship to be embraced rather than avoided. The most impressive statement of this thesis can now be found in N.C. Croy, *Endurance in Suffering: Hebrews 12.1-13 in its rhetorical, religious, and philosophical context* (SNTSMS 98; Cambridge: CUP, 1998).

<sup>53</sup> εὐλογία provides a verbal link between 6:7 and 12:17. Esau, like the soil which brought forth noxious plants, also loses the blessing and cannot regain it.

<sup>54</sup> For a study which takes into account all of the warning passages in Hebrews and their mutually supporting agenda and use of patron-client expectations, see D.A. deSilva, 'Exchanging Favor for Wrath: Apostasy in Hebrews and Patron-Client Relations', *JBL* 115 (1996) 91-116.