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### The Epistle to the Hebrews and Patron-Client Relationships: Toward a Missiological Appropriation

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## *Chapter 6*

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### **THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS AND PATRON-CLIENT RELATIONSHIPS: TOWARD A MISSIOLOGICAL APPROPRIATION**

CHERYL DOSS

Missionaries in cultures where patron-client relationships are common can find their participation in such relationships difficult. Recent New Testament scholarship has illuminated the patron-client relationships implicitly described in the epistle to the Hebrews. Utilizing this scholarship, this article explores the patron-client relationships illustrated in the epistle to the Hebrews seeking biblical principles to guide missionary life and practice.

A missionary family has lived for a number of years among people who suffer much economic hardship. Frequently they are petitioned for one kind of assistance or another. Today the local pastor's teenage son has come for a visit. After the usual polite preliminaries he presents the missionaries with a request. School will be starting in two weeks and he does not have any money for school this year. Would they be willing to pay his school fees?

A new missionary learns from local Christians that he is expected to visit the mayor of his new hometown and take a substantial gift. A gift is necessary to foster good relationships, he is told, and to make sure his telephone and electricity get connected promptly. The missionary is troubled. Is the gift bribery

or friendship? When he asks his friends that question, they answer, “No, it is neither of those.” What other kind of relationship is there?

Such scenarios are the common stuff of life for missionaries in many places. New missionaries are often baffled and dismayed by the expectations that seem to precede them wherever they go. Older missionaries struggle with the awareness that vast need surrounds them, yet their ability or willingness to help is inadequate. They have collided with the dilemma of Christian wealth in a poor world. Unlike the early church where Paul boasts of his missionary weakness (1 Corinthians 2:3), in the modern missionary movement the gospel has often been carried by the relatively wealthy to the materially poor. Missionaries, willingly forsaking the standard of living in their home countries, are frequently surprised to discover they are considered wealthy by the people in their fields of service (Bonk 1991: *xvii*), placing them in unfamiliar roles.

While the amount and adequacy of missionary support varies greatly between missionaries and organizations, missionaries often earn much less than they would in their home countries. However meager the amount, it may still be ten or more times what the average church pastor is paid in his host country. Missionaries typically drive cars, send their children to (relatively) expensive schools, and live in houses with running water and other amenities unknown in local homes (Nthamburi 1991: *xiv*). Yet, while many missionaries serving in many places are better off materially than the people they are trying to reach, money is only one part of the package. Missionaries may also be blessed with assets that are less tangible. Often they are better educated, have more connections and prospects for the future, and enjoy greater opportunities to grow toward and to achieve their potential than the people they serve. Thus, even if missionaries, through necessity or choice, could have a lifestyle almost indistinguishable from the local populace, the missionaries’ lack of material belongings would not diminish the relative wealth of their intangible or invisible assets (Chinchen 1995:446).

All of missionary life and service is impacted when this disparity in personal resources occurs. To pretend otherwise is to ignore the fundamental shaping that pervasive poverty and relative affluence place on human relationships. According to Jonathon Bonk, the missionary response must be to live as a “righteous rich” person within the norms of the local culture (Bonk 2002). To discover what being a “righteous rich” person looks like requires understanding the relationships involved in resource management within a given culture. While the specific ways cultures handle resources are as varied as the cultures

themselves, human society does seem naturally to gravitate toward relationships of reciprocity to manage resources (Weiner 1996:1060). In many cultures the reciprocal relationships through which resources are managed are called patron-client relationships (Eisenstadt and Roniger 1984:3). As a result of their relative affluence, in societies where patron-client relationships are common, missionaries will usually be expected to fill the roles of patron and broker, and occasionally the role of client. Understanding the reciprocal nature of patron-client relationships and finding biblical principles to guide those relationships will help missionaries in their quest to live as “righteous rich” in the cultures where they serve.

### **Patronage Today**

Patron-client relationships are a type of resource management system that function in many cultures in the twenty-first century much as they did in the first century after Christ. From the Americas to Africa to Asia, patronage remains deeply embedded in many cultures and intertwined with the worldview of the peoples of those cultures. In parts of Europe, also, patronage remained alive and well into the twentieth century.

From the wholesale market in Athens to the desert of Western Cyrenaics, 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. (Davis 1977:146)

Missionaries, confronted with a culture’s patronage system, often feel uncomfortable and may even question the ethics of such relationships (deSilva 2000a:95). Indeed, discussion of resources and the attendant power relationships frequently creates frustration with the inequity and corruption seemingly inherent in all human systems of resource management. Seeking to understand the way resources are handled in their new culture will help missionaries to be open to the good and wary of the pitfalls possible within the system. For many missionaries, understanding patronage will help them live more incarnation-ally and enhance their ministry (Chinchen 1995:446).

### ***Understanding Patronage***

In the broadest sense, patronage (sometimes called clientism) refers to any *interdependent* relationship between people of unequal status (Van den Berge 1985:262). Patronage can be distinguished from other patriarchal forms, such as paternalism, patriarchalism, and patrimonialism, because patronage is reciprocal in nature while the others are not (Riesebrodt 1985:261). “The term ‘patrongae’ and ‘paternalism’ are frequently interchanged, but patronage implies a relationship between adults and paternalism (according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*) parental tutelage over a child” (Goodell 1985:252). Thus, the defining difference between the two is the stance of the giver toward the receiver. To patrons other people are clients, perhaps socially or materially inferior, but able to engage in reciprocal relationships. Paternalism, on the other hand, treats others as children, possibly intending to do good, but without concern for their autonomy (Goodell 1985:247). Sometimes patron-client relationships can become paternalistic, reducing reciprocity through large power differentials that favor a predatory elite. Thus, when Chirevo V. Kwenda decries the “giving without receiving” of colonialism’s “patronage” (Kwenda 1998:1), he is actually talking about an institutionalized paternalism that precludes the necessary reciprocity found in patron-client relationships.

In societies where patron-client relationships are common, such relationships provide a way of gathering support and redistributing wealth. Patrons and clients give both tangible and intangible gifts to each other (Lingenfelter and Lingenfelter 2003:85). Clients provide basic labor services and other supplemental services to the patron in exchange for the patron furnishing them with some kind of tangible goods and extending to them the protection they need. The client then becomes a loyal member of the patron’s faction while the patron serves as “crisis insurance” for the client. The client gives honor to the patron and receives derived honor from being associated with the patron. While the client must work to bring new clients to the patron, the patron will act as a go-between and influence broker on behalf of the client. Both the patron and the client desire the services of the other, making the relationship reciprocal and beneficial to both, although in different ways and in differing amounts (deSilva 2000a:93).

As with all human systems, patron-client relationships may become distorted and abused (Wiseman 1985:263). When missionaries see obvious domination of the poor by rich patrons, they feel antipathy toward such an unequal

system. Missionaries themselves are frequently cast into the role of patron or client, causing them to feel abused or used and to offend people unwittingly by their unwillingness or inability to “fit into the system.” If missionaries unthinkingly adopt the “system,” they may also fall into the abuses that so often accompany patronage relationships. In missionary training the topic of relationships, including patron-client relationships, needs thorough discussion and understanding in order for missionaries to make good relationship choices with the people among whom they live and witness.

### ***Characteristics of Patronage***

Patronage can show various faces in different parts of the world. However, the study of contemporary, as well as historical, patronage cultures around the world has led to general agreement on the following seven basic characteristics as itemized by John Chow in his book, *Patronage and Power* (Chow 1992:31, 32).

*The relationship of patron and client is based on exchange.* Patrons provide for their clients mostly tangible goods or services they need while generally receiving less tangible support in return—honor, loyalty, information, publicity. Like other exchange relationships—friendship, for example—the giving must be reciprocal although not necessarily equivalent.

The relationship of patron to client is always asymmetrical in greater or lesser degree. Since, by definition, patron and client are not equal in power, the relationship is different than a friendship. The patron has access to resources unavailable to the client. The client is dependent upon the patron for providing or mediating access to the needed resources. The strength of the patron-client relationship is, therefore, dependent upon the patron’s continued monopoly on the resources and the client’s continued need.

The patron-client relationship is informal but necessarily particularistic. For the relationship to remain strong, resources and services must be given to individuals, not distributed generally. The solidarity between patron and client depends upon this particularistic quality.

The relationship between patron and client is “supra-legal.” Often the patron-client relationship is not regulated by law and may even be opposed by the laws of the land, making the relationship discrete and subtle.

The patron-client relationship is generally binding and long-range. There is strong interpersonal obligation in the relationship with punitive action by

the patron possible for failures by the client. In turn, the client has the right to expect long-term support from the patron.

The relationship between patron and client is voluntary. While the relationship must be seen as voluntary by all parties, it may, in fact, be thought necessary by the patron or the client who sees no other recourse to acquire power or resources.

The patron-client relationship is a vertical relationship. Patrons and clients are usually bound together in exclusive relationships that prohibit horizontal solidarity between clients, although sometimes patrons organize groups of clients to face a crisis. Competition between patrons may allow clients to manipulate the situation somewhat for their personal benefit.

### **Patronage as a Social Construct in the New Testament World**

Social-historical studies of New Testament times proliferated in the last century. Recent studies have uncovered patronage as an important concept for understanding the context of some problems in the early church (Chow 1992:12). For example, Chow believes many of the behavioral problems at Corinth grew out of conflicts in the patron-client relationships within the church (Chow 1992:188). DeSilva calls the patron-client relationship “the basic building block of Greco-Roman society” (deSilva 2000b:766). Patronage tends to appear where political ties are loose and limited in their control. The Roman Empire with its vast size and polyglot institutions would have been ripe for such a system to develop—almost as a necessary component of rule. G. E. M. de Ste. Croix states, “Patronage, indeed, must be seen as an institution the Roman world simply could not do without” (de Ste. Croix 1981:364).

### ***Patronage in the Greco-Roman World***

First-century Christians lived in a world where good was seen as limited and finite (Malina 1981:75). In the peasant agricultural communities or pre-industrial urban centers in which they lived, the few elite controlled and dominated the many poor. The world in which people found themselves was bounded by the available natural resources, their social position, and their occupation. They had no ability to vary their position to any great degree, whether horizontally or vertically. By experience, most desirable things in life—from food to health, from security to prestige—were in limited supply. Land, for ex-

ample, could only be sub-divided into smaller and smaller parcels but not increased. Since good was seen as finite and could not be increased, one person could gain only when another lost.

An honorable person must not appear to presume on others to avoid being accused of reducing another's good (Malina 1981:78). Thus, honor required that no favors be demanded and every gift be repaid. While hard work and thrift were necessary to maintain one's status and honor, they would not gain one additional wealth or influence. What did the first-century person of honor do when an emergency struck or essential needs were not met in the usual ways? The informal reciprocity of the patron-client relationship gave the honorable person recourse to resources not otherwise available without encroaching on the limited good. By seeking to obligate those who could help them, honorable people committed themselves to reciprocate those who accepted. This reciprocity maintained the balance of society. Even the person who sold something bestowed a favor (giving a limited resource) and deserved the buyer's loyalty. Thus, patronage relationships of various types enhanced the interests and security of first-century citizens at all levels of society (Malina 1981:82).

Often the way a patron could best help clients was by giving them access to another patron who controlled the benefit they needed. The patron then became a broker or go-between or mediator for the client. Brokers incurred a debt on behalf of their client but also increased their honor by their client's indebtedness. Brokerage was greatly valued because it gave clients connections they could not otherwise achieve. Many examples of brokerage can be found in Roman writings, such as when Pliny gained citizenship from the emperor for his physical therapist and Cicero brokered a positive outcome from a judge for one of his clients (deSilva 2000a:98).

Relationships between equals in which resources of comparable value were exchanged were called friendships. The underlying values of reciprocity and personal loyalty remained similar to patron-client relationships. Patrons often called clients "friends" despite their social inequality as a way of generously maintaining the client's honor. Conversely, clients did not seek to hide their lower status, honoring their patrons by calling them "patron" rather than calling them "friend" (deSilva 2000a:99).

### ***Patronage in New Testament***

In the New Testament world, patronage existed throughout every strata of society with the emperor being the most powerful patron. From the emperor, ever-widening layers of patronage permeated down throughout the culture. Since the emperor held absolute power, everyone everywhere was indebted to him as the ultimate giver of good things. Documents reveal that the language of patronage applied to the emperor included such terms as patron, benefactor, savior, son of a god (Chow 1992:42). Inscriptions on monuments to emperors extolled their gracious gifts and benefaction to all people.

Honors and gifts were bestowed purely at the whim of emperors and other powerful patrons. Such favors could, and were, easily recalled at the patron's caprice or displeasure. The fortunes of many families rose or fell depending on who was emperor and whether or not they were currently in favor with him or those close to him. Numerous feasts and celebrations were initiated to give praise, in song, dance, or games, to the imperial household and maintain the reciprocity of patronage. Loyalty to the emperor earned the client his favor and trust. The client gained access to the emperor and became a go-between/mediator of access and favors to others (Chow 1992:52). Thus, the language of benefaction, brokerage, eulogy, reciprocity, resources, and power become tracers to the discovery of patronage in the biblical text. The epistle to the Hebrews richly exemplifies the use of patronage language in the New Testament (deSilva 1996:116).

David A. deSilva proposes that a correct view of the background of Hebrews must include an understanding of the importance that honor and shame played in the culture of the day (deSilva 1999:1). In studying the Mediterranean worldview, anthropologists have discovered the foundational nature of concepts of honor and shame (deSilva 1999:2). Indeed, Malina calls honor and shame "pivotal values of the first-century Mediterranean world" (Malina 1985:25). Value judgments, social interactions, motivations, and decision-making were all undertaken in an effort to maintain honor and avoid shame. Integral to the acquisition of honor and avoidance of dishonor in the Mediterranean culture were patron-client relationships. The epistle to the Hebrews makes explicit this concern with honor, using the language of patrons and clients in its emphasis on the importance of maintaining God's honor and the imminent possibility that some believers may instead repay Him with dishonor.

DeSilva asserts that the establishment of the patron-client relationship with God “. . . unifies every section of the letter” (deSilva 1999:5).

Where do missionaries find good role models for patron-client relationships? What does the Bible teach about being a good patron, a sensitive go-between, a responsible client? In the complex relationships of cross-cultural life, every missionary fills each of these roles at some point. When viewed through missiological eyes, the epistle to the Hebrews can provide missionaries with an illustration of patronage relationships that may be used as a teaching metaphor of God’s relationship with His people and as a model for missionary life.

### **Patronage in the Epistle to the Hebrews**

Hebrews calls itself a “word of exhortation” (13:22). While the book contains examples of closely reasoned theology, it is at heart a sermon (Lane 1985: 17). The writer sees a need in the congregation and addresses it with energy and skill. Much of Hebrews focuses on who can adequately help humanity come into favor with God and maintain an on-going relationship with Him. The only possible answer, according to the writer of Hebrews, is Jesus. Jesus is shown to be the divine patron whose great gift is access to “the favor of another patron, in this case, God’s own self” (deSilva 2004:792).

#### ***The Patronage of God***

Hebrews opens with God on center stage (“Long ago God. . .,” 1:1). God spoke in the past through the prophets and continues to speak today through His Son (1:1, 2). God is the majesty of heaven, and the Son, a reflection of His glory, is His chosen representative (1:3). The Son is superior to angels (i.e., all heavenly beings) because of His relationship with God—He shares the same name (1:4). In these first four verses the writer has introduced themes that will continue throughout the book. God is the supreme power and authority and God wants a relationship with His people. Not only does God have all glory and majesty, but He has designated His own Son as His messenger, go-between, mediator, to those who live in these last days (1:2). Believers, through Jesus, have been given, “. . . among other noteworthy gifts, access to God as their personal Patron” (deSilva 2000c:50).

The writer of Hebrews continues to describe in broad strokes the power of God as patron and value of Jesus as patron/broker who mediates access to another patron. God is the Creator of all things, and if heaven and earth should

disappear God would remain (1:10-12). God's throne is forever (1:8) and the angels are His servants (1:14). To the writer of Hebrews God's existence, majesty, and creative power are givens only needing to be mentioned, not proven. It is the Son's status and relationship to God that the second half of chapter one is emphasizing. The Son stands in a different relationship to God than the angels (1:5). Unlike angels, the Son is to be worshiped (1:6). The Son rules as God rules (1:8) and He created as God created (1:10). His years will never end (1:12) and God will put everything under His feet (1:13).

Chapter two reiterates God's supreme power. God is able to command worlds (2:5) and place whom He will in power (2:8). It is God for whom and in whom all things exist (2:10). Yet God is gracious and has provided a Savior, the same Son who rules in chapter one and is now identified as Jesus (2:9). God is portrayed as the all-powerful Patron who has given a magnificent gift to His people—His Son who is Ruler, Mediator, and Substitute. The value of that gift clearly places everyone in God's debt. People have a need and He has provided for it. The believer now must fulfill every obligation to Him to maintain the patron-client relationship thus begun. The culture of reciprocity requires repayment; if that is not possible, gratitude and loyalty must not be neglected (deSilva 2004:793).

God not only is the all-powerful Creator but also the all-seeing Judge. Those who turn away from Him can no longer find rest and succor in Him (3:11). If people rebel against their Patron despite His work on their behalf, they can expect His anger (3:9, 10). The example of those who rebelled against God and fell in the wilderness at His command should be a warning to all (3:16-19). God can and will act to maintain His honor (deSilva 2000c:228). Unbelief, distrust, and unfaithfulness all sever the relationship and cut the client off from the patron's favor—from entering His rest (4:19).

Since there is no one greater than God (6:13), every promise He makes will come to pass, no matter how long it takes (6:15). To His promise God adds an oath (6:16) that no one would have excuse for doubting. His purpose for His people is unchangeable, giving them a sure and steadfast hope (6:19). Just as earthly patron-client relationships are reliant upon the personal integrity of the parties (deSilva 2000a:115), so the heavenly patron swears by Himself (6:13). His trustworthiness is based upon His unchangeable word for God cannot prove false like earthly patrons might (6:17, 18). God takes an oath, not for the same reasons people do, but to aid human trust (deSilva 2000c:250). All people

can, therefore, put full faith in His promise whose fulfillment has already begun in Jesus (6:20).

God's faithfulness, power, and interactions with His clients are frequently referred to throughout the epistle to the Hebrews (deSilva 2000c:78). The Majesty of heaven (8:1) receives worship (8:5), finds fault (8:8), leads His people (8:9), covenants (8:10), and shows mercy (8:12). God intervenes in peoples' lives (chapter 11), acts as a loving parent (12:7), offers grace (12:14), judges (13:4), and deserves praise (13:15). Perhaps the most explicit description of the patronage contract between God and His people is found in 11:6. Believers, as good clients, must believe God exists and will reward those who are faithful to Him. Without this trust (faith), the heavenly patron cannot act on His people's behalf. This verse embodies the discrete subtlety of the patron-client relationship. One gift requires another. The rule of reciprocity allows the crediting of both tangible and intangible gifts (deSilva 2000b:768). Continued loyalty and deep gratitude are essential even if the tangible rewards have not yet materialized. It is the maintenance of the relationship that is primary. God, as the all-powerful Creator, the ultimate Patron, deserves every loyalty, praise, and service.

### ***The Mediation of Jesus***

The first-century Mediterranean world was a structured society based on a hierarchy of personal statuses. God, archangels or sons of God, angels, humans, animals, and inanimate objects formed a closed vertical system of relationship and causality (Malina 1981:89). Persons at each level could influence the lives of those below them but not the other way around. A person of lower rank could only effectively influence someone higher through a patron who would act as a go-between. Such an intermediary must be of the same or higher rank than the one being influenced (Malina 1981:90). Naturally the closer the relationship between the client and the mediator, and the mediator and the patron, the more certain would be the influence and rewards. The writer of Hebrews skillfully articulates the remarkable relationship between humanity and God brought about through the mediation of Jesus Christ.

Jesus' position as God's Son is reinforced in several passages. Jesus is called "heir of all things" (1:2), "my Son" (1:5), "the firstborn" (1:6), "the Son" (1:8), "a faithful Son" (3:6). God is "his Father" (1:5). Amazingly, Jesus claims all humans as brothers and sisters (2:12) and makes them God's children (2:13). He

shares with them flesh and blood and knows their fight with the devil (2:14). God is the “one Father” (2:11) to all those who have become Jesus’ brothers and sisters. Jesus did not come to earth to help angels (2:16) but to identify with His people through suffering so that His mediation on their behalf would be effective (2:17). Even more than Moses, Jesus is worthy of glory and honor (3:3). The writer of Hebrews emphasizes that “the apostle and high priest of our confession” (3:1) is God’s Son (3:6).

Believers, as clients, have many needs. They need salvation (2:3), victory over death (2:15), atonement for sins (2:17), turning from sin (3:13), obedience (4:6), and God’s rest (4:11). God has chosen a mediator to become the go-between of His goodness. Just as a high priest is chosen to mediate the things of God, so God appointed Christ as the superior high priest who can mediate God’s forgiveness (5:1-10). Only through Christ can human needs be met. He brings salvation (5:9), becomes the source of obedience (5:9), gained victory over death (5:7), is the example and guide (6:20). Christ is the high priestly mediator/go-between “having been designated by God” (5:10).

According to Hebrews’ writer this is the “main point”—believers have a go-between who is related to them and also reigns with God (8:1). He is able to aid the believer’s approach to God since that is what He always lives for (7:25). His mediation is perfect, unlike that of other mediators (7:28). Furthermore, He brokers a relationship with the patron that is better than any that has gone before (8:6). It is based on better promises (8:6) and on a covenant that God Himself will see fulfilled (8:10). Not only is the patron able to give good gifts, but He provides a go-between to mediate them, and promises their continuous availability based on His own faithfulness (deSilva 2000c:283-284).

No wonder the writer of Hebrews unequivocally denounces those who reject God’s offer (10:26-31). Those who willfully refuse to reciprocate God’s gifts with loyalty and faithfulness cannot expect “a sacrifice for sins” (10:26). Some have even spurned the patron’s offer and His chosen go-between’s mediation (10:29). “All the more ignoble would be the response that held Jesus, the broker of God’s gifts, up to public scorn” (deSilva 2000c:254). The patron has every right to avenge such an offense to His honor (10:30). It is “a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (10:31).

***The Obligations and Rewards of the Client***

To maintain honor and avoid dishonor, it was essential for the honorable person to respond to gifts and favor from the patron with demonstrable gratitude (deSilva 2000a:141). The writer of Hebrews fears his audience may fail in their obligations (deSilva 2000c:226). They are in danger of drifting away from their heavenly patron (2:1) and neglecting His great gift of salvation (2:3). Rebellion leads to hard hearts (3:15), unbelief to loss of privileges (3:19), and disobedience to unrest (4:6). Clients who turn away from the patron after receiving His gifts (6:4) dishonor God and reject His Son's sacrifice (6:6), leaving them worthless and justifiably accursed (6:8). Taking a favor without reciprocating is comparable to land that receives rain and cultivation but produces only thorns and thistles (6:7, 8).

The writer of Hebrews repeatedly emphasizes the excellent access believers have to their patron because of the mediation of Jesus Christ. As high priest (i.e., mediator and sin-bearer), Christ can sympathize with every need (4:15). He is not just a rich man who doesn't understand what it means to be poor, or a divine being who doesn't understand temptation. He has been poor, tried, and tempted (4:15). Because He understands, believers can boldly approach with their needs and be assured of help and mercy from their patron (4:16). Jesus is the forerunner (6:20) opening the way for all (10:20) directly to the throne of grace (4:16). He it is who calls Himself brother (2:11), who is like His people (2:17), in whom there is hope (6:19), and who is able to make intercession for all who approach God (7:25). Jesus esteems His followers, "judging them to be suitable beneficiaries and reliable clients who will not disappoint or bring shame upon him" (deSilva 2000c:115).

Failure to accept Jesus' help or rejection of His mediation crucifies Him anew and heaps contempt upon Him (6:6). Therefore, true hearts and unwavering loyalty are necessary (10:23). Encouraging each other in loving deeds that bring honor to God should continue as the believer comes closer to seeing Him (10:24, 25). The reward for endurance is sure (10:35, 36). Many others before maintained faith in God (11:4-38), and while they did not receive the promised reward in this life, God the heavenly patron has prepared something far better for them (11:38, 39). Jesus, the example, endured even the cross and now sits at God's right hand (12:2). Therefore, believers must not grow weary or lose heart (12:3). Their trials are merely the discipline of the heavenly patron who is treating them as more than clients—treating them as His children (12:7).

Just as Jesus suffered they must be willing to suffer (13:12, 13) for they, too, are looking for a city that is to come (13:14). Indeed, their heavenly patron is trustworthy (6:18), their mediator perfect (2:10), their reward certain (10:35-37).

### **Patronage and the Message of Hebrews Today**

Western sensibilities may find aspects of patronage offensive. Its hierarchical nature, obligatory reciprocity, and nebulous parameters affront the worldview of an egalitarian, individualistic society. Yet, in much of the rest of the world, patronage is still a necessary, integral part of the culture. Even for Western Christians, relationships of reciprocity are common. Friendships, work relationships, and relationships with authorities of various sorts all have similarities to patronage relationships—they fill needs, they require loyalty, they are often inherently unbalanced and based on implicit contracts. Thus, for people everywhere a missiological reading of Hebrews offers a very contemporary message.

Just as any human institution is but a poor reflection of heavenly realities, so the practice of patron-client relationships carries negative baggage. The self-interest and potential for exploitation that is so often a part of human patronage systems (Greenfield 1972: 71) cannot be attributed to the relationship with God that the writer of Hebrews is promoting. Rather, using a relationship familiar to its readers, Hebrews aims to motivate Christians to uphold their end of a reciprocal relationship with God and offers three reasons that still resonate today.

*People have needs that only God, the ultimate Patron, can meet.* He alone can bestow salvation, forgiveness, peace. He has offered these gifts in return for faith in His ability to deliver them and loyalty to His purposes. The “. . . universal sense of defilement . . .” (Johnsson 1994:167) with which all humanity struggles can only be eradicated by His power. Solely by maintaining a relationship with Him do believers have any chance of receiving what they so desperately need. Hebrews offers the good news that God is able and willing to enter a saving relationship with His people. They need only respond with enduring faith.

*Access to the patron is available and certain.* Hebrews single-mindedly focuses upon the work and ministry of Christ (Bruce 1973: *lii*). Jesus is the center of the gospel, the center of Hebrews, and the center of a relationship with God. He provides open, ongoing, effective access to God's patronage and

gifts (deSilva 2000c:62). Lane concisely summarizes the message of Hebrews as, “We are not alone” (Lane 1985:55). The believer’s relative and God’s, Jesus Christ, is not only uniquely capable of being a conduit of the patron’s gifts, but His elevation to God’s right hand also gives assurance that the rewards God has promised are certain.

*Believers are more than clients; they have become members of God’s household.* Sometimes patron-client relationships could become so intimate that the client was adopted into the patron’s family (deSilva 2004:135). Hebrews suggests such has happened to believers (3:6). The believer has moved beyond the patron-client relationship into the family relationship where God is Father and Jesus is Brother. To turn one’s back on family relationships, to sever fellowship with members of one’s own household, is to lose something so precious it may never be restored. No wonder the writer of Hebrews employs strong language when speaking of such rejection. God has invested so much in His people and they owe so much to Him that only unswerving faith and loyalty can be expected. God’s honor and theirs’ is at stake. Their faithfulness is the only possible response to His overwhelming faithfulness (Lane 1985:56).

### **The Message of Hebrews and the Missionary Task**

A missiological reading of Hebrews provides guidance for missionary life and method. Understanding the underlying concepts of patronage in the book helps missionaries apply its message to people who are themselves part of patronage cultures. The godly relationships displayed in Hebrews offer a model for missionaries, cast into patronage roles, endeavoring to be righteous patrons, go-betweens, and clients.

#### ***Flawed Structures Teach Flawless Truth***

The writer of Hebrews illustrates the use of contextualized forms to express divine truth. Despite the inequalities and inherent possibilities for abuse that all hearers would have encountered in patron-client relationships, Hebrews’ writer utilizes a flawed human system to explain core concepts of salvation. In fact, the language of patronage brings new meaning to the concept of grace (Malina and Rohrbaugh 1992: 75). While the old covenant left people distanced from God, the new covenant mediated by Jesus brings believers boldly to the throne of grace. The word used for grace in the social setting of that time denotes both the free gift of the patron and the proper gratitude of the client (deSilva

1996:100). Using the obligations of the patron-client relationship reinforces the dangers of ingratitude for God's gifts. Apostasy insults God. Turning ones back on such a privileged, intimate relationship will obviously cause irreparable damage to that relationship. Missionaries today can take comfort and courage in their contextualizing efforts from the boldness of Hebrews' writer and the powerful truth still emanating from the human metaphors in the text.

The message of Hebrews speaks to missionary obligations as well. Missionaries are clients under God's patronage (deSilva 2000b:769). Their loyalty and faith in Him cements their relationship. As good clients they have a responsibility to bring other potential clients to the heavenly Patron. Their ability to do so draws upon the strength of their own relationship with their Patron. The writer of Hebrews warns, "See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many" (Hebrews 12:15). Missionaries must remember that Jesus, alone, is the mediator of God's favor, and they too are in need of His mediation on their behalf. God's grace and salvation come to each client, each hearer of the gospel, individually, and every client's concern and joy is the patron's honor. Such a focus may help missionaries who are placed in the patron role to withstand the inevitable temptations of such a position. Manipulation of people and processes for personal goals, giving little while expecting much in return, enforcing hierarchical distinctions, and assuming one's own superiority and power are rightful and good—all are pitfalls for unwary missionaries who forget that they too are clients answerable to the heavenly Patron.

### ***The Righteous Patron***

A missiologial reading of Hebrews suggests it is possible to be a righteous patron, an honest go-between, and a loyal client. Westerners, especially, have a great fear and expectation that mixing money transactions (or other exchange of valuables) with personal relationships will inevitably lead to corruption and diminished fellowship. In the individualistic West, material resources are handled by contracts, explicitly detailed in legal documents and rigorously removed from friendship or family relationships. Missionaries, encountering patron-client relationships, will need an open mind to understand their subtleties and wisdom to withstand the temptations inherent in them. Only a firm commitment to the pursuit of righteousness in such relationships will enable missionaries to overcome their own presuppositions and act as good clients of God,

sharing His blessings with others as good patrons/brokers. Just as Hebrews makes clear that all are clients in need of Jesus' mediation and God's patronage, so too the message of Hebrews is that all the good ever done comes by faith in God. When missionaries sacrifice like Abel (11:4), build like Noah (11:7), or serve like Abraham (11:9), they are only sharing what God has given them.

A righteous patron has no need for tactics of power manipulation. The heavenly patron of Hebrews is just (6:10), loving (12:6), and sympathetic (4:15). A righteous patron always gives from within a relationship. The heavenly patron of Hebrews speaks with His clients (1:1, 2), forgives and restores them (8:9, 10), and treats them as family (12:7). A righteous patron receives as well as gives. The heavenly patron of Hebrews gives salvation (2:3), Sabbath rest (4:9), hope (6:19), mercy and grace (4:16), but only when receiving belief (3:12), faith and patience (6:12), trust (10:35), and persistent loyalty (12:3). These gifts cannot earn the favors received; rather, they are a natural outgrowth of the relationship. Thus, a righteous patron is one who uses power unselfishly, receiving as well as giving, within the context of relationship.

Missionaries must give and receive as God gives and receives. Because of the Western mindset of "altruistic giving," missionaries have frequently failed to recognize what they need to receive from those they are helping and what they actually do receive (Kwenda 2001:4). Missionaries have often received welcome and honor, acceptance of their message and methods, friendship, and many other expressions of loyalty without recognizing the worth of such gifts. When giving is divorced from receiving, it becomes paternalistic and demeaning to the receiver and devalues the relationship in the mind of the giver.

The righteous patron as pictured in Hebrews is not forced into giving but chooses to build a relationship of trust within which God's gifts and the clients' gratitude naturally flow (2:11). Missionaries, likewise, can only give and receive from within a relationship. Within a relationship, giving can be empathetic, based upon the client's real needs, rather than sympathetic, based upon the patron's perception of the needs. Empathetic giving opens the door for patrons to recognize and receive gifts from their clients. Ultimately, when missionaries choose to give, they are also choosing to be in relationship (Blueberger 2001:16).

The righteous patron of Hebrews gives and receives from individuals, not groups (6:10). Real relationships are between individuals. The quality rather than the quantity of relationships should be the concern, freeing missionaries from the guilt and oppression of too many requests (Chinchen 1995:448).

Careful observation and study can help missionaries discover and implement cultural norms of relationship building. Building individual relationships also helps to diminish the temptation to call unfairly upon clients' gratitude and loyalty to further the patron's personal agenda.

The righteous patron of Hebrews gives through a mediator (4:14-16). The mediator is not a way of distancing the patron from the client but rather assists in bringing the patron closer to the client. The mediator must be one who is close to the patron (1:5) and also close to the client (2:18). Missionaries will often need the advice and help of a national mentor to guide them in the establishment of healthy relationships.

The epistle to the Hebrews does not portray a righteous patron as an aloof dispenser of disconnected favors. Rather, to be a righteous patron is to be deeply involved in clients' lives, to enjoy a two-way relationship that can be damaged by distrust or disinterest, and to maintain personal integrity reflected in relational responsibility. Perhaps such high goals are one reason the writer of Hebrews concludes with exhortations to right relationships and a prayer for the necessary equipping (13:27).

## **Conclusion**

Missionaries are frequently faced by expectations of financial and other support from the people they encounter in their area of service. Especially is this true when, because of their tangible and intangible assets, they are considered relatively wealthy. The assumption that missionaries are potential patrons is usually automatic where people use some form of patron-client relationships in the handling of resources. As missionaries become a part of such systems, they will also at times be expected to play the role of go-between or of client.

Patronage of various types has a long and well-documented history in virtually every society on earth. Though sometimes abused for the benefit of the patron, it has endured in many cultures as a reciprocal and personal relationship for gaining status and accessing needed resources. A social-historical study reveals that the concepts and context of patronage underlie much of New Testament language and thought. The epistle to the Hebrews provides an example of the way a first-century writer contextualized the message of salvation utilizing concepts common to patron-client relationship. Missionaries can take courage from the fact that appropriate contextualization may occur using

even flawed human metaphors. Hebrews also provides a snapshot of a “righteous patron” for missionaries to emulate.

Through the language of patron-client relationships the message of Hebrews speaks powerfully to every Christian today. God, the heavenly Patron, seeks a relationship with His clients. Jesus Christ is the powerful patron/mediator of His favor. As God’s clients, believers must reciprocate with love, trust, and loyalty, sharing God’s gifts with others. Anything less spurns the heavenly patron’s favor and damages the relationship. The believer’s life and God’s honor is at stake. As missionaries seek to enter into godly patron-client relationships, they may find reassurance and direction in the spiritual patron-client relationships illustrated in the epistle to the Hebrews.

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