

BOOK REVIEW

Jason A. Whitlark, *Enabling Fidelity to God: Perseverance in Hebrews in Light of the Reciprocity Systems of the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Paternoster Biblical Monographs; Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008). xvi + 225 pp. Pbk. \$39.99.

This monograph, the result of Whitlark's doctoral dissertation from Baylor University under the guidance of Charles Talbert, advances the investigation into the influence of reciprocity and benefaction in the interpretation of Hebrews. This topic has been most extensively researched by David deSilva in his published dissertation *Despising Shame: Honor Discourse and Community Maintenance in the Epistle to the Hebrews* and commentary *Perseverance in Gratitude*. Whitlark's dissertation serves both as a critique and as a continuation of deSilva's work.

The most significant critique of deSilva by Whitlark is of the notion that fidelity is secured and maintained in Hebrews through reciprocity—a common dynamic in the ancient Mediterranean world. Rather, Whitlark argues, Hebrews follows a Jewish stream of thought in which human fidelity toward God is secured through divine enablement. This view holds to a pessimistic anthropological assumption within which fidelity toward God is unattainable through human effort. To support this thesis, Whitlark investigates relevant primary and secondary Greco-Roman and Jewish sources using authorial audience criticism (the attempt to reconstruct the values and expectations of the original audience and how the author anticipated or defied those expectations).

After an introductory first chapter, Chapter 2 investigates the historical context of Hebrews in relation to reciprocity and fidelity. This chapter provides an in-depth examination of relevant sources from Aristotle, Seneca, Homer and many other Greco-Roman writers. Throughout this investigation, Whitlark develops a characterization of reciprocity in the Greco-Roman world that includes four elements. First, reciprocity was a relational bond undertaken voluntarily by each

party. Secondly, this bond was long-term and was maintained by fidelity and a sense of indebted gratitude. Thirdly, reciprocity was characterized by the cooperation to obligations—sometimes defined and sometimes not. Lastly, this bond was characterized by mutual dependence upon each party to fulfill these obligations and thus there was a sense of risk within this relationship.

The second part of this chapter establishes that this characterization of reciprocity was based upon an optimistic anthropological assumption. That is to say that the capability to meet the obligations of this relational bond was assumed by the benefactor to be inherent in the beneficiary's moral ability. Or, as Whitlark states, 'what a beneficiary *should* do or be, that person *can* do or be' (p. 54). This assumption is revealed in the primary literature through an emphasis upon the worthy *character* of each party in a successful reciprocity relationship. Further, a belief is shown that virtuous character could be produced through the giving of benefits. Thus, it was believed that the ability to uphold the obligations of the reciprocity relationship—whether that be human–human or human–divine relationships—was inherent in all persons.

The third chapter investigates the religious background of Hebrews in relation to divine–human reciprocity relationships. Whitlark here looks at Old Testament, intertestamental, and even New Testament literature to conclude that reciprocity was assumed when discussing the covenant between God and Israel. However, as Whitlark explains, the success of such relationships to secure fidelity to God was perceived differently depending upon which anthropology was assumed—optimistic or pessimistic.

An optimistic anthropological assumption believed that fidelity could be secured through reciprocal relationships and that humans were able to fulfill their obligation of honoring God through obedience to the covenant. This, in Whitlark's analysis, is seen most fully in Josephus, intertestamental literature (4 Ezra, Sirach, 4 *Maccabees*) and Rabbinic literature. Next, a pessimistic anthropological assumption is traced through various Old and New Testament texts as well as Philo and the Qumran documents. This pessimistic view understood reciprocity to be possible based upon divine enablement rather than human ability.

In Chapter 4, Whitlark turns his attention to Hebrews in light of its historical and religious backdrop of reciprocity. Through a brief analysis of the epistle, he demonstrates that the language and concepts

of benefaction and patronage are present throughout the text. However, fidelity within the divine–human relationship is not secured through reciprocity. To argue this, Whitlark begins by providing a critique of deSilva’s interpretation of Hebrews and then articulates how the epistle follows a pessimistic anthropological assumption.

The criticism of deSilva revolves around two main issues. First, it is argued that deSilva does not simply describe the context of Hebrews but rather imposes contextual values onto the epistle. Thus, the concepts of benefaction and patronage, while certainly a significant aspect of Hebrew’s social context, are forced onto the text and become more prominent than they should really be. Secondly, deSilva does not articulate any sort of anthropological assumption in Hebrews—whether optimistic or pessimistic—but simply assumes the Greco-Roman optimistic assumption.

Then, using Paul’s writing as an example, Whitlark argues that the author of Hebrews makes limited use of the language of benefaction while being implicitly critical of reciprocity as a way to secure fidelity to God. Instead of reciprocity, he argues, Hebrews affirms that fidelity comes from God’s election and enablement. This, Whitlark states, necessitates a pessimistic anthropology. The rest of this chapter traces election motifs and the concept of enablement in the epistle with a short section on the paradox of election/divine enablement and human responsibility in Hebrews.

The strengths of Whitlark’s monograph come from his two chapters surveying the Greco-Roman and Jewish literature relevant to benefaction, patronage and reciprocity relationships. This section is excellent in both depth and range. Whitlark paints a fuller picture of the role of benefaction in the first century than deSilva’s main works. Further, the critique of deSilva might also be helpful in correcting a possible over-emphasis on use of honor, patronage, benefaction and reciprocity in Hebrews.

What becomes troublesome in Whitlark’s argument is when he begins to merge the concepts of reciprocity and benefaction with soteriology. It seems at certain points that the concept of securing fidelity to God becomes confused with earning salvation. This is an easy jump since the dynamic of reciprocity called for returned grace in order to receive continued grace. Yet it is probably best to understand God as an ultimate benefactor who pours out gifts even to those who do not deserve them. Further, in Hebrews the concept of patronage serves not

as a way to secure salvation but as encouragement to respond to God's grace with grace.

I am surprised that Whitlark focuses mainly on *Perseverance in Gratitude* while ignoring deSilva's other works that treat the issue in more depth (such as *Despising Shame*, which is mentioned briefly in the introduction). deSilva's *Honor, Patronage, Kinship and Purity*, for example, has an entire chapter on 'Patronage and Grace in the New Testament'. In this work, deSilva makes clear that often in Greco-Roman patronage it was understood that a client, who was socially inferior, could not repay the patron but expressed gratitude by some other means (*Honor*, p. 141 n. 43). Thus, in the divine-human relationship it was not necessary, or even possible, to 'repay' God's grace, yet receiving such benefits should motivate a gracious response.

In relation to patronage in Hebrews, there is no sense that the believer earns his or her salvation through reciprocity. Rather, identifying God as patron (and Jesus as 'broker', a concept that deSilva explores in *Despising Shame* [pp. 226-39] but is not addressed by Whitlark) encourages the audience of Hebrews to respond with honor and trust. Conversely, to respond to God with a lack of trust or dishonor (a very real concern for the author of Hebrews) means giving up the benefits of the patron. Hebrews 10.26-31 makes this warning clear. (Note also that it is the new covenant community to which this warning is addressed.)

Enabling Fidelity to God has its greatest strength in its wealth of sources and presentation of first-century Greco-Roman and Jewish culture. However, it seems that Whitlark is theologically motivated in his analysis of patronage in Hebrews. His incorporation of election and enablement themes is forced and Whitlark fails to take into account how the warning passages fit into this model. His response is that the presence of election motifs and a stress on human responsibility in Hebrews is a 'paradox in the experience and theology of the author' (p. 167). By doing this, Whitlark neglects to engage with the greatest challenge to his model by simply labeling it a paradox. It would have been better to see Whitlark tackle these issues more completely in his analysis.

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