

An Appeal to Personality in Hebrews: A Social-Scientific Study

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Abstract

Understanding the people we meet in the Letter to the Hebrews (hereafter: Hebrews) with Western concepts of personality is misleading. This is because people in today's Western society are different from those who lived in Mediterranean societies during the first-century. This article uses personality as a social-scientific model to study Hebrews. It will be shown that first-century Mediterranean concepts of personality allow for a full appreciation of the author's rhetoric and appeal to the audience. After discussing social-scientific criticism and some models of first-century personality, the relevant aspects of the theories on personality are used as a lens through which to consider Hebrews' appeal to its readers. The study concludes that Hebrews portrays its readers as typical collectivist persons with a group orientation, who are concerned primarily with the pursuit of goals and interests related to the group.¹

Key Terms

personality; Hebrews; Mediterranean; social-scientific; collectivist; group

1 Introduction

Hebrews has been considered from a number of interpretative perspectives. Not much, however, has been done in the application of specific theories and models from the social sciences to Hebrews. The little that has been done entails the application of social-identity theories, including most

¹ This article represents a reworked version of portions of the Ph.D. dissertation submitted by Seth Kissi, titled *Social Identity in Hebrews and the Akan Community of Ghana*, in the Department of New Testament Studies, University of Pretoria, with Prof. Dr. Ernest van Eck as supervisor.

notably the works of Muir (2014) and Marohl (2008). DeSilva (2012) examines Hebrews in the light of honour and shame, patron-client relationships, group identity and commitment. In some recent publications Kissi and Van Eck (2017a; 2017b) demonstrated that ethnicity plays a key role in the social identity of Hebrews. To date, Hebrews has not been interpreted from the perspective of theories on personality. This is despite the fact that personality provides a relevant way of appreciating the appeal of the author of Hebrews to his² audience. This article therefore contributes to the study of Hebrews by considering the letter from the perspective of personality. In the process, it is revealed that the author appeals to his readers as collectivist persons with a group orientation within the social script of first-century Mediterranean society.

The article begins by explaining both social-scientific criticism and the concept of personality in first-century Mediterranean culture. This is followed by a brief introduction to the social context of Hebrews, providing necessary background information for the subsequent discussion of personality in Hebrews. Relevant aspects of the theories on personality are then delineated and applied to Hebrews, illustrating that the audience is in each instance addressed as typical Mediterraneans with a group orientation. The article therefore concludes that the author deals with his audience as typical collectivist persons.

2 Social-Scientific Criticism

Social-scientific criticism employs theories from the social sciences during the interpretation of biblical texts. The social sciences relevant to this endeavour include, but are not limited to, anthropology, psychology, archaeology and cultural studies (Jokiranta 2013, 5). Social-scientific criticism is a multi-disciplinary method, as it embraces not only the theories of the social sciences, but also the traditional critical methods of biblical studies. Horrel (1999, 24) argues that, as literary material, the biblical text can hardly be studied with social interests without the application of literary tools of investigation. Similarly, Elliott (2001, 7) remarks that social-scientific criticism is “a method that merges exegesis and historical research with the resources of the social sciences” (see also Horrell 1999, 3; Chalcraft 1979, 17). These theories and models help us to appreciate how some of the social institutions, norms, experiences and expectations of the people in the Bible give meaning to the biblical text.

² The masculine pronoun is used because the author was in all likelihood male.

3 Personality in First-Century Mediterranean Society

When considering personality, the focus is on factors that inform the self-concept, choices and life goals of people, their attitude towards the norms of society, and how other people perceive these factors. These considerations have implications for the behaviour of people and give indications of their personality. Malina (1996, 42), Hartin (2009, 10) and Crook (2004, 48) discuss the differences between persons we encounter in first-century Mediterranean societies and persons who live in current Western society. The Western concept of personality tends to emphasise one's uniqueness as a product of his or her genetic makeup, with less emphasis on social influences (Burkitt 1991, 17). Of course, there are attempts in Western scholarship to explain personality as a product of certain social interactions (Burkitt 1991, 4–16); yet the dominant view of the human person in the West is one that is purely individualistic and psychological. As Hartin (2009, 12) notes, “in Western societies, people have been given a sense of the self that stresses interiority and an inwardness that produces an awareness of oneself as an entity that reflects on itself as a psychological unity, ‘an inner being’ that is an organising principle of experience.” Malina (1996) explains further:

The men and women who people the pages of the Bible are imagined to act like “religious” Americans—individuals in pursuit of “salvation” as they attempt to control other people and things so that they might find success. Modern Bible readers generally believe that the people around Jesus saw him as their personal Lord and Saviour, their personal Redeemer. So long as Jesus' followers found that their consciences did not bother them, what they did was good. Good intentions were what counted. While only God gave success, God did help those who helped themselves, those who took the initiative, and those who persevered in their resolve. But in fact none of these traits that Americans normally associate with persons and personhood is to be found among the people described in the Bible. (p. 42)

While in the Western world the emphasis is on individualism when it comes to personality, in many agrarian cultures, including those of the Mediterranean, the emphasis is on collectivism. Individualism and collectivism are explained by Malina (2008) as follows:

Individualism means that individual goals precede group goals. In contrast, collectivism suggests that group goals naturally precede individual goals. As a cultural orientation, American individualism was, and still is, a way of being a person that is totally alien to the scenarios of the ancient Mediterranean world. In the contemporary world individualism can be found among the affluent, socially, and geographically mobile segments of society. Individualistic cultures as a whole emerged only where Enlightenment values have permeated society and agriculture has become the occupation of extremely few people. Since the contemporary version of the individualistic self emerges rather late in human history, it surely was not available in the first-century C.E. Mediterranean area. (pp. 257–258)

With these observations, Malina does not deny the existence of some forms of individualism before the period of Enlightenment. His focus is on individualism as it exists now. Citing Murdock and Provost's (1973, 388) index of cultural complexity, Triandis, Bontempo and Villareal (1988, 324) point to the presence of individualism among some early less-developed societies like the Mbuti Pygmies. Triandis and Suh (2002, 138) likewise draw attention to individualistic cultures among hunting-and-gathering communities that predate the Enlightenment.³ Malina's explanation should therefore be understood in terms of individualism as it exists in twenty-first century Western society, within the context of an industrialised economy, rather than a hunting-and-gathering economy.

Hartin (2009, 10) observes further that the self at work in Western societies gives prominence to "interior influences," while the self in Mediterranean societies gives prominence to "exterior experiences." In a similar vein "freedom of expression and choices of the individual" are important to a person in Western societies, whereas acting in accordance with group norms is important to a person in Mediterranean societies (Hartin 2009, 10).

Malina (1996, 43) suggests that if one is to understand ancient Mediterranean persons in some comparative way, one has to have appreciable knowledge of what is shared between the group-oriented

³ They observe that, "among hunters individual action is often more valuable than collective action, whereas among agricultural people collective action (e.g., building an irrigation system) is often extremely valued. The result is that hunting cultures are more individualistic than farming cultures . . . and the latter are more conforming than the former, an attribute that is associated with collectivism" (Triandis and Suh 2002, 138).

culture of the Mediterranean milieu and cultures from other parts of the world. According to Malina, the Mediterranean person attributes his or her emotional and psychological state to external influences, placing much stock in the opinions of others as a basis for knowing oneself. This explains why a person's physical appearance and the group to which he or she belongs are important considerations in ancient descriptions of individuals. These descriptions assume that members of a group share in a stereotypical way the same qualities. At the same time Mediterraneans are persons for whom the pursuit of honour is a primary concern. This pursuit for honour drives their decisions and actions to accommodate whatever might be considered honourable in their culture.

4 The Social Context of Hebrews

That Hebrews is addressed to a mixed group of Jewish and gentile believers is now gaining acceptance alongside the traditional view that it addresses mainly Jewish believers (Ellingworth 1993; Ekem 2008; Schenck 2003; DeSilva 2012). Similarly, it is increasingly being accepted by scholarship that one of the main issues addressed by the letter is the tendency of audience members to revert back to the more dominant and powerful groups from whence they came, which included not only Judaism (see Muir 2014, 427; DeSilva 2012, 59–64). How these powerful groups treated their former members was a result of the conduct of these former members, who had seemingly abandoned everything that was cherished and considered appropriate for social and political cohesion in society (see DeSilva 2012, 49; cf. 2012, 6, 46, 163). For example, sacrifices to the gods were regarded as respectable acts of piety, which were intrinsic to every facet of life in Roman society, to the extent that any sustained neglect of such acts would be considered inimical to the health of society at large, including the spheres of politics, commerce and social life (DeSilva 2012, 49). Since the addressees of Hebrews showed an aversion to such practices, they in effect rendered themselves deviants and were therefore treated with contempt by members of the larger society (Heb 10:33; see DeSilva 2012, 46).

As part of his commentary on the four macarisms in Luke 6:20–23, Neyrey (2008, 93) claims that the sanctions faced by followers of Jesus in situations like these were the result of spontaneous reaction rather than official arrangement. Families were mainly responsible for taking action against members whose conduct affronted and shamed them, so that families functioned as a safeguard against the improper behaviour of individual members. Neyrey maintains that conversion to a Jesus group

usually brought about such reproach from families, especially Jewish families, whose reaction could include expulsion from the family. Since a son's honour and wealth were more often than not derived from his family, expulsion from the family meant the loss of these benefits. DeSilva (2012, 50) explains that, in addition to other factors, the perception that Jesus was a false messiah accounted for the negative treatment of his followers.

Given these circumstances, the audience of Hebrews would perceivably have had a negative self-perception, brought on by the social and economic abuse that they endured at the hands of other groups. It is possible that the intent behind this abuse was not only to engender such a negative self-perception, but also to put pressure on members of the Hebrews group to withdraw from that group (Heb 10:36–39). The impact of such abuse and pressurisation on the Hebrews group would have been significant, especially considering that they were dyadic persons who required the opinions of other people to know who they are. Their negative self-perception would have contradicted the emotions brought on by their hope of inheriting all the promises of God and their pride and confidence as people of God (Heb 3:6, 14). Having withstood the pressure from the larger, more powerful community for some time, the believers were beginning to show a tendency towards abandonment of the Jesus group, with some individuals actually ceasing to attend the group's meetings (Heb 10:25; cf. 10:32–34). Certain scholars maintain that a number of members had actually withdrawn from the group. Compton, for instance, draws a parallel between the comment in Hebrews 10:25 that people were “forsaking” their “assembling together” (ASV; ἐγκαταλείποντες τὴν ἐπισυναγωγὴν ἑαυτῶν) and the reference to “sinning wilfully” (ASV; ἔκουσίως . . . ἀμαρτανόντων) in Heb 10:26, the latter of which will attract the wrath of God (Heb 10:27). The implication for him is that those who had stopped attending the meetings were actually guilty of sinning wilfully, which in effect meant withdrawal from the group (Compton 1996, 142). To address this situation, the author of Hebrews presents his words of exhortation in ways that are commensurate with the concept of personality in first-century Mediterranean culture. Relevant aspects of theories on personality will now be discussed and related specifically to Hebrews.

5 Personality Theories and the Study of Hebrews

5.1 *The collective self and social behaviour*

The process by which people learn how to conduct themselves in acceptable ways in society is expressed with terms like “enculturation,” “formation in humanity” and “socialization” (Malina 1996, 45). As part of this process, “social drama” accompanies the formation of personality (Kippenberg 1990, 104). For Mediterranean societies, this process of socialisation is responsible for the formation of dyadic persons, whose self-identity depends on what others say and think about them (Malina 1996, 45). This is all part of a system in which Mediterraneans share not only the opinions of the group to which they belong, but also the fate of members of that group. According to Malina (1996, 45), it would be unthinkable to speak of Jesus as one’s personal (i.e., individual) Lord or Saviour in the context of Mediterranean culture. Jesus was the Lord and Saviour of an individual only to the extent that he or she belonged to a group of which Jesus was the Lord and Saviour.

Two considerations were vital for people in group-oriented Mediterranean societies: (1) the priority of group goals; and (2) a concern for the positive image of one’s group—both of which were foundational to people’s choices and actions (Malina 1996, 47; see also Burnett 2001, 48; Hartin 2009, 22). Given these priorities, conformity to group norms was an essential feature shared by collective persons. Esler (1994, 29) identifies craft associations, religious cults and military units as some of the important groups in this respect. Triandis and Suh (2002, 141) argue that in all cultures there are in various proportions both idiocentrics (persons concerned with their own self-interests) and allocentrics (persons concerned with the interests of others). With their interests centered on themselves, idiocentrics have a higher probability for feeling oppressed by the norms of their society, which makes them poor candidates for group membership. The opposite tendency is true for allocentrics, who conform more readily to the norms of society and tend to be ideal candidates for group membership (Triandis and Suh 2002, 141). Yet, regardless of the type of society, all people have the innate ability to become aware of their own individual interests and goals, as well as the extent to which these interests and goals are in tension or continuity with the norms of society at large (Burnett 2001, 49). For Burnett (2001, 49), the factor that determines whether someone would be inclined towards individualism or collectivism is the number of values that are shared by that person with other people from the same group. The tendency

will be towards collectivism whenever the number of values shared with others in the group outweigh the number of values not shared with them. Conversely, the tendency will be towards individualism whenever the number of values *not* shared with others in the group outweigh the number of values that are indeed shared with them.⁴ In what sense does this information help us to understand Hebrews?

The past conduct of the readers and the concerns of the author, as expressed in his exhortation, reveal the group orientation of both parties. In the midst of a threatening and intimidating social situation, the group takes a bold stand to identify with other believers who had been imprisoned and subjected to public abuse (Heb 10:32–34). The fact that such public solidarity with the Jesus group could compromise their personal safety reveals that their orientation was towards the group, together with its interests and integrity. In his exhortation, the author speaks in a manner that seems to equate faithfulness to God with continued membership in the Jesus group (Heb 10:25; cf. 10:38). They are not of those who “shrink back” (οὐκ ἔσμεν ὑποστολής) nor should they stop attending the meetings of the group, thereby putting their continued identification with the group on display—a reason for their public abuse (Heb 10:38–39; cf. 10:25). They should rather intensify their meetings as they see “the Day” (τὴν ἡμέραν)⁵ approaching (Heb 10:25). We have here a clear expression of group orientation, in which both the author and the readers feel obliged to prioritise group interests over personal interests, as is typical of collectivist persons.

Some members of the Jesus group had begun withdrawing from the group’s meetings (Heb 10:25). The social pressure directed towards them was beginning to take its toll. The idiocentrics among them, who would have had a higher tendency to feel oppressed by group norms, may have found the situation unbearable. That some people were leaving the group indicates that their values differed from the values of the group, which is why they left in the first place while others stayed. The seriousness of leaving the Jesus group is illustrated by its implication not only for the salvation of these absconders, but also for the social image of the group, as is reflected in the gloomy and grave description of abandonment. For the author, withdrawing from the group means shrinking back, so that the Lord’s soul has no pleasure anymore in the person who withdraws (Heb 10:39). Such an act is like a land that has drunk the frequent rain, but has

⁴ This is evident from anthropological research that has studied Eastern cultures, in particular the Chinese (Burnett 2001, 49, citing Yu 1996, 231–232 and Abbott 1970).

⁵ Referring to the return of the Lord and the coming judgement.

yielded thorns and thistles instead of the expected crop (Heb 6:8). It is like crucifying Christ all over again and holding him up publicly for contempt (Heb 6:6–7). It is siding with Jesus' opponents rather than with his loyal followers, the abandonment of the group's Saviour, which brings reproach to the group. Such abandonment has serious implications for collectivist persons, who are concerned with the goals and interests of their group. The author's admonition can be understood as an attempt to forestall such a reproach with its implications for the group of readers. Such admonition, with its group focus, is intended to activate the readers' collective selves so that they would take the required decision in the interest of the group.

5.2 *Acting in accordance with one's nature*

For the ancient Mediterranean, it was thought possible to look at the physical appearance of a person and know the person's behaviour (Malina 1996, 52). Malina (1996, 52) identifies the ways by which one's conduct could be determined. These are called physiognomies and included one's gender, appearance, physical characteristics, ethnic group and the animal that one resembles, either in general or in detail. Accordingly, physiognomies were determined by the bloodline into which one was born (Van der Watt 2000, 166). This belief meant that one's behaviour was almost invariably fixed due to the people into which one was born and the environment in which one was brought up. Because of this, any deviation from the expected behaviour was attributed to outside influences such as the gods (Hartin 2009, 15; Malina 1996, 53). As Esler (1994, 30) points out, this way of thinking resulted in people being described stereotypically. According to Crook (2004, 48), "when you know someone's family, or their ethnic origin, you know all you need to know about them" (see also Van der Watt 2000, 166). Esler (1994, 30) gives the following two examples from the NT. First, Nathanael's question, "can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46) reveals how the people from Nazareth were generally regarded as nobodies. Second, the question, "is this not the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" illustrates that Jesus' worth was determined by means of an appeal to the worth of his family members (Mark 6:3). In this sense, the behaviour of the members of other communities could be accurately predicted because they shared common qualities (Malina and Neyrey 1991, 75).

Hebrews expects people to act stereotypically, in a manner that is congruent with their nature and commensurate with their status as members

of a family unit. The author finds these expectations useful when urging his readers to act appropriately towards God and the Jesus group. The behaviour of the readers is therefore expected to conform to the behaviour of their Father and of fellow members of God's family. That the believers are members of the family of God is clear (Heb 3:6). Hebrews advocates certain qualities that must be expected from members of God's family—qualities that were personified in the person of Jesus. One such quality that is prevalent throughout Hebrews is Jesus' faithfulness to God (Heb 3:2; 3:6). In being faithful, Jesus behaves just like his Father, who is also faithful (Heb 10:23; Heb 11:11). Such reasoning makes sense in a culture where people of the same household share the same qualities. The author uses the same logic when he calls upon the readers to remain faithful as well. Thus, the author urges his readers to "consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession, who was faithful to him who appointed him" (Heb 3:1c–2; ESV). As a token of his faithfulness, Jesus trusted in God (Heb 2:13) and submitted to him when tasting death for the sake of his brothers and sisters (Heb 2:9). Since the readers belong to the same divine family as Jesus, the author insists that they represent the faithful who preserve their faith, and not those who shrink back and are destroyed (Heb 10:39). They should therefore maintain their original confidence to the end, as faithful people are expected to do, and not fall away in the face of their suffering (Heb 3:14). If they do this, they act in accordance with their nature as members of God's family in a manner reminiscent of Jesus (Heb 12:2–3).

5.3 *The private, public and collective selves*

Triandis identifies three selves at work in people: the private, the public, and the collective selves (see Triandis 1989:507, citing Baumeister 1986 and Greenwald and Pratkanis 1984). The *private self* relates to personal characteristics, and would typically find expression through statements like "I am introverted," "I am honest," "I will buy X." The *public self* is concerned with the views of other people in the public sphere, and may be expressed with declarations like "people think that I am introverted" or "people think that I will buy X." The *collective self* is that part of a person that is concerned with the opinions of other members of the group to which he or she belongs, and may be expressed with statements like "my family thinks that I am introverted" or "my co-workers believe that I travel too much" (Triandis 1989, 507). In situations where attention is drawn to a particular self, that self becomes activated. Once that happens, the qualities related to that self are likely to be activated as well. People tend to sample

the collective self when they form part of only a few in-groups,⁶ and the private self when they form part of many in-groups (Triandis 1989, 513). When personal interests are in conflict with group interests, people tend to stay with an in-group if that group has a lot of resources that would encourage continued membership (Triandis 1989, 513). People are at times socialised to be highly conscious of their membership in a group, being constantly exposed to remarks like “remember you are a member of this family,” or “you are a Christian” (Triandis 1989, 507). In such cases, chances are that the collective self would constitute a large percentage of someone’s overall self, which increases the probability that that self would be activated in particular circumstances.

In their immediate historical past, the readers of Hebrews had exhibited an attitude of solidarity with other believers who were being persecuted. In the process, they became partners, as it were, with these believers, being publicly exposed while also suffering reproach and affliction. They also had compassion for those in prison (Heb 10:33–34). Their compassion and bold display of solidarity with other believers clearly indicate the activation of their collective selves, which included the prioritisation of group interests over personal safety. The activation of their private selves can be witnessed in the tendency of some of them to leave the group, and especially in the behaviour of those who had stopped attending their group meetings (Heb 12:12 cf. 10:25). In the context of their public mistreatment by citizens of the city, their public selves could be made salient (since that self is concerned with how people of the general public perceive them), increasing the chances that the readers would activate that self. In his response, the writer recognises the possibility of such influence on the readers as a result of their mistreatment by members of the dominant groups. His intervention is therefore to be understood as a reinforcement of the readers’ collective self, so as to increase the probability of its activation and thereby produce the desired results in the interest of the group. When the author reminds the audience in Heb 3:6 that they are God’s house (i.e., family), and in Heb 2:17 (cf. 2:11) that Jesus is their brother, it indicates that the believers have been socialised in a way that is likely prioritise the collective self. According to Triandis (1989, 513), this could increase their chances of activating the collective self. This is exactly what the author seeks to achieve with his exhortation.

⁶ In-groups are groups to which one belongs.

5.4 *The self and in-group demands*

In collectivist societies, it is generally difficult for people to leave a group, so that even if someone's lot within a group is unfavourable, leaving the group is a last resort (Triandis, Bontempo and Villareal 1988, 324). In such a situation, the collectivist person would instead adjust to the conditions and demands of a group in order to ensure that his or her interests as part the group are being met (Triandis and Suh 2002, 141). At least some of the recipients of Hebrews, as far as the evidence shows, may have found the cost of remaining in the Jesus group unbearable. Contrary to the view that collectivist persons would remain in a group no matter what demands were being made upon them by this group, these people showed signs of wanting to leave the group.

The latter can be explained in more than one way. Succumbing to the pressure, the idiocentrics among them may have begun to activate their private selves in reaching a decision about whether or not to leave the group. This reveals a clear inclination to place personal interests above the interests of the group. Reasons for the latter may include the continuation of their struggles and the waning of their former pride and confidence, which were evident in their previous displays of public solidarity (Heb 10:32–34; cf. 12:12). It is also likely that the Jesus group represented by Hebrews did not have the necessary resources that would encourage loyalty to the group by its members. This might have been a result of the prolonged social pressure faced by such members. According to Triandis (1989, 513), groups that lack resources stand a small chance of encouraging loyalty amongst its members. The attention given by the author to certain benefits from God enjoyed by the readers, as well as the promise of a greater reward for faithful members of the group, are attempts by him to compensate for the missing resources that would promote loyalty to the group by its members (Heb 2:3, 14–15; 2:17–18; 3:14; 4:14–16; 6:4–5; 10:34; 12:22; 28).

Another way to explain the inclination to leave the Hebrews group is that the persons in question were spoilt for choice, having a number of options available to them. It is possible that there existed a number of groups with which the believers were previously associated, and that they did not completely break their ties with these groups (Muir 2014, 129). This opened up the possibility of reverting back to these groups, but at the same time concealing their membership of the Hebrews group. According to Triandis (1989, 513), “when many ingroups are salient, conflicting norms lead individuals to turn inward to decide what to do.” What this means is that

while their identification with the Jesus group attracted public abuse, the believers may have turned inward to decide what to do, influenced no doubt by the more comfortable option offered by their affiliation with other groups. Thus, according to the theory, they were more likely to sample the private self in such a situation (Triandis 1989, 513). This should give credence to Muir's (2014, 129) suggestion that Hebrews deals with a situation in which the believers had not completely broken ties with some of their former groups.

5.5 *Honour and personality*

In a society where honour was the most important virtue, one's personality was shaped to a large extent by one's desire and attempts to acquire honour and avoid shame. According to Watson (2010), from an ancient Mediterranean perspective,

honour involves not only the way in which I think about myself, but the way in which other people think about me. Moreover, some opinions matter considerably more than others. Specifically, the opinions of my immediate family, and then other blood relatives, are of the highest importance. In general, the opinions of other people take on less significance as the relationship of those people to me becomes more distant. Exceptions to this rule were, for the most part, limited to high-ranking people who could bestow honour or shame even on people with whom they previously had only the most distant relationships. (p. 15)

Hence, someone felt honoured only to the extent that certain significant others held him or her in honour. This is consistent with our earlier assessment that the perception dyadic persons had of themselves was determined by other people's view of them. In the honour scheme of these societies, a person's self-perception carried less importance than other people's perception of him or her. That the author of Hebrews deals with readers who place a high premium on honour explains why he finds expressions about honour important. It also explains why he urges the readers to pursue honourable acts, encouraging them to look constantly to Jesus, who acted honourably by enduring the cross in faithfulness to God. Jesus did this paying no attention to the associated shame, but looking ahead to the joy set before him (Heb 12:2). It is relevant to the current consideration of honour that the joy set before Jesus is understood to involve

his exaltation (Heb 10:12; cf. 1:3–4, 9; 2:7–9). The readers are encouraged to see Jesus crowned with glory and honour in the present moment, his condition resulting not only from the fact that he suffered death, but also the fact that he temporarily accepted a lower status than the angels (Heb 2:9). By this, the author impresses upon his readers the goal of pursuing honour by remaining faithful to God in the midst of their current suffering. The honourable acts that they are to pursue are invariably bound to their identification with the Jesus group. The expressions of honour used to describe Christ and the group are also meant to activate their collective selves with the emotive value of the ascribed honour they derive from the group. The author claims that Jesus is counted worthy of more honour than Moses (Heb 3:3). He is also anointed with the oil of gladness because he hated evil and loved righteousness (Heb 1:9, quoting Ps 45:7–8). He loved righteousness in the sense that he kept faith in God; and this implies that the evil he hated was breaking faith with God in the face of his suffering (Heb 12:2). In addition to the reference to Christ being anointed with the oil of gladness above his companions, all the emphases on the superior nature of Christ's ministry and its benefits for the readers are to be appreciated in terms of their relevance for ascribed honour to dyadic persons. Mention is made of a better covenant enacted on better promises (Heb 8:6; cf. 7:22) and better sacrifices (9:23); Jesus' blood speaks a better word than that of Abel (Heb 12:24); the believers have better things that belong to salvation (Heb 6:9); a better hope (Heb 7:19); better and abiding possessions (Heb 10:34). In this sense, the dishonourable deeds that the readers are to avoid are ways of maintaining and enhancing the honour that the group already has (Heb 13:4). Since the author is a significant person in the readers' group, his views about what brings honour are important, especially when considering that dyadic persons place a high premium on the views of such significant members of their in-group (Watson 2010, 15). The author's appeal to his readers to "[c]onsider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted" (Heb 12:3), is important precisely because it comes from such a significant member of the in-group. The fact that *Jesus* is also a significant member of the in-group makes his example instructive as well.

5.6 *Bravery and honour*

In the Mediterranean culture, achieving honour was usually associated with public action that involved bravery, courage, hospitality and other virtues (Hartin 2009, 15; Leerssen 2007, 334). In Heb 12:1–4, the author uses a

race as metaphor to encourage his readers to show bravery in the midst of their suffering. Such bravery includes resisting and defying the pressure from members of the dominant society. They should do this by continuing to publicly take a stand for their faith, as they have done previously when enduring public abuse and identifying with those treated poorly (Heb 10:32–35). If the suffering of the believers can be likened to a race set before them (Heb 12:1), then they must go through their suffering with the mindset and attitude of an athlete who aims to win the contest and take the honour of the victor. The integrity of the Hebrews group was extremely important to the author, presumably because the group's survival and possible growth depended on it. It was therefore crucial for the writer to urge them to pursue this honourable act. He reminds his readers that he and his fellow leaders desire "to act honourably in all things" (Heb 13:18b). In a similar vein, the members should neglect neither to do good nor to share what they had, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God (Heb 13:16). God should be seen as a significant member of the group, whose views are important in the context of honour. It follows that if good acts are pleasing to him, they must be taken seriously. The readers are encouraged not to neglect showing hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares (Heb 13:2). In the same literary context, they are further urged to remember those who are in prison, as though they are in prison with them, as well as those who are mistreated. The exhortations to let marriage be held in honour among all, and for the marriage bed to be undefiled (Heb 13:4), relate in particular to doing the honourable thing. Sex was an important area of life in which honour had to be upheld, and the violation of honour in this sphere had serious effects on the honour of one's family or in-group (Esler 1994, 31).

As long as the readers acted in such honourable ways, they could lift up their heads despite their suffering. Within this Jesus community, those who had taken a bold public stance for their faith were regarded as highly honourable, with some of them even daring to become martyrs. Such people, without a doubt, became models of honourable conduct for other believers, especially if one considers the list of traditional heroes recalled in Heb 11 as behavioural models. The author of Hebrews deemed their courageous stance to be necessary for the survival and growth of the Jesus group. The latter continued well into the second century, during which records show that martyrdom led to the expansion of the Jesus community rather than its demise. In this respect, Tertullian is often quoted as stating

that “[t]he blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church” (see Iltis 2014, 33).

In light of this, the author’s call to his readers to display honourable acts like courage and boldness in public defence of their faith, as though they were part of an athletic competition, should be appreciated for its relevance to people who place such a large value on honour. Once these believers took a public stance for the group, its impact on the fortunes of the group would be obvious. As such, the author could have changed how the readers’ experienced their suffering, turning a disheartening experience into an ambitious contest for honour.

5.7 *Shared group fate and viewpoints*

Mediterranean persons believed that they shared a common fate as members of the same group or family (Malina 1996, 45). It was in one’s membership of a group that the fortunes of that group were shared. This explains why it would be difficult to conceive of Jesus as your Lord and Saviour if you were not part of the group who proclaimed Jesus as its Lord and Saviour (Malina 1996, 45). For Hebrews, all the benefits offered by God to the readers are dependent on them being members of the group. Their withdrawal from the group would mean the loss of the salvation of their souls (Heb 10:38–39). The author’s concern about the tendency of some readers to withdraw from the group—seen as roots of bitterness that could affect other members of the group—speaks to the perception that the group shared a common fate (Heb 12:15). In addressing his readers, the author makes use of certain group expressions that gain significance when considered in light of the current discussion. He states: “We are his house, if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope” (Heb 3:6; ESV). In other words, to hold on to their confidence and boasting in their hope proves that they are God’s house. According to this text, the mentioned hope and confidence are attributes of the house (i.e., the group) and not of the individual, who only shares in them as long as he or she remains in the house. The text that expresses a shared group fate more than any other in Hebrews is probably Heb 11:40 (ESV): “since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.” When stating that without “us” (i.e., the readers and the writer) the heroes of faith should not be made perfect, the author claims that his readers enjoy a shared group fate with the heroes of faith. That the perfection of these former faithful people of God is dependent on and bound to the perfection of the readers, is striking. Other texts in Hebrews that feature group expressions likewise betray an

orientation towards the group and a shared group fate (cf. Heb 4:1; 4:11; 4:14; 6:1; 6:9 10:19–25; 12:1). The author and readers of these texts place value not on “I” or “you” in the singular, but on “we” and “us” in the plural. In addressing Mediterranean people who were oriented towards their in-group, it was important for the author to reinforce such orientation and socialisation in the midst of troubling times. This was important because it was needed in pursuing the interests of the group.

5.8 *Interpersonal obligation within the group*

A shared group fate leads naturally to a sense of responsibility on the part of members to ensure appropriate conduct by other members. This is because the outcome of the conduct of one member affects all the other members in the group, either positively or negatively. In Hebrews, this explains the need of the author to demand interpersonal responsibility from group members. They are urged to ensure that no root of bitterness—that is, displaying any of a number of tendencies to leave the group or performing any other dishonourable act—springs up and defiles many (Heb 12:15). They should also encourage one another, and all the more as they see the Day drawing near, and not neglect their group meetings (Heb 10:25). Exhortations to hospitality in Hebrews should be understood as a way of urging interpersonal obligation within the in-group. Exhortations to do good and be hospitable necessarily involves interpersonal obligations (and, for that matter, interpersonal relationships). Contrary to Marohl’s (2008, 88) view that Hebrews is concerned only with inter-group relationships and behaviour, one finds a clear call to interpersonal obligation here.

Though strangers are mentioned in Heb 13:2, it is very likely a reference to believers in Jesus who came from other places to the city of the readers. This reading is supported by the fact that the introductory sentence “let brotherly love continue” references love for members of the in-group (Heb 13:1). Furthermore, the subsequent appeal to hospitality is also directed at people belonging to the in-group (Heb 13:3). The interpersonal obligation discussed in this section was crucial during those critical times when the group’s survival was at stake, since it ensured greater solidarity.

5.9 *Control over people’s lives*

Another feature of the collective culture of the Mediterranean world was that control over a person’s life was usually expected to come from the outside rather than from the individual. Significant members of one’s

family, such as the father or other male figures, exercised such control (Malina 1996, 48). The overriding incentive behind such control was the need to protect the family's honour. It was further justified by the belief that children had to reciprocate their parents' acts of giving birth to them and taking care of them. In respect of performing reciprocal acts to promote the image of the family, most members conformed to the expectations of their families. When it comes to Hebrews, the author fulfils the role of the Father's (i.e., God's) surrogate, or of the group's dominant male figure (in his capacity as a leader), trying not only to exercise control over the lives of his readers through his words of exhortation, but also to stem their tendency to do the dishonourable. The latter was important, since the dishonourable acts of group members invariably affected the group as a whole. The author's authority in giving such exhortation (Heb 13:22) has its basis in his being an elder or leader of the group, as well as a member of the group. For this reason, he uses the first-person plural often (see Heb 2:1, 3; 3:14: 4:3, 13, 14, 15; 6:3; 7:26; 10:10, 20, 22, 26; 12:1, 9; 13:6, 14). His authority is also justified by the claim that he speaks on behalf of, and in the authority of God, who is the Father of all in the group (Heb 13:17–18). In this respect, the exhortation in Heb 13:17–18 is revealing (ESV): "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you." The line of their authority as leaders, therefore, is traced to God. For this reason, the members should obey and submit to them (including the writer), especially when doing so would be to the advantage of these members.

The two basic ways in which the author seeks to exercise his control over the conduct of his readers are (1) through stern warnings and (2) by recalling God's benefits and his promise of a great reward for faithfulness to the group. They are warned that they cannot escape if they neglect such a great salvation (Heb 2:3). If they fall away, there is no chance for them to be restored again to repentance (Heb 6:6). Those who have trampled underfoot the Son of God have a worse punishment to look forward to than the punishment that was operative under the Law of Moses (Heb 10:29), and to face God's judgement is very terrifying (Heb 10:31). If it was difficult to escape when they refused the one who warned them on earth, it would be more difficult to escape when they refuse the one warning them from above (Heb 12:25).

Regarding God's benefits and promise of reward, the author has a long list. Throughout Hebrews, everything Jesus did in his humiliation and

exaltation was for the benefit of the readers as children of God and siblings of Jesus. He came to destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and to deliver all those who, through fear of death, were subject to lifelong slavery (Heb 2:14–15). He brings many sons to glory (Heb 2:10) and makes propitiation for the sins of his people. He suffered when he was tempted so that he is able to help those who are being tempted (Heb 2:18). The believers are now people who share in Christ (Heb 3:14). They are those who will enter God's rest because they believe in Christ (Heb 4:3). They can draw near with confidence to the throne of grace to receive mercy and grace because they have a high priest who is able to sympathise with their weakness (Heb 4:15–16). They have been enlightened, tasted the heavenly gift, shared in the Holy Spirit, tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come (Heb 6:4–5). If they remain faithful, theirs will be the promised rest (Heb 4:1–3) and the heavenly city of the living God (Heb 12:22)—a kingdom that cannot be shaken (Heb 12:28). Their hope in Christ gives them a better possession, an abiding one (Heb 10:34). Even the suffering that they are going through is God's discipline that is meant for their good (Heb 12:7–11). By not only threatening punishment, but also recalling God's present benefits and promise of reward, the author is employing both negative and positive reinforcements as a means to control the conduct of his readers.

6 Concluding Remarks

The nature of the collectivist persons addressed in Hebrews comes to light when considering theories of personality in the Mediterranean world. The readers are presented as people with collective selves, who prioritised group goals and interests. Consistent with the stereotypical way of assessing and anticipating people's behaviour in a collectivist society, the author demands from his readers specific attitudes and actions that would be congruent with their nature as people of God's household. Against the background of a shared group fate, the interpersonal obligations placed on the readers become intelligible as attempts to ensure the well-being and integrity of the group. The author's use of both negative and positive reinforcements to curb the readers' tendency to apostatise also becomes significant when considering the notion of a shared group fate. All these considerations support the extreme likelihood that both the audience and author are people with a group orientation who would much rather appeal to their collective selves than their other selves.

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