

Article

Defining Boundaries with a Vengeance: Identity Formation and the Motif of Divine Vengeance as Boundary Control in the Epistle to the Hebrews

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Abstract: The Epistle to the Hebrews contains several so-called “warning passages”. In these texts, the author of Hebrews warns the addressees that they may not tarnish their Christ-given identity through apostasy and leaving the Christ-believing community. One of the literary motifs the author uses is the motif of divine vengeance in Hebrews 10:30. This paper will show how the author uses this motif as a way to prevent the addressees, as children of God’s household, from apostatizing, while at the same time defining the boundaries and the consequences when boundaries are crossed. Social-scientific insights into the mechanisms of honor and reciprocity will be used to clarify why the author of Hebrews employs the motif of divine vengeance. The addressees of Hebrews, in fact, will slight the honor of God and reject the gift that God has given in Christ through their apostasy. Divine vengeance is portrayed as the reaction of God to this slight and rejection. In that way, the addressees of Hebrews are deterred from becoming outsiders and urged to remain insiders, merging their particular identity with their given theological identity.

Keywords: vengeance; honor; reciprocity; social identity complexity theory; Hebrews



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1. Introduction

Kobus Kok has shown in his article in *HTS Theologiese Studies* that Social Identity Complexity Theory enriches the study of the New Testament (Kok 2014). Identity formation in early Christianity was a dynamic and complex process in which distinguishing boundaries between the inside-group and outsiders was necessary. Based on the work of Roccas and Brewer, Kok distinguishes several modes of “identity representation” (Kok 2014, p. 2): intersection, dominance, compartmentalization, and merger (Kok 2014, pp. 2–5). His conclusion is that the early Christian movement probably envisioned the merger model, celebrating the diversity of identities within the one Christ-given identity (Kok 2014, p. 8). Kok applies this social-scientific theory to several passages in the New Testament, such as Galatians 2 and Philippians 3, to show its relevance and explanatory power.

Kok could also have included the epistle to the Hebrews, as other studies have done before him using Social Identity Theory (Muir 2014; Marohl 2018). The author of Hebrews carefully sketches the identity of its addressees, but at the same time employs a diverse pallet of boundary controlling mechanisms. One of the elements of boundary establishment in Hebrews is the notion of divine vengeance, which we can find in Hebrews 10:30.

This contribution wants to reconstruct the identity of the addressees of the epistle to Hebrews using elements of Social Identity Complexity Theory, while at the same time examining the way the author of Hebrews employs the notion of divine vengeance as a method of boundary control. Firstly, we must explore the question as to how divine vengeance was understood in ancient times, in its context of honor and reciprocity. Secondly, we take a look at the data for Hebrews regarding the social and religious location of the addressees. Thirdly, we will examine the theological identity of the addressees that is

sketched by the author of Hebrews. Fourthly, the problem which the author of Hebrews addresses and the modes of warning that the author uses are explored. Finally, the notion of divine vengeance in Hebrews 10:30 and its implications for the identity of the addressees are scrutinized within the practice of identity formation and the setting of boundaries.

2. Understanding Divine Vengeance in Its Cultural Context

A proper understanding of the use of the notion of divine vengeance in Hebrews first demands an exploration of this motif and its roots in history. Previous research on the topic of divine vengeance in the New Testament has pointed towards two important cultural mechanisms that serve as matrices for vengeance in antiquity: honor and reciprocity (Van den Os 2023).

2.1. Honor in Antiquity

Social-scientific study of honor in relation to the New Testament has taken flight in the last decades (DeSilva 2000, pp. 23–93; Malina 2001, pp. 27–57). David DeSilva has argued that honor and identity formation are tightly linked (DeSilva 2017, p. 30). Personhood in antiquity was not only an individual matter, but one's view of self was influenced by the norms and expectations of society and peer-groups. There is a constant dialectic between external norms and reproduction of these norms in behavior (Malina 2001, p. 31). By embodying these norms, one receives acknowledgment and honor from peers which shape and confirm one's status and self-respect.

Individuals, groups, and societies were eager to show honorable behavior and receive honor in antiquity, while they were careful not to exhibit dishonorable conduct. An individual could, however, be torn between several sets of honor discourse, for instance, between the social peer-group one belongs to and the societal understanding of honorable behavior. One had to choose which honor ethos one adopted, while accepting that the other party would dishonor or shame the individual.

One also had to be cautious in slighting the honor of another individual, because the power differential could make or break a person. Honor was an agonistic phenomenon and slights in antiquity were rapidly considered to be an attack on or challenge to one's status. These slights had different shapes (verbal, material, physical), but they always demanded a response. A neglect of this challenge could result in the loss of honor, because the peer group could regard this neglect as a legitimate or successful challenge to one's worthiness. The person challenged had to do something to restore and reinstate their honor. The answer of the person challenged had variable forms, but the goal was always the same: restoring the balance of honor and underlining one's power and status.

The notion of honor was also vital in religion. The gods needed to be honored and respected, because they have blessed the world in multiple ways (Aristotle 2003, *Eth. Nic.* IX.2.8; Seneca 1935, *Ben.* II.29.6; Mikalson 2010, p. 21). One honored the gods, because one would want to ensure that the gods stayed favorable in the future. Honoring the gods could take different shapes (Pulley 1997).

2.2. Reciprocity in Antiquity

Honor in daily and religious life in antiquity is connected to reciprocity, "the most important bond of society" (*maxime humanam societatem*) (Seneca 1935, *Ben.* I.4.2). Individuals and groups were connected to each other via a system of gift-exchange (χάρις), creating bonds of "friendship" (φίλια) and long-lasting "loyalty" (πίστις) (Sierksma-Agter 2023). These gifts could have a material form, but sometimes gifts were immaterial gestures of honor. The reciprocal exchange of gifts was not something that was voluntary: there was a certain amount of collective pressure to maintain one's status or retain protection (Kotsidu 2000, p. 593).

The giver of a gift must ideally give indiscriminately (Seneca 1935, *Ben.* VI.9.3), but in reality givers were quite critical. Receivers needed to be worthy of receiving their gift. The esteem of others ensures the giver that one's honor is not undercut and that the reciprocal

relationship would be healthy and profitable for the giver too. The goal of gift-giving was to enrich the other individual, but also to secure or even enhance one's status, life standard, or wealth.

Gifts were not given without expectations: a gift must be given in return. The idea of the pure gift, without any expectations of return, is a modern idea, stemming from Immanuel Kant and underlined by Jacques Derrida (Van den Os 2023, pp. 51–52). Ajax had already stated, in the words of Sophocles: kindness begets kindness (Sophocles 1994, line 522). Returning the gift in the right mode and time showed that one had the spirit of real gratitude. This return must be related to the value of the gift: the return is equal or, even better, more valuable. The intricate question was when to repay the gift: a quick return showed contempt and an attempt to get rid of responsibilities, while waiting too long or neglecting the gift could also be perceived as ingratitude. Gifts must be repaid either way or the initial giver would seek retribution.

This system of reciprocity can also be detected in ancient religion. The gods have showered the world and its inhabitants with gifts. They have even given blessings to those who are unworthy. The responsibility of humanity was to recompense the gods for all these favors, to maintain a healthy relationship and to eventually assure divine favor. Humans could show their gratitude in their ways of honoring, through votive offerings, sacrifices, and prayer (Pulleyn 1997; Bremer 1998).

2.3. Vengeance in the Context of Honor and Reciprocity

The notion of vengeance must be connected to both cultural mechanisms. Vengeance is the negative retribution when one's honor is challenged. An act of ὕβρις, which caused humiliation and shame, could not remain unanswered, but always led to an act of vengeance (Fisher 1992). The balance of honor was overturned and the existing equilibrium was breached. Individuals were diligent to restore the original social hierarchy through vengeance and show one's superiority and power (Cohen 1995, p. 268; Cairns 2002, p. 73). This avenging reaction resembled the offense and could range from murder to social dishonoring (exile, repossession, public humiliation). One of the main prerequisites was that vengeance could not exceed the offense: a burglary cannot be retributed with a murder. If the one offended was not capable of avenging the slight, his relatives (οἰκος) had to plead one's case and restore the honor of the victim.

Reciprocity is also an important context of vengeance. Insulting the gift or the giver, either through ingratitude or the absence of an answer, was considered to be an act of ὕβρις which had to be retaliated. Vengeance "is the opposite twin to the gracious return of favors that was called *charis*" (Pippin Burnett 1992, p. xv). The friend becomes an enemy and the reciprocal relationship is ended. Through the retribution of vengeance, the initial giver becomes the last actor in the exchange of gifts and shows one's superiority and power.

Honor, reciprocity, and vengeance thus are interconnected with each other, also in a religious perspective. When the blessings of the gods were neglected or not acknowledged, the honor of the gods was challenged. The gods could retaliate on the basis of the notion of "divine justice" (θεόδικη), as a counterpoise to the slight. The tyrant Philanthropos, for instance, was killed by lightning, after he set the sanctuary of Olympia on fire out of frustration for a prayer not granted (Westermann 1839, p. 221, fr. 14; via Versnel 1981, p. 40). Revenge prayers to the gods were also common in Greek and Roman societies (Van den Os 2023, pp. 58–60). A certain Eudoxos confesses in a stele from Anatolia that he has committed perjury by not fulfilling his promise to the gods after they have given him grace (χάρις) and that he was punished for that offense (Petzl 1994, fr. 58). The gods were the avengers of men, as Aegisthus in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* exclaims (Aeschylus 2006, lines 1577–82).

This short overview of divine vengeance in the context of ancient honor and reciprocity provides a lens through which we can consider Hebrews and the motif of divine vengeance in the epistle. Before we can apply this framework, we must first identify the addressees of Hebrews.

3. The Social and Religious Location of the Addressees and the Occasion of the Epistle

The exact identity of the addressees of Hebrews has been one of the main questions in the history of research on the epistle. Does the author of Hebrews write this work for a Jewish or Gentile or even a mixed audience? The paucity of textual evidence makes it incredibly difficult, even impossible, to pinpoint the exact social and religious location of the addressees. When one assumes that the first readers can be found in Rome, as Hebrews 13:24 seems to suggest, a mixed audience within the Christ-following community can be expected. One has to take the warning of Harold Attridge into consideration that we must not be too eager to identify the addressees within the bounds of the evidence (Attridge 1989, p. 12).

One can observe that the addressees of Hebrews are second-generation believers. The author of Hebrews concludes that the first readers of the epistle need teaching “again” (πάλιν) (Heb. 5:12). Hebrews 6:4–5 provides more ground to believe that the addressees are Christ-followers: they have been “enlightened” (φωτισθέντες), “tasted the heavenly gift” (γευσαμένους τε τῆς δωρεᾶς τῆς ἐπουρανίου), were “partners of the Holy Spirit” (μετόχους πνεύματος ἁγίου) and “tasted the good Word of God and the powers of the age to come” (καλὸν γευσαμένους θεοῦ ῥῆμα δυνάμεις τε μέλλοντος αἰῶνος). The addressees have heard the Christ-message (Heb. 2:3), have probably been baptized (Heb. 10:22), have served God and the Christ-following community (Heb. 6:10), and have even suffered with joy (Heb. 10:32–34).

An exact identification of the Christ-followers in Hebrews thus seems to be impossible, because of the scarcity of evidence. Yet the epistle describes the theological identity of the addressees in length.

4. The Theological Identity and Calling of the Addressees According to the Author of Hebrews

Hebrews contains several instances in which the author emphasizes the identity that the addressees have received when they came to faith in Christ. These texts can be considered with conventional historical–critical methods, but the contribution of social-scientific insights has provided several important insights into the question of the theological identity of the addressees of Hebrews (Muir 2014; Marohl 2018). When it comes to the identity of the addressees in relation to the notion of divine vengeance, the social-scientific tools of honor and reciprocity seem pivotal in understanding how the identity formation in Hebrews is connected to the use of divine vengeance in the epistle.

The importance and use of honor and reciprocity in Hebrews has been noted by other studies (DeSilva 1995; Whitlark 2008). The author of Hebrews shapes the worldview and identity of the addressees using honor and reciprocity discourse and imagery. The addressees are shamed in their present situation, but they must look upon the Son. He has been crucified, the method of shaming, but the cross became the throne of his glory (Heb. 12:2; cf. 2:9). The addressees have received the “heavenly gift” (τῆς δωρεᾶς τῆς ἐπουρανίου) (Heb. 6:4) of being part of God’s household and they will receive even more gifts when they will enter the heavenly sanctuary (Heb. 4:16). The bond, which the Christ-gift creates, is formulated by the author of Hebrews in terms of kin (Peeler 2014). They are “children” (Heb. 2:10, 13–14; 12:5–8), part of God’s οἶκος (Heb. 3:6), and brothers of Christ (Heb. 2:11–12, 17). The addressees thus have been placed in a honorable relationship with the Father through the Son and the Spirit, being made worthy by receiving the Christ-gift.

The recipients must recognize that the gift comes with expectations of return. In the words of the author of Hebrews: “let us have gratitude” (ἔχωμεν χάριν) (Heb. 12:28). This gratitude consists in Hebrews of lasting obedience and faithfulness. The addressees must finalize their race through perseverance (Heb. 12:1). They may not see the divine reality now (Heb. 11:1), but they must fix their gazes upon the coming divine promise and joy (Heb. 11:13). They must set aside other discourses of honor and travel as pilgrims to the eschatological city (Heb. 4:9–11; 13:14). They have examples for this attitude of obedience. Jesus is the superior example for the addressees: he has shown obedience to the Father

(Heb. 5:8–9) and is the pioneer and perfecter of faith through his suffering on the cross (Heb. 12:2). Several ancestors also serve as examples for the addressees of this persevering faith in the face of difficult circumstances (Heb. 11:3–40). Their past selves are also examples of this attitude, disregarding suffering in light of the future (Heb. 10:32–34).

The author of Hebrews thus employs honor and reciprocity discourse and imagery to formulate the identity and calling of the addressees. They have received an honorable position in the new covenant through believing in the Son and his mediating work (Heb. 2:9–11). The Father has forged a bond of kinship with the believers through his gift of grace, which ensures the addressees that they will receive further gifts when they enter the eschatological realm of God. The gift of the Father is met with the return of the gift through gratitude and perseverance, thereby disregarding other norms of honor and shame and remaining on the path to eternal honor (Heb. 12:3).

Put in terms of Social Identity Complexity Theory, the author of Hebrews argues for a model of merger. The particular identities of the addressees are not dissolved or dominated by their theological identity, but their identities are merged into the one identity which the Father has established through the Son and the Spirit. The addressees retain their individuality, but these individualities are included in their identity as an integral part of God's household. This given theological identity is the space in which the individual identities can form their ethos.

The author of Hebrews writes this epistle, however, because a crisis has become apparent in this process of identity formation and ethos establishment.

5. The Problem Addressed in Hebrews and the Modes of Warning of the Author

The reason that the author writes this “word of exhortation” (Heb. 13:22) is highlighted in Hebrews 5:11: the addressees suffer from spiritual dullness. They have become immature people (νωθοί) (Heb. 5:11). They are demonized and treated badly because of their Christ-following identity (Heb. 13:3, 13). This situation of being an outcast is taking its toll on the community. Some do not attend the services of the community (Heb. 10:25), “drifting away” (παραρῶμεν) (Heb. 2:1) into a situation of “shrinking back” (ὑποστολή) (Heb. 10:39). They willfully (ἔκουσίως) cross the boundaries of the “truth”, namely the truth of the work of the Father in the Son and the identity that has been acquired by the Son and applied by the Spirit in the lives of the addressees (Heb. 10:26). The author of Hebrews designates how he values this withdrawal out of the Christ-following community: the addressees are apostatizing (Heb. 3:12; 6:6) (Rice 1985).

The implications of this willful sin are multifaceted. Apostasy means, firstly, “trampling the Son of God” (ὁ τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ θεοῦ καταπατήσας) (Heb. 10:29), a description which resembles the image of re-crucifying Jesus used in Hebrews 6:6. The meaning is clear: those apostatizing show their contempt and neglect by spurning the Mediator of the new covenant and the superior high priest (Heb. 9:15). Secondly, apostasy “profanes the blood of the new covenant” (τὸ αἷμα τῆς διαθήκης κοινὸν ἡγησάμενος) (Heb. 10:29). In the covenantal sacrifice of the Son, the addressees are sanctified and purified (Heb. 2:11; 9:14; 10:10.14; 13:12). Through apostasy, they defile Jesus' sacrifice and declare that life in the new covenant is a thing of the past. Thirdly, apostasy “slights the Spirit of grace” (τὸ πνεῦμα τῆς χάριτος ἐνυβρίσας). The Spirit in Hebrews serves as the mediator between, on the one hand, the Father and the Son and, on the other hand, the addressees (Heb. 2:4; 6:4–5). Apostates dishonor the acts, speech, and thus the name and person of the Spirit.

The author of Hebrews wants to return this movement back to the life of faithfulness to God. This redirection is accomplished in the epistle in two ways. First, the author provides an insight into the theological identity of the addressees. Lengthy expositions on aspects of the Christ-message serve to show the continuity of God's faithfulness and the necessity of faithfulness for the believers. Secondly, the author of Hebrews adds several passages of warning and exhortation to define the boundaries and the course of faith the addressees now have to undergo. The two threads are intertwined in the epistle and cannot be understood without each other.

Within the so-called “warning passages” (Heb. 2:2–3; 3:7–4:11; 6:4–6; 10:26–31; 12:25–29), the author of Hebrews uses several argumentative tools to get his point across (McKnight 1992). He employs a *qal-wa-chomer* or a *minore ad maius* argument in Hebrews 2:2–3 (cf. Heb. 12:25): if punishment in the old covenantal situation was distributed to the disobedient, how much more retribution will be given to those who neglect the God of the new covenant? The same line of reasoning can be found in Hebrews 10:28–29: God’s punishment will be more severe and certain in the new covenantal situation than in the old covenantal situation, alluding to Deuteronomy 17:6–7. The author provides examples of infidelity to God and God’s punitive acts as a reaction to this unfaithfulness: Israel’s wilderness generation (Heb. 3:7–4:11) and Esau (Heb. 12:26–17). The point which the author of Hebrews is communicating is clear: God does not consider apostasy a light offense. His promises are certain, as is the severity of his punishment.

Those who willfully overstep the boundaries are thus not secured by the sacrifice of the Son, but they await “a fearful prospect of judgment and torrid fire” (φοβερόν ἐκδοχὴ κρίσεως καὶ πυρὸς ζῆλος). The author of Hebrews uses several motifs from the Old Testament book of Isaiah (Isa. 26:11; 30:27 LXX; 66:15–16) to underline the danger which apostates face: horrific judgment and the consummation (ἐσθίειν) of God’s opponents. The notion of divine vengeance is placed within this context of warning.

6. Divine Vengeance in Hebrews 10:30 as Boundary Control

The motif of divine vengeance in Hebrews 10:30 is part of a sequence of warnings within the passage 10:26–31, in which the author of Hebrews constantly alludes to Old Testament passages. The addressees must be familiar with these texts, as the author of Hebrews quotes and alludes to the Hebrew Bible frequently (Steyn 2011; Pierce 2020). Using all these quotations and allusions enables the author of Hebrews to get through to the addressees that their current path in life is in the most positive case a form of compartmentalization and in a negative sense a form of discarding their God-given identity.

The notion of divine vengeance is also linked in Hebrews 10:30 with an Old Testament text, in this case an explicit quotation. The introduction to this quotation from Deuteronomy 32:35–36 is more personal than previous warnings. The addressees share a certain intimacy with God due to their identity as children of God’s household. God is not someone who is unknown to them; the author and the addressees “know him” (οἶδαμεν). Therefore, they know that God is also the God who can avenge and retribute when his honor is slighted and his gracious gift is neglected by apostatizing ingratitude.

The author of Hebrews underlines the certainty of God’s righteousness and justice by quoting Deuteronomy 32:35–36. The context of Old Testament quotations often resonates in the context of the epistle to Hebrews (Docherty 2009, p. 200), which is also the case here in Hebrews 10:30. In Deuteronomy 32, YHWH shows that his instruments, who were designated to punish his people, have become a haughty, appropriating power which does not belong to them (Deut. 32:27). The friends of YHWH have become his enemies, in the words of Whitlock Blundell (Whitlock Blundell 1989). YHWH assures that his enemies will certainly be the object of his avenging justice and this moment of retribution and vindication is very near (ἐγγύς) (Deut. 32:35). The unfaithfulness and transgressions of the boundaries which YHWH has established result in punishment. God will avenge his honor and power, which is underlined in Deuteronomy 32:35–36.

As we have seen, the situation of Deuteronomy 32 resembles the present situation according to the author of Hebrews. The addressees may know that they are friends of the Father through the Son and the Spirit, but they are now behaving as his enemies by apostatizing. This haughtiness will be punished with divine vengeance, because the Father does not tolerate the transgression of the boundaries and the defilement of the identity given to the addressees.

This threatening side of God is once again emphasized by the author of Hebrews in verse 31, a statement which concludes this warning passage. God is described as “fearful” (φοβερόν), referring back to the “fearful” judgment in verse 27. God’s love is shown in

giving the Son as the gift of atoning grace; his wrath arises when the addressees cross his boundaries and shame their identity, thereby slighting his honor. The addressees must reckon that the Father is not unresponsive or defenseless, but that he is “the living God” (θεοῦ ζῶντος): he actively speaks and acts according to his own standards.

When we take the whole passage and its textual clues into consideration, we can see that the motif of divine vengeance is an element in a series of warnings and threats based on Old Testament texts and images. The context of Deuteronomy 32 and also of Hebrews 10:19–31 warrants a covenantal reading of divine vengeance: there is a special relationship between God and his people, based upon God’s grace, and God exacts vengeance when his people defile their given identity and the lifestyle that this identity demands. Divine vengeance in Hebrews is a reaction to neglect of God’s gift of grace: the covenantal gift of atonement in the Son is met with apostasy and impurity. This reaction slights the honor of the Spirit and thus also the Father as the great Benefactor. The addressees are given examples in the warning passages based on Old Testament texts and images, and thus data which are familiar to them. They know God in his love, but they must be reminded of the side of God’s avenging wrath.

The author of Hebrews uses the motif of divine vengeance, and other threatening images, to warn and exhort. He does not state as a matter of fact that the addressees are objects of God’s wrath, but that they know God will judge and exact his vengeance on his people when they do not live up to their identity. This knowledge serves as a reminder and exhortation that they must not apostatize, but return to their faithful roots and grow in faith (Heb. 5:12–14). In terms of Social Identity Complexity Theory, the author of Hebrews admonishes the addressees to merge their particular identity with the Christ-given identity instead of compartmentalizing or exalting their particular identity over their theological identity. They must do that now, because the moment of God’s coming is near (Heb. 10:25).

Scott Mackie summarizes the point of Hebrews poignantly: “and so the author again encircles the recipients with bare eschatological facts, forcing a reconsideration of unexamined lives and half-hearted commitments, and providing well-reasoned motivation for them to step boldly into the eschatological realities Jesus has provided them” (Mackie 2007, pp. 134–35).

7. Conclusions

The author of Hebrews is worried about the present situation of the addressees. They are in danger of tarnishing their gifted identity of children and members of God’s household. The author wants to divert the way of the addressees by exhibiting the richness of their identity, but also through severe warnings. The motif of divine vengeance is used by the author in Hebrews 10:30 to mark boundaries and instill fear. The addressees must expect God’s avenging justice when they apostatize, because they slight his honor and reject God’s gift of grace in his Son. Divine vengeance here does not stand on itself, but it is used as a means of exhortation to remain in the Christ-following community and confess the Lord in words and deeds. The notion of divine vengeance thus functions as boundary control of the author and as a way to encourage faithful perseverance and fidelity to the Father. The addressees receive the choice of the author of Hebrews. They can either step into the eschatological reality which Jesus has inaugurated (Heb. 2:5–9) or face the consequences: “they will be overtaken by the coming day of judgment, brought by the Coming One, Jesus” (Mackie 2007, p. 124). The notion of divine vengeance in Hebrews thus functions in the complex web of identity formation and establishing boundaries between insiders and outsiders.

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