

LOVE OF MONEY - NOT AS IN GREED BUT LEGITIMATE: A SOCIAL SCIENTIFIC STUDY OF ἀφιλάργυρος IN HEBREWS 13:5.

Abstract

ἀφιλάργυρος (freedom from love of money) is usually interpreted as speaking against the attitude of greed and covetousness towards money. A social-scientific look at the use of the word in the context of Hebrews, however, suggests a warning against love for money (wealth) and means of making a living which are all legitimate. Until interpreters come to terms with how love of money in the legitimate sense can be a hindrance to Christian pursuit as in the context of Hebrews, ἀφιλάργυρος will hardly be made to address an important reality of life. This article takes a look at the debate on the relationship of Hebrews 13 (in which the admonition of ἀφιλάργυρος occurs) with the rest of Hebrews and takes the position of coherence of Hebrews 13 with the rest of Hebrews. It explains social-scientific criticism and social control against Christians in first-century Graeco-Roman world as the model by which the study is carried out. Attention is also given to the socio-economic context of Hebrews against which ἀφιλάργυρος is examined together with the prescribed attitude for achieving ἀφιλάργυρος.

Introduction

Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you"
(Heb 13:5 ESV).

In the New Testament, ἀφιλάργυρος occurs only here in Hebrews 13:5 and 1 Timothy 3:3 where it appears in the accusative singular but not only in Hebrews 13:5 as Lane has it.¹ The exhortation not to love money is, however, found elsewhere but not with ἀφιλάργυρος.² Whereas the only other occurrence in 1 Timothy appears in the context of the qualities of overseers, that of

¹ William L. Lane, *Word Biblical Commentary: Hebrews 9-13* (Dallas, Texas: Word Books, 1991), 518. Ellingworth examines ἀφιλάργυρος and concludes that apart from these two occurrences the word appears nowhere else in the Greek Bible and classical literature. See Paul Ellingworth, *The New International Greek Testament Commentary: The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, Michigan & Carlisle, Cumbria: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company & The Paternoster Press Ltd, 1993), 698.

² 1 Tim 6:10; 2 Tim 3:2

Hebrews appears in the concluding chapter in which many find the author giving miscellaneous pieces of ethical exhortations.³ William Lane gives a survey of reasons why some scholars see Hebrews 13 as an appendix or supplement to Hebrews. These are based on three considerations – coherence, form and content.⁴ Lane, however, argues convincingly for the integrity and coherence of Hebrews 13 with the rest of Hebrews such that Hebrews 13 gives the practical implications of the worship the believers are called upon to give to God in Hebrews 12:28. In this sense, the form and content of Hebrews 13 does not need to be like Hebrews 1-12 as it deals with the practical implications of the import of Hebrews 1-12 where theological expositions are sandwiched by practical homilies. It is observed, however, that whether Hebrews 13 is considered coherent with the rest of Hebrews as Lane holds or not, the usual interpretation of ἀφιλάργυρος by interpreters is that it speaks against greed and covetousness.⁵ This article, however, argues that ἀφιλάργυρος should be understood not as speaking against greed but love for legitimate wealth and means of making money. From the point of view of coherence of Hebrews 13 with the rest of the Epistle, this article argues that, given the nature of the pressure against which the readers were being urged to stand, ἀφιλάργυρος should not imply warning against greed. A social-scientific study of the context is a helpful way of appreciating this understanding of ἀφιλάργυρος in Hebrews.

Social-scientific criticism

³ Leon Morris, for instance sees Hebrews 13 as an appendix dealing with a number of practical points. See Leon Morris, “Hebrews” in Frank E. Gaebelien *et al.* *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary with The New International Version of the Holy Bible in twelve volumes* Vol. 12 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1981), 145.

⁴ Lane, Hebrews 9-13, 495-496.

⁵ F.F. Bruce takes love of money as one of the ways covetousness finds expression. See F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 373. Others who understand ἀφιλάργυρος this way include Morris, “Hebrews,” 147; F.B. Craddock, “The letter to the Hebrews” in L.E. Keck (ed.), *The New Interpreter’s Bible in Twelve Volumes* Vol. 12 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 163; Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Bake Book House, 2003), 1134; Luke Timothy Johnson, *The New Testament Library Commentary, Hebrews: A commentary* (Louisville, London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 342; John F. MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary – Hebrews* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1983), 432, [https://books.google.com.gh/books?id=1u-ViXqC0AC&printsec=frontcover&dq=commentary+Hebrews&hl=en&sa=X&ved](https://books.google.com.gh/books?id=VrvAZtYi-3eC&printsec=frontcover&dq=commentary+Hebrews&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEWjB-; Donald A. Hagner, <i>Understanding the Bible Commentary Series – Hebrews</i> (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1983), see under “The security of the Believer (Heb 13:5-6),” <a href=)

Social-scientific criticism is a multidisciplinary interpretive tool to the interpretation of ancient texts like Scripture. It draws mainly on theories and models from the social sciences such as sociology, psychology, anthropology, archaeology and literary approaches to biblical interpretation. With theories and models from the social sciences, the approach affords the interpretation of scripture the understanding of the social institutions and scripts that give meaning to the text of scripture. As Elliott has noted, the biblical text encode information about, and derive their plausibility, meaning, and persuasive power from the social and cultural systems in which they were produced. For this reason, the method requires examination of the salient and interrelated properties of the society and culture, the institutions and cultural codes that governed ancient thought, institutionalised behaviour and conventional modes of interaction.⁶ In this light, the way Christians – perceived as deviants – were treated by their families and trade associations in first-century Mediterranean world offers some important perspectives on how to understand the use of ἀφιλάργυρος in Hebrews.⁷

Social Control against Christians in First-Century Graeco-Roman World

Before discussing social control against believers in first-century Graeco-Roman world, it is relevant to note some conclusions from studies on social control of deviant behaviour. This will help provide the lens with which to appreciate the social control in first-century Hellenistic Roman society. Social control for Clinard and Meier is the process that seeks to limit a deviant event – events that violate social norms. They mention internal and external social control systems. The internal involves individuals learning and accepting the norms of their group such that the individual feels guilty when violating the norms. The external systems can be negative (punishment to discourage

⁶ John H. Elliott, “On Wooing Crocodiles for Fun and Profit: Confessions of an Intact Admirer,” in John J. Pilch (ed.), *Social Scientific Models for Interpreting the Bible: Essays by the Context Group in Honour of Bruce Malina* (Boston, Köln: Brill, Leiden, 2001) 10.

⁷ DeSilva calls attention to the fact that the believers’ rejection of their former values, practices, and associations accounted for why they were treated as deviant groups. See David A. DeSilva, *The Letter to the Hebrews in Social Scientific-perspective* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2012), 45-46. David Watson notes, “First-century Christians constituted a small minority group that faced a deep and serious social dislocation from the non-Christian culture. See David F. Watson, *Honor among Christians: The Cultural Key to the Messianic Secret* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 147, <https://books.google.com.gh/books?id=ZW83UAidYCKC&pg=PA147&dq=family+persecution+of+members+christian+mediterrane>

deviant conduct) or positive (reward meant to encourage conformity to group norm). The external system also involves sanctions such as criminal penalties or informal sanctions such as gossip and ostracism.⁸

In the general Hellenistic-Roman life as well as among the Jews from whom the Christian movement emerged, Christians were seen as deviants who were generally seen to be breaking many acceptable norms for the well being of the society. Grünewald explains that Christianity was brought forth in the very social, economic and political developments which gave birth to other messianic movements considered to be threat to the established political and socio-cultural order.⁹ The fact that Christians in first-century Graeco-Roman world were engaged in practices that gave them the image of deviants has been pointed out. DeSilva observes,

Giving the gods due reverence and gratitude through the language of cult and sacrifice was deemed an essential characteristic of the virtuous citizen, who was doing his or her part to assure that the gods would continue to show favour to the community of which that citizen was a part. Withdrawal from all such demonstrations would be viewed as an affront to the gods and, therefore, a danger to the city as a whole. Demonstrating one's commitment to one's duty toward the god, moreover, symbolized one's commitment to one's duty towards the state, authorities, friends, and family. People who failed to acknowledge the gods' claim on their lives and service should hardly be counted upon to honor the claims of state, law, family, and traditional values.¹⁰

Since Christian beliefs and practices frowned on the norms just described, Christians became misfit in many Roman cities. It is further explained that piety towards one or another god or goddess constituted a part of almost every

⁸ Marshall B. Clinard & Robert F. Meier, *Sociology of Deviant Behavior* 15th edn. (Boston, MA: Cengage Learning, 1015), 32-33,
https://books.google.com.gh/books?id=Up2aBAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=deviant+behavior+control+theory+pdf&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwi417uZot_

⁹ Thomas Grünewald, *Bandits in the Roman Empire: Myth and Reality*, trans. John Drinkwater (London, Canada: Routledge, 1999), 91-92,
https://books.google.com.gh/books?id=cfYw_aTURmsC&pg=PA91&dq=treatment+of+messianic+groups+in+the+roman+world&hl=en&sa=X&ved

¹⁰ DeSilva, *Letter to the Hebrews*, 49.

political, business, and social enterprise in the Greco-Roman world.¹¹ In a similar vein, Paula Fredriksen notes that what we think of as religion ancient people considered an inheritance, “ancestral custom,” so that in the Roman world, religion and ethnic loyalties were inseparable.¹² This was true at the micro-level of family gods and ancestors, and true at the macro-level of city gods and cosmic divinities. *Eusebeia* or *pietas* (“piety”) did not measure what we think of as sincerity or strength of “belief” so much as attentiveness in the execution of inherited protocols of worship.¹³ Given all this, withdrawing from such traditional practices in situations like these – especially in numbers – would have been considered antisocial and even subversive.¹⁴ In an atmosphere like this, all manner of misfortunes such as earthquake or defeat on the battlefield were attributed to the life of the believers considered as pollutant in the empire.¹⁵ The Christians were made to suffer as scapegoats in some of these instances. By giving up piety towards the gods which was part of almost every facet of life including business and social enterprises, it became difficult for the believers to survive economically, and this explains why hospitality was such an important thing for the Christian leaders.¹⁶ Brian Blount’s comment on the mark of the beast in Revelation speaks to a situation common to Christians in the Roman world:

¹¹ DeSilva, *Letter to the Hebrews*, 49.

¹² Paula Fredriksen observes, “... respect for ancestral tradition was the bedrock of Mediterranean religious, political, and legal civilization. See Paula Fredriksen, “Christians in the Roman Empire in the First Three Centuries CE” in David S. Potter (ed.), *A Companion to the Roman Empire* (Carlton, Victoria: 2006), 595,

<https://books.google.com.gh/books?id=F5wAfRUNxRQC&pg=PA595&dq=respect+for+ancestral+religion+city+mediterranean&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwj8nP7V>

¹³ Paula Fredriksen, “Paul, Practical Pluralism, and the Invention of Religious Persecution in Roman Antiquity” in Peter C. Phan and Johathan S. Ray (eds.), *Understanding Religious Pluralism: Perspectives from Religious Studies and Theology* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2014), 89, <https://books.google.com.gh/books?id=SQ2QBAAAQBAJ&pg=PA89&dq=respect+for+ancestral+religion+city+mediterranean&hl>

¹⁴ DeSilva, *Letter to the Hebrews*, 49.

¹⁵ As Leithart observes, “When the gods seem angry – when earthquakes shake or volcanoes erupt or the Roman army is humiliated on the field – Christians become scapegoats. They are the ones who have made the gods angry. Their “atheism” is a pollutant, and they are abominations that need to be cleansed from the Roman world, if necessary by sword and fire. Their political and social effects are judged pernicious: they are peaceable to everyone, including Rome’s enemies, and their blithe indifference to social caste encourages slaves and other subordinates to become uppity. All in all, persecution is a rational response, a commonsensical defense of Roman order.” See Peter J. Leithart, *Delivered from the Elements of the World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 236-237, https://books.google.com.gh/books?id=Iy_CCgAAQBAJ&pg=PA237&dq=Roman+response+to+threat+to+the+empire+Christians+in+Roman+world&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwi2m

¹⁶ Romans 12:13; 1 Timothy 5:10; Hebrews 13:2; 1 Peter 4:9

The mark clearly has a commercial connection. Without it, without an expression of one's loyalty to the beast, a person loses one's ability to engage in commerce. Shut out of the economic system, a person would be hard-pressed to progress socially and politically, perhaps even to survive. The symbolism of the mark, then, is much broader than imperial coinage. It goes back to John's concern about all the enticements that draw his people toward accommodation to imperial cultic practice. John was particularly concerned that his people are so interested in maintaining strong membership in their trade and other guild associations that they will participate in the idolatrous rites, such as eating meat sacrificed to idols connected with those associations in order to progress socially and economically.¹⁷

From Blount's comments, it is not difficult to appreciate that exclusion from or difficult ties with trade associations was part of the lot of believers in first-century Roman world – a lot which comes with economic hardships.

On the part of non-Christian Jews, DeSilva notes that seeing their own coreligionists joining the Christian sect would have been met with some disapproval. Joining the church in many instances would have been seen to draw Jews further away, particularly in terms of their diligent observance of the terms of the Mosaic covenant.¹⁸ Their allegiance to Jesus, more widely viewed as a messianic *pretender* at best, a blasphemer and sorcerer at worst, would have reinforced the problematic nature of their conversion to the Christian movement.¹⁹ Anyone who dared to identify with the Christian movement run the risk of being treated as a heretic which came with unpleasant social reactions.²⁰ Neyrey suggests that the sanctions the disciples of Jesus faced were

¹⁷ Brian K Blount, *The New Testament Library – Revelation: A Commentary* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 260-261.

¹⁸ DeSilva, *Letter to the Hebrews*, 50.

¹⁹ DeSilva, *Letter to the Hebrews*, 50.

²⁰ In addition to all that, Jesus was evidently regarded as the author of or as responsible for *minut* (heresy). Even to be seen talking to a believer in Jesus was to run the risk of being accused of heresy in post-70 reconstituted Judaism. See James D.G. Dunn, *Neither Jew nor Greek* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2015), 628, <https://books.google.com.gh/books?id=CmauCgAAQBAJ&pg=PA627&dq=minim+jews+roman+world&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjmtt35uZbRAhXIOBoKHV>. This is relevant in so far as it was in a post-70 CE era Hebrews was written. The author writes at a time when the Church had existed long enough to have former leaders (Heb 12:7).

more than formal judicial acts such as exclusion from the synagogue.²¹ This is because loyalty to Jesus entailed loss of honour in the family and kinship network as a result of the violation of the honour code between father and son.²² That following Jesus meant taking up one's cross surely speaks to the negative experiences that resulted from following him.²³ Those who were worthy of following him had to love Jesus above parents and family members.²⁴ Indeed, the followers were to hate parents and family members.²⁵ All these for Neyrey amount to a violation of the honour code between parents and children in a relationship in which children are to love, obey and honour their parents.²⁶ Such violation would attract sanctions that involved the informal ban employed by every community toward those whom it despises which had to do with banning or exclusion, such as family sanctions against a rebellious son.²⁷ In this case a son could be disinherited by his father and shunned by his family resulting in the son becoming poor and hungry due to the loss of not only the land of the family, but its honour and wealth as well.²⁸ This is because, in most cases, the well-being of the son depended on the family and surviving without one's family was an uphill task.

Rick Talbott concludes in a study on the causal relationship between social marginalization in the Galilean Jesus movement and downward mobility that deviants suffered alienation from families and villages, which in turn made disciples part of the honoured poor. He explains that to choose loyalty to Jesus was essentially to make oneself a deviant for the kingdom of God.²⁹ Talbott attests to the fact that some of the disciples of Jesus were not considered deviants or destitute until their families labelled them so for loyalty to Jesus.³⁰

²¹ Jerome H. Neyrey, "Loss of Wealth, Loss of Family, Loss of Honor: The Cultural Context of the original Makarisms in Q" in Jerome H. Neyrey and Eric C. Steward (eds.), *The Social World of the New Testament: Insights and Models* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2008), 93.

²² Neyrey, "Loss of Wealth, 96.

²³ Matthew 10:38

²⁴ Matthew 10:37; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23

²⁵ Luke 14:26

²⁶ Neyrey, "Loss of Wealth, 96.

²⁷ Neyrey, "Loss of Wealth, 93.

²⁸ Neyrey, "Loss of Wealth, 93-96.

²⁹ Rick F. Talbott, *Jesus, Paul, and Power: Rhetoric, Ritual, and Metaphor in Ancient Mediterranean Christianity* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2010), 65, <https://books.google.com.gh/books?id=iXhLAWAAQBAJ&pg=PA65&dq=families+deviants+mediterranean&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEw>

³⁰ Talbott, *Jesus, Paul*, 49. Denise Kimber Buell notes that membership in an *ethnos* or *genos* is

πτωχός (*ptōchos*) is defined as a destitute poor person who lacks sufficiency.³¹ According to Hamel, “The *ptōchos* was someone who had lost many or all of his family and social ties. He was a wanderer, therefore a foreigner for others, unable to tax for any length of time the resources of a group to which he could contribute very little or nothing at all.”³² Neyrey notes that wealth and honour are not individual possessions, but rather are the property of the family or kinship group.³³ Exclusion from family or kinship group therefore meant loss of wealth and honour. It is obvious then that joining the Christian movement had some unpleasant implications which included economic hardships. This was as a result of either choosing to be part of the itinerant movement or by rejection of the believer by his or her family, village or trade association.

The Socio-economic, Political Context of Hebrews

Notwithstanding the lack of precise information on authorship and audience of Hebrews, the socio-economic and political context of the book has useful clues in the text of Hebrews as well as in information available from studies on first-century Mediterranean society. The description of the fate of the readers of Hebrews speaks to some mistreatment in social hostility and economic abuse typical of the deviancy-control measures of the Mediterranean world.³⁴ Hebrews 10:34 which mentions the plundering of the recipients’ possessions speaks to some social sanction on the recipients. It is instructive in respect of the social control of the believers that what they suffered included enduring “a hard struggle with sufferings, ... being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction,” and “the plundering” of their possessions.³⁵ These clearly are some of the informal ways of exercising social control. The public reproach describes the public disapproval of the readers in gossip and other forms of

produced and demonstrated through proper religiosity, and charges of improper religiosity (atheism, impiety, idolatry) both structure the confrontation between state and martyr and the martyrs’ responses to the state. See Denise K. Buell, *Why this New Race? Ethnic Reasoning in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University press, 2005), 53.

³¹ In this definition Neyrey follows Aristophanes, *Plut.* 535-534. See Neyrey, “Loss of Wealth,” 87-88.

³² Gildas Hamel, *Poverty and Charity in Roman Palestine - Near Eastern Studies 23* (Berkeley University of California Press, 1994) cited in Jerome H. Neyrey and Eric C. Steward (eds.), *The Social World of the New Testament: Insights and Models* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc.), 87-88.

³³ Neyrey, “Loss of Wealth,” 88.

³⁴ DeSilva, *Letter to the Hebrews*, 45-46.

³⁵ Hebrews 10:32-34.

verbal abuse. Cockerill elaborates on the seizure of the recipients' property as follows:

Seizure' expresses the violence of the underlying Greek term. Confiscation was often accompanied by imprisonment or exile. It might be carried out by a hostile mob or by the judicial action of civic officials... Officials were only too ready to punish those condemned by the mod. In fact, seizure of property was a common first-century experience for those in disfavour with greedy authorities. The audience are to know that such marginalisation is a normal way for the people of this unbelieving world to treat the faithful who pursue the eternal destiny prepared by God (see Heb 11:37-38).³⁶

From the foregoing, one observes the combination of formal (active or passive [permissiveness] of city authorities) and informal sanctions on the recipients of Hebrews. No plundering of their property could be sustained if the victims could seek redress with city authorities.

ἀφιλάργυρος in the Context of Hebrews

Against the background of the social control against the recipients of Hebrews, the appeal for ἀφιλάργυρος (freedom from love of money) can hardly speak to greed or covetousness. Greed and covetousness are usually associated with cheating and depriving others of what they deserve. They are also associated with refusing to give out what one has. But as the evidence in Hebrews shows, there is hardly any indication that the believers were greedy or covetous. On the contrary, they had demonstrated their willingness to give to those who did not have, and had accepted the plundering of their property with gladness.³⁷ These attitudes certainly cannot be expected of greedy and covetous people. That greed and covetousness are not in view here is reinforced by the author's exhortation to the believers to say in their trust in God, "The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?" The position that greed and covetousness are not what ἀφιλάργυρος addresses in Hebrews is strengthened

³⁶ G. L. Cockerill, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company 2012), 501. He cites Eusebius (*Hist. eccl.* 3.17) in the first part of the quotation.

³⁷ Hebrews 10:34

when “What can man do to me” is properly understood as referring to the plundering of the believers’ property and their exclusion from trade associations and families.³⁸

Therefore if any form of love of money was a possible hindrance to the Christian cause of the recipients, the most obvious and pressing one would be the desire to maintain their normal means of making a living which they were now being denied because they had departed from such practices as sacrifices to the gods. Their normal means of livelihood is now being withheld as a bait to get them to abandon their faith. The only way to keep them away from being caught on the hook with this bait is to free oneself from the desire to make a living even in a normal, acceptable way and to continue to accept the deprivation of even the possessions one legitimately has. It is in this respect that the assurance that God will neither leave nor forsake them becomes meaningful.³⁹ The point is that people do not need to be greedy or covetous to be able to have their daily needs. However, when one’s normal way of making a living is being denied, and the denial can lead one to abandon one’s faith, then the need to count on God for one’s needs becomes even more crucial and meaningful. Scholars have hardly taken this view of ἀφιλάργυρος in Hebrews.

The one whose position on ἀφιλάργυρος comes close to this in taking the context seriously is Lane. He suggests that ἀφιλάργυρος addresses a tendency to amass greater wealth in order for the believers to secure themselves in the wake of the plundering of their property.⁴⁰ While this could be a possible temptation, the evidence in Hebrews points to a more pressing temptation. It is the temptation in which a bait to get the believers to abandon their faith is seen in the plundering of the readers’ property and general difficulty to buy or sell. This is what if the believers do not resist could lead them to abandon their faith in order to have some legitimate comfort. It is in this light that ἀφιλάργυρος gains significance in the urgency of the author’s appeal evident in the rest of Hebrews. In so far as the call to faithfulness runs through the author’s earnest

³⁸ Craddock intimates that Citizens of the many provinces of the Roman Empire did not wait for imperial edicts to make life miserable for minority groups, ethnic or religious. See Craddock, “The letter to the Hebrews,” 125. For the audience of Hebrews, such actions against them certainly involved the plundering of their property and the creation of a situation in which economic life was difficult for them (Heb 10:32-34).

³⁹ The promise neither to leave nor forsake them in Hebrews 13:5 is a citation from Joshua 1:5.

⁴⁰ Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, 518.

appeal to his readers throughout Hebrews,⁴¹ the import of ἀφιλάργυρος for keeping faith (faithfulness) with the Christian group (as discussed above) becomes even more relevant.

Hebrews' Solution to the pressure

The writer of Hebrews provides the antidote to the pressure to get believers to abandon the Christian group. In Hebrews 13:5-6 he advocates trust in God's faithfulness to provide for believers' needs. Believers are to be content with what they have in whatever situation, counting on God who promises never to leave nor forsake them. In this trust, the believer can confidently say "The Lord is my helper: I will not fear; what can man do to me?"⁴² That "What can man do to me?" speaks to the pressure others mount on the readers in order for them to abandon their faith is clear in the context of Hebrews. In such a situation, the believers are to be content with whatever they are left with even if their lot is that of poor people who have to rely on the benevolence of others. It is in this light that the second solution to resisting the pressure is crucial. The writer both praises and advocates hospitality shown to believers under economic and other social pressure. In Hebrews 10:32-34 he states,

But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one.⁴³

It is significant that the acts for which the believers are praised include being partners with those who endured hard struggle with sufferings as well as those publicly exposed to affliction. They are also commended for their compassion on those in prison. As the writer praises them for these acts, he urges them to

⁴¹ Hebrews 3:6, 14; 4:14; 6:18; 10:23, 35, 37-39; 12:3

⁴² This is a citation from Psalm 56:11 (cf. Ps. 56:4).

⁴³ Seizure of their property could refer to plundering the unoccupied properties of the imprisoned or the still-occupied properties of those whose unpopularity would assure that they would never get a fair hearing before local magistrates. It could also refer to a court's or local official's cooperation with popular shaming by the imposition of some kind of fine upon individual Christians. See DeSilva, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, 47-48. This was more so when they had no protection from city authorities.

continue in them. They should thus, "... not neglect to do good and to share what they have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God" (Heb 13:16). The call on the believers to pursue brotherly love in Hebrews 13:1 should be understood in the light of assistance to brothers and sisters under the social and economic pressure described above. Related to taking care of believers under social and economic pressure is the call on them "not to neglect hospitality to strangers" for thereby some have entertained angels unawares (Heb 13:2). While this is likely a reference to believers who came into the city as strangers lacking the rights and protection of citizenship against insult, abuse, and assaults on property, it is note worthy that the recipients themselves were treated as strangers (Heb 10:32-34).⁴⁴ It therefore makes sense that the readers are specifically required to remember those who are in prison and those mistreated as though they themselves were in prison and mistreated also (Heb 13:3). To appreciate these in terms of what pertained in first-century Mediterranean world is helpful.

Citing Wansink, DeSilva observes that prisoners in the Greco-Roman world relied on family and friends from the outside to provide for their basic needs (food beyond subsistence, clothing, medicine), an act which involved the risk of drawing suspicion to the visiting family members and friends and often led to death.⁴⁵ Having compassion on prisoners (Heb 13:3) certainly involved visible acts which most likely included visits to those in prison and providing for their needs. In the Mediterranean society, the way to know the internal state of a person was to watch what the person did externally.⁴⁶ Their compassion could therefore be attested to only in those external acts which gave indication of their compassion.

Lessons from Hebrews' Solution

To overcome the pressure of depriving one of one's legitimate economic fortunes in order to dissuade the person from his or her conviction, lessons can

⁴⁴ DeSilva notes that the stranger or foreigner generally lacks citizenship in the new locale, and thus lacks the rights and protection citizenship afforded against insult, abuse, and assaults on property or honour. See DeSilva, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, 75. This is indicative of how the recipients were themselves treated as strangers and gives relevance for Hebrews' presentation of the exemplars as people who acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on earth (Heb 11:13).

⁴⁵ DeSilva, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, 47.

⁴⁶ B.J. Malina, "Understanding New Testament persons" in R.L. Rohrbaugh (ed.), *The social sciences and New Testament interpretation* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers Inc., 1996), 51.

be drawn from the solution put forth by Hebrews. Whereas the author advocates a detachment from love of what is legitimately one's entitlement, he also advocates what one may call social support systems.

In the first solution is a choice to be content with whatever state one finds oneself in because of standing by one's conviction. It involves trust in God to supply one's needs no matter how difficult one's condition might be. It is a solution that recognises what others can do adversely against one but in which one still is determined to go through hardship for God's sake. This is a call to a higher form of self-denial than the abandonment of the pleasures of evil pursuits as in greed and covetousness. It is a solution in which one should be prepared to become destitute for the sake of what one believes in.

In the second solution, the believers were to use their own individual resources to help one another to foster a bond in which they could stand strong and not bow to the pressure of deprivation. Social support is defined as "... any input, directly provided by an individual (or group), which moves the receiver of that input towards goals which the receiver desires."⁴⁷ Such support may occur naturally, as in an extended helping network of family and friends, or be contrived.⁴⁸ In the second solution of Hebrews therefore lies social support where the author speaks of what other like-minded people can do in support of one another in order to promote a common cause in their conviction. Hebrews finds in the believers' hospitality to one other a powerful way of withstanding the pressure from those who would dissuade the believers from standing by their faith. Beyond the supply of some economic needs of those under pressure, the moral support of solidarity, acceptance and affirmation present in such acts of hospitality are crucial for people in a situation of social abuse of rejection and other forms of hostility.

⁴⁷ Sisca Lentjes and J.M.L. Jonker, "Social support networks: A Literary Study" in J.A. Yoder and J.M.L. Jonker and R.A.B. Leaper (eds.), *Support Networks in a Caring Community* (Dordrecht: Martin Nijhoff Publishers 1985), 9.

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⁴⁸ Whittaker and Garbarino cite Silverman and Associates, and Stack and Silverman in this view. See James K. Whittaker & James Garbarino, *Social Support Networks: Informal Helping in the Human Services* (New York: Aldine De Gruyter, 1983), 29, citing Silverman and Associates, Stack, and Silverman,

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Concluding Remarks

Understanding ἀφιλάργυρος in the light of the foregoing, it becomes imperative that interpreters take care to relate the author's admonition to the issues in the context of Hebrews. Much as freedom from the love of money in general is relevant as admonition against greed and covetous attitude towards to money and wealth, it must also have relevant application to situations where one can be denied of one's legitimate wealth or economic opportunities as a bait to dissuade one from standing by one's convictions.

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