DeSilva’s book is the first socio-rhetorical commentary which appears in New Testament Hermeneutics. The author applied the socio-rhetorical analysis on the epistle to the Hebrews as he had already made in the past with his two published books (Despising Shame: Honor Discourse and Community Maintenance in the Epistle to the Hebrews, SBLDS 152, Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995 & The Hope of Glory: Honor Discourse and New Testament Interpretation, Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1999). It’s true that the cultural world of the recipients of Hebrews is combined with analysis of the author’s rhetorical strategy. The book is divided in two parts. The first is an introduction to the epistle to the Hebrews. It presents the basic problems of the text of Hebrews and then the author describes what is socio-rhetorical analysis. The second and larger part of the book is the commentary.

The principal interest of DeSilva’s book is to present and analyze the rhetorical strategy of Hebrews. For this aim, rhetorical analysis, social-scientific approach and cultural anthropology perspective are used in an inter-cultural model of interpretation. More specifically, structural, literary and narrative strategies come into play, to bring into light aspects that remain unknown to modern research. We will not find a commentary to the kind that we have already seen by H. Attridge or W. Lane, because the interest of the author is not to present us all the philological and theological data of the text, neither to numerate all the sources that probably the author of the epistle made use. The author focuses on the rhetorical devices and the way by which the author of Hebrews communicates with his audience.
The first part of the book deals with the problem of the author and the recipients. DeSilva follows the modern scholarly research in avoiding to identify them with some well-known persons and communities of first-century Christianity. He does not limit the ideological identity of the addressees to Jewish or Gentile Christians. He also discusses the place from which Hebrews was written or the place to which was addressed, the vocabulary and style, the use of Scripture, date of composition, etc. Very important is that the author applies social-scientific analysis to describe the identity of the recipient community and its relation with the larger society. Here the basic sociological model is that of a conflict between groups. Christians were labeled as deviants by the surrounding society because of their confession and way of life. DeSilva suggests a date before 70 C.E. as time of composition and he believes that the author has been influenced by Platonic philosophy and Apocalypticism. He also agrees with most scholars that Hebrews appears to have been written with a view to oral delivery.

The principal sourcebooks for the rhetorical analysis of the author are the classical rhetorical handbooks to which he very often refers to prove his thesis. According to DeSilva the author of Hebrews was an expert of the rhetorical art and he has made use of all the devices that were being used in New Testament times by the Greco-Roman world. He also underlines the main problem of rhetorical analysis of the epistle (to which rhetorical kind of speech Hebrews belongs), which remains up to nowadays open to scholarly debate as it utilizes elements of both epideictic and deliberative oratory. DeSilva presents concisely the history of research of the rhetorical and structural analysis of Hebrews and he suggests that Hebrews can be analyzed as deliberative speech that uses widely epideictic techniques.

The second part of the book is the commentary. The structure of Hebrews is divided in ten units. Each of these units starts with an overview of the theme that is presented in these verses and then follows the commentary. The unit concludes with the summary of what ideas have already discussed and with a section called Bridging the Horizons that is the relation of the text with the contemporary world and its meaning for the modern Christian readers. We can’t find a word-by-word exegesis but a description of all the rhetorical devises that compose the argumentation of Hebrews and mainly their need of existence to the communication with the addresses. I think that three are the main sociological models of analysis. The honor and shame values, the Patron and client relation with focus on the role and importance of the Broker (Mesi/thj) and finally the exchanging gift scheme. All these were basic parts of every day life in first century world.

Honor and shame language is the most suitable to describe the argumentation of the author of Hebrews. These values, according to cultural anthropologists determine the whole life of first-century Mediterranean persons. Everything in Hebrews is viewed from this perspective. The addressees are forced by the author to imitate Jesus’ honor and to
reject the pressure of the outside world. The patron client relation is the most appropriate according to the perspective of the book to analyze the relation between God and his believers. God is presenting to act as Patron, the recipients as his clients and Jesus as Broker. It is a different way of understanding the plan of salvation. Very interesting is that Angels, Melchizedek and the figure of High-Priest function as Brokers between God and humankind. The motif of exchanging gift seems suitable to describe in a social level the experience of giving and receiving benefits between two persons. The theological ideas of rest (κατάπαυσις), perfection, sin, apostasy, faith, gratitude as well as citizenship and sojourn are viewed very effectively by social-scientific approach. DeSilva devotes a large part in his commentary to specify them under this direction. Many of these ideas and some of the situations that Hebrews describes should be analyzed more because there are aspects that could be brought into foreground by a social-scientific approach of the text.

Every rhetorical device (anaphora, inclusio, synkrisis etc.) used by the author of Hebrews is presented under the author’s plan: to press the addressees to be ready for the divine judgment, which is a most powerful tool for strengthening commitment to group values over against society values (p. 174). Every time that DeSilva comments the rhetorical techniques, he refers to classical ancient orators (Aristotle, Cicero, Quintillian, Dio Chrysostom and others) to prove that Hebrews follows all the principles of the art of rhetoric. Helpful are also the schemes used by anthropologists that are presented to shed more light to the rites of primitive cultures which are referred. Much of the material in these units has appeared previously in journal articles or DeSilva’s published dissertation on Hebrews (Despising Shame: Honor Discourse and Community Maintenance in the Epistle to the Hebrews, SBLDS 152, Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995). The commentary is the result of an age-long research on the epistle to the Hebrews by an author who is an expert in socio-rhetorical approach of the New Testament’s books.