

THE OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND OF THE WARNING IN HEBREWS 6:4–8

Randall C. Gleason

The continuous flow of articles on the warning passages of Hebrews over the last decade testifies to the complexity of those passages as well as their enduring theological significance.¹ Often overlooked are the diverse methods used in interpreting the warning passages. For example some utilize a deductive method in which the warnings are primarily interpreted in light of theological concepts found elsewhere in the New Testament. Passages that seem to teach the security of the believer (e.g., John 10:25–30; Rom. 8:28–39; 1 Pet. 1:3–9) are regarded as clear and central to the New Testament, while other passages such as the warnings in Hebrews, which seem to teach the possibility of apostasy, are interpreted in line with the clear texts.² Others

Randall C. Gleason is Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology, International School of Theology–Asia, Quezon City, Philippines.

¹ Articles published since 1987 include Alan Mugridge, "Warnings in the Epistle to the Hebrews: An Exegetical and Theological Study," *Reformed Theological Review* 46 (1987): 74–82; Thomas Kem Oberholtzer, "The Eschatological Salvation of Hebrews 1:5–2:5," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 145 (January–March 1988): 83–97; idem, "The Kingdom Rest in Hebrews 3:1–4:13," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 145 (April–June 1988): 185–96; idem, "The Thorn-Infested Ground in Hebrews 6:4–12," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 145 (July–September 1988): 319–28; idem, "The Danger of Willful Sin in Hebrews 10:26–39," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 145 (October–December 1988): 410–19; idem, "The Failure to Heed His Speaking in Hebrews 12:25–29," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 146 (January–March 1989): 67–75; Scott McKnight, "The Warning Passages of Hebrews: A Formal Analysis and Theological Conclusions," *Trinity Journal* 13 (1992): 21–59; Thomas E. Schmidt, "Moral Lethargy and the Epistle to the Hebrews," *Westminster Theological Journal* 54 (1992): 167–73; Robert A. Peterson, "Apostasy," *Presbyterian* 19 (1993): 17–31; Wayne Grudem, "Perseverance of the Saints: A Case Study from Hebrews 6:4–6 and the Other Warning Passages in Hebrews," in *The Grace of God, the Bondage of the Will*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce Ware (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 133–82; and David A. deSilva, "Exchanging Favor for Wrath: Apostasy in Hebrews and Patron-Client Relationships," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 115 (1996): 91–116.

² One variation of this approach is presented by Grudem in "Perseverance of the Saints," 133–82. Though he does extensive exegetical work throughout his article, he

claim to avoid the pitfalls of a theological reading of the warnings by employing a more inductive method in which they proceed from a purely exegetical viewpoint.³ In the end it seems that the passages with which one begins determine one's theology.

Many exegetes who begin with the Hebrews warning passages end up affirming the non-Calvinistic view that religious apostasy is possible for genuine believers. Meanwhile, those who give other passages more weight generally advocate the Calvinistic interpretation that the epistle warns against those who merely profess to be Christians and are not genuinely converted. Following sociological trends in New Testament studies, deSilva seeks a fresh understanding of the apostasy in light of the patron-client relationship prevalent in Mediterranean societies of the first-century. He argues the author was warning his readers not to violate the social obligations and loyalty due Jesus as "Patron" of the Christian community, because such an affront to their divine Benefactor's honor would result in irrevocable exclusion from God. This method attempts to use a Greco-Roman situation to unlock the meaning these warnings had for a Hebrew audience.⁴

One area that needs more attention is the use of Old Testament themes, particularly in Hebrews 6:4-8. The purpose of this article is to move the discussion back to an Old Testament per-

begins by defining the entrance into salvation according to the beginning stages of regeneration, conversion, justification, adoption, and initial sanctification as taught elsewhere in the New Testament (ibid., 134-37). He then interprets the identity of those described in Hebrews 6:4-6 by whether these stages are true of them. He concludes that since these initial stages of true regeneration are not found in the Hebrews descriptions, it is inconclusive that they are saved (ibid., 152). Assuming non-Pauline authorship of Hebrews, the weakness of such an approach is the use of terms and their meanings from other New Testament authors (mainly from Paul) rather than interpreting the passages within the context of the author's own terms and criteria of salvation. Though Grudem later compares his conclusions with language describing the saved elsewhere in Hebrews (ibid., 161-71), the import of other New Testament concepts seems to take precedence in his conclusions.

³ For example, hoping "to help other people to shed their blinders," I. Howard Marshall sets out "to establish what Scripture actually says" ("The Problem of Apostasy in New Testament Theology," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 14 [1987]: 68). Marshall considers the Hebrews passages to be the "most important" exegetical evidence for rejecting the Calvinistic doctrine of final perseverance of the elect (ibid., 73-74). Also see I. Howard Marshall, *Kept by the Power: A Study of Perseverance and Falling Away*, rev. ed. (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1975), 137-52. Similarly Clark Pinnock is not alone when he declares the pivotal role these warnings played in his pilgrimage from Calvinism to Arminianism (*The Grace of God and the Will of Man* [Minneapolis: Bethany, 1989], 17).

⁴ See deSilva, "Exchanging Favor for Wrath: Apostasy in Hebrews and Patron-Client Relationships," 91-116. That aspects of the patron-client relationship are found within the Hebrew culture of the recipients is granted. However, deSilva's emphasis on the sociocultural environment of the Mediterranean region seems to overshadow the more significant Old Testament background of the epistle.

spective, which seems appropriate because of the Hebrew audience and distinctly Jewish ethos of the epistle. Specifically the experience of the Exodus generation at Kadesh-barnea is a central motif behind the warning passages. This is particularly true of Hebrews 6, often regarded as the most difficult among the epistle's five warnings (Heb. 2:1–4; 3:7–4:13; 6:4–12; 10:26–39; 12:25–29). An Old Testament perspective provides helpful insight into the spiritual state of those described (6:4–5), the impossibility of renewed repentance (v. 6), and the nature of judgment (vv. 7–8).

THE OLD TESTAMENT IN HEBREWS

Numerous studies have analyzed the prominence of the Old Testament in the Book of Hebrews.⁵

Hebrews is impregnated with the OT. The writer makes vital use of the OT text in developing his parennetic sections as well as those that are more theologically oriented. Every chapter is marked by explicit or implicit references to the biblical text. The writer's use of Scripture expresses his conviction of the continuity between God's speaking and action under the old and new covenants, which has urgent implications for Israel and for the Church. A detailed knowledge of the OT is indispensable for understanding what the writer of Hebrews is endeavoring to say. He assumes on the part of his audience a deep familiarity with their contents.⁶

The author of Hebrews cited the Old Testament at least thirty-eight times.⁷ Most citations are clearly marked by an introduction, often attributing them directly to God, Christ, or the Holy

⁵ Those consulted for this study include Markus Barth, "The Old Testament in Hebrews: An Essay in Biblical Hermeneutics," in *Current Issues in New Testament Interpretation*, ed. W. Klassen and G. F. Snyder (New York: Harper & Row, 1962): 53–78; F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), xlvii–lii; Paul Ellingworth, "The Old Testament in Hebrews: Exegesis, Method and Hermeneutics" (Ph.D. diss., University of Aberdeen, 1977); George Howard, "Hebrews and the Old Testament Quotations," *Novum Testamentum* 10 (1968): 208–16; Simon Kistemaker, *The Psalm Citations in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Amsterdam: Van Soest, 1961); Richard Longenecker, "Hebrews and the Old Testament," in *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975): 158–85; J. C. McCullough, "The Old Testament Quotations in Hebrews," *New Testament Studies* 26 (1980): 363–79; Ronald E. Clements, "The Use of the Old Testament in Hebrews," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 28 (1985): 36–45; R. T. France, "The Writer of Hebrews as a Biblical Expositor," *Tyndale Bulletin* 47 (1996): 245–76; and William L. Lane, who gives a concise summary of other works (*Hebrews 1–8*, Word Biblical Commentary [Dallas, TX: Word, 1991], cxii–cxxxiv).

⁶ Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, cxv.

⁷ Longenecker, "Hebrews and the Old Testament," 164–66. The number of Old Testament citations varies among scholars because of the lack in some cases of introductory marks (e.g., Num. 14:29 in Heb. 3:17); see Howard, "Hebrews and the Old Testament Quotations," 209–11.

Spirit.⁸ Also the writer made numerous allusions to both the text and events of the Old Testament.⁹ On these occasions the criteria for determining the presence of possible Old Testament allusions include similarities of theme, content, specific construction of words, and structure. Furthermore, when echoes are traceable to the same Old Testament context and a reasonable explanation of authorial motive for using allusions is given, certainty about them increases.¹⁰ The explicit Old Testament quotations used by the author indicate his preference for the Septuagint and his extensive knowledge of the Pentateuch and the Psalms.¹¹

The author's use of the Old Testament reflects several exegetical principles commonly found in contemporary rabbinical practice.¹² Of these, the most pertinent to the present study is his typological interpretation.¹³ Typology is based on the assumption that the redemptive activity of God follows basic patterns throughout history. Hence typology is commonly defined as the use of patterns of correspondence between persons or events in earlier redemptive history and persons or events in later redemptive history.¹⁴ Examples in Hebrews include the writer's development of his theology of rest according to the pattern of archetype (God's rest, 4:4), type (settlement of Canaan under Joshua, 4:8), and anti-

⁸ For example "he [God] says" (1:6, 7; 5:6; 8:8); "he [Jesus] is saying" (2:12); and "the Holy Spirit says" (3:7).

⁹ Longenecker identifies at least fifty-five additional allusions to Old Testament passages throughout the epistle ("Hebrews and the Old Testament," 166-70).

¹⁰ See G. K. Beale, *The Use of Daniel in Jewish Apocalyptic Literature and in the Revelation of St. John* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984), 307-9.

¹¹ Of the twenty-seven Old Testament passages explicitly cited, nine are from the Pentateuch including Genesis 2:2 (in Heb. 4:4); Genesis 21:12 (11:18); Genesis 22:17 (6:14); Exodus 19:13 (12:20); Exodus 24:8 (9:20); Exodus 25:40 (8:5); Deuteronomy 9:19 (12:21); Deuteronomy 31:6, 8 (13:5); Deuteronomy 32:35-36 (10:30); and ten Psalms are cited, including Psalm 2:7 (1:5; 5:5); Psalm 8:4-6 (2:6-8); Psalm 22:22 (2:12); Psalm 40:6-8 (10:5-7); Psalm 45:6-7 (1:8-9); Psalm 95:7-11 (3:7-11, 15; 4:3, 5, 7); Psalm 102:25-27 (1:10-12); Psalm 104:4 (1:7); Psalm 110:1 (1:13); Psalm 110:4 (5:6; 7:17, 21); and Psalm 118:6 (13:6).

¹² See Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, cxcix-cxxiv.

¹³ See Leonhard Goppelt's treatment of the use of typology in Hebrews in *Typos: The Typological Interpretation of the Old Testament in the New*, trans. Donald H. Madvig (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 161-78.

¹⁴ This definition agrees with the recent tendency to identify typology with "historical correspondences retrospectively recognized within the consistent redemptive activity of God" (R. M. Davidson, *Typology in Scripture: A Study of Hermeneutical *typos* Structures* [Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1981], 94). Also see David L. Baker, "Typology and the Christian Use of the Old Testament," in *The Right Doctrine from the Wrong Texts*, ed. G. K. Beale (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 314-15, 327-28; and G. P. Hugenberger, "Introductory Notes on Typology," in *The Right Doctrine from the Wrong Texts*, 337-38.

type (the believer's rest, 4:9). The author contrasts the priestly ministry of the earthly and heavenly sanctuaries in 8:1-10:22 to illustrate the typological relationship between the Old and New covenants. Most important to this study is the writer's use in chapters 3-4 of the Exodus generation at Kadesh-barnea (Ps. 95:7b-11) as a type of the Christian community to which he was writing. In each case the Old Testament record of God's dealings in earlier redemptive history is used to bring understanding to the present situation of his readers. Because of the author's explicit reference to the rebellion of the Exodus generation in the immediate context (Heb. 3:7-11, 15-19), many have recognized the vital role of the events of Kadesh-barnea in deciphering the warning in 3:12-14.¹⁵ However, few have recognized the allusions to Kadesh-barnea in the warning of 6:4-8.¹⁶

THE BACKGROUND OF HEBREWS

The author gave many indications throughout the epistle that his intended readers were Jewish Christians. The way the writer addressed them as "holy brethren, partakers of a heavenly calling" (3:1), "partakers of Christ" (3:14), and "beloved" (6:9), and his constant use of "we" (e.g., 2:1-3; 4:14-16) and "us" (e.g. 4:1, 11, 16) indicate their converted state. That they were baptized is implied by the repeated reference to their "confession" (3:1; 4:14; 10:23).¹⁷ They were also undergoing persecution and economic deprivation because of their faith (10:32-34; 12:4; 13:3). If this letter were addressed to unbelievers within a mixed audience rather than primarily to believers, one could expect the author to express more uncertainty about their spiritual condition and to appeal more to their need for genuine conversion. However, the author's goal was not to persuade some to be genuinely converted but to exhort all (13:22) to take confidence in what God had already done for them in Christ (3:6; 4:16; 10:19, 35) and to urge them to hold fast to the hope they already confessed in Christ (3:6,

¹⁵ For example Oberholtzer, "The Kingdom Rest in Hebrews 3:1-4:13," 187-86; deSilva, "Exchanging Favor for Wrath," 105-8; and many commentaries.

¹⁶ Two exceptions include G. H. Lang, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (London: Paternoster, 1951), 98-107; and J. Dwight Pentecost, "Kadesh Barnea in the Book of Hebrews," in *Basic Theology Applied: A Doctrinal Application of Basic Theology in Honor of Charles C. Ryrie and His Work*, ed. Wesley and Elaine Willis and John and Janet Master (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1995), 127-35.

¹⁷ In the early church, initiates were required to make a confession of their faith in Christ at their baptism. The author of Hebrews repeatedly appealed to their baptismal confession of allegiance to Christ to encourage them to remain steadfast. See Günther Bornkamm, "Das Bekenntnis im Hebräerbrief," in *Studien zu Antike und Urchristentum: Gesammelte Aufsätze II* (Munich: Kaiser, 1963), 188-93.

14; 4:14; 6:18; 10:23). Some have suggested that the primary message of the epistle addresses genuine Christians while the periodic warnings are directed to the unconverted within their midst. However, this is difficult to reconcile with the author's description of those warned as "partakers" both of Christ (3:14) and of the Holy Spirit (6:4) and as having been "sanctified" by the blood of the covenant (10:29). The author's assumption that his readers had a thorough knowledge of the Old Testament indicates they were Jews. Furthermore the lack of any reference to circumcision rules out the possibility that he was addressing Gentile Christians attracted to Judaism. Also the emphasis on the Mosaic Covenant as "obsolete and growing old" (8:13) and the inadequacy of the Levitical sacrificial system (10:4, 11) would have been meaningful to a Jewish audience.¹⁸

Since the readers had come to faith indirectly through those who had heard Jesus (2:3-4), they were probably second-generation believers. The exhortation to remember those who first led them and "spoke the word of God" to them implies their leaders had died (13:7). The expectation that "by this time [they] ought to be teachers" (5:12) indicates additional time had passed. The earliest date that could account for these factors would seem to be A.D. 60.¹⁹ The author's references to the Levitical sacrifices in the present tense (7:27; 8:3; 9:6-9, 25; 10:1-3; 13:10-11) suggests the Herodian temple was still standing. The absence of any reference to the destruction of the temple suggests that the epistle was written before A.D. 70.²⁰ If Rome was the destination, as indicated by the salutation "Those from Italy greet you" (13:24), the sufferings of the readers (10:32-34) may describe the hardships endured by the Jewish Christians expelled from Rome by the edict of Claudius in A.D. 49.²¹ However, the emphasis on the Levitical priests and sacrifices suggests that the recipients may have been residents in or near Palestine. This possibility is strengthened by the author's negative critique of the city of Jerusalem.²² He

¹⁸ See John V. Dahms, "The First Readers of Hebrews," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 20 (1977): 365-66.

¹⁹ Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, lxii.

²⁰ The destruction of the temple in A.D. 70 would have proved useful to the author's argument for the needless redundancy of the sacrificial system following Christ's atoning work on the cross. The fact that he did not mention it strongly suggests that the temple had not yet been destroyed.

²¹ For a detailed defense of the Roman destination of Hebrews see Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, lviii-lxvi.

²² See Peter Walker, "Jerusalem in Hebrews 13:9-14 and the Dating of the Epistle," *Tyndale Bulletin* 45 (1994): 39-71.

wanted to discourage returning to the temple sacrifices and placing false hope in the city of Jerusalem, the geographical center of Judaism. The author exhorted his readers to go "outside the camp" where Jesus suffered (13:13), an allusion to Golgotha outside the city gates of Jerusalem. He explained that here Christianity does "not have a lasting city, but we are seeking the city which is to come" (13:14). Like their father Abraham, who though living in the land of promise, "was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (11:10), the Hebrew readers were to look to "the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem" (12:22) instead of the earthly Jerusalem.

Walker suggests there is a prophetic element in the author's critique of Jerusalem. Observing the increasing tensions between Rome and the Jews arising from the Jewish Revolt (which broke out in A.D. 66), the author may have foreseen the coming destruction of Jerusalem. This may underlie his expectation of divine judgment in both 10:25 ("all the more as you see the day drawing near") and 10:37 ("for yet in a very little while, He who is coming will come and not delay"). His confidence that the cultic rituals of the Old Covenant were "ready to disappear" (8:13) may be rooted in the impending fate of the temple and the priests in Jerusalem. This would also give meaning to his warning of coming destruction in 10:27 ("a certain terrifying expectation of judgment, and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries"); 10:39 ("we are not of those who shrink back to destruction"); and 12:27 ("the removing of those things which can be shaken").²³ Even if the Jewish recipients lived outside of Palestine (i.e., in the Diaspora), the question of Jerusalem's future would have been of vital concern since it was the religious center of Judaism.²⁴ Walker suggests the growing Jewish patriotism resulting in revolt against Rome was part of the reason the readers "were being strongly tempted to identify more visibly with their Jewish fellow-nationals."²⁵ The threat of Rome demanded complete solidarity among all Jews if the revolt was to succeed. The reluctance of the Christian Jews to observe Jewish rituals was regarded as disloyalty, deserving of persecution from their Jewish

²³ Ibid., 62-71.

²⁴ See Barnabas Lindars, "Hebrews and the Second Temple," in *Templum Amicitiae: Essays on the Second Temple Presented to Ernst Bammel*, ed. William Horbury, JSNT Supplement Series 48 (Sheffield: Sheffield, 1991), 410-33. Arguing for a date between A.D. 65 and 70, Lindars shows how the Epistle to the Hebrews addresses the issue of the profound importance of the temple in Judaism throughout the Diaspora.

²⁵ Walker, "Jerusalem in Hebrews 13:9-14 and the Dating of the Epistle," 66.

countrymen. This explains why some among the audience had already wandered off from the fellowship of the Christian assembly in order to avoid persecution (10:25).

The epistle is best understood as an "exhortation" (13:22) to steadfastness, encouraging the readers to endure patiently in their present persecutions and warning them not to turn from the superior way of Christ and return to the old rituals of Judaism. The letter includes two major thrusts. First, the author emphasizes the superiority of Christ over all the various features of Judaism. As Revealer, Jesus is better than the prophets (1:1-3a), the angels (chaps. 1-2), and Moses (3:1-6). As Redeemer, His priesthood is superior to that of Aaron and the Levitical priesthood (3:1; 4:14-8:6). Second, by a series of warnings that become increasingly severe the author cautioned his readers against lapsing back into Judaism. These warnings are presented throughout the book to reinforce the exhortation to remain steadfast.

THE VARIOUS VIEWS OF HEBREWS 6:4-6

A brief survey of the various interpretations of Hebrews 6:4-6 will help determine the critical aspects of the passage that must be dealt with in establishing any view. With slight variations in detail, most interpretations of this passage fall into one of the following four categories.²⁶

SAVED AND LOST

"Non-Calvinists"²⁷ generally understand this passage to refer to Christians who were in danger of forfeiting their salvation by "falling away" into total apostasy.²⁸ Though they differ over the nature of the apostasy and over the possibility of reconversion,

²⁶ Not included is the unique view offered by V. D. Verbrugge, who argues that Hebrews 6:4-6 is a warning to local covenant communities, not to individual members of the church ("Toward a New Interpretation of Hebrews 6:4-6," *Calvin Theological Journal* 15 (1980): 61-73). Though the covenantal concept is in view, so also are individuals as indicated by lists of persons (11:1-40) given as examples of perseverance. Furthermore individuals seem to be in mind when the author expressed his desire "that each one (*ἕκαστος*) of you show the same diligence so as to realize full assurance of hope until the end" (6:11).

²⁷ Marshall prefers this term because, while all who affirm this view reject the Calvinistic formulations of the Synod of Dort (1618-1619), many "are not happy to be lumped together as 'Arminians'" ("The Problem of Apostasy," 67).

²⁸ Robert Shank, *Life in the Son* (Springfield, MO: Westcott, 1961), 229-34; H. Orton Wiley, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill, 1959), 210; Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God*, 137-53; and Grant Osborne, "Soteriology in the Epistle to the Hebrews," in *Unlimited Grace*, ed. Clark H. Pinnock (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1975), 144-66.

they agree that the loss of salvation is possible. They say final perseverance depends on human requirements accomplished through the help of God and fellow believers. The strength of this view is that the description of those in Hebrews 6:4–5 is taken in the normal sense as referring to genuine conversion. However, the view that the judgment of apostasy (vv. 7–8) speaks of eternal condemnation conflicts with the security of the believer taught elsewhere in Hebrews (e.g., 7:25; 9:14–15; 10:14). Furthermore some fail to account adequately for the impossibility of recovery mentioned in 6:6, for they are unwilling to admit that the apostates who have lost their salvation are forever beyond the possibility of repentance.²⁹

PSEUDO-CHRISTIANS

The most prominent Calvinistic view avoids impugning the security of the Christian by asserting that those described in 6:4–6 were not true believers.³⁰ They are viewed as merely professing Christians who, though they exhibited signs that often accompany faith, had in reality never expressed genuine faith. They made an external profession of acceptance after a thorough exposure to the gospel and consequently shared in the blessings of God's people through their fellowship with them. But later, because of persecution, they renounced their profession and returned to their former manner of life.

Though quite popular, this view fails in several areas. First, the attempt to explain how these individuals had the experiences described in verses 4–5 and yet remained unregenerate seems theologically driven rather than arising naturally from the text. Second, the exhortation throughout the passage is to maturity, not salvation (v. 1). Understanding those in verses 4–5 as merely

²⁹ Regarding this weakness Roger Nicole's critique is classic. "If Heb 6 proves anything about losing salvation, it proves too much! A wise Arminian might do well not to quote this text, since before the end of the discussion he may have to concede that he does not understand it, and that he is unable to point to concrete cases where it applies. This, we should think, would be better than to abandon to damnation all those who are viewed as apostates" ("Some Comments on Hebrews 6:4–6 and the Doctrine of the Perseverance of God with the Saints," in *Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975], 357). However, some like Marshall avoid this problem by acknowledging that the apostate may "go so far in sin" that "God may not permit him an opportunity of repentance" (*Kept by the Power of God*, 150).

³⁰ Gleason L. Archer, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1957), 40; Philip Edgecumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 215; John MacArthur Jr., *Hebrews* (Chicago: Moody, 1983), 136; Nicole, "Some Comments on Hebrews 6:4–6 and the Doctrine of the Perseverance of God with the Saints," 362; and Stanley D. Toussaint, "The Eschatology of the Warning Passages in the Book of Hebrews," *Grace Theological Journal* 3 (Spring 1982): 68.

unsaved professors does not fit the author's purpose to encourage his audience to "press on to maturity." Third, the phrase "renew them again to repentance" (v. 6) suggests that these readers had at one time repented from their sins, which clearly implies they were believers. Fourth, this view requires a mixed audience of both true and false believers which, though possible, is difficult to justify from the author's description of his audience.

HYPOTHETICAL

Proponents of this view maintain that the warning relates to an apostasy that is impossible to commit.³¹ They understand the writer in verse 6 to be expressing the idea that "if they could fall away (which is impossible to do), it would be impossible to renew them again to repentance." There are several strengths to this view. First, it follows the natural interpretation of verses 4-5 as a description of genuine believers. Second, it does not conflict with the security of the believer (7:25; 9:14-15; 10:14). Third, it allows for the severity of the warning in 6:6-8.³² Its main weakness is that if falling away is impossible then the warning is pointless.³³ Furthermore the King James Version translation, "If they shall fall away" (v. 6), is unlikely because it is doubtful that the aorist participle *παρπεσόντας*, because of its linkage by a single article (*τοῦς*) to the preceding participles (vv. 4-5), was intended to express a condition. Neither does verse 6 have the conditional particle *ἄν*, which was usually used to introduce a conditional statement in Greek. Bruce aptly concludes, "The warning of this passage was a real warning against a real danger, a danger which is still present so long as 'an evil heart of unbelief' can result in 'falling away from the living God' (Heb. 3:12)."³⁴

PERSISTENTLY REBELLIOUS BELIEVERS

Proponents of this view maintain those described in 6:4-5 are genuine believers who became "dull of hearing" (5:11) and lapsed

³¹ Donald Guthrie, *Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 145-47; Thomas Hewitt, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (London: Tyndale, 1960), 108, 111; Homer A. Kent Jr., *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972), 113; Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 165; and Kenneth S. Wuest, "Hebrews Six in the Greek New Testament," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 119 (January-March 1962): 52.

³² Kent, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 113.

³³ "If, in fact, the sin contemplated in Heb 6 simply cannot be committed, it would seem absurd for the author to dwell on it precisely at the time when he avows that he will 'press on.' When there is an insuperable barrier there is no need to give warning concerning dangers on the other side" (Nicole, "Some Comments on Hebrews 6:4-6 and the Doctrine of the Perseverance of God with the Saints," 356).

³⁴ Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 123.

back into spiritual babyhood (5:13).³⁵ They are warned not to “fall away” into a state of spiritual retrogression and rebellion. They could enter this state through “a critical decision” consisting of a decisive refusal to press on to maturity.³⁶ At the time of writing, the author indicated that his readers had not yet reached this state. However, the danger was real, and if they continued to disobey they would face divine judgment. This interpretation makes good sense of 6:4–5, but it has difficulty with the description of judgment in 6:7–8 (cf. 10:26–31). Many have quickly dismissed this view because they fail to see the Old Testament allusions to the Exodus generation throughout the passage.³⁷ This fourth interpretation is adopted in this article because it seems best to fit the spiritual condition of the readers (5:11–14; 6:4–5), the meaning of *παρὰπίπτω* (6:6), and the nature of the judgment (6:7–8), particularly when viewed from the perspective of the Old Testament.

THE EXODUS GENERATION IN HEBREWS

In Hebrews 3 the author warned his readers against having “an evil, unbelieving heart” (3:12) similar to the Exodus generation referred to in 3:7–11. They must “take care” lest they fall away from the living God (3:12) the same way the Israelites did when they “provoked” the Lord in the wilderness (3:8, 16). The quotation of Psalm 95:7b–11 refers to Israel’s rebellion in the wilderness, beginning at Meribah and Massah (Exod. 17:1–7)³⁸ and climaxing at Kadesh-barnea (Num. 13–14). Their hearts were hardened (Heb. 3:13, 15); they did not believe God would fulfill

³⁵ Joseph C. Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings: A Study of Eternal Security and the Final Significance of Man* (Miami Springs, FL: Schoettle, 1992), 433–66; Duane A. Dunham, “An Exegetical Examination of the Warnings in the Epistle to the Hebrews” (Th.D. diss., Grace Theological Seminary, 1974), 190; Michael A. Eaton, *The Theology of Encouragement* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1995), 212–17; Robert G. Gromacki, *Stand Bold in Grace* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 112; R. T. Kendall, *Once Saved, Always Saved* (Chicago: Moody, 1983), 175–82, 219–28; Lang, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 98–107; Oberholtzer, “The Thorn-Infested Ground in Hebrews 6:4–12,” 319–28; J. Dwight Pentecost, “Kadesh Barnea in the Book of Hebrews,” 127–35; and idem, *A Faith That Endures* (Grand Rapids: Discovery, 1992), 10–13, 20–22.

³⁶ Gromacki, *Stand Bold in Grace*, 112.

³⁷ McKnight’s rejection of this view as the interpretation of “dispensationalists” (“The Warning Passages of Hebrews,” 24) is misleading since it has no apparent relationship to dispensational distinctives and has received criticism from other “dispensationalists” (e.g., see Buist A. Fanning, “A Theology of Hebrews,” in *A Biblical Theology of the New Testament*, ed. Roy B. Zuck [Chicago: Moody, 1994], 408). Such misconceptions are often based on the false assumption that dispensationalists have a relatively monolithic theology.

³⁸ “The provocation” [LXX] in Hebrews 3:8 is the equivalent of “Meribah” in the Hebrew text, as “the trial” is the equivalent of “Massah” (Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 64).

His promises. They "tried" and "tested" the Lord (v. 9) by repeatedly responding to His mercy with more complaints and unfaithfulness. This resulted ultimately in their death (v. 17) but also in their failure in life to experience God's promised rest (vv. 18-19).³⁹ Throughout chapter 4 the Exodus generation continues as a type of those who forfeit rest through lack of faith (4:2) and through disobedience (vv. 6, 11). They are consistently described by plural substantival participles throughout chapters 3-4 (3:10-11, 16-19; 4:2, 6). The use of plural substantival participles is resumed in chapter 6 with the fourfold description of those who were in danger of falling away (vv. 4-5). The natural antecedents for the four participles in verse 4 would seem to be the Exodus generation discussed in chapter 4. These characteristics correspond to the lethargic Hebrew believers who, if they continued to follow the example of the Exodus generation, would likewise "fall away."

Another indication that the Exodus generation was in view is the author's use of the pilgrimage motif throughout the rest of the epistle. References to the "tabernacle" (*σκηνη*) rather than the temple as the place of service for the Levitical priesthood (8:5; 9:2, 6, 8, 21) points to the conditions of the wilderness "pilgrimage" throughout chapters 8 and 9.⁴⁰ The pilgrimage idea is continued in chapter 11, in which Abraham is described as having gone out without knowing where he was going, living in the land of promise "as an alien . . . as in a foreign land, dwelling in tents . . . looking for the city" (vv. 8-10). His descendants are regarded as "strangers and exiles on the earth . . . seeking . . . a better country, that is, a heavenly one" (vv. 13-16). Likewise Moses, "looking to the reward . . . left Egypt" (vv. 26-27). Those "of whom the world was not worthy," went out "wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground" (vv. 37-38). The author's declaration that his readers had "come to Mount Zion" (12:22) rather than the earthly Sinai (12:18-21, 26) is another clear comparison to Israel's pilgrimage in the wilderness. The exhortation to bear the reproach of Christ "outside the camp" (13:13) again alludes to the "camp" of Israel in the wilderness (13:11).⁴¹ Therefore the author's exhortation "let us press on" (6:1)

³⁹ Concerning "rest" see Walter C. Kaiser Jr., "The Promise Theme and the Theology of Rest," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 130 (April-June 1973): 141-50; and Oberholtzer, "The Kingdom Rest in Hebrews 3:1-4:13," 185-96.

⁴⁰ If Hebrews was written during the tumultuous years before A.D. 70, referring to the temple in terms of the "tabernacle" (*σκηνη*) could also have been a way of avoiding giving offense to Jewish patriots defending Jerusalem (P. W. L. Walker, *Jesus and the Holy City: New Testament Perspectives on Jerusalem* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996], 207-8, 230).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 216-17.

is best understood as a continuation of his pilgrimage motif into chapter 6 with the fate of the Exodus generation in view (6:4–6).⁴²

THE EXODUS GENERATION IN HEBREWS 6

The predominance of the Exodus generation throughout the epistle suggests its vital role in interpreting the warning in Hebrews 6:4–8. As in 3:7–4:11, the author used the spiritual condition of Israel at Kadesh-barnea as a type to warn his audience of the peril of their own spiritual condition.

THE SPIRITUAL CONDITION OF THE READERS

By observing the immediate context of the warning in 6:4–8 (i.e., 5:11–14 and 6:9–12) several characteristics of the audience may be noted. After introducing Melchizedek in 5:6–10, the author broke from the flow of his argument to give this warning. He realized that the readers would have difficulty understanding what he was about to teach concerning the Melchizedekian priesthood of Christ, because they were “dull of hearing” (5:11). This expression is based on the Greek word *νωθρός*, “lazy, sluggish.”⁴³ Their problem was not a faulty message or ineffective teaching, but their own defective hearing. In the New Testament “hearing” is often equated with obedience (e.g., Rev. 2:7). Thus the word “dull” implies that their unwillingness to obey what they heard inhibited their understanding. The verb “have become” (*γεγονάτε*) in Hebrews 5:11 indicates that at one time they were not reluctant to obey. The clause “though by this time you ought to be teachers” (5:12) signifies that they were not novices in the faith. The phrase “you have need again for someone to teach you” does not mean they lacked information, for the word “again” signifies that they had been taught the “elementary principles of the oracles of God” before. Furthermore they were taught enough truth earlier that they “ought to be teachers” but instead they had “come to need milk” (v. 12). They had not always needed milk but after a period of growth they had gone back to babyhood (v. 13). They were “inexperienced” or “unskilled” (*ἀπειρος*; NIV, “not acquainted”)⁴⁴

⁴² For a fuller treatment of the pilgrimage theme see William G. Johnsson, “The Pilgrimage Motif in the Book of Hebrews,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 97 (1978): 239–51.

⁴³ Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2d ed., rev. F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 547.

⁴⁴ Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, abridged ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979), 80.

with the Word not because they had insufficient knowledge but because they failed to practice the knowledge they had already acquired.⁴⁵ This fits verse 14, where the "mature" are defined as those "who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil." Instead of moving forward by obeying the Word, these Jewish believers had retrogressed from their previous point of maturity. This is why the author exhorted them to "press on to maturity" (6:1).

THE SPIRITUAL CONDITION OF THE EXODUS GENERATION

From their bondage in Egypt the people of Israel cried out for help (Exod. 2:23-25), and God raised up Moses to be their deliverer. In response "the people believed" and "bowed low and worshiped" the Lord (4:31). On their departure from Egypt the luminous cloud by day and fire by night began to guide them (13:21-22).⁴⁶ The account of their deliverance from Pharaoh concludes, "Thus the Lord saved Israel that day from the hand of the Egyptians . . . and they believed in the Lord and in His servant Moses" (14:30-31).⁴⁷ As a redeemed people, Israel began receiving manna from heaven (16:4-35) and water from the rock (17:1-7) as they proceeded into the wilderness of Sinai. When they arrived at Mount Sinai, God gave them His "words" (20:1-17) and ordinances (chaps. 21-23) to establish a covenant with them (24:1-10). As they journeyed on from Sinai, the Spirit of God came on the seventy elders, resulting in prophecy within the camp (Num. 11:16-30). Then they came to Kadesh-barnea, and the twelve spies were sent into the land (Num. 13). At that point they made their final decision to return to Egypt (14:1-10). They had exercised faith in the Lord (Exod. 4:31; 14:30-31) and had agreed to the covenant (24:7-11). Yet their immaturity is seen in their idolatry (Exod. 32) and repeated grumbling and complaining (15:24; 17:3; Num. 11:1). Their attempt to insure their return to Egypt by stoning Joshua and Caleb at Kadesh (Num. 14:10) sealed their choice, resulting in their forfeiture of blessings in the land.

THE SPIRITUAL CONDITION OF THOSE IN HEBREWS 6:4-5

The four characteristics described in 6:4-5 unite the spiritual condition of the readers with that of the Exodus generation. Each

⁴⁵ Guthrie, *Hebrews*, 135.

⁴⁶ That it may have been a luminous cloud rather than a physical change from a cloud by day to a pillar of fire by night is indicated by the description of its first appearance in Exodus 14:20. "There was the cloud along with the darkness, yet it gave light at night."

⁴⁷ In Exodus 4:31 and 14:31 the word יָאֵמְנוּ in the Hiphil form means "to believe" (*morevō* in the LXX). This is the same word used in Genesis 15:6, "Then [Abraham] believed in the Lord; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness."

characteristic is expressed in the form of a substantival participle. The article *τοὺς* modifies all four substantival participles, indicating that they are all intended to describe one group.⁴⁸ Also *ἀπαξ* modifies all four participles, signifying that each occurred "once for all."⁴⁹

First, they are described as "enlightened." The participle here is from the Greek verb *φωτίζω* "to give light to, light up, illuminate."⁵⁰ In the New Testament, "light" is often associated with the experience of salvation (e.g., John 1:9, 12; 8:12; 2 Cor. 4:6; Eph. 5:8; 2 Tim. 1:10; 1 Pet. 2:9). The same verb *φωτίζω* occurs in Hebrews 10:32 where it refers to an illuminating work of God that marked the beginning of the readers' Christian experience. As in spiritual regeneration, those in both 6:4 and 10:32 are being acted on (passive voice) rather than enlightening themselves. Therefore it seems best to take the spiritual enlightenment described here as a reference to the regenerating work of the Spirit experienced by all true believers.⁵¹ This parallels the cloud by day and fire by night that marked the beginning of Israel's exodus out of Egypt, giving them "light, that they might travel by day and by night" (Exod. 13:21). These luminous guides are consistently listed among the spiritual benefits enjoyed by the Exodus generation (e.g., Neh. 9:12; Ps. 105:39; 1 Cor. 10:1-2).⁵²

Second, they are characterized as having "tasted of the heavenly gift." The word "tasted" translates *γεύομαι*, which when used figuratively means to "to learn by experience."⁵³ According to its usage in this epistle the word "taste" means more specifically to experience something fully. For example it is used in Hebrews 2:9 to refer to Jesus' death: "that by the grace of God He might taste death for everyone." Jesus did more than merely sample death.

⁴⁸ When one article is used with several adjectives, they all refer to the same person (singular) or group (plural). See A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman, 1923), 777, 785-89.

⁴⁹ G. Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1937), 44. See also Marcus Dods, "The Epistle to the Hebrews," in *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, ed. W. Robertson Nicoll (reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 4:297.

⁵⁰ Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 873.

⁵¹ Dunham, "An Exegetical Examination of the Warnings to the Hebrews," 159; and Oberholtzer, "The Thorn-Infested Ground in Hebrews 6:4-12," 321.

⁵² Nehemiah 9:12 and Psalm 105:39 both used the word *φωτίσαι* in the Septuagint to explain that the purpose of the pillar of fire was "to light" their way.

⁵³ J. Behm, "*γεύομαι*," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 1:675-77.

He vividly experienced its reality. This meaning applied to 6:4 leaves no doubt that the readers had fully experienced the heavenly gift.⁵⁴ This corresponds to the food from heaven eaten by the Exodus generation. In the wilderness they fully experienced God's promise to sustain their lives by daily consuming manna. Since Jesus Christ compared Himself to manna by calling Himself the "bread of life" (e.g., John 6:33; cf. 35, 41, 48-51, 58), it is best to understand the "heavenly gift" as referring to Christ Himself, through whom eternal life is fully experienced (John 6:40, 51-58) and God's gift of salvation is freely granted (Rom. 3:24; Eph. 2:7-9).

Third, the readers are designated as those who "have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit." The key word here is *μετόχοις*, which with its cognates consistently refers in the New Testament to a genuine sharing or an actual participation in something or with someone.⁵⁵ Both here and in 3:14 ("partakers of Christ") the word functions as a technical term for Christians who have responded to God's call of salvation (3:1, "partakers of a heavenly calling").⁵⁶ In each occurrence of *μέτοχοι* the author described more than a temporary or superficial participation; instead he referred to an actual "partaking or sharing" in the benefits of salvation. In 6:4 "partakers of the Holy Spirit" speaks of a genuine experience of the Holy Spirit's presence that accompanies salvation. This corresponds to God's placing the Holy Spirit on the seventy elders to instruct the Exodus generation concerning His power (Num. 11:16-30). This was just as important as other spiritual benefits of the Exodus as confirmed by its inclusion in other Old Testament accounts of Israel's deliverance (e.g., Neh. 9:20; Isa. 63:11, 14; Hag. 2:5).

Fourth, the readers "have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come." Here again "taste" (*γεύομαι*) denotes experiencing something in a real way. The "good word of God" corresponds to the "words" given by God through Moses to the Exodus generation (Exod. 4:28-30; 20:1-26). The "powers of the age to

⁵⁴ Westcott agrees, stating that this term "expresses a real and conscious enjoyment of the blessing apprehended in its true character" (*The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 149).

⁵⁵ For example the cognate verb *μετέχω* in Hebrews 2:14 describes how Jesus "partook" of flesh and blood in His incarnation. Regarding all other New Testament occurrences of *μετέχω* (1 Cor. 9:10, 12; 10:17, 21, 30; Heb. 5:13) Dunham observes, "In every case it refers to an actual participation, a real sharing, not a mere assent or acquiescence to something" ("An Exegetical Examination of the Warnings to the Hebrews," 163).

⁵⁶ H. Hanse, "*μετέχω, μετοχή, μέτοχος*," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 2 (1964): 828-32.

come" naturally follow, for God's Word is often accompanied by His power to attest to its authenticity (Rom. 15:18-19; 1 Thess. 1:5; Heb. 2:3-4). This again corresponds to the "signs" Moses performed "in the sight of the people" (Exod. 4:30). The Hebrew Christians had experienced the "powers" performed by the apostles who "confirmed" and bore "witness" to the authenticity of the word "first spoken through the Lord" (Heb. 2:2-4).⁵⁷

In summary the characteristics described in 6:4-5 indicate that those in danger of "falling away" were genuine believers. They had been believers for an extended time (5:12). However, instead of progressing toward maturity, they like the Exodus generation had retrogressed into spiritual infancy. To these backslidden believers the author offered a strong warning, for they were in danger of "falling away" through refusing to trust God.

KADESH-BARNEA AND THE SIN OF HEBREWS 6:6

An understanding of this passage is hopeless without a clear view of the nature of the sin that could place the readers beyond the possibility of repentance. This sin is designated in verse 6 by a participle of the Greek verb *παραπίπτω*. Like the previous four participles, this participle, found only here in the New Testament, is modified by both *ρούς* and *ἐπαξ* at the beginning of verse 4, linking it to those same believers described in verses 4 and 5. *Παραπίπτω* has a broad range of meanings including "to fall beside, to fall in one's way, to fall aside, to mistake or err."⁵⁸ Because *παραπίπτω* lacks a modifier in verse 6, its precise connotation is difficult to determine from the immediate context.⁵⁹ However, the following observations can be made. First, the sin is something the readers had not yet experienced. This is indicated by the change in the personal pronouns used in verses 4-6. In the preceding verses (5:11-6:3) and the following verses (6:9-12), the author used the first person ("we") and second person ("you"), but in verses 4-6 he changed to the third person ("those"). This change indicates the author did not regard his readers as having yet committed the sin, even though the first four participial phrases (vv. 4-5) described their true spiritual condition.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Oberholtzer suggests that these "powers" were "of the age to come" in that they foreshadowed the glory of the millennial kingdom ("The Thorn-Infested Ground in Hebrews 6:4-12," 322).

⁵⁸ Liddell and Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 526.

⁵⁹ Hebrews 6:6 gives no indication what they fell from or fell into.

⁶⁰ Gromacki correctly observes, "If the other two pronouns had been used, there would have been no need for the warning since they would have been beyond the point of rescue" (*Stand Bold in Grace*, 110).

Third, since the sin (*παρπεσόντας*) is tied to the other participles that describe the genuine converted state of the readers, the sin is one believers are capable of committing. However, the author freely admitted he expected "better things" of his readers (v. 9), thus indicating they had not yet succumbed to the sin along with its irreversible effect. Fourth, *ἀπαξ* modifies *παρπεσόντας* as it does the first four participles. This shows that the sin was something committed "once for all," that is, it was decisive.⁶¹

NOT ABSOLUTE APOSTASY

Some scholars say *παρπεσόντας* refers to absolute apostasy from the faith.⁶² However, this view ignores the problem of slothfulness discussed in the passage. The readers were not in danger of completely giving up all belief in Christ in spite of the warning that they could "again crucify to themselves the Son of God, and put Him to open shame" (6:6). Their immediate problem was rather a passive drifting away from the word of Christ (2:1), a persistent sluggishness to press on to maturity (5:11-6:2), and an avoidance of fellowship with other believers (10:25) for fear of persecution from the Jews (10:32-34). Rather than total rejection of Christ, they faced the danger of falling into a permanent state of immaturity through a willful "once for all" (*ἀπαξ*) refusal to trust God to deliver them from their present troubles.

Often the parallel warning in 3:12 against "falling away from the living God" is said to refer to absolute apostasy, involving rejection of faith in God. The term *ἀφίστημι* ("to fall away") basically denotes movement away from a point of reference, hence "to desert" (Acts 15:38) or "to defect" (1 Macc. 11:43).⁶³ The closest Old Testament parallel is Moses' warning to the people at Kadesh, "Do not rebel [*ἀποστάται*] against the Lord" (Num. 14:9). Later in the passage the same word is used for those who "rejected" (*ἀπέστητε*) the land (14:31). Elsewhere in the Old Testament *ἀφίστημι* is associated with failing to obey God's voice (Jer. 3:13-14; Dan. 9:9) and trusting in mankind rather than God (Jer. 17:5). These uses of the term suggest that *ἀφίστημι* is not a technical term denoting absolute apostasy.

The context of Hebrews 3:7-4:11 clearly has in view the

⁶¹ Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament*, 44. This is consistent with the author's meaning of *ἀπαξ* elsewhere (e.g., 9:26-28; 10:2).

⁶² Wiley, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 216. Lane suggests this idea when he defines *παρπεσόντας* as "a total attitude reflecting deliberate and calculated renunciation of God" (*Hebrews 1-8*, 142).

⁶³ Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 222.

events of Kadesh-barnea recorded in Numbers 14. Several factors indicate that the Exodus generation did not commit absolute apostasy. First, the Lord reluctantly “pardoned them” in response to Moses’ pleas (Num. 14:20). Second, hearing Moses’ pronouncement of judgment on them, “the people mourned greatly” (14:39). The next day they confessed, “We have indeed sinned,” and they attempted to possess the land the Lord had promised (14:40). Though their confession and resolve to enter the land were now too late, these acts are hardly representative of a people that have totally renounced belief in God. Yet they fell away from communion with God that accompanies devotion and obedience. Third, they were not permitted to return to Egypt. Instead, God “put up with them in the wilderness” (Acts 13:18) by feeding, clothing, guiding, and protecting them for the next forty years.

NOT THE UNPARDONABLE SIN OF THE PHARISEES

Also “fall away” does not refer to the unpardonable sin, as others have proposed.⁶⁴ According to the Gospels (Matt. 12:31; Mark 3:28–29; Luke 12:10), two important facts must be noted about the nature of the unpardonable sin. First, it was committed by unbelievers (i.e., Pharisees), not believers. And second, it involved accusing Jesus of being in league with Satan. This sin was committed by the Pharisees when they willfully rejected the Holy Spirit’s work through the Messiah. They saw a great miracle and heard Jesus’ own teaching, but they called good evil (Isa. 5:20) by attributing the miracle to the devil. The person who commits this sin is not ignorant, but chooses in the face of irrefutable facts to reject God, to call God the devil. However, the sin in Hebrews 6:6 was committed by Christians, not non-Christians. These Jewish Christians were not blaspheming the Holy Spirit but were contemplating a return to the Levitical sacrificial system, which would devalue the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ. The problem in this passage is the failure to grow and mature as a Christian, not the public rejection of Christ’s work by attributing it to Satan.

παράπτω IN THE SEPTUAGINT

The dependence of the author of Hebrews on the Septuagint suggests that he used *παράπτω* as a general term “to sin,” as in the Septuagint.⁶⁵ Five of the eight occurrences of *παράπτω* in the Septuagint are in Ezekiel (14:13; 15:8; 18:24; 20:27; 22:4).

⁶⁴ Nicole, “Some Comments on Hebrews 6:4–6 and the Doctrine of the Perseverance of God with the Saints,” 362–63.

⁶⁵ W. Michaelis, “*παράπτω*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 6 (1968): 171.

Michaelis observes that in each of these references "the context shows that what is at issue is a culpable mistake, or sin."⁶⁶ In four of these five occurrences in Ezekiel (all except 22:4) *παραπίπτω* is equivalent to the Hebrew word *עָפָר*, "to act unfaithfully."⁶⁷ Hence, rather than denoting absolute religious apostasy, this word simply refers to an unfaithful act of sin. This is confirmed by its occurrence with the most common Hebrew word for sin (*חַטָּא*) twice in Ezekiel (14:13; 18:24). *Παραπίπτω* does not express the idea of an absolute apostasy involving a complete turning away from all belief in God. Not a mild term for sin, it denotes a serious sinful act or attitude against God. The exact nature of the sin must be determined from the context.

A DECISIVE REFUSAL TO MATURE

The argument of the epistle suggests that it is best to understand *παραπίπτω* as denoting a general state of spiritual retrogression entered through a decisive refusal to trust and obey God. The only other sin mentioned in the passage is that the readers were "dull [*νωθοί*] of hearing" (Heb. 5:11). Their reluctance to put into practice what they had been taught was leading them back into spiritual infancy (5:13). They were not now what they once were spiritually. They were still demonstrating their love for God by ministering to others (6:10), but they were becoming more and more reluctant to do so. In 6:12 the word *νωθοί* ("sluggish") does not describe their present condition as *νωθοί* ("dull") does in 5:11. This can be seen by the use in 6:12 of the aorist *γένησθε* ("become," NIV), which indicates they were not yet "sluggish," but were in danger of becoming so.⁶⁸ In 5:11 *νωθοί* ("dull") is modified (i.e., "of hearing"), but in 6:12 it stands alone. The difference is that they were already "sluggish" (*νωθοί*) in hearing (5:11) but were in danger of yet becoming "sluggish" (*νωθοί*) in general throughout their lives (6:12). They were still evidencing some obedience through their ongoing ministry to the saints (6:10), but the author warned them that the time could come when their slowness to obey

⁶⁶ Ibid., 6:170. *Παραπίπτω* is used a bit differently in Esther 6:10, where it denotes the king's command to Haman: "Do not fall short [*παραπίπτω*] of your word" (author's translation). However, its final two occurrences in the Septuagint (Wis. 6:9; 12:2) correspond to Ezekiel's meaning "to commit an error" or "to sin."

⁶⁷ Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1903), 591.

⁶⁸ Dunham, "An Exegetical Examination of the Warnings in the Epistle to the Hebrews," 174. Unlike 5:11, *νωθοί* is used here with the aorist subjunctive (*γένησθε*) and negative *μή*, which normally expresses the prohibition of a condition that has not yet begun, in this case the state of slothfulness. See E. D. Burton, *Moods and Tenses in New Testament Greek* (reprint, Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1976), 75.

would settle into a general state of retrogression. Hence the sin of “falling away” (*παραπίπτω*) is more than merely “sluggishness of hearing”; it is coming to a decisive point of refusal (“once for all”) to press on to maturity. The author warned them of the danger of such a choice.

SPIRITUAL RETROGRESSION AND KADESH-BARNEA

Understanding *παραπίπτω* as expressing a decisive refusal to trust God which results in a general state of spiritual retrogression parallels the experience of the Israelites at Kadesh-barnea.⁶⁹ For example, when they arrived at Kadesh-barnea, they had already seen the pillar of fire and cloud over the tabernacle (“been enlightened”), eaten of the manna (“tasted of the heavenly gift”), experienced the Spirit on the seventy elders (“made partakers of the Holy Spirit”), and witnessed the giving of the Law at Sinai and the miracles of Moses (“tasted the good word of the Lord and the powers of the age to come”). Like the readers of the epistle, the Jews of the Exodus were a redeemed people (Exod. 6:6–7; 14:31). And most significantly, the wilderness generation was guilty of refusing to press on (Num. 14:1–10) in a way similar to those described in Hebrews 6:6. When the Israelites arrived at Kadesh, they paused and sent spies into the land because they did not trust God’s promise that the land was theirs to possess. When the scouts returned, the majority report was that Canaan was populated by giants who lived in cities with impregnable walls. In spite of the efforts of Joshua and Caleb, the people believed the worst. At that moment the people came to a critical point of decision in which they rejected Moses’ leadership and refused to enter and possess the land. As a result God condemned that generation of adults to die in the wilderness. Though they attempted to enter the land, they were not permitted to do so. Their decision was irreversible.

Similarities between the Israelites and the readers of the epistle are numerous. As the Israelites refused to obey the voice of the Lord (Num. 14:22) and act according to His promises (Exod. 23:27–31; 33:1–2), so too these people were in danger of refusing to “press on to maturity” (Heb. 6:1). Though the Israelites changed their minds and tried to enter the land the next day (Num. 14:39–45), they were not permitted to repent of their decision to return to Egypt. Similarly with the readers of Hebrews there was the ques-

⁶⁹ This fits the use of the related word *πίπτω* used in the warning “lest anyone fall [*πέσῃ*] through following the same example of disobedience” (Heb. 4:11). This “falling” is best understood in light of the same word used earlier to describe “those who fell [*πέσεν*] in the wilderness” (3:17), where it denotes the Exodus generation’s loss of blessing in the land culminating in their physical death.

tion of whether God would permit them to go on to maturity ("This we shall do, if God permits," 6:3), for once they decided to "fall away" it would be "impossible to renew them to repentance" (v. 6). As the wilderness generation was denied the right to the blessings of "rest" in Canaan and died in the wilderness (3:17-19), these Jewish Christians, if they chose to turn away and return to Judaism, would forfeit the blessing of God's rest and would experience His temporal discipline.

In summary, like the Exodus generation, the initial readers of Hebrews were at their "Kadesh." They were faced with a decision. If they chose not to go on in maturity, severe judgment would fall on them (6:7-8). However, the author also knew that the readers had not yet made that final decision (vv. 9-10).

THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF RENEWING THEM TO REPENTANCE

The impossibility of renewing them to repentance once they made the decisive refusal to press on to maturity (6:6a) closely resembles the experience of the Exodus generation at Kadesh. In response to God's refusal to allow all those twenty years old and upward to enter the land, "the people mourned greatly" (Num. 14:39). The following day they awoke early and declared, "We have indeed sinned, but we will go up to the place which the Lord has promised" (v. 40). Ignoring Moses' warning, they attempted to enter the land but were crushed by its inhabitants (vv. 41-45). Their inability to repent did not mean God was unwilling to forgive them, for after Moses' plea God declared, "I have pardoned them according to your word" (v. 20). Rather, God denied them the blessing of rest in the land in order to discipline them in the wilderness. If they had obeyed God and entered the land, the people of Israel would have experienced the physical blessings of the "land flowing with milk and honey" (Exod. 33:3).

The events of Kadesh-barnea parallel the warning here to the Hebrew Christians. In the context "repentance" allows one to return to a place of "blessing" and "rest." To be unable to repent is to be denied God's blessing. As indicated in Hebrews 6:7-8, those who do not "fall away" are like the ground that "brings forth" useful vegetation and they "receive a blessing." On the other hand those who do "fall away" are denied God's blessings. This is also illustrated by Esau, who sought for repentance with tears, yet was denied "the blessing" (12:17). If Esau had been faithful, he would have received the blessing of the firstborn. In each case rebellion resulted in God's withdrawing temporal blessings. Therefore believers who "fall away" by refusing to press on to maturity will be denied the blessings that come with faithful obedience.

Some scholars maintain that the absolute impossibility of re-

newing those who have "fallen away" to repentance extends to both God and man.⁷⁰ This view has several significant problems. First, the word *adunatos* is often used to denote what is impossible with men (Matt. 19:26; Mark 10:27; Luke 18:27), but which is not with God.⁷¹ Second, according to Westcott, "The use of the active voice limits the strict application of the words to human agency," thereby suggesting that it is not impossible for God.⁷² Hence the absolute impossibility in view here extends only to individuals and not to God. Those who have fallen away are unable to repent because of their hardened heart which they cultivated and fostered. As in the case of the Exodus generation God could have permitted them repentance but He chose not to in order to discipline them according to His warnings.

The word "repentance" (*μετάνοια*) in Hebrews 6:6 is said by some writers to refer only to initial conversion as in 6:1, "a foundation of repentance [*μετανόιας*] from dead works and of faith toward God." Accordingly verse 6 is interpreted to mean that it is impossible to be saved or justified again. However, *μετάνοια* in verse 6 seems to refer to repentance that takes place within the life of the sinning believer. This parallels Paul's use of *μετάνοια* with the Corinthian believers who "were made sorrowful to the point of repentance" (2 Cor. 7:9). In summary the author's point is not that his readers could not be saved again, but that once they decided to stay in their state of retrogression they could not be brought back to spiritual renewal through the efforts of fellow believers. In their case the exhortation to "encourage one another" (3:13; 10:24-25) would no longer apply, because they would be beyond the scope of human effort to bring them to repentance.⁷³

"CRUCIFY . . . THE SON OF GOD AND PUT HIM TO OPEN SHAME"

The writer warned his audience not only against forfeiting their opportunity for repentance and blessing, as the Exodus generation had done, but also against the additional guilt of crucifying "to themselves the Son of God and [putting] Him to open shame" (6:6).⁷⁴ Some have suggested that the two adverbial participles

⁷⁰ Kent, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 110.

⁷¹ O. Betz, "Might, Authority, Throne," in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 2:606.

⁷² Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 150. Also see Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 118.

⁷³ This parallels John's comments regarding the futility of praying for a brother who is committing a sin leading to death, for at that point he is beyond human help and awaits God's discipline, which may lead to physical death (1 John 5:16).

⁷⁴ The change in tense from aorist to present participles in Hebrews 6:6 suggests that in addition to the characteristics of the past generation (vv. 4-5) there were

translated "crucify" and "put to open shame" are to be taken temporarily, expressing the idea that those who have fallen away cannot be renewed to repentance *while* they crucify the Son of God. Once they stopped, they could be renewed to repentance. However, this goes against the force of the term "impossible" and does not fit the parallel to Kadesh-barnea, where the children of Israel tried to repent the next day but could not.⁷⁵ Instead, it is best to view these participles as causal,⁷⁶ describing why it is impossible for fellow believers to renew to repentance those who have fallen away.

Many have understood the participle *ἀναστροφούντας* not to mean "recrucify" or "crucify again" but rather simply "crucify," as it was commonly understood in extrabiblical Greek.⁷⁷ In that case the warning is not against crucifying Christ "again," but rather against reducing Christ's death to the level of a common criminal execution, as the Jewish leaders had originally intended. A public return to the animal sacrifices of the Levitical system would in effect empty Christ's death of any sacrificial redemptive value (cf. Heb. 7:26-27; 10:26).

The second participle *παρδειγματίζοντας* means "to make a public example of by punishment"; the Septuagint uses it in Numbers 25:4 to describe a public execution. The author could not have expressed in stronger terms the seriousness of his readers' failure to press on to maturity. Though they thought their quiet return to Judaism in order to escape Jewish persecution would be harmless, their failure to hold fast to their confession in Christ placed them in a similar category with those who cried out, "Crucify Him!"

The expression "put Him to open shame" does not mean that in order to "fall away" one must publicly speak out blasphemously and irreverently about Jesus Christ. Refusing to mature and a quiet return to the temple sacrifices were enough to suggest that they viewed Christ's crucifixion as having no value beyond a criminal's death. Though a retreat back into Judaism was meant to be private, it would bring public disgrace on Christ.

new characteristics that would now be true of the contemporary audience if they followed the example of their ancestors.

⁷⁵ Also this does not fit the parallel to Esau, who sought repentance "with tears" but was unable to receive it (Heb. 12:16-17).

⁷⁶ Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 124; and Dods, "The Epistle to the Hebrews," 298.

⁷⁷ The prefix *ana* apparently refers to the affixing "up" on the cross (Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 61; Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 111, n. 7; Kent, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 110).

THE JUDGMENT OF HEBREWS 6:7–8

The author concluded his warning in Hebrews 6 with the pronouncement of judgment on the land that bears no fruit (vv. 7–8). Similar examples of agricultural imagery can be found in rabbinic sources⁷⁸ and in the parables of Jesus.⁷⁹ However, the author's pattern of drawing from the Old Testament (particularly the Pentateuch) suggests that the source of his imagery is to be found there. The "curse" on the land in verse 8 clearly alludes to Genesis 3:17–18, which records God's declaring that the growth of "thorns and thistles" are part of the curse for Adam's disobedience. However, absent from Genesis 3 is the "blessing" mentioned in Hebrews 6:7. The combination of blessing and curse fits more closely with Deuteronomy 11:26–28. There God offered the survivors of the wilderness generation two options: blessing for obedience or a curse for disobedience. These are further elaborated in Deuteronomy 28–29 with lists of blessings and curses. The final curse is on the land, which will be "a burning waste, unsown and unproductive, and no grass grows in it" (29:23). Disobedience would result in the devastation of the land. Since the blessings of obedience were experienced in relationship to the land (28:1–6), the destruction of the land meant the withholding of those blessings. Likewise in Hebrews 6:7–8 the author referred to the land of promise by the word $\gamma\eta$.⁸⁰ Rather than an undefined piece of "ground" as indicated by most translations, the word $\gamma\eta$ declares that the sacred land of the Jews will be a place of cursing and judgment rather than safety for those Jewish believers who desired to return to Judaism.

FORFEITURE OF BLESSING AND TEMPORAL DISCIPLINE

In light of the Old Testament blessing-curse motif, the judgment in view in Hebrews 6:7–8 is best understood as the forfeiture of blessing and the experience of temporal discipline rather than

⁷⁸ See Albert Vanhoye, "Heb 6:7–8 et le mashal rabbinique," in *The New Testament Age: Essays in Honor of Bo Reicke*, ed. Wilham C. Weinrich (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1984), 2:527–32.

⁷⁹ These parables include those of the sower (Matt. 13:3–8), the tares (13:24–30), the mustard seed (13:31–32), and the vine and branches (John 15:1–6).

⁸⁰ The word $\gamma\eta$ is best understood here as a reference to "the land" of promise for the following reasons. First, $\gamma\eta$ is commonly used in the Septuagint for the Hebrew word אֶרֶץ , which most often denotes the land of Palestine in the Old Testament. This meaning corresponds to the author's dependence on the Septuagint throughout the epistle. Second, the author used $\gamma\eta\nu$ in a similar way without an article in 11:9 to designate "the land of promise." Third, the allusions to the wilderness generation through this immediate passage strongly suggest that the land of promise is also in view here.

eternal destruction. The term translated "worthless" is the Greek word *ἀδόκιμος*, which means "unproved"⁸¹ in the sense of "not standing the test."⁸² Though it is used of unbelievers several times (e.g., Rom. 1:28; 2 Tim. 3:8; Titus 1:16), it can refer to believers. Its antonym *δόκιμος* is used in 2 Timothy 2:15, "Be diligent to present yourself approved [*δόκιμος*] to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed." Thus Paul indicated that it is possible for a believer to be "unproved" (*ἀδόκιμος*) if he is not diligent. This is clearly his meaning in 1 Corinthians 9:27, in which he used *ἀδόκιμος* ("disqualified") to describe a believer who fails to discipline his life in moral purity. Paul followed this warning with examples of the Exodus generation who acted immorally and were physically "destroyed" (1 Cor. 10:1-11). Similarly the judgment of Hebrews 6:8 could be the fate of the Hebrew readers. If they refused to press on to maturity, they too could experience God's physical discipline resulting in death.

The expression "close to being cursed" is not to be understood as a reference to eternal damnation but rather to the immanency of divine discipline culminating in physical death. The "curseings" of the covenant did not affect Israel's standing as God's covenant people but were temporal and disciplinary in nature. The expression "it ends up being burned" does not refer to "final destructive judgment" as some maintain.⁸³ Since the "land" is what is burned, this parallels the curses on the land of promise in Deuteronomy 28-29.

Some have suggested that Hebrews 6:8 refers to the agricultural practice of burning a field that was producing only weeds and stubble in order to clear the ground for further cultivation.⁸⁴ However, it seems preferable to understand this "burning" as a forfeiture of blessing by the destruction of the land wherein the blessing is experienced. This form of divine discipline can ultimately result in the loss of physical life. The judgment in Hebrews 6:7-8 parallels the fate of the Exodus generation that re-

⁸¹ Gromacki, *Stand Bold in Grace*, 113.

⁸² Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 18.

⁸³ Dods, "The Epistle to the Hebrews," 300; Kent, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 115; and Toussaint, "The Eschatology of the Warning Passages in the Book of Hebrews," 175.

⁸⁴ Hodges explains that the aim of field-burning "was not the destruction of the field itself (which, of course, the fire could not effect), but the destruction of the unwanted produce of the field. Thereafter the field might be serviceable for cultivation" (Zane C. Hodges, "Hebrews," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, New Testament*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck [Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1983], 796).

belled at Kadesh-barnea. With the exception of Joshua and Caleb, they all died in the wilderness (Deut. 2:14). Their deaths are not an indication that they were unconverted, because Moses and Aaron also died in the wilderness. Though the "rebellion" (קָרָה) and "unbelief" (לֹא אֵמָנָה) of Moses and Aaron were not of the same magnitude as that of the Exodus generation, the same Hebrew words are used to describe the sin of them all (cf. Deut. 9:23-24 and Num. 20:12, 24). As leaders, Moses and Aaron were held to a higher standard and their fate was the same as that of the others. All, including Moses and Aaron, were prohibited from entering the land because of their unbelief. Their forfeiture of covenantal blessings was sealed by their physical death outside the land.

This kind of temporal discipline that could ultimately lead to physical death is also mentioned several times by the apostle Paul. He spoke of delivering certain ones within the church over to Satan "for the destruction of [their] flesh" so that their "spirit may be saved" (1 Cor. 5:5; cf. 1 Tim. 1:20). Also because of their disregard for the Lord's table, several in the Corinthian church "slept," a metaphor for death (1 Cor. 11:30). If the "sin to death" (1 John 5:16) refers to a sin committed by a believer, then this is another example of judgment on a sinning believer resulting in loss of physical life. God may insure an unrepentant Christian's forfeiture of covenantal blessings by means of physical death.

IMPENDING PHYSICAL DESTRUCTION

Though the eschatological outlook of this judgment may refer to the future judgment seat of Christ,⁸⁵ it may also have in view the impending destruction of Jerusalem. The author may have been warning his audience not to return to Judaism because "the land" of Israel had produced "thorns and thistles" and was now "worthless." Hence the land was "close to being cursed" because the Roman army was threatening an invasion of Judea to crush the Jewish revolt.⁸⁶ As foreseen by the author, Jerusalem was

⁸⁵ In Paul's extended discussion of the judgment seat of Christ in 1 Corinthians 3:9-15, he used imagery similar to that of Hebrews 6:7-8. Both passages mention "burning" of "thorns and thistles" (Heb. 6:8) or "wood, hay, straw" (1 Cor. 3:12) rather than the believer himself (i.e. "the ground" in Heb. 6:7; cf. the "field" in 1 Cor. 3:9). The one who passes the test will receive "a reward" (1 Cor. 3:14) or "a blessing" (Heb. 6:7). And neither passage addresses the believer's soteriological status, but rather what he produces ("vegetation," Heb. 6:7; "each man's work," 1 Cor. 3:13). See Oberholtzer, "The Thorn-Infested Ground in Hebrews 6:4-12," 326.

⁸⁶ The most thorough account of the Roman invasion is recorded by Josephus in *The Jewish Wars*. The Jewish revolt began in A.D. 66 with the Jews' stopping the daily sacrifices in the temple in honor of the emperor and the Jews' massacre of the Roman garrisons at Masada (2.17.1-2). Rome responded with a large-scale military campaign led by Cestius Gallus, governor of Syria, who with four legions at his

burned and leveled by the Romans.⁸⁷ This corresponds to the curse on the land in Deuteronomy 29:22-27. Consequently the author intended his readers to view the land as a place of judgment rather than blessing. This fits the force of the author's argument, for to return to Judaism would mean entering the realm of God's physical judgment.⁸⁸ If the readers sided with Judaism rather than the people of Jesus, they would experience the same "fury of fire" intended to "consume the adversaries"—their Jewish persecutors (Heb. 10:27).⁸⁹

Several factors suggest that the judgment on those warned in the epistle would be greater than the physical punishment experienced by Israel after Kadesh-barnea in the wilderness. First, the author often argued from the lesser to the greater (7:15; 9:11, 14; 12:9). Second, the book contains a strong element of typological

disposal, quickly marched through Galilee and Samaria to Jerusalem (2.18.9-19.4). He successfully pushed his attack up to the temple walls before retreating northward from the city (2.19.1-7). Crediting their withdrawal to divine intervention, the Jews pursued the retreating Romans, inflicted many losses, and finally expelled them from Palestine (2.19.7-9). Nero then appointed Vespasian who entered Palestine in the spring of A.D. 67 with three legions and a strong auxiliary force (3.4.2). His Roman troops slowly proceeded from the north through Galilee to subdue the now well-fortified cities of provincial Palestine. By the next year Vespasian had occupied most of the remaining towns around Jerusalem. His conquest of the city itself was prevented by his election to emperor and his departure with a large part of his army for Rome (4.10.3-6). Again the standstill of the Roman advance in A.D. 68-69 encouraged the Jewish defenders' confidence that they would ultimately prevail through divine deliverance (4.2.1). In the spring of A.D. 70 Titus, the eldest son of the new emperor, gathered his forces before the walls of Jerusalem to begin its final siege (5.1.6-3.1). The Jewish patriots fought fiercely throughout the city, suffering terrible losses. Assured of imminent deliverance by God, they made their final stand in the temple (6.5.2). When the Romans destroyed the temple, Jewish resistance came virtually to an end (6.6.2-3; 7.1-3; 8.1-5). The physical suffering of the inhabitants of the city and surrounding towns was enormous. All ranks of Jewish society were severely affected, including the armed defenders slain in battle as well as the noncombatants subjected to hunger and disease from the sieges.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.8.5; 7.1.1.

⁸⁸ See J. Dwight Pentecost, "The Apostles' Use of Jesus' Predictions of Judgment on Jerusalem in A.D. 70," in *Integrity of Heart, Skillfulness of Hands: Biblical and Leadership Studies in Honor of Donald K. Campbell*, ed. Charles H. Dyer and Roy B. Zuck (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 140-41.

⁸⁹ Eusebius gives a remarkable account of how the Christian community in Jerusalem was warned to leave the city before its destruction: "The people of the church in Jerusalem were commanded by an oracle given by revelation before the war to those in the city who were worthy of it to depart and dwell in one of the cities of Perea which they called Pella. To it those who believed on Christ migrated from Jerusalem, that when holy men had altogether deserted the royal capital of the Jews and the whole land of Judaea, the judgment of God might at last overtake them for all their crimes against the Christ and his Apostles, and all that generation of the wicked utterly blotted out from among men" (*Ecclesiastical History*, trans. J. E. L. Oulton, Loeb Classical Library [London: Heinemann, 1942], 1:199-201 [3.5.2-3]). Also see S. G. F. Brandon, *The Fall of Jerusalem and the Christian Church* (London: SPCK, 1951), 167-84.

heightening in the New Testament fulfillment of the Old Testament type. The New Testament member of the parallel is often seen as greater (3:3; 9:11) or better (8:6; 9:23; 11:40) than its Old Testament counterpart. This escalation is clearly found in warnings of coming judgment in 10:29 (“much severer punishment”) and 12:25–26 (“Yet once more I will shake not only the earth, but also the heaven”).

Does the increasing intensity of future judgment suggest a punishment more severe in degree or kind? A greater kind of judgment could suggest the eternal eschatological destruction of the readers if they were to fall away.⁹⁰ However, this would seem to contradict the author’s repeated assurances given to his audience regarding the “eternal” (*αἰώνιον*) nature of their “salvation” (5:9), “redemption” (9:12), and “inheritance” (9:15). Furthermore warning them against the possibility of eternal destruction would conflict with the claim that Jesus, their superior High Priest, “is able to save forever [or completely] those who draw near to God through Him” (7:25) since “He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified” (10:14).⁹¹ It seems better to explain the increasing intensity of coming judgment in terms of degree in light of the severe devastation and physical suffering foreseen by the author as coming on the inhabitants of Judea and Jerusalem.⁹² Most of those in the Exodus generation died a natural death in the wilderness, their punishment being their forfeiture of blessings in the Promised Land. They faced hardships as they journeyed through the desert but the author warned his readers of a more severe physical judgment to be experienced by many during the Roman invasion of Palestine and Rome’s destruction of Jerusalem.⁹³

⁹⁰ For example Goppelt understands the “typological heightening” in the warnings to indicate “the eternal loss of the true salvation” (*Typos: The Typological Interpretation of the Old Testament in the New*, 200–201).

⁹¹ This is not to minimize the author’s theology of eternal judgment (6:2; 9:27; 13:4). The question is, Did the author warn his readers of eternal judgment if they fell away? One vague hint at other-worldly judgment for his readers is found in 12:26, which speaks of the judgments of the past shaking the earth, but the coming judgment will “shake not only the earth, but also the heaven.” However, the author assured his readers that they had received “a kingdom which cannot be shaken” (12:28), thus suggesting their eternal state was not in question.

⁹² Whether rooted in Jesus’ predictions (Matt. 22:7; 23:38–24:2; Mark 13:1–2; Luke 21:20–24) or awareness of the coming Roman invasion of Palestine, the author’s negative critique of Jerusalem (Heb. 12:22, 27; 13:12–14) seems to anticipate its imminent destruction (Walker, “Jerusalem in Hebrews 13:9–14 and the Dating of the Epistle,” 69–71).

⁹³ Suffering during the Jewish war included Roman massacres throughout the province, civil war among Jewish factions, famine during the siege of Jerusalem,

CONCLUSION

The author's use of the Old Testament in the Epistle to the Hebrews is indispensable to understanding the warning in Hebrews 6:4-8. He used the Exodus generation and particularly the events of Kadesh-barnea to exhort Jewish Christians who had retrogressed in their spiritual life and were considering a return to the rituals of Judaism to avoid persecution from the Jews. Pressure from their Jewish countrymen arose from the growing patriotism resulting in the Jewish revolt of A.D. 66. The author's allusions to Kadesh-barnea show that the sin of "falling away" refers to a final decision to return to Judaism and to remain in a state of spiritual retrogression. Once they made that choice, they, like the Exodus generation, would be beyond repentance and would face the inevitable judgment of God resulting in the forfeiture of blessings and ultimately the loss of physical life.

In an age of spiritual apathy and moral compromise within the church, and often among its leadership, this passage delivers a severe warning to all who take their commitment to Christ lightly.

death by starvation, and Roman pillaging and indiscriminate killing of survivors after the fall of the city. In addition to the accounts given by Josephus (*The Jewish Wars*) and Eusebius (*Ecclesiastical History*, 3.5.3-5), see Jonathan J. Price, *Jerusalem under Siege: The Collapse of the Jewish State 66-70 C.E.* (Leiden: Brill, 1992).