

THE ESCHATOLOGY OF THE WARNING PASSAGES IN THE BOOK OF HEBREWS

STANLEY D. TOUSSAINT

The prophetic portions of the warning passages in the Epistle to the Hebrews contain broad hints as to whom these admonitions are addressed. The notices of judgment and the warnings of failure do not deal with rewards for Christians but with eternal judgment and the missing of millennial blessing.

* * *

INTRODUCTION.

THE Book of Hebrews fairly bristles with a number of large and perplexing problems, such as authorship, destination, the nature of the work, and the writer's use of the OT. At or near the apex of questions concerned with the interpretation of this work is a consideration of the warning passages. Are they directed to believers, advising that there may be a loss of reward, or do they warn professing believers about the danger of apostasy? Even if the warnings are only hypothetical, the reader ultimately is driven back to these two alternatives. It is quite clear the book is addressed to a specific readership in a particular location with a definite situation in view (cf. 10:32-34; 12:4; 13:3, 23). Because the epistle is so specific it can hardly be said that one warning passage is directed to one group and another warning to a different group. It seems that the writer is addressing all the warnings to the same readership.

One great aid in determining the target of the warning passages is the eschatology in these passages. In other words, do the passages threaten loss of reward or the missing of salvation? If the former is correct, the paragraphs in question are addressed to believers; if on the other hand the eschatology deals with eternal damnation or eternal salvation, the passages are aimed at professing believers. It is the thesis of this article that eschatology is a determinative factor in coming to the conclusion that the passages in question are

concerned with the danger of apostasy. There were some in the readership who had made a profession of faith in Christ but were seriously considering returning to Judaism. It was not a case of the Galatian heresy where some were attempting to unite Christianity with Judaism; on the contrary, these people were about to abandon Christianity to slip back to the works system of Judaism.

HEBREWS 2:1-4

A crucial point in this section is the meaning of "salvation" in v 3: ". . . how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?" Does it refer to believers' rewards or to ultimate salvation? For several reasons, the word must be understood eschatologically and soteriologically.

First, the same noun is used in 1:14, where the writer says angels are rendering service for the heirs of salvation. It is obvious that the noun **swthria** is used in 1:14 in the ultimate sense.

The salvation here spoken of lies in the future; it is yet to be inherited, even if its blessings can already be enjoyed in anticipation. That is to say, it is that eschatological salvation which, in Paul's words, is now "nearer to us than when we first believed" (Rom. 13:11) or, in Peter's words, is "ready to be revealed in the last time" (I Pet. 1:5). Our author does not need to explain to his readers what he means by this salvation; the term and its meaning are familiar to them already. What they do need to understand is the fearful danger to which they will be exposed if they treat this salvation lightly.¹

However, someone may object that the question is not the meaning of "salvation" in 1:14 but in 2:3. This criticism sounds valid,

but it must be noted that the author of Hebrews often uses "hook words," i.e., vocabulary that is employed both at the end of one paragraph and at the beginning of the next to link units of thought together.² It appears that "salvation" is one of those hook words. (This is confirmed by the use of **diastoufo** in 2: 1.) The noun **swthria** in 2:3 must then have the same meaning as it does in 1:14, that is, eschatological deliverance. Buchanan agrees with this concept: "Salvation" in the Old Testament usually refers either to deliverance of a nation from the power of the enemy at war, or to receiving a pardon or verdict of "not guilty" in a court case. For the author of

¹ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 25-26.

² Neil R. Lightfoot, *Jesus Christ Today: A Commentary on the Book of Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976); 48-49.

Hebrews it refers to the deliverance that the Son provides when God makes his "enemies a footstool for [his] feet" (1:13), and the Son utilize "the staff of justice" (1:8) to rule over his people.³

There is a second reason why the salvation must be eschatological; v 5 clearly defines it in such a manner. In that passage the writer refers to ". . . the world to come, concerning which we are speaking." The salvation certainly involves an eschatological age. In discussing the phrase **tha oikoumenhn tha mel lousan**, Westcott states:

the phrase is not to be understood simply of 'the future life' or, more generally, of 'heaven'. It describes, in relation to that which we may call its constitution, the state of things which, in relation to its development in time, is called 'the age to come' (**o[mel lwn ai]vn**), and, in relation to its supreme Ruler and characteristics, 'the Kingdom of God,' or 'the Kingdom of heaven,' even the order which corresponds with the completed work of Christ.⁴

Michel in the Theological Dictionary of the New Testament says, "Hb. 2:5 clearly represents the old apocalyptic phrase אָזְנֵי הַיְהוָה." ⁵ There is a third factor that enters into the understanding of salvation in Heb 2:3. This is found in the clause of the same verse, "After it was at the first spoken through the Lord. . . ." The Greek text has **htij a]rxhn labou]sa lal ei]sqai dia]tou? kuriou?** "This singular made of expression suggests somewhat more than the simple fact of having first been spoken, and implies that the teaching of the Lord was the true origin of the Gospel."⁶ This can hardly be the doctrine of justification by faith. That truth had been in effect Since man sinned (Heb 11:4; Gen 15:6; Ps 32:1; Hab 2:4). Nor can it refer to rewards, for this doctrine also is found in the OT (Dan 12:3). The salvation which received a beginning in the preaching of Christ was the kingdom and its nearness. Bruce comments:

It had, of course, been proclaimed in advance by the prophets; but not until the coming of Christ, when promise gave place to fulfillment, could it be effectively brought near. The note of fulfillment was heard when Jesus came into Galilee after John the Baptist's imprisonment, "preaching the gospel of God, and saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent ye, and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:14f), and when, as in the synagogue at Nazareth, He read the words

³ George Wesley Buchanan, *To the Hebrews* (AB; Garden City: Doubleday, 1972) 25.

⁴ Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.) 42.

⁵ *TDNT*, s.v. "**oikoumenh**," by Otto Michel, 5 (1967): 159.

⁶ Westcott, *Hebrews* 39.

of Isa. 61:1f. which announce "good tidings to the poor" and "release to the captives", and proclaim "the acceptable year of the Lord", and followed them with the declaration: "Today hath this scripture been fulfilled in your ears" (Luke 4:18ff).⁷

The kingdom was based on the death and resurrection of the Messiah, but it is not limited to that. The writer is looking beyond forensic imputation to the age to come so graphically proclaimed by the Lord Jesus. That is the salvation which is in view.

The fourth evidence in favor of seeing the salvation in this passage as being eschatological is the usage of a(**swthria** in Hebrews. It is found seven times in the book (1:14; 2:3, 10; 5:9; 6:9; 9:28; 11:7). The occurrences in 1: 14 and 2:3 quite clearly are prophetic in nature. The reference in 2:10 is in the context of bringing sons to glory, an obvious reference to the Christian's future life. In 5:9, the salvation is described as "eternal." The meaning in 6:9 is not so clear; it may, however, look at eternal salvation. The author expects the readers to bear fruit in their lives as those who are heirs of salvation. In 9:28, **swthria** is the goal of Christ's second coming. In 11:7, it is used of Noah's deliverance in the flood and therefore does not relate to the subject at hand. Quite clearly then, the writer of Hebrews looks at salvation as being eschatological. The occurrence in 11:7 does not pertain to Christians. The only debatable uses are in 2:3 and 6:9, both of. which probably refer to ultimate deliverance.

It should be noted that the salvation in view cannot refer to believer's rewards. The context has retribution in view in contrast to salvation. The argument is a fortiori. If disobedience to .the angelic message brought just recompense, how much more will there be judgment on those who disregard the good news of a salvation that bears fruit in the coming age? At the judgment seat of Christ there will be no remembrance of sin (Heb 8:12; 10:17; Jer 31:34; Ps 103:12). The paragraph is looking at eschatological salvation and therefore is a warning to the professing readers of Hebrews not to jettison Christianity in favor of Judaism.

HEBREWS 3:7-4:13

The warning here is for readers to fear coming short of the promised rest. The *crux interpretum* is the meaning of "rest." The vocabulary used is **katapausij** (3:11, 18; 4:1,3 [twice], 5, 10, 11), **katapauw** (4:4, 8, 10) and **sabbatismoj** (4:9). The noun **katapausij** was employed in classical Greek to mean "a putting to rest, causing to cease," but in the LXX and NT it lost its causal sense and simply

⁷ Bruce, *Hebrews*. 29.

meant "rest, repose."⁸ The verb **katapauw** has a transitive meaning in Heb 4:8, where the writer refers to Joshua's failure to give Israel rest. In Heb 4:4 it takes an intransitive sense, where God is said to have rested from his creative work. The noun **sabbatismj** is an NT hapax legomenon and means "Sabbath rest, Sabbath observance."⁹ As one studies the passage he comes to the conclusion the writer of Hebrews is looking at several facets of rest. First, there is the seventh-day rest of God when he ceased from his creative work (4:4, 10). There is a second aspect of rest, the rest which involved Israel's taking the promised land (3:11, 18-19). That the conquest of the land was viewed as a form of rest is seen in such passages as Deut 3:20; 12:9; 25: 19; Josh 11 :23; 21 :44; 22:4, and 23: 1. The third facet of rest in Hebrews 3 and 4 is the promised rest. Here is the difficulty. What is being promised?

There are a number who take the promised rest to be eternal bliss,¹⁰ and several factors support this position. First, the promise of entering the rest (4: 1) implies that the blessing is a future one (cf. 4:11). Second, the heavenly estate described in Rev 14:13 refers to rest.

Others say that the rest in view is the present Christian experience of peace.¹¹ Some who hold this position say that the existing rest for the Christian finds its ultimate completion in eternity. Several lines of evidence are used to support this interpretation. For one, the verb **eißerxomeqa** in 4:3 is present tense, which implies that this is to be the present experience of believers who walk with God. However, this may well be a futuristic present such as one finds in Matt 17:11; John 14:3; and 1 Cor 16:5. Turner affirms that such Occurrences are ". . . confident assertions intended to arrest attention with a vivid and realistic tone or else with imminent fulfillment in mind. . . ."¹² Quite

⁸ G. Abbott Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937), 237.

⁹ William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1957), 746.

¹⁰ Representative of this group are Bruce, *Hebrews*, 77-79; Thomas Hewitt, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 89; Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 161-62; Homer A. Kent, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972), 86-87; Lightfoot, *Hebrews*, 96-97; Westcott, *Hebrews*, 98-99.

¹¹ Representative are W. H. Griffith Thomas, *Let Us Go On* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, n.d.), 45-50; Clarence S. Roddy, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1962), 46-48; Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *The Ryrie Study Bible New American Standard Translation* (Chicago: Moody, 1976), 1841; R. B. Thieme, Jr., *The Faith-Rest Life* (Houston: R. B. Thieme, Jr., 1961), 22-49.

¹² Nigel Turner, *Syntax*, James Hope Moulton, ed., *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*, Vol. 3 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1963), 63.

obviously, this kind of use in Heb 4:3 would catch the reader's attention.

There is a second line of support for taking this to be the peace of God in one's heart as he walks with God. It may be that the invitation of Christ Jesus in Matt 11:28-30 parallels this passage. Of course, the Lord's solicitation in Matthew 11 is a call to rest, but does that prove that this is the meaning in Hebrews? The idea of peace in the Christian's walk is completely biblical, but this by no means confirms that concept here.

The third support for taking this to be the Christian's present experience is typology. Thus, the Exodus is said to portray redemption, the wilderness wanderings illustrate the pre-rest walk of the believer, and being in the land looks to the faith-rest walk. This line of evidence has its own seeds of destruction in it. The writer of Hebrews specifically notes that neither Joshua nor David, who were in the land, gave the people rest (Heb 4:7-8)! Not only does every support for this view lose its force when fully considered; there are formidable objections to it. For one, the words of Heb 4:12-13 oppose such an interpretation. These verses are not words of assurance but warning. That they explain the preceding verse is obvious from the yap with which v 12 is introduced. It is an admonition which predicts judgment for those who do not enter rest. A second objection rests on the instruction of 4:10. There the writer says that the readers are to cease from works as God did. The clear implication of the faith-rest view is that God's works were bad! In other words, the viewpoint which takes this passage as referring to the Christian's intimate walk with God and the peace which results from it enjoins the Christian to cease from his law-works, his striving, his fleshly labors, and simply to trust in God. If the parallel is carried out in 4:10, then God's works were also carnal and fleshly strivings. A third interpretation takes this rest of 3:7-4:13 to anticipate the coming millennial kingdom age.¹³ A number of factors point to this as the best interpretation.

First, in Heb 4: 1, the promise to enter God's rest remains for those who receive it. The promise implies that it is futuristic in application.

Second, Psalm 95, the basis for the entire warning section and the source of the admonition concerning rest, is an enthronement Psalm.¹⁴ Regarding this type of psalm Kaiser says, "Therefore, each

¹³ Representatives of this viewpoint are Buchanan, *Hebrews*, 64-74; G. H. Lang, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (London: Paternoster, 1951), 75-80; Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "The Promise Theme and the Theology of Rest," *BSac* 130 (1973), 138-50.

¹⁴ Christoph Barth, *Introduction to the Psalms* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1966), 21.

of these psalms alike tells the story of a divine kingdom which is yet to be set up on the earth."¹⁵ In other words, the theme of the enthronement psalms is clearly eschatological and anticipates the rule of the Lord on this planet (cf. Ps 93:1-2; 96:10; 97:1; 99:1). The "rest" of Psalm 95 must therefore anticipate the millennium.

Third, the concept of **sabbatism** (Heb 4:9) was used in Jewish literature to refer to the kingdom age. This has been noted by many.¹⁶ In the Jewish prayer after sabbath meals the petition is made, "May the All-merciful let us inherit the day which shall be wholly a Sabbath and rest in the life everlasting."¹⁷ Buchanan asserts that the Epistle to the Hebrews is so steeped in the OT that the concept of rest cannot be limited to a spiritual interpretation but must include national and earthly concepts; in fact, he feels that any other interpretation is inconsistent.¹⁸

Andreasen's view is an illustration of this.¹⁹ While he acknowledges the OT expectation of a Jewish earthly kingdom in the term "rest," he goes on to give the word a limited spiritual meaning in Hebrews. Westcott does the same. He says, "The Jewish teachers dwelt much upon the symbolical meaning of the Sabbath as prefiguring 'the world to come'."²⁰ But having said this he goes on to take this to be eternity. It certainly is more logical to say that the NT theology of rest is founded on OT doctrine.

A fourth factor supports the idea of a millennial rest as being in the mind of the writer of Hebrews. The OT refers to the kingdom age as being a time of rest (Ps 132:12-14; Isa 11:10; 14:3; 32:18; 34:15).

Fifth, the "rest" spoken of in Psalm 95 clearly involved Israel's dwelling in the land; therefore, the promised rest can scarcely be divorced from settlement in the land.

Sixth, Heb 4:8 speaks of another prophetic "day." This clearly is a *period of time* and is explained in 4:9 as the sabbath rest.

Seventh, the rest was prepared from the foundation of the world (Heb 4:3-4) just as the kingdom was (Matt 25:34). This explains why Christ was employed in healing on the Jewish sabbath in John 5. The ultimate sabbath had not yet come so Christ with his Father was working to bring in that ultimate sabbath or kingdom age. It should

¹⁵ Kaiser, "Promise Theme," 142.

¹⁶ Westcott, *Hebrews*, 98-99; cr. Bruce, *Hebrews*, 75; Buchanan, *Hebrews*, 73; Hughes, *Hebrews*, 161.

¹⁷ *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, S.v. "Sabbath (Jewish)" by I. Abrahams (1930): 891.

¹⁸ Buchanan, *Hebrews*, 64-65, 72-74.

¹⁹ Neils-Erik Andreasen, *Rest and Redemption* (Berrien Springs, Michigan: Andrews University, 1978), 109-15.

²⁰ Westcott, *Hebrews*, 98.

be noted that this idea of a sabbath day being the millennial age is no recent, innovative interpretation. It dates back at least to the Epistle of Barnabas in the early second century.

By way of conclusion to this section it may be said that there are three "rests" in these paragraphs of Hebrews. First, there is God's cessation from His creation work. This rest will be manifested in the kingdom age when redeemed mankind enters His inheritance. The second rest was Israel's conquest and possession of the promised land under Joshua. This is a picture of the kingdom rest. The third rest is the promised rest which actually is God's rest which comes to man in the millennium.

Here then is the warning. If the readers were mere professors and rejected Christ in order to go back to the works system of Judaism, they would be excluded from the promised kingdom age or God's rest.

HEBREWS 6:4-8

This warning, infamous for its difficulty, has little to say eschatologically. The only prophetic statement is made by illustration and implication in vv 7-8. There the writer warns, "For ground that drinks the rain which often falls upon it and brings forth vegetation useful to those for whose sake it is also tilled, receives a blessing from God; but if it yields thorns and thistles, it is worthless and close to being cursed, and it ends up being burned."²¹

Obviously, some kind of judgment is in view here. But is it a judgment to determine believers' rewards or is it the condemnation of the lost? Those who claim the former position point to the consumption of the Christian's works by flame in 1 Corinthians 3 as being parallel with v 8 here. Is this, however, the best interpretation? There is no solid evidence that the picture portrays the damnation of the lost. No comfort can be derived from the clause "close to being cursed" in v 7. The same vocabulary is employed in 8:13 for a certain and imminent doom. In other words, the worthless ground was destined to be cursed soil, scarcely the kind of vocabulary to be used of a Christian, even if he was carnal! Furthermore, the contrast between the two verses seems to portray the condition of the earth before the fall and after. In its Edenic state it was blessed and productive; after the sin of Adam it was cursed and in need of redemption.²² Bruce compares the analogy to the vineyard song of Isaiah 5.²³ In either case the figure graphically portrays Israel. It had

²¹ NASB. All extended quotations are from the NASB.

²² Buchanan, *Hebrews*, 110.

²³ Bruce, *Hebrews*, 124-25.

received the blessings of promises, covenants, the law, the Scriptures, and the name of Jehovah. If, however, the people failed to respond to the Messiah, the only destiny was eternal perdition. Kent comments, "The whole tenor of the passage demands retribution and destruction as the emphatic point."²⁴ Also, as Hewitt notes, "The context does not favour the suggestion that the piece of ground should be burnt by man to improve it. . . ."²⁵ The threefold progression in v 8 of worthless, cursed, and burned hardly looks at the life of a believer in Christ. Finally, the contrast with v 9 implies that a distinction is being drawn between the future of the lost and saved. As was noted before, **swthria** in Hebrews when used of Christians anticipates eschatological salvation.²⁶ This is the destiny of the redeemed; v 8 looks to the future of the damned.

HEBREWS 10:26-39

This fourth warning section has a great deal to do with future judgment and some with the promise of future blessing. In this paragraph the writer declares:

For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain terrifying expectation of judgment, and THE FURY OF A FIRE WHICH WILL CONSUME THE ADVERSARIES.

Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses.

How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace?

For we know Him who said, "VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY." And again, "THE LORD WILL JUDGE HIS PEOPLE."

It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

But remember the former days, when, after being enlightened, you endured a great conflict of sufferings, partly, by being made a public spectacle through reproaches and tribulations, and partly by becoming sharers with those who were so treated.

For you showed sympathy to the prisoners, and accepted joyfully the seizure of your property, knowing that you have for yourselves a better possession and an abiding one.

²⁴ Kent, Hebrews, 115.

²⁵ Hewitt, Hebrews, 109.

²⁶ Cf. p. 68.

Therefore, do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward.

For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised.

FOR YET IN A VERY LITTLE WHILE, HE WHO IS COMING WILL COME, AND WILL NOT DELAY.

BUT MY RIGHTEOUS ONE SHALL LIVE BY FAITH; AND IF HE SHRINKS BACK, MY SOUL HAS NO PLEASURE IN HIM.

But we are not of those who shrink back to destruction, but of those who have faith to the preserving of the soul.

This paragraph is the most severe of the five warning sections. Perhaps this is due to the degree of sin and the descriptions of the rebellion committed by those who fall into the peril of the warning. They are guilty of willful sin, outright defiance of God (v 26; cf. Num 15:30-36). The disannulling of the law of Moses described in v 28 looks back to Deut 17:2-6. The context of that OT passage deals with Israelites who abandoned the worship of Jehovah to go into idolatry or the veneration of other gods. In v 29 the writer of Hebrews describes the sins of those who apostatize as trampling under foot (**katapatew**) the Son of God, of regarding (**hgeomai**, a sin of the intellect) as unclean the blood of the covenant, and of insulting the Spirit of grace. In this last sin the verb is **ephubrizw**, a compounded verb which describes the awesome violence of God's holy name by insolence.²⁷ It here parallels the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit (Matt 12:32; Mark 3:29; Luke 12:10).

Sprinkled throughout these descriptions of sin and rebellion are allusions to eschatology, particularly the coming of judgment and the promise of blessing.

In several verses there is the prediction of judgment. The first allusion to this judgment is found in the connective yap in v 26. Quite clearly this particle introduces an explanation of the significance of the approaching day referred to in the preceding verse. That day, while it will be a time of vindication and deliverance for God's people, will bring condemnation for the lost as is seen in this passage. Westcott succinctly asserts, "The mention of 'the day' in v. 25 calls out the sad severity of the warning which follows."²⁸

The judgment is described more fully in Heb 10:27, the verse which follows. The description is very interesting and significant. To explain what the judgment involves the writer of Hebrews quotes

²⁷ The only occurrence of **ephubrizw** in the LXX is in Lev 24:11 where it describes blasphemy.

²⁸ Westcott, *Hebrews*, 327.

from Isa 26:11, a passage which contrasts the righteous with the wicked. Specifically, the lost are referred to as "enemies." The Greek term **ὑπεναντιοῖς** describes what is "opposed to, opposite or contrary to."²⁹ This assize can hardly be a reference to believers' rewards! The awesomeness of this judgment is emphasized by the vocabulary. "The terror of the expectation is brought out by a more literal rendering of the words, 'a certain fearful expectation of judgment' (ASY); the indefinite 'a certain' leaves it somewhat open to the reader's imagination to fill in the gruesome details of that judgment."³⁰ Certainly, as Westcott puts it, "Such a judgment (c.ix.27) would be, for those whom the Apostle describes, condemnation."³¹

This future judgment of the lost is further described in v 29 where the writer uses an a fortiori argument. The punishment inflicted for highhanded or willful disobedience was death (Deut 17:2-6). If this was true in the OT for defiance of the law, how much worse will be God's judgment for scorning the Son of God (cf. 2:2)? What would be worse than physical death but eternal perdition? "The judgment awaiting those who will not trust for their salvation in the sacrifice of Christ must consist of eternal loss in hell. It is pictured as a fire that is almost personified and is possessed of zeal which is about to consume the opponents of Christ."³²

The quotations in v 30 taken from the Song of Moses in Deut 32:35-36 first sets forth the principle that God avenges his enemies. This first quotation is not taken directly from the Hebrew or LXX and may be a well-known proverb adapted from Deut 32:35.³³ While the objects of the warning in Deut 32:35 are Israelites, unbelieving Jews are in view. As Hughes asserts, "This God whom they have confessed as the God of grace and mercy is also the God of holiness and justice: faithfulness to his covenant leads to blessing, but rebellion means retribution."³⁴ The second quotation from Deut 32:36 predicts God's vindication of his people, Israel, in a still future day. The two passages together describe the deliverance of believing Israel and the judgment of those who do not trust in Messiah. Bruce comments, "This certainly means that He will execute judgment on their behalf, vindicating their cause against their enemies, but also that, on the same principles of impartial righteousness, He will execute judgment against them when they forsake His covenant."³⁵

²⁹ The only other NT occurrence is in Col 2: 14.

³⁰ Lightfoot, *Hebrews*, 194.

³¹ Westcott, 329.

³² Kent, *Hebrews*, 205.

³³ The same saying is found in

³⁴ Hughes, *Hebrews*. 425.

³⁵ Bruce, *Hebrews*, 262-63.

Further reference to judgment is found in v 31 of Hebrews 10. While the verse parallels David's statement, "Let us now fall into the hand of the Lord, for His mercies are great" (2 Sam 24:14), the context is pointedly judgmental. For a believer it is a merciful thing to fall into the hands of a loving God, but for apostates it is punitive and terrifying.

Not until Heb 10:37-38 is the next reference to judgment given. It is a quotation from Hab 2:3-4. In an article of this length it is quite impossible to discuss the problems of quotation in this passage. It may be summarized by saying that the writer of Hebrews introduces the Habakkuk quotation by using Isa 26:20, "For yet in a very little while." The passage from Habakkuk is a free citation of the LXX text. In the use of the quotation, the NT writer refers to the one who draws back. The nature of this failure is not spelled out; however, it is quite clear that it refers to an apostate. In such a one God takes no pleasure.

V 39 portrays the destiny of the one who "shrinks back." For him the end is (i,7tWAEtav. Concerning this noun Kent simply states that it

. . . means destruction or ruin, and is commonly used in the New Testament of eternal destruction. Such passages as Matthew 7:13; Romans 9:22; Philippians 1:28; 3:19; and 1 Timothy 6:9 reveal this aspect of the word. Both Judas and the Antichrist are called 'the son of perdition' (John 17:12; 2 Thess. 2:3), because of the eternal torment and ruin which their heinous deeds will bring. The usage of *apoleia* here makes it clear that the judgment described in this context is not just a chastening of God's people but the final destruction of apostates.³⁶

This fourth warning section not only contains eschatology anticipating judgment; it also looks ahead to promise. The first reference to this blessing is found in 10:34 where there is mention of a better and abiding possession. As the Lord had promised in Matt 6:20, they had laid up treasure in heaven. Peter also describes the imperishable quality of the Christian's inheritance (1 Pet 1:4). The Hebrew believer's eschatology in this time of persecution would be a real source of encouragement to him.

V 35 refers to the reward that comes from confidence. This is not the same as the rewards given in I Corinthians 3 and 2 Corinthians 5. Very interestingly, **misqapodosia** occurs only in Hebrews (2:2; 10:35; 11:26). In 2:2 it is used of punishment and in the other two references it has the positive idea of blessing. This noun, derived from **misqoj** and **apodidwni**, looks at a payment of wages. Quite clearly, this is the glory

³⁶ Kent. *Hebrews*, 215.

which awaits God's child (Rom 8:18). Hughes explains, "The relationship of the present pilgrimage to the future reward is the relationship of faith to hope, as the quotation which follows teaches (vv 37 and 38) and the next chapter so amply illustrates."³⁷

What the reward involves is stated more clearly in 10:36. It consists of receiving "what was promised." The Greek literally says "the promise." The verb used in this verse, **konicw**, is used with the promise in 11:13 and 39. This can hardly be accidental. In both of the occurrences in chap. 11 this vocabulary anticipates the millennium. The promise then looks ahead to life in Christ's earthly kingdom.

V 39 explains this as "the preserving of the soul." Bruce interprets the phrase **ej peripoihsin yuxhʒ** ". . . a variant expression for **zhsetai** in the Habakkuk quotation in v. 38."³⁸ "To possess and preserve one's soul is the essence of salvation."³⁹

In summary of the eschatology of the fourth warning it may be said that the promise of life is made and the warning of eternal perdition is issued for apostates.

HEBREWS 12:25-29

This fifth warning section is based on Hag 2:6, a passage which is predictive and eschatological. The argument here is another *a fortiori* one. The writer is looking back to Mount Sinai where God spoke to Israel through Moses. The voice came from Mount Sinai, so it was "on earth" as v 25 states. Today Christ who is in heaven warns through his earthly messengers. If the voice *on earth* brought inescapable judgment, *how much more* the voice from heaven (cf. 2:2-3). From what those who were disobedient did not escape is left unstated. It could be the judgment of death for flagrant disregard of the law or it may be the failure to enter the promised land. Probably it is the latter alternative since that entire generation failed in this regard.

To make the point even more forceful and vivid Hag 2:6 is quoted, "Yet once more I will shake not only earth, but also the heaven." That passage looks back to the shaking of Sinai.⁴⁰ The primary problem here is how literal one is to take the future shaking of earth and heaven. Kent has a good word on this:

Although some interpret the prophecy metaphorically as referring to the upheavals accomplished by Christ's first coming in its effect

³⁷ Hughes, *Hebrews*, 432.

³⁸ Bruce, *Hebrews*, 275.

³⁹ Kent, *Hebrews*, 215.

⁴⁰ Cf. Exod 19:18; Judg 5:4-5; Ps 68:8; 77:18.

upon Jewish worship and politics, the parallelism with the former shaking makes this view unlikely. The first shaking was physical and geographical at Sinai. There is no good reason to take this second shaking of the earth and the heavens above it in any less literal sense.⁴¹

The writer goes on to say that the only things which will remain after this are those things which cannot be shaken. This is not looking at the judgment seat of Christ where the believer's works and motives are to be tried by fire. The contrast is between the saved and lost. This fits with the conclusion in v 28. It is a kingdom which the Christian will receive, not simply rewards in the kingdom.⁴²

Finally, the concept of God as a consuming fire fits the idea of the judgment of condemnation. Hewitt affirms, "At the second advent of Jesus Christ, just as the material and transitory will disappear and the eternal and permanent will remain, so what is false and vile will be revealed in the fire of God's holiness and those whose characters are such will be consumed by the fire of His judgment."⁴³

CONCLUSION

In all five warning passages of Hebrews the thing to be avoided by the original readers of that discourse was not loss of believers' rewards but loss of salvation. Quite clearly the writer knew of a group in that early congregation who had made professions of faith in Jesus Christ but were in peril of jettisoning their confessions to apostatize and lapse back into Judaism. The prophetic elements in the warnings confirm this interpretation.

⁴¹ Kent, *Hebrews*, 275.

⁴² The present participle **paralambanontej** is both present and futuristic. The kingdom is received in the present time by faith; its realization is future. Cf. II :39-40.

⁴³ Hewitt, *Hebrews*, 204.

This material is cited with gracious permission from:

Grace Theological Seminary
200 Seminary Dr.
Winona Lake, IN 46590
www.grace.edu

Please report any errors to Ted Hildebrandt at: thildebrandt@gordon.edu

Christian eschatology is a major branch of study within Christian theology dealing with the "last things." Eschatology, from two Greek words meaning "last" (ἀπὸ τῆς ἐσχάτης, ἔσχατος) and "study" (ἵνα ἐπίσταται), is the study of 'end things', whether the end of an individual life, the end of the age, the end of the world or the nature of the Kingdom of God. Broadly speaking, Christian eschatology is the study concerned with the ultimate destiny of the individual soul and the entire created order, based primarily upon biblical Hebrews 6 - Toussaint Stanley D. "The Eschatology of the Warning Passages in the Book of Hebrews," *Grace Theological Journal* 3.1 (Spring, 1982) 67-80. James Rosscup - The treatments of books within this evangelical set (Lange's Commentary) vary in importance. Generally, one finds a wealth of detailed commentary, background, and some critical and exegetical notes. Often, however, there is much excess verbiage that does not help particularly. The Book of Hebrews daunts even the most gifted preachers and scholars. For one thing, we don't know the author. He quotes the Old Testament at length and repeatedly, but his method of interpreting these passages doesn't always make sense to readers. His arguments about angels, Moses, and the temple require more than cursory understanding of the Hebrew Bible. And then there are the so-called warning passages. It might be hard at first to grasp the significance of the priest Melchizedek, but many Christians viscerally understand the practical importance of these warnings.

Using the popular four-views format, this volume explores the meaning of the five warning passages in the book of Hebrews to both the original readers and us today. Each of the four established New Testament scholars present and defend their view and critique the view of their interlocutors. This unique volume will help readers better understand some of the most difficult passages in all of Scripture.Â

Enter your mobile number or email address below and we'll send you a link to download the free Kindle App. Second, the book of Hebrews emphasizes subjects that don't receive much, if any, attention in Paul's letters. For instance, the author of Hebrews mentioned Melchizedek three times. He drew attention to the Old Testament tabernacle. And he dealt at length with Christ as the high priest. Taken together, these themes distinguish the book of Hebrews from books that we know were written by Paul.Â It's difficult to read these and similar passages without realizing that this author was hardly an impersonal scholar. He was passionate about his audience and Christ. If we miss this passion, we miss one of the book's most prominent features.