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**The Irrevocable Nature of Salvation:
Evidences from the Book of Hebrews**

Dr. David M. Allen¹

Queen's Foundation, Birmingham, UK²

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Introduction

Perhaps more than any other text in the New Testament, the letter to the Hebrews has proved problematic in terms of its portrayal of the process of salvation. The letter, anonymously composed – “without father, without mother, without genealogy” (7:3) – enigmatically sets forth a detailed articulation of the atoning work of Christ, predicated on the Jewish cultic sacrificial system (especially 7:1-10:18). Such elucidation can seem simultaneously confusing and foreign to modern soteriological conceptions; John Dunnill notes how the epistle “positively rejoices in whatever is anomalous or strange: it is a rich meditation on the glorious oddness of God’s dealings with humanity.”³

Coupled with this somewhat alien character, and perhaps more significant for the titular question, are the infamous, so-called “warning passages” of the letter (2:1-4, 3:7-4:11, 6:4-8, 10:26-31, 12:18-29). These sections of the epistle raise the possibility of apostasy, of falling away from the faith, of salvation not being

¹ Books.....

² See www..

³ John Dunnill, *Covenant and Sacrifice in the Letter to the Hebrews* (SNTSMS 75; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 263.

somehow “guaranteed.” Even more significantly, the warning passages perhaps rub salt into the apostate wound, seeming to signal the apparent impossibility for those who have fallen away to return to the community of believers (6:4-6, 10:26-27). Whilst this impossibility argument is equally problematic for Calvinist and Arminian alike, the very existence of the warning passages raises provocative questions as to how well the epistle sits with notions of salvation being “irrevocable.” Until fairly recently, the tendency within New Testament theology has been to read Hebrews through Pauline spectacles, namely to start from the possibility that “loss of salvation” can never happen, and read the text accordingly in that light. Calvin R. Schoonhoven is particularly critical of such tactics and advocates that the text be read for its own sake: “(a)lthough the analogy-of-faith may assert that whatever these texts say they cannot teach that a ‘saved’ person could be forever lost so as never again to be able to experience repentance, this is precisely what is taught here.”⁴ Such prejudicial reading is no longer permissible and the temptation therefore to read Hebrews through Pauline eyes, and dismiss its problematic texts, must be avoided. Letting the epistle stand on its terms, as a distinct voice within the canonical choir, what contribution does it have to make on this issue?

A. The Notion of “Salvation” in Hebrews

Whilst Hebrews’ take on the irrevocability, or otherwise, of salvation has been a source of contention from the Church Fathers onwards, it is perhaps worth noting at the outset some other aspects of its soteriological testimony, as this may have a bearing on the question in hand. It is notable, for example, that Hebrews offers no evidence or justification for the need of salvation;⁵ unlike the rigorous outworking of, for example Rom 1-3, the backdrop of sin is already assumed and the sacrificial system is invoked remedially, against the backdrop of the judgment of God (10:30-31; 12:25-29), without the need for further explanation. As such, salvation is linked to cultic

⁴ Calvin R. Schoonhoven, “The ‘Analogy of Faith’ and the Intent of Hebrews,” in *Scripture, Tradition, and Interpretation* (ed. W. Ward Gasque and William Sandford Lasor; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1978), 105.

⁵ See, for example, Brenda B. Colijn, “‘Let Us Approach’: Soteriology in the Epistle to the Hebrews,” 39 (1996): 571-86.

categories such as purification from sins (1:3) and their expiation (2:17), along with the redemptive power of blood (9:12-14) that brings forgiveness (9:21-22). Hebrews consequently intertwines salvation with the experience of death – death becomes a pre-requisite of the salvific process. It seems that God could have saved Jesus from death (5:7), but chose against it, for it was not part of the plan of perfection so to do (5:8-9). Hebrews’ articulation of salvation also seems to entail a significant element of “deliverance”⁶, namely “preservation from the eschatological judgements that await sinners,”⁷ with the anticipated response being one of reverent worship (9:14, 12:28). Although sharing with Paul the gracious dimension to salvation (2:9, 4:16, 12:15),⁸ Hebrews does not depend hugely on his forensic categories (justification, righteousness – though they are not completely absent – cf. 4:12, 11:4), but instead utilizes imagery drawn predominantly from the Levitical Day of Atonement liturgy. Hebrews’ soteriological portrait is a distinct one within the New Testament canon.

It is also hard to escape the conclusion that Hebrews’ soteriology is christocentric – it is declared in Jesus’ ministry (2:3), pioneered by him (2:10), and achieved once for all by his entrance into the “heavenly” holy of Holies (9:24).⁹ He is the source of salvation (5:9), the one who announced it (2:3) and the one who once for all has achieved it (9:11-12). He will ultimately be the one who returns to bring salvation (9:28). Hebrews’ theological position might be summarized as follows: “Christ’s self-sacrifice is the definitive means of atonement that inaugurates God’s new covenant of mercy.”¹⁰ Lindars ponders such christocentric thinking to consider how Hebrews’ plan of atonement features within contemporary discourse on matters of salvation and religious diversity. He notes that Hebrews shares with all religions the idea of God’s self-revelation to humanity,

⁶ Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2008), 394.

⁷ Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 66.

⁸ Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1981), 629-30.

⁹ Scott D. Mackie, *Eschatology and Exhortation in Hebrews* (WUNT 2.223; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 100.

¹⁰ Craig R. Koester, "God's Purposes and Christ's Saving Work According to Hebrews," in *Salvation in the New Testament: Perspectives on Soteriology* (ed. J. G. Van der Watt; vol. 121 of *Supplements to Novum Testamentum*; Leiden: Brill, 2005), 375.

but also exhibits particularity in that the revelation has a specific, pinnacle moment in Christ Jesus (1:1-2).¹¹

B. Hebrews' Chronology of Salvation

What though of the “irrevocability” of such salvation? For most scholars, a primary “evidence” from Hebrews is its depiction of salvation as a predominantly – for some essentially – future experience, one that is received at the second coming of Christ (9:28), who brings σωτηρία to those who wait faithfully for him.¹² Salvation is something to be inherited (1:14), by implication at some time in the future – it is not an entity or quality that is presently possessed. The exhortation of 2:1-4 is, it could be said, a warning about falling away from the *message* of salvation, not salvation itself¹³ (i.e. because this announced “future” salvation is still to come). Scott D. Mackie, for example, is one of a number of recent scholars to underscore this futuristic perspective,¹⁴ classifying Hebrews' depiction of salvation as a future benefit or “unrealized future hope”¹⁵; the readers have not yet participated in its fullness, even if they have already tasted of its associated blessings (partnership with Christ – 3:14, rest – 4:3, a conscience cleansed from sin – 10:22). For Mackie, Hebrews' depiction of salvation in such futuristic terms is part of its hortatory purposes;¹⁶ he surmises that “the author sets before the recipients the grand benefit, the victorious crown of salvation, as a motivation to persevere. And though they have already imbibed deeply at the well of eschatological blessing (6:4-5), they have not yet attained the

¹¹ Barnabas Lindars, *The Theology of the Letter to the Hebrews* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 129.

¹² See Scot McKnight, “The Warning Passages of Hebrews: A Formal Analysis and Theological Conclusions,” 13 (1992): 55-59: cf. his summary statement (58): “(s)alvation, though experienced now in its inaugurated form, is something reserved for God’s persevering people until the return of Jesus Christ.”

¹³ Koester, “God’s,” 364.

¹⁴ Mackie, *Eschatology*, passim. Koester, “God’s,” 361 begins his analysis of the epistle’s soteriology with the declarative statement: “Hebrews centres on the question of the future of the people of God.”

¹⁵ Mackie, *Eschatology*, 100. David A. deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Epistle “To the Hebrews”* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2000), 100 likewise speaks of it as a “benefaction yet to be conferred.”

¹⁶ He notes that in four of the seven usages of σωτηρία, the future nature of the salvation is combined with a hortatory dimension – Mackie, *Eschatology*, 100.

ultimate benefit.”¹⁷ Mackie therefore does not ignore quasi-soteriological (or membership) language which Hebrews accords to recipients of the letter, but classifies them as essentially “not salvation”. They function instead as blessings, things to encourage believers in what they already have such that they may press forward towards their salvation goal. The benefits are significant and accessible, but any access to the heavenly realm they now possess pales into insignificance compared with what will be had at the Parousia.¹⁸

The analysis of Mackie and others is a helpful and salutary reminder to let Hebrews speak of salvation on its own terms, rather than through the prism of other NT authors. Their analysis, if valid, also goes some way to answering the question regarding the irrevocability of salvation, or at least to limiting the way Hebrews might appropriately address it. If salvation is something to be received in the future, to pose the question in terms of it being either lost or retained is to phrase the question in terms that Hebrews itself does not cast.¹⁹ “One cannot lose what one does not in fact have.”²⁰ Indeed, Scot McKnight advocates that Hebrews’ soteriology remains very orthodox in this regard. It anticipates a final day of judgment that will see the world righted and salvation brought forth, “one that will discriminate between perseverers and apostates.”²¹ It does so, however, without specifically addressing a category of those who are “already saved.”

The titular question, however, cannot be dismissed immediately, as it remains the case that the soteriological landscape of Hebrews is not *solely* futuristic, with several parts of the letter offering a variant or alternative perspective. Marshall notes, for example, how the letter’s portrayal of “salvation is primarily, *but not exclusively*, a

¹⁷ Mackie, *Eschatology*, 101. Cf. also 200: “the persuasiveness of the warning passages ... is almost entirely dependent on the authenticity of the supernatural benefits the recipients are presumed to have experienced.”

¹⁸ Mackie, *Eschatology*, 101.

¹⁹ Cf. Martin Emmrich, “Hebrews 6:4-6 -- Again! (a Pneumatological Inquiry),” 65 (2003): 88: “the warning passages of Hebrews were never designed to investigate the ‘can-true-believers-fall-away?’ kind of question.”

²⁰ McKnight, “Warning,” 58: but cf. his subsequent statement: “we should say that we can ‘lose’ the present dimensions of salvation that have already been inaugurated and experienced” (McKninght 58)

²¹ McKnight, “Warning,” 56; cf. Schreiner, *New Testament*, 394.

future expectation”²² and not every piece of evidence marshalled in support of a future salvation need necessarily be construed as such. Johnson also observes that salvation in Hebrews is “transtemporal, because (it is) also transmaterial”²³; as such it resists the attempt to render it purely futuristic. Three examples might be suggested in this regard. First, the claim that the intercessory Christ is able to save those who come to God through him εἰς τὸ παντελές (7:25) could be said to point temporally forward in orientation (the εἰς τὸ ... construct), but it still remains somewhat more ambiguous time-wise than many would seem to suggest. Indeed, the context of the phrase seems to point to a more “present” or repetitive, ongoing activity, one that is also complete in its scope. The saving action happens repeatedly – because Christ always lives (7:25) – a depiction that sits uneasily with a merely futurist salvation.²⁴ Moreover, Jesus the great high priest is able to save for all time those who come to (προσέρχομαι – 7:25) God. The act of “coming to” elsewhere in the letter is one of arrival, of being at the very precipice of engagement (cf. 12:18, 12:22), and this seems to temper the futuristic dimension of the salvation encounter; salvation is almost within the hearers’ grasp, they have come to its very nearness.²⁵ Read against these other instances of προσέρχομαι, the salvation of 7:25 is potentially (or in some fashion) a more present, imminent experience.

Second, Heb 5:9 is also commonly cited in support of the futurist definition,²⁶ but this really demands more of the verse than it can bear. The verse advocates the christological source of eternal salvation (σωτηρία αἰώνιος), but that is all it explicitly declares; whilst it ascribes confidence in the one who is the ἀΐτιος (and ἀρχηγός – cf. 2:10) of salvation, the “eternal” nature of the

²² I. Howard Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God: A Study of Perseverance and Falling Away* (London: Epworth, 1969), 138, my emphasis. Cf. also Attridge, *Epistle*, 66; Andrew T. Lincoln, *Hebrews: A Guide* (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 89.

²³ Luke Timothy Johnson, *Hebrews: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2006), 148.

²⁴ Mackie, *Eschatology*, 100 seems to acknowledge this as the exception to the generally futurist portrayal of salvation.

²⁵ See David M. Allen, *Deuteronomy and Exhortation in Hebrews: An Exercise in Narrative Re-Presentation* (WUNT 2/238; Tübingen: Mohr (Siebeck), 2008), 195-98.

²⁶ Grant R. Osborne, "A Classical Arminian View," in *Four Views on the Warning Passages in Hebrews* (ed. Herbert W. Bateman IV; Grand Rapids, Mich: Kregel, 2007), 116.

σωτηρία is a somewhat opaque phrase²⁷ and need not be temporally synonymous with “irrevocable”. Indeed, in view of the frequent dualism found within the letter, αἰώνιος is more likely an aspect of the age in which the salvation is experienced (the new age inaugurated by Christ (cf. 9:14-15)), rather than whether or not the salvation can be revoked.²⁸ It is a spatial or locative expression, rather than an essentially temporal one.

Third, the relationship of σωτηρία to those “better things” that the writer expects of his audience (6:9) might possibly be conceived of as forward-orientated; Ellingworth, for example, proposes that ἐχόμενα σωτηρίας might be rendered “which (will) obtain salvation”,²⁹ namely that the recipients would exhibit the conduct that merited their ultimate salvation. But other senses of the expression are equally possible; it may be that the “better things” accompany the present reality or availability of salvation, they evidence σωτηρία rather than anticipate it. Just like the fruit-bearing/blessed land of 6:7, the fruitful activity of the believers is the outworking of the present experience of salvation.³⁰

Furthermore, aside from these indeterminate passages, Hebrews also seems to articulate something possessed *now* by faithful believers, even if this “something” does not specifically carry the label “salvation”. Could this actually be “salvation” but given another appellation; i.e. is the (apparent) reduction of “salvation” to the future aspect merely just playing with words? This question may be answered in two ways. First, those experiences that Mackie regards as eschatological benefits, experiences that, though significant, fall short of the glorious access that (future) salvation brings, could nonetheless

²⁷ Aside from the “shorter ending” of Mark, the phrase occurs only here in the NT (though cf. Isa 45:17).

²⁸ Cf. William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1-8: Hebrews 9-13* (WBC 47A-47B; 2 vols.; Dallas: Word, 1991), 122: “The salvation he provides is ‘eternal’ not simply because it extends beyond time, but because it is true, heavenly, and not human-made.” Likewise Johnson, *Hebrews*, 148: “the notion of ‘eternal’ does not mean simply ‘everlasting’, but more, a participation in the life that is God’s own.”

²⁹ Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 329

³⁰ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1990), 150n61: “the presence of those things in the readers’ lives was a token of the presence of salvation too, since they were so closely and invariably bound up with salvation.” B.F. Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: The Greek Text with Notes and Essays* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1950), 154 notes the difficulty in deciding whether salvation precedes or succeeds the “better things”, and concedes that the sense of “accompany” probably best resolves the ambiguity.

still be viewed as part of the overall salvation process. Though he himself understands the implications of the connection in a different way,³¹ Mackie does acknowledge that the language of the benefits is drawn from cultic terminology, the same arena that will eventually bring about salvation.³² One wonders, therefore, whether Christ's sacrificial achievement (along with the benefits/blessings it yields) can really be distinguished or separated from the future experience of σωτηρία. Ultimately, it depends how distinct one thinks the categories of "atonement" and "salvation" are in Hebrews; Koester, for example, treats them as two distinct groupings,³³ but it may be that such separation is neither valid nor helpful. It is Christ's faithful action in regard to his (atoning) self-sacrificial act that is commended and which effects his pioneering entry into the heavenly rest/holy of Holies (the goal of salvation – 2:9-10, 5:7-10, 9:11-14, 10:11-14); the ἀρχηγός of salvation (2:10) and faith (12:2) is also the ἀρχιερεύς who has offered the once for all atoning sacrifice (2:17, 9:11-12) and now lives to save those who come to him (7:25). Salvation awaits those who eagerly (or faithfully) anticipate his coming (9:28). If one cannot divorce Christ's faithfulness from his atoning work, can one really separate the human faithfulness (that brings salvation) from the salvific effects of Christ's atonement?³⁴ Bruce puts the parallel well: "There is something appropriate in the fact that the salvation which was procured by the obedience of the Redeemer should be made available to the obedience of the redeemed."³⁵

Further evidence of the present experience of salvation comes from the intriguing reference to the entry into the rest in 4:3, the hortatory present εἰσέρχομεθα. Whilst the hortatory sense could be construed futuristically,³⁶ the invitational context, along with the present tense of the verb, seem to weigh in favour of a rest being

³¹ Because of the futuristic access to salvation, Mackie, *Eschatology*, 199 ventures that Hebrews' "careful reservation of final salvation represents a deliberate qualification of his cultic soteriology."

³² Mackie, *Eschatology*, 101.

³³ Koester, "God's," 375.

³⁴ Lindars, *Theology*, 129-30 seems to treat atonement and salvation more or less interchangeably.

³⁵ Bruce, *Epistle (1990)*, 133.

³⁶ So Craig R. Koester, *Hebrews: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 2001), 270.

inhabited *now*.³⁷ If such κατάπαυσις is the heavenly rest similarly enjoyed by God himself, it is hard to ignore the implication that salvation is somehow experienced in the present.³⁸ Even if there is a fullness of rest to come, the impact of the repeated “Today” surely demands that there be a present/current dimension to its experience. Lincoln understands this view of rest as demonstrating the temporal tension that Hebrews exhibits in regard to salvation; whilst believers await the completion of the experience of rest, they do enter it *now*, and such entry comprises the present experience of salvation.³⁹

Discussion thus far has been premised on linguistic matters, and particularly Hebrews use of the σωτηρία/σώζω word group, along with the implications of this for the experience, or otherwise, of salvation.⁴⁰ Whilst analysis of such language offers significant insight into Hebrews’ soteriological program, it does not do so exhaustively, for much of the epistle’s theologizing is premised upon familiar narratives as opposed to precise vocabulary and semantics. Hebrews has a special interest in those narratives drawn from Israel’s sacred story, with three images in particular forming part of its program: entry into the land/rest (3:7-4:11), passage through the Holy of Holies (9:1-10:25), and arrival at the sacred mountains of Sinai and Zion (12:18-29). The first of these is particularly germane for the topic of “salvation”, for it provides a scriptural analogy or pattern for the appropriation, or otherwise, of that salvation. The exodus generation has (successfully) fled Egypt, but at the seminal moment of Kadesh Barnea, it flouts YHWH’s offer of the land/rest in favour of the spies’ report. That generation, observes Hebrews, quoting Ps 94:7-11 LXX, did not enter the divine rest (3:7-19), and therefore missed out on their intended final destiny. Hebrews’ audience are warned against repeating the same unbelief (3:12-14), and rejecting the (new) offer of divine rest (4:1-3). Koester’s summary of the narrative is apposite and, as suggested above, reflects his preference for differentiating

³⁷ So Lane, *Hebrews*, 99.

³⁸ Lindars, *Theology*, 130 also argues that atonement is a feature of the present, “something that belongs properly to the future but which has already been accomplished.”

³⁹ Lincoln, *Hebrews*, 94: Hebrews’ depiction of rest demonstrates the “eschatological pattern of an experience of salvation in the present, with a focus on heaven, to be followed by the consummation of salvation at the end.”

⁴⁰ Σωτηρία is also found in Heb 11:7, but in relation to Noah, rather than the audience themselves.

atonement from salvation: “(t)he story of the wilderness generation enabled Hebrews to distinguish initial deliverance from final salvation in a way that helped make sense of the readers’ own experience”.⁴¹ On the one hand, the exodus imagery implied an experience of liberation akin, Koester suggests, to the atonement action initiated by the Christ event; but this is separated from the subsequent – or different – event that is the entry into the rest. On such a reading, “salvation” rest becomes a future experience, one to be fully experienced at the Parousia, by those who have faithfully persevered. (Koester suggests a similar distinction is found later in the letter, between the atonement achieved through Christ’s high-priestly self-sacrifice and the salvation that will come at the Parousia).⁴²

This liberation/salvation dualism works well up to a point, and undoubtedly fits well with the broad futuristic program articulated elsewhere in the letter. Hebrews is also more interested in where its audience is journeying to, rather than what it has left behind (i.e. it utilizes eisodus, rather than exodus imagery), so the narrational equation of rest with salvation is an obvious one. However, interpreted in this fashion, the wilderness generation paradigm does raise two pertinent questions. First, the model does not take full account of figure of Moses,⁴³ and in particular his participation – or otherwise – in the Sabbath rest. Moses emerges as a figure of no small regard in the letter (3:1-6, 11:23-28), one whose faithfulness serves as a type of that of Christ (11:26). He goes further than anyone else in the book, anyone merely human at least, in providing an exemplar of faithful obedience. Whilst one should be wary of working the image or exemplar beyond its hortatory or rhetorical purpose, Moses’ absence from the land – whilst still remaining faithful – should at least raise some caution about viewing the land/rest – and not the exodus – as the sole/primary “salvation” experience.⁴⁴ Moses, one assumes, does participate in the eternal Sabbath rest, even though he is one who was part of “that generation”, and whose mantle needed to

⁴¹ Koester, "God's," 368.

⁴² Koester, "God's," 375.

⁴³ Cf. Randall C. Gleason, "The Old Testament Background of Rest in Hebrews 3:7-4:11," 157 (2000): 294.

⁴⁴ Koester does not make this error, but it is nonetheless important to refer to the figure of Moses as a counter to the idea that salvation is exclusively futuristic.

assumed by another Ἰησοῦς figure. Whilst one can read too much into typological constructs, it is difficult to avoid the notion that even if something was lost by the wilderness generation, complete exclusion from the “salvation order” is not one of those things.

The second question concerns whether arrival/entry into the land fully encapsulates Hebrews’ depiction of the salvation experience. Linked to the idea of coming into the rest is the broader motif of pilgrimage or journey, the way in which Hebrews portrays its audience as still awaiting their final destiny (13:14).⁴⁵ They are exhorted to carry on towards their κατάπαυσις goal (4:11), to keep running the race (12:1) and to be strengthened for the journey ahead (12:12-13). Abraham’s pilgrim demeanour in the land of promise (11:8-16) is held up as a model of faithful existence. Such pilgrim identity underscores the significance of the process of journeying; Hebrews not only locates its audience “on the way”, but ascribes a great deal of formative significance to the experience. Rather than emphasizing “arrival” or even the destination, the writer concentrates on forward travel; in his commentary, Robert Jewett plays with the pilgrimage motif, noting how Christ is a fellow-pilgrim whose experience of testing, death and uncertainty qualifies him to be an appropriate model for both Hebrews’ recipients and modern-day pilgrims alike.⁴⁶

The stress on journey/pilgrimage is perhaps best born out by the tension it creates with “arrival” or “entry” language; whilst on the one hand, the recipients still journey, still see the land from afar, they are equally said to have arrived, to be at the place, to “have come” (12:18, 12:22; cf, 4:3, 10:22). They are on the very precipice of their salvation promise, classically “there but not there”;⁴⁷ whilst the full fruit may be still to come, the “present” mark of being part of the community of faith is what matters.⁴⁸ Faithfulness is the paradigm mark of the believer (3:1-16, 11:1-12:2); at a time when their life experience does

⁴⁵ On the role of pilgrimage in Hebrews, see E. Käsemann, *Das Wanderende Gottesvolk* (FRLANT 37; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1939); William G. Johnsson, “Pilgrimage Motif in the Book of Hebrews,” 97 (1978): 239-51.

⁴⁶ Robert Jewett, *Letters to Pilgrims: A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (New York: Pilgrim, 1981), 1-17.

⁴⁷ See the discussion of this tension in Allen, *Deuteronomy*, 195-98.

⁴⁸ Note the association Hebrews draws between meeting together and apostasy (10:25); participation in community and faithfulness are closely intertwined.

not seem to fit with the promised divine blessing (10:32-34, 12:3-4), Hebrews places its audience in a liminal position, exhorting them to live faithfully in the knowledge that their pilgrim journey is at its imminent salvation climax. As such, Via proposes that faith is the defining stance in the letter: “to have faith is to have salvation, a point that Hebrews makes otherwise by speaking of Jesus interchangeably as the originator of salvation (2:10; 5:9) and the originator of faith (12:2).”⁴⁹ Those who exhibit faithfulness, who have “faith”, are those who, however proleptically, participate in the promised salvation.

Via also sees Hebrews’ position on faithfulness as opening up a more inclusivist view on salvation:

We see then that there is a complex subdominant strand in Hebrews that extends the scope of saving faith beyond the community of Christian believers. In doing so, it deconstructs the dominating explicit position that Jesus’ mission avails only for those who have made a Christian confession (2:1-4; 4:1-3, 14; 7:25; 10:23) and also deconstructs the corollary that the Old Testament exemplars of faith are further from the fulfilled promises than are Christian believers (11:13, 39).⁵⁰

Such a classification contrasts, of course, with general Reformed thinking, as faithfulness or faith becomes more of an activity, with the emphasis on the human dimension rather than the divine. Buist Fanning summarises the position well, suggesting that, for Hebrews, “continued human fidelity is not the basis for maintaining God’s saving work or bringing it to final accomplishment; it is the necessary effect of God’s genuine saving work.”⁵¹ On this line of thought, faith is evidential not conditional, revealing the presence of “salvation” in the life of the believer, rather than being an expression which “effects” it.

Let us make some summary comments on Hebrews’ soteriological chronology. It remains the case that the futuristic dimension to salvation is a key aspect of the letter’s program, and probably its primary element. Hebrews does regard salvation as something ultimately received at the Parousia, a gracious gift for

⁴⁹ Dan O. Via, “Revelation, Atonement and the Scope of Faith in the Epistle to the Hebrews: A Deconstructive and Reader-Response Interpretation,” 11, no. 3/4 (2003): 518-19.

⁵⁰ Via, “Revelation,” 529.

⁵¹ Buist M. Fanning, “Classical Reformed Response (Wesleyan),” in *Four Views on the Warning Passages in Hebrews* (ed. Herbert W. Bateman IV; Grand Rapids, Mich: Kregel, 2007), 315.

those who wait for Christ (9:28). The presenting need or occasion of the epistle is to keep the faithful going on in their pilgrim journey, and hence the rhetorical slant of the letter is geared towards the reward they will receive at its conclusion. Such “reward” motivates them to keep going (10:35) and the “salvation” language exists broadly within the futurist dimension as part of the hortatory agenda; if one were to accentuate the prior or present realities, at the expense of those to come, then the urgent passion of the letter is watered down. At the same time, however, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that for Hebrews, something genuinely “salvific” has already happened, and happened once for all: “salvation is both present and future, that is, it is present now but will be finalized in the future.”⁵² The language of “inauguration” is perhaps a helpful mediating term, for it incorporates the positive spiritual benefits that are experienced *now*; believers are partakers of Christ (3:14), recipients of the Spirit (2:4, 6:4), and they have tasted of the age to come (6:5), even if they have yet to receive its full component. An alternative is to view the audience’s salvation experience as essentially liminal; they are at the threshold of their salvation moment, what Lindars calls being “on the brink of completion.”⁵³

Thus whilst Hebrews’ salvation portrayal may indeed have a strongly futurist ring, it is not exclusively so, and the question of the irrevocability of salvation remains a valid one to ask of the epistolary text, albeit in nuanced terms. For if there is some present experience of “salvation” (or whatever label Hebrews accords it), there remains the possibility of both relinquishing that status and not receiving its final salvific culmination. In short, Hebrews’ soteriological chronology does allow for the *possibility* of something being “lost” or “revoked”, even if, strictly speaking, the epistle does explicitly identify it as “salvation.” And such a possibility is brought into acute focus by the warning passages of Hebrews, where the prospect of falling away from the community of faith is set before the audience in no uncertain terms.

⁵² Osborne, “Classical,” 116. He also invokes the language of “inaugurated salvation.”

⁵³ Lindars, *Theology*, 129.

C. Salvation and the Warning Passages

Few portions of Scripture have caused as much theological agony as Hebrews' so-called warning passages, with much of their discussion dominated by the particular theological interpretative grid brought to bear. Some have argued for a straightforward reading that allows the force of the passages be retained: "The threat is real, and the author directs it to real believers. It is for this reason that the recent scholarly attempts to mollify the implications of the language are misguided."⁵⁴ I. Howard Marshall likewise proposes that "we seem ... to be compelled to allow that a person may go so far in apostasy that God refuses him (*sic.*) the opportunity of repentance."⁵⁵

Hebrews 6:4-6 is perhaps the epistle's most challenging discourse. Theodore Robinson opined of the verses: "Here we have a passage which, perhaps more than any other, has tended to make the Church feel that this author does not represent the true standard of Christian doctrine."⁵⁶ Harry Attridge takes an even more critical position: "In taking this stance (i.e. that of 6:4-6), our author *unjustifiably limits the gracious mercy of God*, and the church's later position on the possibility of repentance and reconciliation seems to be more solidly founded in the gospel message."⁵⁷ On the one hand, the passages apparently raise the possibility of apostasy (though, for some, this is only a hypothetical); on the other, the third and fourth passages (6:4-8, 10:26-31) seem to preclude the apostate individual⁵⁸ from being restored to repentance and the subsequent reception of salvation. The loaded warning passages are consequently a fraught locus of theological interpretation and a "once for all" solution to them may not be found within the parameters of this essay.⁵⁹ Indeed, the apparent evocation of the impossibility of repentance is

⁵⁴ Brent Nongbri, "A Touch of Condemnation in a Word of Exhortation: Apocalyptic Language and Graeco-Roman Rhetoric in Hebrews 6:4-12," 45 (2003): 275.

⁵⁵ Marshall, *Kept*, 147.

⁵⁶ Theodore H. Robinson, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1931), 75.

⁵⁷ Attridge, *Epistle*, 172.

⁵⁸ Though note the interesting, but ultimately unpersuasive, viewpoint of Verlyn Verbrugge, who advocates that the pericope is addressing corporate – rather than individual – apostasy: Verlyn D. Verbrugge, "Towards a New Interpretation of Hebrews 6:4-6," 15 (1980).

⁵⁹ For a broader discussion on the warning passages and a dialogue from those who hold differing theological persuasions, see Herbert W. IV Bateman, ed., *Four Views on the Warning Passages in Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007). Cf. also Thomas R. Schreiner and Ardel B. Caneday, *The Race Set before Us: A Biblical Theology of Perseverance and Assurance* (Leicester: InterVarsity, 2001).

problematic for both Calvinist and Arminian theologian alike.⁶⁰ The former struggle with the concept of a believer 'falling away' (παράπρεσόντας – 6:6) and therefore can view the persons described in 6:4-5 as 'pseudo-Christians', those who had never expressed true saving faith.⁶¹ Such a view, however, fails to take account of language in 6:4-5 that bears all the hallmarks of Christian participation and belief, and which contradicts the prior exhortation to press onto maturity (5:11-6:3; cf. 6:11-12). Why would Hebrews make such an appeal to those who were never 'genuine' believers in the first place? The Arminian cause fares no better; whilst receptive to the notion of a believer's apostasy, the consequent impossibility of repentance is problematic for the self-determinative aspect of their thought. In recent work, however, some reformed scholars have acknowledged the "believer" language of Heb 6:4-5⁶² and such acceptance has generated some further helpful thinking on the interpretative implications of the warning passages.

Two other schools of thought have thus come to bear. First, a 'loss of rewards' school proposes that the falling away of 6:6 is not determinative of future salvation, but rather contributes to loss of blessing in this life and possibly even physical death. This view takes seriously the belief language of 6:4-5, but hold firms to the eternal security language attested elsewhere within the canon.⁶³ The

⁶⁰ See the discussion of the respective theological positions in Randall C. Gleason, "The Old Testament Background of the Warning in Hebrews 6:4-8," 155 (1998): 69-72; Schreiner and Caneday, *Race*, 21-38

⁶¹ Calvin himself opines that 6:4-5 describes the reprobate (and not the elect): "I do not see that there is any reason why He should not touch the reprobate with some glimmerings of his light, or affect them with some sense of His goodness, or to some extent engrave His word in their hearts.... Therefore, there is some knowledge in the reprobate, which later vanishes away" - Jean Calvin, *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews and the First and Second Epistles of St. Peter* (trans. William B. Johnston; Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1963), 76. See also R. Nicole, "Some Comments on Hebrews 6:4-7 and the Doctrine of the Perseverance of God with the Saints," in *Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation: Studies in Honour of Merrill C. Tenney* (ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1975), 355-64. For an alternate Reformed position which takes seriously the possibility of 'falling away', see Alan Mugridge, "Warnings in the Epistle to the Hebrews : An Exegetical and Theological Study," 46 S-D (1987): 74-82.

⁶² For example, Randal C. Gleason, "A Moderate Reformed View," in *Four Views on the Warning Passages in Hebrews* (ed. Herbert W. Bateman IV; Grand Rapids, Mich: Kregel, 2007). Some still remain reluctant to make this connection, however: Dave Mathewson, "Reading Heb 6:4-6 in Light of the Old Testament," 61, no. 2 (1999): 88; Philip E. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1977), 217-18.

⁶³ Thomas Kem Oberholtzer, "The Warning Passages in Hebrews, Pt 3: The Thorn-Infested Ground in Hebrews 6:4-12.," 145 (1988): 319-28; Gleason, "Hebrews 6:4-8," 72-91.

(genuine) believer of 6:4-8 must persevere in the faith, else the blessings of Christian participation (though not eternal salvation) are denied him/her. Alternatively, some have seen the situation of 6:4-6 as hypothetical; the scenario of an apostate believer is posed in order to caution the faithful of the dreadful consequences of disobedience and apostasy.⁶⁴ The audience of Hebrews has not yet reached that point (hence the shift from first to third person in 6:4), but they are warned of the seriousness of the situation should they do so. Such an argument has attracted little support, partly because it fails to explain the other harsh warnings elsewhere in the letter, partly because the plural forms are not suggestive of a hypothetical individual,⁶⁵ and partly because the seriousness of the 6:4-6 would seem unwarranted for a purely hypothetical eventuality.⁶⁶ It also ignores the paradigmatic example of Esau (12:15-17), whose depiction appears to describe someone for whom a restoration to repentance was genuinely impossible.

Coupled with the warning passages is the letter's frequent application of conditional language to the audience's pilgrim existence. The writer notes that they are part of God's house *if* they hold firm in their confidence (3:6); they are partners of Christ *if* they retain their former confidence unto the end (3:14). *If* they are not encountering discipline, they are not true "sons" (12:8); *if* they detach themselves from the community of faith, there is no longer sacrifice for sin (10:25-26). Such conditionality corresponds with the epistle's exhortations to keep going on the pilgrim journey: the recipients are to remain diligent, and not sluggish, until they receive the awaited promise (6:11-12), they are not to allow their bodies to droop along the way (12:12-13). The existence of such conditional imagery raises the possibility that some addressed by the letter might not make it

⁶⁴ Thomas Hewitt, *The Epistle to the Hebrews. An Introduction and Commentary* (TNTC; London: 1960), 109-11.

⁶⁵ Robert P. Gordon, *Hebrews* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 73.

⁶⁶ See also the criticism of Hewitt by Marshall, *Kept*, 146 and subsequently Schreiner and Caneday, *Race*, 36-37. Marshall contends that Hewitt moves from a genuine hypothetical scenario (if..., then...) to the position that the situation is solely/purely hypothetical – i.e. because apostasy could never happen, the situation can only be hypothetical.

until the very end, and hence not receive the promised salvation/reward/rest.⁶⁷

It is important to clarify the genre of the warning passages, or at least to establish the nature of the warnings being issued. A number of scholars have observed that the passages function as exhortations rather than systematic articulations and one should therefore be wary of creating theological grids from them.⁶⁸ Exegetically at least, it is unwise to read doctrinal exactness into the hortatory material which forms so much of the warning passage material. As George Guthrie notes, “it is doubtful that the author primarily was teaching theology when he wrote what we have as Hebrews 6:4-8.”⁶⁹ But at the same time, if such warnings are to have any bite – or to have any warrant for inclusion – then they must surely attest to some form of possible reality, however unlikely the author thinks that they will befall the Hebrews recipients. The attitude of the apostate may be a gradual drift away (2:1-4), or a more purposeful rejection of 12:15,⁷⁰ but either way, some form of apostate attitude is manifest. The mindset of 12:15 does seem to have in mind someone who has been privy to Christian faith, the context of ὑστερέω (12:15) implying the “idea of receiving God's grace and then letting it go rather than that of missing it altogether.”⁷¹ That said, the overall evidence of the letter is that the audience themselves still fall short of the apostate position: i.e. “the only fair conclusion is that apostasy is being seriously considered, but no specific instance of such apostasy is actually reported.”⁷²

The various positions on the warning passages, and the consequences for the irrevocability of salvation that are espoused, have recently been brought together in a volume edited by Herbert Bateman IV, with four scholars of differing theological persuasions in

⁶⁷ For the implied audience, however, it seems a remote possibility, as the writer expects that they will persevere, and does not conceive of them actually falling prey to apostasy.

⁶⁸ Note the structural breakdown of George H. Guthrie, *The Structure of Hebrews: A Text-Linguistic Analysis* (NovTSup 73; Leiden: Brill, 1994), who argues for two operative streams to the letter: doctrine and exhortation.

⁶⁹ George H. Guthrie, “Conclusion,” in *Four Views on the Warning Passages in Hebrews* (ed. Herbert W. Bateman IV; Grand Rapids, Mich: Kregel, 2007), 436.

⁷⁰ Cf. Allen, *Deuteronomy*, 104: “To ‘turn away’ from the grace of God (12:15) is to show contempt for and actively reject life under YHWH's (new) covenantal dispensation and community.”

⁷¹ Paul Ellingworth and Eugene A. Nida, *A Translator's Handbook on the Letter to the Hebrews* (London: United Bible Societies, 1983), 304.

⁷² Guthrie, *New Testament*, 632.

conversation as to the interpretation of the pericopes.⁷³ The discussion of the book is conducted in an irenic spirit, and one senses that the dialogue partners ultimately share more in common than what divides them. However, it remains the case that they do differ theologically, and such theological difference does impact somewhat upon their exegetical method. Space precludes extensive discussion of the respective pieces, and their respective proposals/responses are best read in the book itself, but one salient window onto their discussion is Hebrews' take on what is missed out on by the wilderness generation, and hence for the recipient audience. How does the fate of those who fell in the wilderness (4:11) correspond to any prospect of apostasy on the audience's part?

Advocating a “moderate Reformed” position, Randall C. Gleason proposes a typological like-for-like equivalence between the two groupings;⁷⁴ indeed, he laudably makes the Old Testament backdrop to the account very much the interpretative key for the whole epistolary warning material, with the wilderness generation the core exemplar of the audience's situation. He takes seriously the spiritual position of both parties, but ventures that, for each, their “omission” is physical death rather than eternal loss, fruitful barrenness rather than fiery damnation; Hebrews' recipients potentially lose covenant blessings, but nothing more serious. Salvation is not in jeopardy for either grouping, partly because they have already been redeemed, partly because their “sin” is not willful apostasy but rather a refusal to trust God. Gleason's system is neat, and (rightly) takes seriously the Old Testament backdrop; it also, implicitly at least, affirms the quasi-salvation experience of the exodus generation – they are in some sense “saved”. But one wonders whether it takes full account of the strength of language in the letter. The tenor of the warnings seems more significant than Gleason allows, and to limit them to (just) physical death does not seem to do them justice.

⁷³ Bateman, ed., *Four Views*. The four perspectives represented are: Classical Reformed (Buist M. Fanning), Classical Arminian (Grant R. Osborne), Moderate Reformed (Randall C. Gleason) and Wesleyan Arminian (Gareth L. Cockerill).

⁷⁴ Gleason, “Moderate,” 336-77.

Gareth Lee Cockerill, in contrast, advances a more Arminian response.⁷⁵ He proposes that the warning passages articulate the real, practical possibility of apostasy, with the consequence being self-removal from the culmination of the divine salvation. He suggests that this is the “straightforward reading” of the relevant passages, even if the audience of Hebrews have not themselves fallen prey. Grant Osborne⁷⁶ shares much of Cockerill’s perspective, and on the primary issue of potential apostasy, they are on reasonably common ground.⁷⁷ He notes, however, the way in which Hebrews’ arguments move from the lesser to the greater; where Cockerill sees (like Gleason) a close association between the two generations, Osborne takes the punishment of apostates in Hebrews to be singularly worse (eternal judgment). Where there was (only) physical death for the wilderness generation, a more serious fate awaits the apostate believer.

Buist Fanning’s essay⁷⁸ is perhaps the most intriguing of the contributions, particularly for the way in which he takes seriously the Christian language of 6:4-5. He suggests that actual believers appear to be described there, at least in the terms of the *phenomena* that they exhibit, but seeks to let other parts of the letter’s soteriology dictate the interpretation of the passage. A faithful God, Fanning ventures, preserves the persevering believer until the end – “perseverance is not dependant on human ability to continue in faith but on God’s faithfulness to sustain his people in this salvation.”⁷⁹ Particular attention, therefore, needs to be paid to the epistle’s conditional statements and their implied limitation on salvation. Fanning describes them as “E/I conditionals” (evidence-to-inference) rather than “C/E” ones (cause-to-effect); rather than implying the consequence of the apodosis (the C/E model), the protasis draws inferences from the presented evidence. For example, the C/E model reads 3:6 to the effect of “if we hold firm, then we are his house”; on

⁷⁵ Gareth Lee Cockerill, “A Wesleyan Arminian View,” in *Four Views on the Warning Passages in Hebrews* (ed. Herbert W. Bateman IV; Grand Rapids, Mich: Kregel, 2007), 257-92.

⁷⁶ Osborne, “Classical,” 86-128.

⁷⁷ Their dissent, where it exists, is on the nature of the apostasy being exhibited, and the sin that occasions it.

⁷⁸ Buist M. Fanning, “A Classical Reformed View,” in *Four Views on the Warning Passages in Hebrews* (ed. Herbert W. Bateman IV; Grand Rapids, Mich: Kregel, 2007), 172-219.

⁷⁹ Buist M. Fanning, “Classical Reformed Response (Arminian),” in *Four Views on the Warning Passages in Hebrews* (ed. Herbert W. Bateman IV; Grand Rapids, Mich: Kregel, 2007), 134n4.

the E/I construal, holding firm is the evidence of being part of God's house.⁸⁰ With such a reading, the problematic conditional element of the warning passages is removed. Faith is evidential, rather than causative, of participation in the plan of salvation; obedient faith is the outworking of the divine purpose.

There still, however, remains the question of apostasy and the way in which 6:4-5 appears to describe real believers. Although cognizant of that, Fanning's solution is that those who appear to have fallen away were never actually "true" believers – those who reject Christ were never his partners (3:14) in the first place.⁸¹ Hebrews knows true believers will not fall away: "those who repudiate Christ thereby give evidence that they have never partaken the benefits of Christ's cleansing sacrifice."⁸² The "believing" manifestations of 6:4-5 are therefore the "phenomena" of those who appear to be Christian, but never were, with Hebrews using such apparently confessional language to convey the significance of that which the (real) unbeliever rejects.

For Fanning, therefore, the warnings have more of a retrospective dimension, in the "this is what it would have looked like had you rejected Christ – but you've not" sense. Taken in this way, and set alongside the parallel assurances of divine faithfulness, the warnings function to inspire confidence in the pilgrims' journey, following after the Faithful One Jesus Christ. A variant, though not unrelated view, is that of Thomas Schreiner and Ariel Caneday,⁸³ articulated in their recent book and revisited in condensed form in Schreiner's NT theology. Schreiner argues that the warnings are *prospective*; they function in tandem with the promises of Hebrews to forestall apostasy, particularly when suffering and pressure are experienced, such that believers (Schreiner understands those addressed in 6:4-5 as such) are encouraged to persevere in their journey of faith.⁸⁴ For Schreiner, therefore, the warnings have a more positive function, they are an intrinsic part of the author's hortatory armory, designed to prevent any drifting away from the faith. "The author does not

⁸⁰ Fanning, "Classical View," 206-19.

⁸¹ Fanning, "Classical Response (Wesleyan)," 315.

⁸² Fanning, "Classical View," 218-19.

⁸³ Schreiner and Caneday, *Race*, 142-213; Schreiner, *New Testament*, 585-97.

⁸⁴ Schreiner, *New Testament*, 596.

specifically address the question of whether Christians are capable of committing apostasy; rather, he writes stern warnings so that they will avoid apostasy.”⁸⁵

However, whichever way you construe the warnings (prospectively or retrospectively), the problem ultimately still remains as to why the epistle really needs them, particularly in such stark terms, if the possibility of a believer falling away is such an impossibility. For as Osborne rightly observes,⁸⁶ on Fanning’s assessment, the warnings become merely hypothetical (if it did happen, this is what it would look like, but it doesn’t), and such hypothetical categorization struggles to justify why the text warrants such rigorous and striking passages. Schreiner’s insights are helpful in that they do warn us about posing questions of a text that it does not explicitly address, but the question as to why the warnings are given in such a rigorous, challenging form remains unanswered. Much then depends upon what one calls a “straightforward reading” of the warning passages, and how far the assurance/faithfulness language elsewhere in the letter (2:10-18, 6:13-20, 12:1-3, 12:22-24, 13:8) impacts upon or shapes that reading. For those within the Reformed tradition, the faithfulness of God and Christ is paramount and confidence in such faithfulness gives grounds for confident assurance of salvation (cf. 10:14). For others, Hebrews sees the danger of apostasy for believers as a real threat, one that genuine believers can fall prey to; the same faithful God is with such believers, but does not stand in their way should they actively reject the divine grace (12:15).

Conclusion

Hebrews does not articulate a comprehensive, explicitly worked out “solution” to the question of the irrevocability of salvation; it might have a lot to say that is broadly on the subject, but it does so with a rhetorical and pastoral mindset, rather than in the guise of a systematic theologian.⁸⁷ The spirit of the letter is ultimately one of

⁸⁵ Schreiner, *New Testament*, 596.

⁸⁶ Grant R. Osborne, “Classical Arminian Response,” in *Four Views on the Warning Passages in Hebrews* (ed. Herbert W. Bateman IV; Grand Rapids, Mich: Kregel, 2007), 232.

⁸⁷ Emmrich, “Heb. 6:4-6,” 89 therefore observes that Hebrews does not reflect a “divine perspective” on the believers’ situation, but rather a “human” or “pastoral” one: “the very last thing he [Footnote continued on next page ...]

encouragement, a λόγος παρακλήσεως (13:22) that underscores how the salvation package has “once for all” been inaugurated through a one-time efficacious sacrifice. In a letter containing several problematic discourses about the challenges of falling away, and the rigorous demands and awesome God that they encounter, there is the danger that the purposes outlined by the letter are forgotten. A critical aspect of this plan of salvation is the confidence that it may generate for those who embrace it. The throne of grace may be approached with boldness (4:16) and the sanctuary with confidence (10:19). Christ – the source of salvation (5:9) – has destroyed the devil, the one who holds the power of death (2:15-16). The letter is sent to *encourage*, not *discourage* – how can they really forget so great a salvation (2:3)?

As such, Hebrews’ answer to the question of “can one apostatize?” is neither “yes” nor “no” but rather “*don’t!*”;⁸⁸ the benefits and rewards of so great a salvation (2:3-4) are too manifold to consider laying aside, the once for all atonement so comprehensive that the believers would be foolhardy to go back to a worthless and empty religious structure (10:1-4). To such an interpretation, most readers, one suggests, would assent, as there is general agreement regarding the letter’s frequent and positive exhortations to faithfulness (3:1-6, 6:9-10, 10:32-36, 13:5).⁸⁹ Amidst the pilgrim ethos or dispensation that the letter creates and celebrates, amidst the exhortation to keep journeying onward, the emphasis is on the great salvation goal that awaits, not a heated debate about whether or not a u-turn is theologically possible.

Yet without wishing to twist the letter to answer questions it doesn’t ask, the evidence of the letter does at least hold out the possibility that apostasy *is* a potential reality, even if the recipients themselves are not in that category. At several instances in the letter, the hearers do presently receive/experience something that may be “removed” from them, should they fall away (6:4-6, 10:26). The example of Esau, held out as a legitimate prior manifestation points in

wants to do is sing songs of ‘eternal security’ to these faltering pilgrims as though their decision for or against Christ could have no eternal consequences.”

⁸⁸ I am grateful to the Rev. John Valentine for this pithy assessment.

⁸⁹ Schreiner, *New Testament*, 585: “The call to faith and obedience is the purpose for which the book is written.”

that direction, and for the warnings to have any real “bite”, or any substantial justification for their inclusion, they must have more than merely a hypothetical dimension. The exhortation “don’t apostatize” only works if the possibility of ignoring the warning actually exists.

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