

**THE PARADIGM OF KADESH BARNEA AS A SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM OF
HEBREWS 6:4-6**

INTRODUCTION

The warning found in Hebrews 6:4-6 has provoked difficulty and disagreement among Bible interpreters and exegetes. Gromacki observes that this passage is “Probably the most controversial passage within Hebrews...”¹ As a result of this difficulty, various interpretations have arisen. Most Calvinist and Reformed interpreters insist that the warning passage is too strong to apply to believers and thus unbelievers are in view in these verses. Arminians contend that the passage is speaking of genuine believers who are at risk of losing their salvation. Others argue that these verses are speaking of genuine believers and the severe warning constitutes a mere hypothetical scenario. Still others contend that these verses speak of believers who are in jeopardy of losing blessings. Who is right? How are interpreters to make sense of this difficult passage?

The purpose of this paper is to show that the difficulty typically associated with this passage is perhaps overstated. Confusion only arises when interpreters attempt to understand Hebrews 6:4-6 in isolation of what precedes these verses a few chapters earlier.² In Hebrews 3–4, the writer compares his audience to the generation of Jews that committed the sin of unbelief at Kadesh Barnea (Num 13–14). Such a comparison is warranted on account of the similarities between the two groups. Fear of the Canaanite giants caused the Exodus generation to distrust God and disobey His command to take Canaan. Such distrust and disobedience had irretrievable consequences as that generation permanently forfeited the blessings of inheriting and enjoying the Promised Land. Similarly, fear of persecution from the Jews was tempting the Hebrew Christians into lapsing back into Judaism. Such persecution was causing them to lose confidence in God and thus violate His

¹ Robert Gromacki, *Salvation Is Forever* (Chicago: Moody, 1973), 151.

² J. Dwight Pentecost, class notes of Andy Woods in BE450A The Book of Hebrews, Dallas Theological Seminary, February 10, Spring 2005.

admonition to press on in the faith. The author of Hebrews connects the sin of the Exodus generation with that of his audience for the purpose of showing them that they too would irrevocably forfeit blessings if they imitated the distrust and disobedience of the Exodus generation.

The contention of this paper is that if the interpreter first begins with Hebrews 3–4 and considers how the writer compares his audience to the generation of Jews that committed the sin of unbelief at Kadesh Barnea (Num 13–14), then the warning of Hebrews 6 becomes understandable. In other words, if Kadesh Barnea is seen as the paradigm for the Book of Hebrews, then the warning passages are decipherable.³ Such a perspective logically leads the interpreter away from the Calvinist, Arminian, and hypothetical views and instead causes the interpreter to embrace the loss of blessing view. In order to build this case, the paper will first focus upon the Exodus generation. Specific attention will be given to the spiritual status of that generation. It will be demonstrated that the Exodus generation was redeemed with its population regenerated prior to the events of Kadesh Barnea. Thus, their unbelief at Kadesh Barnea did not affect their justified status but rather introduced an irrevocable forfeiture of enjoying the blessings of Canaan. Second, the paper will examine the audience of the writer of Hebrews. Attention will be called to the audience's regenerated status. Attention will also be called to how this regenerated group was also on the verge of experiencing a permanent loss of blessings. Finally, the paper will interact with alternative interpretations of Hebrews 6:4-6. These include the views of Calvinism and Arminianism, as well as the hypothetical view. It will be demonstrated that these alternative views do not give adequate attention to the Kadesh Barnea paradigm and thus are inadequate in comparison to the loss of blessings view.

³ This thesis is developed in J. Dwight Pentecost, *Faith That Endures: A Practical Commentary on the Book of Hebrews*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1992); idem, class notes of Andy Woods in BE450A The Book of Hebrews, Dallas Theological Seminary, Spring 2005.

THE EXODUS GENERATION

The Exodus Generation's Redeemed Status

Crucial to the thesis advanced in this paper is the demonstration of the Exodus generation's believing spiritual status. Such a determination is critical toward understanding exactly what was lost at Kadesh Barnea. If it can be shown that they were already redeemed and regenerated, then what was lost at Kadesh Barnea was non-soteriological in nature but rather was related to additional rewards or blessings forfeited by that redeemed generation. While there may have been some unbelievers in the group, the biblical data points in the direction of viewing the Exodus generation as redeemed and the crux of the nation as believing and regenerated prior to the events of Numbers 13–14.

Several clues from the Book of Exodus furnish evidence of the nation's redeemed and believing status.⁴ For example, in Exodus 4:22-23, God referred to the nation as His first-born son. Such a title signifies the adopted status of Yahweh's special nation. Also, in Exodus 12:27-28, after trusting in the Passover sacrifice, the nation is depicted as bowing down and worshipping Yahweh. These could hardly constitute the actions of an unregenerate nation. Moreover, immediately after the miracle of the parting of the Red Sea, "the people feared the Lord and they believed in the Lord and in His servant Moses" (Exod 14:31).⁵ Allen observes that this verse is nearly semantically identical to Genesis 15:6, which the New Testament uses as an example of Abraham's justification (Rom 4:3). Both verses contain the hiphil of אָמַן plus the preposition בְּ followed by the name Yahweh. Thus, both verses mean "to believe in Yahweh." The same kind of idea is found in the New Testament construction *pisteuō* plus the preposition *eis* followed by the name Jesus meaning

⁴ Joseph Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings: A Study of the Eternal Security and the Final Significance of Man* (Miami Springs, FL: Schoettle Publishing, 1992), 50, 55.

⁵ All Scripture quotations throughout are taken from the NASB.

“to believe in Jesus.” The only real difference between the two verses is that in Genesis 15:6 the verb is in the singular while in Exodus 14:31 the verb is in the plural. Allen further observes that just as Paul uses the chronology of Genesis 15:6 and Genesis 17 to prove that Abraham was justified before being circumcised (Rom 4), Exodus 14:31 could be similarly used to prove that the nation was justified before receiving the law, which came later in Exodus 19–24.⁶ Regarding Exodus 14:31, the *Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Commentary* notes:

When we read *so the people feared the Lord* and the words that follow, we are meant to understand that the community had come to saving faith and so were a reborn people. They *believed the Lord* (the same wording used of Abraham’s saving faith in Gen. 15:6; read Paul’s comments in Rom. 4)...The people were transformed spiritually even as they were delivered physically.⁷

Furthermore, Exodus 15 records the nation’s worship of Yahweh after He had delivered them. The nation’s worship of Yahweh is reiterated in Exodus 33:10. Such worship would be uncharacteristic of an unregenerate people. The nation also seemed to provide further evidence of its regenerated status when it promised, “All that the Lord has spoken we will do!” (Exod 19:8). The nation’s promise to submit to everything God had revealed was reiterated on two more occasions after the law had been given (Exod 24:3, 7). These promises must be emanating from spiritually born people since the sinful mind is hostile to God and unable to submit to God’s law (Rom 8:7-8). Given the natural man’s hostility to God, why would God give His law (Exod 19–24) and instructions for worship (Exod 25–31; 35–40) to those who are unregenerate and thus incapable of such obedience and worship?

While it is true that the Exodus generation did engage in some heinous sin such as the manufacturing of a golden calf (Exod 32), such carnal behavior does not disqualify them from being

⁶ Ronald B. Allen, class notes of Andy Woods in BE2006 Seminar in Torah and the Former Prophets, Dallas Theological Seminary, February 17, March 3, Spring 2005.

⁷ Earl Radmacher, Ronald B. Allen, and H. Wayne House, eds., *Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), 113.

believers. As new believers, they were immature. It is possible for believers to engage in carnal activity. The Corinthians provide an example of this. Although their positional status was that of a saint (1 Cor 1:2), their practical behavior was anything but saintly. Throughout the letter they are depicted as following men instead of Christ (1 Cor 1:10-17), exhibiting worldly wisdom (1 Cor 1:18-2:16), divisive (1 Cor 3), sexually immoral (1 Cor 5; 7), litigious (1 Cor 6), drunk at the Lord's table (1 Cor 11), abusing their spiritual gifts (1 Cor 12–14), and denying the resurrection (1 Cor 15). Kendall notes how the biblical evidence favors viewing the nation as regenerated in spite of her carnality. He observes:

It would be a serious mistake to dismiss the children of Israel in the wilderness by writing them off as unregenerate from the start. To say that such people were never saved is to fly in the face of the memorable fact that they kept the Passover. They obeyed Moses, who gave an unprecedented, if not strange command to sprinkle blood on either side and over the doors (Ex. 12:7). But they did it...If obeying Moses' command to sprinkle blood on the night of the Passover was not a type of saving faith, I do not know what is. These people were saved. We shall see them in heaven, even if it turns out they were "saved so as by fire" (1 Cor. 3:15).⁸

In addition to these clues found in the Book of Exodus, the New Testament also makes clear that the Exodus generation was a believing, redeemed generation. For example, Paul analogizes the Exodus generation to members of the New Testament church (2 Cor 10:4-6). In fact, in this passage, Paul even says that the water from the rock that the Exodus generation drank from typified spiritual drink offered by the spiritual rock Christ.⁹ Moreover, the author of Hebrews includes the Exodus generation in the "Hall of Faith" (Heb 11:29-30). He uses the same phrase "by faith" to describe this generation that he uses to describe the other members of the "Hall of Faith." These other inductees include Enoch, Abraham, Moses, and numerous others. All of these giants were certainly justified. There is no doubt that Enoch was justified since he was translated into heaven (Gen 5:24).

⁸ R.T. Kendall, *Once Saved Always Saved* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), 153-54.

⁹ Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings: A Study of the Eternal Security and the Final Significance of Man*, 45, 54, 55.

Abraham was justified (Gen 15:6). Moses was justified (Matt 17:3). The point is that if the phrase “by faith” refers to other members of the “Hall of Faith” that we know were regenerated, then consistency seems to dictate that we view the Exodus generation as regenerated as well since the same phrase “by faith” is also used to describe them.¹⁰

Despite the evidence of the believing status of the Exodus generation, many still contend that this generation was not regenerated on account of the fact that they failed to enter the Promised Land. Christian hymns sometimes analogize the passing from this life into heaven with the crossing of the Jordan into Canaan. Numerous influential commentaries attempt to draw a parallel between the entrance into Canaan in the Old Testament with the New Testament believer’s entrance into heaven.¹¹ For example, Pink connects the journey from Egypt to Canaan with the Christian’s journey into heaven.¹² Hoekema observes, “Canaan, therefore, was not an end in itself; it pointed forward to the new earth...of which Canaan was only a type.”¹³ According to Fairbairn, “The occupation of the earthly Canaan by the natural seed of Abraham, in its grand and ultimate design, was a type of the occupation by the redeemed church of her destined inheritance of glory.”¹⁴

Although such an equation might at first sound good at a devotional level, it represents theological error. If Canaan represents heaven, then Moses is not a citizen in heaven since He died before entering Canaan (Deut 3:27; 4:21-22; 31:2; 32:52; 34:5-8). To argue that Moses never made it into heaven is quite unsatisfactory given the fact that he appeared with Christ on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matt 17:3), is enumerated in the “Hall of Faith” (Heb 11:23-28), and may be one of the two witnesses depicted in the Book of Revelation (Rev 11:6).¹⁵ Furthermore, if Canaan

¹⁰ Ibid., 54.

¹¹ Ibid., 55-56.

¹² Arthur Pink, *An Exposition of the Book of Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1968), 196.

¹³ Anthony Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 279.

¹⁴ Patrick Fairbairn, *Typology of Scripture* (1845-47; reprint, New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1900), 2:4.

¹⁵ Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings: A Study of the Eternal Security and the Final Significance of Man*, 50. For an alternative view arguing that the figure in Revelation 11:6 is Moses like rather than Moses himself see J.

represents heaven, then one is forced to conclude that all but two of the 2.5 million members of the Exodus generation are in hell. Because Joshua and Caleb were the only two members from that generation to enter Canaan, they are that generation's only representatives in heaven.¹⁶ According to Farrar, "If...the rest meant *heaven*, it would be against all Scripture analogy to assume that *all* the Israelites who died in the wilderness were excluded from future happiness. And there are many other difficulties which will at once suggest themselves."¹⁷

Various Old Testament passages make it clear that Joshua and Caleb entered the land not because they were justified soteriologically but rather because they followed the Lord wholeheartedly.¹⁸ In other words, because of their faith and obedience in God after they were justified, they were the only two of that redeemed generation to enter the land. Numbers 14:24 says, "But My servant Caleb, *because he has a different spirit and has followed me fully*, I will bring into the land which he entered, and his descendants shall take possession of it." According to Numbers 32:11-12, "None of the men who came up from Egypt, from twenty years old and upward, shall see the land which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob; *for they did not follow me fully*, except Caleb...and Joshua...*for they have followed me fully*." In Joshua 14:8-9, Joshua says, "...*I followed the Lord my God fully*. So Moses swore to me on that day, saying, 'Surely the land on which your foot has trodden shall be an inheritance to you... *because you have followed the Lord my God fully*.'"¹⁹ A parallel can be found in the life of Abraham.²⁰ Although he was justified already (Gen

Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology* (Findley, OH: Dunham Publishing Company, 1958), 306-7.

¹⁶ Zane Hodges, "Hebrews," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton: Victor, 1983), 787.

¹⁷ F. W. Farrar, "The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews," in *Cambridge Greek Testament for Schools and Colleges* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 67.

¹⁸ Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings: A Study of the Eternal Security and the Final Significance of Man*, 49.

¹⁹ Emphasis is mine in the preceding passages.

²⁰ Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings: A Study of the Eternal Security and the Final Significance of Man*, 53-54, 58.

15:6), his entrance into the blessings of the Abrahamic covenant was only possible through his personal obedience. This becomes clear through the phrase, "...because you have obeyed My voice" found in Genesis 22:18. All of this information establishes that there is no necessary nexus between the failure to enter Canaan and being an unbeliever. The sin of the Exodus generation at Kadesh Barnea was not the sin of being an *unbeliever*. Rather, their sin was in being *unbelieving* toward God's command to take Canaan.

The Exodus Generation's Irrevocable Decision

Since the Exodus generation was already regenerated, believing, and redeemed prior to the events of Kadesh Barnea, what the nation forfeited in Numbers 13–14 was unrelated to the opportunity to be saved but rather involved the blessings of inheriting the land. These blessings were irretrievably lost for that generation. Such irrevocability can be seen in Numbers 14:20–38 when God announces judgment upon that generation for their unbelief and disobedience. In this section, God repeatedly reaffirms that the Exodus generation would never see the Promised Land. Such irrevocability can also be seen in the nation's decision to enter the land anyway the next day. They were warned not to and were subsequently defeated (Num 14:40–45). Pentecost explains, "Thus God made it impossible for those who had rebelled—even though they repented—to proceed into the land to enjoy its blessings. Their loss of privilege was, in other words, irreversible."²¹

An example of such an irreversible forfeiture of blessings can also be found in the life of Esau. After bartering away his birthright in exchange for some vegetable stew (Gen 25:29–34), he later repented with tears (Gen 27:38). "However, neither Esau's plea nor his tears could bring Isaac's blessings to him. By his earlier willful act, the privileges and blessings that might have

²¹ Pentecost, *Faith That Endures: A Practical Commentary on the Book of Hebrews*, 106.

belonged to Esau were forever lost.”²² In sum, since the Exodus generation is the paradigm for understanding Hebrews, there are two things that must be understood about that generation before the warning passages of Hebrews can be grasped. First, the Exodus generation was already believing, redeemed, and regenerated prior to the events at Kadesh Barnea. Thus, what that generation forfeited in Numbers 13–14 involved blessings received after salvation. Second, the forfeiture of the blessing of enjoying the land was an irreversible decision. Now that this foundation has been laid we are in a position to better understand the warning passage of Hebrews 6.

HEBREWS 6:4-6

If the Exodus generation and the incident of Kadesh Barnea is the paradigm for the Book of Hebrews, then the characteristics that epitomized the Exodus generation should also be the same attributes that characterize those addressed in Hebrews 6. In the previous section, it was established that the Exodus generation was redeemed and that their disobedience in Numbers 13–14 introduced an irreversible forfeiture of blessings. In this portion of the paper, it will be similarly shown that those addressed in Hebrews 6 were also regenerated and on the verge of irreversibly forfeiting blessings.

The Believing Status of Those Addressed

A proper understanding of the warning is intertwined with a proper understanding of the spiritual status of the audience. If it can be shown that the addressees of Hebrews were already believers, then what the passage is warning can be forfeited is not related to justification but rather to additional blessings believers receive after they are saved. This view allows for a theology that says while all those blessed are believers, not all believers are blessed. Thus, the purpose of this section is to demonstrate that those addressed in Hebrews 6:4-6, like the Exodus generation, were

²² Ibid.

already believers. This point becomes clear by carefully examining the various contexts surrounding the verses in question. To this end, this section will explore the extended context, the preceding context, the immediate context, and the subsequent context of Hebrews 6:4-6.

Extended Context

The extended context refers to the context of the book as a whole. It is clear from the book as a whole that the addressees were genuine believers.²³ The author routinely uses “us” when describing his audience thus equating his own spiritual status with that of his audience (Heb 1:2). He also refers to his audience as those who had their sins purged (1:3) and those who were on the verge of neglecting rather than rejecting their salvation (2:1-3). The notion of neglecting implies a prior possession. For example, the fact that Timothy was told not to neglect his ministry gift automatically implies that he presently possesses such a gift (1 Tim 4:14).²⁴ He also calls his audience holy brethren who are partakers of the heavenly calling (3:1). The term “brethren” is used ten times in Hebrews. Four of these uses do not describe the original audience. The word simply refers to either humanity in general (2:17) or is used in the Old Testament sense of Jewish brethren (2:12; 7:5; 8:11). However, the remaining six uses do describe the original audience. These uses either inarguably refer to believers or must refer to believers since the exhortations they are associated with would be inapplicable to unbelievers (2:11; 3:1, 12; 10:19; 13:22, 23).²⁵

In chapter four the writer expresses concern that his audience will not attain rest rather than not attain salvation (4:1). He also refers to them as fellow believers together with him (4:3). He assumes that Christ their high priest is interceding for them (4:14, cf. 7:26-8:1; 10:21), and that they

²³ Most of the items enumerated on the following list were originally compiled in *Ibid.*, 29-31.

²⁴ Mike Duffy, “The Hermeneutical Problem of the Mixed Audience in the Book of Hebrews” (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1988), 38.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 32-34.

already have access to the throne of grace to obtain help in time of need (4:16). He assumes their need is patient endurance rather than salvation (10:36-39). According to 10:22-25, they have been cleansed, sprinkled from an evil conscience, made a public confession, and identified with other believers. He presupposes that they could serve the living God (9:14), have been sanctified (10:10), have received the ministry of the Holy Spirit (10:15), and that Jesus is the author and finisher of their faith (12:2). He also refers to them as sons (12:7) and as those who are inheriting a kingdom (12:28).

The believing status of the audience is also evidenced through the numerous exhortations given in the book. Pentecost identifies at least 38 exhortations that the writer gives to his readers.²⁶ Yet there is not to be found in the book a single exhortation to trust Christ for salvation. One would expect this exhortation to show up at least once if the writer was addressing unbelievers.²⁷ By way of comparison, one of the reasons we know that the Gospel of John has an evangelistic purpose is because the purpose statement of the book is an exhortation to saving faith (John 20:31). Yet no similar exhortation is found in Hebrews.

Preceding Context

The preceding context refers to the verses occurring immediately before the verses in question. In this case, the preceding context encompasses 5:11-6:3. It will now be shown that this section could only be describing believers. Looking first at 5:11-14, six facts make it clear that this section refers to believers. First, they are encouraged to grow.²⁸ You do not encourage an

²⁶ Pentecost, *Faith That Endures: A Practical Commentary on the Book of Hebrews*, 33-34.

²⁷ Duffy, "The Hermeneutical Problem of the Mixed Audience in the Book of Hebrews," 40.

²⁸ F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 108; B.F. Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 2d ed. (London: Macmillan, 1892; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 135.

unbeliever to grow. Rather, you encourage such a person to get saved.²⁹ Second, he calls them “babes” (5:13). Such terminology refers to new spiritually born people rather than to unbelievers because unbelievers must be born again (John 3).³⁰ “Babes” is frequently used in the New Testament to contrast immature believers with mature believers (Gal 4:3; 1 Cor 2:6; 3:1; 14:20; Eph 4:13-14).³¹ Third, he states that some of them should be teachers by now (5:12). The writer certainly would not be admonishing unbelievers to teach believers.³²

Fourth, he says that they need milk and not solid food (5:12). Elsewhere Peter describes newly born believers as those who hunger after the milk of the word (1 Peter 2:2). The need of the unsaved is not milk but life.³³ Fifth, he describes his audience as those who are slow to learn (5:11). It is this reason that has caused him to interrupt his train of thought and interject the warning of 5:11-6:20. He wants to convey to them the complex spiritual truth of the Melchizedekian order but he is unable to do so due to their spiritual infancy. This cannot be describing unbelievers who are not marked by a slowness of learning but rather by an inability to learn spiritual truth (1 Cor 2:14; 2 Cor 4:4; Eph 2:1-3; Rom 3:11). Given their limitations, how could an unbeliever be expected to digest the complex spiritual truth of the Melchizedekian priesthood?³⁴ Sixth, he desires for his audience to train themselves by God’s word so that they can distinguish between good and evil (5:14). Yet such discernment would be impossible for an unbeliever due to their spiritual blindness and deadness.

In sum, these verses are clearly speaking of believers. MacArthur, a Calvinist interpreter, attempts to get around the clear import of these verses by making them apply to unbelievers. He

²⁹ Duffy, “The Hermeneutical Problem of the Mixed Audience in the Book of Hebrews,” 40.

³⁰ J.B. Rowell, “Exposition of Hebrews Six,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 94 (July-September 1937): 325.

³¹ Farrar, “The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews,” 78.

³² Duffy, “The Hermeneutical Problem of the Mixed Audience in the Book of Hebrews,” 44.

³³ Rowell, “Exposition of Hebrews Six,” 325.

³⁴ Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings: A Study of the Eternal Security and the Final Significance of Man,*

argues that the maturity described here is instantaneous as in conversion.³⁵ However, such an explanation strains credulity. Verse 14 describes maturity as a process when it says, “because of practice have their senses trained.” Also, why would the writer ever want unbelievers to teach believers?³⁶

It is equally clear that 6:1-3 depicts believers as well. First, the “therefore” at the beginning of 6:1 links this unit back to 5:11-14. Because these two sections are linked, to the extent that one regards 5:11-14 as believers, consistency dictates that 6:1-3 must be describing believers as well.³⁷ To contend that 5:11-14 refers to believers and 6:1-3 refers to unbelievers is hermeneutically tantamount to “switching horses in midstream.” Second, in 6:1, the audience is encouraged to press on to maturity (*teleiōtēs*). If the writer were dealing with unbelievers, he would be calling them to believe rather than to mature. Third, the author uses “us” and “we” when communicating with his audience (6:1, 3). By doing so, he is equating his own spiritual status with that of his audience. Thus, if the author is saved then his audience must be saved as well. Fourth, the author presupposes their initial salvation experience through his use of the term “faith toward God.” This presupposes that they already had saving faith. Fifth, by using the phrase “leaving the elementary teachings about the Christ” (6:1) he assumes that they already had an exposure to basic Christian doctrine and had already believed such doctrine. The unsaved could not leave behind such teachings since they have not even begun in them.³⁸

Many contend that the six foundations enumerated in 6:1-2, which the writer uses to describe the elementary teachings that his audience had already been exposed to, relate to Old Testament Judaism. However, not all scholars concur with this conclusion. For example, Sauer

³⁵ John MacArthur, *Hebrews*, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 1983), 128-34.

³⁶ Duffy, “The Hermeneutical Problem of the Mixed Audience in the Book of Hebrews,” 44.

³⁷ Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings: A Study of the Eternal Security and the Final Significance of Man*, 433.

³⁸ Rowell, “Exposition of Hebrews Six,” 325.

contends that these six foundations describe the Christian faith rather than the religion of Judaism.³⁹ In sum, the context that precedes the verses in question is found in 5:11-6:3. As has been shown, the details of these verses argue convincingly that believers are in view.

Immediate Context

Just as the Exodus generation prior to the events of Kadesh Barnea was a redeemed, believing nation, the same can be said for those addressed in Hebrews 6:4-6. This becomes clear by studying how the audience is described in the book of Hebrews as a whole. An examination of the immediately preceding verses (Heb 5:11-6:3) also makes this point clear. This portion of the paper will now show that this same pattern also holds true upon careful examination of Hebrews 6:4-6.

Unfortunately, the NIV omits the introductory “for” at the beginning of verse 4. The existence of this word is crucial as it connects these verses back to the unit preceding them in 5:11-6:3. Thus, if one is convinced that believers are in view in 5:11-6:3, then believers must also be in view in 6:4-6.⁴⁰ Hebrews 6:4-5 use five descriptive phrases to describe “those” who are at risk of falling away. When these five phrases are examined in their totality, it becomes overwhelmingly obvious that believers are being described.

The first descriptive phrase is “who have once been enlightened” (6:4). One of the best ways to determine the meaning of a word is to see how the author uses the same word elsewhere in the same book. This principle proves itself useful for identifying the meaning of all four descriptive phrases in Hebrews 6:4-6. The word for enlightened (*photisthentas*) is also used in Hebrews 10:32,

³⁹ R.C. Sauer, “A Critical and Exegetical Examination of Hebrews 5:11-6:8” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Manchester, 1981), 176ff; cited in Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings: A Study of the Eternal Security and the Final Significance of Man*, 434, n. 3.

⁴⁰ Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings: A Study of the Eternal Security and the Final Significance of Man*, 435.

“where the reference to true Christian experience can hardly be doubted.”⁴¹ Those enlightened in Hebrews 10:32 proved their justification through their confidence (10:35), works, and hope of heaven (10:32-34). Those enlightened (10:32) are also called sanctified (10:29) and are said to possess imputed righteousness (10:38). Interestingly, other New Testament writers apply the word “enlightenment” to believers (Eph 1:18).⁴² They also use the notion of light to describe the salvation experience (2 Cor 4:3-6; 1 Peter 2:9).⁴³ Hebrews 6:4 says that they had been “once for all” (*hapax*) “enlightened.” The notion of “once for all” (*hapax*) is used elsewhere by the author to communicate finality. For example, it is used to describe the once for all entry by the high priest on the Day of Atonement (Heb 9:7), Christ’s once for all appearance at the end of the age to do away with sin (Heb 9:26), the finality of death to all men (Heb 9:27), and Christ once for all atoning for sin (Heb 9:28). Jude also uses the term to describe doctrine that was once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 3).⁴⁴ In sum, based upon the other uses of “once for all” and “enlightened” found throughout Hebrews and the rest of the New Testament, these words in Hebrews 6:4 are best understood as the finality of spiritual enlightenment accompanying regeneration.

The second descriptive phrase is “have tasted of the heavenly gift” (6:4). The word “taste” (*geuomai*) is used in 1 Peter 2:3 to describe the complete salvation experience. It is also used by the writer elsewhere to indicate Christ’s total experience of death for the benefit of the human race (Heb 2:9). Thus, internal consistency indicates that its meaning in Hebrews 6:4 also refers to a full experience rather than a mere sampling. The word “gift” (*dōrea*) in all of its other ten uses in the New Testament either refers to a regenerated person receiving a gift from God, or the gift itself is

⁴¹ Hodges, “Hebrews,” 794.

⁴² Rowell, “Exposition of Hebrews Six,” 325.

⁴³ Hodges, “Hebrews,” 794.

⁴⁴ Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings: A Study of the Eternal Security and the Final Significance of Man*, 437.

regeneration (John 4:10; Acts 2:38; 8:20; 10:45; 11:17; Rom 5:15, 17; 2 Cor 9:15, Eph 3:7; 4:7).⁴⁵

There is no logical reason for concluding that *dōrea* in Hebrews 6:4 is the single exception. In sum, the phrase “tasted of the heavenly gift” in 6:4 refers to the complete experience of regeneration.

The third descriptive phrase is “have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit.” The Greek word for “partakers” is “*metochoi*.” When one studies how this word is used elsewhere in the Book of Hebrews, two interesting facts emerge. First, it is often used to describe partnership. For example, it is used of companions of the messianic king in Hebrews 1:9. It is also used of partners in a heavenly calling (3:1, 14) and partners in discipline (12:8). Thus, Hebrews 6:4 must also be speaking of a full partnership of the Spirit rather than just an initial taste of Him.⁴⁶ Second, in all of its uses, regenerate people are referred to (Heb 1:9; 3:1, 14; 5:13; 6:4; 7:13; 12:8).⁴⁷ Hebrews 1:9 speaks of regenerated partners of the king. Hebrews 3:1 speaks of the regenerated “holy brothers” as partners of the heavenly calling. When Hebrews 12:8 mentions those who partake in discipline, Hebrews 12:6 reminds us that only God’s children undergo discipline. There is no compelling reason why Hebrews 6:4 should be the one exception to this rule. Therefore, *metochoi* in Hebrew 6:4 must also be speaking of regenerated people. It is also worth noting that the other references to the Holy Spirit in relation to people in Hebrews always refers to the Spirit’s activity in relation to the regenerated. In Hebrews 2:4, the Spirit imparts gifts to the regenerated. In Hebrews 10:29, He imparts grace to those already saved (Heb 10:32-34).⁴⁸ In sum, given how the writer consistently employs these same terms elsewhere in his book, the phrase “have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit” (Heb 6:4) speaks of the Spirit’s work in regeneration.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 438; Hal Harless, “Fallen Away or Fallen Down? The Meaning of Hebrews 6:1-9,” *Chafer Theological Journal* 9 (Spring 2003): 8.

⁴⁶ Hodges, “Hebrews,” 794.

⁴⁷ Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings: A Study of the Eternal Security and the Final Significance of Man*, 440.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 441.

The fourth descriptive phrase is “have tasted the good word of God” (6:5). This phrase also refers to a believer since Peter uses a nearly identical phrase to describe newly born Christians. Peter first explains how it is natural for newly born believers to crave pure spiritual milk, which is the Word of God (1 Peter 2:2). He then uses Psalm 34:8 to say, “if you have tasted the kindness of the Lord” (1 Peter 2:3). Thus, because Peter equates tasting God’s Word with the activity of believers, it is likely that the author of Hebrews is doing the same thing. Once again, based on how the writer uses the verb “taste” elsewhere in the book (Heb 2:9), it is unlikely that mere sampling is in view.

The fifth descriptive phrase is “have tasted...the powers of the age to come” (Heb 6:5). What is described here is far more than just the mere observation of miracles (Heb 2:4). The author’s use of “taste” elsewhere (Heb 2:9) argues against such a limited interpretation and instead argues for a full experience. Those depicted in Hebrews 6:5 had actually been given a first-fruits experience of what the millennial kingdom would one day be like when it is manifested upon the earth. According to Govett:

The supernatural endowments then bestowed on faith were first-fruits of the outpourings of the Holy Ghost, which, in the millennial day, shall be bestowed on all flesh. They were God’s witnesses, that those who possessed these powers were on their way to the day of glory and reward, and belonged to it. Their participating of the Spirit in both His external and His internal operations, marked them out as partners “of the Christ,” as the king of the coming kingdom (Heb 3:14).⁴⁹

Such a fore view of the kingdom would only be available to citizens of the future kingdom. Thus, believers must be in view in Hebrews 6:5.

When these five descriptive phrases are studied in harmony with one another, the case becomes overwhelming that believers are being addressed. Thus, Marshall notes that the vast

⁴⁹ Robert Govett, *Govett on Hebrews* (Miami Springs: Conley & Schoettle, 1981), 157.

majority of scholars view the addressees in Hebrews 6:4-5 as believers...⁵⁰ Nicole admits that, “The most immediate impulse would be to interpret this cluster of statements as describing regenerate persons.”⁵¹ Barnes similarly observes:

...the language here is such as appropriately describes Christians, and as indeed can be applicable to no other. It may be remarked respecting the various expressions here (ver. 4, 5,) (1) that they are such as properly denote a renewed state. They obviously describe the position of a Christian; and though it may not be certain of any of them, if taken by itself, would prove that the person to whom it was applied was truly converted, yet, taken together, it is clear that they are designed to describe such a state. If they are not, it would be difficult to find any language which would be properly descriptive of the character of a sincere Christian. I regard the description here, therefore, as that which is clearly designed to denote the state of those who were born again, and were the true children of God...⁵²

Despite all of this evidence, many still contend that unbelievers are in view in this Hebrews 6:4-6. They buttress their case by pointing to three items in verse 6 that allegedly could apply only to unbelievers. Yet upon closer inspection, each of these items could be descriptive of believers rather than unbelievers. The first item is “repentance” (*metanoia*). It is argued that only unbelievers are called to repent. However, this argument quickly disappears upon understanding that the admonition to repent in Scripture is often aimed at believers (Luke 17:3; 2 Cor 7:10; 12:21; 2 Tim 2:25; Rev 2:5, 16).⁵³ Thus, the mere existence of *metanoia* in Hebrews 6:6 does not automatically disqualify the addressees from being believers.

The second item is “since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God, and put Him to open shame.” Here, it is argued that a true believer is incapable of committing such an atrocious act. Yet it is quite possible for a believer to be involved in such an activity just as it was possible for the redeemed Exodus generation to manufacture a golden calf. The audience in the Book of Hebrews

⁵⁰ I. Howard Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God*, 3d ed. (Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster, 1995), 142.

⁵¹ R. Nicole, “Some Comments on Hebrews 6:4-6 and the Doctrine of the Perseverance of God with the Saints,” in *Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation*, ed. G.G. Hawthorne (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 356.

⁵² Albert Barnes, *Notes, Explanatory and Practical, on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1854), 134.

⁵³ Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings: A Study of the Eternal Security and the Final Significance of Man*, 446.

was under duress to renounce their Christian baptism and confession by lapsing back into Judaism in order to escape persecution from the Jews. It was the unbelieving Jewish nation that crucified Christ. There are numerous references to this in the various sermons given in Acts (Acts 2:22-23; 7:52). Had the Hebrews lapsed back into Judaism they would be publicly identifying with the nation that killed Christ. In essence, they would be saying, “you were right and we were wrong.” In this sense they would be re-crucifying their messiah.⁵⁴

The third item is “and then have fallen.” Here, it is argued that an unbeliever must be in view since it is impossible for a believer to fall away. In response, it might be noted that this phrase cannot be describing an unbeliever because an unbeliever cannot fall away. “He is already as far from God as he can be (Rom 3:23).”⁵⁵ Moreover, the New Testament furnishes examples of believers moving away from truth (2 Tim 2:17-18).⁵⁶ Also, the notion of “fallen away” must be kept within its proper context of pressing on toward maturity (Heb 5:11-6:3). Thus, the writer is warning his readers of “falling away” from the goal of maturing in Christ.⁵⁷

Another way to bolster the position that the warning passage of Hebrews 6 is addressed to believers is to compare it to the other warning passages in Hebrews. All of these warning passages seem to be parallel in meaning.⁵⁸ Thus, if it can be established that believers are in view in the other warning passages, then it is likely that believers are in view in the Hebrews 6 passage as well. The details of these other warning passages argue persuasively that they are addressed to believers.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Pentecost, *Faith That Endures: A Practical Commentary on the Book of Hebrews*, 107; Hodges, “Hebrews,” 795; Thomas Oberholtzer, “An Analysis and Exposition of the Eschatology of the Warning Passages in the Book of Hebrews” (Ph.D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1984), 120; Leon Morris, *Hebrews*, The Expositor's Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 12:55.

⁵⁵ Duffy, “The Hermeneutical Problem of the Mixed Audience in the Book of Hebrews,” 38.

⁵⁶ Thomas L. Constable, “Notes on Hebrews,” online: www.soniclight.com, accessed 27 February 2005, 57.

⁵⁷ Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings: A Study of the Eternal Security and the Final Significance of Man*, 442-43.

⁵⁸ Stanley Toussaint, “The Epistle to the Hebrews” (unpublished class notes in 307B Hebrews, General Epistles, and Revelation, Dallas Theological Seminary, Spring 2000), 20.

⁵⁹ Duffy, “The Hermeneutical Problem of the Mixed Audience in the Book of Hebrews,” 24-28, 30-31.

Regarding Hebrews 2:1-4, the introductory “for” indicates that the author is basing his warning upon the data presented in chapter 1. Thus, this warning should be understood in the following manner: since the readers are heirs of salvation (Heb 1:14), they should heed what they have heard all the more carefully in order to avoid drifting. Also, the repetition of “we” and “us” throughout this passage indicates that the author is equating his spiritual status with that of his audience. The fact that the warning of Hebrews 3:1-4:16 is also addressed to believers is evident from the repetition of the first person pronouns “we,” “us,” and “our” sprinkled throughout the passage (3:1, 6; 4:2) as well as the references to the audience as “holy brethren” and “partakers of the heavenly calling” (3:1).

The warning of Hebrews 10:19-39 is also addressed to believers. The author refers to his audience as “brethren” (10:19). He exhorts them to draw near on the basis of the finished work of Christ their high priest (10:22), hold fast to their confession (10:23), stir up one another in love (10:24), and not to forsake the assembling of themselves together (10:25). He also tells them that they have enduring possessions in heaven (10:34). The works depicted in 10:32-34 could only be attributable to believers. The use of the words “sanctified” (10:29), “righteous” (10:38), and “confidence” (10:35) also argues convincingly that believers are in view. The repetition of “we” is found throughout this chapter as well (10:39). The warning of Hebrews 12:1-29 also seems addressed to believers as the introductory “therefore” connects it with Hebrews 11. All of those mentioned in Hebrews 11 were regenerated. Because faith was seen as the proper foundation for perseverance in Hebrews 11, the same theme must also be in view in Hebrews 12 given the interconnectedness between these chapters. In sum, because of the fact that the other warning passages describe believers and because of the author’s intentional paralleling of all the warning passages, it is likely that believers are also in view in Hebrews 6.

Subsequent Context

The subsequent context refers to Hebrews 6:7-12. The introductory “for” at the beginning of verse 7 connects this unit to what precedes it. Thus, if it can be demonstrated that verses 7-12 refer to believers, then the case becomes even more overwhelming that verses 4-6 also refer to believers. These verses depict rain falling on land yielding a crop of vegetation as well as thorns and thistles. This imagery represents a believer receiving blessings from God and bringing forth both a positive and negative crop. Four reasons suggest a believer is in view in this scene.

First, the author of Hebrews uses the verb “drink” (pinō) to describe the rain being absorbed into the land (Heb 6:7). The verb is often used elsewhere to describe the reception of soteriological blessings (John 4:13; 6:54; 7:37-38).⁶⁰ Second, the blessing (vegetation) and cursing (thorns and thistles) produced by the land would naturally bring to memory the blessing and cursing aspect of the Mosaic Covenant found in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28.⁶¹ Such imagery argues for a believer being in view here because the Mosaic Covenant was given to a nation already redeemed and regenerated (Exod 14:30-31). Third, the writer addresses his audience as “beloved” (Heb 6:9). This term has sixty uses in the New Testament. In nine instances it is used by the Father in reference to Christ. In all of its other uses it refers to believers.⁶² Fourth, the works of those described in verses 9-12 could only refer to believers. In verse 12, the author admonishes his audience to imitate those who inherit the promises. This must be a reference to those already saved because “Nowhere in the Word of God is anyone asked to imitate any man in order to be saved.”⁶³ The phrase “things that accompany salvation” (Heb 6:9) pertains to blessings beyond initial

⁶⁰ Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings: A Study of the Eternal Security and the Final Significance of Man*, 450.

⁶¹ Oberholtzer, “An Analysis and Exposition of the Eschatology of the Warning Passages in the Book of Hebrews,” 125.

⁶² Duffy, “The Hermeneutical Problem of the Mixed Audience in the Book of Hebrews,” 36.

⁶³ Rowell, “Exposition of Hebrews Six,” 338.

salvation.⁶⁴ The introductory “but” and “for” (Heb 6:9, 10) makes it impossible to divorce verses 9-12 from what precedes them.⁶⁵

However, many reject this interpretation and instead contend that a true believer could not create a crop of thorns and thistles. Some attempt to solve the problem by envisioning two lands in verse 7-8. According to this scenario, one land produces a crop representing believers and the other ground produces thorns and thistles representing unbelievers. This view finds support from the NIV which translates verses 7-8 as follows: “Land that drinks in the rain often falling on it and that produces a crop useful to those for whom it is farmed receives the blessings of God. But the land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burned.” However, “In the Greek text the word *ground* (gē) occurs only once (namely, in v 7...not twice as the NIV implies). So the point is that the same ground can have two possible outcomes, and by analogy there can be two possible outcomes for any individual’s life.”⁶⁶ The notion that a believer cannot produce a positive crop of vegetation and a negative crop of thorns and thistles has far more to do with theological presuppositions than the exegetical evidence. The author of Hebrews indicates his audience had in fact produced both a positive (6:9-12) and a negative crop (5:11-14). Well known believers such as Abraham, Moses, David, Solomon, and Peter produced both a positive and negative spiritual crop during their lives.⁶⁷

Others reject the idea that a believer is in view in Hebrews 6:8 on account of the words “worthless,” “cursed,” and “burned.” Toussaint notes:

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

⁶⁴ Ibid., 329.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 332-33.

⁶⁶ J. Paul Tanner, “But If It Yields Thorns and Thistles: An Exposition of Hebrews 5:11-6:12,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 14 (Spring 2001): 35.

⁶⁷ Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings: A Study of the Eternal Security and the Final Significance of Man*, 450-51.

between the future of the lost and saved. As we noted before, σωτηρια in Hebrews when used of Christians anticipates eschatological salvation. This is the destiny of the redeemed; v. 8 looks at the future of the damned.⁶⁸

However, the existence of these terms in the passage is not sufficient to disqualify it as pertaining to believers. Application of the word “worthless” (*adokimos*) could hardly disqualify such a person as being a believer since Paul applied the same word to himself (1 Cor 9:27). The word simply means disapproved rather than totally rejected.⁶⁹ The antonym of the word is *dokimos*, which emphasizes a favorable evaluation (1 Cor 11:19; 2 Cor 10:18; 2 Tim 2:15; Jas 1:12).⁷⁰

Many believe that the word “curse” must be describing an unbeliever because such imagery is reminiscent of the curse in Genesis 3. However, the imagery is described differently upon comparing Hebrews 6:8 with Genesis 3. The curse in Genesis 3 produced the thorns and thistles. In Hebrews 6 the thorns and the thistles produced by the land resulted in the curse being near.⁷¹ Thus, the curse as used here must be understood differently.⁷² Perhaps a better understanding of curse is divine discipline experienced by believers (Heb 12:5-11).

Others contend that the word “burned” conveys the idea of hell. Yet such an idea fails to grasp the agricultural analogy employed in these verses and the purpose for burning a field in the ancient world. According to Hodges:

Naturally the reference to ‘burned’ has caused many to think of hell, but there is nothing in the text to suggest this...to think of hell here is to betray inattention to the imagery employed by the author. The burning of a field to destroy the rank growth it had produced was a practice known in ancient times. Its aim was not the destruction of the field itself (which, of course, the fire could not effect), but the destruction of the unwanted produce of the field. Thereafter the field might be serviceable for cultivation.⁷³

⁶⁸ Stanley Toussaint, “The Eschatology of the Warning Passages in the Book of Hebrews,” *Grace Theological Journal* 3, no. 1 (Spring 1982): 75.

⁶⁹ Constable, “Notes on Hebrews,” 59.

⁷⁰ Tanner, “But If It Yields Thorns and Thistles: An Exposition of Hebrews 5:11-6:12,” 38.

⁷¹ Jean Héring, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, trans. A.W. Heathcote and P.J. Allcock (London: Epworth Press, 1970), 48, n. 15.

⁷² Oberholtzer, “An Analysis and Exposition of the Eschatology of the Warning Passages in the Book of Hebrews,” 124.

⁷³ Hodges, “Hebrews,” 795-96.

Elder Pliny (AD 112) furnishes extra-biblical evidence of this practice when he says, "...some people also set fire to the stubble in the field...their chief reason, however, for this plan is to burn up the seed of weeds."⁷⁴ Thus, "burning" as used here is not for the purpose of destruction but rather for the purpose of pruning for greater future usefulness. Therefore the mere existence of "burning" in the passage need not automatically convey that unbelievers are in view. Elsewhere, Paul uses the imagery of burning to describe loss of rewards at the Bema Seat Judgment (1 Cor 3:10-15). In fact, "God's anger against His failing people in the Old Testament is often likened to the burning of fire (cf., e.g., Isa. 9:18-19; 10:17)."⁷⁵ In sum, the context subsequent to Hebrews 6:4-6 argues convincingly that believers are being referred to.

Conclusion

Like the regenerated and redeemed status of the nation prior to the events of Kadesh Barnea, those addressed in Hebrews 6:4-6 were believers. The extended context, preceding context, and subsequent context all pertain to believers. Given this surrounding context, Dillow asks, "Is it exegetically ethical to switch addressees in the middle of the warning context?"⁷⁶ Such a hermeneutical move is even more implausible upon observing that the clauses of Hebrews 6:4-6 themselves argue convincingly that a believing audience is being referred to.

Irreversible Forfeiture of Blessings

The previous section showed that the Exodus generation and the addressees of Hebrews share the common bond of a regenerated spiritual status. However, the similarities do not end there. This section will show a second similarity. Just as the Exodus generation at Kadesh Barnea

⁷⁴ Elder Pliny, *Natural History*, 18:72:300.

⁷⁵ Hodges, "Hebrews," 795.

⁷⁶ Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings: A Study of the Eternal Security and the Final Significance of Man*, 448-49.

permanently lost out on the blessings of Canaan as a result of their unbelief and disobedience, the addressees of Hebrews were on the verge of committing the same sin and consequently suffering the same type of irrevocable consequences.

If the Exodus generation missed out on the blessings of Canaan, what blessings were the addressees of Hebrews on the verge of missing out on? These blessings have nothing to do with salvation since the addressees were already saved. Rather, these blessings must relate to maturity since this is the overriding concern of the author in this section (Heb 5:11-6:3). If his audience lapsed back into Judaism, they would miss out on the blessings of maturing in Christ. Without their salvation being jeopardized, they would be locked into a permanent state of infancy if they went back to the Old Testament system. This view is consistent with how Paul describes the Law as holding men in a state of immaturity until the coming of Christ (Gal 3–4). This condition can be likened to a mentally retarded individual who is permanently incapable of maturing beyond a certain level. Such would be the fate of the Hebrews if they were to yield to the temptation of returning to Judaism.

The irreversible nature of this awful state is depicted in Hebrews 6:6, which says, “and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance...” Some have attempted to blunt the irreversible nature of this verse by instead arguing that it would be “difficult to renew them again to repentance.” Such an interpretation is unlikely given how the author uses the word “impossible” (*adynatos*) elsewhere in the book. “The author of Hebrews characteristically uses *αδυνατος* to describe something that is in the nature of the case impossible.”⁷⁷ Elsewhere, the author uses *adynatos* to convey that it is impossible for God to lie (Heb 6:18), it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sin (Heb 10:4), and it is impossible to please God without

⁷⁷ Harless, “Fallen Away or Fallen Down? The Meaning of Hebrews 6:1-9,” 14.

faith (Heb 11:6). Thus, “it is impossible to dilute this word into *difficult*.”⁷⁸ Calvin correctly concluded, “Some take *impossible* to mean ‘unusual’ or ‘hard’ which is wholly foreign to the meaning of the word.”⁷⁹

For whom would it be impossible? This cannot be referring to God since nothing is impossible for Him (Gen 18:14; Num 11:23; Luke 1:37). Rather, it would become impossible for other believers to renew such an immature individual. Numerous times in Hebrews the addressees were told to stay in close fellowship with one another to receive mutual support and encouragement (Heb 3:13; 10:25). However, if they regressed back to Judaism, it would be impossible for the encouragement and exhortation of fellow believers to draw them out of their state of immaturity.⁸⁰

Fortunately for the addressees of Hebrews, the author was convinced of better things concerning them (Heb 6:9-12). There was still hope for them. There would be no sense in warning them if this were not true. They had not yet reached the point of no return as the Exodus generation had done. However, they were rapidly approaching this point. The writer recognizes this and remembers the irrevocable consequences that the Exodus generation had experienced. Consequently he uses the events of Kadesh Barnea as his basis for warning his audience.

Conclusion

The purpose of this section has been to suggest a method for understanding Hebrews 6:4-6. This method involves allowing the events of Kadesh Barnea to be the filter through which the writer of Hebrews views his audience’s predicament. According to part one of the paper, two

⁷⁸ Marvin Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament* (Scribner's Sons, 1900; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946), 4:444.

⁷⁹ John Calvin, “The Epistle to the Hebrews,” in *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews and the First and Second Epistles of St. Peter*, ed. David Torrance and Thomas Torrance, trans. William Johnston, Calvin's Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 74.

⁸⁰ Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings: A Study of the Eternal Security and the Final Significance of Man*, 444.

characteristics epitomized the Exodus generation. First, that generation can be classified as redeemed and believing prior to the events of Numbers 13–14. Second, unbelief and disobedience at Kadesh Barnea caused that generation to permanently forfeit enjoyment of the blessings of the Promised Land rather than salvation. In the second part, it was shown that the addressees of Hebrews possessed these identical features. First, they were already believers. Second, unbelief and disobedience was causing them to contemplate lapsing back into Judaism. Such a decision would cause them to permanently miss out on the blessings of maturing in Christ rather than salvation. As the writer of Hebrews sees his audience about to commit the same error that the Exodus generation had committed, he uses the events of Kadesh Barnea as the basis for warning them.

INADEQUATE ALTERNATIVES

Thus far this paper has contended for the loss of blessing view. Unfortunately, understanding Hebrews 6:4-6 as a warning against loss of blessing is not the only view that interpreters have embraced. Competing against the loss of blessings view are the Calvinist, Arminian, and hypothetical views. This section will discuss each of these alternative views. It will be demonstrated that each of them should be rejected for failing to adequately consider the Kadesh Barnea paradigm as well as for other inadequacies.

Calvinist View

The Calvinist or Reformed interpretation of Hebrews 6:4-6 attempts to argue that true believers are not addressed in these verses. Rather, the passage merely speaks of those exposed externally to the gospel through affiliation with other Christians. In other words, those in view are mere professors rather than actual possessors. An example of such a person would be Judas who

had a close relationship with Christ and the rest of the disciples but was never an actual convert.⁸¹ Thus, Calvin taught that Hebrews 6:1-9 referred to the reprobate unbeliever.⁸² Numerous commentators hold to this position including Bruce,⁸³ Hughes,⁸⁴ Pink,⁸⁵ Kent⁸⁶ as well as the *New Scofield Reference Bible*.⁸⁷ However, four reasons cause this view to be suspect. First, it ignores the Exodus generation as the paradigm of understanding the warning. As previously developed, the Exodus generation was a redeemed and believing generation prior to Kadesh Barnea. Second, the view ignores the previously given exegetical arguments that believers are in view in Hebrews 6:4-6.

Third, the view attempts to interpret the various clauses in Hebrews 6:4-5 in ways that are exegetically unsatisfying. For example, MacArthur points out other uses of *phōtizō* are found in the LXX in Isaiah 9:1-2 and Matthew 4:16 where it is used to speak of a general enlightenment short of actual conversion.⁸⁸ He notes that the same concept of general enlightenment is also found in John 1:9. However, these other uses of *phōtizō* are not accompanied by the word *hapax* as in the uses in Hebrews. Also, this view gives inadequate attention to how the author consistently uses the word of *phōtizō* within Hebrews itself.⁸⁹ Toussaint cites several texts supposedly demonstrating how a person can be enlightened without being saved (Heb 10:26; 2 Peter 2:20-21; John 16:8-11).⁹⁰ However, the words “hapax” and “enlightened” are not found in any of these texts.

⁸¹ Toussaint, “The Epistle to the Hebrews,” 19.

⁸² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.3.21.

⁸³ Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 118-25.

⁸⁴ Philip E. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 206-24.

⁸⁵ Pink, *An Exposition of the Book of Hebrews*, 298-320.

⁸⁶ Homer Kent, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972), 107-15.

⁸⁷ C. I. Scofield, ed., *The New Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1909), 1315.

⁸⁸ MacArthur, *Hebrews*, 142.

⁸⁹ Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings: A Study of the Eternal Security and the Final Significance of Man*, 438, n.11.

⁹⁰ Toussaint, “The Epistle to the Hebrews,” 18.

Moreover, most Calvinists interpret “taste” (*geuomai*) in Hebrews 6:4-5 in terms of a mere sampling rather than in terms of a complete salvation experience.⁹¹ But this interpretation is fraught with problems. Because the writer uses “taste” to describe Christ’s work in the atonement (Heb 2:9), the addressees could not have sampled the Holy Spirit anymore than Christ sampled death through His work on the cross. “We should have quite a theological dilemma on our hands if Christ merely tasted death for us but did not fully undergo it.”⁹² “Taste” is also used to describe total participation in salvation in 1 Peter 2:3. As Farrar explains:

Calvin vainly attempts to make the clause refer only to “those who had as it were *tasted with their outward lips* the grace of God, and been irradiated *with some sparks* of His light.” This is not to explain Scripture, but to explain it away in favour of some preconceived doctrine. It is clear from 1 Peter ii: 3 that such a view is not tenable.⁹³

The New Testament often uses the word “taste” (*geuomai*) as a synonym for “eat.” Acts 10:10 says, “And he became hungry and was desiring something to eat...” (*geuomai*). Acts 20:11 says, “And when he had gone back up, and had broken the bread and eaten...” (*geuomai*).⁹⁴ Interestingly, one secular papyrus manuscript uses *geuomai* to say, “I was going to bed without bite or sup.”⁹⁵ The word carries the meaning “to partake of” or “to join” rather than a mere sampling.⁹⁶ While Toussaint is able to marshal some texts where *geuomai* is used to communicate a mere sampling (Matt 27:34; John 2:9),⁹⁷ it must be remembered that these texts occur in non-soteriological contexts and are ultimately unpersuasive as they must be subordinated to how the author of Hebrews uses the word elsewhere in his book.

⁹¹ MacArthur, *Hebrews*, 143; Scofield, ed., *The New Scofield Reference Bible*, 1315.

⁹² Tanner, “But If It Yields Thorns and Thistles: An Exposition of Hebrews 5:11-6:12,” 32.

⁹³ Farrar, “The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews,” 82.

⁹⁴ Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings: A Study of the Eternal Security and the Final Significance of Man*, 439.

⁹⁵ James Hope Moulton and George Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament*, One-vol ed. (1930; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 125.

⁹⁶ Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3d ed., ed. Frederick William Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 157; Moulton and Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament*, 125.

⁹⁷ Toussaint, “The Epistle to the Hebrews,” 18.

In addition, Calvinists often attempt to make the clauses in Hebrews 6:4-6 refer to unbelievers by pointing out what they do not mention. Kuyper states:

It is true the apostle declares that the men guilty of this sin *were ‘once enlightened,’ ‘have tasted of the heavenly gift,’ were made ‘partakers of the Holy Ghost,’ and ‘have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come’*; but they are never said to have had *a broken and a contrite heart.*⁹⁸

Similarly, Toussaint observes, “It should be noticed that the writer does not mention forgiveness of sins, cleansing, sanctification, the salvation of the soul...new life, or the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.”⁹⁹ However, such a contention represents an argument from silence. If this principle were consistently applied we would be forced to second guess the audiences of other passages typically taken as addressed to believers. Dillow notes, “There is no mention of ‘faith’ in the description in 1 Cor. 1:1-10, yet nobody doubts that Christians are there in view.”¹⁰⁰

Fourth, the Calvinist interpretation of Hebrews 6:4-6 appears to have more to do with reading the text through an a priori theological grid rather than with sound hermeneutical principles. Because these verses appear to conflict with the preexisting theological principle that all true believers will persevere in works, Calvinist interpreters are forced to convert these verses into referring to unbelievers because they seemingly conflict with their “perseverance of the saints” theology. Nicole admits that he concludes these verses are describing non-believers because the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints is “powerfully grounded” elsewhere.¹⁰¹ After commenting on the fact that exegetically Hebrews 6:4-6 should be interpreted as relating to believers, Barnes observes, “...and it seems plain to me, that no other interpretation would ever have been thought of,

⁹⁸ Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1900; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 610.

⁹⁹ Toussaint, “The Epistle to the Hebrews,” 19.

¹⁰⁰ Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings: A Study of the Eternal Security and the Final Significance of Man*, 442, n. 27.

¹⁰¹ Nicole, “Some Comments on Hebrews 6:4-6 and the Doctrine of the Perseverance of God with the Saints,” 357-59.

if this view had not seemed to conflict with the doctrine of the ‘perseverance of the saints.’”¹⁰²

Hodges notes, “The assertion that such a failure is not possible for a regenerate person is a theological proposition which is not supported by the New Testament.”¹⁰³ This, of course, is problematic for the Calvinist interpretation because theology should be derived from exegesis rather than allowing theology to control exegesis.

Arminian View

The Arminian interpretation has the advantage of understanding that those addressed in Hebrews 6:4-6 are believers. Thus, this view does not have to resort to the exegetical gymnastics that the Calvinist view must resort to in order to maintain that those addressed in this passage are unbelievers. The Arminian view simply asserts that those addressed in these verses have the potential of losing their salvation. Examples of Arminian interpreters include Westcott,¹⁰⁴ Moffatt,¹⁰⁵ and Marshall.¹⁰⁶ Although this view is more exegetically persuasive than the Calvinist view in that it maintains the believing status of those addressed, five reasons cause the view to be suspect.

First, it ignores the Kadesh Barnea incident as the paradigm for the book. Although that generation lost the opportunity to enjoy its inheritance in the land subsequent to its sin at Kadesh Barnea, the nation did not forfeit its redeemed status following the events of Numbers 13–14. God continued to provide for the nation (Num 20:11; 12:16; Deut 8:4; 13:12-18; 29:5) as well as give the nation victory (Num 21:1-3, 21-25).¹⁰⁷ Because of God’s protective care, the nation was not

¹⁰² Barnes, *Notes, Explanatory and Practical, on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 134.

¹⁰³ Hodges, “Hebrews,” 795.

¹⁰⁴ Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 148-53.

¹⁰⁵ James Moffatt, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, International Critical Commentary Series (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1963), 76-82.

¹⁰⁶ Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God*.

¹⁰⁷ J. Dwight Pentecost, class notes of Andy Woods in BE450A The Book of Hebrews, Dallas Theological Seminary, February 10, Spring 2005.

curseable (Num 23–24). In fact, it was predicted that the messiah would still come from the nation (Num 23:8). Thus, at Kadesh Barnea that generation forfeited blessings rather than their redeemed status. If Kadesh Barnea is indeed the paradigm of the book, then Hebrews 6 should also be understood in terms of forfeiture blessings rather than salvation. The Arminian interpretation, which interprets Hebrews 6 in terms of loss of salvation, ignores this paradigm.

Second, this view finds itself at variance with other strong passages that teach that a believer can never lose his salvation (John 6:39; 10:28; Rom 8:29-39; Eph 1:12-14; 4:30; Philip 1:6; 1 Pet 1:3-5). If God is the one who initiates salvation, what action can man perform to reverse it?¹⁰⁸ Third, if the phrase “it is impossible to renew them again to salvation” is talking about a loss of salvation, then such a person could never be saved again.¹⁰⁹ Stanley notes the practical absurdities that flow from such a proposition when he says:

If Hebrews 6:6 is talking about renewing a person’s salvation, doesn’t this passage teach that once a person loses salvation, he or she can never regain it? If that is the case, aren’t we doing children a great disservice by encouraging them to be born again? Shouldn’t we wait until they are much older to lessen the likelihood that they fall away during their teen years and thus lose their salvation forever?¹¹⁰

Fourth, the Arminian view relies upon the translation “if they fall away” (Heb 6:6). This is exegetically problematic because each of the five participles in Hebrews 6:4-6 (have once been enlightened, have tasted of the heavenly gift, have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, have fallen away) are governed by the single article “those who” (*tous*) at the beginning of the list. The use of this single article indicates that only one group of individuals is in view.¹¹¹ “Significantly, all five participles are governed by the one definite article *tous* in v 4 which serves to unite them. As a result, these are not

¹⁰⁸ Hodges, “Hebrews,” 794.

¹⁰⁹ Toussaint, “The Epistle to the Hebrews,” 19.

¹¹⁰ Charles Stanley, *Eternal Security: Can You Be Sure?* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1990), 165.

¹¹¹ A.T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1934), 777, 785-89.

two different situations, but a single situation in which the one who ‘falls away’ is the very one who had been enlightened, etc.”¹¹² Thus, if there is no conditional element in the first four participles, then there cannot be a conditional element in the last participle either.¹¹³

Fifth, the Arminian interpretation understands “have fallen away” (*parapitō*) in Hebrews 6:6 in the sense of departing or apostatizing from the faith. Yet the linguistic evidence does not support this interpretation.¹¹⁴ Classical Greek interprets this word along the lines of falling aside, making a mistake, erring, or going astray.¹¹⁵ In the LXX, *parapitō* has the meaning of to fall short, to fall into error, to transgress, to offend or to trespass (Esth 6:10; Wis 6:9; 12:2; Ezek 14:13; 15:8; 18:24; 20:27; 22:4). In Koiné Greek, it is used to communicate befall, to be deprived of something, to be broken, to be lost, and to sin.¹¹⁶ In the New Testament, the verb is only used in Hebrews 6:6. However, the New Testament uses the noun *parapitōma* to convey sin rather than apostasy.¹¹⁷ Other Greek words could have been used to communicate “apostasy” had that been the author’s intention, such as *aphistēmi* or *skandalizō*. In sum, *parapitō* conveys the notion of falling down rather than falling away just as when Peter denied Christ “...he suffered loss, but he was not lost.”¹¹⁸ Thus, *parapitō* does not have the linguistic meaning necessary to support the Arminian interpretation. The Arminian view also neglects the immediate context of *parapitō*, which pertains to falling away from maturity (Heb 5:11-6:3) rather than the loss of salvation.

¹¹² Tanner, “But If It Yields Thorns and Thistles: An Exposition of Hebrews 5:11-6:12,” 30.

¹¹³ Hodges, “Hebrews,” 794-95.

¹¹⁴ The linguistic data and conclusion presented in this paragraph were originally presented in Harless, “Fallen Away or Fallen Down? The Meaning of Hebrews 6:1-9,” 10-14.

¹¹⁵ Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), 1321; W. Bauder, “Fall Away,” in *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Collin Brown. 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 1:608; Wilhelm Michaelis, “Parapitō, Paraptōma,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley. 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 6:170.

¹¹⁶ Moulton and Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament*, 488-89; 1 Clement 51:1; 56:1.

¹¹⁷ Michaelis, “Parapitō, Paraptōma,” 6:172.

¹¹⁸ Rowell, “Exposition of Hebrews Six,” 333.

Hypothetical View

Others treat the warning of Hebrews 6 as a mere hypothetical warning. According to this view, if a believer could lose his salvation, which could never happen, then he could never be saved again. Interpreters who hold this position include Barnes,¹¹⁹ Guthrie,¹²⁰ Thomas,¹²¹ Wuest¹²² as well as the *Ryrie Study Bible*.¹²³ However, several problems make this view untenable. First, it ignores the Kadesh Barnea paradigm. What happened in Numbers 13–14 was an actual loss of blessing rather than a mere hypothetical situation. That generation actually lost the blessings of entering the land (Num 14:27-32). Second, “Why have a warning revolve around a straw man?”¹²⁴ Hodges observes, “Far from treating the question in any hypothetical way, the writer’s language sounds as if he knew of such cases.”¹²⁵ Third, as previously indicated, all five participles are grammatically connected. Regarding the fifth participle, Toussaint notes, “Grammatically, it is parallel to the four aorist participles of verses four and five and is just as ‘real’ as they are.”¹²⁶ Fourth, Kaiser notes the internal inconsistency with the hypothetical view. He observes

Is it possible that the author is simply writing about a hypothetical situation? If so, there are two possible ways to understand it. The first is that both the author and his readers know that this cannot happen, so it is hypothetical for all of them. In that case one wonders why the author wasted his ink. His purpose clearly is to exhort them to return to Judaism. If his warnings are only hypothetical, how would they keep people from apostatizing? The second possibility is that the author knows this is hypothetical, but he believes his readers will take it seriously. In that case it would serve as a warning, but it would be deceptive. Is the author of Hebrews likely to defend the truth with deception? Would he scare his readers with a situation he knows could never happen?¹²⁷

¹¹⁹ Barnes, *Notes, Explanatory and Practical, on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 134.

¹²⁰ Donald Guthrie, *Hebrews*, Tyndale New Testament Commentary Series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 140-46.

¹²¹ W.H. Griffith Thomas, *Hebrews: A Devotional Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 72-75.

¹²² Kenneth Wuest, “Hebrews Six in the Greek New Testament,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 119, no. 473 (January-March 1962): 45-53.

¹²³ Charles C. Ryrie, *The Ryrie Study Bible: New American Standard Bible* (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 1951.

¹²⁴ Toussaint, “The Epistle to the Hebrews,” 19.

¹²⁵ Hodges, “Hebrews,” 795.

¹²⁶ Toussaint, “The Epistle to the Hebrews,” 19.

¹²⁷ Walter Kaiser et al., *Hard Sayings of the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 682-83.

CONCLUSION

One cannot understand the warning of Hebrews 6:4-6 without first understanding that the writer views the predicament of his audience through the lens of the Kadesh Barnea incident (Heb 3-4). The nation was regenerated prior to the events of Numbers 13-14. At Kadesh Barnea, the nation experienced an irrevocable loss of blessings. Similarly, the addressees of Hebrews were believers. They were also on the verge of irretrievably forfeiting blessings, which consisted of maturing in Christ. The similarity between the two situations caused the writer to use Kadesh Barnea as the basis for warning his audience. Other views competing with the loss of blessings view, such as the Calvinist, Arminian, and Hypothetical views, are inadequate alternatives because they fail to give proper attention to Kadesh Barnea as the paradigm for interpreting the Book of Hebrews.

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