The Warning Passages in Hebrews: Revised Theologies and New Methods of Interpretation

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Abstract
The interpretation of the warning passages in Hebrews has long been disputed, especially 6.4-6. Discussions on the issue over the last several decades frequently remain in dialogue with the theologies of Calvinist-Reformed and Arminian traditions, and intrigue about the passages often centers on whether or not the recipients of the message are 'genuine' believers and able to abandon their salvation because of apostasy. Recent methods of interpretation have opened up new ways of looking at the warnings and bring them into sharper relief. Such methods include historical-critical, socio-rhetorical, social-scientific, intertextual, and oral-critical methods. This article addresses studies of the warnings in Hebrews relevant to such approaches, and it also surveys recent interpretations that integrate Calvinist or Arminian viewpoints.

Biblical interpreters have long wrestled with the interpretation of the warning passages in Hebrews (Heb. 2.1-4; 3.7–4.13; 5.11–6.12; 10.19-39; 12.1-29). The apparent inability of a second repentance for those who have fallen away from faith (e.g., Heb. 6.4-6) has ignited a long history of discussions and debates on the issue (Thomas 2008: 29-50; Koester 2001: 23). From at least the time of the Shepherd of Hermas (c. 150 CE), whose writing permits a second repentance after baptism, there is mention of teachers who do not allow for the forgiveness of

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post-baptismal sins (*Vis.* 4.3.1-7). In the third century the Novatian controversy targeted those who under Roman persecution had lapsed from the faith. They were not allowed to return to the church (Oropeza 2000: 8-9). Many churches during the Middle Ages saw the end of a rigid stance by granting penance for post-baptismal sins, and Heb. 6.4-6 was interpreted as denying a second baptism rather than a second repentance (Heen and Krey 2005: 84-85). After the Reformation, Calvinists and Arminians interpreted the warnings primarily in terms of perseverance and apostasy rather than baptism (Thomas 2008: 51-69). The impossibility of being restored in 6.4-6 was frequently understood as applying to only the reprobate rather than elect (Calvinism) or to believers who forfeited salvation and sinned against the Spirit of God (Arminianism). More recently the theological divide continues, but newer approaches to the warnings in Hebrews have been employed in an effort to unlock fresh meaning. We will first explore interpretations directly relevant to Calvinist and Arminian theologies before moving on to the other methods.

I. Calvinist and Arminian Revisitations on the Warning Passages

A number of biblical studies raise the question of whether the warning passages in Hebrews are addressed to 'genuine' Christ-followers who are in danger of falling away. For the most part these studies examine the biblical warnings on a level that surpasses the dogmatic proof-texting commonly found in earlier systematic-theological works. As might be expected, those who examine the passages beginning with Reformed-Calvinist perspectives end up with Reformed-Calvinist conclusions: the ones who are in danger of apostasy in Hebrews are not elect or 'genuine' believers (e.g., Nicole 1975; Fanning 1994; Grudem 1995). Likewise, those who approach the texts with Arminian theological agendas conclude with the Arminian position that the warnings evince a real possibility that believers can abandon salvation (e.g., Osborne 1975; Shank 1989: 226-35, 317-19, 336).

Some other prominent views that are influenced by these theological discussions include the perspectives that the covenant community rather than individuals are in danger of apostasy in Hebrews (Verbrugge 1980); the warnings themselves are a means which God uses to preserve the elect's salvation (Schreiner and Caneday 2001: 38-45, 193-213, 312-31), and that believers will be punished if they disobey the warnings, but the punishment is temporal and does not engender loss of salvation (Gleason 2000; 2002; Oberholtzer 1989). These positions have all been critiqued by opposing scholars who advance their own contributions to the debate (Peterson 2008; Thomas 2008: 69-96; Schreiner and Caneday 2001: 21-38). A problem raised against Verbrugge's study, for example, is that the warnings sometimes stress that the individual is in danger of falling away

(Heb. 3.12-13; 4.1; 6.11). Problematic for Schreiner and Caneday's view is the lack of explicit support for their position in Hebrews, especially given that in 3.6–4.11 the wilderness generation's apostasy occurred despite divinely sanctioned warnings (e.g., Num. 14.8-10, 39-45); the author in Hebrews warns that his audience is in danger of a similar apostasy (Heb. 3.12; 4.1, 11; cf. Psa. 95.7-11). Troublesome for Gleason and Oberholtzer's views is the lack of persuasive explanations that would mitigate the fiery and the lesser to greater (*qal wahomer*) judgments awaiting those who fall away (e.g., 6.7-11; 10.26-29; 12.25-29).

Relevant to these discussions Herbert Bateman (2007) edited a work collecting four different views of the warning passages based on the theological persuasions of Classical Arminianism (Osborne), Classical Reformed (Fanning), Wesleyan Arminianism (Cockerill), and Moderate Reformed (Gleason). The respective authors of these positions advance their interpretation of the warning passages and also respond to the other authors. Not surprisingly both Osborne (2007: 128) and Cockerill (2007: 289) in support of the Arminian view argue that believers can fall away and this would lead to eternal judgment or severance from God's plan of salvation. For the Reformed position Fanning asserts that apostates, the repudiators of Christ, 'give evidence that they have never partaken in the benefits of Christ's cleansing sacrifice' (2007: 218-19). For the Moderate Reformed position, Gleason maintains physical punishment rather than eternal condemnation as the penalty for those who disregard the warnings in Hebrews, and 'falling away' is interpreted as 'a serious act of unfaithfulness toward God' instead of 'absolute apostasy involving a complete turning away from all belief in God' (2007: 354; cf. 360-67).

The strength of this comparative approach is that we learn how multiple authors from competing perspectives interpret the warnings and how these authors respond to the arguments of the other positions. The authors in Bateman take seriously exegetical inquiries related to these passages, even though their theological agendas may have guided their research and colored their interpretations. One of the weaknesses with this approach is our doubt that first-century emergent Christians, influenced by Hellenism and formative Judaism, would have understood the warnings with the same kind of theological assumptions held by Reformed and Arminian scholars today. Emmrich (2003: 88) rightly points out that commonly used terms in the current discussions, such as 'genuine' or 'true' as opposed to 'false' believers, is not the kind of language used by the ancient writer for his audience. We may suspect that a number of theological elements foreign to the author's original purpose have made their way into discussions about the texts.

The Test-of-Genuineness

Another advanced study on the warnings in Hebrews that emerges from Calvinist and Arminian dialogues comes from C. Adrian Thomas (2008: 17,

90-93) who, influenced by Fanning (2007), defends the Reformed-Calvinist 'test-of-genuineness' position. He proposes that the author of Hebrews, like any concerned pastor, realizes that his congregation consists of a mixture of members who are genuinely saved and others who are not. Hence, 'not knowing for sure who these individuals are, he addresses the whole body as though all were believers', and the warnings serve 'all in the professing community as a means of urging their perseverance in the faith they already professed…failure to persevere (to heed the warnings) is indicative of a spurious faith. In this regard, the warnings serve as a test of one's profession since the criterion of a genuine faith is that it perseveres' (2008: 15-16).

Thomas draws on an evidence-inference interpretation of the conditional sentences in Heb. 3.6 and 14 to read that if in fact a person continues to persevere to the end (evidence [apodosis]: 'if we hold fast our confidence…'), then that person is shown to be a genuine partaker of Christ (inference [protasis]: 'we are his house', 'we have become partakers of Christ'). From this starting point he interprets other profession/confession passages in Hebrews as indicating authentic or inauthentic faith (e.g., Heb. 4.14; 10.23), and moves on to mixed community inferences delineated by such distinctions as the text's use of second and third persons, and then interprets various dissimilarities as supporting true and false faith (e.g., 4.2; 6.7-8; 10.38-39). With this multi-layered system intact, Thomas then interprets warning passages such as 6.4-6, which is said to describe a 'false profession' (2008: 260-65).

Thomas's idea of a mixed audience has the advantage of seeing the recipients as a community rather than merely individuals. However, even Thomas admits at one point that if the interpretative steps mentioned above are examined independently, the entire model is weakened (2008: 182). This admittance raises our suspicions about this study as we notice that inference is built upon inference with almost every step along the way being questionable. Moreover, we notice that a number of scholarly studies in recent years structure the entire message of Hebrews, and none of them regard 3.6 or 3.14 as the central thesis for the letter/homily (e.g. Joslin 2007; Guthrie 1994; Rice 1985; Vanhoye 1963), and this raises doubts that the writer of Hebrews would consider these verses to be the foundation for interpreting the warnings. These verses do not appear to function as the thesis of the homily, nor do they represent its first, last, central, or most extensive warning. Thomas's starting point can be accused of not reflecting the ancient writer's objective, and the study seems arbitrarily arranged to support and defend the Reformed theological position.

Does the ancient author really have a mixed audience in mind with only those who have spurious faith as the ones in real danger of the warnings? If so, we must ask why the author includes himself in these warnings by using first person plurals 'we' and 'us' throughout his message (e.g., Heb. 2.1, 3; 3.6, 14; 4.11;

10.30, 39; 12.25, 28-29; differently see 5.11). As other scholars affirm, this is more than merely a rhetorical or literary device—the 'we' is emphatic, for example, in Heb. 2.1: '*hêmas* = we Christians…you and I, as in v. 3' (Moffat 1948: 17). Regardless of whether or not he actually knows the spiritual state of every congregation member, the author of Hebrews assumes those among his audience are every much the believer that he is. Conversely, he includes himself among those in his audience who are susceptible to apostasy (2.1; 4.1, 11; 10.26). Phenomenologically speaking, the author considers the recipients as believers in the most complete sense of the term (McKnight 1992: 43-44), and he identifies them indiscriminately as beloved (Heb. 6.9), saints (13.24), holy partners (3.1), brothers and sisters in faith (3.1, 12; 10.19; 13.22; cf. 2.11-12, 17; 13.23), and sanctified by the blood of Christ and his covenant (Heb. 10.29).

Another problem for the 'test-of-genuineness' view is raised by scholars who question the evidence/inference interpretation of 3.6 and 3.14 (e.g., Osborne 2007: 231). In the same context as these verses the writer uses *ean* clauses in what appears to be cause (protasis) and effect (apososis) relationships regarding the warnings (3.7, 15): 'if' Christ's followers obey God's voice, they must not harden their hearts. Given the multiple warnings against apostasy in Hebrews 3–4, the cause and effect interpretation would seem to make better sense of 3.6, 14.

A related problem centers on the perfect tense *gegonamen* in 3.14 ('we have/ are become' sharers…), which is said to imply that only 'genuine' believers from the Christian community persevere to the end; spurious or superficial believers do not (Thomas 2008: 186-89; Carson 1996: 84-85; 1992: 17). Other scholars tend to disagree. Wallace (1996: 574-76) lists Heb. 3.14 as an intensive perfect, which stresses a resultant state: 'Consequently, *stative* [emphasis in original] verbs are especially used in this way. Often the best translation of the intensive perfect is as a *present* tense.' Differently, Porter (1989: 269-70) suggests that the perfect tense *gegonamen* is a timeless perfect: 'we are become partakers of Christ if we might hold firmly to our beginning confidence until the end'. Moreover, the parallel passage of 3.6b uses the present tense *esmen*: 'We are [God's] house if we hold fast our confidence and boasting of hope', and both passages intend to stress that being a partner with Christ is a present reality which the audience already experiences. It is likely that they once were *not* in this state (Johnson 2006: 118), and if they do not persevere, they will not *remain* in this state. Ellingworth (1993: 227) notices that perfect *gegona* frequently appears in Hebrews (5.11-12; 7.16, 20, 23; 12.8) and suggests the following:

> [It] may well mean no more than *esmen*…'we have become partners with Christ, if only we keep our initial confidence firm to the end', which appears to make a past condition dependent on a future, is perhaps unnecessarily difficult. The implication is rather: 'We have become, and are now, partners with Christ; and we shall remain such if we hold fast to the end.'

Such problems with the 'test-of-genuineness' view, then, suggest that even the most intricate studies beginning with Calvinist or Arminian agendas can fall short of being persuasive when they interpret the warning passages in Hebrews. Some scholars criticize the way these positions are imposed on biblical texts (Oropeza 2000: 33-34, 228, cf. 13-21; misread by Osborne 2007: 306) and they suggest that advocates of Calvinist and Arminian positions sometimes have a tendency to create procrustean beds out of the verses that do not 'fit' well with the theological tenets they are attempting to support or defend.

II. Different Interpretative Approaches to the Warning Passage

Other studies on the warning passages in Hebrews have attempted methods of interpretation that do not appear to have as one of their foremost aims a concentrated effort to support Calvinist or Arminian theologies. To be sure, some may mention aspects of the debate as a launching pad from which to depart, and their outcomes may even be compatible with one of these traditions, but a heavy accent is placed on the interpretative approach itself as a key to unlocking fresh meaning behind the passages. Among these investigations, the older approaches that we will observe are perhaps best categorized as historical-critical studies, and the newer works utilize rhetorical, social-scientific, intertextual, and oral-critical methods.

Wandering and Eschatological Tension

Ernst Käsemann's influential study in Hebrews (1939; 1957; 1984) centers on the motif of the wandering people of God based on Hebrews 3–4. For Käsemann there is an eschatological orientation to the idea of promise as a 'statute of the future order of salvation' in which the tension between 'already fulfilled' and 'yet to be fulfilled reality of the promise' inform why 'the attitude of faith can only be described as wandering' (1984: 30-31, 37). Faith involves confident wandering, but the concept of sin is antithetical to it with its strategy to ensnare victims and harden them against the promise. Sin has the goal of leading them to abandon God (Heb. 3.12-13; 4.1). A decision must be made by the bearer of the promise between faith or sin, between 'obediently abiding under the promise and wandering with the people of God already begun, or disobedience toward and apostasy from the promise, from wandering, and from the people of God' (1984: 48). The ground for the people's confidence in salvation is revealed through the message of the heavenly priesthood activity of Christ, and the concept of 'rest' in this context is viewed as the goal of this spiritual journey, which is rooted in the heavenly trek of the gnostic myth of the redeemed Redeemer and *Urmensch*, the primal man (1984: 74-75, 87, 239-40).

Käsemann's view of gnostic influence behind the text has been criticized by later scholars (e.g., Laansma 1997: 10-13; Hofius 1970). One problem

with his study is that Gnosticism as a religious system develops in the second century CE, which seems too late to be influential on Hebrews. The general consensus among scholarship today considers Hebrews to be written sometime in the late first century CE (Feld 1985: 14-18; Attridge 1989: 6-9; Hvalvik 2007: 206).

Nevertheless, the strength of Käsemann's concentration on the wandering people of God is that it engages the subjects of warning and apostasy in Hebrews. We find in this work a common denominator with many other New Testament writings that present or presuppose the emergent Christian life as a journey or new exodus-wilderness pilgrimage in which eschatological salvation overlaps the two ages of present and future. The Christ-followers may be interpreted as having liminal existence between intersecting macro-eras in which faithfulness and perseverance are necessary if their salvation is to be fully realized at the culmination of time when Christ returns. Other scholars have followed up on Hebrews 3–4 with studies on the subject of 'rest' (*katapausis*), a concept that evokes a constellation of related ideas including God's rest from creation, Israel's Sabbath, and the land of rest from the wilderness travels of God's people past and present (Bénétreau 2003; Wray 1998; Laansma 1997; Yeo 1991; Johnsson 1978; Hofius 1970; deSilva 2000b; Gleason 2000; Weiss 1991: 268-73). Käsemann's stress on the interface between soteriology and two-ages likewise has been an influential point of departure for scholars (e.g., Mackie 2007: 35-37, 100-101, 208-11, 230). Until the promised 'rest' is fully realized, the Christ-followers' plight remains somewhat similar to Israel's wilderness generation. They wander and face diverse tests while advancing through the metaphoric desert of time 'already fulfilled' and time 'not yet fulfilled'. In this predicament they must persevere in faith and not succumb to sin which, as Käsemann rightly says, has as its aim their apostasy.

The importance of the audience's choice between faith and sin is widely recognized as an important issue in Hebrews. Later studies such as those of Gräßer (1965) and Rhee (2001) examine the former concept, and Löhr (1994) focuses on the latter. Löhr's study in particular investigates sin and reversal/change ('umkehr': *metanoia*) in relation to the rigorism of warnings in Heb. 6.4-6 and 10.26-27. He considers the community in Hebrews to be on the move in the sphere of salvation and yet heading towards its completion in the heavenly city (cf. Heb. 12.22-24). From Hebrews he argues that sin is viewed not in terms of different levels of intensity but as a loss of faith and turning away from salvation, and he suggests that apostasy ('der Abfall') is sin *par excellence* (1994: 134-35). The recipients have entered into the salvific realm through the gift of *metanoia*. This gift, however, can be undone through the afore-mentioned sin, and if lost, it cannot be regained. The impossibility of a return is a result of the ordering of God, and yet God is not responsible for their rebellion (1994: 148-52, 242-74, 286-87).

The Finality of the Christ Message

Another study of the warnings is undertaken in I. Howard Marshall (1995 [1969]), which covers the entire New Testament corpus on the subject of perseverance and apostasy. In his section on Hebrews, Marshall follows an approach by F.F. Bruce (1964: lii-lxiv) that centers on the finality of the Christian message. The person and work of Christ is viewed as God's final revelation of salvation (Heb. 1.1-4) superior to what was revealed before whether through angels (1.5-14), Moses (3.1-6), the Levitical and Melchizedek priesthoods (4.14-16; 7.15-28), and the old covenant (8.8-13; 10.1-10). With this approach Marshall distills various contrasts between imperfect and perfect, earthly and heavenly, shadow and reality, type and antitype, old and new covenants, two ages, and so forth. The imperfect, for example, was once a legitimate venue for God prior to the revelation of the perfect, but 'since the author believes that Christian faith is the only way of salvation, he develops a long argument to show that there can be no question of turning aside from Jesus even to Moses' (1995: 138). In Hebrews, salvation primarily rests on a futuristic expectation, and the danger of relapse involves falling away to an apathetic form of Judaism (1995: 137). Apostasy is understood in new covenant parlance as the act of deliberate or 'witting' sin that openly puts Christ to shame. A Christian is able to commit such an act and find no forgiveness if persisting in that attitude, but the author 'never states how it could be determined whether a person had actually gone this far and reached the point of no return' (1995: 152-53). The antidote to avoiding apostasy, according to Marshall, is for the recipients to remember the word they had previously heard (Heb. 2.1-4; 4.14), maintain trust in and obedience to God, and exhort one another as they continue on their spiritual journey (3.13; 10.24-25; 13.17).

Marshall's study intends to provide an alternative to the interpretations of both Calvinist and Arminian dogmaticians by approaching biblical texts using the historical-critical method instead of systematic-theological paradigms. He takes issue with G.C. Berkouwer (1958), who though rightly stressing the assurance of salvation, plays down the acute dangers found in the warning passages of the New Testament. He also criticizes Rudolf Bultmann (1951: 320-22) on the other end of the spectrum for presenting faith as though it were dependant on human endeavors and provides little or no comfort and assurance (1995: 200-208). Marshall's study intended to land between these two poles. One of his outcomes is that both Hebrews and the entire New Testament support the idea that one's faith could be entirely undermined by apostasy. We wonder, however, whether the entire New Testament really could be harmonized on the issue. The warnings in Hebrews, at any rate, are intended to encourage perseverance so that the believers do not fall away. Perseverance in Hebrews has been recognized by others as an important motif (Kim 1997), but Marshall's study is sometimes categorized as belonging to the Arminian tradition (Schreiner and Caneday 2001: 11) even

though his intention was to transcend dogma through a careful examination of the scriptures.

A Synthetic Approach to the Warnings

Another influential interpretation of the warnings comes from Scot McKnight (1992) who identifies the five warning passages in Hebrews and examines them synthetically in light of: (1) identifying the audience being warned or subjects committing what is warned against; (2) identifying the sin committed; (3) determining the exhortation used; and (4) discerning the consequence of the sin. Another component from the warnings mentioned by McKnight in Heb. 6.9 and 10.39 concerns 'pastoral encouragement' (1992: 28).

Regarding the first point, the audience is comprised of converts to Christ: 'phenomenologically, the ancient writer believes them to be, and presents them as, believers in the fullest sense possible' (1992: 44). On the second point, the sin is apostasy which is deliberate, intentional, and consciously done (cf. Heb. 10.26). It includes abandonment of ethical precepts and a turning away from God (3.12; 12.25), the Son and his sacrifice (6.6; 10.29), and the grace-giving Spirit (10.29). The offense in 10.29 is blatant and the 'practitioner is proud of it… Apostasy in Hebrews does not lead to a concern over one's status before God but to pride in one's sinful defiance of God's will' (1992: 42-43). On the third point, essentially the recipients of the message are exhorted to persevere and be faithful; they should have an active faith requiring obedience to God. Fourth and finally, the consequence of the sin involves eternal destruction and forfeiture of final salvation (1992: 31-35, 43). Among other things, this punishment is described as not entering into the promised 'rest' (3.11, 18-19; 4.1, 6, 11), Gehenna or 'hell' (6.8), fire (10.27; 12.29), death without mercy (10.28), and a greater judgment than what took place under the old covenant (10.28-29; 12.18-19; cf. 2.1-4).

McKnight's approach to Hebrews looks at all the warning passages together and points out the high-handed nature of apostasy without associating it with a relapse to formative Judaism as some other scholars do (e.g., Bénétraeu 1989: I, 28-29; Ellingworth 1993: 78-80). Koester (2001) likewise does not consider the warnings as a relapse to emergent Judaism, but different than McKnight he emphasizes the nature of apostasy as the culmination of malaise, which is related to the recipients suffering external harassment (Heb. 10.32-39; 13.3, 13). Hence, the recipients are encouraged to continue attending fellowships and persevere in boldness (2001: 70-71, 76-77, 466-68). The brashness of apostasy is nonetheless evident in 10.26-29, and so we may wish to ponder on the possibility that the message in Hebrews addresses more than one type of apostasy.

Expanding on McKnight's mention of pastoral encouragement, Peterson (2008: 42-43) suggests from 6.9-11 and 10.39 a congregation comprising a

'majority of believers and some unbelievers' in which the minority are repeatedly warned against apostasy, such as in 6.4-8 and 10.26-38, and the majority are assured 'that they are believers who will demonstrate it by persevering' in 6.9 and 10.39. As we observed earlier, however, the author claims some sense of solidarity with the audience by his use of 'we' in the warnings; he identifies himself both with those whom he warns (10.26) and those whom he encourages (10.39), making a dichotomy between the two difficult to maintain. In addition, the other warnings in Hebrews 2, 3–4, and 12 do not end with clear words of assurance as they do in Hebrews 6 and 10. It seems quite strange that the author would invest so much of his message on warning the alleged minority of the congregation without offering words of assurance for the majority who could easily think the other warnings pertained to themselves.

Other interpreters (Nongbri 2003: 276-78; deSilva 2000a: 244-45; Attridge 1989: 174) claim that the strategy used in 6.9 and 10.39 was commonly employed in rhetorical speeches of the day, which encourage good will rather than allow harsh language to have the final word. In the art of persuasion, without such encouragement the audience might become alienated from the communicator, and the latter's sharp words might be rendered ineffective (cf. *Rhet. Her.* 4.37.49-50; Aristotle, *Rhet.* 2.5.1, 16; Dio Chrysostom 32.11). It was commonly understood that in frank speeches, after disseminating harsh language directed at friends, the speaker should give words of praise. At times Paul makes use of such rhetoric after giving a severe warning to his congregations (Gal. 5.10; 1 Cor. 10.13). Our author in Hebrews appears to be doing something very similar in 6.9 and 10.39. He adds words of confidence to offset the severe language of no restoration (Klauck 2006: 422).

Peterson nevertheless raises a valid point that such words of confidence and assurance can be neglected in discussions about the warnings, and pastoral encouragement, he claims, 'is not Calvinist special pleading for Hebrews' (2008: 43). The recipients are reminded of Christ's priestly intercession for them (Heb. 4.14-16; 5.2; 7.25), the forgiveness of sins via the new covenant (8.10-12; 10.14, 17-18), their assurance of hope and faith (6.9-11, 18-19; 10.22; 11.1), and God's faithfulness to them (13.5). One may read these texts in light of the way Peterson does, but there are other options. One view is typified by Cockerill (2007: 237-42) who argues that passages such as 7.23-25 and 10.14-17 are grounded in Christ's work and the new covenant (e.g., Heb. 7.22; 10.16), and both of which can be rejected by the apostate so as to cut off such a person from the benefits of Christ's work and the new covenant (cf. 10.29). Another conclusion is that when such assurances are combined with the warnings, we run into irresolvable tensions (Borchert 1987: 151-214). A third view is for us to consider the other assurances as having a rhetorical aim similar to the one addressed above. Whatever else the assurances in Hebrews might suggest, it seems that they too can be abandoned by the congregation members (10.29, 35; cf. 3.6, 12-14). The audience has the

responsibility of drawing near to God in faith and confidence (4.16; 7.25; 10.22), and they must not turn away in unbelief and disobedience (3.12; 4.1, 11).

Social-Scientific and Rhetorical Methods: Patron-Clients and the Pathos of Fear

Studies interacting with socio-rhetorical and social-scientific methods have opened novel ways of thinking about the warnings. David deSilva (1996; 1999: 230-35; 2000a: 240-44) reads the passages in light of the social ethos of reciprocity and patron-client relationships. He considers the rhetorical situation behind the homily 'as an address to clients of the divine patron urging the maintenance of loyalty and obedience' that governs the message's appropriation and application (1999: 232). God is viewed as a divine benefactor whose clients are the addressees of Hebrews, and apostasy is reckoned a serious 'affront to the only means of access (i.e., broker) to God as patron and benefactor, thus causing the offended to fall back into an adversarial relationship with God, the natural state before Jesus' mediation' (1996: 116). When examining the issue of no second repentance in Hebrews, deSilva suggests the author shares a similar social ethos with Seneca in which two differentiated sets of considerations are expected depending on whether a person is benefactor or recipient. Benefactors are expected to exercise generosity and give for the sake of giving to others rather than for personal advantage; recipients are to show gratitude to the giver and never forget what was received. To show ingratitude is to be ignoble and insulting to the benefactor (e.g., Seneca, *Ben.* 1.2.3; 1.4.3; 2.10.4; 3.1.1; cf. Dio Chrysostom 31.38, 65). The author of Hebrews warns his audience that the act of insulting their divine benefactor will exclude them from favors in the future (Heb. 6.4-6; cf. 10.26-31; 12.16-17).

DeSilva argues that by mitigating the force of passages such as Heb. 6.4-8, the belief of 'eternal security' goes too far with an expectation that a patron be lenient to indulgent and half-hearted clients 'who can easily excuse themselves from making a fair return (particularly if it becomes inconvenient or costly)' (1999: 234). On the other hand, a view teaching that God excludes second chances for apostates also goes too far. The author of Hebrews, influenced by ancient societal roles of patron-client relationships, wishes to instill in his audience honor and loyalty as clients belonging to the Lord, and thus he wants to eliminate every excuse related to ingratitude and disloyalty to God. The ancient writer is not disingenuous in his dire warnings to the audience, because from 'the perspective of the client, this is the face of reality', but from the patron's perspective, forgiveness and restoration remain the patron's (or God's) 'noble option, but one on which the client cannot presume… Favor is always fresh, always unmerited, always surprising, never to be taken for granted—and never to go unrequited!' (2000a: 204). We notice that at times, when Seneca addresses benefactors, he encourages them to be generous even to the ungrateful (*Ben.* 1.10.5; 7.31-32).

DeSilva's approach adds the interesting dynamic of blending theology with socio-rhetorical method, but he has received criticism from Brent Nongbri (2003) that his patron-client model does not fully explain the severity of language used in Heb. 6.4-8 (cf. 10.31): the breaking of the patron-client bond results only in dishonor and shame, not eternal destruction as Hebrews presents. Using apocalyptic sources and especially *4 Ezra* 9.10-12, along with Greco-Roman rhetorical guidelines on pathos related to fear and comfort, Nongbri posits that the author of Hebrews instills the emotion of fear in the hearts of the marginalized recipients. Rather than being anxious about reproaches from outsiders they are to fear apostatizing from the Christ community; eternal condemnation with no chance of repentance awaits them if they fall away.

This fear, however, is qualified by Patrick Gray (2003). The recipients are to have 'godly fear' which involves a moral response to submit to God's will (cf. *eulabeias*: 5.7; 12.28): 'Fear of God as both Hebrews and critics of superstition like Plutarch usually perceive, is not anxiety directed at a fickle, sadistic, and totally unpredictable deity. More accurately, the gods elicit fear because they are thorough to punish wrongdoing, whether in this world or in the next' (2003: 217). This requires the recipients possessing both a sense of awesomeness about God as well as a deep realization that God will punish the wicked at the end of time (2003: 153-54). For our author this punishment includes any Christ-followers who reject God. Along these lines Peter Perry (2009) studies Heb. 5.11–6.12 in light of Aristotle's *Art of Rhetoric* to suggest that the author attempts to get his audience who are 'unambitious' (*nôthros*) to see that his warnings against incurring God's wrath pertain to them and 'not generally to someone else' (2009: 122). The author shames them in 5.11-12 and attempts to make the emotion of fear personal to the recipients through the passage.

Social-Scientific Legitimation and Hebrews 6.4-6

Interpreting Hebrews from a social-scientific perspective, Iutisone Salevao (2002: 5-6) adopts the concept of legitimation from Berger and Luckmann (1966), which is 'essentially the aggregate of ways a society or social world is explained and justified to its members', and applies it to Hebrews in an effort to explain the correlation of the theology and situation of the recipients. For Salevao the ancient author creates a symbolic universe 'to legitimate the institutional order of the community of the readers' (2002: 93). These recipients are primarily Jewish Christ-followers who live in imperial Rome and struggle with the prospect of a relapse to Judaism as they cope with both in-group (deviation) and out-group (marginalization and persecution) conflicts. In this situation the author seeks to legitimate the validity of meanings, beliefs, and behavior of the group and empowers it to endure and persevere in the Christian confession (2002: 109-114, 165-69, 247-49, 252). Hebrews 6.4-6 evinces that some members were on the

verge of departing from the 'Christian universe' to Judaism, and the author has as his aim the prevention of this emigration by warning that a departure from the Christian faith is irrevocable (2002: 250-338). The believer's reception of the once-for-all death of Christ through repentance and baptism is unrepeatable, and deviance from the faith constitutes loss of salvation. Although Salevao's study offers a new methodological approach to the warnings, the traditional idea of a 'relapse to Judaism' will no doubt find scholarly dissenters.

The Intertexture of Israel's Scriptures in the Warnings

Another interpretative approach to understanding the warnings arises from studies that recognize how the author of Hebrews frequently cites, alludes to, or echoes Israel's scriptures throughout the work (Guthrie 2003). Studies examine the Song of Moses in Heb. 2.1-4 and 10.27, 30-31 (Proctor 2004; Steyn 2000; Swetnam 1994; Allen 2008: 19-43, 141), exodus-wilderness themes in Hebrews 3–4 and 12 (Enns 1997; Allen 2007; Thiessen 2009), Habakkuk in Heb. 10.37-38 (Gheorghita 2003: 148-224), and Deuteronomic covenant blessings and curses in Heb. 6.4-8 and 12.15-17 (Allen 2008: 103-108, 126-43, 244-45).

Allen (2008: 126-34) brings out the clearest echo from the wilderness traditions in the warning of Hebrews 6 as Deut. 11.11 (cf. Heb. 6.7-8), which is relevant to the covenantal blessings and curses motif. The echoes of more questionable references are heard by Dave Mathewson (1999) in 6.4-6. He adds 'OT example' as a fifth category to McKnight's four components of audience, exhortation, sin, and consequence (1999: 210-11) and argues that behind 6.4-6 rests the Kadesh Barnea rebellion in the wilderness already recognized in Hebrews 3–4 (cf. Ps. 95/Num. 13–14). He suggests that the thought of those who were once 'enlightened' from Heb. 6.4, for instance, alludes to the pillar of cloud that lit the Israelites' path at night (cf. Neh. 9.12, 19; Ps. 104[105].39). He also concludes that 'in analogy to the old covenant community the people depicted in 6.4-6 are *not genuine believers* or true members of the new covenant community' (1999: 224; emphasis in original). This is derived from his interpretation of other passages in the homily (Heb. 3.8, 12, 19; 4.2) where he finds the basis for thinking that the people experiencing the blessings in 6.4-6 are not 'genuine': like the wilderness generation before them, they are hard-hearted and fail to believe. Mathewson, however, does not explain why he thinks the people mentioned in Hebrews 3–4 (presumably) never had faith or were always hard-hearted. At any event, it is certainly possible that Hebrews 3–4 has informed the ancient author's rigorous view that apostates cannot be restored (e.g., Ps. 95.11), and despite the study's potential shortcomings, it rightly suggests that such pursuits are important because the ancient writer wants his audience to consider their situation in light of Israel's tradition history. More thorough examinations of the warnings in Hebrews in relation to Israel's scriptures are in order.

Hearing the Warnings: The Oral-Critical Method

Casey Davis (2008) highlights the perspective that Hebrews was created in the matrix of an oral culture with a high rate of illiteracy. The mindset of the original audience of Hebrews should be pondered in terms of original *hearers*. 'Authors could not, and would not, expect many in their audience to pour over their compositions and analyze their intent. As such, they wrote using conventions used in storytelling and rhetorical presentations that were ingrained in the life of the society' (2008: 759). Among the characteristics of oral composition is a formulaic style filled with rhythmic patterns, repetitions, antitheses, assonances, and the like. Also important are oral thoughts and expressions bringing to the foreground such things as agonistically toned 'friend' vs. 'foe,' and 'us' vs. 'them' expressions, and redundant patterns such as concentric structure, chiasms, inclusio, and parallelism (2008: 755).

The mindset behind the warnings suggests an agonistic culture which, in common with other early Jewish and Christian compositions, forms a structural chiasm. The first (Heb. 2.1-4) and fifth (12.1-29) warnings are parallel in structure (2.3; 12.25); the second (3.7–4.13) and fourth (10.19-39) refer to judgment from the scriptures and a theme of promise (4.1; 10.36), and the third and central warning of 5.11–6.12 is the focus of the oral composition. Within each of the five passages one finds condemnation, warnings, commands, encouragement/ assurance, and first-person plurals that make an inclusio and include the author with the audience (2008: 761). Davis's list of condemnations, however, has only one entry (5.11-14), and the verses classified as encouragement/assurance in certain cases are quite questionable (e.g., 12.29).

For Davis the central warning is different because 'we' forms an inclusio in 5.11 and 6.9, 11 that does not include the audience and there is no 'true command' in the passage (Davis places the command in 6.11 under the rubric of 'Encouragement'). The audience is placed in an adversarial role of 'them' rather than 'us' (i.e., the author) in which the author is telling them that he cannot personally restore them to repentance or fix their situation if they decide to stay in a state of retrogression: 'If they fall away they are *on their own* in returning to God' (2008: 765; emphasis in original). The warning in 6.4-6, then, does not affirm the impossibility of a second repentance. Davis paraphrases the writer to be saying: 'Therefore, I will move to this mature teaching since, if you turn away from God, I cannot *make* you right with him by constantly going over the elementary things. If you turn away, *you* must come back' (2008: 767).

The strength of oral criticism is that it takes seriously how the ancient audience may have heard the original message. Davis's observation of the distinction between the 'we' in 5.11–6.12 and those in other warnings is perceptive. Further ponderings might suggest the possibility that the aorist participles in 6.4-6 point to a third party that had already fallen away, and perhaps the recipients knew

about this. One setback with the oral approach, at least Davis's version of it, is that a structural chiasm of the warnings has been noticed by others who do not read the text in light of oral criticism (e.g., Bateman 2007: 84). Moreover, we should ask whether the audience would have really heard the message the way this study is imagining. Whereas a chiastic hearing of the warnings may be possible, Davis's view that the situation in 6.4-6 is not 'unrepentable' is critically weakened by the fact that at least two other times, in the fourth and fifth warnings, the author mentions no restoration for those who fall away (Heb. 10.26; 12.17). In an oral culture where this entire message would be heard in one setting, and the thoughts in it would be reinforced by being repeated (i.e., redundancy), it is very difficult to deny that the audience would have understood all three passages as precluding another chance to repent once the apostasy had taken place. One only needs to hear together 6.4-6; 10.26-29; and 12.15-17.

III. Observations

The various interpretations of the warning passages in Hebrews all have their respective merits, some more so than others. Studies motivated by Calvinist and Arminian theologies in the last generation have become more sophisticated than their systematic-theological predecessors, but such motivations still seem to guide the scholars' outcomes in predictable ways. New insights to the texts might be hindered in an effort to 'defend' one's tradition, and, overall, conclusions from such studies often fail to persuade the 'other side'. To be sure, it is impossible that we could abandon all our presuppositions and become a clean slate when reading the scriptures, but there is a tendency for scholars to look askance at those who come to the text with an entire pre-set theological paradigm of this sort intact. The other biblical approaches we examined tend to foster new and creative venues for interpretation.

At least four areas may warrant further studies on the warnings in Hebrews. First, more studies should include the use of recent methods such as the ones surveyed above. Second, more explanations that integrate in a cohesive manner the warnings with the assurances in the message are in order. Third, although the identity of the author has been virtually impossible to resolve (see options in Gräßer 1990: I, 19-22), more fruitful discussions might be ventured by probing the nature of apostasy in relation to the situation behind the homily. These include further attempts to determine Jewish or Gentile recipients and their respective locations. Do the recipients come from Rome/Italy (Hvalvik 2007: 206-208; cf. Heb. 13.24) where marginalization may have tempted members to stop fellowshipping with other Christ-followers? Do they come from Jerusalem/Palestine and may be affected by a conflict with Rome (e.g., Gleason 2002; but see Mackie 2007: 129-32)? Is this a community from Asia Minor (Dunnill 1992: 22-24; Spicq 1952: I, 235-36) that may be privileged but sluggish about their faith,

similar to churches in Revelation? Is there another option? A fourth area of study can combine synthetic and comparative investigations. It might first examine the passages that appear to deny restoration (Heb. 6.4-6; 10.26; 12.15-17) and then it would compare the results with other passages in the New Testament that maintain both similar thoughts (1 Jn 5.16-18; Mk 3.29; Mt. 12.31; and Lk. 12.10) and dissimilar (Gal. 6.1; Rom. 11.25-32; 2 Tim. 2.24-26; James 5.19-20; Jude 22–23). A careful study of this sort, however, might reveal that the early Christ-communities had differing and even conflicting viewpoints on this issue and that neither Calvinist nor Arminian theologies possess the final word on how we interpret such passages as a whole.

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