

## **A SEVERE WARNING AGAINST DEFECTION**

### ***HEBREWS 10:26-31***

by Dr. J. Paul Tanner

#### **INTRODUCTION**

The author of Hebrews writes as a concerned pastor for his audience who stood in danger of retreating in their spiritual pilgrimage. Most likely, his readers were Jewish by background, and had come to embrace Jesus as their Messiah and Savior. Throughout the book, their identity as true regenerated Christians is affirmed. In Heb 3:1, for instance, he addresses them as "holy brethren" and declares that they have already become "participants" (Gk μέτοχοι) of a heavenly calling. Theirs was a "heavenly calling" because God was calling them (like Abraham) to a heavenly country, more specifically, to the New Jerusalem of Messiah's kingdom in the "world to come" (2:5; 11:16; 12:22). There they would have a "lasting city" (13:14). The author credits their faith as real and genuine, because they had been willing in days past to suffer for their faith. He says that "after being enlightened," they "endured a great deal of sufferings" (10:32). Along the way, however, they had neglected their spiritual progress. They had not matured as they should have and had even become "dull of hearing" (5:11). The author thus rebukes them, because though they ought to have been teachers by now, they were still struggling with "spiritual baby food" (5:12). The author recognizes that their spiritual sluggishness (6:12) left them in a very dangerous position. Apparently they were being tempted to turn away from submission to their spiritual leaders (13:17), and some seem to have come to the point of even forsaking the Christian assembly (10:25). Unless they were rescued from their spiritual lethargy and rebellion, they stood in danger of wavering in regard to their Christian "confession" (i.e., their confession of Christ and His atoning work for them by His perfect sacrifice—Heb 3:1). Thus the author urges them in Heb 4:14, "let us hold fast our confession" and again in 10:23, "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering."

If they make the perilous step of abandoning their confession, there would be a two-fold loss for them. First, they would jeopardize the potential reward that God promised those who remained faithful (6:11-12). For this reason, he exhorts them, "Therefore, do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised" (10:35-36). In light of the eschatological overtones of the book, this has to mean reward in the future Messianic kingdom. Second, abandoning their confession would place them in position to receive severe judgment from God Himself. It is this concern about facing God's judgment that is the subject of our passage in Heb 10:26-31.

#### **THE CONTEXT OF HEBREWS 10:26-31**

The author of Hebrews knows that the best way to deal with his wayward audience is to confront them, not with mere emotional appeals, but with a convincing and convicting presentation of Scriptural truth—particularly that which would be of interest to a Jewish believer. They need to understand that Jesus is God's Son who has ushered in a New Covenant to replace the old Mosaic covenant and all its earthly

sacrificial apparatus. Furthermore, they need to realize that this was the expectation of the Old Testament itself (this was announced beforehand!). In chapters 1–7, the author focused his argument on the superiority of Jesus to several key figures involved in the old economy. His superiority ensures the superiority of the New Covenant itself. In chapters 8–10, however, the author turns his argument to consider the priestly ministry that belongs to Jesus. He had already established that Jesus was indeed both a king and a high priest—a role combining two important ministries that had been predicted of Messiah following the pattern of Melchizedek (Ps 110). If therefore Jesus is a priest, what is his priestly ministry? Chapters 8–10 show that the New Covenant is superior, because (1) God had predicted through the prophet Jeremiah that the Old Covenant would be replaced and (2) the sacrifice of Christ was vastly superior to anything that animal sacrifices might have achieved. Those sacrifices were the *shadow*, but His sacrifice was the reality—one made in the heavenly tabernacle itself! The author concludes the doctrinal treatise by pointing out that the sacrifice involving the shedding of Christ's own blood was sufficient to sanctify forever those who turned in faith to Jesus Christ (10:10,14), and thus assured the New Covenant participant of eternal forgiveness (10:18).

With the doctrinal presentation of 8:1–10:18 complete, the author turns to give his readers an appropriate exhortation in 10:19-39. This is designed to challenge them in the way they should consider responding to the superior sacrifice of Christ under the New Covenant. Scripturally and logically, Christ's priestly work is infinitely superior to the Old Covenant. There is no reason for them to forsake their confidence in Christ in favor of retreating to some form of Judaism. He develops the exhortation in three phases:

- (1) In 10:19-25, he admonishes them to *draw near* to God and faithfully participate with the community of believers.
- (2) In 10:26-31, he warns them of judgment that awaits those who cease fellowshiping with the community of believers and abandon their confession of faith in Christ and the perfect sacrifice He made with His blood.
- (3) In 10:32-39, he encourages them and calls for them to endure through the exercise of faith, so that they might eventually be rewarded.

The exegetical *big idea* for this whole unit could be summed up in the following words:

*In light of the superior sacrifice for sins provided in the New Covenant, believers must faithfully endure in their allegiance and service to Jesus Christ!*

## **EXEGETICAL TENSION POINTS**

Most commentators agree that Heb 10:26-31 is a strong warning addressed to those who might possibly abandon their profession of faith in Christ, and that in doing so they would face God's judgment. However, there is substantial disagreement on the true spiritual status of those who might do so, as well as the nature of the judgment that would be incurred. Are the guilty ones true Christians or had they merely made a profession of faith without really being regenerated? Is the ensuing judgment one of eternal condemnation to hell or some other severe chastisement?

Secondary debates concern the nature of the sin itself in verse 26, the intended reference of the phrase "by which he/it was sanctified" (verse 29), and the proper translation and point of the second quotation in verse 30. As for the sin in verse 26, does the author have in mind a singular heinous sin, or is he thinking about persistency in sin in general (note the *NIV* translation "If we deliberately keep on sinning" in contrast to the *KJV* "if we sin willfully").

It is this author's conviction that the key to understanding the entire passage is a careful identification and interpretation of the Old Testament quotations and allusions that undergird these verses. Every verse of this passage involves either a quotation or allusion to some Old Testament verse. In the course of this paper, I will attempt to explain each one and the bearing they have on the exegesis of the text before us. At the same time, I would also concur with Scot McKnight that this *warning passage* cannot be interpreted in isolation, for all the warning passages must be studied "not as unrelated texts as they have been traditionally treated, but as an organic whole, each of which expresses four components of the author's message."<sup>1</sup> As for the identification of the spiritual status of those in view, this must be decided on the basis of exegetical and contextual factors.

### **THE SPIRITUAL STATUS OF THOSE BEING WARNED**

The following chart summarizes the substantial difference of opinion as to the true spiritual status of those who are being warned as well as the consequent judgment they potentially face.

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<sup>1</sup> Scot McKnight, "The Warning Passages of Hebrews: A Formal Analysis and Theological Conclusions," *Trinity Journal* 13 (Spring 1992): 22-23.

| VIEW | SPIR. STATUS  | JUDGMENT                    | REPRESENTATIVE PROPONENTS  |
|------|---|-----------------------------|--|
| 1    | Non-Christian   | Hell                        | Bruce, <sup>2</sup> Hughes, Morris, Nicole, Peterson, Stedman, Toussaint |
| 2    | True Christian  | AD 70 Judgment              | Pentecost, <sup>3</sup> Randall Gleason <sup>4</sup>                     |
| 3    | True Christian  | Hell<br>(loss of salvation) | Ellingworth, <sup>5</sup> Lane, Marshall, McKnight                       |
| 4    | True Christian  | Temporal<br>Judgment        | Dillow, <sup>6</sup> Hodges, Oberholtzer                                 |
| 5    | Hypothetical View<br>(viewed as Christians, but<br>actually unregenerate) | Hell                        | Mugridge <sup>7</sup>  |

The issue of the spiritual status of those threatened with judgment in this passage is obviously crucial to any interpretation of the passage of the whole. Because of the perceived severity of the judgment, there is

<sup>2</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, 2<sup>d</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1990); Philip E. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1977); Leon Morris, "Hebrews," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 12 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 1981); Roger Nicole, "Some Comments on Hebrews 6:4-6 and the Doctrine of Perseverance of God with the Saints," in *Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation: Studies in Honor of Merrill C. Tenney Presented by his Former Students*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co.); Robert A. Peterson, "Apostasy," *Presbyterion* 19 (Spr 1993): 17-31; Ray C. Stedman, *Hebrews*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992); and Stanley D. Toussaint, "The Eschatology of the Warning Passages in the Book of Hebrews," *Grace Theological Journal* 3:1 (Spring 1982): 67-80.

<sup>3</sup> J. Dwight Pentecost, *A Faith That Endures* (Grand Rapids, MI: Discovery House Publishers, 1992).

<sup>4</sup> Randall C. Gleason, "The Eschatology of the Warning in Hebrews 10:26-31," *Tyndale Bulletin* 53 (1, 2002): 97-120.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews; A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1993); William L. Lane, *Hebrews*, Word Biblical Commentaries, 2 vols. (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1991); I. H. Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God: A Study of Perseverance and Falling Away* (London: Epworth, 1969); and Scot McKnight, "The Warning Passages of Hebrews."

<sup>6</sup> Joseph C. Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings: A Study of Eternal Security and the Final Significance of Man* (Schoettle Pub. Co., 1992); Zane C. Hodges, "Hebrews," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, New Testament edition, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983); Thomas Kem Oberholtzer, "The Danger of Willful Sin in Hebrews 10:26-39; Part 4 of The Warning Passages in Hebrews," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 145:580 (Oct-Dec 1988): 410-419.

<sup>7</sup> Alan Mugridge, "Warnings in the Epistle to the Hebrews: An Exegetical and Theological Study," *The Reformed Theological Review* 46:3 (Sep-Dec 1987): 74-82.

a temptation to retreat to our theological systems too quickly and thereby short-circuit the exegetical analysis. Our theological presuppositions must patiently await our examination of the contextual details.

In the preceding paragraph (10:19), the author referred to his readers as "brethren," a designation that stems from his argument in chapter two of the closeness of relationship between Jesus and those whom He has sanctified as "the author of their salvation." He concludes, "For both He who sanctifies and those who are sanctified (οἱ ἁγιαζόμενοι) are all from one *Father*, for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren" (2:11). Chapter two concludes by pointing out that for these same *brethren*, Jesus is able to come to their aid when they are tempted (2:18). His opening statement of chapter three in which he calls them "holy brethren" (ἀδελφοὶ ἅγιοι) must be seen in light of his usage of these terms in chapter two. For them, Jesus is the Apostle and High Priest of their "confession" . . . a confession that they are exhorted to *hold fast* (3:1; 4:14). The reference to being "tempted" at the end of chapter two is clarified by the context of chapter three. Just as the wilderness generation of Israelites hardened their hearts against God until they rebelled at Kadesh-Barnea, the author knows that his readers face a similar temptation to turn against God. Thus, he applies the Old Testament illustration to them: "Take care, brethren, lest there should be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart (Lit., *an evil heart of unbelief*) in falling away from the living God" (3:12).<sup>8</sup> We notice once again his designation of them as "brethren," but it is clear that it is these brethren that are in danger of "falling away."<sup>9</sup>

The reference, then, to his readers as "brethren" in Heb 10:19 has significant connections to his expectations and concerns in the earlier part of the book. The author follows this affirmation of their faith with an immediate reinforcement of their spiritual status. He reminds them that they now have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus who is their great priest over the house of God (10:19-21). Nevertheless, he expresses his concern for them, as he had earlier in chapter three. In contrast to "an evil heart of unbelief" (3:12), he exhorts them to draw near to God with a "sincere heart" (ἀληθινῆς καρδίας) in full assurance of faith (10:22). Once again, he reminds them to hold fast their "confession" without wavering (10:23). In chapter three, the author had followed his warning of falling away by an appeal to "encourage one another day after day," knowing that they needed each other's mutual support. Likewise, he urges them in 10:24 to "consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds," not forsaking their own assembling together. The parallels between chapters 2–4 and 10:19-25 are striking, yet the latter takes on far greater significance in light of the doctrinal presentation of Christ's atoning sacrifice for them in 9:1–10:18.

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<sup>8</sup> The translation "evil heart of unbelief" sharpens the comparison with the wilderness generation. The word translated "unbelief" (ἀπιστίας) is used specifically of the sin of the wilderness generation in Heb 3:19: "And so we see that they were not able to enter because of unbelief (ἀπιστίαν). The particular form of unbelief for the wilderness generation, however, was not soteriological but rather a lack of faith in trusting God to enable them to enter the land and conquer it as He had promised. Neither is the author's concern for his readers a soteriological one.

<sup>9</sup> The Greek term for "falling away" is ἀποστῆναι from the verb ἀφίστημι. This is the only time our author uses this particular term in the whole epistle (though it is used 14 times in the NT—take note of Acts 15:38 where it is used of John Mark who "deserted" Paul and Barnabas on their missionary journey). In the LXX, ἀφίστημι is used at least four times with the preposition ἀπὸ and either θεός or κύριος as the object (Deut 32:15; Josh 22:19; 2 Chr 26:18; 30:7). In 2 Chr 26:18, for instance, it is used of King Uzziah (a king known for doing "right in the sight of the LORD") who *rebelled* (ἀπέστης) against the Lord. In Deut 32:15, the expression is used of Israel in regard to *forsaking* God by turning to idols.

In the warning passage of 10:26-31, the opening words "if we sin willfully" can hardly be taken to apply to anyone other than these same readers the author has just affirmed and exhorted in 10:19-25. In other words, the preceding context would most naturally suggest that the "we" of 10:26 refers to these "brethren" whose confession, though genuine, must be *held fast*.

Likewise, the following context reinforces their identity as true believers in Christ. In reminding them of their former days in which they had suffered greatly for their faith, he adds the note that this was "after being enlightened" (10:32). Surely, the author has in mind sufferings subsequent to the time of their conversion, for it is extremely doubtful that his Jewish readers would have suffered for a faith in Jesus that they had not genuinely experienced. The fact that he exhorts them with the words "do not throw away your confidence" in verse 35 confirms that they are indeed genuine believers. Furthermore, verse 36 reflects that their real need is "endurance" (not new birth through *saving faith* in Christ). In the final verses of the chapter (vv 37-39), the author draws from the Septuagint rendering of Isa 26:20 and Hab 2:3-4 to remind them that their endurance should be focused on the Lord's return—"for yet in a very little while, He who is coming will come and will not delay."<sup>10</sup> In so doing, the author has expressed a Messianic understanding of Hab 2:3. This is significant for the author of Hebrews, for the next verse of Habakkuk focuses on the "righteous one" who is expected to live by faith. In quoting from Habakkuk 2:4, however, the author of Hebrews has deliberately reversed the lines. He first cites Hab 2:4b and then 2:4a, apparently to accentuate the words "my righteous one." Ellingworth adds,

The restructuring of the verse means that the subject of ὑποστείληται is no longer 'the vision,' as in the LXX, but 'my righteous one.' This supports the author's presupposition that his readers are all believers (and thus 'righteous'), but that some of them are in danger of shrinking back from the life of faith.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, there are two alternatives available for God's "righteous one": (1) he may "live by faith," i.e., walk with God by faith. An option that will be encouraged in chapter 11; or (2) he may "shrink back," in which case, the Lord will not take delight in him, i.e., He will not be pleased with him. The crucial observation here is to note that the pronoun in the words "if he shrinks back" refers back to "the righteous one." Yet, *shrinking back* must be avoided, for such a choice could result in "destruction." Undoubtedly a severe judgment akin to what the author had spoken of in 10:27,31.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> This expectation of the Lord's return builds upon his previous statement in Heb 9:28 that Christ shall appear a second time to those who eagerly await Him for salvation. He is prone to think of "salvation" in eschatological terms connected with the Second Coming of Christ.

<sup>11</sup> Ellingworth, 555.

<sup>12</sup> There is no necessary reason to assume that "destruction" (ἀπώλεια) means *destruction in hell*. The term itself is used about 18 times in the NT and 122 times in the LXX, in each case in an assortment of different ways. The term is used of the "man of lawlessness" (the Antichrist) in 2 Thes 2:3 who is also called "the son of destruction" (which could imply his destruction by the Lord Himself and his being cast into the lake of fire). On the other hand, the word can be used merely in the sense of *loss of life*. In Esther 7:4, for instance, the LXX reads, "For both I and my people are sold for destruction" (εἰς ἀπώλειαν). Unfortunately, the NIV has translated Heb 10:39 so as to imply that the issue is soteriological: "But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved." In the Greek text, however, there is no verb "believe" or "saved." More literally, the verse says "but *we are* of faith to (*resulting in*) the preserving of life" (ἀλλὰ πίστεως εἰς περιποίησιν ψυχῆς). As chapter 11 substantiates, the *faith* he has in mind is not soteriological.

If both the preceding and following paragraphs to 10:26-31 clearly address true believers, it seems logical to conclude that those who are warned in the central paragraph (namely, 10:26-31) are true believers. Xbarring any evidence to the contrary. For some, their theological presuppositions may not allow them to concede that *true believers* could commit such a heinous sin as envisioned in these verses. Yet the text must be allowed to speak for itself. Within the paragraph, we seem to have confirming evidence that they are indeed true believers. The author points out that one of the offenses of the apostate is that he has "regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified" (ἐν ᾧ ἡγιασθη). The following tables summarizes the various interpretations that have been given to the last clause of this statement:

|   | VIEW                   | DESCRIPTION  | PROPOSERS  |
|---|------------------------|--|--|
| 1 | Christian              | They are Christians who have been cleansed by Christ's blood.                                      | Lenski, <sup>13</sup> Westcott, Pentecost, Lane, Marshall, Hodges, Dillow, Mugridge (hypoth.), McKnight, Oberholtzer, Ellingworth, |
| 2 | Christ                 | The "he" refers to Christ, not the apostate  | MacArthur, <sup>14</sup> Nicole (but see "Professing")   |
| 3 | Covenant               | The blood has sanctified the covenant  | N. Weeks <sup>15</sup>   |
| 4 | Only-hope              | The blood <i>alone</i> can sanctify his people   | F. F. Bruce (262)  |
| 5 | Potential              | The blood has the <i>potential</i> to sanctify him   | P. E. Hughes (423)   |
| 6 | Initial Sanctification | The apostate experienced an <i>initial act</i> in the sanctifying process (but short of salvation) | Leon Morris (107)  |
| 7 | Covenantally Set Apart | The apostate had been covenantally set apart as 'belonging to God' (but not saved)                 | Peterson (25)  |
| 8 | Professing             | The apostate had <i>regarded himself</i> as holy by the blood                                      | Stedman (112); [Nicole admits possibility - 362]   |

Views 4 and 5 must be ruled out by virtue of the grammar. The aorist indicative passive of ἡγιαζω is certainly looking at an actual accomplished event, not something that was merely potential or an only hope.<sup>16</sup> Views 2-3 and 6-8 are extremely doubtful in light of the way ἡγιαζω is used in Hebrews. In his doctrinal argument about the sacrifice of Christ (chapters 9X10), the author instructed his readers that "by this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (10:10; cf. 2:11). A few verses later, he indicates that the benefit of Christ's sacrifice (which brings eternal forgiveness) is for the *sanctified*: "For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified" (10:14). In these verses, the author uses "sanctification" in the sense of justification, not as

<sup>13</sup> R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Epistle to the Hebrews and The Epistle of James* (Minneapolis, MI: Augsburg Pub. House, 1966), 360; Brooke F. Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: The Greek Text with Notes and Essays* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1892; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1974), 331; Pentecost, 177; Lane, 2:294; Marshall, 148; Hodges, 806; Dillow, 463; Mugridge (hypoth.), 79; McKnight, 38; Oberholtzer, 414; and Ellingworth, 540.

<sup>14</sup> John MacArthur, *Hebrews* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1983), 279; and Nicole, 356.

<sup>15</sup> N. Weeks, "Admonition and Error in Hebrews, *Westminster Theological Journal* 39 (1976), 80.

<sup>16</sup> The aorist verb ἡγιασθη in 10:29 is certainly a *constative aorist*. An *ingressive* use of the aorist must be ruled out by virtue of ἡγιαζω in the perfect tense in Heb 10:10.

progressive conformity to the image of Christ, and most commentators understand it that way in light of the context of Christ's atoning sacrifice. Hence, F. F. Bruce concludes,

The sanctification which his people receive in consequence is their inward cleansing from sin and their being made fit for the presence of God, so that henceforth they can offer him acceptable worship. It is a sanctification which has taken place once for all; in this sense it is as unrepeatable as the sacrifice which effects it.<sup>17</sup>

The reference, therefore, in Heb 10:29 to having been "sanctified" clearly has in mind what was just said in this same chapter. It is *believers* who are sanctified by Christ's perfect atoning sacrifice. It is not Christ who is sanctified . . . it is not the covenant which is sanctified! Furthermore, the verse says nothing about a *potential* of being sanctified or of being *covenantally set apart*. The contextual use of ἀγιάζω in this chapter warrants against such a suggestion.

Finally, I would agree with others (e.g., McKnight) who have pointed out that those in danger in Heb 10:26-31 are one and the same as those in Hebrews six. The characteristics of those in view in Heb 6:4-5 (those whom he hopes will move on to maturity) are convincingly *Christian*. One can consult my article on Hebrews 5:11–6:12 for a substantiation of the arguments.<sup>18</sup>

Taking the context before and after Heb 10:26-31 into consideration as well as the *clue* in 10:29 that the potential apostate has been "sanctified," those in danger of judgment in this passage are clearly true regenerate Christian believers.

### THE SIN AND THREAT OF JUDGMENT (10:26-27)

In verse 26, there is a question as to the nature of the sin the author has in mind. Is he thinking of one particular kind of sin or (in a more general sense) of *continuance* in sin? The *NIV*, for instance, implies that the issue is one of continuing in a lifestyle of sin: "If we deliberately keep on sinning." The words "keep on" have been added by the translators to reflect their understanding of the present participle (ἀμαρτανόντων), though the grammar certainly does not demand *persistent* action.<sup>19</sup> In a similar construction in Hebrews 10:1, we have the conjunction γὰρ with a present tense circumstantial participle (though "causal") and followed in the sentence by a present tense main verb. Yet the participle does not express persistent action, but mere statement of fact: "For the Law, since it has (not *keeps on having*) only a shadow . . . , can never make perfect."<sup>20</sup> There are certain constructions in which a present tense

<sup>17</sup> Bruce, 243.

<sup>18</sup> J. Paul Tanner, "But If It Yields Thorns and Thistles"; An Exposition of Hebrews 5:11–6:12," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 14:26 (Spring 2001): 19-42. Cf. Randall C. Gleason, "The Old Testament Background of the Warning in Hebrews 6:4-8," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 155 (Jan-Mar 1998): 62-91; and Scot McKnight, "The Warning Passages of Hebrews," 45-48.

<sup>19</sup> Dana and Mantey state, "Though the tense of the participle never conveys an independent expression of time, yet its relation to its context involves a temporal significance. . . . Time with the participle is purely relative" (H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* [Toronto: The Macmillan Co., 1927, 1955], 229-30). They go on to describe how the participle has three variations in respect to the main verb of the sentence: antecedent action, simultaneous action, or subsequent action.

<sup>20</sup> Another similar situation involving a present tense circumstantial participle arises in Heb 4:14, yet once again the point is not *persistence* of action but mere acknowledgment of fact: "Since therefore we have (ἔχοντες - Pres Ptc) a great high priest . . . , let us hold fast (κρατῶμεν - present subjunctive) the confession."



verb might be used to reflect persistent action, but that has to be carefully decided on the basis of context.<sup>21</sup>

Since the grammar alone does not determine whether the author has in mind *a continual state of sinning* or the fact that a certain sin is done, we must look closely at the context to determine his point. Three matters from the context suggest that the author is thinking of a particular sin rather than a lifestyle in which one *continues* to sin. The first clue stems from the preceding paragraph, in which the author had just exhorted his readers to "hold fast their confession of hope without wavering." The fact that he had expressed the same concern earlier in the book (see 3:6; 4:14) underscores the significance of this action. He was obviously concerned that they might abandon their confession, and the fact that he reiterates this again in chapter 10 reflects that this was uppermost in his thinking.

A second clue is the author's use of the verb *ἁμαρτάνω* for "sinning." Although this is a common word to express the idea of sinning, our author has used it only one other time, namely, in Heb 3:17. In that case, it spoke of those who sinned in the wilderness by rebelling against God and who died off without going into Canaan.<sup>22</sup> This was the sin of rebellion at Kadesh-Barnea, in which the wilderness generation had refused to go up to conquer the land . . . a sin which our author had gone to great lengths to highlight, since the repercussions were so monumental (i.e., it led to their severe judgment).<sup>23</sup> As he has frequently done, our author seems to be drawing a parallel between the Old Testament situation and his present readers. Just as the wilderness generation greatly sinned when they rebelled against the LORD at Kadesh-Barnea (and were severely judged), so our author is concerned that his readers might sin on a par with their Old Testament counterparts.

The third clue—and the most significant—comes from the adverb *ἔκουσίως*, translated "deliberately" or "willingly." The word is only used one other time in the NT (1 Pet 5:2), and the combination of *ἔκουσίως* with *ἁμαρτάνω* is not used in either the NT or the LXX. The word *ἔκουσίως* usually has the meaning "to be willing to do something" or to do something "voluntarily."<sup>24</sup> Several commentators have pointed out that Heb 10:26 may have some connection with the Old Testament concept of "intentional sin" in Numbers 15: 22-31, although the lexical connections with this passage are usually overlooked. The adverb *ἔκουσίως* does suggest a connection.

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<sup>21</sup> In Rom 6:1, we do have a present tense verb in which the idea of *continuance in sin* is expressed ("Are we to continue in sin?"), but in that case the *persistent action* stems from the lexical meaning of the verb itself (*ἐπιμενω*) and not from the fact that it is present tense (*ἐπιμένωμεν τῇ ἁμαρτίᾳ*). In Phil 1:22, we have a conditional statement reflecting persistent action, but the syntax involves the particle *εἰ* followed by a present infinitive: "If I am to go on living in the body." In most cases where a present tense verb *could* be taken in the sense of persistent action, it could just as well be taken in the sense of mere acknowledgment of fact. For instance, we have a present participle (*τοὺς ἁμαρτάνοντας*) in 1 Tim 5:20, but the translations handle this differently. The *NASB* translates "Those who continue in sin, rebuke in the presence of all," whereas the *NIV* translates "Those who sin are to be rebuked publicly."

<sup>22</sup> The *rebellion* aspect of their decision is reflected in Deut 1:26 in Moses' reflection upon the events of Kadesh-Barnea: "Yet you were not willing to go up, but rebelled against the command of the LORD your God."

<sup>23</sup> The same word *ἁμαρτάνω* was used in the LXX at Num 14:40 to express the wicked deed of those who sinned at Kadesh Barnea: "we have indeed sinned" (*ἠμάρτομεν*).

<sup>24</sup> The adverbial form appears five times in the LXX (Ex 36:2; Ps 53:8; 2 Macc 14:3; 4 Macc 5:23, 8:25), although we also have the cognate form *ἐκούσιος* in Lev 7:16; 23:38; Num 15:3; 29:38; and Deut 12:6.

The passage in Numbers 15 is concerned with transgression of the Mosaic Law. If the violation was not intentional (they were unaware that the Law was being violated), then an acknowledgment along with an appropriate sacrifice was to be made.<sup>25</sup> This could happen at either the community level or individual level. Num 15:22-26 describes the community situation, whereas Num 15:27-31 describes the individual situation. Furthermore, the individual situation is divided into two parts: verses 27-29 prescribe what to do when the sin is unintentional, and verses 30-31 handle the case where the violation of the Law was done intentionally or *willfully* (with full knowledge and purposeful transgression). The latter was termed sin "of a high hand" (הַיָּד הַגְּבוּרָה).<sup>26</sup>

The LXX translators rendered the phrase "by a high hand" with the Greek words ἐν χειρὶ ὑπερηφανίας, meaning "by an arrogant or defiant hand." Verse 30 goes on to say that in doing so, "he has *reviled* (ἐβλασφημῆσεν) the LORD." Consequently, that one is to be "cut off" from the people, i.e., to be put to death.<sup>27</sup> The point is, in contrast to the preceding situations, that the violator had no recourse to a sacrifice but was left with the severe alternative of judgment by capital punishment.

If the author of Hebrews has this situation in mind, that would do a lot to explain Heb 10:26. That he probably does have Num 15:22-31 in mind is borne out by his deliberate use of the words ἔκουσίως and ἀμαρτάνω to describe the concept "to sin intentionally." Although this phrase is not used in the Num 15 passage, the antithetical expression "to sin unintentionally" does employ the lexical antonym of ἔκουσίως, namely ἀεκούσιος.<sup>28</sup> In fact, the idea "to sin unintentionally" is expressed in vs 27 by the Greek phrase ἀμαρτή ἀκουσίως (with the aorist subj. active of ἀμαρτάνω). Thus, if Moses uses ἀεκούσιος and ἀμαρτάνω to describe the concept of "sinning unintentionally," it would be logically deduced that the opposite idea ("to sin intentionally") would be expressed by ἔκουσίως and ἀμαρτάνω which is exactly what the author of Hebrews has done.<sup>29</sup>

Recognition of the lexical play upon Num 15:22-31 is significant to our exegesis of Heb 10:26. The issue in Num 15 was not *persistence in sin* but a certain kind of sin that was so serious as to warrant death. Likewise, the author of Hebrews is thinking of a *particular kind of sin* that would be to the New Covenant believer what "sin of a high hand" had been to the Old Covenant believer. Furthermore, when the author of Hebrews says "there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins," he still has the Num 15 passage

<sup>25</sup> Harrison notes, "These transgressions could include actions undertaken in ignorance of Levitical law, inadvertent neglect or violation of Tabernacle or priestly protocol, or some other social misdemeanor that, although unintentional in nature, had the effect of violating the sanctity of the whole community of priests. Because the transgression was not deliberate, no specific moral guilt was attached to it" (R. K. Harrison, *Numbers*, The Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary [Chicago: Moody Press, 1990], 225).

<sup>26</sup> Ashley points out that not all intentional sin was considered sin "of a high hand." The latter "differs from the intentional sin described in Lev. 5:20-26 (Eng. 6:1-7) for which a reparation offering may be made, 'when the offender feels guilty' (5:23,26)" (Timothy R. Ashley, *The Book of Numbers*, NICOT [Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1993], 288).

<sup>27</sup> For the idea of the Hebrew verb הָרַג meaning "put to death," see Ex 31:14 (cf. *BDB* 504b 1b). The LXX translators rendered הָרַג in vs 30 by ἐξολεθρευθήσεται (from ἐξολεθρευω), meaning "to be utterly destroyed."

<sup>28</sup> The presence of ἀεκούσιος in Num 15:22-31 takes on even greater significance when it is observed that the word occurs four times in vv 24-29, and a verb form of ἀκουσιάζω occurs in vs 28.

<sup>29</sup> We should also note that the author of Hebrews employs the word "sacrifice" (θυσία) along with the phrase "for sins" (περὶ ἁμαρτιῶν), both of which occur in Num 15:24.

in mind. When one committed "sin of a high hand," he had to realize that he had crossed the point of no return—there was no sacrifice available that could undo the damage. He could only expect judgment in the form of death. Likewise, the author of Hebrews is thinking of a most serious sin in which the believer will have crossed the point of no return—where he can only expect God's severe judgment. There is a certain irony in all this, however, for the author of Hebrews had stated only a few verses earlier that Christ had "offered one sacrifice for sins for all time" (10:12).<sup>30</sup> How sad it would be that a believer would come to the point of abandoning his confidence in Christ (and His once and for all sacrifice for sins), only to discover that his "willful sin" would leave him no alternative sacrifice to deter God's judgment.

This may seem contradictory, for if Christ's perfect sacrifice brings forgiveness for all sins such that no further sacrifice is needed (10:14, 18), how is it that His sacrifice has not protected the one who committed the "willful sin" in verse 26? The theological tension can be resolved, if we distinguish more clearly *in what way* Christ's sacrifice protects the sinner. If we are talking about the believer's eternal standing before God, then Christ's sacrifice has completely and absolutely brought him forgiveness from any and all sin. If we are talking about *averting judgment* (i.e., chastisement for sin), then Christ's perfect sacrifice does not avert the judgment for "willful sin" any more than His sacrifice would avert God's chastisement for a believer who had committed adultery or had drunk of the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner (1 Cor 11:27-30). The New Testament is clear that believers can (and do) commit sin that results in God's judgment and discipline, though they have God's eternal forgiveness of such sin through Christ's sacrifice on their behalf. We must be careful not to *over-read* Heb 10:26b. The verse is not necessarily saying that (by committing this "willful sin") they have lost God's eternal forgiveness. Commensurate with Num 15:22-31, the author is simply saying that once such a serious sin is committed (abandoning their confession), there is no sacrifice that will avert God's judgment.<sup>31</sup> He is making them aware that they will certainly face some form of judgment from God—though he does not say precisely what that judgment will be. For the Old Covenant community, the judgment was of a temporal nature—capital punishment—not eternal punishment in hell.

What makes this sin in Heb 10:26 so tragic is that it is done "after receiving the knowledge of the truth." Some have thought this phrase only means that the guilty one had *some enlightenment*—some understanding of the gospel—but decided in the final analysis to reject Christ's atoning work (and thus never to have entered into His salvation).<sup>32</sup> However, the words "the knowledge (ἐπίγνωσις) of the truth" are found at least four times in the pastoral epistles and are consistently used of authentic Christian experience.<sup>33</sup> In 1 Tim 2:4, for instance, Paul refers to God our Savior "who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." Lane concludes that this is a technical expression,

<sup>30</sup> In Heb 10:26, the author of Hebrews uses the Greek phrase *περὶ ἁμαρτιῶν ... θυσία* to express a "sacrifice for sins," whereas in Heb 10:12, Christ's sacrifice is *ὑπὲρ ἁμαρτιῶν ... θυσίαν*. Although there is no apparent significant difference in meaning (note 1 Pet 3:18), he may have been influenced by the Num 15 passage which uses *περὶ ἁμαρτίας* (three times! X vv 24, 25 and 27). Cf. Heb 5:3.

<sup>31</sup> For the author of Hebrews, the sin of "abandoning one's confession" must be a very hardened state and not a mere momentary denouncing of Christ. Even Peter denied the Lord three times, yet he was forgiven and went on to become one of the great Apostles of the first century. Westcott (330) concluded about the apostate of Heb 10, "His conduct shews that he has already abandoned his faith, and that too after he had made trial of its blessings. His decision, expressed in deed, is regarded as complete and final."

<sup>32</sup> R. Stedman, 110; and P. E. Hughes, 419.

<sup>33</sup> 1 Tim 2:4; 2 Tim 2:25; 3:7; and Titus 1:1.

This technical expression refers to the acceptance of life in response to the preaching of the gospel . . . . The phrase thus describes a dynamic assimilation of the truth of the gospel. It is an equivalent expression for the solemn description of authentic Christian experience in 6:4-5.<sup>34</sup> The author's reference in Heb 10:32 to their sufferings after "having been enlightened" would support Lane's conclusion. Certainly the sin in view in Heb 10:26 is one involving authentic Christians, not merely those who had professed to have believed at some point in the past.

Just as the Old Testament "sin of a high hand" resulted in severe judgment, so the sin of abandoning one's confession of faith would be expected to result in "a certain terrifying expectation of judgment" (10:27). There can be no questioning of the fact that the author speaks of "fearful judgment," but commentators do not agree as to the nature or timing of the judgment. The mention of "fire" in verse 27 evokes, for some, the thought of eternal torment in hell. Stedman, for instance, writes, "it is to experience after death the eternal judgment of raging fire."<sup>35</sup> The identification of the judgment with "hell" is shared by both those who view the guilty ones as unsaved as well as those who see them as true Christians.<sup>36</sup> Oberholtzer, on the other hand, argues that the judgment is something less than hell, namely, temporal discipline. He states, "It is preferable to view the metaphor of fire against the background of the Old Testament, where Yahweh's anger toward His failing covenant people is described by the metaphor of fire (Isa. 9:18-19; 10:17)."<sup>37</sup>

Since the author customarily thinks with Old Testament events in mind, it should not be thought surprising that he might be doing so here. Thus we should consider more carefully how the metaphor of fire is used in the Old Testament. Fire is associated with judgment in the Old Testament in other ways than hell. For instance, we have the case of Nadab and Abihu (Levitical priests!) in Lev 10:1-3 who dishonored the LORD by using the firepans in an inappropriate way, such that "fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed them." In another incident, Korah (a Levitical priest) along with Dathan and Abiram and 250 leading men of Israel (the latter being Levites also; Num 16:8-10) challenged the leadership of Moses and Aaron (Num 16). The issue apparently was jealousy of the exalted positions that Moses and his brother Aaron had obtained (both of whom were descended from Levi). Though only Aaron and his descendants could be high priests, the "rebels" themselves were not without privilege—they served as Levitical priests at the tabernacle. As a result, the LORD brought judgment upon those who participated in Korah's rebellion (since their challenge was really a rebellion against the leadership structure that God Himself had ordained). The ground swallowed up Korah, Dathan and Abiram, while "fire came forth from the LORD and consumed the two hundred and fifty men" (Num 16:35).

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<sup>34</sup> Lane, 2:292. Schmitz concurs, "The knowledge of God's truth is of equal importance with experiential profession of the Lord, and finally pushes it into the background. Hence, conversion to the Christian faith can be described almost technically as coming to a knowledge (*epignōsis*) of the truth (1 Tim. 2:4; 2 Tim. 3:7; cf. Heb. 10:26; 1 Tim. 5:3; 2 Tim. 2:25; Tit. 1:1; 2 Pet. 2:21)" (Colin Brown, ed., *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 1976], s.v. "knowledge," by E. D. Schmitz).

<sup>35</sup> R. Stedman, 113. Similarly, Hughes says, "his end is perdition" (420). Westcott is vague, but calls it "condemnation" and later "fatal punishment" (329). The inference about "enemies" (ὑπερταύτους) at the end of verse 27 has also been used to argue that those judged are "God's enemies," thus deserving hell (Morris, 107).

<sup>36</sup> Ellingworth, for example, holds that those in view are Christians, but assumes that the judgment is "final judgment" (534).

<sup>37</sup> Oberholtzer, 414. Cf. Hodges (805) who argues that the judgment of Heb 10:27 is not hell, but "God's flaming indignation and retribution."

Thus, "fire" was used to express divine anger and judgment in the Old Testament, though it is doubtful in either of the two cases cited above that the judgment was anything more than temporal judgment involving loss of physical life. Eternal condemnation does not seem to be involved. With these observations in mind regarding the role of "fire" in Old Testament judgment contexts, let me point out that the author of Hebrews is apparently alluding to Isaiah 26:11 in particular (from the LXX). Six of the final seven words from Heb 10:27 are found in the LXX translation of Isa 26:11.<sup>38</sup>

| ISA 26:11   | HEB 10:27  |
|---|--|
| ζήλος λήμψεται λαὸν ἀπαίδευτον,<br>zeal shall seize an ignorant people            | καὶ πυρὸς ζήλος ἐσθίειν μέλλοντος τοὺς ὑπεναντίους<br>and a fiery zeal about to devour the adversaries |
| καὶ νῦν πῦρ τοὺς ὑπεναντίους ἔδεται.<br>and now fire shall devour the adversaries |  |

The similarity of wording with the Septuagint translation of Isa 26:11 suggests that this is the source of his allusion. The context is appropriate with its contrast between the faithful and those who act wickedly. Of greater significance, however, is the eschatological setting in which this chapter occurs. Chapters 24X27 of Isaiah are a depiction of the coming judgment of God in the "Day of the Lord" which is followed by kingdom blessing.<sup>39</sup> The unit begins with the announcement that God will enact a universal judgment upon the earth that has transgressed his commandments (and this theme pervades the whole unit):

"Behold, the LORD lays the earth waste, devastates it, distorts its surface, and scatters its inhabitants. . . . The earth will be completely laid waste and completely despoiled, for the LORD has spoken this word" (Isa 24:1,3)

"So it will happen in that day, that the LORD will punish the host of heaven, on high, and the kings of the earth, on earth" (24:21).

"For behold, the LORD is about to come out from His place to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity" (26:21).

God's judgment at this time is likened to a fire. Isa 24:6 states, "the inhabitants of the earth are burned, and few men are left." Though this will be a terrible time of judgment for the inhabitants of the world, it

<sup>38</sup> Heb 10:27 is quite similar to the final line of Isa 26:11. Both ἔδεται and ἐσθίειν are forms of the verb ἐσθίω. The word ζήλος in Heb 10:27 seems to have been inserted under the influence of the preceding line in Isa 26:11. Heb 10:27 adds the word μέλλοντος, a word often used in Hebrews with eschatological overtones (note Heb 1:14; 2:5; 6:5; 10:1; 13:14). There could also be an influence of Isa 26:21, "The LORD is about to come out from His place" (understanding the participle ἔξῃ as "futur instans" Xso *NASB*).

<sup>39</sup> Though the phrase "the day of the LORD" is not used in Isa 24X27, the abbreviated form "in that day" occurs seven times (24:21; 25:9; 26:1; 27:1,2,12,13). Announcement had been made in Isa 13:9 that "the day of the LORD is coming" (cf. 13:6). This would be "the day of His burning anger" (13:13) in which He would "punish the world for its evil" (13:11). The judgment of this "day" is described in Isa 24X27. References to the cosmic disturbances in Isa 24:23 confirm the eschatological setting of this time (cf. Joel 2:10; 2:31; 3:15; Ez 32:27; Mt 24:29; Lk 21:25; Rev 6:12; 8:12).

will be good news for the righteous, since the judgment will be quickly followed by kingdom blessings. The Messianic kingdom (which had been described earlier in Isaiah 2:1-4; 11:1-10) results from this universal day of judgment. As Isa 24:23 declares, "the LORD of hosts will reign on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, and His glory will be before His elders." In 25:6-9, the kingdom is likened unto a "lavish banquet." God's judgment of the wicked, His deliverance of His afflicted ones (note 25:3-5), and the inauguration of the kingdom in which the LORD personally reigns (cf. 32:1; 33:17) are depicted as the "eschatological salvation" for the righteous. They respond, "Behold, this is our God for whom we have waited that He might save us. This is the LORD for whom we have waited; let us rejoice and be glad in His salvation" (25:9).<sup>40</sup> The opening of chapter 26 clarifies that the initiation of the kingdom is a millennial event: "In that day this song will be sung in the land of Judah." This also suggests that the call to rejoice in 25:9 primarily has in mind believing Jews in the aftermath of the Great Tribulation, which would make the "song" of 26:1ff. particularly relevant to Jewish readers and thus quite appropriate for the author of Hebrews.

This "kingdom song" of the righteous is even more relevant to the Book of Hebrews when we observe that it begins with rejoicing that the righteous and faithful are given the privilege to enter the "strong city"—undoubtedly Jerusalem in this context (24:23; 27:13). The song of Isa 26 begins by stating: "We have a strong city; . . . Open the gates, that the righteous nation may enter, the one that remains faithful" (26:1-2). The author of Hebrews held out the eschatological heavenly Jerusalem as the ultimate hope of New Covenant believers: "For here we do not have a lasting city, but we are seeking the city which is to come" (13:14; cf. 11:16; 12:22).

Yet the song goes on to lament that though the inhabitants of the world learn about God's righteousness when they are made to experience His judgments (in the context, the "day of the Lord"), the wicked "in the land of uprightness" (i.e., Israel) have not learned righteousness (Isa 26:9-10). The Septuagint translation for the end of verse 10 differs from the Hebrew text: "Let the ungodly one be taken away, that he might not behold the glory of the Lord."<sup>41</sup> Then in Isa 26:11 (following the LXX text), the prophet declares, "O Lord, Your arm is raised high (i.e., posed to strike in judgment), but they do not see *it*."<sup>42</sup> But when they perceive *this*, they shall be ashamed. *The zeal* (of God) shall seize *this* ignorant people, and then fire shall devour the adversaries."

In both the Hebrew text as well as the Septuagint translation, the prophet seems to have in mind the wicked among Israel who fall under God's judgment at the time of the "day of the Lord." They are in contrast to those in the nation who are trusting in the Lord (26:3-4) and waiting eagerly for Him (26:8). The "fire" depicts God's judgment against His covenant people (recall 24:6; cf. 5:24-25; 9:19; 29:6;

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<sup>40</sup> Since the author of Hebrews thinks of "salvation" in primarily eschatological terms, this section of Isaiah would be particularly appropriate to his case (note Heb 1:14; 2:3 with 2:5; and especially 9:28). In fact, his reference in Heb 9:28 to "those who eagerly await him" may have in mind Isa 25:9 (cf. 26:8).

<sup>41</sup> Failure to see the "glory" (δόξαν) of the Lord in this verse should be contrasted with those before whom the Lord is glorified (δοξασθήσεται) when He comes to reign (Isa 24:23). The MT, however, uses two different words (תִּהְיוּ in 26:10 vs. כְּבוֹד in 24:23).

<sup>42</sup> On the thought of God's uplifted arm in judgment, see Isa 5:25; 9:21; 30:30.

33:14).<sup>43</sup> The fire is a threat to the unrighteous within the nation, but not to the righteous. Later (33:14-15), Isaiah states:

"Sinners in Zion are terrified; trembling has seized the godless.  
Who among us can live with the consuming fire?  
Who among us can live with continual burning?  
He who walks righteously, and speaks with sincerity."

In these passages in Isaiah, the fiery judgment does not speak of eternal punishment in hell but rather of the eschatological judgment from God that will engulf the whole world and even Israel in particular. How the author of Hebrews envisioned this in relation to his readers is not altogether clear. At the very least, however, we could conclude: if God does not withhold his awesome judgment against His own covenant people as depicted in Isaiah 24–27, there is no reason to think He would spare those who forsook the New Covenant. That is, if rebellious Jews of the Tribulation will certainly receive God's judgment, so will those who rebel in the days when the author of Hebrews writes. The allusion to Isa 26:11 would be particularly meaningful to the readers who were of Jewish descent and who should have their hopes set upon the future coming of Messiah to inaugurate His kingdom and the eschatological Jerusalem.<sup>44</sup>

### THE DESERVING OF MORE SEVERE PUNISHMENT (10:28-29)

In verses 28-29, the author employs an *a fortiori* argument in which he argues from the lesser to the greater to prove a point, a technique that he had used in the first warning passage in Heb 2:2-3.<sup>45</sup> He contrasts the severity of punishment under the Old Covenant in verse 28 with the expectation of greater severity of punishment under the New Covenant in verse 29.

In using the phrase "anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses," the author is referring to one's hostile action against the Old Covenant. Although the basic meaning of "set aside" (ἀθετέω) is to "declare invalid, make invalid," the word was used in the LXX in the sense "to despise" (1 Sam 2:17) and even "to rebel against" (1 Kgs 12:19; cf. 1 Kgs 1:1; 2 Kgs 3:5,7).<sup>46</sup> The OT allusions in Heb 10:28b clarify that the author has in mind situations where the death penalty would be called for under the Old Covenant. The words "dies upon (the testimony) of two or three witnesses" is an abbreviated quotation of Deut 17:6 (cf.

<sup>43</sup> For other contexts in which "fire" (πυρ) and "zeal" (ζήλος) are used in combination, see Zeph 1:18; 3:8; Ps 79:5 (LXX = 78:5).

<sup>44</sup> There are numerous *conceptual* parallels between chapters 24–27 of Isaiah and the Book of Hebrews that may have prompted the author of Hebrews to utilize Isa 26:11. For example, both have an expectation of the Lord coming to reign and establish His kingdom (note Isa 24:23). Both refer to those who wait for the Lord's salvation (swthriā), though the terms for "waiting" are different in the Greek (Isa 25:9; Heb 9:28 — the term for waiting used by the author of Hebrews [apekdecomai] is not found in the LXX). Finally, both refer to "confessing" His name (Isa 26:13; Heb 10:23; 13:15). The author of Hebrews uses the word omol ogew, a term rarely used in the OT prophets and never by the translators of Isaiah. Isaiah, instead, has othonaizw.

<sup>45</sup> In Rabbinical exegesis, this style of argument was known as *qal wā-hōmer* (light to heavy), and was listed as one of Hillel's seven basic rules (see Richard Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period* [Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1975], 34).

<sup>46</sup> Balz & Schneider, 1:35.

Deut 19:15).<sup>47</sup> The context of Deut 17:2-7 indicates that the specific issue was the transgression of idolatry, though Num 35:30 applies the same principle to murder. Although the stress in those OT passages was upon the requirement of sufficient witnesses before capital punishment was applied, the primary concern of the author of Hebrews is that there were transgressions under the Old Covenant that called for "death" as punishment. In such cases, judgment was to be executed "without mercy."<sup>48</sup>

If violent transgressors of the Old Covenant deserved a punishment of death for turning to idolatry, the author of Hebrews reasons in 10:29 that those who utterly rebel against the New Covenant are deserving of even more severe punishment. The author uses a series of three participles to describe the situation. The heinous sin he has in mind is undoubtedly that of a decisive abandonment of one's faith in Christ and His atoning blood (contrast Heb 10:23 which called for holding fast one's confession of hope without wavering). In this case, the author clearly has in mind the sin of a true Christian, for in describing the blood in verse 29, he adds the phrase "by which he was sanctified."<sup>49</sup>

In the first of his three descriptions of this sin, the author points out that this would be tantamount to "trampling under foot the Son of God."<sup>50</sup> The Greek word for "trample" (καταπατέω), though meaning literally to "trample under foot" (Mt 7:6), carries the figurative meaning "to treat with disdain," i.e., to have utter contempt and disregard for (BAG, 415). We should remember what the author has said about the exalted status and preeminence of the Son in Heb 1:1-4. Now He is being sneered at with contemptuous repudiation.

Secondly, the author points out that in this sin, the guilty one regards as "unclean" the blood of the covenant, i.e., the blood of the *New Covenant* . . . the atoning blood of Jesus which is infinitely superior to the blood of goats and bulls (Heb 9:11-14). The words "the blood of the covenant" reflect the Septuagint translation of Ex 24:8. When Moses inaugurated the Old Covenant, he referred to "the blood of the covenant" which the LORD had made with the people. The terminology serves to highlight the contrast between the two covenants. The apostate regards Jesus' blood—the blood on which the New Covenant is based—as "unclean" (κοινός). Although the word κοινός often means "common," here it is used in the cultic sense of that which was *defiling* under the Law. In Acts 10:14-15, for instance, Peter responded in the vision of the animals from heaven, "Lord, I have never eaten anything unholy or unclean." How

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<sup>47</sup> Moffatt (150) points out that "ἐπί with the dative means 'on the ground of (the evidence given by),' though Lenski (358) believes that ἐπί means "before, in the presence of" (i.e., they were to start the stoning *before* the witnesses). Moffatt is undoubtedly correct, as ἐπί is used in the LXX text of Deut 17:7 in regard to the testimony itself (cf. *BDF* ε 235 [2]).

<sup>48</sup> The words "without mercy" (χωρὶς οἰκτιρμῶν) are not part of Deut 17:2-7, nor do they even appear in the Pentateuch. The thought, however, reflects Deut 13:6-11 which calls for death upon the Israelite who attempted to influence others to abandon YHWH in order to pursue other gods. In such cases, Deut 13:8 pointed out "and your eye shall not pity (φείσεται) him." The word φείδομαι means "to spare" (as of persons or things in war, i.e., not destroying them) and thus to "be merciful" (*A lexicon : Abridged from Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon* [Oxford : Oxford University Press]).

<sup>49</sup> On the interpretation of this phrase, see the earlier discussion under the section "The Spiritual Status of Those Being Warned."

<sup>50</sup> Notice that the article ὁ in Heb 10:29 governs all three participles, thus indicating that a singular sin is in view . . . not three different sins.



ironic (and tragic!) that the very blood of Christ which alone can "sanctify" a person would be regarded on par with things considered "unclean" before the Law.

Thirdly, the author points out that the apostate has "insulted the Spirit of grace." The mention of the person of the Spirit in the transgression has caused Hughes to equate this with "the eternal and irremissible sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (Mk. 3:22-30)."<sup>51</sup> This, however, is quite unlikely, as the contexts are significantly different. In the gospel account where blasphemy against the Holy Spirit was mentioned, the offenders were the Scribes and Pharisees . . . religious leaders who staunchly rejected Christ all along and never made a profession of faith in Him. Furthermore, it was their attributing of His miracles to Satan that brought about the warning. The situation in Hebrews is entirely different: the issue is not the source of power by which Christ performed miracles, and those in view have been called "holy brethren."

In Heb 10:29, the word "grace" should probably be understood as a *genitive of description*: He is the Spirit who gives grace. The readers had been commended in 4:16 to "draw near with confidence to the throne of grace" in order to "find grace in time of need." The author may have thought of the Spirit as the agent who dispensed "grace" from the heavenly throne. Yet an abandonment of one's faith in Christ and His atoning blood was an insult to the Holy Spirit who had actively worked to make grace available to the Christian pilgrim on his way to "rest."<sup>52</sup>

### **SUPPORT FOR THE IDEA OF PUNISHMENT UPON GOD'S PEOPLE (10:30)**

The conjunction γὰρ at the onset of verse 30 indicates that the author now wants to support what he had said in the preceding verse. In verse 29, the author had spoken of punishment for that one who decisively abandoned his faith in Christ. Now he turns to an Old Testament case in point where God had spoken of judgment upon His people. Since God was not one who refrained from bringing severe judgment upon His people under the Old Covenant, there is no reason to think that He would do otherwise for those who had participated in the New Covenant. The author offers as support two quotations from Deut 32.

A careful examination of these two quotations is called for, since scholars have come to diametrically opposite conclusions about their intended meaning. Some would contend that the vengeance and judgment mentioned in these two quotations is not for Israel (the people of God) but for her enemies. Peterson, for example, claims that "These OT quotations speak of God's delivering Israel by inflicting judgment on her enemies."<sup>53</sup> He uses this claim to argue that God is able to separate the true from the false (in keeping with his position that the transgressors in Heb 10:26-31 are not genuine Christians). Toussaint argues that the second quotation (with the words "His people") must be understood, not in the sense of God judging His people, but of God *vindicating* His people.<sup>54</sup> In contrast, I will argue that these quotations are indeed speaking of God's judgment upon "His people" Israel.

<sup>51</sup> P. E. Hughes, 424.

<sup>52</sup> The word translated "insult" is the verb ἐνυβρίζω, a word not found elsewhere in the NT or LXX. Moulton and Milligan (219) offer an example from extra-biblical literature: "she continues her outrageous behavior and insulting conduct (ἐνυβρίζων) towards me" (The Oxyrhynchus Papyri 237<sup>vi.17</sup>, vol. II, ed. B. P. Grenfell and A. S. Hunt, [London: 1898-1927]).

<sup>53</sup> Peterson, "Apostasy," 26.

<sup>54</sup> Toussaint, "Warning Passages," 77. Cf. Bruce, 264; Ellingworth, 543; Lane, 2:295.

Before we can come to any conclusion about the intended meaning of the quotations in Heb 10:30, we first must determine their original intent in Deut 32 itself. A survey of commentaries, however, reveals that there is quite a difference of opinion concerning Deut 32:35-36 and the object of God's judgment in that context. Though all would agree that the chapter speaks condemningly of Israel because of her idolatry, there are also references to Israel's enemies and the pagan gods associated with them. Thus, when God speaks of exercising vengeance in Deut 32:35, there is some difficulty in knowing whether that is intended for Israel or for Israel's idolatrous enemies, since both are mentioned in the preceding context. A further complication involves the proper translation of Deut 32:36, since this is rendered quite differently in our English Bibles:

| Deut 32:36  |   |
|---|---|
| <i>NIV &amp; NKJV</i>   | <i>NASB</i>   |
| "The LORD will <u>judge</u> his people<br>and have compassion on his servants." | "For the LORD will <u>vindicate</u> His people,<br>And will have compassion on His servants." |

The idea of God "judging" His people (so *NIV* and *NKJV*) is significantly different than the idea of God "vindicating" His people (so *NASB*). In the Hebrew text, we have the verb  $\text{יָדַע}$ , which lexically can mean either "judge" or "vindicate" (or even "defend His people"), and context will have to be the deciding factor.<sup>55</sup> Someone might argue that the two lines are in synonymous parallelism, and therefore the positive thought of "compassion" in the second line calls for a positive thought such as "vindicate" in the first line. This is not conclusive, however, since the general context of the chapter makes mention of both God's judgment upon Israel (e.g., 32:23) and God's avenging on behalf of His people (32:43). Hence, this verse could be stipulating that God will first bring judgment upon His people and then subsequently extend compassion upon them, which is precisely what the chapter as a whole depicts.

What is needed is a careful analysis of the thought flow of the chapter. I shall begin by pointing out that this chapter has an important part to play in regard to the book of Deuteronomy as a whole. Deuteronomy is essentially a charge to the new generation of Hebrews (who are poised near the Jordan and about to enter the promised land) to be faithful to conquer the land and then to live faithfully by God's Law. If they do, God will extend great blessings to them, but if they are disobedient, He will send curses (i.e., discipline) upon them. These curses could be as severe as punishing them with a foreign nation and removing them from the land to cast them into exile. Deuteronomy 32, also known as "the song of Moses" (note 31:30), is a poetic anticipation by Moses of the nation's future . . . a future that will be sad since the nation will eventually turn away from God to embrace idolatry. Because of idolatry, God will have to bring judgment upon them, though He will in the final analysis act on their behalf to deliver them.

In the opening of the chapter, an indictment is brought against them in verses 5-6 of acting corruptly, which is then followed in verses 7-14 by a review of their past history in which God lovingly cared for

<sup>55</sup> The Hebrew verb  $\text{יָדַע}$  usually has a negative connotation such as "judge," "execute judgment upon" or "contend with." In some cases, however,  $\text{יָדַע}$  can be used in a *favorable sense* such as "plead the cause of someone" (Jer 5:28; 22:16), "defend the rights of someone" (Prov 31:9), "defend one from enemies" (Ps 54:3 [Heb]), or even of "vindicating someone" before their opponent or rival (Gen 30:6). The case of Gen 49:16 involving the prophecy about the tribe of Dan is very difficult to determine. The verb  $\text{יָדַע}$  could have a favorable sense such as "provide justice" (so *NIV*) or "vindicate," but following statements in the context are admittedly negative.

them. Israel's rebellion is then described in verses 15-18, highlighting their idolatry in verse 17: "They sacrificed to demons who were not God, to gods whom they have not known, new gods who came lately, whom your fathers did not dread." As a result, God promises judgment upon Israel in verses 19-25. This judgment will include both temporal judgment (disasters and defeat by enemies) as well as provoking them to jealousy by God's favor upon Gentiles.<sup>56</sup> Here, I highlight verses 21, 23-24a, and 25a:

"They have made Me jealous with what is not God;  
 They have provoked Me to anger with their idols.  
 So I will make them jealous with those who are not a people;  
 I will provoke them to anger with a foolish nation. . . .  
 I will heap misfortune on them;  
 I will use My arrows on them.  
 They shall be wasted by famine, and consumed by plague  
 and bitter destruction; . . .  
 Outside the sword shall bereave,  
 And inside terror."

In verses 26-27, the LORD shows concern for how His judgment upon Israel will be perceived by Israel's enemies. Thus, He will not totally destroy Israel, lest this be misconstrued by her enemies (i.e., they might view Israel's misfortune as an indication that their own power brought them victory). Verses 28-30 return to consider Israel's lack of understanding (notice the singular "nation" in verse 28). These verses lament the fact that Israel cannot perceive what is going on in her experiences. "Would that they were wise, that they understood this, that they would discern their future!" (vs 29). Israel ought to understand that when she triumphed in battle, it was because the LORD was fighting on her behalf, and when she suffered defeat, it was because she had been disobedient and was reaping the consequences of God's displeasure with her. That is, Israel's enemies only triumphed, because God had allowed them to defeat her.

Some of Israel's enemies would surely think they had prevailed because their gods were superior to Israel's. Hence, verses 31-33 are given to reject that notion. When Moses says "Indeed their rock is not like our Rock," he means that their *pagan god* is not like Yahweh (note that the metaphor "Rock" was used of Yahweh in 32:4,15,18). If the enemies of Israel think their god is superior to Israel's God, it is only because they have been deceived into thinking so (a deception comparable to wine laced with poison).

There is a delicate transition from verses 31-33 to 34-36a. In vv 31-33, Moses had spoken of the enemies' deception in thinking their gods were superior, but in vv 34-36a God speaks about the vengeance and retribution He has stored up for "them." Verse 35 ends by stating, "For the day of their calamity is near, and the impending things are hastening upon them." The crucial question is whether this vengeance and "day of calamity" pertain to Israel or to Israel's enemies. Though it is true that Israel's enemies (who were deceived about their gods) were in view in the preceding verses of 31-33, most likely verses 34-36a are speaking about God's vengeance upon Israel. This is true for a couple of reasons. First, the main thrust of this chapter is about Israel's rebellion and idolatry, and consequently the judgment that God intends for her. This is seen, for example, in the instructions to Moses that preceded the song:

"Now therefore, write this song for yourselves, and teach it to the sons of Israel; put in on their lips, in order that this song may be a witness for Me against the sons of Israel" (Deut 31:19)

<sup>56</sup> For the latter thought concerning Gentiles, see Paul's use of Deut 32:21 in Romans 10:19.

All the pronouncements of judgment in the chapter up to this point have been about God's judgment upon Israel, not her enemies (e.g., "I will heap misfortunes on them" in vs 23 pertains to Israel). Since he has spoken of Israel's judgment prior to verse 34 but not about judgment upon Israel's enemies, the most natural understanding would be that the reference to judgment in vv 34-36a pertains to Israel.<sup>57</sup> Second, the following context (vv 36b-38) mocks the idolatrous gods in whom "they" trusted. Though the enemies certainly trusted in idolatrous gods, this was the primary contention of the LORD with Israel in this chapter (recall vv 15-18, 21). In vv 36b-38, the LORD will allow "them" to be nearly overwhelmed by His calamity so that "their strength" is nearly gone.<sup>58</sup> This will cause them to see the futility of their trust in idols, for their idols will not be there to rescue them in this time of God's judgment. When this is sufficiently demonstrated, the LORD will proclaim to them: "See now that I, I am He, and there is no god besides Me" (vs 39). This would most likely be the lesson for Israel, since the theme of the song was about the lament of Israel turning to other gods rather than to Yahweh who had blessed her.

A further confirmation that verses 36b-38 pertain to Israel is seen in the way that the irony of these verses ("Where are their gods? . . . Let them rise up and help you") is used in condemnation of Israel later in her history (Jud 10:13-14; Jer 2:26-28). Israel will have repeated opportunities in her future history to see if these gods can help her in time of trouble. Thus, if verses 36b-38 describe the calamity of Israel, this would substantiate that verses 34-36a are also speaking about God's vengeance upon Israel. Though Merrill admits that this unit in verses 34-36 is open to question, he agrees that Israel is probably in view. These verses "appear to refer to the resolution of the question of ultimate responsibility for the punishment of covenant unfaithfulness."<sup>59</sup> Whatever means God may have used in bringing calamity against Israel, ultimately He is the One ordaining it.

If it is agreed that verses 34-36 refer to Israel, then what is the relation of verse 36 to verses 34-35? In answering this question, we must carefully observe the conjunction ׀ that initiates verse 36. Unfortunately, the *NIV* does not reflect the conjunction in their translation, thus obscuring the connection of verse 36 to the preceding line. Yet the ׀ is undoubtedly *causal* in this case, giving the reason for what was said at the end of verse 35.

Vs 35 Vengeance is Mine, and retribution,  
In due time their foot will slip;  
For the day of their calamity is near,  
And the impending things are hastening upon them.

Vs 36 For (׀) the LORD will judge His people.

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<sup>57</sup> I acknowledge that the song ends in verse 43 on a note of God's vengeance upon Israel's enemies, but that is not the primary thrust of the song. In the final analysis (after Israel has been humbled before God, suffered her "calamity," and seen the worthlessness of trusting in other gods besides Yahweh), God will come to her defense and render vengeance on her enemies.

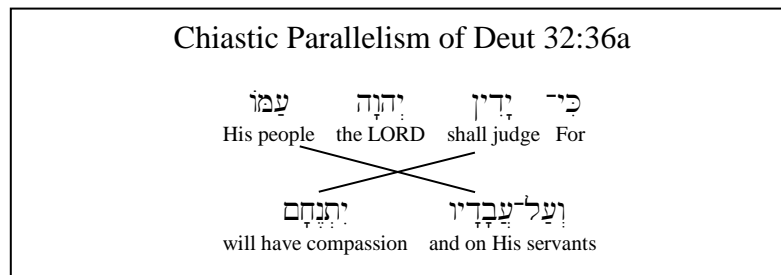
<sup>58</sup> This time of "calamity" probably refers to Israel's time of distress in the "latter days" that was mentioned in Deut 4:30. Yet the LORD will have compassion upon them because of His covenant with their fathers (i.e., the Abrahamic covenant). God's "compassion" is bestowed in response to Israel "returning to the LORD" (cf. God's plan of restoration for Israel in Deut 30:1-10).

<sup>59</sup> Eugene Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, The New American Commentary (Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 422.

The first line of verse 36 explains the reason why the "calamity is near" and why "the impending things are hastening upon them." Since the "calamity" and "impending things" of verse 35 pertains to Israel, the first line of verse 36 must be translated "the LORD will judge His people" rather than "the LORD will vindicate His people."

What remains to be explained, however, is the proper understanding of the second line of verse 36. Most translations suggest the idea that God "will have compassion on His servants," though it is possible that the Hebrew words could mean that God will "avenge Himself on His servants."<sup>60</sup> The latter translation would form a good parallel with "judging," whereas the former option "compassion" might seem contradictory to the first line. Let us assume, however, that "compassion" is the best rendering (since that is what most translations have). This may not be as contradictory as it might seem at first, for there is some evidence that the two lines may be intentionally contrastive rather than being a case of synonymous parallelism. Having declared that He, the LORD, will judge His people, He quickly reminds them that He will *also* have compassion on them. This is similar to what He had spoken to them in Deut 4:30-31: Israel's distress in the latter days will be followed by their return to Him and His compassion on them. In Deut 4:31, we are told that He will not completely destroy them because of the covenant He had sworn to their fathers (i.e., the Abrahamic covenant). Thus, the thought of judgment followed by compassion in Deut 32:36 may be a reflection of this expectation previously revealed in chapter four (cf. Deut 30:1-3). Furthermore, the thought of judgment followed by compassion is echoed again just three verses later in Deut 32:39: "It is I who put to death and give life. I have wounded, and it is I who heal."<sup>61</sup>

Merrill understands verse 36 in such a way: "But it also was he who acted with compassion even in the midst of judgment (v. 36)."<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, the chiasmic structuring of the first two lines in verse 36 may be used to heighten the deliberate contrast:



<sup>60</sup> The word translated "compassion" is the *hithpael* form of the verb נָח. In the *niphal* stem, נָח can mean to "have compassion." Aside from the case of Deut 32:36 under consideration (= Ps 135:14), נָח in the *hithpael* does not mean "to have compassion" in its five other occurrences. It can mean (1) "to repent" (i.e., change one's mind) in Num 23:19; (2) passively "to be comforted, consoled" (with no thought of vengeance) as in Gen 37:35 and Ps 119:52; (3) reflexively "to console oneself" with the thought of taking vengeance on someone (Gen 27:42); and (4) "to avenge oneself" (Ez 5:13). The latter case is translated "I shall be appeased" by the *NASB* and "I will be avenged" by the *NIV*. This idea of "avenging oneself" is even found in the *niphal* of the verb נָח in the case of Isa 1:24 (which is confirmed by the parallelism with the verb נָקַם having the same meaning). The *LXX* translated נָח in Isa 1:24 by οὐ παύσεται μου ὁ θυμὸς, "my wrath shall not cease."

<sup>61</sup> The thought of death contrasted with life should be understood in light of its metaphorical usage in Deut 30:15-20, where "life" represented the LORD's blessings upon the nation for obedience, and "death" represented the curses and adversity for disobedience.

<sup>62</sup> Merrill, 423.

In conclusion, whether  $\text{נָקַם}$  in Deut 32:36 be translated "avenge Myself" or "to have compassion," the translation of  $\text{יָרַךְ}$  in the preceding line as "vindicate" is not warranted. The first line should properly be translated "The LORD will judge His people," (so *NIV* and *NKJV*) and the intended meaning is that God will punish His own covenant people Israel, because they were unfaithful to His covenant demands (i.e., they turned away from Him to pursue idolatry).

The implication of this meaning of Deut 32:35-36—God will execute vengeance by judging His own covenant people—for Hebrews 10:30 is that God will (in similar fashion) bring judgment upon those who have abandoned their confession of faith in Jesus as the promised Messiah. Thus, Hebrews 10:30 supports verse twenty-nine by giving the reason why "severer punishment" is appropriate for one who has abandoned his confession. In Deuteronomy 32, God had spoken of the punishment He would inflict upon those in the covenant community who turned away from Him to embrace idolatry. Because He is a God who "judges His people," it is certainly not out of keeping with His character to bring judgment upon those who apostatize from the New Covenant.

### **A SOLEMN REMINDER TO THOSE WHOM GOD JUDGES (10:31)**

In the final verse of this paragraph, the author reminds his readers, "It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God." The expression "living God" ( $\text{θεοῦ ζῶντος}$ ) was used in Heb 3:12 to warn the "brethren" of the danger of succumbing to an evil heart of unbelief such that they rebelled against the "living God" (cf. 9:14; 12:22).<sup>63</sup> The unbelief and rebellion the author had in mind were the same as had been committed by the wilderness generation of Hebrews, for which they suffered temporal punishment from God (dying off in the wilderness). This expression would have reminded our author's Hebrew readers that God was still a *living God*—not a complacent uncaring God who took no notice of His people's rebellion against Him.

Ellingworth's suggestion that the words 'into the hands of the living God' imply the "condemnation of apostates at the last judgment" is an over-reading of the text.<sup>64</sup> More likely, the thought is drawn from the Old Testament and God's temporal discipline upon David. In 2 Sam 24:14, David said to Gad, "I am in great distress. Let us now fall into the hand of the LORD for His mercies are great, but do not let me fall into the hand of man." In that case, however, "falling into the hand of the LORD" was quite severe, for God sent a pestilence by which 70,000 Israelites died. Surely this must have included a great many *believing Israelites*! Though David himself did not die, he did (as a believer) suffer much grief by falling into the hands of the Lord. David must have been deeply hurt that his sin had cost the lives of so many of his countrymen.

<sup>63</sup> For the nuance "rebel" for ἀφίστημι in Heb 3:12, we would do well to study the cases in the LXX where ἀφίστημι is used with the preposition ἀπο and θεος/κύριος as the object. This construction, for instance, was used in 2 Chr 26:18 in regard to Uzziah: "for you have rebelled against the Lord (ἀπέστης ἀπὸ κυρίου)" (cf. 2 Chr 30:7 and Josh 22:19). In the latter case, ἀφίστημι translates the Hebrew  $\text{קָמַר}$ , "to revolt, rebel").

<sup>64</sup> Ellingworth, 544.

## THE NATURE OF THE JUDGMENT FOR THE APOSTATES

If it is true, as I have argued, that the warning of Heb 10:26-31 is directed against true believers of the New Covenant community who were in danger of abandoning their faith (some had already gone to the extent of forsaking their assembling together), then what precisely is the judgment that might be in store for them? Some commentators (e.g., Marshall, Ellingworth, Lane) have answered that the punishment is the loss of salvation that results in perishing in hell. Such a conclusion, however, is too hasty. First, the text makes no clear statement that the punishment is hell. Second, the doctrine of the eternal security of the believer rests on clear Scriptural support. In Jn 10:28, for example, Jesus promised His sheep, "I give eternal life to them, and they shall never perish; and no one shall snatch them out of My hand." If there was any possibility of them perishing, He could not have made such an outright promise to His sheep. Furthermore, Romans 8:29-30 makes clear that all whom God foreknew and predestined, these He also called, justified, and glorified. This speaks of a *process* that God is faithful to from start to finish. Hence, Paul can confidently say in Rom 8:38-39 that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

What the author of Hebrews does say is that the New Covenant believer who abandons His confession of faith in Jesus deserves a "worse punishment" (χείρονος τιμωρίας) than those of the Old Covenant who received the death penalty for certain offenses like idolatry and murder. Apparently, then, the author must have in mind a punishment worse than death.

In the NT, death is sometimes used as a punishment upon erring Christians, just as it was in the Old Testament. We have, for example, the case of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5 who held back some of the price from the sale of their land, and were put to death by the Lord for trying to appear as though they gave all the money to the apostles. In 1 Cor 11:28-31, we are cautioned to examine ourselves when participating in communion, lest we "eat and drink judgment" to ourselves. Paul reminds the Corinthians in verse 30 that some among them had already been disciplined: "many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep [a euphemism for death]." We also read in 1 John 5:16 about a brother who commits "sin leading to death." Thus, death is seen elsewhere as a discipline upon Christians for sins other than apostasy.

What then would be a "worse punishment" that the apostate from the faith would deserve? We should begin by noting that the Greek word for "punishment" in Heb 10:29 is τιμωρία. This is the only case of this word in the NT, although the related verb form τιμωρέω occurs twice in the NT (Acts 22:5; 26:11). In both cases in Acts, the verb form refers to the torturous punishment that Paul inflicted upon Christians prior to his conversion. In the LXX, the verb form occurs eleven times, either of extreme human torture (e.g., 2 Macc 7:7 — pulling one's skin off his head) or of God's temporal discipline upon Israel in the form of famine, wild beasts, etc. (Ezek 5:17; 14:15). Though the noun form τιμωρία only occurs in the NT in Heb 10:29, we do find fifteen occurrences in the LXX. Quite often, it speaks of horrendous torture such as was afflicted by Antiochus or Ptolemy Philopator on the Jews (3 Macc; 4:4; 4 Macc 4:24; 5:10). It is also used of temporal punishment such as a financial penalty or imprisonment (1 Esd 8:24), and even punishment by whipping (Prov 19:29). It is also used to describe the infliction that God cast upon the Pharaoh of Egypt in Exodus (3 Macc 2:6). In 4 Macc 11:3, Antiochus is warned that he will meet "heaven's punishment," a threat that could include both temporal and eternal consequences.

One thing we can conclude from a study of τιμωρία/τιμωρέω is that the word is most often associated with temporal forms of punishments (often of torture!), but never of eternal punishment in hell. There are, however, several other NT words for punishment: δίκη, ἐκδίκησις, κόλασις, ἐπιτιμία, ἐκδίκησις, and κολάζω (as a participle). Of these, δίκη is used in 2 Thess 1:9 to speak of those who will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, and in Jude 7 of those who go to "the punishment of eternal fire." Also κόλασις is used in Mt 25:46 to speak of those who "will go away into eternal punishment." We should take note that the author of Hebrews did not use one of these other words that would have been suitable for speaking of "eternal punishment." This does not prove that τιμωρία cannot refer to "eternal condemnation to hell," but it certainly establishes that τιμωρία is most often used with other connotations in biblical literature.

In contrast to those who see the punishment as hell, other scholars (e.g., Hodges, Dillow, Oberholtzer) understand it to be temporal judgment from the Lord.<sup>65</sup> Although I would agree that temporal judgment could certainly be included (compare Heb 6:7-8), the context seems to demand more. The context seems to suggest that some kind of eschatological judgment may be in store. In Heb 10:25 (the very verse that precedes our paragraph of study), the author had exhorted the readers to encourage one another, "and all the more as you see the day approaching." The conjunction γὰρ linking verse 26 with the preceding paragraph does suggest a connection. What did the author have in mind when he spoke of "the day"? Pentecost takes the position that the *approaching* "day" refers to God's temporal judgment upon the first century generation of Jews at the hands of the Roman general Titus in AD 70.<sup>66</sup> This would then be a fulfillment of the judgment that had been announced by Christ on unbelieving Israel who had rejected Him as Messiah (see Mt 23:37X24:2). The problem with this interpretation is that there are clues from the context that would associate "the day" with the Second Coming of Christ rather than with an event in the first century.

Most likely "the day" has a connection with the Second Coming. In Heb 9:28, the author had just reminded the readers that Christ would appear a second time. This time it would not be to bear sins (as He had done in His first advent), but to bring "salvation" (σωτηρία) for those who eagerly awaited Him, i.e., an eschatological salvation. This would include the formal establishment of the Messianic kingdom and all things being made subject to Christ that had been spoken of in chapters 1X2. In this light, "the day" probably refers to the eschatological "day of the Lord" that Scripture often mentions. In the Old Testament, the "day of the Lord" was a time of judgment that God was bringing on the whole world, including Israel. Although this had a partial fulfillment in the Babylonian invasion in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, prophets such as Zephaniah anticipated a more universal time of judgment in the distant future. Schneider concludes, "Although Zephaniah's contemporaries had surely referred 'the Day of the Lord' to Jerusalem's fall in 587 B.C., later generationsXincluding the NT writersXsaw that Zephaniah's prophecies

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<sup>65</sup> Hodges, "Hebrews," 806; Dillow, 462; and Oberholtzer, "The Danger of Willful Sin in Hebrews 10:26-39," 415. Dillow writes, "The more severe punishment is a punishment even worse than physical death . . . . An example of more severe punishment which comes to mind is the mental anguish that Saul went through. He became mentally ill and was tormented by evil spirits (1 Sam. 16:14-15). Here was a man who was depressed, consumed with hatred, whose fate was far worse than physical death. . . . A more severe punishment could be a prolonged illness, being kept alive by artificial means, or insanity" (*The Reign of the Servant Kings*, 462).

<sup>66</sup> J. Dwight Pentecost, *A Faith That Endures*, 173.



still awaited a complete fulfillment that God would effect at the end of the age."<sup>67</sup> The Apostle Paul clarified in 2 Thess 2:2-3 that "the day of the Lord" would not begin until the Antichrist had been revealed. In 1 Thess 5:1-11, he taught that "the day of the Lord" would come as swift destruction and wrath upon the unbelieving world, yet Christians were to obtain *salvation* through Christ (5:9). Although "the day of the Lord" would include the period of the Great Tribulation preceding the Second Coming (as Paul taught in 1 & 2 Thessalonians), it would apparently include judgments even beyond that, i.e., it would extend beyond the millennial kingdom to include the Great White Throne judgment and the destruction of the present creation (2 Pet 3:11-13).

Thus, the mention of "the day" in Heb 10:25 suggests that there may be a punishment in store for apostates in connection with "the day of the Lord." Furthermore, the following context to Heb 10:26-31 points us to such a conclusion. In Heb 10:35-36, the author speaks about the time when rewards will be dispensed and about those who endure faithfully receive "the promise." This is connected with the Second Coming, because in Heb 10:37 he states, "For yet in a very little while, He who is coming will come, and will not delay."<sup>68</sup> Although the Second Coming will be good news for most believers, there will be some for whom this will not be so. John, for instance, wrote, "And now, little children, abide in Him, so that when He appears, we may have confidence and not shrink away from Him in shame at His coming" (1 Jn 2:28; cf. 4:17). Thus, in Heb 10:38 (quoting the LXX of Hab 2:4), the author reminds us that God's "righteous one" is to live by faith—an enduring faith that he is about to illustrate in chapter 11—and not "shrink back," i.e., to cowardly turn away from the Lord.<sup>69</sup> He ends the chapter by saying, "We, however, are not of those who cowardly turn back *resulting in* destruction, but *we are* of those who *exhibit an enduring faith resulting in* the preservation of soul" [my own translation].<sup>70</sup> There is no need to take "destruction" (ἀπώλεια) here as a reference to *hell*. The noun occurs eighteen times in the NT in a variety of ways.<sup>71</sup> The word could be used of *eternal destruction*, as it does in Rom 9:22 when Paul speaks of "vessels of wrath prepared for destruction" (cf. 2 Pet 3:7; 2 Thess 2:3; Rev 17:8,11). On the other hand, "destruction" can be used of people (including believers) in cases where eternal destruction is not in view. In 1 Tim 6:9, Paul warns that the desire to get rich can "plunge men into ruin and

<sup>67</sup> Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed., *The International Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1979-1988), s.v. "Zephaniah, Book of," by D. A. Schneider. Cf. Greg A. King, "The Day of the Lord in Zephaniah," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152:605 (Jan-Mar 1995): 16-32.

<sup>68</sup> Heb 10:37 is not a strict quotation, but consists of an allusion to Isa 26:20 combined with a slightly reworked quotation from the Septuagint of Hab 2:3.

<sup>69</sup> The words "shrink back" translate the verb ὑποστέλλω in Heb 10:38b. In Galatians 2:12, this has the meaning of withdrawing in fear. Similarly, it has the meaning "to turn back (in fear)" in the LXX (note particularly Ex 23:21, Dt 1:17 and Wisdom of Solomon 6:7).

<sup>70</sup> Since the context deals with *enduring faith* in a believer's life rather than soteriological faith, I find the NIV paraphrase of Heb 10:39 to be rather theologically slanted: "But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved." The verse has no verb "believe," but rather uses the word "faith" (πίστεως) . . . the same word which was used in 10:38. The mention of "endurance" in 10:36 and the following chapter which describes those who *endured* by faith strongly suggests that soteriological faith is not in view. The preposition εἰς before both ἀπώλειαν and περιποίησιν indicates "result" (so Ellingworth, 557; cf. BAG 4e on page 229c).

<sup>71</sup> The related verb form, ἀπόλλυμι, can refer to either eternal destruction in hell (so Jn 3:16; 1 Cor 1:18) or to temporal physical destruction (Mt 26:52; Mk 4:38). In Mk 4:38, the disciples were in a storm at sea and about to die, and thus cried out, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?"

destruction." A lot of people have destroyed their lives by wanting to get rich. In Acts 8:20, Peter has to tell Simon "May your silver perish with you [lit., *be to destruction*]," since he wanted to purchase the ability to bestow the Holy Spirit on others." Peter may have been suggesting that Simon was close to being put to death by the Lord, in a similar fate to Ananias. This probably does not refer to destruction in hell, because Luke had already told us in Acts 8:13 that "even Simon himself believed" and had even been baptized by Philip. Finally, ἀπωλεία can even be used of something that is "wasted," as some saw the matter of pouring perfume on Jesus' head (Mt 26:8; Mk 14:4).

The reference to the fact that the Lord will not be delayed in His "coming" (Heb 10:37) together with the idea that some who have done the will of God will be rewarded and receive "the promise" (10:35-36) may suggest that the "worse punishment" in store for the apostates is a *negative experience* at the judgment seat of Christ. The coming "day of the Lord" would not only mean the pouring out of the King's wrath in the Tribulation, but also the time when believers have to appear before the judgment seat of Christ (2 Cor 5:9-10; Rom 14:10-12).<sup>72</sup> The emphasis of this event is that the Lord examines each believer for the purpose of determining his or her appropriate reward. For those who "continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel," they will be presented before Him "holy and blameless and beyond reproach" (Col 1:22-23). For others who have not *abided* in Him, however, they will shrink back in shame at His coming (1 Jn 2:28).<sup>73</sup> The Bible does not present a clear picture of what the implications will be in regard to our "bad deeds," but it does suggest that there will be some negative consequences. The promise in Jn 5:24 that those who believe in Christ will not come into judgment probably means that the Lord will not take our sins into account in regard to determining our eternal destiny. Believers are assured of forgiveness of sins based on the work of Christ on the cross (Col 2:13-14). Nevertheless, all that we have done—"whether good or bad"—will be evident at the judgment seat of Christ (2 Cor 5:10). Since our sins were forgiven by His blood, this cannot affect our eternal destiny. However, our sins will obviously be brought up, because Paul declares in 1 Cor 4:5 that the Lord will "both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts." He goes on to say, "then each man's praise will come to him from God." The evil that we have done will *factor in* to the praise that the Lord gives us. Sin that others never knew about (things done "in the darkness") and things done with impure motives will detrimentally affect what praise we receive. Furthermore, our "work" (i.e., our service for Christ) will be examined. The mention of "the day" in 1 Cor 3:13 seems rather significant to the context of Hebrews 10: "each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it, because it is to be revealed with fire; and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work." Our "work" that survives the fire will be rewarded (3:14). On the other hand, "if any man's work is burned up, he shall suffer loss; but he himself shall be saved, yet so as through fire" (3:15). On the basis of this verse, a "loss" will be suffered for work that was not approved by the Lord. To some extent then, we will all suffer some loss of praise and loss of reward.

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<sup>72</sup> From my studies in the Book of Revelation, I have concluded that the "judgment seat of Christ" takes place after the Second Coming rather than after a pretribulation rapture of the church, as some have taught. Notice how at the end of Revelation the Lord declares, "Behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to render to every man according to what he has done" (Rev 22:12). In the context of Revelation, the mention of His "coming" must mean the Second Coming that was described in chapter 19. I would also point out that Paul's statement in 1 Cor 4:5 most naturally implies a time of examination after the Second Coming.

<sup>73</sup> John had defined what he meant by "abiding in Him" in 1 Jn 2:6: "the one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked." Cf. 1 Jn 2:10, in which he particularly emphasized the matter of loving one's brother.

Taking this on into the context of the Book of Hebrews, some may "come short" of God's *rest* (4:1). Those who follow the example of disobedience laid down by the wilderness generation will fall short, and thus there is a need to be diligent to enter the *rest* our author has in mind (Heb 4:11). In light of chapters 1–2, the author probably is thinking about sharing in the Son's inheritance and the honor of exercising dominion over creation in the Messianic kingdom ("the world to come," 2:5) in fulfillment of Psalm 8. These privileges could be forfeited by those who follow the negative example of the wilderness generation. Hardening one's heart to the point of rebellion against the Lord (Heb 3:12-13) would be a terrible spiritual catastrophe that ought to be (and can be) avoided. The judgment seat of Christ will not only determine whether one receives praise from the Lord and whether or not one's work is rewarded, but will also determine whether one enters the *eschatological rest*, i.e., is allowed to share in the Son's inheritance and exercise dominion with Him. This would suggest that the "worse punishment" for the apostates in Heb 10:26-31 will *at least include* a denial of the latter opportunity of the *eschatological rest* . . . a punishment that they will have to live with for all eternity. This may also be accompanied by temporal judgment.

## CONCLUSION

Throughout the Book of Hebrews, the author has interrupted his exposition from time to time to insert a paraenetic section that would warn his readers of their need to remain faithful to the Lord Jesus Christ who had instituted the New Covenant on their behalf. His first warning in Heb 2:1-4 was rather mild, reminding them that they needed to pay much closer attention to what they had heard (in what God had spoken through the Son) lest they *drift away* from it. In Heb 10:26-31, however, the author takes a much sterner approach. He confronts them in a most serious tone that abandonment of their confession in Christ (whose sacrificial blood had been taken on their behalf into the heavenly tabernacle) would result in severe judgment from God.

The author writes sternly, because his readers are true believers, and such an act on their part would be the most reprehensible thing they could possibly do in light of all that Christ had done for them. It would amount to a sin of rebellion resembling what the wilderness generation had done at Kadesh-Barnea, yet deserving of even greater punishment. Both the preceding and following contexts argue for their identity as true believers, as well as the fact that the author reminded them in verse 29 that they had been "sanctified" by Christ's blood.

The author reminds them in verse 26 that for those who have received the knowledge of the truth (i.e., true Christian enlightenment), to decisively turn their backs on Christ would be likened to the Old Testament "sin of a high hand" described in Numbers 15. For such acts, judgment could not be averted by sacrifice. Likewise, those guilty of decisively turning from Christ (not a mere momentary denial of Christ or fluctuation of faith) were left with a "certain expectation of judgment." In reminding his readers of such judgment, the author drew upon Isaiah 26:11, a verse from a context describing God's eschatological judgment upon the world, including His own covenant people. In that context, "fire" was used as a metaphor of God's judgment upon the earth's inhabitants prior to the establishment of the Messianic kingdom, not as a symbol of hell.

In verses 28-29 of Hebrews 10, the author resorted to another *a fortiori* argument based on an Old Testament principle. The abbreviated quotation in verse 28 is drawn from Deuteronomy 17:6. Rebellion against the Mosaic Law by such deeds as idolatry and murder was to be met with punishment in the form

of physical death (provided two or three witnesses could testify against the guilty one). If sins of extreme rebellion were punished by death under the Old Covenant, certainly apostasy against Christ is deserving of a severer punishment for those who have participated in the New Covenant. Verse 29 describes just how contemptuous such a sin is viewed in the eyes of God.

The author does not describe specifically what form the punishment would take. He certainly does not say that eternal condemnation in hell awaits the apostate (though many commentators have assumed such a fate). The eschatological overtones of the chapter (including the reference to reward in verse 35) might suggest that the punishment will take place primarily at the judgment seat of Christ. The author may have in mind being denied the right to God's "rest" (ch 4) as well as the right to share in the Son's inheritance and exercise of dominion in the kingdom ("the world to come"). This, however, does not rule out that God may also inflict temporal punishment on the guilty one.

Such judgment upon God's own people may seem harsh, but the principle of God judging His own people and "repaying" them with vengeance had its precedent in Deuteronomy 32:35-36 from which our author quotes in Heb 10:30. Because Israel had provoked God to jealousy by their participation in idolatry, God was storing up judgment for His covenant people at some point in their future. Rightly does the author conclude in verse 31 that it is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God. David had experienced what it meant to "fall into the hands of God" when he was disciplined by the Lord in 2 Samuel 24. God is undoubtedly a God of love and mercy, but He does also punish those in covenant relation with Him. This principle was true for those under the Old Covenant, and it remains true under the New Covenant. Utter rebellion under the New Covenant—such as abandoning one's confession of faith in Christ—results in a punishment more severe than the punishment of death under the Old Covenant, because more is at stake (the covenant blood of Christ).

As horrifying as such judgment might be for one of God's children, it is reserved only for those who have decisively abandoned their confession of faith in Christ—an extreme situation and not the normal experience of the child of God. Fortunately, the author does not draw the conclusion that his readers had gone to that extent just yet, for he continues to urge them to make the right choice to remain faithful to Christ. He proclaims, "Therefore, do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward" (10:35). Our confidence in Christ and His finished work is worth clinging to. For this, God promises us a great reward, not just a reward but a "great reward." You and I will never be disappointed for a life lived in faithful obedience and service to God's Son . . . the heir apparent through whom He has spoken in "these last days."