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Norman H. Young

Avondale College, norm.young2@gmail.com

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# IS HEBREWS 6:1-8 PASTORAL NONSENSE?

*Norman H. Young\**

## I Introduction

The difficulty that Hebrews 6:1-8 presents to those in the Calvinist tradition is that these verses seem to teach - contrary to a strict doctrine of election and perseverance - that even true believers (vv 4-5) can fall away (*parapesontas*, v 6).<sup>1</sup> For those who are not within the Calvinist tradition, the problem of these verses is not the apparent teaching that sincere Christians can fall away, but the statement that it is impossible (*adunaton*, v 4) to renew apostates unto repentance (*palin anakainizein eis metanoian*, v 6).

The agricultural parable in vv 7-8 appears only to confirm the impression gained from vv 4-6 that the writer allowed no restoration for any member of the community who rebelled in unbelief. The offensiveness of this severe teaching for most is not that it disrupts the harmony of some theological system, but that it violates the Christian conviction that God's mercy is never irrevocably withdrawn even from the apostate sinner (e.g., the Parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15:11ff.).

## II The Limits of Hebrews' Rigorism

It may profitably be asked at this point just how rigorous is the author's doctrine concerning the irremedial nature of apostasy. Does it, for example, deny forgiveness for every and any post-baptismal sin? It was the conviction of many of the early church fathers that post-baptismal forgiveness was impossible. Tertullian, for instance, interpreted this text to mean that post-baptismal sexual immorality<sup>2</sup> and apostasy<sup>3</sup> were beyond pardon. Novationists and Donatists were also rigorous in their refusal to restore to communion any Christian who defected during pagan persecution.<sup>4</sup>

Some modern commentators also believe that Hebrews 6:1-8 propounds a doctrine of no post-baptismal remission. C. E. Carlston, for example, argues that the eschatological scheme of the Epistle to the Hebrews bequeathed to the church the inevitable conclusion - though one, he says, that the author himself did not draw - that 'if no further sacrifice is possible, no further sin is forgivable'.<sup>5</sup> G. Buchanan in his *Anchor Commentary* also felt that the passage taught that 'since the sacrifice of Christ was enough to cover all the sins committed before belief, no further sacrifice was available for additional sinfulness (6:1-12)'.<sup>6</sup>

There are, however, in the epistle itself indications that the author, who shows considerable evidence of being pastorally sensitive,<sup>7</sup> did accept forgiveness for sins that occurred within the new covenant but which did not amount to a repudiation of that covenant. For instance, though the author gives Esau as an example of the finality of apostasy (12:17), he also lists the likes of Samson, Jephthah and David (11:32) as champions of persevering faith. Presumably these latter did not qualify for such a status without the availability of forgiveness within the covenant. The

\* Dr. Norman H. Young teaches at Avondale College, Cooranbong, N.S.W.

comforting assurance in the reiterated 'we have' (*echomen*, 4:15; 6:19; 8:1; 13:10) is hardly pertinent if the community needed or allowed no forgiveness within the new covenant community.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, the statements which refer to the high priestly intercession of Christ in the heavenly sanctuary (7:25; 9:21); the present efficacy of his sacrifice (*haimati rhantismou kreitton lalounti para ton Abel*, 12:24); the availability of mercy and grace in time of need (2:17; 4:16; 10:22); the well-known contemporary qualification of sinning deliberately (*ekousiōs*, 10:26); and the fight against sin (12:1-4), all sit rather uncomfortably with any interpretation of the Epistle to the Hebrews that restricts forgiveness and purification to the single historical event of the cross and a once only experience of its benefits.<sup>9</sup>

### III Denials and Explanations of the Rigorism

Even the limiting of the Epistle to the Hebrews' bleak denial of the possibility of a renewal unto repentance to the one sin of apostasy is an unacceptable conclusion for many commentators (both ancient and modern) and attempts have frequently been made to ameliorate the apparently severe language of the writer. The simplest way to do this is to construe *adunaton* (v 4) to mean no more than 'difficult'<sup>10</sup> or to say that the impossibility is only so for man but not for God.<sup>11</sup> Usage elsewhere in the epistle (6:18; 10:4; 11:6) hardly supports these proposals.

The suggestion that the writer is making a hypothetical supposition<sup>12</sup> and not depicting the actual situation is excluded by the epistle's urgency. The frequent effort to make *adunaton* more palatable by taking the participle *anastaurountas* in a temporal sense ('while they are still crucifying')<sup>13</sup> does seem to reduce the thought, as F. F. Bruce observed,<sup>14</sup> to an innane truism. L. Sabourin<sup>15</sup> relates *adunaton* to *anastaurountas* and thus, by avoiding the usual translation, cuts the Gordian knot with one stroke. However, that *adunaton* most naturally goes with the present infinitive *anakainizein* is indicated by the fact that Sabourin himself is forced to render the present participle *anastaurountas* as an infinitive: 'For it is impossible to crucify afresh the Son of God for the sake of one's repentance'.<sup>16</sup>

The view that the text is not referring to true Christian converts<sup>17</sup> hardly does justice either to the force of the four participles in vv 4-5 or to the pastoral anxiety and urgency evidenced by the author. V. D. Verbrugge's<sup>18</sup> thesis that 6:4-6 is directed at an entire local community tends to underplay the individualistic note that sounds in many of the exhortations (e.g. 6:11; 10:26-39; 11:1ff.). Of course, from a pastoral point of view an irremedial apostasy of a whole local group would only increase the disquiet one may have with this passage rather than reduce it.

On balance then there is little one can say against the general accuracy of such translations as the R.S.V. and N.E.B. The situation accordingly is of a group which, having begun in a bold way to develop a Christian faith upon a Jewish foundation (6:1-2),<sup>19</sup> is now in danger of losing that initial boldness (*parrēsia*). Such a failure of perseverance and nerve, the writer warned, would end in total and irreversible disaster. There seems to be no convincing way of modifying this cheerless outlook through any of the interpretations suggested above.

#### IV Causes of the Rigorism

Three observations need to be made as regards the now widely admitted rigorism of the Epistle to the Hebrews. First, the dynamic nature of the writer's pastoral exhortation. Secondly, the influence of the epistle's eschatological urgency. Thirdly, the logic of the author's contrasting argument between the levitical cult (especially the Day of Atonement) and Christ's priesthood. We now turn to deal with each of these considerations in order.

##### A.

The pastor to the Hebrews, writing to a people whose faith was on the brink of disaster, could not afford to eviscerate the force of his exhortations by allowing any hint to intrude into his writings that repentance after apostasy was possible. The writer's basic concern was that his readers move on from their Jewish foundation to its full completion (*teleiōtēta*, 6:1).

Whether his language referred to 'going out' (*exerchomai*, 3:16; 11:8; 13:13) or 'going in' (*eiserchomai*, 3:11, 18, 19; 4:1, 3, 5-6, 10-11), the writer's concern was that his readers not shrink back (10:38) into a safe obscurity,<sup>20</sup> but move out and onto the glorious inheritance that lay just before them (*mellō*, 1:14; 2:5; 6:5; 10:1; 13:14 [cf. 11:8, 20]; *prokeimai*, 6:18; 12:1).

The readers needed urging to come out (11:8, 10, 15, 27; 13:13) as well as admonishing to press on and to enter into the glory just ahead. This was no time to suggest that a negative decision could be reversed later.

##### B.

In an analysis of 1 Thess 2:13-16, G. E. Okeke makes the comment 'that Paul is writing from the background of the conception of an imminent Parousia which does not permit of a long-term process of rebellions and opportunities for repentance'.<sup>21</sup> The same eschatological outlook of 'already and soon' is also an important element in the theology of the Epistle to the Hebrews.<sup>22</sup>

The Christian pilgrims<sup>23</sup> are strengthened in their resolve to persevere in their struggling ascent by the assurance that Christ has already entered (*eisēlthon*, aorist, 6:20; 9:12, 24)<sup>24</sup> the heavenly destination and will soon return for his faithful brothers (9:28). His triumphant arrival into the heavenly presence of God and the promise of his soon return was the assurance that the pilgrims were near journey's end and should therefore be encouraged to remain faithful. However, to give up their Christian faith so near to the end carried the same hopeless consequences as when Israel lost its faith on the borders of the promised land (3:16-4:1).<sup>25</sup> For the Coming One will soon come (10:37-38), the day is drawing near (10:25), the voice of God will soon shake the heaven and the earth (12:26), the casting away of one's confidence now on the brink of the reception of its reward would leave no opportunity for second thoughts.<sup>26</sup>

##### C.

The Day of Atonement for Judaism was preeminently a day of annual remission and repentance.<sup>27</sup> The injunction that the Israelites were to afflict their souls (Lev 16:31, *ānāh*) was universally understood to require repentance and fasting,<sup>28</sup> 'Sin-offering and guilt-offering and death and the Day of Atonement, all of them

together, do not expiate sin without repentance'.<sup>29</sup> Annually, then, within certain careful limits, Judaism provided an opportunity for a new beginning.<sup>30</sup>

The 'Rabbis said God would restore the promised land if all Israel repented for just one day. That day would be the Day of Atonement when each year Israel had a chance to have its debt to God forgiven'.<sup>31</sup> The logic of the author's argument which made a contrast with Judaism led him to deny any second start in the Christian faith for apostates. The writer develops a series of contrasts between the new faith of Christ and the old levitical order, especially the Day of Atonement,<sup>32</sup> by using his beloved term *hapax* or *ephapax*.

First, the old order priesthood was one that was constantly changing, for mortality necessitated the continuous investiture of new priests (7:16, 23), but Christ's investiture was by divine oath once-for-all and thus his priesthood is unchanging (*ou metamēlēthesetai*, 7:21; *aparabatos*, 7:24) and eternal (*eis ton aiōna*, 6:20; 7:17, 21, 24, 28; *eis to diēnekes*, 7:3).

Secondly, the earthly priests, not least the high priest, offered sacrifices continuously, which for the author was proof of the old order's ineffectiveness (*kath' hēmeran*, 7:27; 10:11; *pollakis*, 9:25; 10:11; *kat' eniauton*, 10:1, 3; *eis to diēnekes*, 10:1); but Christ's obedient death was once-for-all and therefore efficacious (*ephapax*, 7:27; *hapax*, 9:26, 27, 28; *mia thusia [prosphora] eis to diēnekes*, 10:12, 14).

Thirdly, the levitical priests and high priests went continuously into the earthly tabernacle on a daily and annual cycle to perform their cultic duties (*dia pantos, hapax tou eniautou*, 9:6-7; *kat' eniauton*, 9:25), but Christ entered into the most holy place once-for-all (*ephapax*, 9:12, cf. 6:20; 9:24). Christ's sitting posture (1:3; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2) as opposed to the levitical priests' standing position (10:11) no doubt announces a similar contrast.

Fourthly, the ceremonial cleansing of the worshippers in the ancient cult was really an annual remembrance (*anamnēsis*, 10:3) of sin rather than a removal of sin (10:4, 11), but Christ's death truly took away sin (9:26, 28) and is accordingly a once-for-all cleansing (1:3; 9:12-14; 10:2, 10, 14, 18).

It is no great step, continuing along this line of thought, for the author to contrast the annual Day of Atonement repentance<sup>33</sup> of Judaism with a single initial and unrepeatable act of repentance for converts to Christianity in the time of the New Age.<sup>34</sup> Christian believers are enlightened once (*hapax*, 6:4). So our author's consistent argument of contrast, as well as his eschatological outlook and pastoral fervour, has led him to make a powerful if intemperate exhortation in Hebrews 6:1-8. Opposed to Judaism's annual Day of Atonement repentance, the writer asserts that Christian repentance is a final and not a repetitious act.

## V Conclusion: Is it Pastoral Nonsense?

Has the author in his zeal to lift the 'drooping hands' and to strengthen the 'weak knees' (12:12) limited the grace of God and presented a sub-Christian doctrine of redemption? The question must be answered from within the writer's own milieu and terms. His strong belief that Christ had begun the salvation of the New Age demanded, as far as the writer to the Hebrews was concerned, an equally powerful conviction that the abandonment 'of the good things that have

come' (9:11) after accepting them meant the loss 'of the good things to come' (10:1; 2:5; 12:10).

There can be little doubt about the pragmatic effectiveness upon the readers of the stern reminder that without persevering faith they would lose not only their foundation in Judaism (3:12; 6:1), but also the glorious future inheritance (10:31; 12:28-29). If one believes that a divine revolution has occurred in history (1:1-2), one preaches with a revolutionist's fervour. To denounce the writer's pastoral vehemence as nonsense is to denounce every reformer's urgency as insane.

But granting the appropriateness of the writer's unremitting appeal given his sense of fulfilment, change, and new eschatological beginning, it must still be asked whether his zeal and urgency is in any way pertinent today. If our conception of Christianity is that it is just one way of looking at life among many; or simply the religious tradition that happens to be one of the historical roots of our society; or a religious philosophy to be quietly and tolerantly discussed, then it may well be that the unrelenting demand of the Epistle to the Hebrews is a very relevant challenge to our moribund and liberal urbanity.

The rigorism of Hebrews 6:1-8 is not nonsense, either then or now, but then neither is it wise pastoral counsel to be followed by any minister concerned to shepherd his lost sheep: it is an urgent voice sounding forth and admonishing a weakening faith at the time of the birth of a New Age. Today we cannot emulate the writer's uncompromising warnings for we are no longer at the beginning, at the point of revolution; but we must, if Christianity is to remain a religious power, partake in part of his urgent and revolutionary spirit. When the redemptive love of God in Christ is preached and practised, then, perhaps, will be felt our author's horror when those who have tasted it turn away.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. The following attempts to harmonize Hebrews 6:1-8 with Calvinism may be mentioned: P. E. Hughes, 'Hebrews 6:4-6 and the Peril of Apostasy', *WTJ* 35 (1973) 37-55; R. Nicole, 'Some Comments on Hebrews 6:4-6 and the Doctrine of the Perseverance of God with the Saints', *Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation* (ed. G. F. Hawthorne; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1975) 355-64; V. D. Verbrugge, 'Towards a new Interpretation of Hebrews 6:4-6', *CalvinThJourn* 15 (1980) 61-73; N. Weeks, 'Admonition and Error in Hebrews', *WTJ* 39 (1976) 72-80.
2. *de Pudic*, 16, 20.
3. *Ibid*, 9. In this passage Tertullian limits the repentance of the prodigal son to the first calling of a gentile and denies that there is any reference to restoration of an apostate Christian.
4. Cf. Jerome *adv. Jovin.* ii, 3; Ambrose *de Poen.* ii, 2, 6ff.
5. C. E. Carleton, 'Eschatology and Repentance in the Epistle to the Hebrews', *JBL* 78 (1959) 301.
6. G. Buchanan, *To the Hebrews* (New York: Doubleday, 1972) 108.
7. E.g., 6:10-12; 10:32-39; 11:39-40.
8. Note the reference to 'weaknesses' (4:15).
9. This is not to deny the strong emphasis in the epistle on the completion of the purification of sins through the death of Christ (e.g., 1:3; 9:12), but to observe the presence also of an emphasis on the continuing availability of Jesus' achievement to each member of the struggling community. See further G. Hughes, *Hebrews and Hermeneutics* (Cambridge: University Press, 1979) 171, n. 142; R. Williamson, *Philo and the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Leiden: Brill, 1970) 250-52.
10. C. Spicq, *L'Épître aux Hébreux* (2 vols.; 3rd ed.; Paris: J. Gabalda, 1953) I, 168.
11. Ambrose *de Poen.* ii, 2. For discussion see O. Michel, *Der Brief an die Hebräer* (12th ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1966) 245-47.
12. B. F. Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (2nd ed.; London: MacMillan, 1892) 165; E. F. Scott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1922) 23.

13. J. K. Elliott, 'Is Post-baptismal Sin Forgivable?' *The Bible Translator* 28 (1977) 330-32.
14. F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1964) 124.
15. L. Sabourin, 'Crucifying Afresh For One's Repentance' (Hebrews 6:4-6), *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 6 (1976) 264-71.
16. *Ibid.*, 271 (emphasis added). Elsewhere in the epistle (6:18; 10:4; 11:6) *adunaton* is always followed by an infinitive.
17. Nicole 'Some Comments on Hebrews 6:4-6 and the Doctrine of the Perseverance of God with the Saints', 363; Hughes, 'Hebrews 6:4-6 and the Peril of Apostasy', 155.
18. V. D. Verbrugge, 'Towards a New Interpretation of Hebrews 6:4-6', 61-73.
19. As F. F. Bruce (*Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 112) says, 'the impression we get is that existing Jewish beliefs and practices were used as a foundation on which to build Christian truth'.
20. T. W. Lewis, '... And If He Shrinks Back' (Hebrews X. 38b), *NTS* 22 (1976) 88-94.
21. G. E. Okeke, '1 Thessalonians 2:13-16: The Fate of the Unbelieving Jews', *NTS* 27 (1980) 130.
22. C. K. Barrett, 'The Eschatology of the Epistle to the Hebrews', *The Background of the New Testament and Its Eschatology* (ed. W. D. Davies and D. Daube, Cambridge: University Press, 1964) 363-93; B. Klappert, *Die Eschatologie des Hebräerbriefs* (München: Chr. Kaiser, 1969).
23. For the pilgrim motif see W. G. Johnsson, 'The Pilgrimage Motif in the Book of Hebrews', *JBL* 97 (1978) 239-51.
24. When the author is speaking of the levitical priests entering the sanctuary he always uses the continuous present tense (*eisiasin*, 9:6-7; *eischeretai*, 9:24; *eispheretai*, 13:11).
25. The same verb (*eischeromai*) is used by the author for both entering the rest (3:11, 18, 19; 4:1, 3, 5, 6, 10-11) and entering the sanctuary (6:19-20; 9:12, 24, 25). The verb is taken from Ps 95:11 (LXX), the text that chapters 3 - 4 are based upon. The future form that is used in Ps 95:11 (LXX) also occurs in reference to Aaron's entrance into the sanctuary (Lev 16:3, 23 LXX), though for the actual entrance with the sacrificial blood *eisporeuomai* or *eispherō* are used. Whether or not the use of *eiseleusthai* in both Ps 95:11 (LXX) and Lev 16:3, 23 (LXX) is a case of the author using the rabbinical exegetical principle of *g<sup>e</sup>zerah shawa'* in chapters 3 - 4 and 9, there can be no doubt that he intends to relate the themes of entering the rest and entering the sanctuary by his use of *eischeromai* in these two sections.
26. C. E. Carleton ('Eschatology and Repentance in the Epistle to the Hebrews,' 300) comments that 'the relationship between the shortness of time and the impossibility of repentance is never clearly spelled out'; but as G. Hughes (*Hebrews and Hermeneutics*, 171 n. 140) notes, we should not separate the 'horizontal' (future) too rigidly from the 'vertical' (realized).
27. *Jub.* 5:17-18; *m. Yoma*, 8:8; *b. Yoma* 86a; *Abot R. Nat.* 29, 44b; Philo, *Spec.* I, 186ff.; *Leg. All.* III, 174; *Post.* 48; *Cong.* 107ff.
28. *Tos. Yoma* 5:9, cf. *b. Yoma* 85b. See G. F. Moore, *Judaism* (3 vols.; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University press, 1962) I, 498-500, 508-9.
29. *Jub.* 34:18-19; *Pss. Sol.* 3:9(8); *Sipra Lev.* 16:29; *b. Yoma* 74b; *IQP Hab.* 11; Philo, *Spec.* II, 193ff.; *Mos.* II, 23ff.
30. G. Buchanan, *The Consequences of the Covenant* (Leiden: Brill, 1970) 224-26. Buchanan gives rabbinic references which use the language of 'new creation', 'as if innocent'.
31. *Ibid.*, 225.
32. W. Manson, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1951) 130-31.
33. For references see Strack-Billerbeck II, 422. The editors (*ibid.*) comment that 'when the Israelite repents on the Day of Atonement, God views him as a new creature, even as a new-born child who is free of sins and guilt . . . sin is forgiven and a new reckoning begins. This indeed also is filled with guilt, but then the next Day of Atonement draws near and permits the repentant to appear once more as a new creature, and so it continues unto the End' (author's translation).
34. The fact that we have argued that Hebrews taught a continuing forgiveness for 'weaknesses' is not disharmonious with the assertion that the writer believed that the initial repentance was irrepeatable. Is John 13:10 a parallel?