

COVENANT AND THE WARNINGS OF HEBREWS: THE BLESSING AND THE CURSE

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Anyone familiar with the literature on the warning passages from the book of Hebrews is well aware of the familiar arguments regularly put forth for and against the possibility that genuine believers actually apostatize. These exegetical paths are well trodden, and one would be rather presumptuous to suggest that something new could be added to the fray this late in the game. As the title of this essay suggests, I am interested in the broader issue of covenant, particularly as it relates to two areas of concern: (1) the blessings of covenant that members can be expected to receive; and (2) the curses of covenant that stand as a warning to members against covenant unfaithfulness. In focusing on these two areas, I am attempting to synthesize two exegetical threads I have explored elsewhere by zeroing in on their significance for the book of Hebrews, one being the covenant significance of the good word in the OT,¹ the other being the high-handed sin of Numbers 15.² It is my view that these two strands of thought contribute significant insight for interpreting the warning texts of Hebrews.

I. THE COVENANT BLESSING: RECIPIENTS OF THE GOOD WORD IN HEBREWS 6:5

Hebrews 6:4–6 records one of the more familiar warning passages from this exhortation (cf. 2:1–4; 3:6; 3:7–4:13; 10:26–39; 12:25–29) and emphasizes the fact that it is impossible for the said apostate to renew repentance. Though the emphasis on this text is usually couched in the negative, it is also important to observe the elements of covenant that appear to be assumed amidst the cataloguing of characteristics observable in these individuals identified in vv. 4–6. One might argue that the writer of Hebrews clothes his discussion in the nomenclature of the old covenant, all the while transforming the situation in light of the new covenant reality inaugurated in Christ.³ Numerous studies have focused on the purported OT background subsumed in this list, but none has fully articulated how the strictures of covenant blessings and curses might play a role in the writer's argument concerning apostasy.

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¹ Matthew McAfee, "The Good Word: Its Non-Covenant and Covenant Significance in the OT," *JOT* (forthcoming).

² Matthew McAfee, "F. Leroy Forlines on Presumptuous Sin in Numbers 15:27–30 and the Way Forward" (paper presented for the Forlines Lecture Series of Welch College, Nashville, TN, March 2013).

³ This fact is nowhere more obvious than his quotation of Jer 31:31–34 in Heb 8:8–12.

1. *“The good word” in secondary literature.* Until recently there has been a significant gap in the secondary literature on the meaning of the expression “the good word” in the OT and its significance as covenant terminology. The importance of this expression for the book of Hebrews becomes apparent in light of the writer’s reference to those who have tasted of the “good word of God” in Heb 6:5. However, scholars have not adequately explored the ramifications of this connection. Paul Ellingworth equates the good word in Heb 6:5 with Christian preaching and the “powers of the age to come” that accompanied it.⁴ Despite an appeal to the OT background of this passage, Dave Mathewson similarly affirms that it is probably “the word which was preached to the covenant community and confirmed by signs and wonders in 2:1–4,”⁵ moving a step closer to the argument we will advance momentarily. Martin Emmrich makes the same assessment, though he entertains Erich Grässer’s earlier suggestion that the good word may derive from earlier statements in Josh 21:45 and 23:15.⁶ Emmrich suggests that such a connection may indicate that these believers are to envision their own experiences as a “replica” of Israel during its formative period as a nation, but stops short of articulating how this point would affect our reading of the passage. F. F. Bruce also connects this expression with the preaching of the gospel, citing as a parallel Acts 6:3 where Simon Magus “realized how good the word of God was” and was amazed by the accompanying signs and great powers.⁷ This interpretation is slightly different from the one proposed by Ellingworth, Mathewson, and others in that Bruce seems to be interpreting *καλὸν ῥῆμα* as an identifiable quality of gospel preaching rather than gospel preaching itself. George Guthrie follows this same approach by translating the expression, “the goodness of the word of God,” instead of the usual, “good word of God.”⁸ Although this interpretive option may make sense in an English rendering of the expression, it does not accurately reflect the actual phraseology of the Greek. The Greek phrase does not express the quality of something unstated and thus implied in the text (i.e. the goodness of the word of God, which is the gospel preached), but refers to the thing itself that they have actually received or experienced (i.e. the good word of God).⁹

⁴ Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 321.

⁵ Dave Mathewson, “Reading Heb 6:4–6 in Light of the OT,” *WTJ* 61 (1999) 218. Similarly, see Philip Hughes, “Hebrews 6:4–6 and the Peril of Apostasy,” *WTJ* 35 (1973) 142.

⁶ Martin Emmrich, “Hebrews 6:4–6—Again! (A Pneumatological Inquiry),” *WTJ* 65 (2003) 85–86, citing Erich Grässer, *An die Hebräer [Hebr 1–6]* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1990) 352.

⁷ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, (rev. ed.; NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 147.

⁸ George Guthrie, *Hebrews* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998) 219. Cf. Donald Guthrie, *Hebrews* (INTC 15; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 143; Stanley Outlaw, *The Book of Hebrews* (Randall House Bible Commentary; Nashville: Randall House, 2005) 128; Luke Timothy Johnson, *Hebrews: A Commentary* (NTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006) 163; Gareth Lee Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012) 270–71.

⁹ Technically speaking, *καλὸν* is an attributive adjective modifying the noun *ῥῆμα*, thus “good word.” For the translation, “goodness of the word of God,” one would expect an abstract noun followed by a series of two genitives. It is also possible to interpret *καλὸν ... ῥῆμα* as a predicate accusative: “tasting the word of God (as) good.” We have opted for the attributive interpretation, but as we shall see below, the OT exhibits both attributive and predicate renderings of this expression.

I would not deny the validity of equating the good word with the gospel message of Christ as a whole, but what does not seem valid is to suggest that it is loosely defined as the goodness one perceives each time the gospel is proclaimed. The real interpretive challenge, however, is how one moves from “good word” to “gospel.” But what often goes without saying is that the specific designation “good word” as such appears nowhere else in the NT. Appeals to occurrences of the word λόγος or ῥῆμα as it refers to the gospel message are not entirely helpful either,¹⁰ since these words appear to share a more generalized reference to the Christian gospel message. True, καθὼν ῥῆμα must have its ultimate significance in the gospel, but the specific meaning of this term deals with a particular aspect of the gospel, an aspect we will identify more fully below.

Mathewson has grappled valiantly with this issue in his study of the OT background informing these descriptions in Heb 6:4–6. The most helpful aspect of his study is that it considers the underlying old covenant context from the perspective of covenant blessings and curses.¹¹ He argues convincingly for a literary connection between Heb 6:7 and Deut 11:11 (LXX), as the following comparison aptly demonstrates:

γῆ γὰρ ἡ πιούσα τὸν ἐπ’ αὐτῆς ἐχόμενον πολλάκις ὑετόν (Heb 6:7)

γῆ ... ἐκ τοῦ ὑετοῦ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ πίεται (Deut 11:11 LXX)

“For ground that drinks the rain that often comes upon it”

“The ground drinks from the rain of heaven”

As Mathewson notes, the context of Deuteronomy 11 is one of blessing and cursing: the rewards for obedience outlined in vv. 13–15 and 22–25, and the punishment for disobedience mentioned in vv. 26 and 28.¹² The allusion in Hebrews is all but certain in light of the writer’s explicit mention of blessing (εὐλογίας) and cursing (κατάρας) in Hebrews 6, vv. 7 and 8 respectively.¹³ Essentially, the writer applies the old covenant land promise to the new covenant reality inaugurated in Christ.

Commentators have been less clear on the significance of “the good word” as it is referenced in Heb 6:5. Mathewson comes closer than any previous scholar I am aware of in couching the conversation in covenant terms,¹⁴ but even he does

¹⁰ E.g. Hughes, “The Peril of Apostasy” 142; Scot McKnight, “The Warning Passages of Hebrews: A Formal Analysis and Theological Conclusions,” *TrinJ* 13 (1992) 47. McKnight’s unique approach to the good word is to suggest that it refers to the believer’s confession of faith, emphasizing that it is reflective of genuine Christian experience. The problem with his analysis is that it compares καθὼν ῥῆμα with uses of ῥῆμα by itself. This approach fails to recognize the distinct nuance of the good word in the OT, as we will outline it below.

¹¹ “Heb 6:4–6 in Light of the OT” 221.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ See also Harold Attridge, *Hebrews: A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1982) 173 n. 90.

¹⁴ Similarly, David deSilva, “Hebrews 6:4–8: A Socio-Rhetorical Investigation (Part 1),” *TynBul* 50 (1999) 55–57.

not develop this motif to its fullest interpretive potential.¹⁵ Part of the problem lies in the fact that the good word has not been fully understood as a covenant expression in its distributive contexts throughout the OT. My previous recent study of covenant and non-covenant contexts of “the good word” seems to confirm the scholarly hunch that “the good word” in Heb 6:5 may in fact relate to Josh 21:45 and 23:15.¹⁶ We shall now summarize the findings of this particular study as to the meaning of the expression before considering its significance for interpreting Heb 6:5.

2. *The good word in the OT.* According to a recent analysis of the Hebrew expression *dābār ṭōb* “good word” as it variously appears in the OT, we find that it was commonly used in both non-covenant and covenant contexts. When we isolate those non-covenant environments, this phrase tends to yield two related nuances: (1) the good word as a reliable word; and (2) the good word as a favorable word. For example, the good word in the sense of “reliable word” is found in the context of Absalom’s coup of his father’s throne when he intercepted individuals approaching the king with cases of dispute. Absalom tells them: “See, your words are good and right, but there is no one from the king listening to you” (2 Sam 15:3). In other words, the people had “sound arguments” (lit. “good words”), but the king was not listening to them. At other times, a good word refers to favorable words, like the prescribed “good word” of the prophets for King Ahab, as Micaiah is thus counseled: “Please, let your words be like their word and speak something favorable (lit. “speak good”).” This particular meaning gives way to a more nuanced depiction of a pleasant or delightful utterance (Ps 45:1[2]; Prov 15:23), or even a word of comfort in the case of YHWH’s “good words” to the distressed prophet Zechariah (Zech 1:13).

As we turn our attention to the good word in covenant contexts, there are several instances dealing with personal/political alliances, but for our purposes we will focus on YHWH’s covenant with Israel.¹⁷ Whenever the good word appears

¹⁵ Verlyn Verbrugge also appeals to the OT covenant community as a necessary background for interpreting Heb 6:4–6, but the purpose for doing so does not arise from his exegesis of 6:4–6, but from that of 6:7–8 (citing allusions to Isa 5:1–7 and Deut 11:26–28). He offers a communal interpretation of the warning, stating that “the primary concept in the author’s mind is that of a covenant community and not the individual child of God. Thus, when we read of the falling away and of God’s subsequent rejection, it is rejection of a community that is in focus” (“Towards a New Interpretation of Hebrews 6:4–6,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 15 [1980] 62). More exactly, this warning is against the incipient danger of that local community of believers committing apostasy as a whole, urging them not to repeat Israel’s apostasy for which there is no further repentance (p. 69). The main problem for Verbrugge’s novel reading is that it undercuts the author’s allusions to the wilderness wanderings of Numbers 13–14, wherein the individuals responsible for leading in the rebellion, along with their associates, are punished, while the community of Israel as a whole continues its journey to Canaan. Note also deSilva’s critique of this view in “Hebrews 6:4–8: A Socio-Rhetorical Investigation” 52 n. 43. On the connections between Numbers 13–14 and Heb 3:7–4:13, see Mathewson, “Heb 6:4–6 in Light of the OT” 212–13; as well as the recent thesis by Todd Scacewater, “Hebrews in Rebellion: The Appropriation of Numbers 13–14 in Hebrews 6:4–8” (Th.M. thesis, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2012).

¹⁶ McAfee, “Good Word.”

¹⁷ By saying monolithically “covenant of Israel,” we are not diminishing the fact that the biblical covenants are diverse and multifaceted. On the other hand, the biblical authors do present God’s cove-

within this context, it demonstrates reliable favor in two ways: (1) covenant blessings in particular; or (2) covenant blessings in contrast with covenant curses. The paradigmatic text comes from Josh 23:14–15, which has been duly noted as a plausible background for Heb 6:5. Because of its importance for Hebrews, we cite it fully here:

Look, I am going this day the way of all the earth, and you know with all your heart and with all your soul that not one word from all the good words which YHWH your God pronounced upon you has fallen. The whole [of the good words] came to you; not one word from it has fallen. But just as every good word that YHWH your God spoke to you has come to you, thus YHWH will bring upon you every bad word, until he destroys you from upon this good land that YHWH your God has given to you.¹⁸

Taking this passage in front of the backdrop of the words YHWH had delivered to Moses earlier, these good words are tied to the promise of land. Furthermore, these words are the opposite of the covenant curses, or as they are designated here, “the bad words.” We should think not only of Deut 28:15–68 where the specific curses are outlined, but also Deut 11:26—“Look, I am setting before you this day blessing and cursing”—in light of the fact that it appears to be front and center in the argument of the author of Hebrews in 6:7–8. Land is part of the promise, but a series of divine acts of judgment leading up to the eventual removal from the land constitute the curses. What is important to keep in mind here is that, technically speaking, the OT good word is the promised blessing associated with living in the land that will be replaced by curses leading up to a final removal from the land should covenant members act unfaithfully.¹⁹ The good word is essentially the blessings of the covenant promised to those who live in faithful obedience to the terms of the covenant and not the covenant itself. For this reason, the author’s use of the good word in Hebrews does not refer to the gospel as a whole, but rather to the blessings associated with the new covenant reality of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Another development in the OT usage of the good word finds expression in Solomon’s prayer dedicating the newly constructed temple in Jerusalem. He announces, “Not one word from all his good word which he pronounced through Moses his servant has fallen” (1 Kgs 8:56b). The intertextual affinities with Josh 23:14–15 are without question, as the king envisions a certain level of fulfillment concerning the words of Joshua announced on the other side of the Jordan. This point is confirmed by the additional rest motif in the first portion of the verse: “Blessed is YHWH who has given rest to his people, according to all that he

nant activity at least in a progressive fashion, whereby successive covenants seem to build and expand upon previous covenants.

¹⁸ All translations are mine.

¹⁹ The old covenant context envisions the curses both corporately and individually. On the corporate level, the covenant curses outlined in Deuteronomy 28 will be enacted against the covenant community as a whole should it defect from Torah corporately. Yet on the individual level, high-handed sin against the stipulations of covenant will result in removal from the covenant community irrespective of the status of the whole. As Num 15:27–30 frames it, there remains no sacrifice for the individual who has committed this kind of sin. See the discussion in part 2 of this essay.

spoke” (1 Kgs 8:56a). This text is also significant in that the good word as “promised land” and the good word as “promised dynasty”²⁰ coalesce, seeing that the Davidic dynasty is fully intact in the person of Solomon (the good word as a royal dynasty) whose prayer envisions that the temple provides symbolic confirmation for the rest of YHWH’s covenant people in the land (the good word as promised land).

3. *The significance of the OT good word for Heb 6:5.* In addition to the insights already noted regarding the author’s observable awareness of Deuteronomy 11, the usage of the good word in the OT further strengthens the case that the book of Hebrews is reinterpreting old covenant categories in light of the realities inaugurated in the new. This awareness brings further light to earlier warnings regarding the potential failure to enter into rest (4:1, 3, 5, 8, 9, 10, 11).²¹ According to the language of 6:5, the rest amounts to the good word now experienced in part by new covenant believers, even though there is another aspect of this rest yet to come. The tension between the now and not yet aspects of this rest finds expression in 6:5. The identification markers listed in vv. 4–6 cannot be interpreted fully from a surface-level reading of the passage.²² Careful analysis of 6:4–6 demonstrates that the five-member list should be read as a series of two parallel pairs falling under the governing phrase “those once having been enlightened,”²³ as demonstrated in the following arrangement of the text:

²⁰ There are apparently two applications of the good word in the OT: (1) the good word as the covenant promise of land for the people of Israel, as we have already noted; and (2) the good word as the promise of a royal dynasty to David and his descendants. This second application of “the good word” can be seen in 2 Sam 7:28: “And now, O Lord YHWH, you are God, and your words are true; you have spoken this good thing to your servant,” the “good thing” being the promise of an eternal dynasty.

²¹ The curious reference to ἡσούς in 4:8 has spawned a great deal of speculation about whether Jesus or Joshua is intended. See the listing of interpretive options in Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews* 252–53: (1) a reference to the historical Joshua of the OT; (2) a reference to Jesus; or (3) a reference to the historical Joshua as a play on words bringing to mind Jesus. One might simply add that the broader theme of rest and its connection to the good word in 6:5, where the primary OT texts as such are Josh 21:45 and 23:14–15, might add weight to the view that the historical Joshua is meant. Admittedly, such an interpretation would move us beyond the wilderness wanderings of Numbers 13–14, which clearly serve as the main backdrop of the writer’s argument (see Mathewson, “Heb 6:4–6 in Light of the OT” 212–13; and especially Scacewater, “Hebrews in Rebellion”), but it fits in with his overall point that there remains a future rest, even one beyond that of Israel residing in the land of Canaan during the days of Joshua.

²² E.g. Wayne Grudem’s conclusion that these terms are inconclusive as to the identity of the individuals being described, since “they speak of events that are experienced by genuine Christians and by some people who participate in the fellowship of a church but are never really saved,” misses the point of these descriptions altogether (“Perseverance of the Saints: A Case Study of Hebrews 6:4–6 and the Other Warning Passages in Hebrews,” in *Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge, and Grace* [ed. Thomas Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000] 137).

²³ Cf. Cockerill, *Epistle to the Hebrews* 268, who argues that the first participle is emphasized by its position and accompanying qualifier “once,” leading him to analyze the following three participles in apposition to the first.

τοὺς ἅπαξ φωτισθέντας	those once having been enlightened,
	both
γευσασμένους τε τῆς δωρεᾶς τῆς ἐπουρανίου	having tasted of the heavenly gift
καὶ	and
μετόχους γενηθέντας πνεύματος ἁγίου	having become partaker of the Holy Spirit
καὶ	and
καλον γευσασμένους θεοῦ ῥῆμα	having tasted the good word of God
δυνάμεις τε μέλλοντος αἰῶνος	and the powers of the age to come. ²⁴

The first pair is marked by a τέ ... καί construction: both “tasting of the heavenly gift” and “partaking of the Holy Spirit,”²⁵ while the second pair is indicated by the fact that the one participle γεύομαι “having tasted” governs both objects: “the good word of God” and “the powers of the age to come.” The second occurrence of the postpositive particle τέ in v. 5 appears simply to function as a conjunction, perhaps chosen stylistically as a means of organizing the two pairs chastically: τέ ... καί ... καί ... τέ. Taking these two items together—the good word of God and the powers of the age to come—is important for the overall theology of the book of Hebrews, especially in light of its warning in chaps. 3 and 4 that focuses strongly on the prospects of failing to enter into the rest of God. For Hebrews, covenant entails both the now and the not yet: “tasting the good word” with its emphasis on the promise of rest, and “(tasting) the powers of the age to come” with its emphasis on the actual entrance into rest.²⁶ Therefore, the issue in this pas-

²⁴ For similar structural analyses, see Grant R. Osborne, “A Classical Arminian View” in *Four Views on the Warning Passages in Hebrews* (ed. Herbert W. Bateman IV; Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007) 111–12; Cockerill, *Epistle to the Hebrews* 268–69 n. 3. Osborne also cites George Guthrie, *The Structure of Hebrews: A Text-Linguistic Analysis* (Leiden: Brill, 1994) 217, but this appears to be incorrect, as I have been unable to locate such an analysis in this book. Guthrie does provide a syntactical analysis in his commentary, but he interprets four parallel participles here: having been enlightened, having tasted the heavenly gift, having become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and having tasted the goodness of God’s word and the powers of the coming age (*Hebrews* 217).

²⁵ The postpositive particle τέ thus functions in two ways: (1) as a particle marking close connection between coordinate words or phrases (i.e. “both X and Y”); and (2) as a simple conjunction much like καί (see BDAG 993). This particle occurs a total of twenty times throughout the book of Hebrews (1:3; 2:4; 2:11; 4:12; 5:1; 5:7; 5:14; 6:2a; 6:2b; 6:4; 6:5; 6:19; 8:3; 9:1; 9:2; 9:9; 9:19; 10:33; 11:32; 12:2), and all but four of these instances (1:3; 6:2a; 6:5; 12:2) mark a “both ... and” construction. This particular function of τέ is indicated when it occurs with καί in one of two positions: (1) immediately before καί (most common) or (2) before καί but with intervening words. For example, the more common τέ καί occurs in 2:4: σημείους τε καὶ τέρασιν “both by signs and wonders”; the less common τέ ... καί is found in our passage, as well as in 2:11: ὁ τε γὰρ ἁγιάζων καὶ οἱ ἁγιαζόμενοι ἐξ ἑνὸς πάντες “For both the one who sanctifies and those being sanctified are all from one” (see also 6:2b; 9:2; 9:19).

²⁶ One should keep in mind that “good word” is not exclusively concerned with the now, while “powers of the age to come” is not limited to the not yet, since both are in some sense inaugurated with further fulfillments yet to come. This fact does not deny, however, that “good word” emphasizes prom-

sage is not so much a matter of determining whether or not this list describes genuine believers. The text assumes they are members of the covenant community who have experienced the good word of God's promised rest in the now and who are destined to experience the powers of the age to come should they persevere.²⁷

Consequently, Mathewson's claim that the people depicted in Heb 6:4–6 were not true members of the new covenant community but had failed to exercise saving faith defies the power of the "rest" motif utilized in the writer's overall argument.²⁸ If we follow Emmrich and others who assume a pilgrimage imagery as operative here,²⁹ the ultimate rest must be understood as the final eschaton or destination of the Christian journey. Emmrich may be warranted in claiming that these warning passages in Hebrews "were never designed to investigate the 'can-true-believers-fall-away?' kind of inquiry."³⁰ On the contrary, the text assumes this fact *prima facie*. The OT covenant context assumes that the members of the wilderness wanderings were members of the covenant community; what was not a given, however, was that all covenant members would by necessity achieve the promised rest. The whole argument of the writer on this point is founded upon the notion of covenant blessings and covenant curses as the proper motivation for instilling perseverance within the new covenant community.

II. THE COVENANT CURSE: RENUNCIATION OF THE GOOD WORD IN HEBREWS 6:4: A HIGH-HANDED SIN?

Given the fact that a reasonable case can be made for interpreting the good word in Heb 6:5 in light of its OT covenant force, coupled with the explicit mention of blessing and cursing in 6:7–8 replete with allusions to Deut 11:11 as noted above, not to mention a broader awareness of the work's Jewishness as a whole,³¹ interpreting the warnings according to the covenant framework of curses is entirely warranted, if not mandated. The OT background apparently guiding the writer's

ise (as we have argued from the OT evidence) and that "powers of the age to come" emphasizes fulfillment. Thomas Oberholtzer has also recognized the now and the not yet aspects of this passage, but mistakenly suggests that "good word" may refer to Jesus' teaching about the kingdom, citing Heb 2:3 ("The Thorn-Infested Ground in Hebrews 6:4–12," *BSac* 145 [1988] 322).

²⁷ The structure of the text as it is outlined here renders highly unlikely Roger Nicole's (and others') contention that although the reference to having tasted the powers of the age to come "could refer to people who have received 'eternal life,'" it may just as well "describe people who had been in contact with the supernatural power of the gospel" ("Some Comments on Hebrews 6:4–6 and the Doctrine of the Perseverance of God with the Saints," in *Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation* [ed. G. Hawthorne; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975] 361). As a parallel to *καλὸν ῥῆμα*, which refers to the blessings of the new covenant, it is more natural to interpret *δυνάμεις τε μέλλοντος αἰῶνος* "and the powers of the age to come" as a reference to the eschatological rest awaiting the new covenant saints who persevere.

²⁸ Mathewson, "Heb 6:4–6 in Light of the OT" 224.

²⁹ Emmrich, "Hebrews 6:4–6—Again!" 86–87; Randall Gleason, "The OT Background of the Warning in Hebrews 6:4–8," *BSac* 155 (1998) 73–74.

³⁰ Emmrich, "Hebrews 6:4–6—Again!" 88.

³¹ Note especially Donald Guthrie, *Hebrews* 38–46. See also Robert P. Gordon, *Hebrews* (2d ed.; Readings; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2008) 24–29; Bruce, *Epistle to the Hebrews* 25–29; Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews* 37–42, 45–49.

articulation of the sin of apostasy is arguably that of Num 15:30 and the high-handed sin, but the significance for this type of sin is framed in terms of its meriting the covenant curses, at least according to the argument of Heb 6:7–8.

1. *The high-handed sin of Num 15:30 and the warnings of Hebrews.* The language of the OT presumptuous sin utilizes the expression, “to act with a raised/high hand,” in Num 15:30–31, rendered here in full:

מְקַרֵּב יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר־תַּעֲשֶׂה בְיַד רִמָּה מִן־הָאָזְרַח וּמִן־הַגֵּר אֶת־יְהוָה הוּא מַגְדִּיף וְנִכְרַתְהָ הַנֶּפֶשׁ הַהוּא
כִּי דִבְרֵי־יְהוָה בָּזָה וְאֶת־מִצְוֹתוֹ הִפְרָה הַפְרַת תִּכְרַת הַנֶּפֶשׁ הַהוּא עֹנֶה בָּהּ: ³³עֲמָה:

But the person who acts with a raised hand, whether native or foreigner, he is a reviler, and that person will be cut off from the midst of his people. Because he has despised the word of YHWH and has turned aside from his command, that person will certainly be cut off; his iniquity is on him.

This statement contrasts the previous stipulations concerning inadvertent sin, for which atonement through sacrifice was granted.³⁴ Unlike all other types of sin committed, no sacrifice was provisioned for the high-handed sin.³⁵ Verse 31 interprets the nature of this sin, specifying that it involves despising the word of YHWH and turning away from his command. The notion of defiance or stubborn

³² To be read: הִיָּיא (here and in the following verse).

³³ It is a 3fs suffix because its antecedent, נֶפֶשׁ, is feminine.

³⁴ I interpret this passage as designating two categories of sins, (1) the high-handed sin and (2) all other sins, while at the same time recognizing two subcategories under the second type, one involving sins committed without the knowledge of the offender and the other concerning sins committed with some knowledge of the offense, yet short of being considered “high-handed” (following F. Leroy Forlines, *The Quest for Truth: Theology for Postmodern Times* [Nashville: Randall House, 2001] 472). My approach differs from that of Jay Sklar who proposes three categories: (1) sins committed without knowledge with provisional atonement; (2) sins with knowledge with provisional atonement; and (3) sins with knowledge without provisional atonement (“Sin and Atonement: Lessons from the Pentateuch,” *BBR* 22 [2012] 478–82). The weakness of his interpretation is that he claims to base it upon whether or not atonement is granted. However, according to this stricture, there are only two kinds of sins: those for which atonement is granted, and the one for which it is not. For this reason, I deliberately avoid calling the non-high-handed sins “sins of ignorance” or “sins in error,” due to the fact that this category includes all sin short of the one high-handed sin (i.e. sins knowingly committed and sins unknowingly committed). In NT terms we would call this special category of sin apostasy, concerning which the author of Hebrews warns that it is beyond the pale of repentance and likewise involves the renunciation of Christ’s once-for-all sacrifice, thus beyond sacrifice. This point also suggests that there is only one sin of apostasy, even though the biblical authors speak of this sin in numerous ways (e.g. sin against the Holy Spirit [Matt 12:32; Mark 3:29], sin unto death [1 John 5:16–17], drift away [Heb 2:1], fail to enter into rest [Heb 4:1], fall away [Heb 6:6]). Concerning all sin short of this one and final high-handed sin, the repentant individual can find forgiveness through Christ’s once-for-all sacrifice.

³⁵ We can thank the KJV for the translation “presumptuous,” while others such as the NASB and NIV qualify the sin as being committed “defiantly.” The ESV retrieves a more ancient tradition in translating the phrase quite literally, “with a high hand.” The ancient versions favor a literal reading of this idiom. For example, the Syriac Peshitta is strictly literal in its translation: **ספספא גולבנו כאגרא** **ספספא** **גולבנו כאגרא** (*wnps’ dt’ bd b’ yd’ rmt*) “The person who acts with a high hand,” while the LXX is less so, but closer to the original than most English versions: καὶ ψυχὴ ἥτις ποιήσει ἐν χειρὶ ὑπερηφανίας “The person who acts with a hand of arrogance.” Interestingly, the Aramaic Targums introduce the notion of an uncovered head in their readings of this statement: **וְאִישׁ דְּעֵבִיד בְּרִישׁ גְּלִי** “The man who acts with an uncovered head” (*Tg. Onq*); **וּנְפֵשׁ דִּי תַעְבַּד בְּרִישׁ גְּלִי** “The person who acts with uncovered head” (*Tg. Neof*). This tradition highlights that this sin concerns the defiance of divine authority.

opposition for the “raised-hand” idiom becomes clearer in light of its two other attestations in the OT. In Exod 14:8 we find the exit of the Israelites from the land of Egypt “with a high hand,” in opposition to Pharaoh. This statement follows the narrative’s report of YHWH strengthening Pharaoh’s heart and thus provoking his pursuit of Israel during their initial exodus. Numbers 33:3 harkens back to the same event. In both cases, high-handedness should be read against the backdrop of Pharaoh’s stubborn will in opposition to YHWH and his refusal to permit Israel’s departure from Egypt. God told Moses that Pharaoh would not let them leave, “except with a strong hand,” and this no doubt signals the battle of the gods about to commence. Israel’s departure “with a high hand” signals defiance in the face of Pharaoh’s will, thanks to the overwhelming force of God’s power and ability to break the obstinate king of Egypt.³⁶

Although several commentators have pointed out the importance of Num 15:30 for the warnings in Hebrews, its interpretive import yields different opinions. Charles Carlston assumed this background for Heb 10:25 with its emphasis upon the fact that there remains no further sacrifice for the sin of apostasy, adopting “the well-known distinction between presumptuous and unintentional sins.”³⁷ Thomas Oberholtzer observes that Num 15:30–31 illustrates the sin of Heb 10:26–39, but softens its offense by maintaining that the issue in Numbers 15 was not soteriological, but was a “temporal discipline for violating the Mosaic Covenant.” He goes on to summarize the sin of Hebrews 10 as follows: “Sinning willfully results in being in a position in which experiential forgiveness of sin is no longer possible. The result of this position is an expectation of temporal discipline on the defecting believer.”³⁸ Besides the simple fact that this interpretation lacks textual support from either context, Numbers 15 appears not to be aware of the tidy distinction between the physical and soteriological as Oberholtzer has defined them, but simply warns that high-handed sin will result in being cut off from the life of the covenant community, which is tantamount to death.

The larger context of the wilderness wanderings narrated in Numbers 13–14 should inform our understanding of the high-handed sin of Num 15:30–31 and its application to Hebrews 10. Although the wilderness wanderings are widely recognized as a subtext for the author’s argument concerning entering into rest in Hebrews 3–4 and his warning against apostasy in 6:4–6,³⁹ the original connection be-

³⁶ The expression “with a strong hand” occurs in Exod 3:19; 6:1; 13:3, 14; 14:16. The fact that Israel departed “with a strong hand” is in direct contrast with the stubborn will of Pharaoh, which YHWH eventually breaks. On the significance of this expression, see McAfee, “The Heart of Pharaoh in Exodus 4–15,” *BBR* 20 (2010) 350–51.

³⁷ Charles Carlston, “Eschatology and Repentance in Hebrews,” *JBL* 78 (1959) 298. Cf. Bruce, *Epistle to the Hebrews* 261 n. 132; Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews* 531; Guthrie, *Hebrews* 217; Outlaw, *Book of Hebrews* 253; Osborne, “A Classical Arminian View” 120.

³⁸ Thomas Oberholtzer, “The Danger of Willful Sin in Hebrews 10:26–39,” *BSac* 145 (1988) 412, 419.

³⁹ See Oberholtzer, “The Kingdom of Rest in Hebrews 3:1–4:13,” *BSac* 145 (1988) 187–88; Gleason, “OT Background of the Warning in Hebrews 6:4–8” 72–74; Mathewson, “Heb 6:4–6 in Light of the OT” 212–13; Scacewater, “Hebrews in Rebellion” 24–64.

tween Numbers 13–14 and the high-handed sin of Numbers 15 is often left unstated.⁴⁰ It seems that the placement of this teaching on two types of sin—the high-handed sin versus all other sin types—is deliberate. At the least, Numbers 15 is intended to be read in light of the wilderness rebellion in the preceding two chapters; at the most, the sin “with a high hand” is the sin committed by those who gave an evil report.⁴¹ Furthermore, the immediate context of the sin outlined in Num 15:30, beginning in v. 17, concerns one’s obedience to the stipulations of the covenant, provisioning atonement in the case of non-high-handed failure to observe “all these commandments” (v. 22). The curse of death for certain individual sins is only invoked in cases of high-handed sin, which is illustrated in the following narration of the wood-gatherer’s breaking the Sabbath (Num 15:32–36). According to the wording of Num 15:31, such a one’s guilt is not temporarily set aside, but is “against him,” thus necessitating the covenant community’s executing the individual via stoning. The precedence for the communal execution of an individual is found in the divine execution of the evil spies and their associates—the grumbling generation of twenty years of age and older, save Caleb and Joshua—during the forty-year wilderness wanderings (Num 14:22–23, 26–35). This death sentence is essentially the curse, in that it entails being cut off, not only from the community, but also from the good word (= covenant blessing) of the Promised Land.

2. *The high-handed sin of apostasy as incurring the covenant curse.* When read together, the warnings of Hebrews 6 and 10 make their case for the severity of this sin from the perspective of sacrifice, and for the new covenant community that sacrifice is none other than Christ crucified. For the new covenant community the only means of sacrifice for sin is the “once for all” sacrifice of Christ, which, if renounced in a “high-handed” manner, leaves the individual beyond the pale of atonement. Hebrews 6 emphasizes the problem from the perspective of the blasphemer who renounces Christ’s sacrifice: it is as though the Son of God were crucified again (6:6).

⁴⁰ For an alternative approach arising from source analysis, see Joel Baden, “The Structure and Substance of Numbers 15,” *V/T* 63 (2013) 357–62. I do not deny the immediate connection with the following narration of the man gathering wood on the Sabbath as a sample illustration of the high-handed sin, as Baden puts forth. On the other hand, from a canonical reading of the text (which is the perspective of Hebrews) the preceding narration of the wilderness rebellion would have inevitably informed one’s reading of the high-handed sin of Numbers 15.

⁴¹ This point seems clear from the introduction of the ritual material in Num 15:2: “Speak unto the sons of Israel and say unto them: When you enter into the land of your dwelling which I am giving to you . . .” It is in this way that YHWH has forgiven the Israelites, as stated in Num 14:20: the nation of Israel will go on and inherit the land. This is precisely why the text is at pains to state YHWH’s pardon carefully: “I have pardoned according to your [Moses’] word” (Heb.: *סְלַחְתִּי כְדִבְרְךָ*) (Num 14:20). Randall C. Gleason’s appraisal that the sin of Hebrew 6 is “not absolute apostasy” is based partly on a misreading of this passage, leading him to suggest that the Lord reluctantly “pardoned them” in light of Moses’ petition (“OT Background of the Warning in Hebrews 6:4–8” 79–80). But as we have noted, it is not that YHWH pardoned the sins of the wicked spies; on the contrary, they and those aligned with them were judged: the wicked spies were executed by divine plague (Num 14:36–37) and the evil generation that allied with them were sentenced to death in the wilderness, and consequently were banned from entering Canaan. The generation responsible for the rebellion of chaps. 13–14 will not inherit the land. The way in which God pardoned such iniquity “according to Moses’ word” is that he did not destroy the nation entirely and start anew with Moses and his descendants (Num 14:11–12).

Hebrews 10, on the other hand, presents the act from the divine perspective, indicating that no further sacrifice is provisioned for the one who renounces Christ (10:26).

III. CONCLUSIONS

Thus far we have set out to analyze the warning passages of the book of Hebrews from within the covenantal framework of blessing and cursing. It therefore remains for us to specify two major conclusions that naturally arise from this particular covenantal perspective.

1. *The nature of the covenant community and the sin of apostasy.* As we reflect on the teaching of Hebrews on apostasy through the lens of covenant blessings and curses, the significance of one's association with the covenant community becomes clear. As we consider the language of Heb 6:4–8 concerning apostasy, the individual who renounces his identity as a member of the new covenant community in turn revokes the covenant blessings in exchange for curses. The OT covenant significance of “the good word” as an equivalency for the old covenant blessings only solidifies the fact that we are dealing with legitimate covenant members who have actually received the inaugural blessings of the new covenant reality through the enlightening work of the Holy Spirit. What remains to be seen, however, is their perseverance in the life of the new covenant community and the final attainment of the eschatological rest. The failure of certain members of the old covenant community constitutes the bedrock of the writer's argument for the new covenant community against the same hardness of heart—if God judged the high-handed sin of that generation, so will he judge such sin in the new covenant community.

It is patently incorrect to overemphasize the communal nature of the old covenant community over against the individual nature of the new. Again, it should be noted that YHWH dealt with the Israelites on both the corporate and individual levels. Regardless of what we might believe about the continuity versus the discontinuity of the old and new covenants, the argument of Hebrews assumes that God deals with Israel on both levels. The presumptuous sin of the wicked spies in Numbers 14 (or the wood gatherer in Num 15:32–36) and its relation to the high-handed sin of Numbers 15:30–31 shows that although God judged their sin by invoking the curse of death, at the same time he pardoned the community of Israel in allowing the younger generation to continue on in their journey to the promised land. Yet, one also sees the potential for the opposite situation to develop as well—the failure of the covenant community as a whole and the inevitable application of the corporate curse of exile does not necessitate God's rejection of the faithful remnant. For these reasons, the argument of paedobaptists rings hollow in their suggesting a third category of individual in view in the book of Hebrews beyond “saved” and “unsaved”—namely, as Michael Horton explains, “the person who belongs to the covenant community and experiences thereby the work of the Spirit

through the means of grace, and yet is not regenerate.”⁴² Not only does this suggestion fail to understand the meaning of the second parallel pair of Heb 6:4–5 (i.e. the blessing of the now and the blessing of the not yet), it also fails to account for the old covenant’s means of dealing with sin on the individual level. Such an argument is foreign to the overall sense of Hebrews, especially in its allusion to the wilderness wanderings of Numbers 13–14 and the subsequent teaching on high-handed sin in Num 15:30–31, which in simple terms is meant to dissuade covenant members from defecting from the faith.

Besides, this approach also fails to take account of what is “new” about the new covenant in the writer’s argument for its superiority over the old. One of its key features is the removal of any potential “third” category, according to Horton’s covenant reading. Note especially the writer’s quotation from Jer 31:31–34, particularly vv. 33b–34:

I will set my Torah in their midst and upon their mind I will write it. I will be their God and they will be my people. No longer will each person teach his neighbor nor each person his brother, saying, “Know YHWH,” for all will know me from the least unto the greatest.

This statement comes shortly after YHWH’s oracle to Jeremiah concerning the sour grapes proverb in v. 29, “The fathers have eaten sour grapes, but the children’s teeth are set on edge.”⁴³ It is generally believed that this saying may have arisen from misappropriating the statement from the third word of the Decalogue concerning the sins of the fathers visiting the third and fourth generations.⁴⁴ As for Jeremiah, he stresses individual accountability for sin in his preface to the new covenant pronouncement, stating in v. 30 that “a man will die in his own iniquity” and that “for each man who eats sour grapes, his own teeth will be set on edge.”⁴⁵ Notwithstanding the fact that God held individual sinners accountable under the

⁴² Michael Horton, “A Classical Calvinist View,” in *Four Views on Eternal Security* (ed. J. Matthew Pinson; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002) 37. This particular view on the Hebrews warning texts has not gained much attention within evangelical scholarship, but, in my opinion, is a much more robust argument than the typical discussions that focus on whether or not the addressees were genuine believers. Part of the appeal of Horton’s position (and others like his) is that it is able to maintain two seemingly incompatible tenets, one exegetical and the other theological: (1) exegetically, the text presents these individuals as covenant members; and (2) theologically, the Calvinistic view of perseverance maintains that regenerate believers cannot fall away. Horton affirms both points by redefining what it means to be a member of the new covenant community. No doubt part of the hesitancy among evangelicals is their unwillingness to accept Horton’s “mixed” new covenant community approach, which poses serious problems for baptistic Calvinists. While I agree with Horton’s contention that these are indeed covenant members, I disagree with his definition of what that membership entails (i.e. regenerate covenant members and unregenerate covenant members). On the other hand, I agree with the baptistic approach to the new covenant community as consisting of regenerate members, but at the same time I cannot justify exegetically the attempt to deny covenant membership for these addressees in Hebrews.

⁴³ Cf. Ezekiel’s quotation of the same proverb in Ezek 18:2 and the following discussion in vv. 3–24.

⁴⁴ Exod 20:5–6; Deut 5:9–10.

⁴⁵ Hebrew: כִּי אִם־אִישׁ בְּעוֹנוֹ “for indeed each person will die in his own iniquity.” Cf. the similar phraseology of Num 15:31: הַנֶּפֶשׁ הַזֹּאת עוֹנָהּ בָּהּ “As for that individual, iniquity will be against him.”

old covenant,⁴⁶ there will be a superior manifestation of this principle in the new. Returning to our author's use of this text from Jeremiah, he quotes it again in Heb 10:16–17, only this time it is found within his argument concerning the sufficiency of Christ's "once for all" sacrifice, for which he singles out Jer 31:33 and its emphasis on the internalization of the law for new covenant members.

The outlook of the covenant community as it is presented in the book of Hebrews is one of inaugurated eschatology, emphasizing on the one hand their reception of the covenant blessings already experienced by members of the new covenant community ("the good word of God"), all the while maintaining that they are indeed participating in the eschatological community of the heavenly great high priest ("the powers of the age to come"). Or as Carlston has aptly expressed the same sentiments, "the community with which believers are associated is an eschatological community, not merely in the sense that its members entertain a common hope ... but also (and primarily) in that they all worship in the same sanctuary, the heavenly one."⁴⁷ Again, this is the exact imagery of Hebrews 10 with its emphasis on Christ's finished atonement and his being seated at the right hand of God in heaven (v. 12). Such emphasis then leads into his exhortation for the believers of Hebrews to enter the true sanctuary by the new and living way (vv. 19–25). The worship of the new covenant community envisions its members worshipping in the true heavenly sanctuary through the work of Christ, the great high priest who is seated there.⁴⁸

It goes without saying that the trajectory of the book of Hebrews and its appropriation of the covenant framework stands against the argument of those who suggest that the individuals exhorted in these warnings are not truly regenerate.⁴⁹ Such is an intrusive element utterly unfamiliar to the literary setting of these warnings. In particular, the old covenant nomenclature of the good word as "covenant promises" in Heb 6:5 assumes inaugural membership in the covenant community and warns against the potential forfeiture of the eschatological rest awaiting those who persevere. On the other hand, to avoid entirely questions regarding the identity of the addressees, instead affirming that these warnings function rhetorically to motivate true believers to perseverance, actually deconstructs the sting of the author's argument as a whole—that they are in grave danger of committing the sin of apostasy, which is without remedy. On the exegetical level, the "means-of-salvation" approach does nothing to exclude the real possibility that some might

⁴⁶ See also Deut 24:16: "Fathers shall not be put to death for sons, and sons shall not be put to death for fathers. Each one shall be put to death on account of his own sin."

⁴⁷ Carlston, "Eschatology and Repentance in Hebrews" 300.

⁴⁸ See also Heb 8:1–5; 9:11, 23–26.

⁴⁹ E.g. Grudem, "Perseverance of the Saints" 133–82; cf. Nicole, "Some Comments on Hebrews 6:4–6" 355–64; Buist M. Fanning, "The Classical Reformed View" in *Four Views on the Warning Passages* 172–219. Christopher W. Cowan has recently made a more extensive criticism of the "false-believer view" advocated by Grudem and Fanning in "The Warnings in Hebrews Revisited: A Response to Wayne Grudem and Buist M. Fanning" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the ETS, Baltimore, MD, November 2013). Cowan levels his criticisms as an advocate of the "means-of-salvation-view" of Schreiner and Caneday (see next note).

not persevere. Otherwise it renders the author's appeal to the old covenant context entirely irrelevant, since the same fate that met the previous generation of believers could never meet those of the new covenant community. In other words, this position would actually negate the basis for the writer's allusions to the wilderness rebellion of Numbers 13–14 in the first place.⁵⁰

For these reasons, we find that the covenant connotations of the “the good word” require that the subjects of these warning passages be granted the status of full covenant membership, which they are in danger of forfeiting should they apostatize. From this covenantal perspective, these individuals have experienced full membership in the life of the new covenant community, but they have exhibited a certain hardness of heart characteristic of their forbears in the wilderness wanderings. Indeed, these warnings are intended to dissuade them from their hardened ways in order to bring them to repentance, but their spiritual destruction via apostasy looms ever so near as a real and present danger.

2. *The nature of the curse incurred by the sin of apostasy.* The second prong of our argument concerning the covenant community in the book of Hebrews concerns its appropriation of the high-handed category of sin and its application to the sin of apostasy. Consideration of this feature is largely connected to our contention that the author assumes these individuals are members of the new covenant community, and thus the high-handed sin of apostasy invokes the covenant curse of individual separation from the life of the covenant community. This is the main outlook of Num 15:30–31 and the surrounding narratives, both of which necessitate interpreting the pronouncement of the offender's being cut off as a death sentence. As we have already argued, the fact that YHWH condemns the wicked generation of

⁵⁰ For example, note the arguments of Thomas R. Schreiner and Ardel B. Caneday, *The Race Set Before Us: A Biblical Theology of Perseverance and Assurance* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001) 193–213. With regard to Hebrews 3:12–14, Schreiner and Caneday state that “the warning and the admonition function to encourage us to persevere in order that we may receive salvation” (p. 202). They summarize the overall purpose of these warnings as follows: “Thus, all the warnings caution us concerning conceivable consequences. They do not confront us with an uncertain future. They do not say that we may perish. Rather, they caution us lest we perish” (pp. 207–9). I do not deny that the author pens these words for the distinct purpose of urging these believers to persevere, which is rather obvious from the fact that he wrote them in the first place. But for Schreiner and Caneday to suggest that “they do not say that we may perish” is entirely unfounded exegetically, especially given his appeals to old covenant examples where individuals did indeed perish. Neither will appeals to typology alleviate this problem, as Schreiner and Caneday do in cautioning that “the New Testament writers do not use Israel to show that it is possible for God's spiritually birthed children to apostatize and perish,” but rather “appeal to Israel's rebellion to admonish us to be the true people of God that Israel was not” (p. 226). Yet, this perspective fails to account for the OT's use of this event in Ps 95:7–8 for the old covenant community, which happens to be the exegetical lens through which the author of Hebrews appears to be reading the Israelite rebellion of Numbers 13–14. As Numbers 13–14 served to warn the old covenant community in their reading the Psalter, so does it warn the new covenant community in their reading the exhortations of Hebrews. Schreiner and Caneday's typological argument might work within a context perceivably removed from the early Jewishness of the Christian faith, but it would be quite unfamiliar to a largely Jewish Christian audience, tempted to revert back to a pre-Jesus-as-Messiah observance of the faith. If Numbers 13–14 functioned typologically for the author of Hebrews, one would suspect that the basis for its doing so was grounded in its typological import for the psalmist before him. At the least, it would be highly unlikely for the typology applied in Psalm 95 to be entirely different from that of Hebrews.

Numbers 14 to die in the wilderness for their sin of unbelief, along with the divine death sentence prescribed against the Sabbath violator with his subsequent stoning in Num 15:35, bears this out without question. But the significance of this observation for the argument of Hebrews becomes clearer when we understand his method of reinterpreting these materials in lieu of the new covenant reality. To the degree that the new covenant community could be said to participate in the heavenly realm of God's true temple through the high priestly work of Christ, so too is the curse against high-handed sin to be understood in terms of eternal consequence. The old covenant reference to the offender being cut off from the covenant community in death as an analogy to being cut off from the heavenly life of the new covenant community breaks down if we maintain that those in danger of experiencing such judgment have not actually participated in this new reality in the first place. In plain language, the punishment of physical death for high-handed sin in Numbers 14–15 has been replaced by the spiritual death of apostasy in the book of Hebrews.⁵¹ This is the curse against the high-handed renunciation of the atoning work of the new covenant great high priest. The curse corresponds equally to the blessing, or the “good word of God,” in that it reanalyzes the rest motif from a hope of entering into the physical locale of the land of promise (i.e. Canaan) to the heavenly reality of the new covenant community, both as it has been inaugurated in Christ's high-priestly work and as it will be finally realized in the eternal rest awaiting those who persevere.

Therefore, the appropriation of the high-handed sin as a way of interpreting apostasy in Hebrews means that it involves a true covenant member's final renunciation of the new covenant blessings. This renunciation is not simply a matter of losing out on certain benefits/rewards associated with the Christian life now or hereafter, but it results in one's eternal destruction. As the author's appeal to the wilderness wanderings from Numbers would suggest, this act arises from a persistent hardening of heart toward the Lord and his covenant stipulations, resulting in the irremediable forfeiture of the covenant promise of eternal rest.

IV. SUMMARY

The above discussion has attempted to connect the warnings of Hebrews with the blessings and the curses associated with covenant faithfulness/unfaithfulness in the OT. Doing so leads us to conclude that these warning texts do indeed lend themselves to the possibility that an individual in covenant relationship with God can by deliberate unfaithfulness to the covenant be excluded from that relationship. The basis for this association arises from the author's utilization of the old covenant expression “good word” (i.e. the promised blessing) and

⁵¹ An obvious question for those who maintain that these individuals are not true believers is this: Why would the judgment of spiritual death be held out as a negative motivation for those who are already spiritually dead? On the contrary, the writer seems to be addressing the uniqueness of the situation involving high-handed sin committed by members of the new covenant community.

his categorizing the sin of apostasy as being beyond the remedy of atonement (i.e. the warned curse).⁵²

⁵² I would like to thank Matthew J. Pinson and Robert E. Picirilli for reading earlier drafts of this article and offering many helpful criticisms. All remaining deficiencies, however, are entirely my own.