

# Testamentum Imperium

## An International Theological Journal

[www.PreciousHeart.net/ti](http://www.PreciousHeart.net/ti)

Volume 2 – 2009

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### The Irrevocable Nature of Salvation in Hebrews

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### Introduction

Over the past half century the Epistle to the Hebrews has held the strong interest of observers the world over. Some of the most promising research at the present time is being performed by scholars who seek to explore the cultural, religious and literary backdrop of

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<sup>2</sup> See [www.Marquette.edu](http://www.Marquette.edu).

Hebrews. Many excellent studies have described the relationship between Hebrews and the literature, both canonical and otherwise, containing the images upon which the author of the epistle draws. Debate has centered on the extent to which the author's thought is influenced by images and ideas present in Jewish apocalyptic literature which circulated during the last three to four centuries B.C.E. and the first century C.E.

This study examines the limits of divine grace in Hebrews as the concept is rooted within a particular type of heavenly vision in Jewish apocalyptic literature. The time frame of writings I will examine begins in the first century C. E. and goes into the second and third centuries. This period is the one into which Hebrews itself falls, though the author has made unique use of the heavenly ascent traditions which were contemporary with the composition of the epistle. Visions in this stage of development feature words and phrases which are closely echoed in Hebrews. Visions include an encounter in heaven with a figure, sometimes Enoch or Christ, who is exalted above the angels and acts as a divine agent. These divine agents, though foreshadowed in earlier apocalypses, are a new feature in the development in this literary style and are built upon the earlier types of visions. Hebrews reflects this stage in its Christology, its language, and its concept of the salvation.

The other area of focus in this study is how, despite its rootedness in earlier apocalyptic traditions, Hebrews makes a unique contribution to the discussion of the limits of divine grace. Hebrews represents a significant development in the focus of the discussion. Previous Hellenistic Jewish authors of apocalypses and those contemporary with Hebrews approach the question of whether or not salvation can be revoked by focusing on divine judgment. That judgment is made on the basis of a combination of an individual's good works, sin, and the bestowal of divine grace. Hebrews, on the other hand, focuses on the individual's conscience, which the author believes is cleansed through the self sacrifice of Christ and continued affirmation of the recipient community's faith confession.

### **A. History of the Question**

Before a discussion of contemporary scholarship on this issue can be undertaken, it will be helpful to take a look at the manner in which Hebrews has been consulted in attempting to answer questions

regarding the limits of divine grace and the restoration of apostates to divine favor. Two particular schools of thought seem to have arisen in response to this question. One camp takes the admonition in Heb 6:4-8 at face value, arguing that repentance is precluded for apostates who abandon the Christian faith. The other school of thought argues that the author could not have meant such a harsh warning to be interpreted in such a wooden manner. The second school of thought seeks to offer allegorical solutions or other methods at softening the tone of this admonition. Commentators from a wide variety of periods in church history have consulted Hebrews in trying to address this question. The commentators cited below offer a sense of how Hebrews has contributed to the discussion.

### 1. Early Church and Patristic Commentators

In the second century C.E. Hebrews held somewhat of a position of authority in the discussion of biblical teaching regarding restoration of apostates. Tertullian (b. 160) sharply criticized *Shepherd of Hermas* for not sharing the absolutist view of Hebrews, noting the greater authority of Hebrews because of its association with Barnabas.<sup>3</sup> Tertullian's position carried some weight but was not decisive in a large number of churches. Hebrews figured into the church's decision to restore apostates to communion over the objection of the Novatians.<sup>4</sup> They cited the above mentioned passage in Hebrews, but their position was contradicted by Cyprian (3<sup>rd</sup> cent.), who insisted that the time limit for repentance extends to the end of the current age.<sup>5</sup>

Origen approached this question by first affirming that indeed repentance and restoration are possible in most cases. However, mortal sins require a much more difficult remedy, and the restoration of such an apostate may be outside of the scope of the church.<sup>6</sup> Part of Origen's thought on this matter relates to his concept of shadow and reality. The enlightenment a Christian receives in experiencing the gospel increases liability, whereas those who commit apostasy

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<sup>3</sup> Tertullian, *On Modesty* 20:3.

<sup>4</sup> Gabriele Banterle, ed., *Delle varie eresie: Filastro di Brescia. trattati: Gaudenzio di Brescia* (Milan: Biblioteca Ambrosiana, 1991), 102.

<sup>5</sup> Cyprian, *Ep.* 51.

<sup>6</sup> J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.; London: Continuum, 2000), 217.

while not yet fully enlightened are not subject to the kinds of prohibitions of restoration found in Heb 6.<sup>7</sup>

Related to the imagery of enlightenment is Origen's comparison of Heb 6 to the raising of Lazarus in John 11. In his commentary on John, Origen compares those who have committed apostasy as described in Heb 6 to Lazarus having been resurrected but remaining wrapped in grave clothes. While they are unable to shake off the grave clothes themselves, the command of Christ can unbind their hands and feet from the bonds of sin.<sup>8</sup> Origen makes these arguments through frequent references to Hebrews. In a portion of his commentary on Hebrews cited by Pamphilus (3<sup>rd</sup> cent.), Origen admits that scripture "uses corporeal metaphors to express spiritual truths."<sup>9</sup>

The debate about the meaning of Heb 6 as it pertains to the irrevocability of divine grace continued into the fourth and fifth centuries as it impacted questions concerning baptism. Ambrose (340-397) interpreted the statements against restoration in Heb 6 as prohibiting multiple baptisms for those who had abandoned the faith or apostatized in some way. Since baptism is a participation in the death of Christ, rebaptism would constitute a re-crucifixion, violating the warning in 6:6. This passage is to be interpreted in terms of baptism; it is not applicable to the question of repentance and restoration. The passage precludes only a second baptism. Ambrose bases his exegesis on patristic use of "enlightenment" as a metaphor for baptism.<sup>10</sup> Harold Attridge correctly notes that this imagery was not yet used in a direct manner to refer to baptism when Hebrews was written.<sup>11</sup>

## 2. Medieval and Reformation Era Discussion

In addition, Ambrose argued that the restoration of an apostate, which is impossible for humanity, is possible for God.<sup>12</sup> This

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<sup>7</sup> Rowan A. Greer, *The Captain of Our Salvation; A Study in the Patristic Exegesis of Hebrews* (BGBE 15; Tübingen: Mohr, 1973), 39.

<sup>8</sup> Origen, *Commentary on John* 28.15

<sup>9</sup> George Christopher Stead, "Eusebius' and the Council of Nicaea," *JTS* 24 (1973): 90.

<sup>10</sup> See Justin *I Apol.* 61.12; Clement *Paed.* 1.6.26,2.

<sup>11</sup> Harold Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews : A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Hermeneia 28; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 169.

<sup>12</sup> Ambrose, *De paenitentia* 2.2.

argument found support among many eastern writers.<sup>13</sup> Theodore of Mopsuestia (350-428) advocated the view that restoration of an apostate would be impossible only after the final resurrection.<sup>14</sup> His modification did not dissuade wide acceptance of Ambrose's interpretation, and in fact Ambrose paved the way for a long-lasting affirmation of Hebrews as a theologically sound epistle. Ambrose's interpretation received support well into the Middle Ages. Alcuin reiterated Ambrose's prohibition of rebaptism on account of Heb 6. Further exegesis by Nicolas of Lyra (1270-1340) posited the difficulty of repentance from apostasy while acknowledging that it could occur.<sup>15</sup> Monastics took a decidedly different approach, reading the prohibitions of restoration in a very literal sense, but distinguishing between one who is truly apostate and one who is guilty of lesser sinfulness. William of St. Thierry (1085-1148) admitted his own sin, but denied that in his sin he willingly spurned Christ.<sup>16</sup>

Erasmus (1466-1536) approached this issue by distinguishing between the prohibitions in Heb 6 and Paul's willingness to restore to one of the congregations a man who had committed a type of incest. For Erasmus this provided further proof of Hebrews' questionable canonical status.<sup>17</sup> Though he affirms Ambrose in saying this passage prohibited rebaptism, he also interprets it as warning to those who conclude that their own personal practice of righteousness was adequate for salvation. Erasmus' greatest interest in this issue was its evidence against Pauline authorship.

Paul Bugenhagen (16<sup>th</sup> cent.) treated the question of apostasy in Heb 6 at length. His treatment followed the lines of Origen and William of St. Thierry, distinguishing between sins which should be considered mortal and those which should not.<sup>18</sup> The deadly sin referenced in Heb 6 and 10 was blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>13</sup> Craig Koester, *Hebrews: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 36 New York: Doubleday, 2001), 25.

<sup>14</sup> Greer, *Captain*, 234-35.

<sup>15</sup> Kenneth Hagen, *Hebrews Commenting from Erasmus to Bèze, 1516-1598* (BGBE 23; Tübingen: Mohr, 1981), 12.

<sup>16</sup> Thomas M. Tomasic, "Neoplatonism and the Mysticism of William of St. Thierry," in *An Introduction to the Medieval Mystics of Europe: Fourteen Original Essays* (ed. Paul Szarmach; Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), 65.

<sup>17</sup> Hagen, *Commenting*, 6.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

Bugenhagen and Martin Luther had both inherited this argument from Psuedo-Hugh of St. Victor (12<sup>th</sup> cent.), though Luther did not affirm it.<sup>19</sup> Calvin also followed the thought of Bugenhagen concerning this question.<sup>20</sup> Heinrich Bullinger (1504-1575) did not make the same distinction between severities of sins. Rather, in attempting to refute the Novatian position, Bullinger interprets the warnings in Heb 6:4-6 as an admonition against unfaithfulness and indolence.<sup>21</sup> While there is clearly no theological consensus in the tradition on the meaning of Hebrews 6 for the restoration of sinners to the Church, Hebrews had an unmistakable influence on the way this question was framed throughout more than a millennium of theological discussion.

### 3. Nineteenth Century Commentators

This question of restoration after apostasy also drew the interest of nineteenth-century commentators. Alexander Nairne compares the harsh warnings against apostasy and the lack of possibility for restoration in chs. 6 and 10 to similar passages in *2 Bar.* 85:12 and *4 Ezra* 7:102-115. Specifically Nairne discusses the meaning of "place of repentance" in the latter two writings. Concerning the possible relation of the use of this phrase to the corresponding idea in Hebrews, Nairne says, "There is so much in this epistle which seems akin to these books that the question might arise whether the severity of their doctrine should not affect our judgment of the meaning of the epistle."<sup>22</sup> If these writings do influence the interpretation of Hebrews, according to Nairne, they only reinforce the sense already present in Hebrews that there is no opportunity of restoration for an apostate. He notes that *2 Baruch* and *4 Ezra* only preclude the possibility that anyone may intercede at the time of divine judgment, an idea completely consonant with the warnings in Heb 6 and 10.<sup>23</sup>

Nairne is reacting to claims by G.H. Box that *4 Ezra* 7 reflects an Alexandrine influence which emphasizes the centrality of one's life as

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<sup>19</sup> Kenneth Hagen, *A Theology of Testament in the Young Luther: The Lectures on Hebrews* (Studies in Medieval and Reformation Thought 12; Leiden: Brill, 1974), 18.

<sup>20</sup> Hagen, *Commenting*, 64.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Nairne, *The Epistle of Priesthood* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1913), 413.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

the determining criteria on the day of judgment.<sup>24</sup> Nairne disagrees, but does not think Box's contention would affect the way in which the reader understands the warnings in Heb 10. Moreover, the possibility suggested by some in reference to Heb 11:40 that the recipients of the epistle may somehow play a role in the salvation of heroes of the faith is excluded.<sup>25</sup> Franz Delitzsch identifies a possible parallel to this prohibition of restoration in Philo, who denies the possibility that a soul who has spurned the Logos' offer of "penitential discipline" may be able to return to the earth.<sup>26</sup> He also finds echoes of Philo in the reference to those who have tasted the free heavenly gift (Heb 6:4).<sup>27</sup> But the reader is left to assume that beyond slight echoes in Philo, this kind of prohibition is original to the church and has no predecessor in Second Temple Judaism. Delitzsch holds the opinion of most nineteenth-century commentators that this sharp prohibition is, either in language or principle, rooted in the NT communities and their writings.<sup>28</sup>

It is readily apparent that questions of the restoration of apostates and the limits of divine grace were frequently interpreted with significant influence from the Epistle to the Hebrews during various eras of the history of the church. With small variations for doctrinal concerns, most commentators and theologians tend to interpret salvation in Hebrews as revocable only for those who abandon the faith.

### **B. Modern Commentary on the Apocalyptic Roots of the Nature of Salvation in Hebrews**

With this background in mind, let us continue on to the views of modern commentators regarding the author of Hebrews' thought regarding repentance, grace and restoration. The point of commonality between Hebrews and Jewish apocalypses from this

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<sup>24</sup> Box, *The Ezra-Apocalypse Being Chapters 3-14 of the Book Commonly Known as 4 Ezra* (London: Pitman, 1912), 154.

<sup>25</sup> Nairne, *Priesthood*, 413.

<sup>26</sup> Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews Vol. 1* (trans. Thomas Kingsbury; Minneapolis: Klock and Klock, 1978), 281.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 285.

<sup>28</sup> Vaughan, C. J., *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (New York: Macmillan, 1891), 107. See also Bruce, Alexander B. *The Epistle to the Hebrews: The First Apology for Christianity: An Exegetical Study* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1899), 210.

period involves the discussion of whether or not repentance can take place at the close of the age.

### 1. Fourth Ezra

E. P. Sanders identifies two approaches (though there may be more) to this question which appear in literature from this genre.<sup>29</sup> These approaches roughly correspond to the two approaches which were referenced in the beginning of this article. He identifies the first, which he finds in *4 Ezra* as "legalistic perfectionism." The author of *4 Ezra* views the mercy of God as designated for sinners with no "storehouse" of good works, whereas the righteous have earned salvation on account of their good works (8:31-36). The other approach is more common to Jewish apocalyptic literature. Sanders observes that in the rest of Jewish literature "God punishes the wicked for their deeds, while bestowing mercy on the righteous."<sup>30</sup> While their righteousness on its own is inadequate for salvation, the addition of God's mercy, which is well deserved, raises the status of their fate.

Richard Bauckham says Sanders has exaggerated the actual divergence between the two approaches. Though Bauckham does not identify a standard in *4 Ezra* by which one can be judged to have adequately obeyed the Torah, he argues that God's mercy to the righteous is not precluded.<sup>31</sup> It is more accurate to say that God's mercy to the righteous is not remarkable in this writing because, as Sanders notes, God traditionally was conceived of as rewarding righteousness with mercy. In Heb 4:3-11 the author compares the rest the Israelites enjoyed upon entering the Promised Land with the eternal rest offered to those who remain faithful to Christ throughout the sufferings of earthly life. The author uses new creation language to speak of this eternal Promised Land which he considered to be in the process of becoming the dominant and soon the only reality of the cosmos (12:28). A similar matrix of images appears in *4 Ezra* 8:52 and *2 Bar.* 85:11, as well as in other passages from this period. The possibility of God's mercy to sinners stands out because of the finality of the eschaton. This possibility of repentance after death but prior to final judgment is excluded in *4 Ezra* 7:82. This is most certainly the

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<sup>29</sup> Sanders, *Paul*, 427.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 421.

<sup>31</sup> Bauckham, "Apocalypses," 182.



case for those who have "shown scorn and have not kept the way of the Most High" (7:79). In Hebrews the same fate awaits those who have "spurned the Son of God" (10:29).

## 2. The Apocalypse of Zephaniah

The *Apocalypse of Zephaniah* in some ways straddles the categories Sanders proposes. Zephaniah undergoes judgment upon his ascent. His sins are recorded on a scroll and presented at the time of judgment (2:15). The lacuna after the reading of his sins probably contained an even more impressive list of his righteous deeds.<sup>32</sup> The extent of Zephaniah's righteousness may explain the announcement that he has conquered "the accuser" (3:1). Prior to the list of his righteous deeds, Zephaniah asks for God's mercy, which is described as "everywhere" (2:18). Martha Himmelfarb cites this reading of scrolls as evidence that Zephaniah has not ascended as a living human being, as in the case of Isaiah in *Ascension of Isaiah*, but rather as the soul of a deceased man.<sup>33</sup> Judgment would be premature if Zephaniah had not completed his earthly existence. Bauckham notes that while the author emphasizes the extent of God's mercy toward the chosen people, the same cannot be said for Gentiles.<sup>34</sup> Bauckham's point regarding the qualifications of the heavenly intercessors cannot be proven conclusively. But few observers would argue that the members of the group cited in this vision are chosen for the level of righteousness they practiced in their own lives. Indeed, Zephaniah himself cannot even proceed to this point in his vision without being judged righteous.

One ambiguity is whether Zephaniah cries for mercy because he is unaware of the impending reading of his righteous deeds or because he feels his salvation requires divine mercy in addition to his righteous deeds. Bauckham is probably correct in affirming the latter.<sup>35</sup> Zephaniah occupies a different category from those catechumens who, at the end of the extant material, endure torture in Hades because they abandoned the spiritual instruction they had been

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<sup>32</sup> Wintermute, O. S. "Apocalypse of Zephaniah," in *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha Volume 1* (New York: Doubleday, 1983), 513-14.

<sup>33</sup> Himmelfarb, *Ascent*, 54.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>35</sup> Bauckham, "Apocalypses," 158.

receiving (3:16). These apostates have the opportunity to repent until the coming day of judgment (3:17).

The similarity between this group of righteous dead and the list of faithful in Heb 11 is also of importance to this study. Though all of these righteous dead from *Apocalypse of Zephaniah* appear in Heb 11 by name except Elijah (and even he may be referenced in 11:35 as a prophet who enabled a widow to receive her resurrected son), the verbal agreement is less important than the fact that in both writings the most righteous figure(s) are exalted to a mediatory place and role in God's own presence. The authors diverge in their placement of the righteous dead. In *Apocalypse of Zephaniah* the righteous are judged upon death and directed to their reward in the highest level of heaven. But the totality of the righteous dead consists of the group mentioned above (3:10). The author does not specify those who died in righteousness without rising to the level of those who stand before God. Part of the reason may be the author's concern with the question of repentance by the dead prior to the final judgment. What is clear is that the elite group of righteous dead receives their reward for righteousness upon death.

The treatment of this question in apocalypses from this time period may be rooted in apocalyptic literature from an earlier period. *Testament of Levi* also associates the coming of a new priesthood with a time of rest for the righteous (18:9). A similar promise of rest for the righteous, those who remain faithful to the confession, is an integral part of the eschatology of the author of Hebrews. Heaven and earth will be shaken (3:9) as a sign of God's knowledge regarding the sin of humanity. This shaking is associated with a coming time of judgment when those who have remained oblivious to God's work in the world will be punished (4:1). In Hebrews a similar expectation remains for much the same reason (12:25-26). In Hebrews this eschatological shaking has been reinterpreted not as a warning to humanity in general, but to those in the recipient community who intentionally remain indifferent to God's demand for obedience. His use of this eschatological shaking is reminiscent of its use in *I En* 1:6 where the trembling signals God's judgment upon the sin of humanity. Specifically the shaking in *I Enoch* is set in the context of God's purging the world of the sin of the Watchers.

Richard Ellingworth notes that earlier observers contrasted Hebrews' image of eschatological shaking with *T. Levi* 3:9. There the author asserts that the prophecy of shaking in *T. Levi* 3:9 is to be associated with the giving of the Torah on Mt. Sinai.<sup>36</sup> He notes the manner in which the author of Hebrews recasts this eschatological expectation, adapting it to the first-century Christian expectation of Christ's return. While Ellingworth is correct in identifying the author's use of the Haggai tradition, it is by no means certain that the eschatological shaking prophesied in *T. Levi* 3:9 refers to the trembling of the earth at Sinai. In addition, the text in Exodus does not refer to the shaking of heaven. Instead, God descends to the mountain in a cloud. Since this is so, the contrast between the shaking in *T. Levi* 3:9, and the imminent shaking in Heb 12, which does include heaven, is untenable. Rather, the tradition of an eschatological shaking in *T. Levi* 3:9 seems much more in line with the use of that tradition in Heb 12 because both heaven and earth are involved. In addition, unlike the shaking of Sinai at the giving of the law, the eschatological shaking in *T. Levi* 3:9 and Heb 12:26 are signals of God's impending judgment upon humanity.

Thus the author of the *Apocalypse of Zephaniah* treats the same issue raised by the author of Hebrews, following a tradition of earlier apocalypses which dealt with the finality of divine judgment. The author of Hebrews also warns his recipients against abandoning their faith after "coming to a knowledge of the truth" (10:26). Both writings envision punishment in the afterlife for those who abandon their religious instruction. Two divergences deserve note. First, the instruction in *Apocalypse of Zephaniah* can only be Torah instruction. But the faith which must not be abandoned in Hebrews is contained in the community's confession (4:14). Though these teachings are unknown, some may appear in Heb 6:1-2. Whatever the content of the confession, the author of Hebrews' concept of old and new covenants would suggest he sees the confession as rooted in and possibly growing out of the Torah (8:6).

The second divergence involves the opportunity for repentance. Unlike the catechumens in *Apocalypse of Zephaniah*, the recipients of Hebrews may not repent after a period of suffering in the afterlife.

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<sup>36</sup> Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 686.

Their opportunity for repentance is in this current life. The author of Hebrews may be reacting to claims in his theological milieu that such repentance is possible even after death as an expression of God's faithfulness to the Abrahamic covenant. The *Apocalypse of Zephaniah* probably expresses that sentiment in the intercession by Abraham, Isaac and Jacob for those apostate catechumens (3:20-21). This issue was debated frequently in first-century Jewish and Jewish Christian circles, as is evidenced by its appearance in a number of writings beyond those discussed to this point. But as Bauckham notes, most Jewish sources from this period deny the possibility of repentance after death, as does Hebrews. The *Apocalypse of Zephaniah* is unique in this respect.<sup>37</sup> Nor is the author of Hebrews interested in the concept of intercession by the righteous dead on behalf of the unrighteous dead. The only intercession takes place as a part of Christ's ongoing high priestly ministry (7:25).

### 3. The Apocalypse of Abraham

The question of the finality of God's judgment also surfaces as a theological concern in the *Apocalypse of Abraham*. Himmelfarb observes the resemblance between the character of Abraham challenging God's choices in the apocalypse and the depiction of him bargaining with God in Genesis (18:23-32).<sup>38</sup> The author seems to reinforce the impossibility of divine mercy upon sinners at the end of the age. This lack of mercy must be related to God's predestination of sinners to sin and the righteous to righteousness (22:5). All of history plays out according to the pattern God envisioned prior to creation.

Christopher Rowland specifies that not every choice and action of humanity is pre-determined in the *Apocalypse of Abraham*.<sup>39</sup> But it is impossible for those destined to destruction to choose repentance. This idea must be held in tension with other claims in the apocalypse regarding the freedom of human will (26:5). Abraham questions the fairness of God's choice to predestine some for destruction, but his questions are met with firm answers which affirm the irrevocability of God's judgment on evil in the world. No opportunity for repentance

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>38</sup> Himmelfarb, *Ascent*, 66.

<sup>39</sup> Rowland, *The Open Heaven: A Study of Apocalyptic in Judaism and Early Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 57.

exists. There would be no point in repentance if human will operates only within divine sovereignty. This extreme sense of divine sovereignty is lacking in Hebrews. But a taste of God's eternal knowledge of the inner intentions of humanity appears in 4:12-13. Rather than establishing the eternal destinies of individual humans, Hebrews conceives of Christ as establishing the parameters of creation (1:10). God also establishes the heavenly city to which Abraham looked forward (11:10). In reconstructing a Greek *Vorlage* for *Apocalypse of Abraham*, Alexander Kulik retroverts the Slavonic text of 26:5 to the Greek θεμελιόω.<sup>40</sup> This word appears in both Heb 1:10 and 11:10 in reference to God's sovereign establishment of the cosmos and the eschatological city. While the two writings are divergent in their concept of divine sovereignty, both writings agree on utter divine awareness of the human psyche in regards to the choice of good or evil. And both seek to encourage their recipient communities to endure a time of suffering with faithfulness or risk eternal punishment.

#### 4. Second Enoch

Divine judgment after death also requires a nuanced understanding of intercession in *2 Enoch*. Like the figure of Christ in Hebrews, Enoch acts as a savior of humankind in *2 Enoch*. Philip Alexander describes the image of Enoch as a second Adam figure who redeems humanity.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, in his heavenly ascent and transformation before the throne Enoch "has carried away the sin of humankind" (64:5).<sup>42</sup> Enoch redeems the protoplast, making it possible for the righteous to be saved from God's final judgment. But this saving work does not remove human responsibility for sin. In fact, as Christian Böttrich notes, Enoch clearly rejects the notion of heavenly intercession for sin on behalf of the individual (53:1).<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Kulik, *Retroverting Slavonic Pseudepigrapha: Toward the Original of the Apocalypse of Abraham* (SBLTCS 3; Leiden: Brill, 2005), 67.

<sup>41</sup> Alexander, "From Son of Adam to a Second God: Transformation of the Biblical Enoch," in *Biblical Figures Outside the Bible* (ed. Michael E. Stone and Theodore A. Bergren; Harrisburg: Trinity, 1998), 111.

<sup>42</sup> Andrei Orlov, *The Enoch-Metatron Tradition* (TSAJ 107; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 233.

<sup>43</sup> Böttrich, *Weltweisheit, Menschheitsethik, Urkult: Studien zum slavischen Henochbuch* (WUNT 2/50; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1992), 194-95.

In his wisdom-like address to his community, Enoch stresses the efficacy of sacrifice for the forgiveness of sin. God will honor a sacrifice made cheerfully from one's own labor prior to the day of judgment (62:1). But if a person dies prior to judgment, repentance, as in Hebrews, is impossible. An additional parallel lies in the fact that both writings speak to a situation where an individual has made some type of commitment to God to which he or she is bound for life. In Hebrews the recipient community must continue to affirm the confession they have received (4:14). In *2 Enoch* some unspecified oath is in question. It may be associated with the revelation of heavenly wisdom to Enoch, which is described as a supplement to the revelation of the Torah to Moses (48:6-7).<sup>44</sup> An abandonment of said commitments is an act that cannot be undone; repentance from apostasy will not affect divine judgment (Heb 6:4; *2 En.* 62:2).

*Second Enoch* also shares with Hebrews and *Apocalypse of Abraham* the emphasis on divine knowledge of human action and intent (53:2). Rowland notes that *2 Enoch*, unlike *Apocalypse of Abraham*, conceives of human action as the result of human choice to be obedient or disobedient.<sup>45</sup> The concept of incisive divine vision appears in both Hebrews and *2 Enoch*. In *2 Enoch* the divine light reveals human treachery. Not even the inner thoughts of the individual will escape God's attention and judgment (46:3-4). The apocalypse emphasizes the importance of the human heart as the seat of human will and morality.<sup>46</sup> The same can be said for Hebrews, where the mind of God pierces flesh and bone to reveal human intent (4:12-13). The bone marrow is the deepest part of the human body from which intentions arise. Because this is so, divine judgment is in some ways a present reality. God's knowledge is intricately bound up with God's judgment, and because the abandonment of certain theological commitments is an act which precludes repentance, divine judgment is rendered even prior to death.

To summarize the evidence we have seen so far, the apocalypses from this period have striking similarities to Hebrews in both image and theology. They share Hebrews' concern with the righteous dead,

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<sup>44</sup> See P. G. Davis, "Divine Agents, Mediators, and New Testament Christology," *JTS* 45 (1994): 500.

<sup>45</sup> Rowland, *Heaven* 145.

<sup>46</sup> Bauckham, "Apocalypses," 153.

who in some cases intercede on behalf of Israel. They emphasize the impossibility of repentance after death, though some apocalypses from this stage do allow for mercy to be granted through the intercession of the righteous dead. Hebrews has much in common with other Hellenistic Jewish writings from the theological milieu in which it is situated.

### **C. Reconsideration of Hebrews' Concept of the Nature of Salvation in the Context of First Century Jewish Apocalyptic Literature**

#### **1. The Obsolescence Torah Obedience.**

The final issue for consideration is how Hebrews is unique in its conception of the irrevocability of salvation. The answer to that question centers on the free choice of the members of the recipient community to affirm the community's confession of faith or abandon it in the face of some sort of oppression, which to this point has not yet involved bloodshed (12:4). Salvation is as irrevocable as Christ's self sacrifice for those who hold fast to the confession. But the author adamantly warns the community that not only is salvation revoked, but also that restoration is impossible for those who abandon the confession (6:4-6; 10:26-28). In that case, the self sacrifice of Christ no longer applies to their sin. Whereas most of the apocalyptic writings dealing with this question focus on a divine record of an individual's good works, a storehouse of good deeds, or the issue of divine mercy for those whose deeds are lacking, Hebrews conceives of those good works arising from the cleansing of an individual's conscience (10:22) and the replacement of obsolete sacrifice rituals with teachings about Christ. In fact, the good works with which the author is concerned stem not from an attempt to merit salvation, but from the enlightened life of the community as they comfort one another through various trials and persecutions (10:33-34).

While those who have abandoned the community's confession may conceivably engage in Torah obedience, those good works are inextricably bound to an obsolete and ineffective system of dealing with the issue of sin. Since this is so, those who abandon the confession have exchanged an irrevocable assurance of salvation for an approach to righteousness which guarantees failure because of its earthly nature. The repetition of these ineffective rituals is ample

evidence of the revocability of the divine forgiveness which they were thought to access (10:3-4).

## 2. Cleansing of Sin Consciousness

The key to the irrevocable nature of salvation in Hebrews is related to the cleansing of the believer's conscience. The author repeatedly contrasts the temporary nature of salvation through temple rituals, animal sacrifice, and Torah obedience to the irrevocable concept of salvation through Christ's self sacrifice, which cleanses the conscience (9:14; 10:2; 10:22). As I mentioned above, the author departs from the equation of righteousness and purity with Torah obedience which appears so frequently in apocalyptic literature from this time. In 4 Ezra 9:10-12 the author reprimands those who failed to obey the Torah and squandered the opportunity to repent before the end of their lives. Clearly the author believes that such repentance and obedience would have restored the repentant to a right relationship with God. Brent Nongbri correctly notes that the author of Hebrews exchanges the gift of the law in 4 Ezra with the enlightenment of those who have received the divine gift.<sup>47</sup> The implication is that salvation is the gift or part of it. But the comparison should go further in that the gift of the law in Hebrews involves consciousness of sin. The gift of Christ involves the loss of consciousness of sin because sin has been removed in an eternal manner.

Moreover, the opportunity for repentance is significantly different in Hebrews. Those who reject the gift of the law in 4 Ezra may repent of that sin any time prior to their death and receive full restoration. The apostates from the recipient community in Hebrews, by contrast, are not afforded any opportunity for repentance because salvation now involves eternal consciousness of sin. One may move from a lower consciousness to a higher consciousness, but not vice-versa because the high consciousness of sin involves knowledge of and reception of the eternal divine sacrifice for sin. Those who know sin through the law can go through the cycle of sin and cleansing as long as their human lives allow. But the self sacrifice of Christ

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<sup>47</sup> Nongbri, "A Touch Of Condemnation in a Word of Exhortation: Apocalyptic Language and Graeco-Roman Rhetoric in Hebrews 6:4-12," *NovT*, 45 (2003): 265-279.



cleanses the consciences of those who have been enlightened regarding sin. This knowledge prohibits repeated sin and cleansing.

Craig Koester rightly notes the association of the cleansing of an individual's conscience with faith. He interprets this association to begin with the announcement of the death of Christ as the core of Christian preaching. Upon an individual's positive response (faith), the sacrifice of Christ purifies his or her conscience.<sup>48</sup>

But this cleansing of the conscience accomplishes significantly more than simply the erasing of the individual's concern for personal sin. It enlightens the individual to eternal realities which can only be seen by faith, one of which is the irrevocable nature of salvation for those whose consciences have been cleansed. This relationship is apparent in 10:22 where the cleansing of one's conscience is associated with the "assurance of faith." Hebrews 11:1 clearly defines faith as the "assurance of things hoped for." While this concept has traditionally been understood by scholars purely in terms of an eternal reward, the cleansing of one's conscience is inextricably related to the eternal vision in Heb 11. Some commentators have understood this relationship to imply that those in the community who have committed apostasy are not completely cut off from salvation, but instead suffer a loss of that vision due to the dirtying of their conscience. T. K. Oberholtzer interprets the metaphorical burning of apostates in 6:8 as a fire of purification rather than final punishment.<sup>49</sup> But since fire is to be the "end" of the land which bears thorns and thistles, the land, not the worthless fruit it bears, is destined for burning. In other words, the enlightenment (6:4) which enables vision of the coming eternal world (6:5), and which is enabled by a clean conscience is permanently lost by apostates.

### Conclusion

In conclusion the question of the revocability of salvation in Hebrews is rooted partly in Jewish apocalyptic literature which preceded the epistle and is related theologically to apocalyptic literature contemporary with the epistle. The various concepts of the eschaton in that literature and the finality of the events associated with

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<sup>48</sup> Koester, *Hebrews*, 119.

<sup>49</sup> Oberholtzer, "The Thorn- Infested Ground in Hebrews 6:4-12," *BSac* 155 (1998), 62-91.

decisive divine action at the end of the age require the consideration of temporal limits for repentance and a structure for the balance of divine mercy vs. judgment for sin. Like Hebrews, these writings are intended to engender obedience to divine teaching, though most Jewish apocalyptic writings hold Torah righteousness as the standard for individual godliness. Hebrews, in contrast, ties continued godliness to the ongoing affirmation of the recipient community's faith confession and participation in the community's life as various members are persecuted for such participation.

Since the question of when and how apostate Christians may be restored to the church has been debated since the beginning of the church, Hebrews has been consulted consistently throughout church history by ecclesiastical authorities in search of biblical guidance. The epistle's guidance on this issue has yielded a wide variety of interpretations. Some interpreters have incorporated baptism into their thought on the question. Others have sought to understand the way in which Hebrews speaks of the actual level of apostasy to which one must sink in order to lose the opportunity for repentance and restoration into communion with the church.

Like most Jewish apocalyptic literature of its time, Hebrews seeks to warn readers of the danger in abandoning received teachings. Most of the literature to which Hebrews is theologically related treats repentance as an option for the sinful, a direction in which they may turn until the day of their deaths. Some even conceive of a formula for divine mercy in the case of those whose deeds of Torah obedience are lacking. Hebrews diverges from that stream of thought in its temporal conception of salvation. The sacrifice of Christ deals with an individual's sin for eternity. It involves not only forgiveness, but also the consciousness of sin. Since this is so, those who have responded in faith to the teachings of the community and continue to uphold its confession can never lose their salvation. Their salvation is irrevocable. Those who at some point respond in faith and gain this eternal level of assurance of salvation only to subsequently abandon the confession in the face of tribulation cannot be restored from their apostate status. In their case, the choice to revert to an obsolete manner of dealing with sin is irrevocable. While there are certainly more questions regarding the author of Hebrews' thought on this subject, it is my hope that this study opens new avenues of inquiry.

Testamentum Imperium – Volume 2 – 2009

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