

The Paradigm of Kadesh Barnea as a Solution to the Problem of Hebrews 6:4–6

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Introduction

The warning found in Hebrews 6:4–6 has provoked disagreement among Bible interpreters and exegetes. Gromacki observes that this passage is “probably the most controversial passage within Hebrews.”¹ Most Calvinist and Reformed interpreters insist that the warning passage is too strong to apply to believers, so unbelievers must be in view in these verses. Arminians contend that the passage is speaking of genuine believers who are at risk of losing their salvation. Others argue that these verses are speaking of genuine believers and the severe warning is a mere hypothetical scenario. Still others contend that these verses speak of believers who are in jeopardy of losing blessings. Who is right? How are interpreters to make sense of this difficult passage?

The purpose of this article is to show that the difficulty typically associated with this passage is perhaps overstated. Confusion only arises when interpreters attempt to understand Hebrews 6:4–6 in isolation from the preceding context.² In Hebrews 3–4, the writer compares his audience to the generation of Jews that committed the sin of unbelief at Kadesh Barnea (Numbers 13–14). Such a comparison is warranted because of the similarities between the two groups. Fear of the Canaanite giants caused the Exodus generation to distrust God and disobey His command to take Canaan. Such distrust and disobedience had irretrievable consequences: that generation permanently forfeited the blessings of inheriting and enjoying the Promised Land. Similarly, fear of persecution from the Jews was tempting the Hebrew Christians to lapse back into Judaism. It was causing them to lose confidence in God and thus violate His admonition to press on in the faith. The author of Hebrews connects the sin of the Exodus generation with that of his audience in order to show them that they too would irrevocably forfeit blessings if they imitated the distrust and disobedience of the Exodus generation.

If the interpreter first begins with Hebrews 3–4 and considers the writer’s comparison between his audience and the generation of Jews that committed the sin of unbelief at Kadesh Barnea (Numbers 13–14), then the warning of Hebrews 6 becomes understandable. In other words, if Kadesh Barnea is seen as the paradigm for the Book of Hebrews, then the warning passages are

¹ Robert Gromacki, *Salvation Is Forever* (Chicago: Moody, 1973), 151.

² J. Dwight Pentecost, class notes of Andy Woods in BE450A The Book of Hebrews, Dallas Theological Seminary, February 10, Spring 2005.

decipherable.³ Such a perspective logically leads the interpreter to embrace the loss of blessing view and reject the Calvinist, Arminian, and hypothetical views.

In order to build this case, the article will first focus upon the Exodus generation, giving specific attention to their spiritual status. It will be demonstrated that the Exodus generation was redeemed, with its population regenerated prior to the events of Kadesh Barnea. Thus, their unbelief at Kadesh Barnea did not affect their justified status but rather introduced an irrevocable forfeiture of the blessings of Canaan. Second, the paper will examine the audience of the writer of Hebrews. Attention will be called to the audience's regenerated status and their being on the verge of experiencing a permanent loss of blessings. Finally, the article will interact with alternative interpretations of Hebrews 6:4–6, which include the views of Calvinism and Arminianism, as well as the hypothetical view. It will be demonstrated that these alternative views do not give proper attention to the Kadesh Barnea paradigm and thus are inadequate.

The Exodus Generation

The Exodus Generation's Redeemed Status

Crucial to the thesis advanced in this article is the demonstration of the Exodus generation's believing spiritual status. Such a determination is critical for understanding exactly what was lost at Kadesh Barnea. If it can be shown that they were already redeemed and regenerated, then what was lost at Kadesh Barnea was nonsoteriological in nature but rather was related to additional rewards or blessings. While there may have been some unbelievers in the group, the biblical data points in the direction of viewing the Exodus generation as redeemed and regenerated prior to the events of Numbers 13–14.

Several clues from the Book of Exodus furnish evidence of the nation's redeemed and believing status.⁴ For example, in Exodus 4:22–23, God referred to the nation as His first-born son. Such a title signifies the adopted status of Yahweh's special nation. Also, in Exodus 12:27–28, after trusting in the Passover sacrifice, the nation is depicted as bowing down and worshipping Yahweh. These hardly constitute the actions of an unregenerate nation. Moreover, immediately after the miracle of the parting of the Red Sea,

³ This thesis is developed in J. Dwight Pentecost, *Faith That Endures: A Practical Commentary on the Book of Hebrews*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1992); idem, class notes of Andy Woods in BE450A The Book of Hebrews, Dallas Theological Seminary, Spring 2005.

⁴ Joseph Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings: A Study of the Eternal Security and the Final Significance of Man* (Miami Springs, FL: Schoettle, 1992), 50, 55.

“the people feared the Lord and they believed in the Lord and in His servant Moses” (Exodus 14:31).⁵ Allen observes that this verse is nearly semantically identical to Genesis 15:6, which the New Testament uses as an example of Abraham’s justification (Romans 4:3). Both verses contain the hiphil of *’mn* plus the preposition *by* followed by the name Yahweh. Thus, both verses mean “to believe in Yahweh.”

The same kind of idea is found in the New Testament construction *pisteuō* plus the preposition *eis* followed by the name “Jesus,” meaning “to believe in Jesus.” The only real difference between the two verses is that in Genesis 15:6 the verb is in the singular while in Exodus 14:31 it is in the plural. Allen further observes that just as Paul uses the chronology of Genesis 15:6 and Genesis 17 to prove that Abraham was justified before being circumcised (Romans 4), Exodus 14:31 could be used to prove that the nation was justified before receiving the law, which came later in Exodus 19–24.⁶ Regarding Exodus 14:31, the *Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Commentary* notes, “When we read **so the people feared the Lord** and the words that follow, we are meant to understand that the community had come to saving faith and so were a reborn people. They **believed the Lord** (the same wording used of Abraham’s saving faith in Gen. 15:6; read Paul’s comments in Rom. 4). . . . The people were transformed spiritually even as they were delivered physically.”⁷

Furthermore, Exodus 15 records the nation’s worship of Yahweh after He had delivered them. The nation worships Yahweh again in Exodus 33:10. Such worship would be uncharacteristic of an unregenerate people. The nation also seemed to provide further evidence of its regenerated status when it promised, “All that the Lord has spoken we will do!” (Exodus 19:8). Their promise to submit to everything God had revealed was reiterated on two more occasions after the Law had been given (Exodus 24:3, 7). These promises must have emanated from spiritually born people, since the sinful mind is hostile to God and unable to submit to God’s law (Romans 8:7–8). Given the natural man’s hostility to God, why would God give His law (Exodus 19–24) and instructions for worship (Exodus 25–31; 35–40) to those who are unregenerate and thus incapable of such obedience and worship?

While it is true that the Exodus generation did engage in the heinous sin of manufacturing a golden calf (Exodus 32), such carnal behavior does not disqualify them from being believers. As new believers, they were immature. It is possible for believers to engage in carnal activity. The Corinthians

⁵ All Scripture quotations throughout are taken from the NASB.

⁶ Ronald B. Allen, class notes of Andy Woods in BE2006 Seminar in Torah and the Former Prophets, Dallas Theological Seminary, February 17, March 3, Spring 2005.

⁷ Earl Radmacher, Ronald B. Allen, and H. Wayne House, eds., *Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Nelson, 1999), 113.

provide an example of this. Although their positional status was that of saints (1 Corinthians 1:2), their practical behavior was anything but saintly. Throughout the letter, they are depicted as following men instead of Christ (1 Corinthians 1:10–17), exhibiting worldly wisdom (1 Corinthians 1:18–2:16), divisive (1 Corinthians 3), sexually immoral (1 Corinthians 5; 7), litigious (1 Corinthians 6), drunk at the Lord’s table (1 Corinthians 11), abusing their spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 12–14), and denying the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15). Kendall notes that the biblical evidence favors viewing the nation as regenerated in spite of her carnality. He observes:

It would be a serious mistake to dismiss the children of Israel in the wilderness by writing them off as unregenerate from the start. To say that such people were never saved is to fly in the face of the memorable fact that they kept the Passover. They obeyed Moses, who gave an unprecedented, if not strange command to sprinkle blood on either side and over the doors (Ex. 12:7). But they did it If obeying Moses’ command to sprinkle blood on the night of the Passover was not a type of saving faith, I do not know what is. These people were saved. We shall see them in heaven, even if it turns out they were “saved so as by fire” (1 Cor. 3:15).⁸

In addition to these clues found in the Book of Exodus, the New Testament also makes clear that the Exodus generation was a believing, redeemed generation. For example, Paul analogizes the Exodus generation to members of the New Testament church (2 Corinthians 10:4–6). In fact, in this passage, Paul even says that the water from the rock that the Exodus generation drank from typified spiritual drink offered by the spiritual rock, Christ.⁹ Moreover, the author of Hebrews includes the Exodus generation in the “Hall of Faith” (Hebrews 11:29–30). He uses the phrase “by faith” to describe this generation—the same phrase he uses to describe Enoch, Abraham, Moses, and numerous other members of the “Hall of Faith.” All of these giants were justified. There is no doubt that Enoch was justified since he was translated into heaven (Genesis 5:24). Abraham was justified (Genesis 15:6). Moses was justified (Matthew 17:3). The point is that if the phrase “by faith” refers to other members of the “Hall of Faith” who were regenerated, then consistency seems to dictate that we view the Exodus generation as regenerated as well.¹⁰

Despite the evidence of the believing status of the Exodus generation, many still contend that this generation was not regenerated because of the fact that they failed to enter the Promised Land. Christian hymns sometimes analogize the passing from this life into heaven with the crossing of the

⁸ R. T. Kendall, *Once Saved Always Saved* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), 153–54.

⁹ Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings*, 45, 54, 55.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 54.

Jordan into Canaan, and so do numerous influential commentaries.¹¹ For example, Pink connects the journey from Egypt to Canaan with the Christian's journey into heaven.¹² Hoekema observes, "Canaan, therefore, was not an end in itself; it pointed forward to the new earth . . . of which Canaan was only a type."¹³ According to Fairbairn, "The occupation of the earthly Canaan by the natural seed of Abraham, in its grand and ultimate design, was a type of the occupation by the redeemed church of her destined inheritance of glory."¹⁴

Although such an equation might at first sound good at a devotional level, it is theological error. If Canaan represents heaven, then Moses is not a citizen in heaven, since He died before entering Canaan (Deuteronomy 3:27; 4:21–22; 31:2; 32:52; 34:5–8). To argue that Moses never made it into heaven is quite unsatisfactory, given the fact that he appeared with Christ on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matthew 17:3), is enumerated in the "Hall of Faith" (Hebrews 11:23–28), and may be one of the two witnesses in the Book of Revelation (Revelation 11:6).¹⁵ Furthermore, if Canaan represents heaven, then one is forced to conclude that all but two of the 2.5 million members of the Exodus generation are in hell.¹⁶ According to Farrar, "If . . . the rest meant *heaven*, it would be against all Scripture analogy to assume that *all* the Israelites who died in the wilderness were excluded from future happiness. And there are many other difficulties which will at once suggest themselves."¹⁷

Various Old Testament passages make it clear that Joshua and Caleb entered the land not because they were justified soteriologically but rather because they followed the Lord wholeheartedly.¹⁸ In other words, because of their faith in God and obedience after they were justified, they were the only

¹¹ Ibid., 55–56.

¹² Arthur Pink, *An Exposition of the Book of Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1968), 196.

¹³ Anthony Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 279.

¹⁴ Patrick Fairbairn, *Typology of Scripture* (1845–47; repr., New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1900), 2:4.

¹⁵ Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings*, 50. For an alternative view arguing that the figure in Revelation 11:6 is Moses-like rather than Moses himself, see J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology* (Findley, OH: Dunham, 1958), 306–7.

¹⁶ Zane Hodges, "Hebrews," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton: Victor, 1983), 787.

¹⁷ F. W. Farrar, "The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews," in *Cambridge Greek Testament for Schools and Colleges* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 67.

¹⁸ Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings*, 49.

two of that redeemed generation to enter the land. Numbers 14:24 says, “But My servant Caleb, *because he has a different spirit and has followed me fully*, I will bring into the land which he entered, and his descendants shall take possession of it.” According to Numbers 32:11–12, “None of the men who came up from Egypt, from twenty years old and upward, shall see the land which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob; *for they did not follow me fully*, except Caleb . . . and Joshua . . . *for they have followed me fully*.” In Joshua 14:8–9, Joshua says, “*I followed the Lord my God fully*. So Moses swore to me on that day, saying, ‘Surely the land on which your foot has trodden shall be an inheritance to you . . . *because you have followed the Lord my God fully*.’”¹⁹

A parallel can be found in the life of Abraham.²⁰ Although he was justified already (Genesis 15:6), his entrance into the blessings of the Abrahamic covenant was only possible through his personal obedience. This becomes clear through the phrase “because you have obeyed My voice” in Genesis 22:18. All of this information establishes that there is no necessary nexus between the failure to enter Canaan and being an unbeliever. The sin of the Exodus generation at Kadesh Barnea was not the sin of being an *unbeliever*. Rather, their sin was in being *unbelieving* toward God’s command to take Canaan.

The Exodus Generation’s Irrevocable Decision

Since the Exodus generation was regenerated, believing, and redeemed prior to the events of Kadesh Barnea, what the nation forfeited in Numbers 13–14 was related not to the opportunity to be saved but rather to the blessings of inheriting the land. These blessings were irretrievably lost for that generation. Such irrevocability can be seen in Numbers 14:20–38, where God announces judgment upon that generation for their unbelief and disobedience. In this section, God repeatedly reaffirms that the Exodus generation would never see the Promised Land. The irrevocability can also be seen in the nation’s decision to enter the land anyway the next day. They were warned not to and were subsequently defeated (Numbers 14:40–45). Pentecost explains, “Thus God made it impossible for those who had rebelled—even though they repented—to proceed into the land to enjoy its blessings. Their loss of privilege was, in other words, irreversible.”²¹

An example of such an irreversible forfeiture of blessings can also be found in the life of Esau. After bartering away his birthright in exchange for some vegetable stew (Genesis 25:29–34), he repented with tears (Genesis

¹⁹ Emphasis is mine in the preceding passages.

²⁰ Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings*, 53–54, 58.

²¹ Pentecost, *Faith That Endures*, 106.

27:38). “However, neither Esau’s plea nor his tears could bring Isaac’s blessings to him. By his earlier willful act, the privileges and blessings that might have belonged to Esau were forever lost.”²² In sum, since the Exodus generation is the paradigm for understanding Hebrews, there are two things that must be understood before the warning passages of Hebrews can be grasped. First, the Exodus generation was believing, redeemed, and regenerated prior to the events at Kadesh Barnea. Thus, what that generation forfeited in Numbers 13–14 involved blessings received after salvation. Second, the forfeiture of the blessing of enjoying the land was an irreversible decision.

Hebrews 6:4–6

If the Exodus generation and the incident of Kadesh Barnea is the paradigm for the Book of Hebrews, then the characteristics of the addressees of Hebrews 6 must be the same as those of the Exodus generation. In the previous section, it was established that the Exodus generation was redeemed and that their disobedience in Numbers 13–14 introduced an irreversible forfeiture of blessings. Now it will be shown that those addressed in Hebrews 6 were also regenerated and on the verge of irreversibly forfeiting blessings.

The Believing Status of Those Addressed

A proper understanding of the warning is intertwined with a proper understanding of the spiritual status of the audience. If it can be shown that the addressees of Hebrews were already believers, then the warning is not related to justification but rather to additional blessings believers receive after they are saved. Thus, the purpose of this section is to demonstrate that those addressed in Hebrews 6:4–6, like the Exodus generation, were already believers. This becomes clear through a careful examination of the various contexts surrounding the verses in question.

Extended Context

It is clear from the book as a whole that the addressees were genuine believers.²³ The author routinely uses “us” when describing his audience, thus equating his own spiritual status with theirs (Hebrews 1:2). He also refers to his audience as those who had their sins purged (1:3) and who were on the verge of neglecting their salvation (2:1–3). The notion of neglecting implies prior possession.²⁴ He also calls his audience holy brethren who are partakers

²² Ibid.

²³ Most of the items on the following list were originally compiled in *ibid.*, 29–31.

²⁴ For example, the fact that Timothy is told not to neglect his ministry gift automatically implies that he presently possesses such a gift (1 Timothy 4:14). See

of the heavenly calling (3:1). The term “brethren” is used ten times in Hebrews. Four of these uses do not describe the original audience. The word simply refers to either humanity in general (2:17) or, as in the Old Testament, to Jewish brethren (2:12; 7:5; 8:11). However, the remaining six uses do describe the original audience. These uses either inarguably refer to believers or must refer to believers since the exhortations they are associated with would be inapplicable to unbelievers (2:11; 3:1, 12; 10:19; 13:22, 23).²⁵

In chapter 4 the writer expresses concern that his audience will not attain rest rather than not attain salvation (4:1). He also refers to them as fellow believers together with him (4:3). He assumes that Christ their high priest is interceding for them (4:14, cf. 7:26–8:1; 10:21) and that they already have access to the throne of grace to obtain help in time of need (4:16). They need patient endurance rather than salvation (10:36–39). According to 10:22–25, they have been cleansed and sprinkled from an evil conscience. They also made a public confession and identified with other believers. The author presupposes that they are able to serve the living God (9:14), have been sanctified (10:10), and have received the ministry of the Holy Spirit (10:15) and that Jesus is the author and finisher of their faith (12:2). He also refers to them as sons (12:7) and those who are inheriting the kingdom (12:28).

The believing status of the audience is also evidenced through the numerous exhortations given in the book. Pentecost identifies at least 38 exhortations that the writer gives to his readers.²⁶ Yet there is not to be found in the book a single exhortation to trust Christ for salvation. One would expect this exhortation to show up at least once if the writer were addressing unbelievers.²⁷ By way of comparison, one of the reasons we know that the Gospel of John has an evangelistic purpose is that the purpose statement of the book is an exhortation to saving faith (John 20:31). Yet no similar exhortation is found in Hebrews.

Preceding Context

The preceding context refers to the verses occurring immediately before the verses in question. In this case, the preceding context encompasses 5:11–6:3. This section could only be describing believers. In 5:11–14, six facts make it clear that this section refers to believers. First, they are encouraged to grow.²⁸

Mike Duffy, “The Hermeneutical Problem of the Mixed Audience in the Book of Hebrews” (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1988), 38.

²⁵ Ibid., 32–34.

²⁶ Pentecost, *Faith That Endures*, 33–34.

²⁷ Duffy, “The Hermeneutical Problem of the Mixed Audience in the Book of Hebrews,” 40.

²⁸ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 108; B. F. Westcott, *The Epistle to*

Unbelievers would not have been encouraged to grow but rather to get saved.²⁹ Second, he calls them “babes” (5:13). Such terminology refers to recently spiritually born people rather than to unbelievers because unbelievers must be born again (John 3).³⁰ “Babes” is frequently used in the New Testament to contrast immature believers with mature believers (Galatians 4:3; 1 Corinthians 2:6; 3:1; 14:20; Ephesians 4:13–14).³¹ Third, he states that some of them should be teachers by now (5:12). The writer certainly would not be admonishing unbelievers to teach believers.³²

Fourth, he says that they need milk, and not solid food (5:12). Elsewhere Peter describes newly born believers as those who hunger after the milk of the Word (1 Peter 2:2). The need of the unsaved is not milk but life.³³ Fifth, he describes his audience as those who are slow to learn (5:11). This has caused him to interrupt his train of thought and interject the warning of 5:11–6:20. He wants to convey to them the complex spiritual truth of the Melchizedekian order, but he is unable to do so due to their spiritual infancy. This cannot be describing unbelievers, who are not marked by a slowness of learning but rather by an inability to learn spiritual truth (1 Corinthians 2:14; 2 Corinthians 4:4; Ephesians 2:1–3; Romans 3:11). Given their limitations, how could an unbeliever be expected to digest the complex spiritual truth of the Melchizedekian priesthood?³⁴ Sixth, he desires for his audience to train themselves by God’s Word so that they can distinguish between good and evil (5:14). Yet such discernment would be impossible for unbelievers due to their spiritual blindness and deadness.

In sum, these verses are clearly speaking of believers. MacArthur, a Calvinist interpreter, attempts to get around the clear import of these verses by making them apply to unbelievers. He argues that the maturity described here is instantaneous as in conversion.³⁵ However, such an explanation strains credulity. Verse 14 describes maturity as a process when it says, “because of

the Hebrews, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1892; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 135.

²⁹ Duffy, “The Hermeneutical Problem of the Mixed Audience in the Book of Hebrews,” 40.

³⁰ J. B. Rowell, “Exposition of Hebrews Six,” *Bsac* 94 (July–September 1937): 325.

³¹ Farrar, “The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews,” 78.

³² Duffy, “The Hermeneutical Problem of the Mixed Audience in the Book of Hebrews,” 44.

³³ Rowell, “Exposition of Hebrews Six,” 325.

³⁴ Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings*, 448.

³⁵ John MacArthur, *Hebrews*, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 1983), 128–34.

practice have their senses trained.” Also, why would the writer ever want unbelievers to teach believers?³⁶

It is equally clear that 6:1–3 depicts believers as well. First, “therefore” at the beginning of 6:1 links this unit back to 5:11–14. Because these two sections are linked, if one sees the addresses of 5:11–14 as believers, one must also see 6:1–3 as describing believers.³⁷ To contend that 5:11–14 refers to believers and 6:1–3 to unbelievers is hermeneutically tantamount to “switching horses in midstream.” Second, in 6:1 the audience is encouraged to press on to maturity (*teleiōtēs*). If the writer were dealing with unbelievers, he would be calling them to believe rather than to mature. Third, the author uses “us” and “we” when communicating with his audience (6:1, 3). By doing so, he is equating his own spiritual status with theirs. Thus, if the author is saved, then his audience must be saved as well. Fourth, the author uses the phrase “faith toward God.” This presupposes that they already had saving faith. Fifth, his use of the phrase “leaving the elementary teachings about the Christ” (6:1) indicates that they already had an exposure to basic Christian doctrine and had already believed such doctrine. The unsaved could not leave behind such teachings since they have not even begun in them.³⁸

Many contend that the six foundations enumerated in 6:1–2, which the writer uses to describe the elementary teachings that his audience had already been exposed to, relate to Old Testament Judaism. However, not all scholars concur with this conclusion. For example, Sauer contends that these six foundations describe the Christian faith rather than the religion of Judaism.³⁹ In sum, the context that precedes the verses in question is found in 5:11–6:3. As has been shown, the details of these verses argue convincingly that believers are in view.

Immediate Context

Just as the Exodus generation prior to the events of Kadesh Barnea was a redeemed, believing nation, so were the addressees of Hebrews 6:4–6. This is clear from the descriptions of the audience in the book of Hebrews as a whole. An examination of the immediately preceding verses (Hebrews 5:11–6:3) also makes this point clear. The same pattern holds true upon careful examination of Hebrews 6:4–6.

³⁶ Duffy, “The Hermeneutical Problem of the Mixed Audience in the Book of Hebrews,” 44.

³⁷ Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings*, 433.

³⁸ Rowell, “Exposition of Hebrews Six,” 325.

³⁹ R.C. Sauer, “A Critical and Exegetical Examination of Hebrews 5:11–6:8” (Ph.D. diss., University of Manchester, 1981), 176ff; cited in Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings: A Study of the Eternal Security and the Final Significance of Man*, 434 n. 3.

Unfortunately, the NIV omits the introductory “for” at the beginning of verse 4. The existence of this word is crucial as it connects these verses back to the unit preceding them in 5:11–6:3. Thus, if one is convinced that believers are in view in 5:11–6:3, then believers must also be in view in 6:4–6.⁴⁰ Hebrews 6:4–5 uses five descriptive phrases to describe “those” who are at risk of falling away. When these five phrases are examined in their totality, it becomes overwhelmingly obvious that believers are being described.

The first descriptive phrase is “who have once been enlightened” (6:4). One of the best ways to determine the meaning of a word is to see how the author uses the same word elsewhere in the same book. This principle proves useful for identifying the meaning of all five descriptive phrases in Hebrews 6:4–6. The word for “enlightened” (*photisthentas*) is also used in Hebrews 10:32, “where the reference to true Christian experience can hardly be doubted.”⁴¹ Those enlightened in Hebrews 10:32 proved their justification through their confidence (10:35), works, and hope of heaven (10:32–34). Those who are enlightened (10:32) are also called sanctified (10:29) and are said to possess imputed righteousness (10:38). Interestingly, other New Testament writers apply the word “enlightenment” to believers (Ephesians 1:18).⁴² They also use the notion of light to describe the salvation experience (2 Corinthians 4:3–6; 1 Peter 2:9).⁴³ Hebrews 6:4 says that they had been “once for all” (*hapax*) “enlightened.” The notion of “once for all” (*hapax*) is used elsewhere by the author to communicate finality. For example, it is used to describe the once-for-all entry by the high priest on the Day of Atonement (Hebrews 9:7), Christ’s once-for-all appearance at the end of the age to do away with sin (Hebrews 9:26), the finality of death to all men (Hebrews 9:27), and Christ once for all atoning for sin (Hebrews 9:28). Jude also uses the term to describe doctrine that was once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 3).⁴⁴ In sum, based upon the other uses of “once for all” and “enlightened” found throughout Hebrews and the rest of the New Testament, these words in Hebrews 6:4 are best understood as the finality of spiritual enlightenment accompanying regeneration.

The second descriptive phrase is “have tasted of the heavenly gift” (6:4). The word “taste” (*geuomai*) is used in 1 Peter 2:3 to describe the complete salvation experience. It is also used by the writer elsewhere to indicate Christ’s total experience of death for the benefit of the human race (Hebrews 2:9). Thus, internal consistency indicates that its meaning in Hebrews 6:4 also refers to a full experience rather than a mere sampling. The word “gift”

⁴⁰ Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings*, 435.

⁴¹ Hodges, “Hebrews,” 794.

⁴² Rowell, “Exposition of Hebrews Six,” 325.

⁴³ Hodges, “Hebrews,” 794.

⁴⁴ Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings*, 437.

(*dōrea*) in all of its other ten uses in the New Testament either refers to a regenerated person receiving a gift from God or to the gift of regeneration itself (John 4:10; Acts 2:38; 8:20; 10:45; 11:17; Romans 5:15, 17; 2 Corinthians 9:15, Ephesians 3:7; 4:7).⁴⁵ There is no logical reason for concluding that *dōrea* in Hebrews 6:4 is the single exception. In sum, the phrase “tasted of the heavenly gift” in 6:4 refers to the complete experience of regeneration.

The third descriptive phrase is “have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit.” The Greek word for “partakers” is *metochoi*. When one studies how this word is used elsewhere in the Book of Hebrews, two interesting facts emerge. First, it is often used to describe partnership. For example, it is used of companions of the messianic king in Hebrews 1:9. It is also used of partners in a heavenly calling (3:1, 14) and partners in discipline (12:8). Thus, Hebrews 6:4 must also be speaking of a full partnership of the Spirit rather than just an initial taste of Him.⁴⁶ Second, in all of its uses, the referents are regenerate people (Hebrews 1:9; 3:1, 14; 5:13; 6:4; 7:13; 12:8).⁴⁷ Hebrews 1:9 speaks of regenerated partners of the king. Hebrews 3:1 speaks of the regenerated “holy brothers” as partners of the heavenly calling. When Hebrews 12:8 mentions those who partake in discipline, Hebrews 12:6 reminds us that only God’s children undergo discipline. There is no compelling reason why Hebrews 6:4 should be the one exception to this rule. Therefore, *metochoi* in Hebrews 6:4 must also be speaking of regenerated people. It is also worth noting that the other references to the Holy Spirit in relation to people in Hebrews always speak of the Spirit’s activity in relation to the regenerated. In Hebrews 2:4, the Spirit imparts gifts to the regenerated. In Hebrews 10:29, He imparts grace to those already saved (Hebrews 10:32–34).⁴⁸ In sum, given how the writer consistently employs these same terms elsewhere in his book, the phrase “have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit” (Hebrews 6:4) speaks of the Spirit’s work in regeneration.

The fourth descriptive phrase is “have tasted the good word of God” (6:5). This phrase also refers to a believer, since Peter uses a nearly identical phrase to describe newly born Christians. Peter first explains how it is natural for newly born believers to crave pure spiritual milk, which is the Word of God (1 Peter 2:2). He then uses Psalm 34:8 to say, “if you have tasted the kindness of the Lord” (1 Peter 2:3). Thus, because Peter equates tasting God’s Word with the activity of believers, it is likely that the author of Hebrews is doing the same thing. Once again, based on how the writer uses the verb

⁴⁵ Ibid., 438; Hal Harless, “Fallen Away or Fallen Down? The Meaning of Hebrews 6:1–9,” *CTS Journal* 9 (Spring 2003): 8.

⁴⁶ Hodges, “Hebrews,” 794.

⁴⁷ Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings*, 440.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 441.

“taste” elsewhere in the book (Hebrews 2:9), it is unlikely that mere sampling is in view.

The fifth descriptive phrase is “have tasted . . . the powers of the age to come” (Hebrews 6:5). What is described here is far more than just the mere observation of miracles (Hebrews 2:4). The author’s use of “taste” elsewhere (Hebrews 2:9) argues against such a limited interpretation and for a full experience. Those depicted in Hebrews 6:5 had actually been given a firstfruits experience of what the millennial kingdom would one day be like when it is manifested upon the earth. According to Govett:

The supernatural endowments then bestowed on faith were first-fruits of the outpourings of the Holy Ghost, which, in the millennial day, shall be bestowed on all flesh. They were God’s witnesses, that those who possessed these powers were on their way to the day of glory and reward, and belonged to it. Their participating of the Spirit in both His external and His internal operations, marked them out as partners “of the Christ,” as the king of the coming kingdom (Hebrews 3:14).⁴⁹

Such a fore view of the future kingdom would only be available to its citizens. Thus, believers must be in view in Hebrews 6:5.

When these five descriptive phrases are studied in harmony with one another, the case becomes overwhelming that believers are being addressed. Thus, Marshall notes that the vast majority of scholars view the addressees in Hebrews 6:4–5 as believers.⁵⁰ Nicole admits, “The most immediate impulse would be to interpret this cluster of statements as describing regenerate persons.”⁵¹ Barnes similarly observes:

the language here is such as appropriately describes Christians, and as indeed can be applicable to no other. It may be remarked respecting the various expressions here (ver. 4, 5), (1) that they are such as properly denote a renewed state. They obviously describe the position of a Christian; and though it may not be certain of any of them, if taken by itself, would prove that the person to whom it was applied was truly converted, yet, taken together, it is clear that they are designed to describe such a state. If they are not, it would be difficult to find any language which would be properly descriptive of the character of a sincere Christian. I regard the description

⁴⁹ Robert Govett, *Govett on Hebrews* (Miami Springs: Conley & Schoettle, 1981), 157.

⁵⁰ I. Howard Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God*, 3rd ed. (Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster, 1995), 142.

⁵¹ R. Nicole, “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.G. Hawthorne (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 356.

here, therefore, as that which is clearly designed to denote the state of those who were born again, and were the true children of God. . . .⁵²

Despite all this evidence, many still contend that unbelievers are in view in Hebrews 6:4–6. They argue by pointing to three items in verse 6 that allegedly could apply only to unbelievers. Yet upon closer inspection, each of these items could be descriptive of believers. The first item is “repentance” (*metanoia*). It is argued that only unbelievers are called to repent. However, the admonition to repent in Scripture is often aimed at believers (Luke 17:3; 2 Corinthians 7:10; 12:21; 2 Timothy 2:25; Revelation 2:5, 16).⁵³ Thus, the mere existence of *metanoia* in Hebrews 6:6 does not automatically disqualify the addressees from being believers.

The second item is “since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God, and put Him to open shame.” Here, it is argued that a true believer is incapable of committing such an atrocious act. Yet it is quite possible for a believer to be involved in such an activity just as it was possible for the redeemed Exodus generation to manufacture a golden calf. The audience in the Book of Hebrews was under duress to renounce their Christian baptism and confession by lapsing back into Judaism in order to escape persecution from the Jews. It was the unbelieving Jewish nation that crucified Christ. There are numerous references to this in the various sermons given in Acts (Acts 2:22–23; 7:52). Had the Hebrews lapsed back into Judaism, they would be publicly identifying with the nation that killed Christ. In essence, they would be saying, “You were right and we were wrong.” In this sense they would be re-crucifying their Messiah.⁵⁴

The third item is “and then have fallen.” It is argued that an unbeliever must be in view since it is impossible for a believer to fall away. In response, it might be noted that this phrase cannot be describing an unbeliever because an unbeliever cannot fall away. “He is already as far from God as he can be (Romans 3:23).”⁵⁵ Moreover, the New Testament furnishes examples of believers moving away from truth (2 Timothy 2:17–18).⁵⁶ Also, the notion of

⁵² Albert Barnes, *Notes, Explanatory and Practical, on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1854), 134.

⁵³ Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings*, 446.

⁵⁴ Pentecost, *Faith That Endures*, 107; Hodges, “Hebrews,” 795; Thomas Oberholtzer, “An Analysis and Exposition of the Eschatology of the Warning Passages in the Book of Hebrews” (Ph.D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1984), 120; Leon Morris, *Hebrews*, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 12:55.

⁵⁵ Duffy, “The Hermeneutical Problem of the Mixed Audience in the Book of Hebrews,” 38.

⁵⁶ Thomas L. Constable, “Notes on Hebrews,” online: www.soniclight.com, accessed 27 February 2005, 57.

“fallen away” must be kept within its proper context of pressing on toward maturity (Hebrews 5:11–6:3). Thus, the writer is warning his readers of “falling away” from the goal of maturing in Christ.⁵⁷

Another way to bolster the position that the warning passage of Hebrews 6 is addressed to believers is to compare it to the other warning passages in Hebrews. All of these warning passages seem to be parallel in meaning.⁵⁸ Thus, if it can be established that believers are in view in the other warning passages, then it is likely that believers are in view in Hebrews 6 as well. The details of these other warning passages argue persuasively that they are addressed to believers.⁵⁹

Regarding Hebrews 2:1–4, the introductory “for” indicates that the author is basing his warning upon the data presented in chapter 1. Thus, this warning should be understood in the following manner: since the readers are heirs of salvation (Hebrews 1:14), they should heed what they have heard all the more carefully in order to avoid drifting. Also, the repetition of “we” and “us” throughout this passage indicates that the author is equating his spiritual status with that of his audience. The fact that the warning of Hebrews 3:1–4:16 is also addressed to believers is evident from the repetition of the first person pronouns “we,” “us,” and “our” sprinkled throughout the passage (3:1, 6; 4:2) as well as the references to the audience as “holy brethren” and “partakers of the heavenly calling” (3:1).

The warning of Hebrews 10:19–39 is also addressed to believers. The author refers to his audience as “brethren” (10:19). He exhorts them to draw near on the basis of the finished work of Christ their high priest (10:22), to hold fast to their confession (10:23), to stir up one another in love (10:24), and not to forsake the assembling of themselves together (10:25). He also tells them that they have enduring possessions in heaven (10:34). The works depicted in 10:32–34 could only be attributable to believers. The use of the words “sanctified” (10:29), “righteous” (10:38), and “confidence” (10:35) argues convincingly that believers are in view. The repetition of “we” is found throughout this chapter as well (10:39). The warning of Hebrews 12:1–29 also seems addressed to believers, as the introductory “therefore” connects it with Hebrews 11. All of those mentioned in Hebrews 11 were regenerated. Because faith was seen as the proper foundation for perseverance in Hebrews 11, the same theme must also be in view in Hebrews 12, given the interconnectedness between these chapters. In sum, because of the fact that

⁵⁷ Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings*, 442–43.

⁵⁸ Stanley Toussaint, “The Epistle to the Hebrews” (unpublished class notes in 307B Hebrews, General Epistles, and Revelation, Dallas Theological Seminary, Spring 2000), 20.

⁵⁹ Duffy, “The Hermeneutical Problem of the Mixed Audience in the Book of Hebrews,” 24–28, 30–31.

the other warning passages describe believers and because of the author's intentional paralleling of all the warning passages, it is likely that believers are also in view in Hebrews 6.

Subsequent Context

The subsequent context refers to Hebrews 6:7–12. The introductory “for” at the beginning of verse 7 connects this unit to what precedes it. Thus, if it can be demonstrated that verses 7–12 refer to believers, then the case becomes even more overwhelming that verses 4–6 also refer to believers. These verses depict rain falling on land yielding a crop of vegetation as well as thorns and thistles. This imagery represents a believer receiving blessings from God and bringing forth both a positive and negative crop. Four reasons suggest a believer is in view in this scene.

First, the author of Hebrews uses the verb “drink” (*pinō*) to describe the rain being absorbed into the land (Hebrews 6:7). The verb is often used elsewhere to describe the reception of soteriological blessings (John 4:13; 6:54; 7:37–38).⁶⁰ Second, the blessing (vegetation) and cursing (thorns and thistles) produced by the land would naturally bring to memory the blessing and cursing aspect of the Mosaic Covenant found in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28.⁶¹ Such imagery argues for a believer being in view here because the Mosaic Covenant was given to a nation already redeemed and regenerated (Exodus 14:30–31). Third, the writer addresses his audience as “beloved” (Hebrews 6:9). This term has sixty uses in the New Testament. In nine instances it is used by the Father in reference to Christ. In all of its other uses it refers to believers.⁶² Fourth, the works of those described in verses 9–12 could only refer to believers. In verse 12, the author admonishes his audience to imitate those who inherit the promises. This must be a reference to those already saved because “nowhere in the Word of God is anyone asked to imitate any man in order to be saved.”⁶³ The phrase “things that accompany salvation” (Hebrews 6:9) pertains to blessings beyond initial salvation.⁶⁴ The introductory “but” and “for” (Hebrews 6:9, 10) make it impossible to divorce verses 9–12 from what precedes them.⁶⁵

However, many reject this interpretation and instead contend that a true believer could not create a crop of thorns and thistles. Some attempt to solve

⁶⁰ Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings*, 450.

⁶¹ Oberholtzer, “An Analysis and Exposition of the Eschatology of the Warning Passages in the Book of Hebrews,” 125.

⁶² Duffy, “The Hermeneutical Problem of the Mixed Audience in the Book of Hebrews,” 36.

⁶³ Rowell, “Exposition of Hebrews Six,” 338.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 329.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 332–33.

the problem by envisioning two lands in verses 7–8. According to this scenario, one land produces a crop representing believers and the other ground produces thorns and thistles representing unbelievers. This view finds support in the NIV, which translates verses 7–8 as follows: “Land that drinks in the rain often falling on it and that produces a crop useful to those for whom it is farmed receives the blessings of God. But the land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burned.” However, “In the Greek text the word *ground* (gē) occurs only once (namely, in v. 7 . . . not twice as the NIV implies). So the point is that the same ground can have two possible outcomes, and by analogy there can be two possible outcomes for any individual’s life.”⁶⁶ The notion that a believer cannot produce a positive crop of vegetation and a negative crop of thorns and thistles has far more to do with theological presuppositions than the exegetical evidence. The author of Hebrews indicates his audience had in fact produced both a positive (6:9–12) and a negative crop (5:11–14). Well-known believers such as Abraham, Moses, David, Solomon, and Peter produced both a positive and negative spiritual crop during their lives.⁶⁷

Others reject the idea that a believer is in view in Hebrews 6:8 on account of the words “worthless,” “cursed,” and “burned.” Toussaint notes, “The threefold progression in v. 8 of worthless, cursed, and burned hardly looks at the life of a believer in Christ. Finally, the contrast with v. 9 implies that a distinction is being drawn between the future of the lost and saved. As we noted before, σωτηρια in Hebrews when used of Christians anticipates eschatological salvation. This is the destiny of the redeemed; v. 8 looks at the future of the damned.”⁶⁸

However, the existence of these terms in the passage is not sufficient to disqualify it as pertaining to believers. The word “worthless” (*adokimos*) could be applied to a believer since Paul applied the same word to himself (1 Corinthians 9:27). The word simply means disapproved rather than totally rejected.⁶⁹ The antonym of the word is *dokimos*, which emphasizes a favorable evaluation (1 Corinthians 11:19; 2 Corinthians 10:18; 2 Timothy 2:15; James 1:12).⁷⁰

Many believe that the word “curse” must be describing an unbeliever because such imagery is reminiscent of the curse in Genesis 3. However, the

⁶⁶ J. Paul Tanner, “But If It Yields Thorns and Thistles: An Exposition of Hebrews 5:11–6:12,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 14 (Spring 2001): 35.

⁶⁷ Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings*, 450–51.

⁶⁸ Stanley Toussaint, “The Eschatology of the Warning Passages in the Book of Hebrews,” *Grace Theological Journal* 3 (Spring 1982): 75.

⁶⁹ Constable, “Notes on Hebrews,” 59.

⁷⁰ Tanner, “But If It Yields Thorns and Thistles: An Exposition of Hebrews 5:11–6:12,” 38.

imagery in Hebrews 6:8 and Genesis 3 is different. The curse in Genesis 3 produced thorns and thistles. In Hebrews 6 the thorns and thistles produced by the land resulted in the curse being near.⁷¹ Thus, the curse here must be understood differently.⁷² Perhaps a better understanding of curse is divine discipline experienced by believers (Hebrews 12:5–11).

Others contend that the word “burned” conveys the idea of hell. Yet such an idea fails to grasp the agricultural analogy employed in these verses and the purpose for burning a field in the ancient world. According to Hodges:

Naturally the reference to “burned” has caused many to think of hell, but there is nothing in the text to suggest this . . . to think of hell here is to betray inattention to the imagery employed by the author. The burning of a field to destroy the rank growth it had produced was a practice known in ancient times. Its aim was not the destruction of the field itself (which, of course, the fire could not effect), but the destruction of the unwanted produce of the field. Thereafter the field might be serviceable for cultivation.⁷³

Elder Pliny (A.D. 112) furnishes extra-biblical evidence of this practice when he says, “some people also set fire to the stubble in the field . . . their chief reason, however, for this plan is to burn up the seed of weeds.”⁷⁴ Thus, “burning” as used here is not for the purpose of destruction but rather is a method of cultivation for greater future usefulness. Therefore, the mere existence of “burning” in the passage need not automatically convey that unbelievers are in view. Elsewhere, Paul uses the imagery of burning to describe loss of rewards at the Bema Seat Judgment (1 Corinthians 3:10–15). In fact, “God’s anger against His failing people in the Old Testament is often likened to the burning of fire (e.g., Isaiah 9:18–19; 10:17).”⁷⁵ In sum, the context subsequent to Hebrews 6:4–6 argues convincingly that believers are being referred to.

Conclusion

Like the regenerated and redeemed nation prior to the events of Kadesh Barnea, those addressed in Hebrews 6:4–6 were believers. The extended context, preceding context, and subsequent context—all pertain to believers. Given this surrounding context, Dillow asks, “Is it exegetically ethical to

⁷¹ Jean Héring, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, trans. A. W. Heathcote and P. J. Allcock (London: Epworth, 1970), 48 n. 15.

⁷² Oberholtzer, “An Analysis and Exposition of the Eschatology of the Warning Passages in the Book of Hebrews,” 124.

⁷³ Hodges, “Hebrews,” 795–96.

⁷⁴ Elder Pliny *Natural History* 18.72.300.

⁷⁵ Hodges, “Hebrews,” 795.

switch addressees in the middle of the warning context?”⁷⁶ Such a hermeneutical move is even more implausible upon observing that the clauses of Hebrews 6:4–6 themselves argue convincingly that a believing audience is being referred to.

Irreversible Forfeiture of Blessings

The previous section showed that the Exodus generation and the addressees of Hebrews share the common bond of a regenerated spiritual status. However, the similarities do not end there. This section will show a second similarity. Just as the Exodus generation at Kadesh Barnea permanently lost out on the blessings of Canaan as a result of their unbelief and disobedience, the addressees of Hebrews were on the verge of suffering the same type of irrevocable consequences.

If the Exodus generation missed the blessings of Canaan, what blessings were the addressees of Hebrews about to miss? These blessings have nothing to do with salvation since the addressees were already saved. Rather, these blessings must relate to maturity, which is the overriding concern of the author in this section (Hebrews 5:11–6:3). If his audience lapsed back into Judaism, they would miss out on the blessings of maturing in Christ. Without their salvation being jeopardized, they would be locked into a permanent state of infancy if they went back to the Old Testament system. This view is consistent with Paul’s description of the Law as holding men in a state of immaturity until the coming of Christ (Galatians 3–4). This condition can be likened to a mentally retarded individual who is permanently incapable of maturing beyond a certain level. Such would be the fate of the Hebrews if they were to yield to the temptation of returning to Judaism.

The irreversible nature of this awful state is depicted in Hebrews 6:6: “and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance.” Some have attempted to blunt the irreversible nature of this verse by arguing that it would be “difficult to renew them again to repentance.” Such an interpretation is unlikely, given how the author uses the word “impossible” (*adynatos*) elsewhere in the book. “The author of Hebrews characteristically uses *ἀδυνατός* to describe something that is in the nature of the case impossible.”⁷⁷ Elsewhere, the author uses *adynatos* to convey that it is impossible for God to lie (Hebrews 6:18), it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sin (Hebrews 10:4), and it is impossible to please God without faith (Hebrews 11:6). Thus, “it is impossible to dilute this word

⁷⁶ Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings*, 448–49.

⁷⁷ Harless, “Fallen Away or Fallen Down? The Meaning of Hebrews 6:1–9,” 14.

into *difficult*.”⁷⁸ Calvin correctly concluded, “Some take *impossible* to mean ‘unusual’ or ‘hard’ which is wholly foreign to the meaning of the word.”⁷⁹

For whom would it be impossible? This cannot be referring to God, since nothing is impossible for Him (Genesis 18:14; Numbers 11:23; Luke 1:37). Rather, it would become impossible for other believers to renew such an immature individual. Numerous times in Hebrews the addressees are told to stay in close fellowship with one another to receive mutual support and encouragement (Hebrews 3:13; 10:25). However, if they regressed back to Judaism, it would be impossible for the encouragement and exhortation of fellow believers to draw them out of their state of immaturity.⁸⁰

Fortunately for the addressees of Hebrews, the author was convinced of better things concerning them (Hebrews 6:9–12). There was still hope for them. There would be no sense in warning them if this were not true. They had not yet reached the point of no return as the Exodus generation had done. However, they were rapidly approaching it. The writer recognizes this and reminds them of the irrevocable consequences that the Exodus generation had experienced, using the events of Kadesh Barnea as his basis for warning.

Conclusion

The purpose of this section has been to suggest a method for understanding Hebrews 6:4–6. This method involves allowing the events of Kadesh Barnea to be the filter through which the writer of Hebrews views his audience’s predicament. As seen in part one, two characteristics epitomized the Exodus generation. First, that generation can be classified as redeemed and believing prior to the events of Numbers 13–14. Second, unbelief and disobedience at Kadesh Barnea caused that generation to permanently forfeit enjoyment of the blessings of the Promised Land. In the second part, it was shown that the addressees of Hebrews possessed these identical features. First, they were already believers. Second, unbelief and disobedience were causing them to contemplate lapsing back into Judaism. Such a decision would cause them to permanently miss out on the blessings of maturing in Christ.

⁷⁸ Marvin Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament* (Scribner’s Sons, 1900; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946), 4:444.

⁷⁹ John Calvin, “The Epistle to the Hebrews,” in *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews and the First and Second Epistles of St. Peter*, ed. David Torrance and Thomas Torrance, trans. William Johnston, Calvin’s Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 74.

⁸⁰ Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings*, 444.

Inadequate Alternatives

Thus far this article has contended for the loss of blessing view. Competing against this view are the Calvinist, Arminian, and hypothetical views. This section will discuss each of these views and demonstrate that they should be rejected for failing to adequately consider the Kadesh Barnea paradigm as well as for other inadequacies.

Calvinist View

The Calvinist or Reformed interpretation of Hebrews 6:4–6 attempts to argue that true believers are not addressed in these verses. Rather, the passage merely speaks of those exposed externally to the gospel through affiliation with other Christians. In other words, those in view are mere professors rather than actual possessors. An example of such a person would be Judas, who had a close relationship with Christ and the rest of the disciples but was never an actual convert.⁸¹ Thus, Calvin taught that Hebrews 6:1–9 referred to the reprobate unbeliever.⁸² Numerous commentators including Bruce,⁸³ Hughes,⁸⁴ Pink,⁸⁵ Kent,⁸⁶ and the *New Scofield Reference Bible*⁸⁷ hold this position. However, this view is suspect for four reasons. First, it ignores the Exodus generation as the paradigm of understanding the warning. As previously developed, the Exodus generation was a redeemed and believing generation prior to Kadesh Barnea. Second, the view ignores the previously given exegetical arguments that believers are in view in Hebrews 6:4–6.

Third, the view attempts to interpret the various clauses in Hebrews 6:4–5 in ways that are exegetically unsatisfying. For example, MacArthur points out other uses of *phōtizō* found in Matthew 4:16 and in the LXX in Isaiah 9:1–2, where it is used to speak of a general enlightenment short of actual conversion.⁸⁸ He notes that the same concept of general enlightenment is also found in John 1:9. However, these other uses of *phōtizō* are not accompanied by the word *hapax* as in the uses in Hebrews. Also, this view gives inadequate attention to how the author consistently uses the word *phōtizō* within

⁸¹ Toussaint, “The Epistle to the Hebrews,” 19.

⁸² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.3.21.

⁸³ Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 118–25.

⁸⁴ Philip E. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 206–24.

⁸⁵ Pink, *An Exposition of the Book of Hebrews*, 298–320.

⁸⁶ Homer Kent, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972), 107–15.

⁸⁷ C. I. Scofield, ed., *The New Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1909), 1315.

⁸⁸ MacArthur, *Hebrews*, 142.

Hebrews.⁸⁹ Toussaint cites several texts supposedly demonstrating how a person can be enlightened without being saved (Hebrews 10:26; 2 Peter 2:20–21; John 16:8–11).⁹⁰ However, the words “once” and “enlightened” are not found in any of these texts.

Moreover, most Calvinists interpret “taste” (*geuomai*) in Hebrews 6:4–5 as a mere sampling rather than as a complete salvation experience.⁹¹ But this interpretation is fraught with problems. Because the writer uses “taste” to describe Christ’s work in the atonement (Hebrews 2:9), the addressees could not have sampled the Holy Spirit any more than Christ sampled death through His work on the cross. “We should have quite a theological dilemma on our hands if Christ merely tasted death for us but did not fully undergo it.”⁹² “Taste” is also used to describe total participation in salvation in 1 Peter 2:3. As Farrar explains, “Calvin vainly attempts to make the clause refer only to ‘those who had as it were *tasted with their outward lips* the grace of God, and been irradiated *with some sparks* of His light.’ This is not to explain Scripture, but to explain it away in favour of some preconceived doctrine. It is clear from 1 Peter ii: 3 that such a view is not tenable.”⁹³

The New Testament often uses the word “taste” (*geuomai*) as a synonym for “eat.” Acts 10:10 says, “And he became hungry and was desiring something to eat” (*geuomai*). Acts 20:11 says, “And when he had gone back up, and had broken the bread and eaten” (*geuomai*).⁹⁴ One secular papyrus manuscript uses *geuomai* to say, “I was going to bed without bite or sup.”⁹⁵ The word carries the meaning “to partake of” in a broader sense, not necessarily referring to a mere sampling.⁹⁶ While Toussaint is able to marshal some texts where *geuomai* is used to communicate a mere sampling (Matthew 27:34; John 2:9),⁹⁷ it must be remembered that these are nonsoteriological contexts, and an interpreter must give primacy to how the author of Hebrews uses the word elsewhere in his book.

In addition, Calvinists often attempt to make the clauses in Hebrews 6:4–6 refer to unbelievers by pointing out what they do not mention. Kuyper

⁸⁹ Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings*, 438 n.11.

⁹⁰ Toussaint, “The Epistle to the Hebrews,” 18.

⁹¹ MacArthur, *Hebrews*, 143; Scofield, *The New Scofield Reference Bible*, 1315.

⁹² Tanner, “But If It Yields Thorns and Thistles: An Exposition of Hebrews 5:11–6:12,” 32.

⁹³ Farrar, “The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews,” 82.

⁹⁴ Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings*, 439.

⁹⁵ James Hope Moulton and George Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament*, one-vol. ed. (1930; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 125.

⁹⁶ BDAG, s.v. “*geuomai*”; Moulton and Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament*, 125.

⁹⁷ Toussaint, “The Epistle to the Hebrews,” 18.

states, "It is true the apostle declares that the men guilty of this sin were 'once enlightened,' 'have tasted of the heavenly gift,' were made 'partakers of the Holy Ghost,' and 'have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come'; but they are never said to have had a broken and a contrite heart."⁹⁸

Similarly, Toussaint observes, "It should be noticed that the writer does not mention forgiveness of sins, cleansing, sanctification, the salvation of the soul . . . new life, or the indwelling of the Holy Spirit."⁹⁹ However, such a contention represents an argument from silence. If this principle were consistently applied, we would be forced to second-guess the audiences of other passages typically taken as addressed to believers. Dillow notes, "There is no mention of 'faith' in the description in 1 Cor. 1:1–10, yet nobody doubts that Christians are there in view."¹⁰⁰

Fourth, the Calvinist interpretation of Hebrews 6:4–6 appears to have more to do with reading the text through an *a priori* theological grid rather than with sound hermeneutical principles. Because these verses appear to conflict with the preexisting theological principle that all true believers will persevere in works, Calvinist interpreters are forced to convert these verses into referring to unbelievers because they conflict with their "perseverance of the saints" theology. Nicole admits that he concludes these verses are describing nonbelievers because the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints is "powerfully grounded" elsewhere.¹⁰¹ After commenting on the fact that exegetically Hebrews 6:4–6 should be interpreted as relating to believers, Barnes observes, "and it seems plain to me, that no other interpretation would ever have been thought of, if this view had not seemed to conflict with the doctrine of the 'perseverance of the saints.'"¹⁰² Hodges notes, "The assertion that such a failure is not possible for a regenerate person is a theological proposition which is not supported by the New Testament."¹⁰³ This, of course, is problematic for the Calvinist interpretation because theology should be derived from exegesis rather than the other way around.

Arminian View

The Arminian interpretation has the advantage of understanding that those addressed in Hebrews 6:4–6 are believers. Thus, this view does not have to

⁹⁸ Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1900; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 610.

⁹⁹ Toussaint, "The Epistle to the Hebrews," 19.

¹⁰⁰ Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings*, 442 n. 27.

¹⁰¹ Nicole, "Some Comments on Hebrews 6:4–6 and the Doctrine of the Perseverance of God with the Saints," 357–59.

¹⁰² Barnes, *Notes, Explanatory and Practical, on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 134.

¹⁰³ Hodges, "Hebrews," 795.

resort to the exegetical gymnastics of the Calvinist view in order to maintain that the addressees in this passage are unbelievers. The Arminian view simply asserts that the addressees have the potential of losing their salvation.¹⁰⁴ Although this view is more exegetically persuasive than the Calvinist view in that it maintains the believing status of those addressed, five reasons cause the view to be suspect.

First, it ignores the Kadesh Barnea incident as the paradigm for the book. Although that generation lost the opportunity to enjoy its inheritance in the land, the nation did not forfeit its redeemed status following the events of Numbers 13–14. God continued to provide for the nation (Numbers 20:11; 12:16; Deuteronomy 8:4; 13:12–18; 29:5) as well as give the nation victory (Numbers 21:1–3, 21–25).¹⁰⁵ Because of God’s protective care, the nation was not curseable (Numbers 23–24). In fact, it was predicted that the Messiah would still come from it (Numbers 23:8). Thus, at Kadesh Barnea the Exodus generation forfeited blessings rather than their redeemed status. If Kadesh Barnea is indeed the paradigm of the book, then Hebrews 6 should also be understood in terms of forfeited blessings rather than salvation. The Arminian interpretation, which understands Hebrews 6 in terms of loss of salvation, ignores this paradigm.

Second, this view finds itself at variance with other strong passages that teach that a believer can never lose his salvation (John 6:39; 10:28; Romans 8:29–39; Ephesians 1:12–14; 4:30; Philip 1:6; 1 Peter 1:3–5). If God is the one who initiates salvation, what action can man perform to reverse it?¹⁰⁶ Third, if the phrase “it is impossible to renew them again to salvation” is talking about a loss of salvation, then such a person could never be saved again.¹⁰⁷ Stanley notes the practical absurdities that flow from such a proposition when he says, “If Hebrews 6:6 is talking about renewing a person’s salvation, doesn’t this passage teach that once a person loses salvation, he or she can never regain it? If that is the case, aren’t we doing children a great disservice by encouraging them to be born again? Shouldn’t we wait until they are much older to lessen the likelihood that they fall away during their teen years and thus lose their salvation forever?”¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ The adherents of this view include Westcott, Moffatt, and Marshall. See Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 148–53; James Moffatt, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, International Critical Commentary Series (Edinburgh: Clark, 1963), 76–82; Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God*.

¹⁰⁵ J. Dwight Pentecost, class notes of Andy Woods in BE450A The Book of Hebrews, Dallas Theological Seminary, February 10, Spring 2005.

¹⁰⁶ Hodges, “Hebrews,” 794.

¹⁰⁷ Toussaint, “The Epistle to the Hebrews,” 19.

¹⁰⁸ Charles Stanley, *Eternal Security: Can You Be Sure?* (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 1990), 165.

Fourth, the Arminian view relies upon the translation “if they fall away” (Hebrews 6:6). This is exegetically problematic because all five participial phrases in Hebrews 6:4–6 (have once been enlightened, have tasted of the heavenly gift, have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, have fallen away) are governed by the single article “those who” (*tous*) at the beginning of the list. The use of this single article indicates that only one group of individuals is in view.¹⁰⁹ “Significantly, all five participles are governed by the one definite article *tous* in v 4 which serves to unite them. As a result, these are not two different situations, but a single situation in which the one who ‘falls away’ is the very one who had been enlightened, etc.”¹¹⁰ Thus, if there is no conditional element in the first four participles, then there cannot be a conditional element in the last participle either.¹¹¹

Fifth, the Arminian interpretation understands falling away (*parapiptō*) in Hebrews 6:6 as departing or apostatizing from the faith. Yet the linguistic evidence does not support this interpretation.¹¹² Classical Greek interprets this word along the lines of falling aside, making a mistake, erring, or going astray.¹¹³ In the LXX, *parapiptō* has the meaning of “to fall short,” “to fall into error,” “to transgress,” “to offend,” or “to trespass” (Esther 6:10; Wisdom 6:9; 12:2; Ezekiel 14:13; 15:8; 18:24; 20:27; 22:4). In Koiné Greek, it is used to communicate “to befall,” “to be deprived of something,” “to be broken,” “to be lost,” and “to sin.”¹¹⁴ In the New Testament, the verb is only used in Hebrews 6:6. However, the New Testament uses the noun *paraptōma* to convey sin rather than apostasy.¹¹⁵ Other Greek words could have been used to communicate “apostasy” had that been the author’s intention, such as *aphistēmi* or *skandalizō*. In sum, *parapiptō* conveys the notion of falling down

¹⁰⁹ A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1934), 777, 785–89.

¹¹⁰ Tanner, “But If It Yields Thorns and Thistles: An Exposition of Hebrews 5:11–6:12,” 30.

¹¹¹ Hodges, “Hebrews,” 794–95.

¹¹² The linguistic data and conclusion presented in this paragraph were originally presented in Harless, “Fallen Away or Fallen Down? The Meaning of Hebrews 6:1–9,” 10–14.

¹¹³ Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), 1321; W. Bauder, “Fall Away,” in *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Collin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 1:608; Wilhelm Michaelis, “Parapitō, Paraptōma,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 6:170.

¹¹⁴ Moulton and Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament*, 488–89; 1 Clement 51:1; 56:1.

¹¹⁵ Michaelis, “Parapitō, Paraptōma,” 6:172.

rather than falling away, just as when Peter denied Christ “he suffered loss, but he was not lost.”¹¹⁶ Thus, *parapiptō* does not have the linguistic meaning necessary to support the Arminian interpretation. The Arminian view also neglects the immediate context of *parapiptō*, which pertains to falling away from maturity (Hebrews 5:11–6:3) rather than to the loss of salvation.

Hypothetical View

Others treat Hebrews 6:4–6 as a mere hypothetical warning. According to this view, if a believer could lose his salvation, which could never happen, then he could never be saved again. Interpreters who hold this position include Barnes,¹¹⁷ Guthrie,¹¹⁸ Thomas,¹¹⁹ Wuest¹²⁰ as well as the *Ryrie Study Bible*.¹²¹ However, several problems make this view untenable. First, it ignores the Kadesh Barnea paradigm. What happened in Numbers 13–14 was an actual loss of blessing of entering the land rather than a mere hypothetical situation (Numbers 14:27–32). Second, “Why have a warning revolve around a straw man?”¹²² Hodges observes, “Far from treating the question in any hypothetical way, the writer’s language sounds as if he knew of such cases.”¹²³ Third, as previously indicated, all five participles are grammatically connected. Regarding the fifth participle, Toussaint notes, “Grammatically, it is parallel to the four aorist participles of verses four and five and is just as ‘real’ as they are.”¹²⁴ Fourth, Kaiser notes the internal inconsistency with the hypothetical view. He observes:

Is it possible that the author is simply writing about a hypothetical situation? If so, there are two possible ways to understand it. The first is that both the author and his readers know that this cannot happen, so it is hypothetical for all of them. In that case one wonders why the author wasted his ink. His purpose clearly is to exhort them to return to Judaism. If his warnings are only hypothetical, how would they keep people from apostatizing? The second possibility is that the author knows this is hypothetical, but he

¹¹⁶ Rowell, “Exposition of Hebrews Six,” 333.

¹¹⁷ Barnes, *Notes, Explanatory and Practical, on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 134.

¹¹⁸ Donald Guthrie, *Hebrews*, Tyndale New Testament Commentary Series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 140–46.

¹¹⁹ W. H. Griffith Thomas, *Hebrews: A Devotional Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 72–75.

¹²⁰ Kenneth Wuest, “Hebrews Six in the Greek New Testament,” *Bsac* 119 (January–March 1962): 45–53.

¹²¹ Charles C. Ryrie, *The Ryrie Study Bible: New American Standard Bible* (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 1951.

¹²² Toussaint, “The Epistle to the Hebrews,” 19.

¹²³ Hodges, “Hebrews,” 795.

¹²⁴ Toussaint, “The Epistle to the Hebrews,” 19.

believes his readers will take it seriously. In that case it would serve as a warning, but it would be deceptive. Is the author of Hebrews likely to defend the truth with deception? Would he scare his readers with a situation he knows could never happen?¹²⁵

Conclusion

One cannot understand the warning of Hebrews 6:4–6 without first understanding that the writer views the predicament of his audience through the lens of the Kadesh Barnea incident (Hebrews 3–4). The nation was regenerated prior to the events of Numbers 13–14. At Kadesh Barnea, the nation experienced an irrevocable loss of blessings. Similarly, the addressees of Hebrews were believers on the verge of irretrievably forfeiting blessings, which consisted of maturing in Christ. The similarity between the two situations caused the writer to use Kadesh Barnea as the basis for warning his audience. Other views competing with the loss of blessings view, such as the Calvinist, Arminian, and hypothetical views, are inadequate alternatives because they fail to give proper attention to Kadesh Barnea as the paradigm for interpreting the Book of Hebrews.

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¹²⁵ Walter Kaiser et al., *Hard Sayings of the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 682–83.