

FALLING FROM THE GREATEST HEIGHT: AN EXEGETICAL
STUDY OF HEBREWS 10:26–31

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I. Introduction

The book of Hebrews as a letter can be highlighted in both a positive and negative way. The positive aspect involves the way Hebrews unveils the curtain of the OT message and how Jesus is who it pointed to, what it foreshadowed, what it longed for. In sum, the message of Hebrews is that Jesus Christ is better, greater, superior, and more effective than any OT figure, event, and infrastructure.¹ But on the other hand, the audience of Hebrews receive glimpses of hard warnings and horrifying images of the severe consequences that are met by those who apostatize.² So devastating are such passages, intense trepidation usually results for those who hear such words the first time. Though the two themes highlighted here seem to stand in contradiction to one another, they both serve the common purpose which is to fulfill the author's intention for his hearers, that is, to *persevere and not fall away*. It is the whole Christ that serves as the doctrinal anchor for the believer's soul to remain steadfast in the faith until one's final breath (6:19).

In this paper, the latter theme of apostasy in Hebrews will primarily be in view. Stringed together by five warning passages (2:1–4; 3:7–19; 6:4–8; 10:26–31; 12:25–29),³ the one that will be at the center of focus will be 10:26–31. The following in this paper will consist of three parts. First, a section will be dedicated to the larger context of Hebrews especially to the previous three warning passages, in order to establish the main themes to set up our text. Second, the main body of the paper will involve an exegesis with a focus on the Greek text, as well as insights that tie in the biblical-theological aspects of apostasy. Lastly, there will be a conclusion including both a summary and final comments.

¹ Due to the content of Hebrews, I assume that the make-up of the audience was Jewish Christians who were considering going back to their previous ways of Judaism. The internal evidence not only points this way, but historically also, this had been the traditional view until E. M. Roeth in 1836, however, the standard view remains predominant in most circles of scholarship. See Gareth Lee Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 22; See also page 28 of Raymond Brown, "Pilgrimage in Faith: The Christian Life in Hebrews," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 28(1) (1985): 28–35; see also page 26 of Denis Harold Tongue, "The Concept of Apostasy in the Epistle to the Hebrews," *TynBul* 5 (1960): 19–27.

² Carson gives a helpful NT definition of apostasy, "The word ἀποστασία, for instance, occurs only twice in the NT, once to refer to turning away from Moses on the part of Jews (Acts 21:21), the other to refer to the great rebellion that takes place when the man of lawlessness is revealed (2 Thess. 2:3)." The key here is to understand that apostasy entails a *turning away* from a former conviction, in this case, it is from the covenant. See page 13 of D. A. Carson, "Reflections on Christian Assurance," *WTJ* 54 (1992), 1–29.

³ Due to differences amongst scholars regarding the verse borders of the warning passages, it would be helpful to treat these parameters more so porous than concrete. The list provided in parentheses is by Dana Harris, *Hebrews*, EGGNT (Nashville: B & H, 2019), xi–xvii; However, the most precise structure I have read is by (pages 34–35) George E. Rice, "Apostasy as a Motif and Its Effect on the Structure of Hebrews," *AUSS* 23(1) (1985): 29–35.

II. Larger Context: Overview of Warnings

As already mentioned, the author throughout the letter of Hebrews navigates between the two themes of Christ's superiority and horrific warnings, in that order. Here I will provide a brief overview of the first three warnings. The fifth warning however, I will touch upon at the close of the exegetical portion (see section III. F. 2).

A. *A much surer revelation.* By the first warning in 2:1–4, the author has established two things: firstly, that the Son is God's final revelation (1:2),⁴ and second, the Son is superior to the angels (1:5–14). The final revelation of the Son is put in contrast to the word of God previously disclosed to God's people under OT dispensations (1:1–2). Thus, the argument is that the revelation of Christ surpasses prior revelations since the Son is the clearest expression of God, because the Son is God himself (1:3).⁵ Immediately, the second comparative is given between the Son and the angels. In Jewish theology, angelic beings would have held lofty status in the hierarchy of creation.⁶ But the author puts the celestials in their place, by stating the following facts: they worship the Son (1:6); they are merely creatures (1:7); and they are God's servants whose task is to serve humans (1:14).⁷ Now that the Son's superiority to angels is established, the warning that follows, "how will we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?"⁸ (2:3a), simply reflects the urgency to heed God's final Word, and the consequences that would come about as a result of abandonment. The statements that then follows seems to double down on the idea of this *surer revelation*. For the subjects who are involved in the act of speaking and testifying of the message in vv. 2:3b–4 are: The Lord Jesus Christ, the apostles, God, and the Holy Spirit. Clearly, having

⁴ Geerhardus Vos comments on 1:1–2, "It will be noticed in Hebrews 1:1–2, as in the statements of the Old Testament, and of Jesus and Paul, the new dispensation appears as final. And this applies to the revelation introducing it." See Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 302.

⁵ The relationship of the OT-NT contrast should not be looked at as a negative-positive. Rather, in the words of Simon J. Kistemaker,

The revelation that God had given to the believers in the Old Testament era was completed in the New Testament era by the Son of God. There are not two revelations, one for the Old Testament believers and one for the New Testament believers. God's revelation is one, although given in two phases. During the first phase God's revelation came often and in a variety of ways. The second phase constitutes the fulfilment of God's revelation in the person of the Son; the New Testament is the fulfilment of that promise.

See Simon J. Kistemaker, *New Testament Comm : V.15 : Hebrews*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 32.

⁶ Cockerill, *Hebrews*, 110; see also page 21 of Philip E. Hughes, "The Christology of Hebrews," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 28(1) (1985): 19–27.

⁷ Harris, *Hebrews*, 37.

⁸ NASB 1995 used throughout unless specified.

received a *Trinitarian witness* along with the apostles makes one thing for certain, the way God has spoken in these last days, he has done so with the utmost clarity. Therefore, the degree of culpability in receiving this message far surpasses and outweighs those who were under the dispensation of angels (2:2). For under the angels was given the law, but the gospel came through Jesus Christ (Acts 7:53; Gal 3:19; John 1:17).⁹

B. *Striving to enter God's rest*. In this second warning (3:7–19) a quotation from Psalm 95:7–11 (LXX 94:7b–11) is given, however, the quote is not attributed to the psalmist (David), but rather to the Holy Spirit.¹⁰ Interestingly, so far the author has attributed quotations from the OT to each person of the Trinity: the Father (1:5–13), the Son (2:12–13), and now the Holy Spirit (3:7–11).¹¹ Thus, the author sees the Jewish Scriptures synonymously with divine speech as well as a living and active entity that is applicable to believers under the new covenant (4:12–13).¹² However, the quotation here is especially notable due to it having originally been written long after the occupation of Canaan.¹³ The point that is driven home therefore, is that the promise of rest for God's people had yet seen its complete fulfilment. And it is from here, the application is drawn by use of parallel to the wilderness generation of Moses's day, to the current state of believers struggling to persevere. In both cases, faith and final perseverance is the condition for which believers will enter the promised rest (3:6, 14), and sin and unbelief are demonstrated to be what denies entry (3:12–13, 17–19; 4:2, 6, 11). Thomas Schreiner simplifies this warning in an a fortiori form, "When we read about the wilderness generation, we see what happens to those who

⁹ "First, the law of Israel was communicated through angels. The gospel was brought to earth by the Son of God. As he is superior to angels, so the gospel is superior to the law." See page 6 of F. F. Bruce, "The Structure and Argument of Hebrews," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 28(1) (1985): 6–12.

¹⁰ Pages 56–57 of Martin Emmrich, "Pneuma in Hebrews: prophet and interpreter." *WTJ* 64(1) (2002): 55–71.

¹¹ Quotes attributed to the Father in the order of 1:5–13: Ps 2:7; 2 Sam 7:14; Ps 97:7; 104:4; 45:6–7; Isa 61:1, 3; Ps 102:25; 102:26; Isa 51:6; Ps 102:26–27; 110:1. The Son: Isa 8:17–18. The Holy Spirit: Ps 95:7–11. For a comprehensive work on divine discourse within Hebrews, I recommend the work of Madison N. Pierce, *Divine Discourse in the Epistle to the Hebrews: The Recontextualization of Spoken Quotations of Scripture*, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph 178 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

¹² Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 140; See also, Hans-Friedrich Weiss, *Der Brief and die Hebräer* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991), 258–259. Interestingly, "every chapter in Hebrews (except Hebrews 9 and 11) includes an example of divine speech." For quote and data, see Dana M. Harris, "'Today if you hear my voice': the Spirit speaking in Hebrews--implications for inerrancy," *Presbyterion* 45(1) (2019): 108–27.

¹³ Emmrich, "Pneuma in Hebrews," 57.

disbelieve and disobey. They failed to enter God's *earthly rest*. How much more terrible it is to fail to enter the *heavenly rest*.”¹⁴

C. Repentance is impossible for those who fall away. At this juncture of the letter (5:11ff), the author unpacks in detail the superiority of Christ's priesthood that is in the order of Melchizedek. But frankly, the dilemma that is before the author is that he sees the audience as not having matured appropriately since the time they first believed. As a result, there are two problems: (1) the lack of growth had left the readers incapable of grasping rich concepts such as the superior Melchizedekian priesthood; and (2) spiritual idleness had left these believers vulnerable to falling away. Thus, the admonition is given to advance from the fundamentals of the faith (6:1–3), and the warning is then followed (6:4–8).

There is much to say about this passage, for it has been controversial especially in regards to the debate of soteriology between Arminians and Calvinists.¹⁵ It is apparent as to why, for the description of those who fall away (6:4–5) seem to fall nowhere short of a true believer.¹⁶ However, the key to understanding the identity of these people described is in the verse following, “and who have fallen away” (CSB 6:5).¹⁷ In short, the description in 6:4–5 makes the warning address all who were self-professed believers in the covenant community, however, the fact that they apostatize (6:6) renders the identity of those described as those never to have had true faith. This is because in the second warning of Hebrews, the author had firmly established the criteria of true

¹⁴ Italics added for contrast emphasis. See Thomas R. Schreiner, *Hebrews*, EBTC (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020), 132.

¹⁵ An exhaustive discussion on this issue is not possible, however, these two articles by Wayne Grudem and Scot McKnight do well to represent both sides. See Wayne Grudem, “Perseverance of the Saints: A Case Study from the Warning Passages in Hebrews,” in *Still Sovereign*, ed. T. R. Schreiner and B. A. Ware (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000): 133–82; Scot McKnight, “The Warning Passages in Hebrews: A Formal Analysis and Theological Conclusions,” *TrinJ* 13NS (1992): 21–59.

¹⁶ 6:4–5, “For in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come.” The list put forward by the author is better understood as a unified experience and not seen as mutually exclusive sets, as in the Greek they are appositionally expressed. The following are given in the aorist substantive participle form: “enlightened” (φωτισθέντας), “tasted” (γευσαμένους, mentioned twice vv. 5–6), “have been made” (γενηθέντας). Cockerill, *Hebrews*, 268.

¹⁷ The CSB does well in being consistent to group παραπεσόντας along with the previous four substantival participles. Some English translations have opted to render παραπεσόντας as an adverbial, which can be taken either as a conditional (KJV) or temporal (ESV, NASB). But both of these options surrender consistency by providing a sudden switch to the last participle that is in apposition with the previous four. This detail is crucial since it can unhinge the meaning of apostasy as a hypothetical reality, rather than as phenomenological language of false-believers. See Benjamin L. Merkle, *Exegetical Gems from Biblical Greek: A Refreshing Guide to Grammar and Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 162–163.

Christianhood, that being, persevering in faith to the end (3:14). Therefore, by definition, genuine believers are those who *persevere*, and the ones who fall away fall short of what it means to be a Christian.¹⁸ The contribution then, of this warning, is that having covenant status does not necessarily entail a subjective reality of membership. It is perseverance that proves legitimate status.

III. Exegesis of Hebrews 10:26–31

A. Hebrews 10:26

a *For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, b* *there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins,*

It will be worth providing some brief comments to bridge the material between the previous warning (6:4–8) to our focus passage. From chapter six to seven, the author has expounded upon the priesthood of Christ in the order of Melchizedek being superior to that of Aaron. In chapters eight and nine following, there is a discussion of the new covenant and its comparisons to the old. Here, the main point is that the new covenant surpasses the old in its glory, efficacy, and mediator. Chapter ten continues this argument and focuses specifically on the comparison of sacrificial structures between the covenants. In sum, the sacrifices under the old system proved ineffective in its capacity to remove sins (10:4). Therefore, there was a need to remove the old way (Levitical sacrifices) and establish a better sacrifice, which was Christ himself (10:9).¹⁹ It is in this new way that believers can now ground a firm assurance, because unlike the old, the sacrifice of Christ is perfect in its cleansing of sins, it is offered *only once* for all time (10:10, 18), and it achieves the freedom to enter the divine presence (10:19).²⁰ Thus, an exhortation is given in 10:19–25 to be assured in this new way that Christ has presented, holding fast in faith and obedience to enter the fullness of the promise.

1. Now, we come to the fourth warning in Hebrews. Starting in v. 26, the conjunction “for” (γὰρ) links the previous exhortation (vv. 19–25), completing a contrast of responses to Christ’s

¹⁸ Carson has commented in light of this, “In short, genuine faith is tied to perseverance; transitory faith is spurious.” Carson, “Reflections on Christian Assurance,” 17.

¹⁹ O’Brien, *Hebrews*, 352.

²⁰ Page 78 of Alan Mugridge, “Warnings in the Epistle to the Hebrews: An Exegetical and Theological Study.” *The Reformed Theological Review* 46(3) (1987): 74–82.

redemption (vv. 19–25 positive; vv. 26–31 negative).²¹ Beginning with a conditional statement (“if”), the warning is to avoid turning v. 26a into a reality for the sake of avoiding the horrific consequences of the next clause (v. 26b).²² The nature of the “sinning” (ἁμαρτανόντων) is defined by the adverb ἐκουσίως (“willfully”) which is placed in the emphatic position.²³ The ἁμαρτανόντων being a present active participle, it would suffice to say that the manner of this rebellious act is ongoing.²⁴ Combined however, with ἐκουσίως, the denotation is that the sinning is a deliberate act to disdain the law of God (cf. Num 15:30–31).²⁵ Therefore, it is crucial to note that this sin is not encompassing all acts of disobedience such as ongoing struggles and the regretful giving in to temptations (2:17; 4:15ff; 5:2ff).²⁶ Rather, the category of sin in mind is *apostasy* (3:12)—a persistent lifestyle that repudiates the truth of the gospel which they once received.²⁷ This detail, “after receiving the knowledge of the truth” is what makes the sin heinous.²⁸ To come to the knowledge and assent of Christ’s atoning work, and then resolve to deny its power by way of incessant sin, one is spitting upon the face of Christ and now stands with those who urged for his crucifixion (6:6).²⁹

2. It is for these who sin high-handedly for which “there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins.” In this clause, οὐκέτι (“no longer”) is positioned at the front, and θυσία (“sacrifice”) is positioned at the end. The placement of both of these words in the emphatic position, stresses the

²¹ Harris, *Hebrews*, 281; O’Brien, *Hebrews*, 373.

²² Most English translations correctly render the genitive absolute (ἁμαρτανόντων ἡμῶν) with conditional force. The consequences of leaving out the conditionality is that it makes the consequence of v. 26a an already realized state of both the author and the listeners. See Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 632–33.

²³ Paul Ellingworth, *Commentary on Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 531.

²⁴ Mugridge, “Warnings in the Epistle to the Hebrews,” 78.

²⁵ Many commentators have identified the sin here to find its biblical origin to Num 15:30–31, see page 113 of Randall C. Gleason, “The Eschatology of the Warning in Hebrews 10:26–31,” *TynBul* 53(1) (2002): 97–120; See also a detailed comparison in pages 30–33 of Daniel Kwame Bediako, “Sabbath Worship and ‘Sinning Willfully’ in Hebrews 10:26–31,” *Valley View University Journal of Theology* 5 (2018): 28–39.

²⁶ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 258.

²⁷ Luke Timothy Johnson, *Hebrews: A Commentary*, NTL (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 262.

²⁸ The content of ἀληθείας is the gospel which they received (2:1–4). O’Brien, *Hebrews*, 375.

²⁹ See page 547 of Matthew McAfee, “Covenant and the warnings of Hebrews: the blessing and the curse,” *JETS* 57(3) (2014): 537–53.

implication that sacrifices outside of Christ will simply prove as a vain pursuit.³⁰ In addition, the author makes a switch from the singular to the plural form of “sin” (ἁμαρτιῶν [cf. v. 18/v. 26b]), making the scope of the offenses in view as comprehensive.³¹ It then follows, due to the once and for all unrepeatable nature of Christ’s sacrifice (vv. 10, 12, 14), the future for apostates only involves inevitable judgement.³²

B. Hebrews 10:27

a *but a terrifying expectation of judgment* and **b** *THE FURY OF A FIRE WHICH WILL CONSUME THE ADVERSARIES.*

1. In v. 27a the conjunction “but” (δέ) introduces the contrast to v. 26b, in which the idea of what “remains” (ἀπολείπεται) is elliptical (see NJB).³³ In the case of the indefinite pronoun τις (omitted in many modern translations), it has the effect of intensifying the statement (as in BLB “*certain* terrifying expectation”).³⁴ The contrast therefore, is between the secure status of those persisting in their hope of Christ’s sacrifice, as opposed to those who persist in sin. Just like the expectation of Christian hope being fulfilled, the certainty is just as much guaranteed for those who will be judged.³⁵ Regarding this judgement however, the emphasis falls on its adjective φοβερὰ (“terrifying”). With only three occurrences in the NT (all in Heb: 10:27, 31; 12:21), all three instances reference an encounter with God, and each time the fearfulness pertains to the severe distress one encounters when facing an impending threat.³⁶ Keeping in mind though, the judgement of apostates will be executed in righteousness than it will be in cruelty. In the words of Arthur Pink, “the general term ‘judgement,’ as in 9:27... signifies that it will be a righteous sentence proportioned unto their awful crime: there will be a full and open trial, with an impartial judicial condemnation of them.”³⁷ Therefore, the severe language of judgement that follows, is not

³⁰ Harris, *Hebrews*, 281.

³¹ Cockerill, *Hebrews*, 533.

³² William L. Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, WBC 47B (Dallas, TX: Word Books, Publisher, 1991), 293.

³³ Harris, *Hebrews*, 281.

³⁴ Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 534.

³⁵ Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 534.

³⁶ Kistemaker, *Hebrews*, 294

³⁷ Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1954), 612.

a reflection of a callous and brutal God, but a reflection of the crime. The punishment will fit the offense, and for the apostate, there are no euphemisms for the horror they will face.

2. In transition to the OT quote, the καὶ is exegetical, introducing a quotation from Isa 26:11 (LXX).³⁸ Curiously, the author of Hebrews simplifies the quote:

ζῆλος λήμψεται ... καὶ νῦν πῦρ τοὺς ὕπεναντίους ἔδεται (Isa 26:11)	πυρὸς ζῆλος ἐσθίειν μέλλοντος τοὺς ὕπεναντίους (Heb 10:27)
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There are three major changes to notice: (1) apart from ζῆλος, the first clause is omitted; (2) ζῆλος (“fury” ESV, “zeal” LSV) is now an emotion attributed to the fire; and (3) the future form of the verb “to eat” (ἐσθίω) has been changed to a present infinitive combined with μέλλοντος (expressive of forthcoming action). Ultimately, this condensed recontextualized form of Isa 29:11 is now applied with a higher degree of imminence (ἐσθίειν + μέλλοντος), and an intensified picture of divine vengeance (πυρὸς + ζῆλος).³⁹ Despite language of fire used in the sense of a trying or sanctifying effect in other texts of the OT (e.g., Ps 12:6; Isa 48:10; Ezek 22:18; 1 Cor 3:13–15), the fire here is associated with utter destruction of those who oppose God (Gen 19:24; Exod 9:24; Isa 65:15; Ezek 38:22; 39:6). In the NT, fire is more so linked to eschatological doom and recompense (Matt 3:10–12; 7:19; 2 Thess 1:6ff).⁴⁰

3. Additionally, “the context of this Old Testament passage depicts a contrast between the righteous who walk in the ways of the Lord and desire his presence over against the wicked who persist in doing evil in spite of God’s grace to them.”⁴¹ In short, there is no middle ground between the righteous and the wicked, and the day of the Lord will make that clear.⁴² But, the label of “adversaries” in the context of this passage are *apostates*.⁴³ Schreiner sees this apostasy of willful sin as that of turning back to the Levitical cult, and to do this would be to identify as an enemy of God.⁴⁴

³⁸ Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 535.

³⁹ David A. DeSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Epistle “to the Hebrews”* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 346.

⁴⁰ Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 535.

⁴¹ Direct quote from O’Brien, *Hebrews*, 376.

⁴² Mary Healy, *Hebrews*, Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 217; J. A. Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1993), 216.

⁴³ Lane, *Hebrews*, 293.

⁴⁴ Schreiner, *Hebrews*, 324–25.

C. Hebrews 10:28

Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses.

1. Here in v. 28, we see the first-half of a “light and heavy” (*Qal wahomer*) argument (v. 28 lesser and v. 29 greater). The lesser situation is one that the audience would have conceded as it alludes to Deuteronomy 17:2–7 (LXX): a passage dealing with the legal settlements of those who transgress God’s covenant by committing idolatry.⁴⁵ Then, upon the evidence of multiple witnesses, the idolater is stoned to death by the people, however, the ones to cast the first stones would be the witnesses (Deut 17:7). I will touch on the significance of the witness detail in the exegesis of the next verse (see under section III. D. 5.).

2. In the Greek form, the participle ἀθετήσας⁴⁶ (“set aside”) is placed in the emphatic position, and in the same way “Christ ‘set aside’ the Aaronic priesthood (7:18), and just as thoroughly as his sacrifice did away with sin (9:26), so the idolater ‘has set aside’ the law of Moses and severed himself from it.”⁴⁷ Keeping in mind, the object of the rejection is not specifically to one of the laws (e.g., idolatry, murder), but rather to the law as a whole.⁴⁸ It is for these who demonstrate such disregard for the law of God, that the appropriate resolution is a merciless death (Deut 13:8). A closer look into the OT context of these passages reveals that these warnings served as an incentive to follow God wholeheartedly through observing his law. The administration of

⁴⁵ Concession due to the background of the audience being that of reverencing the OT Scriptures, see G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2007), 979.

⁴⁶ Schreiner has helpfully laid out how ἀθετήσας ought to be understood here, as well as how it is used elsewhere:

The verb is used to describe blatant and outright rebellion (1 Sam 2:17; 1 Chron 2:7; 5:25), representing Israel’s apostasy against the Lord (Isa 1:2; Jer 3:20; 5:11; 9:1; 12:1; 15:16 LXX; Ezek 22:6; 39:23; Dan 9:27). In the same way, the Pharisees rejected God’s purpose in Christ (Luke 7:30), and some reject the words of Jesus’ messengers (Luke 10:16; cf. also John 12:48). Paul warns the Galatians not to reject God’s grace by trusting in the law for salvation (Gal 2:21; cf. also 1 Thess 4:8). Every Israelite transgressed the law, but the death penalty was assigned to those who egregiously violated what the law mandated (e.g., Num 35:30; Deut 17:2–7).

For full quote see Schreiner, *Hebrews*, 325.

⁴⁷ Compare how ἀθετήσας is used in 7:18 and in 9:26, see direct quote from Cockerill, *Hebrews*, 487.

⁴⁸ “The verb ἀθετέω, meaning ‘to reject something as invalid’, hence ‘to nullify, ignore’, comes to be used of violating a divine institution.” See O’ Brien, *Hebrews*, 376; and Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 24.

such punishments acted as a deterrent for the rest of the people onlooking.⁴⁹ Thus, the warning against apostasy issued by the author of Hebrews serves the equivalent purpose.

D. Hebrews 10:29

a *How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve* **b** *who has trampled underfoot the Son of God,* **c** *and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified,* **d** *and has insulted the Spirit of grace?*

1. The greater part of the *a fortiori* argument is laid out here in v. 29. This was anticipated in 2:2–3, in which the lesser case was the stringent justice meted out under the dispensation of angels. However, since divine revelation had reached its crescendo in the gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ (1:2), it necessarily follows that the just penalty for neglecting the greater would be catastrophic in comparison.⁵⁰ Thus, the anticipated answer to the author’s rhetorical question is that of a punishment worse than death.⁵¹ There are three offenses listed, and each will be dealt with in the subsequent paragraphs. However, it is crucial to note that each offense is not representative of different sets of people, but rather, as a single package (cf. the list of experiences in 6:4–5).⁵²

2. The act that is described in v. 29b καταπατήσας, is used only four other times in the Greek Bible. Each of which, pictures trampling of: salt on the ground (Matt 5:13); pearls by swine (Matt 7:6); seed on the ground (Luke 8:5); and people on people in a crowded space (Luke 12:1). Though the brief amount of mentions, it is clear that the implication is that whatever is being stepped on is treated worthless or without much care. Therefore, the atrocity of the act would vary according to the object that is trampled on. In this case, it is the Son of God.⁵³ Such an illustration is metaphoric to be sure, yet, a depiction this scandalous demonstrates a flagrancy beyond imagination.⁵⁴ The act of apostasy is therefore a straight mockery of Jesus Christ.⁵⁵ The irony

⁴⁹ Kistemaker, *Hebrews*, 294.

⁵⁰ Lane, *Hebrews*, 293.

⁵¹ The pronoun πῶς indicates a rhetorical question, see Craig Koester, *Hebrews: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 452;

⁵² Each of the following offenses: καταπατήσας (“trampled underfoot”), ἡγησάμενος (“regarded as”), and ἐνυβρίσας (“insulted”), are united in that they are all in the aorist tense, see O’Brien, *Hebrews*, 377.

⁵³ “Jesus’ sonship points to his divinity and his special relationship with God, and Hebrews often designates Jesus as God’s Son (1:2–3, 5, 8; 3:6; 4:14; 5:5, 8; 6:6; 7:3, 28).” Direct quote from Schreiner, *Hebrews*, 326.

⁵⁴ According to Harold Attridge, the verb καταπατήσας is metaphoric, see Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), 294.

⁵⁵ Johnson, *Hebrews*, 294.

however, is that those who trample underfoot the Son of God will one day be trampled under his feet (1:13; 10:13; Ps 110:1).

3. The second offense laid out in v. 29c is that against the *work* of Christ's priestly office. Both the larger argument of Hebrews and especially the preceding context (9:1–10:18) focuses on the superiority of new covenant to which Christ is the mediator of.⁵⁶ The αἷμα ("blood") of Christ is the instrument in which the new covenant was inaugurated to both cleanse and sanctify his people (Matt 26:26–29; Mark 14:22–25; Luke 22:17–20; 1 Cor 11:23–25).⁵⁷ And it is this αἷμα to which the apostate regards as κοινὸν ("unclean" contrast with ἡγίασθη). The language of κοινὸν has cultic overtones, therefore, the sense is not ethical in that it is necessarily bad, however, that it is simply useless.⁵⁸ The tragedy of coming to such a position is only worsened by the following clause "by which he was sanctified" (ἐν ᾧ ἡγίασθη). One interpretation scholars have taken, is that this is obviously language evocative of genuine believers.⁵⁹ However, this becomes difficult to square with the larger scope of Hebrews, which *perseverance* is a cemented criteria for true Christian identity (3:6, 14), and that there is still a distinction within God's visible covenant people of who is truly "in" and "out" (3:7–19 old covenant people/new covenant people).⁶⁰ A helpful paradigm to look at this is through the reformed categories of the three senses of faith: notitia (knowledge), assensus (assent), and fiducia (whole trust).⁶¹ Those who are apostates have been described by the author of Hebrews as those who have intimately been involved in Christianity. They have come to know the gospel (notitia), and have even taken part in the confession of the Christian message (assensus). However, because their faith had not persevered, they fall short of claiming the full scale of true faith (fiducia). Thus, they make themselves out to be like those of

⁵⁶ O'Brien, *Hebrews*, 378; Kistemaker also provides a list of verses in which every chapter of Hebrews argues this very point: 1:3; 2:17; 3:1; 4:14; 5:5; 6:20; 7:3; 8:1; 9:11; 10:21; 11:28; 12:24; 13:12. See Michael J. Kruger, ed., *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the New Testament: The Gospel Realized* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 412.

⁵⁷ Kistemaker, *Hebrews*, 295.

⁵⁸ Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 540.

⁵⁹ Schreiner is notably the biggest reformed proponent of this view, that the warnings in Hebrews are descriptive of actual believers, however, the warnings prove to be hypothetical in nature and a means for believers to persevere. See Schreiner, *Hebrews*, 327.

⁶⁰ Some have argued that the quotations from Jeremiah 31 (9:8–12; 10:16–18) demonstrate that the new covenant does away with such categories of visible and invisible. I hold that this interpretation is a failure to see the "now and not yet" element of such promises.

⁶¹ See page 5 of Ignatius W.C. Van Wyk, "Philipp Melancthon: A short introduction," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 73 (2017): 1–8; for the originator of these categories, see Philipp Melancthon, *Loci Communes 1521*, Församlingsfakultetens Skriftserie 1 (Göteborg: Församlingsförlaget, 1997).

the wilderness generation who had the faith to be redeemed out of Egypt, but did not have the faith to get in the promised land (3:16–19).

4. The last offense listed is in no way less heinous than the first two. The offended party involves the Holy Spirit; however, the title is modified as πνεῦμα τῆς χάριτος (“Spirit of grace” [descriptive genitive]) likely as a reference to Zechariah 12:10.⁶² If that is the case, the grace that is demonstrated by the Spirit is that of convicting one to come to the knowledge of the truth in Jesus Christ. Thus, to violently insult (ἐνυβρίσας) the Spirit in an act of persistent hardened rebellion, one cuts himself off from the only entity that can bring about this act of repentance.⁶³ This act is strikingly similar with blaspheming the Holy Spirit (Matt 12:31–32; Mark 3:29; Luke 12:10). Like the Pharisees, these apostates were a part of the covenant people of God, knew the Jewish Scriptures that pointed to Christ (Matt 22:41–46; Luke 24:27; John 5:46; Gal. 3:15–25), witnessed the great power of God (6:5), and had the witness of the Holy Spirit (6:4). Yet, having encountered such a considerable degree of revelatory light, they look in the face of the gospel and deny its power. For this person, he commits the unforgivable sin and his fate is eternally sealed (Matt 12:31–32; Mark 3:29; Luke 12:10).⁶⁴

5. It is interesting to note, the offended party in this warning sees each of the divine persons of the Trinity. Edward Wickham notes, “the wrong done to the Father in the rejection of His Son, to the Son in the scorn poured on the Covenant sealed in His own Blood, to the Spirit in the meeting of grace with despoil.”⁶⁵ It just may be that the multiple witnesses (v. 28) who will testify against these apostates will be the Triune God himself.

E. Hebrews 10:30

a *For we know Him who said, “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay.”* **b** *And again, “The Lord will judge His people.”*

1. In order to solidify the argument of vv. 28–29, there is an appeal to two OT passages from the Song of Moses in verses 35a (10:30a) and 36a (10:30b) in Deuteronomy 32 (textual

⁶² English translations are right to render πνεῦμα τῆς χάριτος as personal, see Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 541.

⁶³ Kistemaker, *Hebrews*, 295; Bruce, *Hebrews*, 261–62.

⁶⁴ Calvin comments that the punishment in view is “not only the death of the body, but eternal perdition.” See John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews*, ed. and trans. John Owen, vol. 22 of *Calvin's Commentaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 247; Carson sees an illuminating connection between the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit with the sin described here. See D. A. Carson, *Matthew 1–12*, EBC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 292.

⁶⁵ E. C. Wickham, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, WC (London: Methuen Publishing, 1910), 87.

details in following sections). However, in introducing the quotes there is a prior appeal to *knowing* (οἶδαμεν [1st plural, “we know”]) “Him who said,” an intended double meaning of knowing the character of God who punishes the guilty, and knowing that this God has spoken.⁶⁶

2. The quote in v. 30a corresponds not with the LXX but with the MT, syr^p, and Targum Onqelos.⁶⁷ The same wording is also found in Romans 12:19, in which Paul gives an exhortation to believers to refrain from avenging oneself when faced with the evil of others.⁶⁸ The basis of abstaining from violence being, that God would avenge them.⁶⁹ Although Hebrews utilizes the quotation differently from Paul, the core principle stands, that it is God who will be responsible for administering vengeance, not people.⁷⁰ In the context of the OT quotation, Deuteronomy 32:35a is in the midst of the third and final part of the song, in which there is a proclamation of God’s judgement and salvation (32:30–43).⁷¹ For the original hearers, the song would have been a comfort and a grounds for worshipping the righteous God of Israel who condemns his enemies and saves his people. But in the case of Hebrews, the quotation acts as a surety of divine recompense upon covenant breakers.

3. The second quote is introduced with καὶ πάλιν (“and again”) in order to emphasize and build off of the first quote (cf. 2:13a-b//Isa 8:17–18).⁷² Being an elliptical addition, the same idea is continued, however, the detail of “His people” (λαὸν αὐτοῦ) has been a cause of disagreement amongst scholars. Although it is agreed upon that λαὸν αὐτοῦ is a reference to God’s people, some have identified inconsistency with the context of the OT quote with the application the author of Hebrews draws. Reason being, that Deuteronomy 32 regards God’s judgement to be upon Israel’s enemies, however, the author of Hebrews postures the quotation toward the people of God.

⁶⁶ Harris, *Hebrews*, 285; Ellingworth opts for the latter option due to the context, however, both are viable, see Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 541.

⁶⁷ Beale and Carson, 980.

⁶⁸ Kistemaker suggests that due to the quotation phrased the same in both instances of the NT, that this may have circulated in the early church as a proverbial saying, as well as it being sung in worship services. See Kistemaker, *Hebrews*, 298.

⁶⁹ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, BECNT 6 (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 672.

⁷⁰ Calvin, *Apostle to the Hebrews*, 249.

⁷¹ “The song has three main movements. The first concerns the past blessing of God on the people (32:1–14), the second addresses Israel’s provocation of God’s anger by their sin (32:15–29), and the third proclaims God’s judgement and salvation (32:30–43).” Direct quote from Beale and Carson, 931; see also D. L. Christensen, *Deuteronomy 21:10–34:12*, WBC 6B (Nashville: Nelson, 2002), 788, 799, 809.

⁷² Cockerill, *Hebrews*, 492.

Because of this, some have opted for κρινεῖν to be rendered as “vindicate” rather than “judge.”⁷³ Though it may be a valid option in terms of word level translation, the context however, leans the other way. From v. 27, we see the label of “adversaries” applied to those who are a part of the covenant community. Therefore, the context of this warning suggests that the judgement that will be against the people of God, is the type of judgement that involves God’s wrath and punishment upon apostates. Secondly, Deuteronomy 32 demonstrates the principle of impartial judgement, to which Israel was no exception. Yes, vindication certainly was in mind, but so was the sin of apostasy (Deut 32:1–25), and since Israel held the privileges of being the chosen people of Yahweh, their degree of responsibility was no lower. Therefore, what was true for Israel was even more so for the church.⁷⁴

F. Hebrews 10:31

It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

1. In conclusion, the author provides a short yet forceful summary of the warning he has given. Used to describe the expectation of judgement in v. 27, φοβερόν (“terrifying”) is used again in the emphatic position to accentuate the awful predicament of judgement.⁷⁵ Here, there are two descriptions of God to unpack. First, the object to which it is terrifying to fall into, is the *hands* (χεῖρας) of God. Χεῖρ is mentioned only three times in reference to God: as Creator (1:10), as Savior (8:9), and now as Judge (v. 31). The former two offices of God are majestic in their vivid depictions, the latter however, despite having the same weight of awe, the imagery evokes terror more so than beauty. The second description of God is that he is *living* (ζῶντος). The author has warned previously to not fall away from the *living God* as the source of life (3:12), he has described the word of God as a *living* entity able to judge the hearts of men and women (4:12), and he has shown that the purpose of having been cleansed is to serve the *living God* (9:14). For this reason, the fall into judgement is horrifying. Because nothing about this God is inactive or asleep (1 Kgs 18:27), he is in essence the living God who will bring final judgement (12:29).

Immediately after the close of this warning, the author reinforces a word of hope, encouraged that the audience will not end up apostatizing, but pressing on in faith to inherit the

⁷³ See page 67 of John Proctor, “Judgement or Vindication? Deuteronomy 32 in Hebrews 10:30,” *TynBul* 55(1) (2004): 65–80.

⁷⁴ Bruce, *Hebrews*, 262.

⁷⁵ Lane, *Hebrews*, 295.

promise (v. 36).⁷⁶ Moving to chapter eleven, the author lays out the qualities of this faith, being: “(1) faith must be grounded in history, (2) that it is borne by strangers and exiles, (3) that it is expressed in mutuality, (4) that it requires perseverance, and (5) most importantly, that it looks to Jesus Christ.”⁷⁷

2. In the last warning (12:25–29), there again is an *a fortiori* argument that is given to stress the importance to not refuse the voice of God. Having made a contrast between Mount Sinai and Zion (12:18–24), that being of earth and heaven, the point made is that once again the stakes are now ratcheted up due to the degree of revelation explicated with the new covenant. Therefore, rejection or apathy in response to the living God will result in facing God, who will be to them a *consuming fire* in judgement (12:29).

IV. Conclusion

In the study of Hebrews 10:26–31, it has been demonstrated that a key to exegeting this text was to consider the other warning passages in the book. This ensured both an identification of key arguments, and an illumination of the biblical-theological theme of apostasy. The first warning in 2:1–4 showed that God has spoken with the utmost clarity through Jesus Christ, therefore, a refusal of this revelation would be to face consequences worse than those who rejected the message dispensed under angels. The second warning in 3:7–19 made a parallel to the situation of Israel in the wilderness to the believers currently facing challenges with their faith. The application being, that final perseverance is key to obtaining the promise of God’s final rest. The third warning in 6:4–8 cautions that for those who have intimately experienced the blessings of the Christian faith and then turn away, that coming back is not an option. Thus, there is a recapitulation of the theme of perseverance, in which the focus ought to be steered from experiences more so to seeking perpetual growth as a sure sign of their conviction.

In our text, it is identified immediately in v. 26a that the type of sin that is in view is that of a persistent willful lifestyle of sin that denies the gospel. From there, vv. 26b–27a shows two outcomes are granted: (1) the sacrifice of Jesus Christ no longer applies; and (2) the only thing left to expect is terrifying judgement. The author then gives an *a fortiori* argument in vv. 28–29,

⁷⁶ Lane demonstrates how the parallel structure of 10:26–36 and 6:4–12. Lane, *Hebrews*, 296–97.

⁷⁷ See page 160 of D. F. Durnbaugh, “Go forth in faith: qualities of faith from Hebrews 11-12,” *Brethren Life and Thought*, 35(2) (1990): 160–67.

demonstrating that under the law of Moses, rejection resulted in a merciless death. Therefore, the rejection of the gospel will result in a punishment much worse. In v. 30, there is a two-fold confirmation which is a quote from God in Deuteronomy 32:35a and 36a, this confirmation being that of God's judgement of his own people who turn away from him. The last sentence in v. 31, serves as a chilling admonition for the reader to seriously reconsider the repercussions of abandoning so great a salvation.

It was the Puritan William Gurnall who once said, "None sink so far into hell as those that come nearest heaven, because they fall from the greatest height."⁷⁸ The fourth warning passage in Hebrews is a clear demonstration that God will judge more harshly those who have come nearest to him. Nevertheless, a huge mistake when coming to this text or any of the warnings, is to only see them for their grim depictions of judgement and horror. When in fact, behind it all is a deep loving concern for those who profess Jesus Christ as Lord. The warning here serves as a means for which true believers will heed and persevere, as well as a foretelling of the fate of apostates. Motivations to press on in the faith come in many different forms in Scripture, and the letter of Hebrews gives two motivations side by side. It displays the beauty of the lamb as well as the wrath of the lion.

⁷⁸ William Gurnall, *A Puritan Golden Treasury*, compiled by I. D. E. Thomas (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2000), 20.

Appendix A: Comparison of Hebrews 10:26–31 in English and Greek

<i>NASB 1995</i>	<i>NA28</i>
<p>26 For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins,</p> <p>27 but a terrifying expectation of judgment and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries.</p> <p>28 Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on <i>the testimony of</i> two or three witnesses.</p> <p>29 How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace?</p> <p>30 For we know Him who said, “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay.” And again, “The Lord will judge His people.”</p> <p>31 It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God.</p>	<p>26 Ἐκουσίως γὰρ ἁμαρτανόντων ἡμῶν μετὰ τὸ λαβεῖν τὴν ἐπίγνωσιν τῆς ἀληθείας, οὐκέτι περὶ ἁμαρτιῶν ἀπολείπεται θυσία,</p> <p>27 φοβερὰ δέ τις ἐκδοχὴ κρίσεως καὶ πυρὸς ζῆλος ἐσθίειν μέλλοντος τοὺς ὑπεναντίους.</p> <p>28 ἀθετήσας τις νόμον Μωϋσέως χωρὶς οἰκτιρμῶν ἐπὶ δυσὶν ἢ τρισὶν μάρτυσιν ἀποθνήσκει·</p> <p>29 πόσῳ δοκεῖτε χειρόνος ἀξιωθήσεται τιμωρίας ὁ τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ θεοῦ καταπατήσας καὶ τὸ αἷμα τῆς διαθήκης κοινὸν ἡγησάμενος, ἐν ᾧ ἡγιάσθη, καὶ τὸ πνεῦμα τῆς χάριτος ἐνυβρίσας;</p> <p>30 οἶδαμεν γὰρ τὸν εἰπόντα· ἐμοὶ ἐκδίκησις, ἐγὼ ἀνταποδώσω. καὶ πάλιν· κρινεῖ κύριος τὸν λαὸν αὐτοῦ.</p> <p>31 φοβερὸν τὸ ἐμπεσεῖν εἰς χεῖρας θεοῦ ζῶντος.</p>

Appendix B: Hebrews 10:27 Quotation of Isaiah 26:11⁷⁹

<i>Hebrews 10:27 (NA28)</i>	<i>Isaiah 26:11 (LXX)</i>
φοβερὰ δέ τις ἐκδοχή κρίσεως καὶ πυρὸς ζῆλος ἐσθίειν μέλλοντος τοὺς ὑπεναντίους.	κύριε ὑψηλός σου ὁ βραχίων καὶ οὐκ ᾔδεισαν γνόντες δὲ αἰσχυνθήσονται ζῆλος λήμψεται λαὸν ἀπαίδευτον καὶ νῦν πῦρ τοὺς ὑπεναντίους ἔδεται

<i>Hebrews 10:27 (NASB 1995)</i>	<i>Isaiah 26:11 (NASB 1995)</i>
but a terrifying expectation of judgment and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries.	O Lord, Your hand is lifted up <i>yet</i> they do not see it. They see Your zeal for the people and are put to shame; Indeed, fire will devour Your enemies.

⁷⁹ Words in red indicate the quotation parallel according to DeSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude*, 346.

Appendix C: Hebrews 10:30 Quotation of Deuteronomy 32:35–36

<i>Hebrews 10:30 (NA28)</i>	<i>Deuteronomy 32:35–36 (WLC)</i>
<p>30 οἶδαμεν γὰρ τὸν εἰπόντα· <i>ἐμοὶ ἐκδίκησις, ἐγὼ ἀνταποδώσω.</i> καὶ πάλιν· <i>κρινεῖ κύριος τὸν λαὸν αὐτοῦ.</i></p>	<p>35 לִי נָקָם וְשָׁלֹם לְעֵת תִּמּוּט רַגְלָם כִּי קָרוֹב יוֹם אֵיֶדֶם וְחָשׁ עֲתִידָת לָמוֹ: 36 כִּי־יִדְּיוֹן יְהוָה עַמּוֹ וְעַל־עַבְדּוֹ יִתְנַקֵּם כִּי יֵרָאֶה כִּי־אֵזְלָת יָד וְאָפֶס עָצוּר וְעֲזוּב:</p>

<i>Hebrews 10:30 (NASB 1995)</i>	<i>Deuteronomy 32:35–36 (NASB 1995)</i>
<p>30 For we know Him who said, <i>“Vengeance is Mine, I will repay.”</i> And again, <i>“The Lord will judge His people.”</i></p>	<p>35 ‘Vengeance is Mine, and retribution, In due time their foot will slip; For the day of their calamity is near, And the impending things are hastening upon them.’ 36 “For the Lord will vindicate His people, And will have compassion on His servants, When He sees that <i>their</i> strength is gone, And there is none <i>remaining</i>, bond or free.</p>

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