EXEGESIS PAPER ON HEBREWS 6:4-6

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Introduction, Historical and Contextual Background

The Epistle to the Hebrews is one of the most amazing books in the New Testament. It has some of the most serious doctrinal content in the Bible, containing both glorious truths about the Lord Jesus Christ, as well as sobering warnings that have been much debated as to what their meaning and audience are. This paper is an attempt to study the text of Hebrews 6:4-6 to come to an understanding of the meaning of this passage and its implications.

The book of Hebrews is also one of the most mysterious in that we don’t know much about its background. Scholars have suggested many different people as the author, but the text does not give any conclusive evidence. As Carson states, “It is far better to admit our ignorance. We do not know who wrote it; almost certainly the first readers did. In all likelihood the author was a Hellenistic Jew who had become a Christian, a second-generation believer (Heb. 2:3). He was steeped in the LXX (none of his numerous quotations from the Old Testament depends on the Hebrew) and, judging by his excellent vocabulary and Greek style, had enjoyed a good education.”

As far as the date, there is a little more certainty. Because the author and possibly the readers were second generation Christians (Heb. 2:3), and because they most likely knew the Apostle Paul’s companion Timothy (Heb. 13:23), It can very safely be dated between AD 50-100. While it is not explicitly stated in the text, the arguments of the book as a whole strongly suggest that it was written before the destruction of the Temple in AD 70.

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2 Ibid., 398.
3 Ibid., 399-400.
these are Christians suffering the threat of persecution under Nero, and suggests the date of AD 64.4

Regarding the recipients, Carson says, “All agree that the book is written for Christians, who are urged to maintain their confession.”5 As can be deduced from the traditional title, “ΠΡΟΣ ΕΒΡΑΙΟΥΣ”6 (To the Hebrews), the recipients have long been held to have been Jewish converts to Christianity. Although some have disagreed with this position in recent years, the ISBE defends the original understanding of the recipients by saying that, “The entire message of the Epistle, the dominant claims of Christ and the Christian faith, rests upon the supposition that the readers held Moses, Aaron, the Jewish priesthood, the Old Covenant and the Levitical ritual, in the highest esteem.”7 The recipients of the letter were apparently well known by the author.8

Coming persecution was probably the circumstance of this letter. “After a peaceful time the readers were again being subjected to renewed persecution, and it looked as though more serious things were ahead. In view of their spiritual laxness they were in danger of falling away from their Christian faith. It was the recognition of this danger that furnished the occasion for the writing of Hebrews.”9 Regarding what specifically the danger was, “the traditional position has been that the Hebrews were in danger of forsaking their Christianity and going back into Judaism.”10 Under the persecution of Nero Christians were sheltered under the protection afforded Jews in Rome. If these are Jewish Christians of that time, then it is possible that they

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7 The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, s.v. “Hebrews, Epistle to the.”
8 Hiebert, “Introduction,” 72. “It appears that the unnamed writer was a friend and teacher of the readers and was closely acquainted with their circumstances and spiritual condition.”
9 Ibid., 86.
10 Ibid.
were tempted “to minimize as much as possible their Christian distinctives and to emphasize their Jewish background and beliefs.”

It is against this backdrop that we read the book of Hebrews, which consists of sections of majestic teaching on the finality of God’s revelation in the Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, punctuated by warnings against apostasy. The larger context of Hebrews 6:4-6 is a passage that begins in 5:11 and extends to the end of chapter 6 (vs. 20), where the Author warns his audience of “the danger of failure through sloth and apostasy.” The Author first reproves the Hebrews for their spiritual immaturity (5:11-14), then urges them to press on to mature growth in the faith (6:1-3), warns them of the danger of apostasy (6:4-6), Illustrates the danger of apostasy (6:7-8), and finally gives specific encouragement to be persevere in their faith in Christ (6:9-20).

**Lexical and Syntactical Study**

Hebrew 6:4-6 can be broken into 3 distinct sections. The first section consists of the subject of the main clause; the second is the main clause itself; the third is the adverbial modifiers of the main clause. The sections will be analyzed and then connected to the context in order to arrive at the meaning and significance.

**The Subject of the Main Clause**

The main clause of vss. 4-6 is represented by the adjective ἀνακαινίζειν. It is an adjective functioning as the predicate nominative of an implied ἐστίν, and the subject of the implied verb is the infinitive ἀνακαινίζειν, along with its modifiers. This infinitive is used only herein the New Testament and means “renew” or “restore.”

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11 Ibid., 88.
13 Hiebert, “Introduction,” 94.
14 The diagram in the appendix can be used to follow the explanation of the text.
what are they being restored to? It is agreed that the identity of the object of this infinitive is central to understanding the passage.16

The object of the infinitive is found in Heb. 6:4-6. It consists of a chain of five accusative participles headed up by a single article (τους) and connected by a series of conjunctions (a “τε” and then three “και”). The article indicates that these participles are functioning as a noun phrase,17 and the series of conjunctions binds them together so that they are all describing a single group of people.18 Moreover, these participles are all in the aorist tense, indicating that the Author is conceiving of the actions as a whole, rather than as a process. While the infinitive can take its “subject” in the accusative case, here the accusative chain is receiving the action of the infinitive (functioning as the direct object).

The first of the participles is φωτισθαιρντας (v. 4), which comes from φωτιζω, meaning “to give light,” whether physically or spiritually. Because this context is talking of spiritual things, its meaning is more specifically “to make known in reference to the inner life or transcendent matters and thus enlighten” (translated as “enlighten”).19 The same word is used in Heb. 10:32 to refer to the conversion of the audience of the letter, and in Eph. 1:18 it is used as a perfect participle to describe the results of salvation.20 To strengthen the case that the illumination here spoken of is salvation, it should be noticed that ἀποφαξις is used to qualify

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16 Rodney J. Decker, “The Warning of Hebrews 6.” The Journal of Ministry & Theology 5, no. 2 (Fall 2001): 38. “Perhaps the single most crucial exegetical question that must be resolved is the spiritual condition of the individuals in Hebrews 6:4-6.”


18 Contrary to Robert G. Gromacki (Stand Bold in Grace, footnote on page 107), this cannot be an example of Granville Sharp rule because they are plural participles (Young, 62). However, context clearly indicates that these five participles are to be describing one group that shares all of these characteristics (Ibid., 63).


20 The noun form is also used in a soteriological context in 2 Cor. 4:4, 6.
φωτισθ/uniρF73ντας. It is an adverb that means “a single occurrence” and may even be translated “once for all,” indicating that this enlightenment was a decisive event.

The second participle is γευσαµ/uniρF73νους (v. 4), from the verb γε/uniρF7Bοµαι meaning “to taste.” It can also have the connotation of “to experience something.”22 The thing that is being experienced is “the heavenly gift.”23 It is called “heavenly” because its origin is heaven.24 The gift could refer to the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38),25 or the gift of salvation (Eph. 2:8-9).26 The gift of salvation is preferable because the Holy Spirit is mentioned next and to refer to it here would be redundant. The idea being communicated here is not that something is being tasted without being eaten; rather it has the idea of something being experienced.27

The third participle is γενηθ/uniρF73ντας (v. 4), from γ/uniρF77νοµαι meaning “to be or become.” The object of the participle is µετ/uniρF79χους πνε/uniρF7Bµατος /uniρF0ργ/uniρF77ου. The genitive phrase πνε/uniρF7Bµατος /uniρF0ργ/uniρF77ου is an objective genitive, showing that it is the object of the verbal idea in µετ/uniρF79χους (“sharing in/participating in”).28 The same word is used earlier to describe believers as ones who are “sharers of the heavenly calling” (3:1) and “sharers in Christ” (3:14). So here it shows that the persons being described are “sharing/participating in the Holy Spirit” (6:4). This most likely

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23 (6:4) Translations are the writer’s unless otherwise indicated.
24 Gromacki, 108.
26 Gromacki, 108.
27 Ibid. Gromacki points out that “this same term was used of Christ when He tasted death for every man (2:9). He did not sample death; rather He experienced death in all of its totality.”
describes the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in which all believers have become equal sharers (cf. 1 Cor. 12:13). 

The fourth participle here is again γευσάμενος (v. 5), meaning “to taste” or “to experience.” This participle has two objects coordinated by τε, (and). The first is “καλόν...θεό όμοιο.” The second is “δυνάμεις...μέλλοντος αἰώνος.” As above, so here γευσάμενος does not indicate so much tasting as separate from consuming as it does experience. It indicates a personal experience with the goodness of the Word of God and a personal experience with the miracles that accompanied the preaching of the gospel by the apostles (2:4).

The fifth and last participle is παραπεσόντας (v. 6), from παραπέπτω, meaning “to fall away, commit apostasy.” According to Wuest, this word is used only here in the New Testament, but it is used in Ezek. 14:13 and 15:8 (LXX) “where Israel is seen falling away from the true worship of Jehovah.” The overall argument of the Book of Hebrews defines this falling away as not just a great moral failure, but rather “departing from the living God” (Heb. 3:12, NKJV) and “[drawing] back to perdition” (Heb. 10:39, NKJV). It consists of repudiating Christ and the gospel. While some English translations see this participle as functioning adverbially-conditionally (translated “if they fall away”), it is better to understand it to be functioning as part of the noun phrase with the rest of the participles in this string.

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29 Kenneth S. Wuest, Hebrews in the Greek New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1947), 115. Here, Wuest’s claim that they participated in the Spirit “in the sense that they willingly co-operated with Him in receiving His pre-salvation ministry” seems to be derived from his theological conclusions rather than exegesis of the text.
32 Wuest, 117.
33 Gromacki, 109. “...The use of the connective... before the participle shows that it is part of the series of five participles. All have an attributive function in the total description of the group under discussion.”
These participles describe those who are being restored as “those who have been enlightened once for all and experienced the gift from heaven and have become sharers of the Holy Spirit and have experienced the good word of God and the powers of the coming age and have fallen away.” These are the ones who are the object of the infinitive ἄνακαινίζειν, to “renew.” But what are they being renewed to?

The infinitive ἄνακαινίζειν is being modified by the adverb πάλιν (“again”), and the prepositional phrase εἰς μετάνοιαν (“unto repentance”). The question is, “what is meant by repentance?” Is this the repentance that is part of conversion (2 Pet. 3:9), or a different repentance? While some argue that this is “repentance for a sinning Christian,” it seems better to understand it as a part of conversion because “repentance” is not qualified in the text, but rather it is used in a context that is talking about conversion (“once for all enlightened,” “experiencing the gift from heaven,” “becoming sharers of the Holy Spirit,” etc.). In addition, πάλιν follows παραπέσοντας, seeming to indicate that “being renewed again” is a reversal of the process of apostasy. This makes most sense if the “falling away” is falling away from Christ and the “renewing again unto repentance” is conversion back to Christ.

So the subject of this sentence is: “. . .to renew again unto repentance those who have been enlightened once for all and experienced the gift from heaven and have become sharers of the Holy Spirit and have experienced the good word of God and the powers of the coming age and have fallen away. . .” The central idea of the subject is the infinitive “to renew.” Next it is important to see what the text affirms about this subject.

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34 Gromacki, 110.
35 Ibid.
The Main Clause

As was mentioned above, the main clause of vss 4-6 can be identified by the nominative singular neuter adjective ἀδύνατον, meaning “impossible” (v. 4). It is the predicate nominative of the implied ἐστὶν, and the subject of the verb is the infinitive ἀνακαλύψειν with its modifiers. It seems best to understand it as being in the indicative mood, since that is the default mood and fits best with the context.

Essentially the main clause is affirming, with reference to the subject, that “[it is] impossible.” The situation described by the subject, the renewing of those who have been enlightened and fallen away, is “incapable of happening or being done.”36 Surely Wuest is correct when he affirms that “the Greek word translated ‘impossible’ cannot be diluted to mean ‘difficult.’”37

The Adverbial Modifiers of the Main Clause

So the heart of the warning of Heb. 6:4-6 is a statement about the impossibility of renewing those who were enlightened and fall away. What remains to be examined are two participles that modify the main clause.

The first participle that modifies the main clause is ἀνασταυροῦντας (v. 6), from ἀνασταυρόω. This is an intensive of σταυρόω, “to crucify.” With the preposition prefixed on the front it is possible that is still only means “crucify,”38 but with the use of πάλιν in the near context it may be possible to understand it as “crucify again.”39 The word is used only here in the

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37 Wuest, 113.
38 Wuest, 118. “...[ἀντα] here means ‘up’ and refers to the lifting up on the Cross; also...the compound verb was used and understood by the Hellenistic world to mean only “crucify.”
39 A Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, 3rd ed., s.v. “ἀνασταυρόω.” “...the context seems to require the fig. mng. crucify again (ἀνάλα = again), and the ancient translators and the Gk. Fathers understood it so...”
New Testament.\footnote{Ibid.} By falling away from Christ after experiencing the benefits of salvation, a person is “crucifying to themselves the son of God” (v. 6).

The reflexive pronoun ἑαυτοῖς is in the dative, and is a dative of reference, indicating that as far as they are concerned, Christ is dead to them, although in reality He lives. This can be best understood when compared to the similar statement in Gal. 6:14, where Paul says that through the cross of Christ “ἐμοὶ κόσμος ἐσταυρώτατι κἀγὼ κόσμῳ” (as far as I am concerned, the world was crucified, and as far as the world is concerned, I [was crucified]). Paul is saying that because of the cross, “all fellowship between him and the world is broken off.”\footnote{Franz Delitzsch, \textit{Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews}. Vol. 1. trans. by Thomas L. Kingsbury (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1868), 289.} If ἀνασταυρῶω is taken as “crucify again,” it may indicate that in rejecting Christ, they are agreeing with those who crucified the Lord Jesus and subjecting Him again to the judgment of being an “imposter” and worthy of death.\footnote{Pink, 296.}

While the apostate’s falling away is serious enough to be considered a “re-crucifying of the Son of God” (v. 6), it does not stop there. The second participle is παραδειγματίζοντας (v. 6), from παραδειγματίζω. This word means “to disgrace someone publicly.”\footnote{\textit{A Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature}, 3\textsuperscript{rd} ed., s.v. “παραδειγματίζω.”} Those who receive all of the benefits of vss. 4-5 and then repudiate Christ by falling away disgrace the Lord Jesus. Kent comments that “by renouncing Christ, they bring more public shame upon Him than if they had never believed at all.”\footnote{Homer A. Kent, Jr. \textit{The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary} (Winona Lake: BMH Books, 1972), 111.}

It is important to notice here that there is a change in tense. While the series of five participles functioning as the direct object of the infinitive are in the aorist tense, indicating that the Author is considering these actions as a whole, both of the participles here are in the present...
tense, indicating that the Author considers them a continuous action or process. This indicates that the apostates’ condition of being fallen away in unbelief is a constant statement of their agreement with His crucifixion and, a constant public disgrace of Christ.\textsuperscript{45}

It is also significant that both of these participles are functioning adverbially. They are modifying the main clause in vss. 4-6 (“. . . to renew . . . is impossible. . .”) as participles of reason. They are expressing the unintentional cause of the main clause.\textsuperscript{46} Those who are enlightened…and then fall away are by their falling away re-crucifying Christ and disgracing Him publicly. While it is not their intention, this causes them of be unable to be renewed again to the repentance that leads to life.

This is illustrated in vss. 7-8. There the Author explains that if a piece of ground soaks up the rain that falls on it an bears useful plants, it receives a blessing; but if the ground instead yields undesirable plants such as “thorns and briers” (vs. 8, NKJV), it is ἀδόκιμος, “rejected” or “worthless,” and its “end is to be burned” (NKJV). This illustrates that when God does a work of salvation in a person, the expectation is that that person will bear fruit that is useful to the Lord. If the person receives the spiritual work that God does in a person (i.e. “drinks the rain that often falls upon it,” v. 7), and despite it all falls away and rejects Christ, there is no further work that God can do for that person. This is different than an unsaved person, because the unsaved still have the potential to hear and repent and be saved, but for one who has tasted all that God has to offer and then falls away, re-crucifying Christ and disgracing him publicly, there is no hope of restoration.

\textsuperscript{45} Delitzsch, Ibid. While he points out the fact of the tense change, I have differed slightly on my interpretation of its significance.
\textsuperscript{46} Young, 154.
In Context

In Heb. 5:11-14 the Author points out that the Hebrews have a problem in that they are spiritually immature. His solution is that they need to progress to maturity (6:1-3). Vss. 4-6 are connected to vss. 1-3 by the use of the conjunction γὰρ, which indicates that the main clause of vss. 4-6 is the grounds\(^\text{47}\) of the exhortation “let us progress to maturity.” They need to progress to maturity because for those who receive the benefits of salvation and then fall away there is no renewal to salvation. He is insisting that to regress would be disastrous; they must progress. The Author then explains this truth with the illustration of the cursing and destruction of the ground that bears no fruit (vss. 7-8), but then affirms that he is convinced that they will in fact persevere (vs. 9).

Theological Analysis

This passage is particularly thorny because of the tension over the security of the believer and the seriousness of the warning against apostasy. Several solutions have been proposed in the past, but they are all have in common the attempt to account for eternal security as it is taught in other passages, while also allowing the warning to have real significance.

The first proposed solution\(^\text{48}\) is that this passage describes people who are genuinely saved and then lose their salvation. This position is held mostly by Arminians.\(^\text{49}\) The fact that believers are safe in the hands of the Father and of Christ (Jn. 10:28-29), the fact that all who are justified…are glorified (Rom. 8:29-30), and the implications of predestination (Eph. 1:3-14) argue against this interpretation. In addition, the Spirit’s work of sealing until the day of redemption (Eph. 1:14; 4:30) and the fact that believers are kept by God (1 Pet. 1:5; Jude 1) also

\(^{47}\) Young, 182. “Grounds is the basis or supporting evidence for a conclusion, question, or exhortation.”

\(^{48}\) In this discussion, I am drawing the first four possible interpretations from the “Summary of Views on 6:4-6” in Kent, 111-113; however these views are common and some variation of them is found in most commentaries.

\(^{49}\) Ibid., 111.
make this view impossible. While this view tries to deal faithfully with the seriousness of the warning in this passage, it misses the mark with regard to the overwhelming amount of Scripture that teaches the security of the believer.

The second proposed view is that these are people who have professed Christ but have never been saved. This is the view of many Calvinistic interpreters.\(^{50}\) This view understands the chain of aorist participles in vss. 4-5 to be referring to someone who has only tasted a superficial work of the Spirit and not genuine conversion. The problem with this view is that, as described in the study above, the chain of participles seems to describe a converted person.

The third proposed view is that the persons in view are saved people who are “in danger of divine chastening.”\(^{51}\) This view sees the five participles as describing a genuinely saved person, but sees the falling away as a falling away from maturity, not from salvation. The problem with this view is that according to the study above, the context of the repentance and falling away indicates that they are referring to salvation, not just maturity.

The fourth view that tries to deal with the difficulties of the other views is that the Author is describing a hypothetical case – that if apostasy were possible, then the person who falls away would not be able to be saved again. The critique of this view is that if it is not possible for a person to be genuinely saved and then lost, then the warning lacks any real urgency.\(^{52}\)

A fifth view has been presented more recently under the name “means-of-salvation” view.\(^{53}\) This view is in some ways a variation of the hypothetical view, except it explains that the purpose of the warnings is not to tell the audience what would happen if they could fall away but to keep them from falling away as “a crucial means God uses to protect his people for ‘the

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\(^{50}\) For example, see Pink, 285-297.

\(^{51}\) Kent, 112.

\(^{52}\) Gromacki, 111.

salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time’ (1 Pet. 1:5 NIV).”\textsuperscript{54} This seems to be what Spurgeon expressed in his sermon on Heb. 6:4-6:

[God’s purpose in the warning passage is] to keep thee from falling away. God preserves his children from falling away; but he keeps them by the use of means; and one of these is . . . showing them what would happen if they were to fall away. There is a deep precipice: what is the best way to keep any one from going down there? Why, to tell him that if he did he would inevitably be dashed to pieces. In some old castle there is a deep cellar, where there is a vast amount of fixed air and gas, which would kill anybody who went down. What does the guide say? "If you go down you will never come up alive." Who thinks of going down? The very fact of the guide telling us what the consequences would be, keeps us from it. Our friend puts away from us a cup of arsenic; he does not want us to drink it, but he says, "If you drink it, it will kill you." Does he suppose for a moment that we should drink it. No; he tells us the consequences, and he is sure we will not do it. So God says, "My child, if you fall over this precipice you will be dashed to pieces." What does the child do? He says, "Father, keep me; hold thou me up, and I shall be safe." It leads the believer to greater dependence on God, to a holy fear and caution, because he knows that if he were to fall away he could not be renewed, and he stands far away from that great gulf, because he know that if he were to fall into it there would be no salvation for him.\textsuperscript{55}

This view takes the passage a face value as a warning of a real danger, but also holds on to the understanding that God is the one who preserves His children to the end. It is in this writer’s opinion an improvement of the hypothetical view in that it explains that the purpose of the warning is to be a means to keep believers running the race rather than to simply inform believers of what would happen if they could fall away (which they can’t). This explanation also seems to capture the tension in the passage itself.\textsuperscript{56}

The reality is that while God is sovereign in salvation, He has also placed us in a very real world which operates on the basis of cause and effect. The Author is genuinely warning his

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 38.
\textsuperscript{56} Schreiner, 44. “We believe that holding the proper tension between the already and not-yet aspects of . . . salvation leads us to recognize that biblical warnings are prospective, designed to elicit faith that perseveres to the end in order to lay hold of the eternal prize of life.”
audience what will happen if they fall away and yet in vs. 9 he tells them that he is convinced that they are truly saved and therefore will not in fact fall away.

**Practical Application and Conclusion**

This passage is a reminder of the need for believers to persevere in faith. The gospel of Jesus Christ is not a door that is passed through at a point in time and then forgotten; it is a room into which a person must enter and abide. Believers must persevere in believing the gospel not only because of the hope that lies ahead of us, but also because of the fearful consequences that will befall us if we turn aside. This does not endanger the promises of God to preserve His children, but stimulates His children to lay hold of those promises and believe them until the end.
Appendix: Diagram of Hebrews 6:4-6

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\text{γάρ} & \quad \text{ἀνακαίνιζειν} \quad \text{τούς} \\
& \quad \text{πάλιν} \quad \text{φωτισθέντας} \\
& \quad \text{εἰς} \quad \text{μετάνοιαν} \\
& \quad \text{γευσάςσείς} \quad \text{τὸ νακαινίζειν} \\
& \quad \text{ετάνοιαν} \quad \text{γενηθέντας} \\
& \quad \text{δωρεάς} \quad \text{φωτισθέντας} \\
& \quad \text{παξ} \quad \text{πουρανίου} \\
& \quad \text{καὶ} \quad \text{θεοῦ} \\
& \quad \text{καὶ} \quad \text{δυνάμεις} \\
& \quad \text{καὶ} \quad \text{αιώνος} \\
& \quad \text{μέλλοντος} \\
& \quad \text{καὶ} \quad \text{ζῷος} \\
& \quad \text{καὶ} \quad \text{θεοῦ} \\
& \quad \text{καὶ} \quad \text{εὐαγγελίας} \\
& \quad \text{καὶ} \quad \text{τὸν νιών} \\
\end{align*}
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