

F. Excursus IV: Hebrews 3-4 As An Alleged Evidence For Perpetually Sinning Christians

Some affirm that when Hebrews 3-4 speaks of unbelieving Israel wandering in the wilderness for forty years, so that their “carcasses fell in the wilderness” (Hebrews 3:17), the text pictures people who are saved but never begin the process of Christian growth, which is alleged to originate typologically only with Israel’s crossing the Jordan River into Canaan.¹ Thus, Hebrews 3-4 is alleged to demonstrate that some saved people live and die in perpetual carnality and sin, acting in every way like the unconverted. Such a conclusion faces severe problems.

First, typology should never be used to question or overthrow plain passages of Scripture. The many plain texts that affirm that all believers will be progressively sanctified cannot be overthrown because of conclusions derived from typology.

Second, Jude indicates that the Israelites who died in the wilderness do not picture perpetually carnal saved people, but lost people who are eternally damned. Speaking of unconverted false teachers who are “ordained to . . . condemnation” (v. 4), Jude writes: “I will therefore put you in remembrance, though ye once knew this, how that the Lord,

¹ For example, Hannah W. Smith described “Hebrews 3 and 4” as “the rest of faith, now in this present life” (Letter to Sister, 1867, reproduced in the entry for February 15 of *The Christian’s Secret of a Holy Life*, Hannah W. Smith, ed. Dieter), and she “long[ed] unspeakably to show . . . every child of God whose feet are still wandering in the wilderness . . . the way to the promised land” by means of the Higher Life (Letter to Anna, November 10, 1871, reproduced in the entry for June 24 of *The Christian’s Secret of a Holy Life*, Hannah W. Smith, ed. Dieter). The “wilderness,” where Israel was “neither in Egypt nor in the Promised Land,” represents the “7th of Romans, the wilderness experience of the Christian. . . . It is hardly worthwhile for any one to tell those of us who have taken these two steps, that there is but one. We know better; and our own experience is far more convincing to us than a thousand theories,” that is, experience is better than the conclusions of grammatical-historical exegesis (Letter to Miss Beck, reproduced in the entry for September 6 of *The Christian’s Secret of a Holy Life*, Hannah W. Smith, ed. Dieter). The two experiences in my own life have been equally marked.” Similarly, “American Higher Life writer, Miss Ruth Paxson, who addressed the women’s meetings at Keswick on a number of occasions, compares, as Keswick speakers have often done, the defeat and failure of . . . Christians . . . making no advance or increase at all . . . to the wilderness wanderings of the children of Israel. ‘The vast majority of Christians stop short in their experience of the blessings of salvation with the joy of forgiveness of past sins and with the hope of Heaven in the future. But the present is a forty-year wilderness experience full of futile wanderings, never enjoying peace and rest, never arriving in the promised land.’ This . . . is a legitimate conclusion. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews draws such an analogy. ‘Let us therefore fear, lest, a promise being left us of entering into his rest, any of you should seem to come short of it. . . . Let us labour therefore to enter into that rest, lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief’ (Hebrews 4:1, 11)” (pg. 68, *So Great Salvation: The History and Message of the Keswick Convention*, by Steven Barabas; cf. also pgs. 59-60). Compare Boardman’s belief that those who are justified but have not yet entered the Higher Life are experiencing “the wanderings of the wilderness life . . . before reaching the Land,” so that they must enter into “a present rest remaining for the people of God; a rest from burdens and cares,” based on Hebrews 3:15 (pgs. 56, 167, *Life and Labours of the Rev. W. E. Boardman*, Mrs. Boardman; also pgs. 140-142, *The Higher Christian Life*, Boardman).

having saved the people out of the land of Egypt, afterward destroyed them that believed not” (v. 5). He continues by comparing these people who are “ordained to . . . condemnation” and who “believed not” to “the angels which kept not their first estate, but left their own habitation, [who are] reserved in everlasting chains under darkness unto the judgment of the great day” (v. 6) and to the sodomites who, “giving themselves over to fornication, and going after strange flesh, are set forth for an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire” (v. 7). The people who did not believe and who died in the wilderness are suffering in eternal fiery torment with demons and sodomites. They are not saved people who just never started living for Christ. What the context of Jude 4-7 requires also receives support from the fact that the unbelievers of v. 5 are “destroyed” (ἀπόλλυμι). This verb, while it does not absolutely require eternal damnation in hell (cf. Romans 14:15; 1 Corinthians 8:11; also Matthew 9:17; 8:25; 2:13, etc.), is very commonly used for the everlasting perdition of the lost (Matthew 10:28; Luke 13:3, 5; John 3:15-16; 10:28; 11:50; 17:12; Romans 2:12; 1 Corinthians 1:18; 2 Corinthians 2:15; 4:3; 2 Thessalonians 2:10; 2 Peter 3:9, and many other texts, including, notably, Jude 11).

Finally, in Hebrews 3-4, those who died in the wilderness picture lost people, not saved people who just never grew. First, God has “wrath” (ὀργή) against those who die in the wilderness (Hebrews 3:11; 4:3). The lost face the wrath (ὀργή) of God, the “wrath to come” (Matthew 3:7; Luke 3:7), since “the wrath of God abideth” on them (John 3:36), and they treasure up to themselves “wrath against the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God” (Romans 2:5; cf. 1:18; 2:8; 3:5) as the “vessels of wrath fitted to destruction” (Romans 9:22), the “children of wrath” (Ephesians 2:3; cf. 5:6; Colossians 3:6), facing the coming “wrath of the Lamb . . . the great day of his wrath” (Revelation 6:16-17; cf. 11:18), for they “shall drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is poured out without mixture into the cup of his indignation; and . . . be tormented with fire and brimstone . . . the smoke of their torment ascendeth up for ever and ever” (Revelation 14:10-11), facing “the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God” (Revelation 19:15; 11:18; also 1 Thessalonians 2:16). In contrast, believers, “being now justified by [Christ’s] blood . . . shall be saved from wrath through him” (Romans 5:9), since “Jesus . . . delivered [them] from the wrath to come” (1 Thessalonians 1:10), and “God hath not appointed [them] to wrath, but to obtain salvation by [the] Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thessalonians 5:16). God’s wrath against the people who die in the wilderness in Hebrews 3-4 indicates that they were unconverted lost sinners.

Second, the individuals in question in Hebrews 3-4 had “an evil heart of unbelief” (καρδία πονηρὰ ἀπιστίας) (Hebrews 3:12). Evil, unconverted men have evil hearts, while saved people have renewed hearts (Matthew 12:35; Luke 6:45; cf. Ezekiel 36:26).

Furthermore, while the rest of the New Testament does sometimes employ ἀπιστία in connection with Christ’s disciples (e. g. Matthew 17:20), Paul uses the noun only for the unconverted (Romans 3:3; 4:20; 11:20, 23; 1 Timothy 1:13; the other two references are those in question, Hebrews 3:12, 19). The “evil heart of unbelief” that the individuals discussed in Hebrews 3-4 possessed led them to departing, to apostasy from (ἀποστῆναι, Hebrews 3:12) God. The verb *depart/apostatize* in Hebrews 3:12 is also employed in 1 Timothy 4:1: “Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some *shall depart* from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils” (cf. also Luke 8:13; 13:27). While the verb can be used for believers who depart from or fail to complete a task (cf. Acts 15:38), nowhere does the New Testament state that saved people depart from God. Thus, to affirm that regenerate individuals have “an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God” (Hebrews 3:12) is extremely problematic. Nor is the problem alleviated by the fact that the warning of Hebrews 3:12 is addressed to “brethren” (3:12)—Paul was a Jew, and he wrote Hebrews to his Jewish brethren (cf. Acts 1:16; 2:29, 37; 3:17, 22; 7:2, 37; 13:15, 26, 38; 22:1; 23:1, 5, 6; 28:17, 21; Romans 9:3). Clearly, just as many of Moses’ Jewish brethren in the wilderness were unregenerate, so many of Paul’s Jewish brethren warned in the book of Hebrews were unregenerate, and thus had evil hearts, were in unbelief, and departed from the living God.

Third, the individuals in Hebrews 3-4 were warned about being “hardened through the deceitfulness of sin” (Hebrews 3:13; cf. 3:8, 15; 4:7). In the texts outside of the book of Hebrews, however, those who are hardened are unsaved Christ-rejectors (Acts 19:9) whom God will not show mercy (Romans 9:18). The hardening terminology in Hebrews suits the unconverted, those who “after [their] hardness [σκληρότης] and impenitent heart treasure up unto [themselves] wrath against the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God” (Romans 2:5).² It does not suit the regenerate.

Fourth, Hebrews 3:18 states, “to whom sware he that they should not enter into his rest, but to them that believed not?” The verb employed in Hebrews 3:18 for unbelief (ἀπειθέω) appears sixteen times in the New Testament (John 3:36; Acts 14:2; 17:5; 19:9; Rom 2:8; 10:21; 11:30-31; 15:31; Hebrews 3:18; 11:31; 1 Peter 2:7-8; 3:1, 20; 4:17), and always of the unregenerate. Those who are in unbelief have the wrath of God on them (John 3:36). No New Testament text states or implies that believers are in

² Note also σκληροτράχηλος, Acts 7:51. The force of this particular argument is weakened, however, by the clear application of σκληροκαρδία to believers (Mark 16:14), not just to unbelievers; cf. also Matthew 19:8; Mark 10:5.

apeitheo, in unbelief or disobedience. Similarly, the related noun *unbelief* or *disobedience* (ἀπειθεία) found in Hebrews 4:6, 11 is employed in the New Testament for the unregenerate alone (Romans 11:30, 32; Ephesians 2:2; 5:6; Colossians 3:6; Hebrews 4:6, 11). Likewise, the related adjective *unbelief* or *disobedience* (ἀπειθής) limits such unbelief and rebellion to the unregenerate (Luke 1:17; Acts 26:19; Romans 1:30; 2 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:16; 3:3). The adjective *apeitheis*, the noun *apeitheia*, and the verb *apeitheo*, “unbelief,” all demonstrate that those who do not enter the rest of Hebrews 3-4 are unregenerate.

Fifth, Hebrews 4:2 states that “the gospel preached . . . did not profit [those who died in the wilderness], not being mixed with faith in them that heard *it*,” indicating that those the people in question did not have “faith” (πίστις). The noun *pistis* appears 244 times³ in the New Testament. Huge numbers of verses with the word refer to the saving faith of the regenerate (Romans 3:28; 5:1; Galatians 2:16; etc.). Only three of the 244 texts refer to the unsaved possessing *pistis*, each of them contrasting the saving faith that produces works with a dead “faith” that produces nothing (James 2:17, 20, 24).⁴ None of the 174 instances of *pistis* in the Pauline epistles speaks of it as a possession of an unsaved person.⁵ Since faith is the possession of the regenerate, the people who had no faith in Hebrews 3-4 are not saved people who just never grew and need revival; they are lost people who are dead in trespasses and sins.

Sixth, when Hebrews 4:3 states, “we which have believed do enter into rest” (εἰσερχόμεθα γὰρ εἰς τὴν κατάπαυσιν οἱ πιστεύσαντες), the aorist participle

³ The complete list is: Matthew 8:10; 9:2, 22, 29; 15:28; 17:20; 21:21; 23:23; Mark 2:5; 4:40; 5:34; 10:52; 11:22; Luke 5:20; 7:9, 50; 8:25, 48; 17:5-6, 19; 18:8, 42; 22:32; Acts 3:16; 6:5, 7-8; 11:24; 13:8; 14:9, 22, 27; 15:9; 16:5; 17:31; 20:21; 24:24; 26:18; Romans 1:5, 8, 12, 17; 3:3, 22, 25-28, 30-31; 4:5, 9, 11-14, 16, 19-20; 5:1-2; 9:30, 32; 10:6, 8, 17; 11:20; 12:3, 6; 14:1, 22-23; 16:26; 1 Corinthians 2:5; 12:9; 13:2, 13; 15:14, 17; 16:13; 2 Corinthians 1:24; 4:13; 5:7; 8:7; 10:15; 13:5; Galatians 1:23; 2:16, 20; 3:2, 5, 7-9, 11-12, 14, 22-26; 5:5-6, 22; 6:10; Ephesians 1:15; 2:8; 3:12, 17; 4:5, 13; 6:16, 23; Philippians 1:25, 27; 2:17; 3:9; Colossians 1:4, 23; 2:5, 7, 12; 1 Thessalonians 1:3, 8; 3:2, 5-7, 10; 5:8; 2 Thessalonians 1:3-4, 11; 2:13; 3:2; 1 Timothy 1:2, 4-5, 14, 19; 2:7, 15; 3:9, 13; 4:1, 6, 12; 5:8, 12; 6:10-12, 21; 2 Timothy 1:5, 13; 2:18, 22; 3:8, 10, 15; 4:7; Titus 1:1, 4, 13; 2:2, 10; 3:15; Philemon 1:5-6; Hebrews 4:2; 6:1, 12; 10:22, 38-11:1; 11:3-9, 11, 13, 17, 20-24, 27-31, 33, 39; 12:2; 13:7; James 1:3, 6; 2:1, 5, 14, 17-18, 20, 22, 24, 26; 5:15; 1 Peter 1:5, 7, 9, 21; 5:9; 2 Peter 1:1, 5; 1 John 5:4; Jude 1:3, 20; Revelation 2:13, 19; 13:10; 14:12.

⁴ Note, however, the statements in Matthew 17:20; Mark 4:40; Luke 8:25; 17:6. None of these texts, though, speak of unsaved people possessing *pistis*.

⁵ Romans 1:5, 8, 12, 17; 3:3, 22, 25-28, 30-31; 4:5, 9, 11-14, 16, 19-20; 5:1-2; 9:30, 32; 10:6, 8, 17; 11:20; 12:3, 6; 14:1, 22-23; 16:26; 1 Corinthians 2:5; 12:9; 13:2, 13; 15:14, 17; 16:13; 2 Corinthians 1:24; 4:13; 5:7; 8:7; 10:15; 13:5; Galatians 1:23; 2:16, 20; 3:2, 5, 7-9, 11-12, 14, 22-26; 5:5-6, 22; 6:10; Ephesians 1:15; 2:8; 3:12, 17; 4:5, 13; 6:16, 23; Philippians 1:25, 27; 2:17; 3:9; Colossians 1:4, 23; 2:5, 7, 12; 1 Thessalonians 1:3, 8; 3:2, 5-7, 10; 5:8; 2 Thessalonians 1:3-4, 11; 2:13; 3:2; 1 Timothy 1:2, 4-5, 14, 19; 2:7, 15; 3:9, 13; 4:1, 6, 12; 5:8, 12; 6:10-12, 21; 2 Timothy 1:5, 13; 2:18, 22; 3:8, 10, 15; 4:7; Titus 1:1, 4, 13; 2:2, 10; 3:15; Philemon 1:5-6; Hebrews 4:2; 6:1, 12; 10:22, 38-11:1; 11:3-9, 11, 13, 17, 20-24, 27-31, 33, 39; 12:2; 13:7.

believed naturally speaks of the single act of saving faith, through which all the saved enter into spiritual rest, rather than a moment-by-moment continuing faith decision to possess a post-conversion higher Christian life that allegedly enables a believer to begin doing good works. The other aorist participles of *believe* in Paul refer to the point action of the exercise of saving faith (Ephesians 1:13; 2 Thessalonians 2:12; cf. Jude 5), as do the significant majority of the aorists of *pisteuo* in Paul generally (Romans 3:2; 4:3, 17-18; 10:9, 14, 16; 13:11; 1 Corinthians 3:5; 15:2, 11; 2 Corinthians 4:13; Galatians 2:16; 3:6; Ephesians 1:13; 1 Thessalonians 2:4; 2 Thessalonians 1:10; 2:11-12; 1 Timothy 1:11; 3:16; Titus 1:3; Hebrews 4:3; 11:6).

Seventh, the references in Hebrews 3-4 to Psalm 95:7-11 prove that those that hardened their hearts and died in the wilderness typify the unconverted, as do other portions of the psalter where such people are affirmed to have “believed not in God, and trusted not in his salvation” (Psalm 78:22, 32). In Psalm 95:8, the warning is given: “Harden not your heart, as in the provocation, *and* as *in* the day of temptation in the wilderness.” When the Old Testament speaks of those who harden (קָשָׁה) their hearts, or employs similar phraseology (“hardened their necks,” etc.), the phrases regularly refer to the unconverted, and not one text clearly deals with saved people hardening (קָשָׁה) their hearts (cf. Exodus 7:3; Deuteronomy 2:30; 10:16; 2 Kings 17:14; 2 Chronicles 30:8; 36:13; Nehemiah 9:16-17, 29; Job 9:4; Proverbs 28:14; 29:1; Jeremiah 7:26; 17:23; 19:15. Note that each instance is in the Hiphil). Furthermore, the verb rendered “grieved” (קָטַח) in Psalm 95:10 could also be translated “loathed” (cf. Ezekiel 6:9; 20:43; 36:31; Psalm 95:10; 119:158; 139:21; Job 8:14; 10:1); it is difficult to think that Jehovah *loathes*, possesses deep-seated abhorrence and detestation of, His beloved saints. Those who *tempt God* in the Psalter, as those did who perished in the wilderness (95:9), are unconverted (Psalm 78:18, 41, 56; 106:14). Similarly, the statement that those who perished “have not known [God’s] ways” (לֹא יָדְעוּ דְרֹתַי) (Psalm 95:10) indicates that those in view are lost sinners, not saints (cf. Exodus 18:20; 33:13; Joshua 3:4; Judges 18:5; Job 21:14; 23:10; Psalm 25:4; 67:3; 95:10; 103:7; 143:8; Proverbs 3:6; 4:19; Isaiah 42:16; 59:8; Jeremiah 5:4-5). In Hebrews 3-4, those to whom God swore in His wrath that they would not enter His rest (Psalm 95:11; Numbers 32:10) are pictured as lost men, not saved people who do not produce fruit or who are not revived.

Anyone who employs Hebrews 3-4 to evidence that some saved people never grow, based on the example of the Israelites who did not believe God and wandered in the wilderness for forty years, errs seriously in his exegesis. Proper hermeneutics does not employ typology to mitigate or overthrow plain didactic statements in Scripture. Furthermore, Hebrews 3-4 presents the people who died in the wilderness as unbelievers

under the wrath of God and headed for hell. Nothing in Hebrews 3-4 favors the idea that saved people can be perpetually ungodly and be dominated by sin, or that sanctification does not begin in the regenerate until a post-conversion second blessing takes place.