

“See that you do not refuse the one who is speaking”: Hearing God Preach and Obedience in the Letter to the Hebrews

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At first sight, the notion of obedience does not seem to be prominent in the Letter to the Hebrews. The author uses the verb ὑπακούω (obey) only two times. In the first passage, he asserts that Jesus “became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey [τοῖς ὑπακούουσιν] him” (Heb 5:9). In the second, he refers to the fact that “Abraham obeyed [ὑπήκουσεν]” when God called him to set out to an unknown place (11:8). Likewise, the noun ὑπακοή (obedience) appears only once, referring to the fact that the Son “learned obedience through what he suffered” (5:8). The other two references to obedience are the use of the passive of πείθω in 13:17, referring to the need to obey church leaders, and εὐλαβέομαι in 11:7, referring to Noah’s obedience in building the ark.

This superficial first impression, however, is misleading. Hebrews is a moving exhortation built upon the conviction that “God has spoken to us in *His* Son” (1:2 NASB, the emphasis is original) and, therefore, “we must pay greater attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it” (2:1 NRSV, as hereafter unless otherwise noted). A study of this complex New Testament document shows that the author seeks through carefully crafted arguments, compelling logic, and moving examples to strengthen the sagging faith of these Christians who courageously suffered in the past public shaming, persecution, and financial loss but have now begun to drift away from Christ and are even in danger of blatant unbelief. William Lane’s description of this document is on the mark: “Hebrews is an expression of passionate and personal concern for

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the Christian addressed.”¹ That is why the argument of Hebrews reaches its climax with a strong exhortation to “hear” God’s voice: “See that you do not refuse the one who is speaking; for if they did not escape when they refused the one who warned them on earth, how much less will we escape if we reject the one who warns from heaven!” (Heb 12:25). Thus, we can appropriately describe Hebrews as a “passionate and personal” exhortation to obey the “word of God.”

The purpose of this paper is to explore Hebrews’ theology of the word of God as the basis for understanding its passionate call to obedience. It is structured around three questions: (1) How has God spoken to us? (2) What has God said? (3) What are the implications of obedience and disobedience? I suggest that we take the climax of the argument, Heb 12:18-25, as the point of departure for understanding Hebrews’ theology of the word of God.²

How Has God Spoken to Us?

Hebrews 12:18-24 consists of a contrast between mounts Sinai and Zion which the author develops into an *a fortiori* argument (“from the lesser to the greater”).³ The author compares here—once again—the experience of the ancient Israelites before Sinai at the inauguration of the first covenant to the experience of believers at Mount Zion on the occasion of the inauguration of the new covenant (cf. 2:1-4; 3:7-4:11; 9:15-23).

On the one hand stands Sinai.⁴ The mountain is enshrouded in the numinous phenomena of the blazing fire, the darkness, the gloom, the tempest, and the sound of the trumpet: all of them powerful physical events that produced fear even in Moses, the mediator of the covenant.

¹ William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*. WBC, ed. David A. Hubbard, Glenn W. Barker, and Ralph P. Martin, 47a (Dallas: Word, 1991), c.

² Kiwoong Son has recently suggested that the symbolism of Sinai and Zion in this passage is the hermeneutical key to the argument of the Letter, *Zion Symbolism in Hebrews: Hebrews 12:18-24 as a Hermeneutical Key to the Epistle*, Paternoster Biblical Monographs (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005).

³ Luke Timothy Johnson, *Hebrews: A Commentary*. NTL, ed. C. Clifton Black and John T. Carroll (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 326. Contra, Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC, ed. I. Howard Marshall and W. Ward Gasque (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 669.

⁴ The mountain itself is not referred by name. The description assumes that the readers are familiar with Deut 4:11-12. Hebrews 12:21 quotes Deut 9:19, which refers to Moses’ fear of approaching God after the golden calf incident.

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This formidable scene climaxes in a “voice” that “made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them” (vs. 19).⁵

On the other hand stands Zion, where a “festal gathering” contrasts with the dreadful scene of Mount Sinai. No phenomena or barriers prevent access to God; instead, believers blend with angels in the celebration that takes place. The description culminates with the “sprinkled blood” of Jesus that “*speaks* a better word than the blood of Abel” (vs. 24, emphasis mine).

The main point of the contrast is that at the climax of each event, both Israel and the believers have “heard” a voice. This is the pivot on which the hortatory argument of the passage turns. On this basis the author warns the readers:

See that you do not refuse *the one who is speaking*; for if they did not escape [ἔξέφυγον] when they refused the one who warned them on earth, how much less will we escape if we reject the one who warns from heaven! (Heb 12:25, emphasis mine.)

Note that this warning repeats, in essence, the first warning of the Letter:

Therefore we must pay greater attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it. For if the message declared through angels was valid, and every transgression or disobedience received a just penalty, how can we escape [ἐκφευξόμεθα] if we neglect so great a salvation? (2:1-3a)⁶

The question is, now, how have the readers heard the voice of God speaking to them from heaven? Also, in what sense is this experience greater than the one Israel experienced at the foot of Sinai when they heard the voice of God speak—literally—the ten commandments? This leads us to the author’s theology of the nature of Scripture.

⁵ Ironically, “The physical phenomena, which might seem to manifest divine power, do more to conceal God than to reveal him.” Craig R. Koester, *Hebrews: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB, ed. William Foxwell Albright and David Noel Freedman, 36 (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 549.

⁶ For the relationship of this passage to Heb 1-2 see Albert Vanhoye, *La structure littéraire de l’Épître aux Hébreux* 2e ed. (Paris: Desclée De Brouwer, 1976), 233-4.

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**Hebrews' Use of the Old Testament Creates a World
in which Believers Stand in the Presence of God**

No other document of the NT quotes the OT as often as does Hebrews.⁷ Beyond the amount of quotations, however, there is something unique to Hebrews' use of Scripture: the oral nature of the word of God and its immediacy.⁸

Pamela Michelle Eisenbaum has noted—and I will follow her argument here—that almost all the quotations from the OT “are quotations of *direct speech*” (emphasis hers).⁹ The significant thing is that whether they quote the oracles of the prophets or the meditations of the psalmist,

⁷ See George H. Guthrie, “Old Testament in Hebrews,” in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament & Its Developments*, ed. Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1997), 841-2. Hebrews scholars do not agree on the number of quotations of, and allusions to, the OT in Hebrews largely because they use different criteria to identify them. For an overview of the different lists and criteria, see S. Kistemaker, *The Psalm Citations in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Amsterdam: van Soest, 1961), 16.

⁸ Pamela Michelle Eisenbaum, *The Jewish Heroes of Christian History: Hebrews 11 in Literary Context*, SBLDS, ed. Pheme Perkins, 156 (Atlanta: Scholars, 1997), 89-133. Richard B. Hays argues convincingly that there was an hermeneutical tradition in early Christianity that understood the Psalms as *having been spoken by Jesus* and that this phenomenon is the matrix from which early Christology rose. Richard B. Hays, “Christ Prays the Psalms: Israel’s Psalter as Matrix of Early Christology,” in *The Conversion of the Imagination: Paul as Interpreter of Israel’s Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 101-18. The difference with Hebrews is that Hebrews emphasizes this aspect in the introduction to its quotations of the OT, while the placing of the Psalms in the mouth of Jesus elsewhere in the NT is implicit.

⁹ Eisenbaum, 92. She identifies the following quotations as being of “direct speech” (the numbers in parenthesis refer to OT passages quoted from the LXX): Heb 1:5a (Ps 2:7); 1:5b (2 Sam 7:14); 1:6b (Deut 32:43); 1:7 (Ps 103:4); 1:8-9 (Ps 44:7-8); 1:10-12 (Ps 101:26-28); 1:13 (Ps 109:1); 2:12 (Ps 21:23); 2:13a (Isa 8:17=2 Sam 22:3); 2:13b (Isa 8:18); 3:7-11 (and several times in the section; Ps 94:7-8); 5:5 (Ps 2:7); 5:6 (Ps 109:4); 6:14 (Gen 22:17); 7:21 (Ps 109:4); 8:5 (Exod 25:40); 8:8-12 (Jer 38:31-34); 9:20 (Exod 24:8); 10:5-7 (Ps 39:7-9); 10:16-17 (Jer 38:31-34); 10:30a (Deut 32:35); 10:30b (Deut 32:36); 10:37a (Isa 26:20-21); 10:37b (Hab 2:3-4); 11:18 (Gen 21:12); 12:5-6 (Prov 3:11-12); 12:21 (Deut 9:19); 12:26 (Hag 2:6); 12:29 (Deut 4:24); 13:5 (Deut 31:8); 13:6 (Ps 117:6).

There are two exceptions: Heb 4:4 (Gen 2:2) and 11:5 (Gen 5:24). There are, as well, two that are of an intermediate nature (neither direct nor indirect speech). These are introduced by the verb *μαρτυρέω*: 2:6-8a (Ps 8:5-7); 7:17 (Ps 109:4). Both of them imply the written nature of the word of God. See Eisenbaum, 98-100.

For the several functions of quotations of direct speech and a brief history of its research, see George W. Savran, *Telling and Retelling: Quotation in Biblical Narrative*, Indiana Studies in Biblical Literature, ed. Herbert Marks and Robert Polzin (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1988), 7-12.

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the author of Hebrews understands and presents them as instances of divine utterance. In some cases, Hebrews quotes God's *ipssissima verba* from the LXX; for example, "I will surely bless you and multiply you" in Heb 6:14 (quoting Gen 22:17). In other cases, when Hebrews quotes a person inspired by God, such as a prophet or a psalmist, it makes no mention of the human agent.¹⁰ Sometimes the quotation itself makes clear that God is speaking: for example, "The days are surely coming, *says the Lord*, when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel . . ." (Heb 8:8, quoting LXX Jer 38:31, emphasis mine). Other times, the use of the first person in the quotation itself identifies God as the speaker; for example, "*I* will be his Father, and he will be my Son" (Heb 1:5, quoting LXX 2 Sam 7:14, emphasis mine). Finally, in the vast majority of cases, Hebrews introduces the quotation with a verb of saying in which God is the subject.¹¹

Thus, implicitly or explicitly, the author of Hebrews describes God as speaking directly to the audience of the letter in the words of the Scriptures. Note that the "word of God" is spoken, not written.¹² It is a striking fact that the author of Hebrews does not use the common formula "as it is written." Many other ancient authors—including Qumran and the Mishnah—use verbs of saying to introduce Old Testament quotations; however, "no other author uses them to the complete exclusion of

¹⁰ There are three exceptions: David is mentioned Heb 4:7 and Moses in 9:19-20 and 12:21. In both cases, however, the mention of the human agent is necessary for the argument of the letter. There are two quotations of an intermediary nature, 2:6-8a (Ps 8:5-7) and 7:17 (Ps 109:4).

¹¹ There are cases in which Jesus (2:12; 10:5) or the Holy Spirit (3:7) is identified as the speaker. Verbs of saying are common in introductory formulas for the quotation of Scripture in Qumran, the NT, and the Mishnah. See Joseph A. Fitzmyer, "The Use of Explicit Old Testament Quotations in Qumran Literature and in the New Testament," in *Essays on the Semitic Background of the New Testament*, SBLSPS, no. 5 (Missoula: Society of Biblical Literature and Scholars Press, 1974), 7-17; Bruce M. Metzger, "The Formulas Introducing Quotations of Scripture in the NT and the Mishnah," *JBL* 70 (1951): 297-307. Note, however, that only in a few cases is God the subject of the verb in Qumran and the NT. See Fitzmyer, "The Use of Explicit Old Testament Quotations," 10-12. In the Mishnah, the great majority of cases use the Niphal form of the verb—implying its written nature. In the minority of cases where the active form is used, the Scriptures or God are the implied subject; Metzger, "Formulas," 298-9.

¹² This does not negate the author of Hebrews' recognition that God has spoken through human agents. Hebrews 1:1 makes clear that he understands this; Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 24. However, he has chosen to present Scripture as spoken immediately by God in the presence of or to the audience; see Eisenbaum, 97; Luke Timothy Johnson, "The Scriptural World of Hebrews," *Int* 57 (2003): 239-40.

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writing verbs or references to scripture *qua* scripture, i.e., as written text.”¹³

This leads us to the second peculiar characteristic of Hebrews’ use of Scripture: its immediacy. Note that a quotation of direct speech—as the vast majority of Hebrews’ quotations are—is in fact a subcategory of the more general term “quotation,” and it has unique characteristics.¹⁴ A quotation evokes the past and therefore is bound to the original context and meaning.¹⁵ As George W. Savran affirms: “Repetition [i.e., quotation] . . . de-emphasizes the present moment by *supplying the perspective of an earlier time*” (emphasis mine).¹⁶ A quotation of direct speech has a different force, however. It “*speaks directly to and within the new context*, with as much immediate impact as it had in its original context” (emphasis mine).¹⁷ In other words, a quotation refers the hearer to a time and context different than his, but the quotation of direct speech *re-uses* the past to speak to the hearer in the present. Thus, the “quotations in

¹³ Eisenbaum, 97. “The author never uses the word ‘written’ in any form in connection with biblical material” (Eisenbaum, 97). Hebrews 2:6 and 7:17, however, seem to imply or at least to point towards the written nature of the word of God. Kenneth Schenck suggests that the author considered the scriptures as “instantiations” of the word of God, “God Has Spoken: Hebrews’ Theology of the Scriptures,” Paper presented at the the St Andrews Conference on the Epistle to the Hebrews and Christian Theology (St Mary’s College, St Andrews, Scotland, July 18-22, 2006).

¹⁴ Savran, 7.

¹⁵ A quotation is a speech-act and, as such, not only informs or describes something, but is itself an act. Speech acts comprise (1) locution (what is actually said), (2) illocution (what is done or accomplished in an utterance), and (3) perlocution (the effect on the hearer). [See J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1962). Also, the development and refinement of his ideas in John R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1969).] We are interested here with the illocutionary force of quotations, that is, with what they accomplish or do.

A quotation may “accomplish” or “do” several things. For example, a quotation may lend an “air of objectivity” to the argument of the author who quotes the words of another as independent witness of his point of view. If that independent witness is a recognized authority, it gives the “illusion of external evidence.” A quotation may demonstrate the fulfillment of a past idea in the present. Also, the repetition of something said in the past suggests a comparison between the past and the present. See Eisenbaum, 110. On the illocutionary force of Hebrews’ description of God’s speech, see also Dunnill, 245-8. Cf. Harold W. Attridge, “God in Hebrews: Urging Children to Heavenly Glory,” in *The Forgotten God: Perspectives in Biblical Theology*, ed. A. Andrew Das and Frank J. Matera (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 203-8.

¹⁶ Savran, 12.

¹⁷ Eisenbaum, 109. Also Schenck.

Hebrews are reused prophetic oracles” which retain their original oracular force.¹⁸

The effect of the use of direct speech in Hebrews is, then, that Hebrews’ quotations are not used to refer to or evoke something God said in the past but “re-present” God’s words to the audience in the present.¹⁹ They speak “directly to and within the new context” of the audience. In this sense, they are a new speech-act of God.²⁰ Accordingly, Hebrews not only uses verbs of saying to introduce its quotations from Scripture but also, in most of the cases, the verb form introducing the quotation is present indicative or a present participle.²¹

This immediacy of the word of God in Hebrews is very important for its hortatory argument. By means of the quotation of the word of God as direct speech, Hebrews has made a “theological redescription of time and space.”²² In other words, it has constructed through Scripture a world where the readers—or, hearers—stand in the presence of God and hear him speak.

Now, what is God saying?

What Has God Said?

Hebrews 12:22 describes God speaking at Mount Zion.²³ This is the only place where Mount Zion is explicitly referred to in Hebrews; nonetheless, Mount Zion is the scriptural background to the events referred to through scriptural quotations in the Epistle.²⁴

¹⁸ Eisenbaum, 111. Her discussion of the function of prophetic biblical oracles in Hebrews in contrast to their function in Matthew and John, for example, is illuminating.

¹⁹ They refer to or evoke the past only *indirectly* because the readers know that the author is using the words of Scripture. See Luke Timothy Johnson, “Scriptural World,” 240-41.

²⁰ Savran, 14.

²¹ I am referring here to the large majority of verses in which God is implicitly or explicitly understood as the subject.

²² John Dunnill, *Covenant and Sacrifice in the Letter to the Hebrews*, SNTSMS, ed. Margaret E. Thrall, 75 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992), 134. Also Luke Timothy Johnson, “Scriptural World,” 239-47.

²³ The priority in the structure of the sentence and the contrast to Mount Sinai in vss. 18-21 suggest that Mount Zion is the chief definition of the place in this passage.

²⁴ For an introduction to Zion traditions in the Hebrew Bible, see Jon D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible*, New Voices in Biblical Studies, ed. Adela Yarbro Collins and John J. Collins (Minneapolis: Winston, 1985). For the study of Zion traditions in Hebrews, see Kiwoong Son.

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First, Mount Zion is the place where Jesus, the Son of God, has been enthroned. Three of the Psalms Hebrews uses to describe the enthronement of the Son in Chap. 1 have Mount Zion as their context. Hebrews 1:5 (also 5:5) quotes Psalm 2:7, which refers to an event happening at Mount Zion: “‘I have set my king *on Zion*, my holy hill.’ I will tell of the decree of the LORD: He said to me, ‘You are my son; today I have begotten you’” (Psalm 2:6-7, emphasis mine). Likewise, Ps 110:1, quoted in Heb 1:3, 13 (*passim*), refers to an event in Zion: “The LORD says to my lord, ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.’ The LORD sends out *from Zion* your mighty scepter. Rule in the midst of your foes” (Ps 110:1-2, emphasis mine). Finally, the acclamation of Jesus’ eternal rule in Heb 1:10-12 uses the words of Ps 102:21-25 that have, again, Zion as their context (cf. vss. 13, 16, 21).

Second, Mount Zion is the place where the Son was appointed “priest for ever, according to the order of Melchizedek” (Heb 5:6). The introduction of Jesus’ appointment as priest (5:6) with a reference to his adoption as Son of God (5:5) links the appointment of Jesus as high priest with his enthronement as king. Likewise, the scriptural context to Ps 110:4—the scriptural basis for Jesus’ appointment as high priest—is, again, Mount Zion (cf. Ps 110:2).

Finally, the argument of Hebrews implies that Zion is also the place where the covenant is inaugurated. Hebrews 7:12 argues that a change in the priesthood implies a change in the law (cf. 7:11-19).²⁵ From this, the author develops the notion that a new covenant has been inaugurated with the appointment of Jesus as high priest (chaps. 8-10). This is confirmed in Heb 12:24, where at the center of the “festal gathering” at

²⁵ Hebrews 7:11-19 makes clear that a change in the law refers here to a change in the law of priesthood. Similarly, Hebrews 10:8,9,18 declares that animal sacrifices have been abolished and Heb 8:1-6; 9:8-10 refers to the supersession of the earthly sanctuary. Hebrews 10:1 refers to these three things as shadows “of the good things to come” (7:23-28; 8:5; 9:12-14). They are ritual aspects of the law that prefigured the realities of the new covenant (see note 9:9; also Col. 2:17). The author argues that these “shadows” were abolished once the “real thing” came (7:11-19; 9:8; 10:9,18). On the other hand, the author contends that the law itself—that is, what was not a shadow—was confirmed by being written on the *hearts* of believers (8:7-12; 10:16-17). The author of Hebrews also explains that the problem of the first covenant resided not in the covenant itself, but in the unfaithfulness of the people (8:7-8). For a study of the failure of the first covenant and its relation to the new covenant, see Skip MacCarty, *In Granite or Ingrained?: What the Old and New Covenants Reveal about the Gospel, the Law, and the Sabbath*, (Berrien Springs: Andrews UP, 2007).

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Mount Zion stand “Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and . . . the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.”

These three events—Jesus’ enthronement, his appointment as high priest, and the inauguration of the new covenant—constitute the backbone of the structure of Hebrews’ expository sections, and all of them are performed through God’s speech—or what contemporary philosophers would call God’s “illocution.”²⁶ God enthrones Jesus above the angels (Heb 1-2) with the words of a catena of Psalms (Heb 1:5-14)—especially Pss 2:7 and 110:1. God appoints Jesus as high priest (Heb 5-7) with the oath of Ps 110:4. God creates a new covenant (Heb 8-10) with the words of Jer 31:31-34. Therefore, by referring to and using Scripture as God’s *own speech* in his exposition, the author of Hebrews has constructed a world in which the audience stands at Mount Zion where they hear God speak and, hence, witness the enthronement of the Son, his appointment as high priest, and the inauguration of the new covenant.²⁷

What are the Implications of Obedience and Disobedience?

This leads us to an important realization. To reject the voice of God in Hebrews means to refuse Jesus as the ruler seated at the right hand of God, to disavow him as our high priest in the heavenly sanctuary, and to repudiate the provisions of the new covenant. On the other hand, to “hear” or “obey” the word of God means to acknowledge Jesus as our leader and follow him into the rest of God (Heb 4), to confess Jesus as our high priest and draw near with confidence because of his intercession into the presence of God (Heb 4:14-16; 10:19-23), and to own the provisions of the new covenant by embracing the “once for all” sacrifice of Christ and its benefits, renouncing the multiple sacrifices of the old covenant.

²⁶ Hebrews’ exposition follows a logical order that develops step by step from Jesus’ enthronement (Heb 1-4), through his appointment as high priest (Heb 5-7), to the inauguration of the new covenant (Heb 8-10). For a description of this linear development of the exposition of Hebrews, see Guthrie, *The Structure of Hebrews*, 116-27. For a fuller analysis of God’s speech and a description of its role in the argument of Hebrews, see Attridge, “God in Hebrews,” 203-8.

²⁷ As Harold W. Attridge notes, “Hebrews . . . operates with the conceit that readers and hearers of Scripture can listen to God speaking to the Son and ultimately to all God’s children. In this conceit, the character of God and of his scriptural speech provides the raw material for both reflection and parenthesis. . . . In the development of this conceit resides the most creative theological work of this complex text.” Attridge, “God in Hebrews,” 203-4.

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Thus, the stakes for obedience in Hebrews are very high. On the one hand, the rewards are exceedingly generous. God offers faithful believers even better promises than those offered under the first covenant (Heb 8:6).²⁸ The author claims that “it is impossible that God would prove false” to his promises so that “we who have taken refuge might be strongly encouraged to seize the hope set before us” (6:18). For those who take refuge in him, “he always lives to make intercession for them” (7:25). On the other hand, the penalties are very harsh.²⁹ The author warns the readers about the dire consequences of disobedience. It is impossible to restore to repentance those who spurn the son of God (10:26) and hold him up to contempt (8:4-6). They will suffer the “wrath of God” (10:26-31).

Disobedience implies the rejection of the rule of Jesus as king, his intercession as high priest, and the provisions of the new covenant. In other words, it means the rejection of grace.

The promises and warnings of Hebrews are especially relevant for us in the 21st century. We might think that those who heard Jesus speak and saw him perform miracles have a greater responsibility than we who have met him only through the words of Scripture. Hebrews argues the opposite, however. The readers did not hear God speak at Mount Sinai or Jesus while on earth (2:1-4); yet, they have greater responsibility because they hear God’s voice speaking to them through Scripture. This is, in my

²⁸ The old covenant promised the faithful “rest” from their pilgrimage in the land of Canaan (Heb 3:7-19); God, however, offers new covenant believers the opportunity to enter God’s “own” rest, the very rest he experienced on the first Sabbath after creation (Heb 4:1-11). The old covenant offered a gentle high priest able to have compassion for weak human beings who are tempted (5:1-4); the new covenant, however, provides an eternal high priest who “has been tested as we are, yet without sin” (4:15) and is “able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them” (7:25). The old covenant provided ritual means to cleanse the flesh from defilement (9:10,13), but the new covenant provided a “once for all” sacrifice that cleanses the conscience from sin (9:9,14,26). The heroes of faith looked forward to a homeland, a city promised by God; new covenant believers, however, have arrived at the heavenly Jerusalem (12:22-24). In other words, the old covenant promises were as inferior to the new covenant realities as the “shadow” is inferior to the “true form” of reality (10:1).

²⁹ Old covenant people were forbidden to enter Canaan; new covenant people, the presence of God (Heb 4). Those unwilling to enter the rest faced the “sword of the Amalekites and Canaanites” (Num 14:43-45); new covenant people will face the “word of God” that is “sharper than any two-edged sword” and able to discern “the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Heb 4:12). In short, the consequences are harsher under the new covenant, just as spiritual penalties are harsher than material ones.

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view, the most striking teaching of Hebrews regarding obedience. Hebrews places the authority of Scripture over the authority of sense experience. What you “hear” through Scripture is more authoritative than what you see, touch, hear, or taste through the senses.

Luke Timothy Johnson is correct in his conclusion:

Scripture . . . is not simply a collection of ancient texts that can throw light on the present through analogy; it is the voice of the living God who speaks through the text directly and urgently to people in the present. The word of God is therefore living and active (4:12).³⁰

Therefore, Hebrews’ warning continues to be relevant for us who hear today God speak in Scriptures: “if they did not escape when they refused the one who warned them on earth, how much less will we escape if we reject the one who warns from heaven!” (12:25).

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³⁰ “Scriptural World,” 240-41.