

EXEGESIS OF HEBREWS 10:32-39 WITH SPECIAL ATTENTION ON THE USE OF
HABAKKUK 2:3-4

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Introduction

In the following paper we will exegete Hebrews 10:32-39 while giving special attention to how the author uses Habakkuk 2:3-4 in his argument. In order to do this we will begin by summarizing the message of this epistle. Then we will examine the context of the passages surrounding Heb. 10:32-39. Then we will examine the focus passage.

Once we have done these steps we will explore how Hab. 2:3-4 functions in the context of that book before we seek to understand how the author of Hebrews applied it to his message. These steps will allow us to gain a greater appreciation for how the author of this epistle understands the nature of faith. It will also help to clarify what it means for someone to “go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth.” (Heb. 10:26)

Context of Hebrews 10:32-39

The Context of the Epistle

The Epistle to the Hebrews has a general theme that “is not in dispute: the unqualified supremacy of God’s Son, Jesus Christ, a supremacy that brooks no challenge from angelic or human beings.”¹ Therefore, the agenda of the author in each section of this epistle is to show *in what sense* Christ is supreme. Since he opens this letter informing his audience that God has spoken in a new way that is superior to the ways in which he addressed the fathers of the Jewish people he has no intention of allowing the readers to ponder whether or not something from the Jewish tradition is equal to Christ, or worst, superior to Christ.

The Son is the means by which God addresses the world in “these last days”. God has declared the beginning of the end in Christ. As Raymond E. Brown wrote, “In the eschatological context of the last days, the introduction (1:1-3) affirms the superiority of Christ over all that has

¹ D.A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992. 391.

gone before in Israel.”² Jesus is God’s last word regarding salvation until the day when the one who has been appointed “heir of all things” (v. 3) rightfully receives that inheritance.

The purpose of this epistle appears to be to exhort those who are considering returning to that which is outdated. There are some who are on the verge of rejecting this new revelation given by God through Christ. There is some debate over whether or not the audience is made up of Jewish Christians reconsidering returning to Judaism or Jewish Christians who have come to believe that Christ is not sufficient and therefore aspects of Judaism must be reinstated in order to make everything complete.³ Whichever of these two options are closest to the truth is of little importance compared to the fact that orthodox Christology is being rethought by the audience of this epistle and this is one area where there is no room for error. To demote Jesus to anything less than what God has declared him to be is to reject what God has declared to be true.

In several places within this epistle the author addresses his audience with what is known as “warning passages”. Those passages are 2:1-4; 4:11-13; 6:4-8; 10:26-31; and 12:25-29. While we are unable to address each of these passages we do believe that the focus of this paper will allow us to better understand how these warning passages function. Especially since 10:32-39 directly follows the fourth warning passage in 10:26-31.

The Pre-Text

In 10:26-31 we find statements that have worried readers over and over again for many generations. In v. 26 we read, “If we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins.” This has caused many to fret over the possibility that while our initial salvation may come by grace through faith our sanctification is by works. This is not how vv. 26-31 should be read.

² Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, New York, NY: Doubleday, 1997. 683.

³ Carson, 401-404.

In v. 26 we notice two things of importance. First, ἔκουσίως implies some of premeditated, intentional behavior. It is translated something like “willfully” or “deliberately”. In itself this point does not settle the problem so the second observation we must make is that ἁμαρτανόντων is a present, active participle. This implies a continual action which is why it is translated something like “go on sinning” or “keep on sinning”. We can gain from this that whatever the author means by “sinning” he means (1) it is intentional and (2) it is continual.

Is the “sinning” in this passage to be understood as moralistic? No. In 10:29 we are given a better understanding of what it means to “willfully go on sinning”. This occurs when (1) someone “trampled under foot the Son of God”, has (2) “profaned the blood of the covenant” and (3) has “outraged the Spirit of grace”. Ben Witherington notes that this means v. 26 implies that “if someone rejects and refuses the one recourse from sinning—the one means by which one can be saved—then one has committed apostasy.”⁴ The only way to do those things mentioned in v. 29 is to continually *reject Christ as the sufficient means of entering into New Covenant salvation*. The content of 10:32-39 will confirm this assertion.

The Post-Text

The context immediately following 10:32-39 is the famous eleventh chapter where examples of faith from Jewish history are cited as examples of what it means to actually live by faith in God. We notice that each person that is mentioned is a person who has major flaws, who had doubts, and who many would consider failures. The one thing that brings each of these characters together is that when it mattered they obeyed God in faith.

While many of these characters lived lives that exemplify victory over the elements there were some whose story ended in less than ideal ways. In v. 37-38 the author mentions that some

⁴ Ben Witherington, *Letters and Homilies for Jewish Christians: A Social-Rhetorical Commentary on Hebrews, James, and Jude*, Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007. 288.

were stoned, sawed apart, murdered by the sword, made wandering nomads, and so forth. The author states in v. 39 that these people gained approval from God by means of faith (juxtaposed with any ritual or allegiance from/to Judaism). These ones did not see the promises of God come to pass. In v. 40 the author reminds his readers that God has provided something better for us which 12:2 clarifies to be Jesus. If the people of old could maintain their faith in the promises of God before Christ arrived then how much more so should those who hear the voice of God through Christ?

Exegesis of Hebrews 10:32-39

As we read 10:32-39 we ought to do so noting that this section should divide after v. 35 into two paragraphs. This “recognizes that vv. 32-35 are turned mainly toward the past, while vv. 36-39 point forward.”⁵ We will now exegete this passage by focusing on these two sections: vv. 32-35 and vv. 36-39.

Heb. 10:32-35

David A DeSilva notes that in this section, “The author...sets out to praise those who have embodied the course he is advising.”⁶ This is supported by how the author closes out this argument in v. 39 when he assumes his audience consists of those who “have faith and preserve their souls”. The readers are asked to “remember/recall” (Ἀναμνησθεσθε) the “former days”. These were the days when they were “enlightened” (φωτισθέντες). The aorist passive form of this word suggests that there was a particular moment when this enlightening occurred.

Enlightenment here likely refers to the truth of Jesus as the Messiah/the message of Jesus. Throughout this epistle Christ is the center. The issue here is whether or not the readers will be

⁵ Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NIGTC, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993. 544.

⁶ David A. DeSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Epistle “the the Hebrews”*, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000. 357.

faithful to what they know about Christ. Therefore, the enlightenment must have been when God opened their eyes to see Jesus.

In these days the readers endured πολλήν ἄθλησιν. Ellingworth points out the use of πολὺς is to indicate degree.⁷ These were “hard/harsh” conflicts. Thomas G. Long understands this to be an athletic image and therefore the phrase should be translated as “you endured a *contest of suffering*”.⁸ Therefore, in v. 32, the author want to motivate his readers to maintain their faith by reminding them of how much they were able to endure when they first became enlightened.

In v. 33 the author outlines the details to this “great conflict of sufferings”. Paul Ellingworth observes that τοῦτο μὲν... τοῦτο δὲ, “denotes correspondence rather than contrast or separation”.⁹ The humiliating public exposure of some was supported by others who shared in their treatment.

G.H. Gunthrie notes that the verb θεατριζόμενοι once had the meaning “to bring up on stage”, but he notes that the word eventually evolved to refer to a merely making a public spectacle of someone.¹⁰ The words νειδισμοῖς τε καὶ θλίψεσιν indicate great disgrace and “tribulation” that should have shaken the faith of these Christians. These Christians were socially isolated and they were made examples to others who would consider joining this movement.

The end of v. 33 smoothly transitions into v. 34. Ellingworth and Nida explain γὰρ functions as a means of making the beginning of v. 34 “expand and support” the end of v. 33.¹¹In

⁷ Ellingworth, 545.

⁸ Thomas G. Long, *Hebrews*, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997. 111.

⁹ Ellingworth, 546.

¹⁰ George H. Gunthrie, *The NIV Application Commentary: Hebrews*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998. 359.

¹¹ Paul Ellingworth and Eugene A. Nida, *A Translator's Handbook on The Letter to the Hebrews*, London, UK: United Bible Societies, 1983. 243.

v. 33 the second group of people—those who stood by the side of those who were publically shamed—were the people who also “showed sympathy to the prisoners”.

Ellingworth states that *συνεπαθήσατε* with a dative does not mean to “suffer with” but to be “sympathetically affected”.¹² This contrast the perspective he held in his textual commentary with Nida where they wrote, “[I]t is important to indicate that the readers actually suffered themselves.”¹³ Various translations also appear to disagree on whether or not we have one group who suffered and another who sympathized with them, or if the second group actively took part in the suffering of the first group. Translation include “had compassion” (ESV), “showed sympathy” (NASB), and “shared the sufferings” (NET).

Luke Timothy Johnson argues that the stronger rendering—suffered with—“better suits the conception of them as ‘partners’” (*κοινωνοὶ* in v. 33).¹⁴ This would make better sense of the next statement of vv. 34 where the author does not make any distinction between those who “shared” in the sufferings and those who “accepted joyfully the seizure of your property.”

ἀρπαγὴν connotes robbery or plunder. Those who lost their possessions lost them with force. The ESV (“plundering”) and NASB (“seizing”) do a better job of conveying this word than the NET and NIV rendering, “confiscated”. While these ones may not have suffered in prison they did suffer the loss of their possessions.

Ellingworth states that *ὑπαρχόντων* “is a verbal noun from *ὑπάρχω*, ‘to be (someone’s) disposal’; hence available resources”.¹⁵ The emphasis here is that whatever material resources these Christians had when they converted was quickly lost when they were forcefully taken from

¹² Ellingworth, 548.

¹³ Ellingworth and Nida, 243.

¹⁴ Luke Timothy Johnson, *Hebrews: a Commentary*, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006. 270.

¹⁵ Ellingworth, 548.

them *because of their faith*. Nevertheless, these Christians accepted (προσεδέξασθε) the seizing of their material resources *joyfully* (μετὰ χαρᾶς).

We should not understand προσεδέξασθε as merely a begrudged “acceptance” of their loss of possessions. Of course, μετὰ χαρᾶς modifies προσεδέξασθε so that the reader understands the action was done “joyfully”. But προσεδέξασθε in itself means “receiving or welcoming someone or something”.¹⁶ Therefore, it should be understood that these Christians “joyfully welcome” the seizure of their property “The joy with which the hearers welcomed their affliction was grounded in a certain perception of reality. They were able to have ‘joy’ when their human property was taken away “because they knew” (*ginoskontes*): their understanding of the nature and certainty of the promise made by God was then sufficient not only to endure but to endure joyfully, rather than ‘abandon their assemblies’ as some of them are now doing (10:25).”¹⁷

In the next statement κρείττονα indicates degree: it is a comparative form of ἀγαθός (good). The “existing things”, “possessions” (ὑπαρξιν) that they have are “better” than those possessions (ὑπαρχόντων) that were stolen from them. Furthermore, the possession that they still have are “abiding” (μένουσαν). This implies that the author wanted to remind his audience that what they lost was not only material, it was temporal. The possessions that they retained are spiritual; they are eternal.

Μὴ ἀποβάλητε in v. 35 is an exhortation not to “throw away” their παρρησίαν. This is boldness, confidence. This is the characteristic that was most evident in the community in those first days during the persecutions. This is what allowed those who were not immediately persecuted to go and share the sufferings of those in prison.

¹⁶ Ibid, 549.

¹⁷ Johnson, 271.

It is this boldness/confidence that cannot be thrown away. If it is maintained there will be a “reward” (μισθαποδοσίαν). Again the author uses an adjective that indicates degree: μεγάλην.

The reward will be “great”.

Heb. 10:36-39

The author shifts his focus from the past to the future beginning in v. 36. In v. 35 he acknowledges that his audience had had boldness/confidence and he encourages them to maintain that. In this transition it is evident that he sees his audience as able to continue on if only they would add “patience/endurance”.

The present active indicative ἔχετε states that this is what is needed (χρεῖαν) at this moment. ὑπομονῆς can be translated endurance, perseverance, or patience. The author wants them to see what they do not need is to throw away what they have—boldness/confidence. Instead what they do need is to add something to that boldness/confidence—patience/endurance.

“The boldness has a great reward, but only if they hold on to it the way they did in the past.”¹⁸ This is the “will of God” that they are to do—endure (ἵνα τὸ θέλημα τοῦ θεοῦ ποιήσαντες). The end of v. 36 reiterates the end of v. 35, except this time the “great reward” is now the promise (ἐπαγγελίαν).

In vv. 37-38 the author applies Hab. 2:3-4 to the current situation of the readers. This is done by the Apostle Paul in Rom. 1:17 and Gal. 3:11 as well as the Qumran community in 1QpHab. Each of these authors has a different approach to reading Hab. 2:3-4 when applying it to their audience.

Before we explore Hab. 2:3-4 in its original context, and before we seek to understand how it functions in this passage, we must first look at vv. 37-38 as it fits in this context. The

¹⁸ Ibid, 272.

author continues his eschatological theme by reminding the audience that the coming one is coming. He develops a sense of immediacy when he used the phrase μικρὸν ὅσον ὅσον. This could be literally translated something like “as little as long as long as”, but as Ellington and Nida notes, it is better translated something like “just a little while longer”, “in a very short time”, “not long from now”, or “soon”.¹⁹ This statement is lifted from the LXX translation of Isa. 26:20.

The author then launches into semi-quote of Hab. 2:3. In this passage he writes, “the coming one will come and not delay.” This statement echoes back to v. 25 where “the day” is mentioned, this is the “the day of the Lord”. Ellington is correct to note that this is likely in reference to Messiah.²⁰ N.T. Wright adds, “the point here in Hebrews 10:37 is that, with the coming of the Messiah, the devastating judgment on the one hand, and the rescue from it on the other, are not far off.”²¹ The future indicative ἔξει reminds the readers that this is an event yet to take place, but contextually it should not be seen as too far away.

In v. 38 the quote moves to Hab. 2:4. The “righteous one” (δίκαιός) has nothing to do with someone who is morally upright, per se, but rather one who is declared righteous by God. The one who is declared righteous by God, and therefore avoids judgment, does so ἐκ πίστεως. The preposition should be understood as a being used with a genitive of means. The righteous one “will live” (future tense) (ζήσεται) by the means of faith.

Again, this points toward the future and it is eschatologically driven. When Messiah judges the one who lives will live by means of faith. In some sense the author is trying to urge

¹⁹ Ellington and Nida, 245.

²⁰ Ellington, 554.

²¹ N.T. Wright, *Hebrews for Everyone*, Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2004. 124.

his audience to have the fear of God. As Ben Witherington writes, "...our author is trying to head off apostasy."²²

Those who do not live by faith ὑποστείλῃται. This is retreating, withdrawing. That person is not considered good by God (οὐκ εὐδοκεῖ). In fact they very "soul" or "person" of God (ἡ ψυχῆ) is grieved by such a person. That person will be judged at the Second Coming of Messiah.

In v. 39 those who retreat do so "into destruction" (εἰς ἀπώλειαν). Again, this refers to eschatological judgment. If one does not live by faith now, when Messiah returns they will be destroyed. The author uses two tactics in this statement. First, as in v. 32, he assumes the best about his readers and he says that he believes he is not speaking about them. Second, he does note that there may be some who he is speaking toward and therefore they must be warned that they are in danger of judgment. Those who truly have faith will not lapse back. Those who truly have faith will realize that whatever persecution has come their way is nothing compared to the judgment that comes from God.

Context of Habakkuk 2:3-4

Walter Brueggemann writes that the Book of Habakkuk deals with the question of theodicy while "it is transposed into international affairs."²³ The prophet, beginning in 1:2, laments the wickedness of Judah as well as the pagan nations. He wonders why YHWH has not intervened and why YHWH allows this injustice to continue. YHWH replies in 2:2 when he gives Habakkuk a vision to write down. He promises that this vision will not be delayed, but it will come to pass (כִּי־בֹא יְהוָה לֹא יִאָּחֵר in 2:3). In this vision he assures Habakkuk that,

²² Witherington, 291.

²³ Walter Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination*, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003. 241.

“The judgment for which he pleads is twofold: vengeance on the wicked and vindication of the righteous.”²⁴

The positive side of this promise, which inspired the author of Hebrews, a Qumran author, and the Apostle Paul, is “the righteous one by his faithfulness he will live” (יְחִיָּהּ: וְצַדִּיק בְּאַמוּנָתוֹ). David Eckman notes that אֱמוּנָה is derived from אָמַן which introduces the idea of believing/trusting in something. Therefore, in Hab. 2:4, YHWH is guaranteeing that the one is continually believing, and therefore trusting, in YHWH is the one who displays continual faithfulness.²⁵

The context of Hab. 2:3-4 is that YHWH has a message for the prophet that answers his question about why YHWH has delayed judgment and why YHWH is judging in the way that he is judging (i.e. Why YHWH would judge wicked Judah with *even more wicked* Babylon). The answer is that those who faithfully adhere to the law of YHWH, those who believe YHWH “when all the religious institutions...fail”²⁶, those ones will survive that day of judgment.

The LXX of Hab. 2:4 differs from the MT. The MT reads:

הִנֵּה עֹפֵלָה לְאִישׁוֹרָה נִפְשׁוֹ בּוֹ וְצַדִּיק בְּאַמוּנָתוֹ יְחִיָּהּ:

“Behold, he is inflated; he is not upright, but the righteous one according to faithfulness he will live.” The MT juxtaposes the proud one with the righteous one who will live because of *his own personal* faithfulness to YHWH. This differs from the LXX which reads: ἐὰν ὑποστείληται οὐκ εὐδοκεῖ ἡ ψυχὴ μου ἐν αὐτῷ ὁ δὲ δίκαιος ἐκ πίστεώς μου ζήσεται. “If he withdraws my soul is not well unto him, but the righteous one from *my faith(fulness)* he will live.

²⁴ William Sanford Lasor, David Allan Hubbard, and Frederic Wm. Bush, *Old Testament Survey: The Message, Form, and Background of the Old Testament*, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996. 323.

²⁵ David Eckman, June 11, 2009.

²⁶ Ibid.

In the LXX the man is no longer a proud man, per se, but rather one who retreats. The “soul/being” of YHWH is not “well/good/pleased” with this one. On the other hand, the righteous one will live, but by *the faithfulness of YHWH*, rather than by his own faithfulness. Oddly enough the author of Hebrews appears to have combined the LXX rendering of first part of 2:4 with the MT gloss of the second part.

Function of Habakkuk 2:3-4 in Hebrews 10:32-39

While we agree that “The meaning of the text as quoted here must not be confused...with the meaning of the Hebrew and Greek texts of Habakkuk”²⁷ we do argue that there is a reason that the author of Hebrews decided to use this short quotation as an echo for the situation he was addressing with his readers. The *Siz im Leban* of the prophet Habakkuk parallels that of the author of Hebrews (as well as the Qumran author, and the Apostle Paul, for that matter) in that the author is (1) identifying a period of judgment from God and (2) the religious institutions that used to serve as a means by which people could approach God are failing in this context of judgment and (3) God has promised that those who are faithful to Him will live. This is the idea that the author of Hebrews intended to echo to his audience (who likely were Jews who would have recognized the words of Habakkuk).

In v. 37 the author updates the message of Habakkuk. It is no longer the fulfillment of the vision given by YHWH that must be waited upon that is surely coming, but rather the returning Messiah. As we noted earlier this epistle is Jesus-centric and it is obvious to most commentators that “the one who is coming” is none other than Jesus himself.

In v. 38 the author uses the LXX reading of Hab. 2:4, in his own words, to urge the reader to remember that the one who “shrinks back” or “withdraws” *is not the one who lives by faith*. Therefore, according to the author of Hebrews, authentic faith does not draw back. The

²⁷ Ellington and Nida, 245.

righteous one will be saved by God; the wicked will be destroyed. This clarifies what the author intended to say in v. 26 when he notes that someone could “go on sinning”. There are two options: continue in faith until the end (authentic faith) or at some point reject Jesus and therefore prove your faith to be false faith and continue sinning.

Summary and Conclusion

The author of the epistle to the Hebrews understood that there is a fine line between the authentic faith of those elected by God and the pseudo-faith of those who were once “enlightened”, and who *claimed* to be people of faith, yet who prove that their faith was false because it did not endure to the end. Authentic faith is *faithfulness*. Authentic faith *continues* and the one with authentic faith.

In 10:37-39 the author shows that there are two groups of people: (1) those that withdraw and therefore are destroyed when “the coming one” arrives and (2) those that have authentic faith and therefore are declared righteous which results in life. For modern expositors the question many ask is how this truth relates to debates between those of that adhere to Arminianism and those who adhere to Calvinism. We would argue that neither view sufficiently answers every nuance of this debate as relates to this epistle, but we further point out that the author sees faith that does not continue as *pseudo-faith*. He does not see a person as having authentic faith and then losing that faith at some point. Instead, the one who withdraws never was a person of faith.

Equally, the author does not say that the person who falls away has fallen away from *salvation* (although this is implied in some sense because to fall away is to forfeit any chance at salvation) but rather the one who falls away falls away from the enlightenment that was given to them. While Arminianism is correct to note that there is something serious about falling away and that it is authentic apostasy, Calvinism is correct that if this person had genuine faith, and

therefore genuine salvation, that person would *live when Christ comes to judge*. Since those who fall away do not continue in faith we can conclude that the faith they displayed was false, the salvation that they confessed was never obtained, and that the most such a person had ever obtained was enlightenment since authentic salvation must be past, present, *and future*.

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