

## False Believers in the Letter to the Hebrews

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### I. Introduction

The letter to the Hebrews was written to show the superiority of Christ over Judaism by demonstrating that Jesus is superior to angels, Moses and Aaronic high priests. The goal was to encourage the recipients of the letter not to fall away from their faith in Christ reverting back to Judaism. The author of Hebrews warns the recipients that they would fall under God's severe judgment if they succumbed to the temptation and renounced their faith in Jesus Christ. The author does not seem to consider all the recipients in danger of apostasy but rather some individuals (4:1, 11; 6:11) as I will try show later in this paper.

The purpose of this paper is to make a case that the individuals to whom the warnings are addressed are false believers. False believers may be broadly defined as those who are within the believing community without having been regenerated.<sup>1</sup> The warnings in the Letter to the Hebrews may be understood as warnings addressed to the whole community but specifically targeted at the false believers.<sup>2</sup> Several factors in the letter lend support to this view. I will discuss five of them to which we now turn.

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<sup>1</sup> Jesus warned that the believing community would be a mixed community of genuine and false believers (e.g., Matt. 22:1-14; 25:1-13). For a detailed discussion, see Joseph K. Pak, *False Believers in the New Testament* (Deer Park, NY: Linus Publications, 2011). See also Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1982), 5-6.

<sup>2</sup> See D. A. Carson, "Reflections on Christian Assurance," *Westminster Theological Journal* 54 (spring 1992): 1-29; Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977); Roger Nicole, "Some Comments on Hebrews 6:4-6 and the Doctrine of the Perseverance of God with the Saints," in *Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation: Studies in Honor of Merrill C. Tenney*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 355-64; Alan Mugridge, "Warnings in the Epistle to the Hebrews: An Exegetical and Theological Study," *Reformed Theological Review* 46 (January-April 1987): 74-82; Wayne Grudem,

## II. Indications of the Existence of False Believers in the Letter to the Hebrews

### 1. Assurance of Salvation Given to the Believers in General

The warnings against apostasy in Hebrews should be interpreted in connection with the fact that the author also gives assurance of salvation to the readers several times throughout his letter.<sup>3</sup> After giving a dire warning against apostasy in 6:4-8, the author reassures the readers of their salvation in 6:9-20 (e.g., v. 9 “Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things—things that belong to salvation”).<sup>4</sup> As an example of those who inherit God’s promise, the author mentions Abraham. It is noteworthy that in telling the readers about Abraham inheriting God’s promise, the author’s focus is much more on God’s guarantee of the fulfillment of his promise than on Abraham’s persevering faith.<sup>5</sup> This provides a secure hope to the believers as a “sure and steadfast anchor of the soul” (12:19). Abraham is mentioned only once by name whereas God is mentioned by name three times (vv. 13, 17, 18).<sup>6</sup> God’s action or character in promise, oath, purpose, and truthfulness are the focus of five of the six verses which talk about Abraham’s experience (vv. 13-18).<sup>7</sup>

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"Perseverance of the Saints: A Case Study from Hebrews 6:4-6 and the Other Warning Passages in Hebrews," in *The Grace of God, the Bondage of the Will*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 133-82; Donald Hagner, *Hebrews*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1990), 92; George Guthrie, *Hebrews*, The NIV Application Commentary, ed. Terry Muck (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 230-31.

<sup>3</sup> Guthrie, *Hebrews*, 222. For the view that the author is confident about the readers’ salvation, see James W. Thompson, *Hebrews*, Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 135; Hughes, *A commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 224-25. Cf. For a view which holds that the expression of confidence is simply a conventional rhetorical device to persuade the addressees, see Harold W. Attridge, *Hebrews*, Hermeneia, ed. Helmut Koester (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 174.

<sup>4</sup> Unless otherwise noted, the Bible translations are in English Standard Version.

<sup>5</sup> Buist M Fanning, “A Classical Reformed View,” in *Four Views on the Warning Passages in Hebrews*, ed. Herbert W. Bateman IV (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2007), 193-94.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

After another serious warning in 10:26-31, the author gives reassurance in verses 32-39. Making a contrast with those who shrink back, the author identifies himself with the readers and says, “But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls” (v. 39). In both 5:11-6:20 and 10:19-39, the same pattern of giving a very severe warning (mostly using third person reference) which is followed by reassurance (mostly using first and second person reference) emerges.<sup>8</sup>

The author’s emphasis on the high priesthood of Jesus Christ also provides a strong assurance to the believers. Jesus is “able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them” (7:25). This verse makes believers’ final salvation dependent upon Christ’s unceasing intercession for them, not upon their own ability to maintain their faith. Jesus also offered himself as a perfect sacrifice so that “by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified” (10:14).<sup>9</sup> If the author sees believers’ final salvation as dependent on Christ’s redemptive and intercessory work for them rather than their own faith, then his warnings against apostasy seem to have been addressed to those among the readers whose salvation has not been secured by Christ’s sacrifice.

## 2. Conditions Attached to Belonging to Christ

The author of Hebrews attaches certain conditions to belonging to Christ, and it seems to suggest that he does not regard everyone in the community as already belonging to Christ (3:6, 14). In 3:6a, the author writes, “but Christ is faithful over God’s house as a son. And we are his house.” In the preceding verses, the writer expounds on the superiority of Christ over Moses—

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 192.

<sup>9</sup> Christopher Wade Cowan, “‘Confident of Better Things’: Assurance of Salvation in the Letter to the Hebrews” (PhD diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2012), 34. In 2:10, the perfecting of Christ is connected to the perfecting of believers. See also Jeanne Stevenson-Moessner, “The Road to Perfection: An Interpretation of Suffering in Hebrews,” *Interpretation* 57, no. 3 (July 2003): 281.

whereas Moses was faithful in God’s house as a servant, Christ is faithful over God’s house as a son (3:1-5). Then, the author identifies “God’s house” with the believers (“we are his house”), but he adds a condition: “if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope” (3:6b). A few verses later the author again attaches the condition of holding fast to becoming God’s people: “For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end” (3:14). Obviously, the author wants to strongly emphasize the condition. Sandwiched between these two conditional statements is a warning to the readers not to harden their hearts like the exodus generation who, as a result, were not allowed to enter God’s rest (3:7-13).

What is the relationship between the protasis and the apodosis of these two conditional sentences? Is it cause and effect as some take it? Is the author saying in verse 6 that the readers’ holding fast their confidence is required in order for them to become God’s house, and in verse 14 that their holding their confidence firm until the end will cause them to share in Christ? If that is the case, the author’s use of present tense in verse 6 (“we are [ἔσμεν] God’s house”) and perfect tense in verse 14 (“we have become [γεγόναμεν] sharers of Christ”) is strange. He would have used a future tense to make his point clear if he wanted to communicate to the readers that their salvation depended upon their perseverance. Cause and effect relationship does not seem to explain the use of present and perfect tense in the apodosis.

A better way to view the relationship between the protasis and the apodosis of these two conditional sentences seems to be what Wallace suggests—as evidence and inference.<sup>10</sup> Evidence-inference relationship means that what is stated in the protasis is not the cause but the

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<sup>10</sup> Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1996), 682-84.

evidence of what is stated in the apodosis. Thus in 3:6 and 14, the author would be saying that their being God's house and sharers in Christ is evidenced by their holding onto their confidence until the end.<sup>11</sup> Another example of evidence-inference relationship is found in 12:8: "If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons." Being left without discipline does not cause them to become illegitimate children; rather, it is the evidence of it. There are many such evidence-inference conditional sentences in the Bible.<sup>12</sup> For example, James 2:17 says, "So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead." Not having works does not cause the faith to be dead but rather is the evidence that it is dead.<sup>13</sup>

To sum up the first two indications of the existence of false believers in Hebrews, the author of Hebrews assures the readers of the security of their salvation not based upon their own ability to maintain their faith but upon what Christ has done and is doing for them. He also adds an evidence-inference condition to that assurance by telling them that their salvation would be evidenced by their perseverance in faith. This condition that he attaches to the security of salvation suggests that he is conscious of the existence of false believers among his readers who are still in need of salvation.

### 3. The Author's Plea Not to Harden Their Hearts

The author's repeated plea to the readers not to harden their hearts when they hear God's voice (e.g., 3:15; 4:7) may indicate that some in the community have not yet experienced the new covenant blessing of a new heart. New covenant fulfillment is a defining characteristic of

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<sup>11</sup> Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 138.

<sup>12</sup> Fanning, "A Classical Reformed View," 210-212.

<sup>13</sup> Another example of evidence-inference conditional statement is found in Leviticus 13:51, which says, "If the disease has spread in the garment . . . , the disease is a persistent leprous disease." The disease spreading in the garment is not the cause, but the evidence that it is leprous.

the Christian community, and it results in the change of heart. The new covenant is such an important theme in the letter to the Hebrews, and it is the letter's governing narrative.<sup>14</sup> One of the key features of the new covenant is that God's laws will be written on the hearts of his people. In 8:10 (and similarly in 10:16) the author quotes Jeremiah 31:33: "For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people."

For the author of Hebrews, "heart" is a very important word appearing no less than 11 times in the letter (3:8, 10, 12, 15; 4:7, 12; 8:10; 10:16, 22 [twice]; 13:9).<sup>15</sup> He is in good company when he makes the heart a central issue that determines one's covenant relationship with God. After forty years of leading the exodus generation in the wilderness, Moses attributed his congregation's failure to obey God to the condition of their hearts:

You have seen all that the LORD did before your eyes in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to all his servants and to all his land, the great trials that your eyes saw, the signs, and those great wonders. But to this day the LORD has not given you a heart to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear (Deut. 29:2b-4).

Moses knew the reason the people continued in their rebellion and unbelief after forty years of God's miraculous provision for them was that their hearts had remained unchanged. He also knew because of this, they would experience God's curses contained in the covenant:

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<sup>14</sup> S. Lehne, *The New Covenant in Hebrews* (Sheffield, UK: JSOT Press, 1990); David M. Allen, "'The Forgotten Spirit': A Pentecostal Reading of the Letter to the Hebrews?" *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 18 (2009), 65.

<sup>15</sup> Three times, he warns the readers against hardening their hearts quoting Psalm 95:7-8 twice (3:8, 15; 4:7). Twice, he talks about a heart that goes astray or does not believe (3:10, 12). Once he says that the word of God discerns the thoughts and intentions of the heart (4:12). He seems to be saying that they may be able to deceive others and even themselves but not God, since God knows their hearts. Twice the author talks about the new covenant written in the hearts of God's people (8:10; 10:16) both times quoting Jeremiah 31:33. Three times he talks about desirable conditions of the heart: having full assurance of faith (10:22), being cleansed from evil conscience (10:22), and being strengthened by grace (13:9).

Beware lest there be among you a man or woman or clan or tribe whose heart is turning away today from the LORD our God to go and serve the gods of those nations. Beware lest there be among you a root bearing poisonous and bitter fruit, one who, when he hears the words of this sworn covenant, blesses himself in his heart, saying, “I shall be safe, though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart.” This will lead to the sweeping away of moist and dry alike. The LORD will not be willing to forgive him, but rather the anger of the LORD and his jealousy will smoke against that man, and the curses written in this book will settle upon him, and the LORD will blot out his name from under heaven. And the LORD will single him out from all the tribes of Israel for calamity, in accordance with all the curses of the covenant written in this Book of the Law (Deut. 29:18-21).

Noteworthy here is the fact that Moses’ warning is directed mostly to an individual: “a man or woman” (v. 18), one who walks in the stubbornness of his heart (v. 19), and thus the one who will be singled out from all the tribes of Israel (v. 21). So if the author of Hebrews has individuals in mind who are in danger of falling under God’s judgment, not the entire congregation, then in this Deuteronomy passage, there is a close parallel.

The author makes extensive use of the example of the wilderness generation in his warning toward his readers, which means that he sees a close parallel between the situation of the wilderness generation and that of his readers. Specifically, he seems to see a parallel between the individuals in Moses’ congregation to whom Moses’ warnings were directed and those in his congregation whose hearts remained unchanged. In Hebrews 12:15 the author warns: “See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no ‘root of bitterness’ springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled.” This is a clear reference to Deuteronomy 29:18.<sup>16</sup> In both cases, even though these individuals are in God’s community, their hardening of hearts will result in God’s judgment.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> So Gareth Lee Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Gordon D. Fee (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 636; George Guthrie, *Hebrews*, The NIV Application Commentary, ed. Terry Muck (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 404.

<sup>17</sup> What does failing to obtain the grace of God mean? In 12:15 the author links it to a root of bitterness springing up and causing trouble, and in the original context of Deuteronomy 29:18-21, it refers to hardening of

For Moses as well as Jeremiah, in order for God's people to experience covenant blessing from God, it was critical for them to hear and obey God's voice with their whole heart.<sup>18</sup> People's hearts turning away is equated to not hearing God's voice and the consequence is perishing (Deut. 30:17-18).<sup>19</sup> In order for them to live, they had to love Yahweh, obey his voice and hold fast to him (30:20). This is why there is a repeated command in Hebrews not to harden their heart when they hear God's voice (Heb. 3:8, 13, 15; 4:7). What is meant by this phrase, "the hardening of heart"? In the context of the wilderness generation that the author of Hebrews refers to, hardening of heart seems to refer to refusing to believe in God (Num. 14:1-11).<sup>20</sup> Hardening of heart is a response of unbelief to God's voice.

According to Jeremiah and Moses, what was needed for God's people to hear and obey God's voice with their whole hearts was to circumcise and to remove the foreskin of their hearts.<sup>21</sup> A call for repentance had been issued: "wash your heart from evil, that you may be

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one's heart when hearing the words of the covenant (v. 19). In response, God refuses to forgive that person, blotting out his name from under heaven (v. 20), and singling him out from all the tribes of Israel for calamity according to the curses of the Mosaic covenant (v. 21). Failing to obtain the grace of God, then, is to fall under God's wrath due to hardening of the heart. Guthrie sees missing the grace of God as rejecting the gospel and missing the forgiveness offered by virtue of Christ's sacrifice (*Hebrews*, 404).

<sup>18</sup> See Deut. 30:1-3, 9-10. When Moses' prophetic pronouncement about the future exile (Deut. 30:1) was fulfilled and the people of Judah were about to be taken into exile by the Babylonians, Jeremiah also made a prophetic statement concerning them which sounded very much like that of Moses: "I will give them a heart to know that I am the LORD, and they shall be my people and I will be their God, for they shall return to me with their whole heart" (Jer. 24:7). Then Jeremiah later sent a letter to the exiled people to whom he prophesied again: "you will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart" (29:13). Then Yahweh would bring them back to their homeland from the place of exile, just as Moses had said.

<sup>19</sup> Deut. 30:17-18a "But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you today, that you shall surely perish."

<sup>20</sup> William Lane, *Hebrews: A Call to Commitment* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1985), 64.

<sup>21</sup> Jer. 4:4 "Circumcise yourselves to the LORD; remove the foreskin of your hearts, O men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem; lest my wrath go forth like fire, and burn with none to quench it, because of the evil of your deeds." Moses also had prophesied that future generations would experience God's deliverance through a change of their heart: "And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live" (Deut. 30:6).

saved” (Jer. 4:14). A stubborn and rebellious heart turns aside from God because there is no fear of God (5:23-24).<sup>22</sup> They resist God because “their hearts are uncircumcised” (6:10).

The circumcision imagery is significant since circumcision was the obligation that Abraham and his descendants were to fulfill in the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 17:10-14). Circumcision was to be a sign of the covenant between God and Abraham, and the covenant that God was making with Abraham was to be an everlasting covenant in their flesh through circumcision (vv. 11, 13). Anyone who is not circumcised is to be cut off from God’s people because he has broken God’s covenant (v. 14). So Jeremiah’s application of the circumcision imagery to the idea of the heart indicates that, to Jeremiah, circumcision is the sign of God’s covenant with his people under the New Covenant also—but this time circumcision is not to be in the flesh but in the heart. Just as anyone who was not circumcised in the flesh was to be cut off from God’s people under the old covenant, anyone under the new covenant who is not circumcised in the heart would also be cut off from God’s people.

Time and again, the heart is the issue for Jeremiah. There must be a change of heart in order for the people of God to return to God and be saved. Otherwise, only God’s fierce wrath and his judgment are to be expected. Jeremiah repeats three times this exact sentence: “Shall I not punish them for these things? Declares the LORD; and shall I not avenge myself on a nation such as this?” (5:9, 29; 9:9) These words of Jeremiah find their parallel in the warning passages in Hebrews where God’s severe judgment is pronounced upon the apostates who have unbelieving hearts: just because one belongs to a church does not guarantee that they have become God’s children. Those who do not subject themselves to God’s discipline are illegitimate children—

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<sup>22</sup> They refused to take correction and refused to repent even after God consumed them (Jer. 5:3). God will not pardon them (5:7) because they have eyes that do not see and ears that do not hear, and they do not fear God (5:21-22).

they do not belong to God (Heb. 12:8).<sup>23</sup> So the author is drawing a distinction between those individuals who harden their hearts when they hear God’s voice resulting in unbelief and disobedience, and those in whom God’s new covenant promise of new heart has been fulfilled because the good news they heard was united with faith.<sup>24</sup> The former of these two groups may be labeled as false believers. Therefore, the author’s repeated plea to the readers not to harden their hearts seems to imply that he sees the existence of false believers with unchanged hearts among the readers.

#### 4. Exhortation to Enter God’s Rest (Heb. 4:1-13)

In 4:1 where the author says, “Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it,” he warns that there may be individuals who have failed to enter God’s rest. This rest is a metaphor of salvation experience in the context of 4:1-3 since it is connected with the gospel message and believing (v. 2 “For good news came to us just as to them, but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened.”).<sup>25</sup> Then in verse 3 the author contrasts those who have not believed with others who have: “For we who have believed enter that rest.”<sup>26</sup>

What exactly is the rest that the author is talking about? The settlement in the land of Canaan was a type of the rest to be enjoyed by God’s people, and God’s rest from his works (4:4) is the archetype of the promised rest—the antitype being the Sabbath celebration following the

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<sup>23</sup> As Jose David Rodriguez, Sr. points out, Jesus shapes the lives of those who belong to the truth (“The Church: Sign and First Fruit of the Kingdom,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* [August 2002]: 273).

<sup>24</sup> Heb. 4:2: “For good news came to us just as to them, but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened.”

<sup>25</sup> See Attridge, *Hebrews*, 126-28 for the connection between the concept of rest and soteriological motifs in Hebrews.

<sup>26</sup> Fanning, “A Classical Reformed View,” 196. Fanning remarks, “the verse does not seem to allow for the possibility that those who begin in faith may in the end actually fail to enter.”

consummation of history.<sup>27</sup> The idea of entering God’s rest also has the present aspect of salvation—it is not just a future event but a present reality to be experienced as well (4:3a).<sup>28</sup> The writer is implying that the believer’s present Sabbath rest is as much a reality as God’s rest when he says in verse 10, “for whoever has entered God’s rest has also rested from his works as God did from his.”<sup>29</sup>

Donald Guthrie finds it strange that the participle οἱ πιστεύσαντες (“we who have believed”) in 4:3 is in the aorist tense instead of present tense (“For we who have believed enter that rest” instead of “we who believe enter that rest”).<sup>30</sup> However, it is not so strange if the author is intentionally making a distinction between those who have believed and those who have not. This is consistent with the author’s conditional clauses in 3:6 and 14 where he adds qualification to those who have become sharers in Christ. One who has not yet entered God’s rest is the one who has not believed since those who have believed enter that rest (4:3a). This is supported by the analogy of the wilderness generation who did not enter God’s rest because of unbelief: “So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief” (3:19).

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<sup>27</sup> Stanley D. Toussaint, “The Eschatology of the Warning Passages in the Book of Hebrews,” *Grace Theological Journal* 3 (spring 1982): 70-74; Lane, *Hebrews*, 68.

<sup>28</sup> Attridge, *The Epistle To The Hebrews*, 128. The author of Hebrews connects entering God’s rest with responding to the good news by faith (4:2), and it is those who believe that enter God’s rest (4:3). David deSilva views the rest as the kingdom (*Perseverance in Gratitude: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000], 167). See also Alan C. Mitchell, *Hebrews*, Sacra Pagina Series, vol. 13, ed. Daniel J. Harrington (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007), 89. Arguing that rest in Hebrews is not a place or time but a state, Mitchell correctly states that rest has a final sense as the eschatological goal of Christians and also a present sense to the extent that the readers participate in God’s rest. Andrew Lincoln also points out that salvation is “a present and continuing experience” (2:3, 4, 10; 5:9; 7:25) as well as future (*Hebrew: A Guide* [London: T & T Clark, 2006], 89). See also George Guthrie, *Hebrews*, 165.

<sup>29</sup> Donald Guthrie, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, ed. Leon Morris (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1983), 117.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

There is tension of present and future, and spanning this tension is “‘today’ (Heb. 3:13-15; 4:7), the opportune time to prepare for the ultimate destination.”<sup>31</sup> Hence there is repeated emphasis not to harden their heart, “‘today,” when people hear the voice of God. Those who did not harden their heart when they heard God’s voice are the ones who have believed, and they are the ones who have entered God’s rest (4:10). However, those who harden their heart when they hear God’s voice will not enter God’s rest. These are the false believers in the believing community who are still in need of salvation and in danger of falling away from their profession of faith.

##### 5. The Author’s Discourse about Those Who Failed to Enter the Promised Land

Both the wilderness generation and the readers were faced with formidable foes: for the former, the foes were the inhabitants of Canaan against whom the Israelites felt like grasshoppers (Num. 13:33), and for the latter the foes were intimidating persecutions they have experienced and will continue to face. In both cases, there are two groups: those who respond in faith (like Joshua and Caleb) and the others that respond in unbelief (like the rest of the wilderness generation).<sup>32</sup> That is why the author spends much space comparing his readers with the wilderness generation and warns them against unbelief (3:7-4:13). As F.F. Bruce observed, “they too had experienced the redeeming power of God; they too had the promise of the homeland of the faithful to look forward to; but one thing could prevent them from realizing that promise, just as it had prevented the mass of the Israelites who left Egypt from entering Canaan—and that one

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<sup>31</sup> Mitchell, *Hebrews*, 22.

<sup>32</sup> Jude also shares the same view that the wilderness generation was destroyed because of their unbelief (Jude 5 “Now I want to remind you, although you once fully knew it, that Jesus, who saved a people out of the land of Egypt, afterward destroyed those who did not believe.”).

thing was unbelief.”<sup>33</sup> Unbelief was what ultimately caused the wilderness generation to fail to enter the Promised Land, and it is what was preventing the false believers among the readers from receiving their salvation.

Matthew Thiessen has an interesting take on the exodus theme in the letter to the Hebrews. He contends that to the author of Hebrews the exodus of the Old Testament never ended. Not only the first generation but also the entire history of Israel was characterized by a failure to enter God’s rest because of unbelief. The first generation serves as a warning only in as much as the readers themselves are also in the exodus and wandering period.<sup>34</sup> The list of people in Hebrews 11 should be seen “as exemplifying the author’s claim that the long history of Israel, up to the present day, belongs to the period of the exodus/wilderness wanderings. . . . Marginalization is and has always been a sign that one belongs to God’s people.”<sup>35</sup> The letter ends with both warning and encouragement drawn from Deuteronomy, the point in Israel’s history where they are about to enter God’s rest.<sup>36</sup>

I would differ with Thiessen slightly concerning where the readers stand in comparison to the exodus generation. Since the new covenant promise has been fulfilled through the finished work of Jesus Christ and those who have believed have entered God’s rest (4:3, 10), the author seems to be picturing the readers as being on both sides of the Jordan River. Those who have believed have crossed the river and have entered the rest, but “it remains for some to enter it” (4:6). God is still speaking to them today and they must not harden their heart when “today if you hear his voice” (4:7). The author, as a pastor at heart, wants to make sure that no one fails to enter that

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<sup>33</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, The International Commentary on the New Testament, ed. F. F. Bruce (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1964), 69.

<sup>34</sup> Matthew Thiessen, “Hebrews and the End of the Exodus” *Novum Testamentum* 49 (2007), 358-360.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 362.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 369.

rest. So he exhorts them “Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience” (4:11). Here is another emphasis on individuals that we saw earlier.

### III. Conclusion

To the author of Hebrews, apostasy is the matter of the heart. It is the “evil, unbelieving heart” (3:12) that will lead some individuals among the readers to fall away from God. What causes falling away is unbelief. The author portrays the exodus generation as those who always went astray in their heart and who did not know God’s ways but were rather rebellious, disobedient and unbelieving (3:16, 18, 19). Then he warns the readers of facing the same consequence of failing to enter God’s rest because of unbelief.

Can we make the case that there are false believers in the Letter to the Hebrews? In this article, I tried to provide five arguments for the case. First, the author gives assurance of salvation to the readers in general several times throughout the letter while he issues severe warnings to those who are in danger of apostasy. Second, the author attaches certain conditions to belonging to Christ, which suggests that he does not assume that everyone in the believing community automatically belongs to Christ. Third, the repeated plea of the author to the readers not to harden their hearts reveals that some of them have not experienced the new covenant blessing of a new heart. Fourth, the exhortation in Hebrews 4:1-13 to enter God’s rest which signifies salvation indicates that some among the readers have not yet entered that rest which symbolizes salvation in Heb. 4:1-3. Fifth, the author’s reminder to the readers that many of the wilderness generation failed to enter the Promised Land because of unbelief suggests that he sees some individuals among his readers as facing the same danger of failing to be saved because of unbelief.