

## HEBREWS 6:4–6 FROM AN ORAL CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Few biblical passages have caused more confusion and argumentation than Heb 6:4–6: “For it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, since on their own they are crucifying again the Son of God and are holding him up to contempt.”<sup>1</sup> Learned writers have struggled for nearly two millennia to decipher these enigmatic verses. Recent strategies have employed new approaches, including a synthetic look at the five warning passages in the book, discourse analysis, comparison to Roman patron-client relationships, and the investigation of OT backgrounds, Jewish apocalyptic, and pneumatological literature.<sup>2</sup>

All of these methods are viable because they recognize the mindset of the original audience. As Dave Mathewson states, “One of the important ways in which Old Testament allusions and echoes function is to create a conceptual or semantic grid through which reality is perceived.”<sup>3</sup>

Such a perceptual grid is crucial to understanding how the original audience would understand what they were hearing. The purpose of this

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the NRSV.

<sup>2</sup> A synthetic look at the warning passages: S. McKnight, “The Warning Passages of Hebrews: A Formal Analysis and Theological Conclusions,” *TrinJ* NS 13/1 (1992) 21–59. Discourse analysis: G. H. Guthrie, *Hebrews* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); A. H. Snyman, *Hebrews 6:4–6: From a Semiotic Discourse Perspective* (JSNTSup 170; ed. S. E. Porter and J. T. Reed; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999) 354–68. Roman patron-client relationships: D. A. DeSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000). Kadesh-barnea: R. C. Gleason, “The Old Testament Background of the Warning in Hebrews 6:4–8,” *BSac* 155/617 (1998) 62–91; G. H. Guthrie, “Hebrews’ Use of the Old Testament: Recent Trends in Research,” *CurBS* 1/2 (2003) 271–94; D. Mathewson, “Reading Heb 6:4–6 in the Light of the Old Testament,” *WTJ* 61 (1999) 209–25; N. Weeks, “Admonition and Error in Hebrews,” *WTJ* 39 (1976) 72–80. Deuteronomic blessings and curses: H. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989); F. B. Craddock, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (NIB; Nashville: Abingdon, 1994); D. A. DeSilva, “Exchanging Favor for Wrath: Apostasy in Hebrews and Patron-Client Relationships,” *JBL* 115 (1996) 91–116. Apocalyptic literature: B. Nongbri, “A Touch of Condemnation in a Word of Exhortation: Apocalyptic Language and Graeco-Roman Rhetoric in Hebrews 6:4–12,” *NovT* 45/3 (2003) 265–79. Pneumatological literature: M. Emmrich, “Hebrews 6:4–6 Again! (A Pneumatological Inquiry),” *WTJ* 65 (2003) 83–95.

<sup>3</sup> Mathewson, “Reading Heb 6:4–6 in the Light of the Old Testament” 223.

paper is not to propose a new insight but to take another step toward filling in that perceptual grid by adding to current and historical scholarship in order to go back to the mindset of the original audience, the original *hearers*. Scripture, as we know it, is a literary entity. That was not true for the majority of people in its original setting. It was created in a strongly oral culture, one in which authors structured their compositions for hearing audiences who thought the way hearing audiences think.

Unfortunately, before we can apply the original audience's mindset to Heb 6:4–6, we must admit that we do not really know how that audience thought. Excellent work by Paul Achtemeier, William Harris, Eric Havelock, Walter Ong, and a host of others after them has shown that, although reading and writing had been around for centuries and was becoming an increasingly influential part of everyday life, it was a skill that was unavailable to over ninety percent of the populace.<sup>4</sup> The vast majority of people could not sit down and pour over the text, analyzing the subtle nuances of the author's communication. For them, "What they *heard* was what they got." Those who heard needed to have an author who would provide mnemonic clues, and a structure which showed the progression of thought by aural rather than visual indicators such as sentence, paragraph and chapter markings. Even more to the point, they needed someone who could describe reality and express notions of truth in a manner that they could understand.

Primary oral cultures, or ones in which there is no literacy, demonstrate a certain pattern of thought and behavior. Characteristics of such cultures include a lack of concern for original forms and authorship,<sup>5</sup> extreme respect for rhetorical skill,<sup>6</sup> placing greater value on interpersonal interaction than on abstract sets of values and logical deductions,<sup>7</sup> and stress on the community rather than on individualism and individual thought.<sup>8</sup> These cultures are

<sup>4</sup> P. J. Achtemeier, "Omne Verbum Sonat: The New Testament and the Oral Environment of Late Western Antiquity," *JBL* 109 (1990) 3–27; W. V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989); E. A. Havelock, *The Literate Revolution in Greece and Its Cultural Consequences* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982); idem, *The Muse Learns to Write: Reflections on Orality and Literacy from Antiquity to the Present* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986); W. Ong, *Interfaces of the Word* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977); idem, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Methuen, 1982); idem, *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967).

<sup>5</sup> A. B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Harvard Studies in Comparative Literature 24; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960) 94, 96, 100, 123, 138.

<sup>6</sup> Ong, *Orality and Literacy* 68.

<sup>7</sup> Eric Havelock relates the development of the vowelized phonetic alphabet to the development of abstract thinking in ancient Greece. A. R. Luria and Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole come to the same conclusions regarding the Russian and Arabic languages. Havelock, *The Literate Revolution in Greece and Its Cultural Consequences*; A. R. Luria, *Cognitive Development: Its Cultural and Social Foundations* (trans. M. Lopez-Morallis and L. Solotaroff; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976); Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole, *The Psychology of Literacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), cited by T. J. Farrell, "Kelber's Breakthrough," *Sem* 39 (1987) 29–30.

<sup>8</sup> J. Goody and I. Watt, "The Consequences of Literacy," in *Literacy in Traditional Societies* (ed. J. Goody; London: Cambridge University Press, 1968) 38.

concerned with matters of high practicality and interest. If an idea or procedure loses its validity or usefulness, it is forgotten. Thus, these societies are conservative, maintaining an equilibrium which is referred to by oral scholars as a 'homeostatic balance.'<sup>9</sup>

In such societies, oral poets learn their craft through apprenticeship and the techniques are assimilated by the rest of the society. The primary characteristic of oral composition is a formulaic style.<sup>10</sup> Walter Ong describes it this way:

In a primary oral culture, to solve effectively the problem of retaining and retrieving carefully articulated thought, you have to do your thinking in mnemonic patterns, shaped for ready oral recurrence. Your thought must come into being in heavily rhythmic, balanced patterns, in repetitions or antitheses, in alliterations and assonances, in epithetic and other formulaic expressions, in standard thematic settings . . . , in proverbs which are constantly heard by everyone so that they come to mind readily and which themselves are patterned for retention and ready recall, or in other mnemonic form.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to the formulaic style, Ong lists nine "characteristics of orally based thought and expression." For the purpose of this article, the following two are especially important.<sup>12</sup> (1) Oral thought and expression is "redundant or copious." The speaker returns to previously used vocabulary and ideas. This technique keeps both the speaker and the hearer on the right track while, just as importantly, indicating the internal structure of the discourse. It is referred to in oral scholarship variously as chiasm, ring composition, concentric structure, inclusio, respension, parallelism, etc. (2) Oral thought and expression is "agonistically toned." Oral stories are based in a world of conflict and struggle while writing draws our attention more toward inner crisis.<sup>13</sup> Oral composition splits the world into friends and foes and is filled with name-calling, and its opposite, expressions of praise.

<sup>9</sup> Goody and Watt, "Consequences of Literacy" 30-31, 33-34.

<sup>10</sup> Milman Parry defines a formula as "a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea." It does not indicate theme, structure, or style but is a preset group of expressions used to communicate given ideas within the poetic meter. Types of formulas include epithets, metaphors, phrases for binding clauses and formulas for non-periodic enjambment. M. Parry, "Studies of the Epic Technique of Oral Verse-Making, I: Homer and the Homeric Style," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 41 (1930) 80.

<sup>11</sup> Ong, *Orality and Literacy* 34. John Miles Foley stresses that the exact definition of a formula is dependent on its societal context. J. M. Foley, "Beowulf and Traditional Narrative Song: The Potential and Limits of Comparison," in *Old English Literature in Context: Ten Essays* (ed. J. D. Niles; London: Boydell, Rowman & Littlefield, 1980) 117-36, 173-78.

<sup>12</sup> The other seven are: (1) "Additive rather than subordinate." There are many "ands" linking the sentences. (2) "Aggregative rather than analytic." Epithets are used to develop clusters of terms. A soldier is a brave soldier, a princess is a beautiful princess, etc. (3) "Conservative or traditionalist." The need to repeat important knowledge encourages traditionalism. (4) "Close to the human lifeworld." All facts and procedures are linked to human or quasi-human stories. (5) "Homeostatic." (6) "Empathetic and participatory rather than objectively distanced." (7) "Situational rather than abstract." Ong, *Orality and Literacy* 37-57.

<sup>13</sup> Compare this to the difference between seeing a movie based on a novel and reading the novel itself. They are two different experiences.

However, the NT is not oral composition from a primary oral society. Just because most of the audience was illiterate did not mean that they necessarily thought the same way that people do in primary oral societies. Thomas Boomershine, Joanna Dewey, Werner Kelber, and many others have shown that the shift from an oral cultural mindset to a literate one is a long and complicated process.<sup>14</sup> While the average illiterate person could not make personal use of written materials he/she could be influenced by the reflection and teaching of those who could. For centuries there was a move from the corporate, circular, and traditional epic thinking of an oral culture to the individual, linear, and logical contemplation of a literate one.

Scholars are at odds concerning where the NT writings fit on the continuum.<sup>15</sup> Even within the canon, some books show more evidence of literary influence than others. It truly is a complex scenario. There is no need to even assume that the author of any given text was literate, much less the audience. Nearly all compositions, even centuries after the NT era, were dictated to an amanuensis.<sup>16</sup> In examining Hebrews, however, it is reasonably safe to assume that the author was not only literate but well educated. Numerous scholars have demonstrated his familiarity with Hellenistic rhetoric, philosophy, idioms and education.<sup>17</sup> As noted earlier, recent work linking Heb 6:4–6 to OT literary backgrounds and to Jewish apocalyptic and pneumatological literature has added to already strong evidence that he was thoroughly familiar with Jewish literature.

How then can we examine this book from a viewpoint of oral influence? Two aspects of what Walter Ong calls “oral residue” are particularly important.<sup>18</sup> As mentioned above, redundancy or concentric structure and an agonistic tone are strong characteristics of oral composition.

## II. SCHOLARLY UNDERSTANDING OF HEBREWS 6:4–6

Before looking at the passage from an oral perspective, it will be helpful to take a quick overview of various ways in which it has been interpreted.

<sup>14</sup> T. E. Boomershine, “Jesus of Nazareth and the Watershed of Ancient Orality and Literacy,” *Sem* 65 (1994) 7–36; J. Dewey, *Markan Public Debate, Literary Technique, Concentric Structure, and Theology in Mark 2:1–3:6* (SBLDS 48; Chico, CA: Scholar’s Press, 1980); W. H. Kelber, “Modalities of Communication, Cognition, and Physiology of Perception; Orality, Rhetoric, Scribality,” *Sem* 65 (1994) 193–216. See also J. Goody, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); J. Goody, “Introduction,” *Literacy in Traditional Societies* (ed. J. Goody; London: Cambridge University Press, 1968) 1–26; Goody and Watt, “Consequences of Literacy”; Havelock, *Literate Revolution in Greece and Its Cultural Consequences*; Ong, *Orality and Literacy*.

<sup>15</sup> For an overview of various stances see J. D. Harvey, “Orality and Its Implications for Biblical Studies: Recapturing an Ancient Paradigm,” *JETS* 45 (2003) 99–109.

<sup>16</sup> Achtemeier, “Omne Verbum Sonat: The New Testament and the Oral Environment of Late Western Antiquity” 13.

<sup>17</sup> See especially Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*; W. L. Lane, *Hebrews 1–8* (WBC; Dallas: Word, 1991).

<sup>18</sup> “Habits of thought and expression tracing back to preliterate situations or practice, or deriving from the dominance of the oral as a medium in a given culture, or indicating a reluctance or inability to dissociate the written medium from the spoken.” W. Ong, *Rhetoric, Romance and Technology* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1971) 25–26.

1. *The audience.* The first question which must be, and has been, asked is, “Who is the audience?” or “Are the people to whom this warning is addressed saved?” Numerous answers have been postulated. Guthrie summarizes the scholarly interpretations using six categories: (1) Hypothetical audience: there is no audience in mind because the sin involved cannot actually be committed. (2) Pre-conversion Jew: these are Jews who have associated themselves with the Christian community but have not made a commitment to Christ. (3) Covenant community: it is the community that God is rejecting, not individuals. (4) True believer under judgment: these are Christians who are facing God’s judgment, but cannot lose their salvation. (5) Phenomenological true believer: the author is speaking to Christians who can lose, or have lost, their salvation. (6) Phenomenological unbeliever: the audience appears to be Christian but is not.<sup>19</sup>

It is difficult, if not impossible, to come to this passage with a clean slate and not allow other Scriptures and one’s theological history to dictate the interpretation. Randall Gleason makes the following observation, “In the end it seems that the passages with which one begins determine one’s theology.”<sup>20</sup> This is particularly true when determining the audience.

Wayne Kempson gives a strong argument in favor of viewing the audience as Christians: “If we were to read the four phrases of verses four and five in any other context, we would be comfortable preaching a four point sermon on the content of the Christian experience. . . . Our best interpretation takes the author at face value.”<sup>21</sup> In the same vein, William Lane comments, “Together, the clauses describe vividly the reality of the experience of personal salvation enjoyed by the Christians addressed.”<sup>22</sup>

On the other side of the argument, Donald Hagner states, “Christians can apostatize. Yet paradoxically, if they become true apostates, they show that they were not authentic Christians.”<sup>23</sup>

With the continuing debate on this issue, it is appropriate to heed the warning of Martin Emmrich, “Certainly the warning passages in Hebrews were never designed to investigate the ‘can-true-believers-fall-away?’ kind of inquiry. Our use of predications such as ‘true/genuine’ or ‘false’ is itself obstinately wrong and incurs suspicion of importing alien concepts into our text.”<sup>24</sup>

2. *The sin.* The next question which has been asked is, “What is the sin about which the audience is being cautioned?” While numerous scholars comment on the fact that, outside of the Bible, the word translated “fall away” (*παράπιπτο*) often means no more than to go astray, the clear majority agree

<sup>19</sup> Guthrie, *Hebrews* 226–28. He cites numerous authors who have dealt with the subject, particularly McKnight, “Warning Passages of Hebrews” 23–25.

<sup>20</sup> Gleason, “Old Testament Background of the Warning in Hebrews 6:4–8” 63.

<sup>21</sup> W. R. Kempson, “Hebrews 6:1–8,” *RevExp* 91 (1994) 570.

<sup>22</sup> Lane, *Hebrews* 1–8 141.

<sup>23</sup> D. A. Hagner, *Hebrews* (NIBC 14; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1990) 92.

<sup>24</sup> Emmrich, “Hebrews 6:4–6 Again” 88.

that this is a “decisive, definitive turning away from God in apostasy.”<sup>25</sup> Paul Ellingworth says, “The context virtually requires a reference to apostasy here.” He cautions, however, that both here and in 10:26, “the author is not concerned to specify the sin which makes a second repentance impossible.”<sup>26</sup>

Lane states, “The ἀδύνατον, ‘impossible,’ which is placed emphatically at the beginning of the sentence, is created and conditioned by an event and by facts. . . . The final aorist participle παραπεσόντες, ‘fall away,’ . . . indicates a decisive moment of commitment to apostasy. . . . a total attitude reflecting deliberate and calculated renunciation of God.”<sup>27</sup>

Scot McKnight points to the warning in Chapter 10 and stresses that the sin is intentional—there is a sense of publicity and pride. He agrees with Guthrie that the audience is not apostatizing to Judaism but away from Christianity, that is, into “moral apathy and irresponsibility.”<sup>28</sup>

3. *The result.* The third and final question is, “What is the outcome of this sin?” As is to be expected, there is a wide variety of answers. Hagner takes a bold and honest approach, “[B]ecause of the very nature of apostasy, the word *impossible* must be taken as absolute.”<sup>29</sup>

F. F. Bruce is a bit softer, saying:

Those who have shared the covenant experiences of the people of God, and then deliberately renounced them, are the most difficult of all persons to reclaim for the faith. It is indeed impossible to reclaim them, says our author. We know, of course, that nothing of this sort is ultimately impossible for the grace of God, but as a matter of human experience the reclamation of such people is, practically speaking, impossible.<sup>30</sup>

Gleason echoes the thought: “First, the word ἀδύνατος is often used to denote what is impossible with men, but which is not with God. Second, according to Westcott, ‘The use of the active voice limits the strict application of the words to human agency,’ thereby suggesting that it is not impossible for God.”<sup>31</sup>

McKnight states:

In light of the futurity of salvation in Hebrews it is reasonable to contend that one cannot in fact ‘lose one’s salvation,’ since one has not yet acquired it. . . . Rather, I think it is wisest to say that those who are phenomenologically believers can ‘lose their faith’ and the enjoyment of God’s salvation that persevering faith would have made possible for them.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>25</sup> G. L. Cockrell, *Hebrews: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Indianapolis: Wesley, 1999) 139. See also P. Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993); Guthrie, *Hebrews*; Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*; McKnight, “Warning Passages of Hebrews”; Nongbri, “Touch of Condemnation in a Word of Exhortation.”

<sup>26</sup> Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews* 322.

<sup>27</sup> Lane, *Hebrews 1–8* 141–42.

<sup>28</sup> McKnight, “Warning Passages of Hebrews” 40–42.

<sup>29</sup> Hagner, *Hebrews* 91.

<sup>30</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 144.

<sup>31</sup> Gleason, “Old Testament Background of the Warning in Hebrews 6:4–8” 84; B. F. Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (New York: MacMillan, 1903) 150.

<sup>32</sup> McKnight, “Warning Passages of Hebrews” 58.

Ellingworth cautions that such a concern goes beyond the author's intention:

The application of these verses to situations in which, as far as can be humanly ascertained, apostasy has taken place is doubly hazardous; first of all, because it involves an anticipation of God's final judgment, and secondly, because it involves addressing to this text questions with which the author was not directly concerned.<sup>33</sup>

Going even farther, Andries Snyman posits that, "The use of ἀδύνατον seems to be an instance of hyperbole, in view of the warnings of apostasy."<sup>34</sup> Also, Brent Nongbri insists, "The most effective means of moral exhortation allowed for extremely harsh language, but such language ought not to be the last word, if that was the case, the harshness would alienate the audience and render the entire exhortation useless."<sup>35</sup>

In light of such diverse findings, it is reasonable to look in a different direction to seek an understanding of this passage. To do so, we will look backward to a mindset which viewed and expressed ideas differently than modern, and possibly even ancient, interpreters of the text.

### III. AN ORAL PERSPECTIVE

The NT world was an oral world, and the "literature" of the NT was "written" (actually, it was dictated) with an oral mindset. Authors knew that what the vast majority of the audience would learn from their teaching was what they would understand upon hearing and take with them in their memories. Authors could not, and would not, expect many in their audience to pour over their compositions and analyze their intent. As such, they wrote using conventions used in storytelling and rhetorical presentation that were ingrained in the life of the society.<sup>36</sup>

At issue in examining Heb 6:4–6, and the Bible in general, is the expectation of a purely logical presentation. Logic certainly did play its part. Syllogism and enthymeme had found their way into the society at large through the use of rhetorical principles. However, there was also a homeostatic and agonistic overtone which flavored the social attitude and affected all forms of communication.

Our author would assume a religious, historical, and cultural background that was fully ingrained in the psyche from childhood. However, for him to expect his original audience to spend a great deal of time drawing logical consequences and critically analyzing that background would be quite unusual until much later when literacy was firmly established. In this sense we cannot even count on the earliest commentators to necessarily give an accurate view of how the *original audience* understood this or any other biblical passage.

<sup>33</sup> Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews* 325.

<sup>34</sup> Snyman, "Hebrews 6:4–6: From a Semiotic Discourse Perspective" 366.

<sup>35</sup> Nongbri, "Touch of Condemnation in a Word of Exhortation" 276.

<sup>36</sup> See C. W. Davis, *Oral Biblical Criticism: The Influence of the Principles of Orality on the Literary Structure of Paul's Epistle to the Philippians* (JSNT Sup 172; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999).

They would be able to critically and logically analyze the intent of the author while the audience would hear the message as they had been taught to hear it from birth. Instead of a predominantly logical orientation, the norm in an oral culture which was carried through into the first and second century world, was an “us versus them,” “good guy versus bad guy,” mentality.

Susan Hunt states, “*Nomoi* and *ethe* are decidedly not legal, philosophical or moral abstractions or principles. They are illustrated only by particular situations and examples.”<sup>37</sup> Principles were not primarily reasoned out and expounded upon, but demonstrated in narrative illustrations. People acted a certain way not because it was ‘right’ but because they were following the example of a hero. The mindset was, “The right thing to do is what ‘we’ do.” Conversely, although it was often not as explicit, the wrong thing is what “they” do.

This mindset is particularly evident in the five “warning passages” of Hebrews (2:1–4; 3:7–4:13; 5:11–6:12; 10:19–39; 12:1–29). Our text, 6:4–6, is part of the third warning. With this focus in mind, it is important to see what possible light might be shed on our text by the other warning passages. In particular, we will look at the use of the first person plural and the way the author relates to his audience.

The fact that there are five warning passages in Hebrews brings immediately to mind the fivefold use of themes in Jewish and Christian compositions.<sup>38</sup> Graham Stanton points out that the five discourses of Jesus used to structure the Gospel of Matthew are presented in a chiasmic or concentric structure. The first and fifth are longer than the others and introduce and conclude major themes in the book. The second and fourth present instructions to the disciples. The third stands alone and, as the middle point in a chiasm in an oral composition often does, presents the focus of the structure and of the Gospel.<sup>39</sup> A similar chiasmic structure may exist in the warning passages of Hebrews. A detailed analysis of these sections is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is important to note a few practical points.

Warnings 1 and 5 show distinct similarities. Both draw credence from the fact that they have been attested with signs and wonders.<sup>40</sup> Further, 2:3 and 12:25 show strong structural parallels.

2:3	how can <i>we</i> escape	if <i>we</i> neglect so great a salvation?
12:25	how much less will <i>we</i> escape	if <i>we</i> reject the one who warns from heaven!

<sup>37</sup> S. Hunt, “In the Beginning Was the Text: Orality, Literacy, Ethics and Economics,” *Interculture* 22 (1989) 32.

<sup>38</sup> G. Stanton, *The Gospels and Jesus* (2d ed.; New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) 59–62. In personal correspondence Stanton identified the Pentateuch and the Book of Psalms along with Papias’s *Logia*.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* 59–62.

<sup>40</sup> 2:2: “the message declared through angels”; 2:4: “God added his testimony by signs and wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit”; 12:26: “At that time his voice shook the earth; but now he has promised, ‘Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heaven.’”

Warnings 2 and 4 display a strong sense of OT judgment. The theme of promise is found in both 4:1 and 10:36. Further, the theme of faith as a community issue is stressed.<sup>41</sup>

McKnight has done an excellent job of analyzing the synthetic nature of the stress on the audience, the sin, the exhortation and consequences of the sin in these passages. He states, “[W]e cannot understand one warning passage, especially 6:4-6, until we have understood all the warning passages, because each sheds light on the other.”<sup>42</sup>

Oral compositional considerations may add further insight into this synthesis. In particular, we will look at the use of inclusio on the first person plural and the patterned positioning of three themes: warning, command, and encouragement and assurance.<sup>43</sup>

Table 1. *Structure of the Warning Sections*

	<i>Inclusio on the First Person Plural</i>	<i>Condemnation</i>	<i>Warning</i>	<i>Command</i>	<i>Encouragement &amp; Assurance</i>
First Warning	2:1, 3 Includes the audience		2:1, 3	2:1	2:3-4
Second Warning	3:14; 4:11-13 Includes the audience		4:11	4:11	4:12-13
Third Warning	5:11; 6:1, 3, 9, 11 <u>Does not include the audience</u>	<u>5:11-14</u>	6:4-6		6:9-12
Fourth Warning	10:26, 30, 39 Includes the audience		10:26-31	10:32a, 35a	10:32b-34, 35b-39
Fifth Warning	12:1-2, 9, 25-28 Includes the audience		12:1-2, 25	12:1-25, 28	12:29

In the first warning section, the first person plural forms an inclusio with the occurrence in 2:1 and 2:3. Verse one begins with a warning in the form of a statement with the force of a command.<sup>44</sup> Another warning follows in verse three. Encouragement and assurance come at the end (2:3-4).

In the second warning section, 3:7-11 are introductory material with OT quotations. The true personal warning starts in 3:12-14, with the first person plural in 3:14. The section ends with the first person plural used in command and encouragement and assurance in 4:11-13.

<sup>41</sup> In 4:2, the Israelites did not receive the blessing because they were not united by faith. In 10:39, “we” will receive the blessing of salvation because “we” are among those who have faith.

<sup>42</sup> McKnight, “Warning Passages of Hebrews” 27.

<sup>43</sup> Inclusio is repetition (including that of sounds, grammatical constructions, words and topics) at the beginning and end of a section to mark it off as a unit. It is a major characteristic of oral composition.

<sup>44</sup> δέí with the infinitive.

The third warning section differs from the first two. The first person plural occurs at the beginning, end, and middle. However, as will be discussed below, this “we” does not include the audience and is not part of the warning. The section begins not with warning but condemnation of the audience. There is no true command. The only imperative force that involves the audience comes at the end with the expression of the author’s desire that they show diligence in 6:11. Encouragement and assurance do play a strong role at the end.

In the fourth warning section, the pattern returns. The first person plural occurs at the beginning (10:26) and end (10:39), as well as the middle (10:30). The section begins with warning (10:26–31), moves to command (10:32a, 35a), and ends with encouragement and assurance (10:32b–34, 35b–39).

The fifth and final warning section again uses the first person plural at the beginning, end, and middle (12:1–2, 9, 25–28). It begins with a combined warning and command (12:1–2), and continues with a command (12:3–24). It then repeats the pattern with a combined warning and command (2:25) and a command (2:28). It ends with encouragement and assurance (12:29).

The structural similarities in warnings one, two, four, and five are striking. However, warning three (5:11–6:12) shows some clear differences. The inclusio on the first person plural clearly does not include the audience in 5:11 and 6:9, 11. There is condemnation of the audience instead of warning at the beginning and there is no clear command to the audience.

The “us versus them” mentality is particularly evident in all these warnings. In one, two, four, and five, the author strongly associates himself with the audience, assuming the role of the “good guys.” The problem is that the audience is being drawn into temptation to join the “bad guys.”<sup>45</sup> There is a strong sense that “we are the ‘good guys’ and we need to be careful not to become part of the ‘bad guys.’” The author even includes himself in the warnings: “Therefore we must pay greater attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it . . . how can we escape if we neglect so great a salvation. . . . For we have become partners of Christ, if only we hold our first confidence firm to the end. . . . Let us therefore make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one may fall through such disobedience as theirs. . . . For if we willfully persist in sin after having received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins. . . . Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us . . . how much less will we escape if we reject the one who warns from heaven. . . . Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe; for indeed our God is a consuming fire.”<sup>46</sup>

<sup>45</sup> The temptation theme is very common in oral composition, particularly with respect to religious initiation. The author of Hebrews twice mentions the fact that Jesus himself was tempted (2:18; 4:15). G. Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964) 23–28; R. H. Stein, *Jesus the Messiah: A Survey of the Life of Christ* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996) 103.

<sup>46</sup> Heb 2:1, 3; 3:14; 4:11; 10:26; 12:1, 25, 28.

In the third warning, however, the author never does associate himself with his audience. They are not the “bad guys” in terms of salvation, but they have stopped growing—they are not being mature. The first verse sets the tone, “About this *we* have much to say that is hard to explain, since *you* have become dull in understanding.”<sup>47</sup> The “we” is editorial.<sup>48</sup> It obviously does not include the audience. He makes sure that there is no confusion here by using both first and second person plural.<sup>49</sup> The same is true at the end of this warning passage in 6:9 and 11.<sup>50</sup> From an oral perspective, the author is placing himself and his audience in an adversarial relationship. They are not enemies, but since the audience is not part of “us,” they are now “them.”

There are five important points to note in 5:11–6:3, leading up to the actual warning in 6:4. (1) The author’s focus is on his immediately preceding teaching about the priesthood of Christ after the order of Melchizedek. (2) His frustration with his audience is over their dullness in understanding this concept.

(3) The audience does not have the maturity of understanding that they should have. A crucial point is reached in 6:1. The use of “therefore” (διό) <sup>51</sup> is not an enigma. Bruce suggests, “[W]e might have expected him to say . . . nevertheless, I am going to press on with the provision of solid food.” Rather, as Bruce continues:

[T]heir particular condition of immaturity is such that only an appreciation of what is involved in Christ’s high priesthood will cure it. Their minds need to be stretched, and this will stretch them as nothing else can. They have remained immature too long; therefore he will give them something calculated to take them out of their immaturity.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Heb 5:11.

<sup>48</sup> Referring to the author, either himself alone or including others to the exclusion of the audience. Also referred to as the literary plural. BDF 146–47; D. B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996) 394–95.

<sup>49</sup> Guthrie cites Hartwig Thyen: “The switch back and forth between the second person plural ‘you,’ the first person, ‘I’ and the first person plural ‘we,’ was common to the style of preaching found in the Greek-speaking Jewish synagogues of the period.” Guthrie, *Hebrews* 204; H. Thyen, *Der Stil der Jüdisch-Hellenistischen Homilie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1955) 17. This may be what was happening in the second, fourth, and fifth warnings (3:12–14; 4:1; 10:36–39; 12:25) where the audience was in danger of not reaching their goal, but the author saw himself as their partner. In those instances he was dealing with salvation and could readily associate himself with them. In the fourth warning he goes so far as to use the first person when he is warning the audience and the second person when he is commending them. In any case, random switching does not account for the polarity found in 5:11; 6:9, 11, where the author was not part of this immature group.

<sup>50</sup> 6:9: “Even though *we* speak in this way, beloved, *we* are confident of better things in *your* case, things that belong to salvation.” 6:11: “And *we* want each one of *you* to show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope to the very end” (6:9 Πεπείσμεθα δὲ περὶ ὑμῶν, ἀγαπητοί, τὰ κρείσσονα καὶ ἐχόμενα σωτηρίας, εἰ καὶ οὕτως λαλοῦμεν. 6:11 ἐπιθυμοῦμεν δὲ ἕκαστον ὑμῶν τὴν αὐτὴν ἐνδεκνυσθαι σπουδὴν πρὸς τὴν πληροφoρiαν τῆς ἐλπίδος ἄχρι τέλους).

<sup>51</sup> Louw and Nida define διό; διόπερ as “relatively emphatic markers of result, usually denoting the fact that the inference is self-evident.” J. P. Louw and E. A. Nida, eds., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1988) 783.

<sup>52</sup> F. F. Bruce, “St. Paul in Macedonia” 3; idem, “The Philippian Correspondence,” *BJRL* 63 (1981) 138.

(4) Since the “we” in 5:11; 6:9, 11 does not include the audience, there is no reason to assume a different situation in the author’s use of the first person plural in 6:1–3.<sup>53</sup> He could easily be exhibiting rhetorical flair. When he says, “Therefore, let us go on toward perfection,” he is using an editorial plural as he did in 5:11. He is referring to himself.<sup>54</sup> He is not exhorting his audience to action; he is telling them what *he* wants to do for them. They may join him if they like. Further, the strong contrast between “perfection,” or better, “maturity”<sup>55</sup> (τελειότητα) and “the basic teaching about Christ” (τὸν τῆς ἀρχῆς τοῦ Χριστοῦ λόγον) shows that he is talking about leaving behind the basic teaching and moving on to more mature *teaching*. *He* wanted to do this. The question was, would they?

Now we can take it one step farther. Rather than “let us move on,” we can translate the passive first person plural subjunctive, φερώμεθα as “permit me to move on, and you may join me if you wish.” Admittedly, the first plural subjunctive would normally have a hortatory force, and we would only expect the permissive sense in the singular.<sup>56</sup> However, the typical sense of the passive form of φερω is “to be moved or driven, to let oneself to be driven.”<sup>57</sup> Such a usage hints that the author is not the one who determines whether his moving on will do any good. He *is* going to proceed to this mature teaching (as he does in 7:1), but it will not do any good if the audience does not concur.

Likewise, when he says, “we will do this, if God permits,” he is further stressing the part played by those other than audience. There are three parties involved in this scenario: (1) the author, who wants to move on; (2) the audience, who will determine the effectiveness of moving on; and (3) God,

<sup>53</sup> Ellingworth argues that the author’s use of the first person in 6:1–3 and the third person in 6:4–6 indicates that the author does not want to “explicitly identify the people described with the readers of the epistle.” Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews* 138. However, the author has not shown reluctance to use the second person in referring to them as “dull in understanding” (νοῦθοι τοῖς ἀκοαῖς) and condemning them for their lack of growth. He is showing that, in this regard, the audience is “them,” not “us.”

<sup>54</sup> Ellingworth acknowledges this in 6:1, but rejects it without explanation in 6:3. Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews* 311, 317.

<sup>55</sup> ‘Maturity’ is a better translation of τὴν τελειότητα because of the link to τελείων in the previous verse where maturity is clearly in view. The only other NT occurrence of τὴν τελειότητα (“maturity,” “completion,” “perfection”) is in Col 3:14. In Heb 5:14, the previous verse, the cognate, τέλειος, is used in reference to mature Christians. These words occur throughout the NT. In Matt (5:48; 19:21), τέλειος is used in the context of loving other people. In Paul (2 Cor 7:1; 12:9; 13:9; Titus 2:10), as well as τελειότης in Col 3:14, it deals with holy living within the body. In James (1:17; 1:25; 3:2), it refers either to the perfection in something that God does or the lack of it in what humans do. In 1 John (2:5; 4:12, 17, 18), it is always love that is perfected. In Rev 3:2, the Church of Sardis is warned that Jesus has not found their works complete. If they do not put into practice what they have heard, Jesus will remove their candlestick.

<sup>56</sup> BDF 183–84. In the NT, this usage is always introduced with ἄφες or δεῦρο. It is interesting to note that in classical Greek the introductory word could be φέρε, the imperative form of the word used for the subjunctive. Could this be a play on words? If it is, it is an inside joke. Even if the author was familiar with classical Greek, it is unlikely that he would expect his audience to be.

<sup>57</sup> Admittedly, φερω does often have an active force in the passive voice in classical literature. F. W. Danker, rev. and ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (3d ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000) 1051–52. See also Attridge, *Epistle to the Hebrews* 162–63, n. 97.

who is truly in charge, but “is not unjust” (Heb 6:10)—he *will* permit them to move on.

In a society where good and bad are determined by an “us versus them” mentality, he and God are on the “us” side. The author has already taught them all he can at an elementary level. He can no longer be of assistance to them if they stay at that stage, so he wants to proceed to the more mature teaching. If they go with him, they will be on the “us” side. Will they move on with him, or remain where they are and in this regard be “them?” The author is stressing what he can do for the audience versus what they must do for themselves.

(5) The use of “For” (a causal γάρ) at the beginning of 6:4 refers to the beginning of 6:1. “I will move on to the more mature teaching *because* I can no longer do anything for you at an elementary level.” If they do grow, it is ludicrous for him to teach the rudimentary lessons again. If they do not grow and do fall away, his repetitive teaching will not cause them to be redeemed—that is *their responsibility*. It is no coincidence that the author stresses that it is impossible for him to restore the audience to *repentance*, the first thing listed among the elementary teachings that he wants to leave behind.

“To restore again to repentance” (πάλιν ἀνακαινίζειν εἰς μετάνοιαν) now takes on an entirely different meaning than is often supposed. The author is telling his audience that it is impossible for someone else (himself) to restore them to repentance. He does not say that they cannot repent. Gleason states, “In summary the author’s point is not that his readers could not be saved again, but that once they decided to stay in their state of retrogression they could not be brought back to spiritual renewal through the efforts of fellow believers.”<sup>58</sup>

Thus, the “impossibility” of 6:4 does not deal with the audience’s returning to repentance, but with the author’s ability to bring them to repentance. If they fall away, they are *on their own* in returning to God. This is so because “*on their own* they are crucifying again the Son of God and are holding him up to contempt.”<sup>59</sup>

The warning does not refer to salvation, but to the audience’s reliance on what the author can do for them. The audience may have felt that their association with the author and/or the community was their insurance. This is the mindset of the Jews whom John the Baptist and Jesus condemned for relying on being “children of Abraham.”<sup>60</sup> The author spends the whole book showing that association with Judaism does not make things right. Here, he is saying that association with the church does not make things right. He takes it even farther in 10:25, where he admonishes them not to give up meeting together. Apparently, some not only sinned deliberately and continuously with the thought that their association with the church would

<sup>58</sup> Gleason, “Old Testament Background of the Warning in Hebrews 6:4–8” 84.

<sup>59</sup> Regardless of whether one interprets the dative of ἑαυτοῖς as crucifying “to yourself,” “on your own,” “to your own destruction,” or in any other way, the focus is on one group’s actions as opposed to the actions of others. They are doing it to themselves; he cannot help them.

<sup>60</sup> Matt 3:9; Luke 3:8; John 8:33–59.

make everything right (10:26), but they also felt that the association carried through even when they did not meet with the church.<sup>61</sup>

The author then moves to the use of agricultural imagery in 6:7–8. This is quite similar to Jesus' parable of the soils in which the sower sows indiscriminately and it is the soils that make the difference.<sup>62</sup> The sower cannot turn his audience into good soil; that is up to them. In Heb 6:7–8, the rain falls repeatedly on two types of soil, but one produces a crop while the other produces thorns. The author's teaching is the rain. What kind of soil the audience will be is up to them.

It has often been stated that the severity of the punishment for the ground which produces thorns is an indication that those who fall away are beyond hope. However, this ground is not yet cursed. It is "on the verge of being cursed," ripe to be cursed (κατάραξ ἐγγύς). This describes the state of those who fall away. Their judgment has not been pronounced. Rather, it is near if they do not repent.<sup>63</sup>

In 6:1, the author implies that he will push on in the hope that he will motivate his audience to desire this teaching. And he does indeed push on. He picks up the subject of the priesthood of Melchizedek in 7:1. He can do this because of the confidence he expresses in 6:9–12. Nongbri states, "[O]ur author uses the language of condemnation in 6:4–8, but then in a display of good rhetorical form, he reestablishes a good rapport with the members of his audience by praising their past deeds in 6:9–12 to make them more receptive to his message of encouragement."<sup>64</sup>

Verses 6:13–20 are not usually included in the warning section, but the author's focus on the faithfulness of God here is an indication that he can push on because "God will permit" (6:3). The choice is up to the audience.

In oral composition the middle element of a chiasmic (ABCBA in this case) pattern is the focus of the pattern and is often different in form than the other elements.<sup>65</sup> Such is the case with this third of the five warnings found in Hebrews. The author signals the difference to his audience when he separates himself from them in 5:11; a clue that would not be missed in an oral society. He stresses it further by condemning them before he warns them. In the other passages he is willing to associate himself with his audience in his warning (e.g. "How shall we escape?). There, he is speaking about salvation to those who, like himself, are already saved.<sup>66</sup> Here, however, he is speaking

<sup>61</sup> This may fit historically with the supposition that these are Hellenistic Jews. Jews living in Rome, for instance, would not be able get to the temple for many, if any, of the festivals. This could develop a mindset which says, "We are part, but we do not take part."

<sup>62</sup> Many authors have pointed to the frequent use of agricultural imagery in the OT and in Jesus' teaching. For a list of OT, classical, and rabbinic parallels, see Attridge, *Epistle to the Hebrews* 172, n. 69–72; A. Vanhoye, "Heb 6:7–8 et le Mashal Rabbinique," *The New Testament Age: Essays in Honor of Bo Reicke* (ed. W. C. Weinrich; Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1984) 527–32.

<sup>63</sup> The majority of scholars do not follow this interpretation. They argue that "the portentous phrase is used to suggest something inevitable." Attridge, *Epistle to the Hebrews* 175.

<sup>64</sup> Nongbri, "Touch of Condemnation in a Word of Exhortation" 266.

<sup>65</sup> Nils Lund gives three laws for chiasmic structure: (1) the center is the turning point; (2) there is often a change in the trend of the argument where an opposite idea is introduced; (3) similar ideas are dispersed to the extremes. N. W. Lund, *Chiasmus in the New Testament: A Study in the Form and Function of Chiasmic Structures* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992) 25–47.

about mature Christian teaching to an audience who is stuck on elementary teaching. He cannot associate himself with them on this issue.

In 6:1-3, he tells them what he can do for them, what he can teach them about growing into "maturity." In 6:4-6, he shows them that if, in their state of immaturity, they "fall away," he cannot help them; he cannot "restore them again to repentance" because they have already been there. He is saying:

I cannot help you because, on your own, you have placed yourself in a position where the crucifixion no longer affects you. You are re-crucifying Jesus. Therefore, *you* must re-repent. I cannot give you the status of the repentant. You have taken me out of the loop. I can only be of service to you when you decide to move on in your understanding.

#### IV. A PRACTICAL CONCLUSION

Numerous scholars have rightly pointed out that since this passage is meant to encourage the audience; it is dangerous to go beyond the author's intentions and use it to give a theological definition of apostasy. We must ask ourselves, however, why he would speak of a situation from which one could not recover without delineating exactly what that situation is. In 6:9-12, he tells his general audience that they have not yet gone too far. But what about those who have strayed a little farther than others? If he is indeed speaking of a hopeless situation without defining the boundary, then his encouragement becomes (and has since become) one of the most discouraging passages in the Bible.

Such a disastrous situation demands definition. Otherwise, human nature being what it is, people who have strayed away, but not gone as far as apostasy, including some of his audience, are going to think that they are lost and will give up. Every pastor and Christian counselor has had people come to them thinking they have committed the unforgivable sin. If the author is saying that one cannot come back to faith, we would expect some guidelines and encouragement for those in his audience who were still in a "repentable" state.

That is not an issue here. The author does not need to give guidelines because their situation was not "unrepentable." It was simply not something *he* could fix for them.

Verses 5:11-6:6 may be summarized in this way:

I want to teach you about this more mature understanding of Jesus<sup>67</sup> but you are not willing to learn of it. You need someone to teach you the elementary things but the teaching that I want to give you is for the mature. Therefore, I will move on to this mature teaching since, if you turn away from God,<sup>68</sup> I cannot *make* you right with him by constantly going over the elementary things.<sup>69</sup> If you turn away; *you* must come back.

<sup>66</sup> This interpretation obviously speaks against the phenomenological unbeliever position discussed above.

<sup>67</sup> The priesthood of Jesus according to the order of Melchizedek as discussed in the previous section.

<sup>68</sup> "What can happen when you do not grow."

<sup>69</sup> "I cannot give you the status of a repentant person by repeatedly teaching you about repentance."