

Assurance of Salvation in Hebrews

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Abstract

The paper asks whether the author of Hebrews provides assurance of salvation to his readers. The answer is in the affirmative for these reasons: first, Jesus, who is the author and perfecter of their faith (12:2), has gone into the heavenly sanctuary by his own blood securing their redemption (9:12). Second, he intercedes for them as a perfect intercessor who is both fully divine that is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him (7:25), and fully human who, because he himself suffered when tempted, is able to help those who are being tempted (2:14-18). Third, he is the inaugurator and guarantor of the new covenant (7:22) that has internalized the law through the Spirit and provided complete forgiveness of sins (8:8-12; 10:15-18). Fourth, Jesus has perfected those who are being sanctified for all time by a single offering (10:14). Fifth, the believers are said to have already entered God's rest in the present (4:9-10), have come to the heavenly Jerusalem (12:22), and have been enrolled in heaven (12:23). Finally, believers who can enjoy present confidence of their salvation (6:9-10; 10:39) are consistently distinguished from the individuals in the community who are in danger of eternal judgment because of their unbelief.

Keywords: Jesus, high priest, assurance of salvation, intercessor, new covenant, rest,

Introduction

It is unlikely that there will be a consensus among scholars on how to interpret the Letter to the Hebrews especially on the salvific status and eternal destiny of the apostates. The writings of Verbrugge,¹ Nicole,² Hughes,³ Grudem,⁴ and McKnight⁵ among many contributed to our understanding of the warning passages in Hebrews. *Four Views on the Warning Passages* (Bateman, ed. 2007) provided good articulation of several views on the warning passages and healthy interactions among them.⁶ There have also been attempts to interpret Hebrews warning passages using various tools from other disciplines than biblical studies including deSilva's social-scientific and rhetorical methods,⁷ Salevao's social-scientific legitimation,⁸

¹ Verlyn D Verbrugge, "Towards a New Interpretation of Hebrews 6:4-6," *Calvin Theological Journal* 15, no. 1 (April 1980): 61-73.

² Roger R 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 Presented by His Former Students*, 1975, 355-364.

³ Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, "Hebrews 6:4-6 and the Peril of Apostasy," *The Westminster Theological Journal* 35, no. 2 (1973): 137-155.

⁴ Wayne A Grudem, "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, Vol 1: Biblical and Practical Perspectives on Calvinism*, 1995, 133-182.

⁵ Scot McKnight, "The Warning Passages of Hebrews: A Formal Analysis and Theological Conclusions," *Trinity Journal* 13, no. 1 (1992): 21-59.

⁶ Herbert IV Bateman, ed., *Four Views of the Warning Passages in Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Kregel, 2007).

⁷ David Arthur DeSilva, "Exchanging Favor for Wrath: Apostasy in Hebrews and Patron-Client Relationships," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 115, no. 1 (1996): 91-116.

⁸ Iutisone Salevao, *Legitimation in the Letter to the Hebrews: The Construction and Maintenance of a Symbolic Universe*, 1st edition (London ; New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002). Salevao rightly emphasizes "the important correlation between theology, situation and strategy in Hebrews, a correlation that is vital to a proper understanding of the meaning and function of that theology" (414).

Mathewson's intertexture of Israel's Scriptures approach,⁹ and Davis' oral-critical method.¹⁰ These studies shed more light on how to interpret Hebrews but with mixed responses from reviewers. One area of study that deserves further examination is the relationship between Jesus' high priesthood and the perseverance of saints in Hebrews. This paper will argue that there are many indications in Hebrews that for the author of Hebrews, Christ's high priestly ministry provides present assurance to the believers of their final salvation.

In *Four Views on the Warning Passages*, four contributors, Grant Osborne, Buist Fanning, Gareth Cockerill, and Randall Gleason represents a classical Arminian view, a classical Reformed view, a Wesleyan Arminian view, and a moderate Reformed view, respectively. Gleason's emphasis that the echoes of the Old Testament passages, especially about the wilderness generation, should be recognized in order to interpret the warning passages correctly is well taken. However, he sometimes reads too much into the Hebrews passage by making one on one correspondence between the wilderness generation and the recipients of the letter, concluding that for both groups salvation is not at stake but temporal judgment.¹¹

⁹ Dave Mathewson, "Reading Heb 6:4-6 in Light of the Old Testament," *Westminster Theological Journal* 61 (1999): 209–25.

¹⁰ Casey Wayne Davis, "Hebrews 6:4-6 from an Oral Critical Perspective," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 51, no. 4 (December 2008): 753–767.

¹¹ David M. Allen has a good critique on Gleason: "He takes seriously the spiritual position of both parties, but ventures that, for each, their 'omission' is physical death rather than eternal loss, fruitful barrenness rather than fiery damnation; Hebrews' recipients potentially lose covenant blessings, but nothing more serious. Salvation is not in jeopardy for either grouping, partly because they have already been redeemed, partly because their 'sin' is not willful apostasy but rather a refusal to trust God. Gleason's system is neat, and (rightly) takes seriously the Old Testament backdrop; it also, implicitly at least, affirms the quasisalvation experience of the exodus generation – they are in some sense 'saved'. But one wonders whether it takes full account of the strength of language in the letter. The tenor of the warnings seems more significant than Gleason allows, and to limit them to (just) physical death does not seem to do them justice" ("The Irrevocable Nature of

Osborne and Cockerill both present Arminian views and do good jobs in presenting their views based on sound exegesis of the text, concluding that genuine believers and eternal judgment are in view. Fanning also does a fine job in approaching the warning passages synthetically letting the author's argument in the whole letter determine the interpretation, and concluding that what is in view in the warning passages is the eternal judgment of those in the community who "have never partaken in the benefits of Christ's cleansing sacrifice."¹²

Bringing in the social background of the first century in interpreting Hebrews, deSilva argues that the author's attitudes concerning apostasy are firmly rooted in the socio-cultural values and expectations of the Mediterranean. Specifically, deSilva believes a patron-client relationship between God and believers which bind them into certain obligations play an important role in understanding the warning passages.¹³ Oropeza objects such patron-client model does not fully explain the severity of language used in Hebrews 6:4-8 and 10.31 because the breaking of the patron-client bond typically results only in dishonor and shame, not eternal destruction.¹⁴ On the other hand, Cockerill evaluates deSilva's use of ancient rhetoric and the Greco-Roman patron/client relationship in understanding Hebrews a success.¹⁵

Salvation: Evidences from the Book of Hebrews," *Testamentum Imperium* 2 [2009]: 18).

¹² Fanning, "A Classical Reformed View," in Bateman, *Four Views of the Warning Passages in Hebrews*.

¹³ DeSilva, "Exchanging Favor for Wrath," 115-116.

¹⁴ B J Oropeza, "The Warning Passages in Hebrews: Revised Theologies and New Methods of Interpretation," *Currents in Biblical Research* 10, no. 1 (October 2011): 92.

¹⁵ Gareth Cockerill, "A Wesleyan Arminian View," in Bateman, *Four Views of the Warning Passages in Hebrews*, 258. DeSilva also applies Socio-rhetorical interpretation which co-ordinates multiple levels such as "inner-texture, inter-texture, social and cultural texture, ideological texture, and sacred texture" to reading a text into an integrated method into interpreting Hebrews 6:4-8 (David deSilva, "Hebrews 6:4-8: A Socio-

Recent research into the use of the OT in the NT has pointed to the importance of allusions, echoes, and implicit and subtle uses of Scripture.¹⁶ Matthewson is correct when he maintains that by alluding to texts which belong to a larger matrix of ideas the author of Hebrews is evoking the entire context and story of Israel's experience in the wilderness.¹⁷ Casey Davis brings in the oral-critical study in interpreting Hebrews reminding us that the New Testament world was an oral world and writing was done using conventions of story-telling.¹⁸

These have certainly added more lights in interpreting Hebrews, but it yet remains to be seen the degree to which they will shape the perennial debate on the question about the perseverance of the saints in Hebrews. Does the author of Hebrews believe that believers can lose their salvation? It is to this question we now turn.

What makes it difficult for the reformed view is that the author of Hebrews seems to have a futuristic understanding of salvation. McKnight capitalizes on this and contends, "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."¹⁹ DeSilva similarly asks, "Are the

Rhetorical Investigation (Part 1)," *Tyndale Bulletin* 50, no. 1 [1999]: 33–57).

¹⁶ Dave Matthewson, "Reading Heb 6:4-6 in Light of the Old Testament," *Westminster Theological Journal* 61 (1999): 209–25.

¹⁷ Matthewson, "Reading Heb 6:4-6 in Light of the Old Testament," 223. "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."

¹⁸ Casey Wayne Davis, "Hebrews 6:4-6 from an Oral Critical Perspective," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 51, no. 4 (December 2008): 753–767. Davis points out that "The NT world was an oral world, and the "literature" of the NT was "written" (actually, it was dictated) with an oral mindset." What that means is that "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" (759).

¹⁹ McKnight, "The Warning Passages of Hebrews," 58.

people described in 6:4-5 ‘saved’ individuals in the estimation of the author of Hebrews? They cannot be, since ‘salvation’ is, for this author, the deliverance and reward that awaits the faithful at the return of Christ.”²⁰

The question I am attempting to answer in this paper is whether the author of Hebrews provides assurance of salvation to his readers when salvation is a future reality to him. I believe that for the author of Hebrews, such assurance is provided by Christ’s high priestly ministry. Though salvation awaits the future, and believers are to persevere in this life in order to attain their eschatological salvation, they can nevertheless enjoy assurance of salvation in the present life for the following reasons.

First, Jesus, who is the author and perfecter of their faith (12:2), has gone into the heavenly sanctuary by his own blood securing their redemption (9:12). Second, he intercedes for them as a perfect intercessor who is both fully divine that is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him (7:25), and fully human who, because he himself suffered when tempted, is able to help those who are being tempted (2:14-18). Third, he is the inaugurator and guarantor of the new covenant (7:22) that has internalized the law through the Spirit and provided complete forgiveness of sins (8:8-12; 10:15-18).

Fourth, Jesus has perfected those who are being sanctified for all time by a single offering (10:14), giving them confidence to enter God’s presence (10:19) because Jesus who made the promise is faithful (10:23). Fifth, the believers are said to have already entered God’s rest in the present (4:9-10), have come to the heavenly Jerusalem (12:22), and have been enrolled in heaven (12:23) even though the final rest remains the future. Finally, believers who can enjoy present confidence of their salvation (6:9-10; 10:39) are consistently distinguished from

²⁰ David deSilva, “Hebrews 6:4-8: A Socio-Rhetorical Investigation (Part 1),” 43.

the individuals in the community who are in danger of eternal judgment because of their unbelief due to their repeated hardening of their hearts when they hear God's voice (3:8, 15; 4:7), thus have not yet entered God's rest (4:1, 11), and have not obtained the grace of God (12:15). We will look at these six reasons in turn.

Jesus the Author and Perfecter of Salvation

First, Jesus, who is the author and perfecter of their faith (*tes pistews archegon kai teleioten*) (12:2), has gone into the heavenly sanctuary by his own blood securing their redemption (9:12). Twice Jesus is called an *archegos* in Hebrews. He is the *archegos* of salvation in 2:10 and the *archegos* and *teleioten* of faith in 12:2. The term *archegos* is related to the verb *archo*, which means "to rule" or "to begin."

According to Julius Scott, a survey of LXX and non-Biblical use of the term *archegos* suggests a threefold connotation: (1) path-breaker (pioneer) who opens the way for others, (2) source or founder, and (3) leader-ruler, and most translations of *archegos* tend to gravitate toward one or another of these meanings.²¹ Scott himself thinks that it is not either/or, but all of concepts of "pioneer-founder-victor-leader-ruler-hero" are present in the meaning of the word *archegos* in Hebrews.²²

In Heb 2:10 the word is best understood to mean "author" or "originator" since the author of Hebrews goes on to say in 2:11

²¹ J. Julius Scott, "Archēgos: The Salvation History of the Epistle to the Hebrews," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 29, no. 1 (1984): 47. "Discussions of the cultural background from which archēgos entered Christianity or that of the group of early Christians who used it generally seem to assume that the source-founder emphasis is more likely to be Greek while the leader-ruler connotation probably reflects a Semitic background."

²² *Ibid.*, 53. "The author of Hebrews proclaims Jesus as the *archēgos*, the pioneer-founder-victor-leader-ruler-hero who established the new age and remains in that capacity for the people of God of that new age. The two occurrences of the term are but the tip of the iceberg of a distinct way of thinking and talking about Jesus."

“For he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one source.” So the author of Hebrews is talking about Jesus being the one who is not just a leader but the originator and founder of their faith. Elsewhere in the NT, the word is used two more times. In Acts 3:15 where Peter says that his hearers “killed the Author of life” (*ton de archegon tes zoes*) referring to Jesus. In this context also, the meaning seems clear: Jesus is the one who is the originator of life. He is the one who gives life (whether it be the second birth or the resurrection life). The translation “leader of life” does not make sense in that context. One other place the word is used is Act 5:31 which states “God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior (*archegon kai soter*), to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.” Again, the best meaning of the word in the context is “founder” or “originator.”²³

Therefore when the author of Hebrews says in 12:2 that Jesus is the ἀρχηγός of our faith, he is clearly referring to the fact that Jesus is the originator of their faith, which is further confirmed by the expression, “the originator and the perfecter of our faith” (*tes pisteus archegon kai teleiotes*). Jesus is the one who gives and perfects the faith of believers. For the author of Hebrews, faith of believers is not originated by themselves but by Jesus, and it is Jesus who also perfects it. Scott states, “Given its full range of meaning, the word *archegos* designates an individual who opened the way into a new area for others to follow, founded the city in which they dwelt, gave his name to the community, fought its battles and secured the victory, and then remained as the leader-ruler-hero of his people.”²⁴ Since Jesus is the one who gives and perfects faith, believer’s faith is not conditional but evidential, revealing the presence of “salvation” in the life of the believer, rather than the cause of salvation.²⁵

²³ So also BDAG,

²⁴ Scott, “Archēgos: The Salvation History of the Epistle to the Hebrews,” 52.

²⁵ David Allen, “The Irrevocable Nature of Salvation: Evidences from the Book of Hebrews,” *Testamentum Imperium*, vol 2 (2009), 12. In Heb 5:9 a

The word *teleiotes* (“perfecter”), though it occurs nowhere else in the NT, echoes the language of perfection in Hebrews both of Jesus (2:10; 5:9; 7:28) and humanity (7:11; 9:9; 10:1, 14; 11:40; 12:23). In Heb 12:2 what is perfected is faith, and the idea seems to be that Jesus is the initiator and completer of the faith of the believers.²⁶ This theme of perfection is sustained throughout the epistle: Jesus has been made perfect through suffering (5:7), and the faithful of the past have not yet been made perfect apart from the New Covenant believers (11:40). The concept of perfection is closely tied to the *epangelia* “promise,” which is manifest in 11:39-40, where the “promise” and the “perfecting” stand parallel to one another.²⁷ The point the author is making in Heb 12:2 seems to be that Jesus, not the believers, is the one who provides and completes the faith of the believers through the redemption he accomplished by his own blood. Jesus is no ordinary high priest who only intercedes for his people, but one who also provides everything for their redemption including their faith.

The Divine-Human Intercessor

Second, Jesus intercedes for the believers as a perfect intercessor who is both fully divine and thus able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him (7:25), and fully human and thus able to help those who are being tempted because he himself experienced temptation (2:14-18). Swetnam points to the faithfulness of Jesus as the high priest, on the basis of his divinity (1:5-14), as well as of his humanity (2: 10-18): “The faithfulness of Jesus as God is assumed from the background of the Old Testament, whereas the faithfulness of Jesus as man is grounded in his own trusting in God at the moment of his being tested. On both counts Jesus is *pistos*, i.e.,

similar idea is found when it says, “he became the source (*aĩttos*) of eternal salvation to all who obey him.”

²⁶ William L. Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, vol. 47b, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Inc, 1991).

²⁷ Andrew Neamtu, “An Exegesis on the Greek Text of Hebrews 12:2,” *Faith & Mission* 16, no. 3 (1999): 33.

faithful in the sense of trustworthy.”²⁸ Jesus is faithful in his constant ministry of saving those who draw near to God through him. What if those who draw near begin drawing back and fall away? According to 2:14-18, Jesus is able to help them when they are tempted, and apostasy was the strongest temptation the readers of Hebrews were experiencing. Thus the offspring of Abraham have irrevocable salvation since Jesus who is able to save them continually intercedes for them even when they are tempted with apostasy.

In 7:25 when it says that Jesus is able to save to the uttermost (*sozein eis to panteles*), this prepositional phrase can be taken qualitatively (“completely, fully, wholly”) or temporally (“forever, for all time”).²⁹ It probably means both. The author is expressing the completeness and permanence of the salvation Jesus brings to those who draw near to him even when they are tempted.³⁰

In Heb 9 the author uses words to indicate that Jesus has taken care of the sin problem once and for all. In 9:26 he uses *athetesis*, which is a legal term meaning “abrogation, annulment” when he says that Jesus appeared at the end of the age “to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself” (*eis athetisin*

²⁸ James Swetnam, “A Merciful and Trustworthy High Priest: Interpreting Hebrews 2:17,” *The Pacific Journal of Theology* 21 (1999): 17.

²⁹ Brian C. Small, *The Characterization of Jesus in the Book of Hebrews*, vol. 128, Biblical Interpretation Series (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2014), 228.

³⁰ Small, *The Characterization of Jesus in the Book of Hebrews*, 229. The word *prosevrcomai* (“draw near”) in 7:25 is significant. Allen captures the significance of the word in its implication of the present aspect of salvation when he states, “The act of ‘coming to’ elsewhere in the letter is one of arrival, of being at the very precipice of engagement (cf. 12:18, 12:22), and this seems to temper the futuristic dimension of the salvation encounter; salvation is almost within the hearers’ grasp, they have come to its very nearness” (David M. Allen, *Deuteronomy and Exhortation in Hebrews: An Exercise in Narrative Re-Presentation* [WUNT 2/238; Tübingen: Mohr (Siebeck), 2008], 195-98, cited by David M. Allen, “The Irrevocable Nature of Salvation: Evidences from the Book of Hebrews,” *Testamentum Imperium*, vol 2 [2009], 6.)

[tes] hamartias dia tes thusias autou).³¹ The word implies that Jesus effects the abolition, removal, or cancellation of sin. The adverb ἄραξ suggests the permanence of this removal of sin. In 9:28 the author states that Jesus was “offered once to bear the sins of many” (*hapax prosenechtheis eis to polon anenengkein harmatias*). The language of bearing sins is also found in 1 Pet 2:24 where it is clearly reminiscent of the Suffering Servant in Isa 53:12. Small points out, “The language suggests that Jesus’ sacrifice was substitutionary; he bears the consequences or punishment for sins on behalf of others. His sacrifice benefited many people. The two aorists (*prosenechtheis, anenengkein*), in conjunction with the adverb ἄραξ, again suggest the permanent efficacy of his sacrifice.”³²

As the heavenly high priest in the presence of God on behalf of humanity (9:24), Jesus is able to help humanity (2:18; cf. 4:16), sympathize with our weaknesses (4:15), and intercede for us (7:25). In 2:18 Jesus’ ability to help humanity arises from his shared experience of temptation and suffering. As Neamtu points out,

Both His human suffering and His heavenly exaltation are related to Jesus' service as high priest, who has made the ultimate sacrifice, has purified believers from sin, and has gone through the veil into the very presence of God where He intercedes for His followers and makes it possible for them to come freely to the throne of God. Jesus as perfecter has opened the way for believers to stand in the presence of God, for it is only when they stand in God's presence that perfection is accomplished. Jesus as pioneer has gone ahead to show His followers the way. As perfecter He has cleared the way, torn open the veil, and set believers free to live uninterruptedly

³¹ Heb 9:26b (“But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.”)

³² Small, *The Characterization of Jesus in the Book of Hebrews*, 230.

in the presence of God. This standing in the presence of God is the writer's concept of perfection. The saving work of Christ lies both in His deep and profound identification with sinful, suffering humanity, and in such absolute identification with the will and purpose of God that He remains eternally in God's presence—at the right hand.³³

The author reminds the readers of Christ's priestly intercession for them (Heb. 4:14-16; 5:2; 7:25), the forgiveness of sins through the new covenant (8:10-12; 10:14, 17-18), their assurance of hope and faith (6:9-11, 18-19; 10:22; 11:1), and God's faithfulness to them (13:5).³⁴ Jesus, in His humanity and suffering, is repeatedly made the focus of attention as the basis of the writer's total argument and exhortation: "We see Jesus . . ." (2:9); "Consider Jesus . . ." (3:3); "In the days of His flesh, Jesus . . ." (5:7); and "Jesus . . . forerunner . . ." (6:20).³⁵ In short, salvation depends on Jesus' ability to save, not the human ability to persevere.

The Inaugurator and Guarantor of the New Covenant

Third, Jesus is the inaugurator and guarantor of the new covenant (7:22) that has internalized the law through the Spirit and provided complete forgiveness of sins (8:8-12; 10:15-18). In Hebrews, all the key elements of the New Covenant promises are affirmed as having been fulfilled: purification from sin is procured (1:3; 7:27; 9:11-14; 10:10, 14), forgiveness is granted (8:12; 9:24; 10:17-18), relationship with God is established (8:10-11), and unhindered access to God's presence is granted (4:16; 6:19-20; 10:19-20).

³³ Andrew Neamtu, "An Exegesis on the Greek Text of Hebrews 12:2," *Faith & Mission* 16, no. 3 (1999): 35.

³⁴ B J Oropeza, "The Warning Passages in Hebrews: Revised Theologies and New Methods of Interpretation," *Currents in Biblical Research* 10, no. 1 (October 2011): 90.

³⁵ Neamtu, "An Exegesis on the Greek Text of Hebrews 12:2," 32.

New covenant fulfillment is a defining characteristic of 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.³⁶ One of the key features of the new covenant is that God's laws will be written on the hearts of his people.³⁷ 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).³⁸

According to Jeremiah and Moses, what God's people needed in order to hear and obey God's voice with their whole hearts was circumcision of their hearts.³⁹ A call for repentance had been

³⁶ 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.

³⁷ In Heb 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."

³⁸ 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). Moses also attributed his congregation's failure to obey God to the condition of their hearts (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.

³⁹ 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).

issued: “wash your heart from evil, that you may be saved” (Jer. 4:14). A stubborn and rebellious heart turns aside from God because there is no fear of God (5:23-24).⁴⁰ 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 heart indicates that, to Jeremiah, circumcision is the sign of God’s covenant with his people under the New Covenant also—but this time not in the flesh externally but in the heart internally. 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. But for those who have been circumcised in their hearts, the internalization of the law is permanent. It is what Paul calls the sealing of the Holy Spirit.

Though the author of Hebrews does not explicitly mention circumcision of the heart, he uses a similar concept of cleansing of conscience. According to Carlson,

The key to the irrevocable nature of salvation in Hebrews is related to the cleansing of the believer’s conscience. The author repeatedly contrasts the temporary nature of salvation through temple rituals, animal sacrifice, and Torah obedience to the irrevocable concept of salvation through Christ’s

⁴⁰ 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).

self-sacrifice, which cleanses the conscience (9:14; 10:2; 10:22). . . .This cleansing of the conscience accomplishes significantly more than simply the erasing of the individual's concern for personal sin. It enlightens the individual to eternal realities which can only be seen by faith, one of which is the irrevocable nature of salvation for those whose consciences have been cleansed. . . . The sacrifice of Christ deals with an individual's sin for eternity. It involves not only forgiveness, but also the consciousness of sin. Since this is so, those who have responded in faith to the teachings of the community and continue to uphold its confession can never lose their salvation. Their salvation is irrevocable.⁴¹

But then he adds, "Those who at some point respond in faith and gain this eternal level of assurance of salvation only to subsequently abandon the confession in the face of tribulation cannot be restored from their apostate status. In their case, the choice to revert to an obsolete manner of dealing with sin is irrevocable."⁴² It seems Carlson contradicts himself without explaining how the author of Hebrews makes an exception to the irrevocable nature of salvation in the case of apostasy. This is not borne out by anything he discusses in his article. The primary and probably the only indicator for the possibility of the apostasy in Hebrews is found in the warning passages. As I will argue later, I believe the warning passages are addressed not to the believers but to those in the community who are unregenerate.

Joslin makes a helpful connection between Jesus' high priestly atonement for sin (foreshadowed by the sacrificial goat and the scapegoat on the Day of Atonement) and his inauguration of the New Covenant: "The writer of Hebrews' theological aim of verses

⁴¹ Carlson, "The Irrevocable Nature of Salvation," 16-18.

⁴² Carlson, "The Irrevocable Nature of Salvation," 18.

11-28 is to demonstrate that Christ fulfills the Day of Atonement ritual in his death and self-offering as the new high priest, and that this self-offering both permanently atones for sin as well as inaugurates the promised New Covenant.”⁴³

Referring to Heb 9:28, Joslin, along with many scholars, sees a clear allusion to Isaiah 53:12 thus interpreting the death of Christ in Heb 9:28 as substitutionary.⁴⁴ When Isaiah says the Servant will “make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities” (53:11), the idea of substitution is evident: they receive righteousness and peace, because their sin and guilt has been born by the Servant.⁴⁵ Joslin concludes that for the author of Hebrews Christ’s death is not just a substitutionary death, but a penal substitutionary sacrifice.⁴⁶ If this is accepted, then it strengthens the reformed view that for those whom Christ died in their place, the permanence of their atonement does not depend on the human abilities but on Jesus’ substitutionary bearing of their sins. Jesus’ inauguration of the New Covenant which internalizes the law and circumcise the hearts also is based upon his penal substitution for the sins of his people.

The All Sufficient Sacrifice and Faithful High Priest

Fourth, Jesus has perfected those who are being sanctified for all time by a single offering (10:14), giving them confidence to enter God’s presence (10:19) because Jesus who made the promise is faithful (2:17; 10:23). Behind the idea of Jesus perfecting those who are sanctified by a single offering in 10:14 is the whole picture of Jesus offering himself in chapter 9, especially in verses 26-28, which we looked at earlier, and now we will take a closer look. In this passage the author states that

⁴³ Barry Joslin, “Christ Bore the Sins of Many: Substitution and the Atonement in Hebrews,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 112 (2007): 85.

⁴⁴ Joslin, “Christ Bore the Sins of Many,” 88.

⁴⁵ Joslin, “Christ Bore the Sins of Many,” 89.

⁴⁶ Joslin, “Christ Bore the Sins of Many,” 90.

Jesus “appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself” (v. 26) and “having been offered once to bear the sins of many” (v. 28). This in turn is a clear picture of portraying Jesus as the sacrificial goat on the Day of Atonement (Lev 16), and there is a near unanimity on this among scholars.⁴⁷ The vast majority of Hebrews scholarship is in agreement that Yom Kippur forms the main OT backdrop for the writer’s discussion of Christ’s work throughout Hebrews 9 (9:13, cf. 10:4; 6:19-20; 10:19-20).⁴⁸ On this day, consequences of sin such as defilement and guilt and God’s wrath against sin are dealt with.

On Yom Kippur, the death of the sacrificial goat represents the propitiation of God’s wrath through substitutionary death. Lev 9:22 has a clear statement about the scapegoat also vicariously bearing people’s sins on itself as a substitute: “The goat shall bear all their iniquities on itself to a remote area, and he shall let the goat go free in the wilderness.” Lev 17:11 states, “For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life.” This verse ought to be viewed in terms of averting the destruction of God’s wrath due to sin.⁴⁹ Joslin rightly argues that purification cannot be disconnected from forgiveness, because Jesus purifies and reconciles sinful people to the holy God in ratifying the New Covenant.⁵⁰

The goats on the Day of Atonement function as foreshadows of what Christ would do through his own death. Interestingly, the Servant of Yahweh in Isaiah 52:13-53:12 is the only person in the OT who bears the sins of others.⁵¹ Jesus clearly understood himself as the fulfillment of the Servant of Yahweh (e.g., Luke

⁴⁷ Joslin, “Christ Bore the Sins of Many,” 75.

⁴⁸ Joslin, “Christ Bore the Sins of Many,” 84.

⁴⁹ Joslin, “Christ Bore the Sins of Many,” 80.

⁵⁰ Joslin, “Christ Bore the Sins of Many,” 80.

⁵¹ Joslin, “Christ Bore the Sins of Many,” 78.

4:18-21). It is Jesus' death on the cross that provides propitiation and expiation for complete forgiveness of reconciliation with God.

The author of Hebrews believes that Jesus is "a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation (*hilaskesthai*) for the sins of the people" (2:17), and "we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus" (10:19) because "he who promised is faithful (*pistos*)" (10:23). In the OT, the pairing *hesed waemeth* ("kindness and faithfulness") describes God's acts of kindness as coming from him in a reliable and constant manner.⁵² Swtnam's article has explored the words *hesed waemeth* ("kindness and faithfulness") and seen that they refer to God's covenant kindness and abiding trustworthiness.⁵³ In Heb 2: 17 the adjective forms of those nouns, *eleemon genetai kai pistos* ("merciful and faithful"), are used, linking the characteristics of God with the high priest.⁵⁴ The word *pistos* usually is used to translate the Hebrew verb *amen* ("confirm, support") to which the noun *emeth* ("faithfulness") is etymologically related.⁵⁵ Jesus, in his

⁵² James Swetnam, "A Merciful and Trustworthy High Priest: Interpreting Hebrews 2:17," *The Pacific Journal of Theology* 21 (1999): 12-13.

⁵³ Swetnam, "A Merciful and Trustworthy High Priest: Interpreting Hebrews 2:17," 19 ("the two adjectives *eleemiin* and *pistes* constitute the key divine attributes connected with the Old Testament covenant").

⁵⁴ Swetnam, "A Merciful and Trustworthy High Priest: Interpreting Hebrews 2:17," 14.

⁵⁵ Swetnam, "A Merciful and Trustworthy High Priest: Interpreting Hebrews 2:17," 15. "The Hebrew verb is used in a special way in Dt 7:9 and Is 49:7 to indicate God's faithfulness to Israel. In Dt 7:9 this faithfulness is manifest in his covenant graciousness. In Is 49:7 this faithfulness is manifest in his choice of Israel. The important thing to be noted is that these are not attempts to speculate about the inner nature of God. Rather, they are a carefully phrased statement about how God has *shown* his faithfulness to his people and therefore merits their trust. These two texts-Dt 7:9 and Is 49:7-are of considerable importance for the understanding of Heb 2: 17, for these are among the few places in the Septuagint where the adjective *pistos* is used to express God's faithfulness. The inference is that Christ's faithfulness has been *shown* a subtle testimony by the author to his deep reverence for Christ's faithfulness to his people. Faithfulness has been shown and this shown faithfulness means that God is trustworthy."

faithfulness to the covenant promises, has offered a once-for-all sufficient sacrifice for the complete forgiveness of the sins of his people and their full reconciliation with God.

The Provider of God's Rest

Fifth, the believers are said to have already entered God's rest in the present (4:9-10), have come to the heavenly Jerusalem (12:22), and have been enrolled in heaven (12:23) even though the final rest remains the future. Just as there is a present and future aspects of salvation, there is also present and future aspects of rest. The author of Hebrews exhorts his readers to enter into the rest in the present tense in 4:3, using the hortatory present *eijsevrcomeqa* ("let us enter"). Though the hortatory sense could be interpreted as future entrance into the rest,⁵⁶ the invitational context and the present tense of the verb seem to suggest that the author has present rest in mind.⁵⁷ If the rest (*katapausin*) that the author is inviting the readers to enter into is the heavenly rest that God himself is enjoying, the implication seems to be that this rest is somehow experienced in the present by the believers also.⁵⁸

After researching recent interpretations of Hebrews 3-4, Docherty concludes, "The dominant view today, therefore, seems to be that there is *both* a future *and* a presently realized dimension to the eschatology of Hebrews, since the followers of Jesus do enter that 'rest' (Heb 4:3) but must also continually strive to attain it (Heb 4:11)."⁵⁹ Lanzinger sees an analogy between Jesus' priestly intercession for the believers and his

⁵⁶ So Craig R. Koester, *Hebrews: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 2001), 270.

⁵⁷ So Lane, *Hebrews*, 99.

⁵⁸ Allen, "The Irrevocable Nature of Salvation," 9.

⁵⁹ Susan Docherty, "Recent Interpretation of Hebrews Chapters 3-4: Critical Issues and Scholarly Trends," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 81, no. 4 (2016): 385-96.

once-for-all sacrifice and God's ongoing work and rest at the same time:

although the author highlights several times that Christ's salvific work happened 'once for all' (*hapax/ephapax*, 7:27; 9:12, 26, 28; 10:10), he states at the same time that Jesus 'always lives to make intercession' for those who approach God through him (*pantote zone is to entungchanein huper auton*, 7:25). What at first glance looks like a contradiction can easily be explained by comparison to the concept of rest in Hebrews 4. The apparent tension between Christ's ongoing intercession and his finished salvific work is parallel to that between God's ongoing work and his ongoing rest, and has a similar solution: Christ rests from his work in the same way that God rests, that is to say, by actively sustaining what he has accomplished.⁶⁰

The Provider of God's Saving Grace

Finally, believers who can enjoy present confidence of their salvation (6:9-10; 10:39) are consistently distinguished from the individuals in the community who are in danger of eternal judgment (6:4-8; 10:26-31) because of their unbelief due to their repeated hardening of their hearts when they hear God's voice (3:8, 15; 4:7), thus have not yet entered God's rest (4:1, 11), and have not obtained the grace of God (12:15). The author makes extensive use of the example of the wilderness

⁶⁰ Daniel Lanzinger, "A Sabbath Rest for the People of God' (Heb 4.9): Hebrews and Philo on the Seventh Day of Creation," *New Testament Studies* 64 (2018): 107. Marshall and Osborne also see salvation as having both present and future aspects. Marshall states, "salvation is primarily, but not exclusively, a future expectation" (I. Howard Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God: A Study of Perseverance and Falling Away* [London: Epworth, 1969], 138. Cf. also Attridge, *Epistle*, 66; Andrew T. Lincoln, *Hebrews : A Guide* [London: T&T Clark, 2006], 89.). Osborne also holds, "salvation is both present and future, that is, it is present now but will be finalized in the future" (Osborne, "Classical," 116. He also invokes the language of "inaugurated salvation.")

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 29:18.⁶¹ In both cases, even though these individuals are in God's community, their hardening of hearts will result in God's judgment.⁶²

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.").⁶³ Then in verse 3 the author

⁶¹ 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.

⁶² 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 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).

⁶³ See Harold W. Attridge, *Hebrews*, Hermeneia, ed. Helmut Koester (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 126-28 for the connection between the concept of rest and soteriological motifs in Hebrews.

contrasts those who have not believed with others who have: “For we who have believed enter that rest.”⁶⁴

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 consummation of history.⁶⁵ 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).⁶⁶ 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.”⁶⁷

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”).⁶⁸ However,

⁶⁴ 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.”

⁶⁵ 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.

⁶⁶ 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.

⁶⁷ Donald Guthrie, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, ed. Leon Morris (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1983), 117.

⁶⁸ Guthrie, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, 112.

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).

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.⁶⁹ 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 hearts when they hear God's voice will not enter God's rest. These are the unregenerate in the believing community who are still in need of salvation and in danger of falling away from their profession of faith.

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).⁷⁰ That is why the author spends much space comparing his readers with the wilderness generation and warns them against unbelief (3:7-

⁶⁹ Mitchell, *Hebrews*, 22.

⁷⁰ 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.").

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 thing was unbelief.”⁷¹ 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. As Matthewson points out,

[I]n an analogy to the old covenant community the people depicted in 6:4-6 are *not genuine believers* or true members of the new covenant community. Like their OT counterparts, they have experienced all these blessings (w. 4-5), but like the wilderness generation they are hardhearted, rebellious (3:8) and possess an ‘evil heart of unbelief’ (3:12, 19). More clearly, 4:2 poignantly states that both groups (the wilderness generation and the new covenant community) have had the gospel preached to them, but the wilderness generation to which the readers of Hebrews are compared failed to believe, and therefore the message was of no value to them.⁷²

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. Those who fail to enter God’s rest are

⁷¹ 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.

⁷² Matthewson, “Reading Heb 6:4-6 in Light of the Old Testament,” 224.

the ones who have not experienced God's saving grace and internalization of the New Covenant law in their hearts. In short, they are not the offspring of Abraham whose salvation is irrevocable.

Conclusion

Allen believes that the author of Hebrews provides assurance of salvation to the believers: "A critical aspect of this plan of salvation is the confidence that it may generate for those who embrace it. The throne of grace may be approached with boldness (4:16) and the sanctuary with confidence (10:19). Christ – the source of salvation (5:9) –has destroyed the devil, the one who holds the power of death (2:15-16). The letter is sent to *encourage*, not *discourage* – how can they really forget so great a salvation evidence of the letter does at least hold out the possibility (2:3)?"⁷³ However, he goes on to say that "the evidence of the letter does at least hold out the possibility that apostasy *is* a potential reality, even if the recipients themselves are not in that category. At several instances in the letter, the hearers do presently receive/experience something that may be 'removed' from them, should they fall away (6:4-6, 10:26). . . . The exhortation 'don't apostatize' only works if the possibility of ignoring the warning actually exists."⁷⁴

I hope I have made my argument clear through this paper that the warning of apostasy is addressed not to the "offspring of Abraham" (2:16) but to the individuals in the community who have not experienced the New Covenant internalization of the law, have not entered God's rest (4:1-11) because of their evil, unbelieving hearts that will lead them to fall away from the living God (3:12) and because they hardened their hearts when they heard God's voice (3:15) and because they continued in unbelief (3:19). So the author gives his final exhortation to them: "See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did

⁷³ Allen, "The Irrevocable Nature of Salvation," 22.

⁷⁴ Allen, "The Irrevocable Nature of Salvation," 22.

not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven” (12:25).

For the believers who the author calls the offspring of Abraham, perseverance does not depend on their ability to continue in faith but on God’s faithfulness to sustain his people in this salvation.⁷⁵ For those who repudiate Christ, they thereby give evidence that “they have never partaken the benefits of Christ’s cleansing sacrifice.”⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Buist M. Fanning, "Classical Reformed Response (Arminian)," in *Four Views on the Warning Passages in Hebrews* (ed. Herbert W. Bateman IV; Grand Rapids, Mich: Kregel, 2007), 134 n4.

⁷⁶ Fanning, "Classical View," 218-19.