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Obedience in the Letter to the Hebrews

Felix H. Cortez

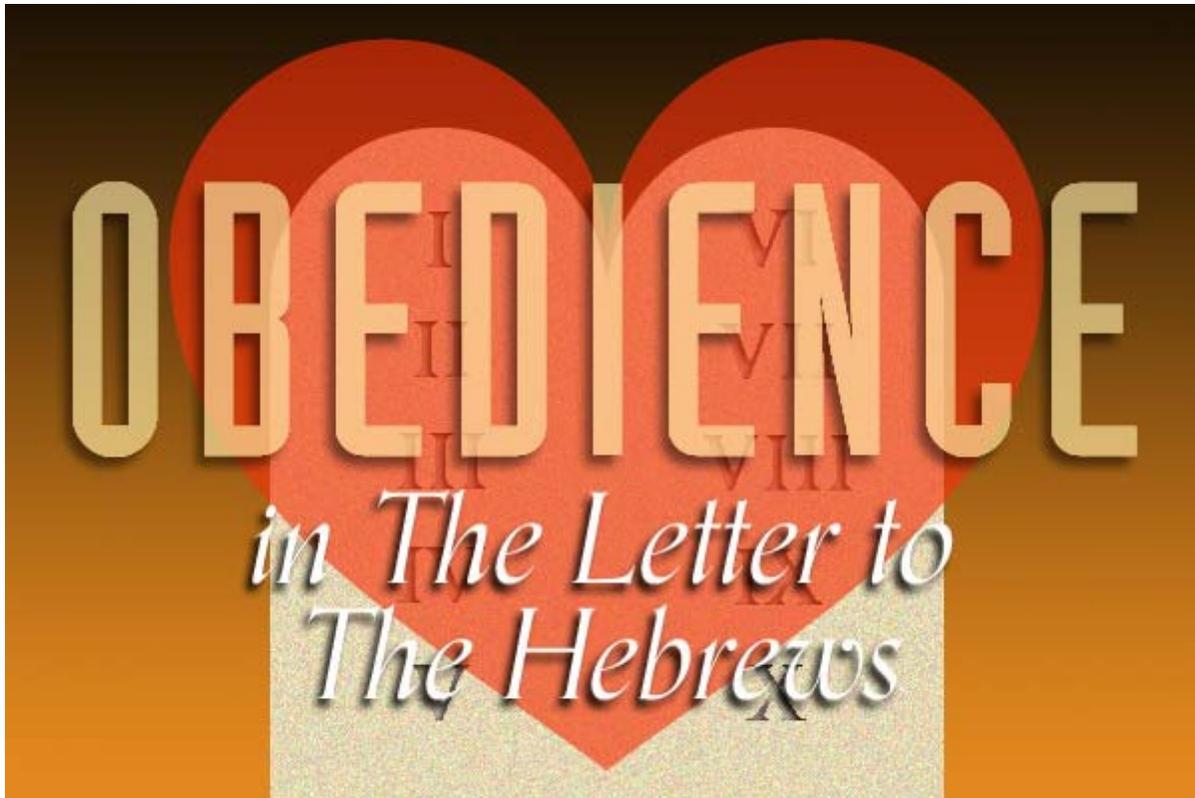
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The Epistle to the Hebrews makes some startling assertions about God's expectations of us.

By Felix H. Cortez

At first sight, the notion of obedience does not seem to be prominent in the Letter to the Hebrews. The author uses the verb *obey* only two times. In the first passage, he asserts that Jesus “became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him” (Heb. 5:9, NRSV).¹ In the second, he refers to the fact that “Abraham obeyed” when God called him to set out to an unknown place (11:8).

Similarly, the noun *obedience* appears only once, referring to the fact that the Son “learned obedience through what he suffered” (5:8). Two other references to passive obedience appear in 13:17, referring to the need to obey church leaders,

and in 11:7, referring to Noah's obedience in building the ark.

This superficial first impression, however, is misleading. Hebrews is a moving exhortation built upon the conviction that God "has spoken to us in His Son" (1:2, NASB) and, therefore, "We must pay greater attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it" (2:1). A study of this complex New Testament document shows that the author seeks through carefully crafted arguments, compelling logic, and moving examples to strengthen the sagging faith of these Christians who courageously suffered in the past public shaming, persecution, and financial loss but have now begun to drift away from Christ and are even in danger of blatant unbelief.

William Lane's description of this document is on the mark: "Hebrews is an expression of passionate and personal concern for the Christian addressed."² That is why the argument of Hebrews reaches its climax with a strong exhortation to "hear" God's voice: "See that you do not refuse the one who is speaking; for if they did not escape when they refused the one who warned them on earth, how much less will we escape if we reject the one who warns from heaven!" (12:25). Thus, we can appropriately describe Hebrews as a "passionate and personal" exhortation to obey the "word of God."

The theology of the word of God in the Book of Hebrews is structured around three questions: (1) How has God spoken to us? (2) What has God said? and (3) What are the implications of obedience and disobedience?

How Has God Spoken to Us?

Hebrews 12:18-24 consists of a contrast between mounts Sinai and Zion, which the author develops into an argument "from the lesser to the greater." The author compares here—once again—the experience of the ancient Israelites before Sinai at the inauguration of the first covenant to the experience of believers

at Mount Zion on the occasion of the inauguration of the new covenant.

On the one hand stands Sinai. (The mountain itself is not referred by name. The description assumes that the readers are familiar with Deuteronomy 4: 11, 12. Hebrews 12:21 quotes Deuteronomy 9:19, which refers to Moses' fear of approaching God after the golden calf incident.) The mountain is enshrouded in the numinous phenomena of the blazing fire, the darkness, the gloom, the tempest, and the sound of the trumpet: all of them powerful physical events that produced fear even in Moses, the mediator of the covenant. This formidable scene climaxes in a "voice" that "made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them" (Heb. 12:19).

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

The main point of the contrast is that at the climax of each event, both Israel and the believers have "heard" a voice. This is the pivot on which the exhorting argument of the passage turns. On this basis, the author warns the readers: "See that you do not refuse *the one who is speaking*; for if they did not escape when they refused the one who warned them on earth, how much less will we escape if we reject the one who warns from heaven!" (vs. 25, italics supplied).

Note that this warning repeats, in essence, the first warning of the letter: "Therefore we must pay greater attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it. For if the message declared through angels was valid, and every transgression or disobedience received a just penalty, how can we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?" (2:1-3).

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

A World in Which Believers Stand in the Presence of God

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

Pamela Michelle Eisenbaum has noted that almost all the quotations from the Old Testament "are quotations of *direct speech*" (italics hers).³ The significant thing is that whether they quote the oracles of the prophets or the meditations of the psalmist, the author of Hebrews understands and presents them as instances of divine utterance. In some cases, Hebrews quotes God's very words from the LXX; for example, "'I will surely bless you and multiply you'" in Hebrews 6:14 (quoting Genesis 22:17). In other cases, when Hebrews quotes a person inspired by God, such as a prophet or a psalmist, with few exceptions it makes no mention of the human agent. Sometimes the quotation itself makes clear that God is speaking: "'The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah'" (Heb. 8:8, italics supplied). At other times, the use of the first person in the quotation itself identifies God as the speaker: "'I will be his Father, and he will be my Son'" (Heb. 1:5, italics supplied). Finally, in the vast majority of cases, Hebrews introduces the quotation with a verb of saying in which God is the subject.

Thus, implicitly or explicitly, the author of Hebrews

describes God as speaking words of the Scriptures directly to the audience of the letter. Note that the “word of God” is spoken, not written. It is a striking fact that the author of Hebrews does not use the common formula “as it is written.” Many other ancient authors—including Qumran and the Mishnah—use verbs of saying to introduce Old Testament quotations; however, “No other author uses them to the complete exclusion of writing verbs or references to scripture *qua* scripture, i.e., as written text.”⁴

This leads to the second peculiar characteristic of Hebrews’ use of Scripture: its immediacy. A quotation of direct speech—as the vast majority of Hebrews’ quotations are—is in fact a subcategory of the more general term “quotation,” and it has unique characteristics. A quotation evokes the past and therefore is bound to the original context and meaning. As George W. Savran affirms: “Repetition [i.e., quotation] . . . de-emphasizes the present moment by *supplying the perspective of an earlier time*.”⁵ A quotation of direct speech has a different force, however. It “*speaks directly to and within the new context*, with as much immediate impact as it had in its original context.”⁶ In other words, a quotation refers the reader to a time and context different than his own, but the quotation of direct speech *reuses* the past to speak to the reader in the present. Thus, the “quotations in Hebrews are reused prophetic oracles”⁷ that retain their original oracular force.

The effect of the use of direct speech in Hebrews is, then, that Hebrews’ quotations are not used to refer to or evoke something God said in the past but to “re-present” God’s words to the audience in the present. They speak “directly to and within the new context”⁸ of the audience. In this sense, they are a new speech-act of God. Accordingly, Hebrews not only uses verbs of saying to introduce its quotations from Scripture but also, in most of the cases, the verb form introducing the quotation is present indicative or a present participle.

This immediacy of the word of God in Hebrews is very important for its hortatory argument. By means of the quotation of the word of God as direct speech, Hebrews has made a “theological redescription of time and space.”⁹ In other words, it has constructed through Scripture a world in which the readers—or, hearers—stand in the presence of God and hear Him speak.

Now, what is God saying?

What Has God Said?

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

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

Second, Mount Zion is the place where the Son was appointed “priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek” (Heb. 5:6). The introduction of Jesus’ appointment as priest (vs. 6) with a reference to His adoption as Son of God (vs. 5) links the

appointment of Jesus as high priest with His enthronement as king. Likewise, the scriptural context to Psalm 110:4—the scriptural basis for Jesus’ appointment as high priest—is, again, Mount Zion (Ps. 110:2).

Finally, the argument of Hebrews implies that Zion is also the place where the covenant is inaugurated. Hebrews 7:12 argues that a change in the priesthood implies a change in the law (7:11-19). From this, the author develops the notion that a new covenant has been inaugurated with the appointment of Jesus as high priest (8–10). This is confirmed in Hebrews 12:24, where at the center of the “festal gathering” at Mount Zion stand “Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and . . . the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel”

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

Implications of Obedience and Disobedience

This leads to an important realization. To reject the voice of God in Hebrews means to refuse Jesus as the ruler seated at the

right hand of God, to disavow Him as high priest in the heavenly sanctuary, and to repudiate the provisions of the new covenant. On the other hand, to “hear” or “obey” the word of God means to acknowledge Jesus as leader and follow Him into God’s rest (Hebrews 4), to confess Jesus as high priest and draw near with confidence because of His intercession into the presence of God (4: 14-16; 10: 19-23), and to own the provisions of the new covenant by embracing the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ and its benefits, renouncing the multiple sacrifices of the old covenant.

Thus, the stakes for obedience in Hebrews are very high. On the one hand, the rewards are exceedingly generous. God offers faithful believers even better promises than those offered under the first covenant (8:6). The author asserts that “it is impossible that God would prove false” to His promises so that we who have “taken refuge might be strongly encouraged to seize the hope set before us” (6:18). For those who take refuge in Him, “He always lives to make intercession for them” (7:25). On the other hand, the penalties are very harsh. The author warns the readers about the dire consequences of disobedience. It is impossible to restore to repentance those who spurn the Son of God (10:26) and hold Him up to contempt (8:4-6). They will suffer “a fearful prospect of judgment” (10:27).

Disobedience implies the rejection of the rule of Jesus as king, His intercession as high priest, and the provisions of the new covenant. In other words, it means the rejection of grace. The promises and warnings of Hebrews are especially relevant for us in the 21st century. We might think that those who heard Jesus speak and saw Him perform miracles have a greater responsibility than we who have met Him only through the words of Scripture.

Hebrews argues the opposite, however. The readers did not hear God speak at Mount Sinai or Jesus while on earth (2:1-4); yet, they have greater responsibility because they hear God’s

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

Luke Timothy Johnson is correct in his conclusion: “Scripture . . . is not simply a collection of ancient texts that can throw light on the present through analogy; it is the voice of the living God who speaks through the text directly and urgently to people in the present. The word of God is therefore living and active (4:12).”¹⁰

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

Felix H. Cortez, Ph.D., is Associate Professor of New Testament Interpretation and Academic Secretary of Graduate Programs in the School of Theology at Universidad de Montemorelos, Montemorelos, Mexico.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Unless noted otherwise, all Scripture references in this article are quoted from the *New Revised Standard Version*.

2. William L. Lane, in David A. Hubbard, et al., eds., *Hebrews 1-8* (Dallas: Word, 1991), p. c.

3. Pamela Michelle Eisenbaum, in PHEME PERKINS, ed., *The Jewish Heroes of Christian History: Hebrews 11 in Literary Context* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1997), p. 92.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 97.

5. George W. Savran, "Telling and Retelling: Quotation in Biblical Narrative," In Herbert Marks and Robert Polzin, eds., *Indiana Studies in Biblical Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 12, italics supplied.

6. Pamela Michelle Eisenbaum, op cit., p. 109, italics supplied.

7. Ibid., p. 111.

8. George W. Savran, op cit., p. 14.

9. John Dunnill, in Margaret E. Thrall, ed., *Covenant and Sacrifice in the Letter to the Hebrews* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 134.

10. Luke Timothy Johnson, "The Scriptural World of Hebrews," *Int* 57 (2003), pp. 240, 241.