

Is There Hellfire in Hebrews?

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Though it seems nothing is simple about the Epistle to the Hebrews, this study seeks to make a simple point about the nature of the fire imagery used in three of the warnings sections. Interpretations of the warning passages in Hebrews (2:1-4; 3:7-4:13; 6:1-8; 10:26-39; 12:25-29) usually assume that the judgment threatened is eternal damnation.² There are some exceptions that take the judgment as other than eternal damnation. One exception is the view that the judgment threatened is the danger brought by the physical destruction of Jerusalem.³ Another exception views the judgment as God's temporal discipline, which can even result in death.⁴ Still another argues that it is some kind of loss at the future event called the Judgment Seat of Christ.⁵ But these alternative interpretations are outnumbered by the preponderance of voices favoring hellfire in Hebrews. Is the majority interpretation based on assumption, theological bias, or biblical evidence?

Interpretations favoring eternal judgment are no doubt influenced toward that position because of the strong language used in the warnings. One aspect of that language is the fire imagery

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² For the purpose of this study, when we speak of eternal damnation or a similar concept, we will not distinguish between those who view the final eschatological condemnation of unbelievers as eternal *punishing* (traditional view) and eternal *punishment* (annihilation view). Some commentators who see eternal condemnation as the judgment in view: F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964); Wayne 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*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce Ware (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 133-82; Homer Kent, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972), 205; John MacArthur, *Hebrews*, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 1983); Scott McKnight, "The Warning Passages of Hebrews: A Formal Analysis and Theological Conclusions," *Trinity Journal* 13 (Spring 1992): 34-36; Stanley D. Toussaint, "The Eschatology of the Warning Passages in the Book of Hebrews," *Grace Theological Journal* 3 (Spring 1982): 68.

³ Randall C. Gleason, "The Old Testament Background of the Warning in Hebrews 6:4-8," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 155 (January-March, 1998): 89-90; J. Dwight Pentecost, "The Apostles' Use of Jesus' Predictions of Judgment on Jerusalem in A.D. 70," in *Integrity of Heart, Skillfulness of Hands: Biblical and Leadership Studies in Honor of Donald K. Campbell*, ed. Charles H. Dyer and Roy B. Zuck (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 140-41; and *A Faith that Endures* (Grand Rapids: Discovery, 1992): 173; Peter Walker, "Jerusalem in [Hebrews 13:9-14](#) and the Dating of the Epistle," *Tyndale Bulletin* 45 (1994): 39-71; Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 153.

⁴ Joseph C. Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings*, (Hayesville, NC: Schoettle, 1992), 452-453, 464-466; Gleason seems to allow for this as well as the destruction of Jerusalem: "Old Testament Background," 86-88; Zane C. Hodges, "Hebrews" in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, eds. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1983), 795-796, 803-804; Tanner admits this possibility: J. Paul Tanner, "'But If It Yields Thorns and Thistles': An Exposition of Hebrews 5:11-6:12" *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 14 (Spring 2001): 30-32; and "'For Whom Does the Punishment of Hebrews 10:26-31 Teach a 'Punishment Worse Than Death'?" *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 19 (Autumn 2006): 73.

⁵ The Judgment Seat of Christ is understood as a future judgment for believers only where their works and faithfulness are evaluated and rewarded (or denied reward) accordingly. See Rom. 14:10-12; 1 Cor. 3:9-15; 2 Cor. 5:10. Those who view this judgment as a loss of reward at the Judgment Seat of Christ: Dillow, 453-453 (He also allows for temporal judgment); R. T. Kendall, *Once Saved, Always Saved* (Chicago: Moody, 1983), 175-182; Thomas Kem Oberholtzer, "The Thorn-Infested Ground in [Hebrews 6:4-12](#)," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 145 (July-September 1988): 319-28; "The Danger of Willful Sin in [Hebrews 10:26-39](#)," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 145 (October-December 1988): 410-19; and "The Failure to Heed His Speaking in [Hebrews 12:25-29](#)," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 146 (January-March 1989): 67-75; J. Paul Tanner, "Hebrews 5:211-6:12," 40, and "Hebrews 10:26-31," 73-77.

used in three of the warnings (6:8; 10:27; 12:31). The pertinent parts of each of these three warnings are listed below with the fire imagery emphasized.

6:7-8 *For the earth which drinks in the rain that often comes upon it, and bears herbs useful for those by whom it is cultivated, receives blessing from God; but if it bears thorns and briers, **it is rejected and near to being cursed, whose end is to be burned.***⁶

10:26-27 *“For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but **a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries.**”*

12:28-29 *Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. **For our God is a consuming fire.***

The mention of fire seems the tipping point toward the assumption that all the warnings threaten eternal judgment in hell. For example, McKnight comments on 6:7-8, “The image of being cursed by God, with its close association with fire, can only adequately be explained as an allusion to Gehenna or hell, an allusion to God’s punishment and retributive justice.”⁷ One wonders how interpretation of the warning passages would be influenced if fire were not mentioned.

This assumption of hellfire seems to prejudice some basic assumptions about the spiritual state of the readers. One would hope that the question of the readers’ spiritual condition would inform one’s interpretation of the warnings’ judgments since there is far more explicit detail given about their condition than there is the nature of the judgment. However, it seems highly likely that many interpreters have worked backward, that is, they have concluded that hellfire is the judgment and that has influenced their characterization of the readers.⁸

Of course, Arminian interpreters have no problem accepting the obvious evidence that the readers are genuine⁹ believers.¹⁰ Calvinist interpreters tend to dodge the theological bullet aimed at

⁶The New King James Version is used unless otherwise noted.

⁷ McKnight, “The Warning Passages,” 35. See also Buist M. Fanning, “A Classical Reformed View,” in *Four Views of the Warning Passages in Hebrews*, ed. Herbert W. Bateman (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007), 189-190; Robert A. Peterson, *Our Secure Salvation: Perseverance and Apostasy* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2009), 159.

⁸ See for example, McKnight’s criticism of Nicole’s theologically biased interpretation of the state of the readers in Hebrews 6. McKnight, “The Warning Passages,” 51-53.

⁹ I use the word “genuine” as a concession to the discussion which demands such clarification. The Bible uses no such qualifiers to describe believers as “genuine, real, true, etc.” or to disqualify unbelievers as “false, insincere, temporary, spurious”, etc. I believe it can be shown that when the Bible refers to someone as a believer (in the context of Jesus Christ or the gospel as the object), it always intends someone who has believed unto salvation. To conclude otherwise is to impose one’s theology on the given text rather than allow it to speak for itself.

¹⁰ For example, R. C. H. Lenski, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1966), 174-187, 355-357; I. Howard Marshall, “The Problem of Apostasy in New Testament Theology,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 14 (1987): 68; Clark Pinnock, *The Grace of God and the Will of Man* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1989), 17. Bateman claims that all contributors to

the doctrine of eternal security by saying that the readers addressed in the warnings are either false professors of Christianity¹¹ or that the warnings are only hypothetical (i.e., the sin in view is actually impossible to commit).¹²

The interpretation of all aspects of the warning passages requires more time and space than this study can afford. I intend to focus only on a very specific aspect of those warnings, the fire imagery found in three of the warnings. Do these references to fire demand a judgment of hellfire on unbelievers, or do they refer to some other form of severe judgment on believers? Fire is definitely used in the Bible for the punishment of eternal hell.¹³ We will not examine those passages where fire is obviously referring to hell. I will comment from a non-Arminian perspective since I believe that the Scriptural evidence for eternal security, including that which is presented in this article, is too overwhelming to deny.¹⁴ Before we consider how fire is used in the three warnings, we must briefly discuss the spiritual state of the readers and the sin that they are in danger of committing.

The State of the Readers

Crucial to any interpretation of Hebrews and the warning passages is an understanding of the spiritual state of the readers. Are they believers or unbelievers or a mixed group? Some commentators agree the epistle is generally written to believers, but the warnings to unbelievers. This views the target audience for the warnings as those who profess, but do not possess faith in Jesus Christ. But is this consistent with the evidence in the text? Most agree that the rest of the book clearly addresses believers. Is there any apparent disparity between the way those in the warnings are addressed and the rest of the epistle? A brief discussion will show that the warnings are intended for believers.

the book *Four Views*, which includes the views of Classical Arminianism (Grant R. Osborne) and Wesleyan Arminian (Garreth Lee Cockerill), as well as Classical Reformed (Buist M. Fanning), and Moderate Reformed (Randall C. Gleason), believe that the recipients of Hebrews are true believers (*Four Views*, 24).

¹¹ For example, Gleason L. Archer, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1957), 40; Bruce, 118-19; Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 215; John MacArthur Jr., *Hebrews* (Chicago: Moody, 1983), 135-149; Roger Nicole, "Some Comments on [Hebrews 6:4-6](#) and the Doctrine of the Perseverance of God with the Saints," in *Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 362; Peterson, 175; Toussaint, "Eschatology of the Warning Passages," 68.

¹² For example, Donald Guthrie, *Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 145-47; Thomas Hewitt, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (London: Tyndale, 1960), 108, 111; Homer A. Kent, Jr., *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972), 113; Westcott, 165; Kenneth S. Wuest, "Hebrews Six in the Greek New Testament," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 119 (January-March 1962): 52.

¹³ See Matt. 5:22; 13:37-50; Mark 9:43-48; 2 Thes. 1:8-9; Jude 7; Rev. 14:10-11; 19:20; 20:10, 14-15; 21:8. Interestingly, it is difficult to find in the Old Testament a reference to eternal hellfire. Isa. 66:24 is usually thought to be behind the references to "Gehenna" and eternal punishment in passages like Mark 9:43-48, but as we will see, the imagery of fire was commonly used for temporal judgment in the Old Testament. Also, Isaiah's image of the worm devouring decaying bodies in the grave is used elsewhere for an activity in time, not eternity (Job 17:14-16; 34: 19-20). Not all commentators see all New Testament references to "Gehenna" as an automatic reference to eternal punishment. See W. F. Albright and C. S. Mann, "*Matthew: A New Translation and Introduction*, in *The Anchor Bible*, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), 60ff; Adam Clarke, A., *Clarke's Commentary: Matthew*, electronic ed. (Logos Library System, 1999), s.v. "Mt 5:22;" Michael Eaton, *No Condemnation: A New Theology of Assurance* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1995), 206-207; N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPEK, 1996), 332-368, 445. 14:10-11; 19:20; 20:10, 14-15; 21:8.

¹⁴ John 5:24; 10:28-30; 17:9-12; Romans 8:28-39; 2 Cor. 1:22; Eph 1:13-14; 4:30; Note also the teaching of Hebrews on eternal security: 7:25; 9:14-15; 10:14.

Evidence from outside the warnings

Most agree that the epistle was written generally to believers, so little needs to be said here. Apart from the warnings, we find the readers addressed as “brethren” (10:19; 13:22) and “holy brethren” (3:1). Things are said to them that can only apply to Christians (cf. 3:1; 6:9; 5:12; 10:24-25). Note that all these affirmations appear shortly before or after the warning sections. Also, the nature of the exhortations in chapter 13 shows they were obviously intended for believers. There is no attempt to apply them to two different groups. In fact, in the entire epistle, the warning passages are never introduced with any transition that indicates the author is shifting his attention to a different group within the readership. To imply otherwise would be artificial and disruptive to the flow of the text.

Evidence from within the warnings

We now examine how the author speaks to those warned. His language makes it clear that they are Christians.

1. They are addressed using first person plural pronouns or verbs, which shows the author identifies with them as believers (2:1, 3; 3:14, 19; 4:1-3, 11; 6:1, 3; 10:26, 30, 39; 12:28).
2. They are also called “brethren” (3:12). Just as in the non-warning sections, this clearly shows their common position in God’s family.
3. They have believed (4:3; 10:39). This speaks of an unqualified faith in Christ as Savior.¹⁵
4. They have Christian confidence (3:14; 10:35). This refers to their assurance of the benefits of Christ’s provisions. They are therefore told to hold fast (3:14; 4:14; 10:23) and endure (10:36) in that confidence.
5. They are in danger of denying their faith. That they could “drift away” (2:1), depart “from the living God” (3:12), “fall away” (6:6), “draw back” (10:39), or “turn away” (12:25) demands a point of departure from which they can fall. The only such point in the epistle is Jesus Christ and their confession of Him.
6. They are encouraged to enter God’s rest (4:11) and go on to maturity (6:1). As in the Old Testament, “rest” refers not just to the reception of God’s promise, but the enjoyment of it. It is a privilege of believers only, as is the possibility of growth into maturity.¹⁶
7. They suffered for their faith after they were “illuminated” (10:32-34). They were able to endure this persecution because they knew they had a heavenly possession (10:34).

¹⁵ See note no. 6.

¹⁶ See Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., “The Promise Theme and the Theology of Rest,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 130 (April-June 1973): 141-50; and Thomas Kem Oberholtzer, “The Kingdom Rest in [Hebrews 3:1–4:13](#),” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 145 (April-June, 1988): 185–96.

8. They are never told to believe in Christ, which we would expect if they were unbelievers. It would be a travesty for the author to omit this. Instead, he says the epistle was written to exhort or encourage the readers (13:22).

9. They are described as having experienced the blessings that come with faith in Christ. The most convincing evidence is from 6:4-5: They were “enlightened” had “tasted the heavenly gift,” had “become partakers of the Holy Spirit,” and had “tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come.” They had also “received the knowledge of the truth” (10:26), were “sanctified” (10:29), “know” God (10:30), were “illuminated” (10:32), and by implication are called “just” or righteous (10:38). Any attempt to apply these descriptions to unbelievers forces the text at the expense of the plain sense of the language.

10. They are given Old Testament analogies that in the past and now in their present apply to God’s chastening of His people. In 3:16 Psalm 95 is used of the redeemed who came out of Egypt and so obviously applies to the redeemed readers. In 10:30 Deuteronomy 32:36 speaks of God judging “His people” (discussed below).

11. They are exhorted to “serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear” (12:28), something impossible for unbelievers.

12. They face the prospect of rewards conditioned on their faithful perseverance and obedience. They can be “partakers of Christ” (3:14), can enter God’s rest (4:9,11), can have “an enduring possession . . . in heaven” (10:34), can receive a “great reward” (10:35), and are “receiving a kingdom” (12:28).¹⁷

The evidence is overwhelming, both in the general nature of the epistle and in the warnings themselves, that the author is addressing Christians.¹⁸ The fact that he so often and so clearly reminds them of their salvation experience is a crucial basis for his appeals to go on to maturity. Based on these clear affirmations in the text, attempts to explain away the obvious seems theologically driven. They are not in need of salvation, but faithful endurance.

The Sin Facing the Readers

Much has been and could be said about the nature of the sin the readers are in danger of committing. Most agree that the epistle in general is an exhortation to persevere in faithfulness. The warnings are a negative motivation toward this same end, but they also indicate that the readers could fall away, that is, neglect to persevere, or worse, turn back to the safety of

¹⁷ These arguments are adapted from an article by John Hosler, “Were the First Century Hebrew Christians in Danger of Losing Salvation and Falling into Hell Fire?,” http://www.napierchurch.org/pdf/articles/bible_study/falling_from_grace.pdf (accessed December 19, 2009).

¹⁸ Others who argue that the readers of the warnings are regenerate include Bateman et al. in *Four Views* (see note no. 10); Dillow, 435-444, 459; Michael Eaton, *No Condemnation: A New Theology of Assurance* (InterVarsity 1995), 212-217; Kendall, 175-182; William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 47A (Dallas: Word, 1991), 141; Tanner, “Hebrews 5:11-6:12,” 30-32, and “Hebrews 10:26-31,” 57-77; Oberholtzer, in his previously cited series in *Bibliotheca Sacra* vols. 145 (1988) and 146 (1989); Andy M. Woods, “The Paradigm of Kadesh Barnea as a Solution to the Problem of Hebrews 6:4-6,” *Chafer Theological Journal* 12 (Spring 2006), 50-62.

Judaism.¹⁹ Evidently, these are Jewish believers who are tempted to mask their Christianity with Judaism, or revert altogether, because of the threat of persecution.

The warning in chapter 6 is especially informative. The immediate context is neatly bracketed by a concern that the readers are “dull of hearing” (5:11) and might become “sluggish” (6:12). The author reminds them that they should have grown to be teachers by now (5:12). This supports the recurring exhortations in Hebrews to press forward in Christian faith and growth (3:6; 4:14; 10:23; 12:1). Forming an inclusio with 5:11-12 is 6:11-12, another exhortation to grow and press on in their faith.

The warning in 6:4-8 implies that the readers could indeed “fall away,”²⁰ which is interpreted by some as apostasy from Christian beliefs or a total denial of the Christian faith.²¹ A similar word and thought is seen in 4:11, translated “fall,”²² which refers to the example of the sin of rebellion against the Lord which happened at Kadesh Barnea (cf. 3:12; Num. 14), an obvious background for this warning.²³ The argument and context of Hebrews suggests that this is a falling away from their profession of Christ and confidence in Him (3:6, 14; 10:23-25; 35-39), which would be the case if they returned to the Mosaic system of sacrifices and the safety of Judaism to avoid persecution.²⁴ In the grammar of the original language, falling away is not treated as hypothetical.²⁵

The sin in the warning of 6:4-8 seems to be the same sin in the warning of 10:26-39. The willful sin of 10:26 would be a deliberate abandonment of their confession of the sufficiency of Christ’s sacrifice for a return to insufficient Jewish sacrifices. The author wrote to the Hebrews that “Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many” (9:28), that “by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified” (10:14), and that once forgiven “there is no longer an offering for sin” (10:18). The Law offered them nothing since it looked forward to the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus Christ (10:1-10).

The background for understanding the warning of 10:26-39 is very likely Numbers 15:30-31. There we see that for certain serious (or presumptuous) sins no sacrifices were stipulated, therefore those who committed those sins were “cut off” from their people (put to death). The author is saying

¹⁹ McKnight, “The Warning Passages,” 26.

²⁰ From *parapiptoō*, “to fail to follow through on a commitment, fall away, commit apostasy,” *BAGD*, 3rd Ed. (2000).

²¹ Bruce, 122-124; Lenski, 185-186; McKnight, “The Warning Passages,” 26, 39-42.

²² From *piptō*, *BAGD*, 3rd Ed. (2000).

²³ Gleason, “Old Testament Background,” 62-91; Woods, “The Paradigm of Kadesh Barnea,” 44-70.

²⁴ See 10:19-39; 12:1-4. The historical occasion could be the persecution of Christians under Roman emperor Nero. .

²⁵ It is best to take the aorist participle *parapapesontas* not as conditional, but as concessive by implication. Hughes quotes the New English Bible approvingly: “for when men have once been enlightened ... and after all this have fallen away ...” Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 212, n. 56. Other Scriptures show that believers can harden their hearts to the point of abandoning their faith (Luke 8:13; 1 Tim. 1:19; 2 Tim. 2:18).

that if the readers of Hebrews abandon the only sufficient sacrifice for their sins, they too will be judged severely. Their salvation is not the issue.

The sin in view for the warning of 12:24-29 is named in 12:15 as falling short of the grace of God, which would be a more general way of characterizing a failure to press on to maturity and to shrink back from persecution by returning to the cover of Judaism, the same sin that is in view in chapters 6 and 10.²⁶ The exhortation to not fall short corresponds to the opposite exhortation “let us have grace” in verse 28.

This study is written from the perspective that the warnings concern the same sin, that of neglecting to persevere in the Christians faith and worse, of turning back to Judaism. Having said this, the exact nature of the sin does not necessarily impact the nature of the judgments.

God’s People Judged by Fire

The judgments in the three warnings under consideration mention fire. It is very informative to see how fire is used as a judgment against God’s people in both the Old and the New Testaments. The examples that follow do not exhaust the references, but are enough to establish a consistent pattern of how God deals with His people who persist in sin.

In the Old Testament

The Old Testament is an obvious background for the language and warnings of this epistle to Jewish believers.²⁷ Fire is often used in reference to God’s people in the Old Testament. Most pertinent to this study is how it is used of Israel in a non-soteriological sense. The concept of eternal hellfire is difficult if not impossible to find.²⁸ Three categories of usage will show how fire can be used in the Old Testament for God’s disciplinary punishment, His jealousy, and His purifying purposes.

Sometimes fire is used to depict God’s anger or wrath that disciplines His people. Some of the clearer examples follow with a brief summary of the context.

Leviticus 10:1-2. Fire consumed Nadab and Abihu for offering “profane fire” to God, who then consumed them with a literal fire. These were Levitical priests in God’s service.

²⁶ Paul Ellingsworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, in *New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 664; Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, in *New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 385.

²⁷ Gleason, “Old Testament Background,” 64; Lane, cxii-cxxiv.

²⁸ See note no. 13.

Numbers 16:35. When Korah (a Levitical priest), Dathan, Abiram, and 250 of Israel's leaders challenged Moses' leadership, the ground swallowed the three men while the 250 were consumed by literal fire from God.²⁹

Numbers 11:1-3. Some of those Israelites who complained in the wilderness were consumed by fire, but some of the complainers were spared when Moses interceded for them. This shows that these complainers had a privileged relationship with God as part of Israel.

Psalms 78:21. In spite of God's blessings of provision for Israel in the Wilderness, they still complained, so "a fire was kindled against Jacob, and anger also came up against Israel." The judgment fire in the Wilderness was a literal fire.

Psalms 80:14-16. The psalmist prays for God's revival because Israel is like a vineyard with broken down hedges and a vine that has been burned.

Psalms 89:46. After listing the temporal judgments endured by Israel and reminding God of His covenant with David, the psalmist asks how long God's wrath will burn like fire against Israel.

Isaiah 42:25. Because Israel disobeyed, God burned them with his furious anger, but intends to redeem them as His own (43:1ff.).

Jeremiah 4:4. God calls the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem to repentance lest He send His fury on them like a burning fire.

Jeremiah 11:16. God compares the house of Judah and the house of Israel to a tree He has planted but that He will break and burn because of their worship of Baal.

Jeremiah 15:14. Because of Manasseh's sin, God will judge Israel with temporal judgments that are compared to a fire kindled in His anger that burns them.

Jeremiah 17:4. Israel's idolatry has kindled a fire of God's anger, which will result in their servitude to their enemies.

Lamentations 2:3-4; 4:11. God has "blazed against Jacob like a flaming fire" and "kindled a fire in Zion," references to the calamity of Jerusalem's siege and destruction which resulted in severe famine.

Amos 2:5. God will send a fire upon Judah because they disobeyed His commandments.

Fire is also used to picture God's jealousy for the devotion of His people:

Deuteronomy 4:24. God's jealousy is compared to a consuming fire, because He longs for Israel's devotion and He will judge them if they worship idols.

²⁹ Jude 11 is not commenting on whether those who followed Korah were punished eternally, but that they were punished suddenly and severely in their deaths. Jude uses the aorist tense in "perished" (apolonto) to emphasize that judgment of the false teachers is likewise certain.

Psalm. 79:5. The psalmist asks how long God's anger will last against Jerusalem and how long His jealousy will burn like fire.

Fire sometimes refers to a cleansing or purifying trial or judgment:

Psalm 66:10-12. The psalmist declares how God has refined Israel as silver and brought her through fire.

Zechariah 13:9. In the Day of the Lord, God calls one third of Israel "My people" and declares they will be brought through the refiner's fire like silver or gold.

Malachi 3:2-3. As a refiner purifies silver and gold, God will refine and purify the Sons of Levi.

These examples refer to God's temporal wrath, not to eternal judgment. Let us also remember that in the Old Testament God's fire is sometimes used in unequivocally positive ways. For example, His appearance was sometimes marked by fire (Gen. 22:6-7; Ex. 3:2). God used a pillar of fire to guide the Israelites through the wilderness (Ex. 13:21-22; Num. 9:15-16) and to accompany the Tabernacle (40:38). In the Song of Solomon love is compared to a fire (Song 8:6).³⁰

In the New Testament

New Testament uses continue the pattern of God's judgment of His people with references to fire.

John 15:6. Believers are compared to branches which either abide in Jesus Christ and bear fruit or do not abide in Him and are as useless as vines which are burned.³¹

1 Corinthians 3:13-15. In a future day of judgment those believers whose works are unworthy will have those works burned, though they themselves will be saved.

1 Peter 4:12. Peter encourages the readers to rejoice in the fiery trials they are experiencing because they are an opportunity for God's blessing in the present and in the future.

In the New Testament, fire is also used positively in references to the Holy Spirit (Matt. 3:11-12; Acts 2:3). Since in both Testaments fire can be used positively or negatively, literally or figuratively, and temporally or eternally, context must determine its meaning.

In the three warnings of Hebrews

³⁰ Some think that the term "flames of fire" is a play on the name of Yahweh. See the NASB and the comment in The NET Bible. If so, this makes the comparison even stronger.

³¹ The context of this passage is not soteriological. In the Upper Room Discourse Jesus is discussing fruitfulness with the saved disciples (15:3) who are compared to branches that are in the Vine, which is Christ (15:1-2). For more discussion see Charles C. Bing, *Lordship Salvation: A Biblical Evaluation and Response*, GraceLife Edition (Burleson, TX: GraceLife Ministries, 1997), 36-40.

Now we can evaluate the mention of fire in the three warnings of Hebrews. A very important general observation is that *eternal* fire, eternal torment, hell, or Gehenna are never mentioned in these warnings.

Hebrews 6:8.

Before considering the judgment of fire in verse 8, it would be good to establish the flow of thought from the first consequence of falling away, the impossibility of renewing these believers to repentance. Those who say this passage teaches that Christians can lose eternal life must admit that it also teaches it is impossible for them to repent so as to be saved again. They would have no second opportunity to be saved. Since they had already repented of the “dead works” of the Mosaic system (6:1; cf. 9:14), they could not do that again because they knew better. When the readers became Christians they had rejected the Jewish sacrifices and accepted the eternal sacrifice of Jesus Christ. To go back and identify with Judaism is to publicly deny the benefits of Christ’s sacrifice and even show implicit agreement that Christ deserved to die, thus the statement in 6:6: “since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame.” With such an attitude it is impossible to bring them back to repentance. These believing readers could make a pivotal decision not to press forward, to deny the provision of Christ’s sacrifice, and thus forfeit the benefits of professing and growing in Christ. If they do, they cannot claim ignorance and start over. Again, this alludes to the pivotal incident at Kadesh Barnea mentioned in 3:7-19 in which those Israelites who decided to turn back were not allowed to enter the Promised Land, though they tried (cf. Num. 14). The author later uses Esau as an example of one who could not have another chance though he “sought it diligently with tears” (12:15-17).

Verses 7 and 8 compare believers to earth that is blessed by rain, but either brings forth fruit or brings forth thorns. A believer who receives God’s blessings but turns away from the faith is like earth that produces thorns and briars instead of fruit and is “rejected and near to being cursed, whose end is to be burned.” The word “rejected” (*adokimos*) means to not pass the test or to be disqualified³² and is used of believers in the New Testament in reference to losing future rewards, but is never used of hell. According to common agricultural practice, earth that bears useless thorns is set on fire to burn the thorns so that the earth might become productive in the future. It is important to note that in the original language there is only one earth, not two, and it (the believer) is not burned, but the thorns are burned (what the believer produces). Note also that the earth is *near* to being cursed, not actually cursed. This denotes the seriousness of the apostasy (6:6), but stops short of a total (eternal) rejection. When it says that the earth is to be burned, one correctly pictures the thorns and briars being burned off the earth, because the earth itself cannot burn. Thus it pictures a fire of judgment and/or purging that burns up that which is useless. This judgment could be God’s temporal discipline in this life, since its goal is the productivity of the judged believer’s life (cf. John 15:6).³³ Some who take the judgment as temporal also see it as a reference to the loss of rewards at the

³² “Not standing the test, unqualified, worthless,” *BAGD*, Third ed. (2000). Cf. 1 Cor. 9:27; 2 Cor. 13:5; See Kendall, 173-175.

³³ So Hodges, 795-796; In this way, it reminds of God’s disciplinary judgment intended to make believers holy and fruitful (cf. 12:5-11).

Judgment Seat of Christ.³⁴ It would make sense if it referred to both since a believer who is disciplined for ignoring God's warning would also lose his or her reward at the Judgment Seat of Christ. As mentioned earlier, some would also take this as a reference to the danger associated with the Jews and the physical destruction of Jerusalem.³⁵

There seems to be an intended relationship of this warning to Isaiah 5:1-7 which warned Israel that God would burn her for being an unfruitful vineyard.³⁶ The warning of Hebrews 6 shows that believers who do not go forward with their faith squander God's blessings so that what is produced is not useful but useless and fit only to be discarded, or burned. The fire does not indicate hellfire.

This passage does not teach that one can lose eternal salvation, nor is it addressing unbelievers or presenting a hypothetical situation. It addresses Hebrew Christians in danger of making a terrible choice to abandon their forward progress in faith to return to Jewish rituals. They would lose forever the progress they would have otherwise made and would suffer God's severe judgment.

Hebrews 10:27.

The believer who sins willfully³⁷ has in store "a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which devours the adversaries." This willful sin is the same as in chapter 6, a turning back to sinful Judaism which would be tantamount to giving one's approval to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.³⁸

Before we discuss the fire imagery, we first note that God's discipline of believers can be fearful. Christians can face a fearful judgment either temporally or at the Judgment Seat of Christ (or both). In Acts 5 when Ananias and Sapphira were struck dead by God because they lied, "great fear came upon all the church" (5:11). The Judgment Seat of Christ can also be a fearful prospect for those who have not lived well.³⁹

³⁴ See Dillow, 453; Oberholtzer, "Hebrews 6:4-12," 326; Tanner, "Hebrews 5:11-6:12," 40.

³⁵ See note no. 3.

³⁶ Bruce, 124-125.

³⁷ Again, note that the author includes himself as a possibility by using the first person plural "we."

³⁸ The author of Hebrews apparently has a particular sin in mind, which becomes evident as we consult the context. He had exhorted his readers previously to hold fast to their confession (3:6; 4:14) and has warned them about the dangers of not pressing on in their faith (6:1-8). He reinforces this concern in the verses immediately preceding this warning about the willful sin (10:23-25). The readers were on the verge of abandoning their confession of faith in Christ and returning to the Mosaic Law and its sacrifices, which is why he discussed the inadequacy of the Mosaic sacrifices especially from chapter 8 onward.

³⁹ In reference to the Judgment Seat of Christ mentioned in 2 Cor. 5:10, 5:11 uses the word "fear" (*phobos*).

The “fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries” (v. 27; *pyros zēlos*, literally “fiery zeal” or “fire of zeal”⁴⁰) refers to the zeal of God’s judgment toward sin. Believers can experience the same *zeal* of judgment toward their sin as God’s enemies experience toward theirs, though the results are different. This part of verse 27 is from Isaiah 26:11, a prophecy of God’s judgment against His covenant people. However, as Tanner notes, “The fire is a threat to the unrighteous within the nation, but not to the righteous.”⁴¹ The “worse punishment” of verse 28 is compared to the death penalty for the presumptuous sin of Numbers 15:30-31,⁴² which was the severest penalty dictated at that time. Is there a punishment worse than death? Absolutely! Suffering in this life can be so terrible that some people would rather die to find relief.⁴³ Furthermore, the fire of the Judgment Seat of Christ burns away a believer’s unworthy works causing forfeiture of rewards for all eternity.⁴⁴

In the end, those who would be judged are still “His people” (v. 30). This is a quote from Deuteronomy 32:35-36: “The Lord will judge His People.” In that passage God will not only judge the enemies of His people, but based on His impartiality He will also judge His own people when they forsake His covenant. With great privilege comes great responsibility. Bruce comments, “The privileges which Israel enjoyed as God’s covenant-people meant that their responsibilities were greater and that retribution would be the more severe in their case if they gave themselves up to unrighteousness.”⁴⁵ These who sin will not fall into hell, but “into the hands of the living God” (v. 31). Though it is a “fearful” prospect, at least they will be *in* His hands not out of them. Finally, the contrast between “destruction “ (*apōleia*, or “ruin”)⁴⁶ and “saving of the soul” (literally, “preserving of the life”)⁴⁷ in verse 39 could speak of physical life and death or contrast a ruined life with a life that is delivered from the consequences of a negative judgment.

This warning which mentions fire is meant to picture the terrible consequences that believers face if they should willfully turn away from Jesus Christ. The consequences are spiritually devastating, even more painful than death, but eternal hell is not mentioned. It is conceivable that the readers, Hebrew Christians being tempted to re-identify with sinful Israel, might also understand this

⁴⁰ Taken appositively by Ellingsworth, 535.

⁴¹ Tanner, “Hebrews 10:26-31,” 71-72. He points out that Isaiah 33:14-15 shows that the righteous in Israel will survive God’s consuming fire.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 64-65.

⁴³ Cf. Lam. 4:6, 9; Jonah 4:3.

⁴⁴ 1 Cor. 3:13-15. Commenting on the parallel of 1 Cor. 3:13-15 with the warnings in Hebrews, Gleason remarks, “If it is true that believers will face a judgment after death linked to ‘fire’ that poses no threat to their eternal salvation, then why would we object to temporal fiery judgments experienced in life by genuine believers as divine discipline? For these reasons I find the common assumption that Hebrews warns of eternal damnation unproven.” (Randall C. Gleason, “Moderate Reformed Response,” in Bateman, *Four Views*, 255). In my opinion, the severity of these judgments upon believers whether divine chastening in this life and/or loss of rewards for eternity answers the argument that eternal damnation must be in view because Hebrews presents an “escalated” judgment (See Fanning, “A Classical Reformed View,” in Bateman, *Four Views*, 189-90).

⁴⁵ Bruce, 263.

⁴⁶ *BAGD*, Third Ed. (2000).

⁴⁷ The phrase uses *peripoiēsin* (keeping safe, preserving, saving). *BAGD*, Third Ed. (2000).

as a warning about the impending national judgment of a fiery destruction of Jerusalem which occurred only a short time later (A.D. 70), something they would know about from Jesus' warnings (Matt. 23:27-24:2; Mark 13:1-2; Luke 21:5-6; cf. Acts 2:40).

Hebrews 12:29.

The third warning that mentions fire contrasts the fearful scene at Mount Sinai when the Law was received with the readers who are assured that they have come to experience Jesus Christ and the salvation of the New Covenant. The Jewish Christians readers have a much more privileged position than those Jews who received the law. With greater privilege and revelation comes greater responsibility. The readers cannot ignore God's warnings. There will be no escape from the consequences for failure to persevere in godly faithfulness. That God is "a consuming fire" is a motivation to practice gracious godly reverence in God's service, which was mentioned in the previous verse (v. 28). This cannot be a threat of hell, because verse 28 speaks confidently of the readers "receiving a kingdom." This metaphor of God as a consuming fire comes from Deuteronomy 4:24 where it speaks of God's jealous judgment. He is jealous for Israel's devotion and will judge them if they turn from His covenant to worship idols.

Conclusion

The interpretation of the fire imagery in Hebrews not only impacts interpretation of the epistle as a whole, but shapes theological and pastoral concerns. It is very clear that Hebrews, including the warning passages, was written to believers. The three warnings in Hebrews that mention fire do not refer to hellfire but to a severe judgment for believers. When we see how fire and fire imagery is used in the Bible, we find that though it used for the fiery punishment of unbelievers, it is often used as a threat or punishment against those who are called God's people. While one aspect of fire is the judgment of hell, we also find it used for God's temporal discipline of His people characterized by His anger, zeal, and jealousy or used of trials that test or purify believers. These facts should inform our interpretation of the nature of the judgments in the warnings of Hebrews rather than have the obscure language used in the warnings determine the spiritual state of the readers. Fire also characterizes a future judgment of works at the Judgment Seat of Christ. Another possibility is that the fire in these warnings was understood by the readers as the fiery destruction of Jerusalem which happened a short time after this book was written, a judgment on Israel for rejecting and crucifying Jesus Christ. In any case, believers don't need to fear burning in hell, but they should fear an experience of God's burning anger if they willfully turn away from the benefits of the eternal salvation which Jesus Christ provided through His death and resurrection.