

A Close Reading of Hebrews 3,7 – 4,11 and *Logos* as Christ in Hebrews 4,12

James Swetnam, S.J.

Introduction

Current exegesis of the Epistle to the Hebrews is well-nigh unanimous in holding that the *logos* of Heb 4,12 is the word of God in Scripture, not the Word of God as God, that is, as presented, for example, in the prologue of the Fourth Gospel. The present note is written from the contrary, minority point of view. The first half of the note will present a new argument which points to the *logos* of 4,12 as *Logos*, that is, as being the same as the *Logos* of the prologue of the Fourth Gospel; this new argument is based on a close reading of 3,7 – 4,11. The second part of the note will rehearse the arguments previously given for this understanding of the *Logos* and will situate them in the new context provided by the argumentation in the first part of the note.¹

Hebrews 3,7 – 4,11

A. Group Failure vs. Individual Failure

A common view of Heb 3,7 – 4,11 is that the section presents a symmetrical view of the desert generation of Israel at the time of the Exodus and the Christians who are being addressed by the author of Hebrews. That is to say, this common view maintains that the Exodus generation as a group did not “hear”, i.e., obey, God’s command of faith-trust as they wandered in the desert, and that the Christians as a group were now being presented with the same choice as the one rejected by the desert generation: hear, or lose the chance of entering into God’s rest as a group.²

But a close reading of the text does not seem to support this view.

True, with regard to the desert generation of the Exodus, the entire generation

1. For the present writer’s previous discussions on the matter cf. J. Swetnam, “Jesus as *logos* in Hebrews 4,12-13”, *Biblica* 62 (1981) 214-224; Idem, “The Context of the Crux at Hebrews 5,7-8”, *Filologia Neotestamentaria* 14 (2001) 103-107.
2. For example, this view of symmetrical failure seems to be held by H. W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Hermeneia, Philadelphia 1989, 113-132.

had a chance of entering and the entire generation failed. This seems clear from Heb 3,16-19 and 4,6. The word of God of Scripture was directed to the entire generation. They were warned not to lose trust in God's saving presence. But they did lose trust and they did so as a group (cf. the way failure is spoken of in the plural at 3,7-11; 3,15; 4,3; 4,5; 4,7). Thus the threat of failure was over the group as a whole, and, as a matter of fact, the threat materialized because of the communal failing of the group to have trust. This much of the common view seems supported by a close reading of the text.

But this view involving group failure does not seem to be applicable to the group of the Christians who are being addressed by the author of the epistle. Whenever the author warns his addressees about the possibility of failure, he does so in terms of the individual. Cf.: 3,12 ("lest there be in any one of you"); 3,13 ("lest any one of you become hardened"); 4,1 ("lest any one of you be thought to have fallen short"); 4,11 ("lest any one fall into the same pattern of disobedience"). But when the author of the epistle speaks in terms of a positive outcome he speaks of a group entering: 3,13 ("encourage each other"³), followed by 3,14; 4,2; 4,3; 4,6; 4,11.

The picture which emerges is thus not one of symmetry between the Exodus generation and the Christian addressees as is envisioned in the common contemporary interpretation, i.e., that the Christian generation was symmetrically threatened with total failure just as the Exodus generation was threatened. The Exodus generation as a group obviously could fail because it did fail. The Christian generation, however, by implication, will apparently fail, if at all, only on a one-by-one basis, not as a group. In other words, the Christians as a group are treated as though they will enter into God's rest, but with the possibility of the failure of some individuals.

B. *The Importance of Hebrews 4,2*

Heb 4,2 is a particularly illuminating verse with regard to the view of symmetry regarding the two generations.

At 4,2 the author of Hebrews continues to draw a contrast between the Exodus generation and the Christians: "For we have received the good news just as they

3. This call to all to "encourage each other" in 3,13 has as its purpose the avoidance of an *individual* falling away, as is clear from the second part of the verse.

did, but the word of hearing did not benefit them because they were not united in faith with the ones who listened". The "word of hearing" (*ho logos tês akoês*) would seem to refer not formally to the words of Ps 95 at 3,7, because the author of Hebrews states in 4,7 that these words were written by David after the failure of the Exodus generation, and this fact figures importantly in his argumentation.⁴ Rather, the phrase would seem to hark back to 2,2, where the Law is referred to as *logos* and where it is presented as being "spoken" (*laleô*) "through angels".⁵ Thus the phrase *ho logos tês akoês* means "the word heard", i.e., the word which depends on hearing to be communicated.⁶

In Heb 4,2 "good news" is said to have been presented to both the Exodus generation and the Christian generation (*kai gar esmen euëγγελισμένοι καθaper kakeinoi*). In Hebrews, as elsewhere in the New Testament, this "good news" is connected with the "promise" (*epaggelia*) of entering into a rest (cf. 4,1).⁷ In Hebrews this promise would ultimately seem to be the promise made by God to Abraham (cf. Heb 11,9). But in the context of the epistle this promise to Abraham is looked on as having been conveyed to the Exodus generation and to the Christian generation in contrasting ways. In Heb 2,2 these two ways stand side-by-side, just as they stand side-by-side in Heb 4,2. The promise was transmitted to the Exodus generation when the Sinai covenant was promulgated by being "spoken (*laleô*) through angels".⁸ But the salvation of the Christians had its beginning "spoken" (*laleô*) through the Lord. That is to say, inasmuch as the exalted Christ is superior to the angels after the momentary inferiority of his earthly life (cf. 1,5-18), the Christians have received the "good news" of the promise of entering into the rest promised to Abraham from a significantly more powerful source.⁹

The phrase "because they were not united in faith with the ones who listened" (*mê sugkekerasmenous tês pistei tois akousasin*) continues the contrast between the Exodus generation and the Christians. The implication seems to be that both

4. But, of course, the same idea about the necessity of obeying God's command to trust is found in the psalm. It is relevant to the argument materially, if not formally.
5. But the *idea* of hearing alludes to the same idea as expressed in Ps 95 (cf. Heb 3,7a; 3,15; 4,7)
6. Cf. Attridge, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 125.
7. On the association between *euaggelizomai* and *epaggelia* cf. Acts 13,31 and the discussion in P. Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary, Eerdmans/Paternoster, Grand Rapids, Michigan/Carlisle 1991, 241.
8. Cf. also Heb 9,19, where all the commands of the Law are "spoken (*laleô*) by Moses" on the occasion of the inauguration of the Sinai covenant.
9. Cf. J. Swetnam, "The Structure of Hebrews 1,1 – 3,6", *Melita Theologica* 43 (1992) 58-66.

generations listened, but only the Christian generation “heard” (*akouô*) the promise in the sense that it obeyed what it heard, in contrast to the Exodus generation. This statement implies a difference between the nature of the “hearing” referred to in 4,2 by the words *akoê* and *akouô*. The first refers to “mere hearing” (cf. 3,16), whereas the latter refers to “hearing to good effect”, i.e., obeying.¹⁰ The author would then seem to be reasoning thus: “The Christian generation as a whole is hearing to good effect. If the desert generation had only been united to this efficacious hearing, they too would have entered into God’s rest”. What is clear is that for the author of Hebrews the Christians have received their “good news” from a more powerful intermediate source than the Exodus generation did (cf. Heb 2,1-4). But it is not clear if this disparity in “hearing” has something to do with this disparity of source.

According to Heb 4,2, then, the Christian generation “hears” in a way in which the Exodus generation did not. At first glance this efficacious “hearing” of the Christians could well be a simple *de facto* one: as a matter of fact, the Christians *are* obeying, and if the Exodus generation had had this type of hearing, it would have entered into the rest.¹¹ But this view runs into difficulty with a close reading of 4,8-11.

C. *The Importance of Hebrews 4,8-11*

Heb 4,8-11 offers another strong exegetical challenge in the context of 3,7–4,10, for it seems to offer a wholly different perspective on the entering into promised “rest”. Not only is there an apparently arbitrary introduction of Joshua and an allusion to the circumcision he administered to the generation which succeeded the Exodus generation, but the whole point of the passage is to show that the “rest” which the Christians are entering is the Sabbath “rest” of God, not the terrestrial “rest” of the land of Canaan. Faith is not mentioned, but by the fact that even Joshua did not succeed in giving what seems to have been a faithful generation the “rest” promised, it follows that no amount of faith possessed by the Exodus generation would have been availing: the “rest” of God is beyond any human attaining. Thus it would seem that Heb 4,8-11 undercuts the entire discussion about the reason for the failure of the Exodus generation. Even with faith, the Exodus generation could not have entered into the “rest” promised by God. And yet, the emphasis on entering “rest” (*katapausis*, *katapauô*) in the passage (4,8.10.11) indicate that it belongs with what precedes.

10. Cf. the discussion in Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 243.

11. This seems to be the opinion of Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, 98, when he speaks of an “eschatological faith”.

D. The Importance of Christ

But there are indications in Hebrews which seem to point a way toward resolving the apparent anomalies involved in a close reading of 4,8-11. In introducing at 3,6 the entire section 3,7 – 4,12¹² the author implies that the trustworthy Christ as Son, in contrast to the trustworthy Moses as servant, is the key for the successful completion of the Christians' attempts at perseverance in their endeavours. And the Christians do so as members of God's "house" (*oikos*) over which the Son has been placed. Membership in this "house" is presumed to be necessary for the Christians. This membership in God's house under the Son is developed at 3,14, where "participation" in Christ is again presumed to be necessary for the Christians as they journey. In these two allusions to participation in Christ through membership in his "house" the author gives, according to the close reading of the text being advanced here, the decisive clue for the mention of Joshua and circumcision in 4,8-11 and thus for the unifying element of the whole passage 3,7 – 4,11. Christ and union with Christ are the unifying elements as well as the point of contrast with Joshua and circumcision.

The Christian generation believed in Christ and are members of God's house over which Christ presides as son (3,6). Their membership will continue as long as the underlying reality (*hypostasis*)¹³ with which they began this association is maintained in its validity (3,14). Implied here is the liturgical act by which the Christians entered into this house cleansed in heart and body (cf. Heb 10,22), i.e., baptism. If the Christian generation maintains the validity of its purity of heart granted through baptism, it will enter into God's own "rest" where Christ has already entered (cf. Heb 2,10).

The use of the name "Jesus" (*'Iêsous*) for Joshua at the beginning of 4,8 sets up an implied comparison with Jesus Christ; the circumcision administered by Joshua sets up an implied comparison with the baptism administered by Christ.¹⁴ The

12. For arguments that these verses constitute a unified section cf. Swetnam, "The Context of the Cruc at Hebrews 5,7-8", 101-102.
13. The word *hypostasis* in 3,14 is taken by the present writer as forming an important part of the full argument regarding the nature of Christian faith. But an adequate treatment of the word as it is found in Hebrews would be well beyond the limits of the present note, which can stand on its own in a limited way.
14. For a presentation of the views of some doctors of the Church about the prefiguration of Jesus by Joshua and of Christian baptism by the circumcision administered by Joshua cf. Swetnam, "Jesus Λουτρο~ in Hebrews 4,12-13", 216-218.

inference intended would seem to be that the ineffective circumcision administered by Joshua is countered in some way by the effective circumcision administered by Christ.

In the context of the preceding part of the section, 3,7 – 4,7, this effective baptism of Christ, which brings about participation in Christ in the “house” of God, i.e., the Church, is what makes entrance of the Christian generation into God’s Sabbath rest possible. As individuals the Christians can fail, but not as a group. (The group failure of the Exodus generation is a warning to the Christian generation, but as individuals, not as a group.) That is to say, as long as Christians remain members of Christ’s “house”, entrance for them is assured.

Here begins to emerge the answer to the question whether the effective “hearing” of the Christians with regard to trust in God is something *de facto* or something deeper. The fact that Christians, as members of Christ’s “house”, are participants in Christ himself (3,14), is surely not without significance. For the risen Christ has already entered into God’s Sabbath rest. Insofar as the Christians remain participants of this risen Christ and thus members of his “house”, eventual success is inevitable.¹⁵

Christ as Logos in Hebrews 4,12-13

This is the background for the author’s use of *logos* in 4,12-13. Elsewhere the present writer has advanced arguments for an interpretation that sees the word at 4,12-13 as having the same meaning as the *Logos* in the prologue of the Fourth Gospel.¹⁶

The difficulties with the prevailing contemporary interpretation in which the *logos* of these verses (the “word” of God as scripture in v. 12, “account” in v. 12) may be summarized as follows:

15. “The prophet Jeremiah foretold a ‘new covenant’ in which there would be a fundamental change in the way the covenant would be regarded. Christians interpreted this new covenant as having a central role in their relations with God, so central that Jesus is pictured as using the language of the new covenant in relation to the Eucharist, the centre of Christian worship. This centrality is matched by the radical change which the Christians thought of as characterizing the new covenant: for them Christ’s death had removed the curse provisions of the old covenant so that there was no more possibility of the failure for the new people of God. Only individuals could fail” (J. Swetnam, “The Old Testament and the New and Eternal Covenant”, *Melita Theologica* 46 [1995] 78).
16. Cf. above, n. 1.

- 1) The terminology is inconsistent: two radically different interpretations of the word *logos* are given when the arrangement of the words in such proximity seems to indicate that they are to be construed as parallel in meaning. The *logos* of v. 12 is found at the beginning of the verse, the *logos* of v. 13 is found at the end of the verse, as though together they were intended to serve as a frame for what is being said.
- 2) The imagery is inconsistent. V. 12 is about the penetrating power of *logos*, whereas v. 13 seems to involve sacrifice.
- 3) The description is inconsistent, for it is not clear how a “two-edged sword” is appropriate for a sacrifice.
- 4) The language is inconsistent. The use of the illative particle *oun* in 4,14 is anomalous; and the use of the participle “living”, *zōn*, would be the only instance in Hebrews of its use modifying non-personal life.

But if one interprets the *logos* of 4,12-13 in the same sense as the *Logos* of the prologue of the Fourth Gospel, these anomalies disappear:

- 1) The terminology becomes consistent: the interpretation of *logos* as *Logos* gives intelligibility to the use of the word as a frame. In v. 12 *Logos* refers to Christ in his divine ability to furnish a spiritual circumcision of the heart necessary to make possible definitive entry into God’s rest. (This has been prepared proximately by the discussion of “heart” in 3,7 – 4,7, and immediately by the allusion in 4,8-11 to the ineffective circumcision administered by Joshua.) In v. 12 *Logos* refers to Christ in his divine ability to act for men as intercessor with God the judge before whom nothing is hidden. The allusion to sacrifice in the verse alludes to the sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham.
- 2) The imagery becomes consistent. V. 12 involves the imagery of spiritual circumcision in imaginative terms and relates to what precedes. V. 13 involves the imagery of a sacrificial victim who becomes a priestly intercessor by reason of his sacrifice and relates to what follows.
- 3) The description becomes consistent. The description is of a “knife”, not a “sword”, *makaira* being the word used in the Septuagint for the implement used by Joshua in Jos 5 and by Abraham in Gen 22. The word “two-edged” alludes not only to the double function of the knife—to circumcise and to sacrifice—but also to the double function of *Logos* in the context, referring as it does to what precedes (v. 12) and to what follows (v. 13).
- 4) The language becomes consistent. The illative particle *oun* in v. 14 refers to what immediately precedes, i.e., *oun* is used in its normal sense and refers to the

Logos as intercessor as a result of his sacrificial death on the cross. *Zōn* refers to a person in 4,12, as elsewhere in the epistle.

Hebrews 4,12-13 in the Context of Hebrews 3,7 – 4,11

The arguments given above for the advisability of interpreting the *logos* of 4,12-13 in the same sense as the *Logos* of the prologue of the Fourth Gospel are a rehearsing of what the present writer has previously stated, and seem suasive (nothing else is presumed here) on their own terms. But they become more suasive still (nothing else is presumed here) when placed in the context of 3,7 – 4,11 as advanced in the first part of the article. In these verses a close reading seems to indicate that some transcendent force brought about the certainty with which the Christian generation faced the challenge of entry into God's rest. Membership in the house created by God and over which Christ presides as Son (3,6) is the external sign of membership in the group so benefited, because such membership results in a participation in Christ (3,14). Entrance into this house is effected, of course, by the spiritual circumcision administered by the *Logos* (cf. 10,22 and the connection between baptism, heart and faith referred to there, all in the context of v. 21 with its association of Christ as high priest and the people as his house); perseverance in that house is made possible by the fact that the *Logos* is always in God's presence willing to intercede for his people (cf. 2,17 and the allusion to the mercy and trustworthiness of the Christian high priest).

All of this, for anyone who is cognizant of the Christian tradition, is a way of referring to Christian baptism as the means of entrance into the Church of Christ, i.e., participation under Christ in Christ as an organized body externally visible,¹⁷ as well as the continued helping presence of Christ for the Christians as they journey. It is an example of how working explicitly within the Christian tradition aids the interpreter in arriving at a view of a New Testament which is not only consistent in itself and not inconsistent with his or her faith commitment, but illuminative of that faith commitment as well.

In retrospect, this view of the *logos* of Heb 4,12 as being the *Logos*, i.e., as divine, together with the view that this *Logos* has acted on the Christians to guarantee their

17. "House" is taken here as alluding to the spiritual "faith-dynasty" of Christ (cf. 12,2, where Jesus is portrayed as the "initiator and perfecter of faith") which is outwardly visible in the liturgical groups which celebrate his liturgy (cf. 10,25).

entrance into God's rest, throws new light on Heb 4,2, where the phrase *ho logos tês akoês*, "the word heard", is found. Considered by itself, *ho logos tês akoês* seems to be a rather odd expression.¹⁸ But in the light of the exegesis of Heb 4,12 as the *Logos* who achieves his goal by acting, not by speaking, the expression takes on new intelligibility: it is cast in a form which is designed to contrast with the *Logos* of 2,2. There is the "word which has been heard" in 4,2, and the "Word who has acted" in 4,12.

Conclusion

The above exegesis is offered as a result of a "close reading" of the text. But, as is well known, one interpreter's "close reading" is another interpreter's "eisexgesis". Valid exegesis results largely in free choices, but free choices which are valid to the extent that they can be justified by objective evidence. It is up to the interpreter to make his or her choices of what seems plausible in Heb 3,7 – 4,12. What stands in need of constant re-examination is the objective evidence on which this exegesis was made.

Via della Pilotta, 25
00187 Rome
Italy

18. Cf. the discussion in Ellingworth, *Commentary on Hebrews*, 242.