

## Item #41 (Cause and Condition in Hebrews 3,7 – 5,10)

This was Entry #49 on my previous website.

**I**n the discussion of Hebrews 3,7 – 4,10 in my book *Hebrews—An Interpretation* (Subsidia Biblica 47; Rome: Gregorian & Biblical Press, 2016) the central verses were taken to be 4,12-13, which, in the interpretation being advanced, refer to the Λόγος not as the word that is Scripture but the Word that is the fully divine Son referred to in the prologue. 4,12 looks back, referring to what has preceded; 4,13 looks forward to what will follow.

The theme of the passage is set by the citation of Ps 95,7-11 in Heb 3,7b-11 introducing the account of the first Exodus and, by implication, referring to the new, Christian Exodus. The thesis was presented that the first Exodus generation failed because they were hard of heart and did not have the definitive spiritual circumcision (baptism) brought by the Word as high priest (Heb 3,12 – 4,11). This section was taken as implying the promise made to Abraham of land.

Heb 4,12 – 5,10, on the other hand, was about the promise to Abraham of offspring. It seems to involve forgiveness of sins of those who have been baptized, i.e., members of the Church. This forgiveness, of course, comes from the Word as high priest. Again there are two elements needed for the forgiveness of sins to be effective: approaching the “throne of grace” (4,16) of the Word and obedience to the risen Christ (5,9).

The question arises just how the parallel two elements are understood: freedom from hardness of heart and the spiritual circumcision effected by the Word, and forgiveness of sins from the Word and obedience.

It would seem that the author of Hebrews viewed them as two mutually illuminating sets, for he sets off the need for freedom from hardness of heart (Heb 3,12 – 4,7) from the need for spiritual circumcision (4,8-11) as contrasted with the need for the mercy of the Word (4,14-16) and the need for obedience to the risen Christ (5,1-10).

The symmetrical parallelism is striking:

3,12 – 4,7  
     4,8-11  
         4,12  
         4,13  
     4,14-16  
 5,1-10

What is needed is some corresponding difference in labeling the two “needs”. There would seem to be a difference in their intrinsic force,

otherwise the structure seems gratuitous. The distinction that comes to mind is the distinction between condition and cause. A necessary condition for entrance into the Promised Land of God's Rest is lack of hardness of heart, i.e., the need for faith-trust in God. The corresponding cause of entrance into the Promised Land of God's Rest is baptism, i.e., participation in the "house" founded by God through the Son. The necessary cause for being a member of the offspring promised to Abraham is the mercy of the Word for sins committed as a member of the house. The corresponding condition is obedience to the risen Christ (cf. Heb 5,9, with the expression that the risen Christ is the ἀΐτιος of salvation).

This is not to say, of course, that the author of Hebrews thought explicitly in terms of "cause" and "condition". But he does seem to have been consciously aware of the distinction which is illumined by those terms. **(28 March 2012)**