

The Migrant Camp of the People of God: A Uniting Theme for the Epistle to the Hebrews

by

Annang Asumang¹

Bill Domeris²

Abstract

Although the movement motif is prominent in Hebrews, it has not been demonstrated that it unites the epistle. In a previous article, we proposed that the author used the spaces of the wilderness camp and tabernacle as a heuristic device for the Christological expositions. This article will employ the root metaphor of migration to explain the exhortations and suggest that “the Migrant Camp of God’s People” serves as a uniting theme for Hebrews. Judging that the precarious state of his congregation typologically corresponded to that of the Exodus generation, the author has provided us with a Christian interpretation of the Book of Numbers as its solution. This relationship also accounts for the epistle’s unique literary structure.

¹ Dr Asumang is a medical doctor practicing medicine in England. He holds an MTh in Biblical Studies from the South African Theological Seminary.

² Dr Bill Domeris holds a PhD in Theology from the University of Durham. He was a professor in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of the Witwatersrand 1982-2002 and is present involved in pastoral ministry in East London.

1. Introduction

Craig Koester's (2002:103-123) proposal that the community behind the epistle to the Hebrews developed through three historical phases of conversion, persecution and malaise has significantly elucidated its contextual background.³ What now remains to be resolved is the question of a uniting theme or "master idea" (Saydon 1961:19) that seamlessly connects the author's distinctive theological emphases and choices with his literary and rhetorical approach aimed at addressing the pastoral problems. Lindars' (1991:26) suggestion that "[i]t is a mistake to look for a leading idea as the key to the whole", while understandable as an expression of the frustration involved in the venture, is perhaps mistaken as an approach. Earlier generations of scholars, from Davidson (1882) to Swetnam (1974), favoured the doctrine of the high priesthood of Christ as the "central category" (Moule 1950:37), and Hughes' (1977:2) proposition that "the absolute supremacy of Christ" is the epistle's "comprehensive theme" is well known, but they both fail to provide fitting links with the exhortations. Since, according to Attridge (1990:211), the purpose of Hebrews is "not to socialize new members of a group, to legitimize a structure of authority, or to polemicize against an external social unit and its symbol system, but to reinforce the identity of a social sub-group in such a way as not to isolate it from its environment", any proposal must demonstrate how this reinforcement of identity is achieved. In addition, it must also fit the socio-historical context of the epistle, as far as that may be ascertained, and explain the unique literary and rhetorical style.

The proposal that so far qualifies to be near enough to fulfilling these conditions is the theme of the Christian life as a pilgrimage. Eastern Christianity, as early as the third century, cherished this theme in the exhortations of Hebrews (Koester 2001:19), but it was Ernst Käsemann's *The Wandering People of God* (1984) which in 1938 brought the idea of

³ The questions about authorship and date are probably irresolvable from the internal evidence alone. We assume, based largely on Hebrews 11:32, that the author is male. His philosophical background is clearly found within the primitive Christian faith and the general consensus that Hebrews is a homily also seems to be now firmly established. The issue of the ethnicity of the congregation is not fully settled and though we assume that they were Jewish Christians in diaspora, the import of this assumption is marginal to our investigation.

movement in the exhortations of Hebrews 3-4 and 11 to the attention of Western Christianity. Käsemann did not propose the theme as uniting the epistle and emphasised a wandering motif rather than pilgrimage theme. His suggestion that the motif was derived from a strong Gnostic influence on the author was also clearly incorrect. Barrett's (1956) refinement of Käsemann's proposal firmly established the presence of the motif as uniting the exhortations of Hebrews⁴ and as its major contribution to New Testament theology. More recently, Isaacs (1992) has employed the phenomenology of space to suggest that there are parallel pilgrimage themes in both the exhortations and the expositions. The cultic expositions demonstrate that Christ has arrived in His own pilgrimage into the inner sanctum that is heaven, whereas the exhortations encourage the Hebrews congregation to also persevere in their pilgrimage towards the same destination. The expositions of Hebrews are however rather static and do not readily exhibit movement themes, and though Jesus is presented as Apostle and Example to be emulated, this is found in the exhortations. In addition, Isaacs postulated that the author aimed at redirecting the congregation's traditional understanding of the destination of pilgrimage from the recently destroyed Jerusalem temple to the heavenly sacred place. Though such a construct of the purpose of the epistle is plausible, it seems not to account sufficiently for the urgency in the author's tone.

Some of the most important features of Hebrews do not completely match the pilgrimage motif either. The Christological comparisons are not adequately explained by the motif and similarly the nature of the destination as expounded in the exhortations, that is, salvation (Heb 2:1-4), God's rest (Heb 3-4), perfection (Heb 5-6) and the promise (Heb 10-13) do not fully fit the pilgrimage model in which cultic rituals mark the destination. The cultic experience in Hebrews occurs more during the journey rather than at its destination. The transitional exhortations to "approach" (Heb 4:16) and to "draw near" (Heb 10:22) to God's throne in the Holy of Holies are therefore

⁴ Other significant contributors to the development of the pilgrimage theme include Spicq (1958-59:365-390) who suggested that the community who received the epistle were displaced persons and Partin (1967) who employed the Muslim *hajj* as a heuristic device to explore the pilgrimage theme in the epistle.

designed to provide “mercy and find grace to help” (Heb 4:16) during the journey rather than an exhortation to step into the pilgrim’s destination. Likewise, the emphasis that Christ’s sacrificial death and the congregation’s experience of some of its benefits were in the past does not sufficiently fit the pilgrimage model.

In a comprehensive evaluation of the pilgrimage metaphor in Hebrews, Johnsson (1978) has questioned whether that theme sufficiently accounted for both the expositions and exhortations of the Epistle. He posited that “Christianity in Hebrews is set forth in a variety of ways and we should not claim too much for the pilgrimage idea...among the different ways in which Christianity is described within Hebrews, the leading ones are those of cult and pilgrimage” (248). He therefore concluded that the Christians of Hebrews should be viewed as a “cultic community on the move” (249). Johnsson did not however define the actual nature of this movement, and what may have been the precedence for our author’s unique approach to the pastoral challenges he aimed to address with his homily.

In what follows, we employ cognitive and sociological theories in human spatial movement to affirm that “the cultic community on the move” motif indeed unites the epistle, that the root metaphor of migration best describes this motif and that our author typologically interprets the situation of Israel during their migration from Egypt to the Promised Land that is depicted in the Book of Numbers as corresponding to that of his congregation.

The basic tenet of our methodology is that root metaphors are not mere rhetorical adornments but do serve as a guide to the literary intentions of a writer (Lakoff and Johnson 2003:254-257). We therefore share Barcelona’s (2003:3) definition of a metaphor as a “cognitive mechanism whereby one experiential domain is partially ‘mapped’, i.e. projected, onto a different experiential domain, so that the second domain is partially understood in terms of the first one.” A root metaphor is a fundamental but often unstated underlying assumption in a text that the author employs as a heuristic device. By investigating the nature of the cognitive construct by which the root metaphor of migration governs the author’s choices in Hebrews, we hope to ascertain some of the underlying assumptions that influence his presentation. Contrary to Synge’s (1959:51) assertion that the expositions and exhortations

are from two independent sources, we agree with DeSilva (2000:71) that our author has woven “his material together so artfully that no scheme will be able to separate perfectly what he has so closely joined together.” We therefore hypothesise that a single motif or root metaphor is more likely to have underpinned his sermon, and this theme is the migration of God’s people to the Promise. We begin by briefly setting out the model of migration and movement.

2. Sociology of Human Movement and Migration

2.1 *Orientation during Movement*

The movement of a person may be defined as his or her change of location relative to other places over time through the use of spatial direction and orientation. Whereas location refers to the person’s position in space relative to other persons and places, direction of movement refers to the specific route between the original position and the intended destination. The spatial orientation of a moving person refers to the process of alignment in relation to a specific direction of movement and a set of reference points, and involves the mental integration of sensory perception from the environment. Thus spatial orientation is the more general term that combines the cognitive and perceptual aspects with the direction of motion. Since a moving person’s location constantly changes, orientation is required to enable continuous alignment in relation to the specified direction. The role of sensory perception and integration in this spatial orientation is for that matter fundamental. In humans all input from the six major senses—sight, hearing, taste, touch, smell and balance—are integrated in the brain to provide this spatial orientation. The first two of these sensations (i.e., sight and hearing) in particular serve as rich sources of Biblical metaphors related to the orientation of the believer as a person on the move. The Bible, for example, frequently expresses revelation with the metaphor of sight or insight (e.g., Matt 13:14-15), and obedience to God as “hearing” or paying “heed” to God’s Word (e.g., Rev 13:9). The lack of sufficient sensory input or wrong interpretation of any of these sensations results in disorientation. Darkness is therefore a disorienting environment and is commonly used as a Biblical metaphor for being lost and lacking God’s

enlightenment (e.g., Matt 6:23, Luke 11:36, 2 Pet 1:19). Similarly blindness is used as a metaphor for spiritual ignorance (e.g., Matt 23:24) so that in parts of the gospels (e.g., Mark 10, John 9) the healing of blind persons is linked with Jesus' call to discipleship (see Achtemeier 1978). These metaphors of sensory perception demonstrate the essential orientational roles of the Word of God and faith in the Christian life, as we shall find in Hebrews.

The integration of the sensory input relies on recollections of previous other experiences of the sensation, so that memory plays an important role in spatial orientation. In a similar manner, the Bible employs memory to orientate the disciple of Christ. Thus in Mark 8:18 Jesus rebukes His disciples: "Do you have eyes and do not see? Do you have ears and do not hear? And do you not remember?" Equally, instructions for orienting disciples tend to be cyclically repeated to enhance memory (Mouton 1997:128). In addition, mental concentration enhances orientation by aiding the integration of perception. The author of Hebrews, as we shall see, also employs the reinforcement of the collective memory of the congregation and rigorous warnings to ensure focus and realignment in their migration toward the promise.

2.2 *Liminality during Movement*

From the sociological point of view, human movement may be analysed by employing the concept of *liminality*. The word "liminal" is derived from the Latin *limen*, which means threshold and describes the intermediary state of a person or group of persons who are in transition. The concept was first proposed by Arnold van Gennep who used the metaphor of movement to analyse rituals and rites of passages and asserted that liminality "accompany every change of place, state, social position and age" (1960:vii). He indicated that all such transitions may be analysed in three sequential phases: the separation or pre-liminal phase, the liminal phase itself and the aggregation or the post-liminal phase. The separation and aggregation phases of movement depend very much on the purpose of the movement. Thus the separation phase of migration may well be affected by socio-economic and political factors whereas pilgrimage is made for religious purposes.

The social anthropologist Victor Turner defined liminality as a transitional phase during which a person abandons his or her old identity and dwells in a threshold state of ambiguity, openness and indeterminacy. “During the Liminal stage, the between stage, one’s status becomes ambiguous; one is ‘neither here nor there’, one is betwixt and between all fixed points of classification...” (Turner 1974:232). People in liminality tend to experience a sense of togetherness, comradeship, lowliness and non-hierarchical homogeneity, which he called *communitas*. They also tend to be marginalised in society. The liminal phase is particularly dangerous because of the disorientation, ambiguity and instability it produces. It is experienced as a difficult, fragile, risky and trying phase in which the ambiguities may not be well tolerated (Taylor 1990). As stated by Douglas, “Danger lies in transitional states, simply because transition is neither one state nor the next. The person who must pass from one to another is himself in danger and emanates danger to others.... To have been in the margins is to have been in contact with danger” (2002:119-120). The instructions that are provided before one enters the liminal period therefore tend to underscore these dangers and are aimed at instilling a positive sense of fear that will help *liminas* to maintain their concentration and therefore orientation during the movement. For the uninitiated, these warnings may sound as if they are exaggerations, but they are fundamental for survival during the movement (Douglas 2002:120).⁵

One of the most common Biblical symbols of liminality is the wilderness; for on the one hand, it symbolises hardships that test one’s covenantal loyalty and faithfulness to God (Funk 1959:209); and on the other hand, it is a “location where God is encountered, where personal transformation takes place and where community is formed” (Dozeman 1998:43); a place of “judgment and renewal” (Gibson 1994:15). The wilderness symbolism in Scripture therefore has both positive and negative aspects: everyone who passes through it is subjected to one test or another. Those who humble themselves and persevere in faith come out of it transformed whereas those who succumb to the tests and dangers may give up their faith and end up “departing from the living God” (Heb 3:12). In an examination of 1 Corinthians 10:1-12 using the

⁵ The concept of liminality has been used to explore the social circumstances of the earliest Christians by Meeks (1983), Wedderburn (1987) and McVann (1991) among others.

concept of liminality, Oropeza has cogently argued that “[i]t was during the Israelites’ wilderness trek that the conceptions of liminality and *communitas* affected the social and religious values of the people in a religious way” (1999:75) and that the Apostle’s stern warnings against apostasy were a reflection of the liminal status of the Corinthian believers. We suggest that this liminal situation also applied to the Hebrews congregation.

2.3 *Migration as a Metaphor*

Migration is defined as a “permanent or semi-permanent change of residence of an individual or group of people” (Johnson and others 2000:504). Of the several theories that examine the separation phase of migration, the simplest is Lee’s (1966:47-57) in which he delineated the factors influencing migration as various “pushes” and “pulls” from both the origin and destination. “Push” forces such as war, famine, forced human trafficking and flooding combine with “pull” forces such as liberation, better climate, employment and socio-economic lifestyle and family factors to influence the flow of people from one place to another. Unlike pilgrimage, people seldom migrate for a single reason, as Giddens’ Structuration theory demonstrates (Johnson and Others 2000:505). Likewise in Hebrews, though there is one destination, the author depicts it in different forms, each one of which emphasises an aspect. This makes migration a more suited metaphor than pilgrimage for the movement theme of Hebrews. Again, in contrast to the pilgrims’ separation from their origins, the departure of the emigrants in many cases may be a complete physical severance from the origin with no intention of return. The phase of liminality with regard to migration is similar to that of pilgrimage, even though in the case of the migrant, liminality may extend throughout the period of settlement in the host country and often never terminates.

In addition to the social status of liminality, the migrant also experiences a peculiar sense of place characterised by a hybrid consciousness described by Cohen as “diasporic” (1997: xi), in which the migrant (and also exiled person) may feel “in place” but not “at home”. This diasporic consciousness, according to Baumann, expresses a specific type of thinking, “of hybridity, heterogeneity, identity fragmentation and reconstruction, double consciousness, fractures of memory, ambivalence, roots and routes, discrepant

cosmopolitanism, multi-locationality and so forth” (2000:324). It tends to orientate the migrant’s psychological, social and cultural behaviour in the host country so that in many respects the immigrant maintains a different identity from the native person. Generally, the migrant may not intend to return to the land of origin, and yet has an idealised vision of a “homeland”, of a symbolic geographical place to which he or she belongs and regards as home and to which he or she may wish eventually to return. Thus to the migrant, “returning home” is an eschatological concept that provides orientation during liminality. This conception of a migrant’s “homeland” has been highlighted by Edward Said’s migration related theory of “imaginative geographies”. Imaginative geographies are mental representations of a homeland far away, which are reflections of the desires, fantasies, expectations and preconceptions of the migrant and which help to sustain the identity and orientation of the migrant. Said asserts that “[i]maginative geography and history help the mind to intensify its own sense of itself by dramatising the distance and difference between what is close to it and what is far” (1978:55). In other words, imaginative geography helps in the orientation of the migrant. The Biblical counterpart to this concept is hope and, as we shall find in Hebrews, it plays an indispensable orientating role for the migrant people of God. Unlike Said’s imaginative geography, however, hope is anchored in the reality of the ministry of Christ in the heavenly Holy of Holies (Heb 6:18-20) and though it is full of desire and pregnant with expectation, it is not based on fantasy.

Throughout their history, the Israelites have been very familiar with this diasporic migrant consciousness. During their journey to the Promised Land, they had the most profound spiritual, cultural, political, theological and social experience that constituted them as a nation in diaspora. This experience was forever to serve as the template⁶ of the idealised liminal migrant spirit—both positively and negatively (Bauman 2000:317). To the Jew in exile, life was always very much equivalent to that in the wilderness, being tested and tried and prepared by God for return to the Promised Land which was their home. By the first century BC, the Mediterranean region was teeming with millions of Jewish migrants familiar with this consciousness (Elliot 1981:67). The earliest Christians, who were largely Jewish and even more marginalised

⁶ See for example Is 35, Jer 2, Hos 2, Ezek 20, Ps 78 & 106

because of the non-recognition of their religion at the time, therefore had the worse of the “liminal migrant condition”. Christians were sometimes “excluded from voting and landholding privileges as well as from the chief civic offices and honours, they enjoyed only limited legal protection while ... they still shared full responsibilities with the citizenry for all financial burdens, such as tributes, taxes, and production quotas” (Elliot 2000:94). It is in this sense that they developed three main migration related terminologies to describe their diasporic state: as strangers (or aliens), foreigners and sojourners. These metaphors themselves had double meanings for, in some respects, Gentile Christians were no longer “excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise ... but [became] fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household” (Eph 2:12, 19). And yet at the same time they were to consider themselves “like a stranger in a foreign country ... looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (Heb 11:9-10). The Christian condition is clearly therefore a diasporic migrant condition whose orientation is towards the heavenly homeland. If, as is likely, the community behind Hebrews were Jews in diaspora (Koester 2001:49), such a consciousness would have been so familiar to them that its use as root metaphor was not only appropriate but, perhaps, even “therapeutic”, as we now demonstrate.

3. The Migrant Camp of God's People

In a previous article (Asumang and Domeris 2006:1-26) we employed sociological models in spatiality to examine the expositions of Hebrews and concluded that the spaces of the wilderness camp of Israel that are depicted in Numbers were typologically interpreted by the author of Hebrews in his schematic expositions. In this scheme, the “inhabited world” (Heb 2:5-18) corresponded to the Camp itself that extended to the front gate of the tabernacle where sacrifices took place, the “house” (Heb 3:1-6) corresponded to the priestly courtyard and Holy Place, heaven corresponded to the Holy of Holies (Heb 5-10) and the Christological comparisons were a reflection of the contested nature of these spaces. Hebrews 1 is located in heaven and acted as the author's summary of the state of knowledge of the congregation. This basic spatial scheme was a semiosphere that controlled the author's choices of theological themes, persons, cultic practices and expositions. We therefore

proposed that “the picture of the encamped people of God around the tabernacle” (23) should influence the reading of the epistle. We now examine the exhortations of Hebrews,⁷ which contain the movement theme and demonstrate that it is also influenced by the theological themes of Numbers.

3.1 The Migration of God’s People – the Exhortations of Hebrews

The exhortations of Hebrews contain several metaphors of movement. Believers are warned not to “drift away” from the great salvation or they would not “escape” God’s punishment; they are to “enter” or “go in” to God’s Rest; they are to “leave” the basic doctrines behind and “go on” to perfection; and they are again to “enter” and “draw near” and not to “shrink back” from the Promise. Similarly, faith is explained as a movement towards God while one is “looking forward to” or “thinking of” or “longing for” the “city” and the “country” that God has built for His people. It is also expressed as “running the race with perseverance” while the “eyes” are fixed on Christ and believers are hence to “go to Him” outside of the Camp. How has the author organised this movement theme and for what purpose?

Each block of exhortation, like the expositions, is constructed in a self-contained manner so that it has five main components (table 1 below): a reference to God’s Word, warning against retrogression or failure to progress, encouragement to persevere, move forward and enter, positive and/or negative OT examples and a reminder of the past experiences of the community (see McKnight 1992:21-59 for a formal analysis of these passages). Hebrews 10:19-13:17, though containing these five components, follows a different pattern.

Table 1: The Five Components of the Exhortations of Hebrews

Component	Heb 2:1-4	Heb 3:7-4:16	Heb 5:12-	Heb 10:19-
-----------	-----------	--------------	-----------	------------

⁷ We have adopted Guthrie’s (1998) proposal for the literary structure of the epistle, even though as we shall later point out, the alternative Vanhoye’s (1963) chiasmic structure equally explains the link between Hebrews and Numbers. In Guthrie’s structure, the Exhortations of Hebrews are in Heb 2:1-4, 3:1-4:16, 5:11-6:20, 10:19-13:17. Heb 3:1-6 is an exposition with hortatory elements.

The Migrant Camp of the People of God

			6:20	13:17
God's Word (Perception)	Heb 2:1	Heb 3:7-11	Heb 5:12-14	Heb 10:24-25
Warning (Dangers in Liminality)	Heb 2:1, 3	Heb 3:12-19	Heb 6:4-8	Heb 10:26-31, 12:25-29
Encouragement (Movement)	Heb 2:1	Heb 4:1-16	Heb 6:1-3, 12-20	Heb 10:19-23, 35-39, 12:1-3
Reminder (Memory)	Heb 2:4	None	Heb 6:9-11	Heb 10:32-34
OT Examples (Memory)	Punishment in OT (Heb 2:2)	Wilderness Generation (Heb 3)	Wilderness Gen. & Abraham (Heb 6:12-15)	Positive & Negative (Heb 11 & Esau - 12:16)

Of these components, the encouragement to hold fast to the confession, move forward and enter (Heb 2:1, 4:1-16, 6:1-3, 12-20, 10:19-23, 35-39 & 12:1-3) serves as the central purpose of each block and constitutes the major movement theme. The references to hearing or heeding God's word (perception), the negative and/or positive examples from the OT (memory), the warnings against the consequences of retrogression and failure to persevere (dangers in liminality) and the reminders of the past experiences of the community (memory) provide alignment and orientation for the journey. These feed the life of faith (orientation), hope (migrant consciousness) and love (*communitas*) required for completing the journey. In addition, Heb 4:14-16 and 10:19-22 show how access to the cultic ministry of Christ in the Holy of Holies provides an ever present provision of grace, help and mercy for the migrant who approaches, draws near and enters.

In the background of each section of exhortation are not just a movement motif, but also allusions and echoes to the wilderness experiences of Israel. Thus each block is presented in such a fashion that it contains a stated or implied origin, destination, dangers that could cause disorientation and encouragement to faith, hope and love to enable orientation in the migration. As shown in table 2 below, the destination is called salvation in Heb 2:1-4, Divine Rest in Heb 3-4, Perfection in Heb 5-6 and the Promise in Heb 10-13. Each one of these is treated by Hebrews in a complex manner but represents an aspect of "eternal life" and may therefore be subsumed under the title of

“The Promise”. Each is also experienced in some limited form during the journey, but the full inheritance awaits “the world to come”. Since each one is also symbolised by the Holy of Holies, the migrant’s access to it during the journey provides a foretaste of the Promise.

Table 2: The Migration Scheme in the Exhortations of Hebrews

	Heb 2:1-4	Heb 3:1-4:13	Heb 5:11-6:20	Heb 10:19-13:17
Separation	Signs & Wonders	Holy & Called to heaven	Birth & Flight	Falsehood to Truth Darkness to light
Disorienting Dangers	Neglect & Drift	Unbelief & Disobedience	Immaturity & Falling Away	Deliberate sin, Spiritual Fatigue & Bitterness
Orienting Praxis	Pay Heed to God’s Word	Faith & Perseverance	Know God’s Word & Faith	Faith, Hope & Love
Destination	Salvation	Rest	Perfection	The Promise

We now briefly discuss each of the exhortations

3.1.1 Don’t drift away but inherit your salvation (Heb 2:1-4)

The separation of the Hebrews Christians as migrants was instigated by the “pull” factor of the “great salvation”. This is the salvation for which angels have been sent to minister to the saints (Heb 1:14) and which was first proclaimed by the Lord and His apostles “with signs and wonders and with different kinds of miracles” (Heb 2:4). Their separation was therefore characterised by God’s mighty intervention in human life that transformed them into new people signified by the “gifts of the Holy Spirit”. While no doubt the miraculous events occurred at their conversion, the author’s manner of description also alludes to the separation of Israel from slavery in Egypt, for this was the Old Testament’s formula for characterizing that momentous event (Exod 3:20, 7:3, 15:11, Deut 4:34, 6:22, 7:19, Ps 135:8-9). Rengstorf hence states, “When the OT speaks of God’s signs and wonders the reference is almost always to the leading of the people out of Egypt by Moses and to the special circumstances under which the people stood up to the passage of the

Red Sea and in all of which God proved Himself to be the Almighty and showed Israel to be His chosen people” (1976:216). The implied reference to the reception of the law at Sinai in Hebrews 2:2 strengthens this allusion. Indeed, the whole of Hebrews 2:1-4 echoes a similar statement by God to the failing Exodus generation “who have seen My glory and My miracles which I did in Egypt and in the wilderness” (Num 14:22). The Hebrews congregation, like the Exodus generation, saw God’s glory and wonders, and it was important for them, unlike their Old Testament counterparts, to pay attention to His voice.

The author expresses concern over the state of the congregation’s faith during liminality and warns them not to “neglect” their salvation or drift away from their position in Christ. “Neglect” and “drift” or “slip” are expressions of spatial disorientation. “Neglect suggests a gradual, unthinking movement away from the faith” (Koester 2001:206) and lack of concentration in a dangerous environment. Similarly “drift away” is a nautical metaphor depicting an unanchored ship that is drifting carelessly from the harbour into the sea. Distraction during liminality easily results in destruction. The warnings of apocalyptic danger are therefore meant to awaken and refocus the migrant’s orientation to the Promise and are represented by the movement metaphor of “escape” (Heb 2:3).⁸ Hebrews 12:25 will echo a similar sentiment. It has been debated throughout church history whether the envisaged consequences of drifting away, or falling away, are eternal damnation or some sort of temporary punishment or even lack of rewards. Important though this debate is, the intention of the author was more to re-

⁸ The particular Greek word, *εκφευξόμεθα* (“we escape”), is used seven times in the New Testament; on four occasions it refers to escaping the apocalyptic judgment of God (Luke 21:36, Rom 2:3, 1 Thes 5:3 & Heb 2:3.), the other three refer to escaping from other dangers such as imprisonment (Acts 16: 27), physical harm (Acts 19:16) and persecution (2 Cor 11:33).

orientate drifting migrants.⁹ The response he was looking for was not one that asks whether eternal damnation was at all possible for the Christian, but a response of constructive fear instilled by the knowledge of potential disaster if one is careless during liminality (see Gray's [2003] analysis of the concept of fear in Hebrews). Noah's fear (Heb 11:70) is one such example that reflected his faith and believers are therefore encouraged to cultivate a similar fear (Heb 12:28-29). In this respect, Hebrews' warnings parallel Paul's in 1 Corinthians 10:12. The antidote to drifting away from the faith during the liminal phase is careful attention or "paying heed" to God's Word. The Exodus generation who heard the laws given by the angels failed to pay heed and perished (Heb 3:17-19). How much more those who have heard the Gospel from the superior Christ?

In setting the great salvation in opposition to punitive destruction, the author of Hebrews conveys the notion of salvation as the destination of the migration of God's people. He had previously intimated in Hebrews 1:14 that believers are those who will inherit this salvation, now he conveys some of its features. This salvation was first preached by the Lord (Heb 2:3), for He is the Author (Heb 2:10) and the Source (Heb 5:9) of it. It is a great salvation because He provides it from within the Holy of Holies, "to the uttermost", to those who come to Him (Heb 7:25). Though it is in the future, since it is inherited (Heb 1:14) and fully experienced at the second coming of Christ (Heb 9:28), its experience by the believers has already begun, for entrance into it occurs now as we come to Him (Heb 7:25), taste of its powers (Heb 6:5) and indeed escape "to take hold of the hope" before us (Heb 6:18). It is therefore an "already and not yet" salvation, fulfilled but not yet consummated (Ladd 1974:575, Osborne 1975:145). Here in Hebrews 2:1-4, our author's concern was that by sheer neglect, carelessness and laziness, his hearers might become disoriented and ignore this great salvation leading to a severe punishment.

⁹ The warning passages of Hebrews are integral to the author's argument. Interpretations that reduce their full rhetorical force are akin to dismissing as exaggerations the warnings by a driving instructor about the dangers of driving while disoriented, at least in sociological terms. Since our author's dire warnings echo the warnings by the Lord (Matt 12:31-32), Paul (1 Cor 10, 1 Tim 1:20) and John (1 Jn 5:16-17) and yet equally emphasize the completeness of the salvation for which we are redeemed, the focus of interpretation should be on how they contribute to orienting the migrant and not whether they are exaggerations by the author.

3.1.2 *Don't depart from the living God, but enter His rest (Heb 3-4)*

The influence of Numbers on the author of Hebrews is most obvious in Hebrews 3-4. In Hebrews 3:1-6, he employs an exposition on God's witness about the faithfulness of Moses "in all My House" (Num 12:1-8)¹⁰ to underline the superiority of Jesus in this sphere. He then follows it with an exhortation in which he expounds on Psalm 95's commentary on the failure of the Exodus generation to enter God's Rest as in Numbers 13-14. The nature of our author's approach here, in which he does not directly cite the main text on which he depends for his argument but rather alludes to it, demonstrates how allusions and intertextual echoes (see Hays 1989:29-32) are vital clues to the root metaphor controlling the migration theme of Hebrews.

As with the first exhortation, the separation phase of this group of believers is described in brief but dramatic terms. He calls the believers "holy brothers, called to be partakers of the heavenly calling" (Heb 3:1). This way of identifying the believers demonstrates a number of themes that typify their separation. They are holy; that is, they have been set apart from the world unto God. The description looks back to the portrayal of believers in Hebrews 2 as people who have been freed from slavery and sanctified by the Son who declares God's name to them so they praise Him in the assembly (Heb 2:10-15). Secondly the group's identity is one of collegiality, kinship and partnership together in God's service—they had *communitas*. Thirdly they have been called from and towards heaven. They are indeed children who are being brought to glory (Heb 2:10). The word "calling" is used throughout the New Testament to describe the Christian way of life;¹¹ it denotes having to tread a specific direction and lifestyle that is heavenward. Fourthly, the description echoes an Old Testament idiom for the migration of Israel from Egypt (Exod 4:22-23). God speaks for example of how He "called My son out of Egypt" (Hos 11:1). In describing the believers therefore as brothers who have been called towards heaven, the author of Hebrews depicts their

¹⁰ Allusions to the oracles to Eli in 1 Sam 2:35 and to Nathan in 1 Chron 7:14 may also have contributed to the author's discussion here.

¹¹ Rom 11:29, 1 Cor 1:26, 7:20, Eph 1:18, 4:4, Phil 3:14, 2 Thes 1:11, 2 Tim 1:9, & 2 Pet 1:10.

separation in terms that alludes to the redemption of Israel from Egypt (Heb 3:16). Unlike Israel, however, the destination of their journey is heaven, of which Canaan is figurative.

Hebrews 3-4 portrays the nature of the dangers that believers face in their condition of liminality as they travel to their heavenly destination. This may be summarised using Hebrews 3:12. In the liminal phase of the journey, carelessness leads to unbelief, which then leads to disobedience and departure from the living God. In addition to careful attention to God's Word, continuous fellowship, effective *communitas*, is required for orientation (Heb 3:13). The Exodus generation did not do that but were rather full of strife and dissention and hence became hardened in their attitude towards God. Those who keep their focus on God's Word will know God's direction and not stray from His ways (Heb 3:10). God's "ways" (Heb 3:10) is an expression that depicts both His powerful and gracious manner of dealing with His people and the instructions that He lays before them to follow (Deut 26:17, Ex 33:13). Underlying this metaphor is the imagery of a widely open wilderness, with several confusing paths, only one of which is God's Way. Thus He sent His angel to guide and guard Israel, "to keep you in the way" (Exod 23:20), if they would only pay attention to Him. According to Coats therefore, "the uniting motif in the wilderness theme is God's leadership" (1972:292). Knowing God's ways, in the context of the wilderness motif of Psalm 95 therefore evokes the imagery of the pillar of cloud and fire together with the tabernacle that led God's people (Num 14:14; see Harrelson 1959:27). The Exodus generation did not pay heed to Him but this must not be repeated with the Hebrews congregation.¹² From the narratives of the wilderness wanderings of Israel in the Pentateuch, their unbelief consisted of a continual questioning of God's love and intentions for His people (Exod 17:1-7), lack of will to believe God's promises of giving them the Land (Num 13-14) and repeated rejection of the authority of God through His servant Moses (Deut 1). On all counts, unbelief is directly related to the dismissal of the Word of God and results in

¹² Prov 1-9 similarly reflect this emphasis on God's Ways as a correct direction in the liminal phase. Equally, described the first Christians as followers of "the Way" (Acts 9:2, 19:9, 23, 24:14, 22).

the hardening of the heart. It is, in Lane's words, "a deliberate act of rejection" (1991:86).

The destination of the Christian's migration in Hebrews 3-4 is God's Rest. Its exposition in Hebrews 3-4 is complex and the text indicates several shades of its meaning. The author uses three Greek words to express the same concept: *κατάπαυσίν* (Heb 3:11, 18, 4:1, 3, 5 10, 11), *κατέπαυσεν* (Heb 4:4, 8) and *σαββατισμός* (Heb 4:10). In the Old Testament, it was a term used for the land of Canaan as the place of Israel's rest from their enemies (Deut 3:20, 12:10), as the place where the Ark of the Covenant resides, that is, the Holy of Holies (Ps 132:8, 13-14) and for the Sabbath day celebrations (Exod 35:2). The author of Hebrews combines all three in the exposition of Rest in Hebrews 4 (see Toussaint 1982:71). The crux question is whether the promised rest is a future eschatological condition that is only part of life in heaven, or the summary of the whole condition of heaven or a spiritual experience which though extending into the future heaven, may be foretasted in this life (see Bruce 1990:77-79, Oberholtzer 1985:185-196, Isaacs 2002:63).

Being the condition of intimate spiritual communion in God's presence, Rest in its fullness is life in heaven as it is now and in the world to come. But a foretaste of it is experienced in this life by faith (Heb 3:16-19). In exhorting the believers to exercise their faith "today", Hebrews 3-4 teaches that assurance and foretaste of God's Rest is now available (Heb 4:3). Just as the Holy of Holies is symbolic of God's throne-room (Heb 4:14-16), it is also symbolic of His Rest (Ps 132:8, 13-14). And just as even now, believers have the confidence to enter this throne-room for help in time of need, they may also now experience the foretaste of the Rest that God gives from there. The full nature of God's Sabbath's Rest will certainly only be experienced in the future when all the people of God, "together with us", are made perfect (Heb 11:40). In eschatological terms, Rest is in the future, but in terms of soteriology, it represents realised salvation, a taste of what is in the future. The Exodus generation of Numbers did not enter an aspect of God's Rest (Canaan); the Hebrews congregation must "fear lest any of you should seem to come short of it" (Heb 4:1). Fear, godly fear, once again plays a focussing orienting role in bolstering faith.

3.1.3 Don't delay your growth, but go on to perfection (Heb 5:11-6:20)

In the third exhortation, our author decries the lack of spiritual progress in the congregation, expresses his deep anxiety that this made them prone to fall away, warns them of the dire consequences of such a result, conveys his confidence that they will persevere and not fall away and encourages them to imitate the faith of God's people who have in the past relied on the sure and unfailing promises of God to persevere to the end. Unlike the other exhortations, no explicit reference to an Old Testament example is made, even though attention to the Scriptural allusions and echoes will direct us again to the Exodus generation. While suggestions on the Old Testament background have ranged from Psalm 110 (France 1996:245-276), Deuteronomy 11 (Attridge 1989:169) and no Old Testament background (Ellingworth 1993:42), we agree with Gleason (1998:62-91) and Mathewson (1999:209-225) that the migration of Israel and the whole wilderness motif, particularly in Numbers 11-14 & Nehemiah 9 (in addition to Deut 11), provide the background to this exhortation.

Two metaphors are used to express the separation phase of the believer's journey in this passage: the metaphors of "birth" and of "flight". At the time the author wrote the homily, he felt the believers were not maturing (Heb 5:13-14). Their redemption was regarded as new birth and our author expresses his disappointment that they remained infants after some period of time. In Hebrews 6:18, the author describes believers as people who "have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope" anchored in the Holy of Holies. The author had earlier noted how salvation is an escape from severe punishment (Heb 2:2-3); and how before they were redeemed, believers were held as slaves to the fear of death by the devil (Heb 2:15). Here in Hebrews 6:18 "flight" conveys both notions: flight from severe danger and into a place of refuge. Not surprisingly, both metaphors of birth and flight were associated with the deliverance of Israel from Egypt (Exod 3:8). Though the primary allusion in Hebrews 6:18 is the altar in the priestly courtyard as the place of refuge (1 Kings 1:50, 2:28), the depiction of the redemption of the Hebrews congregation also echoes the flight of Israel from Egypt (Exod 14:5) for refuge. In addition, the depiction of the previous experience of salvation of the Hebrews congregation in Hebrews 6:4-5 alludes to the life of redeemed Israel in the wilderness. Salvation as spiritual enlightenment not only portrays a

movement from ignorance to the knowledge of the truth (Heb 10:26), but also alludes to the pillar that gave Israel light on their journey (Exod 13:20-22, Num 14: 14 & Neh 9:12, 9). Sharing in the Holy Spirit also alludes to the experience in the wilderness where, according to Nehemiah 9:20, God “gave [His] good Spirit to teach them”. Numbers 11:25 similarly describes the corporate ecstatic experience of God’s Spirit in the wilderness. The Word of God as a “heavenly gift” to be tasted is an allusion to the manna by which God fed His people in the wilderness (Exod 16, Num 11:7-9, Deut 8:3, 16, Neh 9:15). Thus the language that influences our author’s depiction of the experience of salvation is largely drawn from the wilderness experience of the Exodus generation.

Disorientation and retrogression characterised the liminal phase of the congregation. They had become “dull of hearing”. Hearing and understanding God’s Word, as in the previous exhortations, is necessary for orientation and progress through faith. On the other hand maturing believers are distinguished by their ability to teach others because they have understood it (Heb 5:12) and are able to apply it to make judgments between what is right from wrong (Heb 5:14). The role of the knowledge of God’s Word in maturing Christians cannot be overemphasised. As stated by Fortosis, “Though spiritual development is often reflected in behaviour, its roots and rationale begin in the mind and emotion” (1992:283).

To many readers, what is unnerving about this passage is the relationship the author saw between lack of spiritual growth and possible apostasy. He points out that if the believer failed to leave the elementary issues of the faith and move on to perfection, then the end result could be a wavering faith that leads to falling away. Fear of falling away should therefore concentrate the mind and orientate and spur believers on to perfection. The author used the most intense apocalyptic language of warning to instill this fear (see McKnight 1992:26) but, as noted by Nongbri, the actual words of apocalyptic language are not as important as “the specific kind of fear” (2003:265) that they are designed to instill (for discussion on the various views on “impossibility”, see Koester 2001:311-335). The author was convinced that destruction was not the lot of his audience, however, for the faithfulness of God, as well as theirs, was at stake in the matter. The harsh warning, thankfully, serves a crucial purpose;

to spur and orientate the migrant from immature dependence and go on to perfection.

Perfection therefore is the destination of the migration as expounded in this exhortation. The term perfection is used in Hebrews in a complex manner since four forms of the Greek word τελειότητα are used by our author on sixteen occasions, three of which are directly applicable to the perfection of Jesus (Heb 2:10, 5:8-9 and 7:28). The word is used in Hebrews in such a way that each occurrence has more than one semantic meaning. Ellingworth has noted that in Hebrews the meaning of perfection could span from the telic (i.e., to bring something to its goal or completion), to the cultic (i.e., qualify for participation in worship), the ethical (i.e., remove imperfections), the organic (i.e., make mature) and the temporal (make complete) (1993:162). In Hebrews 11:40, for example, perfection of all believers occurs in the future eschatological age, whereas in Hebrews 9:9-14 Jesus has attained cultic perfection already for us in the Holy of Holies by cleansing our consciences from dead works. Jesus was Himself made perfect (Heb 2:10) through His death in order to make us perfect so we may draw near to God (Heb 7:19). An aspect of perfection is therefore obtainable and experienced by believers now but its fullness lies in the future. Thus Bruce defines perfection as “unimpeded access to God and unbroken communion with Him” (1990:80), whereas Silva suggests an additional eschatological dimension (1976: 60-71). Lindars notes that perfection in the end is “the completion of God’s Plan” (1991:44-45), the summation of the whole intention of God for humanity. Like salvation in Hebrews 2 and rest in Hebrews 4, perfection is also God’s perfection. Evidently, when applied to Jesus, perfection has no ethical component, but expresses His death that made Him complete as our Saviour so that He became the “Perfector of our Salvation” (Heb 12:2); He is the one who leads us to complete the process of our salvation.

With this background in mind, it is clearly insufficient for τελειότητα in Hebrews 6:1 to be simply translated as “maturity” (e.g., NIV). What our author had in mind is not only a mature stage in the Christian life when the person is able to teach and discern good from evil (Heb 5:12-14), but also one reaching forward to God’s goal of completion of the journey of migration that is marked out for us, characterised by an unbroken fellowship with God in His eternal presence. Perfection starts now and continues to end in the future

eschatological age. This is why, to our author, not leaving the elementary issues to go on to perfection will certainly result in “falling away”. Going on to perfection, like going on to Salvation and Rest, requires faith and faithfulness for orientation. Though our author mentions faith on several occasions it is in the next exhortation that he discusses it.

3.1.4 Don't despair but persevere to inherit the promise (Heb 10:19-13:17)

The final section of Hebrews is a long cyclical exhortation. Its tone is generally more positive than the previous three, even though it contains two sub-sections of warnings that are designed to concentrate the minds and efforts of the believers to persevere towards the goal of their migration to the Promise. Though made up of the usual five components (table 1), these are in a different format.

While several different citations of the Old Testament are made, there are sufficient reasons to suggest that the motif of the wilderness journey to the Promised Land continues to echo in the background of this long exhortation. The warning against the rejection of God's Word in Hebrews 10:26-31 is influenced by the Mosaic Law against deliberate or willful sin promulgated in Leviticus 4-5, Numbers 9 & 15 and the reference to punishment by fire to Deuteronomy 4:24, 17:2-6 & 32:35-36. The encouragement in Hebrews 10:32-39 to live by faith is influenced by the quotation from Habakkuk 2:3-4 but the rest of the exhortation from Hebrews 11-13 have the migration theme in the background. Rhee's examination of the chiasmic structure of Hebrews 11 (1998: 327-345) concluded that Heb 11:13-16 holds the clue to understanding the key message of that encomium. To put it simply, therefore, faith is basically living the Christian life as if one is a diasporic migrant in a liminal wilderness state while orientated towards the inheritance of the Promise.

The athletic imagery in Hebrews 12:1-3 to run the Christian race with patience also has in its background, the wilderness journey motif through its relationship with Isaiah 35. Similarly, the encouragement to persevere in suffering in Hebrews 12:4-11 is influenced by the paranaetic instructions of Proverbs 3-4 which in itself is based on a journey motif. The instruction not to despise the Lord's discipline (Prov 3:11; cf. Heb 12:5) is set in the context of

allowing God to “make your paths straight” (Prov 3:6; See Habel 1972:131-133). The exhortation to endure hardship in Hebrews 12:4-11 therefore plays the same role as it does in Proverbs 3, namely, to encourage the believer not to despair of God’s discipline as He directs him or her on the way to inherit the Promise. In addition, some of the imageries in the rest of the epistle from Hebrews 12:12-13:17 echo several parts of Isaiah’s vision of the redeemed people in Isaiah 35 which is also placed in a wilderness journey setting. The exhortation to “strengthen your feeble arms” in Hebrews 12:12-13, for example, not only quotes Proverbs 4:26 but also Isaiah 35:3 and the exhortation to “live in peace with all men” in Hebrews 12:14 echoes Proverbs 4:25-27 and Isaiah 35:5 & 8. Though the reference to arrival at Mount Zion as the migrant’s destination instead of Sinai in Hebrews 12:18-24 is clearly our author’s own construction, it has strong echoes of Isaiah 35:4 & 10. Thus in addition to Proverbs 3-4, Isaiah 35 influences our author’s choices of themes and words in Hebrews 12.

Within the concluding paranaesis of Hebrews 13:1-17 is another reference to the migrant camp of the people of God in Hebrews 13:9-14. Believers are depicted as priests who minister with Christ in the priestly courtyard of the camp-tabernacle complex. And just as Jesus suffered “outside the city gate”, we are also exhorted to “go to him outside the camp” (Heb 13:13). Thompson has suggested that in addition to the burning of the carcasses of sacrificial animals outside of the camp, there is an element of Moses pitching his tent outside the camp to avoid defilement (Exod 33:7) in this passage. He proposes therefore that “outside the camp” means “outside the earthly sphere ... to give up earthly securities (11:8) and to accept the lifestyle of the pilgrim people” (1978:53-63). Like all the major points made by our author throughout the exhortations, therefore, the migration of Israel from Egypt towards the Promised Land is the background narrative, which served as the master parable, controlling and directing his message. Hebrews 10-13 may therefore be conveniently studied using the phases of separation, liminality and entry into the destination as guide.

The separation phase of the believer’s migration in Hebrews 10-13 is described as a movement from falsehood to truth (Heb 10:26) and from

darkness into light (Heb 10:32).¹³ For the believer, ignorance (Lev 4-5, Num 15) is inexcusable. Joshua also depicted life in Egypt as one of falsehood and idol worship and so challenged his people to give that life up and follow Yahweh (Josh 24:14).

The way of life of the believer is described by our author as a “new and living way” and is characterised by a diasporic migrant lifestyle requiring an effective *communitas*, faith, faithfulness and perseverance to reach the destination. This peculiar diasporic sense of place orientates the Christian psychologically, socially and culturally so that the Christian has a completely different identity—s/he belongs to “a better country—a heavenly one”. As a migrant, the Christian is therefore not actually intending to return to his or her origins (Heb 11:15). Instead s/he should have an “imaginative geography” of a heavenly homeland—long for a better country, the heavenly Jerusalem, a city with foundations whose architect and builder is God (Heb 11:10). Unlike Said’s description, this “imaginative geography” is not one of “fantasy and the play of desire” (1995:55), but is a hope that is anchored in the certain and unchangeable Promise of God (Heb 6:18).

The journey of migration through the wilderness holds a number of dangers that threaten to trip the Christian. Hebrews 10-13 highlights several of these. There is the danger of deliberate or willful sin (Heb 10:26-30), of withdrawing or shrinking back (Heb 10:38-39), of hardships and persecutions (Heb 11: 32-38), of the weight and sin that would weigh the migrant down into distraction and destruction (Heb 12:1-2), of weariness and faint heartedness, of fatigue, despair and giving up under suffering (Heb 12:3-13) and of internal spiritual decay and defilement that is caused by bitterness towards God and His people (Heb 12:14-17). Some dangers are of the believer’s own making; others are not, but are part of the normal experience of spiritual growth and discipleship (Heb 12:4-11). All of them however have the strong potential to cause disorientation and apostasy. Our author was in no doubt that the consequences

¹³ Paul describes salvation in similar terms in 1 Timothy 2:4 & 2 Timothy 3:7. Salvation sharply contrasts with the ignorance of living in sin (Acts 17:30, 1 Cor 15:34, Eph 4:18, 1 Pet 1:14 & 2:15) and the knowledge of the truth comes through the experience of God’s Word and His Holy Spirit who is the Spirit of truth (John 14:17, 15:26, 16:13, 1 Jn 4:6, 5:6).

of apostasy are horrifying: it is one of experiencing God's fiery judgment (Heb 10:27), destruction (Heb 10:39) and loss of His blessings (Heb 12:17). He therefore cites positive examples of godly fear (Noah, Heb 11:7; cf. Heb 12:28-29), of faithfulness in perseverance (Jesus, Heb 12:1-3) and of faith (Heb 11) that help to maintain focus and orientation. These fellow migrants join the larger *communitas* of believers, both contemporary (Heb 10:25) and past (Heb 11:40), to serve as "a great cloud of witnesses" encouraging the migrant on to persevere to the end (Heb 12:1-2).

The term "faith" occurs some thirty two times in this epistle, and even though two thirds of these are in the special chapter eleven that is devoted to the subject, the rest are scattered throughout the epistle. Thus our author clearly saw faith and faithfulness as playing a very crucial part in the migrant's journey to the Promise. To him, faith is everything the migrant does to keep his/her orientation. In Bultmann's words, the earliest Christian "understanding of faith was the relationship people have with God. Faith can be belief, obedience or trust. It can be future-oriented as a hope for something yet to come" (1968:205-208). Faith in Hebrews is not just one single act of belief but a continuous attitude required for the separation throughout the journey and entry into the Promise. It has an immediate certainty to it, which is boldness (Heb 4:16) assurance (Heb 4:2, 6:11, 10:22) and confidence (Heb 10:23, 35); it is a faith that immediately rises up to our great High Priest in heaven's throne-room and gets His response. This faith has Christ as its object (Heb 2:17-18, 4:14-16; see Hamm 1990:270-291 and Rhee 2000:83-96). On the other hand, Hebrews presents the other aspect of faith as unremitting trust, patience, perseverance and endurance throughout the liminal journey while holding firm to the hope and promise. This faith, or better put, faithfulness is constancy, loyalty and fidelity (Heb 3:6). It is therefore a horizontal and temporal faith that holds on to enter into the Promise, sees it afar off but lives now in view of it; benefits from it in some respects but waits and endures and strives and perseveres to inherit it at the end. This type of faith is therefore hard work (Heb 6:12) and continuously needs reinforcing (Heb 4:2-3). It also has Christ as its object all right, for according to our author, Moses suffered "disgrace for the sake of Christ" (Heb 11:26); but much more than that, Christ is the exemplar, enabler and perfecter of this aspect of faith (Heb 12:2). Barrett was right: "there is only one faith in Hebrews, with both spatial and

temporal categories, vertical and at the same time horizontal with both heaven/earth dualism and already/not yet interpretation” (1954:381-382). The Epistle to the Hebrews therefore presents the widest possible spectrum of understanding of faith in the New Testament.

Hope relates to faith in Hebrews through a very interesting orientational scheme. In this scheme (Heb 11:1), “hope is the goal and faith is a means toward its full realization” (MacRae 1978:192). Hope, according to Hebrews, is anchored behind the veil (Heb 6:19) and faith is the way of life within the liminal priestly courtyard that is aiming forward to this hope. Because Christ’s Body, which is the veil, has been torn to make a new and living way (Heb 10:20), we can now look towards hope. This is why the metaphor of “seeing” or “looking for” is so stressed by the author of Hebrews (e.g. Heb 9:28, 11:10, 13, 26, 12:2). In his definition in Hebrews 11:1, faith is “the certainty of what is not seen” (NIV); in other words, and to borrow another metaphor, faith is an orienting telescope that makes the unseen but heard Promise visible to the migrant. Our author sets the tone with regard to the role of this “vision” in relation to faith in Hebrews 2:8-9: “at present we do not see everything subject to him. But we see Jesus....” What we do not yet see is the fulfillment of the full potential of humanity, namely, his/her perfection, full salvation, enjoyment of God’s Rest, or inheriting the Promise (see Attridge 1989:310). On the other hand, what we do see by the telescope of faith is the Lord Jesus exalted on God’s right hand as our eternal and great High Priest; it is He the “apostle and High Priest of our confession” whom we should “consider” (Heb 3:1) and it is on Him, “the pioneer and perfecter of our faith” that we should “fix” our eyes (Heb 12:2) as we journey to the Promise in faith, and look for His second coming (Heb 9:28). Because we can, through faith, see Jesus exalted on high in the Holy of Holies, we will remain oriented and be certain that all His promises will be fulfilled.

The Promise is therefore the destination of the migrant’s journey in the last exhortation. Like salvation, rest and perfection, the promise is again a complex concept in Hebrews, which has several facets. It may generally be experienced in part in this world, though its fullness will only be inherited in the future world. To start with, our author uses the singular “*a* promise” (Heb 4:1, 6:3) or “*the* promise” (Heb 6:15, 10:36, 11: 39) interchangeably with the plural “promises” (Heb 6:12, 7:6, 8:6, 11:13, 17, 33) in a fashion that suggests there

is no considerable difference between them. The Promise in Hebrews is an umbrella term that brings together all the promises of God for humanity. It is, as always, God's promise and consists of the promise of eternal salvation that believers will inherit (Heb 1:14, 9:28), the promise of the "world to come" in which humanity will fulfill its full potential (Heb 2:5), the promise of sharing in God's Sabbath Rest (Heb 4:1), the promise of perfection for all believers (Heb 11:39-40), the promise of a better resurrection (Heb 11:35), the promise of righteousness that comes by faith (Heb 11:7), the promise of a better country (Heb 11:16) and the promise of entering the heavenly Jerusalem (Heb 12:22). It is also the promise of a kingdom that cannot be shaken (Heb 12:28), the promise of "an enduring substance" (Heb 10:22), an eternal city that endures (Heb 13:14) and whose architect and builder is God (Heb 11:10). The Promise is hence the sum total of all that God has promised the Christian as a migrant on the way to the inheritance (see Koester 2001:268 and Lindars 1991:112). It is in effect the "pull-factor" of the Christian's migration.

It is therefore demonstrated that the migration of the camp of Israel from Egypt to the Promised Land served as a root metaphor for the exhortations of the epistle to the Hebrews. Our author has interpreted the experiences of the migrant camp of Israel through a Christ tinted lens to produce a very effective sermon aimed at addressing the spiritual liminality of his congregation.

4. Hebrews, Numbers and Postmodern Discipleship

If this interpretation is correct, two questions immediately need answering. First of all, if his intention was to match the Old Testament narrative of the wilderness experience of Israel, why does the author adopt a literary style that is not linear but circular? And secondly, if the root metaphor of migrating camp of God's people unites the epistle, how does that influence our application of Hebrews?

In answer to the first question, we propose that the author aimed to match not only the theology but also the circular literary style of the Book of Numbers. As established, the dangers that confronted the Hebrews congregation, though different from those of the Exodus generation, were of similar spiritual and sociological nature. The author of Hebrews evidently saw strong parallels

between his congregation and those in Numbers and, therefore, employed the correspondences to pen a sermon that would deal with such an ominous spiritual disaster. Ashley has noted the preponderance of the orientation/disorientation theme in Numbers and suggested that the book may be structured into three parts (1993:8): orientation (Num 1-10), disorientation (Num 11-21) and new orientation (Num 22-36). This parallels the dominance of the same theme in Hebrews. Harrelson has also established that the major theme of Numbers is “Yahweh’s guidance and testing of Israel in the Wilderness” (1959:27). This guidance theme fits very well with the emphases on orientation in both Numbers and Hebrews. God provided His Word, the angelic presence, the pillar of fire and cloud and His constant Presence in the tabernacle to guide and lead Israel to the Promised Land. Similarly, the author of Hebrews highlights the primary role of the Word of God in guiding and orienting the faith of the people of God on their way to the Promise. The expositions of Hebrews are, on the other hand, focused on the tabernacle and teach the doctrine of the accessibility of God’s presence provided through Christ to enable the orientation of the migrant believer. The theme of the fulfillment of God’s Promise is another parallel between the two books as is the journey motif. MaCrae has summed up this journey motif of Numbers by noting, “No other book of the OT contains so much that is exactly parallel to the pilgrim journey of the Christian in the present age” (1954:52). It is right to say also that no other book in the New Testament presents the Christian experience as a movement, pilgrimage or, more appropriately, migration to the Promise in the way that the epistle to the Hebrews does. These correspondences between Numbers and Hebrews are unlikely to have been mere coincidences.

Like Hebrews, Numbers is structured in such a way that narratives of rebellion and disorientation on the part of the Israelite congregation alternate with laws, many of which are of cultic and ritual nature designed to orientate God’s people. This superficially haphazard nature of the structure of Numbers earned the book an unfortunate reputation, but the alternating narrative/laws structure is not just a way of producing a polyphony (Leveen 2002:201-220) that compares idealism (the six laws) with real human experience (the seven narratives), but more than that reflects the theology of the guidance and the presence of God among His redeemed migrant people. Using indexes of

spatiality and spatial orientation in the text, Douglas has established that Numbers is made up of a complex chiasmic concentric ring structure, “formed of alternating stories and laws set in parallel with each other, twelve in all” (2004:xxiii). This structure reflects the spatial structure of the camp arranged around the tabernacle as elaborately described in Numbers 1-10. The chiasmic structure has also been noted by Milgrom, who argues: “The main structural device, to judge by its attestation in nearly every chapter of Numbers, is chiasm and introversion” (1990:xxii). Such a statement would have been equally true were it to be made of Hebrews, for the concentric chiasmic structure of the epistle which was proposed by Vanhoye (1963) has similar though less complex features.

Clearly, the author of Hebrews has greatly transformed the theology of Numbers through his reading using the death, resurrection, ascension and exaltation of Jesus as his interpretive key. The differences between Numbers and Hebrews are many. The congregation of Hebrews had not yet apostasised as the Exodus generation did. The Exodus generation had Moses and Aaron as their leaders, whereas the Hebrews congregation had Jesus as their Apostle and High Priest. The tabernacle and Ark of the Covenant in Numbers were physical objects that were symbolic of the true tabernacle of heaven where Christ is seated on the right hand of God Almighty. The new covenant that was inaugurated by Him is far superior to the “faulty” and “vanishing” old covenant in Numbers. The Hebrews congregation was therefore in a better position than the Numbers congregation to enter the promised salvation, rest, perfection and promise. Nevertheless, the experiences of the Exodus generation were “examples” (1 Cor 10:6; cf. Heb 4:2) for the Hebrews congregation, and for us.

Read this way, Hebrews demonstrates itself to be a potent epistle for spiritual formation and discipleship, especially for the postmodern “liminal” mentality. Migration, pilgrimage, quests, nomadism, multiple interpretations, hybridity, indeterminacy and diaspora are familiar concepts that are associated with the postmodern generation. In this respect, Hebrews is thoroughly postmodern and an approach to the epistle that employs these ideas as methodological models is likely to be beneficial. In a recent sociological examination of anthropological theories of religion, Tweed (2002 and 2006) has demonstrated that the most stimulating religious experiences are best expressed in terms of

movement and orientation. He has therefore argued that “religions orient itinerant individuals and groups in time and space as they map the natural and social terrain, mark the always shifting horizon, and offer the means to cross over” (Tweed 2002:262). He further argues that what religion does is to enable its adherents to be oriented “in the body, the home, the homeland and the cosmos” (Tweed 2006:101). If he is right, then our approach, employing spatiality, movement, orientation and migration as interpretative tools in Hebrews, will be much useful for Christian discipleship and spiritual formation.

5. Conclusion

The Hebrews congregation was in a state of liminality which threatened to disorientate them and shift them from their focus on Christ. The author rightly saw a typological correspondence between his congregation and the migrating camp of Israel in the wilderness. Through his Christological reading of the Old Testament, he constructed a sermon, which represents the Christian as a migrant on the way to the Promise. Faith, faithfulness, focus on God’s Word and hope enables the migrant to maintain his or her orientation. In addition the fellowship of believers, past and present, provide a much needed *communitas* during the liminal stage. During the journey to salvation, Divine rest, perfection and the promise, the migrant has continual access to the Holy of Holies where the superior and exalted Christ ministers to provide grace, mercy and help. This in effect is the summary of Hebrews.

Notwithstanding the epistle’s popularity as a goldmine for various proof texts, its systematic exposition continues to be neglected in many of today’s pulpits. As one of the most important documents in the Bible, not the least because of the interpretive bridge it provides between the two testaments, this situation is regrettable. A uniting theme as the one proposed may contribute in ameliorating this shortfall.

Works Cited

- Achtemeier PJ 1978. And he followed Him: miracles and discipleship in Mark 10:46-52. *Semeia* 11:115-145.
- Ashley TR 1993. *The Book of Numbers*. NICOT. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Asumang A and Domeris WR 2006. Ministering in the tabernacle: spatiality and the Christology of Hebrews. *Conspectus* 1:1-26.
- Attridge H 1989. *The epistle to the Hebrews*. Philadelphia: Fortress.
- _____ 1990. Paranaesis in a homily (logos parakleseos): the possible location of, and socialization in, the “Epistle to the Hebrews”. *Semeia* 50:211-226.
- Barcelona A 2003. Introduction: cognitive theory of metaphor and metonymy. In A Barcelone (ed), *Metaphor and metonymy at the crossroads: a cognitive perspective*. Berlin: Mouton.
- Barrett CK 1956. The eschatology of the Epistle to the Hebrews, 363-393. In WD Davies and D Daube (eds), *The Background of the New Testament and its Eschatology*. Cambridge University Press.
- Baumann M 2000. Diaspora: genealogies of semantics and transcultural comparison. *Numen* 47:313-337.
- Bruce FF 1990. *The epistle to the Hebrews* (rev ed). NICNT. Eerdmans.
- Bultmann R 1968. Rudolf Bultmann and Artur Weiser, $\pi\sigma\tau\epsilon\upsilon\omega$ TDNT vol 1, ed. Gerhard Friedrich (trans. Geoffrey Bromiley, Grand Rapids; Wm. B. Eerdmans)
- Coats GW 1972. Exposition of the wilderness traditions. *Vetus Testamentum* 22:288-295.
- Cohen R 1997. *Global diasporas: an introduction*. UCL Press.
- Davidson AB 1882. *The epistle to the Hebrews*. T & T Clark.
- DeSilva DA 2000. *Perseverance in gratitude: a socio-rhetorical commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*. Eerdmans.
- Douglas M 2002. *Purity and danger: an analysis of concept of pollution and taboo*. Routledge Classics.
- _____ 2004. *In the wilderness: the doctrine of defilement in the Book of Numbers*. Oxford University Press
- Dozeman T 1998. The wilderness and salvation history in the Hagar story. *JBL* 117:23-43.
- Elliot J 1981. *A home for the homeless: a sociological exegesis of 1 Peter: its situation and strategy*. Fortress.
- _____ 2000. *1 Peter: a new translation with introduction and commentary*. Doubleday.
- Fortosis A 1992. A developmental model for stages of growth in Christian formation. *Religious Education* 87:283-298.
- France RT 1996. The writer of Hebrews as a Biblical expositor. *Tyndale Bulletin* 47:245-276.
- Funk RW 1959. The wilderness. *JBL* 78:206-214
- Gibson JB 1994. Jesus’ wilderness temptation according to Mark. *JSNT* 53:3-34.
- Gleason RC 1998 The Old Testament background of the warning in Hebrews 6:4-8. *BSac* 1998:62-91.

- Gray P 2003. *Godly fear: the epistle to the Hebrews and Greco-Roman critiques of superstition*. Brill.
- Guthrie G 1998. *The structure of Hebrews: a text linguistic analysis*. Baker.
- Habel N 1972. The symbolism of wisdom in Proverbs 1-9. *Interpretation* 26:131-133.
- Hamm D 1990. Faith in the Epistle to the Hebrews: the Jesus factor. *CBQ* 52:270-291.
- Harrelson W 1959. Guidance in the wilderness: the theology of the book of Numbers, *Interpretation* 13:24-36.
- Hays RB 1989 *Echoes of Scripture in the letters of Paul*. Yale University Press.
- Hughes PE 1977. A commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews. Eerdmans.
- Isaacs ME 1992. *Sacred space: an approach to the theology of the epistle to the Hebrews*. JSNTS 73. JSOT Press.
- Johnsson WG 1978. The pilgrimage motif in the Book of Hebrews. *JBL* 97: 239-251.
- Johnston RJ, Gregory D, Pratt G & Watts M 2000. *The dictionary of human geography*. Blackwell.
- Koester CR 2002 Hebrews, rhetoric and the future of humanity. *CBQ* 64:103-123.
- Ladd GE 1974 *A Theology of the New Testament* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans
- Lakoff G and Johnson M 2003. *Metaphors we live by* (2nd ed). University of Chicago Press.
- Lane W 1991. *Hebrews 1-8*. WBC 47a. Thomas Nelson.
- Lee E 1966. A theory of migration. *Demography* 3:47-57.
- Leveen AB 2002 Variations on a theme: differing conceptions of memory in the Book of Numbers. *JSOT* 27:201-221.
- Lindars B 1991. *The theology of the letter to the Hebrews*. Cambridge University Press.
- MaCrae A 1954 The book called "Numbers". *BSac* 111:47-53.
- MacRae GW 1978. Heavenly temple and eschatology in the letter to the Hebrews. *Semeia* 21:179-199.
- Mathewson D 1999 Reading Heb 6:4-6 in light of the Old Testament. *WTJ* 61:209-225.
- McKnight S 1992 The warning passages of Hebrews: a formal analysis and theological conclusions. *TrinJ* 13:21-59.
- McVann M 1991 Baptism, miracles and boundary jumping in Mark. *BTB* 21:151-157.
- Meeks W 1983. *The first urban Christians: the social world of the apostle Paul*. Yale University Press.
- Milgrom J 1990. *Numbers*. The JPS Torah commentary. The Jewish Publication Society.
- Moule CFD 1950. Sanctuary and sacrifice in the church of the New Testament. *JTS* 1:29-41.
- Mouton E 1997 The transformative potential of Ephesians in a situation of transition. *Semeia* 78:121-143.
- Nongbri B 2003. A touch of condemnation in a word of exhortation: apocalyptic language and Greco-Roman rhetoric in Hebrews 6:4-12. *Novum Testamentum* 45:265-279.
- Oberholtzer TK 1985. The kingdom rest in Hebrews 3:1-4:13. *BSac* 145:185-196.
- Oropeza BJ 1999. Apostasy in the wilderness: Paul's message to the Corinthians in a state of eschatological liminality. *JSNT* 75:69-86.
- Osborne G 1975. *Soteriology in the Epistle to the Hebrews*. In CH Pinnock (ed), *Grace unlimited*. Bethany House.

- Partin HB 1967. *The Muslim pilgrimage: journey to the centre*. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago.
- Rengstorf KH 76. σημειῶν. In G Kittel, GW Bromiley & G Friedrich (eds), *The theological dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 7:200-261. Eerdmans.
- Rhee V 1998. Chiasm and the concept of faith in Hebrews 11. *BSac* 155:327-345.
- Said E 1978 *Orientalism*. Penguin.
- _____ 1995 *Orientalism: western conceptions of the orient*. Penguin.
- Saydon PP 1961. The master idea of the Epistle to the Hebrews. *Melita Theologica* 13:19-26.
- Silva M 1976 Perfection and eschatology in Hebrews. *WTJ* 39:60-71.
- Spicq C 1958-1959. L'Épître aux Hébreux: Apollos, Jean-Baptiste, les Hélienistes et Qumran. *RevQ* 1:365-390.
- Swetnam J 1974. Form and content in Hebrews 7-13. *Biblica* 55:333-348.
- Synge FC 1959. *Hebrews and the Scriptures*. SPCK
- Taylor M 1990. *Remembering esperanza: a cultural-political theory of North American praxis*. Orbis.
- Thompson J 1978. Outside the camp: a study of Hebrews 13:9-14. *CBQ* 40:53-63.
- Toussaint S 1982. The eschatology of the warning passages in the Book of Hebrews. *GTC* 3: 67-80.
- Turner V 1974. Margins, poverty. In *Dramas, fields, and metaphors: symbolic action in human society*. Cornell University Press.
- _____ 1968 *Myth and symbol*. In D Sills (ed), *The international encyclopaedia of the social sciences*, 576-582. Macmillan & the Free Press.
- Tweed T 2002 On moving across: translocative religion and the interpreter's position. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 70:253-277.
- _____ 2006. *Crossing and dwelling: a theory of religion*. Harvard University Press.
- Van Gennep A 1960. *Rites of passage*. Routledge & Kegan.
- Vanhoye A 1963. La structure littéraire de l'Épître aux Hébreux. *StudNeot* 1. Bruges.
- Wenham G 1981. *Numbers: an introduction and commentary*. TOTC. IVP.
- Wedderburn AJ 1987. *Baptism and resurrection: studies in Pauline theology against its Greco-Roman background*. JCB Mohr.