

NUM 15:30-31 AS BACKDROP TO HEB 10:26

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Introduction

It seems evident that Heb 10:26 has Num 15:30-31 in mind as a backdrop: not only does it speak of a sin that is committed “deliberately” (ἐκουσίως) (cf. the “high hand” and “despising” and “breaking the commandment” language of Num 15:30-31), it also makes explicit what Num 15:30-31 implies, namely, that there is no sacrifice available for the type of sin that is in view (cf. Num 15:24-25, 28 with 15:30-31). It is therefore no surprise that most commentators make some reference to Num 15:30-31 in their explanation of Heb 10:26.¹

What is less evident is the manner in which Heb 10:26 is using Num 15:30-31 as a backdrop. In order to bring clarity to this point, it is important to understand the type of sin in view in Num 15:30-31 as well as the type of sin in view in Heb 10:26. This will in turn lay the foundation for understanding the ways in which Heb 10:26 makes use of Num 15:30-31 as a backdrop.

What is a “high-handed” (בִּיד רָמָה) sin?

Num 15:30-31 is part of a larger pericope that addresses sins that are committed “inadvertently” (בְּשִׁגָּגָה) (vv. 22-29) and sins that are committed “with a high hand” (בִּיד רָמָה) (vv. 30-31). Inadvertent sins are committed by mistake, as indicated by one of the few explicit examples given: unintentionally dropping a heavy object upon someone and killing them (Num 35:22-23; cf. vv. 11, 15). The accidental nature of this type of sin is further supported, however, by the fact that in some instances the person was not even aware that a sin had been committed and thus had to have their sin made known to them (4:14, 23, 28). What is important to note is that this type of sin could be forgiven by means of sacrificial atonement (Num 15:24-26, 27-29).

In stark contrast, those who sinned “with a high hand” (בִּיד רָמָה) had no recourse to sacrificial atonement at all; they were instead to be “cut off” (כָּרַת) from their people:

וְהַנֶּפֶשׁ אֲשֶׁר־תַּעֲשֶׂה אִם בִּיד רָמָה מִן־הָאֶזְרָח³⁰
וּמִן־הַגֵּר אֲתִיְהוּהוּ הוּא מַגִּדֵף וְנִכְרְתָה הַנֶּפֶשׁ הַהוּא מִקֶּרֶב
עַמּוֹהֶ: כִּי דַבְּרִיָּהוּהוּ בְּזָה וְאֶת־מִצְוֹתוֹ הִפְרָה הִפְרָת אֶת־כִּפְרֹת
הַנֶּפֶשׁ הַהוּא עֹנֶה בָּהֶ: פ

³⁰ But whoever acts high-handedly, whether a native or an alien, blasphemes the LORD, and shall be cut off from among his people.

³¹ Because of having despised the word of the LORD and broken his commandment, such a person shall be utterly cut off and bear his guilt.

¹ E.g. Ellingsworth, *Hebrews*, 531; Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, 292; Johnson, *Hebrews*, 262; Attridge, *Hebrews*, 292; Hughes, *Hebrews*, 419.

This leads to a very natural question: what is a “high-handed” sin? Commentators provide a fairly wide variety of answers, though they may be helpful grouped into three broad camps.

First, many commentators have answered the question by simply contrasting it with inadvertent sin (vv. 22-29) and concluded that a high-handed sin is an intentional sin of whatever type. Thus Noordtzij writes: “The purpose of this law is to inculcate the distinction between unintentional and intentional sin...In the case of unintentional sin atonement is possible; in the second case, in which the Lord’s will and man’s will collide, only one punishment impossible: the offender must be ‘cut off,’ regardless of what kind of sin he committed.”² The comments of Keil and Davies may be understood similarly.³

Second, many more recent commentators are emphasizing the public nature of the sin, that is, that it is not simply intentional but also done openly against the LORD. Milgrom, for example, contrasts these sins with sins that are “performed in secret”.⁴ He also points out that such an approach has ancient corroboration: “Targ. Onk. and Targ. Neof. aptly render [the phrase ‘with a high hand’ with] *beresh galei*, ‘publicly.’”⁵ Gane notes that Schenker also emphasizes the public nature of the sin, that is, that it is done “openly, boldly, shamelessly”.⁶

Third, a few recent commentators are emphasizing the rebellious posture from which the sin is committed. Ashley, for example, describes these as “sins of open rebellion (such as those of ch. 14)”,⁷ and Gane writes that “the language of these verses (‘high-handedly...for he has despised the word of YHWH’) appears to describe an ‘in your face’ kind of offense that goes significantly beyond a simple deliberate moral lapse. Such defiance is a personal affront to YHWH (v. 30 – ... ‘he reviles YHWH’); it is rebellion against him, his authority, and his covenant.”⁸

It is the last position which would appear to do the most justice to this passage. This is not to deny that the sin is intentional (which it certainly is, as the contrast with vv. 22-29 makes clear), nor to deny that it can be done publicly (though it not need be, as the example of Achan demonstrates). Rather, it is to affirm that the focus of Num 15:30-31 is not on either of these as much as it is upon the fact that the person committing such a sin is doing so from a posture of complete rebellion. This becomes especially clear from a careful consideration of the language of the text. We will begin by considering the phrase “with a high hand (בִּיד רָמָה)” itself before turning to consider the related words of vv. 30-31 that help to explicate it.

The phrase בִּיד רָמָה

To begin, יָד occurs together with some form of רָמָה in several instances and with two different ranges of meaning. In the first range of meaning, this syntagm is used to express

² Noordtzij, *Numbers*, 138.

³ Cf. Keil (*The Pentateuch*, 103); Davies (*Numbers*, 158): “...the sacrificial system provided no means of expiation for anyone who had committed an offence ‘with a high hand’ (*NEB*, ‘presumptuously’), i.e., in deliberate defiance of God’s will (cf. *NIV*).”

⁴ Milgrom, *Numbers*, 125.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 312 n. 43.

⁶ Gane, *Cult*, 209, citing Schenker, “Interprétations,” 65, 69; *Recht und Kult*, 121.

⁷ Ashley, *Numbers*, 285.

⁸ Gane, *Cult*, 209.

“triumph” over an enemy. In these instances the “hand” – which stands metonymically for the “power” or “strength” of the person⁹ - is “lifted up” in victory, i.e. is “triumphant”. So Mic 5:8 (9): “Your hand *will be triumphant* (תָּרַם יָדְךָ) against your adversaries, and all your enemies *will be cut off*.” The phrase is used similarly in Deut 32, where the LORD holds back from executing full judgment upon Israel lest their enemies wrongly conclude, “Our hand *is triumphant* (יָדֵינוּ רְמוּהָ), and the LORD has not done all this” (v. 27b). It is likely that Exod 14:8 and Num 33:3 also belong here, both of which describe Israel going out from Egypt with a “triumphant hand” (בְּיַד רְמוּהָ).¹⁰

In at least one other instance, however, this syntagm is used to express “defiance” or full-scale “rebellion” against another: “Then Jeroboam the son of Nebat, an Ephraimite of Zeredah, Solomon’s servant, whose mother’s name was Zeruah, a widow, also *rebelled* (וַיִּרְם יָדְךָ) against the king. Now this was the reason why he rebelled (וַיִּרְם יָדְךָ) against the king....” (1 Kgs 11:26-27a). The word “also” in v. 26 is significant, since it puts Jeroboam in the same category as Hadad and Rezon, both of whom are described as an “adversary” (שָׁטָן) to Solomon (vv. 14, 23). Clearly, Jeroboam stands in complete opposition to Solomon. It is this second use of the syntagm that fits best in Num 15:30: “But the person who commits sin *defiantly*...”¹¹ The sense, then, is not simply that a person sins intentionally; rather, this is a description of the defiant sinner, one who is in a posture of apostate rebellion against the LORD.

This conclusion is not only suggested by the use of the syntagm in 1 Kgs 11:26-27, it is supported by the use of the root רָם elsewhere. In particular, words built on the root רָם are used in phrases describing those who have rejected covenant living and thereby the covenant Lord. In the wisdom literature, for example, those who have “lifted up (= haughty) eyes” are ruthlessly wicked: “There is a kind – oh how lofty are his eyes (מִזֶּה רָמוּ עֵינָיו)! And his eyelids are raised [in arrogance]. There is a kind of [man] whose teeth are [like] swords and his jaw teeth [like] knives, to devour the afflicted from the earth and the needy from among men” (Prov 30:13-14). Not surprisingly, then, “haughty eyes” are listed as one of seven things that the LORD hates (Prov 6:17) and are described elsewhere simply as “sin” (Prov 21:4). Similarly, those with a “lifted up (= proud) heart” (רָם + לֵבָב) are those who “forget (שָׁכַח) the LORD [their] God” (Deut 8:14).¹² Significantly, the verb “forget” is used in many places in Deuteronomy and elsewhere to describe those who have rebelled against the LORD or his covenant (Deut 4:23; 6:12-14; Judg 3:7; 2 Kgs 17:38; Prov 2:17; Isa 17:10; Jer 18:15; Hos 2:15 [13]). In

⁹ For this use of יָד see Exod 14:31; Jos 8:20; cf. BDB, 390.2.

¹⁰ This is especially clear in Num 33, which in context reads as follows: “They journeyed from Rameses in the first month, on the fifteenth day of the first month; on the next day after the Passover the sons of Israel came out *triumphantly* (בְּיַד רְמוּהָ) in the sight of all the Egyptians, *while the Egyptians were burying all their firstborn whom the Lord had struck down among them. The Lord had also executed judgments on their gods*” (vv. 3-4).

¹¹ Lit. “But the person who commits/does with a high hand (בְּיַד רְמוּהָ אֲשֶׁר־תַּעֲשֶׂה)...” Context is clear that it is doing “sin” that is in mind here. Cf. v. 27 (רָם + חָטָא) with v. 29 (רָם + עָשָׂה).

¹² See also Hos 13:6: “As [they had] their pasture, they became satisfied, and being satisfied, their heart became proud (וַיִּרְם לִבָּם); therefore they forgot Me....”

Deut 8 in particular it is used two other times, clarifying that those who “forget” the LORD are those who do “not keep[] His commandments and His ordinances and His statutes” (v. 11), and who “go after other gods and serve them and worship them” (v. 19). In sum, words built on the root רום are frequently used to describe those who are apostate and have rejected the LORD.¹³ This further supports understanding the phrase “with a high hand” in Num 15:30 as referring to those who are apostate. This understanding is further confirmed by the phrases in vv. 30-31 which further define what a high-handed sin is.

Further explications of “high-handed sin” from Num 15:30-31

To begin, the high-handed sinner in Num 15 is also described as “blaspheming the LORD” (אָת־יְהוָה הוּא מְגִדֵּף) (v. 31).¹⁴ This verb occurs only six other times, once with man as the object (Ps 44:17 [16]), and in the remaining instances with the LORD as object (2 Kgs 19:6, 22 [// Isa 37:6, 23]; Ezek 20:27). Whenever the LORD is the object of the verb, it is used to describe a blatant rejection of the LORD as God. In Ezek 20, for example, we read that the forefathers of Israel “blasphemed” the LORD by acting treacherously (מַעַל) against Him (v. 27), in particular, by gross idolatry: “...they saw every high hill and every leafy tree, and they offered there their sacrifices and there they presented the provocation of their offering” (v. 28a). This same type of rejection of the LORD as God is also seen in 2 Kgs 18-19, where the LORD states that the messengers of Assyria and their king have “blasphemed” him (19:6, 22). The messengers, for example, proclaim that no god, including the LORD, is able to rescue from the king of Assyria (18:32-35). Especially significant is the LORD’s rebuke to Sennacherib, king of Assyria: “Whom have you reproached (הִרְפִּיתָ) and blasphemed (וְגִדַּפְתָּ)? And against whom have you raised (הִרְיַמְתָּ) [your] voice, and haughtily lifted up (וַתִּשָּׂא מְרוֹם) your eyes? Against the Holy One of Israel!” (2 Kgs 19:22 [//Isa 37:23]). Not only does this passage describe Sennacherib’s full-scale rejection of the LORD with the verb גִּדַּף, it also uses the strong verb “reproach” (הִרְפִּיתָ) to describe this rebellion, as well as the noun מְרוֹם (thus providing one more instance where words built on the root רום are used in the context of a full-scale rejection of the LORD).

Second, the person in Num 15:31 is also described as one who has “despised the word of the LORD (וְדַבַּר־יְהוָה בִּזְוָה) and broken his commandment (וַיִּשְׁבֹּתוּ אֶת־מִצְוֹתָיו).”¹⁵ Elsewhere, those who “despise” either “the LORD” or his “word” are those who are flagrantly and grossly sinning against the LORD. Eli and his sons, for example, take the very best that the Israelites offer, thus “despising” the LORD instead of “honoring” him. This calls for the LORD’s sure judgment: “Therefore the LORD God of Israel declares, ‘I did indeed say that your house and the house of your father should walk before Me forever’; but now the LORD declares, ‘Far be it from Me – for those who honor

¹³ See also the use of רום in 2 Sam 22:28 (// Ps 18:27); Ps 75:5-8 (4-7); Isa 2:11-17.

¹⁴ Note fronting of אָת־יְהוָה, emphasizing that this offense is against the LORD himself.

¹⁵ Note again the fronting of the noun phrases, emphasizing again that the commands of the Lord have been disregarded and violated.

Me I will honor (כִּי־מִכְבְּדֵי אֶכְבֵּד), and those who despise Me (וַיְבִזוּ) will be lightly esteemed” (1 Sam 2:30). Similarly, the people of Judah despise the word of the LORD through gross rebellion and are sent into exile: “The LORD, the God of their fathers, sent [word] to them again and again by His messengers, because He had compassion on His people and on His dwelling place; but they [continually] mocked the messengers of God, despised (וַיְבִזוּ) His words and scoffed at His prophets, until the wrath of the LORD arose against His people, until there was no remedy. (2 Chr 36:15-16).¹⁶

“Despising the LORD” is paralleled in Num 15:31 by “breaking his commandment” (וַאֲתֵּי־מִצְוֹתָיו הִפָּר). Ezra 9:14 is the only other place this phrase is used. In this context Ezra is confessing the sin of the people who have intermarried with non-Israelites. In this midst of his confession he asks, “...shall we again break your commandments (לְהִפָּר מִצְוֹתֶיךָ) and intermarry with the peoples who commit these abominations? Would you not be angry with us to the point of destruction, until there is no remnant nor any who escape?” (v. 14). Clearly, this has been a most serious breach of covenant faithfulness. It may also be noted, however, that the verb הִפָּר itself occurs frequently in the Bible, and that in the majority of instances it describes “breaking a covenant”, most often the covenant of the LORD (Gen 17:14; Lev 26:15; Deut 31:16, 20; Isa 24:5; Jer 11:10; 31:32; cf. 1 Kgs 15:19 [//2 Chr 16:3]). In these passages the breaking of the covenant is equivalent to complete repudiation of it, and this repudiation often manifests itself in gross disobedience (see esp. Lev 26:14-15 [note connection with “commandment”]; Deut 31:16, 20; Isa 24:5; Jer 11:10). In short, this verb “to break” is used in contexts where the LORD’s “commandment” (Ezra 9:14), and particularly his “covenant” (see above), are rejected on a full-scale level. This is in complete keeping with what it means to “despise the LORD” (see above). Once again, it is a complete rejection of the LORD that appears to be in view.

Finally, the penalty for those who sin with a “high hand” is being “cut off” (כָּרַת) (Num 15:30b), namely, to die prematurely.¹⁷ When this penalty is mentioned elsewhere, it is stipulated for the following types of sins: misuse or desecration of holy items associated with the altar or tabernacle (Exod 30:33, 38; Lev 7:20, 21, 25, 27; 17:10, 14; 19:8; 22:3) or desecration of the tabernacle itself (Num 19:13, 20); committing sexual sins which defiled the land and for which the nations were expelled (Lev 18:29; 20:17, 18); idolatry and sorcery (Lev 17:4, 9; 20:3, 5, 6); and failure to keep the Sabbath (31:14 [cf. Num 15:32-36!]) or to celebrate the Passover, Feast of Unleavened Bread, and Day of Atonement (Exod 12:15, 19; Lev 23:29; Num 9:13). Why do these sins call for such severe penalty? Perhaps because they are so inextricably linked with rejecting the LORD of the covenant in a full-scale manner. To misuse or desecrate holy items associated with the altar or tabernacle, for example, or to desecrate the tabernacle itself, is to show utmost disregard for the holiness and sovereignty of the LORD. Similarly, to defile the land by means of the same sexual sins for which the nations were expelled is to align oneself with the very objects of the LORD’s judgment and declare allegiance with them instead of the LORD. Idolatry and sorcery, of course, are explicit and outright rejections of the LORD as one’s covenant God. The Sabbath was to be a “perpetual covenant” with Israel, in which

¹⁶ See also 2 Sam 12:9-10; Prov 14:2; Mal 1:6-9.

¹⁷ See discussion in Sklar, *Sin, Impurity, Sacrifice, Atonement*, 15-20.

they imitated their maker (Exod 31:16; cf. Isa 56:4, 6). Failure to celebrate it was again a rejection of the Lord of this covenant. The Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread commemorated the foundational act by which the LORD entered into covenant relationship with Israel, namely, his delivering them from Egypt. Not to celebrate these feasts was to disregard completely the foundation of the covenant and the one who rescued them from bondage. Finally, the Day of Atonement was necessary in order to address the sins and impurities of the Israelites, thus enabling covenant relationship with the LORD to continue. Those who refused to observe this day were in effect denying the holiness of the LORD with whom they were in covenant relationship and refusing to “humble themselves” before him (Lev 23:29). In sum, where the “cutting off” penalty is prescribed elsewhere, it is prescribed for flagrant and defiant sins that were full-scale rejections of the LORD himself.

All of this evidence leads directly to one conclusion: the person who sins with a high hand is not simply committing intentional sin; he or she is committing that sin defiantly and from a posture of complete and total rejection of the covenant Lord himself. In short, it is the intentional sin of an apostate that is in view.

The significance of this for understanding Num 15:22-31 is as follows: there are certain types of sins for which forgiveness is guaranteed by means of sacrificial atonement, namely, inadvertent sins (vv. 22-29). As long as inadvertent sinners follow the proper sacrificial procedure, they can know that the sin will be forgiven by the LORD. By way of contrast, sinners who choose to rebel completely against the LORD do not have a guarantee of forgiveness by means of sacrificial atonement (vv. 30-31). A perfect example of this is found in the preceding chapter to Num 15 itself, namely, the rebellion of the Israelites in Num 14. The fact that the Israelites are completely rebelling against the LORD is evident from v. 11, where the LORD asks, “How long will this people spurn me (וַיִּנְאַצְנִי)? How long will they not believe in me (לֹא־יֵאֱמִינוּ בִּי)...?” Significantly, the verb translated “spurn” is used elsewhere in parallel to the phrase “break my covenant” (וַיִּהְפֹּךְ אֶת־בְּרִיתִי) (Deut 31:20; cf. “break my commandment” [וַיִּהְפֹּךְ הַפֶּר] in Num 15:31), and is also used to describe those who “rebel” (וַיִּמְרֹדוּ) against the words of the LORD (Ps 107:11), those who have “abandoned” (וַיַּעֲזֹבוּ) him (Isa 1:4), and those who have “rejected” (וַיִּמְאַסּוּ) his law (Isa 5:24). Similarly, the phrase translated “not believe” (לֹא + וַיִּאֱמִינוּ) is used elsewhere to describe those who “rebel” (וַיִּמְרֹדוּ) against the command of the LORD (Deut 9:23) and those who “stiffen their neck” (וַיִּקְשְׁחוּ אֶת־צַוְעָתָם) against him (2 Kgs 17:14). In a word, the Israelites are now in the position of an apostate: they have completely rejected the LORD and his covenant. It is precisely this type of situation that Num 15:30-31 has in mind. True, the LORD could choose to extend forgiveness in response to the intercession of a godly leader on Israel’s behalf (Num 14:11-20), but there is no guarantee that this will happen and sacrifice is not the means by which it is accomplished.

With this background in view, we may now turn to consider the way in which Heb 10:26 makes use of Num 15:30-31. In order to do this, it will be important to begin by asking what sin Heb 10:26 has in view.

What sin is in view in Heb 10:26?

So what sin is in view in Heb 10:26? The conclusion may be stated up front: a deliberate and ongoing rejection of Jesus and the covenant which he founded by means of his sacrificial death. In a word: apostasy. Support for this understanding of Heb 10:26 now follows.

First, the sin being described here is deliberate, that is, one which is done willingly and intentionally. This is evident from the word ἐκουσίως, an adverb which refers to that which is done “willingly” (1 Pet 5:2), and which can be used in contexts where it is describing the willful and intentional breaking of a command (2 Macc 14:3).¹⁸ The context of Heb 10:26 supports this understanding, since the end of the verse clearly alludes to Num 15:30, where sin that is done “inadvertently” is contrasted with sin that is done “with a high hand” (cf. Num 15:22-29).¹⁹

Second, it is an ongoing rejection of Jesus and his covenant which is implied. The fact that this rejection is *ongoing* is underscored by the grammar of this verse, which uses a present participle (ἀμαρτανόντων) to describe the sinning. The significance of this is noted by Lane: “The use of the present ptc in the gen absolute construction...carries the notion of continuous action: ‘if we persist in sin.’”²⁰ The fact that this is a rejection of *Jesus and his covenant* is made clear from the verse itself, from the immediate context, and from the larger context. The verse itself states that this sinning takes place after the sinner has received “the knowledge of the truth”, that is, the Christian “confession” (v. 23) which centers on Jesus as the mediator of a new covenant which he established by means of his sacrificial death (10:11-18; cf. 9:11-22). By implication, the sinner is willfully rejecting Jesus and his covenant by this ongoing sin. This understanding is also confirmed by the immediate context, which states in no uncertain terms that the sinner of v. 26 is “trampling under foot the Son of God”, “regarding as unclean the blood of the covenant by which we are sanctified”, and “insulting the Spirit of grace” (10:29; cf. 6:4-6).²¹ Finally, this is directly in keeping with the larger context, which describes such a sinner as having “an evil, unbelieving heart...falling away from the living God” (3:12; cf. 6:6a), failing to “hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end” (3:14), and “crucifying...the Son of God and put[ting] him to open shame” (6:6b). In sum, the language here is the language of apostasy; it is not simply describing someone who commits an individual intentional sin, or even a series of them, but someone who is repeatedly and deliberately rejecting Jesus and the covenant he established by means of his sacrificial death.

¹⁸ “Now a certain Alcimus, who had formerly been high priest but had willfully defiled himself (ἐκουσίως δὲ μεμολυσμένος) in the times of separation, realized that there was no way for him to be safe or to have access again to the holy altar...”

¹⁹ Many have noted that the position of the word ἐκουσίως in Heb 10:26 appears to be emphatic (Attridge, *Hebrews*, 292; Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, 277 n. y; Gordon, *Hebrews*, 121; Ellingsworth, *Hebrews*, 531); this could in turn stress the intentionality of the sin.

²⁰ Lane, *Hebrews*, 277 n. z; see also Attridge, *Hebrews*, 292; Gordon, *Hebrews*, 121; Ellingsworth, *Hebrews*, 532.

²¹ Bruce (*Hebrews*, 259-60) concisely explains the severity of such actions:

To spurn the Son of God, to trample Him underfoot (as the word literally means), ‘denotes contempt of the most flagrant kind’ [Moffatt, *Hebrews*, 151]; to treat the covenant-blood of Christ, by which alone His people are sanctified, cleansed and brought to God, as no better than the most common death, is to repudiate decisively both His sacrifice and all the blessings which flow from it; to outrage the Spirit of grace is, in the words of Jesus, to be ‘guilty of an eternal sin’ (Mark 3:29).

In sum, the sinner is rejecting Jesus and the new covenant that he brought about, a covenant which was based on Jesus' sacrificial death.²² This type of sin leaves the sinner in a very dangerous position, as the focus of judgment in this context makes clear.

The theme of judgment in the context of Heb 10:26

V. 26 belongs to a pericope which goes from v. 26 to v. 31. The theme of judgment occurs before, in, and after this pericope. Immediately before this pericope, for example, we read the exhortation for Christians to continue to meet together and to encourage one another, especially as they see “the day drawing near” (10:25). As Johnson notes, the word “day” in this passage evokes a scene of judgment:

In this passage...‘the day’ has specific eschatological overtones derived from the prophetic tradition that spoke simply of a ‘day’ in which God would act for judgment (Isa 2:12-22; Joel 1:15; 3:14; Zech 14:1; Amos 5:18-20; 8:9-14; Zeph 1:14-18), a tradition carried forward by the New Testament compositions, whether simply as ‘the day’ (1 Thess 5:4; 1 Cor 3:13), or as ‘the day of the Lord’ (1 Cor 1:8; 5:5; 1 Thess 5:2; 2 Thess 2:2; 2 Cor 1:14; 2 Pet 3:10).²³

Indeed, this eschatological judgment has already been referred to in 10:13, where we read that Jesus is sitting at the right hand of God “until his enemies be made a footstool for his feet”.

The theme of judgment continues in the passage itself: those who deliberately and continually reject Jesus and his covenant have no recourse for forgiveness (v. 26) but can expect instead “judgment and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries” (v. 27). This is then underscored by means of an *a fortiori* argument: if those who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy (v. 28), how much more will those who reject Jesus and his covenant experience wrath (v. 29), and that carried out by God himself (vv. 30-31).

Finally, the verses following our pericope also speak of the eschatological judgment (v. 37) and of the importance of holding fast to the Christian confession (vv. 32-36) so that one experiences God's favor instead of his wrath (vv. 38-39)

All this language of judgment shares one factor in common: judgment is avoided by those who hold fast to the Christian confession and hope (cf. 10:10-14, 19-23, 35, 38a, 39), namely, that Jesus is the mediator of a new covenant that was established by means of his sacrificial death. Drawing this together with the above leads to a very natural conclusion: those who commit the sin of v. 26 – that is, rejecting Jesus and the covenant that he brought about with his sacrificial death – will experience this coming judgment. As the next section discusses, the author of Hebrews underscores this idea in v. 26 by alluding to Num 15:30-31.

How Num 15:30-31 functions as a backdrop to Heb 10:26

As noted in the introduction above, there is little doubt that Heb 10:26 has Num 15:30-31 in mind as a backdrop: not only does it speak of a sin that is committed “deliberately” (ἐκουσίως) (cf. the “high hand” and “despising” and “breaking the commandment”

²² It may still be asked if the writer is thinking more specifically of certain types of deliberate sin – such as withdrawing from the Christian community (10:25) – that serve as the proof of the sinner's rejection of Jesus and his covenant (cf. Ellingsworth, *Hebrews*, 530), or whether the author has apostasy more generally in mind. Whatever the answer to this question may be, the endpoint is the same, namely, the sinner's deliberate and continuous rejection of Jesus and the covenant that he established (cf. 10:29).

²³ Johnson, *Hebrews*, 260.

language of Num 15:30-31), it also makes explicit what Num 15:30-31 imply, namely, that there is no sacrifice available for the type of sin that is in view (cf. Num 15:24-25, 28 with 15:30-31).

What is important to note, however, is that the allusion to Num 15:30-31 functions on at least two different, though complimentary, levels. On a surface level, one may say that Heb 10:26 simply uses the language and ideas of Num 15:30-31 in order to express the point being made in Heb 10 itself. We may call this the “surface level” for the simple reason that one does not have to recognize the allusion to Num 15:30-31 in order to understand the point being made; the point is evident from the language and context of Heb 10:26 itself. This point is simply that to reject Jesus and the covenant that he brought about with his sacrificial death is to reject the only means of escaping the coming judgment. Stated differently: since one can only escape the coming judgment by embracing the new covenant, and since the new covenant is founded upon Jesus’ sacrificial death, those who reject this covenant through deliberate and continuous sin have cut themselves off from the only way in which that sin may be forgiven, namely, the sacrificial death of Jesus. In short, “there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins” for those who have rejected the sacrificial means of forgiveness.

The author of Hebrews, however, appears to be driving this point home by doing something below the surface as well: by alluding to Num 15:30-31 the author is tapping into the image of the rebellious Israelites first introduced in Heb 3:7-11. In that passage, the author refers back to the rebellious Israelites of Num 14 in order to make the following point: if the Israelites of Num 14 rejected the covenant through their unbelief and suffered judgment as a result (3:7-11), how much more will those who reject the new covenant suffer judgment as well (3:12-19). The exhortation is thus clear: do not be like the Israelites of Num 14, lest you experience the judgment of God.

It is this image of the rebellious Israelites that the author of Hebrews now taps into in 10:26 by alluding to Num 15:30-31. In support of this understanding, it may be noted that the preceding verses have already been leading the reader in the same direction as Heb 3. This is evident from even a cursory comparison of the numerous linguistic overlaps between Heb 10:19-25 and Heb 3: both places speak of the “confidence” (παρρησία) the believer has (3:6; 10:19), a confidence rooted in the fact that Jesus is the believer’s “high priest/great priest” (ἀρχιερεύς, 3:1; ἱερέα μέγαν, 10:21), who is “over his house/over the house of God” (ἐπὶ τὸν οἶκον αὐτοῦ, 3:6; ἐπὶ τὸν οἶκον τοῦ θεοῦ, 10:21), and whose priestly work is the basis of the believer’s “confession” (ὁμολογία; 3:1; 10:23). In light of this confession, it is important for believers to guard their “heart” (καρδία) carefully (3:12; 10:22), and to do so by “encouraging” (παρακαλέω) one another (3:13; 10:25). These numerous linguistic overlaps suggest that the author has the same conceptual picture in view in both places: the importance of the people of God – whether Israel under the old covenant or the believer under the new covenant – fully embracing the covenant from the heart lest they experience the judgment of God. In light of this, it is very plausible to read the allusion to Num 15:30-31 in Heb 10:26 as a way for the author to call the picture of rebellious Israel to mind, since Num 15:30-31 is the perfect illustration of what happens to those who sin in a Num 14 type of way: “there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins” for them. Stated differently, by alluding to Num 15:30-31, Heb 10:26 now makes the comparison clear between the Israelite under the old covenant and the believer under the new covenant: just as the Israelites of Num 14 who rejected the

old covenant had no recourse to sacrifice for forgiveness of sins, so too the believer who rejects the new covenant has no recourse to sacrifice for forgiveness of sins either.²⁴

In sum, Heb 10:26 uses the language and ideas of Num 15:30-31 to accomplish two complimentary goals. On the one hand, it uses the language and ideas of Num 15:30-31 to express the larger argument of the chapter, namely, that those who sin deliberately and consistently are thereby rejecting the new covenant that was established on the basis of Jesus' sacrificial death. As a result, they are cutting themselves off from the only hope they have of forgiveness: "there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins" for them. On the other hand, Heb 10:26 underscores this idea by using the language and ideas of Num 15:30-31 to evoke a larger metaphor, namely, that of Israel rejecting the covenant of the LORD and rebelling against him (Num 14), thereby putting themselves outside the range of sacrificial atonement (Num 15:30-31) and experiencing his judgment (cf. Heb 3:7-11). The implication to an audience familiar with this story would have been clear: do not repeat Israel's mistakes lest you also put yourselves outside the range of sacrificial atonement and experience the LORD's judgment as well.

Conclusion

In the above I have argued for the following points. First, Num 15:30-31 refers to those who completely reject the covenant, that is, apostates. Such apostates have no recourse to sacrificial atonement for forgiveness. Contextually, the chapter preceding Num 15 has provided a perfect example of such apostates: the rebellious Israel of Num 14.

Second, Heb 10:26 is referring to the same type of sin: the apostate who rejects the covenant and for whom no sacrificial atonement is available.

Third, Heb 10:26 uses Num 15:30-31 on two different levels to express the lack of sacrificial atonement available to the apostate. On the surface level, Heb 10:26 uses the language and ideas of Num 15:30-31 to express the idea itself. This may be called the surface level for the simple reason that one does not need to be able to recognize the allusion to Num 15:30-31 in order to understand the point being made. At a deeper level, however, the allusion to Num 15:30-31 is meant to call to mind the larger picture of rebellious Israel (Num 14), and thus underscore the warning being made: do not reject the covenant lest you experience the LORD's judgment as well!

Finally, it may be noted that two larger questions remain unanswered from the above study. First, did the author of Hebrews view apostasy as the *only* type of sin addressed by Num 15:30-31, or did the author understand Num 15:30-31 to be referring to any type of intentional sin? At root of this question is the second: did the author of Hebrews understand the sins of the old covenant to consist of two categories (those which were unintentional and atoneable by sacrifice, and those which were intentional and not atoneable by sacrifice) or of three (those which were unintentional and atoneable by sacrifice, those which were intentional and atoneable by sacrifice, those which were apostate and not atoneable by sacrifice)?

²⁴ Though only a brief survey, the commentaries I consulted did not pick up on the way in which Heb 10:26 taps into the larger metaphor of rebellious Israel introduced in Heb 3. See Bruce, *Hebrews*, 258; Hughes, *Hebrews*, 418-19; Gordon, *Hebrews*, 121; Koester, *Hebrews*, 451, 455-56; Johnson, *Hebrews*, 261-62; Ellingsworth, *Hebrews*, 531-33.