

A PROMISE REMAINS

A STUDY OF PROMISE IN THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS¹

Daniel Stevens

(daniel.stevens@mbible.org)

Dissertation Summary

Despite receiving little direct attention, the theme of promise often features in scholars' discussions of the central themes of the Epistle to the Hebrews, with some even asserting that promise is the foundational motif of the entire work. However, the way in which the author of Hebrews portrays divine promises and uses them to contribute to the structure of his theology has not yet been satisfactorily described. What the author means by promise, how promise relates to other types of divine commitments, and the content and timing of the promise's fulfilment all need clarification and more precise attention.

Through an exegesis of the relevant passages, this thesis provides a new reading of promise in Hebrews. After an exegesis of the epistle, I then describe Hebrews' overall theology of promise. I argue that, unlike in previous analyses, rest is not the primary content of promise, nor is it the primary lens through which the other instances of promise language should be understood. On the contrary, I argue that the promise is most closely associated with the benefits promised to Abraham, and then mediated through the various subsequent covenants. Further, while previous studies have left it unclear how the divine promise relates to both the Old and New Covenants, I argue that Hebrews develops a view of salvation history in which covenants are founded upon promises and then bring those promises to fruition. This is true of both the Old and New Covenants, though in different ways. I then demonstrate the ways in which this understanding of promise

¹ Daniel Joseph Stevens (PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 2019). Supervisor Dr Simon Gathercole.

sheds light on the author's hermeneutic and on his method of achieving his hortatory purposes for the epistle. Finally, I conclude by re-asserting the consistency of the author's thought regarding promise and by addressing questions raised by earlier studies of this theme.

Building upon the hypothesis that the author uses promise language to refer to a distinct concept, the majority of this study proceeds as a sequential exegesis of passages of Hebrews that deal with promise. These passages are grouped according to both their placement within Hebrews and their conceptual unity. However, there will occasionally be references to portions of Hebrews outside of the purview of a given chapter when broader, epistle-wide concerns need to be addressed.

Then, only after all the experimental work of a passage-by-passage exegesis is completed, I develop a more comprehensive theory of the role of promise in the theology of Hebrews. This constructive project is the ultimate goal of this study. The end result is not a disconnected series of arguments, but rather an integrated whole that will allow subsequent readers of Hebrews to come to a better understanding of the thought of Hebrews as a whole. After all, if promise is 'the foundational motif', or even anything close to it, then an accurate understanding of promise is certainly necessary for a sound understanding of the epistle.

The thesis is divided into three parts. Part 1: Introduction and Prolegomena spans the first two chapters, in which a literature review situates this study in the context of other scholarship on divine commitment in Hebrews and other biblical texts (Chapter 1) and in which the general approach and assumptions of the study are outlined (Chapter 2).

Part 2: Exegesis is a section-by-section exegetical investigation of promise in Hebrews. Chapter 3 focuses on Hebrews 3–4. The main discussion of that chapter concerns the relationship between promise, gospel, and rest. In it, I argue that while rest is important for understanding the author's concept of promise, it should not be made the primary content of the promise. Rather, the content and nature of promise are further clarified and defined as the author develops his argument.

Chapter 4 deals with Hebrews 6–7. The focus there is on the relationship between the promise and Abraham, and then between the promise to Abraham and the promise which the author understands as available to the audience. I argue for a unity of promise within

Hebrews: that the promise given to Abraham and that given to the audience are one and the same. More originally, chapter 4 also argues for a new way of understanding promise, fulfilment, and typology within Hebrews, that of promises having partial, typological fulfilments.

Chapter 5 examines Hebrews 8–9. This chapter treats the relationship between promise and covenant within Hebrews. Chapter 5 argues for a new way of understanding the interplay of promise and covenant within the author's portrayal of salvation history. The argument draws upon Lehne's analysis of covenant as well as Rose's emphasis on the distinction between *Verheißungswort* and *Verheißungsgut*. Since this thesis, unlike previous analyses of Hebrews, maintains a firm distinction between promise and covenant in Hebrews, the intricacies of the author's argument are examined in a new light.

Chapter 6 moves to Hebrews 10–11. This section has two main topics: the relationship between faith and promise and the way in which the promise relates to both Old Covenant saints and members of the New Covenant. I argue that faith, in Hebrews, is the desired response to the God who speaks, particularly to the God who speaks in the form of promise, and that the author portrays the promise as the foundation of a kind of unity between saints of all periods of time.

Chapter 7 briefly examines Hebrews 12. This section deals with the eschatology of Hebrews and the way in which promise fits within that broader vision. I argue that the promise of shaking is ultimately a promise of deliverance, and that it does not look to an abandonment of physicality as such, but rather to a kind of transformation.

Chapter 8 begins Part 3 of this thesis: Synthesis and Conclusions. In it, I attempt a constructive theological synthesis of the results of the previous exegetical section. This chapter is divided into four headings: 1. Promise and Salvation History; 2. Promise and Eschatology; 3. Promise and Hermeneutics; and 4. Promise and Exhortation. In this chapter, I detail the various ways in which the theme of promise occupies a central place within the author's theology and how it influences many of the various aspects of the epistle.

Finally, we come to Chapter 9, the conclusion. There, I address and reflect on the questions raised in the Introduction. Is the wandering people of God the base motif for Hebrews' depiction of promise? Is rest the main content of the promise? Is promise exclusively future, unfulfilled? Is Hebrews consistent? How do the Old Covenant saints,

and even the patriarchs before them, share in the promises? I then am able to situate this current study within Hebrews scholarship, offering the results of the exegetical and theological accounts of promise in Hebrews for evaluation.