

Faith in the Epistle to the Hebrews

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In this essay I explore the notion of faith that emerges from the Epistle to the Hebrews. I begin, naturally enough, with the seeming definition of faith offered by Hebrews 11:1, arguing that the concept is as much an ontological as an epistemological one. One of the difficulties with Hebrews 11, it might be felt, is that it appears to define faith without reference to Christ (or very nearly); but in the second part I turn my attention to the way in which Hebrews frames its eleventh chapter with expressions that make it clear that its understanding of faith is profoundly Christological, in particular by describing Jesus as ‘pioneer and perfecter of faith’ in 12:2. This in turn raises the question whether the theological virtue of faith is being ascribed to Jesus, a question dealt with somewhat more tentatively in the final part of this offering.

A Definition of Faith?

Chapter eleven of Hebrews contains perhaps the second best known line regarding faith in the New Testament:¹ ‘Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen’ (11:1).² Whether the author of the Epistle intends to give a formal definition of faith is a matter regarding which commentators spill a great deal of ink, yet for the most part they reach the same view, which is that this sonorous phrase is not an abstract definition of faith such as we might find in a work of scholastic theology, but a programmatic description of that faith to which the author of Hebrews wishes to call his audience.

To be more precise, we should say that Hebrews is telling us that this is what that faith is like to which the word of God speaking through the prophet Habakkuk is calling his people. It is characteristic of Hebrews that it presents the words of the Old Testament as the direct address of God (4:3, 7f), Jesus (2:11f) or the Holy Spirit (3:7) to the present

¹ After Romans 3:28, of course; though perhaps one could make a case for Galatians 2:16.

² All biblical citations are from the NRSV unless otherwise stated.

generation. So it is that the words of Habakkuk cited in 10:37f are understood as being of immediate contemporary relevance: ‘the one who is coming will come soon,’ and it is faith directed towards this promise, a promise that remains for the future, that characterises the righteous who receive God’s approval. For all that Hebrews contains a good deal of realised eschatology,³ it is to that which is still to come that it directs our attention at the end of the tenth chapter, and it is in this context that we find the eleventh chapter’s great encomium on faith, which begins with our programmatic description.

So, faith is that by which those who endure, in the period before the imminent arrival of the coming one, are enabled to do so; it is the only thing that separates those who are to preserve their lives to the end from those who will be lost. These verses therefore raise the question, ‘What is it to live by faith? In what way does the life of one who so lives differ from that of others?’; it quickly becomes apparent, even before the resounding rhetoric of 11:1 has had time to settle in the minds of the audience, that the answer is one that should not surprise us from this text which, of all the NT, makes the most thoroughgoing overt appeal to the scriptures of Israel: to live by faith is to live like the heroes of the OT. It is worth pausing for a moment over 11:2, over which one’s eye does tend to skip somewhat. What can it mean to say that our ancestors ‘received approval’, as the NRSV has it? This translation might lead us to think that faith is simply what God liked about them, but the word⁴ in fact means ‘were testified to’, and it implies that it was the faith of the fathers of old that led to their appearance in the scriptures: and not for their benefit, but for ours (cp. 1 Corinthians 10:11). It is precisely because the characters in the idiosyncratic outline of Israel’s history that follows are recorded in the scriptures that we can be sure that they are examples of faith, even when faith is not explicitly imputed to them in the OT itself (as, for example, with Enoch – hence the rather convoluted logic of 11:5-6).

Hebrews’ procedure, then, is not to look for references to ‘faith’ in the OT and find what they have in common; instead, it begins with an *a priori* idea of what faith is and the conviction that all those whom the OT portrays positively must have had this faith, and further that the OT must show them to live by this faith even if not calling it faith. It is examples of biblical portrayals of this pre-conceived notion of faith which Hebrews draws out of the OT. And these examples will need to be clarifications of

³ On which see the still-classic C.K. Barrett, ‘The Eschatology of the Epistle to the Hebrews,’ in W.D. Davies and D. Daube (eds.), *The Background of the New Testament and its Eschatology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954), pp. 363-393.

⁴ *emarturēthēsan*

what Hebrews describes by the elegant phrase ‘the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen’: elegant, but not necessarily pellucid. St Thomas Aquinas writes that Hebrews ‘posits the definition of faith completely, but obscurely.’⁵ I suggest that we can begin to pierce this obscurity a little by getting our punctuation right, or rather, the absence thereof: there should be no comma after *hypostasis*, as there is in the latest critical editions. *Pragmatōn* (‘things’) lies at the centre of a pleasingly symmetrical expression and is qualified by the two adjectives ‘hoped-for’ and ‘unseen’. A seemingly trivial comma would imply a distinction between the hoped-for and the unseen; in fact, one of the metaphysical assumptions that underlies the Epistle’s whole argument is that they are identical: the realities which are presently unseen, yet are truly real, are the same realities in hope of which the followers of Jesus live. To put it another way, the future already exists; the new Jerusalem is the eternal city that comes down from heaven.

To clear the obscurity yet further we must consider the meaning of the two words translated ‘assurance’ and ‘conviction’ – in Greek *hypostasis* and *elenchos*. Even more wrong⁶ than the NRSV’s translation is the NIV: ‘Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see’. The word *elenchos* simply cannot mean this; it is a piece of forensic terminology meaning ‘proof, solid evidence’. Although *hypostasis* could have the subjective sense of feeling certain, the seemingly deliberate construction of the phrase convinces me that we are not here dealing with personal conviction but with objective reality. Though using language quite different in many ways from that of Hebrews, and with an evident overlay of centuries of theological development, I suggest that Aquinas has put his finger on the meaning of this necessary objective sense when he writes that ‘From this, that someone captivates and submits his intellect to the things which are of faith, he merits that at some time he arrive at seeing that for which he hopes. For vision is the reward of faith. In another way, as it were by its own property, *faith may bring it about that that which is believed to come in the future in reality is in some way already possessed*, as being present, provided that he believe in God.’⁷ In fact, if we were to say instead of ‘that which is believed to come in the future in reality’ with Hebrews’

⁵ ‘*Definitionem fidei complete ponit, sed obscure*’. In *Ep. Ad Heb.* XI.1.552

⁶ I draw the reader’s attention to the following from Episode 2.10 of *The Big Bang Theory*:

Stuart: Oooh Sheldon, I’m afraid you couldn’t be more wrong.

Sheldon: ‘More wrong’? Wrong is an absolute state and not subject to gradation.

Stuart: Of course it is. It is a little wrong to say a tomato is a vegetable; it is very wrong to say it is a suspension bridge.

⁷ In *Ep. Ad Heb.* XI.1.556; emphasis added, obviously, of which the original is *id quod creditur futurum in re, aliquo modo iam habetur*.

characteristic phrase for this, which is ‘the promises’, then we have a perfect summary of what underlies Hebrews’ exhortations in chapters ten and twelve: those who are of faith hold their eyes firmly on the joy that is set before them (cf. 12:2 and 13.7) *because* they are ontologically connected to the heavenly realities that already exist. To put it another way, the description of faith with which Hebrews 11 begins tells us that what follows is an illustration of the possibilities opened up in the history of salvation for those who are essentially eschatological, and who thus provide, in the significant events in which they participate, a demonstration of the reality of the things unseen to which those events bear witness.

The thought here parallels that of Paul in Philippians 3:20: the real home *now* of the believer, the source of the believer’s *identity*, his new reality in Christ, is that heaven from which the believer awaits the Saviour who is still to come. As in Philippians, so in Hebrews, we see a close association between the new status of the Christian as determined by realised eschatology and the future eschatological hope of the return of Christ in glory.

A Christological Faith?

This helps us to counter a potential difficulty with the notion of faith as outlined in Hebrews 11, as compared to St Paul’s treatment, which is that this part of Hebrews appears distinctly un-Christological. Only at verse 26 is there anything approaching a reference to Christ. The faith of our ancestors was certainly eschatological, but was it Christological? Part of the answer must be that this chapter is framed by passages that make the soteriological achievements of Christ the key to their exhortations: in chapter ten we are told not to shrink back at the last, but to press forward together, enduring under trials and persecutions, and that we can do this with a confidence that springs from Christ’s high-priestly entry into the heavenly sanctuary (10:19-22) as well as from the faithfulness of God to his promises (10:23). Chapter twelve begins with a recapitulation of the same argument, in which Jesus is described as ‘pioneer and perfecter of faith’. This chapter certainly intensifies the emphasis on realised eschatology – for the first time in Hebrews 12 the audience is described not as being in the process of approaching God or entering his presence (as for example at 4:3) but as *having come* (12:22); nevertheless, the future aspect remains: ‘But now he has promised “Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heaven”’ (12:26). In another instance of the arguably tendentious exegetical logic of Hebrews, we are told that

this means nothing less than the replacement of the created order by an uncreated world, that same eternal reality stored up for us of which St Paul writes, and which is the heavenly homeland towards which all the faith heroes of chapter eleven were making their pilgrimage (11:13-16). For it is made clear that at the heart of what it is to be characterised by faith is precisely this longing for the eternal and the invisible, the surety that one is not at home in the world but rather one belongs to heaven, and therefore a certain rootlessness. Ernst Käsemann's great (if also profoundly flawed) work on Hebrews⁸ captures this in its title, except that the people of God are not only a *wandering people* but a *pilgrim people*. We may say, it is not so much that the people of God are of their (reconstituted) nature rootless, but that they are rooted in heaven rather than on earth. In this sense, in its ultimate end, Christian faith is precisely the same as the faith of the people of Israel from the beginning, as argued very powerfully by Markus Bockmuehl.⁹ Yet in another sense Hebrews is clear that without Christ this faith is insufficient: 'Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, without us, be made perfect' (11:39f). I suggest that we must read the word here translated 'had provided' (*problepsamenou*) as averring that from the beginning of salvation history it was always intended that faith should only attain its goal in Christ and, indeed, through his followers. Indeed, 11:26 hints quite strongly that the faith of the heroes of Israel's history was always at least implicitly faith in Christ.

Indeed, in view of 11:40¹⁰ we might go so far as to say that it is the appearing of Christ that has turned the people of God from a wandering people, a sojourning people, into a pilgrim people, in this sense: that until the appearing of Christ, though the people of God longed for entry into the heavenly realm, that entry was not possible; through Christ's own entry, the final consummation of that constitutive faith has become possible not only for us but for all those who longed to see what we see but never saw it. The corollary of this is, though, that now that Christ has appeared all authentic faith must be faith in him. Despite the way in which it has sometimes been read in the past, Hebrews by no means seeks to replace the faith of Israel with a new Christian religion, but rather portrays Jesus as being the fulfilment of Israel's faith, intended from the beginning, the culmination of that for which everything in Israel's history

⁸ E. Käsemann, *Das wandernde Gottesvolk: eine Untersuchung zum Hebräerbrief* (Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments 55; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1939).

⁹ M. Bockmuehl, 'Abraham's Faith in Hebrews 11,' in R. Bauckham et al (eds.), *The Epistle to the Hebrews and Christian Theology* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2009).

¹⁰ In this verse we might translate *teleiōthōsin* not as 'be made perfect' but as 'be brought to their goal'.

was preparing her; but the consequence of this is that to reject Christ is to reject everything that has pointed towards him, everything that has always taken its true meaning from him who has now been made manifest (2:9).

A Faithful Jesus?

The foregoing is what it means for Christ to be ‘perfecter’ of faith; but he is also described in 12.2 as ‘pioneer’ (*archēgos*) of faith, and this requires us to consider whether faith is something that is ascribed to Jesus. Describing him as perfecter of faith bears no such implication, for it is the faith of the people of Israel that he perfects, but surely as pioneer of faith he is one who, albeit supremely, actually possesses that quality. It is perhaps notable that nowhere else in the NT is *pistis* ascribed to Jesus, with the arguable exception of Romans 3:22 and Galatians 3:22, which verses echo one another somewhat, and where there is much debate as to whether the genitive is to be understood as a subjective or an objective one (i.e. is it Jesus Christ’s faith, or believing in Jesus Christ). It is certainly the case that Jesus is described as faithful, both in Hebrews and elsewhere, as also is God – which means surely that being faithful (*pistos*) is not the same thing as having the theological virtue of faith. Of itself, the adjective can mean either to be trusting or to be trustworthy, and it is clearly in the latter sense that it is ascribed to God. Indeed it is the reliability of God that underpins Hebrews’ exhortation to steadfastness: ‘Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful’ (10:23); we have already seen that faith in Hebrews – the theological virtue of faith – is founded upon the faithfulness of God to his promises: As Kendall notes, the translation of the passage from Habakkuk makes it clear that ‘the ground of waiting patiently was God’s faithfulness. Such waiting, or enduring, then, is called faith. It was faith in God’s faithfulness.’¹¹

Less clear, though, is whether the adjective when ascribed to Christ has this sense or the sense of ‘trusting’. It would appear more natural to read the former sense in 2:17 since the word is juxtaposed to ‘merciful’ and is in the context of the mission of the Son, where the emphasis is on his divine origin, but when the epithet is repeated at the beginning of the next chapter (3:2) the comparison with Moses might perhaps suggest the ‘trusting’ sense, especially since Moses appears twice in the list of faith heroes in chapter eleven. Moreover the whole section of Hebrews from

¹¹ R.T. Kendall, *Believing God: Studies on Faith in Hebrews 11* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1981), p. 4

3:1 to 4:11 – with 4:12f as a sort of epexegetical addendum – stands as a distinct part of the Epistle in which Christ, his superiority over the angels having been established already, is now asserted to be superior also to Moses, and the *tertium comparationis* is precisely faith: ‘Now Moses was faithful in all his [sc. God’s] house as a servant ... Christ however was faithful over his house as a son’ (3:5f).

I have argued elsewhere¹² at some length that this section of Hebrews establishes a typological relationship between Jesus and Joshua the son of Nun, with whom he shares his name. The typology is one of both similarity and difference: like Joshua, Jesus is superior to Moses in that he completes the work of leading the people of Israel into the Promised Land. But Jesus’s superiority is superior to the superiority of Joshua, if I may put it that way, since the land to which Joshua was able to grant access was a temporary and earthly dwelling place, the Land of Canaan, whereas Jesus grants access to that Promised Land of which Canaan was but a shadow, namely heaven itself. A crucial part of my argument is that the interpretation of Psalm 95 offered in Hebrews 3–4 is predicated upon the understanding that the events to which the psalm refers are those described in Numbers 13–14, in which Joshua is one of twelve spies sent by Moses to scout out the Promised Land and who return with two markedly different reports: ten argue that the Land is not one the Israelites should or can in fact enter, despite the command of God to enter and take possession of it: ‘The land that we have gone through as spies is a land that devours its inhabitants; and all the people that we saw in it are of great size... [T]o ourselves we seemed like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them’ (Num. 13:32f). Only Joshua and Caleb differ, and crucially it not only in the truth of the matter as far as the nature of the Land is concerned but also, and more importantly it seems, in respect of the ability of God to bring about what he has promised: ‘The land that we went through as spies is an exceedingly good land. If the Lord is pleased with us, he will bring us into this land and give it to us, a land that flows with milk and honey. Only, do not rebel against the Lord; and do not fear the people of the land, for they are no more than bread for us; their protection is removed from them, and the Lord is with us; do not fear them (Num. 14:7-9).

Thus it is that the Israelites, even including Moses himself, are barred from entry into the Land because they believed the ten faithless spies; only Joshua and Caleb will be permitted entry into the Land. Hebrews’ exhortation is then predicated upon the parallel between the situation that

¹² R.J. Ounsworth, *Joshua Typology in the New Testament* (WUNT 2.328; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012).

obtained in the wilderness at Kadesh-Barnea and the present situation of its audience: when the psalm says ‘O that today you would listen to his voice...’, that ‘today’ is in fact today, for we have heard the same message, and that message is that the way into the Land lies open; except of course that now it is the ‘true’ Promised Land of heaven that has been made accessible. And what is required? What was lacking then: faith. ‘For indeed the good news came to us just as to them; but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened’ (4:2).

It seems clear, then, that this is what it means for Jesus to be pioneer of faith – and that word *archēgos* that is translated ‘pioneer’ has military overtones that make it echo the conquering achievement of Joshua – is that he manifests superabundantly that trust in God, that belief that God would be faithful to the promises he had made, that made both Joshua and Caleb respond as they did, even in the face of violent opposition from their fellow Israelites, and so earn the distinction of entering the land that was barred to the rest of the wilderness generation.

Now it must be admitted that the concern as to whether Jesus exhibited the theological virtue of faith is one that significantly post-dates the writing of the Epistle to the Hebrews. It is not my concern here to defend the theological opinion that he did not require this virtue, or that it was not fitting for him to have it, still less to defend the orthodoxy of Hebrews. However, it is worth noting in this context that while Hebrews has arguably the highest Christology of any book of the New Testament, it also has perhaps the greatest emphasis on the humanity of Jesus. On the one hand, the Epistle opens with a description of the status of the Son which owes much to the theology of wisdom (compare, for example, Hebrews 1:3 with Wisdom 7:26), asserting the involvement of the Son in creation and his superiority by nature over the angels; the interpretation of the Greek translation of Psalm 8’s ‘a little lower than the angels’ to mean ‘for a little while lower’ is another example of what seems to modern eyes like tendentious exegesis, but we must remember that for Hebrews the whole of the Old Testament speaks of Christ and is to be interpreted in the light of his incarnation, death and exaltation. At the end of the Epistle, when we are told to imitate the faith of our leaders (incidentally the last use of the word ‘faith’ in Hebrews) the following verse seems to enunciate that faith: ‘Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever’ (3:8). What we have here, in fact, is – again, using an anachronistic distinction – not *fides qua* but *fides quem*, not the virtue but the content of faith, a very early creed perhaps, and one that returns

the reader's mind to that eternal nature of Christ with which the Epistle began.

Yet wherever we find expressions of the exalted status of Jesus we find juxtaposed always an insistence upon not only his humanity but his *suffering* humanity. The emphasis is always upon Christ's solidarity with human beings in their weakness, their subjection to temptation and suffering and their mortality. A classic case is 2:8-10, which takes us from the superiority by nature of the Son to the angels and the fact that Jesus can now be seen 'crowned with glory and honour' to 'the suffering of death' and Christ's being made perfect through suffering. Such is the depth of Christ's entry into the human condition that even he who by nature shares in the perfection of the Father underwent that same process of purification through suffering that the Epistle is calling upon its audience to endure with steadfastness and faith.

Indeed it is precisely this notion of a shared journey that provides the necessary context, I suggest, for the description of Jesus as not only perfecter but also pioneer of faith. The word is, I have already remarked, one with military overtones, but it also has connotations of movement. Paul Ellingworth offers¹³ a very helpful outline of what we might call the sacred geography, the soteriological cosmology of Hebrews, based on passages in Hebrews which give or imply a certain geographical-cosmological picture not only of the universe but of Jesus's place within it, and in particular where some movement within the universe is implied. Three conclusions emerge: first, that Hebrews is not consistent, does not attempt to offer a perfectly coherent and straightforward picture of the universe. For example, there is ambiguity between 'heaven' and 'the heavens' (e.g. 9:24 compared with 4:14; 7:26) which cannot convincingly be removed, and does not need to be. Secondly, it is therefore not possible to insist that Hebrews belongs, with regard to its cosmology, to a particular religious-historical background to which all of its statements and implications should be conformed. It is helpful instead to note the apparently happy co-existence of these different pictures, and especially the combination of horizontal and vertical dimensions. But most important for our present purposes, these varying models tend to emerge in discussion of Christ's life as a journey, and the isomorphism between his journey of incarnation, death and exaltation and the pilgrimage of the Christian in solidarity with him. In particular, it is striking that where the notion of movement is absent from the implied sacred geography, so is the emphasis on the solidarity between Jesus and his brethren. As well as

¹³ P. Ellingworth, 'Jesus and the Universe in Hebrews,' *Evangelical Quarterly* 58 (1986)4, pp. 337-54.

in chapter two throughout, we find both notions together in 4:14f, in which Christ is described as having passed through the heavens, and as having been tested in every respect as we are, though without sin; again in 9:24 where Jesus is said to have entered into heaven ‘now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf; in 6:19f Jesus ‘a forerunner on our behalf’ is said to have entered ‘the inner shrine behind the curtain’; and the culmination of this notion of a shared journey comes in 10:19f: ‘we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us...’

These verses also remind us, however, that it is important to strike a balance: on the one hand, we have this key emphasis on the solidarity between Jesus and (the rest of) humanity, which now has the opportunity to share in his journey into heaven. Yet there remains that crucial difference we have also seen, the absolute superiority of Jesus over all creation on account of his sharing in God’s creative sovereignty; and this superiority is also seen in the fact that for Jesus, unlike for us, the journey that he has made and which we are able to follow is the second leg of a return journey. It is precisely because Jesus as Son belongs by nature in heaven that his death can be the moment of his entrance into the sanctuary not made with human hands. As the Son who by nature belongs with the Father in heaven (1:2ff) his priesthood is not like that of Aaron and his sons, requiring repeated sacrifices that are merely signs, but like that of Melchisedek, eternal (7:3) and so able to make an eternally-*efficacious offering* (9:26). Note how the expression in this verse ‘since the foundation of the world’ (*apo katabolēs kosmou*) exactly echoes 4:3, which explores the way in which the follower of Jesus is able to enter also into eternal, heavenly rest.

So we are obliged also to embrace the other possible nuance of the word *archēgos*, that of being a foundation, a first cause or originator.¹⁴ We are not obliged to conclude that Jesus had that same kind of faith in which the Epistle exhorts its audience to endure, a faith that is founded upon things unseen and hoped for. Rather, Jesus in his humanity echoed but also far exceeded the certainty of Joshua and Caleb: they had seen the land of Canaan, but Jesus has seen the invisible realities on which human faith is founded. Christ is not simply the superabundantly faithful human being but the one on whose achievements all authentic faith is founded and in which it is perfected. He travelled by sight, and we by faith, we may say, for we do not yet see what Jesus has seen, though he has torn upon the veil. ‘But we do see Jesus’ (2:9), one who has reached the end of the

¹⁴ Cf. H.G. Liddell et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon* (9th revised edition; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

journey on which the Christian is still engaged, and in this sense he is pioneer as well as perfecter of faith.