THE CLOUD OF WITNESSES IN HEBREWS 11

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I. Introduction

Hebrews 11 is almost universally regarded as a display of the “heroes of faith” whose valiant “assurance” (ὑπόστασις) and “confidence” (έλεγχος) for which “they were commended” (εμαρτυρήθησαν) we are to emulate. In large part, this common interpretation is inspired and reinforced by highly questionable traditional renderings of key terms listed above from Heb 11:1-2, which continue on in newer English versions despite well-founded objections in lexical and scholarly authorities.

This situation is understandable, because when one renders the passage properly it comes across as enigmatic or ironic at best and unintelligible at worst. Scholarly interpretation of the passage is not always clear and, curiously, often devolves to the popular view in the end despite awareness that its basis in translation is faulty.

My understanding of Heb 11 proceeds from the author’s presentation of the OT believers recorded in the biblical record as recipients of divine testimony to the coming eschatological realities, and thence by faith they became participants in and witnesses to the world to come. It was by faith that the “elders” (Heb 11:2)

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1 This viewpoint is especially found in scores of popular treatments, e.g., G. Campbell Morgan, The Triumphs of Faith: Expositions of Hebrews 11 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973), esp. 23-25; and A. S. Peake, The Heroes & Martyrs of Faith (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1910). I wish to emphasize from the start that the author does enjoin us to emulate the persevering faith of the OT saints recorded in Heb 11. He says so explicitly in 6:12, and see 10:35-36 for the ideas of “confidence” and “endurance.” But this is a secondary implication of our chapter’s message, not its primary concern.


5 This idea of OT participation in Christ was suggested most powerfully by Geerhardus Vos, The Teaching of the Epistle to the Hebrews (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 67: “Christ is the core of
acted as instruments of redemptive revelation, and hence they became the “cloud of witnesses surrounding us” (Heb 12:1). Therefore, Heb 11 bears directly on the author’s conception of the nature and central theme of the OT Scriptures as an organic unfolding of redemptive revelation, and this chapter powerfully witnesses to his hearers that they cannot reject Christ, the Reality, and go back to a supposed “old time religion” of the OT era.

To substantiate my interpretation, I will briefly review the lexical evidence for the key words in Heb 11:1-2 and survey some representative scholarly interpretations of the text. I will conclude with a brief discussion of how some of the OT saints in Heb 11 act as witnesses to the world to come in redemptive history.

II. Conviction

The word ὑπόστασις, usually rendered “assurance” or the like, has attracted most of the attention in treatments of Heb 11:1. However, I believe it is more fruitful to start with ἔλεγχος (often rendered “conviction”), which has a simpler range of meanings than ὑπόστασις. The value of this strategy is shown by the clear parallel structure of the statement where ἔλεγχος is presented as a term which expands on the meaning of ὑπόστασις in the same way that “things hoped for” and “things not seen” explain each other. The statement in Heb 11:1 can be arranged so:

A ἔλπιζομένων
B ὑπόστασις
C πράγματων
B' ἔλεγχος
A' οὐ βλεπομένων

Obviously the author has deliberately lined up ὑπόστασις alongside ἔλεγχος (as well as ἔλπιζομένα with οὐ βλεπομένα with coordinating πράγματα in the center). Hence, to understand the meaning of ἔλεγχος first will help us to determine the meaning of ὑπόστασις in Heb 11:1.

The word ἔλεγχος occurs most often in deliberative or forensic contexts for the refutation or disproof of an argument or charge; from here it moves on to mean the heavenly, spiritual world. Therefore a real contact existed between that world and the Old Testament house. The Old Testament house was therefore also in vital contact with the heavenly, spiritual reality” (original emphasis).

6 All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

7 This is the only NT use of ἔλεγχος, though it does occur as a variant for related ἔλεγμος in 2 Tim 3:16. Cf. ἔλεγμος (Acts 19:27), ἔλεγχος (2 Pet 2:16), and verbal ἔλέγχω (17 NT occurrences).

8 This arrangement was also noticed by Ervens Mengelle, “La estructura de Hebreos 11, 1,” Bib 78 (1997): 534-42. Note that ἄρρητα can refer to either some historical occurrence (“event, occurrence”) or to a “matter” or “thing” (as Heb 10:1; cf. BDAG), but it is not strictly needed (as, e.g., Heb 11:7: τῶν μηδέπω βλεπόμενων), since a Greek author normally uses a simple neuter form to reference any “thing” in general. Also notice the fronting of the genitive ἔλπιζομένων but not of οὐ βλεπομένων. These two points confirm that the chiastic parallelism was deliberate. Cf. George H. Guthrie, The Structure of Hebrews: A Text-Linguistic Analysis (SNT 73; Leiden: Brill, 1994), 87-88 for parallels between Heb 11:1-2 and 11:39-40.
the examination or scrutiny of evidence and then to the evidence or proof itself used to establish an argument or legal condemnation (BDAG; L&N; LSJ). Finally, from the cognate verb ἐλέγχω (“I reprove, rebuke”) the noun can also signify a reproach, which is its most frequent meaning in the LXX where it is found alongside κατά, “chastisement, discipline, training” (e.g., Prov 6:23; 15:32; cf. Heb 12:5-7). Beyond this, there is very little leeway for ἐλέγχος, and it never demonstrably signifies mental certainty as to the truth or reality of something as our versions indicate when they render ἐλέγχος as “conviction” (ESV; NASB; NRSV) or “being . . . certain” (NIV; TNIV).9

However, to render ἐλέγχος properly leads to this enigmatic translation: “Now faith is . . . the evidence of things not seen” (KJV; cf. NKJV and NAB). It is no wonder that John Chrysostom exclaimed, “Goodness! What a statement when he says, ‘Evidence of things not seen,’ for we speak of evidence for things which are perfectly evident.”10

As a result of this difficulty, James Moffatt posited that the author of Hebrews was giving ἐλέγχος a new meaning here: “Ἐλέγχος was used in a fresh sense, as the subjective ‘conviction.’ . . . The writer could find no Greek term for the idea, and therefore struck out a fresh application for ἐλέγχος.”11 However, the author of Hebrews did indeed have several other terms at hand in Greek by which to communicate the concept of mental “assurance,” “confidence,” or “conviction”—three of which he uses in his epistle: παρρησία (3:6; 4:16; 10:19, 35); καύχημα (3:6); and πληροφορία (6:11; 10:22); and see also πεποίθησις (e.g., 2 Cor 1:15; 3:4; 8:22; Phil 3:4); ἀσφάλεια (Luke 1:4); and θάρσος (Acts 28:15). We need not follow Moffatt’s desperate measure here.

III. Assurance?

Our look at ἐλέγχος suggests that parallel ὑπόστασις likewise probably does not have a subjective meaning, “assurance”—which is the universal scholarly conclusion from lexical studies—and it is therefore puzzling that newer English versions still have “assurance” (ESV) and “being sure” (TNIV). At least one doctoral dissertation, several lengthy articles, entries in lexicons and other Greek language references, as well as a throng of commentators all agree: ὑπόστασις should not be rendered “assurance” (going back to Luther’s famous feste Zuversicht, “sure confidence”).12 How then should it be translated?

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9 Cf. Luther’s ein Nichtzweifeln.
11 James Moffatt, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1924), 159; emphasis added.
Admittedly, ὑπόστασις is a little enigmatic because of a range of diverse meanings. It was used in early medical texts for “sediment” or “accumulation” in liquids, a “sub-strata” as its etymology from ὑπό (“under”) and ἵστημι (“stand”) suggests. In philosophy, it was often used metaphorically to refer to real “substance,” “essence,” or “being” as a synonym of οὐσία or sometimes to the process of coming into being, “actualization, realization.” As such, ὑπόστασις (“actual reality”) was used over against ἐμφάσις, “mere outward appearance.” Likewise κατ’ ἐπινοίαν was used for “conceptually” versus κατ’ ὑπόστασιν, “really.” This latter usage is particularly interesting since the rendering “confidence” or “assurance” for ὑπόστασις in Heb 11:1 suggests a meaning in the realm of the mind whereas ὑπόστασις was used in Greek in contrast to a mental act (ἐπινοια).\(^{13}\)

The philosophical sense for ὑπόστασις, “essence” or “being” became important in Christological debates in the early church. At the beginning it was used as a synonym for οὐσία, “being,” but by the time of the Chalcedonian Creed, ὑπόστασις had developed into a synonym for πρόσωπον, “person,” to express the differentiation of the three members of the Trinity who are one in οὐσία yet three in ὑποστάσεις. Calvin preferred to discuss the idea of the three ὑπόστασες of the Trinity with the cognate Latin term subsistentiae, “subsistences,” rather than with personae which could easily suggest a modalist misunderstanding (persona was originally the “mask” of an actor in a play, then the “character” portrayed).

The philosophical usage for ὑπόστασις (“essence,” “reality,” “substance”) is immediately relevant for Hebrews in that this is the universally accepted meaning in Heb 1:3 where we read that the Son is the stamp (χαρακτήρ) of the divine “nature” (ESV; RSV; NASB), “being” (NIV; TNIV; NAB), “very being” (NRSV; NKJV), or “person” (KJV). The other use of ὑπόστασις in Hebrews is at 3:14 and yields a very interesting and important interpretation deserving its own treatment, especially when one sees the connection to participation in Christ and the “reality” which he introduces.\(^{14}\)

\(^{13}\) Other renderings for ὑπόστασις are: foundation,” “origin,” “duration [of time],” “steadfastness,” “undertaking,” “plan,” and possibly in the financial realm, “pledge” or “deposit” on a loan (see LSJ; BDAG; and MM). The term is found in the LXX for quite a range of Hebrew words: ms* , “burden” (Deut 1:12); yqum, “what subsists, what is living” (Deut 11:6); khlk, “existence” (Ps 39:5 [MT v. 6; LXX 38:6]); and m'md, “foothold, standing-place” (Ps 69:2 [MT v. 3; LXX 68:3]). ὑπόστασις occurs in places (Ruth 1:12 and Ezek 19:5) where the idea is thought to be “hope,” and hence some people blend this idea into “assurance” for Heb 11:1. However, the one passage (Ezek 19:5) is very obscure in both Hebrew and Greek according to OT commentators (e.g., Cooke, Zimmerli), while the other (Ruth 1:12) is best seen as an instance of the meaning “plan” or even “reality” in the LXX.

\(^{14}\) See esp. Köster, TDNT, 8.587-88; cf. Enrique Nardoni, “Partakers in Christ (Hebrews 3.14),” NTS 37 (1991): 456-72. The other occurrences of ὑπόστασις in the NT are in 2 Cor 9:4 and 11:17 as “plan” or “endeavor”; see esp. BDAG or TDNT.
As mentioned, there are real difficulties for apprehending what Heb 11 is about if ὑπόστασις and ἔλεγχος are properly rendered, so that commentators have sometimes given the opinion that the subjective meanings for these two words are "readily derivable" (though not demonstrably) from their established meanings. But simple lexicographical investigation leads us to conclude with BDAG (p. 1041) that, "The sense 'confidence,' 'assurance'... for Hb 11:1 has enjoyed much favor but must be eliminated, since examples of it cannot be found." Hence, the proper rendering of Heb 11:1 was given long ago in the KJV (cf. NKJV and NAB): "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen."

Scholars who have correctly understood the meaning of the words ὑπόστασις and ἔλεγχος have nevertheless sometimes slipped back into the subjective meaning of faith as "confidence" or "assurance," showing just how troublesome this passage can be. Let me illustrate this with two examples.

The first interpretation is that of Friedrich Büchsel in his TDNT entry on ἔλεγχος:

In Hb. 11:1, in the well-known characterization of faith, ἔλεγχος means "proof" or "persuasion" rather than correction. But it cannot be taken in the sense of subjective persuasion, since this does not correspond to the usage. . . To find the convincing subject in faith, as most of the older exeges did, endangers the necessary parallelism of ὑπόστασις and ἔλεγχος, and obscures the inner right of the ὑπόστασις. If we are to name a convincing subject, it can only be God. A faith which of itself contained or offered proof of things unseen would not be the faith of Hb., which stands on the revelation, Word and promise of God and has nothing but what it receives. Thus faith is confidence in what is hoped for, since it is the divinely given conviction of things unseen.

The second authority we quote is William Lane from his two-volume commentary in the Word Biblical Commentary series. Lane translates Heb 11:1 as: "Now faith celebrates the objective reality [of the blessings] for which we hope, the demonstration of events as yet unseen." Apart from the ambiguous and overused word "celebrates" here, Lane's translation is the sort which we must accept on sound linguistic grounds. But now look at Lane's interpretation of the verse:

From this perspective, πίστις, "faith," is something objective that bestows upon the objects of hope (ἐλπιζομένων) even now a substantial reality, which will unfold in God's appointed time. It gives them the force of present realities and enables the person of faith to enjoy the full certainty of future realization (Dörrie, Ἀνθρ. 46 [1955]:

16 Most interpretations of Heb 11:1 give ὑπόστασις a subjective value (Gefühlswert) which it demonstrably never has" (Dörrie, "Zu Hbr 11:1," 197 n. 5 [my trans.]).
17 Emphasis added. See also the Vulgate: Est autem fides sperandorum substantia, rerum argumentum non forensum.
18 Büchsel, TDNT 2:476; emphasis added.
Faith provides the objective ground upon which others may base their subjective confidence. This capacity of faith permits Christians to exercise a present grasp upon undemonstrable truth and to exhibit stability in the presence of hostility, knowing that the blessings for which they hope are firmly secured by the promise of God.\textsuperscript{20}

There are some aspects of both Büchse\'s and Lane\'s interpretations which we can retain with appreciation. However, note how both authors, after rejecting the notion that faith in 11:1 is a subjective assurance, curiously return to it in the end. This is particularly evident in Lane who states that faith itself \textit{bestows} reality on "undemonstrable truth" (!) in a kind of subjective fideism foreign to the Scriptures much less to Hebrews.\textsuperscript{21}

IV. Divine Testimony

Our last key word to consider in the passage is \textit{έμαρτυρήθησαν} (Heb 11:2) which is rendered "received their commendation" (ESV), "received divine approval" (RSV; cf. NRSV; NASB), or "were commended" (NIV; TNIV). While it is true that the word \textit{μαρτυρέω} can signify a positive testimony about someone, "to approve; praise" (e.g., Acts 6:3; cf. BDAG; LSJ; L&N §33.263), this is not the meaning elsewhere in Hebrews or in Heb 11:2.\textsuperscript{22} Instead, the simple meaning here and elsewhere in Hebrews is to attest solemnly to the reality or truth of something: "to attest, testify, bear witness."\textsuperscript{23}

Hebrews 11:2 is related to the characterization of faith in v. 1 as its undergirding premise with connecting γάρ. The OT saints believed the "reality" and "evidence" of eschatological events, but their faith itself rested upon divine testimony of these things, which is precisely what Heb 11:2 says: "For in connection with their faith [ἐν ταύτῃ], the people of old received testimony." A looser paraphrase can be: "For in connection with their faith God testified [of the invisible objects of hope] to the saints of old."\textsuperscript{24}

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 329; emphasis added.

\textsuperscript{21} Lane\'s view has ancient roots; e.g., John Chrysostom comments: "For since the objects of hope seem to be unsubstantial [ἀνυπόστατα], faith gives them substantiality [υπόστασις], or rather, does not give it, but is itself their substance [ουσία]" (Hom. Heb XXI:4 [NPNF\textsuperscript{1} trans.]). Cf. Michel, \textit{Hebräer}, 373 and n. 1 and his own return to the subjective view on 377.

\textsuperscript{22} \textit{μαρτυρέω} appears in Heb 7:8, 17; 10:15; and five times in ch. 11 at vv. 2, 4 (2x), 5, and 39; synonymous \textit{διαμαρτύρομαι} is found in Heb 2:6; and \textit{συνεπιμαρτυρέω} ("testify together with") in Heb 2:4. See also cognate \textit{μαρτύρησις} and \textit{μάρτυς} in 3:5; 10:28; and 12:1.


\textsuperscript{24} The passive \textit{έμαρτυρήθησαν} has God as the implied subject—so also with passive \textit{μαρτυρέω} in Heb 7:8, 17; 11:5, 39; and with other verbs elsewhere (e.g., future passive \textit{λαληθησομένων} in 3:5, "things to be spoken," may be paraphrased: "things which God would later reveal"; or \textit{έλαλήθη} in 11:8 where the reference is to God\'s promise to Abraham); cf. Daniel Wallace, \textit{Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics} (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 437-38. The active genitive absolute statement in 11:4 confirms this interpretation: \textit{μαρτυρούντων} . . . ὠ τὸ θεό, "God bearing witness." The \textit{ἐν} in the phrase \textit{ἐν ταύτῃ} communicates a general specification, "in connection with" (cf. BDAG, \textit{ἐν meaning} #12). The author avoids the often repeated dative \textit{πίστει} because he does not want to communicate an instrumental idea here; contra Attridge, \textit{Hebrews}, 314 and n. 104.
testimony in the wilderness generation failed to mix the gospel they heard with faith (Heb 4:2; cf. 3:13, 19) and therefore failed to enter into the parabolic portrayal of the eschatological blessing (see Heb 9:9 and 11:19), then it follows that those who did believe the divine, oath-bound testimony (Heb 6:13-17) were, by faith, apprehending the substance of the future eschatological realities promised by God, a hope which he “set before them” (Heb 6:18; cf. 12:2).

V. Faith Characterized

To establish the view that Heb 11 presents the believers recorded in the OT as simultaneously participants in and witnesses to the world to come by faith, we will look at some supporting exegetical details followed by interpretation of some key sections in Heb 11 which illustrate our viewpoint.

First, Heb 11:1 is not a definition of faith, but a characterization of some key aspects of the faith of the OT witnesses. A characterization does not give an exhaustive or abstract definition of something, but brings out certain key features or even distinguishing outcomes of something. For example: “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world” (Jas 1:27; ESV). The care for needy persons and the avoidance of sin do not define “pure and undefiled religion,” but they do well characterize piety in action.

The word “faith” is treated the same way in Heb 11; the author presents faith in action, as comes out so clearly by his repeated use of the instrumental dative πίστει (“by faith”) 18 times in the 40 verses of this chapter (see also δια πίστεως in Heb 11:33 and 39).

An implication of the preceding point is that the author of Hebrews is not directly addressing faith in ch. 11 as it operates in the ordo salutis as is often the focus in Paul. Instead, he is treating the persevering faith of the OT saints in particular as they now testify to us as a “cloud of witnesses” (Heb 12:1). Misunderstanding this distinction has led to support for the errant subjective rendering of ὑπόστασις and ἰλεγχος as well as a failure to appreciate some key details in the brief accounts of the OT saints surveyed in Heb 11. The author here points to the faith of the inscripturated witnesses who apprehended the promised, unseen eschatological realities through divine testimony—and then persevered in this faith (cf. Heb 10:36-39). This was faith in action.

25 “[T]hose who think that an exact definition of faith is being given here are greatly mistaken” (John Calvin, The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews and the First and Second Epistles of St Peter [trans. William B. Johnston; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans], 157); cf. Büchsel in TDNT (2:476) quoted above, who calls Heb 11:1 “the well-known characterization of faith” contra Attridge, Hebrews, 307-8.

26 For other such characterizations, see Jas 3:15-17 (wisdom “from above”); John 4:24 (“God is Spirit”); and John 17:3 (“This is eternal life, that they know you . . .”); cf. C. Spicq, L’Entre aux Hébreux (2 vols.; SB; Paris: Gabalda, 1977), 2:182.

27 Note, however, Gal 3:23-25 where πίστις is said to have arrived with Christ, esp. in light of Paul’s earlier insistence that we believe along with “believing Abraham” (Gal 3:6-9).

VI. Testimony of the Saints

As stated, the OT saints’ faith rested upon God’s promises spoken to them as solemn testimony by the One whose word always comes with a guarantee of absolute fidelity so that his covenantal oath is added only as a concession to our weakness (Heb 1:1; 6:13-18). Because of this fact, the saints who received this prior redemptive revelation and who responded with persevering faith have themselves become “a cloud of witnesses” (Heb 12:1) to us. Note that our author does not call the OT believers of Heb 11 examples for us to emulate—though that may be a secondary implication of our text. Rather, they are first and foremost witnesses who testify to the reality of the heavenly verities which God has promised to them and to us. Why? Because their stories were recorded in the Spirit-given testimony of Scripture (3:7; 10:15).

A wrong turn some have made is to read “witness” in the phrase “cloud of witnesses” as saying that the inscripturated believers of Heb 11 are mere spectators who watch us as we run our race (Heb 12:1b) rather than those who actively bear testimony to us as witnesses. The word “witness” (μάρτυς) does imply some sort of personal experience of an event or person, but in Greek, μάρτυς includes the notion that the person attests or bears witness in some sense to what he has seen. The notion of acting as an onlooker is normally communicated in Greek with the noun ο θεατής (“spectator,” “onlooker”; not used in the Bible) or forms of the verbs θεωρέω or θεάομαι rather than with μάρτυς or its word group. The saints of Heb 11:4-40 whose faith eventually led them into perfection in a heavenly Mount Zion (Heb 12:23) stand as witnesses to us of the realities of the world to come and the benefits of entrusting ourselves to faith’s
“Pioneer and Perfector,” Jesus (Heb 12:2). Like Abel, the OT saints, even though dead, still speak (Heb 11:4).33

This interpretation of Heb 11 is critical for understanding the whole of the Epistle to the Hebrews and particularly the author’s teaching on redemptive revelation and the interconnection between the old and new covenant Scriptures. Hebrews 11 shows that the author regards the whole OT record as a witness to the eschatological realities introduced by Christ “at the consummation of the ages” (Heb 9:26).34 All of this language is grounded in the fact that God has borne witness first of all (Heb 11:2, 4-5, 39), and therefore faith becomes the “realization” and “evidence” of the unseen, hoped-for things (Heb 11:1).

VII. Things Not Seen

We have been thinking of the content of the OT saints’ witness in Heb 11 as the eschatological verities or as the realities of the world to come. Some of the evidence for this point will be explored when we examine sample passages from Heb 11 in more detail, but a brief word on this point is in order.

First, we have seen from our earlier discussion of 11:1 that faith places one into vital contact with the “reality” and “evidence” of “things hoped for” (έλπιζόμενα) and “things not seen” (ού βλεπόμενα). These “things not seen” are not a parallel realm of Platonic forms, but, as implied in “things hoped for,” they are unseen because they are future and they are historical events.35 The author makes this point clear when he remarks that Noah was warned “with regard to things not yet seen” (περί τών μηδέπω βλεπομένων) in Heb 11:7 (also v. 3).36 The author clearly chose the same βλεπόμενα participle in v. 7 in order to elucidate his meaning in v. 1 as future events.

An even more explicit statement to this effect is made in Heb 3:5. In the context of Heb 3:1-5, the author of Hebrews compares the dignity and person of Christ with that of Moses. The connection between the two is their fidelity to their respective offices. Christ was Son and Builder of the house (vv. 2-3, 6; cf. 1:2, 5), whereas Moses was a servant within the house (v. 5; cf. Num 12:7). What concerns us here is the phrase added at the end of v. 5: “Now Moses was faithful in all God’s house as a servant, to testify to the things that were to be spoken later.”

33 “This chapter asserts that believing involves bearing testimony to what is believed. This is done by word and deed. . . . [All those who have died and whose lives are recorded in Old Testament Scripture speak to those who live in Christian times with the voice of God” (Hywel R. Jones, Let’s Study Hebrews [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2002], 120). “Such πνεύματα δικαιών τετελειωμένων ['spirits of righteous men who have reached perfection'] speak to us (11:4) still” (Moffatt, Hebrews, 193). The author of Hebrews similarly expresses the idea of the church bearing witness in the world through the related terms “confess” (όμολογεω) and “confession” (ομολογία) (Heb 3:1; 4:14; 10:23; 11:13; 13:15). Cf. Trites, Witness, 217.


The last phrase in Greek is εἰς μαρτύριον τῶν λαληθησομένων where the future participle of λαλέω is used to refer to the revelation of redemptive events in Christ (e.g., Heb 1:1-4; 2:1-4) and are summarized as “the world to come, of which we are speaking” (Heb 2:5). Hence, Moses the believer was a witness to future redemptive events as a servant in Christ’s household. In Heb 11 all the OT saints recorded in Scripture are likewise invoked as witnesses to these things.

With this treatment of Heb 11:1-2, we can now turn our attention to some of the OT witnesses the author brings to our attention. Let me stress that my list is just a sampling for the sake of demonstrating how the author selects and interprets the stories of the saints from the OT to show how they testify to us. To regard these witnesses as “heroes of faith” who illustrate an abstract definition of faith misunderstands their function as witnesses to the world to come. The examples chosen from the scriptural testimony confirm the author’s solemn warning against apostatizing from Christ for the external, sensible sacrifices of the old covenant.

VIII. Witness of Abel

The first of the OT saints mentioned in Heb 11 is Abel in v. 4, whose testimony the author describes with his characteristic genius for understatement saturated with meaning. It begins with this phrase: “By faith, Abel offered to God a sacrifice of more consequence than did Cain.”

Note the subtle care the author has taken in saying that Abel’s sacrifice was “a sacrifice of more consequence [παρέλαβεν θυσίαν] than Cain’s. To render παρέλαυν here as “better” (NASB; NIV; TNIV) might seem to lend to Abel’s sacrifice some inherent value which it did not have. Hebrews is quite clear: the only sacrifice with any genuinely atoning value is the sacrifice of Christ, which is far and away better (κρείττων) than any previous OT sacrifice could ever be (Heb 9:23; cf. 10:1-4; 12:24), for it alone can cleanse the conscience of those who approach God because of its oath-guaranteed efficacy (Heb 7:20-22; 9:9).

37 Cf., e.g., Eisenbaum’s remark (Jewish Heroes, 2): “Although the author claims to be enumerating stellar heroes of faith, he has chosen some poor examples for illustrating faithfulness, at least not the best the Bible has to offer.”

38 The author uses a relatively rare but established meaning of πολύς/πλείων here, which signifies something of more value or importance (see LSJ meaning #3; but missing in BDAG). This meaning is clearly found in Matt 6:25 (= Luke 12:23): “Is not your life more valuable [πλείων] than food and your body than its apparel?” and in Matt 12:41-42 (= Luke 11:31-32): “And behold, something of more consequence [παρέλαυν] than Jonah [and than Solomon] is here . . . .” The rendering “more acceptable” for παρέλαυν in Heb 11:4 as in the RSV, NRSV, and ESV has no support in Greek. Besides, the author would have used εὐάρεστος if this had been his meaning (as Heb 13:21; cf. adverb εὐαρέστως in Heb 12:28). The ingenious conjecture of C. G. Cobet (see, e.g., Bruce, Hebrews, 282 n. 26) that παρέλαυν is a scribal corruption here for an original ἡδίονα ("more pleasant") is intriguing at first glance given ancient orthography (i.e., ΠΑΕΙΩΝΑ for ΗΑΙΩΝΑ or even ΗΑΙΩΝΑ), but it cannot stand up to the complete lack of manuscript evidence and is superfluous given the established meaning “more valuable” or “of more consequence” for παρέλαυν.
14; 10:2, 22; 13:18). Hence, Abel's sacrifice was only penultimately more valuable than Cain's because it was a testimony of the greater sacrifice to come.

This interpretation of πλείων has the added advantage of guarding against a misunderstanding that might flow from our curiosity about Abel's sacrifice. What made his sacrifice "of more consequence" than Cain's? That it was offered in faith and Cain's was not?\(^39\) Well, yes, but faith without a true object is nothing. Faith does not carry some intrinsic power to consecrate any arbitrary gift we might devise into an acceptable service to God.\(^40\) If it could, the original audience of Hebrews could rightly respond to the author's epistle by claiming that they were turning in faith to the Levitical sacrifices. If faith in God is all that is needed, why not continue in exclusive temple worship and leave the approach to God through Christ's sacrifice as an option for those who so choose?

In the end though, faith is nothing if its object is ethereal, for it cannot bestow reality on objects of hope. Faith must always be solidly rooted in evidence (ἐπεισόδιον) which is real (καθ' ὑπόστασιν). For biblical faith, the foundation is the oath-bound testimony of God himself and the finished work of Christ. When the angel of the covenant raises his right hand (Deut 32:40-42; Rev 10:5-6), or both hands (Dan 12:7), and swears to the certainty of God's consummate acts, we can overcome all wavering doubts in "the full confidence of faith" (Heb 10:22; cf. 6:13-19), knowing that even though we do not yet see the fulfillment of all of God's promises (Heb 2:8), we do see Jesus (Heb 2:9), the consummator of our faith (Heb 12:2).\(^41\)

Abel's sacrifice in Heb 11:4, then, can only be regarded as of more consequence than that of Cain because, as the text clearly says, through faith he received divine testimony to his righteousness at the offering of his gifts.\(^42\) It is at this juncture that rendering μαρτυρέω as "to commend" or "to approve" is most distracting to the author's real point in both its occurrences in v. 4 and cannot be accounted for in the Greek text.\(^43\)

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\(^39\) This is one of the two main answers given to this question in the history of interpretation. The other is that Abel's was a blood offering of his firstborn animals ("and of their fat portions" in Gen 4:4 shows that he slaughtered them), but Cain's gift was only a cereal offering ("of the fruit of the ground") and not even his firstfruits (as noted as early as Philo in his treatise on the subject, Sacr., esp. §20).

\(^40\) Cf. Jones, Hebrews, 127.


\(^42\) As with most commentators and made explicit in the NIV and TNIV, I am taking the antecedent of the relative pronoun in the phrase ἐν αὐτής to be πίστις ("faith"), not θυσία ("sacrifice"); faith is the dominating theme of the discussion; πίστις stays in view as the antecedent of the demonstrative pronoun ἐν αὐτής in v. 4d also; so Westcott, Hebrews, 257; Spicq, Hébreux, 2:342; Attridge, Hebrews, 316; etc.

\(^43\) The meaning, "approved" for μαρτυρέω is given in the lexicons primarily for the idea of speaking well about someone (e.g., Luke 4:22); or in the passive for someone whose life or good conduct is "well attested" by the community (e.g., Acts 10:22), someone "of [good] repute" (Acts 6:3). However, the first use in Heb 11:4 has an infinitive clause (διαμαρτυρήθη εἰςα ἡμῖν), which clearly shows that the author intends to identify the content of testimony being borne (as, e.g., Acts...
Now comes a most instructive phrase in Hebrews’ treatment of Abel. The author clearly alludes in the last clause of Heb 11:4 to Gen 4:10 when he observes that Abel speaks in death. But there is a significant difference. In Gen 4:10 Abel’s blood cries out to God from the earth—surely as a cry for vengeance against his murderer which God duly executes by pronouncing judgment on Cain (Gen 4:11-12; cf. Rev 16:6; 17:6; and 18:24 in connection with Rev 19:2; Jub. 4:1-6). But in Heb 11:4, Abel himself speaks to us through faith even though he is dead. The author’s point is perfectly clear. Once the cry of Abel’s blood to God was recorded as part of the living and active voice of Scripture (Heb 4:12), Abel became a living witness who “speaks” to us of the righteousness of faith (cf. Heb 11:7). The common interpretation that faith creates the substance of things hoped for runs aground on this clause, since Abel surely did not hope to die and to speak, though dead, through faith. The object of Abel’s faith was that to which his sacrifice pointed, and the blood which speaks better than his own (Heb 12:24).

IX. Witness of Enoch

The next OT patriarch our author treats is Enoch who drew the attention of many writers of early and late Jewish works. The account in Gen 5:18-24 reiterates in vv. 22 and 24 that Enoch “walked with God,” then “he was not, for God took him.” The LXX renders the “walking with God” in Gen 5:22, 24 and elsewhere as “pleasing” God, which is an accurate interpretation of the Hebrew idiom. Hebrews (11:5) follows the LXX by saying that Enoch “pleased God” before his translation into heaven (so also Sir 44:16).
There are two things to focus upon in Heb 11:5-6 which advance our thesis on redemptive revelation in Heb 11. First, following his theme regarding faith in this chapter, the author of Hebrews asserts that it was by faith (πίστει) that Enoch was “removed” and “not found” “so that he would not see death” (cf. Sir 49:14). Secondly, the author once again underlines divine testimony as foundational to Enoch’s faith, so that Enoch could join the “cloud of witnesses” for our persevering faith.

To begin with, we must see that vv. 5 and 6 are inseparably linked together in a demonstration that Enoch did indeed live by that faith which is required for righteousness and life (Heb 10:38 from Hab 2:4), since Gen 5:18-24 does not explicitly say that Enoch exercised faith. The focus of attention at the beginning of v. 5 is upon God’s translation of Enoch as the eventual outcome of his faith: “By faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death, and he was not found, because God had taken him” (ESV). The repetition here should not be missed: “Enoch was taken up . . . he should not see death . . . he was not found . . . God had taken him.” This emphasis is clearly with an eye upon the Christian’s own hope to escape death through our great High Priest (e.g., Heb 2:14). Enoch had the same faith as ours and is witness to the reality of faith’s object.

The remaining portion of v. 5 and into v. 6 shows us how the biblical witness implies that Enoch had saving faith. The progression of the author’s thinking is clear as long as we include v. 6 and fill in some of the blanks: Enoch received testimony that he pleased God, and since this is impossible apart from faith Enoch must have exercised faith, and so his translation can be said to have been “by faith.” The use of γάρ (“for”) at v. 5b shows that his exposition in v. 5b-6 is the underlying reason for his interpretive conclusion in v. 5a.

One of the linchpins in the author’s demonstration of Enoch’s faith is that “before his translation he had this testimony, that he pleased God” (KJV). NASB makes it even more explicit that Enoch himself “obtained the witness . . . that . . . he was pleasing to God.” We are not told in the Genesis text how it is that Enoch received this testimony, but our author says that the reiteration of the fact that “Enoch pleased [or ‘walked with’] God” in Gen 5:22 and 24 would have been known to Enoch himself and therefore would have given him attestation to the reality of things for which he hoped. After all, Gen 5:22 says that

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48 Some early writers believed that Enoch died a normal death and that his “translation” was a reference to his repentance from sin; cf. Dieter Lührmann, “Henoch und die Metanoia,” ZNW 66 (1975): 103-16. Hebrews clearly interprets Enoch’s “removal” or “translation” (μετάθεσις) as his “not seeing death” so that he was removed from earth into God’s presence. This is the only viable interpretation of the Hebrew and LXX of Gen 5:24. Note that the expression “and he died” is a recurring refrain for the patriarchs in Gen 5 (vv. 5, 8, 11, 14, 17, 20, 27, 31) except Enoch, so that the absence of this phrase in Gen 5:24 is most striking.

49 Several commentators make this observation, e.g., Paul Ellingworth, The Epistle to the Hebrews (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 576; Lane, Hebrews, 2:337; Michel, Hebrews, 386-87; Attridge, Hebrews, 318.

50 Once more, rendering μεμαρτύρηται with the infinitive as “he was commended as having pleased God” (ESV; cf. TNIV) does not follow Greek usage for this verb.
Enoch walked with God for 300 years and thus implies a lifetime of close communion with the Lord. Hence, Enoch’s faith rested firmly on divine testimony. The content of Enoch’s faith, of course, was rooted in the germinal promise represented in Gen 3:15. This was sufficient faith until the full revelation of the incarnate Son, so that Enoch is attested to be one of those who draw near to God in faith, and as a result Enoch himself received the reward for which he sought: entrance into God’s very presence to which we are all invited in the “new and living way” created by Christ Jesus (Heb 10:19-25, 35; cf. Ps 73:25). The author does clarify the content of this nascent faith in v. 6 when he says that one must believe that God exists and that he rewards those who seek him. We should not read v. 6 as a comprehensive statement of the object of saving faith. It is rather a statement tailored to bring out particularly that Enoch sought out God and was brought into his presence by faith.

X. Witness of Noah

The author of Hebrews next gives another condensed account of a patriarchal witness to the reality of the world to come in Noah. In one scant verse (Heb 11:7) Hebrews teases out only those elements which advance his argument from a relatively lengthy Genesis narrative concerning the Noahic development of redemptive revelation and the divine testimony of which it consists (Gen 5:26-9:29).

First off, the author confirms that the “things not seen” in v. 1 are not for him static Platonic ideas but future, eschatological events when he says that Noah received divine warning (i.e., testimony) “concerning events as yet unseen” (ESV). Likewise, other patriarchs apprehended future events (περί μελλόντων) (v. 20) such as the Exodus (v. 22) by faith, though it was “from afar” (v. 13). We too do not see the full consummation of these future realities (Heb 2:8), but we do see them come to fuller revelation and fulfillment in the coming of the Son (Heb 2:9; cf. Heb 1:1-3; 9:28). Faith, then, gives us sight like that of the servant of Elisha (2 Kgs 6:15-17). Hence, it was in reverent faith (πίστει... εὐλαβηθείς) that Noah

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51 Thomas Aquinas and others are perfectly correct to observe that the reward which God offers us who seek him is “nothing other than God himself,” as cited in Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 461.

52 Contra Lührmann, “Henoch und die Metanoia,” 103.

53 Heb 11:6 does represent a general principle of the necessity of faith to please God, but the author uses it specifically in connection with v. 5. Consequently, certain attempts to use Heb 11:6 to establish that Jesus himself had saving faith is wholly unjustifiable. Jesus did not draw near to God through sacrificial mediation as we must, since he was “holy, without evil, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens” (Heb 7:26-27). Note for instance the astonishing confusion evidenced in this statement by Norman Shepherd (The Call of Grace [Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2000], 19): “All this is made possible through the covenantal righteousness of Jesus Christ. His was a living, active, and obedient faith that took him all the way to the cross. This faith was credited to him as righteousness.” Cf. Attridge, Hebrews, 318 n. 155 for other places in Hebrews where general principles appear in the argument.
acted upon the divine warning of the coming judgment by building the ark, declares our author.\textsuperscript{54}

We must distinguish what was just said about Noah's faith as one which apprehended future events from a common interpretation of Heb 11 that believers somehow \textit{create} these realities in their minds. On this latter view we can look to William Lane's comments on Noah's faith in Heb 11:7:

Faith conferred upon those events a reality so substantial that he did not hesitate to act as thought they were already beginning to happen. He appears to have recognized that the word of God is performative; it sets in motion circumstances that will eventuate in the promised reality.\textsuperscript{55}

While I appreciate Lane's idea that God's word is performative, the problem is that he places the reality of the "things not yet seen" as somehow beginning to happen in Noah's mind. Hebrews is not interested in a merely psychological phenomenon. The reality is in the historical events as they occur, but the proof of their fulfillment in history is the giving of divine testimony, in this case when Noah was "warned" of future events (cf. Heb 12:25).

In the next section of Heb 11:7 we are told that Noah's preparation of the ark resulted in the deliverance of his household and that Noah condemned the world through faith.\textsuperscript{56} These interrelated points are most instructive for our author's understanding of redemptive revelation. Specifically, it raises the issues of typology and the organic development of revelation.\textsuperscript{57}

When Hebrews mentions that Noah's acts of faith resulted in the salvation of his house, there is an echo of the Son's actions on behalf of his house. It was the Son who demonstrated definitive, sacrificial fidelity to the one who appointed him as apostle and high priest thereby guaranteeing our hope for salvation from sin and judgment (read Heb 3:1-6 in connection with Heb 9:26-28). And so, Noah, the savior of his house, is allusively presented as a type of Christ, the

\textsuperscript{54} As with Abel, Enoch, and others, the author of Hebrews deduces the patriarch Noah's faith from a Genesis narrative which does not explicitly say that he believed. It is the nature of Hebrew historical narrative to demonstrate faith or unbelief by the actions of the subjects of the narrative; cf. Heb 3:12-19 and the author's conclusion about the wilderness generation's unbelief. The participle \textit{εὐλαβηθείς} signifies the attentiveness to one's duty in godly reverence evidenced in Noah's complete obedience to God's instructions (so Gen 6:22); cf. related \textit{εὐλαβεῖα} in Heb 5:7 and 12:28 and \textit{εὐλαβής} in Luke 2:25; Acts 2:5 and 8:2.

\textsuperscript{55} Lane, \textit{Hebrews}, 2:339; cf. Bruce, \textit{Hebrews}, 287: "Noah received a divine communication that a deluge would sweep over the earth. Such a catastrophe had never been known before, but Noah's faith supplied the proof of "things not seen"" (emphasis added).

\textsuperscript{56} As with most commentators (Calvin excepted), I take the antecedent of the relative pronoun in this clause (δι' ής) to be faith rather than the "ark" or "salvation." NIV and TNIV make this explicit: "By his faith he condemned the world." Cf. above on v. 4.

Savior of God’s household.\textsuperscript{58} Likewise, the deliverance of God’s people in Noah’s day spelled the destruction of the world in divine wrath.\textsuperscript{59}

The kind of typology proper which interprets Noah as a type of Christ only works within a broader principle of the organic development of redemptive revelation. This broader principle is what our author is working with in Heb 11, not only the more specialized area of types and correspondences between OT and NT figures. This development could be called the development of the kingdom of God or of the covenant of grace.\textsuperscript{60}

This broader area of revelatory development can be observed in the author’s focus at the end of Heb 11:7 upon Noah’s becoming an heir of that righteousness which is “according to faith.” This is a remarkable point, particularly since Noah’s righteousness is stressed in the Genesis narrative: “Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation. Noah walked with God. . . . ‘Go into the ark, you and all your household, for I have seen that you are righteous before me in this generation’” (Gen 6:9; 7:1; ESV; cf. Ezek 14:14, 20; 2 Pet 2:5).\textsuperscript{61} Hebrews was aware of this stress, and he himself also stresses Noah’s righteousness.\textsuperscript{62} But the statement on Noah’s righteousness in Hebrews represents a critical interpretative development made in one masterful stroke.

Noah’s covenant loyalty in Genesis may have been the basis of the covenant grant for the salvation of himself and his household in the temporal judgment, but it was not the perfect righteousness required for him to qualify as an heir of the world to come (Heb 12:28), much less as the surety of the new covenant (Heb 2:5) and of the kingdom which cannot be shaken (Heb 12:28), much less as the surety of the new covenant (Heb 7:22). So, Noah’s righteous standing in Genesis points to the greater righteousness needed for deliverance of Christ’s household from the coming judgment (e.g., Heb 10:30-31), of which household Noah was himself a member as are we (Heb 3:1-6).


\textsuperscript{59} Calvin (\textit{Hebrews, 166}) helps us understand this difficult statement: “The fact that [Noah] was taken up so long in building [the ark] removes all excuse from the wicked and the event which followed proved that the destruction of the world was just.” Other commentators also helpfully point to Noah’s role as a “herald of righteousness” in 2 Pet 2:5. For the notion of redemptive judgment and Noah in Genesis see esp. Meredith G. Kline, \textit{Kingdom Prologue: Genesis Foundations for a Covenantal Worldview} (Overland Park, Kans.: Two Age Press, 2000), 234-41.

\textsuperscript{60} For similar statements on Noah’s righteousness in extra-biblical literature, see esp. Bruce, \textit{Hebrews}, 288; or Lane, \textit{Hebrews}, 2:339-40. Interestingly, Moffatt (\textit{Hebrews}, 168) writes: “Philo (\textit{de congressu eruditi. 17}) notes that Noah was the first man in the OT to be specially called (\textit{Gn 6\textdegree 6\textdegree} δίκαιος).” As with Enoch, the LXX interprets the MT statement that Noah “walked with God” as “Noah pleased God” in Gen 6:9.

\textsuperscript{61} The genitive phrase τής κατά πίστιν δικαιοσύνης έγένετο κληρονόμος is brought forward and expressed in front of its lead noun, κληρονόμος, for emphasis. The normal word order has the genitive follow its lead noun as found in many examples in Heb 11 itself, e.g., vv. 3, 7, 12 (2x), 21, 25, and 27. There are also other interesting examples of fronting the genitive in Hebrews, e.g., Heb 3:1; 9:15; 11:1 and 25.
Note in particular that Noah became an heir of this (future) righteousness as something not yet seen (cf. Gal 5:5).

The last phrase in Heb 11:7, then, shows that the stream of redemptive revelation is broader than typology more narrowly defined in the fact that this broader OT stream reveals in outline all the issues of the covenant of grace come to fulfillment in the Son as the covenant mediator.63 This is how Noah acts as witness to a righteousness which is one of the "things not yet seen" (i.e., of the world to come) which "comes by faith" (κατά πίστιν) as a future grant.64 We too, in faith, share in this inheritance of salvation (Heb 1:14; 10:35-39) and of all the promises of God (Heb 6:12, 17; cf. 9:15) through the Son of God, "the heir of all things" (Heb 1:2; cf. esp. Rom 8:17; 2 Cor 1:20; Eph 3:6).65

XI. Abraham and His Seed

After such brief, one-verse vignettes in Heb 11:4-7, we are now given a relatively extensive treatment of Abraham and of his immediate posterity in Heb 11:8-22.66 Rather than belaboring all the details in this pericope, let me point out some of its more salient points for this article's thesis, since the author of Hebrews makes his case quite clearly and powerfully.67

First off, the author portrays Abraham "along with Isaac and Jacob, fellow heirs of the same promise" (v. 9), as pilgrims.68 This wandering of God's people was necessary because their inheritance is not of this world, but heavenly. It is essential to observe that God never blurted this out to Abraham openly, but

63 Note again the important discussion in Kline, Kingdom Prologue, 234-41.
64 See esp. Lane, Hebrews, 2:340-41. The meaning of κατά in the phrase κατά πίστιν may be either periphrasis for a genitive construction in order to avoid an ambiguous use of two genitives together (cf. Eph 1:15), or more likely it retains its meaning as a kind of norm: "the righteousness which conforms to the dictates of faith" as is the meaning of κατά πίστιν a few verses later in Heb 11:13: "These all died in conformity to the dictates of faith." In either case, the connection with Paul's conception of "a righteousness of faith" which formed the basis of Abraham's inheritance (Rom 4:11-13) is impossible to miss. Attridge (Hebrews, 320) calls the expression an "odd notion."
65 In other words, the author of Hebrews and Paul are in perfect agreement in their doctrine of justification by faith, even to the point of a terminological echo here, though there are, of course, different focal points in the two authors. This is hardly surprising if our author, a companion of Timothy (Heb 13:23), has some connection to the Pauline circle. Compare Grüsser, Der Glaube critiqued in Victor (Sung-Yul) Rhee, "Chiasm and the Concept of Faith in Hebrews 12:1-29," WTJ 62 (2001): 269-84.
66 The whole pericope can be organized around these divisions of thought: the patriarchs' pilgrimage to the heavenly city (vv. 8-10, 13-16); the birth of Isaac by faith (vv. 11-12); the sacrifice, or better, "resurrection" of Isaac (vv. 17-19); the testimony of Abraham's fellow heirs: Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph (vv. 20-22; cf. v. 9).
67 There are some interesting details examined in the commentaries to which the reader is referred. One, for instance, is whether the author is referring to Abraham's faith or to Sarah's in v. 11; see esp. Lane, Hebrews, 2:344-45; and Hughes, Hebrews, 471-76; cf. J. Harold Greenlee, "Hebrews 11:11: 'By Faith Sarah Received Ability,'" ATJ 54 (1999): 67-72.
68 This theme in Hebrews was emphasized by Ernst Käsemann in his well-known Das wandernde Gottesvolk: Eine Untersuchung zum Hebräerbrief (1939) available in English as The Wandering People of God (trans. R. A. Harrisville and I. L. Sandberg; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984).
rather he subtly disclosed Abraham’s true inheritance to him over the course of a lifetime of faith. The way that Hebrews interprets the Abrahamic narrative in Genesis demonstrates as clearly as any other place in Scripture that revelation was given as an organic development which would only blossom into its fullest expression at the coming of the Son “in these last days” (Heb 1:2).

Abraham, when called to leave his “country, his kindred, and his father’s house” (Gen 12:1), goes out in ignorance of his destination but in possession of God’s promise that he will inherit a land. Abraham “sojourns” in “the land of promise,” but as in a “foreign land” not his own (Heb 11:9). Abraham’s lack of an earthly inheritance is epitomized by his living “in tents,” a symbol of hardship and the gypsy existence of those who were “strangers and resident aliens” of the cities in the author’s time (cf. 1 Pet 1:1; 2:11; Eph 2:11-19).

In other words, God deliberately withheld the ownership of Canaanite real estate from Abraham as part of his unfolding revelation to him and to us. It forced Abraham to deliberate upon the real fulfillment of the land promise (cf. Josh 21:43, 45). God intended all along to withhold an earthly inheritance from Abraham for two purposes: first, that Abraham would look in faith for a greater city “whose designer and builder is God” as his real inheritance; and second, that Abraham and his fellow heirs would not inherit apart from us (Heb 11:40). The household of God (Heb 3:1-6) must altogether inherit the “enduring” heavenly city (Heb 11:10, 16; 12:22; 13:14). Hence, by faith, Abraham did see his heavenly homeland (v. 14) where both he and we have our citizenship (Phil 3:20), though for Abraham and the patriarchs the view was “from afar” (Heb 11:13-14; cf. v. 27). The distance of viewpoint was not because Abraham’s faith was weak—just the opposite!—it was because Abraham lived near the head of the stream of redemptive revelation.

The question naturally arises in our minds as to how much the patriarchs themselves actually understood of these future glories. We would err in either case if we imputed to them either too much or too little knowledge. Though revelation was relatively undeveloped for Abraham and his kin, and their understanding undoubtedly grew over a lifetime of reflection on God’s dealings with them, God’s revelation was always sufficient for them to apprehend genuinely the heavenly blessings that awaited them. The author of Hebrews states explicitly in Heb 11:13-20 that the patriarchs knew and longed for these things to which they bear witness, though from a distance. The view of other things, like Moses’ sight of “the reproach of Christ” (Heb 11:26) was mediated by the circumstances of the revelatory era in which these saints lived.69 But their apprehension was sufficiently clear though not yet fully developed.

69 Vos (Teaching, 67-68) puts this point well: “In 11:26 we read that Moses preferred the reproach of Christ to the treasures of Egypt. This phrase, the reproach of Christ, is explained by its usage in 13:13, ‘Let us therefore go forth unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach.’ This reproach is thus seen to be a reproach which Christ Himself first bore and which we now bear together with Him. So we must similarly interpret the reproach of Christ borne by Moses. This does not imply that Moses had a prophetic knowledge of the sufferings of the future Messiah, but rather that the reproach which Moses bore was objectively identical with the reproach suffered by Christ and His people throughout the ages. This implies, therefore, that back of all the reproaches and sufferings...
At first glance, it seems haphazard to us that the author enfolds the birth of Isaac in vv. 11-12 within the pilgrimage section of vv. 8-10 continued in vv. 13-16, only to pick up Isaac again in vv. 17-19. But the author is making a similar point with the Isaac narrative as with the pilgrimage theme: God deliberately postponed the fulfillment of his promise to Abraham in the birth of Isaac in order to point him to a better fulfillment to come. God could easily have given Abraham and “barren Sarah” (v. 11) a natural son early on in his dealings with them, but he waited until it became clear that he would bring a great people “from one man, and him as good as dead” (v. 12). Then, after Isaac was born and the promise explicitly fulfilled, God commanded Abraham to offer up his son in order that Abraham would be forced to conclude that God is able to raise the dead. We tend to see a picture of the substitutionary death of Christ in the “sacrifice” of Isaac, but Hebrews reads it as driving Abraham to the conclusion that a resurrection from the dead awaits, for Abraham did receive Isaac back in resurrection “figuratively speaking” (ἐν παραβολῇ) (Heb 11:19; cf. v. 35).

In the way the author of Hebrews interprets these patriarchal narratives, we see that he regards not only God’s words as oracular but the events recorded in Scripture as revelatory as well—they all “speak” as it were. By word, God testified to Abraham of a future inheritance and of natural descendants by repeating his promises and sealing them with an oath-bound covenant (Gen 15, 17). By event, God held off fulfilling his promises with earthly fulfillment, so that Abraham and his heirs were led, in time, “to long for a better [homeland], that is a heavenly one . . . which God prepared” (Heb 11:16). Therefore even the events of Abraham’s life were directed by God to be revelatory—they were revelation ἐν παραβολῇ.

If God’s testimony came to the fathers through word and event, so also the patriarchs testify to us through their words and actions as recorded in Scripture. Notice how Hebrews points to the verbal testimony of Abraham and of Jacob as “confessing” that they are aliens on earth who look for a heavenly homeland (Heb 11:13-14; cf. Gen 23:4; 47:9; 1 Chr 29:15). This confession is a form of testimony to the reality of those things for which they hoped. Then the patriarchs’ actions when they refused to turn back to an earthly homeland (Heb 11:15) or when Abraham offered the son of promise (v. 17) speak to us as witness of those unseen things in which we too hope: life from the dead and a heavenly homeland.

It is part of the author’s thesis that neither Abraham nor any other OT saint actually inherited the final form of the promised inheritance (“something better”; 11:39-40) but only a shadowy foretaste. Nevertheless the OT saints were indeed heirs of the same promise as we are, so that we too should heed their testimony and “become imitators of those who through persevering faith were heirs of the promises” (Heb 6:12; cf. Heb 6:13-18; 7:6; 11:17, 33; also 4:1; 8:6; 9:15; 10:36).

which God’s people have endured stood Christ. How this appeared to Moses’ own subjective consciousness is told us in 11:25, ‘choosing rather to share ill treatment with the people of God. . . .’”

70 ὀμολογήσαντες in Heb 11:13; note that “confessing” something is a form of testimony in texts like John 1:19-20 and 1 Tim 6:12-13; cf. Acts 7:17 and BDAG, ὀμολογέω, §4b.
So then, the author of Hebrews shows us clearly that God’s OT revelation was oriented all along to the stage of worldwide fulfillment inaugurated by Christ (whose day Abraham saw [John 8:56])—the same point the NT makes elsewhere (e.g., Rom 4:23-25; Gal 3:8; 1 Pet 1:11-12). The patriarchs in Heb 11:8-22 saw by faith “things not yet seen” such as the heavenly homeland, “future things” (μέλλοντα) related to Jacob and Esau (v. 20), and “the exodus of the sons of Israel” (v. 22).

XII. Conclusion

In conclusion, we have seen that Heb 11 presents the OT saints as witnesses who point to those unseen, hoped-for realities which have been brought to definitive, inaugurated fulfillment by Christ. The world to come is a central subject of the book of Hebrews. But the author does not think this unique, for he finds it to be the main, if evolving focal point of the OT Scriptures as well. The OT saints reviewed in Heb 11 are presented as witnesses to various aspects of this eschatological reality to which we have now come in Christ.

The author’s presentation of the OT saints as witnesses to the ultimate historical realities makes his case in the epistle pressingly strong. Given that his audience intends to center their hope on supposedly “pure,” old covenant sacrifices, our author invokes the old covenant saints themselves as witnesses to an exclusive faith in the new covenant Mediator, Jesus—not faith in the “weak and useless” (Heb 7:18) shadowy types “of the good things to come” (Heb 10:1; cf. 9:11). To return to old covenant religion after Christ is to trample him under foot (Heb 10:29) and abandon the faith of the old covenant saints themselves. For “many prophets and righteous men” saw these things “from afar” and longed to see them as we do, but did not (Matt 13:17; cf., e.g., John 1:45; 8:56; 12:39-41; 1 Pet 1:10; Heb 11:13).

The author of Hebrews is essentially reiterating in Heb 11 what Jesus had said to the Jews who had “put their trust in Moses” (John 5:45) when they plotted to kill him (John 5:18): “If you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?” (John 5:46-47; ESV; emphasis added). Moses himself had considered “the reproach of Christ to be greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt” (Heb 11:26), but his descendants preferred the empty rites of Levitical ceremony in place of that sacrifice of Christ to which Levi and Aaron pointed and in which they themselves had put their faith. Levi, Moses, Aaron, and all the OT saints are witnesses to Christ by their confession of faith and the events of their lives under God’s sovereign direction in both revelatory word and deed.

71 “Hebrews now integrates the Christian church as the ‘last generation’ in a history of faith” (Michel, Hebräer, 370 [my trans.]).