

The New Testament Faith of the Old Testament Righteous One: *Abraham in the Letter to the Hebrews*

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Introduction

The goal of this work is to gain a better understanding of how the author of the Letter to the Hebrews interpreted the Old Testament narratives in order to strengthen the faith of New Testament believers. It will focus on the passage from Heb 11:1–19, with main attention given to vv. 8–19, which describes the life of one of the greatest Old Testament heroes of faith, Abraham.

Today most scholars probably agree that the overall theological theme of the letter is the supremacy of Christ.^[1] However, they would also admit that the goal of the letter was not to present part of a systematic theology on the supremacy of Christ, but rather to strengthen the faith of believers, who, under the pressure of suffering and probably even of threat to their lives, became unsure of the appropriateness of the chosen way. Hughes characterizes the message of the letter as “a tonic for spiritually debilitated.”^[2] Hence, as will be discussed later, “faith” has a specific meaning in the epistle, which differs from the dominant meaning found elsewhere in the New Testament.

The letter gives a lot of attention to the Old Testament. Practically the entire letter is built around Old Testament quotations and examples, alternating with the author’s comments and interpretation on the text. The longest quotation in the New Testament from the Old Testament is found in 8:8b–12 (from Jer 31:31–34). Unlike most of the New Testament writers, the author of Hebrews mostly disregards the human authors



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^[1] See Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), vii; Frederick Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, revised edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), xii.

^[2] Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 1.

of his Old Testament quotations. Morris observes that “without actually saying ‘God says,’ he normally ascribes the passage he quotes to God, except, of course, where God is addressed, as in 2:6.”^[3] And, as Westcott observes, he does this even in those cases where the words are clearly spoken by a man (e.g. Deut 32:36 is quoted in Heb 10:30; Isa 8:17 in Heb 2:13).^[4] “The effect is,” says Morris, “to emphasize the divine authorship of the whole Old Testament. For the author, what Scripture says, God says.”^[5]

According to Westcott’s analysis, the author’s favorite sources are the Pentateuch and the Psalms. Of the twenty-nine Old Testament quotations, twenty-three are taken from these two sources (twelve from the Pentateuch and eleven from the Psalms). The Pentateuch is undoubtedly his main source of reference since, in addition to the clear quotations, thirty-nine allusions to the Pentateuch are found throughout the epistle (in comparison with only two allusions to the book of Psalms).^[6] There are surprisingly few references to the Prophets in comparison with the Pentateuch: four quotations and eleven allusions, though, as Morris comments, “[o]ne would think he would have found much in the Prophets that was applicable to his purpose.”^[7]

Another important observation made by Westcott, which deserves the attention of this work, is that out of “the *twenty-nine* passages which are reckoned as direct quotations *twenty-one* are peculiar to the writer of the Epistle,”^[8] which

means that elsewhere in the New Testament these passages are not referred to. This again demonstrates the uniqueness of the book and draws to it even closer attention.

General observation on “faith” in Hebrews

First, it should be noted that the theme of faith is not secondary to the book of Hebrews. The word πίστις occurs in the letter thirty-one times, yielding in quantity only to the book of Romans (thirty-five times). However, in correlation to the number of verses in the book containing a hit, the Letter to the Hebrews has a higher percentage of word occurrences than the epistle to the Romans: 10.2% and 8.1% respectively.^[9]

Second, a careful reader will note that faith in Hebrews has its own specific features, in many respects different from the meaning given to it elsewhere in the New Testament. In the Synoptics and Acts faith is an essential part of performing miracles, wonders and signs. For example, one needs faith to receive healing (Mark 2:5; 5:34, 36; Acts 14:9), or to walk on water (14:31). There are almost no boundaries for the one who has faith: he is able even to move mountains (17:20; cf. 1Cor 13:2). On the contrary, because of people’s unbelief, as the evangelists narrate Jesus’ story, even Jesus was not able to perform many miracles (Mark 6:3–5).

^[3] Leon Morris, “Hebrews,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. 12. *Hebrews-Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 7.

^[4] Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, reprinted (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 474.

^[5] Morris, “Hebrews,” 7.

^[6] Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 472–473.

^[7] Morris, “Hebrews,” 7.

^[8] Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 473.

^[9] In first place for percentage is 1 Timothy: eighteen out of 113 verses in the book contain a hit (15.9%).

John does not use the noun πίστις in his gospel at all, using instead the verb form from the same root—πιστεύω. The verb is used almost in every tenth verse of the gospel (eighty-five times in 878 verses). The quintessence of the gospel is apparently located in 20:31: “These have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.”^[10]

In most letters of Paul—especially to the Romans and the Galatians—faith is portrayed as “the only saving, or justifying, response to the good news about Christ.”^[11] For Paul it is very important to demonstrate that no works or deeds are necessary for salvation. One simply needs to wholeheartedly believe in God and accept His gift of grace in Jesus Christ—that is all. In a sense such faith is a rational, intellectual act—faith that can be characterized as dogmatic or doctrinal.

Not contradicting this view in general, the author of Hebrews nevertheless depicts a different facet of faith.^[12] The definition of the term in 11:1 makes it clear that for this author faith is tightly connected with hope and expectation: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Elsewhere in the letter the term is used alongside the term “patience,”

which sounds natural—one who waits has to be patient: “So that you will not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience (μακροθυμία) inherit the promises” (6:12).

Additionally, it is important to note that the entire “faith chapter” (Hebrews 11) is bracketed by the word “endurance” (ὑπομονή, 10:36 and 12:1), which, except in these two instances, does not occur elsewhere in the letter. In the paragraph preceding Hebrews 11 (10:35–39), to live by faith is practically equal to having endurance.^[13] The readers are called there to wait with patience for “a very little while” and then the Coming One will come and will not delay. And as they wait they will definitely need patience, endurance (ὑπομονῆ).^[14] In ch. 12 the author summarizes ch. 11 and picks up again the theme left at the end of ch. 10, a witness to which is the word “endurance”: “Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance (ὑπομονῆ) the race that is set before us” (12:1).

Thus, the context into which the author of the epistle sets ch. 11 shows his intention to depict faith not as “a saving, or justifying, response to the good news about Christ,” but as a life of trust and

^[10] All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are from the New American Standard Bible, 1995.

^[11] T. Desmond Alexander, Brian S. Rosner, D. A. Carson, eds., *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology: Exploring the Unity & Diversity of Scripture* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), 493.

^[12] “The theme of the faith of Abraham in the NT, in fact, has a number of facets to it, and each possesses its own validity as well as serves to enhance the whole” (Richard N. Longenecker, “The ‘Faith

of Abraham’ Theme in Paul, James and Hebrews: A Study in the Circumstantial Nature of New Testament Teaching,” *Journal of Evangelical Theological Society* 20.3 [September 1977]: 211).

^[13] Morris, “Hebrews,” p. 111, notes: “The first point made is that faith and shrinking back are opposed to each other.”

^[14] Cf. Rom 8:24–25 and 15:4 where patience and endurance are depicted as essential parts of expectation and hope.

obedience to God, as a process of running a race with endurance.^[15] In this sense his message is similar to the message of James, for whom also faith and endurance go together: “Knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance (ὑπομονή)” (Jas 1:3). Therefore, the given context suggests that the examples given in Hebrews 11 are intended to illustrate a faith-endurance, to demonstrate what biblical faith looks like, and what it means to live by faith.

It is for this kind of faith, as the author argues in 11:2, that the ancients were commended. They were looking forward with patience. This is the kind of faith that the author wants his readers to imitate. Referring to “the ancients” he wants to show that faith manifested through patience and endurance is not something new, applied only to the Christian age, but rather an integral part of all God’s people in all times. Having said that, he provides a long list of Old Testament heroes who can serve as examples of the kind of faith he is speaking about.

Survey of Hebrews 11:1–7

Before we move to the study of the Abrahamic passage in Hebrews 11, which is the main target of this work, it is helpful to survey those examples that the author provides in the beginning of his discus-

^[15] Morris, “Hebrews,” p. 111, makes a helpful comment on 10:38: “The words about the ‘righteous one’ living by faith are used again in Romans 1:17 and Galatians 3:11. In those passages the emphasis appears to be on how the man who is righteous by faith will live, whereas here the author seems to be using the words to convey the meaning that the person God accepts as righteous will live by faith.”

^[16] See Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark), 225–226.

sion on faith and to see where he puts his emphasis.

Abel

The first example provided in Hebrews 11 is Abel: “By faith Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain” (v. 4). The Old Testament text, which the author of Hebrews obviously has in mind, at first glance does not provide a clear basis for this statement. It simply says that “the LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor” (Gen 4:4–5; NIV). The sacrifices that the two brothers offered were brought “at the end of days” (בְּאַחַר הַיָּמִים), which probably means at the end of the season. This phrase alludes more to the sacrifice of thanksgiving rather than to the sin offering, even if the people were aware of this distinction at that time, as some argue.^[16] It is therefore unlikely that God was more pleased with the blood of the offered animal than with the fruits of the ground. On what basis, then, did the author of Hebrews conclude that Abel offered by faith a better sacrifice? Outside of Genesis 4 Abel is never mentioned in the Old Testament. In the New Testament, besides the passage already mentioned, his name occurs three more times: Mat 23:35; Luke 11:51; and Heb 12:24. In the gospels Jesus calls him a “righteous one.” One may argue that he was called righteous because he suffered and even was killed as a martyr. This, however, does not shed any more light on the question at hand. Neither does the reference in Heb 12:24: “You have come . . . to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than *the blood of Abel.*”

Two things in the Genesis account, however, deserve closer attention. The first thing mentioned by the author of Genesis is the essence of Abel's offering. The text says that Abel offered from the firstborn (בְּכֹרֶהָ) of his flock and of their fat portions (חֵלֶב). The second is that this statement is immediately followed by another: "And the LORD had regard for Abel and for his offering" (Gen 4:4), which may imply that the attention of the Lord was drawn to offered sacrifices. While many commentators argue that the Lord had regard for Abel and not for his sacrifice—implying that Abel was intrinsically righteous^[17]—it seems that the text makes connections between Abel's heart and his offering, when it says that the Lord had regard for Abel *and* for his offering. Abel's offering consisted, as was mentioned, from some of the firstborn of his flock and from their fat portions (חֵלֶב). By using alliteration between Abel (חֵלֶב) and his offering (חֵלֶב) it seems that the author draws the reader's attention to the kind of offering Abel made. The word חֵלֶב though basically meaning "fat" can also mean "the best part." Thus, for example, in Deut 32:14 Moses in his song describing God's goodness to Israel states that God fed them with the fat of lambs and rams as well as "with the finest (חֵלֶב) of the wheat." This means that Abel gave to the Lord the best of what he had, and this, it seems, was pleasant in the eyes of the Lord.^[18]

[17] See, for example, Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 281, 283.

[18] Cf. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 224–225.

[19] Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 354, says: "[T]he narrative in Genesis suggests that the deeper gratitude of Abel found an outward expression in a more abundant offering."

The author of Hebrews alludes to this feature mentioned in the text of the Old Testament when he states that Abel's offering was better than his brother's. Then he continues to explain the motivation behind Abel's action: "*By faith* Abel offered to God a better sacrifice" (emphasis added). This conclusion seems to be based on the author's deep conviction that "without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him" (v. 6, NIV). This is the author's main assumption and conviction, on the basis of which he describes not only Abel, but all the Old Testament heroes mentioned in the chapter. Basically he states two things: first, one must believe that God exists—which applies to both Cain and Abel—and second, one must believe that God will reward those who seek him and trust him. He seems to be saying that because Abel had this second element of faith, he was able to give up and to offer to God his best.^[19] As Richard Phillips states, "the offerings were different, and in that difference we see the faith of one and the unbelief of the other."^[20]

Two things can be observed at the conclusion of this section. The first is the author's diligent exegesis of the text; the second is his deductive method of making a conclusion. His deep conviction that there is no way to please God without exercising one's faith leads him to conclude that Abel acted by faith.

[20] Richard D. Phillips, *Faith Victorious: Finding Strength and Hope from Hebrews 11* (Phillipsburg: P. & R., 2002), 17. He, however, comes to a different conclusion regarding the sacrifices, arguing that the problem with Cain's offering was that "it did not involve the shedding of blood. This was the key difference between Abel's offering and Cain's" (Ibid., 19).

Enoch

Enoch is the next on the list of those distinguished by faith. As in the case of Abel he is mentioned only in one Old Testament passage (Genesis 5), which basically consists of a genealogy of Adam's descendants. The one thing that separates him from the others in the genealogy is that he walked with God and therefore was taken by God without seeing death. For the author of Hebrews there is only one explanation for this incident, namely Enoch's faith. This explanation is again based on his conviction presented in Heb 11:6. The phrase, "before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God" (11:5), is probably a reference to a note made by the Old Testament author in Gen 5:22: "Enoch walked with God," which is again evidence of diligent exegesis of the Old Testament text. According to his conclusion, "to walk with God" means "to please God." The very mention of Enoch in this chapter is very important because further in his letter the author is going to speak about the life that transcends the limits of earthly existence.

Noah

Noah lived in a hard time in the history of humanity when God, using the anthropomorphic language of the writer of Genesis, regretted his own work of creation and decided to destroy it. A puzzled reader may, on the one hand, take God's side because the world is clearly corrupt; on the other hand he may ache for humanity about to meet disaster. Then he meets Noah, whose description is similar

^[21] Thomas Mann, *The Book of the Torah: The Narrative Integrity of the Pentateuch* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1988), 23.

to that of his great grandfather, Enoch: Noah walked with God (Gen 6:9).

The interpretation given to Noah's faith by the author of Hebrews is clearer and more concrete than that given to his predecessors. It is said that he believed God's message regarding the divine judgment and obeyed everything God commanded him to do: "By faith Noah, being warned *by God* about things not yet seen, in reverence prepared an ark for the salvation of his household" (Heb 11:7). Commenting on the story of Noah Thomas Mann notes:

Since Hebrew narrative usually prefers dialogue to develop character and plot, it is striking that Noah never utters a word throughout the entire story. The narration consists only in the speech of God and the words of the narrator. Of Noah, we are only told that he "did all that God commanded him." . . . [I]t is not coincidental that he is the only character so far who *listens* to what God says.^[21]

The author of Hebrews seems also to have paid attention to this characteristic of Noah. He says that when Noah received God's revelation regarding the divine coming judgment, he "in *reverence* prepared an ark for the salvation of his household" (emphasis added). Making this comment on Noah's action he depicts faith as listening to God and obeying what He has to say.

Analysis of Hebrews 11:8–19

It should be observed that in describing the faith of these exemplary heroes of the Old Testament the author of Hebrews several times uses a triadic formula. In 11:1–7 it was applied to Abel and Noah. By faith Abel offered to God a better sac-

rifice; by faith he obtained a testimony that he was righteous; and through faith he still speaks, though he is dead. By faith Noah prepared an ark for the salvation of his household; by faith he condemned the corrupt world and according to faith he became an heir of righteousness. Later in the chapter the same triadic formula will be applied to Moses, who by faith refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, by faith left Egypt, and by faith kept the Passover (11:24-28).

The story of Abraham discussed in this section is also dealt with according to this pattern. The author of Hebrews focuses the attention of his readers on three points in the life of Abraham: his obedience in faith when God called him to leave his father's house and go to the Promised Land, his way of life in the land as a stranger and sojourner, and his readiness to sacrifice his son Isaac when God tested his faith by asking for it.^[22] Unlike the previous examples with Abel, Enoch, and Noah, each act of Abraham's faith referred to in Hebrews deserves closer attention.^[23]

The reason for this, first of all, is the amount of attention the author devotes to Abraham in this chapter. This is not surprising since Abraham is given a lot of attention in Genesis. However, it should not be missed that the author of Hebrews does not simply pick out some examples from Abraham's life demonstrating his faith, but rather, choosing to refer to

the beginning and the culmination of Abraham's spiritual journey, embraces the *entire* life of Abraham. For example, he does not mention the obvious "faith passage" from Gen 15—"Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness" (NIV)—which both Paul and James quote (Rom 4:3; Gal 3:6; Jas 2:23), though it is hard to believe that he missed that point. It is obvious that he is pursuing another goal: by way of the triadic referral to the faith of Abraham—by faith he obeyed (the beginning), by faith he sojourned (the main section of his life), and by faith he offered Isaac (the culmination)—he demonstrates that Abraham's faith should be regarded not so much as some great individual acts (though some acts indeed deserve greater appraisal than others), as it should be regarded as the *mode* of his life. As Desmond Alexander comments, "From beginning to end, faith expressed in obedience is the hallmark of Abraham's relationship with the Lord."^[24]

The first mention of Abraham's faith (Heb 11:8) is based on Gen 12; the last reference (Heb 11:17)—offering Isaac—is taken from Gen 22. The author of Hebrews pictures the story of Abraham in such a way that the two events mentioned above form an *inclusio*, encapsulating the life of Abraham within the "brackets" of faith. Using this literary device, the author emphasizes that Abra-

^[22] The NIV lists four acts of Abraham's faith, including the one in v. 11. However, the Greek text is clear at this point, depicting Sarah and not Abraham as acting by faith: Πίστει καὶ αὐτῇ Σάρρα στείρα δύναμιν εἰς καταβολὴν σπέρματος ἔλαβεν. Including Abraham at this point would disrupt the pattern provided by the author, according to which the faith of Abel, Noah, Abraham and later Moses are portrayed in a triadic formula. For a discussion on whether Abraham or Sarah should be the sub-

ject of Heb 11:11 see Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 471–476.

^[23] Despite the fact that Abram becomes Abraham only in Genesis 17, he will be referred to throughout this article as Abraham, except in those cases when direct quotations from Scripture are used.

^[24] T. Desmond Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land: An Introduction to the Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 153.

ham started his spiritual journey by faith and ended it by faith as well.

It is important to note that it is not the author of Hebrews who formed this inclusio in order to stress his own point. The inclusio was formed by the author of Genesis; the author of Hebrews simply discerned this structure in the Old Testament narrative.^[25] A number of textual parallels between Gen 12 and 22 testify in favor of the “frame” formed by these chapters. For example, as Bruce Waltke notes, the phrase אֶרֶץ-אֶרֶץ occurs in the Old Testament only in these two passages (Gen 12:1; 22:2), showing that the inclusio in this case is an intentional device of the biblical author.^[26] This assumption is further confirmed by the similar phrases found in 12:1 and 22:2: “to the land which I will show you,” and “on one of the mountains of which I will tell you.” Furthermore, there are three things Abraham must leave in Gen 12: his land, his relatives and his father’s house. In the same manner three things are heard in God’s command in Gen 22: “Take your son, your only son, the one whom you love.” In both cases the ring tightens from precious to the most precious: from the home country to the father’s house in the first case and from “your son” to “the son whom you love” in the second. Also, both passages contain the blessing formula: “in you all the families/in your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed” (12:3; 22:18).^[27]

These are some of the arguments showing that the main body of the Abra-

hamic narrative starts in Gen 12 and ends in ch. 22. Chapters 23-25, therefore, describing the death of Sarah, the journey of Abraham’s servant to seek Isaac’s bride, and the death of the patriarch himself, are the epilogue to the narrative.

Since the author of the epistle depicts the life of Abraham in three stages, it will be appropriate to follow his pattern and to analyze each stage individually. It is important to note that those things that were not picked up by other New Testament writers are given priority by the author of Hebrews. While there are references to Abraham’s faith demonstrated in obedience to God’s call (e.g. Acts 7:2-4) and in offering Isaac (Jas 2:20-23), none refers to Abraham’s sojourning as an act of faith. But this seems to be an important theme for the author of Hebrews, which correlates well with the overall message of the letter.

Abraham’s faith in obedience to God’ call

The first act of Abraham’s faith to which the author of the letter turns is Abraham’s obedience: “By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going” (Heb 11:8; NIV). The point is quite clear. It refers to Gen 12 where God appeared to Abraham and told him to leave his country, his people and his father’s house and go to the land, which

^[25] This structure has been observed by many Old Testament scholars. See, for example, *ibid.*, 149; Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis: in Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 185; Allen P. Ross, *Creation and Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 393; Thomas

W. Mann, *The Book of the Torah: The Narrative Integrity of the Pentateuch*, 44.

^[26] Waltke, *Genesis*, 301.

^[27] A detailed comparative analysis of Gen 12:1-9 and 22:1-19 is found in Gary A. Rendsburg, *The Redaction of Genesis* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1986), 30-35.

“I will show you” (Gen 12:1).^[28] Abraham did exactly that: “So Abram went forth as the LORD had spoken to him” (v. 4). The following verse, however, gives several details that readers sometimes miss. It says that Abraham took his family, his nephew and his (nephew’s) family, his slaves and servants and *all* his possessions (כָּל־יְרוּשָׁתוֹ). His faith is portrayed in the fact that he did not go as a spy, as Israel later did, but took all his possessions and went “not knowing where he was going.”

John Sailhamer observes some important details regarding the composition of the Pentateuch. He points out that the Pentateuch was “put together in such a way that one can discern relationships among its parts. Earlier events foreshadow and anticipate later events. Later events are written to remind the reader of past narratives. . . . By means of this technique the author develops central themes and continually draws them to the reader’s attention.”^[29]

Indeed, there are numerous parallels between the Abrahamic narrative and later Israel’s narrative, which suggest that these stories should each be read in light of the other. For example, Abraham went down to Egypt because there was a “heavy” [כָּבֵד] famine in the land (Gen 12:10), and later went out of Egypt “very

heavy” [כָּבֵד] with the wealth he acquired in Egypt (13:2). It finds a close parallel in the story of Israel. Israel, in the person of Jacob’s family went down to Egypt because of the “heavy” [כָּבֵד] famine (47:4), and later left Egypt with great wealth, literally “heavy” [כָּבֵד] (Ex 12:38). Sailhamer provides some additional examples of typological connections between Abraham and Israel. He points out, for example, the three locations where Abraham encamped as he traveled: Shechem, Bethel, and the Negev. They correspond to the three military campaigns during the conquering of the Promised Land: central (Bethel), southern (Negev), and northern (Shechem).^[30] Thus, according to the literary composition of the Pentateuch, before Israel occupied Canaan with three military campaigns, Abraham “occupied” it by faith by erecting there altars to the Lord and calling upon His name.^[31] Another connection between the heroes of Genesis and Israel’s later history is found in Gen 13 where Lot separated from Abraham and in vv. 36–38 becomes the father of the Moabites and Ammonites, “the very group that is prohibited from taking part in the congregational worship (Deut 23:4–5).”^[32]

It seems that the author of the Pentateuch was deliberately trying to draw

^[28] There is no consensus among biblical scholars regarding where God appeared to Abraham for the first time. According to Gen 11:31 the initiative to leave Ur of the Chaldeans to go to the land of Canaan belonged to Terah, Abraham’s father. Then, based on Gen 12:1–3 it seems that it is only after Terah’s death in Haran that God appeared to Abraham with the call to leave the land of his relatives and to go to the land that “I will show to you.” However, Stephen, in Acts 7:2, with full confidence states that, “The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran.” The only place in the Pentateuch that indirectly may support Ste-

ven’s assurance is Gen 15:7, where God, appearing to Abraham, says: “I am the LORD who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess it.” This view also finds support in the prayer of those Jews who returned from the Exile (Neh 9:7; cf. Josh 24:3).

^[29] John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 37.

^[30] *Ibid.*, 4.

^[31] Abraham builds altars in Shechem (north; 12:7); Bethel (center; 12:8); and Hebron (south; 13:18).

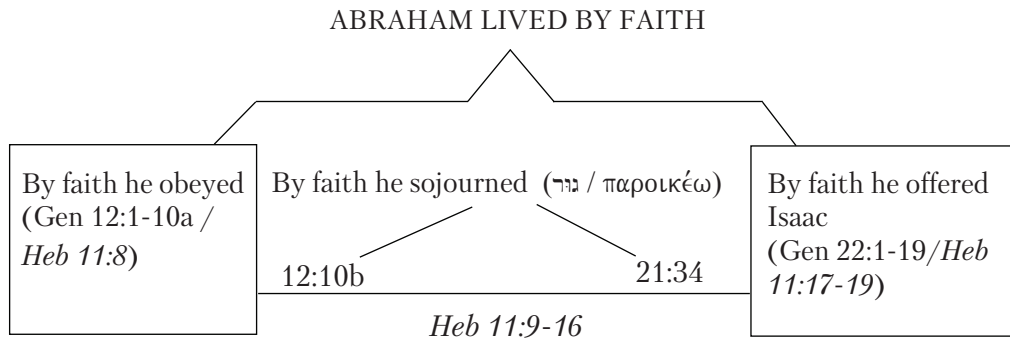
^[32] *Ibid.*, 38

these parallels in order to present Abraham as a prototype of Israel. If this is true, then it is very likely that the author of Hebrews saw Abraham's obedience in going to Canaan against the backdrop of Israel's unbelief: Abraham takes *all* that he has and moves toward Canaan; Israel, in contrast, sends spies. As a matter of fact, in the earlier chapters of his letter he dealt with Israel's unbelief and concluded that "they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief" (Heb 3:19; NIV). Thus, in the same way, though in reverse order, he portrays Abraham's faith against the background of Israel's unbelief, and so makes his point even stronger.

Abraham as a sojourner and alien

The second act of faith to which the author of Hebrews draws the reader's atten-

tion is Abraham's style of life: "By faith he sojourned (παροικέω) in the land of promise, as in a foreign one" (Heb 11:9). The Greek word παροικέω corresponding to the Hebrew word נָדַד means "sojourn," "inhabit a place as a stranger." According to BAGD it is mostly used "of strangers, who live in a place without holding."^[33] It is one of the key words in the Pentateuch describing the way of life of the patriarchs. Of its nineteen occurrences in the Pentateuch (in the Septuagint), sixteen refer to the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jacobs' twelve sons).^[34] As a matter of fact, the very first time this word appears in the Hebrew Bible it has Abraham as its object (Gen 12:10). This word opens the second, main stage of Abraham's life (12:10b) and is used to close it as well (21:34). It can be illustrated by the following figure:



^[33] William, F. Arndt, Wilbur Gingrich, Frederick W. Danker, and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature: A Translation and Adaption of the Fourth Revised and Augmented Edition of Walter Bauer's Griechisch-Deutsches Wörterbuch Zu Den Schrift En Des Neuen Testaments Und Der Ubrigen Urchristlichen Literatur* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996, c1979), 628.

^[34] It seems that the Septuagint reserves the word παροικέω mostly for the patriarchs. The corresponding Hebrew word נָדַד, which occurs in the Pentateuch almost twice as often as its Greek equivalent, besides the patriarchs also refers to the aliens living among Israel (mostly in Leviticus and Numbers). The Septuagint, however, when speaking about aliens, uses a different word, *prosh*, *lutoj*, saving παροικέω for the patriarchs.

It is clear, then, that the author of the Pentateuch portrays Abraham's way of life as "sojourning" (Gen 12:10; 20:1; 21:34; 35:27). As may be seen from Abraham's dialogue with the Hittites, it was Abraham's own attitude toward his life: "I am a stranger and a sojourner (גֵר/παροικος) among you" (23:4).^[35] The native inhabitants of Canaan among whom he lived also perceived him as a sojourner, which is seen from Abimelech's speech in 21:23: "Now therefore, swear to me here by God that you will not deal falsely with me . . . but according to the kindness that I have shown to you, you shall show to me and to the land in which you have sojourned (παρώκησας)" (cf. 19:9). Finally, it is apparent in the way God regarded Abraham's, and later the patriarchs' lives: "I will give to you . . . the land of your sojournings (παροικεῖς)"^[36] (Gen 17:8; see also Exod 6:4). Moreover, God did not merely state that the patriarchs were sojourning; he *wanted* them to live in this way, as seen from the words he addresses later to Isaac: "Sojourn (παροίκει) in this land and I will be with you and bless you" (Gen 26:3).

While the word "sojourn" is prominent in the Old Testament (Septuagint) it is rare in the New Testament. Besides this occurrence in Hebrews, it occurs only in Luke 24:18. This leads to the

conclusion that the author of Hebrews evidently borrowed not only the idea but also the very word from the Old Testament narrative, which he diligently exegeted and which depicts the patriarchs as "strangers and exiles."^[37]

This observation on the part of the author of Hebrews has important theological significance. While readers of the New Testament usually place great emphasis on Abraham's faith expressed in his obedience, his "sojourning by faith," unfortunately, is missed. However, as Hughes rightly underlines:

Indeed, the situation into which he moved on his arrival in the land of promise was a more severe trial of his faith than was the call to leave home and kindred, and it was easier for him to live by faith as he journeyed toward a goal as yet unseen than to do so upon reaching this goal and finding that the fullness of all that had been promised was "not yet."^[38]

The author's point in Heb 11:9–10 is that daily searching and constant waiting for God—without any great deeds and acts—is in itself an act of faith. He emphasizes, for example, that Abraham lived in tents—always wandering—not in a city like his nephew Lot. And in his interpretation there was only one rea-

^[35] Cf. the words of Jacob addressed to Pharaoh in Gen 47:9: "The years of my sojourning (παροικω) are one hundred and thirty." It is interesting that in Gen 24:37 while the Hebrew text has the word "dwell" (שָׁבַט), the Septuagint again uses the word παροικέω once again emphasizing Abraham's style of life as a sojourner: "You shall not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, in whose land I sojourn (παροικω)." It seems that the Septuagint interprets this narrative for the reader so that he/she may grasp the author's main idea more easily.

^[36] In the Septuagint this part of the verse reads "the land upon which you sojourn." That is why the Greek word given in parentheses is a verb instead of noun, as it is in English. The English translation in this case follows the Masoretic Text, which has a plural noun, "the land of your sojournings."

^[37] Support for this view of the patriarchs in the Pentateuch (as sojourners) is found in the later writings of the Hebrew Bible. See 1Chr 16:19; 29:15; Ps 105:23, where the patriarchs are portrayed as sojourners.

^[38] Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 468.

son for this: “he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (v. 10).

The idea of “looking for the city” is developed further in vv. 13–16. Since there is no direct reference in the Pentateuch to a “city with foundations” that God prepared, some argue that the author of Hebrews borrowed this idea from Apocryphal Books. For example, according to the *Syriac Apocalypse of Baruch* (4:2–5) this heavenly city was shown in a vision to Abraham, as well as to Adam before he sinned, and to Moses. Now this paradise is kept for all saints.^[39] However, since, as Westcott argues, there are no quotations from the Apocryphal Books in Hebrews, except probably an allusion in 11:35 to 2 Mac 6–7—which means that for the author of Hebrews only the canonical Scriptures of the Old Testament were authoritative—it is unlikely that this interpretation of Abraham’s faith was derived from the Apocryphal Books.^[40]

Buchanan, making a connection between Ps 87:1—“His foundation is in the holy mountains”—and Heb 11:10 suggests that “the city which had the foundation” be regarded as Jerusalem, which throughout the Old Testament is called the “holy city” (Neh 11:1, 18; Isa 48:2; 52:1; Dan 9:24).^[41] Ray Stedman goes even further, seeing in the city that Abraham was looking for the New Jerusalem:

When he got there he lived as a resident alien, residing in tents and owning

nothing except the cave of Machpelah in Hebron, where he buried his wife, Sarah. The motive for this remarkable behavior was his anticipation that God would fulfill his promise and produce on earth, *a city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God* (vv. 9–10). It is amazing how far Abraham saw by faith. . . . Abraham saw what John saw in Revelation: a city coming down from heaven onto earth (Rev 21).^[42]

Such a conclusion sounds quite bold, although, at least at first sight it does not have a firm foundation in the Old Testament text. What does the author of Hebrews actually mean when he speaks of the city Abraham was looking for?

An interesting study was done by Daniel J. Estes. Having summarized the observations of many scholars that, following the theme of human deprivation and divine judgment in Gen 3–11, Gen 12–50 begins the story of God’s solution to the human problem, he draws attention to the relationship between chs. 11 and 12. This relationship, as he argues, “is specified in the motifs of name and city.”^[43] The builders of the tower wanted to make a name for themselves (Gen 11:4). But, “God now grants that which men had tried to gain by their own resources, . . . to the man of His choice and on His terms.”^[44] Abraham was promised a great name by God (12:3). They wanted to build both the tower and the name for *themselves*. Abraham, on the

^[39] Hughes mentions this view in *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 470, though he himself does not support it.

^[40] Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 473.

^[41] George Wesley Buchanan, *To the Hebrews: Translation, Comments and Conclusions*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City: Doubleday, 1972), 188–189.

^[42] Ray C. Stedman, *Hebrews*, The IVP New Testa-

ment Commentary [CD-ROM] (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992).

^[43] Daniel J. Estes, “Looking for Abraham’s City,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 147 (Oct/Dec 1990): 412.

^[44] J. J. M. Navone, “The Patriarchs of Faith, Hope and Love,” in *Revue de l’université d’Ottawa* 34 (1964): 340; quoted in *Ibid.*

other hand is going to become a blessing for others. The builders of Babel wanted their tower to reach into heaven which means, as Estes notes, referring to the meaning of the term בָּבֶל and especially to its use in Isa 14:13. A vowel is missed in the Hebrew word.^[45] However, they did not succeed because God destroyed their plans. “But from that very geographical area,” observes Estes, “from Ur of the Chaldeans, Yahweh called Abram to begin the quest for a different kind of city, not a city to reach up to God, but a city which has been constructed by God.”^[46]

In the context of the Letter to the Hebrews, when the author tells his readers “do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward ($\mu\iota\sigma\theta\alpha\pi\omicron\delta\omicron\sigma\acute{\iota}\alpha\nu$)” (10:35) and Moses is portrayed as the one who chose “to endure ill-treatment with the people of God” because “he was looking to the reward ($\mu\iota\sigma\theta\alpha\pi\omicron\delta\omicron\sigma\acute{\iota}\alpha\nu$)” (11:26), the city for which Abraham was looking might mean a collective notion of something prepared (v. 16) and provided (v. 40) by God for those who seek Him and wait for His reward. This is what Longenecker means when he says:

The image of ‘the city of God’ in the Biblical materials . . . is to be understood in conjunction with the expression ‘the kingdom of God’ (that is, God’s reign and rule in individual lives, in the Church, and in society), and stands for the visible expression of the kingdom or reign of God in its totality. Thus Abraham, who had received a token of what was promised in the birth of Isaac (Heb 6:15; 11:11–12),

was looking forward to the full realization of God’s promises in the future.^[47]

And Lane says: “[H]e [Abraham] was continuously waiting *there* [in the land] for the appearance of the city of God, of which he was already a citizen by virtue of the divine call and promise.”^[48]

Abraham, indeed, constantly sought God, as evidenced by the altars he built while sojourning throughout the pagan land (12:7, 8; 13:18), and waited for the fulfillment of God’s promise, for God’s reward. He ceded a better piece of land to Lot (Gen 13), because he waited for the land from God. He did not accept a reward from the king of Sodom, because he waited for a reward from God (Gen 14:21–23). Though he had the power to conquer a piece of land for himself (cf. Gen 14), he did not fight even for the property that already belonged to him, but when a well he dug was seized by Abimelech’s people, he just let it go. Neither did he purchase any property for himself, except a small plot of land for burying his wife (Gen 23). He waited for God’s reward, something that God Himself would do for him and then through him.

Thus, summarizing the point the author of Hebrews made in this section, it can be said that Abraham spent the main part of his life in waiting for that which God had prepared for him. This was his primary act of faith: to live searching for God and in expectation of his reward. This is something that is available to every believer; this is something to which the author of Hebrews calls his readers.

[45] Daniel J. Estes, “Looking for Abraham’s City,” 412.

[46] *Ibid.*, 413.

[47] Richard N. Longenecker, “The ‘Faith of Abraham’ Theme in Paul, James and Hebrews,” 209.

[48] William Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 47b (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1991), 351.

Abraham's faith in offering Isaac

The previous discussion helps us to understand the point the author makes in the final section dealing with Abraham. Undoubtedly, God's request to offer Isaac as a burnt offering was the greatest trial in Abraham's life, if not the greatest trial in the history of humanity. It is one thing to endure the hardship and trials that come from the outside; it is another to create those hardships with one's own hands and then to overcome them. Commenting on Abraham's faith Trentham says: "Not only was he willing to go against everything in his father-heart in order that he might obey his God; he was also willing to go against his own understanding of the promise of God"^[49] In a more striking way the same idea is expressed by Clowney: "It was one thing to wait beyond all reason for the fulfillment of the promise. It was another thing, *against* all reason, to destroy with his own hand the promise that had been fulfilled."^[50]

It is important to note that the author of Hebrews places this example at the end of his discussion about Abraham. It seems he want to show that before Abraham was ready to sacrifice his only beloved son, he had to study in the school of faith, where he was taught not to *act* by faith, but to *live* by faith. It is not surprising, then, that Gen 22:1

begins the recounting of this incident with the words: "Now it came about after these things, that God tested Abraham." "After these things" may sound like the conclusion to the whole Abraham story.^[51] At any rate, about forty years separated God's call to Abraham to leave the land of his father and God's command to offer up his son.^[52] Though the story of Abraham is not a full biography, it provides enough information to show that those forty years were a school of faith for Abraham. Buchanan, commenting on Heb 11:19, which states that Abraham believed in God's ability to raise people from the dead, states that "this may refer to the original acquisition of Isaac from Sarah, i.e. 'from one [who was] dead.'"^[53] Whether he is right or not really does not matter for the overall message of the letter. One thing is certain: Abraham learned to live by faith and was sure that God could raise the dead.

The point of the author of Hebrews is that Abraham lived by faith looking for a reward from God. It is natural then, as in any school, that the time for an exam has come and Gen 22:1 states: "Now it came about after these things, that God tested Abraham." Following the text of the Scripture the author of the letter says, "when he was tested" (v. 17). In other words, he wants to say that when the time for the test came, Abraham was ready. This is not to say that it was easy

^[49] Charles A. Trentham, "Hebrews," The Broadman Bible Commentary, vol. 12, *Hebrews-Revelation* (Nashville: Broadman, 1972), 82.

^[50] Edmund P. Clowney, *The Unfolding Mystery: Discovering Christ in the Old Testament* (Phillipsburg: P. & R., 1988), 52

^[51] On the structure of Abrahamic narrative, see the discussion above.

^[52] Since in Gen 22 Isaac was able not only to speak, but also to carry the wood for the burnt offering, it suggests that he was not less than 13–15 years old. This means that Abraham, by that time, was about 115 years old, since in Gen 12 he was 75 (Gen 12:4).

^[53] Buchanan, *To the Hebrews*, 195.

for Abraham to offer up his son. Quite the opposite; it was the culmination of the whole story. But that culmination was possible only after the whole story had been lived.

Conclusion

It has been shown that the letter to the Hebrews has some unique features among the other New Testament writings. It is unique not only because it is anonymous, or because neither the occasion nor the place of its writing is known, but because of its message, its use of the Old Testament Scriptures, and the place and meaning it gives to the theme of faith. Longenecker is right when he says that this uniqueness “stems largely from the situation of his [author’s] addressees and the circumstances he therefore faced.”^[54]

It was also shown that the theme of faith in Hebrews has a different facet than it has in the writings of Paul and even of James. For Paul, the faith exem-

plified by Abraham means acceptance of and response to God’s grace. For James it is an act demonstrating one’s trust and faith in God, and proving its presence in one’s heart. For the author of Hebrews faith is a process of life, which has some specific features. It is the life of a stranger and a sojourner. However, it is not a description of a homeless person, but a picture of a pilgrim with a forward orientation of life.

Faith in Hebrews is tightly connected to expectation and seeking God. To live day by day seeking God is by itself an act of faith. This faith goes alongside endurance and perseverance. To live by faith means to “run with endurance the race that is set before us” (12:1). This faith is nourished from God’s Word, because it considers “Him faithful who had promised” (11:11). The life of faith is a life of hard tests, but also a life of great rewards, because “God is not ashamed to be called their God; for He has prepared a city for them” (11:16).

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