

The Epistle to the Hebrews Session 7

Men and Women of Faith

Hebrews 11

Our homilist continues his exhortation with a summons with a focus on the first element of the faith – hope – love triad that he outlined in 10:22-24. The chapter consists of what he will later (12:1) call a “great cloud of witnesses,” all taken from Israel’s sacred past. After an evocative definition of “faith” (v 1), he builds his witness list using the rhetorical figure of anaphora, beginning verse after verse with the same expression, “by faith.” He may have been inspired by a similar device in the Wisdom of Solomon 10, which celebrates the role of Wisdom in Israel’s life. The structure things done “by faith” takes him to v 31 and, in terms of Israel’s history, to the point of entry to the promised land, the focal point of his earlier interpretation of Psalm 95 in chapters 3 and 4. In those verses he identified specific Biblical figures and recounted elements of their stories. He then paints with a broader brush. He first names a group of judges, kings and prophets (v 32), but says no more about them individually. Instead he refers to episodes from the Biblical accounts of their stories with generalized statements about what they did (vv 33-38). He concludes (vv 38-40) by linking the whole list to his audience.

A Definition: Hebrews 11:1-2

The initial definition of faith is deceptively simple. It is in fact difficult to translate because it evokes many of the dimensions of the reality that our homilist wants to foster. The NRSV translates the first verse as “the assurance of things hoped for.” That faith has something to do with hope is clear enough and the reference to “things hoped for” reminds us of the theme

of expected hopes or promises that has run through the homily (e.g., 4:3; 6:17; 9:15; 10:25) and hope of final salvation, a final homecoming to God's holy city will be the focus of the next chapter (12:18-24). Faith, in any case, has a forward-looking dimension. "Assurance" might connote a subjective disposition, such as confidence, but the Greek term *hypostasis*, has a range of meaning that moves in another direction. The word appeared earlier in Hebrews, at 1:3 for the fundamental reality of God's "very being," and at 3:14, where it has an ethical sense, of "resolution" or "resolve." The philosophical sense will play a large role in the theological discussions of the fourth century when it will often refer to the "persons" of the Trinity, but that is a later development. In this verse our homilist seems to play on the two tenses of the word in evidence earlier. Faith, which is in touch with the fundamental realities of God and Christ, is the "fundamental reality" on which hope is based, and on which the faithful take their stand.

Faith is also the "conviction" of "things not seen." Similar complexity surrounds these apparently simple words. The "things not seen" could be equivalent to the hoped for future realities just mentioned, but in two verses, the homilist will refer to the "unseen" realities from which the world was created. The things unseen therefore probably looks as much to the "heavenly" realities mentioned in the exposition of Christ's priesthood (chapters 9-10) as to future hopes. Faith therefore points upward as well as forward. The Greek word translated as "conviction" (*elenchos*), like *hypostasis* in the first clause, also has a range of meaning that is less subjective than the translation suggests. Closer to the mark would be "test" or "proof." The point, to be amply illustrated in what follows, is that the "faith" of ancient heroes is itself the way in which the truth of their hopes is tested and proved, a bold and somewhat paradoxical claim.

Part of the paradoxical quality of the formulation results from a tension built into many of the examples of ancient faithful men and women. Their faith is often exemplary because it

enables them to achieve something, but in many cases the core of their hopes is *not* realized, and cannot be until the coming of the “inaugurator and perfecter” of faith (12:2). The homilist will make this point explicitly in 11:40.

Another way of reflecting on the tension involved in the initial definition is to think about the connection between faith and Jesus. In this chapter our homilist adapts a form of retelling Biblical history with a moralizing intent, highlighting a particular aspect of that history. Something similar is done in the Wisdom of Ben Sirach 44-50, the Hymn to Famous Men, and moralists often held up to ancient examples of virtue. Our homilist can cite all of these examples of “faith” because Jesus is not simply the *object* of faith. He does not ask his audience to “believe in Jesus.” Jesus is, however, the epitome of faith, the incarnate, quasi-Platonic *ideal* of faith (cf. 10:1-10). Because he is that ideal, the story of faith cannot be told without him. He is the “inaugurator,” even though he comes last in the list of faithful ones (12:1-3). And, for our author, without him the future hopes that faith points to cannot be realized.

Following the definition, the homilist mentions that the people of old “received approval” (NRSV) or, more literally, “received testimony,” i.e., their stories were told in Scripture, which will be the basis for the chapter.

The Heroes of Faith before Abraham: Hebrews 11:3-7

What the homilist means by “faith” emerges gradually through the list of its examples. The first case (v 3), unlike the rest, is not the story of a Biblical figure, but it is *our* story when “we” read and “understand” the account of creation in Genesis. Exactly what kind of cosmology the author has in mind is unclear. By saying that the visible was made from the invisible he could simply be referring to creation by the “word” of God. He may have in mind a more elaborate

scenario, where the “unseen” is that realm of Platonic ideals in the mind of God. Precisely such a combination of Genesis and Platonic philosophy was made by Philo and it is probably presupposed here. Whatever the cosmological presuppositions, faith is here seen to involve a cognitive dimension, an understanding of some fundamental principle.

Some of the examples of faith refer to elements of the Biblical that are explicitly identified as acts of trust, fidelity, or belief. Sometimes the rationale for the example is not immediately transparent. Thus Abel (v 4) seems to be an example of “faith” because according to Genesis 4:4 God “had regard for his offering,” which our homilist takes to be equivalent to being judged “righteous.” The homilist also calls attention to the detail that Abel’s blood “is crying out to me from the ground” (Genesis 4:10) as emanating from his faith. He will call attention to that detail again in thinking about the way in which the blood of Jesus speaks (12:24).

The key point of the Enoch story (11:5–6) is the testimony that “God took him” (Genesis 5:24), which Jewish tradition understood to be a translation to heaven. Legendary expansions of the brief Biblical account underlie our homilist’s other comments, that Enoch “pleased God” (Sirach 44:16; Wisdom of Solomon 4:10). On that basis, our homilist infers Enoch believed that God is and that He rewards those who seek him (11:6). Faith again has a cognitive dimension.

The Noah story exemplifies trust in the divine oracle about “things as yet unseen,” i.e., the flood. Noah is also an example of resolute action, building the ark, which made him an “heir of righteousness that is in accordance with faith” (11:7). It is interesting to compare this very Pauline sounding formula with the way in which Paul treats “righteousness according to faith,” especially in his Epistle to the Romans. Where Paul emphasizes divine grace, our homilist focuses on the resolute action.

Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob: Hebrews 11:8-22

The figure of Abraham (vv 8-10), who also played a large role in Paul's discussion of faith in Galatians 3 and Romans 4, looms large here in part because he fits so nicely as a model for the addressees. Like them he is "called" (3:1), for an inheritance (9:15), lives in hostile environment (10:32-34), in expectation of a "city" (12:18-24). The account is based on Genesis 12-13, but the detail about Abraham's expectation seems to be our homilist's adaptation. Sarah receives equal prominence, a fact obscured by the common translation of v 11. She is the subject of the sentence, not a parenthetical remark and according to one school of Greek medicine at the time, she would have had the "power of procreation." That she "trusted that the promiser was faithful" may reflect a tradition of interpretation of Sarah's laughter (Genesis 18:9-15) as a sign of her joy, not her skepticism. In the accounts of Abraham and Sarah "faith" involves trust in divine promises and action consistent with that trust.

The homilist drives home the connection of the patriarchal examples of faith (vv 13-16). Although he had earlier (6:15) said that Abraham received the promise (of progeny), he now highlights another feature of the Genesis story, that Abraham did not receive the promise (of "the land"). This gives him the opportunity to reinterpret the "promised land" in familiar ways, as something "heavenly" (v 16), like the heavenly "rest" (4:3) and as the "city" that God was preparing (12:18-24). Faith that trusts and acts is intimately bound up with hope for the fulfillment of God's promises.

The treatment of the patriarchs continues with an allusion to the Aqedah, or "Binding" of Isaac (Genesis 22). Our homilist offers a rationale for Abraham's action, and at the same time highlights another important element of faith. He suggests that Abraham inferred from God's promise that his descendants would come through Isaac (Genesis 21:12, cited in v 18), that God

could raise Isaac from the dead if Abraham did indeed kill him. Isaac was then “figuratively” raised (v 19). Faith then is trust in the power of God to raise from the dead. The cases of Isaac, Jacob and Joseph (vv 20-22) all suggest that they looked to the future, in blessing their offspring and thinking about the exodus from Egypt and, in the case of Joseph, the transferal of his bones (Genesis 50:24-25).

The Aqedah is a dramatic scene that fascinated many artists. This version was painted by Caravaggio in 1603.



Moses, Joshua and Rahab: Hebrews 11:23-31

Moses ranks with Abraham as a major figure in this catalogue of the faithful. Not his faith, but the faith of his parents, who disobeyed Pharaoh's command (Exodus 2:1-10), constitutes the first case (v 23). Resistance to an ungodly ruler is also exemplified by Moses himself who renounced being called Pharaoh's son, probably a reference to his flight to Midian (Exodus 2:11-15). As our homilist had explained Abraham's motives, he does so here with Moses arguing that he chose to side with God's people (v 25), a simple reading of Exodus 2:11, but also suggesting that his motivation was and preferred "abuse suffered for the Christ (or Messiah)" over Egyptian treasure (v 26). The Messianic reference may simply be an allusion to Moses' role as leader of the Israelites, with all the resistance that entailed, beginning with the sharp question of a Hebrew in Exodus 2:14. Or our homilist may have a sense that Moses as a visionary prophet had a notion that his role was connected with that of Jesus the Messiah. Moses' role as a visionary is mentioned in v 27, in connection with his departure from Egypt. Our homilist is no doubt recalling the vision of the burning bush in Exodus 3:1-6. Moses exemplifies faith in action by his celebration of the Passover (v 28) and the Exodus (v 29).

Joshua, who appeared at 4:8, is not named, here, but his action in bringing down Jericho's walls (v 30), like Rahab the harlot's hospitality (v 31), both stories from Judges 6:14-25, are further examples of faith as resolute action looking to the future.

Judges, Kings, Prophets: Hebrews 11:32-38

The next section consists of allusions to numerous Biblical stories, falling into two blocks. The first consists of heroic accomplishments (vv 33-35a); the second to sufferings of various sorts (vv 35b-38). Most of the allusions are from Biblical stories in Judges, and the

historical books of the Old Testament. The first of the stories of suffering, however, coming at the center of this list, refers to the account of the Maccabean martyrs, told in 2 Maccabees 6:18-7:42. An important feature of that story is highlighted here in the reference to the hope for “a better resurrection,” a hope that Abraham’s story also embodied (v 19). The faith that the homilist wants to foster in his audience is very much in view here.

Finale: Hebrews 11:39-40

In concluding his catalogue of the faith, who exemplified right belief, firm hope and resolute action, defying authority and accepting suffering, the homilist emphasizes continuity between his audience and this sacred past. There is certainly continuity in the way “faith” is structured, but he is concerned here to make another point. The continuity between the faithful of old and his audience lies primarily in the promise that they all share. The faithful of old, aliens and sojourners in lands not their own, were, he claims, striving for the same thing as the faithful today, a reality now made available by the Great High Priest.

Questions:

1. What are the principal characteristics of “faith” as defined in chapter 11?
2. How does the initial definition of “faith” help to clarify what the homilist is trying to describe?
3. How important is it for Christians today to be in touch with the history of the people of Israel?

Reading:

François Bovon, "Christ, the Faith and Wisdom in the Epistle to the Hebrews (Hebrews 11 and 1)," in idem, *New Testament Traditions and Apocryphal Narratives* (PTMS 36; Allison Park, PA: Pickwick, 1995) 119–31.

Pamela Eisenbaum, "Heroes and History in Hebrews 11," in Craig A. Evans and James A. Sanders, eds., *Early Christian Interpretation of the Scriptures of Israel: Investigations and Proposals* (JSNTSup 148; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997) 380-96.

William G., Johnson, "The Pilgrimage Motif in the Book of Hebrews," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 97 (1978) 239-51.