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# THE ESSENCE OF FAITH: AN EXEGETICAL ANALYSIS OF HEBREWS II:1–3

JUSTIN SODERQUIST

Ἔστιν δὲ πίστις ἐπιζομένων ὑπόστασις πραγμάτων ἔλεγχος οὐ  
βλεπομένων. ἐν ταύτῃ γὰρ ἐμαρτυρήθησαν οἱ πρεσβύτεροι. πίστει νοοῦμεν  
κατηρτίσθαι τοὺς αἰῶνας ῥήματι θεοῦ, εἰς τὸ μὴ ἐκ φαινομένων τὸ  
βλεπόμενον γεγονέναι. (Hebrews II:1–3, NA<sup>27</sup>)

QUESTIONS revolving around the definition of faith are likely to be wrestled with in any and every Bible-believing congregation. Questions include the following: Where does faith originate? What is its object? How is it obtained? What is its purpose? What are the fruits in store for those who are found possessing it in the last day? Answers to these questions are not easily understood. One must look at the scriptural definitions and examples of those who lived faithful lives in order to obtain a knowledge of what faith meant to God's ancient people. This paper will do just that.

## Contextual Analysis

*Historical Context.* The historical context of the book of Hebrews is murky at best. The audience of the book is presumably a group of Jewish Christians, hence the title of the work, but it could also be written to non-Jewish Christians attracted to or influenced by Jewish temple worship. There is no internal evidence which helps identify an author, and the Greek of the book of Hebrews far surpasses the rest of the Pauline corpus, but these facts do not entirely deny Pauline authorship. It is clearly possible for a person to write differently when doing so in a new context or occasion. The problem, however, is that we have no reason to assume that this was the case for Paul. This does not exclude the possibility that the work could have been written by someone else's hand while maintaining Pauline thought and instruction. The ancient idea of authorship portrays this notion far better than today's society—it is a

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matter of intermediate versus ultimate agency. In the end, Origen's view on the Paulinity of Hebrews must prevail: "Who wrote the epistle is known to God alone."<sup>1</sup>

The place from which the letter was written is also a matter of debate. One of the only clues we have from the text itself is in the last chapter of the book where the author extends greetings from "those of Italy" (13:24). It is unknown whether this is a reference to Christians living in Rome at the time or if it was from Christians who originally came from Rome but had moved elsewhere. Acts 2:10 seems to suggest the latter.

The date awarded to Hebrews depends entirely upon its authorship. If it is truly Pauline, it was most likely written around 65–68 C.E. during Paul's imprisonment. Other clues about the date stem from the subject matter itself. Hebrews is rich in description of temple ritual (or tabernacle, as the case may be). This point could either imply that it was written before or after the destruction of the Jewish temple, depending on one's take. There is no mention of the Jewish temple in the work. This could be an indication that it was written before the destruction—the lack of reference to the temple manifesting disdain for its apostate state. Conversely, it could have been written after the destruction, making reference instead to the heavenly temple (or tabernacle) which replaced the old Mosaic system. Notwithstanding these uncertainties, the message of the book stands as a strong witness of the divinity of Christ as the great High Priest.

### Literary Context

The Epistle to the Hebrews is not very representative of how an ancient epistle was structured. The letter starts off as a treatise (1:1–3), then continues into the body of the letter as a homily, or rather a sermon often-homiletic (1:4–12:29), and then concludes as an epistle proper (13:1–19). In the body of the letter, the author explains the superiority of Jesus in three different aspects: First, the superiority of Jesus as God's son (1:4–4:13), second, the superiority of Jesus' priesthood (4:14–7:28), and third the superiority of Jesus' sacrifice and ministry (8:1–10:18). In the following section (vv. 10:19–12:29), he explains how we should conduct ourselves in order to become a participant in the blessings made available in and through Christ's superiority. To accomplish this we must live a life of faith and endurance. It is here that the pericope under discussion is found. It consists of a strong doctrinal definition of faith which serves as a foundation for the verses that follow which exemplify the principles taught using various scriptural accounts of the "elders" who lived the faithful life.

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1. Eusebius, *The History of the Church*, ed. Andrew Louth, trans. G. A. Williamson (London: Penguin Books, 1989), 202 (§6.25).

### Formal Analysis

As mentioned, this pericope is situated in the latter part of the letter's body—the sermon often-homiletic. The first verse in this passage is the bedrock for the following two. It declares (in part, at least) what faith is. The next verse shows the purpose of and need for faith and prefaces the rest of the chapter which is filled with examples of these “elders” (πρεσβύτεροι) who were approved by God and received his testimony. Finally, the third verse emphasizes the importance of faith in the eternal scheme of the plan of salvation and ushers in this list by telling of the creation—the first in a powerful series of case studies.

### Detailed Analysis

Hebrews 11:1 is the most direct and straightforward definition of faith in the New Testament. Paul Ellingworth notes that ἔστιν δέ, the first two words of the verse, “is followed by an anarthrous noun in definitions,” which is certainly the case here.<sup>2</sup> However, this verse should not be understood to be a complete, all-encompassing definition per se, but rather a partial one—an explication of certain aspects of faith only. This is because there is no mention of the faith's object in the verse, also because it lacks any reference to who possesses the faith.

This discussion presupposes that faith is the subject of the verse as opposed to the predicate nominative. Several scholars have created rubrics for the purpose of making this distinction. Daniel B. Wallace mentions two as most noteworthy: Goetchius in his book *The Language of the New Testament*, and McGaughey in his *Descriptive Analysis of Ἔστιν*. According to Goetchius's standards, one of the principle factors used to distinguish the two is to determine whether or not one or the other “is mentioned in immediately preceding context.”<sup>3</sup> Faith is mentioned in the last verse of chapter 10, making it an obvious candidate for the subject by his rubric.

Another exegetically significant grammatical note to consider is whether the subject-predicate nominative pair is a subset or a convertible proposition.<sup>4</sup>

2. Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 564.

3. Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar: Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 42.

4. See Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 40–45. According to Wallace, the subject and the predicate nominative are not always interchangeable. When this is the case, the predicate nominative often represents a larger class or state to which the subject belongs. “In linguistic terms, the narrower category (subject) is the hyponym and the broader category (predicate nom.) is the superordinate.” This is called a subset proposition. A convertible proposition is where the subject and the predicate nominative are interchangeable: A=B, for example, is the same as B=A.

It would seem that a case could be made for either possibility in this passage. Thus, secure exegesis of it is not entirely possible. Perhaps this accounts for the continual discussion of the meaning of faith—an area where there seems to be rampant and progressive disaccord among Christians.

Although the relationship between the subject and the predicate nominative is indeterminate, there is much to be gained by exploring the nuances of each term. Craig R. Koester asserts that “faith encompasses both trust in God and faithfulness to God.”<sup>5</sup> Taking faith as the subject, the assumed predicate nominative is ὑπόστασις. There are five occurrences of this word in the New Testament (2 Cor 9:4; 11:17; Heb 1:3; 3:14; and 11:1).<sup>6</sup> Meanings derived from the different contexts of the word can be separated into two general senses: the objective sense of “guarantee” or the subjective sense of “being sure.”<sup>7</sup> The New Revised Standard Version translates the word as “assurance,” which seems to do a fine job of capturing both of the senses just mentioned.<sup>8</sup> The ὑπόστασις is both the conviction a person has in unseen rewards which are “hoped for” as well as the guarantee, deed, or entitlement given us by God who is, himself, the guarantor. As Ellingworth phrases it, “Faith guarantees what believers hope for.”<sup>9</sup>

The “things unseen” (πραγμάτων . . . οὐ βλεπομένων) mentioned in this verse are the same as those “hoped for” mentioned earlier. John Barton and John Muddiman note that “those invisible things are both the objects of future hope and the transcendent realities, God and his exalted Son, that guarantee hope.”<sup>10</sup> Contrary to their rendering, however, οὐ βλεπομένων is probably better translated as “unseen” rather than “invisible,” as the latter connotes the inability of the things hoped for to be seen, which would defy the whole point and purpose of one’s hope, assuming literality of the passage.

Understanding the second verse requires an awareness of the pericope’s larger context—specifically of vv. 4–40. The elders (πρεσβύτεροι) mentioned here are most likely the men mentioned in those following verses. The key term to aid in the understanding of this verse is the word ἐμαρτυρήθησαν.

5. Craig R. Koester, *Hebrews: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 472.

6. The fact that the only other occurrences of this word outside of Hebrews come from the secure Pauline is evidence of Pauline authorship—be it intermediate or ultimate.

7. Renderings of this word in some of the major modern translations include “confidence, substance, assurance, reality, conviction, undertaking, matter, and state.” Frederick W. Danker ed. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1041 (hereafter BDAG), favors the rendering “realization.”

8. Joseph Smith, in his new translation of the Bible, also favors “assurance” (JST Heb 11:1).

9. Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 564.

10. John Barton and John Muddiman, eds., *The Oxford Bible Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1251.

According to J. Beutler, the verb in the passive sense means “witnessed” or “testified,”<sup>11</sup> although other renderings include “gained approval” (NASB), “received approval” (NRSV), “were commended” (NIV), “were attested” (NAB), “obtained good report” (KJV), and “obtained a testimony” (Rheims). The sense that should be understood here is that the elders accomplished by faith whatever it was that they were commanded to do by God and thus were received into his favor and grace. This “approval” could, perhaps, be the “assurance of things hoped for” mentioned in the previous verse.

The third verse of the pericope is by far the most challenging grammatically—perhaps theologically as well. The dative of means is employed both in the case of πίστει and of ῥήματι. In the case of πίστει, the text does not directly specify who it was that employed the faith—men or God. Indirectly, however, it seems to be tied to the verb νοοῦμεν, connoting that the faith is of men (possessive), yet in God. The dative ῥήματι together with the passive infinitive portrays the means by which the action of the verb is accomplished. Although the text suggests that the means of accomplishment was the immaterial “word” spoken by God, it is tempting to cross-textually equate ῥήματι here with the Johannine λόγος—who, like the “word,” is also God’s, thus turning the dative of means into one of agency. However, assuming Pauline authorship (be it either intermediate or ultimate), it is almost impossible to reconcile this rendering with the remainder of the Pauline corpus. Also, given the rarity of the dative of agency in the New Testament, interpreting ῥήματι thus might be taking a little too much liberty.

Stemming from ῥήματι comes the seemingly difficult phrase, εἰς τὸ μὴ ἐκ φαινομένων τὸ βλεπόμενον γεγόνεσθαι. The key to understanding this phrase lies in the nuance of the phrase εἰς τὸ. The construction of εἰς τὸ plus an infinitive denotes either purpose or result.<sup>12</sup> In this case, result seems to make the most sense as it describes how “what is seen” (τὸ βλεπόμενον) came to be in its present state—finished or completed. It appears that the γεγόνεσθαι at the end of the verse parallels the κατηρτίσθαι at the beginning. Following this mode of reasoning, τὸ βλεπόμενον would parallel τοὺς αἰῶνας and μὴ ἐκ φαινομένων would do the same with ῥήματι—the ἐκ functioning in the same capacity as the dative of means (ῥήματι).<sup>13</sup> Viewing the verse as a parallelism helps clarify what the author meant with his somewhat awkward use of terminology.

11. Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider, eds., *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 2.390.

12. See F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. Robert Funk (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 207 (§402.2); see also Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 591–93.

13. See BDAG, 296–97 (3d–g). On the comparison of the singular with the plural, see Herbert W. Smyth, *Greek Grammar* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 270 (§1003).

### Synthesis

Hebrews 11:1–3 is short yet profound. It begins with a bold, doctrinally significant partial definition of faith, which is then followed by a small verse declaring for us its purpose: to receive a testimony or witness from God of the unseen things that are “hoped for” in the first verse. Faith becomes an assurance (ὑπόστασις) of these objects of our hope—both a firm belief and a guarantee from God of their ultimate realization. Finally, the third verse draws the audience’s attention to the over-arching importance of faith. This is done by taking them back to the beginning, creation, wherein the ages were prepared by God’s word. This verse ushers in an account of several of the scriptural “elders” who, through their faith, received from God a witness of their approval and an assurance (both objectively and subjectively) of the realization of things “hoped for.”

### Reflection

The definition of faith in Hebrews 11:1–3 is powerful, yet incomplete. Taken in the context of the examples of faithful elders, deeper meaning becomes manifest. Faith is not something that can be explained or understood with mere words. Instead, one truly learns faith in the living practice of it. Perhaps this is why the author of Hebrews included the list of faithful individuals with his definition in v. 1—perhaps these examples are meant to be an integral part of the definition, the embodiment of the principle.

Additional and somewhat similar definitions of faith are found in the Book of Mormon. The first is in Alma 32:21: “And now as I said concerning faith—faith is not to have a perfect knowledge of things; therefore if ye have faith ye hope for things which are not seen, which are true.” Another is in Ether 12:6: “And now, I, Moroni, would speak somewhat concerning these things; I would show unto the world that faith is things which are hoped for and not seen; wherefore, dispute not because ye see not, for ye receive no witness until after the trial of your faith.” In the first example, Alma is giving a discourse that invites people to live the gospel faithfully, whether or not they are allowed inside the synagogues. They are encouraged to experiment with the word (definitely sharing Johannine Christology) and live it. Only in and through this experiment on the word can they gain knowledge. They must live faith to know it.

In the second example, Moroni very distinctly captures the nuance of the Hebrews passage with its accompanying examples. One must prove that he will live the principles during the trial of his faith. Then and only then will the witness come which, in turn, begets an even greater faith in that individual.