

Isaac as Promise: A Study of the Symbolism in Hebrews 11,19

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Introduction

The Epistle to the Hebrews manifests a particular interest in the promises made by God to Abraham in Genesis. This can be seen from the frequency with which the words “promise” and “I promise” are found in Hebrews.¹ But there are many more indications, such as the extended imagery of the entry of the people of Israel into the Promised Land in Heb 3,7 – 4,11, or the rehearsing in Heb 6,13-18 of the oath of God in Gen 22,16-17 with regard to progeny.² The present study will focus on Heb 11,19 and the implications with regard to “promise” suggested by the context (vv. 17-18): “In faith Abraham has offered Isaac while being tested: he who had received the promises offered up his only son, he to whom it was said that ‘By Isaac your seed will be called’, having reasoned that God was able to raise even from the dead; hence he received him [sc., Isaac] back as a symbol”.

The Language of Promise in Hebrews

Of immediate interest are the texts in Hebrews where the noun “promise” (*epaggelia*) or the verb “to promise” (*epaggellomai*) are found.

4,1: A promise (of entering into God’s “Rest”, the spiritualized promise of land) still remains; hence the addressees should fear that anyone of them be fall short of entrance. [*epaggelia*]

1. Cf. the use of the noun *epaggelia* at Heb 4,1; 6,12,15,17; 7,6; 8,6; 9,15; 10,36; 11,9[*bis*].13.17.33.39, and the use of the verb *epaggellomai* at Hebrews 6,13; 10,23; 11,11; 12,26.
2. “Like many other early Christians, our author believed himself and his addressees to be the ultimate recipients of God’s promises. For him, the most important of these promises are understood to remain open (4:1, 8), and their fulfillment is something that the faithful Christian can expect for the future. In the deepest sense the ancient recipients of the promises of God did not receive their fulfillment . . .” H. W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Hermeneia; Philadelphia 1989, 176-177.

6,12: The addressees should be mindful of those who inherited the promises (of land and seed) through faith and perseverance lest they become sluggish. [*epaggelia*]

6,13: God, having made a promise [of seed] to Abraham, swore an oath by Himself involving the promise (v. 14). [*epaggellomai*]

6,15: And thus (i.e., accompanied by an oath) through perseverance Abraham obtained the promise (sc., of seed). [*epaggelia*]³

6,17: God wishes to show the immutability of His design to the heirs of the promise and thus resorts to an oath. [*epaggelia*]

7,6: He whose genealogy is not reckoned from the people (i.e., Melchizedek) has given tithes to Abraham, the one who holds the promises (sc., of land and seed) and blesses him. [*epaggelia*]

8,6: Christ has obtained a liturgy as much better than that of the old dispensation as His mediatorship of the covenant is better (sc., than the old covenant), a better covenant which has become law based on better promises (i.e., of land and seed). [*epaggelia*]

9,15: Christ is the mediator of a new covenant in order that, when His death took place for the remission of the transgressions on the basis of the first covenant, those called to the inheritance might receive the thing promised (sc., seed). [*epaggelia*]⁴

10,23: The addressees are urged to hold on to their profession of hope without wavering, for the one who has promised is faithful. [*epaggellomai*]

3. P. Ellingworth thinks that the meaning is that Abraham received that which was promised itself on the grounds that the verb *epitugchan_* too strong to convey the mere conveying of a promise in words. But this is to ignore the whole context: if the promise itself had been obtained, there would be no point in God's being portrayed as stressing by an oath that it would be granted. Cf. P. Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (The New International Greek Testament Commentary); Grand Rapids / Carlisle 1992, 338-339.
4. The whole context of the section 8,1 – 10,39 is about Christ's priesthood, which is primarily concerned with His instituting a new covenant for obtaining the promise of seed (cf. Heb 7,12).

10,36: The addresses have need of perseverance so that by doing the will of God they may obtain the thing promised (sc., seed). [*epaggelia*]⁵

11,9: In faith Abraham dwelt in the land of promise as if belonged to another, staying in tents with Isaac and Jacob the fellow heirs of the same promise (sc., of land). [*epaggelia*]

11,11: In faith sterile Sarah received power to produce seed even though she was beyond the proper age, because she regarded as faithful the one who had made the promise (sc., of seed). [*epaggellomai*]⁶

11,13: In faith all of these persons died without having received the things promised, but having looked on them from afar and greeted them and confessed that they were strangers and sojourners on the earth. [*epaggelia*]

11,17: In faith Abraham stands as having offered Isaac, being tested he tried to offer his only born, he who had received the promises. [*epaggelia*]

11,33: The heroes of old (sc., those named in Heb 11), with faith conquered kingdoms, wrought justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions. [*epaggelia*]

11,39: And all of these, though witnessed to through faith, did not obtain the thing promised (sc., land—cf. v. 38). [*epaggelia*]

12,26: God's voice shook the earth at one time, but now He has promised, "Still one more time I shall shake not only the land but also heaven as well". [*epaggellomai*]

Much, obviously, depends on the exegesis of these texts. But it can at least be said that a defensible interpretation of the passages in questions yields a consistent view: The author of Hebrews regards the promises of land and of seed as the two principal promises made by God to Abraham (cf. 4,1 with regard to the promise of

5. Cf. previous note.

6. The text should be taken as it stands in Nestle–Aland, *Novum testamentum graece* Stuttgart²⁷1993, 580. Cf.: J. Śwetnam, *Jesus and Isaac: A Study of the Epistle to the Hebrews in the Light of the Aqedah*, *Analecta Biblica* 94; Rome 1981, 98-101; J. J. Bailly, "La mention de Sara en Hébreux 11,11", unpublished mémoire en vue de l'obtention du grade de licencié en philologie biblique, Université Catholique de Louvain, Faculté de Théologie 1989.

land; 6,13.15.17; 11,11 with regard to the promise of seed; 7,6; 11,17 with regard to both promises).⁷ These promises were inherited by others: 11,9.39 (land); 6,17; 11,11 (seed); 4,1; 6,12; 11,13.33 (both). The obtaining of the things promised is destined for the addressees: 4,1 (land); 6,17 (the promise of seed is reinforced by an oath which designed not only for the heirs of the promise but for the heirs of the thing promised); 9,15; 10,36 (seed). Abraham obtained the promises through faith and perseverance (6,15; 11,17). These same virtues accompanied the obtaining of the promises by others (6,12; 11,11; 11,33). Christ is the instrument by which the promises made to Abraham (11,17) and inherited by others (6,12) become “better” (8,6), i.e., become definitive.⁸ He also makes possible the obtaining of the things which are promised (8,6; 9,15). But the addressees need faith and perseverance to obtain these realities which have been promised (6,12; 10,23.36). The reality of the transformed land is God’s Rest (4,1).⁹ The reality of the transformed seed is involved in the exegesis of 11,19, which is the subject matter of this paper.

The Language of Inheritance in Hebrews

Of primary interest in connection with the texts which speak of “promise” are the texts which speak of “heirs”, “to inherit”, and “inheritance” (*klēronomos*, *klēronomeō* and *klēronomia*).

At 6,12 there is mention of “those who inherit the promises” (*klēronomeō*) through faith and perseverance. At 6,17 there is reference to “the heirs (*klēronomos*) of the promise” (sc., of seed). As was noted above, the heirs can be both those of the old dispensation and of the new: God’s oath is a means of assuring both of the unchanging nature of His designs. In 9,15 those called are said to receive the promise of the eternal “inheritance” (*klēronomia*). At 11,8 Abraham is said to go out obediently to the place which he is to receive as an “inheritance” (*klēronomia*);

7. For an attempt to outline the relevance of the promises of land and offspring in Heb 3,7 – 6,20 cf. J. Swetnam, “The Context of the Crux at Hebrews 4,7-8”, *Filologia Neotestamentaria* 14 (2001), 101-118 [published in February, 2004].
8. “*Kreitton*, in this context as usually in Hebrews . . . , refers to the Christian dispensation, and here specifically to its divine origin (Ellingworth, 410). On the definitive aspect conveyed by this word in Hebrews cf. Swetnam, *Jesus and Isaac*, 150.
9. Cf. Heb 4,1-11 and Attridge, 122-132.

although the word “promise” is not explicit in this verse, it is in the next: the allusion to the “land of promise” is clear enough from the context.¹⁰

These verses indicate how closely are interconnected the ideas of “inheritance” and “promise”. Even Abraham is said to await the obtaining of land which had been promised him “as an inheritance”.

The relation between “promise” and “inheritance” takes on particular significance because of the prominence the idea of “inheritance” has in Hebrews. Already in 1,2 the idea is introduced: “. . . in this end time God has spoken to us in a Son whom he placed as heir of all things, He through whom He also made the ages”. Again in the prologue, in v. 4, the author speaks of the “name” which the Son has “inherited”. The “name” which the Son “inherited” is precisely the name “Son”, as is explained by the following two verses, which constitute a *gezera shewa* in which the linking word is “Son” (*huios*).¹¹ At the resurrection (alluded to by the use of Ps 2,7—cf. Acts 13,33) the Son becomes fully Son because He is “generated” by the Father so as to have a human body commensurate with His divinity and commensurate with His role as definitive high priest.¹²

From the key role of the idea of “inheritance” in the prologue of Hebrews it may be legitimately assumed that the idea is intended to have thematic importance

10. “The locus of Abraham’s sojourn is the ‘land of promise’ (*gēn tēs ejaggelias*). The designation, unique in scripture, is an appropriate allusion to the divine promise to Abraham, but constitutes more than a casual allusion to the biblical account. The reference to the ‘same promise’ (*tēs epaggelias tēs autēs*) at the end of the verse emphasizes the future orientation of Abraham’s faith” Attridge, *Hebrews*, 323.
11. Cf. J. Swetnam, “The Structure of Hebrews 1,1 – 3,6”, *Melita Theologica* 43 (1992), 59-60. “Christ within the supernal world has a position higher than any other member of that world because he is in possession of a special ‘name.’ That unspecified name is clearly ‘Son,’ the title emphatically presented in vs 2 and the focus of the first quotation of the following scriptural catena,” Attridge, *Hebrews*, 47.
12. “At 1,4 Jesus is said to have inherited a name as far above the angels as he himself was. This name is ‘Son’, and 1,5 indicates that it was given him at the resurrection. But this is surely a second meaning of ‘Son’, a meaning given to Jesus in addition to the title ‘Son’ which he enjoyed during his earthly life (cf. 5,8). When read with the supposition in mind that at the resurrection Jesus was given a body commensurate with his high priestly need of immortality, the words ‘You are my Son, today I have given you birth’ become stunningly apposite: at the resurrection Jesus finally and fully became the ‘Son’ which his divinely-appointed role in the drama of salvation demanded that he be”, J. Swetnam, “Christology and the Eucharist in the Epistle to the Hebrews”, *Biblica* 70 (1989), 78-79.

in what follows. The basis of this assumption is the widespread conviction contemporary with the epistle of the inheritance promised by God.¹³

Hebrews 11,19

Against the background of the foregoing discussion of “promise” and “inheritance” in Hebrews, it is possible to attempt a study of Heb 11,19. The Old Testament setting on which the author of Hebrews is commenting in Heb 11,17-19 is Gen 22 and the testing of Abraham’s faith by God. God commands Abraham to sacrifice His only son, Isaac, thus apparently contradicting His previous promise that “through Isaac will be your seed be named” (cf. Gen 21,12). Abraham, the one who had received God’s promises of land and seed, passes the test by willingly attempting to offer his only son as a sacrifice. The author of Hebrews says that behind Abraham’s compliance was his reasoning that God was capable of raising from the dead. The author of Hebrews concludes: “Wherefore he received him back as a symbol”.¹⁴

The word “wherefore”, *hōthen*, indicates a logical relationship with faith in the resurrection underlying Abraham’s reasoning expressed in the first half of the verse.¹⁵ “Received him back”¹⁶ is expressed by the verb κομίζω, “to receive”. Here it is important to note the way this verb is used in Hebrews: in connection

13. “The general Old Testament tradition about the inheritance promised by God was developed in various ways in apocalyptic and wisdom literature. During the Hellenistic period the inheritance is increasingly specified as a transcendent or heavenly reality. Drawing on these traditions, early Christians frequently affirm that Christ, through his resurrection and exaltation, was given a heavenly inheritance that his followers share. In Hebrews, Christ’s status as heir is manifested in his exaltation to the ‘right hand’ (vs 3d), a transcendent position that guarantees his brethren their inheritance and a share in a ‘heavenly calling’,” Attridge, *Hebrews*, 40.
14. Translation by Attridge, 333.
15. Ellingworth (603) notes “(a) that this is the meaning of *hōthen* elsewhere in Hebrews (2:17; 3:1; 7:25; 8:3; 9:18), and (b) that *hōthen* ultimately refers to Abraham’s future-oriented faith and thus forms an integral part of the wider argument of this chapter.”
16. For this nuance of receiving something as the fruit of one’s endeavors cf. Mt 25,27; 2 Cor 5,10; Eph 6,8; Col 3,25. (C. Spicq, *L’Épître aux Hébreux*. II. Commentaire (Études Bibliques; Paris 1953), 331. Ellingworth notes (605) that active effort on Abraham’s part “is excluded by the context and by the use of the middle voice”. This seems to be somewhat exaggerated. True, a basic underlying idea in the passage is that the promise of progeny to Abraham through Isaac was fundamentally a gratuitous gift of God. But the context of the passage in Heb 11,19 is set in good part by Heb 11,6, where God is presented as rewarding those who seek him.

with the obtaining of what was promised. In 10,36 it is used positively of obtaining that which was promised (here, probably the seed). In 11,39 it is used negatively to indicate that the heroes of Old Testament faith did not receive the land promised, that being reserved for the addressees and for the heroes only through them.¹⁷ It would seem legitimate, therefore, to see in its use here at 11,19 the implication that Abraham received Isaac back as involving that which was promised in some way.¹⁸

In the view of the author of Hebrews, Abraham receives Isaac back “as a symbol” (*en parabolē*). The word is used at Heb 9,9 to indicate that the outer tent of the desert tabernacle is a symbol of present reality conceived as a type of fulfillment.¹⁹ Thus it seems legitimate to infer that at 11,19 it conveys the idea of an eschatological reality.²⁰ And this eschatological reality must have a relation with resurrection, given the first half of v. 19 (*logisamenos hoti kai ek nekron egeirein dynatos ho theos*) together with the inferential particle introducing the second half (*hothen*).²¹ Thus Isaac is received back by Abraham charged symbolically with an eschatological meaning involving resurrection.

An eschatological meaning involving resurrection in a Christian context such as Hebrews can have reference only to the resurrection of Jesus and the subsequent resurrection of all believers (cf. Heb 13,20-21). Given the role of Christ in Hebrews, the primary reference here is to the resurrection of Christ from the dead, and through

17. This is noted by Ellingworth, 553. At Heb 11,13 the verb *komizō* is a variant reading for the much better attested *lambanō*. The similarity between 11,13 and 11,39 could well have caused a scribe to change the original reading. The reading with *lambanō* emphasizes the reality of the obtaining or not obtaining the promises, as opposed to the eschatological nuance of the reading with *komizō*.
18. Attridge (335, and 335, n. 30) notes that this “receiving” has occasionally been applied to the birth of Isaac. But he points out that the idea of “receiving Isaac back” is part of the tradition of the Aqedah, i.e., the sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham. But it would seem that more important for the meaning is the context, which obviously speaks of Abraham receiving Isaac back after the successful completion of his test of faith.
19. Cf. Ellingworth, 440, and Attridge, 241.
20. “The noun *en parabolō* is used [sc., in 11,19] in the same sense as at 9:9, of a symbol pointing to an eschatological reality” Attridge, 335.
21. “Hebrews does not specify in what way the event [i.e., Abraham receiving Isaac back] was symbolic, but its significance is surely connected with the belief in resurrection attributed to Abraham”, Attridge, 335.

Christ, the resurrection of Christians.²² The reason for this lies in the way the idea of “inheritance” is presented in Hebrews. This is the dominating context in which the promises are presented (for the relevance of promises here, cf. the preceding verse, 11,18). Christ is the “heir of all things” (*klēronomos pateōn*), as Heb 1,2 states thematically. It is through His death and covenant that those called receive their eternal inheritance (9,15). The resurrection of Jesus does play a prominent part in Hebrews (1,5-13), and does not simply constitute an afterthought at the end of the letter (13,20).²³

This central role of the resurrection of Jesus in Hebrews can be confirmed by noting the way the concept of “salvation” (*sōtēria*) is handled in 2,10: God begins the process of leading many sons to glory by bringing to perfection through suffering the originator of their salvation.²⁴

The word “bring to perfection” (*teleiōō*) is here best taken as referring to the “completion” of Jesus’ earthly body through the resurrection in the sense that it is brought to the perfection commensurate with Jesus’ status as Son of God.²⁵ This ontological perfection enables Jesus to function definitively as the high priest of the Christian dispensation and thus bring His priesthood to perfection.²⁶ The word “to perfect”, *teleiōō*, so central to the letter (2,10; 5,9; 7,19.28; 9,9; 10,1; 11,40; 12,23), indicates the centrality of the resurrection of Christ in the letter’s theology.

Thus the primary referent in Heb 11,19 of the symbolism involving Abraham’s receiving of Isaac with reference to the resurrection is the resurrection of Jesus, and only secondarily the resurrection of Christians. Or, better still, the primary referent of the Isaac of Heb 11,19 is the risen Jesus, and through Him of all Christians:

22. *Contra*: Attridge, 335, n. 34: “Isaac . . . is not restricted to a christological symbol, although Christ is certainly among those brought by God from death. Cf. 13:20. A typological relationship between the sacrifices of Isaac and Christ, common in patristic exegesis, is not explicitly developed.”

23. Heb 1,1 – 3,6 may be structured as follows: 1,1-4: prologue; 1,5 – 2,4: Jesus as “Son of God” (the resurrection of Jesus viewed as exaltation); 2,5 – 3,6: Jesus as “Son of Man” (the resurrection of Jesus viewed as following death). Cf. J. Swetnam, “The Structure of Hebrews 1,1 – 3,6”.

24. For the various grammatical and lexicographical problems connected with this verse see Ellingworth, 157-163.

25. Cf. Swetnam, “Christology and the Eucharist in the Epistle to the Hebrews”, 75-78.

26. The episode of the Transfiguration which figures so prominently in the Synoptic gospels indicates that Jesus always had the power to assume a transfigured body. There is question in the resurrection of assuming this transfigured body as a permanent state.

Abraham received Isaac back as a symbol, i.e., Isaac himself is a symbol.²⁷ In other words, for the author of Hebrews the crucial thing about Isaac when he is received back by Abraham is his symbolic value pointing to an eschato-logical dimension (*komizō*) with reference to resurrection (*logisamenos hoti kai ek nekron egeirein dynatos ho theos*) and in the context of the promise of seed made to Abraham (*pros hon elalēthē hoti en Isaak klēthēsetai soi sperma*). For the author of Hebrews, writing from the standpoint of eschatological fulfillment, the reality of the seed (*sperma*) promised by God to Abraham is above all Jesus.

Hebrews 11,19 and Galatians 3,16

The conclusion reached here with regard to the implications of vv. 17-19 for the reality promised to Abraham under the imagery of “seed” might seem at first sight farfetched. But as a matter of fact this is the interpretation advanced by Paul in Gal 3,16: “The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. It does not say, ‘and to his seeds’, as referring to many, but as referring to one, ‘and to his seed’, who is Christ” (*tō de Abraam erretēsan hai epaggeliai kai tō spermati autou. ou legei kai tois spermasin, hos epi pollōn all’ hōs eph’ henos kai tō spermati sou, hos estin Christos*). It is beyond the scope of this paper to elucidate Gal 3,16, but it is intriguing to note the clustering around this verse of words central to the argumentation of Hebrews, such as “covenant” (*diathēkē*), “inheritance” (*kleronomia*) and “promise” (*epaggelia*). If Paul feels free to interpret the “seed” promised to Abraham as Christ, it would seem legitimate to infer that the author of Hebrews could also feel free to do so.

Summary

The present study explores the implications of the symbolism indicated in Heb 11,19 in the context of the promise of “seed” (i.e., offspring) made to Abraham. A study of the use of the word “promise” in Hebrews indicates that the author distinguishes between the promises as such and the realities indicated by the promise, i.e., the promises as fulfilled. He regards the fulfillment of the promises as coming through Christ as the one who instituted a new covenant. The presentation of the promises in Hebrews, important as it is, is subordinated to the presentation of the theme of inheritance. From the very beginning of the letter Christ is presented as

27. There is no intention here of implying that Abraham foresaw the one whom Isaac symbolized.

heir, with the Christians as receiving their inheritance through him. This inheritance has to do with salvation, which is constituted by the promises in their eschatological reality. Central to this eschatological reality is the risen Christ.

A study of Heb 11,19 indicates that the author is thinking of the promises, in particular, of the promise of seed made to Abraham. He is thinking of the resurrection. He is thinking of an eschatological context which for him is realized in Christ. And he is thinking of Isaac as a symbol. When these elements are placed together, the conclusion would seem to be that for the author of Hebrews the risen Christ is the reality symbolized by Isaac. Just as God's Rest is the reality of the transformed promise of land made to Abraham, so the reality of the transformed seed is the risen Christ and through Him of those who will share in His risen state. The two realities go together: Christians share in the resurrection of Christ, who is the transformed seed promised to Abraham. And with Christ they share the reality of the transformed land, which is God's Rest. That Christ is the reality of the promise of seed made to Abraham is an interpretation advanced also by Paul in Gal 3,16.

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