

HEBREWS 11 - AN INTERPRETATION

James Swetnam

The overriding tendency for an exegete of the Epistle to the Hebrews on entering into Chapter 11 is to play it straight.¹ True, there are problems with this approach. But then almost everywhere one looks in Hebrews there are problems. True, the first three verses have complicated terminology - *pistis*, *hypostasis*, *elenchos* - and complicated imagery - "things not seen", "things invisible", "completing the aeons". But the overall meaning seems clear enough. True, some Old Testament people are mentioned but not others - why is Jephthah singled out, for example?² But the author should be indulged an occasional idiosyncrasy. True, there is the occasional odd textual reading - where on earth, for example, did the best-attested text for v. 11 come from, which has Sarah portrayed sexually in terms of a male? But this is clearly a scribal aberration; a slight correction will put things in order.³

The present article takes a different approach. The apparent anomalies mentioned above will all yield to a bit of careful - and imaginative - interpretation if one is willing to credit the author of Hebrews with a bit of careful - and imaginative - writing. Hebrews is not the kind of work which yields its meaning easily: this is the supposition operative in the present article. And this supposition is matched by a twin: but yield it Hebrews will.

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- 1 The present article complements the review article "The Structure of Hebrews - A Fresh Look" by the present author in *Melita Theologica* XLI/I(1990) 25-46. The book under review was Harold W. ATTRIDGE, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Philadelphia (1989)). Attridge is an example of a commentator who "plays it straight" in Chapter 11. This fact, plus the extraordinary richness of the information and insight which he offers, makes his work an ideal foil for the interpretation given in this article.
 - 2 Cf. Attridge, *Hebrews*, 348: "Jephthah, remembered for his tragic vow, seems to be particularly inappropriate".
 - 3 Cf. ATTRIDGE *Hebrews*, 325: "The most likely resolution then is to make a slight emendation...."

The Context of Hebrews 11

The key to Hebrews 11 is the structure of the epistle as a whole. The present writer has elsewhere outlined his views of what that structure is.⁴ In that structure the content of the epistle is closely related to the epistle's form. Basically the message of Hebrews, the form-content, is seen as centering on the promises of land and seed to Abraham as fulfilled in Christ who as Word passes on that fulfillment to others, both those who lived before his sojourn on earth and those who lived after. The epistle takes the Aqedah - the sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham in Gen 22 - and the relation between offering and posterity found there and plays upon it in the light of perspectives generated by the promise of land made to Abraham, the resurrection of Jesus, belief in Christ as the Word of God existing from all eternity, and various Old Testament texts involving Melchizedek, the Day of Atonement ceremony, and the prophecy of Jeremiah about a new covenant. In Chapters 11-13 the author of Hebrews discusses the posterity of Abraham and of Christ. Chapter 11 concerns the posterity who lived before Christ's coming, and Chapters 12 -13 the posterity who lived after it.

To Chapter 11 the author of Hebrews assigns a special function: the imaging forth of Christian realities objectively evidenced (*elenchos*) by Old Testament personages as they unwittingly act out their role in salvation history under the creative influence of Christ as Word, the initiator and perfecter of faith.⁵ The challenge for the exegete, then, is not to play it straight, but to search out the meanings hidden in the chapter. Eisegesis is, of course, a prime occupational hazard of such an approach. But the possibility should not be ignored that one who plays Chapter 11 straight can be more a victim of eisegesis than one who does not.

Abel, Enoch, Noah as Christian Realities

An interpretation of these three Old Testament figures in terms of Christian realities has been given elsewhere.⁶ Abel in Heb 11,4 is meant to suggest Christ,

4 In the review article mentioned above in note 1.

5 For a fuller explanation of the crucial passage Heb 11,1-3 cf. SWETNAM, "The Structure of Hebrews".

6 *Ibid.*, 24-25.

whose sacrifice and vindication by God is the main point at issue in these opening verses. Enoch in vv. 5-6 is meant to suggest Mary, the mother of Jesus, and her assumption. Noah in v. 7 is meant to suggest Christ and his founding of the Church symbolized by the ark. These latter two Christian realities are viewed as marvelous vindications by God of Jesus and his sacrifice (cf. Heb 2,4).

The Structures of Hebrew 11

The above interpretation of Heb 11,4-7 suggests a structure for the entire chapter. There are two parts to the chapter, following on the introductory verses 1-3. Vv. 4-16 constitutes the first part, and vv. 17-40 the second. Each part begins with mention of the sacrifice of Christ in terms of an Old Testament reality (v. 4: Abel; vv. 17-19: Abraham-Isaac). Each part is about the promises made to Abraham (vv. 4-16, the promises of progeny and land - cf. the plural *epangelias* at 11,13; vv. 17-40, the promise of progeny - cf. the singular *epangelian* at 11,39). Each part closes with a sentence containing the phrase *huotoi pantes* (cf. vv. 13 and 39). Thus the chapter is a miniature reprise of the entire epistle, which is based on the sacrifice of Jesus in the context of the two promises, progeny and land, made to Abraham.

Abraham's Ignorance and Christian Realities

V. 8 tells of Abraham's obedience coupled with ignorance about his final goal. In Hebrews this ignorance is implicitly extended to the ultimate "land" to which he was headed, God's heavenly rest (cf. Heb 4,1-11 and 11,16). Christ in Hebrews assumes the role of Abraham as he takes on himself the function of educating "children" who look to him for an example (cf. Heb 2,13; 12,1-3; 12,4-13).⁷ At 11,8 Abraham is meant to suggest Christ and his ignorance at the experiential level. Just as Abraham was unaware of just where God was leading him, so Christ was "unaware" of just where God was leading him. This lack of awareness was on the level of experience (cf. the use of the standard play on words at Heb 5,8, *emathen af hon epathen*).⁸ Christ at the hour of a death granted because of his Father's will "learned" by what he suffered where

7 Ibid.,8-9a.

8 Cf. ATTRIDGE, *Hebrews*, 152-153. Attridge, however, gives an interpretation of Heb 5,7-8 different from the one being followed in this paper. Cf. ATTRIDGE, *Hebrews*, 147-154. The present writer follows the interpretation he gave in *Jesus and Isaac: A Study of the Epistle to the Hebrews in the Light of the Aqedah* (Rome 1981) 182.

obedience to the Father's will leads - resurrection and eternal life.⁹

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as Coheirs and Christian Realities

In vv. 9-10 the author of Hebrews tells about Abraham's sojourning with Isaac and Jacob who were "coheirs of the same promise". And this is linked with their heavenly destiny under the image of a "city".¹⁰ The use of the word "same" is plausibly viewed as emphasizing the future orientation of Abraham's faith.¹¹ But this interpretation fails to do full justice by the "parable" referred to at 11,19: the Aqedah is being used by the author of Hebrews as a connected story with multiple implications. Nor does it convey any particular Christian meaning except the rather banal one that Christians, like Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, were concerned with the future. To give the imagery bite it seems more appropriate to view Isaac as alluding to all persons who are not descendants of Jacob, i.e., all those who are not physically members of the twelve tribes of Israel.¹² Such persons are viewed by Paul in Ephesians in terms of rising from the dead (Eph 5,14; cf. Eph 2,1.5). Further, in the parable of the "prodigal son" in Luke the prodigal is said to have been dead and then brought back to life (Luke 15,24). The contrast between the elder son and the prodigal is quite plausibly intended to be a contrast between Judaism (cf. Luke 15,31, uttered by Jesus doubtless with more than a touch of irony) and paganism. "Resurrection" means return to life with God in the full sense of the word. In Hebrews use of the word *autos* is meant to suggest not only that the same future is involved for Isaac and Jacob, i.e., pagans and Jews, but that this future is one of parity for both parties.¹³

9 The level of experience is the only level on which the Word - Jesus as divine - can learn in the context of human life. This possibility of "learning" is why Jesus can have faith (cf. Heb 2,13) and why he can be "tested" (cf. 2,18).

10 The image of "city" is of major importance in the chapter and will be discussed at greater length below.

11 Cf. ATTRIDGE, *Hebrews*, 323.

12 The appropriateness of this interpretation will become clearer in the light of subsequent exegesis of the chapter.

13 Cf. the implication of the repeated use of prefix *sun* in Eph 2,5-6.

Sarah and Christian Reality

With v. 11 Sarah appears. This is one of the classic cruces in the epistle.¹⁴ The text used here will be that which retains Sarah as the subject of the sentence: "It was faith that enabled Sarah, barren till then, to receive power for depositing seed, although she was past the age of child-bearing, because she deemed faithful the one making the promise." The problem, of course, consists in trying to understand the phrase "power for depositing seed", which is unmistakably masculine, in the context of the woman's role in reproduction. One solution is to modify the text in some way to make Abraham the subject.¹⁵ But if Christian realities are being alluded to through the description of Old Testament figures, a plausible interpretation suggests itself: the author is conveying in vivid language Christian belief in the virgin birth of Christ. Sarah suggests Mary, and when the text says that she received power for depositing seed through her faith it means that Mary conceived with no aid from a male. But the text also makes sense in terms of Sarah, provided it be kept in mind that the author of Hebrews is thinking of Abraham's offspring primarily in terms of faith: Sarah did not have the advantage of Abraham's successful example of faith, but succeeded in sharing in it all the same by her own. Because Abraham's faith is normative, the language used to describe Sarah's faith is expressed in terms appropriate for a male - faith is presented with language drawn from physical generation. In the sense intended by the author of Hebrews, Abraham's descendants are spiritual, i.e., they imitate Abraham's faith (cf. the meaning of "son" in Heb 2,5-18 and the example of the patriarchs in Heb 11,17-22). The result of Sarah's act of faith is expressed in studiously ambiguous terms (*afhenos....kai tauta nenekromenos*) because two persons are being referred to, Abraham (explicitly) and Christ (by allusion).¹⁶

14 Cf. the ample discussion in ATTRIDGE, *Hebrews*, 324-326.

15 This is the solution adopted by ATTRIDGE (*Hebrews* 325-326).

16 Manifestations of scepticism by Sarah in the text of Genesis cause no more difficulty for the author of Hebrews than do the manifestations of skepticism by Abraham. He was looking at Old Testament persons from the standpoint of New Testament persons, and not vice versa. This said, one should recognize that Sarah's faith was not a *topos* the way Abraham's was. Attridge's evocation of Sarah as an "amused sceptic" (325) makes the origin of the *lectio difficilior* into a challenge which his suggested solution on grammatical grounds (326) doesn't really meet.

The Summary at Hebrews 11,13-16

At 11,13-16 the author makes a summary, obviously referring to all whom he had mentioned. Emphasis on the “city” being prepared by God is clear from the placement at the end of v. 16. Just what is meant by the word is presumed by the author to be understood by his readers.

The Akedah and Christian Reality

With 11,17-22 the second half of the chapter begins. In the first half the author of Hebrews was concerned with the presentation of the Christian realization of the promises made to Abraham as regards progeny and land. The second half of the chapter is concerned with the Christian realization of one of these promises (cf. the singular, *epangelia*, at 11,39). Presumably the point of view will be somewhat different from the point of view in the first half of the chapter.

In 11,17-22 the discussion is about Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and the sons of Joseph. The verses are meant to be taken as a unit: the use of the phrase “also about future realities” (*kai peri mellonton*) at v. 20 links v. 20 explicitly with what precedes; and because of the similarity of structure, v. 20 is linked with what follows in vv. 21-22.¹⁷ The scene in Gen 22 is evoked and because of the extended treatment (vv. 17-19) and the key role of Isaac (v. 20) it seems to be intended as having a key role. In presenting the Akedah the author portrays Abraham as “offering” (*prosphero*, used twice) Isaac. The use of this technical term indicates that Abraham is being viewed as a priest.¹⁸ Allusion

17 Cf. ATTRIDGE, *Hebrews*, 336 and 336, n.39.

18 The use of the perfect tense (*krosenochen*) and then the imperfect (*krosopheren*) is perhaps best explained by understanding the sacrifice as being completed in Abraham’s intention, but incomplete in fact (conative imperfect). This interpretation would explain why the word *prosphero* is used twice in such a relatively short compass. Use of the imperfect creates an opening for fulfillment in the sacrifice of Christ. ATTRIDGE (*Hebrews*, 334) opts tentatively for the conative but takes the perfect as an “exegetical perfect” used elsewhere in Hebrews. He thinks the play on tenses may be “significant” but offers no suggestions. Like many other apparently minor detail, this use of tense is worth reflecting on in the light of the epistle as a whole.

in v. 17 to the promises and to the “test” prepares the way for v. 18 where mention of the promise of progeny is made. The text chosen to refer to this promise is not taken from Gen 22, which would seem the text to use inasmuch as the Aqedah is being discussed, but from Gen 21. The reason for this deviation from the expected seems to be that the text in Gen 21 uses the term “call” (*kaleo*) which elsewhere in Hebrews seems associated with Abraham (cf. 11,8), priesthood (cf. 5,4), and Christians (cf. 3,1). In v. 19 the author describes Abraham’s attitude in attempting to sacrifice Isaac: “...thinking that God was able to raise even from the dead; and so he received him back in parable”. This is a crucial verse, for it describes the faith of Abraham which is the source of his spiritual children: one becomes a son of Abraham in Hebrews by believing as Abraham believed, and here that belief is articulated. It is belief focussed on resurrection from the dead.¹⁹ As a result of that belief (*hothen*)²⁰ Abraham’s faith is rewarded by receiving Isaac back as an indication that the promise of progeny was being renewed (cf. Heb 6,13-15). The phrase “in parable” seems to indicate that the account of the sacrifice of Isaac in Gen 22, like the account of the temple service evoked at Heb 9,9, is being used as an extended story with multiple applications.²¹

The author of Hebrews, then, regards vv. 17-22 as a unit. In the context of Hebrews this unit uses language which indicates that the author is thinking of Abraham’s offering as being a sacrifice in the technical sense, possibly as being intended to be completed but actually unfulfilled.²² But the primary focus of the author is clearly on the Aqedah as it relates to resurrection. The use of the term “parable” suggests multiple applications. The progeny of Abraham is somehow involved. How do these rather obvious aspects of the passage fit in with the allusions to the patriarchs?

In terms of Christian realities the parable suggests Jesus as sacrificial victim who is risen from the dead. He seems to be passing on this blessing in some way

19 The point is noted by ATTRIDGE (*Hebrews*, 335) but not developed adequately because of his failure to see the importance of the Aqedah for Hebrews as a whole.

20 Cf. ATTRIDGE, *Hebrews*, 335, n. 27.

21 There is the connotation of an eschatological reality in the use of *parabole* but this seems to be *per accidens*. Cf. ATTRIDGE, *Hebrews*, 335 and 335, n. 32, who stresses the eschatological aspect and notes that the word occurs elsewhere in the New Testament only in the gospels.

22 Cf. above, n. 18.

to the patriarchs. Some sort of restriction is involved so that the author does not want to be understood as speaking of Christ's descendants as a whole: therecipients of the blessing are in pairs, with the younger in each of the two cases being mentioned before the older.²³ This order mirrors the scriptural account, where the firstborn gives way to the one who is not first-born. In the context of the resurrection of Christ being passed on a blessing this would seem to indicate that the author of Hebrews is thinking of the risen Christ as being in some way not the firstborn. Now in Hebrews the risen Christ is explicitly viewed as being "firstborn" (*prototokos* - 1,6). That is to say, at the resurrection he is viewed as being born anew (cf. 1,5) in that his exaltation involves the "perfecting" of his humanity to a state appropriate for his pre-existent sonship.²⁴ He is "firstborn" in the sense that he is to precede others in this exalted state. (cf. 11,18; 2,10). When the author of Hebrews presents the risen Christ as passing on the blessing of his status in terms of a reversal of the Old Testament custom of the priority of the physically firstborn, the implication would seem to be that a priesthood was instituted by the risen Christ to pass on his sacrificial victimhood (with his role as offerer possibly being implied - the conative imperfect in v. 17). This priesthood - his descendants viewed under the formality of a selective restriction symbolized by the reversal of Old Testament right of inheritance - is passed on by a special blessing and thus does not depend on physical birth as does the Old Testament priesthood. The addressees presumably are acquainted with the priesthood of Christ; perhaps they are priests themselves. Now they are shown how this priesthood was foreshadowed in the lives of the heroes of old.

In 11,21 Jacob is said to have bowed down to the tip of his "staff" (*rhabdos*). Here is another allusion to the priesthood of the age to come, i.e., Christ's, for in 1,8 the risen Christ is presented as having a "staff" (*rhabdos*) as a sign of his kingdom, and at 9,4 the "staff" (*rhabdos*) of Aaron is mentioned as a symbol of the Old Testament priesthood.²⁵ In bowing down to his own staff Jacob is

23 ATTRIDGE, *Hebrews*, 336, notes that the blessings concern "things to come" (*ton mellonton*).

24 Cf. SWETNAM, *Jesus and Isaac*, 75-79.

25 At Heb 9,4 the staff of Aaron is placed in the "ark" (*kibotos*) along with the jar of manna. This innovation by the author of Hebrews is probably to be construed as an indication that he sees these items as prefiguring the priesthood and eucharist which, with the tablets of the covenant foreshadowing the eucharist from a different perspective, constitute the "ark" (*kibotos*) which is the Church (cf. 11,7).

viewed as unwittingly bowing down to the future staff of the risen Christ, symbol of his heavenly priesthood of the firstborn which Jacob has unwittingly prefigured in giving his blessing to the younger of Joseph's sons.

11,17-22 ends with Joseph's thinking of the exodus of the sons of Israel and with his prescribing about his bones (v. 22). The prescribing about his bones emphasizes his trust in the resurrection²⁶, and his thinking of the exodus ties in vv. 17-22 with the passage which follows, vv. 23-31, where the exodus is explicitly referred to (v. 29).

Moses and Christian Reality

The crucial verse for understanding the role of Moses in the discussion of the Christian realities which he prefigures is 11,28. There the Passover sacrifice and the pouring out of blood are performed by Moses lest the one who destroys the firstborn (*ta prototoka*) touch them.²⁷ Here the Passover sacrifice is presented as taking place *after* Moses left Egypt (cf. 11,27), i.e., it is being assimilated to the sacrifice made on the occasion of the Sinai covenant.²⁸ In terms of Hebrew's view of Christian reality, Christ's covenant sacrifice involves among other things protection for the firstborn, i.e., the Old Testament foreshadows a future divine economy in which protection for the firstborn would be allied with a new covenant. The "firstborn", of course, are to be understood in terms of Christ's heavenly priesthood as explained in 11,17-22.

Moses' role as one who prefigures Christ is alluded to explicitly at 11,24-27. Even though he became a great personage he did not want to be called the "son" of the daughter of pharaoh (v. 24) but preferred to throw in his lot with God's people rather than enjoy the pleasures of sin (v. 25), thinking that the reproach

26 Cf. ATTRIDGE, *Hebrews*, 337: "In faith Jacob's son looked to the future, but God was planning something better (vs 40) than the outcome for which the patriarch had hoped."

27 ATTRIDGE, *Hebrews*, 342, thinks that the Passover sacrifice is presented at 11,28 as taking place before the exodus and thus interprets 11,27 as referring to Moses' youthful departure for Midian. But it seems preferable in view of Moses' lack of fear and of his seeing the invisible (see below) that 11,27 refers to Moses' exodus and that 11,29 refers to the exodus of the people of Israel in general.

28 The author of Hebrews makes a special point of Moses' prefiguring of the sacrifice of Jesus (cf. Heb 3,5 and 9,19-20). Again, he is viewing the Old Testament in the perspective of Christian realities, and not vice versa.

Christ suffered was preferable to the riches of Egypt, for he looked to the reward (v. 26). In Hebrews Christ suffers reproach by going outside the "camp" (i.e., Jerusalem) to die (13,11-13); Moses prefigures this by leaving Egypt at the time of the exodus. Moses foresaw the "reward" of such action: eternal life (cf. the use of "rewarder" at 11,6). In Hebrews the true exodus issues eventually in the promised land of heaven.

With this discussion the author's message as contained in Chapter 11 finally begins to take on a *Sitz im Leben*: what he is conveying in indirect but immensely powerful language is the confrontation between two priesthoods: the Jerusalem priesthood, in charge of the temple sacrifices, and the Christian priesthood, in charge of Christ's unique sacrifice. The Jerusalem priesthood is viewed as being responsible for Christ's death (cf. the Cain-Abel imagery of 11,4) which is viewed as a sacrifice (11,4: *thusia, prospero, doron*).

This Jerusalem priesthood is the firstborn of the two in terms of flesh, but the scriptural text, in which the sacrifice of Abel, the younger son, is preferred, prefigures by indirection the realities of the Christian dispensation in which the earthly firstborn does not inherit the definitive priesthood. It is the risen Christ as "heavenly" firstborn who has inherited God's blessing implied in Isaac's "resurrection" from the dead and realized in Christ's real resurrection. It is this blessing priesthood which Christ passes on to his priests (11,17-22). Just as Christ bore reproach in going outside the camp, so Moses bore reproach in refusing to accept the privileges of the Egyptian establishment. By an extraordinarily audacious use of imagery, the author of Hebrews is using the example of Moses, the very personification of Jewish identity, to witness against the Jerusalem priesthood in favour of the Christ whom they killed and who, by that very death, is the one who really sanctifies, i.e., who is the legitimating factor (Son and heir - cf. Heb 12,8) in the disputed question as to where the true people of God is to be found (cf. also 11,25 and 13,12). God's action in the assumption of Mary (11,5-6) and in the founding of the Church (11,7) are viewed as witnessing in favour of Christ's sacrifice and, by implication, as witnessing against the sacrifices of the Jerusalem priesthood (cf. 13, 10). The "pagans" are part of this true people of God (11,9 - again a play on older and younger²⁹ in the context of the resurrection).

29 Cf. above, n. 12.

This evocation of Moses' prefiguring of Christ and Christian life implies the rejection of the Jerusalem priesthood, its sacrifices, and its covenant (cf. 8,13 and 1,13). At 9,28 the future return of Christ is envisaged with reference to his sacrifice in terms of definitive salvation. At the time of this return Christ will be "seen" (*ophthesetai*).³⁰ This text seems to belong thematically with 11,27, where Moses is said to have left Egypt as one "seeing the unseen" (*ton...aoraton hos horon*): he did not fear to leave Egypt because, as though seeing the invisible, he saw the judgement to be meted out to the Egyptians by God (11,29). In Hebrews this "seeing" by Moses is presented in terms of what it prefigured, the destruction of Jerusalem when Christ will be seen as being definitively vindicated (cf. 2,4; 1,13).³¹

The Exodus and the Chosen People

After Moses, the subject of discussion shifts to the chosen people. In vv. 29-31 they cross the Red Sea as the Egyptians drown, and then assist at the fall of Jericho. The harlot Rahab does not perish but lives because of her faith expressed in her receiving the spies. This is an enigmatic choice of Old Testament detail when viewed from the standpoint of the Old Testament. But when viewed in the context of the Christian priesthood and the epistle as a whole some educated guesses are possible.³² The context of new covenant priesthood seems implied by the remark at 11,22 which has Joseph bearing in mind the exodus of the "sons of Israel" as he dies and thinks of his bones, i.e., resurrection.³³ Thus the passages are related in the mind of the author of Hebrews: 11,23-31 are part of the discussion of the promise made to Abraham of progeny, but here a progeny restricted to the definitive priesthood.

30 Attridge discusses this text at *Hebrews*, 342-343. He is uncertain as to how it should be understood but concludes: "However Moses' vision of the unseen is to be understood, its consequence was that Moses 'endured' (*ekarteresen*)" 343.

31 The appropriateness of this interpretation will become clearer in the light of subsequent exegesis of the chapter.

32 Needless to say, the Christians who had "beheld" (*blepo*) the realities being discussed in Chapter 11 in terms of Old Testament personages were under no constraint to make an educated guess about what was being referred to.

33 Cf. again ATTRIDGE, *Hebrews*, 337.

The most obvious thing to be noted about 11,29-30 is that the passage involves the imagery of entrance into the land - Jericho is beyond the Jordan. Hence there is no question here of the land being used to image forth heaven, as in Chapters 3 and 4, although the eschatological connotation of the land as being linked in some way with heaven is impossible to ignore. Second, this is not the first time a city is referred to in the context: a city prepared by God figures prominently in the first part of Chapter 11 (cf. vv. 10 and 16). Third, Moses was portrayed as sharing in the "reproach" of Christ when Christ went "outside the camp" (i.e., outside Jerusalem - cf. 13,12-13), which the Christians are supposed to do as well (13,13). Fourth, the fate of the Egyptians is explicitly mentioned (11,29). Fifth, God is going to vindicate his people (10,30). Sixth, God is giving witness to the sacrifice of Christ (11,5-7; cf. 2,4). In the light of all these factors the guess can perhaps be hazarded that the author of Hebrews is suggesting that a new city is being readied for the Christian priesthood to replace Jerusalem, the city of the old dispensation. This city is usually understood to be a metaphor for heaven, and the relevance of heaven, given the use of the "promised land" imagery in Hebrews as explained in Chapters 3 and 4, cannot be ignored. But neither can the example of Rahab be ignored. She is referred to explicitly as "the prostitute" (*he porne*). She accordingly symbolizes the city of the great prostitute toward which the people of God is heading (for the imagery of the prostitute cf. Apoc 17,1.5.15). The city in question is Rome. Rahab is the symbol of those in Rome who will be saved by their faith.³⁴ When Jerusalem is visited by God and the sacrifice of God's Son is witnessed to as being just and God's people is accordingly vindicated, the centre of God's dispensation will shift fully to Rome. The author of Hebrews was probably writing before the destruction of Jerusalem and thus did not know exactly how the vindication would take place other than that it would involve the destruction of the Egyptians as a

34 On the external evidence linking Hebrews with Rome cf. ATTRIDGE, *Hebrews*, 10: "External evidence tends to tip the scales in favour of a Roman destination [sc., for Hebrews]. Such evidence is the attestation of Hebrews in Rome by the late first or early second century in *1 Clement*, and the close affinities between Hebrews and *1 Peter*, which was written from 'Babylon' (5.13), clearly a symbolic designation for Rome". The author of *1 Peter* felt constrained to use a *roman à clef* approach to his link with Rome and so the massive indirection which the author of Hebrews resorts to with regard to the city should not seem odd. The first Christians could hardly afford to broadcast their belief that Rome was destined to become the new Jerusalem. On the possible relevance of Heb 13,17 and Rome cf. ATTRIDGE, *Hebrews*, 401-402.

foreshadowing (cf. 11,29).³⁵

In the light of the guess that Rome is the city being referred to under the image of "Jericho" at 11,30, the first half of Chapter 11 needs reexamination. In v. 4 the sacrifice of Abel is presented as being the vehicle of Abel's being seen as just in relation to the sacrifice of Cain. What is at stake here is Christ being seen as just in relation to his "older brother", the Jerusalem priesthood, which was instrumental in bringing about his death (imagery of Cain). Next comes the example of Enoch (vv. 5-6) which, as interpreted in this paper, is to be seen as a prefiguring of the assumption of Mary, the mother of Jesus. This "assumption" is not to be viewed as simply a marvel performed in favour of a much-beloved person, but rather as a symbol involving what this person represented: God's people. In 11,11-12 the mother of Jesus is prefigured by Sarah as the mother of all those who live by faith, i.e., all Christ's "children". As such she is known, in a different context, as Daughter of Sion, i.e., Jerusalem.³⁶ The author of Hebrews does not mention this aspect, but it is implicit in his discussion of Mary in the context of the prefiguring of Sarah and the search for a city. The change of covenants involved in Christ's death involves a change of cities as the focal point of priesthood (the supposition at the basis of the guess being hazarded here). This change does not involve the death of God's people but a change to a new life, a life involving assured access to glory and salvation. This change from symbol of the people of the old dispensation (Daughter of Sion) to symbol of the people of the new (Mother of the Church) is effected symbolically in Mary without death. Her "assumption", in other words, is part of her role as symbol of God's people and this underlies the allusions in 11,4-16.

At 11,7 Noah's building of the ark symbolizes the Church, to be centred in Rome just as the old dispensation was centred in Jerusalem.

At 11,8 Abraham is pictured as heading for a place he was ignorant of. Again, in terms of Christ experiential knowledge was not achieved of the "place"

35 The fact that the foreshadowing of the Egyptians' deaths does not match neatly the destruction of Jerusalem may be a testimony to the date of the composition of Hebrews. On the other hand, predictions of the destruction of Jerusalem are fairly straightforward in the synoptic gospels, and these predictions must represent an ancient tradition, no matter what the dates of the redaction of the gospels are.

36 Cf. I. DE LA POTTERIE, "La Figlia di Sion. Lo sfondo biblico della mariologia dopo il Concilio Vaticano II", *Marianum* 49 (1987) 356-376.

(*topos*) assigned as an inheritance. The word *topos* seems to be designedly ambiguous, referring both to heaven and to the city (cf. 11,14).

At 11,9-10 Abraham, Isaac and Jacob await the city. Isaac and Jacob are the symbolic components of the Church which is composed of both Gentiles and Jews. The city which they await is as specific and concrete as Jerusalem, and at the time in which the first Christians lived was easily understandable as the city to be the centre for the priesthood which served such a Church.

Sarah's motherhood of the descendants of Abraham-Christ at 11,11-12 (cf. again the designedly ambiguous *afhenos* implies the virgin birth (supposing, of course, that one looks at the Old Testament from the perspective of Christian belief). Again, this reality in the personal life of Mary is also symbolic of a reality in the life of God's people. It is through a conception that was virginal that God's son took on the blood and flesh³⁷ which enabled him to die an expiatory death (cf. Heb 9,22) and which acted as an ontological means for transmitting God's fatherhood immediately, so to speak, to his brothers and sisters. Thus God's people has God for Father uninterruptedly, but in the aeon of the new covenant in a way which is ontological and hence definitive. The virginal birth and the assumption, in other words, are intrinsically necessary for the combination of continuity and radical change willed freely by God for his people.³⁸

At 11,13-16 "all these", i.e., Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Sarah, die as sojourners on the earth. The passage ends with the word "city" (*polis*) which underlines the importance it has for the author. Vv. 4-16 are concerned with the "promises" made to Abraham (cf. 11,13), i.e., there is question of both land and progeny. In vv. 4-16 the "land" is viewed as a city, and the progeny are viewed as the people as a whole. In vv. 17-40 there is question of only one promise (cf. 11,39). This promise seems to be progeny restricted to the priesthood of the

37 Cf. the unusual order of words at Heb 2.14, and the brief discussion in ATTRIDGE, *Hebrews*, 91-92. At 11,32 the author of Hebrews uses reversal of customary order to indicate that he has something special in mind. Perhaps at 2.14 he reverses the normal order to imply that Christ's participation has something unusual about it, i.e., the virgin birth.

38 The continuity and radical change involved in the transition from old dispensation to new for God's people needs much more study than has been dedicated to it thus far. For this, greater understanding of the role of the mother of Jesus is needed.

new dispensation, although the people as a whole (vv. 35-38) and the land (v. 30) figure incidentally.

Heroes of Faith

11,32 carries on the discourse after the discussion of Moses and entrance into the land (11,23-31). Six figures from the period of the judges and from the time of David are mentioned, along with a general evocation of "the prophets". The curious aspect of the six persons who are explicitly named is that they are mentioned in pairs, with the names of each pair chronologically reversed.³⁹ In the light of the emphasis which the author gave to the priority of the non-firstborn at vv. 20-21, this chronological reversal is certainly deliberate. It does not depend directly on any such reversal in the Old Testament as does the priority of the non-firstborn, and yet it must point to some Old Testament reality, for otherwise the author could not expect the addressees to recognize an objective indication (*elenchos*) of things which they had seen (*blepo*). Further, the verse is presumably intended as an explanation of some aspect of the Christian priesthood, for it is included in the second half of Chapter 11, which seems to deal primarily with the promise to Abraham of progeny construed as priesthood. The verse follows naturally from the discussion of the entrance into the land at 11,30-31 and is introduced by words which imply continuity with what preceded: *kai ti eti lego*. The nature and function of all six heroes seem to indicate what the author has in mind. For all six heroes were 1) individuals who 2) fought for Israel.⁴⁰ All six heroes were by nature independent of a genealogical chain. They were called by God from nowhere, so to speak, and had no military successors. Only David is an apparent exception, but his successor was Solomon, a man of peace. The chronological reversal seems to be intended to indicate that they belong in a class by themselves in the genealogically oriented world of the Old Testament. But of course in themselves they do form a class - the use of the word "faith" only once for all of them underscores this. The military function of the six heroes is another factor which gives them unity as a group. When understood in terms of Christian reality they are the priests of the

39 Cf. ATTRIDGE, *Hebrews*, 347-348. He says that chronology in the pericope is unimportant. This is true, but the fact that it is unimportant is important.

40 Cf. 1 Sam 12,11 (cited by ATTRIDGE, *Hebrews*, 348, n. 22).

new covenant understood as forming a group independent of genealogical determination (where they stand chronologically is unimportant) who are engaged in spiritual warfare.⁴¹ The phrase given military prowess in the phrase “became powerful in war” (11,34) is intended to be understood with reference to the reality of the Christian soldier.⁴² The prophets seem to be mentioned along with the six heroes because they, too, are not genealogically conditioned in their militant representation of God’s interests.⁴³

Resurrection from the Dead

The chapter ends with reference to the people of God as a whole, invoked incidentally, just as the section on Moses ends with a reference to the people as a whole (vv. 29-31). The mention of women receiving their dead in resurrection at 11,35 is an allusion to 11,19 and the parable of Isaac.⁴⁴ Here again a Christian reading of old dispensation realities could well be in question: Christian men who take on themselves a life of celibacy (cf. Matt 19,12; Luke 18,29). The description of the priesthood given at 11,32 is not incompatible with marriage, but would be compatible with celibacy, especially in view of the relation between priesthood and resurrection of Hebrews (cf. Matt 22,30 and parallels).

Importance of the Firstborn

The theme of the firstborn is something which the author of Hebrews has close to heart. At 12,14-17 the addressees are warned not to follow the example of Esau, who could not regain the blessing (cf. 11,20) of his rights as firstborn

41 Cf. Phil 2,25; Philemon 2; 2 Tim 2,3-4.

42 ATTRIDGE, *Hebrews*, 348, notes the unique nature of this phrase and its context in the New Testament. The implicit praise is intended, of course, to refer to spiritual combat.

43 The prophets were often consulted in military matters.

44 On the connection between 11,35 and 11,19 cf. ATTRIDGE *Hebrews*, 349. Attridge, of course, does not make the suggestion about 11,35 which is made in the present paper.

(*ta prototokia*), even though he sought it with tears.⁴⁵ At 12,22-24 there seem to be two classes of human citizens of the assembly (*ekklesia*) in the "heavenly Jerusalem" to which the addressees are heading: the firstborn and the just. According to the interpretation of Heb 11 being advanced in this paper, the two classes are priests and faithful.

Retrospect

The above reflections are offered as an hypothesis about the structure of Heb 11. Formal indications have been sought in the text itself as a guide to seeing what the structure is, but above all it is the content of the chapter which has been relied upon to fit together what the author seems to have had in mind. To verify this hypothesis one would have to search out further correspondences within the text of Hebrews itself and with the rest of the New Testament and with non-biblical literature.⁴⁶

One thing is abundantly clear, if the interpretation offered is substantially correct: that without tradition ("the things gazed upon") Chapter 11 is unintelligible. Only if one has been informed about certain truths could one see those truths "objectively" foreshadowed in the text of Old Testament.⁴⁷

The exegesis of Chapter 11 sketched here is at times so radically different from what one ordinarily finds in commentaries on Hebrews that no verification satisfactory to a majority of scholars is probably even imaginable. But if no

45 At 5,7 Jesus seeks something "with tears" (*meta... dakruon*) and is granted it.

46 For example, in the New Testament Gal 4,21 - 5,21, with its discussion of the "present" (*nun*) Jerusalem and the Jerusalem "above" (*ano*) in the context of Abraham and Isaac, of promises, and of covenant, would be worth examining in the light of the suggestions made here about Jerusalem and Rome. In view of the interpretation given to the act of blessing with relation to the constitution of the Christian priesthood such texts as Luke 24,51-52 and Rom 15,29 might well repay investigation. In non-biblical literature the designation in *1 Clement*, 29, of Christ and/or Christians as the "holy of holies" needs to be studied. To judge from the textual tradition of this passage, ancient authors found the attribution just as fanciful as do some modern ones. Finally, in Hebrews itself, Chapters 12 and 13 need careful scrutiny.

47 Imparting of tradition seems indicated, for example, at Heb 6,11-12.

convincing rebuttal is forthcoming at least a new vision of the possibilities of this intriguing chapter of a most intriguing New Testament writing will have been made available.

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