D. The Faith of the People of Old (11:1–40)

1. Prologue: The Nature of Faith (11:1–3)

> 1 *Now faith is the firm foundation of what we hope for; it is a conviction regarding things which are not seen.*
> 2 *It is by faith that the men and women of old established their record.*
> 3 *It is by faith that we understand the universe to have been fashioned by God's utterance, so that what is seen has not come into being from things which are visible.*

1 Our author might well have proceeded from 10:39 to the exhortation to "run with steadfast endurance the race for which we are entered" (12:1); but first he encourages his readers further by reminding them of examples of faith in earlier days. In Old Testament times, he points out, there were many men and women who had nothing but the promises of God to rest upon, without any visible evidence that these promises would ever be fulfilled; yet so much did these promises mean to them that they regulated the whole course of their lives in their light. The promises related to a state of affairs belonging to the future; but these people acted as if that state of affairs were already present, so convinced were they that God could and would fulfil what he had promised. In other words, they were men and women of faith. Their faith consisted simply in taking God at his word and directing their lives accordingly; things yet future as far as their experience went were thus present to faith, and things outwardly unseen were visible to the inward eye. It is in these terms that our author now describes the faith of which he has been speaking. It is, he says, the *hypostasis* of things that are hoped for. This word *hypostasis* has appeared twice already in the epistle. In 1:3 the Son was stated to be the very image of God's *hypostasis;* in 3:14 believers are said to be Christ's associates if they hold fast the beginning of their *hypostasis* firm to the end. In the former place it has the objective sense of "substance" or "real essence" (as opposed to what merely seems to be so). In the latter place it has the subjective sense of "confidence" or "assurance."[5] Here it is natural to take it in the same subjective sense as it bears in 3:14, and so the ERV/ARV and the RSV render it "assurance."[6] There is, however, something to be said for the objective meaning, represented by the AV/KJV ("faith is the substance of things hoped for") and the NEB ("faith gives substance to our hopes"). That is to say, things which in themselves have no existence as yet become real and substantial by the exercise of faith. But on the whole the subjective meaning "assurance" is the more probable, especially as this meaning chimes in well with the companion word "conviction." From another use of the word attested in the Hellenistic papyri Moulton and Milligan "venture to suggest the translation 'Faith is the *title-deed* of things hoped for.' " In the instances which they cite from the papyri this meaning is indicated by the context. It might no doubt be said that if we adopt this meaning here, we have something comparable to Paul's language about the Holy Spirit as the "firstfruits" or "earnest" of the coming inheritance of believers;[9] but one would require stronger evidence from the present context before adopting it here. Our author is making much the same point as Paul makes in Rom. 8:24f.: "hope that is seen is not hope; for who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience."

The word rendered "conviction" (Gk. *elenchos*) has the same twofold sense as the English word. In 2 Tim. 3:16 it occurs as a variant reading for the cognate *elegmos* to denote the "conviction" or "refutation" of error which Holy Scripture provides; here it means "conviction" in much the same sense as "assurance" in the preceding phrase. Physical eyesight produces conviction or evidence of visible things; faith is the organ which enables people (like Moses in v. 27) to see the invisible order. Philo similarly links "faith towards God" with "apprehension of the unseen."[12]

2 It was for faith of this kind that men and women of old received the divine commendation, and this has been placed on permanent record as an example to their descendants. The record is surveyed in vv. 4–38. This catalogue of spiritual heroism belongs to the same literary category as "The Praise of the Elders" in Sir. 44:1–50:21, beginning: "Let us now praise famous men, and our fathers that begat us." Ben Sira celebrates at length all the commendable qualities of the men of God whom he commemorates; our author, more concisely, confines himself to those features of his heroes' careers which illustrate their faith in God, for the encouragement of those who come after them. In some ways a better parallel is presented by the last words of Mattathias, father of Judas Maccabaeus and his brothers, in which he stimulates the zeal of his sons by reminding them of the faithfulness under testing of Abraham, Joseph, Phinehas, Joshua, Caleb, David, Elijah, the three Hebrews who were saved from Nebuchadnezzar's fiery furnace, and Daniel (1 Macc. 2:51–60). Indeed, the literary genre is by no means confined to the Judaeo-Christian tradition; it shares many characteristics with the *diatribē* of Stoic-influenced rhetoric, which was given to the accumulation of historical or legendary examples of the particular quality under discussion. Our author, however, does not only accumulate a series of examples; he sets them in historical sequence so as to provide an outline of the redemptive purpose of God, advancing through the age of promise until at last in Jesus, faith's "pioneer and perfecter,"[17] the age of fulfilment is inaugurated.

3 Before he proceeds to celebrate the faith of the elders, however, he illustrates in another way his statement that faith is a conviction or proof of things not seen. The visible universe, he says, was not made out of equally visible raw material; it was called into being by divine power. "By faith we understand that the worlds have been framed by the word of God" (ERV/ARV). Here, as in 1:2, the "worlds" are the *aiōnes* (lit. "ages"); in both places the universe of space and time is meant. There God is said to have made the universe by the agency of the Son; here he is said to have fashioned it by his word. It is unlikely that "God's utterance" here is hypostatized as in John 1:1–3, so as to be practically synonymous with "the Son of God"; for one thing, the Greek substantive translated "utterance" here is not *logos* (as in John 1:1–14) but *rhēma*, referring to the utterance by which God summoned into existence what had no existence before. Our author is thinking of the creative command "Let there be light" (Gen. 1:3), interpreting it and the following commands after the fashion of the psalmist:

> By the word of Yahweh were the heavens made,
> and all their host by the breath of his mouth …
> For he spoke, and it came to be;
> he commanded, and it stood forth.

Thus "the visible came forth from the invisible" (NEB). But how do we know this? By faith, says our author. Greek speculation about the formation of the ordered world out of formless matter had influenced Jewish thinkers like Philo and the author of the book of Wisdom;[23] the writer to the Hebrews is more biblical in his reasoning and affirms the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, a doctrine uncongenial to Greek thought. The faith by which he accepts it is faith in the divine revelation; the first chapter of Genesis is probably uppermost in his mind, since he is about to trace seven living examples of faith from the subsequent chapters of that book.

2. The Faith of the Antediluvians (11:4–7)

> 4 *By faith Abel offered to God a better*[26] *sacrifice than Cain; by virtue of this sacrifice he was attested as a righteous man, for God bore witness to the gifts he brought, and through it he continues to speak even after he has died.*
>
> 5 *By faith Enoch was translated so as not to experience death. He was not found, because God had translated him; for before his translation, as it has been attested of him, he had given pleasure to God.*
>
> 6 *Now without faith it is impossible to give him pleasure, for one who approaches God must believe that he exists, and that he is a rewarder of those who seek him out.*
>
> 7 *By faith Noah, divinely warned about things not yet seen, was moved by reverent submission and built an ark to save his household. By this means he put the world in the wrong and became an heir of the righteousness which is according to faith.*

4 The first example of faith that our author finds in the biblical record is Abel. According to the narrative of Gen. 4:3–5, Abel and his elder brother Cain brought their offerings to God at the appropriate season; Abel brought "of the firstlings of his flock and of their fat portions," since he was a shepherd, while Cain, the agriculturalist, brought "an offering of the fruit of the ground." In either case the material of the offering was suitable to the offerer's vocation; yet "Yahweh had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard." Why was there this discrimination? Cain was dejected because his offering was disregarded, but God pointed out to him the way of acceptance: "If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is couching at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it" (Gen. 4:7). This rendering of the Masoretic text is quite in line with the later prophetic teaching about sacrifice; sacrifice is acceptable to God not for its material content, but insofar as it is the outward expression of a devoted and obedient heart. Let Cain gain the mastery over the sin which threatens to be his undoing,[32] and his sacrifice will be accepted as readily as Abel's was.

The Septuagint version, however, suggests that there was a ritual reason for the rejection of Cain's sacrifice; according to it, God says to Cain: "Have you not sinned if you offer it rightly without dividing it rightly?" (Gen. 4:7). Other ancient interpretations explained its rejection, in contrast to the acceptance of Abel's sacrifice, in terms of the substance of the two offerings. So Philo: "Abel's offering was living, Cain's was lifeless. His was prior in age and quality, Cain's was inferior. His was superior in strength and fatness, Cain's was weaker."[34] Similarly Josephus: "The brothers having decided to sacrifice to God, Cain brought the fruits of the cultivated ground and of trees, while Abel

brought milk and the firstlings of his flocks. This latter offering gave the greater pleasure to God, who is honored by those things which grow spontaneously and in accordance with nature, and not by those things which are forcibly produced by the ingenuity of covetous man"—a farfetched distinction indeed, although Josephus was not the last commentator on this passage to suggest that the shepherd's life involves less expenditure of energy than that of the agriculturalist! "Cain brought of the fruits of the earth, that is to say, less valuable things," says the Midrash *Genesis Rabba*, while the Palestinian Targum makes Abel say to Cain: "The fruits of my works were better than yours and took precedence over yours; so it was my sacrifice that was accepted as well-pleasing." A more recent variation on these accounts sees the distinction in that Abel's offering involved the shedding of blood, apart from which, as our author has said above, the law knows no forgiveness (Heb. 9:22). But it is nowhere suggested in the Genesis narrative that it was a sin offering which the two brothers brought; it was in either case the appropriate presentation of the firstfruits of their increase. The unvarnished Masoretic text makes the situation plain enough; since Cain was told that he would be accepted if he did well, it follows that Abel was accepted because he did well—because, in other words, he was righteous. And in fact the righteousness of Abel is emphasized elsewhere in the New Testament: our Lord refers to "the blood of Abel the righteous" (Matt. 23:35) and John tells us that Cain killed his brother "because his own deeds were evil, and his brother's righteous" (1 John 3:12). To the same effect our author says that Abel "was attested as a righteous man." How? Because "God bore this witness to the gifts he brought." This echoes the Septuagint rendering of Gen. 4:4, "God looked [i.e., with pleasure] on Abel and his gifts." The abiding principle of Scripture in this regard is summed up in the words of Prov. 15:8, "The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to Yahweh; but the prayer of the upright is his delight."

But how could it be known that it was "by faith" that Abel brought God a more acceptable sacrifice than his brother? Probably the close association between righteousness and faith in 10:38, "my righteous one will live by faith," was ground sufficient in our author's eyes for his statement about Abel's faith; moreover, his affirmation in v. 6 below, while primarily applicable to Enoch, is equally applicable to Abel: "without faith it is impossible to give him [God] pleasure"—and since Abel manifestly pleased him, it follows that Abel lived and acted by faith.

Through his faith, too, Abel continues to speak, even in death. When God accused Cain of Abel's murder, he said: "The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground" (Gen. 4:10). Our author's point appears to be that Abel is still appealing to God for vindication, until he obtains it in full in the judgment to come. The idea in that case is paralleled in Rev. 6:9–11, where the souls of the martyrs cry aloud for vindication, and are told that they must wait until the full tale of martyrs is complete. It has been held, on the other hand, that our author simply means that Abel, by his faith, bears abiding witness to succeeding ages; but that more than this was in his mind is suggested by Heb. 12:24, where he says that the purifying blood of Christ "has something better to say than Abel's"—a clear reference to Gen. 4:10.

5 The second example of faith is Enoch. All the Hebrew Bible has to say of him is that he was born to Jared when the latter was 162 years old, and then, that "when Enoch had lived sixty-five years, he became the father of Methuselah. Enoch walked with God after the birth of Methuselah three hundred years, and had other sons and daughters.[44]

Thus all the days of Enoch were three hundred and sixty-five years. Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him" (Gen. 5:18, 21–24). In the Septuagint the repeated clause "Enoch walked with God" is rendered "Enoch pleased God"—from a desire, no doubt, to make the language less anthropomorphic—and the words "he was not; for God took him" are rendered "he was not found, because God translated him."[46] Our author follows the Septuagint here as elsewhere.

In one well-known strand of Jewish and Christian tradition Enoch appears as the recipient of special revelations about the spirit-world and the ages to come; in this rôle he appears once in the New Testament, when Jude (vv. 14f.) quotes the prophecy of "Enoch, the seventh from Adam," about the coming of the Lord with his holy myriads to execute judgment on the ungodly (1 Enoch 1:9). More generally he is said to have been "the first among men that are born on earth who learned writing and knowledge and wisdom" (Jub. 4:17). Of all this our author has nothing to say; he is more in line with the school of thought which regarded Enoch as the typically righteous man. Ben Sira, for example, says:

> Enoch was found perfect, and he walked with Yahweh, and was taken;
> a sign of knowledge to every generation. (Sir. 44:16)

His grandson, turning these words from Hebrew into Greek, conformed them to the sense of the Septuagint:

> Enoch pleased the Lord, and was translated;
> he was an example of repentance to all generations.

In this last clause the reference to Enoch's translation appears to be interpreted of a *moral* change in his life—an interpretation which we find also in Philo.

More striking still is the account of Enoch in Wisdom 4:10–15:

> There was one who pleased God and was loved by him,
> and while living among sinners he was translated.
>
> He was caught up lest evil change his understanding or guile
> deceive his soul.
> For the fascination of wickedness obscures what is good,
> and roving desire perverts the innocent mind.
> Being perfected in a short time, he fulfilled long years;
> for his soul was pleasing to the Lord,
> therefore he took him quickly from the midst of wickedness.
>
> Yet the peoples saw and did not understand,
> nor take such a thing to heart,
> that God's grace and mercy are with his elect,
> and he watches over his holy ones.

Here Enoch is brought forward as the *beau idéal* of righteousness, the type of the person who, according to his enemies, "professes to have knowledge of God, and calls himself a child of the Lord" (Wisdom 2:13). So, in Jub. 10:17, Enoch is perfect in righteousness, excelling even Noah in this respect, "for Enoch's office was ordained for a testimony to

the generations of the world, so that he should recount all the deeds of generation unto generation, till the day of judgment" (here Enoch's righteousness is linked with his prophetic ministry). And in 1 Enoch 71:14, in the conclusion of the section commonly called the *Parables of Enoch*, Enoch is acclaimed by the interpreting angel as the ideal just man:

"Thou art the Son of Man born unto righteousness;
and righteousness abides upon thee;
yea, the righteousness of the Head of Days forsakes thee not."

It is, however, specifically as an example of *faith* that our author adduces Enoch here. Righteousness and faith, as we have seen already, are inseparably associated in his mind. If he is asked why Enoch should be regarded as a man of faith, his answer is that otherwise God would have had no pleasure in him. But the record makes it plain that Enoch did please God;[52] the Septuagint paraphrase of the Hebrew idiom "walked with God" is completely consistent with the teaching of the great prophets, according to which walking humbly with God, together with the practice of justice and lovingkindness, is God's fundamental requirement of human beings.[54]

6 Apart from faith neither Enoch nor anyone else could ever have been pleasing to God. The faith which our author has in mind embraces belief in the invisible spiritual order, and belief in the promises of God which have not yet been fulfilled. Belief in the invisible spiritual order involves, first and foremost, belief in him who is "King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God" (1 Tim. 1:17); and belief in God carries with it necessarily belief in his word. It is not belief in the existence of *a* God that is meant, but belief in the existence of *the* God who once declared his will to the fathers through the prophets and in these last days has spoken in his Son. Those who approach him can do so in full confidence that he exists, that his word is true, and that he will never put off or disappoint the person who sincerely seeks him. For all that he has revealed of himself, whether through the prophets or in his Son, assures us that he is altogether worthy of his people's trust.

The God who created the skies,
The strength and support of His saints,
Who gives them all needful supplies,
And hearkens to all their complaints:

This, this is the God we adore,
Our faithful, unchangeable Friend,
Whose love is as large as His power,
And neither knows measure nor end.

The reward desired by those who seek him is the joy of finding him; he himself proves to be their "exceeding joy" (Ps. 43:4).

No doubt our author states the basic principle, as revealed by the record of Enoch, for the benefit and encouragement of his readers. Of their desire to please God he has no doubt; he insists, however, that they cannot please him apart from faith—the faith which not only believes that he exists but waits patiently and confidently for the reward promised to those who seek him.

7 The next example of faith illustrates this willingness to believe that what God has promised he will certainly perform. Noah was a righteous man, like Abel; he walked with God, as did Enoch; but what is emphasized here is that when God announced that he would do something unprecedented in the experience of Noah and his contemporaries, Noah took him at his word, and showed that he did so by making practical preparations against the day when that word would come true. Noah received a divine communication[58] that a deluge would sweep over the earth. Such a catastrophe had never been known before, but Noah's faith supplied the proof of "things not seen." The building of an ark far inland must have seemed an absurd procedure to his neighbors; but in the event his faith was vindicated and their unbelief was condemned: "through his faith he put the whole world in the wrong" (NEB). He paid careful heed[60] to the divine admonition and got ready the means by which he and his household would be kept safe when the deluge broke; thus he became a living witness to the truth of the scripture already cited: "my righteous one will live by faith" (10:38). Thus, says our author, he "became an heir of the righteousness which is according to faith"; if the Genesis narrative represents God as saying to him, "I have seen that you are righteous before me in this generation" (Gen. 7:1), it was because of his ready acceptance of what God had said. Of him as of Enoch the statement is true: "without faith it is impossible to please God."

The Jewish wisdom writers not unnaturally found in Noah an outstanding example of true wisdom. "When the earth was flooded," says the author of the book of Wisdom, "wisdom saved it again, steering the righteous man in a cheap structure of wood" (Wisdom 10:4). Ben Sira speaks at greater length:

> Noah was found perfect and righteous;
> in the time of wrath he was taken in exchange;
> therefore a remnant was left to the earth
> when the flood came.
> Everlasting covenants were made with him
> that all flesh should not be blotted out by a flood.

In other places in the New Testament the flood of Noah's day is an illustration of sudden judgment, a foreshadowing of the advent of the Son of Man; his safe passage through the waters which overwhelmed others is a figure of Christian baptism;[65] he himself is described as a preacher of righteousness. But here it is his faith that is set in relief, and it cannot be said that our author had to look far to discover faith in the Old Testament story of Noah. The great gospel terms righteousness and grace appear first in relation to him, as far as the canonical order of Scripture goes;[67] and the quality of his faith was proved by his prompt obedience: "Noah … did all that God commanded him" (Gen. 6:22).

3. The Faith of Abraham and Sarah (11:8–12)

> 8 *By faith Abraham, in obedience to the call of God, went forth into a place which he was to receive as his inheritance: he went forth, not knowing where he was going.*
>
> 9 *By faith he took up residence in the land which he had been promised, as though it belonged to others; he became a tent-dweller, as did Isaac and Jacob, fellow-heirs of the same promise.*

10 *For he looked forward to the city which has the (true) foundations, the city of which God is the architect and builder.*

11 *By faith—Sarah herself being barren—he received power to beget a child*[70] *even after the natural season of life, because he reckoned the one who gave the promise to be trustworthy.*

12 *Therefore from one man, one who was as good as dead, there sprang offspring as numerous as the stars in the sky, as unnumbered as the sand on the seashore.*[73]

8 Of Abraham's title to be included in this catalog there can be no question. The faith of Abel, Enoch, and Noah might have to be inferred from what is recorded of them (although for all three of them it is a certain inference); but Abraham's faith is explicitly attested in the Genesis narrative: "he believed Yahweh; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness" (Gen. 15:6). Our author has already referred to Abraham's faith in the promise of God and his patient waiting for its fulfilment; here he enlarges on the same theme. Repeatedly throughout his career Abraham acted as a man who walked by faith and not by sight, and made good his claim to be recognized by all subsequent ages as the father of the faithful. The Levites' prayer of confession in the days of Nehemiah and Ezra recalled God's dealings with him in these terms: "Thou … didst choose Abram and bring him forth out of Ur of the Chaldaeans and give him the name Abraham; and thou didst find his heart faithful before thee, and didst make with him the covenant to give to his descendants the land of the Canaanite, … and thou hast fulfilled thy promise, for thou art righteous" (Neh. 9:7f.). Ben Sira includes this panegyric on Abraham in his "Praise of the Elders":

Abraham was the great father of a multitude of nations,
  and no one has been found like him in glory;
he kept the law of the Most High,
  and was taken into covenant with him;
he established the covenant in his flesh,
  and when he was tested he was found faithful.
Therefore the Lord assured him by an oath
  that the nations would be blessed through his posterity;
that he would multiply him like the dust of the earth,
  and exalt his posterity like the stars,
and cause them to inherit from sea to sea
  and from the River to the ends of the earth. (Sir. 44:19–21)

The author of the book of Wisdom refers to Abraham when he says that "Wisdom … recognized the righteous man and preserved him blameless before God" (Wisdom 10:5). Paul invokes the example of Abraham in support of his claim that the gospel way of righteousness by faith is "attested by the law and the prophets" (Rom. 3:21); if people are justified by their works, then Abraham of all men has something of his own to glory in, but the testimony of Holy Scripture is clear that it was his faith in God that was reckoned to him for righteousness (Rom. 4:3–5; Gal. 3:6–9). Stephen begins his defense before the Sanhedrin by reminding them how "the God of glory appeared to our father Abraham, when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, and said to him, 'Depart from your land and from your kindred and go into the land which I will show you.' Then he

departed from the land of the Chaldaeans, and lived in Haran. And after his father died, God removed him from there into this land, in which you are now living; yet he gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot's length, but promised to give it to him in possession, and to his posterity after him, though he had no child" (Acts 7:2–5). Stephen's point is that, even in the promised land, Abraham lived a pilgrim life; and our author makes precisely this point in the exposition which follows.

Abraham's faith was manifested first of all by the readiness with which he left his home at the call of God, for the promise of a new home which he had never seen before and which, even after he entered it, he never possessed in person. "By faith Abraham, in obedience …"; faith and obedience are inseparable in one's relation to God. If the patriarchal narrative says in one place that Abraham was justified because he *believed* God, in another place God confirms to Isaac the promise made to Abraham "because Abraham *obeyed* my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws" (Gen. 26:5). He would not have obeyed the divine call had he not taken God at his word; his obedience was the outward evidence of his inward faith. So Philo: "impelled by an oracle calling him to leave his native land and family and paternal home, and move to another country, he made eager haste to do so, considering that speed in giving effect to the command was as good as its full accomplishment; in fact, it looked as though he were returning to his homeland from foreign parts and not leaving his homeland for foreign parts." Philo, after his fashion, interprets the story of Abraham's call and migration in a thoroughgoing allegorical manner, to denote the experiences "of a virtue-loving soul in its quest for the true God."[77] But he gives all due prominence to the part of faith in Abraham's response to God; pointing out that in Gen. 12:1 God speaks to Abraham in the future tense of "the land that I *will show* you," he says: "This is a testimony to the faith which the soul placed in God, manifesting its gratitude not on the basis of accomplished facts but on the basis of expectation of things to come. For the soul, utterly dependent on good hope and considering those things which are not present to be indubitably present already because of the trustworthiness of him who has promised, has won as its guerdon that perfect blessing, faith; as it is said farther on: 'Abraham believed God' [Gen. 15:6]."

Our author points out that Abraham did not receive the promise of the inheritance at the time of his first call; the land to which he was directed to go was the "place which he was to receive as his inheritance"; the promise of the inheritance was not given until he had returned from Egypt and Lot had chosen the well-watered circuit of Jordan to settle in (Gen. 13:14–17); it was reaffirmed to him along with the promise of an heir (Gen. 15:18–21), and again after the bestowal of the covenant of circumcision (Gen. 17:8). The divine bidding was sufficient for him at his first call, and "he went forth, not knowing where he was going." The promise of the inheritance was not in the first instance an incentive to obedience; it was the reward of his obedience.

9 Even when he received the promise of the inheritance, it was the promise that he received, not the visible possession of the land; but to Abraham the promise of God was as substantial as its realization. He lived thereafter in the good of that promise. Year after year he pitched his moving tent amid the settled inhabitants of Palestine, "in them but not of them," commanding their respect as "a prince of God,"[81] but owning not a square foot of the country until he bought the field of Machpelah near Hebron from Ephron the Hittite as a family burial-ground. Yet, living like a resident alien in the land which had been promised to him and his descendants, he did not grow impatient. Some visible

tokens of the word of God he did indeed receive, in Isaac the promised child of his old age, and even in Isaac's son Jacob, through whom the line of promise was to run.[83] But Isaac and Jacob in their turn did not live to see the fulfilment of the promise that the land would be theirs; they remained nomads like Abraham himself.

10 What was the secret of Abraham's patience? This, says our author: the commonwealth on which his hopes were fixed was no transient commonwealth of this temporal order. He was looking for a city of a different kind: the city with the eternal foundations, planned and built by God.[86] Just as the true rest of God is not the earthly Canaan into which the first Joshua led the people of Israel (Heb. 4:8), so Abraham kept his eyes fixed on the well-established city of God which was to be revealed in the time of fulfilment.

Here certainly our author may be said to allegorize—to discern in the promise to Abraham that the earthly Canaan would be his and his descendants' an underlying promise of a richer and eternal inheritance. With his statement that Abraham looked for "the city with firm foundations" (NEB) we may compare Philo's description of the land which God promised to give Abraham as "a city good and wide and very prosperous, for the gifts of God are very great."[87] To Philo this city is the abode of the individual soul which spends its time in the contemplation of the universe and cultivation of the knowledge of God; it is the natural habitat of the true philosopher. To our author it is the heavenly Jerusalem, the commonwealth of God in the spiritual and eternal order, now effectively made accessible by the completion of Christ's high-priestly work, so that all the men and women of faith come to be enrolled there as free citizens. In Philo's treatment not only the promised land but Abraham himself is allegorized; our author is content to treat Abraham and all the others listed in this catalogue as real historical characters from whose experience later generations can learn. Nor was his insight at fault in discerning in the promise to Abraham something more abiding than the fairest earthly possession. To those who place their trust in him God gives possessions of real and incorruptible value. Since, in our Lord's words, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob "live to him" (Luke 20:38), their true heritage must be based in the being of God; if the New Testament writers are not misguided in portraying them as the ancestors of the family of faith, their essential blessings must be of the same order as the blessings enjoyed by their spiritual children under the new covenant. "The Old Testament is not contrary to the New: for both in the Old and New Testament everlasting life is offered to Mankind by Christ, who is the only Mediator between God and Man, being both God and Man. Wherefore they are not to be heard, which feign that the old Fathers did look only for transitory promises …"[91]

11 According to the transmitted text, as commonly translated, we now have a statement about the faith of Sarah. There are difficulties in the way of the traditional interpretation, some of them less weighty and some of them more so.

(i) Sarah, it is said, is not a good example of faith. According to Gen. 18:12 she laughed when she overheard the divine promise that she would give birth to a son, and the comment of God on her laughter (Gen. 18:13f.) makes it plain that it was the laughter of incredulity. Chrysostom indeed, in dealing with this difficulty, suggests that her subsequent denial of her laughter was "by faith"; but of course it was nothing of the kind: "Sarah denied, saying, I laughed not; *for she was afraid*" (Gen. 18:15). Yet according to

promise she gave birth to Isaac nevertheless. No doubt when Isaac was born she laughed in a manner that betokened no incredulity but exulting wonder: "God has made laughter for me; every one who hears will laugh over me" (Gen. 21:6). But our author speaks of an act of faith that preceded her conception of Isaac. Still, this is not an insuperable objection. Our author elsewhere in this chapter can see faith where most people would not, and there may be something in R. V. G. Tasker's comment:[96] "It is surely just the paradoxical character of the illustration which is a sign of its genuineness; and *kai autē* ['even herself'] so far from making a poor connexion, as Zuntz asserts, may well give us the insight we need into the author's thought about Gen. xviii. *Even* Sarah's acceptance of a promise which at first she seemed to hear with indifference is to the mind of the *auctor ad Hebraeos* a venture into the unseen world which faith makes real."

(ii) In v. 12 it is still Abraham's faith that is the subject, so that v. 11, if it refers to Sarah, is a digression. Even so, it would not be an irrelevant digression; Sarah was very much involved in the fulfilment of the promise that Abraham would have a son.

(iii) The Genesis narrative lays stress on the quality of Abraham's faith in accepting God's promise that he would have descendants when he was still childless. It is in this particular context that Abraham "believed Yahweh; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness" (Gen. 15:6). Paul, following the Genesis narrative, emphasizes that "no distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised" (Rom. 4:20f.). But on the usual reading of our present passage the author of Hebrews has nothing to say about this signal demonstration of Abraham's faith. If the language of v. 11 were unambiguous, we should simply have to accept this situation; but in fact the language of v. 11 points in another direction.

(iv) The one firm argument against taking v. 11 as a statement of Sarah's faith lies in the fact that the phrase traditionally rendered "to conceive seed" just does not mean that; it refers to the father's part in the generative process, not the mother's. A literal translation would be, "for the deposition of seed"; it does not denote the receiving or conception of seed. This is a straightforward matter of the natural sense of a Greek word, and had it not been for the apparent presence of "Sarah" as subject of the sentence no one would ever have thought of finding a reference to conception here.[100] Tasker describes this objection to the traditional interpretation as a "notorious difficulty"; but adds: "do we know enough about Greek usage at the time to say definitely that an active noun of this kind could not also carry a passive sense?" All that we know of the usage of *this* Greek noun at the time renders it in the highest degree improbable that it would be employed in the sense of "conception," especially by one so sensitive to Greek usage as our author is. But Tasker is certainly right in saying that the solution proposed by Zuntz and others "seems a too drastic cutting of the knot." They suggest that the words "Sarah herself" should be rejected as a very early addition to the text; the verse would then be rendered: "By faith he [Abraham] also received power to beget a child even after the natural season of life …" But it is not necessary to cut out "Sarah herself" from the text. If the adjective "barren" belongs to the original text, "Sarah herself being barren" is best taken as a circumstantial clause[103] and "Abraham" remains the subject of "received power." If "barren" is regarded as a later addition to the text, then "Sarah herself" may be construed in the dative case instead of the nominative, and the verse then runs: "By faith he [Abraham] also, together with Sarah, received power to beget a child even after the

natural season of life, because he reckoned the one who gave the promise to be trustworthy." In either case, v. 12 then follows on naturally.

12 Thus from this one man Abraham, when he was already "as good as dead" as far as the hope of founding a family was concerned, there sprang a host of descendants, in fulfilment of the divine promises that his offspring would be as numerous as the stars in the sky (Gen. 15:5; 22:17) and "as the sand which is upon the seashore" (Gen. 22:17). The word rendered "as good as dead" is the same perfect passive participle as Paul uses in reference to the same subject when he says that Abraham, on receiving the promise of God, weighed up all the adverse circumstances and "did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body now *as good as dead*[106] (he being about a hundred years old), or the deadness of Sarah's womb" (Rom. 4:19), but concluded that the certainty of God's word far outweighed them all. "That is why," adds Paul, "it was reckoned to him as righteousness" (Rom. 4:22); and our author is in full agreement. The point of v. 12, however, is all the more clearly made if Abraham is the subject of v. 11.

4. The City of God the Homeland of the Faithful (11:13–16)

> 13 *All these died in faith: they had not received the promises, but they saw*[110] *and greeted them from afar, acknowledging themselves to be aliens and pilgrims on earth.*
>
> 14 *For those who say such things show clearly that they are seeking a homeland.*
>
> 15 *If indeed the homeland they referred to was the one they had left, they would have had an opportunity to go back there.*
>
> 16 *But as it is, it is a better homeland that they long for—that is, a heavenly one. That is why God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.*

13 "These all"—more particularly, those mentioned in the five preceding verses, Abraham (with Sarah), Isaac, and Jacob—"died in faith," as they had lived in faith. Their lives were regulated by the firm conviction that God would fulfil the promises he had given them, and in death they continued to look forward to the fulfilment of those promises, as is evident from the words in which Isaac and Jacob bestowed their final blessings on their sons or grandsons, as vv. 20 and 21 indicate. But more generally it is true of all the men and women of God in Old Testament days that they "died in faith: they had not received the promises, but they saw and greeted them from afar," as indeed our author affirms in v. 39, at the end of his honors list. It was Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, however, who lived preeminently as "aliens and pilgrims on earth" in a sense which is inapplicable to those Israelites of later generations after the settlement in Canaan. To Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob Canaan remained a "promised" land to the end of their days; their descendants saw the fulfilment of what was a promise to the patriarchs. But to the patriarchs that promise was sure because it was God's promise; and they staked everything on its certainty. In one sense, as our author has said earlier, Abraham, "having shown steadfastness, obtained the promise" (6:15)—he obtained the promised son, not only by his birth but also by his restoration from death "as a type," as v. 19 puts it—but the full realization of the promises had to await the day of Christ. "I am a stranger and a sojourner among you," said Abraham to the sons of Heth (Gen. 23:4); he

recognized and accepted his status as a pilgrim. So too Jacob, in old age, speaks of the long course of his life as "the days of the years of my pilgrimage" (Gen. 47:9).

14 When the patriarchs used language like this, says our author, they made it plain that the place of their sojourning was not their home.[119] Their "pilgrim's progress" through this world had as its goal a home elsewhere. Canaan was no more their home as they sought the country of their hearts' desire than the wilderness was the home of their descendants in Moses' day who journeyed from Egypt to Canaan.

15 It is equally plain that, although they spoke of themselves as pilgrims in a foreign land, they did not refer to the land they had left as being their true home. In that case, they could easily have gone back there. But in fact they had no thought of doing so.[121] When Abraham's servant suggested to his master that Isaac might have to go to Mesopotamia in person to persuade his bride to come to Canaan, Abraham said: "See to it that you do not take my son back there" (Gen. 24:6). In the following generation Jacob had to flee to Mesopotamia from the anger of his brother Esau, but his vision at Bethel on the first night of his journey there made it impossible for him ever to think of Mesopotamia as his home; Canaan, to which his returning steps were directed twenty years later, was now the "land of his fathers" (Gen. 31:3), even if in it he had no settled abode.

16 The truth is, their true homeland was not on earth at all. The better country on which they had set their hearts was the heavenly country. The earthly Canaan and the earthly Jerusalem were but temporary object-lessons pointing to the saints' everlasting rest, the well-founded city of God. Those who put their trust in God receive a full reward, and that reward must belong not to this transient world-order but to the enduring order which participates in the life of God. The example of the patriarchs is intended to guide the readers of the epistle to a true sense of values; like the elect sojourners of the Dispersion addressed in 1 Peter they are to live in this world as "aliens and exiles"[123] (1 Pet. 2:11), and like the Philippians to whom Paul wrote, their "citizenship is in heaven" (Phil. 3:20). This ideal has proved too high for many Christians throughout the centuries of our era; yet there has never failed a distinguished succession of men and women possessed of this pilgrim attitude who have sung with Henry Francis Lyte:

> It is not for me to be seeking my bliss
> And building my hopes in a region like this;
> I look for a city which hands have not piled,
> I pant for a country by sin undefiled.

Yet those who have shared most truly the otherworldliness of the patriarchs have not been unpractical people, too heavenly-minded to be of any earthly use. Abraham's neighbors were enriched by the presence of this wandering stranger in their midst; when the territory of some of them was devastated by an invading army on one occasion, it was "Abram the Hebrew" who took immediate and effective action to deal with the situation.[126] There have indeed been many occasions when practical men of the world have been thankful to saints and mystics for timely help in an emergency beyond their own power to cope with.

"Those who honor me I will honor," says God (1 Sam. 2:30). The patriarchs honored God by putting their faith in him; he honored them by calling himself "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (Ex. 3:6). What higher honor than this could be paid to any mortal? These three patriarchs were not faultless, but God is not ashamed to be called their God, because they took him at his word. It is noteworthy that, while Jacob is in many ways the least exemplary of the three, God is called the God of Jacob much more frequently in the Bible than he is called the God of Abraham or of Isaac. For all his shortcomings, Jacob had a true sense of spiritual values which sprang from his faith in God.[128] For these, then, and for all who tread the same path of faith, God has prepared his city, his commonwealth. There is, of course, no difference between the heavenly country and the city of God. Words could hardly make it clearer that the patriarchs and the other men and women of God who lived before Christ have a share in the same inheritance of glory as is promised to believers in Christ of New Testament times.[131]

5. More About the Faith of the Patriarchs (11:17–22)

> 17 *By faith Abraham offered up Isaac when he was put to the test: Yes, the one who had received*[133] *the promises was on the point of offering up his only son,*[135]
> 18 *the son concerning whom it had been said, "In Isaac your offspring will be called."*
> 19 *He reckoned that God was able to raise people up even from the dead, and it was from the dead that he received Isaac back as a type.*
> 20 *By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau, even in respect of things to come.*
> 21 *By faith Jacob on his deathbed blessed each of the sons of Joseph, and he worshiped, (leaning) on the top of his staff.*
> 22 *By faith Joseph, when his end was near, mentioned the departure of the people of Israel and gave directions with regard to his bones.*

17–18 The "Binding of Isaac," as the story of Gen. 22 has traditionally been called among the Jews, is treated in Jewish interpretation as the classic example of the redemptive efficacy of martyrdom. Its influence is probably to be traced in several New Testament passages,[143] but only in two places is the story expressly referred to—here and in Jas. 2:21–23—and in both of these places it is set forth as an example of faith, faith manifested in action. "Was not Abraham our father justified by works," asks James, "when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by works, and the scripture was fulfilled which says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness'; and he was called the friend of God."[145] James's emphasis is in line with his general argument in that context; but he is in essential agreement with our author: Abraham's offering up of Isaac was a signal demonstration of his faith. Not only so, but this interpretation is consistent with the original narrative, in which God's command to Abraham to offer up Isaac was intended to "test" him (Gen. 22:1), and Abraham's ready obedience attested the unreserved quality of his allegiance to God. "When he was tested he was found faithful," says Ben Sira, plainly in reference to this incident (Sir. 44:20), while the author of Wisdom says that it was wisdom that "kept him strong in the face of his compassion for his child" (Wisdom 10:5). In 4 Maccabees the mother of the seven martyrs appeals to this

example when pleading with her sons to preserve their faithfulness to God in face of deadly threats; it was for God's sake, she says, that "our father Abraham hastened to sacrifice his son Isaac, the ancestor of our nation, and was not overcome by fear at the sight of his own paternal hand descending on him with the knife" (16:20; cf. also 18:11).

What our author emphasizes, however, is Abraham's indomitable faith in the promises of God. God promised Abraham, long after the hope of progeny had receded for himself and Sarah, that he would have a numerous posterity, and at last the long-awaited son was born—the son on whose survival the fulfilment of God's promises to Abraham depended. In this regard Ishmael and any other sons of Abraham did not count, for the word of God was quite specific: "Through the line of Isaac your posterity shall be traced" (NEB). Isaac was unique and irreplaceable—this is the point of the epithet rendered "only begotten"; he was, in God's own words to Abraham, "your only son, whom you love, even Isaac" (Gen. 22:2). And it was *Isaac* who had to be sacrificed! The ethical problem which the story presents to twentieth-century readers is not the problem on which our author concentrates. The problem to which he invites his readers' attention is this: The fulfilment of God's promises depended on Isaac's survival; if Isaac was to die, how could these promises be fulfilled? And yet Abraham had no doubt that the one who had given the promises required the sacrifice of Isaac. What was he to do? It was Abraham's problem; apart from the dictates of natural affection, how could the promise of God and the command of God be reconciled? Later writers, reflecting on the incident, make much of the turmoil in Abraham's heart, although the biblical narrative has little enough to say on this score. Indeed, the impression which we get from the biblical narrative is that Abraham treated it as God's problem; it was for God, and not for Abraham, to reconcile his promise and his command. So, when the command was given, Abraham promptly set about obeying it; his own duty was clear, and God could safely be trusted to discharge *his* responsibility in the matter.

19 Our author's statement that Abraham believed in God's ability to raise the dead is not a gratuitous reading into the narrative of something which is not there. When Abraham left his servants behind while he and Isaac went to the place of sacrifice, he said to them: "The boy and I will go on there and worship, and we will come back to you" (Gen. 22:5). The plain meaning of the text is that Abraham expected to come back with Isaac. But how could he come back with Isaac if Isaac was to be offered up as a burnt offering? Only if Isaac was to be raised from the dead after being sacrificed. Abraham reckoned, says our author, that since the fulfilment of the promises depended on Isaac's survival, God was bound (as he certainly was able) to restore Isaac's life if his life had to be taken. And in fact, as far as Abraham's resolution was concerned, Isaac was as good as dead, and it was practically from the dead that he received him back when his hand was arrested in mid-air and the heavenly voice forbade him to proceed further. He received him back from the dead, says our author, "as a type"—meaning, probably, in a manner which prefigured the resurrection of Christ. Is it this incident which is referred to in the words of Christ in John 8:56: "Your father Abraham rejoiced that he was to see my day; he saw it, and was glad"?

20 In some strands of Jewish interpretation the attitude of Isaac himself, in submitting to being bound by his father with a view to his sacrifice, is commended as an example of obedience, not only to his father but to God. On this our author says nothing; the one

incident from Isaac's career which he mentions as a token of his faith is his blessing of Jacob and Esau[154]—their names are given in this order and not in the order of seniority, perhaps because this was the order in which they received their father's blessing. Nothing is said about the deception practiced on Isaac, in consequence of which the blessing which he had intended for Esau was bestowed on Jacob. The line of promise ran through Isaac, and as Isaac himself had received from God a reaffirmation of the promised blessings after Abraham's death, so he determined to transmit those blessings to the following generation. When he learned that Jacob had received the blessing intended for Esau, he made no attempt to revoke it; rather he confirmed it: "yes, and he shall be blessed" (Gen. 27:33). Yet he did reserve a blessing for Esau, and although it was not the blessing bound up with the promise, yet it was a blessing concerning "things to come," as truly as Jacob's blessing was. Isaac, like his father, believed God, and his faith too was an "assurance of things hoped for, a proof of things not seen."

21 Jacob in his turn demonstrated similar faith. Isaac was misled by the plotting of his wife and younger son into giving the younger son the blessing which he had designed for the elder; but when Jacob on his deathbed blessed the two sons of Joseph he deliberately bestowed the greater blessing on Ephraim, the younger son. But he blessed both of them concerning "things to come," as he himself had been blessed by Isaac; and thus, while his earlier career had been marked by anything but faith, as he endeavored repeatedly by his own scheming to gain advantages for himself, yet at the end of his days he recognized the futility of all his scheming, and relied on the faithfulness of the "Mighty One of Jacob."

The statement that he "worshiped, leaning on the top of his staff," is based on the Septuagint version of Gen. 47:31. The Masoretic text says that "Israel bowed himself on the bed's head";[158] but the Septuagint translators read Hebrew *miṭṭāh*, "bed," as though it were *maṭṭeh*, "staff." The picture of the patriarch sitting on his bed and leaning on his staff is convincing enough; the same cannot be said for the mistranslation in the Latin New Testament, which makes him worship the top of his staff—a form of words from which some curious inferences have been drawn.[160]

22 Joseph also, at the end of his days, showed the same firm faith in the fulfilment of God's promises. Joseph's career certainly presents instances of faith in abundance, such as his steadfastness under temptation and his patience under unjust treatment:

> Joseph was sold as a slave:
> his feet were hurt with fetters,
> his neck was put in a collar of iron;
> until what he had said came to pass
> the word of Yahweh tested him.

He endured his trials nobly and triumphed over them, for (as Stephen puts it) "God was with him, and rescued him out of all his afflictions, and gave him favor and wisdom before Pharaoh king of Egypt; and he made him governor over Egypt and over all his house" (Acts 7:9f.). Other writers enlarge on his righteousness, his fortitude, and his wisdom; but the one incident singled out by our author to illustrate his faith belongs to the end of his life, because, above everything else recorded of him, it expresses his conviction regarding "things to come." "I am about to die," he said to his kinsmen, "but God will visit you, and bring you up out of this land to the land which he swore to

Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob … and you shall carry up my bones from here" (Gen. 50:24f.). Joseph had spent the whole of his long life, apart from the first seventeen years, in Egypt; but Egypt was not his home. Even when the rest of his family came down to Egypt at his invitation, he knew that their residence there would be but temporary. Just as his father Jacob had insisted on being carried back to the promised land for burial, so Joseph made his relatives swear that they would perform the like service for him. He "mentioned the departure [lit. the exodus] of the people of Israel," says our author, "and gave directions with regard to his bones." And in due course the coffin which contained his embalmed body was carried from Egypt when the Israelites left that land under the guidance of Moses, and was buried at Shechem after the settlement in Canaan. After a study of the motif of the bones of Joseph in Jewish literature M. Wilcox concludes that our author's reference to it "fits at once with the picture found elsewhere in Jewish exegesis of the piety and faithfulness of Joseph, and of the view that the visitation of which he spoke referred not only to Moses and the exodus but also to the final liberation of Israel at the hand of the Second Redeemer."[164]

6. The Faith of Moses (11:23–28)

> 23 *By faith Moses, at his birth, was hidden by his parents for three months, because they saw that he was a beautiful child; they were not deterred by the king's decree.*
>
> 24 *By faith Moses, when he grew up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter:*
>
> 25 *he chose the endurance of hardship with the people of God in preference to the temporary enjoyment of sin.*
>
> 26 *He reckoned the stigma attaching to the Messiah to be greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he kept his eyes fixed on the reward.*
>
> 27 *By faith he abandoned Egypt, and not because he was afraid of the king's anger, for he persevered because he saw the Invisible One.*
>
> 28 *By faith he has instituted the Passover, with the sprinkling of the blood, to prevent the destroyer of the firstborn from touching them.*[167]

23 The next example of faith is Moses, whose whole life is marked by awareness of the presence and power of the unseen God, and believing obedience to his word. In Jewish legend the achievements of Moses were magnified far beyond the biblical account. A more sober summary of his career is given in Stephen's speech (Acts 7:20–44). Stephen mentions that "Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and he was mighty in his words and deeds" (Acts 7:22); but he lays chief emphasis on the fact that Moses was God's appointed messenger and redeemer to the people of Israel, the man who "led them out, having performed wonders and signs in Egypt and at the Red Sea, and in the wilderness for forty years" (Acts 7:36). Our author's assessment of Moses is closely akin to Stephen's. He has already spoken of his faithfulness as a servant in God's house (Heb. 3:2, 5); here he singles out those features from the history of Moses which best illustrate his present theme of faith in God.

The faith which was shown at Moses' birth was, of course, not his own but his parents'. He was born in Egypt, soon after the reigning Pharaoh, to restrict the rapidly increasing numbers of Israelites in his realm, had issued a decree ordering that all male

childrn born to them should be put to death at birth. But, according to the Exodus narrative, when Moses' mother "saw that he was a goodly child, she hid him three months" (Ex. 2:2), and after that she placed him in a basket of bulrushes on the brink of the Nile, where he was found by Pharaoh's daughter. While the Hebrew text makes his mother the active party in thus circumventing the royal decree, the Septuagint says that both his parents hid him for three months, and it is the Septuagint account that is followed by our author, as also by Philo[172] and Josephus. Nature itself might suggest that his mother took the initiative, with the acquiescence of his father. Had their defiance of the law been discovered, the penalty would have been severe; but "they were not deterred by the king's decree."

Wherein precisely did their "faith" lie? Probably the statement that Moses was a "goodly" child means more than that he was a beautiful baby. We are perhaps intended to infer that there was something about the appearance of the child which indicated that he was no ordinary child,[175] but one destined under God to accomplish great things for his people. Our author does not repeat the story of the divine revelation to this effect which, according to Josephus, was given in a night vision to Moses' father Amram; but some appreciation of the divine purpose to be fulfilled through Moses is implied in his ascription of faith to Amram and Jochebed.

24 When Pharaoh's daughter found the infant Moses by the Nile, she adopted him and brought him up as her own son. But "when Moses had grown up, … he went out to his people, and looked on their burdens" (Ex. 2:11). Stephen makes him "about forty years old" at the time, thus dividing his life of 120 years into three clearly demarcated periods of forty years each. According to Stephen, Moses presented himself to his fellow-Israelites as their champion, supposing that they "understood that God was giving them deliverance by his hand, but they did not understand" (Acts 7:25). Our author reads the Exodus narrative as Stephen did, and concludes that, by thus identifying himself with the downtrodden Israelites, Moses renounced the status which he enjoyed in Egypt as a member of the royal household. He could not identify himself both with the Israelites and with the Egyptians; he had to choose the one or the other. To choose the side of a slave-nation, with all the contempt and privation which that entailed, in preference to the substantial advantages and prospects which were his as "the son of Pharaoh's daughter," must have seemed an act of folly by all worldly standards. It is, however, an act which has been repeatedly reproduced in our day by outstanding members of subject nations who have stood well with the imperial power, but have preferred to cast in their lot with their own people even if this involved them in loss, discomfort, and imprisonment.

25 It was "by faith" that Moses made his great refusal, with all that it cost him in material terms. His people were being ill-treated, but he chose to share their ill-treatment "rather than enjoy the transient pleasures of sin"[180] (NEB). The privileges and advantages which are attached to high rank and political power are not sinful in themselves; they can indeed be used very effectively to promote the well-being of others and to help the underprivileged. Moses might have argued to himself that he could do much more for the Israelites by remaining in Pharaoh's court and using his influence there on their behalf than by renouncing his Egyptian citizenship and becoming a member of a depressed group with no political rights. But for *Moses* to do this, when once he had seen the path of duty clear before him, would have been *sin*—the crowning sin of apostasy, against

which the recipients of this letter needed so insistently to be warned. Even if (as some have imagined) the crown of Egypt was within Moses' reach had he remained where he was, and his name had been perpetuated in history as the greatest and wisest of the rulers of that land, he would never have attained such a reputation as he did by making the great refusal. But when Moses made that refusal he did not foresee the reputation which he was going to establish for himself; he had nothing to look forward to but privation, danger, scorn, and suffering—with Israel's liberation, please God. To have remained at Pharaoh's court would have been lasting dishonor, and that dishonor would be a price too high to pay for material advantages which at best would be but short-lived.

26 Moses weighed the issues in his mind, and decided that the temporal wealth of Egypt was far less valuable than "the stigma that rests on God's Anointed" (NEB). What others would have considered as something to be shunned at all costs he esteemed as a prize to be eagerly sought. Like Paul after him, whatever gain he had, he counted as loss for Christ's sake. The identification of Christ with his people is noteworthy. The words which the God of Israel put in Moses' mouth when he went to Pharaoh to demand his people's release, "Israel is my son, my firstborn" (Ex. 4:22), are as applicable to Jesus personally as they are to Israel corporately. The Messiah is one with the messianic people, bone of their bone and flesh of their flesh. "In all their affliction he was afflicted" (Isa. 63:9), and in the fulness of time he too, like his people before him, was called out of Egypt and had his Exodus to accomplish.[186] The "stigma" and disrepute which the people of God bore were borne in concentrated form by the Lord's Anointed; to him the New Testament applies the psalmist's cry to God: "the insults of those who insulted thee have fallen on me" (Ps. 69:9). The national history of Israel, which began under Moses' leadership, led on to Christ; by his obedience to the heavenly vision Moses, like Abraham at an earlier date, looked forward to the day of Christ.

To readers whose perseverance was in danger of faltering because of the stigma attached to the name of Christ the example of Moses was calculated to be a challenge and encouragement. It would help them to fix their eyes on the reward[189] held out to faith if they remembered how Moses weighed the issues of time in the balances of eternity: "his eyes were fixed upon the coming day of recompense" (NEB). To have such a secure place in the history of redemption might have been reckoned reward enough; but to our author's mind Moses, as truly as the patriarchs, looked for his perfect recompense in the well-founded city of God.

27 With this forward-looking faith Moses abandoned Egypt. His heart-renunciation of Egypt, with all that Egypt had to offer him, was the essential act of faith; but our author probably thinks of the occasion when he left Egypt to live in the wilderness of Midian,[192] a stranger in a strange land. A difficulty may be felt here, since the Exodus narrative tells how Moses was afraid when he realized that his killing of the Egyptian whom he saw ill-treating a Hebrew was public knowledge. "Moses was afraid, and thought, 'Surely the thing is known.' When Pharaoh heard of it, he sought to kill Moses. But Moses fled from Pharaoh, and stayed in the land of Midian" (Ex. 2:14f.). Our author, who follows the biblical record so closely, certainly does not intend to contradict it, but rather to interpret it. "The fear of Moses is not immediately connected with his flight in the Hebrew story, so that the author may have felt warranted by this in denying that the flight was due to fear." He was afraid, admittedly, but that was not why he left Egypt; his leaving Egypt

was an act of faith. "By faith he left Egypt, and not because he feared the king's anger" (NEB). By his impulsive act of violence he had burned his boats as far as the court of Egypt was concerned; but he might have raised a slaves' revolt there and then. By faith, however, he did nothing of the kind; "he had the insight to see that God's hour had not yet struck, and therefore he resolutely turned his back on the course he had begun to tread, and retraced his steps till he entered on the harder way. For it was harder to live for his people than it was to die for them."

Some commentators, however, have preferred to see here a reference to Moses' departure from Egypt at the time of the Exodus. One argument in favor of this view is the statement that "he persevered because he saw the Invisible One," which might be understood as an allusion to his experience at the burning bush.[198] Against it, however, is the consideration that a reference to the Exodus here, before the institution of the Passover in v. 28, would be out of its natural order, as well as the consideration that fear of the king's wrath would be irrelevant to this later departure from Egypt, since the king and his people alike then urged Moses and the Israelites to get out as quickly as they could.[200] As for Moses' endurance, "seeing the Invisible One," this need not be taken as a specific allusion to the burning bush, but to the fact that Moses paid more attention to the invisible King of kings than to the king of Egypt. If faith is "a conviction regarding things not seen," it is first and foremost a conviction regarding the unseen God, as has been emphasized already in the affirmation that he who comes to God must believe that he is (v. 6). Our author probably means that Moses' lifelong vision of God was the secret of his faith and perseverance. Philo describes Moses as the "beholder of that world of nature which cannot be seen,"[203] by contrast with Pharaoh, who "did not acknowledge any deity that could be discerned by the mind alone, or any apart from those that could be seen." Here again there is a suggestion to the readers of the epistle that the invisible order is the real and permanent one, and not such a visible but transient establishment as Judaism enjoyed in the temple order up to A.D. 70.

28 It was by faith, too, that Moses instituted the Passover in accordance with the divine command. The Passover became a perpetual memorial for Israel of the last night that their forefathers spent in Egypt, when the angel of death[206] passed through the land destroying the firstborn in every home, apart from those whose doorways were marked by the blood of the paschal lamb, for at the threshold of those dwellings the God of Israel himself stood guard and prevented the destroyer from entering. Elsewhere in the New Testament Jesus is presented as the antitype of the paschal lamb;[208] if our author does not press this correspondence, it may be that he did not wish to detract from the correspondence between the death of Jesus and the annual sacrifice on the Day of Atonement.

7. Faith at the Exodus and Settlement (11:29–31)

> 29 *By faith they crossed over the Red Sea as though it were dry land, but when the Egyptians tried to do the same they were swallowed up.*[210]
>
> 30 *By faith the walls of Jericho fell down, after the people had marched around them for seven days.*
>
> 31 *By faith Rahab the harlot did not perish with those who were disobedient,*[212] *because she received the spies hospitably.*

29 The crossing of the Red Sea—the "Sea of Reeds," as the Hebrew has it—was the immediate sequel to the keeping of the Passover. It might well have been cited as a further instance of Moses' faith, but here "all those who came out of Egypt under Moses' leadership" (3:16) are associated with him in this act of faith. Nevertheless it was Moses' faith that inspired them to move forward into the sea; they were full of fear and complaint as they saw the water before them and the pursuing Egyptian army overtaking them from the rear, until at Moses' command they advanced and saw "the salvation of Yahweh" (Ex. 14:13). For the Sea of Reeds receded in front of them by reason of the strong east wind which blew all that night, and they were able to walk across as on dry land.[216] But the pursuing Egyptians were but halfway across when the sea returned to its usual place and overwhelmed them. This great victory which Yahweh won for his people was celebrated in the "Song of the Sea" preserved in Ex. 15:1ff., and commemorated elsewhere in terms of the primeval cosmic triumph of the Creator over the forces of chaos. It supplied a pictorial form of language for describing later deliverances, like the release from the Babylonian exile;[218] and it is used in the New Testament as a type of Christian baptism. But our author is concerned with it for its bearing on the theme of faith. Why did the sea recede before the Israelites so that they passed over dry-shod? At one level it was an act of God;[220] at another level it could be ascribed to the east wind; but our author ascribes it to the Israelites' faith. It was nonetheless an act of God, who used the east wind to accomplish his saving purpose, but it was by faith that they appropriated the deliverance thus procured for them. And why were the Egyptians drowned when they tried in their turn to cross the sea? At one level this also was an act of God; at another level it could be ascribed to the abating of the east wind, coupled with the sinking of their chariots in the mud;[222] but our author implies that they came to grief because they had no faith.

The Israelites' faith on this occasion consisted in their willingness to go forward at God's word, although it seemed impossible to get across the sea. Moses assured them that their God would act on their behalf, and although they could not see how he would do so, they obeyed. But no further act of faith is recorded here throughout the wilderness wanderings. These forty years have already been described in the epistle as a period of unbelief, throughout which God was displeased with that generation.[224] Reference might have been made to Caleb and Joshua's encouraging minority report when they came back from surveying the promised land (Num. 13:30; 14:38); but our author is not attempting to exhaust the biblical examples of faith. Even of Moses' patience throughout those years nothing is said, although indeed the words "he persevered because he saw the Invisible One" (v. 27) belong to this final phase of his life at least as much as to the earlier phases. But the closing obituary testimony of the Pentateuch, "there has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moses, whom Yahweh knew face to face" (Deut. 34:10), would have been regarded by our author as no longer valid, now that a greater than Moses had come and established a better covenant than that of Moses' day.

30 The record of faith, then, is suspended for forty years and resumed with the entry into Canaan. By whose faith did the walls of Jericho fall down? Primarily by Joshua's; he believed and obeyed the divine instructions given him when he saw the angel "commander of Yahweh's army" (Josh. 5:14). But the people's faith was involved as well, for they carried out faithfully the instructions which Joshua communicated to them, until the city fell. But they could not see how it would fall; on the face of it, nothing

could seem more foolish than for grown men to march around a strong fortress for seven days on end, led by seven priests blowing rams' horns. Who ever heard of a fortress being captured that way? Nevertheless, when they marched around the city seven times on the seventh day and heard the last blast on the rams' horns, they "raised a great shout, and the wall fell down flat, so that the people went up into the city, every man straight before him, and they took the city" (Josh. 6:20).

Archaeology can throw much light on the collapse of ancient cities—although in the case of Late Bronze Age Jericho it has thrown much less light than might have been hoped, less indeed than was at one time believed. But the forces which operate in the unseen realm, such as the power of faith, cannot be dug up by the excavator's spade. We may now never discover in material terms what made the walls of Jericho fall, whether earthquake or subsidence or something else, but our author ascribes their fall to the power of that faith which found expression in Joshua's submissive reply to the divine messenger: "What does my lord bid his servant?" (Josh. 5:14). It is by this same faith that other Jerichoes, both large and small, can still be overthrown. "The weapons we wield," says Paul, "are not merely human, but divinely potent to demolish strongholds; we demolish sophistries and all that rears its proud head against the knowledge of God; we compel every human thought to surrender in obedience to Christ" (2 Cor. 10:4f., NEB).

31 The next example of faith is the most surprising that we have met thus far—Rahab, the harlot of Jericho. Yet this is not the only place in the New Testament where she receives honorable mention for her faith: in Jas. 2:25 her kindly treatment of Joshua's spies is one of two arguments for the thesis that faith without works is dead, the other argument being Abraham's offering up of Isaac. In fact Rahab, despite her antecedents, enjoys a place of esteem in Jewish and Christian records. The two scouts whom Joshua sent to spy out Jericho found a night's lodging in Rahab's house, and when the authorities discovered where they were, she concealed them and then helped them to escape, stipulating only that her life should be saved when Jericho fell into their hands. For, as she told them, the news of the Exodus and of Israel's victories in Transjordan had already reached Jericho and caused great alarm and despondency there; "for Yahweh your God is he who is God in heaven above and on earth beneath" (Josh. 2:11). Jericho's fall was therefore a foregone conclusion. They promised to protect her, and so, when Jericho was taken, she and the members of her household were saved from the massacre when the city was "devoted" to Israel's God, and incorporated in the commonwealth of Israel (Josh. 6:25). It was self-evidently her faith in the God of Israel that moved her to behave as she did, and led to her preservation. Indeed, she is probably mentioned in yet another place in the New Testament, for (in spite of a difference of spelling) there can be little doubt that she is the Rahab who appears in Matt. 1:5 as the wife of Salmon, prince of Judah, the mother of Boaz, the ancestress of King David and therefore also of our Lord. The earliest Christian writer outside the New Testament canon, Clement of Rome, recounts the story of Rahab to illustrate the virtues of faith and hospitality, and makes her a prophetess to boot, since the scarlet rope by which she let the spies down from her window on the city wall,[231] and by which her house was identified at the capture of the city, foreshowed "that through the blood of the Lord all who trust and hope in God shall have redemption" (1 Clem. 12:7).

8. Further Examples of Faith (11:32–38)

32 *And what shall I say further? Time will fail me if I tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, and Samuel and the*[234] *prophets.*

33 *Through faith they conquered kingdoms, established justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions,*

34 *quenched the force of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, had their weakness turned to strength, proved mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.*

35 *Women received their dead children back by resurrection. Others were tortured to death,*[238] *refusing to accept deliverance, in order to attain a better resurrection.*

36 *Others had to experience mocking and scourging, and chains and imprisonment too.*

37 *They were stoned, sawn in two, killed by the sword; they went about in sheepskins and goatskins; they were destitute, afflicted, ill-treated.*

38 *The world was not worthy of such people, as they wandered in deserts and on mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.*

32 The comparative detail in which examples of faith have been adduced from the earlier period of Old Testament history now gives place to a more summary account covering the later period. With a rhetorical transition our author goes on, first of all, to mention six men by name spanning the interval between the settlement in Canaan and the early monarchy. The six names are not given in strict chronological order (or the order in which they appear in the biblical narrative); in fact, if we arrange them in three pairs, the two men in each pair are named here in the reverse order to that of their Old Testament appearance, for in the Old Testament Barak appears before Gideon, Jephthah before Samson, and Samuel before David. The reversal of the order of Samuel and David may be intended to bring Samuel into closer contact with "the prophets" who are mentioned immediately after, Samuel being the first in the continuous "prophetic succession" of the age of the Hebrew monarchy.[242] The four figures from the book of Judges who here precede "David and Samuel" remind us of the four who are listed in 1 Sam. 12:11, where Samuel, in a speech to the people after they have chosen Saul to be their king, recalls how in their earlier times of distress "Yahweh sent Jerubbaal and Bedan, and Jephthah and Samuel, and delivered you out of the hand of your enemies on every side." Jerubbaal is another name for Gideon, and if Bedan is a corruption of Barak (as the Septuagint and Peshiṭta versions indicate), then Gideon and Barak appear in the same order as here. (The inclusion of Samuel in this way alongside the others may seem strange, since Samuel is the speaker; but it is not unparalleled: in the twentieth century General de Gaulle referred to himself in the third person when speaking historically. It is interesting, however, that for "Samuel" in 1 Sam. 12:11 the Syriac Peshiṭta reads "Samson.") On three out of these four—Gideon (Judg. 6:34), Jephthah (Judg. 11:29), and Samson (Judg. 13:25, etc.)—the Spirit of Yahweh is said to have come, and this could be taken as conclusive evidence of their faith.

Gideon was Israel's champion against the bedouin Midianites; his small force of three hundred men, equipped with torches in earthenware jars, and trumpets, threw the host of Midian into panic and won a signal victory. Barak was commander of the army of the tribes of Israel who united against Sisera, commander of the confederate Canaanite chariot-force, and defeated him and his followers "at Taanach by the waters of Megiddo" (Judg. 5:19). It is surprising to find Barak mentioned here as an example of faith rather

than the prophetess Deborah, not to mention Jael, "the wife of Heber the Kenite, blessed … above women in the tent" (Judg. 5:24). For Barak refused to take the field against Sisera when Deborah commanded him, in Yahweh's name, to do so, unless she went with him. Yet his very refusal may have been, in its way, a token of faith; his insistence on having Deborah with him was perhaps an expression of his faith in the God whose servant and spokeswoman Deborah was. And when he was told by her that the expedition which he was undertaking would not be for his own honor, he led it nonetheless; it was not his own honor, but the triumph of Yahweh and his people, that he sought.

Samson, who championed Israel's cause against the Philistines in his own single-handed way, may strike one as an odd choice among illustrations of faith; yet the narrative of Judges portrays him as one who was deeply conscious of the invisible God, and of his own call to be an instrument in God's hand against the enemy. And what of Jephthah, commander of the Transjordanian tribes against the Ammonites? Posterity remembers him chiefly for his rash vow; yet, rash as it was, it was a token of his sincere though uninstructed devotion to the God of Israel. The message which he sent to the king of Ammon (Judg. 11:14–27), with its historical retrospect reaching back to the Exodus and wilderness wanderings, expresses his appreciation of Yahweh's guidance of his people in those early days and his confidence that Yahweh will judge their cause today.

David is the only king to be mentioned by name; his record displays faults enough, but it also displays a humble readiness to repent and seek pardon from God, and a conviction of God's providence and faithfulness. He made an earnest endeavor to put into practice the ideal of kingship portrayed in the poem which has come down to us with the title "The last words of David":

> "When one rules justly over men,
> ruling in the fear of God,
> he dawns on them like the morning light,
> like the sun shining forth upon a cloudless morning,
> like rain that makes grass to sprout from the earth.
> Yea, does not my house stand so with God?
> For he has made with me an everlasting covenant,
> ordered in all things and secure." (2 Sam. 23:3–5)

Like Abraham and others before him, he too received promises from God, promises regarding his house "for a great while to come" (2 Sam. 7:19), "the sure mercies of David" which found their fruition, as did the promises to Abraham, with the coming of Christ.

None can question Samuel's fitness for inclusion here.

> Samuel, beloved by his Lord,
> a prophet of the Lord, established the kingdom
> and anointed rulers over his people.
> By the law of the Lord he judged the congregation,
> and the Lord watched over Jacob.
> By his faithfulness he was proved to be a prophet,
> and by his words he became known as a trustworthy seer. (Sir. 46:13–15)

Samuel's name is well worthy to stand alongside those of Moses, Joshua, and David in the annals of Israel. He manifested the prophetic gift in his youth, and when the central sanctuary at Shiloh was destroyed by the Philistines, and the ark of the covenant, the palladium of Israel's nationhood, taken into captivity, it was he who proved equal to the task of rallying the shattered morale of his people. He showed them that God was still in their midst, even if the ark was in the hands of the Philistines; and indeed, when the ark was restored, he left it in an obscure place, lest the people's faith should once more be reposed in it instead of God. He went annually in circuit as judge in Israel, and undertook priestly duties as the nation's representative with widespread acceptance. The central sanctuary was no more, but one man, under God, served as the focus of national life. He recalled Israel to its covenant loyalty, and thanks to his inspiring leadership they defeated the Philistines on the very field of their earlier disaster. Not without cause has Samuel been described as "God's emergency man."[250]

It is in the time of Samuel that we first meet prophetic guilds, and from then on to postexilic days the Old Testament narrative presents us with a sequence of prophets who not only spoke but acted for God—Elijah and Elisha, Amos and Hosea, Isaiah and Jeremiah, and others who, not expressly named by our author, were certainly in his mind as he penned these words.

33 The exploits of these warriors and messengers of God are listed in general terms. The subduing of kingdoms, beginning with the overthrow of Sihon and Og in Transjordan, goes on through the period of Joshua and the judges, and reaches its climax in the reign of David, whose empire stretched from the Egyptian frontier to the Euphrates. Those rulers of Israel also established righteousness within the areas they controlled, in the spirit of that ancient "coronation oath" preserved to us as Ps. 101. This they did through faith in God, whose own throne is founded on "righteousness and justice" (Ps. 97:2). They "obtained promises" that God would be with them as they served his cause in faith, and obtained the fulfilment of his promises in the event; the promises made to David, as we have seen, had regard not only to his personal fortune but to the destiny awaiting his house. It was of these latter promises that Paul spoke in the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch when, after telling how God raised up David to be Israel's king, he continued: "Of this man's posterity God has brought to Israel a Saviour, Jesus, as he promised" (Acts 13:23).

As for stopping the mouths of lions, we recognize immediately the reference to Daniel, thrown into the lions' den for his fidelity to God, but protected from their attacks "because" (in his own words) "I was found blameless before him" (Dan. 6:22).

34 Those who "quenched the force of fire" were Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who refused to fall down and worship Nebuchadnezzar's great golden image. They knew that their God was able to deliver them from the furnace, but they had no means of knowing whether he would in fact deliver them or not—"but if not," said they, "be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods, or worship the golden image which you have set up" (Dan. 3:18). Had they received a special revelation that their lives would be preserved, it would have called for considerable faith to act upon it in face of the burning fiery furnace; but to behave as they did without any revelation of the kind called for much greater faith. The people to whom this epistle was sent might well have a fiery ordeal[257] to face in the near future, but whether life or death was their portion they

could be sure of divine companionship in the midst of it such as the three Hebrews enjoyed.

We can think of several prophets and others who "escaped the edge of the sword": Elijah was delivered from Jezebel, Elisha from her son Jehoram,[259] Jeremiah from Jehoiakim. (But not all were delivered, as v. 37 reminds us.)

It could be said of many of the judges and prophets that they "won strength out of weakness" (RSV). Gideon was least in his father's house, by his own account, and his family was the poorest in Manasseh;[261] yet Gideon and his three hundred were used by God to accomplish a great deliverance. The earliest comment on these words is provided by Clement of Rome. Clement was well acquainted with the Epistle to the Hebrews; in particular, he had studied this chapter and attempted to identify some of the heroes of faith who are here referred to anonymously. On the words "had their weakness turned to strength" he comments: "Many women have been made strong through the grace of God and have accomplished many deeds of valor" (1 Clem. 55:3). He goes on to instance Judith and Esther. What he says of Judith suggests that he thought of her as one in whom the remaining words of this verse came true: "became mighty in war, and put foreign armies to flight" (RSV). "The blessed Judith," he says, "when her city was besieged, asked the elders to let her go out into the camp of the aliens.[265] So, exposing herself to danger, she went out for love of her country and people when they were being besieged, and the Lord delivered Holofernes into the hand of a woman" (1 Clem. 55:4f.). But what was true of Judith in literature was equally true of many Israelites in history, from the days of Joshua and the judges down to the war of independence led by Judas Maccabaeus and his brothers; they and their followers had their "weakness … turned to strength, they grew powerful in war, they put foreign armies to rout" (NEB). They knew, in the words of Jonathan, that "nothing can hinder Yahweh from saving by many or by few" (1 Sam. 14:6); they believed that the battle was not theirs but God's, and therefore one of them chased a thousand, and two put ten thousand to flight.[267]

35 The women who "received their dead children back by resurrection" were the poor widow of Zarephath and the wealthy woman of Shunem; the son of the former was restored to her by Elijah, the son of the latter by Elisha. In the former instance the faith was Elijah's rather than the woman's; when her son died, she could only think that the prophet was a visitant of judgment to her house, bringing nemesis in this form for her sin. But Elijah's prayer of faith, "O Yahweh my God, let this child's soul come into him again" (1 Kings 17:21), was heard and the boy was restored to his mother. The woman of Shunem was an Israelite (not a foreigner, like the widow of Zarephath), and when her little son died, she showed what spirit she was of by hasting to Mount Carmel to lay her plaint before the man of God. Elisha matched her faith with his own, and by prayer and appropriate action he brought the child back to life. Both these incidents are described as resurrections; nowadays we sometimes distinguish between the resuscitation of a body to mortal life and the resurrection of the dead to life immortal; but no such distinction is made in the biblical vocabulary. The distinction is nevertheless real, though not verbal; our author goes on to speak of some who sought a "better resurrection"[270] than that experienced by the two boys just mentioned, this "better resurrection" being a rising to the life of the age to come.

"Others were tortured to death," he says, "refusing to accept deliverance, in order to attain a better resurrection." The particular form of torture indicated by the Greek verb is

being stretched on a frame and beaten to death.[272] This was precisely the punishment meted out to Eleazar, one of the noble confessors of Maccabaean days, who willingly accepted death rather than forswear his loyalty to God. In 2 Maccabees the story of his martyrdom is followed by the record of the mother and her seven sons who endured this and other forms of torture sooner than transgress the law of God. In this story one brother after another declares his readiness to accept torture and death because of the hope of resurrection. One says to the king: "You accursed wretch, you dismiss us from this present life, but the King of the universe will raise us up to an everlasting renewal of life, because we have died for his laws" (2 Macc. 7:9). Another holds out his limbs to be mutilated, saying: "I got these from heaven, and because of his laws I disdain them, and from him I hope to get them back again" (2 Macc. 7:11). And yet another at the point of death says: "One cannot but choose to die at the hands of men and to cherish the hope that God gives of being raised again by him. But for you there will be no resurrection to life!" (2 Macc. 7:14). The resurrection to which they looked forward was "better" than that to which the boys of Zarephath and Shunem had been raised by Elijah and Elisha. Those boys were restored to mortal life, and in due course died; the resurrection for which the Maccabaean martyrs hoped was a resurrection to endless life. They could have avoided torture and death and accepted "deliverance" had they been prepared to compromise with the idolatrous requirements of Antiochus Epiphanes and his officers, but they knew that, if they did so, resurrection to life could never be theirs. They remained faithful unto death, and have been honored ever since by all who set loyalty to God above all else. In the Christian calendar the first day of August is marked as the festival of the "martyrdom of the holy Maccabees"; the Kontakion in the *Horologion* or office book of the Greek Church calls them the "greatest martyrs before the martyrs."

The Old Testament has but little to say about the future life. Long life in the land which Yahweh their God had given them bulked more largely in the eyes of pious Israelites throughout most of the Old Testament period than the life of the world to come. Even at the beginning of the second century B.C. Ben Sira regards posterity's remembrance of a good man's virtues as the kind of immortality which ought chiefly to be desired. But when the persecution broke out under Antiochus Epiphanes, the fear of the Lord was more likely to lead to an early and painful death than to length of days. The martyrs had the faith to perceive that death and the gloom of Sheol could not be the final issue of their loyalty to God. The hope of resurrection blazed up and burned brightly before their eyes, giving them added courage to endure their torments. While the doctrine of resurrection was implicit in the biblical revelation at a much earlier date—Jesus pointed out that it is involved in God's designation of himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in Ex. 3:6—it did not receive general acceptance among the Jews until the age of persecution, but from then on it became a cardinal doctrine in Judaism (except among the Sadducees, whose party, however, did not survive the catastrophe of A.D. 70).

36 When the recipients of the letter read of some who experienced "mocking and scourging, chains and imprisonment," they might well think of members of their own community who had suffered some of these things in earlier days, as our author had already reminded them. And if similar experiences awaited them again, it might help them to realize that they were not the first to tread this path. The martyrs referred to in v. 35 experienced mockery and scourging before they died; and so did the pioneer and perfecter of faith himself. Since, however, the subject of this verse is "others,"[280] our

author probably had in mind others than the martyrs alluded to in v. 35. And one Old Testament figure of whom he may very well have thought was Jeremiah, the prophet of the new covenant. On one occasion Jeremiah was beaten and put in the stocks, and complained that he had been made a laughingstock and an object of mockery not only by the public at large but by members of his own family.[282] At a later date he was beaten again and put in prison, from which he was taken out and thrown into the muddy cistern from which he was rescued by Ebed-melech the Ethiopian.[284]

37a Jeremiah may also have been in our author's mind when he speaks of those who were stoned; this was his fate, according to tradition, at the hands of the Jews in Egypt who could not abide his protest against their continuing idolatry. Jerusalem itself had a reputation, our Lord himself being witness, for killing the prophets and stoning those who were sent to her; and our author may have in mind (among others) the example actually mentioned by Jesus: the priest-prophet Zechariah, who was stoned to death at the instance of King Joash "in the court of Yahweh's house" (2 Chron. 24:21).

As for being "sawn in two," this was the traditional fate of the prophet Isaiah during Manasseh's reign. The apocryphon called the *Ascension of Isaiah*, which records the prophet's death, is a composite work, Christian in its completed form; but the record of Isaiah's martyrdom which it incorporates (especially parts of *Asc. Isa.* 1:1–3:12; 5:1b–14) is of Jewish origin and exhibits affinities with the Qumran literature. It tells how Isaiah, to avoid the wickedness rampant in Jerusalem under Manasseh, left the capital for Bethlehem and then withdrew to the hill country. There he was seized and sawn in two with a wooden saw; before his death he commanded his disciples to escape the persecution by going to Phoenicia, "because," he said, "for me only has God mingled the cup" (*Asc. Isa.* 5:13).

Some through faith, we have been told, "escaped the edge of the sword," but some through faith "were killed by the sword." Elijah escaped Jezebel's vengeance, but other prophets of the Lord were "slain … with the sword" at that time (1 Kings 19:10). If Jeremiah was delivered from Jehoiakim when that king sought his life, his fellow-prophet Uriah was not so fortunate; he foretold the doom of Judah and Jerusalem in similar terms to those of Jeremiah, and when he fled to Egypt he was extradited from there and brought before Jehoiakim, "who slew him with the sword, and cast his dead body into the burial place of the common people" (Jer. 26:23). By faith one lived, and by faith the other died. So too in the apostolic age Herod Agrippa I "killed James the brother of John with the sword" (Acts 12:2); but when he tried to do the same to Peter, Peter escaped his hands.

37b–38 The following words are echoed by Clement of Rome when he exhorts his readers to be "imitators of those who 'went about in sheepskins and goatskins,' announcing the advent of Christ"; he refers, he says, to the prophets Elijah and Elisha, and also Ezekiel (1 Clem. 17:1). Elijah, we know, wore "a garment of haircloth" (2 Kings 1:8); and in the *Ascension of Isaiah* (2:10) those who accompanied Isaiah to his wilderness retreat "were all clothed in garments of hair." But the whole description of those who, roughly clad like this, endured destitution, affliction, and ill-treatment as they wandered in desolate places and sought the shelter of caves, reminds us especially of those godly Jews who fled from the persecution under Antiochus Epiphanes—the "wise among the people" who, in Daniel's vision, fell "by sword and flame, by captivity and plunder, for some days" (Dan. 11:33). Such were the "many who were seeking

righteousness and justice" who, in the narrative of 1 Macc. 2:29–38, "went down to the wilderness to dwell there" with their families, "because evils pressed heavily upon them." When they were besieged in their hiding places they refused to break the law by offering resistance or leaving their caves on the sabbath day, but died "in their innocence" to the number of a thousand persons. "*C'était magnifique, mais ce n'était pas la guerre*"; these were indeed men and women "of whom the world was not worthy." They were outlawed as people who were unfit for civilized society; the truth was that civilized society was unfit for them. They might well take on their lips the psalmist's cry to God:

For thy sake we are slain all the day long;
and accounted as sheep for the slaughter.

Faith in God carries with it no guarantee of comfort in this world: this was no doubt one of the lessons which our author wished his readers to learn. But it does carry with it great reward in the only world that ultimately matters.

9. Epilogue: Faith's Vindication Comes with Christ (11:39–40)

> 39 *All these were well attested for their faith, yet they did not receive what they had been promised,*[296]
> 40 *for God had provided something better with us in view, so that they could not attain their perfection apart from us.*

39 From righteous Abel to those whose faith was so nobly manifested on the very eve of the coming of Christ, they all "won their record for faith" (Moffatt). Some of them, as we were told in v. 33, "obtained promises," but none of them received *the* promise in the sense of witnessing its fulfilment. They lived and died in prospect of a fulfilment which none of them experienced on earth; yet so real was that fulfilment to them that it gave them power to press upstream, against the current of the environment, and to live on earth as citizens of that commonwealth whose foundations are firmly laid in the unseen and eternal order. Their record is on high, and on earth as well, for the instruction and encouragement of men and women of later days.

40 But now the promise has been fulfilled; the age of the new covenant has dawned; the Christ to whose day they looked forward has come and by his self-offering and his high-priestly ministry in the presence of God he has procured perfection for them—and for us. "With us in mind, God had made a better plan, that only in company with us should they reach their perfection" (NEB). They and we together now enjoy unrestricted access to God through Christ, as fellow-citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem. The "better plan" which God had made embraces the better hope, the better promises, the better covenant, the better sacrifices, the better and abiding possession, and the better resurrection which is their heritage, and ours.

E'en now by faith we join our hands
With those that went before,
And greet the blood-besprinkled bands

On the eternal shore.[1]

[1] Bruce, F. F. (1990). *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Rev. ed., pp. 276–331). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.