

Witness in the Theology of Hebrews

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Abstract

In the pages of Scripture, God bears witness to the person and work of his Son, and testifies to the faith of key biblical characters. These in turn testify to Christians about the many dimensions of enduring faith. Jesus is effectively the ultimate witness to the faith that triumphs through suffering. Although Hebrews does not use the language of witness with reference to Christians, they are urged to imitate the faith and patience of those who inherit God's promises, and to confess Jesus as the source of their hope and lifestyle.

Hebrews uses the language of “witness” in three significant ways, each related to Scripture. God testifies to his Son, God testifies to the faith of key biblical characters, and these characters testify to Christian believers about the life of faith. These emphases come together in Hebrews 12 with a climactic exhortation to “run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith” (12:1b–2 NIV). By implication, the suffering and exalted Lord Jesus is the supreme witness to persevering faith (12:3–4). As such, he is the source of ultimate encouragement and hope for disciples who struggle against opposition and sin (12:4–17).

I. The Testimony of God to the Person and Work of Christ

1. The Law of Moses

In an exhortation that anticipates 12:1–3, Hebrews 3:12 challenges all who share in a heavenly calling to “fix your thoughts on Jesus, whom we acknowledge as our apostle and high priest.” Focusing on the faithfulness of Jesus in fulfilling his high-priestly ministry (cf. 2:17), the writer asserts that, “he was faithful to the one who appointed him, just as Moses was faithful in all God’s house.” But Jesus is worthy of greater honor than Moses, “just as the builder of a house has greater honor than the house itself” (v. 3). As “a servant in all God’s house” (v. 5), Moses was part of the “house” or “household” that God is building (v. 4). But Jesus is described as “the Son over God’s house” (v. 6; cf. 1:1–4).

Since Christians are identified as “his house, if indeed we hold firmly to our confidence and the hope in which we glory” (v. 6), the writer clearly envisages a continuity between the people of faith to whom Moses ministered and the people of the new covenant. This is an important preparation for the argument in 11:1–12:1, where certain OT believers are “witnesses” to the sort of faith that Christians are called to exercise. These models of persevering faith are to be contrasted with Israelites who hardened their hearts in unbelief and rebellion, and failed to enter God’s promised “rest” (3:7–4:11).

There is an allusion to Numbers 12:7 in the description of Moses as a faithful servant “in all God’s house” (3:5). But the writer is not talking about the faithfulness of Moses in a general or comprehensive sense. His honored role as God’s servant was for the specific purpose of providing a testimony (*eis martyrion*) to “what would be spoken by God in the future.” Moses’s responsibility was to receive face-to-face revelations from God (Num 12:6–8), and be faithful in passing them on to his people.¹ The future passive participle (*tōn lalēthēsomenōn*) refers to later revelations by God from the temporal perspective of Moses. This could include subsequent biblical prophecies about the Messiah, but most obviously points to the revelation brought by the Son of God himself, concerning the salvation he came to achieve (1:2; 2:1–3).²

¹ Harold W. Attridge (*The Epistle to the Hebrews* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989], 105) points to the way Jewish tradition developed the significance of Moses’s intimate encounter with God, making him “the intermediary par excellence between God and humanity, the sort of claim made for Jesus in Hebrews.”

² William L. Lane (*Hebrews 1–8*, WBC 47A [Dallas: Word, 1991], 78) agrees that, “Moses’ prophecy was a corroboration of the new salvation, which began to find expression in the preaching of Jesus (2:3).”

Moses gave testimony to Christ and his work in advance of his coming, through the revelation he conveyed to Israel in the law. Most importantly, he built the tabernacle and established the worship of Israel according to the “pattern” that was shown to him “on the mountain” (Heb 8:5, citing Exod 25:40). Although the law that he was given was only “a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves” (10:1), its provisions prepared for, and confirmed the necessity for, every aspect of the work of Christ. Consequently, Hebrews expounds that work in terms of the fulfillment of what was revealed to Moses (cf. 8:1–6; 9:1–10:18; 13:10–14).

2. *Prophets and Psalms*

Hebrews uses the verb *martyrein* three times in relation to what God reveals elsewhere in the OT about the person and work of the Messiah.³ God bears witness to the eternal priesthood of his Son in the revelation of Psalm 110:4 (Heb 7:8, 17). A whole chapter of the writer’s “word of exhortation” (13:22) is devoted to explaining how Jesus became “a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.” This revelation means that, “he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.” The Holy Spirit testifies through Jeremiah 31:33–34 to the definitive forgiveness of sins arising from Jesus’s once-for-all sacrifice for sin (Heb 10:15). The need for the new covenant and the way it is fulfilled in Christ becomes the focus of the argument in 8:7–10:18.⁴

In other NT contexts, this manner of speech draws attention to the authority of prophets (Acts 10:43) or the Law and the Prophets (Rom 3:21) in testifying beforehand to the Messiah and the blessings of the new covenant (cf. Acts 13:22, where God testifies in Scripture to the character of David). In Acts 14:3, God is said to have “testified to the message of his grace by granting that signs and wonders be performed through (the apostles)” (Acts 14:3 HCSB; cf. Heb 2:4).⁵

³ Hermann Strathmann (“*μάρτυς κτλ.*,” *TDNT* 4:496–99) contends that the verb *martyrein* is used in the NT with reference to a human declaration of facts; a good report; the witness of God, the Spirit, or Scripture; religious witness in the sense of evangelistic confession; and the witness of Jesus to the nature and significance of his person.

⁴ Cf. David G. Peterson, *Transformed by God: New Covenant Life and Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 77–103.

⁵ Strathmann (“*μάρτυς κτλ.*,” 4:497) concludes that the verb in such contexts “guarantees the correctness of specific statements” and can mean “to declare emphatically, on the guarantee of an existing authority.”

II. *The Testimony of God to the Faith of Biblical Characters*

It is particularly significant that Hebrews mentions God's testimony to the faith of "the ancients" (*presbyteroi*, "elders") in 11:2, before applying their example to the situation of his readers in 12:1–13. An inclusion is formed by references to receiving testimony through faith in 11:1–2 and 11:39–40. As an outworking of the challenge in 10:35–39, persevering faith, even in the face of persecution and suffering, is the theme of this chapter. The verb "endure" (*hypomenein*) is a key term in 10:32; 12:2, 3, 7, and the noun "endurance" (*hypomonē*) is used in 10:36; 12:1.

1. *God's Testimony in Scripture*

The passive form of the verb *martyrein* in 11:2, 4, 5, 39, signifies God's testifying to the faith of these people in Scripture. Although "commended for" (NIV), "received approval" (NRSV), or "won God's approval" (HCSB), are all acceptable translations, the context points to a testimony being given in the biblical record. Strangely, however, none of the narratives from which these examples are drawn explicitly highlights faith.⁶ Surveying these narratives in view of the definition of faith provided in v. 1, the writer seeks to illustrate different dimensions of faith from observations about the lives of successive biblical characters. Similar reviews of sacred history appear in Jewish and early Christian literature, but the difference in the approach of Hebrews is that "certain motifs, such as that of inheriting the promises, seeing the invisible, and receiving divine testimony, punctuate the review and are probably part of our author's adaptation of the genre."⁷

Translators have struggled to give an adequate representation of the terms describing faith in v. 1, and scholars continue to debate their meaning, but "the first part of the definition relates to the attainment of hoped-for goals, the second to the perception of imperceptible realities."⁸ The debate has particularly focused on whether the word *hypostasis* should be understood subjectively as "confidence" (NIV), or "assurance" (NRSV, ESV), or whether it should be understood objectively as "reality" (HCSB). Similarly,

⁶ Like Paul in Romans 4, the writer of Hebrews may have been particularly influenced by what Gen 15:1–6 says about the faith of Abraham and God's response. There are allusions in Heb 11:12 to the divine promise in Gen 15:5, but the writer's reflection on Abraham's faith also refers to passages that make no specific mention of faith.

⁷ Attridge, *Hebrews*, 306–7. Cf. Michael R. Cosby, *The Rhetorical Composition and Function of Hebrews 11: In Light of Example Lists in Antiquity* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1988).

⁸ Attridge, *Hebrews*, 308. Attridge observes that "the notion of aiming at and often attaining something, such as divine favor, salvation, inheritance, or a promised blessing, is constantly repeated" in the chapter, and "the author continually highlights instances where individuals perceived through faith a reality not apparent to the senses."

there has been division about whether *elengchos* should be translated “assurance” (NIV), “conviction” (NRSV, ESV), or “proof” (HCSB). But the subjective and objective dimensions of faith are linked as the chapter unfolds. Indeed, “the subjective side emerges when *hypostasis* is linked with ‘faith,’ which pertains to the believing person. The objective side emerges when *hypostasis* is connected with ‘things hope for,’ since the object of hope lies outside the believer.”⁹

2. Different Dimensions of Faith

a. Faith and Worship

Even though Genesis 4:3–5 is not specific about Abel’s faith, Hebrews 11:4 asserts that, “by faith Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain did” (HCSB). Abel’s faith is evaluated in terms of his actions (cf. 11:8).¹⁰ By this visible demonstration of his faith, Abel was “commended as righteous” (*emartyrēthē einai dikaios*) (11:4). This commendation happened as (lit.) “God approved his gifts.”¹¹ Here the writer reflects on the words of Genesis 4:4 (“the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering”). Abel’s offering is understood to express a right relationship with God. “The close connection between faith and righteousness through the programmatic Habakkuk 2:3–4 in the preceding context ... means that being righteous may be predicated of one who has responded to God in faith.”¹² Although dead, Abel still “speaks” through the biblical narrative to Christian readers (cf. 12:24). His life was short, but he received a commendation from God for the faith expressed in his offerings.

b. Faith and Perseverance

The next character to be examined is Enoch. Hebrews 11:5 declares that, “by faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death, and he was not found, because God had taken him” (ESV). This expansion on Genesis 5:24 acknowledges the Jewish tradition that he was translated or assumed into heaven without having to die.¹³ Hebrews goes beyond that tradition in

⁹ Craig R. Koester, *Hebrews: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AYB 36 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 472. Cf. Thomas R. Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2015), 339–40.

¹⁰ Attridge (*Hebrews*, 316) notes various patterns of Jewish interpretation and the possible influence of the Palestinian Targum on the perspective of Hebrews. This version of Gen 4:3–16 describes the dissension between Abel and Cain as arising from their different beliefs about God.

¹¹ A genitive absolute construction in the present tense (*martyrountos ... tou theou*, “as God approved”) indicates that this divine testimony accompanied the offering of Abel, and was the means by which he was approved or commended as righteous.

¹² Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 403.

¹³ Cf. Attridge, *Hebrews*, 317. In the context of Genesis 5, with its many references to the death of Adam’s descendants, what is said about Enoch is startling.

asserting that Enoch was exalted “by faith.” The justification for this is that, “before he was taken he was commended as having pleased God.” Once again, the verb *martyrein* draws attention to the commendation of God in Scripture. Hebrews reflects the LXX rendering of Genesis 5:22, 24 (“Enoch pleased God”), which is an interpretation of the Masoretic Text (“Enoch walked with God”). The conclusion “without faith it is impossible to please (God)” (v. 6) sums up what has been said about Abel and Enoch. Both are used to illustrate the truth that genuine faith involves believing that God exists and that “he rewards those who seek him.” In contrast with Abel’s short life, however, Enoch’s long life involved an enduring moral and spiritual fellowship with God (cf. Gen 6:9).

c. Faith and Obedience

There are no further references to the commendation of God until the concluding statement in vv. 39–40. But the writer’s interpretive method in vv. 1–6 continues to surface in the rest of the chapter. Biblical narratives are examined to see how the lives of key characters are driven by hoped-for goals and God-given perceptions of unseen realities. This approach to the biblical record reveals the testimony of God to further dimensions of faith.

Noah’s confidence in God’s warning about the approaching flood was expressed in obedience (v. 7). His faith involved “holy fear” or respect for God (*eulabētheis*), leading him to build an ark to save his family. God commended his faith by using it to condemn the unbelief of those around him. Alluding to the link between faith and righteousness in 10:38 and 11:4, the writer concludes that Noah became “heir of the righteousness that is in keeping with faith” (*tēs kata pistin dikaioynēs*). Noah was next in the biblical sequence of those like Abel who “because of their faith, were attested to be righteous.”¹⁴

Abraham is the center of attention in vv. 8–19, because of his significance in the outworking of God’s redemptive plan. The promise made to Abraham about “a place he would later receive as his inheritance” (v. 8 NIV; cf. Gen 12:1) is first recalled. On the basis of this promise, he obeyed and went forth, “even though he did not know where he was going.” Like Noah, his faith was expressed in obedience to God’s call. His motivation was the hope of obtaining the land, which recalls the reward perspective of v. 6. However, the notion of “inheritance” implies a gift of God’s grace, not something to be earned by faith.

Entrance into the land required renewed faith and a fresh commitment to obedience. Abraham had to live like “a stranger in a foreign country,”

¹⁴ Attridge, *Hebrews*, 320. Contrast Schreiner, *Hebrews*, 347.

together with those who were “heirs with him of the same promise” (v. 9). When the writer describes Abraham as “looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (v. 10), he pictures the patriarch as seeking something more than he could see or experience. Waiting for God to provide an earthly inheritance, he came to realize that life is a pilgrimage towards a future that God alone can provide. There is no suggestion in the Genesis narrative that Abraham engaged in a pilgrimage toward heaven. As a man of his own era, however, he had an “eschatological” faith, because he was “continuously waiting for the consummation of redemption.”¹⁵ In this respect, he became a model for those who believe the promises of the gospel.

d. Faith and Testing

God’s second promise to Abraham was that he would give him numerous descendants and make him into a great nation (Gen 12:2; cf. 13:16; 15:5). Although Abraham was “as good as dead,” and Sarah herself was barren, he was enabled to become a father (vv. 11–12). By faith, he literally received “the power for laying down of seed” (*dynamis eis katabolēn spermatis*).¹⁶ Both Abraham and Sarah were called to ignore their age and circumstances, and to trust in the fulfillment of God’s promise.

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob all died without receiving the land of Canaan as an earthly inheritance. The things promised by God were only seen and welcomed from a distance (v. 13). When they admitted to being “foreigners and strangers on earth” (cf. Gen 23:4; 47:4, 9), they made it clear that they were “looking for a country of their own” (v. 14, *patrida*, “a homeland”). If they had been yearning for Mesopotamia as their place of origin, they would have had time to return and make their home there. Instead, they were longing for “a better country—a heavenly one” (v. 15).

As in v. 10, the writer draws a close connection between the faith of Israel’s forefathers and the faith of Christians. The situation of the patriarchs is presented in terms that show the similarity of their situation to ours, and the need for a forward-looking faith.¹⁷ They did not have the clear promise

¹⁵ Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, WBC 47B (Dallas: Word, 1991), 352. Lane shows how the idea of a city that is firmly founded by God echoes biblical descriptions of Zion (e.g., Pss 48:8; 87:1–3, 5; Isa 14:32; 33:20; 54:11–12). Hebrews takes such language to apply to the heavenly city of God, which is the ultimate destination of all true believers (12:22–24).

¹⁶ Scholars are divided about whether Abraham is the subject of v. 11 (NRSV) or Sarah (NIV, ESV, HCSB). For example, O’Brien (*Hebrews*, 415–16) argues for the former, and Schreiner (*Hebrews*, 351–53) for the latter.

¹⁷ The faith that perseveres and reaches its God-given destination will not look back longingly to where it has come from. Neither will it be content with the immediate blessings of life in this world.

of a heavenly homeland that we do, but God delighted in their expectant faith and, through Jesus Christ, “he has prepared a city for them” (v. 16; cf. 13:14). This is the heavenly Jerusalem mentioned in 12:22–24.

Abraham’s faith was further tested when he was asked by God to sacrifice his one and only son (vv. 17–19; Gen 22:1–8). Since God had specifically declared that his offspring would be reckoned through Isaac (Gen 21:12), there was seemingly no hope for the promise to be fulfilled if Isaac died. However, “Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead.” He received Isaac back from death “in a manner of speaking” (v. 19, *en parabolē*). As in 9:9, the word *parabolē* is probably used to signify that this event prefigured an eschatological reality, namely the resurrection of God’s one and only Son, and the resurrection of those who believe in him.¹⁸

e. Faith and Sanctification

In vv. 20–31, faith is further portrayed as a force sustaining God’s people in times of opposition and affliction, enabling them to overcome fear and temptation, and to fulfill God’s purpose for them. Moses receives the greatest attention in this section. By faith, he “refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh’s daughter” (v. 24; cf. Exod 2:5–14).¹⁹ Like Abraham, he rejected earthly comforts and security, in order to serve the living and true God. Although he could have enjoyed “the fleeting pleasures of sin” (v. 25), and all the treasures of Egypt (v. 26), his desires and ambitions were different. Moses chose to be “mistreated along with the people of God” (cf. 10:32–34; 13:3). Here we see that faith has a sanctifying effect, separating people from worldly values and commitments, motivating them to live for God and the reward of knowing him personally.

Paradoxically, Moses judged that there was greater value in suffering abuse or “disgrace for the sake of the Christ” (v. 26, *ton oneidismōn tou Christou*, [lit.] “the reproach of the anointed”). The writer of Hebrews could be assuming “some sort of prophetic consciousness on the part of Moses.”²⁰ But it is more likely that he is reflecting the language of Psalm 89:50–51, indicating that Moses shared the reproach experienced by God’s anointed people throughout their history.²¹ In so doing, Moses accepted the insults and

¹⁸ Cf. Attridge, *Hebrews*, 335; O’Brien, *Hebrews*, 425.

¹⁹ O’Brien (*Hebrews*, 430) argues that the author read Exod 2:11–14 to mean that, by killing an Egyptian and identifying with the Hebrew slaves, Moses was effectively renouncing his status as a member of the royal household.

²⁰ Attridge, *Hebrews*, 341. Like other elements of the portrait of Moses in Hebrews 11, “this remark too anticipates later paraenesis and is shaped by Hebrews’s homiletic program” (Attridge, *Hebrews*, 342).

²¹ O’Brien, *Hebrews*, 432–33.

disparagement that would ultimately be experienced by the Messiah and his followers (cf. 12:1–13; 13:12–14; 1 Pet 4:12–19).

Moses feared God, rather than the anger of Pharaoh, and this enabled him to leave Egypt and take the Israelites with him. He persevered in faith, “*as though he saw him who is invisible*” (v. 27 NRSV [emphasis added], BDAG [*hōs horōn*]). Moses endured opposition and difficulty by focusing on the One who is invisible (cf. vv. 1, 6). As well as transforming his own life, such faith was used to bring deliverance and hope to his suffering people (vv. 28–29; cf. Exod 4–14). This argument prepares for the writer’s exhortation to Christians, that they should endure and enter into their heavenly inheritance by looking to the exalted Lord Jesus, who is perceived and known by faith (12:2; cf. 2:8–9; 3:1–2).

f. Faith and the Future

Hebrews 11 draws to a close by mentioning the faith of four judges (Gideon, Barak, Samson, and Jephthah), one king (David), Samuel, and the prophets (v. 32). The writer then describes what these people accomplished in the political and military sphere (vv. 33–34), with a particular allusion to Daniel (“shut the mouths of lions”; cf. Dan 6:22–23), and the three who were cast into the Babylonian furnace (“quenched the fury of the flames”; cf. Dan 3:25–28).

In the writer’s perspective, however, the supreme goal of faith is victory over death in resurrection (v. 35; cf. v. 19). Certain women received back their dead in this life (e.g., 1 Kgs 17:17–24; 2 Kgs 4:17–37). Other believers had to endure torture and refused to be released from imprisonment, so that they might obtain the “better resurrection” to eternal life.²² Images of persecution and imprisonment pile up to convince the recipients of Hebrews that their experience has been one with that of believers in former generations (vv. 36–38; cf. 10:32–34). As they face further testing, they are encouraged to persevere with similar confidence in God and his promises (10:35–39; 12:1–13).

III. *The Perfecting of Believers in Christ*

Despite the fact that believers in both testaments share similar circumstances and are called to make similar responses, the writer concludes by emphasizing a significant difference. OT characters were “commended for their faith,” in the sense that God testified to their faith in the pages of Scripture, “yet none

²² Some vivid examples of this occur in the Apocrypha, written after the period of history covered in the OT (e.g., 2 Macc 6:19, 28; 7:9, 11, 14).

of them received what had been promised” (v. 39; cf. v. 13). Although they saw the fulfillment of certain promises in this life (e.g., 6:15; 11:11, 33), none of them experienced the comprehensive blessings of the messianic era. The singular noun in v. 39 (*epangelian*, “promise”) refers to eschatological salvation as a whole, viewed from the standpoint of OT prophecy.²³

The failure of these men and women of faith to experience the promised eternal inheritance was through no fault of their own. In his gracious providence, God had “planned something better for us,” in the sense that *their* enjoyment of perfection through Jesus Christ would only be “together with *us*” (v. 40).²⁴ The writer uses the language of perfection previously employed to highlight the benefits of Christ’s saving work for those who believe.²⁵ His point is to express the extraordinary privilege of living in the new covenant age.

Perfection could not be attained through the Levitical priesthood (7:11), and “the law made nothing perfect” (7:19; cf. 9:9; 10:1–4). But a better hope has been introduced by the sacrifice of Christ (10:14), making it possible for Christians to approach God with confidence in the present (cf. 4:14–16; 10:19–22), and ultimately to share in the promised eternal inheritance (12:22–29; 13:14). That inheritance was offered to the people of God typologically in the gift of the promised land and the provision of the sacrificial system, but it has only now become attainable because of the once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Those who were called to trust God in the OT era will receive the promised eternal inheritance when they are resurrected, because the mediator of the new covenant has “died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant” (9:15).

Christians must persevere with confidence in God and his promises so as to obtain the rich reward of eternal life. In this respect, the faithful who are commended in Scripture offer both encouragement and challenge. But Christians are in a better position than their OT counterparts, because “the unseen truth which God will one day enact is no longer entirely unseen; it has been manifested in Jesus ... the ‘end’ in which all believe and towards

²³ The challenge to Christians in 10:36 is to persevere, so that when you have done the will of God, (lit.) “you will obtain the promise” (*kōmisēsthe tēn epangelian*), namely, eternal life (cf. 10:34, 39). The plural noun in 11:13 (*mē kōmisamenoi tas epangelias*, [lit.] “they did not obtain the promises”) refers to a variety of promises, which were seen from afar and welcomed by OT believers, but not experienced.

²⁴ The NIV rightly translates *prolepsamenou* “planned”: the concept is similar to God’s foreknowledge in Rom 8:29, meaning a divine resolution to provide in advance for his elect.

²⁵ Cf. David G. Peterson, *Hebrews and Perfection: An Examination of the Concept of Perfection in the “Epistle to the Hebrews,”* SNTSMS 47 (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1982), 156–59; “Perfection: Achieved and Experienced,” in *The Perfect Saviour: Key Themes in Hebrews*, ed. Jonathan Griffiths (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2012), 125–45.

which all move, has been anticipated and proleptically disclosed.”²⁶ Put differently, the way into the heavenly sanctuary has been opened by Jesus in his death and heavenly exaltation, so that Christians can draw near with confidence and hold fast to the hope he has given us (4:14–16; 6:18–20; 10:19–22; 12:22–24).

IV. *The Testimony of Biblical Exemplars to Christians*

Apart from Hebrews 10:28, the noun *martys* is only used once in Hebrews, where it relates to “the great cloud of witnesses” (12:1) listed in the previous chapter.²⁷ Their number is greater than the writer could discuss in detail (11:32). As those who have God’s testimony to their faith recorded in Scripture, they now “surround” Christian believers and become a source of encouragement to “throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles,” so as to “run with perseverance the race marked out for us.” The argument moves from a passive use of the verb in chapter 11 (“attested by reason of faith”) to a use of the noun that suggests action in chapter 12 (“witness to the validity of faith”).²⁸ This noun evokes “the recurring motif of bearing and receiving good testimony in chapter 11.”²⁹ The focus on endurance makes it clear that the race is not a sprint but a long-distance event.

Since the writer goes on to encourage “fixing our eyes on Jesus,” it is most likely that he views these witnesses as *exemplars*, rather than as spectators: his emphasis falls on “what Christians see in the host of witnesses, rather than on what they see in Christians.”³⁰ Believers are encouraged to gaze at these OT witnesses, as well as at the very human Jesus (cf. 2:18; 4:15; 5:7–8), which suggests meditating on what Scripture says about them all.

²⁶ C. K. Barrett, “The Eschatology of the Epistle to the Hebrews,” in *The Background to the New Testament and Its Eschatology*, ed. William D. Davies and David Daube (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), 382–83.

²⁷ The same noun is used in 10:28 with reference to the requirement that, “anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses” (cf. Deut 17:6; 19:15). This sense of “witness to the facts” is more common in other NT documents (e.g., Matt 26:65; Mark 14:63; Acts 6:13; 7:58). Cf. Strathmann, “μάρτυς κτλ.,” 4:489–90.

²⁸ Here I affirm what is denied by Strathmann, “μάρτυς κτλ.,” 4:491. Witnesses are generally more than observers, being required to make known to others what they have observed or experienced themselves (e.g., Luke 24:48; Acts 1:8, 22; 2:32; 3:15; 5:32; 10:39–41; 13:31; 22:15; 26:16). Only Acts 22:20 comes close to later Christian use of the term *martys* to describe someone who gives testimony to the truth of Christianity as a martyr. Cf. Allison A. Trites, *The New Testament Concept of Witness*, SNTSMS 31 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 217–21.

²⁹ N. Clayton Croy, *Endurance in Suffering: Hebrews 12:1–3 in Its Rhetorical, Religious, and Philosophical Context*, SNTSMS 98 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 170.

³⁰ O’Brien, *Hebrews*, 451. Schreiner (*Hebrews*, 376) contends that both senses may be intended in the context. Cf. Croy, *Endurance*, 170.

Although athletic imagery is used to describe the Christian life in v. 1 (“run with perseverance the race marked out for us”), the noun *agōn* (“competition, contest, race”) can have the more general sense of “a struggle against opposition” (BDAG). A related verb (*antagōnizomenoi*) is used in v. 4 to describe the “struggle” of the readers against sin. This refers to their past and present experience of hostility and persecution from “sinners” (v. 3; cf. 10:32–34; 12:5–13; 13:3), rather than their inward struggle against sin, which is mentioned in v. 1. Their struggle against unbelieving opponents is likened to the struggle of Jesus, though the writer points out that “you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood” (v. 4).³¹

V. The Supreme Testimony and Enabling of Jesus’s Faith

In effect, Jesus becomes the ultimate witness to the faith that triumphs through suffering (12:2–4), though the writer does not specifically describe him in these terms. Jesus’s experience of opposition from sinners is linked with enduring the cross and “scorning its shame.” Moreover, his endurance was driven by “the joy set before him,”³² and the implied challenge is for readers to have the same perspective in their struggle. Jesus is “the perfect example—perfect in realisation and effect—of that faith we are to imitate, trusting him.”³³

The encouragement to fix our eyes trustingly on Jesus takes into account his earthly struggle and its triumphant conclusion: he “sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (v. 2; cf. Ps 110:1). The ascension and heavenly session of the Son of God is central to the writer’s argument (cf. 1:3, 13; 2:5–9; 4:14; 8:1; 9:11–12; 10:12–13). Heavenly enthronement was Jesus’s destiny as Messiah, enabling him to rule in the midst of his enemies (Ps 110:2), and installing him as the heavenly high priest of the new covenant (Ps 110:4). Moreover, Jesus’s heavenly session concluded the earthly struggle he endured, which believers in varying degrees must now share. Jesus has entered God’s “rest” (Heb 4:1–11), and believers are summoned to “guide their pilgrimage by looking to Jesus, considering both his earthly career and his celestial glory. Their conduct should be modelled on his earthly perseverance; but they are also to meditate on his session, the reward of that perseverance.”³⁴

³¹ The writer does not blame them for their failure to resist to the point of shedding their blood, but points them to the greater suffering and shame of Jesus.

³² The preposition *anti* in 12:2 could give the meaning “instead of (the joy),” but its use in 12:16 suggests that its most natural sense in both contexts is “for the sake of.” Cf. Attridge, *Hebrews*, 357; O’Brien, *Hebrews*, 455–56.

³³ Brooke F. Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 3rd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1914), 397. Cf. Croy, *Endurance*, 167–68.

³⁴ David M. Hay, *Glory at the Right Hand: Psalm 110 in Early Christianity*, SBLMS 18

When the writer identifies Jesus as “the pioneer and perfecter of faith” (12:2 NIV [2011]), he links faith to the redemptive effect of Jesus’s death and heavenly exaltation. In this way, Jesus is presented as more than an example of persevering faith: he is the enabler of such faith for believers.

The noun *archēgos* was previously used to describe Jesus as “the pioneer of their salvation” (2:10 NRSV [emphasis added]). In that text, the most obvious meaning is that he is “leader” or “pathfinder” of the “many sons” whom God is “bringing” (*agagonta*) to glory (cf. Heb 6:20 [*prodromos*, “forerunner”]). However, there is also an emphasis in Hebrews on Jesus as the “founder” (ESV) or unique “source” of salvation for others (HCSB; cf. 2:9; 5:9 [*aitios*]), who does for believers what they could not do for themselves (cf. 2:14–15; 7:25; 9:28).³⁵ Although in 12:2 he is the “pioneer of faith,” who goes ahead of his followers in suffering, dying, and being raised to glory, the pairing of *archēgos* with the unusual term *teleiōtēs* (“perfecter”) points to the salvific outcome of his faith. This second noun describes “one who brings something to a successful conclusion.”³⁶

There is a correlation in Hebrews between the perfecting of Christ (2:10; 5:9; 7:28) and his function as perfecter (12:2; cf. 7:19; 10:14; 11:40). As “pioneer and perfecter of faith,” he constitutes “the new ground, content and possibility of true realization of faith in God. By his salvific achievement, he created a new dimension and channel for the fusion of obedience, confidence, hope and fidelity, because he pioneered this road.”³⁷ Put another way, this “messianic redeemer designation” describes Christ’s “perfecting work on his church”: the Redeemer himself has “gone ahead in the history of this way of faith and made it possible.”³⁸

Although the emphasis in 5:7–9 is on the uniqueness of Christ’s work on behalf of his people, even there it is said that, “he became the source of eternal salvation for *all who obey him*.” What the apostle Paul calls “the

(Nashville: Abingdon, 1973), 95 (emphasis removed). Compare the focus on looking to the reward in 11:10, 14–16, 26; 13:13–14.

³⁵ Cf. Peterson, *Hebrews and Perfection*, 57–58; “Perfection: Achieved and Experienced,” 129–30. The same noun is used with reference to Jesus in Acts 5:31, where the context gives the meaning “prince” or “leader,” but in Acts 3:15 “author” is the more appropriate rendering.

³⁶ BDAG. Cf. Croy, *Endurance*, 176. HCSB renders the whole expression “source and perfecter of our faith,” but this obscures the contextual emphasis on Jesus as pioneer or leader in the sphere of faith. The word “our” (as also in NRSV, ESV) has no parallel in the Greek and narrows the application to Christian faith, whereas 11:39–40 embraces OT believers in the perfecting work of Christ.

³⁷ P. J. Du Plessis, *TEAEIOΣ: The Idea of Perfection in the New Testament* (Kampen: Kok, 1959), 226. He argues from 11:39–40 that the perfecting of believers is wholly dependent on Christ’s achievement as “perfecter of faith.”

³⁸ Otto Michel, *Der Brief an die Hebräer*, Meyer-Kommentar, 13th ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1975), 431, 434 (my translation).

obedience of faith” (Rom 1:5; 16:26; cf. 6:12–14; 12:1; 15:16, 18) is made possible by the obedience of Christ (Rom 5:18–19). So also in Hebrews 12:1–4 there is a challenge for believers to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, persevering in the obedience that faith makes possible (cf. 1 Pet 2:18–25). Since Christ has given faith “a perfect basis by his high-priestly work,”³⁹ his faith, and what it achieved, both for himself and for others, becomes a greater incentive and empowerment for faith than the faith of OT exemplars. He is both the specific source of Christian faith and “the first person to have obtained faith’s ultimate goal, the inheritance of the divine promise which the ancients only saw from afar.”⁴⁰

VI. *The Testimony of Christians*

Although Hebrews does not use the language of witness with reference to Christians, it is easy to see how this theme might be developed. The writer’s concern is that his readers should be “imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises” (6:12 NRSV, ESV; cf. 13:7). Such imitation involves looking to the example of the witnesses in chapter 11, and throwing off “everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles,” so as to “run with perseverance the race marked out for us” (12:1). Supremely, however, it means “fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith” (12:2), carefully considering the significance of his suffering, death, and heavenly exaltation for us, so that we “will not grow weary and lose heart” (12:4).

Those who focus on the glorified Lord Jesus in this way will be ready to listen to the exhortations of Scripture, such as Proverbs 3:11–12 (cited in 12:5–6). They will “endure hardship as discipline” (12:7), trusting in God’s fatherly care, and understanding his good purpose in allowing his children to suffer in various ways (12:7–11). In their struggle, they will learn to support and strengthen one another (12:12–13; cf. 13:1–3). With this pattern of life, they will bear witness to the distinctive character and sustaining power of Christ-directed and Christ-empowered faith.

A verbal dimension to this witness may be implied by a reference to Jesus as “the apostle and high priest of our confession” (3:1 NRSV, ESV, HCSB). The word *homologia* is used here in a technical sense to describe the community’s confession about Jesus: “the essential core of the Christian conviction that the writer shared with his audience.”⁴¹ This confession was to be

³⁹ Gerhard Delling, “τέλος κατλ.,” *TDNT* 8:86.

⁴⁰ Attridge, *Hebrews*, 356.

⁴¹ Lane, *Hebrews* 1–8, 75. Cf. O’Brien, *Hebrews*, 130–31.

held fast without wavering, since it expressed their hope for God's help in the present and their hope for final salvation (4:14; 10:23). Furthermore, the writer exhorts his readers to offer continually to God through Jesus "a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that confess his name" (13:15 NRSV [*homologountōn*]). This could refer to formal acts of confession or praise when they gathered together (10:24–25), but also to opportunities in everyday life to identify Jesus as the reason for the hope that they had and the lives they lived (cf. 1 Pet 3:15–17).