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SEVEN THEOLOGICAL THEMES IN HEBREWS

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By examining the relationship of literary form to theological argument in the book of Hebrews, seven theological themes occurring throughout Hebrews are elucidated, each of which is especially prevalent in 11:1-12:2. This smaller section emerges as a theological microcosm of the book as a whole. Upon close inspection, these seven themes can be seen to function as a forceful appeal for the readers not to abandon the New Covenant community for the Old, but rather to endure in faith. The faith that brings such endurance is that which focuses on Jesus, the Pioneer and Perfecter of faith, who himself has endured the cross and has sat down at the right hand of God the Father.

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INTRODUCTION

THE task of interpreting a passage of Scripture is a delicate balancing act. For the exegete who is sensitive to the literary forms of biblical literature and intent on finding the theological argument of a passage, there must be a third concern, that of demonstrating how the two interact. In the context of examining the relationship of literary form to theological argument in Hebrews,¹ seven theological themes were discovered. These themes, which occur throughout Hebrews (but with greater frequency in Heb 11:1-12:2), are (1) faith, (2) perfection, (3) promise, (4) endurance, (5) superiority, (6) witness, and (7) inheritance. The meanings of the Greek word groups associated with these themes are discussed briefly below. The emphasis, however, is on their development within Hebrews as a whole, and within the concluding exhortation (10:19-12:29) in particular.

¹The literary form of Heb 11:1-12:2 has been defined in chap. 1 of my unpublished dissertation, "The Theological Argument of Hebrews 11 in Light of Its Literary Form" (St. Louis: Concordia Seminary, 1984) and in the article "What Is the Literary Form of Hebrews 11?", forthcoming in *JETS*. My thesis is that Heb 11:1-12:2 is an encomium to Jesus.

FAITH

The concept of 'faith' is not only central to Heb 11:1-12:2 (27×) and to the book of Hebrews as a whole (41×), but to the entire scope of biblical revelation. Therefore it is imperative to grasp the scriptural meaning of faith in order to understand how Hebrews employs it.

In extra-biblical Greek, this concept generally signifies "to trust, rely on." With a personal object it can acquire the nuance "to obey."²

In the LXX, the root πιστ- almost exclusively translates the root אָמַן.³ The best examples are found in Gen 15:6 and Hab 2:4. The Hebrew root occurs often in the Hiphil stem where, according to Weiser, it means "to declare God אָמַן," "to say Amen to God."⁴ Used in this sense, the word denotes a response to the consistency of God.

The importance of the OT for the writers of the NT leads to frequent use of this concept. The new meanings given to the concept in the NT are: acceptance of preaching (1 Thess 1:8-9); content of faith (Rom 10:9); personal relation to Christ (Gal 2:20); and the message itself (Gal 1:23). These meanings of faith are sufficiently differentiated from the OT meanings to warrant their being taken as "Christian" usages of the term.⁵

In the book of Hebrews, the concept πιστ-, like so many theological concepts in the book, serves the hortatory purpose of the author. It is closely related to the word of God (4:2, 3) and the promise of God (6:12; 10:23; 11:11). It is the major focus around which the OT history is presented, first with the unbelief of the desert generation (3:7-4:11), and later with the faith of the elders (chap. 11).

This hortatory use of faith has misled some into taking πιστις in Hebrews 11 to mean exhortation. The concept has been identified with obedience (Bultmann, Eichler⁶), hope (Huxhold⁷) and endurance (Graesser⁸; the word is ὑπομονή, also translated "steadfastness" or "perseverance").

The underlying problem with these hortatory definitions is that faith is conceived of as a virtue or human power. That Graesser sees

²Rudolf Bultmann and Artur Weiser, "πιστεύω," etc., *TDNT* 6 (1968) 176-79.

³Edwin Hatch and Henry A. Redpath, *A Concordance to the Septuagint and the other Greek Versions of the Old Testament (Including the Apocryphal Books)* (2 vols.; Graz-Austria: Akademische Druck-U. Verlagsanstalt, 1954), 2. 1137-38.

⁴Bultmann, "πίστις," 187.

⁵Ibid., 205-14.

⁶Johannes Eichler, "Inheritance, Lot, Portion, κληρος," *NIDNTT* 2 (1976) 301.

⁷H. N. Huxhold, "Faith in the Epistle to the Hebrews," *CTM* 38 (1967).

⁸Erich Graesser, *Der Glaube im Hebraeerbrief* (Marburg: Elwert, 1965).

faith in Hebrews in this way is clearly illustrated by his contrast with Paul's use of the term:

With Paul, *generatio fidei* . . . whereby faith—when it has first of all been awakened through the Word—is then itself an “eschatological phenomenon,” that is, “that which conveys justification to men on the basis of δικαιοσύνη.” Here, with Hb, *cooperatio fidei*, whereby faith as instrument . . . is brought in by the hearer himself as the means, as the power, with the help of which he puts himself in a wholly settled position and perseveres in it.⁹

As a further contrast to Paul, Graesser contends that faith in Hebrews is not faith in Christ: “The specifically Christian (‘Christological’) faith finds no further development in Hb, neither in the reflective manner of the Apostle Paul, nor in the unreflective manner of the Synoptics.”¹⁰

One need look no further than Heb 12:2 and the call to “look to Jesus” to conclude that in Heb 11:1–12:2 faith is preeminently Christological. The whole “faith cycle” beginning at 10:32 leads up to the climactic identification of faith (the means of endurance) with “seeing the unseen,” that is, Jesus himself. Taking the book of Hebrews as a whole, it seems clear in light of the development of the teaching on the High Priestly ministry of Christ, and the strong exhortation to “enter God’s presence boldly” on the basis of that ministry (4:14–16; 10:19–25) that faith in Hebrews is pointedly Christological. If the phrase πίστις εἰς Χριστόν / ‘faith in Christ’ is not used in Hebrews, the idea is certainly implied throughout. Even where faith refers simply to God (6:1; 11:6), the background is the teaching of chap. 1, that Christ, in contrast to the angels, is God.

In developing the point that faith is a virtue provided by man, Graesser contrasts the view with that of Paul, which connects faith with the Word of God. But in Hebrews, as in Paul, the object of faith is the word of promise. First, by contrast, unbelief is the rejection of the word which is heard (4:1–3). Then, positively, faith focuses on the promise (6:12). Therefore, with the personal object (Christ) and the promise in mind it is best to understand faith in Hebrews (indeed, throughout Scripture as a whole) in the general sense of trust: “from a purely formal standpoint there is nothing very distinctive in the usage of the NT and early Chr. writings as compared with Gk. usage. As in Gk. . . . πιστεύειν means ‘to rely on’, ‘to trust’, ‘to believe’.”¹¹

⁹Ibid., 66; my translation.

¹⁰Ibid., 79.

¹¹Bultmann, “πίστις,” 203.

The connection of this trust with God's Word is aptly summed up by Gerhard Delling who, in another context (and almost in passing), speaks of "πίστις, which is firm confidence in the fulfillment of God's promise."¹²

In Heb 11:1-12:2 faith may be defined as an attitude of trust by which the believer sees the unseen and thereby sets his hope on the divine promise. The elders trusted that they would eventually be "brought to completion" and qualified to enter their heavenly fatherland, that is, the presence of God. They therefore anticipated the work of Christ as High Priest which would make that entrance possible for them. They "saw the unseen" both in terms of time (the future event of the cross) and of space (looking to heaven they considered themselves strangers on earth). Inasmuch as they looked to God, they also looked to Jesus who is the eternal God.

The believers to whom Hebrews is addressed live in the age of the New Covenant and the fulfillment of the promises. The event of the cross and the current ministry of Christ in intercession are the bases for confident entrance into God's presence in prayer. They live now, however, like the elders once did, on the earthly scene, where there is a great race to be run in order finally to reach the heavenly city. Their situation involves suffering, which calls for endurance. The key to enduring is faith, confident trust in God's promise that "He shall come and not delay" (10:37), looking to the Pioneer and Perfecter of faith to lead them on to their final perfection.

PERFECTION

The concept of perfection (τελ-) is the second most common theme in Hebrews. In extra-biblical Greek and the NT apart from Hebrews, the meanings revolve around the idea of bringing a person or action to completion.¹³ Most crucial for Hebrews, however, is a technical use from the Septuagint.

The phrase τελειώω τὰς χεῖράς τινος . . . is to be understood along the same lines. . . . It is . . . used for the Hbr. "to fill the hands" [אָלַף יָדַי־תָּא]. . . . That someone's hands are made free from stain, or that he is made free from stain, means finally that the one concerned is "able to practice the cultus," cf. Lv. 21:10.¹⁴

It is appropriate that Hebrews, with its theme of Jesus as High Priest, follows the cultic implications of the Septuagint. Christ is not only fully qualified for his ministry as priest, but it is through this

¹²Gerhard Delling, "τέλος," etc., *TDNT* 8 (1972) 86.

¹³*Ibid.*, 80-82.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 80-81.

ministry that he qualifies believers to approach God. This is why the elders were not brought to completion, since their qualification was based on his priestly act which came later. Delling aptly expresses what it means that Jesus is the τελειωτής / 'perfecter' (12:2):

God has qualified Jesus . . . "to come before him" in priestly action. He has done so by the suffering (2:10) in which Jesus confirmed His obedience, 5:8f. As the One qualified (τελειωθεῖς) for priestly ministry before God, as the One eternally qualified (εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα τετελειωμένος, 7:28), He is the absolute High-priest. . . . By His high-priestly work . . . before God Christ has once and for all "qualified" those for whom he acts "to come directly before God" (10:14; cf. 7:19) in the heavenly sanctuary as men whose sin is expiated.¹⁵

The development of the idea of perfection focuses on Jesus as the Pioneer who leads believers to maturity in chaps. 1-6. In the middle section of the book the focus is on the perfecting ministry of Christ, something that could not be accomplished by the Levitical priesthood (chaps. 7-10). Then in 11:1-12:2, the elders had not yet come to completion (11:40) because Jesus' sacrifice had not yet been offered as the basis for their qualification to approach God. Believers of the present age, however, with the groundwork of Jesus' sacrifice already laid, are regarded as complete (as are the elders since the church age has dawned, cf. 12:23). Facing suffering calls for endurance, and that endurance is accomplished by faith, that is, by looking to the Pioneer and Perfecter of faith, Jesus (12:2), the one who led the way through suffering and who qualifies his people to come before God.

PROMISE

The concept of 'promise' (ἐπαγγελ-) is unique for two reasons. First, as a theological idea it practically originated with the Bible; the Greek gods did not make promises, and the gods of the ANE did not keep promises. Second, the verbal root itself is very rare in the LXX; while promise is a basic OT concept, this particular root is almost non-existent in the Greek of the LXX.

In extra-biblical Greek, the root has many meanings, but the common factor in all of them has been mentioned already: "In all these examples there is reference to man's promises to a god, but never ἐπαγγελίαί θεοῦ. . . . There is only one known example of the promise of a god."¹⁶

¹⁵Ibid., 83.

¹⁶Julius Schniewind and Gerhard Friedrich, "ἐπαγγέλλω," etc., *TDNT* 2 (1964), 578-79.

Of the four occurrences of the root in the LXX that have a Hebrew equivalent, the most instructive is in Esth 4:7. In this verse ἐπηγγείλατο translates רָמַג / 'he said'. The LXX translators took the words of Haman to be a "promise." The same is true of the divine promise throughout the OT. When God says something, it can be taken as promised. A good example of this is found in Gen 15:5: "Then He brought him [Abraham] outside and said, 'Look at the sky and count the stars—if you can count them!' So, He said [רָמַג] MT = LXX εἶπεν] to him, 'Thus your seed will be.'" In the OT, then, the divine word is often the divine promise.

The NT in some instances follows the secular meaning of extra-biblical Greek.¹⁷ More often, though, it develops the OT idea of promise. The verb refers to the promise to Abraham (e.g., Acts 7:5) as well as the eschatological promise (Jas 1:12; 2:5; 1 John 2:25). The noun is used by Paul to bring these two concepts together.

In Hebrews the promise is also associated with the promise made to Abraham (6:12–20) and yet takes on the status of an eschatological hope yet to be realized (10:36). This is because of the other-worldly nature of the promised inheritance (as developed, for example, in 11:13–16). The elders had to welcome the promises "from a distance," because the basis of their reception, the High Priestly work of Christ, was not yet complete. The believers of this present age, on the other hand, have possession of the promise in the sense that Christ's sacrifice is complete, yet in their earthly pilgrimage they are absent from the promised heavenly fatherland. They therefore have need of endurance in suffering in order to receive the promise, which the elders by now have received (12:22–23).

Within 11:1–12:2, the concept ἐπαγγελ- stresses two major theological points. First, by the repetition of the phrase πιστὸς ὁ ἐπαγγελλόμενος / 'He who promised is trustworthy' (10:23, 11:11), the purpose of God to carry out the promise is established. Second, the contradiction of "received, but did not receive" regarding the elders demonstrates the crucial nature of Christ's sacrifice as the basis for the fulfillment of God's promises.

ENDURANCE

The verbal concept of 'remain' (μεν-) underlies two important theological themes in Hebrews: (1) the permanent as contrasted with the temporary in God's plan, and (2) endurance in suffering.

The idea of permanence is common in extra-biblical Greek and the LXX. NT theology stresses (1) the immutability of God and

¹⁷Ibid., 579.

divine things (Rom 9:11; 1 Pet 1:23, 25), and (2) the abiding in contrast to the transitory (1 Cor 13:13; 2 Cor 3:11).¹⁸

This latter theme is central to Hebrews. Beginning in chap. 7, Melchizedek and his priesthood are contrasted with the Levitical order (vv 2, 23, 24). The former is eternal, the latter temporal. Thus the ministry of Christ has an eternal significance. His New Covenant is the eternal covenant (13:20), making the first temporary. Evidence of this is seen in the ability of the subjects of the Mosaic covenant to persevere (8:9). That believers have an eternal possession is proven by the fact that the readers were able to take the robbery of their earthly goods with joy (10:34). After all, they awaited a kingdom that cannot be shaken (12:27), a city that does not remain "here" (13:14).

Of greater importance for Heb 11:1-12:2 are ὑπομένειν and ὑπομονή which occur only in the final exhortation (12:1-2). The Greeks regarded this as a virtue roughly equivalent to "courage." The LXX reflects the OT approach which considered endurance not as a manly virtue, but rather an inclination to trust God's promise: "While the Greek moralist censured the linking of ὑπομονή with hope as an inadmissible weakening, OT ὑπομονή issues almost wholly in hope."¹⁹ The peculiar LXX expression ὑπομένοντες τὸν κύριον / 'waiting on the Lord' (cf. Ps 36 [37 MT]:9) does not occur in the NT. However, the NT concept of enduring the trials of this present life (1 Cor 13:7) implies waiting on the Lord, and "apparently the centrality of faith and the prominence given to ἐλπίς ["hope"] as primary Christian virtues leave no place for the OT formula."²⁰ This seems more likely where faith and hope occur in the same context with endurance (1 Cor 13:13; Titus 2:2).

The linking of faith with endurance is especially noteworthy in Hebrews, where faith is seen as the means of endurance. The readers, who have already endured suffering (10:32), still have need of endurance for the race ahead (10:36; 12:1, 7). Their attention is therefore directed toward Jesus, who in carrying out his High Priestly sacrifice by enduring the cross (12:2, 3) is the Pioneer and Perfecter of faith.

SUPERIORITY

The concept 'better' (κρείττον) is crucial to the theology of Hebrews—it occurs more than twice as often here (13×) as in the rest of the NT (6×). Originally a comparative of κρατός / 'strong', it

¹⁸Also note the specialized uses of μέν- in the Pastorals and the Johannine literature; F. Hauck, "μένω," etc., *TDNT* 4 (1967) 574-76.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 584.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 585.

is used predominantly in the LXX as a predicate adjective translating the Hebrew expression *קַטְוּב . . . טוֹב* / 'better . . . than' (see Prov 21:9, 19).

In Hebrews *κραιττόν* is used primarily as an adjective in the attributive position ("better hope," "better covenant," for example). The word is used first to develop the superiority of Christ (1:4; 7:7), then of the better things that relate to salvation (6:9). By the time the "something better for us" is mentioned (11:40), on account of which the elders could not come to full completion, the readers have already heard of the "better hope" (7:19), "better covenant" (7:22; 8:6), "better promises" (8:6), "better sacrifices" (9:23), "better possession" (10:34), "better fatherland" (11:14, 16), and "better resurrection" (11:35). All these things are direct benefits of the climactic High Priestly work of Christ at the cross.

WITNESS

The word 'witness' is naturally associated with testimony in a legal setting. The root *μαρτ-* is so used throughout Greek literature, extra-biblical as well as the OT and the NT. There is a more technical sense, that of "good reputation," "approval," which predominates in Hebrews. This sense of "witness" is based on the veracity of the one giving testimony and thus "relates to things which by their very nature cannot be submitted to empirical investigation."²¹ It is in this sense that Hebrews speaks of God "adding his witness" (*συνεπιμαρτυροῦντος*, 2:4) to the apostolic preaching and of Scripture "emphatically affirming" (*διεμαρτύρατο*, 2:6) the author's point.

It is with this background that the unique connotation of *μάρτυς* / 'witness' in 12:1 is best understood:

The distinctive thing here is, of course, that this *νέφος μαρτύρων* consists of those who according to c. 11 have received witness (acknowledgement) from God because of their faith. . . . As such, they bear witness by the very fact of their existence to the authenticity of faith. It thus seems that the factual witness is also implicitly a confessing witness.²²

The theological import of *μαρτ-* in 11:1–12:2, then, is that God's approval comes by faith, that is, by looking to Jesus. As the elders looked forward to that sacrifice at the cross, which would ultimately qualify them to enter God's presence, they lived by faith. Now that Jesus has offered that final sacrifice, believers run the race by looking to him, realizing they are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses who are

²¹H. Strathmann, "μάρτυς," etc., *TDNT* 4 (1967) 478.

²²*Ibid.*, 491.

approved by God and testify to the necessity of faith as the means of running with endurance.

INHERITANCE

The concept of 'inheritance' (κληρο-) is derived from the verb κλάω 'to break', indicating the breaking up and distributing of an inheritance²³ (the meanings in extra-biblical Greek fit this etymology).²⁴

The major OT theme is that of the possession of the land promised to the fathers. The NT follows this, though often the inheritance is a spiritual rather than a material one. There is, however, a peculiar emphasis in NT theology: "A firm link is established between son-ship and inheritance such as we hardly find in the Old Testament and later Judaism, and runs through the whole of the New Testament."²⁵

This emphasis on sonship is also followed in Hebrews. After identifying believers with Jesus (1:4, 14) and specifying that their inheritance is salvation, the author then develops the concept of sonship relative to Jesus as the Pioneer of salvation (2:10-14). Believers, then, are those who receive "the promise of an eternal inheritance" (9:15). In chap. 11, it is the elders who are heirs (vv 7, 8, 9). It is significant that the inheritance of "righteousness based on faith" precedes the inheritance of the land, since ultimately it is the former that qualifies them to stand before God. This fact, together with the longing of the elders for the heavenly city (11:13-16), shows that the inheritance they saw from a distance was that unseen place, the presence of God. It is that place to which the readers have come (12:22-24), yet they are still pursuing it as they run their earthly race looking to the Pioneer and Perfecter of faith (12:1-2).

CONCLUSION

The theological argument of Heb 11:1-12:2 is set within the hortatory context of the book as follows: the readers, while tempted to desert the New Covenant community for the Old Covenant (10:38-39; 8:13), are commended for their past endurance of suffering (10:32-34), warned against throwing away their confidence (10:35), and told that they need endurance (10:36) in order to lay hold of the promised inheritance. That inheritance consists of the better things laid up for them, including their final approval by God and entrance into his presence in the heavenly city. They are then given an overview of great episodes in the lives of the elders, who were approved

²³Eichler, "κληρος," 296.

²⁴Werner Foerster and Johannes Herrmann, "κληρος," etc., *TDNT* 3 (1965) 768.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 781-82.

by God and who endured by faith. Their attention is turned to the focus of faith, Jesus, who endured the greatest and most significant suffering of all, the cross. The explanation of Jesus' status as Pioneer and Perfecter of faith and the conclusion that he has now sat down at God's right hand is followed by the sober reminder that the readers may face the prospect of death in following their leader (12:3-4), but that even so suffering is evidence of the Father's loving hand of discipline (12:5-8).

Finally, to summarize the theological argument of this passage, the readers require endurance to run the race and to bear suffering. The elders endured by faith. Jesus is the focus of faith. Therefore the readers can run the race with endurance by looking to Jesus—faith is the means of endurance.