

Chapter Eleven

1–2 Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the men of old gained approval.

Having exhorted and encouraged his readers not to forsake their sincere confession of faith, our author goes on to retell the stories of the heroes of faith throughout the history of Israel. These not only offer clear examples of faith in action but they also form a “cloud of witnesses” who stand as proof that faith in God and in His Messiah, Yeshua, is the true path by which salvation and eternal life are obtained.

In viewing these saints of old, our author sees in them the heart to take God at His word in spite of the circumstances and to obey Him regardless of whether or not the things He had promised had yet come to pass. So strong were they in their faith that they clung to God and His promises, even though their fulfillment was yet future, and they ordered their lives in view of the fact that they considered the fulfillment of the divine promises to be a surety.

His description, then, of faith, takes these elements into consideration. “Things hoped for” (ἐλπιζομένων, *elpizomenōn*) and “things not seen” (οὐ βλεπομένων, *ou blepomenōn*) both point to a future reality which presently is beyond one’s grasp. Yet though the thing is not yet in the hand, the eyes of faith consider it as though it were possessed, so much so that such faith brings assurance, conviction, and strength to persevere.

These two words, translated “assurance” and “conviction” by the NASB, are key to understanding this verse. The word translated “assurance”¹ is the Greek word ὑπόστασις, *hupostasis*, used already twice by our author. We find it first in 1:3 of Yeshua: He is the “exact representation of the divine nature (or substance)” [*ἡ ἀκριβὴς εἰκὼν τῆς ὑποστάσεως αὐτοῦ*]. In this verse the word is used objectively, pointing to the “nature” or “reality” of Yeshua’s being. In His very nature, He is an exact representation of the Father.

The second time the word *hupostasis* is used in Hebrews offers a subjective usage of the word. In 3:14 believers are said to be partakers of Messiah “if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance (*hupostasis*)

1 NIV, “confidence”; ESV, “assurance”; HCSB, “reality”; NET, “being sure.”

firm until the end” (ἐάνπερ τὴν ἀρχὴν τῆς ὑποστάσεως μέχρι τέλους βεβαίαν κατὰσχωμεν). In this case, our word *hypostasis* may have the sense of “confidence” or “assurance,” something that is subjective in the sense that it may be expressed and experienced differently by different individual believers.

As these two examples show, our author seems to use the word *hypostasis* in two different ways: an objective sense, indicating what is “reality,” “substance,” or “real essence,” as well as a subjective one, “assurance” or “confidence.” The question before us is how our author intends this term in our current verse to be understood.

Most of the modern translations have opted for the subjective meaning, that faith produces an inner assurance or confidence about something that cannot be rationally or empirically tested.¹

(CEV) Faith makes us sure of what we hope for and gives us proof of what we cannot see.

(CJB) Trusting is being confident of what we hope for, convinced about things we do not see.

(ESV) Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

(NET) Now faith is being sure of what we hope for, being convinced of what we do not see.

(NIV) Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.

(NRSV) Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

Only the HCSB and the TLV opt for the objective sense of the word, as does the old KJV as well as the NKJV:

(HCSB) Now faith is the reality of what is hoped for, the proof of what is not seen.

1 Abbreviations of the English versions are: CEV—Christian English Version; CJB—Complete Jewish Bible; ESV—English Standard Version; NET—New English Translation; NIV—New International Version; NRSV—New Revised Standard Version; HCSB—Holman Christian Standard Bible; KJV—King James Version; NKJV—New King James Version; TLV—Tree of Life Version.

(KJV/NKJV) Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.

(TLV) Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of realities not seen.

While the majority of modern English translations opt for the subjective sense of the word, the objective meaning may well be what our author intends, that is, that the gift of faith bequeathed to the elect forms an objective reality owned by each believer which, as it is caused to grow and be strengthened, makes the promises of God to be received as objectively obtained.

It is interesting to note that in the early Greek papyri which contain common, written documents from the 1st Century and before, the word *hupostasis* is used to mean a “title-deed.” Indeed, in the Greek lexicon of Moulton and Milligan, they even suggest this use of the word as a possible meaning in our text. After showing the various ways the word is used in the papyri texts, they write:

These varied uses are at first sight somewhat perplexing, but in all cases there is the same central idea of something that *underlies* visible conditions and guarantees a future possession. And as this is the essential meaning in Heb 11:1, we venture to suggest the translation “Faith is the *title-deed* of things hoped for.”¹

The subjective sense of the word seems to be in the minds of the Lxx translators when they used *hupostasis* to translate תֹּחֶלֶת (*tōchelet*) in Ps 39:7[8], “And now, Lord, for what do I wait? My hope is in You,” and תִּקְוָה (*tiqvah*) in Ruth 1:12, “Return, my daughters! Go, for I am too old to have a husband. If I said I have hope....” But the objective sense of the word *hupostasis* is also found in the Lxx, as in Ps 138:15, “My bones, which You made in secret were not hidden from You, nor my substance, in the lowest parts of the earth.”

One might ask how the two possible aspects of the word, objective and subjective, actually differ, for does not that which is objective become the means of an inner, subjective assurance? Does not the title deed in one’s possession offer proof of one’s ownership? Yes, it does. But herein lies the difference: the title-deed is an objective *proof* of

1 Moulton and Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament* (Eerdmans, 1930), p. 660.

ownership which thus engenders confidence and assurance whereas the idea of “assurance” or “settled-confidence” puts the emphasis upon a *subjective* inner feeling or thought process rather than upon objective realities.

For this reason, the objective understanding of the word seems best suited for our verse, and especially in light of the on-going context of this chapter. For our author’s intention is to give historical examples of genuine faith from the lives of faithful Israelites as objective proof that faith “works,” that is, that the fruit of saving faith is seen both in one’s faithfulness to God and God’s subsequent blessing such faithfulness as He promised He would.

The central convictions of the Christian religion, at least so far as the gospel of salvation is concerned, are based not upon our own observation, but upon testimony.¹

Given the perspective that our author intends us to understand *hupostasis* as an objective reality, how are we to further understand this? Once again, to allow the continuing context to offer the answer, we see that our author was relying upon the Scriptures (in his case, the Tanach) as the word of God which records accurately the lives of the patriarchs and matriarchs, from which record we are able to possess the objective reality of that in which faith consists. Or to state it succinctly, that “faith is the substance of things hoped for” means that certitude of our salvation is based upon objective, historical facts which cannot be denied. These facts become, then, the “title-deed” of our own, eternal salvation promised to us by the Father, through the Messiah Yeshua, and confirmed in our hearts by the Ruach. And primary among these historical facts is the resurrection of Yeshua, for, as Paul argues, if Yeshua raised from the dead on the third day, then this proves Him to be the One He said He was, and that therefore His teaching is true and may be fully received and trusted.

My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. (John 10:27–28)

...*the conviction of things not seen.* – The second important term in our verse is the word translated “conviction” by the NASB. It is the Greek

1 J. Gresham Machen, *What is Faith?* (Eerdmans, 1946), p. 237.

word ἔλεγχος (*elenxos*). As a noun it is used only here,¹ but the verbal form, ἐλέγχω (*elenxō*) is found 22 times with various meanings: “to scrutinize,” “examine carefully,” “convict,” “prove guilty,” “reprove,” “convince.” In our verse, the word is parallel in meaning to *hupostasis*, and would most likely therefore carry the sense of “to convince” or “to offer assurance.”

In the broader scope of early Greek the word *elenxos* had the same twofold sense that our English word “conviction” has: 1. conviction, meaning “to pronounce a guilty sentence upon a criminal,” and 2. conviction, in the sense of “a firm belief” or “resolutely holding a moral or ethical standard.” This second meaning is the obvious one which our context demands.

Thus, our author has this progression in mind: faith is that which first of all lays hold of the objective facts of the gospel, witnessed by the Scriptures as manifested in the lives of those who had genuine faith, and claims them for himself. Having accepted this reality (*hupostasis*) by faith, it produces a growing faith which yields a settled and sure assurance that what God has promised is already a reality and will be certainly enjoyed in the future. Such certainty in turn produces faithfulness as the child of God lives in the reality of God’s promises. As Francis Samson notes: “As faith *realizes* things hoped for, so it *brings to view* things unseen.”²

For by it the men of old gained approval. – The third thing our author teaches us about faith is that it produces a life worthy of God’s commendation. The heroes of the faith, now to be mentioned, live on in the minds and hearts of those who follow in their footsteps. So unmistakable were the successes of their faith that their very lives bespeak the reality of it. By no other means could they have accomplished what they did apart from their having laid hold of the power of God through faith.

It should be noted at the outset our author presumes that the faith of those mentioned in this chapter was the same saving faith that he enjoins upon his readers and us. Without explanation or apparent awareness of any controversy, the author of Hebrews teaches that there has always been but one faith that saves, and this same faith was participated in by the believers in ancient times before the coming of Messiah

1 It is found as a variant (D Ψ ℳ; CI) in 2Tim 3:16, πᾶσα γραφὴ θεόπνευστος καὶ ὠφέλιμος πρὸς διδασκαλίαν, πρὸς ἔλεγχον, πρὸς ἐπανόρθωσιν, πρὸς παιδείαν τὴν ἐν δικαιοσύνῃ.

2 Sampson, *Hebrews*, p. 409.

as did the messianic believers to whom he was writing. The idea that before the coming of Yeshua there was an alternate method of salvation is everywhere refuted in the Scriptures, as it is here in our text as well.

The NASB of v. 2 is not as accurate as one could wish. The Greek has literally "For by this the elders (οἱ πρεσβύτεροι, *hoi presbuteroi*) bore testimony." Given the fact that *hoi presbuteroi*, "the elders" is masculine plural in the Greek, it is interesting to note that both Sarah and Rahab are included in the venerable list of "elders," marking them as among the "elders" of Israel. It is not beyond reason to think that the term "elder," even though in the masculine gender in this verse, could have included within its concept both men and women who had risen to leadership positions within the community. This may have some ramifications on understanding the term in its early usage among the Messianic congregations of the 1st century. For never are qualifications given in the Apostolic Scriptures for those who hold the position of "elder" within the Messianic community. Paul, when listing qualifications for leadership positions in the Messianic assembly (1Tim 3), mentions only "overseers" (ἐπίσκοπος, *episkopos*) and "deacons" (διάκονος, *diakonos*). It is most likely that the term "elder" (זקן, *zakein*; πρεσβύτερος, *presbuteros*) was used to designate anyone who held a particular position of responsibility or leadership and that *episkopos* and *diakonos* were offices within the messianic assembly that were recognized as having some level of community-wide authority. Thus, "elder" could have been a very broad term to designate those people who were viewed as the established core of the community and to whom the younger members looked for counsel and guidance. If this was the case, it is easy to see how Sarah and Rahab would have easily been grouped within the social circle of "elders."

The NASB translation of v. 2, "For by it [i.e., faith] the men of old gained approval," could be a bit misleading, for it could be read as though one gains approval from God based upon one's own faith. Or to put it another way, that if our faith is simple or weak, we are less approved before God than are those whose faith is mature and strong.

But this is not what our author intended by his words in this verse, regardless of how one understands the passive verb, ἐμαρτυρήθησαν (*emarturēthēsan*). This verb, from the root μαρτυρέω (*martureō*), "to confirm something," "bear witness," "to approve or give an approving testimony," does not have a specific subject, so one is not certain if the implied subject is God, meaning that "the elders gained divine approval by their faith" or that "the elders were proven as genuine by demonstrating their faith."

Hughes takes the former view, reading the passive verb as a “divine passive.”

The literal meaning of the Greek is that they were “approved” or “accorded a good report,” without specifying the source of this approbation. The NEB apparently understands this to mean that the faith of these believers of a former age won for them a place in the Old Testament scriptures (“It is for their faith that the men of old stand on record”). But it is, rather, an instance of a “divine passive,” a form of expression common in the New Testament, in which the implication is that the unexpressed agent is God himself. Thus our version correctly renders it “received divine approval.”¹

Calvin notes in regard to this verse:

He [the author of Hebrews] handles this subject to the end of the chapter—that the fathers obtained salvation and were accepted by God in no other way than by faith.²

Owen likewise notes:

This testimony was given unto them in the Scripture; that is, it is so in particular of many of them, and of the rest in the general rules of it. It is the Holy Spirit in the Scripture that gives them this good testimony; for thereunto doth the apostle appeal for the proof of his assertion.³

Francis Sampson offers this explanation:

“For *by this* were the fathers testified unto” (as being true men of God). Such is the faith which governed the fathers, which we see illustrated in their lives, and which was the means of their winning that approval, divine and human, which makes them undoubted, undisputed examples of the true follower of God. It is an appeal to them to show the practical nature of the faith just defined. The explanation we have given regards the particle γὰρ [“For”] as introducing illustrative confirmation of the proposition of v. 1, that faith is of such a

1 Hughes, *Hebrews*, p. 441.

2 Calvin, *Hebrews*, pp. 262-63.

3 John Owen, *Hebrews*, 7.14.

nature...“The nature of faith is such (as is stated); *for* by just this principle the elders obtained a good report.”¹

In general, these authors are in agreement, namely, that the acts of faith about to be mentioned in the rest of the chapter are proof that faith is what our author defined in v. 1, namely, that genuine faith lays hold of that which is objectively true, testified to by many witnesses and ultimately given the stamp of divine approval.

Our author does not intend, however, to suggest that those who will be mentioned in the subsequent “Hall of Faith” gained right standing before God on the basis of their faithfulness. This puts the cart before the horse or fails to reckon with the fact that fruit is the result of the root and not *vice versa*. Thus, the faithfulness of the believers of old stands as proof of their genuine faith, the kind of faith that our author defines in v. 1.

All too often people get the idea that somehow one’s acceptance before the throne of God is dependent upon whether they have strong faith or not. But such a notion fails to recognize that those who fear that their faith is weak are the very ones who are especially invited to approach the throne of grace, for it is there that our faith is strengthened.

Commenting on the words of the Mark 9:24, in which the father of a boy who needed healing responded to Yeshua, “Lord, I believe! Help my unbelief,” Machen writes:

That cry of the distressed man in Mark was not the cry of perfect faith. But through it the man was saved. So it will be today. Even very imperfect and very weak faith is sufficient for salvation; salvation does not depend upon the strength of our faith, but it depends upon Christ. When you want assurance of salvation, think not about your faith. Faith is not a force that does something, but it is a channel by which something is received...Weak faith will not move mountains, but there is one thing at least that it will do: it will bring the sinner into peace with God. Our salvation does not depend upon the strength of our faith; saving faith is a channel not a force.²

1 Francis Sampson, *Hebrews*, p. 410.

2 J. Gresham Machen, *What is Faith?*, pp. 250-51.