

Item #42 (The Crux at Hebrews 11,11)

This was Entry #50 on my previous website.

One of the classic cruces of Hebrews is the famous challenge to the exegete at Heb 11,11. It would seem that the following verse, Heb 11,12, is also relevant, because of the linking word διό which serves as its introduction. The Greek of the two verses is as follows:

11,11 Πίστει καὶ αὐτὴ Σάρρα στέρρα δύναμιν εἰς καταβολὴν σπέρματος ἔλαβεν καὶ παρὰ καιρὸν ἡλικίας, ἐπεὶ πιστὸν ἠγήσατο τὸν ἐπαγγειλάμενον. **11,12** διὸ καὶ ἀφ' ἐνὸς ἐγεννήθησαν, καὶ ταῦτα νενεκρωμένον, καθὼς τὰ ἄστρα τοῦ οὐρανοῦ τῷ πλήθει καὶ ὡς ἡ ἄμμος ἢ παρὰ τὸ χεῖλος τῆς θαλάσσης ἢ ἀναρίθμητος.

The manuscript tradition is, of course, quite confused, indicating the difficulty interpreters down through the ages have had in making sense of the passage. The present note will not depend on any change in the text presented above, which seems to be the most probable from the standpoint of the textual tradition.

A suggested translation is as follows:

11,11 By faith even Sarah herself, sterile, received power for the production of seed even beyond the time of child-bearing, since she considered the one promising to be trustworthy. **11,12** For this reason were born also from one, and indeed from something dead, what were as the stars of heaven in number and as the uncounted sands of the seashore

The attempts to come to grips with the crux are many and varied.¹ A number of attempts depend on modifications in the text. As stated above, the opinion being offered in this paper is based on the supposition that the text as given above is the original one. In the light of the immense perplexity which the text as it stands has caused, the solution being offered here must be tentative in the extreme. But it would not be surprising that, given the *sui generis* nature of the crux, any solution would have to be *sui generis* as well.

¹ Cf. J. Swetnam, *Jesus and Isaac: A Study of the Epistle to the Hebrews in the Light of the Aqedah* (Rome, 1981), pp. 98-101, for a survey of a number of views. Also H. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia, 1989), pp.324-326; W. L. Lane, *Hebrews 9-13* (Word Biblical Commentary, 47B; Dallas, 1991), pp. 344-345, and pp. 353-355; P. Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews. A Commentary on the Greek Text* (New International Greek Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids / Carlisle [England], 1992). pp. 586-589; J. J. Bailly, "La mention de Sara en Hébreux 11,11", unpublished mémoire, Université Catholique de Louvain, Faculté de Théologie, 1989.

The heart of the crux is the rather bizarre claim that Sarah “received power for the production of seed”. That is to say, she received the masculine capacity to generate offspring. This is such a striking departure from the tightly-controlled nature of the discourse in the epistle that it is clear something extraordinary is in the author’s mind, presuming that the text is authentic (as is the case here). To make a reasonable inference about what such an extraordinary claim might be in terms of the epistle it is important to attempt to establish some presuppositions at work in the text.

A basic presupposition would seem to be that the author is looking at Sarah from the standpoint of the Christ-event and all that goes with it. He is looking back to the old dispensation from the new, not from the old dispensation forward to the new. For this seems to be the perspective used by the author elsewhere in the epistle. Another presupposition would seem to be that any solution must square with the immediate and general semantic context of the epistle. Finally, any solution would seem to be able to fit in with the micro- and macrostructure of the epistle.²

The most immediate point to establish would seem to be the precise force of the word “seed” (σπέρμα). This would seem to be a “spiritual” interpretation, given the interpretation of this word given in the present writer’s exegesis of Heb 2,16.³ There the word was taken as referring, as it does in Romans and Galatians, to the spiritual offspring of Abraham—all those who, like Abraham, had faith-trust in God in the face of death.⁴ In Heb 2,16 this death was understood to be the death of another. In Heb 11,11, Sarah makes an act of faith in God’s power to bring life from her “dead” womb analogous to Abraham’s act of faith, both being based on a promise by God.⁵ Abraham’s act of faith, made on the occasion of God’s command to sacrifice Isaac as recounted in Gen 22,1-18, is explicitly mentioned in the context, Heb 11,17-19, with the word “seed” (σπέρμα) mentioned explicitly in Heb 11,18: “... in Isaac will your seed be designated”. That is to say, Abraham’s descendants will be primarily spiritual, not physical, composed of all those who, like Abraham, had faith in the face of another’s death. This interpretation of “seed” is from the vantage point of the Christian dispensation; originally the word would

² The macro- and microstructure being followed here is that which has been elaborated by the present writer in his book *Hebrews—An Interpretation* (Subsidia Biblica 47; Rome: Gregorian & Biblical Press, 2016).

³ Cf. Swetnam, *Hebrews—An Interpretation*, Chapter 4, *ad loc.*

⁴ Cf. J. Swetnam, *Jesus and Isaac: A Study of the Epistle to the Hebrews in the Light of the Aqedah* (Analecta Biblica, 94; Rome, 1981), pp. 101-113.

⁵ Cf. Swetnam, *Jesus and Isaac*, p. 101.

seem to have been understood in a physical sense. But once it was clear that most Jews were rejecting Christ, it would seem that the Christians saw in their rejection a divine indication of the need for a more profound understanding.

This “spiritual” interpretation is reflected in the use of “faith” (πίστις) of all the protagonists in Heb 11. They all constitute the spiritual descendants of Abraham, even if they lived before his heroic act by which this faith was exemplified.⁶ Sarah belongs in this category, along with Abel, Enoch, and Noah (cf. Heb 11,4-7). Thus faith is the unifying principle.

But this unifying principle would seem to be subjected to a principle of differentiation, for the implication of the use of the word “ages” (αἰῶνας) in Heb 11,3, amid the other thematic statements in Heb 11,1-3, suggests what this principle of differentiation is: it is temporal. Chapter 11, that is to say, would seem to be unified by the concept of “faith”, and differentiated by the concept of “ages”.

The most obvious indication of differentiation based on time is the chronological progression of the persons mentioned, from Cain and Abel in v. 4 to the heroes in v. 32. But the persons mentioned seem to be presented in four main blocks:

- 1) vv. 4-7: the pre-Abraham patriarchs;
- 2) vv. 8-22: Abraham and Isaac and the patriarchs before Moses;
- 3) vv. 23-31: Moses and the arrival before the promised land;
- 4) 32-38: the heroes and heroines of faith after Moses.

This arrangement seems to be designed to highlight the two central sections involving Abraham and Moses, with the preceding and following sections serving to show that the entire period of the old dispensation was unified by faith.

In the context of the entire epistle Moses is the liturgical mediator of the “first”, i.e., Sinai, covenant (cf. Heb 9,18-21). And as such he is contrasted as servant with Christ as Son (cf. Heb 3,1-6).⁷ The section on Abraham has two aspects. From the side of Abraham it presents the story of Abraham’s testing and the resulting origin of his spiritual seed (cf. Heb 11,17-19) based on his faith that God could raise from the dead. Both promises, of land and offspring, are alluded to in the

⁶ Cf., for example, 11,7, where Noah is said to have become an “heir” (κληρονόμος) of Abraham because of his faith, even though he obviously lived before Abraham’s example of faith was available for imitation.

⁷ The covenant based on Christ is presented in the context of faith in Chapter 12 of Hebrews under the formality of faith in the future.

passage (cf. Heb 11,17), but the promise of offspring is emphasized through the explicit mention of “seed” (σπέρμα—cf. Heb 11,18).

These four periods seem to be the four “ages” (αἰῶνες) mentioned in Heb 11,3 as being “set in order” (καταρτίζω) by an “utterance” (ῥῆμα) of God, i.e., ordered for some purpose by God’s interventions in the lives of those mentioned. The purpose is explained immediately: “... in order that from things not in appearance that which is gazed on might come to be” (εἰς τὸ μὴ ἐκ φαινομένων τὸ βλεπόμενον γεγόναι). The present tense of βλεπόμενον is to be noted.

In the context of Heb 11,3, with its explicit linking with things “not in appearance” (presumably, not in appearance in the present time, in contrast to the present tense of βλεπόμενον), a phrase in Heb 11,19 deserves attention: “[Abraham], having reasoned that God was able to raise from the dead, therefore received him [sc., Isaac] back also in parable”.⁸ This verse occurs as the conclusion of the brief entry on Abraham and Isaac which began in Heb 11,17. That verse, because of the use of “offer up” (προσφέρω), refers to the offering of Isaac as a sacrificial act.⁹ It gives to the three verses, 17, 18 and 19, a sacrificial caste. That interpretation, together with the interpretation that Abraham received Isaac back as a parable in connection with resurrection from the dead, suggests that what the author of Hebrews had in the back of his mind was the risen Christ as victim. Which in turn suggests that that which is “being gazed on” (βλεπόμενον) which is a general theme of the chapters 11, 12 and 13, is Christ as a sacrificial victim. Which is precisely what was stated in Heb 2,9: the addressees “gaze” on the Eucharistic Christ as a sacrificial victim.¹⁰ In other words, what is happening in the section Heb 11,8-22 is that Isaac is being looked on from the standpoint of Christ as symbolizing Christ. Abraham, Isaac’s father, transposed to the present, can only be God the Father (cf. the word “only begotten” [μονογενής] in v. 17).¹¹

If Abraham represents God the Father and Isaac represents Christ the Son, then Sarah must represent the mother of Jesus. This is what the

⁸ Cf. Swetnam, *Jesus and Isaac*, pp. 119-123. This translation and the corresponding interpretation are, of course, much contested, as is practically everything else stated in this Entry.

⁹ For detailed argumentation cf. Swetnam, *Jesus and Isaac*, pp. 121-122.

¹⁰ Cf. the discussion in *Hebrews—An Interpretation*, Chapter 4.

¹¹ Cf. the presentation by the present writer of the relations of God the Father and Christ as Son and victim in relation to Abraham and Isaac at Heb 5,7-8 in *Hebrews—An Interpretation*, Chapter 6.

bizarre imagery of Sarah receiving the male power to produce seed would seem to imply. Sarah received the power to produce male spiritual seed without a husband. (Her husband's example was not yet available to her, but she believed nonetheless because "she thought the one who had made the promise that she would conceive was trustworthy" (... ἐπεὶ πιστὸν ἠγήσατο τὸν ἐπαγγειλάμενον) (Heb 11,11).¹² Just so, Mary received the power to produce male spiritual seed without a husband because "she thought the one who had made the promise that she would conceive was trustworthy" (... ἐπεὶ πιστὸν ἠγήσατο τὸν ἐπαγγειλάμενον).

"And, as a result, from one were born, and from what was as good as dead, as the stars of heaven ..." (διὸ καὶ ἀφ' ἑνὸς ἐγεννήθησαν, καὶ ταῦτα νενεκρωμένου, καθὼς τὰ ἄστρα τοῦ οὐρανοῦ ...). This statement is of key importance, for it gives the reason for the receiving¹³ of the gift of producing male seed. In the case of Sarah the result would seem to be that Abraham alone, i.e., Abraham's example alone, is to be looked on as the unique source ("from one"—ἀφ' ἑνὸς) of the spiritual seed which resulted. Sarah was the beneficiary of Abraham's act of faith in the face of death by a special act of God, without becoming in any way its source. As regards Mary, the result would seem to be that Jesus alone, i.e., Jesus' example of faith (or fidelity to the unfulfilled sacrifice of Isaac) in the face of death, is to be looked on as the unique source ("from one"—ἀφ' ἑνός) of the spiritual seed which resulted. Mary was the beneficiary of Jesus' act of faith or fidelity in the face of death by a special act of God, without becoming in any way its source.

In the case of Abraham it would seem that his faith was faith in the face of another's, i.e., Isaac's, death. In the case of Jesus it would seem that His distinctive faith (or fidelity) was in the face of His own death. But inasmuch as he was as man a child of Abraham, His faith in God was in reality two-fold—faith in the face of someone else's

¹² The problem of Sarah's initial incredulity as portrayed in Genesis would seem to be resolved by taking into consideration the tradition of later times which tended to enhance Sarah's image in this regard. Cf. P. Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (The New International Greek Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids, Michigan / Carlisle, England, 1992), p. 588.

¹³ The word "received" (ἐλάβειν) implies that both women were in some way the recipients of gifts from God. This "divine active" (cf. the "divine passive" of New Testament Greek grammar) matches the fact that what ultimately happened afterwards is to be interpreted as a result of this divine action in the women, not a purpose of the women themselves.

death (His future followers') and faith in the face of His own. This is the explanation for the enigmatic "from one" (ἐξ ἑνός) of Heb 2,11.¹⁴

But the "one" of Heb 2,11 is not the spiritual seed of Jesus but the spiritual seed of Abraham as modified by the faith (or fidelity) of Jesus. It is always Abraham's spiritual seed which is in question. And this would seem to be the meaning of "one" at Heb 11,12—Abraham's spiritual seed as modified by Jesus' faith.

At this point it is crucial to reflect on the fact that both Abraham's faith and Jesus' faith (or fidelity) involved God's power to raise from the dead (cf. Heb 11,19). But it would seem that Abraham thought in terms of restoration of Isaac to life in this world, for it was Abraham's concern to have physical offspring generated by him so that God's promise of physical progeny could be realized. On the other hand, it would seem that Jesus thought in terms simply of trust in God (i.e., terms of faith proper to the *tôdâ*), i.e., open-ended as regards specific expectations, but with the realization that he was to fulfill his role as the new Isaac, that is, real death and real resurrection as opposed to the symbolic role of the first Isaac.¹⁵ One further thing to be noted by the comparison of Sarah with Mary. This shift from husband in the case of Sarah to son in the case of Mary implicitly recognizes that the legal husband of Mary was not the ontological father of Jesus and thus can be understood as an implicit indication of the virgin birth: God the father is incapable of making an act of faith.

Thus, from the standpoint of the New Covenant, the seed generated spiritually by the example of Abraham as modified by the example of Jesus is the true seed promised to Abraham. Because of the inclusion of Jesus' being raised from the dead to eternal life his life and death transcend the limitations of time and as a result the expiatory power of his death is applicable to persons of all times. This result was symbolized by Isaac's last-minute reprieve from death, and brought to a fulfillment that was continuous with the "resurrection" of Isaac but also discontinuous in a wholly unique and definitive way—a standard way of viewing new covenant realities in the light of old covenant foreshadowings.

The above understanding of the crux at Heb 11,11 is thus really an understanding of the nature of Abraham's seed as looked on from the standpoint of the new dispensation. But the relation of Sarah to Mary

¹⁴ Cf. *Hebrews—An Interpretation*, Chapter 4. Cf. also J. Swetnam, "'Εξ ἑνός in Hebrews 3,11", *Biblica* 88 (2007), pp. 517-525.

¹⁵ Cf. Entry #31, Chapter 2, and the interpretation given to the words "he learned obedience from the things he suffered" (ἐμαθεν ἀφ' ὧν ἔπαθεν τὴν ὑπακοήν) in Entry #31, Chapter 6.

indicates what the author of Hebrews indicates in Heb 11,3 as the ordering of things not seen so as to explain the things which are being gazed upon by the first Christians. But there is one more theme of Heb 11–13 which merits investigation as regards Heb 11,11-12: the relevance of the word ὑπόστασις in Heb 11,1. In the present writer’s interpretation of Hebrews this word has been taken as referring to that which “stands under” something else.¹⁶ The three instances of the word in Hebrews have been interpreted by the present writer as referring in Heb 1,3 as indicating that ontologically the Son is the exact “duplicate” of that which “stands under” the external glory of God. That is to say, it indicates what is at the very heart of God’s being. As such it governs all that is said in Heb 1,1 – 3,6 about the existence of Christ as divine and human. This ontological reality of the Son also serves as the prime analogate of the other occurrences, Heb 3,14 and here at Heb 11,1. At Heb 3,14 it was understood to be the ontological reality which “stands under” the external realities of the “house of God” spoken of in Heb 3,1-6, i.e., the Church. As such it is an active force, causing the objective realization of the promises made to Abraham of land and offspring as viewed from the Christian standpoint.¹⁷ It would seem that in Heb 11,1, as part of the thematic introduction of Chapters 11, 12 and 13 of the epistle, it is an ontological reality which “stands under” faith in times past, future and present, and is related to God through the Son and exercises an active force not on the objective realization of what faith speaks about but on the very existence of faith itself. This active force is conveyed in Heb 1,2 by the words “through whom he ... made the ages” (δι’ οὗ ... ἐποίησεν τοὺς αἰῶνας).

With the resurrection from the dead Jesus entered into eternity, that is, into an existence which transcended time in the sense that His risen humanity entered into the world of divine causality. It would seem appropriate, in the light of the thematic use of ὑπόστασις (“underlying reality”) in Heb 1,2, that the faith of Jesus was created by God in earthly testing. That it is, it was created through the earthly experience of the Son. This faith serves as the underlying active force of all faith spoken of in Heb 11, 12 and 13. This makes the crux of Heb 11,11-12 less unintelligible, at least to the present writer.¹⁸ **(13 May 2012) (Modified 23 December 2019)** In view of the fact that

¹⁶ Cf. the ending of Chapter 11 in *Hebrews—An Interpretation*, where the matter is discussed under the heading “The Macrostructure of Hebrews”.

¹⁷ Cf. Entry #31, Chapters 5, 6 and 7.

¹⁸ Cf. Entry #46. This entry (#46) and the present entry (#50), it should be repeated, are attempts to come to grips with realities which are shrouded in mystery, and, as such, deserve the indulgence of the reader. They will undoubtedly have to be re-written, and perhaps even withdrawn.

Jesus as human could have had the Beatific Vision “faith” should perhaps be understood as “fidelity” to the example of Isaac, an example (“parable”) that demanded fulfillment by the one destined to do the fulfilling.