

WHAT IS THE LITERARY FORM OF HEBREWS 11?

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C. Spicq has called the eleventh chapter of Hebrews "famous and moving . . . , eloquent and majestic."¹ Its attraction for preachers, theologians and literary critics has indeed been great. The purpose of this article is to propose a literary form for Hebrews 11. A beginning assumption will be that chap. 11 is not a complete unit in itself but is tied to the first two verses of chap. 12.

As the basis for determining the literary form of Heb 11:1-12:2, the passage was compared with prior extant texts whose literary structure and characteristics are similar to Hebrews 11. The result of this comparison was the discovery that texts in the Jewish background of the NT illustrate the literary elements of the passage but not its literary form. It is the Greco-Roman world that is the source of the literary form, the encomium, to be proposed for this passage.

Three literary elements are found in common in Heb 11:1-12:2 and canonical and extra-canonical Jewish literature: historical summary, exemplariness, and catchword.² The historical summary as a literary convention in Scripture goes at least as far back as Moses. In Deuteronomy 1-4 Moses reviews the history of the relationship between the Lord and his people. After tracing this relationship from Mount Sinai to the plains of Moab in the first three chapters, Moses applies this history in an exhortation to the people: "And now, Israel, hear. . . !" (4:1). God's covenant people are to observe the stipulations of his covenant so that they may possess the land and demonstrate his holy character to the surrounding nations. Doubtless this historical summary reflects the prologue of Near Eastern treaties recounting past relationships of suzerain and vassal and requiring submission of the vassal to certain stipulations. By framing such declarations in a theological context, however, a sense of salvation history was impressed on the hearts and minds of God's people. This historical summary form is found in such passages as Psalm 78; 3 Macc 2:2-20, and the attitude that God's hand is guiding in history influenced Jewish writers into the NT era.

*The material presented in this article originally appeared in chap. 1 of "The Theological Argument of Hebrews 11 in Light of Its Literary Form," a dissertation presented to the faculty of the department of exegetical theology at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Theology in May 1984. Merland Miller is now deceased.

¹C. Spicq, *L'Épître Aux Hébreux* (2d ed.; Paris: J. Gabalda, 1952-53), 2, 334.

²All three of these forms are defined in R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (New York: Scribner's, 1951), 1, 96.

Example-series is a form used by both Jewish and Greco-Roman writers.³ In Scripture, examples can be positive, as in Psalm 105 where the psalmist mentions by name Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses and Aaron. Negative examples can also be used, as when Jude cites the angels who sinned, Sodom and Gomorrah, Balaam, Cain and Korah. The form also occurs in such texts as 4 Ezra 7:106–110 and *Ta'an.* 2.4.

Catchword is a form not nearly so common as the other two, for which only one Scriptural example will be given. The apostle Paul uses "love" as a thematic catchword in 1 Corinthians 13. This word is used nine times in thirteen verses. Three times the phrase "if I do not have love" is repeated. This artful use of a single term to emphasize a theme is employed earlier in Jewish literature in Wisdom 10. In extolling Wisdom, the writer shows her role in the history of God's people by use of "Wisdom" and the pronoun "her" as catchwords.

Each of these three forms becomes a literary element in Heb 11:1–12:2. There are two other passages in Jewish and Christian literature of the NT era in which all three of these forms occur. One is CD 2–3, from the so-called "Zadokite Document." Here the writer employs the Biblical theme of "stubbornness of heart" (Ps 81:13), which becomes his catchword. He reviews the sad history of the stubborn of heart and contrasts them with those who did not walk in that way in an extended example-series. By taking them in more or less chronological order (the watchers of heaven, the giants, "all flesh," Noah's sons, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Jacob's sons, Israel in Egypt, in the desert and at Kadesh, sons, kings, heroes and all sinners against the covenant) he uses the example-series within an historical summary. The passage as a whole is an exhortation introduced with the expression "and now" (2:14).

The other passage is 1 Clement 4–6. Clement attempts to heal the divisions in the Corinthian church by focusing on the problem of "jealousy," which is his catchword. He gives a series of examples, again in chronological order, forming an historical summary composed of Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, Joseph, Moses and Pharaoh, Aaron and Miriam, Dathan and Abiram, David and Saul, Peter and Paul. Clement introduces his final exhortation with the expression "therefore."

Heb 11:1–12:2 is also an historical summary, beginning with creation (11:3) and extending probably to the intertestamental period (11:33–37). The example-series begins with Abel (11:4) and concludes with the anonymous heroes of vv 33–37. The catchword is of course "faith," and the expression "by faith" is the most memorable characteristic of the passage (occurring eighteen times in 11:3–31). The thrust of the passage is hortatory, and the exhortation is introduced with the expression "therefore" (12:1).⁴

Despite the parallels of Hebrews 11 with passages containing historical

³The use of examples for instruction and exhortation in the NT world was encouraged by the statements of Cicero (*Tusculan Disputations* 4.29: "In convincing a sufferer that he is able and ought to bear the accidents of fortune, it is helpful to recount the examples of those who have done so") and Philo (*On Rewards and Punishments* 114: "For to gaze continually upon noble models imprints their likeness in souls which are not entirely hardened and stony").

⁴This is not the same expression, however, as in 1 Clem. 7:2. Clement's word is *dio*, while Hebrews uses the rare term *toigaroun*.

summary, example-series and catchword, these elements do not exhaust the literary analysis of the passage. Hebrews employs an encomiastic use of historical summary. It remains therefore to define the term "encomium" and examine how encomiastic method is used in Heb 11:1—12:2.

The first serious suggestion that this passage is an encomium comes from Leland Ryken, who gives the following definition:

An encomium is a work of literature written in praise of someone or something. Although it can be a work in praise of a particular person, it is preferable to define the genre more precisely as a work that praises a generalized character type or an abstract quality.⁵

Using "abstract quality" as the basis of his argument, Ryken contends that faith is the subject of the encomium in Heb 11:1—12:2. It is likely, however, that the subject of the encomium is a person here, as it often is in extra-Biblical literature. The basis for this claim is a comparison of Heb 11:1—12:2 with Sirach 44—50, the "praise of the fathers" passage.

T. R. Lee argues that Sirach 44—50 is an encomium on the high priest Simon II. His definition of encomium is essentially the same as that of Ryken. His understanding is the result of an historical survey of the form in Greek literature ranging from the fifth century B.C. to the third century A.D. Lee summarizes the results:

In the course of the foregoing survey the features of the encomium which have been repeatedly in evidence and which appear to be the basic marks of the *eidos* are: (1) the use of amplification (*auxēsis*), and (2) a distinct arrangement (*taxis*) or outline that has remained relatively standard throughout the periods discussed.⁶

Lee gives several methods by which amplification was accomplished, among them comparison (including contrast), inadequacy of the encomiast, actions that were unique or unprecedented, and actions that produced good or desirable results.⁷

The standard outline to which Lee refers contains four parts: (1) the *proemium*, which may include a summary of the argument, expressions of inadequacy and of the obligation to praise great men, and an appeal to the reader to join in praise; (2) the genealogy, including both positive and negative comparisons, along with a list of ancestors both immediate and remote; (3) the acts, including various methods of amplification; (4) the epilogue, including a recapitulation and an appeal to praise or emulation.⁸

In defining the form of Sirach 44—50, Lee comments on several canonical and extra-canonical historical summaries. Since he believes that the form of Sirach 44—50 is that of an encomium and that encomia are designed to praise

⁵L. Ryken, *The Literature of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974) 201.

⁶T. R. Lee, *Studies in the Form of Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) 44—50* (Berkeley: Graduate Theological Union and University of California, 1979) 211.

⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 212—219.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 224.

men, not God, he rejects the canonical material as parallel to his passage:

We concluded that the pericopes from the Hebrew canon which have been likened to Sir. 44–50 are either hymns of praise of Yahweh for his acts or that they are deuteronomistic recitations of Israel's history where the focus is on the obedience/disobedience of the nation as a whole. In neither case do they offer a parallel to Sirach's Praise of the Fathers.⁹

Lee does, however, see a connection with the extra-canonical material:

There was, however, one form that emerged from our discussion that commended itself as the model employed by Jesus Sirach: that of the *Beispielreihe* or series of examples. We noted that most of the intertestamental pericopes which commentators have seen as similar to Sir. 44–50 were of this form . . . and although these post-date Sirach, the form had already been in use in the Greek world prior to Sirach's time.¹⁰

Even though Hebrews 11 and Sirach 44–50 are both examples of *Beispielreihen* Lee sees a formal distinction between the two passages, which he uses to classify other passages that use examples:

I would suggest that the *exempla* of CD 2–3 and Wisd. 10 are of the same form as that of Heb. 11 in the New Testament where the *Stichwort* is "by faith" Moreover, since they are fashioned around the use of catch-words, they are distinct from the *Beispielreihen* of Sir. 44–50, I Macc. 2, III Mac. 2 and 6, and IV Macc. 16 and 18.¹¹

If both Hebrews 11 and Sirach 44–50 are encomia, then in fact they are not "distinct" formally but share a literary form common to the Greco-Roman world that was rare in Jewish literature. It is this uniqueness that Lee stresses in distinguishing the Sirach passage from other passages that make use of example-series:

Is there a form within which *Beispielreihen* are utilized whose purpose it is to praise men? . . . We proposed that the answer to the above question is the encomium. As a rhetorical *eidos* the encomium's purpose was to praise a man for his achievements and virtues.¹²

Lee cites the praising of a man as an innovation: "In praising men, not God, Sir. 44–50 represents something new in Hebrew literature."¹³ This use of example-series within the structure of an encomium in order to praise an individual is the basis of Lee's thesis:

Thus I suggest that Sir. 44–50 is to be understood as a composition that Sirach has consciously patterned after the types of encomia with which he could conceivably have come into contact in his day. His encomium celebrates Simon II, invites the congregation to praise the God who has given them such a faithful

⁹Ibid., pp. 315–316.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 316.

¹¹Ibid., p. 45.

¹²Ibid., p. 317.

¹³Ibid., p. 315.

high priest, and holds him up as an example for his son, Onias III, to emulate.¹⁴

Among other encomiastic methods used by Sirach, Lee lists examples of comparison and expression of inadequacy. Regarding comparison he explains: "Sirach often describes the forefathers in chapters 44—49 in such a way that it forces us to compare them with Simon II in chapter 50."¹⁵ As instances of comparison Lee cites: (1) the vestments of Aaron and those of Simon (45:7—11; 50:5, 9, 11); (2) the engineering feats of Solomon (47:13), Hezekiah (48:17), Zerubbabel and Joshua (49:12) and Nehemiah (49:13) compared with those of Simon.¹⁶ The rhetorical question in 49:11 is cited as an expression of inadequacy: "How can we magnify Zerubbabel?"¹⁷

Besides showing how Sirach uses encomiastic methods, Lee demonstrates how the structure of chaps. 44—50 fits the standard encomiastic outline:

(i) <i>Prooemium</i> (<i>prooimion</i>)	44:1—15
(ii) <i>Genos</i> (genealogy)	44:16—49:16
(iii) <i>Praxeis</i> (acts)	50:1—21
(iv) <i>Epilogue</i> (<i>epilogos</i>)	50:22—24 ¹⁸

The evidence employed by Lee seems to demonstrate conclusively that Sirach 44—50 is an encomium on Simon II. Yet the question remains: Is Hebrews 11 an encomium? It has been stated before that Ryken sees Hebrews 11 as an encomium on faith. In his comments on Heb 12:1—2 he implies a more likely possibility:

The first two verses of Hebrews 12 complete the encomium with a conventional motif, the command to emulate. . . . The writer, in a brilliant stroke, allows the reader to place himself in a long and distinguished line of heroes. . . . The implication is significant: the heroes of faith listed in Hebrews 11 are intended to serve as a guide and model for believers of later ages. Appropriately, Jesus is held up as the crowning example of faith to whom the reader is urged to look for guidance and the very perfection of his own faith.¹⁹

The language Ryken uses here of Jesus suggests the possibility that the subject of the encomium is not the "abstract quality" of faith but the person of Jesus himself. Coordinating Ryken's comment with that of Lee that Ben Sira "invites the congregation to praise the God who has given them such a faithful high priest"²⁰ drives the interpreter beyond the immediate theme of "faith" back to a major doctrinal theme of Hebrews: Jesus the "faithful high priest"

¹⁴Ibid., p. 318.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 123.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 124.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 260.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 265.

¹⁹Ryken, *Literature* 212.

²⁰Lee, *Studies* 318.

(2:17). The fact that "faithful" (*pistos*) is cognate to "faith" (*pistis*) reinforces the connection between the appeal made in 12:1-2 and the high-priest concept. Surely it is not without significance that the writer introduces the term "faithful" in the context of Jesus' high priesthood in 2:17; 3:2, 5 and then does not use it again until the beginning of his major hortatory summary (10:23; 11:11—these five occurrences exhaust the use of this term in Hebrews). In summarizing the point of calling up the "witnesses" in chap. 11, the writer not only calls on his readers to "run the race" but urges them to "look to Jesus" (12:2) and "consider him" (12:3).

It can be argued therefore that Heb 11:1—12:2 is not an encomium on faith, as Ryken suggests, but—in line with Lee's thesis on Sirach 44—50—an encomium on Jesus. Three lines of evidence will be used to illustrate this thesis: (1) That the high-priest theology of Hebrews is assumed in the exhortation of 12:1-2 will be demonstrated by showing how the language used here parallels previous passages regarding the high priest; (2) the use of the encomiastic method of amplification by comparison will be examined; (3) an encomiastic outline will be suggested for Heb 11:1—12:2.

There are two arguments regarding the language of 12:1-2. At the beginning of the major section in Hebrews concerning Jesus as the high priest, the expression "having therefore" is used (4:14). The same expression is repeated at the end of the section as the writer moves into the final exhortation (10:19). The exhortation in 12:1 begins with "therefore . . . having." Although the object of "having" here is not Christ as high priest as in the prior passages, nevertheless the writer does connect his exhortation with Christ as pioneer and perfecter of faith by means of a participle ("looking to . . . Jesus," 12:2). It is fair to say that Christ as high priest cannot be absent from the readers' (or writer's) minds here.

Secondly, just prior to Hebrews' first mention of Christ as high priest (2:17) he calls him the "pioneer" of salvation (2:10). This word does not occur again till 12:2 where Christ is the "pioneer" of faith. Both of these references use the concept of perfection or completion in connection with Jesus. The one who was completed through sufferings (2:10) is also the pioneer and completer of faith for those who are suffering (12:2).

It is in fact this idea of perfection or completion that Hebrews uses to magnify Jesus in comparison with the elders of chap. 11. After the writer has developed the positive image of the elders and the great deeds that they accomplished "by faith," he surprises the reader by stating that "they should not be brought to completion apart from us" (11:40). Neither the faith nor the deeds of the elders is being minimized here. Indeed it is precisely because of the greatness of those acts of faith that the reader is startled by the statement that the elders were incomplete. This prepares for the introduction of the one who brings them and all believers to completion through his one great deed, the greatest of all: enduring the cross (12:2).

The use of four other themes by Hebrews in describing the faith of the elders accents their use as foils for Jesus: (1) resurrection, (2) sacrifice, (3) suffering, and (4) looking to the unseen. In 11:19 Abraham in his willingness to sacrifice Isaac reckoned that God was able to raise his son from the dead. In fact the writer goes so far as to say that Isaac was received "in a parable," indicating

that this incident actually prefigured Jesus' resurrection. In 11:35 women received their dead by resurrection, and those who were tortured anticipated a better resurrection. These references would bring to the readers' minds the Lord's resurrection, which in turn is implied in 12:2 in the statement that he sat down at God's right hand.

The offering of sacrifices is mentioned in connection with Abel in 11:4, Abraham in 11:17 and Moses in 11:28 (here the Passover). In the context of the previous teaching on sacrifice, these references anticipate the mention of the cross in 12:2. Jesus offered a sacrifice of much greater value and effect than those offered by the elders.

The suffering of the elders is reflected in the mention of death in connection with Abel (11:4), Jacob (11:21), Joseph (11:22) and the elders generally (11:13). The suffering of the elders in general is dealt with at length in 11:35b-38, summed up with the statement: "This world was not worthy of them" (11:38). The emphasis on suffering, however, seems to be centered on Moses. He "chose to be mistreated with God's people" (11:25). For him the treasures of Egypt could not compare with the wealth of "the shame of Christ" (11:26). This last especially is echoed in 12:2, where it is stated that Jesus "despised the humiliation" of the cross. The theme of suffering is reflected in the claim that Jesus "endured the cross." While the elders suffered by faith, the suffering of the pioneer and perfecter of faith resulted in their completion.

Several different expressions emphasize the theme of "looking to the unseen." The participle *blepomenōn* is repeated in the context of the nature of faith (11:1), faith's perception of the universe (11:3) and Noah's faith in face of the coming flood (11:7). In 11:8 Abraham departed by faith, "not realizing" where he was going. The elders saw the promises "from a distance" (11:13) and longed for a "heavenly" city (11:16). Isaac's blessing concerned "future things" (11:20). Moses persevered as if "he saw the Invisible One" (11:27). All of this teaching on faith as "seeing the unseen" undoubtedly anticipates the call in 12:2 to "look away to . . . Jesus." The elders are examples for Hebrews' readers—not primarily examples of great deeds but of an attitude of faith, which for the readers means looking to Jesus.

An analysis of Heb 11:1-12:2 in light of the standard encomiastic outline presented by Lee leads to the following outline:

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| (1) <i>Prooemium</i> | 11:1-3 |
| (2) Genealogy | 11:4-38 |
| (3) Epilogue | 11:39-12:2 |

It will be noted that one part of the traditional four-part outline has been left out: the acts. The general outline given by Lee summarizes practice by encomiasts, divergence from which was not uncommon. Hebrews has varied the acts by including it in both the genealogy and epilogue. This variation functions as a method of amplification by comparison. The faith-acts of the elders, included in the genealogy of 11:4-38, serve to highlight the supreme act of Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. His endurance of the cross surpasses all the acts of the elders.

Finally, it is worth noting that if Heb 11:1-12:2 is an encomium on Jesus, then the innovation Ben Sira introduced of "praising men, not God," is resolved in this passage, since the man who is praised is also God.