

Hebrews 11:29 – 12:2

I didn't used to like Hebrews much, except for the beginning of chapter 13 that tells us "Do not be afraid to offer hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels without knowing it." That right there is some wisdom to live by. But Hebrews has been used for the purposes of supersessionism, the idea that Judaism was fine for a while but now Christianity has transcended that old system. There's a section in which Jesus is imagined as the new high priest, and it's an image that hasn't aged well.

BUT I've warmed up to Hebrews. It's a really human letter, addressed to a community of Jewish Christians probably in the first century, as the flush of excitement over the Jesus movement has begun to wear off. If they were apocalypticists, the apocalypse hasn't come. Meanwhile the Jesus movement is socially unpopular, and being Jewish at all puts people at risk from brutes like Nero, who were only too happy to distract the population from their miseries by putting on spectacles of torture of minority group members. The author of Hebrews wants to inject some courage and hope into an increasingly dispirited group. To this end, they first re-tell the story of the wandering through the wilderness. Remember, your ancestors wandered for *forty years* without any prospect of an end, but by golly God delivered them just like God will deliver you. Second, the author points out, you only *think* that the lack of a temple means lack of access to God. Whether the Temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed at this writing we don't know, but access to it is compromised. The Roman temples provide access to Roman gods, Persian temples provide access to Persian gods, but these Christians have no temple and no high priest, no ritual for encountering God. No worries, says the author of Hebrews, we have Jesus Christ. He can intercede with God just like any high priest, and having been human

and then perfected, he actually closes the gap between God and human beings. We have access.

Then third—and this is the section we’re reading from today—a list, and what a list, of people from sacred history who also had to behave as if what they believed were already fully realized. “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (11:1). Some of them triumphed: the people crossed the Red Sea, Rahab survived the siege of Jericho, judges and kings prevailed against their enemies. Others of them seemed to suffer defeat, being stoned to death, sawn in two, starved and exiled. Those did *not* receive what was promised, “since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.” More on this “something better” in a bit.

The section closes with this lovely vision of all our forebears in faith seated in the stadium, cheering us on as we run our own races. “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us. We run “with perseverance,” not with speed or grace or athleticism. Just perseverance, and Sarah and Abraham and Ruth and Naomi and Deborah and Elijah are all yelling our names and pumping their fists, so damn proud of us for being in the race. I’d run that race.

But what is it, exactly, that makes it all worth while? Depending on whom and when you ask in the first century, it’s God’s reign on earth, very imminent, or it’s a final judgment after which the martyrs are delivered to God’s throne room. This gets sort of flattened into the familiar concepts of heaven and hell, with final judgment put off indefinitely since the apocalypse kept receding into the future. There is a reward for your suffering, and it’ll all be

worth it.

Apocalypticism is woven deeply into the American experience, since the Puritans came to establish a city on a hill, the new Jerusalem. In the 19th century a number of apocalyptic sects developed, notably the Millerites, who believed the world would end on October 22, 1844. Adherents left their fields untilled and unsown that summer, and some of them actually climbed to their roofs on the evening of October 22 so that they'd have less distance to travel when Jesus came for them. But October 23 dawned amid much disappointment. They rallied and decided that something in the Biblical texts had been corrupted so that Miller's math was based on an unreliable source. They went on to become the Seventh Day Adventists, who continue to give a lot of attention to the end-times.

A schismatic group of Seventh Day Adventists in the 1980s formed the Branch Davidians and established a community in Texas. There was a struggle for leadership, won by David Koresh, born Vernon Wayne Howell. The Branch Davidians were *very* focused on the end-times, which they believed would be heralded by violent attacks by the US government, according to their interpretation of the book of Revelation. They accumulated a lot of weapons in anticipation of this final battle, and in February, 1993, nearly thirty years ago, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms obliged by raiding the compound. We all remember how that turned out.

One of the 24 children who survived the siege, Joann Vaega was six years old at the time. When she was interviewed as an adult about her experience, I thought it was really interesting that she was unalarmed by the whole ordeal. She'd been raised to expect this epic battle one day, so when it began, it was no surprise. She knew that they'd all be raised to

heaven, so there was nothing to be afraid of. Her mother had begun to entertain doubts, which is why she sent the little girl out before the attack worsened, but as a six year-old, Joann found it perfectly reasonable to expect a violent apocalypse.

So that's one way to internalize the message of Hebrews: expect to suffer, expect to be persecuted by an evil empire, but know also that you will be delivered immediately to heaven. Here's the thing, which JoAnn Vaega's mother tragically came to grips with too late: it's magical thinking. It's cartoonish to live as if the world were black and white, and to take rich and complex texts at face value. At some level JoAnn's mother knew it was a mirage, and she got her little girl out.ⁱ

Another way, with which I have more sympathy, is the way of William Wilberforce. Wilberforce introduced legislation in the British Parliament to end the slave trade in 1779, and he was ridiculed and ostracized from polite society. But he persisted, year after year, until slavery itself in the British Empire ended in 1833, just a few days before his death. That's a long time to fight against implacable forces. But at one point during the struggle, John Wesley, the father of Methodism, wrote to encourage Wilberforce. He said: "Unless God has raised you up for this very thing, you will be worn out by the opposition of men and devils. But if God be for you, who can be against you? Are all of them stronger than God? Be not weary in well doing! Go on, go on in the name of God and in the power of his might, till even American slavery (the vilest that ever saw the sun) shall vanish before it."ⁱⁱ

What Wesley is saying is that Wilberforce will eventually prevail because God is on his side. Goodness is stronger than evil. Faith is tough. "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." In this situation, Wilberforce will not be rewarded with a

heavenly deliverer; he will be rewarded by eventually prevailing. And that seems truer than the magical cosmic battle. Love and the love of justice do bend the arc of the universe eventually.

But even that is not quite enough, I think. Hebrews acknowledges that some of the cloud of witnesses failed miserably—they were stoned to death, sawn in two, killed by the sword. We know that heroes of the faith have suffered depression and disillusionment in later years. And it's hard to know whether you're being William Wilberforce or Don Quixote. So I want to affirm the Wilberforce interpretation of Hebrews, but I have one final element to bring in.

Dale Allison, who teaches New Testament at Princeton Seminary, has a new book called *Encountering Mystery: Religious Experience in a Secular Age*. He begins by describing several mystical experiences he had, himself, starting in his late teens. "Whatever the causes," he says, "be it imagination, my cerebral circuit board, extra-mundane realities, or (as I think) an even mixture of all three, my experiences have mattered profoundly."ⁱⁱⁱ These experiences have led him to four staunch convictions:

1. The transcendent reality is not something about which he could choose to be indifferent; indeed, nothing by comparison counts.
2. The theological idea of grace is not uninformed theory. Perhaps grace is built into the structure of things.
3. God can speak through the natural world. A mystical presence rolls through all things, and "the soul can split the sky in two/And let the face of God shine through" (Edna St. Vincent Millay, "Renaissance").
4. It is not that appearances can be deceiving. Appearances *are* deceiving. Things are not what they seem to be most of the time. We are like Pharaoh when he looked at Moses; he had no idea of what was really going on. The mysterious hierophany at the heart of the world is concealed. . . . **Behind, beneath, and beyond the mundane face of the**

world, and secreted within our daily lives, is some fundamental, [magical,] mystical, affectionate reality.

Here is what the Branch Davidians and other apocalypse-wishers are missing. They betray their essential secularness with their flat, cartoonish visions. By dividing the world into good and evil, saved and unsaved, blessed and damned, they show that they are unaware of this fundamental mystical, affectionate reality. By needing there to be a villain, an “other,” to oppose, by dehumanizing their opponents—by counting on the destruction of their opponents as the price of their own deliverance—they deny the grace that is *built into* the structure of things.

The author of Hebrews wants to revive the spirits of his community by evoking the mysterious depth and richness of a gracious reality. People suffered, yes. Some won, others lost. All of them are present, rejoicing and cheering for you, for us. There’s more to reality than meets the eye. We can’t begin to know what to hope for, but we know to hope. We know we have reason to persevere.

Let us pray. God of the generations, when we set our hands to labor, thinking we work alone, remind us that we carry on our lips the words of prophets, in our veins the blood of martyrs, in our eyes the mystics’ visions, in our hands the strength of thousands, in every cell the conviction of things not seen.

ⁱ <https://www.today.com/news/survivor-stories-waco-survivor-joann-vaega-reflects-life-compound-t137048>

ⁱⁱ https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2003635/keep_the_faith

ⁱⁱⁱ Allison, *Encountering Mystery*, p. 6. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022.