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ECUMENE DOCTORAL SCHOOL

DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

**A Thousand Threads Through the Eye of the Needle.
Approaching Hebrews 11 in the Context of the Jewish
Interpretive Tradition**

ABSTRACT

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Ezer szállal egy tű fokán
A Zsidókhöz írt levél 11. fejezetének megközelítése a zsidó értelmezési
hagyományokon keresztül

A Thousand Threads Through the Eye of the Needle. Approaching Hebrews 11
in the Context of the Jewish Interpretive Tradition

Keywords

Hebrews, panegyric, early Jewish literature and traditions, Philo, targum, Identifikationsfigur, pre- and post-flood heroes.

My doctoral dissertation was aimed at contributing to the scholarship of the Epistle to the Hebrews. In the first chapter (pp. 1–13), I provide an overview of the most crucial aspects of the Epistle to the Hebrews, including its genre, manuscript tradition, place in the biblical canon, authorship, the identity and location of the addressees, the date of writing, and an overview of chapter 11. This section will also serve as a statement of my perspective, in which I will present my assumptions regarding the interpretation of the Epistle.

In the second chapter of the thesis (pp. 14–21), I formulate my research hypothesis and outline the methodological considerations for the study. My research hypothesis is that a multifaceted examination of the heroes and heroines presented as role models in Hebrews 11, within the context of Jewish tradition,

- helps us realise that the chapter represents a stage in the ongoing interpretation of Israel's history and bears witness to the creative interpretations of the text in the 1st century by both early Jewish and early Christian communities.
- encourages a thorough exploration of shared traditions,
- reveals instances where the author independently interprets the tradition,
- emphasizes πίστις (faith) as the exclusive solution for overcoming a crisis of faith in a particularly compelling manner, and
- lays the foundation for future, more extensive interfaith dialogues.

In addition to employing the historical-critical method, I also delved into Jewish traditions, while considering the concept of Identifikationsfigur, to approach more closely the identification of the traditions embedded in the text and the ways in which the heroes and heroines mentioned in the chapter could serve as points of reference for the addressed community.

In the third chapter of the thesis (pp. 22–28), I conduct a review of the sources available to me. Epistle to the Hebrews chapter 11 extends beyond the biblical framework, frequently incorporating traditions that are found only in select early Jewish and early rabbinic writings. Bearing this in mind, I outline my primary sources, which include the Septuagint, the writings and works of Philo of Alexandria and Josephus Flavius, as well as an extensive array of early Jewish literature (e.g., *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum*, etc.) and early Palestinian Targums.

In Chapter 4 of my dissertation (pp. 29–41), I delve into the *status quaestionis*, with a specific focus on the research history of critical works, including studies, monographs, and monograph chapters published in recent decades. The review has highlighted gaps in existing research, which my dissertation seeks to address.

In Chapter 5 (pp. 42–53), I provide a concrete introduction to the subsequent textual analysis. The historical-critical method, which has been developed by biblical scholarship, ensures that the investigative approach to the text remains systematic and grounded in rigorous methodology. Accordingly, I have conducted my examination of the heroes and heroines in Hebrews 11 by adhering to the phases of the historical-critical method: textual criticism, the chapter's own translation, literary criticism, and critical considerations of form and editing.

In Chapter 6 of this thesis (pp. 54–80), I focus on the first section of the chapter under examination, specifically Hebrews 11:4–7. To start the chapter, I provide insights into the text's structure and introduce the characters of Abel, Enoch, and Noah. In each case, I draw upon evidence from both the Hebrew and Greek Bibles, as well as early Jewish literature. I emphasize, for instance, that Abel's actions align well with the definition of faith presented in Hebrews 11:1. I take a similar approach when discussing Enoch and Noah. Where necessary, I have translated various ancient source texts myself. The author of Hebrews may have been alluding to Jewish traditions in which Enoch served as an exemplar and a symbol to his contemporaries. Enoch's fate serves as an illustration of the challenges

faced by members of his congregation and instils in them the understanding that ‘without faith, it is impossible to please God’ (11:6), offering hope that they too can draw near to God. What is particularly noteworthy is that the attribution of faith to Enoch is a unique feature in early Jewish literature. This concept does not surface until much later, as seen in the third book of Enoch (3Hen 6:3). In the case of Noah, for example, it becomes evident to the reader that it is the ‘admonition’ of the author, coupled with parables from biblical history, that underscores to the recipients, who have faced persecution, public humiliation, and shame, that faith is the sole path to salvation.

In Chapter 7 of my thesis (pp. 81–123), I explore the narratives of the patriarchs (Hebrews 11:8–22). As in the previous chapter, my focus remains on the heroes and heroines, with the notable inclusion of Sarah, rendering this list of heroes unique and praiseworthy. The prominent figures of faith and Judaism, such as Sarah and Moses, receive considerable attention in the dissertation. While discussing these figures, I take care to delineate when the author draws from shared Jewish teachings and when he forges his own traditions. In this chapter, I delve into the lives of Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph.

In Chapter 8 (pp. 124–176), I delve into the stories of the heroes associated with the Exodus and the entry into the land of Israel, as found in Hebrews 11:23–31. These heroes include Moses and Rahab. Moses, a significant figure in Judaism, has captivated the imagination of writers, historians, artists, psychologists, cartoonists, and directors, transcending the confines of Judaism. Throughout the ages, he has epitomized various ideals, as also observed by the author of Hebrews. The figure of Rahab, on the other hand, sheds light on the community addressed in Hebrews. Through Rahab, the author recognizes women who have converted to Christianity, exhibiting independence, resoluteness, and a desire to be heard.

In Chapter 9 (pp. 177–231), I explore the heroes mentioned by the author in Hebrews 11:32–38, who have been presented without detailed explanations of their life events. These heroes are exemplars of conquest and martyrdom. Employing my approach, I delve into the lives of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, Samuel, and David, while also attempting to identify several unnamed heroes. The life circumstances of these unspecific heroes form a crucial connection to the experiences of the recipients of the Hebrews community. These biblical heroes and heroines, like those in the Hebrews community who were enduring trials (cf. Heb 10:32–34), enduring losses, and waging spiritual battles against sin (cf. 12:4),

exemplify unwavering faithfulness to God. According to the author of Hebrews, the community members who, much like these heroes, faced their own trials, losses, and battles, can derive valuable lessons from their steadfast faithfulness, even in the face of martyrdom. They can also draw hope from the possibility of experiencing God's presence, receiving divine assistance, and finding the strength to endure suffering in their own struggles.

In my thesis, I have focused on Hebrews 11. This epistle introduces several preliminary questions, and scholarly consensus has not been reached on many of these issues, due to a lack of adequate information and compelling arguments. My primary objective has been to examine the characters mentioned in this chapter, which, in my assessment, have received limited attention in existing literature. I was particularly interested in the traditions the author drew upon and aimed to shed light on a more distinct literary context of the author, the recipients, and their circumstances. My findings and conclusions are presented in Chapter 10 of the dissertation (pp. 23–2-239).

After conducting my research, I have arrived at 18 conclusions, which I will present below.

1. It is evident from my analysis that the exalted *panegyric* found in Hebrews chapter 11 harmoniously aligns with analogous writings within early Jewish literature, where authors often allude to figures from the past. In doing so, the author of Hebrews becomes a part of an evolving literary tradition, framing the heroes of the chapter as active participants in the ongoing interpretation of Israel's history. This text not only serves as a testament to the creative exegesis of early Jews in the 1st century but also as an embodiment of early Christian exegesis of the same text, representing a gateway to the future. In fact, by the end of the 1st century, figures like Clement of Rome continue this tradition, deliberately adding characters like Judith to the list of heroes not originally named in Hebrews 11.
2. By firmly grounding itself in the shared literary heritage of early Judaism, the author of Hebrews underscores the importance of embracing these common traditions as integral elements in the interpretation of both the chapter and the letter as a whole. This emphasizes that, in the spirit of respecting tradition, it is unwise to sever the threads of tradition and disregard the connections that

- naturally arise when conducting a fair examination of other texts in the New Testament, whether they precede or align with the text or tradition of Hebrews.
3. The author of Hebrews, who continues to operate within the realm of Jewish religious culture while progressively expanding his perspective, maintains a Jewish background throughout and consistently draws inspiration from figures within the biblical and broader Jewish tradition.
 4. In this chapter, the author distinguishes himself in at least two significant ways when compared to the exemplars of early Jewish literature. While in those works, a strong emphasis is placed on the heroic status of the figures, the *Auctor* of Hebrews deliberately departs from this process of idealization, instead crafting a spiritual portrait of these characters. In fact, by forming his unique „heroic list,“ he lays the foundation for the members of the community to perceive Jesus as the ultimate exemplar of faith.
 5. While we cannot fully comprehend the motivations of the author of Hebrews, some tentative responses can be given as to why he chose to incorporate certain heroes and heroines in his exhortation (λόγος τῆς παρακλήσεως). It is my belief that the author, albeit imperfectly, identified with figures who held the power to alter destinies, who confronted challenging fates, who stared death in the face, and whose lives and experiences exemplified the definition of faith (Hebrews 11:1). These heroes pointed to what anchored their hopes and consolidated their convictions in the unseen. The author’s intention, therefore, is to guide and inspire the future, nurturing confidence, heroic fortitude, and unwavering faith in order to realize God’s promises. The author seeks to ensure that the community members addressed in this letter do not become mired in the present but, rather, look forward with a sense of purpose. The biblical characters invoked serve not only as characters in a memorable narrative but as models of faith to be emulated. While some of these biblical figures are derived from existing traditions and are considered exemplary figures, in many instances, the author himself has elevated them to this status, believing that they can impact the recipients. These *Identifikationsfiguren* epitomize lifestyles, choices, and values that the letter’s addressees can follow and experience. Simultaneously, πίστις serves as a means

for the recipients to comprehend themselves, their self-identity, and their circumstances.

6. The panegyric found in Hebrews chapter 11 offers readers role models—figures that shape identity and serve as reference points within a religious, faith-based „coordinate system.” What sets this apart is that the author doesn’t confine this parabolic representation to the heroes of Israel’s history but extends it to heroines as well. This uniqueness is particularly evident when compared to early Jewish literature, where women are conspicuously absent from lists of heroes.
7. The author of Hebrews not only makes general references to female characters but also specifically names some of them. In other words, he does not regard them as undesirable individuals but rather as *persona grata* from whom the community they are addressed to can derive valuable lessons.
8. Through the literary portrayal of women in this chapter, the author perceives and seeks to reach out to women who are independent and resolute in their choices, possessing the capacity and agency to take action. They are not merely seeking encouragement but also affirmation. This is closely tied to the social ethos of hospitality, which the author extends to the members of the community, offering it as a pathway to discipleship.
9. One of the unique aspects of the author’s use of tradition, particularly in relation to the events connected to Abraham, is that he becomes the inaugural link in a tradition that subsequently finds expression in writing. This tradition, as manifested in *Aqedah*, incorporates the motif of resurrection.
10. Hebrews specifically highlights the early events in Moses’ life, particularly those related to the Exodus. This suggests to me that the Jewish author aims to evoke, for his Christian-Jewish readers, the experience and testimony of the *Seder* as a profound and all-encompassing emblem of Jewish identity.
11. In early Jewish literature, the depiction of individual heroes and their life events showcases a variety of virtues worthy of admiration, such as heroism, courage, justice, and the pursuit of virtue. However, the author of Hebrews takes a distinctive approach by prominently highlighting *πίστις*, the fundamental concept of the relationship between God and humanity. This term encompasses not only the nuances found in the Hebrew Bible, including trust and loyalty, but

also those rooted in Hellenistic religious thought, such as certainty, steadfastness in what is hoped for and to be achieved, trusting obedience, perseverance, and persistence. As a result, the concept of πίστις in this chapter serves as an overarching umbrella that unifies a wide spectrum of heroic deeds and human behaviours, all concretely expressed through the action of faith. Key concepts encompassed by πίστις include firmness, perseverance, trust, hope/expectation, patience, and long-suffering (πίστις, ἐλπίς, ὑπομονή, μακροθυμία). The biblical figures portrayed within serve as examples of faithful living and, in the words of Christian Ronning, „projection surfaces” that unveil the lessons the *Auctor* wishes to impart to the recipients.

12. The author’s utilization of tradition is closely tied to this diversity united under a common theme. In certain instances, where ‘faith’ is distinctly embodied in the life and actions of the biblical figure being discussed, the author draws from shared traditions. In other cases, the author independently moulds the available traditions to effectively convey his message, uniting the extensive range of heroic deeds and human behaviours that find concrete expression through the act of faith under the overarching concept of faith. He places significant value on tradition but does not view it as stagnant. In these instances, he presents himself to his readers as an innovative tradent.
13. However, the pronounced focus on faith does not adopt the characteristics of idealization, as seen in the case of hope in Philo of Alexandria. Instead, it serves as a „spiritual instrument” that provides the members of the community with a means to navigate and overcome the crisis of faith.
14. The author’s approach elevates faith to theological heights, transcending the mere sanctification of human endurance and trust in human strength. This ascent carries faith from the realm of religion and sanctity to the ultimate theological pinnacle, culminating in Jesus. Thus, the letter’s concept of faith ultimately finds its culmination in Jesus, who is both the pioneer and the fulfiller of our faith (cf. Heb 12:1–2).
15. Through the course of my research, I anticipated gaining a clearer understanding of fundamental introductory questions, such as the ethnic identity of the author and the recipients, the date of origin, and the author’s utilization of tradition. My

findings affirm that, like the author, the community primarily consisted of Christian-Jewish individuals. In terms of dating, the evidence aligns with a period following the destruction of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, during which traditions related to the heavenly, holy city became particularly prominent. In his work, the author skilfully weaves together a tapestry of various traditions, including the diverse traditions of the Hebrew Bible (narrative and apocalyptic), synagogue traditions (targums), the manifold traditions of Hellenistic and Palestinian Judaism, the rich tradition of scriptural interpretation, and the oral traditions of apocryphal writings.

16. A comprehensive exploration of the heroines and heroes in Hebrews within the framework of Jewish tradition lays the foundation for a future, more expansive, and mutually beneficial interfaith dialogue involving the so-called Abrahamic or monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Due to my approach, I find myself in a unique position to engage in meaningful dialogue not only with Judaism but also with Islam.
17. For this dialogue to be expansive and fruitful, it is essential that it operates on multiple levels: both academic and non-academic, including educational and scholarly conferences, workshops, interfaith programs, and study or reading circles. A valuable approach for achieving this is through Scriptural Reasoning, which can yield interpretations that are beneficial for future academic endeavors. The collaborative reading of shared (Bible) and individual sacred texts (such as the Quran and rabbinic literature) by Christians, Jews, and Muslims, along with the joint organization of events like conferences, workshops, interfaith programs, and study or reading circles focused on common figures of faith (e.g., Heb 11), whether of an academic or educational nature, can yield numerous positive outcomes. This kind of engagement can foster deeper mutual respect and understanding, promote empathy that can lead to constructive relationships, strengthen bonds between diverse religious communities, cultivate a sense of responsibility beyond one's own tradition towards a better understanding of the traditions of others involved in the dialogue, and create opportunities for sharing and productive discussions on different experiences and interpretations. Additionally, it plays a vital social role by serving as a force for reconciliation,

mitigating potential prejudices, communal tensions, and stereotypes, while increasing mutual respect, understanding, and tolerance. This, in turn, fosters improved everyday relationships that can serve as the foundation for collaborative efforts in addressing common issues affecting religious traditions. From this perspective, the study of Hebrews 11 is a forward-looking and society-shaping scholarly endeavour, uniquely suited to cultural and religious dialogue.

18. In the future, scholarly dialogue should encompass not only external interactions but also internal discussions. The diverse and multilingual early Christian literature and iconography, including Greek, Latin, and Syriac sources, illuminate similar ideas about the role models of both men and women. This dialogue, often delving deeper and taking concepts further, aligns with the message of Hebrews 11. The specific emphasis here is that these figures are now „denationalized” biblical heroes, serving as the ultimate role models for Christians. This internal exchange within the early Christian tradition can be immensely enriching for scholars and those practicing alike.

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