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Cliff Barbarick  
cliff.barbarick@acu.edu

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# Both Pattern and Protector: The Cloud of Witnesses in Hebrews 11.1—12.3

Cliff Barbarick

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The Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels in downtown Los Angeles stuns the visitor with its beauty. There is an expansive courtyard containing intricate stonework; clean-lined statues greet you at the entrance. A creatively backlit statue of a simply adorned Mary stands over the doors, welcoming you with open arms. Inside, translucent alabaster windows bathe the cathedral in warm, milky light. The very shape of the space, with its openness and odd angles, inspires awe. On my first visit, however, one particular feature of the cathedral most excited my imagination: the tapestries that line the walls of the nave.

Twenty-five tapestries, which average eighteen feet tall, clothe the walls of the cathedral. Created by artist John Nava, the tapestries picture 135 saints from across the centuries. One finds Peter and Paul, Augustine and Jerome, Mother Theresa and Pope John XXIII. Children stand next to octogenarians, and women and men of various ethnicities crowd together. And the fresco-like images are not the highly stylized depictions one finds in Eastern Orthodox iconography. Each face is exquisitely detailed and realistic. Nava wanted to make the images and the saints they depict accessible so that worshipers could look at his work and see that “a saint could look like me.”<sup>1</sup>

The life-sized depictions of the saints and martyrs of Christian history draw the eye’s attention as soon as one enters the nave, but the most visually arresting feature is the orientation of the figures. Together with the congregation, all 135 figures look toward the altar where the Eucharist is celebrated, visually affirming an understanding of the church as the mystical body of Christ that spans across time and space. Congregants are joined in worship with the full communion of saints.

I too rarely contemplate the church universal and invisible, the mystical body of Christ “spread out through all time and space and rooted in eternity, terrible as an army with banners.”<sup>2</sup> Most often, I think about the church as the local gathering of Christians and, in an important and beautiful sense, that is the church. But it is also more. The Eucharist communicates the union of this mystical body. Somehow all are present in that meal: those who share it in lands far away, those now dead who shared it in the past, and those yet to live who will share it in the future. The tapestries in the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels fire my imagination and lead me to meditate on this mystery, and in so doing they lead me back to a biblical picture of the worshiping community, one found in the book of Hebrews.

The “letter” to the Hebrews is an example of an early Christian sermon that was likely delivered to a Christian house church and eventually circulated among other Christian gatherings. It reads like a sermon for most of the document<sup>3</sup>—beginning with a strong hook (1.1), including asides apologizing for the lack of time

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<sup>1</sup> For information on Nava’s inventive technique and further descriptions of the tapestries in the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels, visit the church’s website: <http://www.olacathedral.org/>.

<sup>2</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 5.

<sup>3</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson highlights the stylistic features of Hebrews that indicate the oral nature of the document in *Hebrews: A Commentary* (NLT; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 10. Of course, given the oral nature of letter writing and performance in antiquity (Paul dictated letters that would be read aloud at Christian gatherings), the distinction between oration and letter may become blurry.



(11.32), and ending with a resounding last phrase (12.29)—and only in chapter 13 do we encounter the telltale features of a letter. And even then, the author refers to what precedes as a “word of exhortation” (13.22), the same phrase used to describe Paul’s sermon in a synagogue worship service (Acts 13.22). Thomas Long imagines the preacher folding up his sermon notes after Hebrews 12.29, transitioning to announcements in 13.1–19 (though like all good preachers, he continues to reinforce his message), and concluding with a prayer request and a benediction (13.18–21).<sup>4</sup> The final “epistle-like” verses reveal that Hebrews is a sermon “preached *in absentia*.”<sup>5</sup> The preacher has written the manuscript for a sermon and is now sending it to his congregation, or possibly a sermon delivered to one Christian community has been transcribed and is now being forwarded to a sister congregation. In either case, the body of Hebrews is a homily that we now experience in written form.

Thus, a *Leaven* issue devoted to *Hebrews and Worship* provides fascinating avenues of inquiry. Hebrews not only speaks about worship and describes the Father and Son whom we worship. It is itself an element of an ancient Christian worship service, and I want to read the document in this light. How did this document function in its original worship setting, and how can that inform what we do in our contemporary worship settings? More specifically, how does the cloud of witnesses, the list of examples in Hebrews 11.1–12.3, function in the sermon, and what does that call us to do in our times of worship?

Unfortunately, the sermon’s ancient worship setting remains opaque. The document reveals little about the precise location of the church or the identity of its author and audience.<sup>6</sup> In broad strokes, however, it reveals some information about the anonymous community’s history and present malaise. They are a second generation of Christians who heard about Jesus from others and whose conversion was marked by miracles and gifts of the Spirit (2.3–4). They suffered an initial persecution involving imprisonment and dispossession that they resolutely and even cheerfully endured (10.32–34). In the period of sustained social ostracization that followed, however, their resolution waned. Now, the preacher worries that they will “drift away” (2.1) or “shrink back” (10.38–39). Thomas G. Long describes the situation well, emphasizing how timely the message remains for our contemporary churches:

His congregation is exhausted. They are tired—tired of serving in the world, tired of worship, tired of Christian education, tired of being peculiar and whispered about in society, tired of the spiritual struggle, tired of trying to keep their prayer life going, tired even of Jesus. Their hands droop and their knees are weak (12:12), attendance is down at church (10:25), and they are losing confidence. The threat to this congregation is not that they are charging off in the wrong direction; they do not have enough energy to charge off anywhere. The threat here is that, worn down and worn out, they will drop their end of the rope and drift away. Tired of walking the walk, many of them are considering taking a walk, leaving the community and falling away from the faith.<sup>7</sup>

The preacher, therefore, calls his congregation to faithful endurance in the midst of their malaise, and the list of faithful heroes in Hebrews 11 serves an important function in his exhortation. A quick survey of the use of *exempla* in ancient ethical instruction will help us discern their important role in moral transformation.

### ***Exempla in Ancient Moral Instruction***

Seneca, a first-century Stoic philosopher, wrote numerous letters (referred to as the *Epistulae morales*) to his student, Lucilius, about the benefits and demands of the philosophic life, teaching him the way of moral transformation. In one letter, he addresses a pressing question: Are specific ethical instructions (what he calls

<sup>4</sup> Thomas G. Long, *Hebrews* (IBC; Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1997), 141–142.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>6</sup> For a succinct and balanced review of the many proposals for authorship and provenance, see Alan Mitchell’s recent commentary, *Hebrews* (SP 13; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007), 2–12.

<sup>7</sup> Long, *Hebrews*, 3.



precepts or advice) necessary for moral transformation? In other words, isn't it enough that one learns the general principles (dogmas)? Surely if a student masters the general principles, then she can deduce how she should act in specific situations. The teacher should focus on clearly explicating the general principles and correcting mistaken dogmas before the specific instructions can have any effect.<sup>8</sup>

Seneca counters that advice is not superfluous; it serves an important role in moral transformation. Precepts may not be able to “overthrow the mind’s mistaken beliefs,” he admits, but advice uniquely “engages the attention and rouses us, and concentrates the memory, and keeps it from losing grip” (*Ep.* 94.25). Often, the human mind cleverly ignores what it already knows; exhortations keep these things before the mind so they are ready at hand when needed.

Additionally, precepts clarify what might otherwise remain vague general concepts. To those who claim that a student familiar with upright dogmas no longer needs advice, Seneca responds that the student who *desires* to act rightly often lacks sufficient clarity to do so. He explains:

For we are hindered from accomplishing praiseworthy deeds not only by our emotions, but also by want of practice in discovering the demands of a particular situation. Our minds are often under good control, and yet at the same time are inactive and untrained in finding the path of duty—and advice makes this clear. (*Ep.* 94.32)

Even if the student can recite a theoretical definition of justice (or faith), she still needs instruction about how that general concept can be enacted in daily living. Precepts provide this clarifying instruction, and the most effective precepts, Seneca indicates, come in the form of examples.

Seneca claims, “Nothing is more successful in bringing honorable influence to bear upon the mind, or in straightening out the wavering spirit that is prone to evil, than association with good men. For the frequent seeing, the frequent hearing of them little by little sinks into the heart and acquires the force of precepts” (*Ep.* 94.40). Thus, in his many letters Seneca repeatedly encourages Lucilius to find a guardian and advocate, a pattern and example, to aid him in his moral transformation. If Lucilius desires growth in virtue, he should know, “the way is long if one follows precepts, but short and helpful, if one follows patterns” (*Ep.* 6.5). He quotes Epicurus: “Cherish some man of high character, and keep him ever before your eyes, living as if he were watching you, and ordering all your actions as if he beheld them.” And he admonishes Lucilius:

Choose a master whose life, conversation, and soul-expressing face have satisfied you; picture him always to yourself as your protector or your pattern. For we must indeed have someone according to whom we may regulate our characters; you can never straighten that which is crooked unless you use a ruler. (*Ep.* 11.10)<sup>9</sup>

By nature, humans are mired in equivocation between their highest aims and an urging that tugs them in the other direction. “No man by himself has sufficient strength to rise above it,” Seneca warns, “he needs a helping hand, and someone to extricate him” (*Ep.* 52.2). Thus, he charges Lucilius to marshal the assistance of some helpers; from among those of the living and those of the past, he should choose guides “who teach us by their lives, men who tell us what we ought to do and then prove it by practice” (*Ep.* 52.8).

In the teaching of the Stoic philosopher Seneca, therefore, examples serve a critical function. Precepts rouse our attention and focus the memory. They clarify vague general concepts by demonstrating the myriad ways that the principle can be applied in specific situations. Examples, either in the form of living associates or figures from the past, are a particularly effective form of exhortation. They are an indispensable aid in moral

<sup>8</sup> Seneca addresses this issue in an extended diatribe in *Ep.* 94. First, he allows an imagined interlocutor to argue for the superfluous nature of precepts (94.5–17). Then, he counters with his defense of precepts.

<sup>9</sup> Seneca quotes Epicurus to the same effect in *Ep.* 25.5: “‘Do everything as if Epicurus is watching you.’ There is no real doubt that it is good for one to have appointed a guardian over oneself, and to have someone whom you may look up to, someone whom you may regard as a witness to your thoughts.”



transformation because they can function as both pattern and protector; they are the object on which the student focuses her attention, and they are the guide, advocate or witness whom the student should imagine watching over all she does. In other words, they provide the model while at the same time motivating and enabling the imitation.

### ***Exempla in Hebrews 11***

The author of Hebrews works with a similar understanding of the function of *exempla*. His list of examples in 11.1–12.3 reminds his audience of the importance of faith while at the same time clarifying his definition of the flexible term and providing numerous demonstrations of how the broader concept might be fleshed out in specific situations. He places the exemplars before the eyes of his audience as models for imitation and imagines them as witnesses that watch over his audience's actions. The many faithful heroes of the past—and Jesus in particular—are both the pattern and the protectors for his audience.

After affirming, somewhat hopefully, almost pleadingly, that his audience is counted among those who have faith (10.35–39), the preacher immediately shifts into an exposition of that faith. He begins with a working definition of the flexible term: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (11.1). Two things should be noted about this definition. First, the preacher is not attempting a systematic description of faith in Christian thought. As Long aptly notes, faith “as a biblical theological concept, is large, round, and complex, and the Preacher’s description encompasses but a few degrees of its circumference.”<sup>10</sup> Faith, in its full robustness, is more than hope and confidence in the unseen. In the writings of other biblical authors, faith includes, among other things, trust, belief, commitment and self-abandonment. In this case, the preacher focuses the definition to challenge his audience at their point of need.

Second, the definition itself is less than clear. The preacher’s definition of faith, according to one commentator, is “a case of clarifying obscure things by means of more obscure words.”<sup>11</sup> Indeed, one can easily find pages of debate over the proper translation and meaning of *hypostasis* (assurance) and *elenchon* (conviction),<sup>12</sup> the two key terms in the definition. If the preacher stopped here, his exhortation would remain recondite. “What exactly are we supposed to do?” his audience might ask. But, of course, he doesn’t stop. He proceeds to offer numerous examples that clarify the faith for which he calls.

The *exempla* in Hebrews 11 illuminate the preacher’s exhortation. In various ways, the examples have hope and confidence in an invisible future reality that affects how they act in the visible present; or, more specifically, they have a confidence in God’s unfulfilled promises that enables them to endure present hardships. God promises Abraham land, for example, and his confidence in that promise enables him to leave the security of his home and endure a lifetime of nomadic wandering (11.8–10). Unnamed exemplars suffered ridicule, torture and even execution because they had hope and confidence in the promised, if still invisible, resurrection (11.35–38). Because of his confidence in his future glorification, Jesus disregarded the shame of the cross and endured the hostility of his opponents (12.2–3). For our preacher, *that* is faith; *that* is assurance of things hoped for and conviction of things not seen; *that* is what he is calling his audience to embrace. In the past, they endured abuse, imprisonment and dispossession because of their confidence in God’s promises (10.32–36). Now he implores them in the midst of continued shame and ostracization: cling to God’s promises. Unflagging confidence in the promised though still invisible reward—life with God in his heavenly city (12.22–24)—will enable their endurance, just like it has for the many faithful who have preceded them and now watch over them.

Along with clarifying the preacher’s definition of faith, the *exempla* in Hebrews 11 motivate and enable moral transformation. They accomplish this in two ways. First, the *exempla* shape the imaginations of his hearers so that they can envision a faithful path through their own hardships. Mired in their own present malaise, the community

<sup>10</sup> Long, *Hebrews*, 113.

<sup>11</sup> David A. deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude*, 382, citing Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 566.

<sup>12</sup> For example, Johnson, *Hebrews*, 277–79; deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude*, 382–86; Craig R. Koester, *Hebrews: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 36; New York: Doubleday, 2001), 472–73.



members might not be able to envision a faithful path through their suffering. Shame and ostracization continue unabated, and they despair. Faithfulness seems impossible. In this context, the examples in Hebrews 11 rouse the audience from their hopelessness. Others, many others, have kept faith in God's invisible promises when visible circumstances seemed to contradict them, and they have done so in myriad ways. The preacher drives them from their shaded ruts and presents new horizons of possibility. He is shaping imaginations. Faithfulness is possible, the examples loudly proclaim, and the hearers begin to imagine how it might be possible in their own circumstances.

Second, the *exempla* act as guardians and protectors who watch over the congregation. Just as Epicurus advised his students to “cherish some man of high character, and keep him ever before your eyes, living as if he were watching you, and ordering all your actions as if he beheld them,” so the preacher marshals the faithful heroes of the past to act as witnesses. He thereby recasts the court of public opinion for his congregation, a significant move in a culture shaped by the values of honor and shame.

In ancient Mediterranean societies, honor was the highest value. Honor was ascribed through things such as one's gender, the status of one's family, or one's physical stature. But honor could also be acquired in the court of public opinion through demonstrations of bravery, acts of benefaction, or witty ripostes to verbal challenges. Conversely, one could incur shame in a variety of ways. The community members addressed in Hebrews, for example, are losing honor and incurring shame through imprisonment, dispossession and association with those who have been imprisoned and dispossessed. And that shame spreads beyond the individual and covers his or her whole family, even if the other family members are not part of the Christian community. The believers' crisis of commitment, David deSilva explains, results from “the difficulties of remaining long without honor in the world. . . . The believers have experienced the loss of property and status in the host society without yet receiving the promised rewards of the sect, and so are growing disillusioned.”<sup>13</sup> The attribution of shame is a powerful tool of social control, and the believers' resistance is weakening. Some Christians may wonder if remaining part of the community is worth the shame it brings them.

The preacher comes to the aid of his floundering congregation by recasting the court of public opinion. Their neighbors and peers do not ascribe honor and shame, as is normally the case in an honor/shame culture. Instead, the preacher asserts, God is the all-seeing judge (4.12–13)—the same God who shamelessly aligns himself with the homeless strangers and foreigners that have been his people (11.16). Then, in Hebrews 11.1–12.3, the preacher calls attention to the “cloud of witnesses” that surrounds the community. “Now,” Johnson explains, “the eyes of those who have struggled for the faith are added to this alternate court of opinion for the measuring of what is honorable and what is shameful.”<sup>14</sup> The judgments of the faithful—not the opinions of their neighbors—are the community's standards for honor and shame.

The preacher also reminds his congregation that Jesus' path to glory passed through suffering and shame.<sup>15</sup> The one through whom the whole world was created became human and was made perfect through suffering before returning to the right hand of the Majesty on high (1.1–4; 2.10, 14–18; 4.14–16; 5.7–10). He faced the most ignominious death—dying naked on a cross, publicly exposed as a criminal—and yet he disregarded the shame of crucifixion and kept his gaze fixed on the promises of God (12.2–3). He is proof that God does not ascribe honor and shame according to the prevailing standards of their society, and he is their example. If they endure as he did, they can confidently expect their suffering to also result in glory and honor.

<sup>13</sup> David A. deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Epistle “to the Hebrews”* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 18.

<sup>14</sup> Johnson, *Hebrews*, 316.

<sup>15</sup> Long calls this path the “parabola of salvation,” which he summarizes in his commentary (*Hebrews*, 21–22): “The ‘parabola of salvation’ sermon [begins] on a lofty pinnacle with the exalted Son, high above all things: ‘the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being’ (1:3). But then the trajectory sweeps downward into painful human experience and tragic history. The glorious son, for the sake of redemption, is made ‘lower than the angels’ and endures the shame of the cross (12:2). And then the curve arcs heavenward once again, sweeping up toward victory, as Jesus is raised from death and, holding fast to those he has redeemed, takes his triumphant seat ‘at the right hand of the throne of God’ (12:2).” The same pattern can be discerned in the hymn in Philippians 2, for example, and in the Christology of 1 Peter.



### ***Exempla* in Our Worshiping Communities**

Now that we have explored the function of *exempla* in this ancient Christian sermon, we can investigate our second question: How does this inform what we do in our contemporary worship settings? First, we must recognize that our worship services are imagination-shaping events. The songs we sing, the prayers we offer, the scriptures we read, the gospel we proclaim, *the stories we tell*—all shape how we see and understand the world. They shape our imaginations so that we can envision ways of acting in this world that we may not have recognized before. And in that way, our worship services enable us to live differently.

Second, *exempla* offer one uniquely powerful way of shaping imaginations, especially if they are told as narratives. The declaration of dogma is good. For all his praise of precepts, Seneca also rightly notes that a student “will never make much progress until he has conceived a right idea of God” (*Ep.* 95.48). We need a foundation from which we act and a *telos*—a purpose or end—toward which we aim, but the neat logic of a universal dogma sometimes fails to help us make the move from orthodoxy to orthopraxis. The messy particularity of a specific story, even when the circumstances are only analogous to our own, sparks reflection and exercises imagination as we begin to ask, how might that look in my life? The preacher’s definition of faith is important, for example, but its universality gives it a dull edge that we can too easily ignore. The sharp particularities of Abraham’s life, however, prick our hearts and minds. When we hear his story, we are roused, engaged, and begin to imagine.

Lastly, we should recognize *exempla* as not only patterns but also protectors and guardians, and we should strive to find ways to express this in worship. Preachers hardly need encouragement to tell more stories. Sermons regularly include narratives of exemplary people the preacher hopes his congregation will be inspired to imitate. But how do we imagine those examples are functioning? Are they simply patterns set before the hearer, models that the hearer, drawing on whatever powers of will he or she possesses, strives to emulate? *Exempla* certainly have this function. But they are more. They can also function as guardians and protectors that are present with us and watch over us. I worry that we have lost this sense of the cloud of witnesses that join us in worship when we gather.

The preacher’s image of the athletic contest in 12.1–3 affirms that we are not alone in our strivings. Christ runs before us, the pacesetter, pioneer and perfecter; our brothers and sisters run at our side (don’t miss the first person plural: “Let *us* run with perseverance”); and a crowd of witnesses, filling the stands with their multitude, cheer us on in the race. It’s this last part of image that I often overlook. We know Christ is the example. We lean on our brothers and sisters for help (even if not enough). But do we recognize the communion of saints, the cloud of witnesses, the full body of Christ “spread out through all time and space and rooted in eternity, terrible as an army with banners” that worships with us and cheers us to endurance? How can we acknowledge the presence of these guardians and protectors?

The Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels symbolizes the cloud of witnesses with the tapestries that adorn its walls. How can we call to mind this powerful image of the church in our own congregations? The preacher of Hebrews provides one example of how this might be done. May he inspire us to imagine how we might do the same in our own times of worship so that when we sing to God, when we share communion, or when we face temptation, we might draw strength and courage from the memory of the faithful and the knowledge of their presence with us in the mystical body of Christ.

CLIFF BARBARICK IS AN ASSISTANT PROFESSOR IN THE DEPARTMENT OF BIBLE, MISSIONS, AND MINISTRY AT ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY IN ABILENE, TEXAS.

