

THE LOCATION OF
THE CLOUD OF WITNESSES (HEB 12:1):
COMPLEXITIES OF TIME AND SPACE IN HEBREWS¹

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ABSTRACT

The hearers of Hebrews are told in Heb 12:1–2 that, as they run the contest lying before them, looking to Jesus, they are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. These witnesses are evidently the people of faith who were described in the previous chapter, but their relationship to the runners is not as clear as most recent scholarship implies. They are not present in order to watch, encourage or bear witness to the race, and their function as models of faith is muted by the text's presentation of Jesus as faith's leader and perfecter. When the temporal perspective of passages such as 11:39–40 is considered, it becomes clear that the audience has the cloud of witnesses lying about them because they will all attain their perfection together, following in the train of Jesus' entry into heaven.

THE BEGINNING OF HEBREWS 12 ENCOURAGES ITS HEARERS WITH THESE WORDS:

Τοιγαροῦν καὶ ἡμεῖς τοσοῦτον ἔχοντες περικείμενον
ἡμῖν νέφος μαρτύρων, ὄγκον ἀποθέμενοι πάντα καὶ τὴν
εὐπερίστατον ἀμαρτίαν, δι' ὑπομονῆς τρέχωμεν τὸν
προκείμενον ἡμῖν ἀγῶνα ἀφορῶντες εἰς τὸν τῆς

¹ This is a revised version of the Presidential Address delivered to the Fellowship for Biblical Studies in Melbourne, 5 November 2015. The paper was also given on 23 November 2015 in the joint session of the Hebrews Section and the Wisdom and Apocalypticism Section of the Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting in Atlanta, Georgia, USA. I appreciated the opportunities to contribute my scholarship and I thank all who took part in the discussions. I dedicate this work to the Revd Dr Ellen Bradshaw Aitken, my teacher and dear friend, who died in 2014. As the article explains, thinking of her in terms of the “cloud of witnesses” of Heb 12:1 turns out to be complicated, but the following verse calls her strongly to mind for me, as one who looked attentively at Jesus, holding fast to him as anchor of our hope (cf. 6:18–20).

πίστεως ἀρχηγὸν καὶ τελειωτὴν Ἰησοῦν, ὃς ἀντὶ τῆς προκειμένης αὐτῷ χαρᾶς ὑπέμεινεν σταυρὸν αἰσχύνης καταφρονήσας ἐν δεξιᾷ τε τοῦ θρόνου τοῦ θεοῦ κεκάθικεν.

Consequently, having so great a cloud of witnesses lying around us, let us also, after putting aside every weight and the sin that ensnares, run with endurance the contest that is lying before us, looking attentively at faith's leader and perfecter, Jesus, who for the sake of the joy that was lying before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

(Heb 12:1–2)²

The passage is typical of the exhortation to endurance and steadfastness in the face of trials that can be found in much of the text. Like many Christians in the centuries since Hebrews was written, I have frequently been cheered by the idea that the challenges of life in Christ are not carried out in isolation, and moreover that one's company includes not only fellow Christians living on earth still, but also "a cloud of witnesses," people who have already passed from this life. I can still assert this statement as an interpretation of Hebrews, but I will argue that there are many aspects to the conventional ways in which it is presented that require rethinking. As I investigate who the witnesses are, where they are, and why they are there, I will also touch on some of the complexities of time and space that operate more broadly in this text.

The first element of rethinking will be familiar to anyone who has spent some time with Hebrews scholarship. Despite what many will say when using the "cloud of witnesses" verse to comfort Christians who are mourning their recently departed loved ones, the witnesses in the context of Hebrews cannot be deceased Christians themselves, or more precisely, they cannot be followers of Jesus who were living on earth after his crucifixion.³ Indeed, the theological situation of recently deceased Christians is barely addressed by the text, even though some followers of Jesus known to the audience would surely have died by the time it was written in the late first century CE.⁴ Instead, as we shall see

² Biblical translations are mine, though often influenced by the NRSV.

³ I make the qualification because the discussion of Moses in Hebrews 11 (especially 11:26) suggests that Moses can be interpreted as "a follower of Christ"; see Jared C. Calaway, *The Sabbath and the Sanctuary: Access to God in the Letter to the Hebrews and its Priestly Context* (WUNT 2/349; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013) 69. Notwithstanding this, and also bearing in mind that the category of "Christians" was still emerging in this period, for the sake of clarity I occasionally employ the term "Christians" with reference to the believers who are the audience of Hebrews but not to the believers in Hebrews 11.

⁴ The brief reference in 13:7 to some leaders in the past tense would seem to confirm that they had experienced death in their community. On the dating of the text, see

in more detail, the witnesses are the people of faith discussed throughout Hebrews 11, the previous chapter. They are ancestors and Israelites from before the time of Jesus' coming into the earthly world who were remembered in Jewish writings and oral traditions. If pastoral and spiritual needs bring people to apply the verse more broadly on occasion, linked to a theology of the communion of saints, well and good—I'm still fond of this reading myself—but it isn't an interpretation that helps when reading the verse in the context of Hebrews.

As Hebrews 12 continues, the present and future sufferings of the intended audience are conceptualised using two related fields of discourse familiar to Hellenistic culture: athletic competitions and *paideia* (in the sense of both education and the physical discipline that accompanied it).⁵ To put it crudely, the audience is told, “no pain, no gain.” In other words, the text assures them that their sufferings are only temporary and are necessary for the goal of salvation, which is spoken of variously as life (12:9), sharing God's holiness (12:10), seeing the Lord (12:14), obtaining God's grace (12:15) and inheriting the blessing (12:17). In 12:1–2, the verses quoted above, the metaphor is of running a contest (ἄγῶν), generally understood here as running a race. It is worth mentioning at this point that the race does not go to the swiftest. The hearers of the text are collectively engaged in this contest, this struggle, and the aim is simply to reach the end. They run together, not in competition with one another.

It is often claimed in semi-popular and homiletic interpretations of this passage that the witnesses (μάρτυρες) are behaving as spectators in the arena or racecourse, watching the race and cheering on the runners, and thus supporting them during the difficulties of life. This again has been a pastorally helpful idea, especially for those whose beliefs about the afterlife prior to the general resurrection include agency for the departed and even an intercessory role for them.⁶ The image of spectators in the rows of onlookers' seats would then also provide a way to understand why the cloud is described as περικείμενον (12:1), a participle with a broad range of applications that includes “surrounding” or “encompassing” as well as “lying around” or “set about.”

However, this understanding turns out to be quite problematic. The passage says nothing about what the witnesses are doing, so it is an argument from

Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989) 6–9.

⁵ Craig R. Koester, *Hebrews: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 36; New York: Doubleday, 2001) 534, 537.

⁶ For an example of a skilful and compassionate sermon along these lines, see Br Curtis Almquist SSJE, “The Saints, Our Heroes,” online posting, 2 November 2014, website of the Society of Saint John the Evangelist [online; sermon at <<http://ssje.org/ssje/2014/11/02/the-saints-our-heroes-br-curtis-almquist>>; accessed 10 September 2016].

silence to say they are providing enthusiastic and encouraging support. Moreover, while “spectators” is a tempting translation of μάρτυρες, the philological arguments for this are weak, as some have pointed out.⁷ The primary-source quotations that are often adduced for it are ultimately untenable.⁸ While they do present examples of a μάρτυς who is watching something, the context always has a courtroom tinge to it, at least metaphorically—the direct visual observation carried out by these μάρτυρες is not presented as mere watching but as being potentially usable evidence toward some form of judgment. Nor can the “spectators” interpretation be salvaged by suggesting that the cloud of witnesses will later give testimony (presumably to God) about the faith and endurance of the runners; there is no suggestion that any such testimony would be sought or required.

Indeed, Hebrews assumes that God is quite capable of knowing the faith of a person without help from others. This brings us to what may be a better reading of μάρτυρες in 12:1. The linking words Τοιγαροῦν (“consequently”) and τοσοῦτον (“so great”) indicate that the μάρτυρες are the faithful people described in the previous chapter. Hebrews 11 has several themes bubbling through it—faith, most obviously, but also hope, the unseen, making the harder choice despite suffering and death, and, most relevantly here, witnessing or attestation (μαρτυρέω, cognate with μάρτυς). Generally, the verb μαρτυρέω appears in the passive in this chapter: after the initial declaration about the nature of faith, the text says that the ancestors were attested (ἐμαρτυρήθησαν) by faith (11:2); shortly afterward this is reinforced when the faithful ones Abel (11:4) and Enoch (11:5) are said to be attested; and the closing statement looks back at “all these, attested through their faith” (οἱ πάντες μαρτυρηθέντες διὰ τῆς πίστεως, 11:39). The verb also occurs once in Hebrews 11 in the active voice, when the text says in regard to Abel, “God attesting about his gifts” (μαρτυροῦντος ἐπὶ τοῖς δώροις αὐτοῦ τοῦ θεοῦ, 11:4).⁹ The com-

⁷ S. M. Baugh, “The Cloud of Witnesses in Hebrews 11,” *WTJ* 68 (2006) 113–32, here 120. Several commentaries suggest the “spectators” interpretation but then back away from it to some extent; examples are Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* 354–55 and William L. Lane, *Hebrews 9–13* (WBC 47B; Dallas: Word Books, 1991) 408. BDAG (3rd ed., 2000) s.v. μάρτυς does not include “spectator” as a translation option.

⁸ The passages surveyed were those listed by Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* 354, namely: Wis 1:6; Josephus *B.J.* 6.2.5 §134; Josephus *A.J.* 18.8.8 §299; and Ps-Longinus *Subl.* 14.2. For a contrary perspective, examining a wider range of evidence, see N. Clayton Croy, *Endurance in Suffering: Hebrews 12:1–13 in its Rhetorical, Religious, and Philosophical Context* (SNTSMS 98; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 58–62.

⁹ There are some text-critical problems with this part of 11:4, but the word μαρτυροῦντος is undisputed and it cannot agree with “Abel” (since Abel is the subject of the sentence), so it must agree with “God.”

bined evidence of these verses indicates that the agent of attestation is God throughout the chapter.¹⁰

In the light of this, the μάρτυρες of 12:1 have repeatedly been said to be divinely attested. The puzzle is that a μάρτυς ought to mean someone who gives witness, not one about whom someone else has given witness. This word was, of course, in the process of acquiring the new meaning of “martyr” during these decades.¹¹ While the designation “martyr” does not suit all the faithful of Hebrews 11, the concentration on the violent, faith-related death of the unnamed Jewish people mentioned toward the end of that chapter may have pushed the vocabulary in that direction. (I wonder, too, whether our understanding of μάρτυς in the “martyr” sense, as a meaning derived from “one who testifies to one’s faith [unto death]” should have a second component in its development, “one who is attested by God for one’s faith [unto death],” which would be highly compatible with the notion of the martyr’s crown that was soon to emerge.) Consequently, I suggest that μάρτυρες should be interpreted not as a reference to anything these people are doing while they are surrounding the runners, but as an indication that these people have been attested by God for their faith and have died in that faith.¹²

We may ask, then, how relevant their attested faithfulness should be to those who are running. Very relevant, most would say: the scholarly literature is replete with descriptions of Hebrews 11 as a catalogue of heroes, an encomium of famous people of faith, and so forth, and it frequently describes the witnesses as models of faith for the audience of Hebrews, a welcome contrast to the negative examples such as the wilderness generation. It is difficult to deny this aspect, given the amount of space the text devotes to them and the resonances Hebrews 11 has with the encomium genre.¹³ The faithful people of old are said to be attested by God and are praised in other ways as well (e.g., 11:16, 38);

¹⁰ Lane, *Hebrews 9–13* 326.

¹¹ The book of Revelation gives several examples of a person called a μάρτυς who has died, and in several cases the person is also described as faithful: Rev 1:5 and 3:14 (Jesus); 2:13 (Antipas); and the martyrs whose blood is drunk by the woman Babylon (17:6). In Acts 22:20 the dead Stephen is called a μάρτυς, but the application of the word to Paul just a few verses before (22:15) makes the new technical sense debatable for Stephen. There is some flexibility in the dating of Revelation, Acts and Hebrews, and their relative chronology is unknown, but they are all within a generation of one another.

¹² Strictly speaking, Enoch (11:5) did not die, but he was faithful and he ceased to live on earth. His special circumstances do not receive attention in Hebrews outside 11:5 and thus will not be handled separately in this investigation.

¹³ F. F. Bruce (*The Epistle to the Hebrews* [NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964], 279) describes Hebrews 11 as a “catalogue of spiritual heroism” and sees it as belonging to the same genre as Sir 44:1–50:21, “The Praise of the Elders.” For a detailed study, see Pamela Michelle Eisenbaum, *The Jewish Heroes of Christian History: Hebrews 11 in Literary Context* (SBLDS 156; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997).

given the paraenetic genre of Hebrews¹⁴ and the endorsement of faith just prior to that chapter (10:38–39) they must, then, have some function as role models.

Yet it is remarkable how much the passage undercuts their function as positive models at the same time. The text does not take the seemingly obvious opportunity at this point to say, “be like they were,” despite often explicitly warning the audience against imitating those who lacked faith and endurance. The closest it comes to embracing them as positive models is καὶ ἡμεῖς (“we too,” 12:1).¹⁵ The circumstantial participle ἔχοντες (“having,” 12:1) does not bear this weight as such. Only when translators and interpreters render the participle as causal (“since we have”) does this implication arise—the grammar would permit it to be read neutrally (as in my translation) or even negatively (“although we have”).

Unfortunately, the other words of the participial phrase do not settle this issue. The choice of the word νέφος (“cloud,” 12:1) is curious in itself. It is unlikely to mean some kind of heavenly or divine cloud. For such purposes in the Jewish and Christian literature of this period we would expect to find νεφέλη, not νέφος,¹⁶ and in any case, the goal language here is expressed horizontally (running on a track) rather than vertically (ascending into heaven). A νέφος is often a dark cloud, and it has a frequent metaphorical use in relation to a collection of people. It does not simply mean a group, though; the expression tends to appear in military contexts, with the implication that the army is so numerous and overwhelming that it loses definition, becoming a mass and impeding one’s vision.¹⁷ The adjective τοσούτον (“so great,” 12:1) confirms the sense of enormity.

The question then arises once more as to the nuance of the participle περικείμενον (“lying around,” 12:1). I would see it as having a literal sense to some extent, describing the location of the νέφος relative to the runners, since visual elements and relative positioning are so important in 12:1–2. The runners are engaged in a contest that is “lying before” them (προκείμενον, 12:1). To do so successfully, they are “looking attentively” (ἀφορῶντες, 12:2) at Jesus, who is ahead of them as faith’s leader (ἀρχηγόν) and the “forerunner” (πρόδρομος, 6:20).¹⁸ Jesus, for his part, suffered for the sake of the joy that

¹⁴ Harold W. Attridge, “Paraenesis in a homily (λόγος παρακλήσεως): The Possible Location of, and Socialization in, the ‘Epistle to the Hebrews,’” *Semeia* 50 (1990) 211–26.

¹⁵ There is also a brief call to imitation of a similar group of people at 6:12, a considerable distance before the passage in question.

¹⁶ See BDAG and LSJ s.v. νεφέλη and νέφος.

¹⁷ Homer *Il.* 4.274, 16.66, 17.755; Herodotus *Hist.* 8.109; Philo *Legat.* 226. The first example from the *Iliad* contains an extended simile comparing the cloud of infantry to a dark and windy storm cloud; in a similar passage in Virgil *Aen.* 7.793, probably influenced by the Homeric passage, the cloud is a *nimbus*.

¹⁸ Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* 356.

was “lying before” him (προκειμένης, 12:2).¹⁹ The runners are not simply told to remember or consider the witnesses, but that they are surrounded by them, and in fact if the etymological sense of ἀφορῶντες is in force here then they should specifically not be looking at the witnesses but at Jesus.²⁰ But is it good to be surrounded by the cloud of witnesses? Interpreters generally understand the passage thus, which is why they imagine the witnesses to be encouraging the runners, if not with their cheers then with their presence. Or does the cloud hamper the runners, like the weight and sin they need to be “putting aside” (ἀποθέμενοι, 12:1)?

There is a remarkable verse in *2 Clement* that is not clearly an allusion to Hebrews but shares with Heb 12:1–2 some notable vocabulary (περίκειμαι, ἀποτίθημι, and νέφος). The text explains that the writer and addressees previously lacked understanding. They worshipped objects made by humans, and their whole life was nothing other than death. But then Jesus Christ brought them salvation and illumination:

ἀμαύρωσιν οὖν περικείμενοι καὶ τοιαύτης ἀχλύος
γέμοντες ἐν τῇ ὁράσει ἀνεβλέψαμεν ἀποθέμενοι ἐκείνο ὃ
περικείμεθα νέφος τῇ αὐτοῦ θελήσει.

Therefore, when we had dullness lying around us and were full of such mist in our vision, we received sight, by his will having put aside that cloud which we had lying around us. (*2 Clem.* 1:6)²¹

The cloud lying around them in this verse of *2 Clement* is undesirable, for it obscures their spiritual vision. Only by Jesus’ will do they manage to set it aside so they can be free from error and know how to worship God truly. Now, *2 Clement* dates from the middle of the second century but it is unclear whether its author knew Hebrews,²² and furthermore, the topic of pre-Christian idolatry prior to Christian illumination is quite different from that of Heb 12:1–2. What the *2 Clement* verse demonstrates, though, is that an image like this, expressed with this cluster of vocabulary, is capable of use in a negative sense. It would not be foolish to argue on philological grounds that the “cloud of

¹⁹ I interpret ἀντί as “for the sake of,” not “instead of.” It has this sense in 12:16 as well.

²⁰ Etymologically, ἀφοράω means to fix one’s gaze on one thing having looked away from (ἀπό) something else. The analogous verb ἀποβλέπω is employed similarly for Moses in 11:26 to say that he disregarded Egypt’s treasures because he looked attentively at his (divine) reward. Lane, *Hebrews 9–13* 410.

²¹ *The Apostolic Fathers* (ed. and trans. Bart D. Ehrman; 2 vols.; LCL 24–25; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003) 1:164–67. This is my translation, designed not for elegance but to highlight the vocabulary choices in the Greek.

²² While *1 Clement* does give evidence of knowledge of Hebrews, *2 Clement* is later and by a different author. On the authorship and dating of *2 Clement*, see Ehrman’s introduction to the text in *The Apostolic Fathers* 1:157–60.

witnesses” could conceivably be a distraction or a hindrance to the runners. Yet despite this example from 2 *Clement*, I am reluctant to argue in the case of Hebrews that the faithful people of old lack any positive role for the intended audience, considering the lavish and complimentary attention they received earlier in the text.

The audience is not told at this point to emulate their faith, however, even though their faith was emphasised in Hebrews 11. The ambivalent situation can be accounted for by several aspects of the text’s theology relating to who Jesus is, what he has done, and how much better Jesus and his actions are than what came before. One of the major dynamics of Hebrews is the notion that the older mode of operation within Judaism was inferior to what Jesus has brought. This is developed most thoroughly in the demonstration that Jesus is a better high priest than the Aaronic high priesthood could ever offer (7:1–8:6). It is linked to the superiority of the heavenly sanctuary over the earthly sanctuary built-with-hands and also to the superiority of the new covenant that was made once for all in Jesus’ blood over the old covenant that was made at Sinai and expressed through the annual Yom Kippur ritual (8:1–10:31). Jesus’ death and his entry into the heavenly sanctuary to offer his own blood have provided forgiveness of sins and opened the way to heaven for those who believe in him (9:11–14; 10:19–22).²³

The capacity to enter the heavenly homeland was therefore not previously available to the people of faith who lived before the time of Jesus’ coming. In 11:13–16, the text implicitly praises them for believing that they would eventually receive the heavenly homeland they had been promised but could only see from afar, but while it affirms that this city has been prepared, it says clearly that they died without receiving the promises (that is, this heavenly promise—some promises are fulfilled for them or their descendants). The reason is “us,” the believers to whom Hebrews is addressed:

Καὶ οὗτοι πάντες μαρτυρηθέντες διὰ τῆς πίστεως οὐκ ἔκομίσαντο τὴν ἐπαγγελίαν, τοῦ θεοῦ περὶ ἡμῶν κρείττον τι προβλεψαμένου, ἵνα μὴ χωρὶς ἡμῶν τελειωθῶσιν. Τοιγαροῦν καὶ ἡμεῖς τοσοῦτον ἔχοντες περικείμενον ἡμῖν νέφος μαρτύρων, ... δι’ ὑπομονῆς τρέχωμεν ...

²³ “Rather than the high priest entering alone, the audience’s itinerary is mapped onto Jesus’s itinerary, so that the holy of holies becomes a highly populated space, full not only of the assembly of the angels, but also of all those whom Jesus has liberated and who ‘hold fast’ (κατέχω, 10:23) by faith to Jesus throughout this itinerary of return.” Ellen Bradshaw Aitken, “The Body of Jesus Outside the Eternal City: Mapping Ritual Space in the Epistle to the Hebrews,” in *Hebrews in Contexts* (ed. Gabriella Gelardini and Harold W. Attridge; AGAJU 91; Leiden: Brill, 2016) 194–209, here 202.

And all these, attested through their faith, did not receive the promise, God having provided something better concerning us, so that they would not, apart from us, be perfected. Consequently, having so great a cloud of witnesses lying around us, let us also ... run with endurance ... (Heb 11:39–12:1a)

The attested faithful can thus only “be perfected” (τελειωθῶσιν) together with “us.” Now, what causes this perfection, for all concerned, is Jesus’ offering of his own sacrificial blood upon his entry into heaven as triumphal high priest, as 10:10–14 indicates.²⁴ By the time Hebrews is written, Jesus has already done this, but in the context of the verses quoted above, “we” have still not attained perfection since we are still running the race. Given that the faithful of old are surrounding us, they too have still not attained perfection.

To understand this, it is necessary to realise that Hebrews works with two temporal perspectives. The text argues both that the decisive salvific action has already been accomplished by Jesus (the theology of priesthood and sacrifice takes this perspective) and that the audience needs to hold fast in faithful perseverance lest they fail to receive the promise (the paraenesis takes this perspective). Even in the verse range 10:10–14 just quoted, which states that their perfection has been accomplished, it is also said both that their sanctification has happened and that it is in the process of happening. Elsewhere, Hebrews states that they must hold fast “until the end” (μέχρι τέλους, 3:14) and must be carried on “to perfection” (ἐπὶ τὴν τελειότητα, 6:1).²⁵ The discussion in 3:17–4:11 of Ps 95(94):7–11 and the wilderness generation helps to hold together these apparently contradictory temporal angles. The immediacy of the call “today,” together with the LXX translation of Massah and Meribah so that they mean “rebellion” and “testing” rather than specific places in the midst of the desert, implies that the people are not wandering in the desert but on the verge of entering the promised land.²⁶ Similarly the negative example of Esau (12:16–17) teaches that Esau had his inheritance within reach and yet managed to lose it.

We have seen one reason that the imitative potential of the ancient faithful ones is downplayed in 12:1–2, namely, that they are not as attractive a model as they might be, since from the perspective of these verses they have not yet

²⁴ Jesus himself is perfected through his sufferings and is thus the perfect high priest (2:10; 7:28).

²⁵ On the further complexities of perfection language in Hebrews, see Kenneth L. Schenck, *Cosmology and Eschatology in Hebrews: The Settings of the Sacrifice* (SNTSMS 143; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 64–73.

²⁶ The observation about Massah and Meribah is from Albert Vanhoye, “Longue marche ou accès tout proche? Le contexte biblique de Hébreux 3, 7–4, 11,” *Bib* 49 (1968) 9–26, esp. 9. He contrasts his interpretation with that of Ernst Käsemann, *Das wandernde Gottesvolk: Eine Untersuchung zum Hebräerbrieff* (4th ed.; FRLANT 55; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1961).

received their reward of a heavenly homeland. A related reason that Hebrews does not explicitly encourage its audience to emulate their faith is that the focus here, as so often, is on Jesus and his faith. The text says, “let us also ... run with endurance the contest that is lying before us, looking attentively at faith’s leader and perfecter, Jesus” (12:1–2). This connects with other places in Hebrews where Jesus is said to open the way to heaven. Jesus is ahead of the runners, in heaven, and what he has accomplished overshadows any other person’s acts. As forerunner on this journey, Jesus provides—one might even say, is—the hope that the believers need for the contest (6:18–19; see also 10:19–23 and 3:6). The contest is lying before us (τὸν προκείμενον ἡμῖν ἀγῶνα, 12:1) and so too is this hope (τῆς προκειμένης ἐλπίδος, 6:18). Furthermore, Jesus entered obediently into his suffering and death, and thereby into his perfection as heavenly high priest, because of his faithfulness and trust in God (2:10–3:6; 5:7–10). However much it might offend later christological developments and thus certain exegetes to talk about Jesus as having faith,²⁷ this virtue is such a strong component of Jesus’ depiction in Hebrews that Jesus is called faith’s leader and perfecter (12:2). He is thus the best model of faith, before whom all other models of faith seem pale.²⁸

Much of this analysis so far has shown that the witnesses do not seem to fulfil several of the possible roles that have been suggested for them. They are not put forth as models of faith to any great extent, they are not there to testify to how “we” run the race, they are not simply spectators, and they are not said to provide encouragement to the runners. The passage could even be interpreted as hinting that the cloud of witnesses could be a distraction from the focus on Jesus, rather than an advantage in the race, though I hesitated to go so far. Why, then, are they mentioned? It will be recalled that this race is not a competition for the fastest runner but an event in which everyone who finishes “wins.” Furthermore, as just explained, the reason the ancient faithful ones have still not received their promise is that it should not happen “apart from us” (11:40). The race is therefore a collective event in which “we” and the faithful ones of old travel together to the finish line; the addressees are surrounded by this cloud of witnesses because their heavenly perfection will be

²⁷ This reluctance has been traced to the influence of St Thomas Aquinas, who considered that Jesus’ perpetual enjoyment of the beatific vision would have been incompatible with faith (considered as distinct from “sight”). See the discussion and references in Christopher A. Richardson, *Pioneer and Perfecter of Faith: Jesus’ Faith as the Climax of Israel’s History in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (WUNT 2/338; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012) 2–6, especially 5 n. 11.

²⁸ For this reason, Richardson (*Pioneer and Perfecter of Faith* 10–11) argues that the encomium generally considered to span Hebrews 11 concludes at 12:3. I am not convinced, however, that the fact that Jesus is “faith’s leader [pioneer] and perfecter” (12:2) means he should be included among the “cloud of witnesses” (p. 7), since I see the witnesses as the people whose description concludes in 11:39–40.

attained together. Since the text places little emphasis on the deaths of individual Christians, it elides the fact that not everyone faces physical death at the same moment; the problem it is dealing with is not that but the danger of the apostasy of individuals. Instead, all Christians who maintain the course, hold fast to hope and look attentively at Jesus will reach heaven together, along with so great a cloud of ancient witnesses whose faith was attested by God long ago.

Towards the end of Hebrews 12 is a passage that deserves attention in the light of this interpretation of the cloud of witnesses. This passage adverts once more to the contrast between the first covenant and the new covenant, together with all that each entails. First it says, “For you have not approached” (Οὐ γὰρ προσεληλύθατε, 12:18), and describes Sinai in negative terms (12:18–21). The language is drawn from an unsympathetic reading of Deut 4:11–12 LXX, including a shared opening verb (except that Deut 4:11 uses the aorist προσήλθετε, “you approached,” not the perfect tense προσεληλύθατε). Then it proceeds to talk about the heavenly Zion as what “you have approached”:

ἀλλὰ προσεληλύθατε Σιών ὄρει καὶ πόλει θεοῦ ζῶντος,
 Ἱερουσαλήμ ἐπουρανίῳ, καὶ μυριάσιν ἀγγέλων,
 πανηγύρει καὶ ἐκκλησίᾳ πρωτοτόκων ἀπογεγραμμένων
 ἐν οὐρανοῖς καὶ κριτῇ θεῷ πάντων, καὶ πνεύμασι
 δικαίων τετελειωμένων καὶ διαθήκης νέας μεσίτη Ἰησοῦ
 καὶ αἵματι ῥαντισμοῦ κρείττον λαλοῦντι παρὰ
 τὸν Ἄβελ.

But you have approached Mount Zion and the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and myriads of angels, a festal gathering, and the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and God the judge of all, and the spirits of the perfected righteous, and Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant, and the sprinkled blood that speaks better than that of Abel. (Heb 12:22–24)

Precise interpretation of the groups of angels and humans in this heavenly Zion has been much debated, but there are good arguments that “the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven” and/or “the spirits of the perfected righteous” are or include the attested faithful of 11:40 who had previously been awaiting their perfection.²⁹ In other words, the witnesses are in heaven in this scene, which may be surprising given that they are surrounding the runners according to 12:1.

²⁹ See the contrasting interpretations in Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* 375–76; Koester, *Hebrews* 545–46; C. Spicq, *L'épître aux Hébreux*, vol. 2, *Commentaire* (Paris: Gabalda, 1953) 407–9.

But when and how does the approach to this scene by “you” take place, and what is the timeframe envisaged for heaven? The perfect tense “you have approached” could be read straightforwardly to suggest that the act has already happened. Recently a detailed case has been made that 12:22–24 (along with passages such as 4:14–16 and 10:19–22, which use the same “approach” verb in the form προσερχώμεθα) is evidence that the community to whom Hebrews was written practised heavenly ascents (proto-*merkabah* mysticism) and was looking into the present reality of heaven.³⁰ If so, my argument about the cloud of witnesses would be affected, because the witnesses would have attained heaven fully and the living Christians would be visiting it intermittently. However, while I am sympathetic to research on ascent mysticism in this period, I am doubtful that it is the best way to understand Hebrews, given the expectation its paraenesis raises in regard to a single and definitive heavenly entry in the future and its warnings against losing this opportunity without hope of restoring it (not least in 12:14–17, just before the passage under discussion).

A more likely interpretation, in my view, is that the heavenly Zion scene is eschatological.³¹ That is, it describes what the long-prepared heavenly city (11:16) will look like in the end time. Zion is often conceived of in apocalyptic writings of this period as the place of the final theophany, the counterpart of God’s primordial manifestation on Sinai.³² While there are connections with the founding of the new covenant (probably in contrast with the older covenant at Sinai), the description is festive and yet simultaneously God’s judging role is emphasised. Moreover, the verses just after (12:25–29) pick up the earthquake and fire themes from Sinai and carry them to the eschatological, cosmic dimension. I would see this scene as a window into all the angelic and human crowds that are assembled at the culmination of the whole covenantal project, not while the race is still being run. That is, the witnesses are present, but so too are the believers from the time after Jesus’ death and entry into heaven; the expressions in 12:23 are applicable to these believers as well as the witnesses. By this reading, the verb προσεληλύθατε, which we owe partly to the Sinai scene and its use of Deuteronomy, is then not describing the entry of the runners into the heavenly scene at the conclusion of the race but the whole experience of divine encounter for those assembled in heaven as they offer their

³⁰ Jody A. Barnard, *The Mysticism of Hebrews: Exploring the Role of Jewish Apocalyptic Mysticism in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (WUNT 2/331; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012) 209, 211 (on how to understand the paraenetic dimensions of Hebrews within this interpretation), 283–84.

³¹ Schenck, *Cosmology and Eschatology in Hebrews* 136, 179; Lane, *Hebrews 9–13* 461, 469–71; Koester, *Hebrews* 544.

³² Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* 374.

worship in eternity.³³ In order to encourage the audience to endure until the end, the author is sketching in words what the whole company of heaven will look like in the eschaton. This picture is detailed and delightful precisely because the addressees cannot yet see this scene for themselves. The horror and fear of the Sinai scene just beforehand make the appeal all the greater because of the contrast.

I have argued that the cloud of witnesses is present around the audience of Hebrews as they run their contest and that all these people (with the exception of any apostates) will notionally arrive together at their heavenly homeland. It remains only to draw attention to a verse from Isaiah that is quoted and put on Jesus' lips at Heb 2:13. The context is that the great arc of Jesus' journey has crowned him with glory and honour but also saved many humans, bringing them to glory too. Evidently at the culmination of his travels, Jesus declares, "Here am I and the children whom God gave me" (ἰδοὺ ἐγὼ καὶ τὰ παῖδιά ἃ μοι ἔδωκεν ὁ θεός, Heb 2:13, quoting Isa 8:18).³⁴ Jesus is forerunner, but those behind him are holding fast to their anchor of hope (cf. 6:19) and looking attentively at him as they run their race. He enters ahead, but he brings them along behind him. While there are parts of Hebrews that emphasise the endurance required for this lengthy and difficult life on earth, there are also portions that view those in Jesus' train as being on the edge of the promised land, on the threshold of the sanctuary. The promise of entering his "rest" is still open (4:1), and the call is to respond "today" (3:17–4:11). Jesus enters the sanctuary, followed closely by both the audience of Hebrews and the cloud of witnesses.

³³ This interpretation rests on the frequent scriptural use of προσέρχομαι in cultic contexts, and thus broadly speaking in settings of worship or prayer. The worship/prayer interpretation fits well for the verb's other uses in Hebrews (4:16; 7:25; 10:1 [a negative example, regarding sacrifices according to the Torah]; 10:22; and 11:6). Lane, *Hebrews 9–13* 459–60.

³⁴ "There is a parallel here to the practice by which the *triumphator's* freedpersons followed him in the triumphal procession, entering into the cultic space of sacrifice and acclamation of regnal power." Aitken, "The Body of Jesus Outside the Eternal City" 202.