

Afraid or Not Afraid?—Hebrews 11:27

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In Hebrews 10:35 the readers are called not to throw away their confidence, for those who persevere will receive the promise, the focus of which is the second coming of Jesus and final salvation (10:36-39). How is this possible? By faith! Heb 11:1 stresses that faith is “seeing” the unseen. Faith focuses on God (11:6) and endures just as the heroes of faith have endured. The most famous among these heroes of faith were Abraham and Moses.

In reference to the latter Hebrews 11:27 says: “By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king.” If this is a reference to Exodus 2:14-15, the question is, “Was Moses afraid or not?” because according to the Exodus passage Moses was afraid and fled to Midian. Which text is correct, Exodus or Hebrews? Has the author of Hebrews forgotten the Exodus narrative or has he reinterpreted an OT quotation? If the latter is true what are the implications?

The author of Hebrews was well versed in the OT. Quoting it repeatedly and alluding to it, he based his understanding of Jesus and his work on the OT. Hence, it would be extremely strange for him to make such a plunder. If he did it deliberately, we would question the author’s trustworthiness. He would belong to those who embellished ancient stories just to make the hero blameless and almost superhuman. Both options are problematic.¹ Therefore scholars have looked for solutions that do justice to both passages, Exodus 2:14-15 and Hebrews 11:27. Here are some suggestions:

- (1) Hebrews 11:27 does not refer to Moses’ flight to Midian (Exod 2:14-15) but to the Exodus from Egypt. When Moses and the Israelites left the country, Moses did not fear Pharaoh, but trusted God.²
- (2) Hebrews 11:27 alludes to Exodus 11:8 where Moses announces the last plague. It is suggested that the author of Hebrews understood the phrase “in hot anger” as referring to Pharaoh instead of to Moses as found in Exodus.³
- (3) When Moses fled to Midian he increased the wrath of Pharaoh which otherwise may have cooled down. Although he fled out of fear, his renunciation of a court position was an act of faith.⁴
- (4) Moses fled to Midian because he was afraid, but he still had faith that God somehow would use him to deliver his people.⁵
- (5) “. . . the author’s focus here is simply on Moses ‘leaving Egypt behind’ as Abraham left his homeland behind and as the addressees left their place in their society behind.”⁶ He is not specifically interested in the flight to Midian or the Exodus.
- (6) According to Hebrews 11:23 Moses’ parents were not afraid of Pharaoh’s decree, a detail not found in Exodus 2:2. In the same way the parallel statement in Hebrews 11:27 stressing that Moses was not afraid of Pharaoh does not occur in Exodus. The author of Hebrews wanted to state that by faith Moses overcame any fear of Pharaoh, a thought implicitly found in the OT. By keeping the invisible God before him Moses overcame “his fear through faith.”⁷

The majority of interpreters see Exodus 2:14-15 as the background of Hebrews 11:27. Their interpretations are complimentary to some extent. The problem with the Exodus interpretation is that Pharaoh and his people wanted the Israelites to go. At that time there was no reason to be afraid. Furthermore, the chronological sequence of events portrayed in Hebrews 11:27 and 28 would be destroyed, if the Exodus would precede the Passover. Although the author of Hebrews does not always proceed chronologically (Heb 11:8-19), in our passage he seems to do it. When dealing with Moses he uses five times the phrase “by faith.” The first refers to his birth, the second to his adulthood, the third to his departure from Egypt, the fourth to Passover, and the fifth to the passing through the Red Sea. Therefore, it seems better to connect Hebrews 11:27 with Exodus 2:14-15.

Exodus 2:14-15 is interesting insofar as Moses' fear is not directly connected to his flight.⁸ Neither is the wrath of the king directly expressed. This may be one reason why Philo (*Moses* 1.49-50) and Josephus (*Antiquities* 2:254-256) have not linked the motif of fear with the departure from Egypt.⁹ The author of Hebrews may have decided to take a similar approach. He certainly does not deny that Moses was afraid, but aside from his fear there was faith.

The two parallel statements in verses 23 and 27 are striking: "they [Moses' parents] did not fear the decree of the king"; "he [Moses] did not fear the wrath of the king." In the end, Moses was moved by faith rather than by fear. Faith triumphed over fear, because Moses kept the Unseen before his eyes. In this manner the readers of Hebrews, those in the first century A.D. and those throughout the centuries, including us, can persevere.

¹Yet they have been supported by some expositors. See James Moffat, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1979), 182.

²For a discussion of this view see William L. Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, Word Biblical Commentary 47B (Dallas: Word Books, Publisher, 1991), 374-375.

³Cf., Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistles to the Hebrews*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), 615.

⁴Cf. C. F. Keil, and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, Vol. 1: The Pentateuch (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982), 432. See also Moffat, 182.

⁵Francis D. Nichol, (ed.). *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, (Washington: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1957), 7:477.

⁶David A. deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude: A Social-Rhetorical Commentary on the Epistle "to the Hebrews"* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 412.

⁷Lane, 375.

⁸Cf. F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, Publishing Company, 1972), 321-322.

⁹Cf. Lane, 375.