Reading Hebrews in a Time of Pandemic: Heroism and Hope in the Face of Fear

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Abstract

Despite its well-known difficulties, the epistle to the Hebrews offers resources for reflection in a time of pandemic. Covid-19 has, in its own way, exposed how the existential fear of death can be crippling in its dominance and yet also provoke heroic actions. In the midst of its catastrophic effects for individuals and societies there has also been a demand for some signs of hope that might sustain efforts to find a better future. To read Hebrews in this setting is to be reminded that some of its major themes resonate with the experience of the pandemic's broad characteristics. It deals with its recipients' perceived bondage to the fear of death. It claims that this fear has been overcome through the heroic death of Christ, whose pattern of life is to be emulated in the heroism of his followers. It sets these topics within an overall message of hope, in which God's action in the exalted Christ is seen as both a 'word against death' and the promise of a better world. The article explores further the potential appropriation for present-day readers of Hebrews' treatment of each of these topics—fear of death, heroism and hope.

Keywords

Pandemic, Epistle to the Hebrews, fear, death, heroism, hope

Fear has been palpable during the Covid-19 pandemic. Fear of catching a potentially lethal virus has led most sensible people to shrink from contact with others via social distancing and to become accustomed to the wearing of face masks in public. Fear of a premature end to life has produced willingness on the part of the elderly and the most vulnerable to be quarantined at home indefinitely while disinfecting every item that crosses their threshold. For some it has created sleepless nights imagining the terrors of fighting for one's last breath alone, deprived of the consolation of family or friends. While there have been many acts of kindness and self-sacrifice, fears about survival have also led to panic buying and hoarding, to other outbreaks of selfish behaviour that have shown no thought for their possible fatal consequences for others, to constant attempts on the part of self-righteous commentators to find someone or something to blame and scapegoat, and even to individual acts of hostility against those suspected of being in contact with or carrying the virus. Fear of succumbing to the virus has inevitably brought whole economies to a virtual standstill and the brink of collapse. If lockdown measures are to be eased and people are to learn to live with the virus, such fear will need to be overcome. Otherwise, as some have suggested, fear could turn out to be more deadly than the virus itself, including having resulted in significant numbers of those with cancer and cardiac conditions not going for treatment and dying unnecessarily. At the root of all such fears is the basic human existential fear of death, whose manifestations can, of course, be healthy and necessary for survival or take on a crippling dominance, diminishing our humanity and distorting our values.

The letter to the Hebrews might not be the first place in the New Testament to which one would think to turn for any illumination on the pandemic and its consequences. It has the reputation of being difficult and full of detailed typological interpretation of the Jewish Scriptures with their regulations for priesthood and sacrifice that are simply foreign to the worlds

of most present-day readers. Some of those features are indeed there and were part of a coherent message of exhortation that made sense for the letter's first readers. But it is worth recalling that a major part of that exhortation was to encourage the addressees to hope in the face of the fear of death and that, in doing so, it employed images of heroism to portray both Christ and the type of life his followers were to emulate. Put like that, the letter's potential begins to become apparent. The pandemic revealed our fear of death as both natural and yet needing to be overcome. It provoked behaviours ranging from selfish denial to admirably sacrificial, and we have frequently called the latter heroic. Throughout the various forms of lockdown and learning to live with the continuing presence of the virus there have been calls for hope – not only hope that the pandemic will end and life will return to some form of normality but also hope that we might become a more humane society as a result and even hope that for loved ones who have died that might not be the final word on their existence. While fear of death, heroism and hope are interrelated in Hebrews, the following reflections will take them up in that order.

Fear of Death

Given the high infant mortality rates, it is usually reckoned that the life expectancy for someone in the Roman empire in the first century was about thirty years. Disease and death were ever-present phenomena, impinging far more frequently and forcefully on the experience of households than has been the case in Western societies that enjoy the benefits of modern medicine. Despite expectation of death's regular visitations, the readers of Hebrews, like most other first century people, would have viewed it as the cruel cutting short of lives. The letter's recipients appear to have had a further more specific reason for fearing death. The writer addresses his 'word of exhortation' (13:22) to them because they are being tempted to drift away

from or even reject their Christian confession. Two main overlapping factors appear to have contributed to producing this temptation. First, their community was facing persecution, suffering and possible death and this produced an accompanying fear. Secondly, feeding into their fear and discouragement was a sense of uncertainty and insecurity about the future salvation they had been promised. How could they be experiencing the salvation of the coming age (cf. 2:5; 6:5) when their world seemed to have changed so little and their specific allegiance to Jesus as Messiah was resulting in further suffering and even death? What sort of messianic age was this when their Messiah had been exalted to heaven and left them to face shaming and humiliation and when any claims of his imminent return bringing the peace, flourishing and glory of the age to come had so far failed to materialise?

As regards fear, the addressees belonged to a community that had already experienced a wave of persecution. They had 'endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and persecution, and sometimes being partners with those so treated.' At that time some had experienced imprisonment and others the plundering of their possessions (10:32-4). They had already, then, confronted persecution in its more everyday guise as persistent mistreatment, humiliation and marginalisation, and this public shaming for their confession of faith and the social stigma of association with a despised community were dispiriting at best. But now they appear to have been facing further testing. Some of them were at present in prison and being tortured (13:3). In attempting to brace the readers for continuing endurance, the writer asserts, 'In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood' (12:4). In context, this is a reminder that in their testing they have not been pushed to the limits endured by their pioneering hero, Jesus (cf. 12:2), and so have no grounds for shrinking back in the face of lesser suffering. It may, however, also indicate that the

writer believed fiercer persecution to be a possibility for them. It is significant that his preceding treatment of heroes and heroines of faith in 11:4-38 is concerned not simply to highlight their faith but also, in several instances, their faith in relationship to death.

The writer appears to believe, then, that a renewed threat of persecution is imminent, that the prospect of death for some is a realistic one, and that this has inevitably provoked an accompanying fear. Other references add support to this reconstruction of the situation. Early on there is talk of those 'held in slavery by the fear of death' (2:15), and the depiction of Jesus' testing mentions his loud cries and tears in the face of impending death (5:7). Then the last citation of Scripture in the writer's exhortation is from Ps. 118:6, a psalm which celebrates God's help in the face of hostility and death (cf. Ps. 118:10-18) and which here in its new context speaks to the fear of death - 'The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?' (13:6).[1]

Hebrews links the readers' fear of imminent death in an escalation of persecution to humans' more universal and basic fear of death when it speaks in 2:15 of 'those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death.' 'All their lives' refers to this common human plight in which anxiety about death is suppressed in order to carry on with living yet at the same time never ceases to exercise its domination. Ernest Becker's classic study of this phenomenon in *The Denial of Death* proposed that the two most fundamental elements in our lives are the fear of death and the urge to heroism and that the two are interwoven because we try to overcome the

[1] For fuller discussion of the role of the fear of death for the addressees, see Andrew T. Lincoln, *Hebrews: A Guide* (London: T & T Clark, 2006) 52-68 and the more recent socio-linguistic analysis of Bryan R. Dyer, *Suffering in the Face of Death. The Epistle to the Hebrews and Its Context of Situation* (London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2017).

former by means of the latter. By the urge to heroism Becker means the need to carve out meaning and worth that will tell ourselves and others we have counted despite our inevitable deaths. Most people learn to survive the dilemma of living with a desire for significance and immortality in bodies destined for decay and death by fitting into the forms of heroism, the standardised systems of death denial, their societies make available, whether that be devotion to family life, career goals, pursuit of wealth, literary or artistic creativity, or working for just or charitable causes. Such heroic behaviours build up the necessary character defences and traits that enable us to repress our basic anxiety about death, justify our existence and tranquilise ourselves with the everyday. The irony is that the deepest need is to be free from the fear of death and annihilation but it is life itself that awakens our fear and so to cope with it we have to shrink from being fully alive.[2] Richard Beck has helpfully extended Becker's discussion by showing that fear of death includes the interrelated but distinguishable categories of basic anxiety and neurotic anxiety. Basic anxiety stems from our biological survival instincts and as an initial reaction to threat is inevitable and necessary, while neurotic anxiety relates more to the heroic cultural systems built in the face of physical extinction and is at the root of how we build self-esteem and pursue meaning in the world.[3] In the words of Hebrews, through fear of death, in both its basic and neurotic guises, we are in lifelong bondage. Of course, for most people most of the time this fear is buried deeply but there are also particular occasions, such as the experience of terminal illness or deaths in the family or among close friends, when they experience its frightening reality and some of the defences drop away. At other times such personal fears are

[2] Cf. Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Free Press, 1973).

[3] Richard Beck, *The Slavery of Death* (Eugene, OR.: Cascade, 2014) 27-43, where he brings to bear insights drawn from psychoanalytic and terror management theories.

prompted by broader anxieties about disasters to our society and our planet – tsunamis and floods, wars and terrorist attacks, financial collapse, famine, global warming and the threat of the planet's extinction. The pandemic constituted by Covid-19, with its invisible threat, the difficulty of containing its spread and its catastrophic effects, is precisely the sort of catalyst that brings to the surface both types of existential fear—basic and neurotic—as it strips away so much of the façade of the diverse forms of heroism that assume that their construction of significance will be sufficient to stave off annihilation and substitute for immortality.

Heroism

The writer to the Hebrews wants his addressees to view their situation, including any crippling fear of death, in the light of the message they have received about Christ and what God had accomplished in him (cf. 2:1-4). His strategy is to direct them away from their external circumstances and inner anxieties and to encourage them to focus on Christ (cf. e.g. 2:1; 12:2,3) and thereby gain a renewed and sustaining vision of what confessing him entails. In a major passage that deals with how Christ can liberate from the fear of death (2:10-18), the writer employs both the mythology and imagery of his day to depict this rescue act. In the mythological depiction death is seen as in the domain of the devil's power and Christ defeats the devil, rescuing humans from the hold that death has had over them. Its present appropriation requires its own discussion,[4] but we shall concentrate here on its employment of the image of

[4] I have reflected on some aspects of this issue elsewhere. See Andrew T. Lincoln, 'Liberation from the Powers. Supernatural Spirits or Societal Structures?' in ed. M. Daniel Carroll, R., David J. A. Clines, and Philip R. Davies, *The Bible in Human Society: Essays in Honour of John Rogerson* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995) 335-54. It is interesting to see the remains of this mythological language surfacing in the British Prime Minister's address to the nation on

Christ as *archēgos*.

This image is part of a specific argument that begins in 2:5. As in the letter as a whole, here the writer applies Scripture read in the light of the new situation in Christ to the needs of his audience. He uses the LXX version of Psalm 8 as a word of exhortation that addresses the tension the readers are experiencing between the inauguration of the world to come and their continuing suffering, dishonour, persecution and facing of death. His point is that all things are meant to be subject to humanity, as the psalm asserts, but if humanity is understood in the light of the man, Jesus, then the psalm can be seen as speaking about how to live with the tension of this not yet being the case. 'We do not yet see everything in subjection' (2:8), as would be expected in the world to come (cf. 2:5). 'But we do see Jesus . . .' (2:9), who represents the 'already' of the coming world's salvation. Does the psalm say of humans that God has 'crowned them with glory and honour' (cf. 2:7)? God has kept this promise about human destiny through Jesus. The one who entered the human sphere and is now exalted to God's right hand is the representative human who has been crowned with glory and honour. For those who might be inclined to object that that may be the case for Jesus but they have been left to experience suffering and dishonour, the writer adds a further observation. Jesus received his exalted status not in spite of but 'because of the suffering of death' and thereby tasted death for everyone, removing its sting (2:9). There will be glory and honour for believers too—God is bringing many sons and daughters to glory (2:10)—, but it should not now be surprising if they have to travel

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May 10, 2020 when he referred to the pandemic as 'this devilish illness.'

the same route to glory as their hero or champion who has blazed the trail and who was perfected through suffering.

It is here then that the term *archēgos* appears. It is frequently translated as 'pioneer' (e.g. NRSV; NIV), which captures some of its force but does not immediately alert one to the fact that it was also employed to designate legendary figures, the gods or other heroes, who accomplished great deeds. So, for instance, it is commonly used to refer to Heracles/Hercules, the most popular hero in Greco-Roman writings. While Heracles was originally acclaimed for success in conflict and battle, the various legends about him emphasise different praiseworthy characteristics of their hero and philosophical schools, such as those of the Cynics and Stoics, could employ the traditions about him to showcase the virtues they wished to promote. Fairly constant, however, is his portrayal as the courageous conqueror who, through the accomplishments of the twelve labours, achieved fame, honour and a status among the gods. Particularly interesting are those accounts that see Heracles as conquering death, subduing the gods of the nether regions, and thereby allaying fear. 'He has crossed the streams of Tartarus, subdued the gods of the underworld, and has returned. And now no fear remains; naught lies beyond the underworld' (Seneca, *Hercules Furens* 881-92). In addition, his own death became the means of apotheosis. He had put on a poisoned cloak that began to burn him, causing excruciating pain. Unable to remove the cloak, Heracles decided that death was preferable to such pain. Eventually he asked for help from the gods and Jupiter sent lightning to consume his body and take him to live with the gods on Mount Olympus. Once immortalised, Heracles became a benefactor who could dispense aid to human supplicants and enable them to avert disasters.[5] Against the background of

[5] For summaries of the various aspects of the Heracles legends and a detailing of their sources, including Euripides' *Alcestis* and Seneca's *Hercules Furens* and *Hercules Oetaeus*, see David E.

its use of Jewish Scriptures, Hebrews, then, appears in addition to employ aspects of the Heracles tradition to show that they were even more appropriate for depicting what God had done in Christ. Heracles can be depicted as a benefactor of others through his strength but there is also a morally ambiguous side to the portrayal of his heroic achievements where self-assertiveness can take the form of untamed violence. Hebrews depicts Christ as willing to identify with humans in their mortality to the point of sacrificing himself as a victim of violence and in order to taste or experience death for their sake (2:9). Whereas Heracles' exploits also brought him fame and a heroic reputation in this life, the heroism involved in Christ's death only brings glory after the suffering.

This point is underlined when in 12:2 Hebrews shows that its taking up the language of heroism for depicting Christ is not just incidental and confined to the earlier passage – '. . . looking to Jesus the *archēgos* and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.' Significantly, this occurs as the culmination of the 'cloud of witnesses' in 11:4 -12:1, frequently referred to as 'the heroes of faith.' Hebrews sees the heroism of Christ's death and exaltation both as once for all in what it has achieved and, in its pattern, a heroism to be emulated by others. Indeed it sees the lives of those Jewish heroes it lists as participating in this pattern in advance. They did not shrink back in the face of death, knowing that reward and acclaim would not be in this life but in the future promised by God. The list ends in 11:32-40 by

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Aune, 'Heracles and Christ. Heracles Imagery in the Christology of Early Christianity,' in ed. David L. Balch, Everett Ferguson and Wayne A Meeks *Greeks, Romans and Christians* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 3-19; Kevin B. McCruden, *Solidarity Perfected: Beneficent Christology in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008) 51-61.

telling of those who exercised faith in the face of severe persecution and violent death - by fire, by the sword, by stoning. As 11:35 indicates, it sees such faith as implying belief in the resurrection – 'others were tortured, refusing to accept release [on the condition of renouncing their faith], in order to obtain a better resurrection [not just a temporary return to mortal life].' Moses himself can be claimed for this heroic pattern. According to 11:24-7, persevering 'as though he saw him who is invisible' and looking ahead to the reward, he refused the worldly honour of being called a son of Pharaoh's daughter. Instead of transient pleasures and treasures he chose marginalisation in solidarity with the ill-treated people of God, thereby suffering abuse and shaming for Christ, while being unafraid of the Pharaoh's hostility and persecution. With the great cloud of witnesses and now with the example of their hero par excellence (12:1,2), the recipients of Hebrews should have every incentive to emulate this pattern of living that calls into question the honour and shame values of their culture and to do so in circumstances that have not yet involved their blood being shed. They can be exhorted to lift any drooping hands and strengthen any weak knees in order to persevere without fear in the face of suffering and death (12:3,4,12). This sort of heroic living will also entail in the process serving others through love and good deeds, practising hospitality and seeking peace with all (6:10; 10:24; 12:14; 13:1,2).

As the case of the various traditions about Heracles illustrates, heroes embody the values and qualities groups or whole societies prize and do so in such a way as to inspire emulation. Similarly Hebrews employs Christ and its other heroes to embody the values its writer wishes to inculcate in the recipients – a willingness to face shame, suffering and death without being publicly honoured in this life, knowing that it is God's approval, God's action in Christ to deliver from bondage to fear and God's promise in Christ of future glory that count and that shape a life of endurance and sacrificial service of others. These are values

that have remained central to Christian faith. The present pandemic has provoked a questioning of some of the more superficial values admired in a celebrity and consumerist culture and for many has revealed that we still prize as heroic some of these Christianly shaped human qualities. It has shown who we really depend on for our society to function and how they are often the lowest paid and most vulnerable among us. Self-sacrificial compassion has been on display in these frontline workers, who, in a variety of settings, have been willing to put their own lives in danger, have been the objects of great gratitude, and have rightly been hailed as heroes.[6] Interestingly, sociologists of disaster have observed several phases after a disaster, such as a pandemic, strikes. The first phase often sees heroic acts but the extended aftermath can include a disillusionment phase when stress takes its toll and exhaustion and a variety of negative reactions surface. At this point the quality of resilience needs to be developed if a society is to reach a reconstruction phase.[7] Hebrews calls for the pattern of heroism seen in Christ to be lived out by the addressees over the long haul. It urges them not to leave behind the compassion and solidarity with others they displayed in earlier days and reminds them of their need for endurance (10:32-6). They are to be imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises (6:12). Patience and faithful endurance appear to be the functional equivalents of the resilience required to sustain

[6] For one argument that, even in a post-Christian society, these values still stem from Christian roots, see Tom Holland, *Dominion. The Making of the Western Mind* (London: Little, Brown, 2019).

[7] See e.g. https://www.samhsa.gov/dtac/recovering-disasters/phases-disaster; Thomas E. Drabek, 'Sociology of Disaster' in ed. K. Korgen, *The Cambridge Handbook of Sociology. Vol. 2* (Cambridge: C. U. P., 2017) 139-47.

heroic acts over a lengthy period.

Arguably, the conscious acts of heroism witnessed in the pandemic are only ultimately coherent if the universe and human lives are not simply the product of chance. Certainly for Hebrews sacrificial living and loving and the hope that sustains them in the face of death are utterly dependent on a Creator God who has been at work in the history of Israel and in the life, death and exaltation of Jesus.

Hope

While the deaths that are feared from the pandemic have their own distinctive traumatic characteristics and have deprived families of the usual rites of grieving, like all deaths, they come as an interruption, something anticipated but never adequately prepared for. Before death arrives, a particular story was being told, one that has now been brought to an abrupt conclusion. In cutting short the narrative that was being constructed, death appears to have the last word in a way that is inappropriate and unnatural. Nearly all religions and cultures, anthropologists have observed, treat death as unwelcome and they express the unacceptability of death having the last word through a variety of rites and practices, funerary and other, that function as words against death.[8]

Seen from this perspective, Hebrews, like other New Testament documents, treats the Christian gospel itself as at its heart a word—a word of good news—against death. The gospel announced that the God of Israel had raised Jesus from the dead, so that in the case of Jesus death had not had the last word. In Hebrews the figure who is both hero and high priest is also God's Word ('in these last days God has spoken to us by a Son' – 1:2) and that divine speech act

[8] See e.g. Douglas A. Davies, *Death, Ritual and Belief: The Rhetoric of Funeral Rites*, 3rd edn (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017).

provides hope because it is a word against death. In particular the further depiction of Jesus' high priestly role in 6:13-7:28 develops this notion of God speaking in Jesus. The writer wants his readers to replace discouragement with the hope or confident assurance that God will fulfil God's purposes for the world's salvation. In 6:13 he takes up the notion of God swearing an oath and points out that one of his key texts, Ps. 110:4, in talking about the priesthood of Melchizedek also talks about an oath. So 6:13 starts with the concept of God's promise and oath and the same concept will round off this section in 7:28 – 'but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect for ever.' In addition to oath, the other major concept that runs through this passage is that of hope. Just previously in 6:11 the writer has said he wants the recipients to realize the full assurance of hope and it is his discussion of the Melchizedek priesthood that will enable him to elaborate on this. He underlines this theme in 6:18,19 – 'the hope set before us' and in 7:19 – 'the better hope.' Hope and confidence are the antidotes for the recipients' fear of future suffering and death and for any sense of being disappointed and insecure about the future. To help them have hope, the author inserts into his commentary on Ps. 110:4 the first instance in Scripture of God's oath-taking, where Abraham was the recipient. One might have expected the bare word of God in itself to have been certainty enough but God condescended to the human level and to human forms of legal agreement (cf. 6:16,17), and so God gives an oath that signifies definite and binding ratification of the agreement. To swear an oath was also to pledge oneself to life or death. So God pledged Godself to the death to keep the promise to Abraham. This, says the writer, should indicate that it is absolutely impossible for God to prove false to what God has promised (6:17,18a). That assertion addresses the very issue the readers are facing – whether the claim about the end-time promises being fulfilled in Christ can really be trusted, since the world to come has not arrived as

expected. The writer then explicitly underlines that this quality of assurance was not just for Abraham but also for the heirs of the promise, who include himself and his readers – 'so that through two unchangeable things [God's promise and God's oath] ... we who have taken refuge might be strongly encouraged to seize the hope set before us' (6:18).

This moves the discussion from the promise-oath to Abraham to the form in which believers now have the assurance of this promise-oath. They have it embodied in Jesus and in his exaltation to heaven and presence there as high priest for ever according to the order of Melchizedek. The writer sees followers of Christ as having fled from the coming judgment on the sinking ship of this present world order in order to grasp as their own the refuge provided in the Christian hope. The hero in whom their hope is anchored has entered heaven as a forerunner or pioneer on their behalf and that means that they can consider themselves moored to an immoveable object (6:19,20). As the type of high priest, who remains for ever, he is 'a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul,' their unbreakable link to the permanent heavenly realm. The writer then elaborates on Melchizedek's superiority to the Levitical priesthood in order to show that Jesus' new Melchizedek priesthood is based on the power of an indestructible life and therefore introduces a better hope (7:15-19). The reference to the power of Jesus' indestructible life indicates just how much the predominant notion of God's exaltation of Jesus in Hebrews presupposes and includes God's raising of Jesus from the dead.[9] Having made his assertion about Jesus' risen life as the basis of the better hope, the writer is now ready to return to the image with which this section started, that of God swearing an oath. The better hope represented by Jesus' Melchizedek priesthood is based on an oath. In the words of Ps. 110:4, 'The Lord has

[9] For an extensive treatment of this point, see David M. Moffit, *Atonement and the Logic of the Resurrection in Hebrews* (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

sworn and will not change his mind, "You are a priest for ever"' (7:20,21). The force for the readers is that God has given them a permanently living oath, Jesus as high priest, to guarantee the divine promises of a better covenant and it is he who serves as their security and confidence. This imagery connects back to the opening of the letter where, as we noted, the Son was seen as God's final and decisive word (1:2). That point is now made even more forcefully. God has not only spoken in the Son, God has also gone on oath in this Son as high priest. To its discouraged addressees this passage is saying that God has given a word of honour, in which the divine reputation is at stake, and because that word consists of what has taken place in Jesus, God cannot ever go back on the promise of the salvation of the world to come. The resurrection and exaltation of Jesus to heaven as high priest is God's absolute oath and therefore the foundation for assured hope.

The way in which God's promise or oath can sustain them in their present situation is illustrated later in 13:5,6. These verses contains God's promise – 'I will never leave you or forsake you.' That translation does not convey the force of the Greek whose clauses have a double and a triple negative. It is so emphatic that one can view it as the equivalent of God going on oath. But this strong assurance is meant to have two effects. It provides the motivation for facing without fear whatever persecution, torture or death the future might bring. 'So we can say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?"' But it also provides the motivation for the preceding exhortation – 'Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have.' God's oath never to abandon God's people in life or death grounds the ability to live a life free from greed and consumerism. Arguably, for our situation of pandemic, it is this sort of living that is desperately necessary for people and governments if any of the proposals for returning to an improved society and for sustaining the

planet are going to work – the heroism of practising a theology of enough over against an idolatry of accumulation and consumption where individuals and nations cannot see beyond short-term selfish gains.

Hebrews summarises the significance of hope in its message when, in its exhortation in 10:23, the Christian confession itself is described in terms of hope – 'let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering.' Again the warrant is spelled out – 'for he who has promised is faithful.' This notion of the God who is faithful to God's promises drives the argument of Hebrews. It offers an invitation to any who are tempted to give up on their calling, on their world and on Christian hope because of the difficulties, darkness, devastation and death they may be encountering. That invitation is to take another look at Jesus and realise the significance of what God has said and done in him. As the Son, he is also the hero who has defeated death and the living high priest who is exalted to heaven. As such, he is not simply God's word against death but also God's oath that there will be a new heaven and earth, the better world of the justice and peace of the city that is to come (cf. 12:28; 13:13,14). The response to fear is confident hope, based on God's promise and oath in raising and exalting Christ, that this God will remain the same God who does not abandon God's creatures (cf. 13:5b,6). Such hope provides the stimulus to imagine the better world, to see the apparently abruptly ended stories of lives within its larger narrative, and to act now in living out one's own heroic existence in the face of death, an existence patterned on Christ's self-giving, solidarity with others, and compassion. With this overall message, Hebrews repays persevering with material, such as its seemingly obscure discussion of Melchizedek, in order to appreciate it as a resource for reflection and appropriation in a time of pandemic and its aftermath.[10]

[10] I am grateful to Dr. Stephen C. Barton for comments on an earlier draft of this article.