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Blessed Are Those Who Have Not Seen and Yet Have Known By Faith:  
Knowledge, Faith, and Sight in the New Testament  
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Key Words: 2 Corinthians 5:7; Biblical Epistemology; Hebrews 11:1; Faith; John 20:29; Knowledge; Sight.

Dru Johnson and Douglas Kennard have recently done some good work on biblical epistemology.<sup>1</sup> But there is more to be done, and in this article I aim to make a modest contribution towards a fuller picture of the biblical theory of knowledge. The New Testament speaks of our having faith rather than sight: ‘Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed”’ (John 20:29<sup>2</sup>). Does this mean that Christianity is about separating faith from knowledge? I think not. Rather, the New Testament understanding of knowledge is that faith is a way of knowing by trust in reliable authority.

The New Testament passages distinguishing faith and sight distinguish not faith and knowledge, but knowledge that relies on trust in reliable authority and firsthand knowledge, for which sight is used as a metonym. When the New Testament authors specify that we have faith but not sight, they also teach us that we *do* have knowledge.

In this article I shall consider the New Testament passages that distinguish faith from sight and explain what I take to be their epistemology. First I shall briefly review some passages in the New Testament which present Christian theology as *known* truths about God. Then I shall briefly overview my understanding of the New Testament distinction between faith and knowledge. Then I shall take a brief look at passages from Peter and John distinguishing faith and sight, and then make a closer examination of passages from Paul and the author of Hebrews.

## I. The New Testament: Faith is knowledge.

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<sup>1</sup> Dru Johnson has recently analyzed the everyday workings of knowledge, with an emphasis on philosophy of science, in *Biblical Knowing: a Scriptural Epistemology of Error* and in *Epistemology and Biblical Theology: From the Pentateuch to Mark’s Gospel*. He argues that these workings show that knowledge relies in large part on reliable authority, and on seeing the world in light of its testimony by obeying its commands; this is also the biblical way of knowing. Similarly, Kennard in *Epistemology and Logic in the New Testament* draws numerous connections between Jewish epistemic canons, philosophical epistemic canons, and the New Testament’s logic and epistemology. See Dru Johnson, *Biblical Knowing: a Scriptural Epistemology of Error* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013); *Epistemology and Biblical Theology: From the Pentateuch to Mark’s Gospel* (New York: Routledge University Press, 2018); *Knowledge by Ritual: A Biblical Prolegomenon to Sacramental Theology*, *Journal of Theological Interpretation* Supplement 13 (Warsaw, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2016); and *Scripture’s Knowing: A Companion to Biblical Epistemology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2016). Douglas Kennard, *Epistemology and Logic in the New Testament: Early Jewish Context and Biblical Theology Mechanisms that Fit Within Some Contemporary Ways of Knowing* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, scripture translations are from the ESV.

The New Testament writers persistently treat faith and knowledge as overlapping.<sup>3</sup> The picture would be rather complex if we were to paint it fully—with nature, miracles, prophecy, apostleship, the inward testimony of the Holy Spirit, and more all playing a part. Central to this picture is the idea that faith is placed in an eminently reliable authority—‘God, who never lies’ (Titus 1:2), speaking to us of matters or by means of acts ‘in which it is impossible for God to lie’ (Heb. 6:18). According to the biblical perspective God’s credit is very, very good, as known from his mighty works of redemption, as stated in Psalm 136; God’s credit is very, very good, as known from his promises kept, according to Joshua 23.

Here are just a few examples of New Testament writers claiming that there is an overlap of faith and knowledge.

In Luke’s preface to his gospel, he explains that he has researched the matter in a manner resembling that of a historian or a journalist, in order that his readers may know that the histories of Jesus are accurate: ‘[...] it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught’ (Luke 1).

In Romans 1, Paul explains that some truths about God are *knowable* to all from creation, and are indeed *known* to all who do not suppress that knowledge. He says:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. (Rom. 1:18–20)

Again, in 1 Corinthians Paul appeals to the foundations of Christian theology in the dual evidences of fulfilled prophecy and eyewitness testimony to the great miracle of the Resurrection of the Messiah:

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born. (1 Cor. 15:3–8)

John in his Gospel says that the miracles of Jesus, as recorded by eyewitnesses, are evidence that he is the Messiah: ‘Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name’ (John 20:30–31). Again, John in his first letter explains that his testimony and that of other apostles is that of eyewitnesses—and also *earwitnesses* and *handwitnesses*:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you

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<sup>3</sup> In this paper I am more interested in New Testament exegesis than criticism. I will take the New Testament claims at face value—not, for example, challenging the traditional accounts of authorship. Although I leave to others the work of tracing their effects, critical theories such as a two-author theory of the Petrine epistles would no doubt, if correct, weaken my case to some degree.

the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete. (1 John 1:1–4)

2 Peter explains that fulfilled prophecy accompanied by eyewitness testimony to the glory of God bestowed on Jesus constitutes solid evidence for Christian doctrines:

For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,’ we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed [...]. (2 Pet. 1:16–19a)

## II. Faith vs. sight

Jesus tells Thomas that it is blessed to believe without seeing. Paul tells us that we walk by faith rather than by sight. The author of Hebrews tells us that faith is in that which we do not see. If, then, New Testament faith is knowledge, why do we have this consistent theme in the New Testament, the separation of faith and sight? Don’t we *know* everything we *see*? And vice versa? If some bit of theology is *known*, shouldn’t it also be *seen* to be true?

We should probably not expect to find that New Testament theology is always perfectly neat and tidy with its categorizing of faith, sight, knowledge, reason, and so on. Nor are the New Testament categorizations of faith and *works* always neat and tidy, allowing for precise definitions and causing things to fall into neat stacks in little boxes. The New Testament *was* written in language, after all, and language is rarely, if ever, all that neat and tidy. (Nor, for that matter, is life.) Faith and works, for example, may be *contrasted* in one place (such as in Paul), *linked* in another (most obviously in James, but also, as I read him, in Paul), and shown to be more or less the *same* thing in a third place (such as in the letter to the Hebrews, as we will see below)!

*Mostly* precise definitions and *reliable* generalizations which correspond reasonably well with the New Testament language should be enough. In John 20:25 Thomas says he will not *believe* (*pisteuo*) without seeing and touching. In 20:27 Jesus tells him to be *believing* (*pistos*) rather than *unbelieving* (*apistos*), and in 20:29 he observes that Thomas now *believes* (*pisteuo*) because he has seen. So faith can operate in the presence of sight. Similarly, in the opening of John’s first letter we see that John believes having seen. So there is a *contrast* or a *distinction*, but not an absolute *dichotomy* between faith and sight in the New Testament.

Here are four New Testament passages which distinguish faith and sight:

- 1 Pet. 1:8: ‘Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him [...].’
- John 20:29: ‘Jesus said to him, ‘Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.’
- 2 Cor. 5:7: ‘[...] for we walk by faith, not by sight.’
- Heb. 11:1: ‘Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.’

There are at least two relevant senses of sight here: the literal and the use as a metonym for firsthand knowledge. One obvious sense of the term in these passages is *literal* sight—that which we do with our eyes. This appears to be the meaning in 1 Peter, and also in John 20 where

Thomas wants to see and touch. Probably the same meaning is intended in Heb. 11 as well, and possibly also in 2 Cor. 5, inasmuch as Paul is talking about the believer's resurrection body, which is something which (and with which) we would no doubt be able to see.

But there is another meaning. Thomas wants to *touch* as well as to see. Christ lets him, and then observes that he has *seen*. There is something which includes both of these ways Thomas has known—seeing and touching, but for which seeing is used as a name. This is knowing *firsthand*, without relying on trust. Sight is a metonym for firsthand knowledge. This is no doubt the meaning used in 2 Cor. 5, inasmuch as the resurrection body is something one would eventually know firsthand by *having* it and not merely by *seeing* it. Christ means this in John 20. Heb. 11, I suspect, also has this secondary meaning (on which more in good time.)

The New Testament distinction between faith and sight is thus a distinction between two ways of knowing: by rational trust, and firsthand. It is not a separation of faith and knowledge; this, happily, is an error rarely if ever made in the commentaries, although from what I can tell they tend not to expound on the New Testament idea of sight as one but not the only mode of knowing.

This particular biblical idea of knowledge is a bit different from some ideas of knowledge which have captured the attention of Christian thinkers. For example, Alvin Plantinga's analysis does not emphasize our knowledge of God via trust in reliable testimony, but rather the direct and unmediated knowledge of God by means of the *sensus divinitatis*.<sup>4</sup> With the greatest respect for Plantinga and his epistemology, the biblical account of knowledge I am considering could do with a little more attention.

A more detailed inspection of these passages will confirm our interpretation.

### III. Peter

Peter tells his readers that they 'have not seen him' and 'do not now see him.' The first thing to note is that 2 Pet. 1:16–21 claims that Peter and the other apostles *did* see. Second, 1 Pet. 1:18–19 refers to some of the related theology as information *known*: '[...] knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers [...] with the precious blood of Christ [...]' Of course, this Christ is the one the readers love, and the ransoming is the reason they love him. The word for 'knowing' here is *eidó*, from *oida*, a word unambiguously connoting knowledge.<sup>5</sup> A third clue presents itself from the well-known 1 Pet. 3:15: '[...] but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, [...]' The word *apologia*, a defense or explanation or reason, is 'a speech of defense,'<sup>6</sup> difficult to achieve if the author's idea of Gospel faith has nothing to do with reason or evidence.

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<sup>4</sup> Among other writings, Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). The difference between Plantinga's analysis and mine is perhaps most evident on pages 265–66 where he looks at two of the same New Testament passages and concludes that faith is a direct knowledge of God produced by the Holy Spirit. I do not contest the sort of knowledge Plantinga describes, but I think there is another sort described in the New Testament.

<sup>5</sup> On the senses of *oida*, see William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, and F. Wilbur Gingrich; "οἶδα;" *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000. Logos Bible Software; Faithlife Corporation).

<sup>6</sup> William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, and F. Wilbur Gingrich; "ἀπολογία, ας, ἡ;" *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000. Logos Bible Software; Faithlife Corporation).

Putting together these clues from the Petrine epistles, a picture of their religious epistemology emerges. Faith in and love for the Christ believers have not seen is second-hand knowledge depending on reliable testimony—namely, on the witness of those who *have* seen. In virtue of their reliable testimony, they do know that Christ really did these wonderful things on their behalf. They must respond with love and faith and hope, following him and being prepared to explain to others the evidence they have for this love, faith, and hope.

#### **IV. John**

John 20:24 tells us Thomas did not see the risen Jesus the first time. The other disciples tell him (20:25) *they* have seen, but he says he will not believe until he also sees and touches. Days later, Jesus meets him and tells him to see and touch. Verse 27: ‘Do not disbelieve, but believe.’ Thomas believes, and Jesus tells him, ‘Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.’

Now consider what John says immediately after: ‘Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name’ (John 20:30–1). Only twenty-four verses later he says that his readers also *know* what they believe: ‘This is the disciple who is bearing witness about these things, and who has written these things, and we know that his testimony is true’ (John 21:24). So when John quotes Jesus as saying that faith without sight is blessed, it seems that he is not (or is not primarily) pointing to ‘a source of knowledge that transcends our ordinary perceptual faculties and cognitive processes [...]’.<sup>7</sup> Rather, John is emphasizing a very ordinary way of knowing—knowing through reliable testimony—and thus he appeals to his own status as a witness passing knowledge on to us. Not only life but also knowledge comes by this belief. John’s readers have not, like Thomas, seen and touched; yet, he considers, they also may believe and know. So there is some knowing without seeing. And that *seeing* would be a variety of first-hand knowledge—that which comes by first-hand, physical experience.

#### **V. Paul**

Here is the passage from Paul’s letter to the Corinthians in context:

For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling, if indeed by putting it on we may not be found naked. For while we are still in this tent, we groan, being burdened—not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee.

So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. (2 Cor. 5:1–9).

Verse 7 tells us that we live not by sight but by faith. The object of faith, that in which we *have* faith, appears to be either the God in whose presence we would like to be but are not *yet*, or else the main topic of this passage, the doctrine of the coming resurrection of the dead.

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<sup>7</sup> Plantinga, 266.

Consider the basis of this faith in verse 5: God ‘has given us the Spirit as a guarantee’ of the keeping of these promises and the fulfilling of these desires. The Holy Spirit is the *arrabon*, the guarantee, the pledge, the earnest-money, the down-payment. This word, *arrabon*, is an economic term, a business term. It means ‘payment of part of a purchase price in advance, first installment, deposit, down payment, pledge.’<sup>8</sup> The Holy Spirit is a down-payment making the credit the Christian places in God’s promises a solid business decision. In Paul’s way of thinking, this trust is rational and has a strong claim to being knowledge, much like comparable economic knowledge by trust. I know I will be paid for my work, the credit card corporation knows, on the basis of my good credit, that I in turn will pay my debt to them, and the Christian knows that the resurrection of the dead will take place.

Of course, this presumes that believers really do *have* the down-payment, and that they *know* they do. In Paul’s view the Corinthian believers know they have the Holy Spirit by the wonders He does among them (1 Cor. 12), by the wonders done when the Holy Spirit came on the church in the first place (Acts 2), by His power gradually to heal them of sin (Gal. 5:16–24),<sup>9</sup> and by the miracles done among them when Paul first came to them with the Gospel (2 Cor. 12:12). Thus David Garland: ‘How do Christians know that the promise of a heavenly existence is real? Paul’s answer is that the experience of the transforming and uplifting power of the Holy Spirit now in their lives is the one piece of empirical evidence that shows that God’s promises are real.’<sup>10</sup> And Colin Kruse: ‘Paul’s hope rests not only upon the objective knowledge that it is God who is preparing him for a glorious future, but also upon the subjective experience of the Spirit which believers enjoy.’<sup>11</sup> (I would add to Kruse’s remark by specifying that this *subjective experience* pertains to knowledge of an *objective fact*.) That eschatological belief which Paul here says is by faith rather than sight is part of a system of theological belief which is, at certain points, subject to direct confirmation.

All of this, in Paul’s way of thinking, makes this trust in this particular bit of eschatology a rational faith—without sight. And that makes it a faith which is also knowledge,<sup>12</sup> assuming that

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<sup>8</sup> William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, and F. Wilbur Gingrich; “ἀρραβών, ὄνομα, ὄνομα;” *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000. *Logos Bible Software*; Faithlife Corporation).

<sup>9</sup> Moser, in an effort to improve on Plantinga’s neglect of arguments for his theological views, suggests that the Christian’s ability to love better is evidence of God’s working in her life; Paul Moser, “Man to Man with Warranted Christian Belief and Alvin Plantinga;” *Philosophia Christi* 3.2 (2001), 369–77.

<sup>10</sup> David Garland, *2 Corinthians*, The New American Commentary, vol. 29 (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1999), 264.

<sup>11</sup> Colin Kruse, *2 Corinthians* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 158.

<sup>12</sup> Or at least a faith which meets the requirement for knowledge that it be rational or justified or warranted. As epistemologists have known at least since Plato wrote the *Meno*, knowledge requires that a proposition be true and believed, but there must also be another condition, a third thing to connect belief to truth—a thing epistemologists have often described in terms of rationality, justification, evidence, or warrant. Johnson offers a different biblical understanding of knowledge as requiring recognizing the authorities God has appointed, but also *acting* on their instructions and *looking* at the world in light of what they say; *Biblical Knowing*, 3. He also claims that knowledge is an active thing, indeed an activity that works by ritual; *Knowledge by Ritual*. I make no objection to this analysis; if it is correct, then *my* analysis is considering only that first requirement for biblical knowledge, the recognizing that an authority is reliable and appointed by God. This, I take it, is the biblical way of satisfying the requirement for knowledge of rationality, justification, evidence, or warrant—whether or not Johnson is correct that the biblical idea of knowledge involves more requirements than the one philosophers emphasize.

the beliefs are *true*.<sup>13</sup> So the New Testament says that we *do* know what we *see*, but we do *not* see everything we *know*—because some knowledge is by trust rather than sight. Our knowledge here is not firsthand knowledge, which is why it is not the same thing as ‘sight.’ Speaking of hope for the same eschatological event, ‘the redemption of our bodies,’ Paul in Rom. 8:23–25 says that this hope is not seen. Sight in Rom. 8 is plainly a metonym for firsthand knowledge, inasmuch as this redemption is something Paul’s reader would expect to know *firsthand* by *experiencing* it. This experience would include the full range of the experience of *being* these redeemed persons with redeemed bodies—including but not limited to sight. Sight is a metonym for firsthand knowledge, and even without it in Rom. 8 those ‘who have the firstfruits of the spirit’ know that this will take place.

Let us return to our text. Consider 2 Cor. 4:13–14: ‘Since we have the same spirit of faith according to what has been written, ‘I believe, and so I spoke,’ we also believe, and so we also speak, knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence.’ Perhaps we are tempted to take 2 Cor. 5:7 as our operative definition of faith and to presume that New Testament faith means believing without seeing, and thus believing without knowing. But then what would we do with 2 Cor. 4:13–14?

I suggest we do it the other way around. 2 Cor. 4:13–14 clearly states that believing the Gospel coincides with knowing that certain promises of God will be kept. Paul here seems to be speaking of the apostles as such, not of his readers. But why should they lack knowledge who have heard from the witnesses who knew, since we who have heard from the witnesses who knew in the areas of science, geography, and history derive some knowledge from their testimony?<sup>14</sup> Perhaps we could take this as a clue to the New Testament idea of faith—that it overlaps with knowledge. Then, upon reading in 5:7 that we walk by faith rather than sight, we can conclude that this variety of knowledge is independent of sight.

In fact, 4:13–14 encapsulates what we have seen already from looking at chapter 5: Faith is a mode of knowing, not firsthand, that God’s mercies are waiting for the believer after death. Johnson’s paraphrase in light of ‘a broader biblical connotation of faith’ is appropriate: ‘We walk by trusting authentic authority and not merely by sight.’<sup>15</sup>

Johnson’s further commentary on this passage is rewarding. To walk by faith rather than sight is not like walking with our eyes closed and knowing where we go by ears alone. It is more like using our ears to know which way to go and using our eyes to apply that knowledge to each step.<sup>16</sup> Johnson adds, ‘Faith and sight are not opposed to one another. Trusting the correct guides, docents, or prophets is the first step that enables our eyes to see.’<sup>17</sup> My only quibble is that in this passage Paul is speaking of sight as it relates to the object of faith, not as it relates to the ground on which we are walking or the life we are living. Sight is firsthand knowledge, faith is

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<sup>13</sup> And assuming this is not a Gettier case. Roughly, a Gettier case, named for the epistemologist Edmund Gettier, is a situation in which I have a warranted belief, but in which the warrant does not lead me to the truth and, yet, when the belief is still true—by sheer luck. The interested reader might consult Edmund Gettier, “Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?,” *Analysis* 23.6 (1963), 121–23, and Linda Zagzebski, “The Inescapability of Gettier Problems,” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 44.174 (1994), 65–73.

<sup>14</sup> Augustine’s line of reasoning in *Confessions* 6 and *On the Usefulness of Believing*.

<sup>15</sup> Johnson, *Biblical Knowing*, 3.

<sup>16</sup> Johnson, *Biblical Knowing*, 1–3.

<sup>17</sup> Johnson, *Biblical Knowing*, 3.



knowledge by trust, and we walk in the light of our good theology which we know in the latter way rather than the former. I cannot, accordingly, agree with C. K. Barrett that in this passage ‘Faith does not proceed on the basis of an objectively authenticated Christ’ in the Resurrection but rather ‘trusts the absent and undemonstrable Christ, whose history has already vanished into the past and whose coming lies in the unknown future.’<sup>18</sup> Faith in this passage could indeed be traced to the Resurrection insofar as it relies on the promises of Christ whose reliability is confirmed by the Resurrection. Granted that the future which is not seen is largely unknown, it seems that Paul considers this particular component of it to be known by trust in reliable promises and by down-payments. And it seems that the immediate basis of this faith is not Christ but the *arrabon* of the Holy Spirit, who according to Paul is neither absent nor indemonstrable nor unknown.

## VI. The author of Hebrews

‘Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen’ (Heb. 11:1). Is this verse really all about a way of believing, an attitude of mind, a trait of assent? Is this verse saying that ‘faith is a hope that is absolutely certain that what it believes is true, and that what it expects will come,’ that faith is ‘the hope which looks forward with utter certainty’?<sup>19</sup> Or is it saying that faith is an inner process instigated by the Holy Spirit which confers warrant directly on our theology such that faith itself is the evidence or warrant for unseen truths?<sup>20</sup> Should a scholarly discussion about how we should interpret this verse focus on the ‘subjective’ aspect of my inner assurance versus an ‘objective’ aspect—the way in which this faith grants me a present experience of future realities?<sup>21</sup>

The first thing to notice about this passage is the soteriological sense of ‘the conviction of things not seen.’ I fear we may have misunderstood this passage most of our lives. It is, in Greek, ‘the *elegchos* of unseen *pragmaton*.’ *Elegchos* can mean ‘the act of presenting evidence for the truth of someth., *proof, proving*,’ alternatively, it can mean ‘the act of charging a pers. with wrongdoing’ or expression of strong disapproval, *reproof, censure, correction*.<sup>22</sup> *Pragma*, the singular of *pragmaton*, means ‘that which is done or happens, *deed, thing, event, occurrence, matter*.’<sup>23</sup> 2 Tim. 3:16 reads in the Majority Text, ‘All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for *elegchos*, for correction, and for training in righteousness’ (with other texts reading *elegmon*). Here the sense would seem to be ‘reproof’ (as the ESV and some other translations handle *elegmon* or *elegchos* in 3:16) or ‘conviction.’ Similarly the infinitive of the verb *elegcho* in Titus 2:9. I think this is the case in Heb. 11:1 as well; *elegchos* is the change

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<sup>18</sup> C. K. Barrett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1973), 158.

<sup>19</sup> William Barclay, *The Letter to the Hebrews: Translated with an Introduction and Interpretation by William Barclay* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press; 1st edition Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1955), 144–45.

<sup>20</sup> Plantinga, 265.

<sup>21</sup> Scholarly debate to this effect cited by David Allen, who seems to favor *both* views, in Allen, *Hebrews*, *The New American Commentary*, vol. 35 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2010), 543.

<sup>22</sup> William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, and F. Wilbur Gingrich; “ἐλεγχος, ου, ό;” *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000. *Logos Bible Software*; Faithlife Corporation)

<sup>23</sup> William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, and F. Wilbur Gingrich; “πράγμα, ατος, τό;” *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000. *Logos Bible Software*; Faithlife Corporation). An examination of *pragmaton* is curiously lacking from some commentaries.

required of us by the unseen *pragmaton*.<sup>24</sup> These *pragmatai*, it seems to me, are, literally, *deeds*. The primary referent is *the deeds of Christ*. The author of Hebrews has just described the mighty sin-purifying deeds of Christ in Heb. 9:23–25, where he says that they are heavenly deeds, deeds done in ‘holy places’ which are not ‘made with hands.’ The author comments on the same deeds again in chapter 10.<sup>25</sup> In 10:1 *pragmaton* refers to these acts, of which the Mosaic sacrifices were symbolic. These are, plainly, deeds we do not *see* with our eyes. We do not know them in that or any other way firsthand. But, we are told, we do know them by the reliable testimony of Christ and of those who testified to him and to those deeds. (11:39–40 shows that the faith of Old Testament saints looked forward to the same deeds of Christ, which to them were *future* deeds.) This, I think, is the primary referent of *pragmaton*; however, there are secondary senses.<sup>26</sup> 11:3 extends the referent of *pragmaton* to other past deeds, the creation of the universe by God; the earlier clause, referencing things we *hope* for, extends the reference to *future* deeds of God in the eschaton. With reference to these particular future events faith allows us to see them, and the author of Hebrews says so in verse 27 when we are told that Moses saw God by faith. A close examination of this use of the language of *seeing* in the New Testament is outside the scope of this paper. It must suffice to observe that this appears to be a non-literal and metaphorical, but *not* metonymal, use of sight—as a metaphor for knowing or understanding *well*, yet by other means than physical eyesight, as in the line from the old hymn, ‘by faith we can see it afar.’<sup>27</sup>

So, taking into consideration these referents of *pragmaton*, faith is first of all the reproof of the unseen deeds of Christ. It is the life-change required of us in response to those deeds. The work of Christ requires us to live differently, to live in light of them. Secondarily, insofar as *pragmaton* references future deeds, faith is the life-change required of those who look forward to them.

The context strengthens this interpretation. Recall the verse immediately preceding 11:1.<sup>28</sup> Heb. 10:39: ‘But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.’ This verse is a call to a way of life following Christ. It is something like a coach’s pep talk: ‘We are not those who give up now, in the time of trial. We are those who persevere!’ Heb. 10:38 refers to ‘my righteous one,’ who ‘shall live by faith.’ Now, in 10:39, the author states that faith requires us to live in a particular way. At last, in 11:1, the author gives his definition of faith, and it is a description of this way of life: Faith is the life-change required by the unseen deeds of Christ.

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<sup>24</sup> Bruce makes the same observation; F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 277.

<sup>25</sup> “The use of the word *pragma*, from which we get the English word ‘pragmatic’, points back in Hebrews to what the writer said about the accomplishment of Christ as our High Priest, Hebrews 10:1–18.” David Packer, “Hebrews 11, 1–2,” *NightTimeThoughts.org*, <http://nighttimethoughts.org/?p=42> (accessed November 6, 2017).

<sup>26</sup> “But the word *pragma* also refers today to spiritual realities around us and points forward to all the promises of God that lay in the future.” Packer, “Hebrews 11, 1–2.”

<sup>27</sup> An aspect of Hebrews 11:1 and 11:27 pointed out by Marvin Vincent as well as by Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 277; Marvin R Vincent, *Vincent’s Word Studies*, Heb. 11:1, <https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/vnt/hebrews-11.html> (accessed November 6, 2017).

<sup>28</sup> Donald Guthrie on Heb. 11:1: “There is no break between this verse and the previous one;” Donald Guthrie, *Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 225.

So it seems that Hebrews 11:1 is not exclusively (if even primarily) epistemic, but is soteriological and practical.<sup>29</sup> It is not standing alone at the beginning of chapter 11 as the verse to which we should go for a statement of the epistemic characteristics of biblical faith—for an understanding of what sort of a belief it is and what relationship it bears to reason and evidence. Hebrews 11:1, rather, is to be taken in conjunction with chapter 9 and with 10:39 as one of the first places to which we *should* go for a statement of the *practical* characteristics of faith.<sup>30</sup> This teaching is much like that of the epistle to James. Faith involves works; it is expressed through works, or we might even say that it *is* a work. Heb. 11:1 is saying that faith is the life-change required of a believer by the unseen deeds of Christ. (Johnson emphasizes the participatory and ritual aspect of the life-change and its characteristic of *testing* God’s promises by acting on them.<sup>31</sup>)

Now I am not saying that Heb. 11:1 is not *at all* about modes of belief. In fact, it seems to me from the *rest* of chapter 11 that 11:1 is *also* about modes of belief. Faith involves things we ‘must believe’ (11:6). These heroes of faith did not see that in which they had faith, for they ‘did not receive what was promised’ (11:39). So 11:1 is about a particular mode of belief as well as a particular mode of life—faith is the life lived in response to the work of Christ inasmuch as one believes in that unseen work without having seen it. After all, why should a connection of faith and works be separate from a distinction between one kind of belief and another? A separation of belief and life is foreign to the Bible’s teachings. So I do not propose that 11:1 is not at all about faith and sight—only that it *is* about works, more so than is commonly appreciated. I also propose that 11:1 defines faith as the life-change required by the unseen deeds of Christ.

Moreover, I propose that this lack of sight is in no way a lack of knowledge. Nothing in the verse ties all knowledge to seeing. Rather, this passage links attributes of knowledge to faith. Heb. 11:3: ‘By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible.’ This, the author presumes, we have learned from reliable authority—in this case, Moses in the Torah. This understanding, from *noeó*, might be taken to mean mere *comprehension* of a statement, not knowledge that the statement is *true*. But let us rewind a bit to an earlier moment in the text, Heb. 10:26: We must not ‘go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth.’ This ‘knowledge’ is *epignósis*, which may be translated simply as ‘knowledge.’<sup>32</sup> And how did a believer get *this* knowledge? She got her knowledge of *creation* from the testimony of a prophet, Moses, and she gets *this* knowledge from the Son of God, by whom God ‘in these last days’ has spoken (Heb. 1:2). This, I suggest, is the most important objective aspect of faith in Heb. 11:1—not that faith gives the believer a present experience of her future hope (although this is not an unbiblical notion), but that it is based on objective facts known by trust in reliable and confirmed authority.

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<sup>29</sup> Allen helpfully reviews three scholarly theories on “the nature of faith in Hebrews, especially ch. 11.” These are the view that faith in Hebrews is “an ethical quality,” and two views focused on the object of faith as a belief. One of these is future eschatological events and the other is Christ. Allen favors the third view. I myself think the correct and complete answer would incorporate all three aspects. Allen, 541–42.

<sup>30</sup> George Guthrie, citing Philip Hughes, is emphatic of the prominent active aspect of the *elegchos* clause; George Guthrie, *The NIV Application Commentary: Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 374–75.

<sup>31</sup> *Scripture’s Knowing*, 83.

<sup>32</sup> William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, and F. Wilbur Gingrich; “ἐπίγνωσις, εως, ἡ;” *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000. *Logos Bible Software*; Faithlife Corporation).

Perhaps we might interpret Heb. 11:1 in light of 10:26 and 11:3—at least when it comes to determining the epistemic characteristics of faith. This would hardly be a novel way of thinking. It would merely be a bit Augustinian, for Augustine held that understanding comes by faith. Thus Donald Guthrie on verse 3: ‘But the words *By faith we understand* show that knowledge is not independent of faith.’<sup>33</sup>

So Hebrews 11:1 is about faith in relation to works, yet is also about faith in relation to sight and about faith in relation to knowledge. And what, in sum, does it say about the relationship of faith, sight, and knowledge? Let us recall chapter 9: The deeds of Christ are heavenly and not physical. This is why they are, quite literally, unseen as far as our bodily eyes are concerned. So 11:1 refers to *literal* sight. I think it is also a metonym for firsthand knowledge. For any of the heroes of faith surveyed in chapter 11, when he eventually should ‘receive what was promised’ (11:39), would know by more than his physical eyes alone. So Hebrews 11:1 says that faith involves a life-change, and it also tells us that Gospel faith is faith in that which we do know but do *not* know firsthand.<sup>34</sup>

The astute reader will perhaps be dissatisfied that I have not yet said anything about the earlier phrase from 11:1, which defines faith as ‘the *hupostasis* of things hoped for.’ This *hupostasis* could mean, suggestive of the Pauline *arrabon*, ‘guarantee of ownership/entitlement, *title deed*.’<sup>35</sup> Or it could mean ‘a plan that one devises for action, *plan, project, undertaking, endeavor*,’ which I suggest is the sense here, as it is in Heb. 3:14.<sup>36</sup> Faith is the believer’s steadiness of mind or conviction with respect to those things she hopes for. The sense of the passage is not such as to exclude any possibility of doubt,<sup>37</sup> but rather to forbid the believer to waver in her commitment. Faith is the commitment and conviction that sticks to Christ no matter what.<sup>38</sup> Faith is not (or is not primarily) the source of warrant for Christian theology,<sup>39</sup> but the commitment to stick with that theology which is warranted in other ways. So, again, the emphasis is on a commitment which constitutes a life-change. Of course, the commitment is based on the knowledge of what Christ has accomplished, and looks forward to what is yet to come; the believer does not (yet) have first-hand knowledge of that fulfillment, for what she only

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<sup>33</sup> Donald Guthrie, 227.

<sup>34</sup> Indeed, there may even be an economic aspect of the passage much like that of 2 Corinthians 5:7, as Wuest explains; Kenneth S. Wuest (*Hebrews in the Greek New Testament for the English Reader* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1947), 193. Bruce (*The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 277) is skeptical, and George Guthrie supports him; George Guthrie, n. 4, 374. Allen very helpfully overviews various scholars on this topic; Allen, 542–43.

<sup>35</sup> William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, and F. Wilbur Gingrich; “ὑπόστασις, εως, ἦ;” *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000. *Logos Bible Software*; Faithlife Corporation). Arndt, Danker, and Bauer are also optimistic about *hupostasis* as the “realization” of the unseen realities as a possible meaning of Heb. 11:1.

<sup>36</sup> On which latter point Bruce concurs; *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 277.

<sup>37</sup> See Barclay above, at footnote 18.

<sup>38</sup> Donald Guthrie: “Faith is the act of commitment on the part of the believer [...]” (226). George Guthrie: “Thus, we can translate this part of the verse: ‘Now faith is the resolute confidence [...]’;” George Guthrie, 374.

<sup>39</sup> See Plantinga above, at footnote 19.

*hopes* for she does not yet have (as Paul says in Rom. 8:24). The *hupostasis* is a mental state, but one with a profound practical application.<sup>40</sup>

## VII. CONCLUSION

In New Testament epistemology faith is trust, and trust in reliable authority is a way of knowing. The metaphor of sight is a metonym for firsthand knowledge, whereas the way of knowing the gospel on which most Christians rely is the way of trusting in reliable authority. Various New Testament authors concur on this. Paul in particular suggests that the credit we place in God's eschatological promises is confirmed by the down-payment of the Holy Spirit, much like the credit the bank places in a creditworthy customer who takes out a loan—knowing that the outstanding commitment will be met. Moreover, the author of Hebrews does not tell us that faith is a confidence in what we do not know, but a commitment to live by the Gospel and its promises, a Gospel known to be true, but not known firsthand.

In short, Jesus is not saying that we are blessed if we believe blindly and without any good evidence, but that those are blessed who have not seen and yet have known by faith!

## ABSTRACT

The New Testament speaks of our having faith rather than sight. This distinction is not made to distinguish faith from knowledge. Rather, it is to distinguish one kind of knowledge from another. We may know by trust in reliable authority; this knowledge is necessarily secondhand, but it is knowledge all the same. This, I argue, is the New Testament idea of faith. Another way of knowing is firsthand. Sight in the New Testament, I argue, is a metonym for firsthand knowledge. In this article I consider the meaning of faith and sight in the relevant New Testament passages, with an extended exegesis of 2 Cor. 5:7 and Heb. 11:1.

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<sup>40</sup> Indeed, the *elegchos*, as Vincent observed long ago, is “included in *hupostasis*,” Vincent, *Vincent's Word Studies*. Thus the life-changing reproof of the unseen deeds of Christ is part of the conviction relating to the things we hope for.