

SINAI AND ZION

THE MOUNTAIN OF LAW VS. THE MOUNTAIN OF GRACE

¹⁸ For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest ¹⁹ and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. ²⁰ For they could not endure the order that was given, "If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned." ²¹ Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear." ²² But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, ²³ and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, ²⁴ and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. Hebrews 12:18-24 (ESV)

Man was created to live in an intimate relationship with his Creator.

Disastrously, man turned his back on his covenant Lord in a self-willed¹ act of idolatrous rebellion.² Consequently, this relationship is now marked by separation, fear, and dread (Gen. 3:7-8). Knowing that the Creator had become their Judge and that they had come under the penalty of the creation covenant (Gen. 2:15-17), Adam and Eve, in an act of self-justification,³ attempt to cover up their nakedness (Gen. 3:7). Further, upon hearing the sound⁴ of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, they immediately hide themselves from His presence (Gen. 3:8). While they hide, God calls out in judgment to

1. Michael Horton writes, "Idolatry is not an accident . . . as if some of us just happened to hit on wrong candidates for deity." *Lord and Servant: A Covenant Christology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 141.

2. Concerning Adam's transgression of God's command, D. A. Carson writes, "What is crucial is not the tree but the rebellion. What is so wretchedly tragic is God's image bearer standing over against God. This is the de-god-ing of God so that I can be my own god. This, in short, is idolatry." *The God Who Is There: Finding Your Place in God's Story* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2010), 33.

3. This act becomes the first instance of self-justification in the Bible.

4. *בְּקוֹל*, "voice".

Adam,⁵ “Where are you?”⁶ Adam replies, “I heard the sound⁷ of You in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid myself.” Tragically, Adam’s fearful response will become the reply of every human conscience in the presence of God.⁸

In Hebrews 12:18-24, the author of Hebrews expresses deep concern about where his readers stand in relation to the God who asks, “Adam, where are you?” Donald Guthrie writes,

Pregnant with relevance for modern living, the two mountains must be understood as theological constructs, two ways of viewing relationship with God, that are as meaningful today as when these words were first written. *This is the most foundational key to interpreting Hebrews 12:18-24.* Although the author couches his words in spatial language (“you have not come . . . but you have come”), he is not concerned with physical movement and literal mountains. No, these mountains represent two covenants, and the author is concerned with where his listeners are in relation to God.⁹

The intended readers were most likely Christian Jews who were beginning to slide back into Judaism.¹⁰ Such a reversion to the old covenant would be disastrous. They would be like the Israelites who trembled in fear when they

5. The Lord’s question is not one of *location* but rather of *judgment*: i.e., “Adam, where are you in relationship to me now that you have broken my covenant?”

6. The fact that both “אֲדָמָה” and “הָאֱלֹהִים” are singular in Hebrew indicates that God is confronting Adam not as a private person but as a public one (i.e., the representative head of the whole human race).

7. קוֹל, “voice”.

8. Horton, *Lord and Servant: A Covenant Christology*, 122.

9. Donald Guthrie, *Hebrews: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 424.

10. If the intended readers are Gentiles, it is almost inconceivable there is no mention of circumcision. This insight was gained from class notes taken in D.A. Carson’s class, “DM 803—Issues in Biblical Studies: The Epistle to the Hebrews with Special Reference to its Use of the Old Testament.”

heard God's "voice" thundering forth from Mount Sinai (Heb. 12:19-21; cf. Ex. 20:19).¹¹

O'Brien summarizes the author's concern: "Christ, His sacrifice, and His priestly work are so relativised that they are effectively denied, and apostasy is only a whisker away. It is to prevent just such a calamity that the author writes this epistle."¹² Such a reversion to Jewish beliefs and practices would mean in effect the abandonment of the gospel, and to lose the gospel is to lose everything!¹³

Therefore, to prevent such a calamity, the author sets forth two contrasting relationships with God, determined by two antithetical covenants. By contrasting the old and new covenants, the author demonstrates the superiority of the new covenant over the old covenant. This superiority not only stresses the disastrous consequences of reverting under the old covenant (10:26-31; 12:25-29) but also provides the motivation for his readers to progress and move forward rather than drift and fall away from God (2:1-3; 3:12).

11. The author's readers would also be like Adam and Eve who hid in fear when they heard the voice of God calling to them in the Garden after they had sinned.

12. Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 13.

13. Philip Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977), 10.

I. Structure and Flow of Hebrews 12:18-24

Hebrews 12:18-24 represents the rhetorical climax of the book.¹⁴ In this expositional pericope, the author gathers together and summarizes¹⁵ the main points and themes of the theological sections of his epistle.¹⁶

Verses 18-24 consist of two carefully crafted sentences,¹⁷ which develop an absolute contrast between Israel under the old covenant (vv. 18-21) and believers under the new covenant (vv. 22-24). This contrast—demonstrating the superiority of the new covenant over the old covenant—underscores the comprehensive theme of the absolute supremacy of Christ.¹⁸

The two sentences are governed by the verb προσέρχομαι.¹⁹ Under the old covenant, Israel had come before a terrifying vision of the Lord at Mount Sinai (vv. 18-21).²⁰ In comparison, under the new covenant, Christians have come to a joyful vision of the Lord at Mount Zion (vv. 22-24).

14. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, 477.

15. Ibid., 478. Key phrases and themes such as “angels” (12:22), “heaven” (12:22-23), “first born” (12:23), “perfection” (12:23), “Jesus the mediator of the new covenant” (12:24), and “sprinkled blood” (12:24) are picked up from the expository parts of the epistle.

16. It is appropriate to refer to Hebrews as an “epistle” since this term was a very broad category in the New Testament and since this is how Hebrews has been classified throughout church history. See O'Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, p. 21, and D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 596.

17. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, 477.

18. Philip Hughes notes, “The superiority of Christ . . . is identical with the superiority of the new covenant, of which He is both the fulfillment and the mediator, to the old covenant,” *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 3. Hebrews repeatedly emphasizes that Jesus is *better* (κρείττων), cf. 1:4; 6:9; 7:19, 22; 8:6; 9:23; 10:34; 11:16, 35, 40; 12:24. For example, Jesus is better than the angels (1-2), Moses (3), Joshua (4), Aaron (5), Abraham (6), Melchizedek (7), etc.

19. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, 477-78.

20. Noting the omission of a specific reference to Mt. Sinai in v. 18, O'Brien writes, “Although our author has Mount Sinai in mind when he describes Israel’s coming to meet with God, he makes no explicit mention of this mountain of revelation. His omission may serve to underscore the positive pole of the antithesis, the heavenly Mount Zion” (479).

The two contrasting paragraphs are structurally balanced with seven features describing Israel's encounter with God at Mount Sinai and seven features describing the Christian's encounter with God at Mount Zion.²¹ The seven features of the Sinai theophany include:

- A. *A mountain* that can be touched (v. 18a)
- B. A blazing fire (v. 18b)
- C. Darkness (v. 18c)
- D. Gloom (v. 18d)
- E. Tempest (v. 18e)
- F. The sound of a trumpet (v. 19a)
- G. A voice speaking words (v. 19b).

The seven features of the Mount Zion theophany include:

- A. Mt. Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God (v. 22a²²)
- B. Thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly (v. 22b)
- C. The church of the firstborn (v. 23a)
- D. A Judge, God of all (v. 23b)
- E. The spirits of righteous men made perfect (v. 23c)
- F. Jesus the mediator of a new covenant (v. 24a)
- G. The sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel (v. 24b).

In each encounter, God speaks (v. 19b, v. 24b) to those who are gathered before Him. However, God's voice functions differently depending on the covenant in which He speaks. God's voice from Mount Sinai creates trembling and fear (v. 21). In distinction, God's voice from Mount Zion creates celebration and joy (v. 22).²³

The "speaking" theme recalls the words of the prologue (1:1-4) and also ties this expositional section to the subsequent warning section of verses 25-29

21. Ibid., 478.

22. Concerning the first descriptive feature of Mount Zion, O'Brien observes, "These three designations are synonymous and should be regarded as a single unit" (483).

23. Mount Sinai represents a covenant of law whereas Mount Zion represents a covenant of grace.

("See that you do not refuse him who is speaking" v. 25a).²⁴ The contrast not only emphasizes the better privileges granted under the new covenant but also the greater responsibility to listen to God's voice.²⁵

Hebrews 12:18-24 fits within a larger section (12:14-29).²⁶ It is preceded and followed by two strong exhortatory sections (vv. 14-17; vv. 25-29).²⁷ The transitions from verses 14-17 to verses 18-24 to verses 25-29 fit the author's pastoral strategy of weaving together exposition and exhortation in order to encourage his readers to persevere.²⁸

The themes introduced in verses 14-17 are further developed in verses 18-24 and 25-29.²⁹ In verses 14-17, the author exhorts the church to pursue peace and holiness (v. 14) and to guard against apostasy (vv. 15-17). The pursuit of holiness is critical because without it no one will see the Lord (v. 14).³⁰ The motive for

24. *Ibid.*, 478.

25. Philip Hughes writes, "Death was the penalty for the violation of the law of Moses: a much worse punishment awaits whoever tramples under foot the blood of the eternal covenant and treats with contempt the grace of God in Christ Jesus." *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 542.

26. Harold Attridge, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), 366. Attridge writes, "Many other commentators . . . prefer to see a break before vs 12. Vss 12 and 13, however, clearly conclude the athletic metaphors begun at 12:1" (366). See also William L. Lane, *Hebrews 9-13* (Dallas: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 445.

27. Concerning 12:14ff., Attridge notes, "The final block of paraenetic material begins here and extends through 13:21," *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 366.

28. For example, concerning the transition to vv. 25ff., John Owen writes, "Having given a summary account of the two states of the law and the gospel, with the incomparable excellency of the latter above the former, the apostle draws from thence a charge and exhortation unto these Hebrews, as unto perseverance in faith and obedience." *Hebrews* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1991), 7:353.

29. Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, 445.

30. The requirement for the pursuit of holiness must not be understood as being in any way meritorious. John Calvin explains, "...when the Lord stimulates us by warning and exhortation, he at the same time moves and stirs up our hearts, that his exhortations may not be in vain, or pass away without effect. Then from precepts and exhortations we are not to infer what man can do of himself, or what is the

pursuing holiness is the prospect of seeing the Lord.³¹ This theme of the vision of God is picked up again and enlarged in verses 18-24, where the author contrasts the fearful vision of God on Mount Sinai (vv. 18-21) with the joyful vision of God at Mount Zion (vv. 22-24).³²

The watchful care³³ demanded of the entire congregation for the spiritual well-being of the church is governed by three subordinate clauses introduced by the phrase, *μή τις* (*that no one falls short*, v. 15a; *that no root of bitterness springs up*, v. 15b; *that no one is sexually immoral or unholy*, vv. 16-17).³⁴ Every detail of the contrasting vision is designed to encourage the readers to pursue peace and holiness (v. 14) and to guard against apostasy in their midst (vv. 15-17).³⁵

The urgent warning of verses 25-29 recalls the author's exhortations and themes set forth in verses 14-17.³⁶ The hook word "λαλέω" ties together the abrupt transition from verses 18-24 to verses 25-29. The omission of any linking conjunction in verse 25 parallels the opening of verse 14.³⁷ Therefore, in addition to serving as the motivation for the exhortatory section in verses 14-17, the contrasting vision of God in verses 18-24 also serves as the motivation to obey

power of free-will; for doubtless the attention or diligence which the Apostle requires here is the gift of God." *Calvin's Commentaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1996), 22:325.

31. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, 472.

32. Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, 445. See also O'Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, 472.

33. ἐπισκοποῦντες, "watching continually" see O'Brien, 473.

34. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, 473.

35. *Ibid.*, 477.

36. *Ibid.*, 491. Lane writes, "The concluding paragraph resumes the motifs of forfeiting the grace of God, of contempt for birthrights secured through the covenant, and of the consequent rejection by God, all of which were introduced in vv 15-17." *Hebrews 9-13*, 445.

37. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, 492.

the exhortatory warning in verses 25-29. The believer's privileged status under the new covenant makes his responsibility to listen to the voice of God even greater than Israel under the old covenant.

II. Exegesis of Hebrews 12:18-24

Exegesis of Hebrews 12:18-21

Verses 18-21 highlight the terrors of the old covenant. The author draws attention to the fearful nature of the Israelites' relationship to God as they are assembled before Him at Mount Sinai.

The paragraph opens in verse 18 with the verb *προσεληλύθατε*. There are several important observations in relation to the author's use of this verb. First, both contrasting paragraphs begin with the verb *προσέρχομαι*, which serves to draw the contrast between the people of Israel gathered at Mount Sinai and Christians gathered at Mount Zion. Second, this verb locates the author's source of verses 18-21 in Deuteronomy 4:11 (cf. Ex. 19:16-19).³⁸ Third, unlike the LXX, which employs the aorist tense of *προσέρχομαι*, the author of Hebrews employs the perfect tense in verses 18 and 22, which serves to make the author's statements emphatic.³⁹ Fourth, *προσέρχομαι* is a common term used in Hebrews to speak of coming into a relationship with God (cf. 4:16; 7:25; 10:22; 11:6).⁴⁰ The mountains represent two distinct covenants, which determine a person's relationship to God. God, speaking in the old covenant, thunders, "Stay away!

38. *Ibid.*, 479.

39. *Ibid.*, 479. Attridge observes, "The perfect tense indicates that the action, and the relationship it symbolizes, has begun and is still in effect." *Hebrews*, 372.

40. Attridge, *Hebrews*, 372.

Do not come near!” Therefore, how much better is the new covenant in establishing a relationship with God, which says, “Come and join the festive celebration!”? Only the new covenant can provide the enduring motivation for the believer to pursue holiness (vv. 14-17) and to welcome the one who is speaking (v. 25)!

The terrifying vision of God is laid out in seven foreboding images. The author begins by telling readers they have not come to a mountain that can be touched, probably alluding to Exodus 19:12.⁴¹ Even though the author doesn’t mention the word mountain (cf. 12:22, Mount Zion), it is implied in the participle *ψηλαφωμένῳ*, which alludes to Exodus 19:12 (cf. 12:20).⁴²

The descriptive visible elements listed in verse 18 (blazing fire⁴³, darkness, gloom,⁴⁴ tempest) emphasize the fearful experience of the Israelites as they gathered at Mount Sinai (Exod. 19:16-22; Deut. 4:11-12).⁴⁵ These external visible phenomena served to obscure rather than reveal God.⁴⁶ The Israelites did not have a clear vision of God at Sinai. They only experienced the terrifying effects of

41. God speaking to Moses commands, “And you shall set limits for the people all around, saying, ‘Take care not to go up into the mountain or touch the edge of it. Whoever touches the mountain shall be put to death.’”

42. Concerning the omission, O’Brien writes, “His omission may serve to underscore the positive pole of the antithesis, the heavenly Mount Zion.” *The Letter to the Hebrews*, 479.

43. Attridge notes that the word *πυρὶ*, “serves a structural function, as an inclusion with the end of the chapter (vs. 29).” *Hebrews*, 373.

44. Concerning the word, *ζόφῳ* Attridge observes, “The poetic term ‘gloom’ . . . is not found in the biblical formulas and is probably an authorial addition to intensify the foreboding imagery.” *Hebrews*, 373.

45. John Owen writes, “A view of God as a judge, represented in fire and blackness, will fill the souls of convinced sinners with dread and terror.” *Hebrews*, 7:317.

46. Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, 462.

His presence. Recalling verse 14, the author underscores how Mount Sinai offers a terrifying vision of God, which discourages the readers from persevering.

In verse 19, the author introduces two audible elements that added to the terrifying Sinai theophany (the blast of a trumpet, Exod. 19:16; a voice speaking words, Deut. 4:12). The references to “speaking” (vv. 19, 24) reveal that Mount Sinai and Mount Zion are places of divine revelation.⁴⁷ The frightening word of law that God speaks at Mount Sinai is contrasted with the *better* word of the gospel (v. 24) that God speaks from Mount Zion.

However frightening were the accompanying phenomena (Exod. 19:16, 19; 20:18), it was the voice of God that utterly overwhelmed the people (Exod. 20:19; Deut. 5:23-27).⁴⁸ Consequently, the Israelites begged that no further messages be spoken to them (12:19b-20).

Some suggest the people’s request to Moses indicated a refusal to listen to the voice of God speaking (cf. 12:25). However, the emphasis of verses 19-21 is on the people’s fear that was elicited by the terrifying sound of words⁴⁹ rather than their rejection of God’s word.⁵⁰ The Israelites feared that God would kill them if they continued listening to Him speak. Moreover, according to Deuteronomy

47. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, 480.

48. John Owen, discussing Israel’s status before God at Mount Sinai writes, “They are like Adam, when he could no longer hide himself, but must appear and answer for his transgression. They have no refuge to betake themselves unto. The law condemns them; they condemn themselves; and God is represented as a judge full of severity.” *Hebrews*, 7:320-21.

49. φωνῆ ῥημάτων

50. Lane points out that the syntactical construction of v. 19 conveys the meaning of “to beg” rather than “to reject.” He writes, “It is important . . . to observe that when the verb signifies ‘to disregard’ or ‘to reject,’ it is followed by the accusative (BAGD 616), as in v 25. . . . In v 19b, however, the verb is followed by the negative particle μή and an infinitive and conveys the sense of pleading that something not be done.” *Hebrews 9-13*, 462-63.

5:28-29, God approves of the people's request and appoints Moses to mediate His words.⁵¹

The emphasis on fear fits well with verses 20-21. Verse 20 is tied to verse 19 by the explanatory γὰρ. The people begged that no further word be spoken to them *for* they could not bear the command. The command recalls Exodus 19:12-13. At Sinai, God set limits around the mountain for the people and paired the command with a strict penalty of death for transgressing it. Thus, God's command further underscores the people's response of fear as well as the unapproachability of a holy God under the old covenant.⁵²

The terrifying experience of Sinai is brought to a climax in verse 21.⁵³ Israel's encounter with God at Sinai is presented in the context of a judgment scene in which Moses is also included.⁵⁴ Moses was equally terrified by the events at Sinai. So terrible was the "manifestation"⁵⁵ of God's presence, Moses cries out, "I am full of fear and trembling."

The word φοβερὸν indicates a profound dread at the prospect of encountering the living God in judgment (cf. 10:26-31).⁵⁶ The word ἔντρομος carries the idea of extreme terror or fear that is often accompanied by physical

51. John Calvin writes, "But by the words the people entreated...is not to be understood that they refused to hear God, but that they prayed not to be constrained to hear God himself speaking; for by the interposition of Moses their dread was somewhat mitigated." *Calvin's Commentaries*, 22:332.

52. Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, 463.

53. Attridge notes that this is the last reference to Moses in Hebrews. *Hebrews*, 374.

54. Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, 463.

55. The phrase τὸ φανταζόμενον is used only here in Christian literature. *Ibid.*, 463.

56. *Ibid.*, 463.

trembling (cf. Mark 5:33; Acts 7:32; 16:29). Together, these terms serve to reinforce each other and accentuate Moses' fearful experience on Mount Sinai.⁵⁷

Neither Exodus 19 nor Deuteronomy 4-5 speak of Moses trembling with fear. Thus, some suggest the answer is found in the word ἔντρομος in v. 21. In Acts 7:32, Stephen states that Moses at the burning bush "trembled and did not dare to look" (cf. Ex. 3:6).⁵⁸ Others argue the author was borrowing from a haggadic tradition, in which Moses said, "I was afraid that the angels could consume me with the breath of their mouths."⁵⁹

However, it seems the author is alluding to Deuteronomy 9:19a, where Moses' fear was a response to the intensity of God's wrath due to the people's worshipping of the golden calf.⁶⁰ Even though Deuteronomy 9 recalls Moses' response to Israel's idolatrous worship, it is observed that the author draws together Deuteronomy 4 and 9 on the basis of verbal analogy.⁶¹ The similarities between the theophanies of Deuteronomy 4 and 9 link Moses' trembling with fear to the earlier account in Deuteronomy 4.⁶² The author is again emphasizing the idea of fear by expanding it to include Moses along with the people.⁶³ Even

57. Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Nida, eds., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1988).

58. Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, 464.

59. *Ibid.*, 464. See also Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 543.

60. Guthrie, *Hebrews: The NIV Application Commentary*, 419. see also G.K. Beale and D.A. Carson, eds. *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 988.

61. Beale and Carson, eds., *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, 988.

62. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, 482. Beale and Carson write, "Both experiences happen at Mount Sinai (4:11; 9:8) and both focus on the Ten Commandments (4:13; 9:9-11). In both passages the mountain burns with fire (4:11; 9:15), and Moses speaks with the Lord (4:14; 9:19)." 998.

63. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, 464.

though Moses was allowed by God to approach the mountain (Exod. 19:20; 20:21), the terrifying manifestation was no doubt a fearful experience for him as well.

Mount Sinai emphasizes the unapproachability of God (Exod. 20:18-21) and the unbridgeable distance that separates the worshipper from God (Exod. 19:12-13). The author is emphasizing the old covenant's inherent inability to deal with sin in the face of divine judgment.⁶⁴ There is nothing in the vision of God at Sinai that would motivate the believer to pursue holiness and persevere in the faith (12:1-2, 14-17). However, there is everything in the old covenant to discourage the believer and cause him to shrink back in fear from God.⁶⁵ Therefore, in contrast to Mount Sinai, the author now turns to Mount Zion.

Exegesis of Hebrews 12:22-24

Verses 22-24 detail the joys of Mount Zion over against the terrifying encounter with God at Sinai. The author describes the ultimate, joyful eschatological encounter with God in the heavenly Jerusalem (11:8, 16; 12:28; 13:14).⁶⁶ In contrast to the old covenant, which was temporary, new covenant believers have come to that which is permanent.⁶⁷ Unlike the earthly Jerusalem that was temporary under the old covenant, the heavenly Jerusalem cannot be shaken (12:28).

64. Ibid., 482.

65. John Owen writes, "...those who will abide under the law, shall never have any token of God's presence with them, but shall be left to desolation and horror. God dwells no more on Sinai. Those who abide under the law, shall neither have his presence nor any gracious pledge of it." Owen, *Hebrews*, 7:313.

66. Ibid., 483.

67. The idea of permanence is stressed by the perfect tense of προσελήλυθατε.

At the center of this vision is the Judge—who is God of all—and Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant. The seven foreboding images of Israel’s encounter with God at Sinai are now contrasted with seven joyful images of new covenant believers at Mount Zion.

First, new covenant believers “have come to Mount Zion,⁶⁸ even⁶⁹ to the city of the living God, [the] heavenly Jerusalem.” In their conversion, the author speaks of the readers having *already* come to their heavenly destination.⁷⁰ In conversion, believers are in one sense *already* citizens of this heavenly city (1 Cor. 1:2; Gal. 4:25-26; Eph. 2:6; Phil. 3:20-21). There is also a sense, though, in which the readers have *not yet* arrived in the heavenly city, and thus it is still the goal of the believer’s pilgrimage (Heb. 4:1-11; 13:14). In verses 22-24, however, the accent is laid on the “already” aspect of this tension in order to encourage believers to persevere in the faith and arrive in the city of the living God.⁷¹

Mount Zion is modified by two descriptive phrases. The modifying phrase “πόλει θεοῦ ζῶντος” brings to mind the idea of God’s presence among His people⁷² and adds to the dignity of this city.⁷³ The adjective “ἑπουρανίω”⁷⁴

68. Simon Kistemaker observes, “In the first portion of the argument Mount Sinai is not even mentioned, for the Israelites were not to stay there.” *Thessalonians, the Pastorals and Hebrews, NTC* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), 392.

69. Concerning this first designation, O’Brien writes, “The qualifying phrase, the city of the living God, is introduced by the appositional καί, which should be translated as ‘even’ rather than ‘and’ since it clarifies what is meant by ‘Mount Zion.’” *The Letter to the Hebrews*, 483.

70. Concerning the verb προσεληλύθατε, O’Brien writes, “The perfect tense . . . gives prominence to the action (as in v. 18): ‘you have already come,’ that is, in your conversion.” 482.

71. *Ibid.*, 491.

72. Cf. Jeremiah 31:33; Ezekiel 11:20; 37:23, 27; Zechariah 8:8; Hebrews 8:10.

73. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, 483.

further highlights the idea of the place where God dwells with His people (Rev. 21:3).⁷⁵

New covenant believers have also come “to thousands upon thousands of angels in⁷⁶ joyful assembly.” Angels were also present at Mount Sinai (Deut. 33:2; Acts 7:53; Gal. 3:19). However, at Sinai the angels acted as witnesses in God’s courtroom of all that transpired in the giving of the law. Their majestic presence added to the fearful sight of the Sinai theophany.⁷⁷

In contrast, the angels are gathered in joyful assembly at Mount Zion. The term πανηγύρει⁷⁸ in the Graeco-Roman world referred to the celebrations of civic festivals and athletic competitions—such as the Olympics.⁷⁹ In the Old Testament, the term referred to a large gathering to celebrate a joyful occasion, often associated with a feast (cf. Ezek. 46:11; Hosea 2:11; 9:5; Amos 5:21).⁸⁰ The word communicates a sense of excitement, revelry, and well-being.⁸¹

74. Concerning the term “ἐπουρανίω,” O’Brien is correct in refuting any notion of a Platonic, metaphysical dualism in Hebrews, 484.

75. Kistemaker observes, “The writer of Hebrews employs the adjective *heavenly* to signify that the place he mentions is not the southeast corner of Jerusalem, but the heavenly Zion where God dwells with all the saints.” *Thessalonians, the Pastorals and Hebrews*, 392.

76. O’Brien notes that πανηγύρει is syntactically connected to μυριάσιν ἀγγέλων rather than ἐκκλησίᾳ πρωτοτόκων for the following reasons: (1) the items listed in vv. 18-24 are linked by καὶ but ἐκκλησίᾳ πρωτοτόκων is a separate item; (2) πανηγύρει is probably a circumstantial dative qualifying the preceding phrase μυριάσιν ἀγγέλων. *The Letter to the Hebrews*, 484.

77. For an interesting discussion of the presence of angels at the giving of the Law, see Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man* (Kingsburg, CA: den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1990), 2:164-66.

78. The term πανηγύρει is a *hapax legomenon*. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, 484.

79. *Ibid.*, 484.

80. *Ibid.*, 484.

81. Guthrie, *Hebrews: The NIV Application Commentary*, 420.

The festive celebration that characterizes believers under the new covenant stands in absolute contrast to the terror that the Israelites experienced under the old covenant. Whereas the angels were commissioned to deliver the law at Sinai (Acts 7:53; Gal. 3:19; Heb. 2:2), they now form a chorus of joyful celebration at Mount Zion.

Third, new covenant believers have come “to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven.” The key terms (ἐκκλησία, πρωτοτόκων) in this description were used of the Israelites when God brought them out of Egypt and led them to Sinai.⁸² The phrase ἐκκλησία πρωτοτόκων refers to the whole communion of saints, which includes believers living and dead as well as faithful Israelites (11:40).⁸³

The author has already used the term πρωτότοκος in reference to the Son (1:6). Here he uses the term in reference to God’s new covenant people (cf. Rom. 8:17). Therefore, writes Bruce, “All the people of Christ are the firstborn children of God, through their union with him who is the Firstborn *par excellence*.”⁸⁴ Through union with Christ, believers have come to be co-heirs with Christ and share in the inheritance the Son has laid claim to as the Firstborn (Rom. 8:17).

82. For the significance of the parallels, see O’Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, 485.

83. Ibid, 484. O’Brien writes, “The vision is of the ultimate, completed company of the people of God, membership of which is now enjoyed by faith.” 486.

84. F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews, NICNT* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 359.

Those who share in the inheritance of the Firstborn are *already* members of the heavenly community.⁸⁵ Their membership is permanent⁸⁶ and secure, for they are those “who are enrolled in heaven.”⁸⁷

New covenant believers have also come to a “Judge, who is God of all.” The word κριτῆ is in the emphatic position.⁸⁸ The descriptive phrase θεῶ πάντων justifies God’s right to judge. Given the context⁸⁹ in which this phrase is employed, the emphasis cannot be upon negative judgment (recalling the fearful sight at Sinai). Rather, the author is emphasizing the idea of vindication.⁹⁰ Guthrie writes, “The new covenant people have not come to Mount Zion for God to pass judgment on them, but for him to vindicate them before their wicked persecutors.”⁹¹ The Christian comes with confidence and full assurance before this Judge, knowing that what is for others a throne of judgment is for him a throne of grace (Heb. 4:16; 10:22).⁹²

85. Bruce writes, “To this community believers have come—not merely into its presence (as they have come into the presence of angels innumerable) but into its membership.” *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 359. Again, the author emphasizes the “already but not yet” aspect of the believer’s inheritance.

86. The idea of permanence is stressed by the perfect tense of ἀπογεγραμμένων.

87. Moses counted all the names of the firstborn males in Israel and enrolled them in a list (Num. 3:40). Yet, how much better is it for the new covenant believer’s name to be permanently enrolled in God’s list (Luke. 10:20; Rev. 21:27)! see Kistemaker, *Thessalonians, the Pastorals and Hebrews*, 394.

88. The word order is most likely deliberate rather than oratorical and thus slightly favors the RSV rendering which places the word “judge” first for emphasis. See Lane, *Hebrews* 9-13, 442.

89. The descriptive phrase καὶ πνεύμασι δικαίων τετελειωμένων, which immediately follows κριτῆ θεῶ πάντων, speaks of those who enjoy rather than fear the presence of God in the heavenly city. See also “angels in joyful assembly,” “firstborn,” “Jesus the mediator,” “sprinkled blood that speaks better.”

90. Guthrie, *Hebrews: The NIV Application Commentary*, 421.

91. *Ibid.*, 421.

92. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 549.

This phrase may, however, serve as a warning against a presumptuous faith and thus underscore the necessity of the believer not to refuse Him who is speaking (12:25). It recalls the earlier warnings in the letter against those who fail to persevere and rebel against God (4:13; 9:27; 10:26-27). Consequently, John Calvin writes, “This seems to have been said to inspire fear, as though he had said, that grace is such a way offered to us, that we ought still to consider that we have to do with a judge, to whom an account must be given if we presumptuously intrude into his sanctuary polluted and profane.”⁹³

Fifth, in their conversion, living Christians have come⁹⁴ “to the spirits of the righteous made perfect.” These are the faithful men and women under both covenants who have died and are now enjoying the presence of God in the heavenly city, which is the goal of their pilgrimage (11:10, 13-16; 13:14).⁹⁵

As noted previously, the author is preeminently concerned with where his readers are in relation to God.⁹⁶ The participle “τετελειωμένων” indicates that they lack nothing in their relationship with God.⁹⁷ Through faith, these believers have been made perfect forever by the sacrifice of Christ (10:14).

93. Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries*, 22:334.

94. Once again, the author sets forth the “already but not yet” tension that is so prominent throughout Hebrews. O’Brien writes, “The paradox which is so characteristic of Hebrews is that these pilgrims in their conversion have come to that city (Heb 12:22) for which they still seek (Heb 13:14),” *The Letter to the Hebrews*, 488.

95. *Ibid.*, 487.

96. See earlier discussion on the significance of the verb προσελήλυθατε, in v. 18.

97. Lane writes, “The use of the perfect participle implies the stable and definitive character of their condition.” *Hebrews 9-13*, 471.

It is important to understand the adjective δικαίων in the context of Hebrews.⁹⁸ The quotation of Habakkuk 2:4 in 10:38 reveals that the righteous in Hebrews are those whose lives are characterized by faithful perseverance. This phrase speaks then of faithful believers under both covenants who have died and subsequently been vindicated by the Judge.⁹⁹ This Judge is now the God of all who have been perfected forever by the sacrifice of Christ.

The joyful vision of Mount Zion comes to a climax¹⁰⁰ as the author tells his readers they have come “to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant.” Through His mediatorial role, Jesus has given believers entrance into the heavenly Jerusalem. It is by His mediation that the new covenant has been inaugurated. He is the reason and basis for the joyful celebration of this heavenly theophany.

In Hebrews, the term μεσίτη is always used in reference to the new covenant promised in Jeremiah 31:31-34 (Heb. 8:6; 9:15).¹⁰¹ Moses served as the mediator of the old covenant (Gal. 3:20). However, the old covenant was temporary and Moses died. Moses was an insufficient mediator of a weak and useless covenant that made nothing perfect in relationship to God (7:18-19). But

98. Ibid., 471.

99. This vindication does not suggest a future justification according to works, such as espoused by N. T. Wright, who teaches that there will be a future justification by works for believers. Christ’s final judgment is simply a public and solemn manifestation of prior judgments. See N. T. Wright, *Justification: God’s Plan and Paul’s Vision*, (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2009), 160.

100. As previously noted, 12:18-24 has been recognized as the rhetorical climax of Hebrews. Throughout earlier chapters, the author has introduced and discussed the themes of the new covenant and mediator (8:16; 9:15) and the sprinkling of the blood (9:11-14; 10:15-18). Now, the author brings these themes to a climactic summary in v. 24. The vision of God at Sinai climaxes with the Old Covenant mediator, Moses, trembling with fear. The vision of God at Zion climaxes with the new covenant mediator, Jesus, whose blood speaks better than Abel’s. See O’Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, 488-89.

101. Ibid., 488.

through Jesus' death the new covenant was sealed and Jesus became the guarantor of a better covenant (7:22).

Lastly, the readers of this epistle have come "to the sprinkled blood, which speaks¹⁰² better than the blood of Abel." When Cain murdered Abel, Abel's blood cried out to God for judgment (Gen. 4:10). The "voice" of Abel's blood condemned Cain and thereby indicated his guilt.¹⁰³ However, the voice of Christ's blood speaks a better word of redemption and forgiveness.

The term ῥαντισμοῦ recalls the Day of Atonement when the high priest would sprinkle the blood of the bull on the mercy seat (Lev. 16:14). Through the sprinkling of His blood on the cross, Christ has effected true atonement. Through His mediation a true and permanent relationship with God has been established. Since Jesus is the mediator of a better covenant, there is nothing lacking in the believer's relationship with God.

III. Sermon Outline and Reflection on Hebrews 12:18-24

In Hebrews 12:18-24, the author sets forth a clear exposition of the distinction between the law (Mt. Sinai) and gospel (Mt. Zion).¹⁰⁴ Of verses 18-24, John Owen writes, "It is a summary declaration of the two states of the law and

102. As previously noted, the transition from verses 18-24 to verses 25-29 is tied together by the hook word λαλοῦντι (vv. 24-25).

103. Guthrie, *Hebrews: The NIV Application Commentary*, 422.

104. Concerning the relationship of law and gospel, Michael Horton writes, "Law and gospel are not inherently antithetical, but they are certainly different 'words.' Law commands and gospel announces salvation. In the life of the justified, law and gospel are perfectly harmonious: the gospel assures us of God's favor, and the law indicates how we are to walk in the light of our blessings in Christ. However, in a biblical *covenant* of law, commands function as stipulations requiring personal and perfect obedience on penalty of death. Therefore, with respect to the question as to how sinners may be justified before God, law and gospel are not only different but totally antithetical principles." *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 395-96.

gospel, with their difference, and the incomparable pre-eminence of the one above the other.”¹⁰⁵ The exposition is designed to motivate the readers to persevere and not fall away. The outline is as follows:

- I. You have not come to a fearful, condemning relationship with God, who is your Judge.
 - A. A *mountain* that can be touched (v. 18a)
 - B. A blazing fire (v. 18b)
 - C. Darkness (v. 18c)
 - D. Gloom (v. 18d)
 - E. Tempest (v. 18e)
 - F. The sound of a trumpet (v. 19a)
 - G. A voice speaking words (v. 19b)

- II. You have come to a joyful, redeeming relationship with God, who is your Mediator.
 - A. Mt. Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God, v. 22a
 - B. Thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, v. 22b
 - C. The church of the firstborn, v. 23a
 - D. A Judge (vindicator), God of all, v. 23b
 - E. The spirits of righteous men made perfect, v. 23c
 - F. Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, v. 24a
 - G. The sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel (v. 24b).

The author of Hebrews shows that the Christian life is to be characterized by faith, holiness, obedience, and perseverance until the end (3:6, 14; 10:23; 12:14-17). However, these qualities are only nurtured in the soil of assurance—born from the gospel, not law. While the law has a critical role to play in the believer’s life, “God,” Calvin writes, “breathes faith into us only by the instrument of his gospel, as Paul points out that ‘faith comes from hearing’ [Rom. 10:17].”¹⁰⁶

105. Owen, *Hebrews*, 7:350. see also John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries*, 22:330-331.

106. Calvin: *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 21 of *The Library of Christian Classics* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 1017. Calvin

It is only through the “blessed change”¹⁰⁷ of the new covenant (12:22-24) that the believer finds the desire and power to pursue peace and holiness (12:14) as well as the enduring motivation to guard against apostasy (12:15-17). As a result of the gospel, the believer no longer has to fear God’s voice (Gen. 3:8-10). The gospel causes the believer to welcome the voice of God rather than refuse it (12:25a). In the gospel, we have assurance that our relationship with the Judge of Sinai is secure because Jesus’ blood continually speaks a better word on our behalf (12:24).¹⁰⁸

In order to be driven to pursue a life of holiness and perseverance it is essential for the Christian to be assured of his acceptance and reconciliation before God. Walter Marshall writes,

You cannot truly live a holy life unless you are totally assured of your justification and reconciliation with God, totally apart from the works of the law. This is the only way you can truly obey the law! . . . The gospel says that when you are firmly assured of God’s love for you, you will respond by living a holy life. If you do not understand God’s love for you, you will fall into a sinful life!¹⁰⁹

It is important, then, to understand how the parenetical and expository sections of Hebrews function.¹¹⁰ The parenetical¹¹¹ sections set forth the proper

107. John Owen notes, “It is a blessed change, to be removed from the summons of the law to answer for the guilt of sin, unto the invitation of the gospel to come and accept of mercy and pardon. . . . Under this dreadful summons of the law the gospel finds us; which exceedingly exalts the glory of the grace of God and of the blood of Christ, in the consciences of believers.” *Hebrews*, 7:319-20.

108. John Owen writes, “A view of God as a judge, represented in fire and blackness, will fill the souls of convinced sinners with dread and terror. How secure soever they may be at present, when God calls them forth unto the mount their hearts cannot endure, nor can their hands be strong.” *Hebrews*, 7:317.

109. Walter Marshall, *The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification: Growing in Holiness by Living in Union with Christ*, put into modern English by Bruce H. McRae (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2005), 29-30.

110. Harold Attridge writes, “Jesus makes possible for the addressees their life of faith. It is the function of the Christological exposition of the text to indicate how this is so and thereby ground the exhortation to faith and with it the whole paraenetic program of the text,” *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 23.

path of obedience and perseverance. The author uses the law to exhort his listeners to persevere and to warn them against the perils of falling short (2:1-4; 3:7-18; 6:4-8; 10:26-31; 12:25-29). On the other hand, the expositional sections are intended to serve as the stimulus for obeying the paraenetic passages.¹¹² Michael Horton observes, “God’s moral law continues to show us the right path, but only the gospel can give us arms and legs.”¹¹³

Understanding the distinctive roles of the exhortatory and expository sections reveals that the superiority of Christ as the Son of God and Great High Priest are not intended to serve as dogmatic theological treatises.¹¹⁴ Rather, the high Christology in Hebrews provides the motivation and power for obedience and faithful perseverance.¹¹⁵

In the expositional section of verses 18-24, the author elaborates on how God’s “voice” (vv. 19, 24) functions differently depending on the covenant in which it is operative. God’s voice in a covenant of law terrifies and kills. In contrast, God’s voice in a covenant of grace produces joy and celebration. God’s voice in a covenant of law creates a community of fear (12:19-21) whereas His voice in the gospel creates a community of faith (12:22-24). God’s voice in the law threatens death (12:20) whereas God’s voice in the gospel promises forgiveness

111. The epistle is clearly paraenetic (παρακλήσεως, 13:22).

112. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, 20. See also Attridge, 21.

113. Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way*, 661.

114. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, 20.

115. John Owen writes, “The principal design in hand is a description of that evangelical state whereinto the Hebrews were called, which they were come and entered into; for from thence the apostle infers his ensuing exhortation.” *Hebrews*, 7:309.

and peace (12:24). God's voice in law repels (12:19-21) whereas His voice in the gospel allures.

The way of holiness is motivated by love, not law. Walter Marshall writes, "God does not drive you along with whips and terrors, or by the rod of the schoolmaster, the law. Rather, He leads you and draws you to walk in His ways by pleasant attractions (Hosea 11:3-4). The love of Christ, of course, is the greatest and most pleasant attraction to encourage you to godly living (2 Cor. 5:15, Rom. 12:1)."¹¹⁶

Because of the superior High Priesthood of Christ, the author reminds his readers of the confidence they now have to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus (10:19-21). It is in light of Christ's saving work that the author exhorts believers to "draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith" (10:19-22).

Nevertheless, one must remember that God is still a holy God. The climactic warning in 12:25-29 serves as a reminder to those who would presume upon the grace of God.¹¹⁷ Consequently, believers must show gratitude for the privileges they have received through the gospel (12:28a) and offer to God

116. Marshall, *The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification: Growing in Holiness by Living in Union with Christ*, 236.

117. John Calvin writes, "Thus we see that God omits nothing by which he may draw us to himself; he begins indeed with love and kindness, so that we may follow him the more willingly; but when by alluring he effects but little, he terrifies us. And doubtless it is expedient that the grace of God should never be promised to us without being accompanied with threatenings; for we are so extremely prone to indulge ourselves, that without the application of these stimulants the milder doctrine would prove ineffectual." *Calvin's Commentaries*, 22:338.

acceptable worship—with reverence and awe—remembering that the God of Zion is still a consuming fire (12:28b-29).¹¹⁸

118. John Owen observes, “We may learn how great our care and diligence about the serving of God ought to be, which are pressed on us by the Holy Ghost from the consideration of the greatness of our privileges on the one hand, namely, our receiving the kingdom; with the dreadful destruction from God on the other, in case of our neglect herein.” *Hebrews*, 7:378.

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