

THE TWO MOUNTAINS:
AN EXEGESIS OF HEBREWS 12:18-24

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Introduction

The Letter to the Hebrews is a unique document in the New Testament; there is no other book quite like it. For many years it was called the Letter of the Apostle Paul to the Hebrews, but this has been judged as essentially a misnomer. For scholars think it is not exactly a letter, definitely not by St. Paul, and not necessarily to the Hebrews, wherever they may be. Father Spicq says that along with Revelation, this is the book of the New Testament furthest away from our modern Western mentality.¹ And yet Luke Timothy Johnson calls it “one of the most beautifully written, powerfully argued, and theologically profound writings in the New Testament.”² It is with a view to illuminating the beauty, powerful argument, and theological profundity of just a small part of this text that this paper is written.

The small part in question is 12:18-24. In this passage, the author juxtaposes the descriptions of two mountains and uses them to illustrate the point he has been making throughout the whole letter. Coming as it does so close to the end of the letter, this passage serves as a sort of climax and “contains the gist of Hebrews in a nutshell.”³ It combines all of the main themes, rhetorical devices, and influences present in the rest of Hebrews, and distills them into a single image which encapsulates the entire work. In order to understand better how this is accomplished, we will begin by examining the background to the letter – who is the author, to whom is he writing and why, and what methods does he use to communicate his message? Next, the passage will be considered in its immediate context, the pericopes just before and after it. Finally, we will explore the passage in detail, verse by verse, and hopefully glean a more profound understanding of what the author is trying to tell us.

I. Background to Hebrews

A. The Author

¹ Spicq, *L'Épître aux Hébreux*, 1:1.

² Johnson, *Hebrews*, 1.

³ Lehne, *New Covenant*, 157.

The authorship of the letter to the Hebrews has long been a riddle. From about the fourth century until the time of the Reformation it was generally accepted that the author was St. Paul,⁴ however both in the early Church and in recent times this has been debated. Candidates for authorship have included Barnabas, Clement of Rome, Luke, and Apollos, and though some still maintain that it really was St. Paul⁵, most agree with Origen that “only God knows” who actually wrote it. Part of the problem is that the letter itself does not give us the name of its author, as do the other letters in the New Testament. Because of this, the arguments about authorship revolve around the text itself, both the style in which it was written and the evidence it gives of the influences on the author. These influences Johnson classifies under three headings: Graeco-Roman culture, Judaism, and the Christian Tradition.⁶ He sees the Greek influence in the way the author uses athletic contests as an image of the moral life and in his rhetoric, but most importantly in his Platonic worldview. Stated briefly, this is a view of the world as being divided between the material and the spiritual. The material world is imperfect and changing, while the spiritual world is the “real” world, unchanging and incorruptible.

The influence of Judaism, on the other hand, is most evident in the fact that Hebrews is so steeped in the Old Testament Scriptures. There are 41 direct quotations from the Septuagint and innumerable allusions as well.⁷ And, of course, the language of covenant, high priest, sacrifice, etc., all comes from Jewish ritual. Most important, however, and arguably most obvious also, is the influence of the Christian tradition. The author of Hebrews is a Christian who received all the basic teachings about Christ from “those who heard him” (Heb. 2:3) and is simply presenting the mystery in his own distinctive way. For the purposes of this letter, he decides to “leave the elementary doctrines of Christ and go on to maturity” (Heb. 6:1), but this presupposes that both he and his audience already know them.

⁴ Filson, *Yesterday*, 10.

⁵ Swetnam, *Hebrews – An Interpretation*, vi.

⁶ The following paragraph is largely a summary of Johnson, *Hebrews*, 15-30.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

Johnson points out many similarities between Hebrews and the writings of Paul, John, and 1 Peter. He does not propose that any of them took material from the others, but merely that Hebrews “pushes toward an understanding of Christ that does not in the least conflict with the shared Christian traditions, but rather builds on those traditions.”⁸

B. The Audience

The next question to consider is that of the audience and purpose of the letter. Not surprisingly, there are conflicting views about this as well. Again, the difficulty is brought about by the absence of a salutation. The title “to the Hebrews” is not original to the letter, “but probably represents an early effort to identify... an anonymous text with no addressees.”⁹ However, the title is attested to before the end of the 2nd century¹⁰, and has been kept ever since, indicating a long tradition that the letter was, in fact, addressed to Jewish Christians. The numerous quotations from the Old Testament seem to propose that the readers would have been very familiar with the Scriptures, and this would be more likely if they were Jewish converts. The contents of the letter suggest that because of hardship and persecution they were being tempted to return to the practice of Judaism, and the author was encouraging them to hold fast to Christianity. Spicq even suggests that they were probably of the priestly class, because then the temptation to return to the practice of the old cult would be even greater.¹¹ On the other hand, it is possible for Gentile Christians to have been educated enough in the Jewish Scriptures to understand the arguments put forth in the letter and that “the readers were a group of gentile Christians under pressure to embrace Judaism,”¹² though Spicq goes to some length to

⁸ Ibid., 29.

⁹ Ibid., 33.

¹⁰ Spicq, *L'Épître aux Hébreux*, 1:220.

¹¹ Ibid., 227-31.

¹² Davies, *A Letter to Hebrews*, 6.

argue against this opinion¹³ and points out that it would not make sense for the author to spend so much time proving that Judaism has been replaced by Christianity if his readers had not been Jews.

It is most probable, then, that the audience were Jewish Christians, but it is not known where they were residing. Suggestions have been made of Rome, Corinth, Jerusalem, Ephesus, Alexandria, and Cyprus, to name a few. Spicq discusses the pros and cons of each of these hypotheses, but in the end, they still remain hypotheses.¹⁴ As Johnson says of the whole letter to the Hebrews, “Its author, first readers, location, and date – these are all matters of debate among scholars, which is another way of confessing ignorance.”¹⁵ And so, confessing ignorance of these matters, we proceed to the text itself.

C. The Letter

The Letter to the Hebrews describes itself as a “word of exhortation” (13:22) and this how it must primarily be seen. Though it certainly contains much material that could put it in the category of a theological treatise, yet the theological presentations are used to serve the hortatory passages; the author is giving his audience reasons why they ought to be more faithful, hopeful, loving, and persevering. This is one of the reasons why Johnson says it is not really a letter, but rather has an “oral character” and is probably a homily or sermon.¹⁶ He also notes the use of speaking and listening verbs as opposed to those which refer to reading and writing, which further indicates that it was meant to be read aloud. However, though Hebrews begins without a salutation, it does contain an ending which suggests it is a letter (13:22-25), and Johnson admits that “Hebrews may well have been written from the first, may indeed have functioned as a letter from the first.”¹⁷ Filson points out that even the letters

¹³ Spicq, *L'Épître aux Hébreux*, 1:223.

¹⁴ Ibid., 232-7.

¹⁵ Johnson, *Hebrews*, 1.

¹⁶ Ibid., 10.

¹⁷ Ibid.

of Paul, which are clearly letters, “are letters specifically written for public reading. Hebrews has this same double character, but with more literary finish.”¹⁸

One of the rhetorical devices the author uses to exhort his audience is the argument *a fortiori*, or *a minore ad maius*. This describes the situation in a small or less important case (*a minore*) and reasons that it would apply all the more (*fortior*) in a great or more important case (*ad maius*)¹⁹. An example of this is found in Heb. 2:2-4: “For if the message declared by angels was valid... how shall we escape...?” The author uses this method frequently when comparing the exigencies of the Old Covenant to the New. But even when the argumentation does not fall exactly into this category, it is still based on a comparison and contrast of the Old with the New, in which the new is always better, greater, and more important. So in a certain sense, the entire exhortation can be characterized as a movement *a minore ad maius*, with a warning not to turn back the other way.

In all of this argumentation, which uses theological exposition to give force to the exhortation, three major themes emerge. These are the high-priesthood of Christ, the New Covenant, and, as Käsemann calls it, “the wandering People of God”²⁰. All three are interrelated, and all three involve a contrast between the old which is passing away and the new which is better and more permanent. The high-priesthood is perhaps the most obviously seen because it is mentioned so many times. From 4:14 to the end of Chapter 10, Christ is presented as the High Priest who is better, holier, and more efficacious than the Levitical priests of old. The wandering People of God is perhaps the least obvious. Käsemann argues that it is in fact the principal theme, and that the people of Israel wandering in the wilderness “appear as antitype of Christianity.”²¹ Certainly this theme is introduced early in Hebrews, with the quotation and exegesis of Psalm 95 in 3:7-4:13, and there are many suggestions of the author

¹⁸ Filson, “The Epistle to the Hebrews,” 20.

¹⁹ Buchanan, *To the Hebrews*, xxiii-xxiv.

²⁰ Käsemann, *The Wandering People of God*, 17.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

exhorting his hearers as on a pilgrimage. So they are to “strive to enter that rest” (4:11), “enter the sanctuary” (10:19), “run with perseverance the race” (12:1), and “make straight paths” (12:13). There is also the theme of the New Covenant, which is described as replacing the Old. Lehne argues that this is the main theme, and that Christ’s high-priesthood is subsumed under it.²² One could even argue that the idea of a new Pilgrim People could be included in this, because it was in their wandering in the wilderness that the Israelites received the Mosaic Covenant and on the earthly pilgrimage that Christians are given the New Covenant, and therefore the New Covenant theme would be more foundational and encompassing than either of the other two. Not only does it include priesthood and pilgrimage; the covenant theme also has to do with cult, sacrifice, the tabernacle, the Law, and the very revelation of the covenant itself, all of which are far superior to the Old Covenant in the New.²³ The author of Hebrews shows how each element of the Old Covenant has a corresponding element in the New Covenant which surpasses the Old, and on this basis exhorts his listeners to persevere in their faithfulness to the New.

II. The Two Mountains

A. Immediate Context

There are many ways to divide Hebrews into sections, but a very useful broad division is given by Farrar in the introduction to his edition of the Greek text. He divides the letter into three main parts: the first, 1:1-7:28, demonstrating that Christ is superior to the mediators of the Old Covenant; the second, 8:1-10:18, demonstrating that the New Covenant is better than the Old; and the third, 10:19-13:25, which he describes as “mainly hortatory.”²⁴ We can see from this division that the main theological themes are developed up to the middle of Chapter 10 and then the focus shifts to exhortation. The language takes on a real urgency in the last section of the letter: “Therefore, brethren,

²² Lehne, *The New Covenant in Hebrews*, 97.

²³ Ibid., 95-99.

²⁴ Farrar, *Hebrews*, xxvi-xxix.

since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus... let us draw near with a true heart" (10:19-22). The pilgrimage is drawing to its goal and this is the moment for the pilgrims to redouble their efforts in one final push. They are encouraged by all the examples of the faith and perseverance of the Old Testament saints in Chapter 11, the great "cloud of witnesses" (12:1), and are further encouraged to run the race, accept the discipline of God (12:5-11), to lift their drooping hands and strengthen their weak knees (12:12).

At this point, the encouragement changes to warning. They are to "see to it that no one fail to obtain the grace of God; that no 'root of bitterness' spring up" (12:15). In 12:16-17, Esau is given as an example of one who did not appreciate what he was given, and so lost it irrevocably. The next section serves to give the basis for this warning by reminding them of the great gift they have in the New Covenant as compared to the Old. The section 12:18-24 is introduced by the word "for" (γάρ), which, according to Lane, indicates that it "provides additional grounding for vv 14-17."²⁵ It is followed by another warning, for which it again serves as the basis, as indicated by the use of the word "speaking" in v. 25 after the "speaks" of v. 24.²⁶ Chapter 12 finishes with the exhortation to "offer to God acceptable worship" (12:28) and the warning that "our God is a consuming fire" (12:29). Then follows Chapter 13, which serves as the conclusion to the letter and recapitulates all its main points. Both Swetnam²⁷ and Filson²⁸ see Chapter 13 as the key to understanding the entire text, though they have very different opinions as to its meaning. Standing as it does at the close of the main body of the letter, framed by two warnings, Heb. 12:18-24 serves as a climax to the letter and contains its core reasoning in a nutshell.

B. The Two Mountains

²⁵ Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, 459.

²⁶ Ibid., 474.

²⁷ Swetnam, *Hebrews – An Interpretation*, viii.

²⁸ Filson, *Yesterday*, 82.

We now turn to the passage which is our main focus, Heb. 12:18-24. The following is the text from the RSV-CE:

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

As is evident, the passage consists of two contrasting sections, vv. 18-21 and vv. 22-24, each being introduced by the phrase "you have (not) come." The contrast is drawn between two mountains, Sinai and Zion, which represent two covenants, the Old and the New. Mount Zion is, of course, mentioned explicitly in v. 22, but even though the word "mountain" is not found in v. 18, and Sinai is not named, the whole of vv. 18-21 is a description of what happened at the giving of the Law on Sinai in Exodus 19, which was the inauguration of the Mosaic covenant. A few contrasts jump out at first glance. Sinai is filled with images of terror and fear; Zion with joy and peace. Sinai is sensible – it can be touched, seen, and heard – while Zion is spiritual – it is filled with heavenly beings. The descriptions of the two mountains are not exactly analogous in that there is no one-to-one correspondence between the lists of things present on Sinai and those on Zion, but there is, at least, the correspondence of the mountains themselves to each other, and also that of Moses to Jesus, a comparison introduced already in Chapter 3. Nevertheless, the contrast is quite striking, and certainly makes for a very dramatic part of an already dramatic hortatory conclusion to the letter.

1. Mount Sinai

18. *For you have not come...* The verb “come” is the same one used in v. 22 and also the same as in Deut. 4:11 in the LXX²⁹, where Moses recalls the experience at Sinai: “And you came near and stood at the foot of the mountain.” It is also a verb that is “used exclusively of an approach to God,”³⁰ and so the contrast between the two mountains is really a contrast of the ways in which the people of the Old and New Covenants come into the divine presence. Mountains were commonly seen as a meeting point between heaven and earth in Near-Eastern religions, and Israel too had its holy mountains: Moriah, Thabor, Carmel, etc.³¹ Both Sinai and Zion had enormous religious significance for the Jews: Sinai, because on it the Law was given to Moses, and Zion, because it was the mountain of the Temple, in which God dwelt, and on which all the events of the messianic times were prophesied to occur. It is significant, then, that Sinai is not mentioned here by name, but only Zion. “Its omission is the symbol of the abolition of the former economy and cult.”³² The perfect tense of the verb “come” suggests a definitive arrival, which may be too strong. The word used can also mean “approach” or “draw near”, and Wilson insists that it must be taken that way because in v. 22 the hearers “come” to Mount Zion, which represents heaven, to which they have not yet fully come.³³ But Johnson says that the author truly is affirming that the hearers have “in principle and in their imagination, if not yet fully with respect to their mortal lives, reached the goal of their pilgrimage.”³⁴ He is describing their final reward, one to which they already have a claim but are in danger of losing if they draw back instead of persevering in their approach.

...to what may be touched... The word “touch” evokes the sensible and material nature of the Old Covenant. It “emphasizes the sheer physicality of the Sinai covenant.”³⁵ This is one of the places

²⁹ Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, 459.

³⁰ Ibid., 460.

³¹ Spicq, *L'Épître aux Hébreux*, 2:403

³² Ibid. My translation.

³³ Wilson, *Hebrews*, 229.

³⁴ Johnson, *Hebrews*, 329.

³⁵ Ibid.

where the Platonic/Philonic influence on the author is evident. Sinai, as able to be touched, is part of the realm of material things, as opposed to Zion, which cannot be touched because it is spiritual, and belongs to the more real, heavenly world. Lane denies any Platonic dualism here and stresses that the sensible description has more to do with conveying “an impression of an overwhelming of the senses by the presence of the God who is unapproachable in his holiness.”³⁶ That is, the mountain can be touched, but God cannot. It seems, though, that there is no contradiction in accepting this view along with the idea that the author’s thought patterns were informed by a Platonic metaphysics.

...a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, ¹⁹*and the sound of a trumpet...* These are elements that describe the theophany which accompanied the giving of the Law on Sinai. They are described in the Old Testament in Exodus 19:16, “...there were thunders and lightnings, and a thick cloud upon the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast...” and in Deuteronomy 4:11, “And you came near and stood at the foot of the mountain, while the mountain burned with fire to the heart of heaven, wrapped in darkness, cloud, and gloom.” The author quotes neither verse directly but paraphrases a combination of both of them in order to evoke the image. He uses a new word for “gloom”; in the LXX it is σκότος, while in Hebrews it is ζόφω,³⁷ “which in other literature is particularly associated with darkness of the nether regions.”³⁸ The overall effect is one of terror, which is made explicit in v. 21. According to St. Thomas, it reveals “what was terrible on the part of God,” that is “zeal for punishment, the severity of punishment, and the hidden nature of the one giving the Law.”³⁹ The fire stands for zeal, the tempest for the punishment, and the darkness both for the veiled nature of the Law and the excellence of God who dwells in inaccessible light, which, as far as human sight is concerned, is like darkness. Lane connects this darkness with that of the ninth plague, “a darkness to be felt” (Ex. 10:21).⁴⁰

³⁶ Lane, *Hebrews* 9-13, 461.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Johnson, *Hebrews*, 329.

³⁹ Aquinas, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 285.

⁴⁰ Lane, *Hebrews* 9-13, 461.

He notes that “the visual images... suggest that which obscures rather than reveals.”⁴¹ The Israelites did not see God on Sinai; they saw only His effects which inspired them with fear.

19. *...and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers entreat that no further messages be spoken to them.* The sound of the trumpet, heard on Sinai, announced the importance of the words that would be spoken, the significance of the event, the presence of a King.⁴² It brings to mind the seven trumpets of Revelation 8-11, which sound at the second coming of Christ. The “voice” is translated by both Lane and Johnson as a “sound of words” and by Spicq as a “clamour of words.” It corresponds to Deut. 4:12, “you heard the sound of words, but saw no form; there was only a voice,” and, like the visible phenomena, obscures more than it reveals; “the auditory terms... combine to create an impression of great noise that effectively interfered with any distinct hearing.”⁴³ And yet, it is the voice of the Lord, which “breaks the cedars of Lebanon... flashes forth flames of fire... shakes the wilderness of Kadesh... and strips the forests bare” (Ps. 29), so at the very least, it reveals the power and majesty of God. The rest of the verse comes from Ex. 20:19, where, after receiving the Ten Commandments, the people “said to Moses, ‘You speak to us, and we will hear; but let not God speak to us, lest we die.’” The people were so afraid that they did not want to hear the words of God directly, but only through Moses. Spicq notes that it is remarkable that the reaction of fear is only noted with regard to the sound of words, what was “most intelligible, most human in this theophany.”⁴⁴ He points out that it was not only the power of God’s voice that was so impressive, but above all the words that He spoke, that is, His Commandments.

20. *For they could not endure the order that was given, “If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned.”* This verse gives the reason why the people did not want God to speak to them: “the

⁴¹ Ibid., 462.

⁴² Spicq, *L’Épître aux Hébreux*, 2:404.

⁴³ Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, 462.

⁴⁴ Spicq, *L’Épître aux Hébreux*, 2:404.

order that was given.” According to Johnson, it is not clear whether this order, or “command” as he translates it, refers to the words that complete the verse, or to the Ten Commandments that had just been spoken to them.⁴⁵ He favours the former interpretation, but Spicq seems at least not to exclude the latter when he interprets the words here rendered “they could not endure” as “a refusal of divine revelation.”⁴⁶ He points out that the Greek word has this meaning in the Pastoral Letters, and this reading would show up a link with what follows in v. 25: “See that you do not refuse him who is speaking.” Lane, however, rejects this view on grammatical grounds, and insists that “they could not endure” only out of fear, and not disobedience⁴⁷; a fear that had to do with the threat of death. In Ex. 19:12-13, the Lord stipulates to Moses that a boundary should be put around the mountain, and that any man or beast that touches it should be stoned to death. The emphasis of the command in Exodus was that no *man* should approach the mountain; the “if even a beast” of the Hebrews version emphasizes the same thing *a fortiori*. In giving this command, God reveals His absolute holiness; it was “a way of showing this as yet uncivilized people the difference between the true God and idols.”⁴⁸ Wilson links it to the death of Uzzah, who stretched out his hand to touch the Ark of the Covenant in 2 Sam. 6, the story of the burning bush, in which God commands Moses to take off his shoes, and the strict regulations surrounding the high priest’s entrance into the Holy of Holies.⁴⁹ All of these serve to emphasize “the unapproachability of God under the old covenant,”⁵⁰ an unapproachability guarded by the very real threat of death.

21. *Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, “I tremble with fear.”* This verse concludes the description of Sinai and summarizes its main tenor in one word: fear. It is curious that the

⁴⁵ Johnson, *Hebrews*, 329.

⁴⁶ Spicq, *L’Épître aux Hébreux*, 2:404. My translation.

⁴⁷ Lane, *Hebrews* 9-13, 463.

⁴⁸ Faculty of Theology of the University of Navarre, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 182.

⁴⁹ Wilson, *Hebrews*, 229.

⁵⁰ Lane, *Hebrews* 9-13, 463.

original Exodus account does not mention any fear on the part of Moses at the giving of the Law. It is the people who were afraid and trembled (Ex. 19:16). In Deut. 9:19, Moses mentions his fear, but this was in connection with the consequences of the people's worship of the golden calf. St. Stephen (Acts 7:32) describes Moses as trembling, but this was in connection with the burning bush. Spicq attributes this mention of Moses' fear to an interpretation that was already traditional among the Jews.⁵¹ Here it serves to place Moses at the same level as the people of Israel; even though he is the mediator of the covenant, he experiences the same fear that they do. This fear has to do with divine judgment; the author had already introduced the word for "terrifying" earlier (10:27-31) in this same connection.⁵² St. Thomas also links the fear described here to judgment and the Law, but distinguishes between the fear of the people and that of Moses. "The Old Testament," he says, "was given in terror, so that the hearts of the Jews, which were prone to idolatry, would be terrified," but of Moses' fear he says, "this was a sign that the Law itself was terrible even to the perfect, since it did not give grace... but only showed fault."⁵³ Thus St. Thomas argues for the superiority of the New Law. Barclay sees all this fear at the giving of the Law at Sinai only the negative: the majesty, unapproachability, and terror of God in which "there is no love at all."⁵⁴ This is certainly too strong. The God of the Old Testament is the same as the God of the New, who is Love Himself. Moses trembles because "the presence of divinity provokes in him the deepest feelings of reverence and fear."⁵⁵ Johnson, too, sees Moses' fear as something positive when he says that "it is precisely such fear of God that recognizes the truth about reality and enables people of faith to resist in the face of human threats."⁵⁶ Though the Old Law was given in fear and the New has come to take its place, it is the same God, the same Christ who gives them both. "For the Law

⁵¹ Spicq, *L'Épître aux Hébreux*, 2:405.

⁵² Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, 463.

⁵³ Aquinas, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 286-287.

⁵⁴ Barclay, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, 186.

⁵⁵ Faculty of Theology of the University of Navarre, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 183.

⁵⁶ Johnson, *Hebrews*, 330.

was as our teacher in Christ, for children are to be taught with things that scare them.”⁵⁷ And we invoke this same Christ every year at Advent when we sing:

O come, O come, great Lord of might,
Who to Thy tribes on Sinai's height
In ancient times once gave the law
In cloud and majesty and awe.⁵⁸

2. Mount Zion

22. *But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem...*

The hearers now come to the second of the two mountains – and it is to this one that they really have come. The contrast between the two is signalled by the “but” at the beginning of the verse, which “indicates that this mountain must be appreciated as decisively different from Sinai.”⁵⁹ It is given three names: Mount Zion, the city of the living God, and the heavenly Jerusalem, all of which essentially mean the same thing –the place where God dwells. Zion is the mountain in Jerusalem on which the Temple was built, and so the name Zion stood for the Temple itself,⁶⁰ and therefore “God’s protective presence in the midst of his people,”⁶¹ as well as the city of Jerusalem⁶². It is “the city of the living God, that is to say the residence of the author of life, from whence he communicates it to all creatures.”⁶³ It is the “heavenly Jerusalem,” the “holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband” (Rev. 21:2). It is meant to signify “not the seat of temporal rule over Israel, but of God’s eschatological rule through Christ.”⁶⁴ Jerusalem was already seen as an image of heaven for the Jews,⁶⁵ but it is here called heavenly to distinguish it further from Sinai, for Paul equates the present, earthly Jerusalem to Mount Sinai and Hagar the slave woman, “but the Jerusalem above is

⁵⁷ Aquinas, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 284.

⁵⁸ “Veni, veni, Emmanuel,” trans. John Mason Neale, <http://www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/o/c/ocomocom.htm>.

⁵⁹ Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, 465.

⁶⁰ Spicq, *L’Épître aux Hébreux*, 2:405.

⁶¹ Faculty of Theology of the University of Navarre, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 183.

⁶² Wilson, *Hebrews*, 230.

⁶³ Spicq, *L’Épître aux Hébreux*, 2:405. My translation.

⁶⁴ Johnson, *Hebrews*, 331.

⁶⁵ Davies, *A Letter to Hebrews*, 127.

free, and she is our mother” (Gal. 4:25-26). Once again, the contrast between earthly and heavenly, material and spiritual is drawn, though Johnson reminds us that “as always in the Platonism of Hebrews, the contrast is not simply between matter and spirit, but above all between what is merely human and what is of God.”⁶⁶ This is why Spicq can say that here it is also a question of the Jerusalem that was the “city which has foundations” (Heb. 11:10) hoped for by Abraham and the patriarchs. And so it is both the earthly and the heavenly, the Jerusalem below and the Jerusalem above, the former being the prototype of the latter. What we have here is an image of the Church, “militant and triumphant, vitally united.”⁶⁷ And so, even though they are not yet in heaven, the hearers have reached the end of their pilgrimage, because by their membership in the Church, they already have a share in their final reward.

...and to innumerable angels in festal gathering... Here begins the list of the inhabitants of the mountain. St. Thomas points out that one of the joys of heaven, after the vision of God, which is the principal joy, is the communion of the saints, “for no possession of a good thing is joyful without a friend.”⁶⁸ And so the first “saints” mentioned are “innumerable angels in festal gathering.” That there are “innumerable” angels in heaven is testified to in Rev. 5:11, “I heard... the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands.” The particular kind of “festal gathering” mentioned here is unique in the whole New Testament. The Greek word denotes “a joyful gathering in order to celebrate a festival”⁶⁹ and the joy provides a great contrast to the fear on Sinai. Even though a different word is used, it brings to mind the rejoicing and celebration of the Father after the return of the Prodigal Son (Lk. 15:32) and the “joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents” (Lk. 15:10). The angels have joy in God, in each other, and in the pilgrims who have come to Mount Zion.

⁶⁶ Johnson, *Hebrews*, 331.

⁶⁷ Spicq, *L'Épître aux Hébreux*, 2:405. My translation.

⁶⁸ Aquinas, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 287.

⁶⁹ Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, 467.

23. ...and to the assembly of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven... There is some debate as to whom this phrase refers. Spicq makes the case that it actually refers to the angels, and that just as Jerusalem was named in a threefold manner, so the angels are called innumerable angels, a festal gathering, and the assembly of the first-born.⁷⁰ He argues that because the angels were the first to be created, they can be called the first-born.⁷¹ However, most commentators see the term as referring to men, either the patriarchs and saints of the Old Testament⁷² who were enumerated in Chapter 11, or the Apostles,⁷³ or, more commonly, the just who belong to the Church on earth⁷⁴, the very people the author is addressing. This last meaning is suggested by two words. First, there is “assembly” (ἐκκλησία), which Johnson describes as an “official gathering of the citizens”⁷⁵ in civic life and which Lane points out is the same word used in the LXX of the gathering of Israel before Mount Sinai in Deut. 4:10.⁷⁶ The latter especially would suggest that the assembly refers to people because of the parallel it would make with the previous description of Sinai. Lane, however, notes that what is really striking about the assembly on Zion is that it is a union of both angels and men, whereas on Sinai they were separated.⁷⁷ The other word that suggests people, and especially the just on earth, is “enrolled”. This calls to mind Lk. 10:20, “rejoice that your names are written in heaven,” and the numerous references to the “book of life” in Revelation (13:8, 17:8, 20:12, 20:15, 21:27), where those whose names are written in it will *enter* the heavenly city, as opposed to already being there. Furthermore, the word for “enrolled” is the same one used of the census in Lk. 2:1 in which “all the world should be enrolled.” It is a word that implies citizenship, and thus calls to mind passages from St. Paul who tells his readers that they “are fellow

⁷⁰ Spicq, *L'Épître aux Hébreux*, 2:406.

⁷¹ Ibid., 407.

⁷² Faculty of Theology of the University of Navarre, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 184.

⁷³ Aquinas, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 288.

⁷⁴ Lane, Wilson, Johnson, *loc. cit.*

⁷⁵ Johnson, *Hebrews*, 332.

⁷⁶ Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, 468.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

citizens with the saints” (Eph. 2:19) and that “our commonwealth is in heaven” (Phil. 3:20), again showing that it is possible for those on earth to be “the assembly of the first-born enrolled in heaven.” This is further strengthened by the fact that the hearers have just been warned, through the example of Esau given in Heb. 12:16-17, not to despise the rights of the first-born, lest they lose them.⁷⁸ Spicq objects that it does not make sense for the Christians addressed to be told that they have approached Christians,⁷⁹ but if it is seen as a description of the great gift they already possess by being Christians, and the goal towards which they are on pilgrimage, it does not seem too out of place to paint them into this picture.

...and to a judge who is God of all... We have already seen that the description of Sinai was a scene of judgment, with God the great and terrible judge inspiring fear in the assembly. Here on Zion, God is “the eschatological judge of all creatures.”⁸⁰ Lane sees this reminder of the judgment as a sobering note, which “provides a powerful motivation for responding to the stern warning to be addressed in v. 25.”⁸¹ Spicq acknowledges this aspect, but notes that “judge” can also be taken in the sense of a ruler of a city, who establishes and defends the law and the rights of the citizens. After all, “Father of the fatherless and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation” (Ps. 68:5). However, he concludes that the real meaning is probably more nuanced; since God is the unique sovereign of the holy city, he chooses the inhabitants and rewards good deeds, but he also chastises the evil.⁸² Though “it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Heb. 10:31), yet is He “the righteous judge” (2 Tim. 4:8) “into whose hands, rather than into the hands of man, it is a blessing to fall.”⁸³

⁷⁸ Johnson, *Hebrews*, 332.

⁷⁹ Spicq, *L'Épître aux Hébreux*, 2:407.

⁸⁰ Johnson, *Hebrews*, 333.

⁸¹ Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, 470.

⁸² Spicq, *L'Épître aux Hébreux*, 2:408.

⁸³ Farrar, *Hebrews*, 160.

...and to the spirits of just men made perfect... This quite clearly refers to men, the just of the Old and the New Testament who because of their faith have reached their goal, obtained eternal life, and are in a stable and definitive condition of perfection.⁸⁴ They are “spirits” because they are souls separated from their bodies, before the resurrection.⁸⁵ It is interesting to note that St. Thomas has “spirit” in the singular, and so interprets this phrase as referring to the Holy Spirit, “Who makes men perfect in justice”, and forming a Trinitarian reference with God the Father in the preceding phrase and Jesus in the next verse.⁸⁶ This would turn the whole passage into an interesting collection of threes: three names for Jerusalem, three designations for the angels (though Thomas himself does not interpret the first-born as angels), and the Three Persons of the Holy Trinity. But the actual word is in the plural, so its plain meaning is that it refers to the Saints. Johnson sees this group as essentially the same as the assembly of the first-born⁸⁷, but Wilson makes an important distinction between them based on the interposition of the “judge who is God of all.” The “spirits of just men made perfect,” coming after the judge, are those who have already experienced their particular judgment and “have completed their course,” while “the assembly of the first-born,” placed before the judge, are “those who still have a race before them, but who as ‘enrolled in heaven’ already belong” to the people of God, the Church, and “live in fellowship with... the saints in heaven.”⁸⁸ Once again we see Spicq’s vital union between the Church Militant and the Church Triumphant,⁸⁹ and we can say with St. Paul that “our commonwealth is in heaven” (Phil. 3:20).

24. *...and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant...* With this phrase, we come to the climax of the vision of the heavenly Jerusalem; we come to Jesus. He is called “Jesus” simply, not “Lord” or

⁸⁴ Spicq, *L’Épître aux Hébreux*, 2:408-9.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Aquinas, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 288.

⁸⁷ Johnson, *Hebrews*, 332.

⁸⁸ Wilson, *Hebrews*, 231.

⁸⁹ Spicq, *L’Épître aux Hébreux*, 2:405.

“Christ”, to emphasize his humanity⁹⁰ and his identity as Saviour. In its vivid expressions, this verse “evokes the whole priestly work of Christ who opens heaven to men.”⁹¹ He is named here as the mediator of the New Covenant to correspond to Moses in v. 21, though the author consistently “avoids calling Moses a covenant mediator,”⁹² for “there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 2:5). As throughout the letter, Jesus is here shown to be far superior to Moses, first in that he is actually called the mediator, and second because Moses was described as terrified and trembling, while Jesus is nothing of the sort. He is in heaven, sitting at the right hand of the Father, his rightful place from the beginning.⁹³ The covenant mediated by Jesus has already been called “new” (8:8; 9:15) and “better” (7:22; 8:6), and will soon be called “eternal” (13:20), so its presence here serves as a reminder and a summation of the whole New Covenant theme which has been developed over the course of the letter. Here, though, a different word for “new” is used, νέας instead of καινῆς, which emphasizes not so much the difference between new and old, but the fact that the New Covenant is quite recent, young and strong.⁹⁴ The Old Covenant is “becoming obsolete and growing old” and “ready to vanish away” (Heb. 8:13), but the New Covenant remains eternally young.⁹⁵

...and to the sprinkled blood... The mention of blood here serves many purposes. First it signifies Jesus’ sacrificial death for our salvation,⁹⁶ for “without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins” (Heb. 9:22). Second, the fact that the blood is “sprinkled” has cultic significance which ties it to the Old Covenant.⁹⁷ In ratifying the covenant on Sinai, Moses took half the blood of the sacrifices and sprinkled the altar, and with the other half, after reading aloud the book of the covenant,

⁹⁰ Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, 472.

⁹¹ Spicq, *L’Épître aux Hébreux*, 2:409. My translation.

⁹² Lehne, *The New Covenant in Hebrews*, 24.

⁹³ Johnson, *Hebrews*, 333.

⁹⁴ Spicq, *L’Épître aux Hébreux*, 2:409.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Johnson, *Hebrews*, 333.

⁹⁷ Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, 473.

he sprinkled the people (Ex 24:3-8). Sprinkled blood effects purification, for “under the law almost everything is purified with blood” (Heb. 9:22), and if this was true in the Old Covenant, “how much more shall the blood of Christ... purify your conscience from dead works” (Heb. 9:14). “For it is impossible that the blood of bulls and goats should take away sins,” (Heb. 10:4) but “the blood of Jesus... cleanses us from all sin” (1 Jn. 1:7). Just as the Israelites were sprinkled with blood by Moses, so Christians are “sanctified by the Spirit for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood” (1 Pet. 1:2) because Jesus “suffered outside the gate to sanctify the people through his own blood” (Heb. 13:12) and “by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified” (Heb. 10:14). Not only does sprinkled blood sanctify, it also saves from death, for Moses also sprinkled blood in connection with the Passover, “that the Destroyer of the first-born might not touch them” (Heb. 11:28). So Jesus saves us from eternal death by his Paschal sacrifice. And unlike the Israelites, who after they were sprinkled still could not approach the presence of God on Sinai, Christians “have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus” and can “draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience” (Heb. 10:19, 22). The “sprinkling” of Jesus’ blood is a metaphor used to bring out all these associations, because usually we speak of Jesus’ blood being “shed”. However, it is not too great a leap of the imagination to see a sprinkling of Christ’s blood in his agony, when “his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down upon the ground” (Lk. 22:44), or on the Cross, when “one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water” (Jn. 19:34). It is by his sprinkled blood that Jesus mediates the New Covenant.

...that speaks more graciously than the blood of Abel. One immediately thinks of Gen. 4:10, when the Lord says to Cain, “The voice of your brother’s blood is crying to me from the ground.” The shedding of Abel’s blood is a sign of “the shedding of the blood of all the just from the beginning of the world”, which in turn prefigured the shedding of the blood of Christ.⁹⁸ And so Abel’s blood cries out for

⁹⁸ Aquinas, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 289.

divine justice, that the guilty might be excluded from heaven,⁹⁹ and for vengeance against them, like the martyrs in Revelation who ask the Lord “how long before thou wilt avenge our blood on those who dwell upon the earth?” (6:9) The words can also be understood in another sense. Lane points out that Abel’s blood as described in Hebrews is not crying out but speaking, using a verb “which in Hebrews is never used of speaking to God.”¹⁰⁰ Abel is first mentioned in Hebrews 11:4, where it is said that “through his faith he is still speaking,” and it is not to God that he is speaking, but to us. He speaks because he “offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain,” and is to us an example of righteousness. His blood speaks of his death, which, innocent as it was, “was unable to effect reconciliation.”¹⁰¹ In both these respects, the blood of Jesus speaks more graciously. The sacrifice of Christ is more acceptable to God than any other, and so the blood of Jesus does effect reconciliation. For “we are now justified by his blood” (Rom. 5:9), and “in him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses” (Eph. 1:7), and through him God was pleased “to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross” (Col. 1:20). And instead of vengeance, the blood of Jesus cries out for mercy, and “opens to sinners the gates of the heavenly Jerusalem.”¹⁰² This is the blood of the New Covenant “which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Mt. 26:28); and so even when the crowd cries out at Jesus’ trial “His blood be on us and on our children,” (Mt. 27:25) the eloquence of Christ’s blood ensures that “these words are not a curse, but rather redemption, salvation”¹⁰³ because it speaks more graciously than the blood of Abel.

Conclusion

The description of the two mountains in Heb. 12:18-24 contains the significance of entire letter in miniature. Indicating a Platonic influence, it contrasts the material, earthly Sinai to the spiritual,

⁹⁹ Spicq, *L’Épître aux Hébreux*, 2:409.

¹⁰⁰ Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, 474.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Spicq, *L’Épître aux Hébreux*, 2:409. My translation.

¹⁰³ Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth Part Two*, 187.

heavenly Zion. It shows forth the author's deep rootedness in the Hebrew Scriptures and his Christian vision of their fulfillment in Christ. It brings together the three main themes of the letter. The wandering People of God are seen at the foot of Mount Sinai; the hearers are also on a pilgrimage, but unlike the Israelites, they have arrived at their destination in the heavenly Jerusalem. The New Covenant is shown to be definitively better than the Old, for while the Old was given in fear of death and judgment, the New is an entrance into joy and celebration and peace. And there is Jesus, the High Priest and mediator of the New Covenant, superior to Moses, whose blood purifies from sin and gains us entrance into the presence of God. The dramatic descriptions form the climax of the letter, the high point of a demonstration *a minori ad maius* which had been building since Chapter 10. Coming as it does between two "warning" pericopes, the contrast of the two mountains serves as the backdrop of the author's final *a fortiori* argument that occurs in 12:25, "for if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less shall we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven." It also gives the hearers the reason why they should strive so hard: the wonders of the heavenly Jerusalem will be their reward. And so the author exhorts them: "let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe" (Heb. 12:28).

This, in the end, is the point of the two mountains: offering to God acceptable worship in reverence and awe. Because of the New Covenant in the blood of Christ, Christians are able to do this in an unprecedented way. For while the people of the Old Covenant could not come close to God in their worship, on pain of death, Christians have already (but not yet – there is still the final judgment) come to Mount Zion, where they have access to God. Even though God "dwells in unapproachable light" (1 Tim. 6:16), "now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ" and "through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father" (Eph. 2:13,18). We are invited to "draw near to God and he will draw near to you" (James 4:8). For even though we have not come to

what may be touched, that which could have been touched it was forbidden to touch in the first place. But through the blood of the new and everlasting covenant, we have access to Mount Zion and the city of the living God, and can touch the heavenly Jerusalem through the very touchable sacraments of the Church. In reverence and awe, each Christian can say, "I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy," (Ps. 43:4) and offer him acceptable worship.

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