

Mount Sinai and Mount Zion: Discontinuity and continuity in the book of Hebrews

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The author of Hebrews draws significant contrasts between Mount Sinai and Mount Zion which both played a major role in the old covenant. For the author of Hebrews the former mountain, Mount Sinai, only had limited significance with respect to the new covenant, whereas the latter mountain, Mount Zion, continued to have significance in the new covenant. Mount Zion was viewed as a shadow of the heavenly reality, which is the true destination for the pilgrimage community. Mount Sinai as the locus of encounter or meeting between God and Israel only played a transitory role, whereas Mount Zion had perpetual significance as the destination, the dwelling place of God and his people.

Berg Sinai en Berg Sion: Diskontinuiteit en kontinuïteit in die brief aan die Hebreërs. Die skrywer van Hebreërs wys op betekenisvolle teenstellings tussen Berg Sinai en Berg Sion, wat elkeen 'n beduidende rol in die ou verbond gespeel het. Vir die Hebreërskrywer het Berg Sinai egter beperkte betekenis vir die nuwe verbond, terwyl Sion nog steeds betekenis het. Berg Sion word as skaduwee van die hemelse werklikheid beskou, wat die uiteindelige bestemming van die pelgrimsgemeenskap is. Berg Sinai, as die lokus van ontmoeting tussen God en Israel, speel slegs 'n oorgangsrol, terwyl Berg Sion steeds beduidende betekenis het as bestemming en woonplek van God en sy volk.

Introduction

The Book of Hebrews pictures the new covenant people or the church as a community on a pilgrimage. As Käsemann (1984:17–20) describes it, Israel's wandering through the wilderness appears in Hebrews as a type for the new covenant community. This pilgrimage is one that is deeply rooted in the old covenant community and it is a continuation thereof. In the first place, the promise of entering God's rest still stands. Israel's wandering in the desert and their entrance into Canaan is viewed as a micro-narrative within a macro-narrative in which God's rest, which God entered after he had completed his work of creation, still stands. Secondly, Old Testament believers looked beyond their micro-narratives through faith; however they did not receive the promises:

- 'Abraham ... looked forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God' (Heb 11:8–12).
- '[Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, and Jacob] were still living by faith when they died ... they were longing for a better country – a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them' (Heb 11:8–16).
- 'By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter ... He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward' (Heb 11:23–26).
- Regarding all the heroes of faith, it is stated: 'These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect' (Heb 11:39–40).

The author of Hebrews draws on several micro-narratives from the Old Testament to show the points of continuity and discontinuity, and points of contrasts between the old and the new covenant. In this article, I intend to focus on the contrast drawn between Mount Sinai and the heavenly Mount Zion in Hebrews 12:18–24. For some the contrast between the two mountains represents discontinuity between the old and the new covenant, which in turn represents the contrast between Judaism and Christianity (Attridge 1989:374; Gordon 2000:157; see also Lehne 1990:103; Williamson & Allen 1989:52–55).¹ Attridge (1989:374) contends that 'the two mountains and their symbolic equivalents are contrasted and become expressions of the discontinuity rather than the coherence of God's action'. The idea that the contrast between Sinai and Zion simply

¹The view that the contrast between Sinai and Zion represents the contrast between Judaism and Christianity will not be subject of discussion in the article. For arguments against this view (see Theissen 1993:203–206; Chilton & Neusner 1995; Käsemann 1984:24–25; Fischer 1989:175–187; Klassen 1986:19; Wall & William 1993:184–185).

expresses 'contrast' and 'discontinuity' tends to undermine the correspondences and progressive relationship between the two mountains which form the basis of the contrast. I will argue that for the author of Hebrews, Mount Sinai is transitory in character and of limited significance whereas Mount Zion as a destination has perpetual significance; yet, both elements of continuity and discontinuity flow from the contrast that is drawn. The elements of continuity and discontinuity are recognisable when the contrast drawn between Sinai and Zion in Hebrews 12:18–24 is viewed as a conceptual framework whose symbolism converges with other symbols within the author's redemptive-historical framework that spans from creation to the eschatological earth and heavens at the climax of which stands a superior covenant mediator, Jesus. Pace Son (2005), the contrast drawn between Sinai and Zion in Hebrews 12:18–24 is not 'the' conceptual framework from which the author of Hebrews developed his argument throughout the book; rather, the contrast drawn has its place and function within the author's redemptive-historical framework. For the author of Hebrews, the primordial act of creation set the stage for redemptive history, which culminates in the eschatological transformation of creation (Heb 1:2; 12:26–28). It is within this broad redemptive-historical framework that the author of Hebrews makes a contrast between the two mountains, Mount Sinai (or Horeb) and the heavenly Mount Zion, and within which the pilgrimage motif is set not only as a forward movement but also an upward movement.

Exposition in Hebrews 12:18–24 is given by the following pattern of contrast: *Ὁὐ γὰρ προσελήλυθατε* [for you have not come] in Hebrews 12:18 in contrast with *ἀλλὰ προσελήλυθατε* [but you have come] in Hebrews 12:22. The pilgrimage motif is characterised by the 'verbs of motion' just as we find in Hebrews 12:18–24 (Käsemann 1984:22–23). In Hebrews 3–4, where the leading motif is that of 'rest' [*κατάπαυσις*], the goal of the new covenant people as a wandering community is to enter God's rest. The 'rest' which Israel entered into when they took possession of the land of Canaan is now viewed as a type of God's eternal rest, which he has made available. As Johnsson (1978:239–251) points out, the tone in that section is one of expectancy – the goal has been set but not yet realised. In Hebrews 12:18–24, the goal is no longer just eschatological; it is in some sense realised: 'You have come.' The backdrop in this case is Israel's experience at Sinai and Israel's experience at Mount Zion.

Mount Sinai – Mountain of transition

Although Mount Sinai is not explicitly mentioned by name in Hebrews 12:18–21, the author is alluding to Israel's experience surrounding the giving of the law when Israel was camped at the desert of Sinai. In this retelling of the events, the author makes use of the Exodus account (Ex 19:1–20:23), its retelling in Deuteronomy (Dt 4:9–5:33), and interpretive interpolations. The author's use of the events at Mount Sinai in this instance evoke, *inter alia*, three things: the theophany motif, the *visio Dei* motif, and the fear motif.

Theophany motif

The author of Hebrews introduces the contrast between Mounts Sinai and Zion by reminding his audience where their pilgrimage has not led them: 'For you have not come'; then it continues to offer a description of the place. The description as already noted points to Mount Sinai, the locus of the old covenant. The description first of all recalls the terror associated with theophany. Mount Sinai is used elsewhere to refer to the place of theophany and the giving of the law (Neh 9:13; in agreement with Ex 19:18, 20; 20:22; Dt 4:36; cf. 4 Ezr 3:17ff.; Bar 2:28; Sir 17:11ff.; 24:33; Jdg 5:14). Mount Sinai, due to the theophanic manifestation, could not be touched; anything that touched it, even if it was an animal, had to die (Ex 19:12). The scene was terrifying for the Israelites: the mountain was on fire, darkness was over it, as were gloom and tempest and in the midst of all this terror, there was the sound of a trumpet and a voice speaking. The Israelites requested Moses to be their mediator rather than risk their lives by directly conversing with God (Ex 20:18–19). As the author of Hebrews also points out, when the people heard the voice they begged that no further word be spoken to them (Heb 12:19). Then he continues to highlight the fact that nobody could approach that mountain, not even an animal.

In the Exodus narrative, the preparation for the theophanic manifestation at Mount Sinai clearly set a boundary around the mountain. For the people to partake in the meeting they had to abstain from sexual intercourse and to wash their clothes (Ex 19:10–12, 23; cf. Dt 5:1–5). This was to set God apart as a Holy One separated from all imperfections and weakness. It is evident from this theophany and from the other theophanic manifestations that a place where God reveals himself is marked as holy ground and protected by explicit restrictions (cf. Ex 3:1–5; Harrington 2001:46). The burning fire on the mountain, as Harrington (2001) points out:

[...] is a good symbol of God's exalted, dangerous holiness. Fire separates pure from impure, creating a boundary which cannot be bridged. For that which can stand its heat, fire functions as purifier and perfecter. Fire is powerful, even uncontrollable; if unleashed it represents a dangerous threat which is respectable by all. (pp. 13–14)

In line with this, the author of Hebrews, as will become clear subsequently, stresses the fact that this mountain was unapproachable.

This also needs to be understood within the broader religious context of the ancient Near East, where the mountain motif played an important role (see Clifford 1972; Levenson 1985:111–137; Talmon 1978:427–447). Mountains were regarded as locations where the gods held their divine assemblies and also as the homes of the gods. For example, the Canaanite god, Baal, was thought to live on Mount Zaphon which in the Bible came to be an epithet for Zion (Levenson 1985:68). The attachment of the ancient world to holy mountains, as Clements (1965:1–2) points out, could be explained by the expectation of the ancient peoples for the gods to continue to reveal their presence in certain localities where a theophany occurred in the past, thereby certain localities were identified

as their dwelling places and altars were erected. Attached to this was the idea that the mountain on which a god dwelt was a chosen, a 'holy spot' or 'holy mountain'. This is evident in the following Ugaritic text as translated by Clifford (1972):

Come, and I will seek it,
In the midst of my mountain, divine Zaphon,
In the holy place, the mountain of my heritage,
In the chosen spot, on the hill of victory. (p. 68)

When God descended on Mount Sinai it became a holy and unapproachable spot. However, when God descended from heaven to Mount Sinai, he did not make Mount Sinai his permanent dwelling place. Mount Sinai was rather a temporary dwelling for God as he continued to narrow the gap between himself and the people by descending even further from the mountain to the tabernacle. God became a wanderer with his people in the desert dwelling in a tent until many generations later during the time of David and Solomon when he chose Jerusalem and Zion to be his dwelling. Mount Sinai was never intended to be the final destination for Israel in their pilgrimage, nor did God make it his permanent dwelling. Mount Sinai rather had a transit function in Israel's pilgrimage.

Visio Dei and Motif of Fear

The theophany goes hand in hand with the *visio Dei* motif. The author of Hebrews uses the verb of *seeing* [φαντάζω] in 12:21 to bring about this linkage: 'Indeed, so fearful was the sight [τὸ φανταζόμενον] ...' In the Exodus narrative the two also go hand in hand (Ex 3:3–7; 19:20–24; 20:18–21; 33:12–13; 40:35–38). 'To the Israelites the glory of the Lord (at Sinai) looked [הָרָא] like a consuming fire on top of the mountain' (Ex 24:17). The forbidding voice warned the Israelites not to 'force their way through to see the Lord and many of them perish' (Ex 19:21). The *visio Dei* motif is also confirmed by God's words in Exodus 20:22, 'You have seen [הָרָא] for yourselves that I have spoken to you from heaven.' The significance of the *visio Dei* motif is affirmed by the parallel passages, which strengthen the connection between seeing and death (see Ex 20:19; cf. Dt 5:24–27; Hague 2001:38). When Moses pleaded with God to show him his glory, God warns Moses saying: 'You cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live' (Ex 33:20).

It should also be observed that the author of Hebrews relates the theophany motif with the *visio Dei* and the fear motif: 'indeed, so fearful [φοβερὸν] was the sight that Moses said, "I am filled with fear and trembling"' (Heb 12:21). The fear motif, according to Exodus 20:20, is the basis of the Sinai covenant: 'Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning."' As Jacob (1992:578) observes, the intent of the Sinaitic revelation 'was to restrain the people from sin'. However, the author of Hebrews expands the fear motif to include Moses as well.

The words ascribed to Moses in this regard are not recorded in the Old Testament. The author was making use of an exegetical tradition that is attested elsewhere in the New

Testament and in haggadic tradition, reproducing it in his own way, as is the case with the other interpretive traditions. In Acts 7:32, Stephen describes Moses as trembling with regard to the initial theophany which Moses saw on Mount Sinai: '*and trembling*, Moses did not dare look'. The textual basis was probably Exodus 3:6, 'Moses hid his face for he was afraid to look at God' (Hughes 1977:543; Lane 1991:464; Thurston 1979:30–31) and/or Deuteronomy 9:19, 'I feared the anger of and wrath of the Lord ...' (Bruce 1990:354–355). As Hughes (1977:543) expresses it, 'Moses, who drew near to the divine presence within the fiery cloud, must have been inspired with awe beyond the rest of the people who remained below.'

It should be noted, however, that a similar motif is found in the *Bayblonian Talmud: Šabbat* 88b according to which Moses at Sinai declared, 'I was afraid that the angels could consume me with the breath of their mouths.' The theme of 'fear of the Lord' is an important one in the Old Testament and is fully developed in wisdom literature, where the 'fear of the Lord' was now used in a positive sense identified with wisdom. However, the fear in this case is one, which is associated with being in the presence of the Most Holy God. The emphasis in Hebrews 12:18–24 is on the holiness of God, in which there is no room for imperfection. The Sinai covenant, or the old covenant, is one that made man conscious of his imperfection and showed him that he needed to worship in fear due to his unworthiness.

Mount Sinai as representative of the old covenant of fear

We have established so far that Mount Sinai, although not explicitly mentioned by name, is identified in Hebrews 12:18–24 as the locus of the giving of the law, the mountain of encounter between God and Israel. Mount Sinai is the locus where God and Israel covenantally came together to journey together to their final destination. The author of Hebrews is not interested here in the abolition of the significance of the covenantal encounter between God and Israel. Rather, he focuses narrowly on establishing the weakness of that encounter. The chronotopic encounter at Mount Sinai, an encounter in space and time, between God and Israel is presented as weak. It was a fearful encounter. The sight was terrifying, the voice of God was also terrifying so that the people were terrified and Moses, the mediator between Israel and God, was also terrified.

In so doing, the author continues with his hermeneutical strategy that can already be observed in the earlier chapters of pointing out the weakness of the old covenant that was established at Sinai. The old covenant failed to bring about the perfection demanded by God: 'If perfection could have been attained ... why was there still need for another ...?' (Heb 7:11). Again he states:

The former regulation is set aside because it was weak and useless (for the law made nothing perfect), but the introduction of the better hope through which we draw near to God. (Heb 7:18–19)

The same idea is repeated in Hebrews 10:

The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming – not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. If it could, would they have not stopped being offered? (vv. 1–2a)

The old covenant is characterised by imperfection: the people failed to remain within the covenant bounds (Heb 8:7–12, esp. vv. 7–8). The Levitical priesthood was administered by fallible and weak men who also needed atoning for their sins (Heb 7:27–28); the gifts and sacrifices that they offered could not perfect the conscience of the worshiper (Heb 9:9); they performed their duties in a sanctuary that was a copy of that in heaven (Heb 9:23–24). The law was a conscious reminder of man's inability to attain the holiness that God demands (Heb 10:1–4, esp. vv. 4–5).

Mount Sinai, as Levenson (1985) describes it:

[I]s the mountain of Israel's infancy, of the days of Moses, when the nation, as the story has it, was but a few generations old. Mount Sinai is the location of only one great event in Israel's history, the revelation of the Torah. (p. 89)

However, for the author of Hebrews, this great revelatory event was one that was clouded in fear, the fear at Mount Sinai was cast negatively as it was contrasted with the joy at Mount Zion. The idea that meeting with God is dangerous and frightening recalls the post-fall encounter between God and the first human couple, Adam and Eve. God's presence which was previously unthreatening was now perceived as threatening, and so out of fear Adam and Eve hid from God (Gn 3:8–9).

However, the covenantal encounter at Mount Sinai is not simply presented as weak, it was also transitory in nature. At Mount Sinai, both God and the people of Israel were in transition. Mount Sinai was not to be a permanent dwelling for God. As terrifying as the initial encounter was, the covenant-making process proceeded. God instructed Israel to build a sanctuary for him that would house him in their midst. God narrowed the gap between himself and Israel by making his dwelling in a tent in the midst of Israel, becoming a wanderer with Israel to her final destination. The final destination for the tabernacle was Jerusalem, on Mount Zion (1 Ki 8:1). On the other hand, Israel at Mount Sinai still looked forward to the Promised Land and there within the land for 'the place the Lord will choose' (Dt 12:5, 11, 14, 18, 21, 26; 14:23, 24, 25; 15:20; 16:2, 6, 7, 11, 15, 16; 17:8, 10; 18:6, 26, 31), that is, a place where he will 'put his name there' (Dt 12:5, 21; 14:24) or 'make his name dwell there' (Dt 12:11; 14:23; 16:2, 6, 11; 26:2). Israel became a carrier of God to his dwelling place. For the author of Hebrews the new covenant community unlike Israel at Sinai has come to Mount Zion.

Mount Zion – The destination

Mount Sinai and Mount Zion both played significant roles within the old covenant. However, for the author of Hebrews Mount Zion has a continual significance in the new covenant whereas the significance of Mount Sinai does not extend

beyond the boundaries of the old covenant. As we have already observed, Mount Sinai played a transitory role as a place of divine descent as God prepared to make his dwelling amongst men. As Levenson (1985:89) argues, as significant as the experience at Mount Sinai was in altering Israel's religion, 'the mountain itself had no ongoing significance for the people who believed their destiny was transformed there.'

Mount Zion, a hill within the bounds of the city of Jerusalem, became the centre of Israel's cult and therefore became the highest mountain on earth, and the peripheral city of Jerusalem became the centre of the world (Anderson 1998:187–224; Clifford 1972:154–173; Levenson 1985:111–137). Mount Zion passed into the hands of the Israelites during the reign of David, when he conquered the city of Jerusalem from the Jebusites, formerly known under the name Jebus and also a stronghold of Zion (2 Sm 5:6–9; 2 Chr 11:5). The name Jerusalem, however, predates the conquest of the city by David as known from the correspondences between the king of Jerusalem and the Egyptian pharaoh in the 14th century BC (Tell El-Amarna Letters 2003: COS 3.92A & 3.92B). This city was also known as Salem (Ps 76:3), which was initially a name of a Canaanite god (Gray 1949:72–83). In the patriarchal narrative, we are told about the encounter between Abraham and Melchizedek, the priestly-king of Salem (Gn 14:18). This, as Levenson (1985:93) points out, was 'perhaps in adumbration of the priestly and royal significance of the city from David's time on'.

Jerusalem was transformed in a unique way into a city of God by two complementary events, the bringing of the Ark of God to the city by David (2 Sm 6; 1 Chr 13:1–14; 15:1–16:43) and the construction of the temple by Solomon (1 Ki 6–8; 2 Chr 2:1–7:10) (see also Alexander 2008:45). However, as the story of the old covenant unfolded, Jerusalem, the city of God, 'gradually gave its name as a symbol of the transcendent action of God in creating a people for himself in the world, that is, in bringing in his Kingdom' (Porteous 1967:109).

Mount Zion as God's Heavenly Dwelling of Joyful Celebration

The author of Hebrews uses Mount Zion synonymously with 'the city of the living God,' which is in turn specified as the 'heavenly Jerusalem' (Heb 12:22). Pace Westcott (1909:413) and Casey (1976:337–346), who treat Mount Zion and Jerusalem as separate entities in order to accentuate the distinction made between the three designations – I regard the three designations to be referring to one and the same destination for the pilgrim community. The synonymous use of Mount Zion and Jerusalem is one that is also deeply rooted in the old dispensation (e.g. 2 Sm 5:6–8; Ps 147:12f.; Am 1:2; Mi 4:2; Isa 24:23; Zph 3:14–20; Zch 1:16; Jr 31:38; Jl 3:17). In the cultic hymns, Mount Zion is the dwelling place of God (Ps 9:12; 74:2), God's holy mountain (Ps 2:6; 87:1; 99:9) and the home of his holy house (Ps 5:7; 27:4). The tradition of the election of Zion is based upon the bringing of the Ark to Jerusalem after David had captured the city from the Jebusites. 'With or without the temple, the presence of the Ark in Jerusalem meant that Yahweh was now dwelling there and had chosen

this place for his abode' (Hayes 1963:421). Thus, Mount Zion as God's abode was transformed into a sacred place where no imperfection was allowed.

The city motif recurs in Hebrews under a variety of metaphors: 'the place' (Heb 11:8), 'the heavenly homeland' (Heb 11:16), 'the unshakable kingdom' (Heb 12:28), and 'the abiding city which is to come' (Heb 13:14). Thus, the idea of a 'city' in Hebrews 12:22 ties this section with Hebrews 11 together, wherein the author introduces the idea of an eschatological city. The thrust of Hebrews 11 is that 'God's people throughout the OT looked beyond the present life to a heavenly reward. They sighted the better country, the city of God, but did not attain to it' (Johnsson 1978:240). They regarded themselves as aliens and strangers on earth (Heb 11: 13) because 'they were longing for a better country – a heavenly one' (Heb 11:16). Like the old covenant people, the new covenant people are supposed to live as aliens and strangers in the world (see also 1 Pt 1:2; 2:11). Accordingly, for the author of Hebrews, the destination for the community of faith is heavenly, not earthly. The citizenship of this community of faith is in this heavenly city where their names are written (Heb 12:23; cf. Phlp 3:20). The heavenly Mount Zion is the locus wherein Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant, resides and continues to fulfil his duty (Heb 12:24).

The city motif should also be identified with God's rest, which he entered into at creation. The author of Hebrews discusses in depth the issue of God's rest in Chapter 4. The promise of God's rest, or the Sabbath rest, still remains open for some to enter into (Heb 4:1, 6). Israel's wilderness experience is analogous to and has a typological bearing on new covenant believers (I am indebted to Richard B. Gaffin with the lecture he gave at Westminster Theological Seminary). The Christian community is currently living in 'today' [σήμερον] which is not the situation of rest in Hebrews 4:7–8, rather, it is the wilderness situation. The rest experienced by Israel when they entered Canaan was only a type of God's rest at creation, which believers currently seek to enter. The Christian community is still on a pilgrimage; God's rest is still available for many to enter through faith. The city has not yet fully manifested itself, it is still 'the city which is to come' (Heb 13:14), 'but the privileges of its citizenship are already enjoyed by faith' (Bruce 1990:357).

The encounter of the new covenant community with God takes place at a different spatial location. The earthly Mount Zion or the earthly Jerusalem as significant as it was in the old covenant, is no longer the locus of encounter between God and the new covenant community. The earthly Mount Zion like Mount Sinai also represents the old order. At Qumran – although they rejected the Zion cult, the temple – its priesthood and rulers continued to use the Zion symbolism for both the present reality and the future reality (Knibb 1987:3–6; Vermes 1995:19–35). The Qumranian community in the interim regarded itself as the temple until such time when the earthly Zion or the temple would be restored (1Q32; 2Q24; 5Q15; 11QT, esp. 29:2–10; 4QFlor 1 i.2–9; cf. *Apoc. Abr.* 29:17–18; *Sib. Or.* 5.249–255, 420–427;

see Hughes 1977:546; Isaacs 2002:69). The author of Hebrews rather shares a view similar to Paul's. Paul, in his allegory in Galatians 4:21–34 regarding Hagar and Sarah, takes the two as representing two covenants: Hagar represents the covenant of Mount Sinai, and Sarah represents the covenant of the heavenly Jerusalem. Paul regards the present (earthly) city of Jerusalem to correspond with Mount Sinai. As Hughes points out, we have in Paul two concepts of Jerusalem: the present or earthly Jerusalem representing bondage and the heavenly Jerusalem representing freedom. The old covenant is inferior due to spatial location – it is earthly and finds expression in terms of the earth, whereas the new covenant has its centre in heaven and finds its expression in heavenly forms (Vos 1956:62). As Adams (2009) notes:

The heaven-earth duality is not for our author an antithetical dualism: heaven and earth are not polarised. In [Hebrews] 11:13–36, the earth is depicted as a place of sojourn, not the final settlement of the people of God. The 'heavenly' country is valued above the existing earth, but the distinction is hierarchical ('better') not oppositional. (p. 134)

Furthermore, Mount Zion unlike Mount Sinai, is an inhabited city. The author of Hebrews gives a welcoming picture of Mount Zion, comparing it favourably to the darkness, gloom, tempest, trumpets and voice coming from the midst of it all, which terrified the Israelites at the foot of Mount Sinai. On the heavenly Mount Zion there is life, and multitudes of angels are to be seen, all in 'festal array [πανήγυρις].' The term πανήγυρις, as some commentators (Hughes 1977:547; Attridge 1989:375; Ellingworth 1993:220) have suggested, gives the assembly of angels a festive character – joy, celebration and worship (cf. Is 66:10), [πανηγυρίσατε]. However, in their company is the 'assembly [ἐκκλησία] of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven' and 'to the spirits of righteous men made perfect' (Heb 12:23). The covenant people of God are given a title of honour, which in Hebrews 1:6 is attributed to Jesus, 'firstborn' [πρωτότοκος] (Lane 1991; Samuel 1998:68), thus, indicating that the enrolment in heaven is through union with Jesus, who is the firstborn par excellence. Furthermore, as DeSilva (2000) argues:

The fact that these 'firstborn' were 'inscribed in heaven' recalls the Jewish notion of the names of the righteous being written in the 'books' of heaven (Dan 12:1; Rev 13:8). Here, however, since no books are actually mentioned, the image may call up more strongly in the hearers' mind 'enrollment' (i.e. as a citizen) in the city of the living God, the enjoyment of full participation for which the people of faith, now dead, had sought ([Heb] 11:13–16) and for which the hearers now are themselves being trained ([Heb] 12:5–11). (p. 467)

The heavenly Mount Zion is pictured positively as a place of joy in contrast to the fear that was experienced at Mount Sinai. The motif of joyous celebration also recalls the joyous occasion when David 'brought the Ark of God from the house of Edom to the city of David with rejoicing [הִתְשַׁבְּחַ]' (2 Sm 6:12). However, in this case it is not God who is received in the city of David with joy, but the pilgrim community that is received in the city of the living God with joyous celebration. The atmosphere at the heavenly Mount Zion is inviting and welcoming, whereas the picture of Mount Sinai is uninviting. To come to heavenly Mount Zion is to come to

a populated mountain in contrast to the uninhabited Mount Sinai; it is to come into the company of the other worldly, the company of angels; it is to come into contact again with the familiar, God's firstborn children, whose names are written in heaven, the righteous ones; it is to come into the presence of his majesty, King Jesus, who sits in the place of honour at the right hand of God as a mediator of the new covenant.

Already and not yet

For the author of Hebrews, the church as a pilgrim community 'has come to Mount Zion' (Heb 12:22). On the one hand, this pilgrim community, unlike Israel at the foot of Mount Sinai, has come to its destination, Mount Zion; and on the other hand, like Israel at Mount Sinai, they have not yet reached their final destination. The latter is evident from the warnings and exhortation sounded to the new covenant community: they were to run with perseverance (Heb 12:1), not to grow weary or fainthearted (Heb 12:3), beware of the 'root of bitterness' (Heb 12:15) and irreligion (Heb 12:16–17), and not refuse him who was speaking (Heb 12:25; Johnsson 1978:241). The pilgrimage has not yet culminated in Mount Zion, in the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. However, we should ask ourselves in what sense this new covenant community had 'come' to the heavenly Mount Zion and yet was still not there?

For the author, the answer to this question lies in the fact that this is a community of faith, a faith that characterises those in the old covenant and those in the new covenant. This is a faith which is not simply directed toward the future, but also toward the unseen realities that already exist, though they will not be manifested till the consummation (Barrett 1956:380). However, the new covenant pilgrim community has an advantage over those in the old dispensation because 'for them the unseen truth which God will one day enact is no longer entirely unseen; it has been manifested in Jesus' (Barrett 1956:380). As Barrett (1956) points out, it is so because:

He [*Jesus*] himself is our forerunner ([Heb.] vi.20), and it is precisely because he has passed through the veil ([Heb] vi. 20; x. 20) and entered now into the holy place in the city of God that we can be confident ([Heb.] x. 22) that in due course we shall endure the time of shaking ([Heb] xii. 26) and reach the city that is to come ([Heb.] xiii. 14). (p. 383)

For the author of Hebrews, the new covenant people already tasted the heavenly reality through their representative head and brother, Jesus, who had travelled the route on their behalf and he was there making the preparations for their arrival. Thus, the new covenant community in terms of their union and solidarity with the ascended Christ, believers 'have come' to the heavenly Jerusalem. As Samuel (1998:56) points out, the verb προσέρχουμαι [to come or to approach] [Heb 12:18, 22] is the same verb used with regard to the call for believers to approach the throne of grace (Heb 4:16); with regard to those who approach God through Jesus, who intercede for them (Heb 7:25); with regard to those who had to approach to worship in the old covenant through sacrifices that had to be repeated endlessly (Heb 10:1); with regard to the confidence of the believers in approaching God through

Jesus, who entered the Most Holy Place (Heb 10:22); and to show the impossibility of approaching God without faith (Heb 11:6; Samuel 1998:567). The new covenant people were already able to approach the Most Holy Place through Jesus, who went ahead of them as their high priest.

The pilgrim community is one that walks by faith, which for the author of Hebrews entails two things: being sure of what they hope for and being certain of that which they do not see. The two go hand in hand: faith entails expectancy, which is the expectancy of the unseen things hoped for. On the other hand, the unseen has become a reality through faith. Believers 'have "already tasted the powers of the age to come," though the full glory of that life is not yet' (Robinson 1961:43). The heavenly Mount Zion, which has existed eternally in heaven, is now realised in and through Christ, yet it is still to come.

However, the author of Hebrews projects three comings to the heavenly Mount Zion. Firstly, the new covenant community through faith has already come to the heavenly Mount Zion (Heb 11:1; 12:22); secondly when they die they come into the assembly of God's firstborn children, whose names are written in heaven (Heb 12:22); and thirdly they will finally come when God shakes the earth and also the heavens (Heb 12:25). The final coming is in line with the author of Hebrews' view that the earth is the place of sojourn in the expectation of a city that is to come. The formulation in Hebrews 11:10 'for he [Abraham] looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God' and Hebrews 13:14 'for here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city which is to come', 'suggests a future "earthly" manifestation of the city that currently exists as a heavenly reality' (Adams 2009:138). Thus, the author of Hebrews seems to project on the one hand an ascending of mankind to make their dwelling with God, and on the other hand, a coming or a descent of Mount Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem (cf. Rv 21:1–2). The final, climactic moment of entering the heavenly Mount Zion is still to come.

Warning and Blessing

The heavenly Mount Zion is presented in Hebrews as both the throne of judgement and the throne of grace. As the author of Hebrews 12 tells his audience:

[Y]ou have come to God, the judge of all men, and to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, and to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. (vv. 23b–24)

There is an intimate relationship between the two, even in the way that the author juxtaposes God as judge and the spirits of the righteous men made perfect on the one hand, and Jesus as mediator of the new covenant, whose blood speaks better than the blood of Abel, on the other. God's justice and mercy go hand in hand, there is no mercy without justice. However, God's justice has been satisfied through a perfect mediator who stands between God and man, Jesus who 'by means of one sacrifice perfected [τετελειωκεν] forever those who are being consecrated to God' (Heb 10:14). Man can have confidence to enter the holy of holies only through the blood of Jesus, the 'great priest of the house of God' (Heb 10:21).

The phrase ‘spirits of the righteous ones made perfect’ gives the impression of ‘complete divine favour and acceptance’ of God as judge (Dumbrell 1976:158–59).

It would be wrong, however, to suppose that the fear motif no longer plays a significant role in the new covenant. Many of the exhortations in the book of Hebrews carry a negative slant of warning. For the author of Hebrews, God has again spoken, however, this time he has spoken through an even greater theophany, the Son, ‘who is the radiance of [God’s] glory and the exact representation of his being [ὄς ὢν ἀπαύγασμα τῆς δόξης καὶ χαρακτήρ τῆς ὑποστάσεως αὐτοῦ]’ (Heb 1:3a). The Son, on the other hand, continues to speak, he speaks through his blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel. In Hebrews 12, the author of Hebrews sounds a warning regarding this voice:

See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we escape if we reject the one who warns from heaven! (v. 25)

This serves as a warning to the new covenant community not to be like the Israelites who begged not to hear the voice of God by refusing to take heed of the gracious voice which proceeds from the blood of Christ (Hughes 1977:556; Oberholtzer 1989:71). The voice that proceeds from the heavenly Mount Zion is more powerful than that which proceeded from Mount Sinai. At Mount Sinai, the voice ‘shook the earth’ (Ex 19:18), whereas in the eschaton the voice of God will shake heaven and earth (Oberholtzer 1989:71–72). The shaking of the earth and the heavens is one which would result in the ‘removal’ [μετάθεσιν] of the ‘things which can be shaken’ [τῶν σαλευομένων] (Heb 12:27); only those things which are unshakable will remain in the eschatological new heaven and new earth. The coming judgement is one which is inescapable for those who fail to hold fast and fall away (Thompson 1975:580–587).

The pilgrim community is especially warned against apostasy (Heb 6:4–6; 10:26–31; 12:15–17). For those who wilfully sin and reject God’s truth, having been enlightened by God’s theophany through his Son, are warned to wait with ‘fearful expectation of judgment’ [φοβερὰ δὲ τις ἐκδοχὴ κρίσεως] because they have trampled the Son of God underfoot, undermined the blood of the covenant, and insulted the Spirit of God (Heb 10:27; cf. Ex 24:17; Dt 4:24; 5:25; Ps 21:9; Is 30:27, 30; 33:10). To drive this point home, the author states, ‘it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God’ (Heb 10:31). The fear motif, with regard to the new covenant, is not the basis for the worship of God but a terror which follows those who continue in unbelief: ‘No sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God’ (Heb 10:26–27). Those who believe in Jesus the high priest approach the most holy place boldly and with assurance of faith (Heb 4:16; 10:19, 22). However, God expects those who draw near to him to pursue holiness ‘without which no one can see God’ (Heb 12:14). The heavenly Mount Zion, as Käsemann (1984:53) notes, is viewed:

As a site of the proclamation and the diathēke established and guaranteed in Jesus’ blood is the primal datum of the people of God and its wandering, just as in the shape of the ‘inheritance’ to be won it will

be the final datum of the wandering people of God, and just as Jesus is both ‘pioneer and perfecter of our faith. (Heb 12:1, [Author’s own emphasis])

To come to Mount Zion is to escape God’s judgement – the fearful theophanic manifestation that will be revealed when God appears as the raging fire that will consume his enemies.

Concluding observations

The hermeneutical strategy that the author of Hebrews employs is one of contrasting the old covenant with the new covenant. In the case of Hebrews 12:18–24, the old covenant is contrasted unfavourably with the new covenant, however, the deficiency of the old can only be realised through the optic lens of the new. Thus, the old is reinterpreted in light of the Christ event, that is, the coming, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, as an event that ushered in a new age. For the author of Hebrews, God has spoken in ‘these last days’ through his Son, a Son who currently sits at the right hand of God in the heavenly Mount Zion (Heb 1:1–3). The author of Hebrews, like Paul, discovered that the Christ event was the means through which the new age was inaugurated (Hooker 2009:209).

The contrast between Mount Sinai and Mount Zion forms part of the broader redemptive-historical framework that spans from creation to the eschatological shaking of the earth and heavens. For the author of Hebrews, the micro-narrative of the pilgrimage to Mount Sinai and ultimately to Mount Zion has its place and function within the broader redemptive-historical framework, which climaxes with the Son. For the author of Hebrews, the new covenant continues God’s grand plan for humanity to enter into his ‘Sabbath rest’ (Heb 4:4, 11), alternatively identified with the ‘true tabernacle’ (Heb 8:2; 9:11); ‘the city to come’ (Heb 11:10; 13:14); Mount Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God (Heb 12:22). The Mosaic cult established at Mount Sinai only functioned on the one hand as ‘a copy and a shadow’ [ὑποδείγματι καὶ σκιᾷ] of the heavenly reality (Heb 8:5), that is, a ‘shadowing down,’ and on the other hand, as ‘symbol’ [παραβολῇ] of the new age that is realised in Jesus Christ (Heb 9:9), a ‘shadowing forward’ to the time of the true high priest, and the true sacrifice (see Attridge 2009:101). However, the realised new age is no mere shadow of the heavenly reality but the actual substance of the heavenly reality. As the author of Hebrews confidently states it, ‘you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, heavenly Jerusalem’ (Heb 12:22).

Mount Sinai is presented as the locus of the old covenant, which has limited significance in relation to the new covenant. Mount Sinai was not the final destination both for God and Israel – it was a temporary stopping place for God as he made his descent to dwell amongst Israel and it was a temporary stopping place for Israel as they journeyed to the Promised Land. Mount Sinai was the place of encounter between God and Israel as they came together to continue together the journey to the Promised Land. Mount Sinai was indeed the mountain of God’s descent where Israel experienced

great theophany. However, the experience at Mount Sinai is presented as one that terrified the people of Israel and Moses, their mediator. The theophanic manifestation was so terrifying that Mount Sinai may be described as the mountain of terror.

The earthly Mount Zion, on the other hand, was the destination, the chosen site and dwelling of God, and a cultic centre for the worshipping community. Mount Zion as the site of the new covenant is superior to Mount Sinai because it is abiding rather than transitory. The earthly Mount Zion is viewed as a type or a shadow of the heavenly Mount Zion, the true dwelling of God. The experience at the heavenly Mount Zion is presented as a joyful one so that Mount Zion may be described as the mountain of joy. Heavenly Mount Zion – unlike the unpopulated Mount Sinai – is a populated mountain. For the author of Hebrews the new covenant people through faith already experienced the heavenly reality, however, for as long as it is still ‘today’ the new covenant community, is still a pilgrim community awaiting the full manifestation of the heavenly Mount Zion, the journey continues.

For the author of Hebrews, the new covenant stands in continuity with the old covenant in its discontinuity of the old. The new covenant supersedes the old covenant and replaces it. The supersession of the old is not the obliteration of the old, the new and the old are interrelated *inter alia* in terms of promise-fulfilment, redemptive history, law-gospel, old-new, typology as these various perspectives offer alternative ways of establishing the relationship. In the case of Hebrews 12:18–24, the old covenant as represented by Mount Sinai is superseded by the new covenant as represented by the heavenly Mount Zion on the basis of a number of motifs: the terror-joy motif, uninhabited-habited motif, transit-arrival motif, Moses-Jesus mediator motif, Abel’s blood-Jesus’ blood motif, earthly-heavenly motif. Thus, the new covenant as represented by heavenly Mount Zion is in some cases oppositionally better (terror-joy motif, uninhabited-habited motif) whereas in some cases it is superior or hierarchically better (transit-arrival motif, Moses-Jesus mediator motif, Abel’s blood-Jesus’ blood motif, earthly-heavenly).

Furthermore, similar hierarchical and oppositional contrast can be observed elsewhere in Hebrews. The old cult under the leadership of God’s faithful servant, Moses, is superseded and drawn to a close by the new cult under the leadership of Jesus, God’s faithful servant, in continuity of God’s plan to bring his people into his rest, heaven (Heb 3–4). The rest achieved under Joshua is superseded by the true rest that is achieved under the leadership of Jesus (Heb 4:1–16). The Levitical-Aaronic priesthood is superseded and replaced by the new priesthood in the order of Melchizedek with Jesus as the high priest (Heb 4:14–5:10; 7:1–8:6). The ministry of Levitical-Aaronic priesthood that took place in the earthly tabernacle is superseded by the ministry of Jesus who ministers in the heavenly tabernacle (Heb 8:1–6). The sacrificial system of the old cult failed to cleanse the conscious, to wash away

sin and to make perfect (Heb 7:19; 9:9, 13; 10:4) and so it is superseded by a new perfect sacrificial system that effectively deals with sin once and for all (Heb 9:14–15, 27–28). Thus, the cultic order established at Mount Sinai gives way to the new cultic order established on the earthly Mount Zion through the death and resurrection of Jesus. The two do not stand side by side in continuity – the old gives way to the new. The new renders the old non-functional. As Goppelt (1981:255) points out, this is not simply a chronological replacement of the old by the new but a fading away of the old with the time frame of the world. The old gives way to the new, which is substantially superior (Heb 9:10).

It should also be noted that the earthly Mount Zion as the sight of the establishment of the new cultic order is not the spatial location for the continual service of Jesus as high priest and destination for the pilgrim community, rather, it is the heavenly Mount Zion – the heavenly Jerusalem, the true tabernacle not set up by man, but by God. The author, by drawing the attention of his audience to the heavenly Mount Zion, probably wanted to avert the distress caused by the destruction of the Temple in AD 70 (Isaacs 2002:12–13; Hooker 2009:191). The destroyed earthly copy and shadow did not mean the end of the new covenantal order – the heavenly reality remains functional. It is there where Christ, the firstborn, sits at the right hand of God and mediates for them as high priest; it is there where the covenantal people are registered; and it is this reality, which they by faith have experienced already through their union and solidarity with Christ. It is surprising, however, that the author does not mention the destruction of the temple and the end of the sacrificial system there, as this would have supported his claim that Christ had fulfilled once and for all the demands of the old covenant sacrificial system (Hooker 2009:191).

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