

## HEBREWS 12:18-24

### APOCALYPTIC TYPOLOGY OR PLATONIC DUALISM?

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#### Summary

*Those who have approached Hebrews either from the point of view of apocalyptic eschatology or from the perspective of neoplatonism have often misinterpreted the two 'mountains' in Hebrews 12:18-24. The first understand these 'mountains' as representing the Old and New Covenants; the second, the earthly and heavenly worlds. This paper argues that the two 'mountains' represent two present possibilities. The first is the present state and future destiny of the disobedient who are excluded from fellowship with God; the second, the present state and future destiny of the faithful who enter into that fellowship.*

*This interpretation is substantiated by a careful examination of the text and confirmed by the way this interpretation fits with Hebrews' rhetorical strategy and use of the Old Testament. Crucial to the argument is the total lack of continuity between the two mountains that would be essential to substantiate either of the traditional interpretations.*

#### 1. Introduction

I need not remind my readers that discussion of Hebrews' eschatology is perennial. Many argue that an apocalyptic, linear eschatology is predominant. Such eschatology anticipates the in-breaking of God's future world of salvation. It has strong affinity with early Christian tradition as represented in other parts of the NT. It is at home with the Old Covenant as a type now fulfilled in the New and with Hebrews' anticipation of the return of Christ (9:28) and the final Judgement

(12:25-29).<sup>1</sup> For those who hold this view, Hebrews' references to a heavenly world pose no objection. Apocalyptic writers often believed in a present, eternal heavenly world as well as in the future in-breaking of that world.<sup>2</sup>

Others, of course, contend that the eschatology of Hebrews is predominately spatial and metaphysical in accord with Philo and other neoplatonic sources.<sup>3</sup> The present temporal world is a copy of the eternal world. The Old Covenant, representative of the temporal world, is a copy of the New Covenant, which represents the eternal world. Hebrews is not concerned so much with the return of Christ and a future judgement as with the entrance of the soul into this eternal world at death. Eisele carries this position to its extreme by eliminating all traces of temporal eschatology from Hebrews.<sup>4</sup>

My sentiments are with those who affirm the foundational nature of apocalyptic, linear eschatology. Nevertheless, the contention of this paper is that approaching Hebrews with a preconceived understanding of its eschatology has sometimes led to distortion. Hebrews' eschatology may be linear, but it is not a mere repetition of the two-age eschatology found elsewhere in the NT, much less of the eschatology found in various apocalyptic writings. While it is important to understand Hebrews within its context, we must not reduce Hebrews to its putative context.

## 2. Hebrews 12:18-24: An Example

For example, preconceived understandings of Hebrews' eschatology have distorted the interpretation of Hebrews 12:18-24 – 'You have not come to what can be touched' but 'You have come to Mount Zion, the City of the Living God, Heavenly Jerusalem.'

Those who approach this passage with an apocalyptic, temporal, linear eschatology tend to see the Sinai of 12:18-21 and the Zion of

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<sup>1</sup> Gareth Lee Cockerill, *Hebrews* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012): 25-28.

<sup>2</sup> In fact, some of the earliest apocalyptic texts, such as *1 Enoch* 1-36, 72-82, emphasise the spatial distinction, while the later, such as *4 Ezra* and *2 Baruch*, give more weight to the temporal. Scott D. Mackie, *Eschatology and Exhortation in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (WUNT, 223; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007]: 31-32.

<sup>3</sup> See Cockerill, *Hebrews*: 28-34.

<sup>4</sup> Wilfried Eisele, *Ein unerschütterliches Reich: Die mittelplatonische Umformung des Parusiegedankens im Hebräerbrief* (BZBW 116; Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2003): 64-133, *passim*.

12:22-24 as representative of the old and new religious orders or of the times before and after Christ.<sup>5</sup> Sometimes they assume that the author is arguing from a 'lesser' Sinai to a 'greater' Zion,<sup>6</sup> from the 'ineffective' type to the 'effective' fulfillment, or that Hebrews is pitting Judaism against Christianity.<sup>7</sup>

Those who come with a dualistic metaphysical eschatology are likely to affirm that the first 'mountain' is the 'earthly' copy of the heavenly world represented by the second mountain.<sup>8</sup> They often point to the facts that the first 'can be touched' (12:18) and that the second is 'heavenly' (12:22).

These approaches require both continuity and contrast between the two mountains. The new age was anticipated by and fulfills the old. The earthly world is a copy of the superior heavenly world. However, the relationship between 'what can be touched' in 12:18-21 and Mount Zion in 12:22-24 is *contrast* with almost no continuity. Graham Hughes admits that continuity has been reduced to a minimum.<sup>9</sup> In fact,

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<sup>5</sup> William L. Lane, *Hebrews* (2 vols; WBC 47a-47b; Dallas, TX: Word, 1991), 2: 461, is representative of this position when he says 'It should be recognized that the writer compares two covenants under the imagery of two mountains in order to contrast the distance that separated the worshiper from God under the old covenant with the unrestricted access to God under the new covenant.' Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977): 542 speaks of 'the contrast between the imperfect and the perfect, the temporary and the permanent'. More recently, John W. Kleinig, *Hebrews* (Concordia Commentary; Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing Company, 2017): 642 says 'Hebrews compares and contrasts the present theophany of God through Jesus and his blood in the Divine Service, anticipating its full manifestation at his second coming, with the historical theophany to Israel at Mount Sinai.' Cf. Alan C. Mitchell, *Hebrews* (Sacra Pagina Series 13; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009): 284; Thomas R. Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews* (Biblical Theology for Christian Proclamation; Nashville: Holman Reference, 2015): 394-402; and Mary Healy, *Hebrews* (Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016): 272.

<sup>6</sup> Both Craig R. Koester, *Hebrews: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 36; New York: Doubleday, 2001): 549 and Luke Timothy Johnson, *Hebrews: A Commentary* (New Testament Library; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2006): 329, appear to fall into this trap.

<sup>7</sup> As argued by R. P. Gordon, *Hebrews* (2nd edn; Readings: A New Biblical Commentary; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008): 179.

<sup>8</sup> James W. Thompson, *The Beginnings of Christian Philosophy* (CBQMS, 13; Washington, DC: The Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1982): 46; James W. Thompson, *Hebrews* (Paideia; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008): 261-62; Johnson, *Hebrews*: 329; Hans-Friedrich Weiss, *Der Brief an die Hebräer* (KEK 13; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991): 671; and others.

<sup>9</sup> Graham Hughes, *Hebrews and Hermeneutics: The Epistle to the Hebrews as a New Testament Example of Biblical Interpretation* (SNTSMS, 36; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979): 44.

the elements of continuity are merely formal: each description begins with ‘you have/have not come’, each can be divided into seven parts,<sup>10</sup> and each ends with a ‘speaking’. These formal parallels make it clear that we must consider the two descriptions in relationship to one another. When we do, however, we see that they describe *opposite* realities. The first in no way anticipates or reflects the second. The first describes a frightful total exclusion from the presence of God; the second describes joyful inclusion with angels and saints in worship of and in intimate fellowship with the living God. Interpreters who give due recognition to this contrast but continue to identify these two ‘mountains’ with the old and new covenants are often led to a disparagement of the old that fits poorly with the positive typological function attributed to it by Hebrews.<sup>11</sup> This lack of continuity is the fatal flaw in Kiwoong Son’s attempt to use 12:18-24 as the hermeneutical key to all the contrasts between the old and the new in Hebrews.<sup>12</sup> Both apocalyptic and neoplatonic eschatology normally require a degree of correspondence absent from this passage.

Casey approaches the truth when he says that the hearers are presented ‘with two scenes – two options as it were. Will they choose Sinai or Sion?’<sup>13</sup> The writer of Hebrews is not talking about past and present or about earthly and heavenly. This passage describes two possibilities for God’s people in the present – ‘You have not come’ but ‘You have come.’ The perfect tense supports this contention.<sup>14</sup> The first

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<sup>10</sup> See the discussion below.

<sup>11</sup> For a recent example see Stefan Nordgaard Svendsen, *Allegory Transformed: The Appropriation of Philonic Hermeneutics in the Letter to the Hebrews* (Copenhagen: Ph.d.-afhandling ved Det Teologiske Fakultet, 2007): 224-27. ‘By painting a bleak picture of the reception of the law, he [the writer of Hebrews] seeks to disqualify the law itself and hence to render it less attractive to his readers’ (226). I have argued that ‘continuity and fulfillment’ rather than ‘continuity and discontinuity’ is a better paradigm for understanding Hebrews use of the OT. See Cockerill, *Hebrews*: 41-59, especially 52-54, and S. Stanley, ‘A New Covenant Hermeneutic: The Use of Scripture in Hebrews 8–10’ (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Sheffield, 1994). See also the summary of Stanley in R. Gheorghita, *The Role of the Septuagint in Hebrews* (WUNT 2/160; Tübingen: Siebeck, 2003): 18-19.

<sup>12</sup> Kiwoong Son, *Zion Symbolism in Hebrews: Hebrews 12:18-24 as a Hermeneutical Key to the Epistle* (Paternoster Biblical Monographs; Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2005).

<sup>13</sup> J. M. Casey, ‘Christian Assembly in Hebrews: A Fantasy Island?’ *TD 30* (1982): 332-33. The hearers, of course, have already chosen ‘Sion’. Nevertheless, the author pictures the mountain of exclusion as a warning lest they apostatise.

<sup>14</sup> Commentators often note the importance of the perfect tense, *προσελήλυθατε* (‘you have come to’), though they may give differing explanations of its significance. See, for instance, Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Hermeneia;

is what the Mountain of God's speaking has become for the apostate; the second, what it has become for the faithful.

First, we will substantiate this interpretation by taking a closer look at this passage. Second, we will argue that this understanding of Hebrews 12:18-24 is in accord with Hebrews' overall understanding of the OT. Third, we will show how this interpretation displays the rhetorical effectiveness of Hebrews 12:18-24.

### 3. Hebrews 12:18-24: A Closer Look

A closer look at this passage verifies our contention that the author is contrasting these two mountains. We begin with the first 'mountain' in verses 18-21. The hearers could not fail to associate this description with the Sinai theophany. Much of this graphic language is drawn from the descriptions of that event in Exodus 19:15-21 and 20:18-21 and Deuteronomy 4:11-12, 5:22-27, and 9:19.<sup>15</sup> They may, however, have been surprised at what the author has both omitted from and added to the description given in these biblical texts. By careful selection, addition, and omission, Hebrews 'has presented Sinai as the dreadful place of judgement and of exclusion from God's presence'.<sup>16</sup> This passage does not even mention God. The omission of both 'Sinai' and 'mountain' shows that the author is not concerned about location but with the terrifying quality of this place.<sup>17</sup> Thus, he calls this place 'that which can be touched' (a description absent from the OT) in order to affirm both the impersonal nature and *palpable* reality of the terrible exclusion from God described.<sup>18</sup>

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Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989): 372; Weiss, *Hebräer*: 670; Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (New International Greek Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993): 670. See also Cockerill, *Hebrews*: 646.

<sup>15</sup> 'Even the verb translated "have ... come" echoes the word used for approaching Sinai in Deut 4:11.' Cockerill, *Hebrews*: 646.

<sup>16</sup> Cockerill, *Hebrews*: 646.

<sup>17</sup> ὄρει ('to a mountain') occurs in the majority of manuscripts, demonstrating the need felt by copyists to supply this apparent lack. Cf. Koester, *Hebrews*: 543.

<sup>18</sup> See B. F. Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: The Greek Text with Notes and Essays* (repr. 1892; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951): 411. Thompson, *Christian Philosophy*: 46 (Thompson, *Hebrews*: 261-62); Johnson, *Hebrews*: 329; Hermut Löhr, 'Thronversammlung und preisender Temple: Beobachtungen am himmlischen Heiligtum im Hebräerbrief und in den Sabbatophertliedern aus Qumran' in *Königsherrschaft Gottes und himmlischer Kult im Judentum, Urchristentum und in der hellenistischen Welt*, M. Hengel and A. M. Schwemer (WUNT 55; Tübingen: Siebeck,

With two participles the writer appeals to his hearers' sense of touch ('to something that can be touched', 'to what has been burning, fire'), with three unqualified nouns to their sense of sight ('to darkness', 'to gloom', and 'to storm'),<sup>19</sup> and with the two final qualified nouns ('to a sound of a trumpet', 'to a voice of words') to their sense of hearing.<sup>20</sup> The omission of articles throughout underscores the terrifying quality of this description.<sup>21</sup> The way in which the author separates each of these items with 'and' adds to their cumulative effect.<sup>22</sup> The result is a sevenfold crescendoing description that overwhelms the hearers with the terror of this place of judgement.<sup>23</sup> The author moves from burning fire through darkness and gloom to the horrible sound of an impersonal voice.

The most terrifying thing about Sinai was the voice of God introduced by the awesome blast of a trumpet.<sup>24</sup> God's speaking is made all the more terrible by the impersonal way in which it is

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1991): 198; others are mistaken when, on the basis of Platonic assumptions, they interpret ψηλαφωμένω, 'to something that can be touched', as indicative of the unreality and inferiority of the earthly Sinai. Hebrews' point is diametrically opposed to this interpretation – this expression emphasises the *reality* of the exclusion from God described. Thompson, *Christian Philosophy*: 45 betrays the weakness of his case when he admits that, though the author refers to the phenomena of Sinai as 'that which can be touched', he 'uses no terms suggesting intangibility for the Christian experience at Zion'. In fact, those realities are described in very concrete terms. Furthermore, as Svendsen, *Allegory Transformed*: 225 is forced to admit, the verb ψηλαφάω is never used by Philo to describe the sense-perceptible world. Svendsen concedes that this verb 'rarely, if ever' occurs with such a meaning 'in mainstream Platonic literature'. Neither Svendsen nor Thompson give one instance of such usage.

<sup>19</sup> γνόφος ('darkness') and θυέλλα ('storm', 'whirlwind') occur nowhere in the Greek Bible except in the descriptions of Sinai recorded in Deut. 4:11 and 5:22-23. Deuteronomy's use of the synonym σκότος ('darkness') for ζόφος ('gloom') probably accounts for the occurrence of σκότος in some mss of Heb. 12:18 (including P<sup>46</sup>, but not κ, A, D, or C.).

<sup>20</sup> On Hebrews' use of the senses see Scott D. Mackie, 'Heavenly Sanctuary Mysticism in the Epistle to the Hebrews', *JTS* 62 (2011): esp. 100, n. 59.

<sup>21</sup> Ellingworth, *Hebrews*: 672; Attridge, *Hebrews*: 371.

<sup>22</sup> See Ellingworth, *Hebrews*: 672. The REB loses this rhetorical effect by making both participles modify πυρὶ – 'to a tangible, blazing fire', and by taking the following datives as datives of accompaniment – 'they do not come to this tangible, blazing fire ... with its darkness, gloom, and whirlwind'.

<sup>23</sup> Weiss, *Hebräer*: 672 calls this description of Sinai a 'fear-engendering event'.

<sup>24</sup> These last two features of this description are chiasmically joined: καὶ (A) σάλπιγγος, (B) ἤχῳ καὶ; (B<sup>1</sup>) φωνῇ, (A<sup>1</sup>) ῥημάτων; (A) 'of a trumpet', (B) 'a sound'; (B<sup>1</sup>) 'a voice', (A<sup>1</sup>) 'of words'. The 'sound of the trumpet' (σάλπιγγος ἤχῳ) comes from Exod. 19:16 (φωνῇ τῆς σάλπιγγος ἤχει μέγα). The substitution by Hebrews of ἤχῳ for φωνῇ only highlights the impersonal nature of this description. φωνῇ ῥημάτων – 'voice of words' – is also found in Deut. 4:11 (cf. φωνῇ μεγάλη in Deut. 5:22-23).

described. The author does not say that God speaks. Rather, the hearers have come ‘to a voice of words’.<sup>25</sup> There is no access to God at this place of judgement. Verse 20 underscores this awesomeness when it says that the people ‘could not bear what was commanded’. ‘If even an animal touches the mountain, it shall be stoned’ shows clearly that there is no access to God here.

In verses 18-20 the author has made his hearers feel, see, and hear the terror of the disobedient when approaching God. In verse 21 this terror comes to clear expression in the words of none other than Moses – ‘so terrifying was the appearance’ that Moses himself said ‘I am full of fear and trembling’.<sup>26</sup> Moses declares that he is ‘full of fear’ (Deut. 9:19) *after* the people worshipped the golden calf. Hebrews intensifies Moses’ statement by adding ‘and trembling’. Moses was afraid ‘because of the wrath and anger of God’ against Israel’s rebellion.<sup>27</sup> Thus this statement not only climaxes but interprets the whole. This is a fearful description of the judgement and exclusion reserved for those who flaunt God’s covenant. This approach is confirmed by Kibbe’s research. He has shown that, in the wake of Deuteronomy, Hebrews merges Israel’s subsequent disobedience in the wilderness with their standing before Sinai.<sup>28</sup> Hebrews 3:7–4:11 described the disobedience at Kadesh in anticipation of this description of Sinai in 12:18-21. Thus it is no surprise that the parallels suggested by Son between 12:18-21 and the apostate wilderness generation in 3:7–4:11 are more convincing than the parallels he finds with many other passages.<sup>29</sup> If this is Sinai, it is Sinai without grace, Sinai for the disobedient.

Hebrews’ description of Mount Zion is sevenfold, as was the description of the unnamed mount of judgement.<sup>30</sup> There, however, the

<sup>25</sup> Even in Deut. 4:12 φωνῆ ῥημάτων (‘voice of words’) emphasises the fact that God was heard but not seen.

<sup>26</sup> “‘The appearance’ maintains the impersonal nature of the description and directs the hearers’ minds to the phenomena already described’ (Cockerill, *Hebrews*: 650).

<sup>27</sup> Deut. 9:19, διὰ τὴν ὀργὴν καὶ τὸν θυμὸν (‘on account of wrath and anger’). When Son, *Zion Symbolism*: 98-102, argues that Moses’ ‘speaking’ shows this is a reference to the entire Sinai revelation, he fails to give adequate attention to both its content and circumstances.

<sup>28</sup> Michael Kibbe, *Godly Fear or Ungodly Failure? Hebrews 12 and the Sinai Theophanies* (BZNW; Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2016): 1-4, 188-207.

<sup>29</sup> Son, *Zion Symbolism*: 133-40.

<sup>30</sup> If we take ‘Mount Zion, and the city of the living God, heavenly Jerusalem’ as (1), we have (2) ‘myriads of angels’, (3) ‘the assembly of the firstborn’, (4) ‘God’, (5) ‘the spirits of the righteous’, (6) ‘the Mediator of the New Covenant, Jesus’, and (7) ‘the blood of sprinkling’. The unusual vocabulary and poetic style of this passage are no

similarity ends. The first mountain remained unnamed. The second is triply designated – ‘Mount Zion, even the City of the living God, heavenly Jerusalem’. That mountain was replete with impersonal, dreadful natural phenomena. This mountain is filled with persons who are in fellowship with God. The first mountain was characterised by the terror of judgement and the second by awe-filled joy. Since the recipients of Hebrews are not disobedient, they ‘have not come’ to the place of God’s judgement. ‘They “have come to”, stand before, and live in a different reality.’<sup>31</sup>

‘Mount Zion’ is made emphatic both by the absence of the contrasting ‘Mount Sinai’ and by the way it is set apart from the two following descriptions by ‘even’.<sup>32</sup> Although ‘Mount Zion’ could be used for the entire city, it was often associated with the Most Holy Place and God’s presence.<sup>33</sup> By bringing God’s people into the Most Holy Place through his high priestly ministry, Christ has also brought them to the true Mount Zion.<sup>34</sup> ‘The City of the Living God’ not only confirms that this is the place of God’s presence but affirms that it is the place where His people will live with him, the eternal, God-founded ‘City’ of their citizenship and the goal of their pilgrimage (11:9-10,13-16).<sup>35</sup> This is the ‘heavenly’ Jerusalem because it is the place where God truly dwells.<sup>36</sup> Even now through Christ the faithful

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reason to believe that the author has incorporated a preexisting liturgical piece (Weiss, *Hebräer*: 674). Pace Gerd Theissen, *Untersuchungen Zum Hebräerbrief* (Studien zum Neuen Testament 2; Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1969): 64-66; E. Grässer, *Der Glaube im Hebräerbrief* (Marburger Theologische Studien 2; Marburg: Elwert, 1965): 182-83; Mathias Rissi, *Die Theologie des Hebräerbriefes* (WUNT 41; Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1987): 101-102; cf. E. Käsemann, *The Wandering People of God: An Investigation of the Letter to the Hebrews*, trans. R. A. Harrisville and I. L. Sandberg (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984): 54-55. See Cockerill, *Hebrews*: 650, n. 39.

<sup>31</sup> Cockerill, *Hebrews*: 650-51; Kibbe, *Godly Fear*: 157-73.

<sup>32</sup> For the καί as ‘even’ instead of ‘and’ see Peter T. O’Brien, *Letter to the Hebrews* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009): 483, n. 202.

<sup>33</sup> Pss 2:6; 74:2; Isa. 8:18; Joel 4:17,21; cf. D. Eduard Riggenbach, *Der Brief an die Hebräer* (2nd/3rd eds; Kommentar zum Neuen Testament 14; Leipzig: Deichert, 1922): 414-15.

<sup>34</sup> Cockerill, *Hebrews*: 651.

<sup>35</sup> ‘Though the author began this passage with the assertion that the community “has not come to a mountain that is touchable” (ψηλαφάω, 12:18), his ekphrastic description of the heavenly “Mount Zion”, and his assertion that the community is present there, should have nevertheless engendered a comparably palpable and nearly tangible experience’ (Mackie, ‘Heavenly Sanctuary Mysticism in the Epistle to the Hebrews’: 115).

<sup>36</sup> Ellingworth, *Hebrews*: 677. See Pss 46:5; 48:9 for Jerusalem as the ‘city of God’.



have preliminary enjoyment of this reality that has always been their ultimate goal.

This 'City' provides the context for intimate fellowship with God, the angels, and the people of God. No impersonal terrifying phenomena here. The next five phrases describe the persons who inhabit this city. The faithful join the 'myriads of angels' whose worship always marks the presence of God.<sup>37</sup> For our purposes it does not matter whether 'a festal gathering' goes with the angelic hosts, the 'assembly of the firstborn', or whether it stands alone.<sup>38</sup> This is a joyous celebration of angels and of the faithful people of God in His presence. 'Assembly of the firstborn' (plural) refers to the people of God past and present, living and dead.<sup>39</sup> Through Christ who is the 'firstborn' *par excellence* (1:6) they enter into their inheritance in God's presence as his 'firstborn'. This is the great 'assembly' or 'congregation' of Christ's brothers and sisters before whom he praised God on the occasion of his exaltation (2:12). In their present worship they echo his praise and exalt in his triumph. They are described as 'enrolled in heaven' because heaven is their true home, their place of citizenship (11:13-16).

God's presence has been obvious from the beginning. He is the centre of the 'City of the Living God'. His presence is what makes the 'heavenly Jerusalem' 'heavenly'. He is the focal point of angelic worship and it is to Him that the 'assembly of the firstborn' have come. Thus it is appropriate that he should hold the third and central place in this list of five persons/groups of persons in the heavenly City. What is striking is that He is called 'a Judge' – 'to a Judge, God of All'.

<sup>37</sup> Attridge, *Hebrews*: 374-75, esp. nn. 56 and 57; Lane, *Hebrews*, 2: 467; Thompson, *Hebrews*: 263; cf. Dan. 7:10 LXX; Rev. 5:11; *1 En.* 1:9; 14:22.

<sup>38</sup> For a discussion of this issue, see Cockerill, *Hebrews*: 654. On the meaning of πανηγύρει ('festal gathering') see Cockerill, *Hebrews*: 653-54, n. 53.

<sup>39</sup> L. R. Helyer, 'The *Prototokos* Title in Hebrews', *Studia Biblica et Theologica* 6 (1976): 15; Lane, *Hebrews*, 2: 469; Hughes, *Hebrews*: 547-49; F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (rev. ed.; The New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990): 358-59; Westcott, *Hebrews*: 415; and Attridge, *Hebrews*: 375. There is no reason to restrict this term to the people of God who lived before Christ or to only the dead in Christ. Spicq's objection that this means Christians have come to Christians is of no consequence. Celsius Spicq, *L'Épître aux Hébreux* (2nd edn; 2 vols; Études Biblique; Paris: Gabalda, 1953), 2: 407. The author is simply saying that the hearers join all the faithful when they come to Mount Zion. Nor is there any reason that 'enrolled in heaven' should limit this description to those still on earth. This is '... the ultimate, completed company of the people of God, membership of which is now enjoyed by faith'. David G. Peterson, *Hebrews and Perfection: An Examination of the Concept of Perfection in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (SNTSMS 47; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982): 282.

Although this passage is about joyful access to God, κριτῆ should be rendered ‘to a Judge’ rather than ‘to a Vindicator’ or ‘to a Redeemer’.<sup>40</sup> The author binds this passage closely with the preceding by reminding the hearers that God is still the holy God of Sinai. He establishes the context for the work of Christ that follows. God’s holiness is not diminished.<sup>41</sup> This wonderful scene of salvation is possible only through the effectiveness of the ‘Mediator of the New Covenant’. We must not forget the author’s penchant for combining warning with encouragement.

‘The spirits of the righteous made perfect’ is appropriately located between God the Judge and Christ the Mediator. They have been accepted as ‘righteous’ before God the Judge because they have been ‘made perfect’ through the mediation of Christ.<sup>42</sup> ‘Spirits of the righteous’ is a common apocalyptic term for God’s people who have died but still await resurrection.<sup>43</sup> Thus this description includes the ‘righteous’ (10:39) of 11:1-40 as well as those who have died in Christ. They have all now been ‘made perfect’ through Christ’s cleansing from sin in the same way that living believers have been ‘made perfect’ and thus brought into God’s presence.<sup>44</sup>

Just as it was appropriate for God to be at the centre of this description, so it is appropriate for this list to climax with ‘the Mediator of the New Covenant’ exalted at God’s right hand, who is none other than the ‘Jesus’ who lived an obedient human life offering himself according to the will of God (10:5-10). He is the ‘main point’ of what the author has to say (8:1-2) and the one upon whom the faithful are to fix their gaze (12:1-3) because he is the one who has provided for cleansing from sin and made this joyous celebration possible! Moses trembled before sin and impending judgement (12:21). Jesus removes

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<sup>40</sup> As suggested by Weiss, *Hebräer*: 681; Attridge, *Hebrews*: 376, esp. n. 80; Riggenbach, *Hebräer*: 417-18.

<sup>41</sup> Kibbe, *Godly Fear*: 190-91 is correct in his rejection of a simplistic contrast between ‘fear’ and ‘joy’ as an adequate description of the relationship between ‘that which can be touched’ and ‘Zion’. This ‘Sinai’ is characterised by fear or terror of judgement. However, the fact that the God of Zion is emphatically called ‘a Judge’ reminds us that the joy of those who ‘have come to Zion’ is an awe-filled joy.

<sup>42</sup> Cockerill, *Hebrews*: 656.

<sup>43</sup> Attridge, *Hebrews*: 376; Donald A. Hagner, *Hebrews* (NIBCNT, 14; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1990): 226; Riggenbach, *Hebräer*: 418; Cockerill, *Hebrews*: 656, n. 70. See *Jub.* 23:30-31; *1 En.* 22:9; 102:4; 103:3-4; *2 Bar.* 30:2 (cited in O’Brien, *Hebrews*: 487, n. 221, referencing Lane, *Hebrews*, 2: 470).

<sup>44</sup> Cockerill, *Hebrews*: 654-55.

sin and judgement. His work is summarised by the seventh description – the hearers have come ‘to blood of sprinkling that speaks better than Abel[’s blood]’. Abel’s blood calls for vengeance; Christ’s self-offering offers cleansing from sin and joyous access to God.<sup>45</sup>

The contrast between Hebrews 12:18-21 and 12:22-24 could not be clearer. The latter depicts the awe-filled joyous celebration of the faithful in the presence of a holy God; the former describes the fearful exclusion of the disobedient subject to divine judgement. It does not describe Sinai as it was but ‘Sinai’ as it has become for those who reject ‘such a great salvation’ (2:3). One might say that the Mountain of God’s speaking anticipated by Sinai has become, on the one hand, the place of horror described in verses 18-21 for the disobedient but, on the other, it has become ‘Mount Zion’, the place of fellowship with God for the faithful as described in verses 22-24. This stark contrast fits poorly with any view that sees this description of Sinai as either a type of the new or a copy of the heavenly.

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<sup>45</sup> Westcott, *Hebrews*: 417; Weiss, *Hebräer*: 682-83; Riggenbach, *Hebräer*: 420; Lane, *Hebrews*, 2: 473; Bruce, *Hebrews*: 361; Hughes, *Hebrews*: 552; George H. Guthrie, *Hebrews* (The NIV Application Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998): 422; and most interpreters (cf. Spicq, *Hébreux*, 2: 409-10). No other interpretation of Abel’s blood adequately accounts for the context in Hebrews. Son, *Zion Symbolism*: 100-102 has proposed that Abel’s blood represents the ineffective blood of the old system. Attridge, *Hebrews*, 377 has suggested that, since Abel was the first martyr, his blood had limited atoning power. His blood’s limited cleansing foreshadowed Christ’s complete ability to remove all sin. Spicq, *Hébreux*, 2: 409-10 has some sympathy with this proposal. According to Erich Grässer, *An die Hebräer* (3 vols; Evangelisch-Katholischer Kommentar; Neukirchen: Benziger, 1990), 3: 324 (cited by Mitchell, *Hebrews*: 284) Abel’s blood cried from ‘the ground’, but Christ carried his blood into the heavenly sanctuary. The first suggestion fails because neither the context in Hebrews nor the account of Abel in Genesis is concerned with the inadequacy of the old sacrificial system. Hebrews has already demonstrated that ineffectiveness. The second suggestion fails because only Christ’s blood can cleanse the conscience from sin (9:11-15). See Samuel Bénétreau, *L’Épître Aux Hébreux* (2 vols; Commentaire Évangélique de la Bible; Vaux-sur-seine: Edifac, 1989-90), 2: 199 for criticism of this view. Finally, Hebrews does not describe Christ as carrying his blood into the heavenly sanctuary (see Cockerill on 9:11-14). Nor does Hebrews say anything about Abel’s blood crying from ‘the ground’. The immediate Hebrews context is concerned with divine judgement on sin. This emphasis on judgement is in full accord with what Genesis says about Abel’s blood. See Cockerill, *Hebrews*: 659, n. 78.

#### 4. Hebrews 12:18-24 and Hebrews' Use of the OT

This understanding of Hebrews 12:18-24 as depicting two possibilities for the people of God fits well with Hebrews' approach to the OT. God's people have come to Mount Zion, but the mount of judgement remains a possibility for those who fail to persevere. Our primary objective in this section is to show that Hebrews 12:18-21 describes a present possibility rather than the situation prevailing under the Old Covenant or before the coming of Christ. It is important to remember that the writer does not call this description of judgement and exclusion in verses 18-21 'Mount Sinai'. Hebrews does not understand the Sinai revelation and covenant as merely a sentence of judgement. It was the 'word' spoken by angels (2:1-4). It can even be called 'good news' (4:1-3). True, the very way in which that covenant was described in the OT showed that it was not effective as a way of coming into God's presence through the removal of sin (9:1-10,16-22). It, however, is and always has been a type or foreshadowing of what God would do in His Son. Its inherent ineffectiveness only underscores this truth. Furthermore, by establishing that Covenant, Moses 'testified to things that would be said' by God in His Son (3:5-6). Both by what Aaron was, by what he did, and by his ineffectiveness he foreshadowed and pointed forward to the effective High Priest (5:1-10).<sup>46</sup> It is true that the practice of the Old Covenant as a way of approaching God has been abolished since its fulfillment in God's Son (7:11-19), but the old order remains what it has always been – an indispensable type that anticipates and enables God's people to understand fulfillment in His Son.

The Old Covenant was a type of Christ, but it also pronounced judgement on the disobedient and the rebellious. The very first warning passage, 2:1-4, made it clear that this pronouncement of judgement on the disobedient is not removed by the coming of Christ. It is, in fact, made more certain. Thus Christ fulfils what was typified by the Old Covenant by providing true access to God through cleansing from sin (10:15-18,19-25). At the same time, he makes the judgement pronounced by the Old Covenant on the rebellious even more certain (10:26-31). In fact, one can say that it is by providing 'such a great salvation' that he confirms the certainty of coming judgement.<sup>47</sup> As

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<sup>46</sup> Cockerill, *Hebrews*: 229-53.

<sup>47</sup> Cockerill, *Hebrews*: 642-43.

noted above, all of this is laid down in the first warning passage (2:1-4): it is the necessary premise for the exemplary use of the wilderness generation in 3:7–4:11 and it is assumed by subsequent warnings. This truth finds graphic clarity in Hebrews 12:18-21. The author has taken all the fearsome aspects of Sinai in the OT and used them to depict God's continuing judgement on the disobedient that has been made more certain by the work of Christ.

Kibbe correctly explores 12:18-24 within the tradition of covenant renewals.<sup>48</sup> However, Hebrews is not telling his hearers, as Moses did on the Plains of Moab, that they were present with their ancestors at a past event. Rather, through Christ, God's speaking in both judgment and salvation is an ever-present reality. As noted above, the fulfillment brought by the eternal, incarnate, exalted Son of God has *both* intensified the judgement of 12:18-21 and brought about the joyful, awe-filled fellowship of 12:22-24.<sup>49</sup>

## 5. Hebrews 12:18-24 and the Rhetoric of Hebrews

Clearly, the author is stating a present fact when he says that his hearers have 'not come' to the palpable phenomena of 12:18-21 but to the Zion of 12:22-24. They are the faithful. They are not being asked to choose a course as if they stood at a crossroads. They have already chosen the way of Zion. Nevertheless, the author pictures the 'palpable mountain' as a possibility should they fail to persevere. The author's use of these two scenes is in full accord with the characteristic rhetoric of Hebrews that integrates warning and encouragement as motivation for perseverance.<sup>50</sup>

Verses 18-21 depict the fate of those who follow the example of the disobedient wilderness generation (3:7–4:13). These verses bring the

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<sup>48</sup> Kibbe, *Godly Fear*: 183-88.

<sup>49</sup> When writing this passage the writer of Hebrews may have been thinking particularly of the worship of the assembled community, as many have suggested. Even if this is true, the community through worship enters into an ever-present reality which at least the 'myriads of angels' and the 'spirits of the just' perpetually enjoy.

<sup>50</sup> Thus Kibbe's objection that the author could not be describing two present realities because 'He is stating a fact ... not offering a choice' lacks validity. See Kibbe, *Godly Fear*: 188, n. 15. It is interesting that, after raising the above objection, Kibbe can describe the 'assembly of the firstborn' in 12:23, among whom he would include the recipients of Hebrews, as 'those who have been offered a choice'. See Kibbe, *Godly Fear*: 192.

warnings of Hebrews to their graphic conclusion. The author of Hebrews laid the foundation for these verses in 2:1-4, the initial warning: if punishment under the old covenant was certain, then the punishment of those who neglect the 'great salvation' brought by Christ is more certain – they will not 'escape'. The author, however, does not tell us what they will 'not escape' until he has described that 'great salvation' in 4:14–10:18. One cannot understand the magnitude of the loss until one grasps the magnitude of this salvation. Then, in 10:26-31, he describes the fate of those who turn away as 'a certain terrifying prospect of judgement and a fury of fire about to consume the adversaries'. Finally, in 12:18-21, he describes the present state of those who face this 'terrifying prospect' with graphic clarity. The tragic fate of godless Esau in 12:14-17 flows directly into this description of complete exclusion from God's presence, which, in turn, draws the hearers into the final Judgement that follows in 12:25-29.

If verses 18-21 depict the present fearful state (and the future fate) of those who follow the example of the disobedient wilderness generation (3:7-4:11), then verses 22-24 describe the blessed state (and the destiny) of those who join the faithful of 11:1-40. If the former verses bring the warnings to a climax, the latter bring the promises and encouragements to culmination (2:14-16; 3:1-6; 4:14-16; 6:9-20; 10:19-25,32-39; 12:1-3). If neglect of the great salvation described in 4:14–10:18 means the kind of loss depicted in 12:18-21, then 'drawing near' and embracing that salvation means the blessing of 12:22-24.

Thus, when we understand Hebrews 12:18-24 as a description of two present possibilities, we can see that this passage brings the rhetorical impact of all the examples, all the warnings, all the words of encouragement, and all that has been said about the full sufficiency of Christ into sharpest focus in anticipation of the final Judgement described in 12:25-29. The author of Hebrews could not give us these contrasting scenes until he had described the examples of disobedience whom we are to shun (3:7–4:11), the sufficiency of Christ that makes the fate of the disobedient so tragic and the destiny of the faithful so glorious (4:14–10:18), and the examples of the faithful whom we are to embrace (11:1-40). The warnings that prevent the hearers from turning to the former, and the words of encouragement that reinforce their movement toward the latter, reach all but final impact in these contrasting scenes of terrible exclusion from and joyful inclusion in the presence of God. While these two scenes describe present possibilities,

they are a window that provides a glimpse of eternal destiny. Thus the last Judgement depicted in 12:25-29 brings this warning/encouragement to its ultimate conclusion by finalising the alternate destinies described in 12:18-24.

## 6. Conclusion

In summary, then, a careful analysis of Hebrews 12:18-24 shows that Hebrews is presenting two contrasting alternatives for the people of God. The first is the experience/fate of the disobedient or apostate; the second of the persevering faithful. This understanding of 12:18-24 is confirmed by an examination of Hebrews use of the OT and substantiated by an analysis of the rhetorical function of this passage – all the warnings, promises, encouragements, examples, and so on reach all but maximum impact in this contrasting description of the two mountains. Squeezing Hebrews into the mold of either two-age apocalypticism or neoplatonic dualism has often obscured the true significance of this passage. It is important to read Hebrews within its *first-century context*. It is at least equally important to read *Hebrews* within its first-century context. Adequate attention to the biblical text is the key to an enriching rather than a reductionist use of the ancient world.