

“YOU [JEWISH CHRIST-FOLLOWERS IN ROME] HAVE COME TO MOUNT ZION...” (HEB 12:22): PILGRIMAGE TO ZION AND THE BOOK OF HEBREWS

Philip Church

Laidlaw College

In 2009, after a period of study leave in Palestine, Tim Meadowcroft encouraged me to attend the 2010 “Christ at the Checkpoint” conference in Bethlehem. Spending ten days in the West Bank was an experience that has shaped my thinking in the years since and will continue to do so. I am grateful to Tim for his encouragement to attend and I count it a privilege to write this essay in his honour.

Among the experiences that stand out in my memory is a visit to the Jewish Settlement of Efrat.¹ We sat in the synagogue and listened to a Jewish man with a New York accent talk about his long standing attachment to the land of Israel from when he lived in the USA, and he explained that if everybody was like “us” there would be peace. He closed his talk by quoting Isa 2:2–4 referring to that peace,

2 In days to come the mountain of the LORD’s house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. 3 Many peoples shall come and say, “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.” For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. 4 He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.²

He explained how the *Aliyah* was the fulfilment of that text, notwithstanding that it refers to “all the nations” streaming to Zion rather than people of Jewish ethnicity. The following day a presenter at the conference read from the same text, and interpreted it in the same way, claiming that he suspected that “all the nations ... includes Israel.”³ It seems to me that, while the text envisages the post-exilic restoration of Zion and Jerusalem, which would no doubt involve the return of the exiles, that is not the main concern. The text anticipates an eschatological pilgrimage of gentiles to Zion to be instructed by and learn *halakha* from YHWH,⁴ followed by universal peace.

¹ For Efrat, see Mic 5:1. Jewish settlements frequently take on biblical place names.

² I have cited the NRSV. I do not recall what translation the man used.

³ See Darrell Bock, “The Land in the Light of the Reconciliation in Christ: A Dispensationalist View,” in *Christ at the Checkpoint: Theology in the Service of Justice and Peace*, ed. Paul Alexander (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2012), 117–18.

⁴ Marvin A. Sweeney, “The Book of Isaiah as Prophetic Torah,” in *New Visions of Isaiah*, ed. Roy F. Melugin and Marvin A. Sweeney (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996), 50 considers that Isa 2:2–4 “is not simply a vision for the nations ... [rather, Isa 2:5 invites] ‘Israel’ or ‘the house of Jacob’ ... to join the nations on Zion to walk in the light of YHWH.” H. G. M. Williamson, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Isaiah 1–27. Volume 1: Commentary on Isaiah 1–5*, 3 vols., ICC (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 187 sees v. 5 as a redactional addition to encourage “the

In this paper I am ultimately interested in understanding Heb 12:22–24, which begins, “you have come to Mount Zion, even the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem ...”⁵ While the circumstances surrounding Hebrews are shrouded in mystery, it seems clear to me that it is a letter intended to be read to a group of followers of Jesus who were ethnic Jews.⁶ They are probably located in Rome while the author is located elsewhere, perhaps in Jerusalem, although this is by no means certain. The temple is still standing, but the author can see its destruction looming on the horizon. The recipients seem to be attracted to certain ritual synagogue meals that other Jews, not (yet) followers of Jesus, are participating in, meals that “drew some of their significance from their dependency upon the Temple.”⁷ The author writes to warn them that if they go down that road there is no way back and they risk losing their salvation.⁸

ZION AND JERUSALEM IN THE OT

The terms “Zion” and “Jerusalem” are relatively common in the OT to refer to where YHWH dwelt in the temple, to where he was to be worshipped, and from where he addressed his people, who were to listen to his voice.⁹ This precise vocabulary is not always present, and as Isa 2:2–4 and Mic 1:1–4 demonstrate, there were a variety of designations for the location. That YHWH selected Zion/Jerusalem for his dwelling place is clear from Ps 2:6 where it is described as my holy hill; from Ps 9:11 where YHWH is said to be “seated” (*yashab*) in Zion;¹⁰ and from Ps 74:2, where Mount Zion is where YHWH “dwells” (*shakan*). That it is where YHWH is worshipped is clear from Ps 100:1–5 where all the people of the world are called upon to enter the presence of YHWH, further described as his gates and his courts, that is the gates and courts of the temple.

One Psalm where the combination of worshipping and listening to YHWH is clear is Ps 95, partially quoted in Hebrews 3 and the subject of a *midrash* in Heb 3–4.¹¹ The first part of the Psalm (vv. 1–7a) is a dual call to worship and the second part (vv. 7b–11) a prophetic announcement addressed to

readers of what follows to live as worthy examples of the principles which have been introduced in vv. 2–4.” I (a gentile) had the opportunity to visit Jerusalem one day during the conference, but thanks to Tim’s prior arrangements, I spent the day in the Library at the École Biblique rather than “streaming to Zion” (the old city).

⁵ Unless otherwise indicated all translations are my own.

⁶ Several scholars argue from Heb 6:1–4 that the recipients are gentiles, but the text seems not to be definitive on this point. See Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 163–64; Kenneth L. Schenck, *Cosmology and Eschatology in Hebrews: The Settings of the Sacrifice*, SNTSMS 143 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 193–94. Elsewhere in Hebrews there is more persuasive evidence to suggest that the recipients are of Jewish ethnicity. On this see Peter W. L. Walker, “Jerusalem in Hebrews 13:9–14 and the Dating of the Epistle,” *TynBul* 45 (1994): passim.

⁷ Walker, “Jerusalem,” 40.

⁸ For argumentation supporting this paragraph see Philip Church, *Hebrews and the Temple: Attitudes to the Temple in Second Temple Judaism and in Hebrews*, NovTSup 171 (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 12–18, 358–65.

⁹ See H. A. Thomas, “Zion,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Prophets*, ed. Mark J. Boda and J. Gordon McConville (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2012), 907. Zion appears 154 times in the Hebrew Bible, and Jerusalem 643 times.

¹⁰ The verb *yashab* has a wide semantic range, and includes the notion “sitting” as well as “dwelling”, with “sitting” in this case probably including the idea of enthronement. See D. J. A. Clines, *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, 8 vols. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993–2011), 4: 318.

¹¹ An earlier version of the following paragraphs appears in Church, *Hebrews and the Temple*, 320.

the gathering worshippers. The dual call to worship (95:1–2, 6) is followed by two reasons why YHWH should be worshipped (95:3–5, 7a).¹² The exhortations to come before his presence (v. 2) and to kneel before YHWH (v. 6) make it likely this Psalm is part of a temple liturgy. The prophetic announcement (vv. 7b–11, quoted in Heb 3) is an urgent call to the gathered worshippers to listen to the voice of YHWH “today,” and not to harden their hearts as did the wilderness generation at Massah and Meribah.¹³ YHWH loathed that generation for forty years and swore that they would not enter his “rest” (*menukhab*). For the wilderness generation, the “rest” (*menukhab*) is the promised land (Deut 12:9–10), for the gathering worshippers implied in the psalm it is the temple itself (2 Chron 6:41),¹⁴ for the implied readers of Hebrews, and later readers eavesdropping on the conversation between the author and his readers, it is their (and our) eschatological goal (Heb 4:1–11).

YHWH’s selection of Zion as his dwelling place led to the belief that Zion was inviolable,¹⁵ something that is clear in Jeremiah’s famous temple sermon (Jeremiah 7), where, in a way that is reminiscent of Ps 95, Jeremiah stands at the gate of the temple and accosts the gathering worshippers, announcing YHWH’s judgement and the exile unless they amend their ways (Jer 7:4–7). At the end of the sermon YHWH announces that he would destroy the “place” (*maqom*), just as he had destroyed his “place” (*maqom*) at Shiloh (Jer 7:12–14).¹⁶ Soon after, with the exile of the southern kingdom, Jerusalem was sacked by Nebuchadnezzar’s army and destroyed (2 Kings 25:8–21).¹⁷

This was not the end, however, for Jerusalem and Zion, for Zion plays a prominent part in Israel’s future in the prophetic literature.¹⁸ The prophets predicted that the city would be cleansed, the temple rebuilt and the people regathered. Moreover, as the text quoted by both the man in the Efrat Synagogue and by Bock at the Christ at the Checkpoint Conference shows, not only would Israel be regathered to Zion, but the nations would also come to Zion to learn the ways of YHWH.

What is remarkable, however, is that Jerusalem and Zion are almost entirely absent from the NT. Apart from Heb 12:22 and Rev 14:1, Zion only appears five times, all OT quotations.¹⁹ As for Jerusalem, while there are numerous geographical references as the backdrop for events described in the Gospels and Acts, and in discussions of Paul’s collection in Romans and 1 Corinthians, it only appears in Gal 4:24–26 where it is displaced by the “Jerusalem above”, in Heb 12:22 where it is the “heavenly Jerusalem” and three times in Revelation, where it is the “new Jerusalem” that comes down from

¹² John Goldingay, *Psalms Volume 3: Psalms 90–150*, BCOTWP (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 88–89.

¹³ The reference to the forty-year period in Ps 95:10 indicates that Massah and Meribah together probably refer to the entire wilderness journey. They occur together in Exod 17:7 (early in the wilderness period) and Deut 33:8 (near the end).

¹⁴ The Psalms Targum at Ps 95:11 reads “the rest of my temple”. In this context *menukhab* is a place of rest rather than a state of rest.

¹⁵ Thomas, “Zion,” 907–8.

¹⁶ That *maqom* can refer to the temple is clear from a comparison of Ps 96:6 with the equivalent line in the poem in 1 Chron 16:27. See William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah 1*, vol. 1, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 237.

¹⁷ Holladay (Ibid., 240) dates the sermon in the late summer or early autumn of 609 BCE.

¹⁸ Carey C. Newman, “Jerusalem, Zion, Holy City,” in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and its Developments*, ed. Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids (Downers Grove: IVP, 1997), 561–62.

¹⁹ Matt 21:5; John 12:15; Rom 9:33; 11:26; 1 Pet 2:6.

heaven.²⁰ And in Heb 13:12–14, rather than moving towards Jerusalem, the followers of Jesus are called to leave the city, following Jesus to where he was executed, bearing the abuse he bore.²¹

In what follows I briefly examine Isa 2:2–4 along with the parallel text in Micah 4:1–4. I follow this with a glance in the direction of Isaiah 35, the subject of an allusion in Heb 12:12, and since Jeremiah plays a significant part in Hebrews,²² I will also look at some texts from Jeremiah that discuss the return of the exiles. I follow this with a study of Heb 12:22–24 in the light of these OT texts.

ISAIAH 2:2–4 AND MICAH 4:1–4

While the idea of an eschatological pilgrimage of the nations to Zion is found in a variety of places in the OT, I expect that Isa 2:2–4 and its parallel in Mic 4:1–4 are foundational for any discussion of the idea. Isaiah 2:2–4 is strategically located at the start of the book, perhaps heading up the collection of oracles about Judah and Jerusalem that encompass chapters 2–12.²³ The pericope also appears with minor differences in Mic 4:1–4, where it immediately follows an announcement of the devastation of Zion, Jerusalem and “the mountain of the house” because of the sins of the leaders of the people.²⁴ Both texts begin with an announcement that what will happen will happen “in the future”,²⁵ but while the Micah text announces a reversal of the judgements of Micah 3, the Isaiah text seems to be setting out a programme for the book.²⁶

Prominent in both Isaiah 2 and Micah 4 are the words “nations” (*goyim*) and “peoples” (*ammim*) with the nations and the peoples streaming up the mountain that has been exalted as the highest of the

²⁰ Rev 3:12; 21:2, 10.

²¹ For this reading of Heb 13:12–14 see Church, *Hebrews and the Temple*, 363–65. In the NT there is movement towards Jerusalem with Paul and his collection for the Jerusalem church (Rom 15:25–29; 1 Cor 16:1–4; 2 Cor 8–9). On the gentile pilgrimage to Zion in Paul, see Christopher Zoccali, *Reading Philippians after Supersessionism: Jews, Gentiles and Covenant Identity*, Kindle ed., New Testament after Supersessionism (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2017), loc. 834–1009.

²² NA²⁸ (pp. 862–63) lists eleven citations of and allusions to Jeremiah in Hebrews, including Jer 31:31–34 in Heb 8. This is the longest OT citation in the NT, treated at length in Heb 9:1–10:18.

²³ James Limburg, “Swords to Ploughshares: Text and Contexts,” in *Writing and Reading the Scroll of Isaiah: Studies of an Interpretive Tradition*, ed. Craig C. Broyles and Craig A. Evans (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 280.

²⁴ It would be a diversion to enter into the debate as to whether Isaiah borrowed from Micah or vice-versa, or whether both used a pre-existing oracle, which seems likely. See the discussion in Hans Wildberger, *Isaiah 1–12*, A Continental Commentary (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 85–87, and Williamson, *Isaiah 1–5*, 166–79.

²⁵ Williamson, *Isaiah 1–5*, 179–81 argues that on its own this expression is not strictly eschatological, although the LXX probably reads it that way with “in the last days” in Isa 2:2 and “at the end of days” in Mic 4:1. Cf. Heb 1:1, “in these last days,” an eschatological formula referring to the new era brought about by the exaltation of Christ. Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 29 reads the text as thoroughly eschatological, “It speaks of God’s time, different in kind from ordinary time, and it signals immediately that there is no simple linear continuity between Israel’s historical existence and the entrance of God’s kingdom. Rather, into the old breaks the radical new.”

²⁶ Williamson, *Isaiah 1–5*, 172. The idea of the pilgrimage of the nations to Jerusalem pervades Isaiah and becomes more and more detailed as the book progresses. Scholars routinely relate later texts back to this programmatic statement, see e.g. M. A. Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), 498; Williamson, *Isaiah 1–5*, 177–78 and John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 1–33*, Rev. ed., WBC 24 (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 46–48. For the pilgrimage of the nations to Zion in Isaiah see 11:10; 24:21–25:10; 45:14–17; 54:1–8; 56:1–8; 60:1–22; 66:18–24. See also Hag 2:6–9; Zech 2:10–14 (MT 2:14–17); 8:20–23; 14:16–19.

mountains.²⁷ The location to which they are to ascend is variously named as “the mountain of the house of YHWH” (Isa 2:2, Mic 4:1), the “mountain of YHWH” (Isa 2:3, Mic 4:2), the “house of the God of Jacob” (Isa 2:3, Mic 4:2), “Zion” (Isa 2:3, Mic 4:2) and “Jerusalem” (Isa 2:3, Mic 4:2).²⁸ They encourage one another to go there so that YHWH, the God of Jacob can teach them his ways, and they can walk in his paths. As Williamson notes, “[t]he nations, therefore, express a desire to be taught the right way to live by God, and they demonstrate their sincerity by declaring in advance their intention to follow that out in practice.”²⁹ This is reflected in the immediately following motive clause in both Isaiah and Micah, “For from Zion shall go forth instruction and the word of YHWH from Jerusalem.”³⁰ And each pericope concludes with a vision of peace among the nations.

Isaiah and Micah diverge at this point. Micah explains that the people will live securely under their own vines and fig trees, with none to make them afraid, “for the mouth of YHWH of hosts has spoken these things” (Mic 4:4), and in Isa 2:5 the people exhort one another to walk in the light of YHWH.

These parallel texts envisage the nations streaming to Zion and Jerusalem to learn the ways of YHWH, with the ultimate result being the cessation of conflict between the nations. It is not concerned with the return of the exiles of Israel and Judah, which is the way the *Aliyah* is normally understood.

OTHER POSSIBLE TEXTS BEHIND HEB 12:22–24

While Isa 2:2–4 and Mic 1:1–4 deal with the pilgrimage of the nations to Zion, as I suggested above, the implied readers of Hebrews are most likely ethnic Jews. There are numerous texts that refer to the return of the (Jewish) exiles to Zion, and I need to be selective in my choice of texts for consideration. Given the allusion to Isa 35:3 in Heb 12:12, and the conclusion of that chapter with the joyful return of the exiles to Zion, and given the number of motifs in Isa 34–35 that are reflected in Hebrews,³¹ Isaiah 35

²⁷ Limburg, “Swords to Ploughshares,” 281, notes that this description “should not be understood in terms of geological phenomena ... but rather as an image illustrating the significance of the mountain and Jerusalem for the future community of ‘all the nations’ and ‘many peoples’.” See also Williamson, *Isaiah 1–5*, 181–82, and Moshe Weinfeld, “Zion and Jerusalem as Religious and Political Capital: Ideology and Utopia,” in *The Poet and the Historian: Essays in Literary and Historical Biblical Criticism*, ed. Richard Elliott Friedman, HSS (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1983), 108.

²⁸ The LXX makes a second destination in Isa 2:2, reading “the mountain of the Lord and the house of God” and also inserts a copula (*kai*) in Isa 2:3 between “the mountain of the Lord” and (*kai*) “the house of the God of Jacob,” which David A. Baer, *When we all Go Home: Translation and Theology in Isaiah 56–66*, JSOTSup 318 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2001), 267–69 also reads as two destinations. The copula is present in both the MT and the LXX of Mic 4:2, and the destination is not expanded in Mic 4:1. 1QIsa^a simply reads “the house of the God of Jacob” in Isa 2:3 (1QIsa^a II 10), omitting any reference to the mountain of YHWH.

²⁹ Williamson, *Isaiah 1–5*, 184.

³⁰ John T. Willis, “Isaiah 2:2–5 and the Psalms of Zion,” in *Writing and Reading the Scroll of Isaiah: Studies of an Interpretive Tradition*, ed. Craig C. Broyles and Craig A. Evans (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 296 sees this clause as the centre of the pericope on which the chiastic structure swings. Jonathan Magonet, “Isaiah’s Mountain or the Shape of Things to Come,” *Prooftexts* 11 (1991): 178 finds the central affirmation in “and he will teach us his ways and we will walk in his paths.” For *torah* as “instruction”, see Sweeney, “Prophetic Torah,” 50–51.

³¹ Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 658. Ellingworth lists the “glory” (Isa 35:2; Heb 1:3) of God; the “majesty” (Isa 35:2, cf. Heb 1:3; 7:26) of God; “encouragement” (Isa 35:4;

warrants a brief examination. Then, I briefly examine three texts in Jeremiah that are concerned with the return of the exiles.

Isaiah 34–35 is a separate section of Isaiah, connecting chapters 28–33 and 36–39 respectively, and probably bound together with the claim that YHWH is coming to take “vengeance” and to “vindicate the cause of Zion” (34:8; 35:4).³² In 35:4–5 the returning exiles are encouraged to strengthen their weak hands and “wobbly knees”,³³ a text cited from the LXX in Heb 12:12, with minor differences. They are encouraged to do this because YHWH is coming to “help” them. Then in 35:10 the exiles whom YHWH has redeemed enter Zion with great rejoicing, and “grief” (cf. Heb 12:11) and suffering come to an end.

Holladay judges Jeremiah 3:16–18b to be a prose addition to Jeremiah, dated in the fifth century, during the time of Nehemiah.³⁴ Be that as it may, it now sits alongside Jer 3:12–14 where YHWH calls upon faithless Israel to return, and announces that he will restore individuals from among the exiles and bring them to Zion and place faithful leaders over them. This announcement is followed by three oracles with an eschatological orientation,³⁵ concerning things that will take place “in those days” (vv. 16, 18) and “at that time” (v. 17).³⁶ The population will increase, the ark of the covenant will be forgotten, having become redundant,³⁷ and YHWH will be enthroned in Jerusalem (rather than between the cherubim).³⁸ “All the nations” will be gathered to Jerusalem to the name of YHWH and will no longer obey the inclinations of their stubborn hearts,³⁹ and the northern and southern kingdoms will be reunited. Thus there will be a spiritual transformation, not only of the exiles from both kingdoms, but also of the nations.

Jeremiah 30–31 comprise Jeremiah’s so-called “Book of Consolation.”⁴⁰ Here YHWH promises to restore his people after the exile. Jerusalem is apparently addressed in 30:12–17, with several verbs with feminine singular suffixes, and in v. 17 YHWH promises to restore and heal Zion. In chapter 31 YHWH promises to restore the exiles, culminating in the new covenant promise of 31:31–34 and the

Heb 3:13; 10:25; 13:19, 22); “cosmic disturbance” (Isa 34:4; cf. Heb 1:10–12; 12:25–29), and “judgement” (Isa 34:8; 35:4, cf. Heb 10:30; 12:26).

³² Christopher R. Seitz, “The Book of Isaiah: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections,” in *New Interpreter's Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1994), 6: 273; Childs, *Isaiah*, 255–56;

³³ Hans Wildberger, *Isaiah 28–39*, A Continental Commentary (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 340.

³⁴ Holladay, *Jeremiah 1*, 1, 81. Peter C. Craigie, Paige H. Kelley, and Joel F. Drinkard Jr, *Jeremiah 1–25*, WBC 26 (Dallas, TX: Word, 1994), 60, ascribe vv. 16–17 to Jeremiah, with an early date, following Moshe Weinfeld, “Jeremiah and the Spiritual Metamorphosis of Israel,” *ZAW* 88 (1976): 21–24, who dates it in the time of Josiah. William McKane, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Jeremiah*, vol. 1, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986), 77 is ambivalent, but seems to think the verses are exilic.

³⁵ Holladay, *Jeremiah 1*, 1, 77; cf. Weinfeld, “Spiritual Metamorphosis,” 23–26.

³⁶ J. A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 203 suggests that vv. 16, 17 and 18 could be separate oracles because of these temporal expressions.

³⁷ McKane, *Jeremiah*, 1, 74. Cf. Leslie C Allen, *Jeremiah: A Commentary*, OTL (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 58, “Yahweh’s ark-linked presence was released to pervade the city.”

³⁸ McKane, *Jeremiah*, 1, 74. On p. 77 McKane sees this enthronement in Jerusalem as enthronement “in its common life.”

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 75–76 refers to Rudolph, who apparently wanted to change “all the nations” to “from all the aliens”, seemingly a reference to diaspora Jews “coming up to Jerusalem as pilgrims for the festivals of the temple.” Rudolph was apparently convinced that Jeremiah did not entertain the idea of the nations streaming to Jerusalem.

⁴⁰ Gerald L. Keown, Pamela J. Scalise, and Thomas G. Smothers, *Jeremiah 26–52*, WBC 27 (Dallas, TX: Word, 1995), 82–84.

promise of the rebuilt city. In 31:6 they encourage one another to go up to Zion to YHWH their God, and in 31:10–14 the word of YHWH is announced to the nations, that YHWH has redeemed them and that they will come and sing for joy “on the heights of Zion” (*bimron Zion*, LXX, *en tō orei Zīon* “on Mount Zion”) and there rejoice in the goodness of YHWH, explicated in terms of agricultural bounty.

Finally, I refer to Jer 50:4–5.⁴¹ Verses 1–3 of this chapter announce the fall of Babylon at the hands of a nation from the north. “In those days and at that time” the exiles from the north and the south will come with tears of repentance to seek God. They will ask the way to Zion and turn their faces toward it and bind themselves to YHWH in an “everlasting covenant” that will not be forgotten. The everlasting covenant is another way of describing the new covenant of 31:31–34,⁴² although the agent of the passive verb “will [not] be forgotten” is unstated. While Allen suggests that the people will not forget the covenant,⁴³ Holladay suggests that YHWH will not forget it.⁴⁴ If this is the case, then it is a promise that the rupture of exile will not happen again.⁴⁵ Once again the people are reunited, and together seek Zion, acknowledging that this is the place of true worship.

HEBREWS 12:18–24

I turn now to Heb 12:18–24, which has been called the “grand finale” of Hebrews.⁴⁶ It is part of the fifth warning passage of Hebrews, extending from 12:14–29.⁴⁷ The warning begins with a positive call to pursue peace and holiness and to be on guard against any apostasy arising in the community.⁴⁸ The readers are also warned against emulating Esau, who sold his rights as a firstborn for a single meal, and later found no place for repentance. Immediately following these warnings, and logically connected to them in some way with the causal particle *gar* (“for”) is Heb 12:18–24, which comprises two contrasting sentences, the first beginning with the expression “you have not come”, and the second beginning with “but you have come”. Tying both sentences together is the notion of God speaking: speaking words in v. 19 that the hearers could not bear, and speaking better things than Abel in v. 24.⁴⁹ These verses are in

⁴¹ NA²⁸ notes an allusion to Jer 50:5 in Heb 13:20.

⁴² Keown, Scalise, and Smothers, *Jeremiah* 26–52, 365. For the everlasting covenant see also 32:40.

⁴³ Allen, *Jeremiah*, 512.

⁴⁴ William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah* 2, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 416.

⁴⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *To Build and to Plant: A Commentary on Jeremiah 26–52*, ITC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 261.

⁴⁶ Barnabas Lindars, “The Rhetorical Structure of Hebrews,” *NTS* 35 (1989): 402. See also George H. Guthrie, *The Structure of Hebrews: A Text-Linguistic Analysis*, NovTSup 73 (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 143; Kiwoong Son, *Zion Symbolism in Hebrews: Hebrews 12:18–24 as a Hermeneutical Key to the Epistle*, PBM (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005), 78. An earlier version of what follows appears in Church, *Hebrews and the Temple*, 343–52.

⁴⁷ Herbert W. Bateman IV, “Introducing the Warning Passages in Hebrews: A Contextual Orientation,” in *Four Views on the Warning Passages in Hebrews*, ed. Herbert W. Bateman IV (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007), 83; Scot McKnight, “The Warning Passages of Hebrews: A Formal Analysis and Theological Conclusions,” *TrinJ* 13 (1992): 22–23, note 3, includes the whole of Heb 12 in this warning passage.

⁴⁸ Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 477.

⁴⁹ For this reading see Gene R. Smillie, “‘The One who is Speaking’ in Heb 12:25,” *TynBul* 55 (2004): 278–83.

turn followed by a warning not to disregard the one speaking (God),⁵⁰ who warned from the earth at Sinai, and is now warning from heaven, with much more serious consequences.⁵¹

While no mountain is named as the place to which the readers have not come, it is clear from the allusions to Deut 4:11, where the same verb is used to describe the approach of the people to Horeb, that Sinai is in view. The text describes “the physical phenomena accompanying the giving of the law,”⁵² followed by the reaction of the people and of Moses who trembled with fear. The overriding emotion that surfaces is terror at the presence of God.

The approach to Sinai is contrasted with the clause *alla proseleluthata Zīōn orei* (“but you have come to Mount Zion”). The perfect tense indicates that the readers are to recognise that as followers of Jesus,⁵³ they have come to and are now present at Mount Zion.⁵⁴ The two sentences contrast two covenants. The former was mediated by Moses (implied, but not stated in the first sentence) and the new covenant is mediated by Jesus (8:6; 9:15; 12:24).⁵⁵

Apart from the reference to a “festal gathering” (*panēguris*) in v. 22, the positive emotions associated with Zion in Heb 12:22–24 are not explicated. The conjunction *kai* appears seven times, with the eight descriptors falling into four pairs.⁵⁶ “Mount Zion” is the destination, with the first descriptor identifying Zion as the “city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.”⁵⁷ Given that this is the only reference to Zion in Hebrews, the readers may have inferred that the author was referring to the earthly Zion, the temple mount over against Sinai. However, the two additional epithets clarify that the earthly

⁵⁰ Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 683–84; Smillie, “The One who is Speaking,” 283–87.

⁵¹ There is a logical connection here with the second warning passage, Hebrews, 3:7–4:13 which deals with Ps 95, mentioned above. Both are concerned with listening to God speaking, and both encourage the people to be alert, using the second person plural imperative of *blepō* (*blepete*, “see to it”), the only instances of this form in Hebrews (3:12; 12:25).

⁵² Luke Timothy Johnson, *Hebrews: A Commentary*, NTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 326.

⁵³ Several scholars use the term “conversion” in this context. See C. K. Barrett, “The Eschatology of the Epistle to the Hebrews,” in *The Background of the New Testament and its Eschatology*, ed. W. D. Davies and D. Daube (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954), 376; 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), 160; F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, rev. ed., NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 255. This term is anachronistic in the context since “Jew” is an ethnic identifier and “Christ-follower” transcends ethnicity. These people remained Jews, and would not have considered themselves to have “converted” from Judaism to Christianity. Nevertheless, the notion of conversion does preserve an element of truth, since it is Christ-following Jews who have come to Mount Zion, over against those who were not yet Christ-followers. For a plea to set aside the term “conversion” in discussion of Christian origins see Paula Fredriksen, “Mandatory Retirement: Ideas in the Study of Christian Origins Whose Time Has Come to Go,” *JR* 35 (2006): 232–37, and for the use of the term to refer to non-Jewish individuals and communities becoming Jews, see Seth Schwartz, “How Many Judaism Were There? A Critique of Neusner and Smith on Definition and Mason and Boyarin on Categorization,” *JAJ* 2 (2011): 232–37.

⁵⁴ Peterson, *Hebrews and Perfection*, 160; Attridge, *Hebrews*, 372; William L. Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, WBC 47B (Dallas: Word, 1991), 440–41 (note w).

⁵⁵ G. Fohrer and E. Lohse, “σιών, κ.τ.λ.,” in *TDNT*, ed. Gerhard Friedrich (1971), 337; Peterson, *Hebrews and Perfection*, 160–66; Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, 461.

⁵⁶ Attridge, *Hebrews*, 374; Son, *Zion Symbolism*, 87–89.

⁵⁷ All these expressions are anarthrous in Greek. I have supplied a definite article in English where appropriate. Johnson, *Hebrews*, 327 translates “a city of the living God, a heavenly Jerusalem,” as though there were more than one of each. He also translates the *kai* in the expression *Zīōn orei kai polei theou zōntos* with “and,” reading “Mount Zion, and a city ...” But surely this *kai* is explicative, identifying Zion with the city and Jerusalem, see Ceslas Spicq, *L'Épître aux Hébreux*, 3rd ed., 2 vols. (Paris: Gabalda, 1952), 2: 405; Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, 441 (note gg); Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 677.

Zion is not in view.⁵⁸ The “city” (*polis*) recalls the city with foundations (11:10), that God had prepared for Abraham and the patriarchs (11:16),⁵⁹ that is, the heavenly Jerusalem.⁶⁰ The author has taken the well-known imagery of Zion/Jerusalem as the place where God is worshipped and from where God speaks, and, by means of the adjective “heavenly”, applied it as a metaphor for access to God under the new covenant.⁶¹

As elsewhere in Hebrews, “heavenly” refers to what is to come, now come into the present,⁶² so that Mount Zion describes the eschatological dwelling of God with his people.⁶³ Thus, temple imagery is pressed into service to symbolise the relationship between God and his people under the new covenant. The figurative language used elsewhere in Hebrews for this dwelling: “the world to come” (2:5); “God’s rest” (4:1–11); “the true tent” (8:2); “within the curtain” (6:19–20; 10:19–25); “the city built by God” (11:10); “the heavenly homeland” (11:16); “the unshakeable kingdom” (12:28); and “the city to come” (13:14), is now extended to include the heavenly Jerusalem.

The next pair of descriptors refers to the inhabitants of Mount Zion, the “myriads of angels in a festal gathering” (*muriasin angelōn panēgurei*),⁶⁴ and the “assembly of the firstborn, inscribed in heaven” (*ekklēsia prōtotokōn apogreggamenōn en ouranois*). The presence of angels in a festal gathering is to be read in the context of the numerous references to angels in the Second Temple literature. The Qumran community seems to have envisaged that angels were present in their worship, either on earth in the life of the community, or in the heavenly temple.⁶⁵ Apocalyptic texts include the notion of a journey to heaven, that is absent from Hebrews. Here, the community is pictured as having come to Mount Zion

⁵⁸ Craig R. Koester, *Hebrews: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 36 (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 550; Son, *Zion Symbolism*, 89; O’Brien, *Hebrews*, 483.

⁵⁹ Johnson, *Hebrews*, 331; Lois K. Fuller Dow, *Images of Zion: Biblical Antecedents for the New Jerusalem*, New Testament Monographs 26 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2010), 173–74.

⁶⁰ Attridge, *Hebrews*, 374. G. W. Buchanan, *To the Hebrews*, AB 36 (New York: Doubleday, 1972), 222 thinks it is a reference to the restored earthly city of Jerusalem, called “heavenly” because of its divine origin. But this is to misread the eschatological orientation of Hebrews. See Robert P. Gordon, *Hebrews*, 2nd ed., Readings: A New Biblical Commentary (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2008), 43–44.

⁶¹ David A. DeSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Epistle ‘to the Hebrews’* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 466.

⁶² Heb 3:1; 6:4; 8:5; 9:23; 11:16.

⁶³ Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, 465; Koester, *Hebrews*, 544; Son, *Zion Symbolism*, 91; O’Brien, *Hebrews*, 483.

⁶⁴ It is debated whether *panēguris* refers to what precedes (the angels) or to what follows (the assembly of the firstborn). The presence of *kai* after *panēguris* suggests that it is to be construed with what precedes, as a circumstantial dative qualifying the angels. If it is construed with what follows the *kai* functions as in v. 22, expressing the idea that the readers have come to a festal gathering, “even” (*kai*) the assembly of the firstborn. Apart from v. 22 *kai* functions elsewhere in this list to join different aspects of Mount Zion, making this latter option unlikely, although it is reflected in the punctuation of NA²⁸. For arguments for construing it with what precedes see Attridge, *Hebrews*, 375; Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, 441–42 (note jj); Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 679.

⁶⁵ For these connections with Qumran see John Strugnell, “The Angelic Liturgy at Qumran—4Q *Serek Širôt ‘Ólat Haššabbat*,” in *Congress Volume Oxford 1959*, ed. G. W. Anderson, VTSup 7 (Leiden: Brill, 1960), 320; Bruce, *Hebrews*, 357–58; Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, 468. Some of the early literature on Qumran (especially Bertil Gärtner, *The Temple and the Community in Qumran and the New Testament: A Comparative Study in the Temple Symbolism of the Qumran Texts and the New Testament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 94–99) overstates the case for connections between Qumran and this text in Hebrews, as the differences are significant. See the judicious comments in Georg Klinzing, *Die Umdeutung des Kultus in der Qumrangemeinde und im NT*, SUNT 7 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1971), 201–2, who suggests the adoption of a common tradition with significant differences in the way it has been put to use. See also Jub. 31:14; T. Levi 3:5; 1 En. 5–16; Apoc. Zeph. Already in the OT numerous angels inhabit heaven and are involved in the worship of God (Ps 89:6; 103:21; 148:2), a tradition also reflected in Rev 5:11–12.

and participating in angelic worship, while still earthbound (in Rome?). Mount Zion, therefore, encompasses earth and heaven and is where the new covenant community encounters God and his heavenly entourage. The “assembly of the firstborn inscribed in heaven” comprises the firstborn ones, who belong to Jesus the firstborn one, already in the world to come (1:6). This is the “assembly” (*ekklesia*) of Heb 2:12 that he came to sanctify, the siblings of Jesus, all the faithful, past and present, Jew and gentile, from all over the world.⁶⁶

The next pair of descriptors describes “God the judge of all” and the “spirits of the righteous made perfect.” In 10:26–31 those who persist in sin have only the fearful prospect of judgment. But the reference to God as judge, juxtaposed in this verse with the reference to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, that is, the righteous dead,⁶⁷ indicates that there is also the prospect of positive judgment for those made perfect—Christians who have died already worshipping in heaven.⁶⁸ These include those listed in Heb 11 (see Heb 11:40) and all who endure to the end. For these people there is the prospect of eschatological acceptance.⁶⁹ Thus, the community of Christ-followers on earth, wherever located, is also in the heavenly temple in the presence of myriads of angels, faithful believers past and present and the righteous dead, now participating in the “Sabbath celebration” (*sabbatismos*) of Heb 4:9.⁷⁰

The final pair of descriptors, forming a climax to the entire sequence, refers to the “mediator of the new covenant, Jesus” (*diathēkēs neas mesitē Iēson*),⁷¹ and “the blood of sprinkling, speaking in a better manner⁷² than Abel” (*haimati rhantismou kreitton lalounti para ton Abel*).⁷³ That Jesus is there indicates a reference to the heavenly temple, where he is enthroned, although not “in heaven”, but wherever his people are located. The blood of sprinkling echoes Heb 9:11–22 and the inauguration of both the Sinai covenant and the new covenant, the latter enabling the promised eternal inheritance (Heb 9:22) envisaged in the present text.

⁶⁶ Attridge, *Hebrews*, 23; Gareth Lee Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 655.

⁶⁷ P. J. Arowele, “The Pilgrim People of God (An African’s Reflections on the Motif of Sojourn in the Epistle to the Hebrews),” *AJT* 4 (1990): 444–45. See 1 En. 22:3–4; 41:8; 103:3–4.

⁶⁸ John M. Scholer, *Proleptic Priests: Priesthood in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, JSNTSup 49 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991), 146.

⁶⁹ O’Brien, *Hebrews*, 487.

⁷⁰ Lane, *Hebrews* 9–13, 467; Koester, *Hebrews*, 545.

⁷¹ As often in Hebrews the name “Jesus” appears in an emphatic position at the end of the clause. See 2:9; 4:14; 6:20; 7:22; 12:2; 13:20.

⁷² *Kreitton* (“better”) is probably best construed as an adverb (Attridge, *Hebrews*, 377) rather than a singular adjective where it would refer to “something better.” P⁴⁶ and 1505 read *kreittona* (plural, “better things”), but this attestation is minimal.

⁷³ The subject of the verb to speak (*laleō*) is a complex exegetical issue. Earlier I referred to Smillie, “The One who is Speaking,” who argues that God is speaking in this verse, while others argue that either Abel (see Heb 11:4) or Abel’s blood (see Gen 4:10) is speaking. Paul Ellingworth and Eugene A. Nida, *A Handbook on the Letter to the Hebrews* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1983), 313 note that most translations add a reference to the blood of Abel speaking (alongside the sprinkled blood of Jesus), and this reading is explicit in P⁴⁶ followed by L and a few minuscules where the definite article is neuter, governing the neuter *haima* blood, rather than *ton* (masculine, governing *Abel*), read by Codices Sinaiticus, Alexandrinus and Bezae and numerous minuscules. One late minuscule (1962) reads the genitive definite article. While I find Smillie’s conclusion satisfying, it is somewhat difficult in that it introduces a ninth descriptor to which the readers have come (God speaking), not separated from the eighth with *kai*.

This neatly balanced pericope contrasts the terrifying events surrounding the inauguration of the Sinai covenant with “the ultimate, eschatological encounter with God in the heavenly Jerusalem.”⁷⁴ Considerable temple symbolism surfaces in the description, indicating that, under the new covenant, the encounter with God in Christ is the reality to which the Jerusalem temple pointed. Given the emphasis in Hebrews on the need to persevere, it seems clear that this imagery does not nullify the eschatological goal that lies ahead of the readers. Rather, it clarifies that they can now experience what is promised to them at the end of their journey. There, they will find a reality that had been experienced all along.⁷⁵ Here the faithful have access to the presence of God, yet to be consummated in the future when they attain to God’s rest (4:11), as long as they remain faithful.

THE SOURCE OF THE IMAGERY IN HEBREWS 12:22–24

It seems clear that lying behind this text in Hebrews is the notion that Mount Zion is the place where God is encountered, where he is worshipped by the saints and the angels, where Jesus is present, and from where God addresses his people with an urgent call to listen. But Mount Zion has been translocated so that it is no longer identified with the earthly Jerusalem, but with the heavenly, where God’s faithful people gather with the saints and angels. Whether the theme of the return of the exiles to Zion is present is unclear. I note that the events described in Isa 2:2–4 and Mic 4:1–4 are said to happen “in the last days” (LXX Isa 2:2, *en tais eschatais hēmerais*; Mic 4:1 *ep’ eschatōn hēmerōn*) and that God’s speech through a Son in Hebrews takes place “in these last days” (*ep’ eschatōn hēmerōn toutōn*, 1:2). I note the piling up of expressions for Jerusalem and Zion in the Isaiah and Micah texts and in Heb 12:22. And I note that the word of YHWH comes from Jerusalem in Isa 2:3 and in Mic 4:2, and the claim that the mouth of YHWH has spoken (LXX *laleō*) in Mic 4:4. These compare favourably with the prominence of God’s speech in Heb 12:18–25. I note the atmosphere of rejoicing in Isa 35:10 and in Heb 12:22–24, and the significance of the themes in Isa 34–35 to Hebrews overall. I note the redundancy of the ark of the covenant in Jer 3:16, something implied in the new covenant of Heb 8:13–9:14; 12:24. I note the atmosphere of joyful worship in Heb 12:23, compared with the same in Jer 31:13–14, and the everlasting covenant of Jer 50:4–5 where the returning exiles turn their faces toward Zion, compared with the everlasting covenant of Heb 13:20. These allusions are intriguing, and were no doubt ideas in the air when the author was writing his letter, but whether any of them are definitive for 12:22–24 is unclear.

What is remarkable is that while these ethnic Jews are somewhere in the Mediterranean diaspora, probably in Rome, they can be described as having come to Mount Zion. However, no journey is implied, since Zion is immediately qualified as a reference to the “heavenly Jerusalem.” This expression does not appear in the OT, but is found several times in Second Temple Jewish literature, in Rabbinic Judaism

⁷⁴ O’Brien, *Hebrews*, 491.

⁷⁵ R. Jewett, *Letter to Pilgrims. A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (New York: Pilgrim, 1981), 223; Scholer, *Proleptic Priests*, 144.

and elsewhere in the NT.⁷⁶ There was a conversation about this heavenly city in the post-exilic period and beyond that the author of Hebrews contributes to. So, while the OT envisaged a return to the earthly Jerusalem, this was later downplayed, and indeed in the NT, where Jerusalem is always a city under judgement, abandoned. The destination of Abraham, to which the recipients are to direct their attention is the heavenly city, whose architect and builder is God (11:10, 16). This is the “city of the living God,” not the earthly Jerusalem, which is implied but not named in 13:12-14 as the place the believers are to leave, following Christ who was ejected from there.

CONCLUSION

I began with two ethnic Jews, one in a synagogue with a *kippah* on his head, and one a Jewish follower of Jesus,⁷⁷ both claiming that the *Aliyah* was in fulfilment of Isa 2:2–4. I am not sure that I agree with either of them, since that text implies that the nations rather than the Jews would encounter God in Zion and learn *halakhab* from God there. The author of Hebrews was an ethnic Jew writing to ethnic Jews, and whether or not the Isaiah text was in his mind when he wrote, he claimed that God’s voice was to be heard not in the earthly Jerusalem but in the heavenly, in the presence of the mediator of the new covenant, Jesus. This is because God no longer dwells in the earthly Jerusalem, he dwells in Christ and wherever his people gather in Christ’s name. If fulfilment of the Isaiah text is to be found at all, it is to be found in Christian worship wherever Christ-followers are found, both Jew and gentile. And those who pin their hopes on an encounter with God in the earthly Jerusalem today will ultimately be disappointed.

⁷⁶ See T. Dan 5:12–13; 2 Bar. 4:2–7; 4 Ezra 7:26; 10:27, 54; 13:36; 1 En. 90:28–39; 2 En. 55:2; Tob 13:10–17; Sib. Or. 5. 250–51; Gal 4:26; Rev 3:12; 21:1–4; b. Hag 12b; B. Bat. 75b. See Barrett, “Eschatology,” 374–76.

⁷⁷ See Bock, “Dispensationalist View,” 110–11.