

THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS - PART XIV- THE HEAVENLY JERUSALEM

AND THE DEMANDS OF THE NEW HEAVEN AND NEW EARTH

I. The letter then rises to a glorious vision of the heavenly Jerusalem and speaks of the transformation that is to come.

A. This section then comes back to the theme of the glorious invisible realm and the fulfilment of the covenant with a glorious vision of the New Jerusalem that we are approaching even now.

B. It begins by contrasting the New Covenant with the descent of God's glory on Mount Sinai, the greatest of the epiphanies of the Old Covenant.

1. In that appearance, especially described in Exodus 19:12-25 and 20:18-21, God appeared in thunder, lightning fire, smoke, a violent earthquake, and a trumpet blast that shook the very earth. The idea is that the eternal and infinite glory of God overwhelms the earth such that even mountains will be destroyed by it. See also Duet. 4:9–14, 5:1-5, 22-33.

2. The people are afraid, and Moses later recounts that God agrees that this fear is rightful, an inspiration to keep faithful to the covenant. See Duet. 5:28-33.

3. This reaction was all before the idolatry with the golden calf, see Ex. 32. Thus, the fear is simply natural to fallen humanity even before there is infidelity to the covenant.

4. Even before this infidelity, there is a natural fear in the presence of God. See Gen. 12:18. And that first covenant does not alone keep the people faithful. The fear of the glory of God, while good, is insufficient. See, e.g., Rom. 3:9-20. Thus, a greater covenant is needed.

5. The order of events was:

A. Two months after leaving Egypt, the Chosen People came to Mount Sinai. Moses went up the mountain and received instructions from God that the people were to remain at the foot of the mountain for two days while they kept holy to be pure to keep God's law. If even an animal touched the mountain at that time, he was to be put to

death.

B. On the third day, a ram's horn was to be blown, indicating that the people may come to the mountain.

C. Moses then went up the mountain in the midst of the terrifying wonders and received God's assurances of the covenant and the Ten Commandments.

D. The people meanwhile stayed at a lengthy distance and, even when Moses invited them up to the mountain, but they were afraid to approach it. So Moses continued to receive more of the instructions of God. See Ex. 21-23. He brought these instructions to the people and they agreed to follow them.

E. Moses then brought Aaron, two of his sons, and seventy other elders of the Chosen People to the mountain, where they beheld God, at least in some form. See Ex. 24:1-11.

F. Moses then went up to the mountain with Joshua for forty days, where he received the revelation of the heavenly worship, of which the Ark, the tent, and the future Temple were to imitate. See Ex. 25-31. Meanwhile, however, the Chosen People fell into idolatry with the golden calf and, when he finds out, Moses is terrified of God's threatened wrath. (That is the time that the letter refers to when it says that Moses was "terrified and trembling." See Duet. 9:19.) But Moses prayed for the people, and God did not destroy them, but did impose upon them many more rules, and especially the detailed regulations in the Book of Leviticus. This episode was the quintessential example of a long history of infidelity, repentance, forgiveness, a new start, but infidelity all over again.

6. Overall, the theme is that the old appearance of God, like the Old Covenant in general, gave a sense of the holiness of God and the demands of that holiness, but could not bring about the internal change necessary to satisfy those demands and be in His presence. See Acts 15:10

C. The letter then presents the new covenant in glorious terms as allowing us to the new and glorious Jerusalem, with the company of glorious angels and saints led by Jesus, whose blood speaks for our holiness.

1. It begins by describing the glorious new city of God as Mount Zion, "the city of the living God" and "the heavenly Jerusalem."

A. At one level, these terms all mean the same thing, the new and glorious Jerusalem, of which the earthly city at her height was but a pale image.

B. The heavenly Mount Zion here contrasts with Mount Sinai. Mount Sinai was considered as solid as anything on earth, but even that trembled with the glory of God.

- This new Mount Zion is at the same time more solid and enduring, for it is the home of God's glory. But it also welcomes the children of God.

C. The idea of a mountain signified the loftiness and permanence of heaven. See, e.g., Ps. 2:6, 78:68-69, 48:1-3. There is a notion of security and protection, as well as the waters of God's favor flowing down upon the nations. See Ps. 125, 133:3; Is. 30:19-26, 33:20.

D. The city of the living God is a term often associated with Zion to emphasize God's protection and holiness. See Ps. 48:1. There may also be a contrast here between the idea of dead works done for earthly reasons could never really bring life, and even the old law, which though good did not give life, and works done for the living covenant. See Heb. 9:14, 2 Cor. 3:1-6, 6:16; 1 Thess. 1:9. In addition, the Psalm 84 refers to a strong longing for the house of "the living God." Ezekiel had prophesied of the glorious city of God being built upon a high mountain. Ez. 40-48

- Finally, the letter also calls the new and glorious realm "the new Jerusalem." The idea is that the earthly Jerusalem is only a small copy of the heavenly one. The Book of Revelation will take up that image as the heavenly Jerusalem, described as a glorious city beyond compare. See Rev.21:9-27. The prophets had spoken of new and glorious Jerusalem that would be the center of all nations. See Is. 62:1-12, 66:10-21; Jer. 33; Zech. 12-14.

2. The letter then moves onto a vision of the gathering of the glorious company of God.

A. It begins with a vision of joining the company of "angels in festive gathering." The prophets would on occasion be brought before the company of the angels. See, e.g., Is. 6:1-6, Dan. 7:10. But here the letter says we have approach this company even now. The phrase "festal gathering" both gives an image of the joy of heaven, see, e.g.,

Is. 33:20; Matt. 22:2; Luke 14:15, and reminds one of the festal garments that those who are forgiven of sin can also wear. See Zech. 3:4, Luke 15:22.

B. The "first born" enrolled in heaven could be either another reference to the angels, to the righteous of the Old Covenant, who are awaiting glory, to the Christian faithful who have already died. In any case, there is the idea that their names are forever inscribed in glory. See Luke 10:20; Rev. 21:27.

C. The letter then says we even approach God the just judge of all. Again, the prophets were sometimes brought before the throne of God, but that was a rare privilege. See, e.g., Is. 6:1-6, Ez. 1:22-28, Dan. 7:9-10. But here the letter says we are all brought before His throne. Among the ancient Jews, there was a strenuous longing for God to come and judge the nations. See, e.g., Ps. 3:2, 7:9-12, 75:3, 82:8. There is also, however, a warning that we must be prepared for that appearance before the judge. See, e.g., Matt. 5:25-26; James 5:9.

D. It seems likely that the "spirits of the just made perfect" refers to the saints of the Old Covenant, who are made perfect by the current worship. See Heb. 11:40. St. Thomas Aquinas argued that this line is here between the reference to God the Father as judge and God the Son in Jesus because we are made perfect by the Holy Spirit. See 1 Cor. 3:16, Gal. 4:6, 5:22-26.

E. Finally, the letter gets to the climax that we are brought into the company of all these glorious figures by Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant. The idea is that the mediator of the old covenant could be considered Moses, the priests, or the angels, as described earlier in the letter. But none of these, even the angels, could bring us to perfection. Only Jesus does so through His blood. This notion of Jesus as the new mediator who brings us into the company of God summarizes all the points of the letter. See, e.g., Heb. 2:10-18, 4:14-16, 8:1-6, 9:11-15, 10:14-22.

- His blood speaks more eloquently than that of Abel because Abel's blood rightfully cried out for vengeance, see Gen.3:10, Matt. 23:35, Luke 11:51. By contrast, Jesus' blood brings us God's mercy and pleads for us before the throne of the Father.

II. The letter then begins the final exhortation to live in a manner fitting for this new life Christ has won for us.

A. It begins by reiterating the message from the beginning that we must be attentive to the message of God, this time emphasizing that it speaks through the blood of Christ.

- As the letter has said before, there were great punishments for those who ignored even the lesser law given by humans or even angels. See Heb. 2:2-3, 10:28-29. Those punishments, however, were only meant as warnings for the final punishment that comes from ignoring the word of salvation coming from Christ. See Wis. 11:17-26.

B. The letter draws upon the image of the word of God shaking Mount Sinai. See Ex. 19:18. See also Judges 5:5, Ps. 29:3-9, 68:9-11. All the more will the Word of God made man shake the very earth.

- The prophet Haggai had prophesied that, when the new temple was restored, God would shake earth and even heaven to pour forth glory upon the new house of God. See hag. 2:6-9, 20-23. Isaiah had also prophesied of a new heavens and a new earth. See Is. 65:17-25, 66:22-24; See also 2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21:1. The letter argues that all things that are temporal will pass away, including the earthly Jerusalem, the earthly temple, and the earthly nations. They must pass away, that what is permanent may become clear.

C. The letter then taps into the idea of a new kingdom, calling for us to be grateful for receiving it and to live in a fashion showing that gratitude. Jesus has already promised nothing less than an eternal kingdom to His faithful. See, e.g., Matt. 25:34, Mk. 10:29-31. The kingdom is offered even now, see Luke 11:20, 16:16, 17:21, 18:17-25, but also in the future, see Matt. 5:20, 6:10, 25:10; Luke 18:29-30. The kingdom is our even now, for we are even now receiving it, but it will be fulfilled when Jesus comes again in glory.

D. This chapter concludes with a rousing warning that "God is a consuming fire. The fire is glorious and purifying for those willing to accept His will, but destroying for those who reject Him. See, e.g., Duet. 4:24, 9:3; Is. 33:14; Ps. 79:5; 1 Cor. 3:13-15; Matt. 3:11; Mark 9:49. See also Ex. 24:17 (the consuming fire on Mount Sinai as an expression of God's glory.)