

March 20, 2005 PM

THE LORD'S SERVICE: WHAT IS GOING ON HERE?

HEBREWS 12:18-24

Situation: Hebrews in danger of turning back to OC structures that are about to be destroyed.

Purpose of Hebrews: to show the superiority of Christ over the OC structures and, thus, the call for faith in him as God's final word

Our passage: Compare and contrast the position of the OC people est. at Sinai and the NC people at Mt. Zion.

1. THE COVENANT CEREMONY AT MT. SINAI (18-21)

What is going on?: The reference for 12.18-21 is Exodus 19–24. There God is establishing his covenant with his people.

This is one more epoch in the history of God's unfolding plan in which he is fulfilling his original purposes and promises.

This is a covenant ceremony. Subsequent covenant ceremonies will be patterned after what goes on here. Each subsequent act of worship that this covenant prescribes will be a *renewal* of the covenant.

The renewal of the covenant is about God reaffirming his promises and our obligations and restoring any breaches that have occurred through sin; thus, restoring his people to communion with himself.

The pattern of approach: Ch. 19 God *calls* the people to gather at Mt. Sinai. Within this call to gather to meet with God (a phrase used by the text in 19.17), they must first be *cleansed*.

Then God speaks to them and constitutes them as a nation; his special treasure. He sets them apart from the rest of the nations. He *consecrates* them, sets them apart, by his word (Ex 20-23).

The people respond to this word in faith and covenant promise: "All that YHWH says we will do and be obedient." (This response, by the way, is pleasing to God. God says so himself in Deut 5.27-29.) They offer up sacrifices.

Then, God took Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and the seventy elders (as representatives of the people) up his holy mountain. The text then says that "they saw God, and they ate and drank." In other words, they *communed* with God.

This would be the same pattern that would take place at the tabernacle and temple. This covenant would be renewed.

The Structure of God's holy mountain: One great contrast: distance (OC) v. nearness (NC).

Mt. Sinai had three basic sections: the fence around the mountain, the middle part of the mountain, and the top of the mountain. Most of the people could not go past the fence. Some of the people could go up the mountain part of the way. But only one person—Moses—could go to the top of the mountain itself; and only when God called him to do so.

At the top of this mountain was the glory cloud of God. The throne of God is seen in the glory cloud (cf. Ezek 1).

This structure is reproduced in the tabernacle and the temple complex: outer court, holy place, holy of holies. It was in the Holy of Holies that God's glory dwelt. It was in the Holy of Holies where God's throne was (i.e., the "top" of God's holy mountain).

God is said to be enthroned "above the cherubim" (cf. e.g., 2 Sam 6.2). These cherubim are the ones positioned upon the cover of the ark of the covenant. These are the cherubim that correspond to God's throne as seen in Ezekiel 1.

The Holy of Holies is the place where heaven and earth meet. We know this because the Scripture says that God's throne is in heaven (cf. e.g., Psa 11.4). But God's throne is also in the tabernacle/temple, behind the veil.

Objectivity of covenant ceremony/rite: objective = "facts;" subjective = "perceptions" or "feelings"

Sinai was an objective covenant ceremony. They approached God's holy mountain. God really spoke to them and set them apart as his people. He really ate and drank with Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and the seventy elders. The people of God saw God's awesome glory cloud. It was there. God met with his people. Whether or not they responded in faith or unbelief does not change the fact that the covenant was established in this fashion.

2. COVENANT CEREMONY AT MT. ZION (22-24)

What is going on?: A constant between the two settings: God's throne.

This is also a covenant ceremony setting. But this covenant is est. in Christ Jesus, the Mediator of the NC (12.24)

Like the reality of the historical event at Sinai, so it is with the NC being established. Our high priest has ascended up to the throne of God, passing through the veil (something author emphasizes in chapter 6).

In doing this the covenant has been established. Now every covenant ceremony subsequent to this is a renewal of this covenant. God comes to assure us of his promises and remind us of our obligations. The covenant that has been breached by sin is reconciled by the blood of his own dear Son (cf. 1 Jn 1.7)

Where are we?: three synonymous names for the same place: Mt. Zion, the city of the living God, and the heavenly Jerusalem.

The significance of all of these names is that this is place where the throne of God resides. Mt. Zion, for instance, is the place where God sets his anointed, his king. This is his holy hill/mountain (cf. Psa 2.6; also 9.11; 48.2). Zion is also the sanctuary (Ps 20.2).

God's throne is in heaven. But Mt. Zion is also the place of his throne. When he tells his readers that they have come to Mt. Zion, the city of the living God, and the heavenly Jerusalem, he is saying that they have passed through the veil with Jesus and have access to the heavenly throneroom. (Cf. Heb 6.19-20; also 4.14-16)

Who is there?: *A myriad of angels in festal array* - The angels at Mt. Sinai were a terrifying sight. They stood ready to judge. Here, the people of God have entered into the presence of the angels without fear. Rather, we join with them in worship.

And please note: it is a *joyful occasion*. They are in "festal array." This is a feast. And at a feast you rejoice.

The church of the firstborn - The firstborn is Jesus Christ himself. The church in him is then the church of the firstborn. The firstborn is the one who inherits the promise.

God the Judge of all - it is his throne room. He is the one who has rendered the verdict concerning God's people when Christ died and rose again. Now, he admits us into his presence.

The spirits of just men made perfect - These are the saints that have gone on to their rest, waiting for the resurrection of the dead. Therefore, we are not only gathered with the entire church on earth, but we are also gathered with all the saints in heaven.

Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant - He is the forerunner who has passed behind the veil into the Holy of Holies, the throne of God. He is the reason that we are there.

"The blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel" is the blood of Christ. This blood calls for vengeance but also atones for the sins of his people before the Father.

It is important to note here that every time this covenant is renewed this is where we are. This is where we are gathered, and this is the crowd around us.

Note also: This is the *church gathered*. This is not about your quiet time. This is about when the church meets as the church.

Objectivity: Coming to Mt. Zion is as "objective" as the people of God coming to Mt. Sinai.

Note contrast between v. 18 and v. 22 - "you have not come" v. "but you have come" (a statement of fact).

Beloved, this means that no matter what we think about the situation of our worship on the Lord's Day when we come together as the church, what is described in this passage is what is going on.

God presents himself to us no matter what we see or feel. We are called to humbly submit our thoughts and our feelings to God's word, allowing that word to shape our lives. This is nothing more than the response of faith.