

SENSORY EXPERIENCE AND THE CONTRAST BETWEEN THE COVENANTS IN HEBREWS 12

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ABSTRACT

Studies of the contrast between Mount Sinai and Mount Zion in Hebrews 12:18–24 have overlooked the key element of sensory experience. On this basis two propositions are set forth. First, the Mosaic covenant is a covenant of the senses because Mount Sinai was unapproachable yet perceivable by the senses. Second, the new covenant's Mount Zion is superior because it is unperceivable by the five senses while being approachable.

INTRODUCTION

THE RHETORICAL CLIMAX of the Epistle to the Hebrews (12:18–24) features an indirect and thematic contrast between the holy mountains of Sinai and Zion.¹ This contrast should be understood as indirect because “Mount Sinai” is never named directly in verses 18–24.² Even so, the references to “Moses” in 12:12

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¹ Following Barnabas Lindars, Paul Ellingworth notes, “These verses form the rhetorical climax of the epistle” (*The Epistle to the Hebrews*, New International Greek Testament Commentary [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993], 669). See also Peter O’Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 477. William L. Lane nuances this view by positing 12:14–29 as the “pastoral and theological climax of the sermon” (*Hebrews 9–13*, Word Biblical Commentary [Dallas: Word, 1998], 448).

² The ASV, KJV, NASB, NIV, and NRSV all read “for you have not come to a mountain that can be touched.” Lane notes, “External evidence strongly supports the reading ψηλαφωμένῳ without ὄρει, ‘mountain’ (P⁴⁶ & A C 048 33 81 1175 vg sy^p co. aeth)” (*Hebrews 9–13*, 441). Allen, following Spicq, suggests that the omission of ὄρει “emphasizes the supremacy of the Zion dispensation” (David Mark Allen, “Deuteronomy Representation in a Word of Exhortation in Hebrews” [Ph.D. diss., Universi-

and the “new covenant” in 12:24 establish a relatively clear contrast between the Mosaic covenant and the new covenant established through Jesus.

Despite the clarity of the broad ideas at work, problems continue to plague interpreters. Hebrews 12:18–24 is a difficult text because it is difficult to relate obvious themes to the list of obscure references. It may be true that the characteristics of the two covenants are “summed up in the words ‘terror’ and ‘grace.’”³ But this large brush does not easily explain the details. One commentator expresses how difficult the matter is and concludes that “there is no close parallel between items in each list.”⁴ This means that the contrast between Sinai and Zion is only “loosely balanced.”⁵ Another commentator looks for balance between the two sections of verses 18–24 and finds that they “fail to correspond at every point.”⁶ This study agrees with Ellingworth that each item is part of a strategy of “rhetorical heaping rather than logical sequence.”⁷

This study will argue that Hebrews 12:18–24 uses sensory experience or lack thereof as the central characteristic of each covenant and its corresponding mountain.⁸ This approach results in two propositions that tie the passage together: *The Mosaic covenant is a “covenant of the senses” because Mount Sinai was unapproachable, all the while being perceivable.*⁹ *The new covenant is a “covenant beyond the senses” because Mount Zion is characterized by not being (currently) apprehensible by the five senses.*

ty of Edinburgh, 2007], 96n265). For comments on the variants, see Herbert W. Bateman IV, *Charts on the Book of Hebrews*, Kregel Charts of the Bible and Theology (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2012), 183.

³ B. F. Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: The Greek Text with Notes and Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1903), 411.

⁴ Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 699.

⁵ Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 372.

⁶ Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 391.

⁷ Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 677.

⁸ “The context of the word choice and the contrast with verse 22 demand that the concept *Mount Sinai* be understood” (Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 389).

⁹ This wording is not without precedent: “The words in Hebrews emphasize Sinai’s complete *unapproachability*” (Gareth L. Cockerill, *Hebrews: A Bible Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* [Indianapolis: Wesleyan Publishing House, 1998], 288). Cockerill does not emphasize sensory experience.

SEARCHING FOR A SECONDARY MOTIF

The dominant way of approaching this textual unit is through the motif of two mountains. Most attempt to find coherence of the whole and its parts through spatial characteristics.¹⁰ One might also see this in terms of references to *place*.¹¹ One commentator states: “Throughout this homily salvation has been depicted as unimpeded access to the presence of God. Not surprisingly, therefore, the language of *place* rather than time dominates.”¹² Commentators also often see a secondary motif at work in the comparison in 12:18–24.

One pastoral commentary suggests that the contrast is between Sinai and Zion but includes a secondary contrast between an unapproachable holiness and a holiness that provides “cleansing and healing.”¹³ There is no doubt that an element of transformation is experienced by those benefiting from the Melchizedekian priesthood of Jesus.

A second suggestion finds “possession in and through Christ” to be a secondary motif.¹⁴ Possession is an idea that attends approachability, but there are not enough words that specify ownership to make this a foregrounded theme in 12:18–24.¹⁵

A third suggestion finds speech or speaking to be the secondary motif at work alongside spatiality. But it is doubtful whether one can argue that the climaxes of each contrast are “references to speaking,” as at least one commentator suggests.¹⁶ Though the second section of the contrast clearly refers to the speech of the “blood of Abel” (v. 24), the speech of Moses (“I tremble with fear,” v. 21) emphasizes his emotion.

¹⁰ “The principal contrast in these verses, however, is between the two places of rendezvous with God—Mount Sinai and Mount Zion” (Marie E. Isaacs, *Reading Hebrews and James: A Literary and Theological Commentary*, Reading the New Testament [Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2002], 147). Similarly Cockerill, *Hebrews*, 287, and Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 676.

¹¹ For a theological exposition of “place,” see Craig G. Bartholomew, *Where Mortals Dwell: A Christian View of Place for Today* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011).

¹² Isaacs, *Reading Hebrews and James*, 147.

¹³ N. T. Wright, *Hebrews for Everyone* (London: SPCK, 2004), 161.

¹⁴ Donald Hagner, *Hebrews*, Understanding the Bible (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 224.

¹⁵ A foregrounded idea would be characterized by repetition of words and concepts.

¹⁶ David L. Allen, *Hebrews*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2010), 589.

A fourth suggestion points to functional superiority as the secondary motif. A recent monograph on Hebrews 12:18–24 explains the rhetorical implications of the contrast between Sinai and Zion by stating that “two focuses of rhetorical comparison” are present in the paragraph: spatial superiority and functional superiority.¹⁷ Zion is *spatially* superior to Sinai because the former is heavenly and the latter is earthly. Zion is *functionally* superior to Sinai because the ongoing priestly ministry of Jesus from heaven impacts the internal “heart” and mind of the believer, whereas the ministry from Sinai was external and not able to perfect the conscience of the worshiper. But this monograph does not consider the role of sensory experience or its equivalent as another important focus of Hebrews 12:18–24. The opening reference in verse 18 to “touching” along with the long list of sights and sounds requires that sensory experience.

These suggestions for a secondary motif do not account for the repetition of words and concepts related to the senses. In addition, neither list of items in the contrasts ends with spatial considerations or places. It is better to see that the four themes suggested above remain in the background, rather than the foreground in verses 18–24. There simply are not enough explicit references to these secondary ideas in the unit.

The argument set forth here is designed to nuance rather than disregard the role of place. While space is important, the ability to experience through the senses is the primary characteristic of each covenant and each mountain highlighted in this section. The contrast is between what can be experienced through the senses and what cannot. The commentator that most closely approximates this position highlights the experiential language of fear at Sinai and celebration at Zion.¹⁸ The old covenant (Mount Sinai) is characterized by what is palpable, touchable, and apprehensible through the senses while the new covenant (Mount Zion) is characterized by what is ephemeral, untouchable, and unseen.

The topic of sensory perception in early Christianity and the New Testament has received renewed attention in recent decades.

¹⁷ Kiwoong Son, *Zion Symbolism in Hebrews: Hebrews 12:8–24 as a Hermeneutical Key to the Epistle* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2005), 202.

¹⁸ “These two encounters with the living God contrast as follows: the first took place in the material realm, the second in the abiding, invisible realm; the first was marked by fear and hedged about with taboos carrying severe penalties, the second by celebratory worship of God” (David DeSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000], 464).

Luke Timothy Johnson notes that “attention to Christian religious experience lags far behind” in the academic study of Christianity.¹⁹ Such study must remember that religious experience is always contextualized by “cultural settings and symbolic worlds within which the first believers dwelt and which dwelt within them.”²⁰ The Old Testament Scriptures and the death and resurrection of Jesus were the two most formative sources for shaping the symbolic world of Hebrews and the way that it utilizes the senses.

Concern with the senses is not an anachronism. The idea of the five senses does have a Greek philosophical origin.²¹ The Platonic tradition emphasized the distinction between two spheres of reality.²² Nevertheless, extrabiblical evidence confirms that the idea of the senses “was well-known to Jewish and Christian intellectuals.”²³ The senses and experience have often suffered from a strong bifurcation between anthropology (human phenomenology) and literary studies of the text.²⁴ This study seeks to bridge this gap by providing a concluding section of application that identifies the phenomenon of faith as a “sixth sense.”

THE STRUCTURE OF THE CONTRAST

The rhetorical structure of Hebrews 12:18–24 leads readers to consider sensory experience alongside the two mountains. The centrality of sensory experience in Hebrews 12:18–24 relies upon two phrases that use the verb προσεληλύθατε (“you have approached”), in verses 18 and 22.

The content of each half of the structure clearly provides a “cumulative picture.”²⁵ Perhaps commentators have struggled so much with this passage because they have focused on the parallel verbs and have missed the importance of the phrases. It is a maxim

¹⁹ Luke Timothy Johnson, *Religious Experience in Earliest Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 2.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 67–68.

²¹ Pieter W. van der Horst, *Studies in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity*, *Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 106.

²² James W. Thompson, *Hebrews*, *Paideia* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 264.

²³ E.g. *Testament of Reuben* 2.3–9 and *2 Enoch* 30.9; and van der Horst, *Studies in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity*, 106.

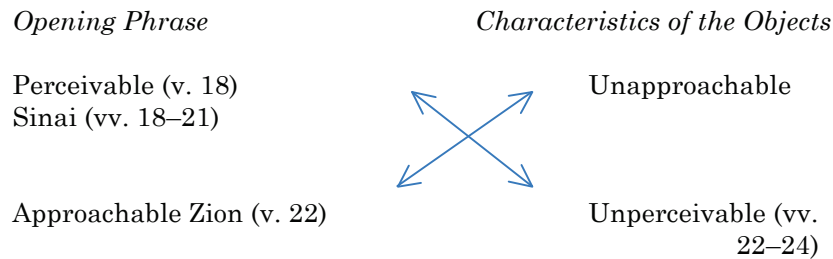
²⁴ Edith McEwan Humphrey, *And I Turned to See the Voice: The Rhetoric of Vision in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 19.

²⁵ Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 699.

of linguistics that words and phrases are more than the sum of their parts. Thus the object that has been approached by the implied reader requires attention. The argument for the significance of sensory experience in Hebrews 12:18–24 draws from the whole phrase that sets up the cumulative picture in each section.

- v. 18 For you have not come to what may be touched
 v. 22 But you have come to Mount Zion

While the verbs set up an obvious parallel, it is not clear how the objects of these verbs in verses 18 and 22 are related if they are a direct comparison. How does Mount Sinai compare with Mount Zion? The contrast is better understood as indirect: Mount Sinai and Mount Zion are distinct in the characteristics of the objects that follow. This contrast can be diagrammed in the following way:



The opening phrase of the first section contrasts with the characteristics of the second section. Likewise the opening phrase of the second section contrasts with the characteristics of the first section. The opening phrase from the first section in verses 18–21 indicates two things: (1) people have approached something material and (2) what they approached was untouchable.²⁶ As the list unfolds in verses 18–21, it is clear that what was untouchable was apprehensible by the senses.

The opening phrase from the second section in verses 22–24 indicates two things: (1) people have approached something, and (2) what they approached is not touchable and not apprehensible by the senses, as Mount Zion is in heaven. The list of objects in verses 22–24 all have the quality of being untouchable or inaccessible by the five senses.

²⁶ “The first descriptive feature, the phrase ‘can be touched’ (12:18) indicates a *visible, material* mountain rather than an invisible and eternal one” (Cockerill, *Hebrews*, 288).

After supplying the implied information from the context, the opening phrases should be understood conceptually in this way:

v. 18 For you have not physically approached Mount Sinai, which is perceivable but not approachable

v. 22 But you have spiritually approached Mount Zion, which is not perceivable but may be approached

The Mosaic covenant is a covenant of the senses because it is unapproachable yet apprehensible by the senses. The new covenant of Mount Zion is a covenant beyond the senses (for the present time) because it is both unperceivable by the senses and wholly approachable. The text may be laid out as follows:

For you have not come to what may be touched,
 a blazing fire
 and darkness and gloom
 and a tempest
 and the sound of a trumpet
 and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them.
 For they could not endure the order that was given, "If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned."
 Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear."

But you have come to Mount Zion
 and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem,
 and to innumerable angels in festal gathering,
 and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven,
 and to God, the judge of all,
 and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect,
 and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant,
 and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

This view of Hebrews 12:18–24 has the following benefits. First, it is driven by the text itself as it takes seriously the enumerative function of the word *καί*, "and." This leaves seven items in each list.²⁷ Second, it allows us to understand the more exacting nature of the elements. The items in each list all have characteristics that create a contrast, not atomistically, but holistically and

²⁷ Attridge argues for "a series of four pairs with appositional elements added at four points" (*Hebrews*, 372); also O'Brien, *Hebrews*, 478.

indirectly. In sum, the contrast in Hebrews 12:18–24 is between the concepts of *perceiving* and *approaching*.

MOUNT SINAI: UNAPPROACHABLE YET PERCEIVABLE

Every item in the list in the first section of the contrast (Hebrews 12:18–21) has the quality of being perceived by one of the five senses (sight, smell, taste, touch, hearing). There is wide agreement that the use of *καί* followed by an anarthrous noun functions in both sections as a way to provide enumeration and distinction.²⁸ The Mosaic covenant is a covenant of the senses, though Mount Sinai was unapproachable. The mountain could not be touched because of God’s holy presence (v. 18). At the same time, the whole Sinai event was visible, audible, and odorous. The word *ψηλαφάω* in v. 18 means “to touch by feeling and handling.”²⁹ What is significant is that this word likely derives from Exodus 10:21, where the darkness is described as palpable.³⁰ Likewise, each of the seven items is apprehensible, perceivable, and even overwhelming to the senses.

BLAZING FIRE

The “blazing fire” (*πυρρί*) in verse 18, along with “darkness and gloom,” echoes Deuteronomy 4:11: “And you came near and stood at the foot of the mountain, while the mountain burned with *fire* to the heart of heaven, wrapped in *darkness*, cloud, and *gloom*.” The fire was the element out of which Yahweh spoke (v. 12). Fire is central to the theophany in Deuteronomy; the author emphasizes that Israel “saw no form” of Yahweh except the fire.³¹ Thus, Hebrews begins with an element (fire) that could be seen and perceived by the senses.

DARKNESS AND GLOOM

Even the darkness and gloom should be understood as perceptible to the senses. The vocabulary echoes references to the “thick black-

²⁸ Allen, *Hebrews*, 589.

²⁹ Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed., rev. Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), s.v. “*ψηλαφάω*,” 1097–8.

³⁰ Allen, *Deuteronomy Representation*, 97.

³¹ Attridge is correct to point out that “fire” becomes structurally important as it ties Hebrews 12:18 with 12:29 (*Hebrews*, 373).

ness” that accompanied Yahweh’s presence. In Exodus 10:21, the Lord tells Moses, “Stretch out your hand toward heaven, that there may be darkness over the land of Egypt, a darkness to be *felt*.” Other examples of palpable darkness include Deuteronomy 4:11; 5:22; and Exodus 19:16.³² That this language echoes the language of the Exodus does not mean it has to refer to the specific event in Israel’s past as the plague of darkness passed over Egypt.³³ Language existed that could describe a darkness that was so overwhelming to the senses one could “feel” it. The poetic addition of the word “gloom”³⁴ strengthens the emotion of fear and the palpability of the darkness.³⁵ The term, not found in Deuteronomy 4:11, likely serves also to unify “darkness and gloom” as one single item rather than two. There is strong evidence that “darkness and gloom” refers to something that can be “felt.”

TEMPEST

The “tempest,” “storm,” or “whirlwind” (θύελλα) of verse 18 also echoes the Sinai theophany of Deuteronomy. The singular noun θύελλα occurs in Deuteronomy 4:11 in the Septuagint. Like the “doom and gloom,” the storm was part of the visible and palpable features of the theophany on Sinai. Not only are darkness, gloom, and tempest items that have perceivable and overwhelming qualities, the very preaching of this text would have been powerful. One commentator notes: “Listeners experience a whirlwind of descriptive elements as author lists item after item.”³⁶ The tempest of Hebrews 12:18 should be understood as experientially overwhelming.

SOUND OF A TRUMPET

Audible aspects of the Sinai theophany “accompanied the visible aspects.”³⁷ In cultic contexts, the trumpet was a warning sound

³² Also see darkness in Philo, *De mutatione nominum* §2, 1.579 and *De vita Mosis* 1. § 28, 2.106; cf. Westcott, *Hebrews*, 413.

³³ Allen points out that a direct reference to the plague of darkness over Egypt is unlikely because it is “an event significantly removed from the later experience of the people at Sinai” (*Hebrews*, 589).

³⁴ The first two nouns γνόφος (“darkness”) and ζόφος (“gloom”) rhyme (Kistemaker, *Hebrews*, 391).

³⁵ The poetic term “gloom” serves “to intensify the foreboding imagery” (O’Brien, *Hebrews*, 479).

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 480.

³⁷ Attridge, *Hebrews*, 373.

“regarding holiness, and God’s punishment on disobedience.”³⁸ Hebrews 12:19 refers to Exodus 19:13: “When the trumpet sounds a long blast, they shall come up to the mountain.” The “sound of a trumpet” in Hebrews 12:19 was a terrifying and overwhelming audible experience.

A VOICE

A divine “voice” (φωνῆ ῥημάτων is literally “a voice of words”) speaks directly to the people of God after the trumpet blast in verse 19. Israel is described collectively as “hearers” (οἱ ἀκούσαντες) of the words of God. God is one who speaks, and the people of God are those who perceive his words—even though they cannot bear to receive them without Moses’s ministry of mediation. The “voice” was heard and perceived by all of Israel, who could not bear the consequences of disobedience as described in the next verse.

AN ORDER

The “order” referred to in verse 20 begins with γάρ and develops the reason why the hearers begged for the voice of God to stop speaking.³⁹ The reason is that Yahweh put a boundary around Mount Sinai; if any person or animal touched the mountain, it was to be stoned to death (Exod. 19:12, 13). Moses had to function as a mediator.⁴⁰ The interpretive framework set forth here easily integrates the “order” from God with the citation from Exodus. While Mount Sinai and all of the activities that surrounded it were perceivable to the senses, it was not approachable.

THE SIGHT

This last item in verse 21 is one of the strongest pieces of evidence for viewing sensory experience as a key component of the Sinai and Zion contrast.⁴¹ The first reason is the unique emphasis on the word “sight” (φαντάζω). This word occurs only once in the New Testament and implies “an extraordinary and startling appearance.”⁴²

³⁸ Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 673.

³⁹ “The *gar* that introduces v. 20 provides the reason for the fear in the preceding clause” (Allen, *Hebrews*, 590–91).

⁴⁰ O’Brien, *Hebrews*, 481.

⁴¹ The last item on the list does not likely function as the climax of the first section because there is no logical sequence to the items (contra O’Brien, *Hebrews*, 481).

⁴² O’Brien, *Hebrews*, 481; Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, eds., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*, 2nd ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), §24.26.

The second reason is the focus on Moses's emotional and fearful response to this sight. Moses does speak, but this is surpassed by the "speech" communicated by the blood sprinkled in heaven in verse 24. The emphasis of the last item is the fear inducing and stunning visual power of the entire scene at Mount Sinai.

SUMMARY

It is clear that the author of Hebrews is emphasizing that the covenant with Moses made on Mount Sinai is characterized by what is unapproachable and yet perceivable.⁴³ Every item in verses 18–21 is something visible or audible. Spatially, these are events of this world and for this world. With respect to phenomenology, Thompson also concludes that the author "locates the Sinai event in the sphere of sense perception."⁴⁴ The act of perception reinforces and is integral to the spatial aspect of "place." The conclusion driven by the repetition of keywords and concepts is that the covenant made with Moses was a covenant of the senses—it is perceivable yet un-touchable; palpable yet unapproachable.

MOUNT ZION: APPROACHABLE YET UNPERCEIVABLE

The second part of the contrast covers verses 22–24. The rhetorical marker indicating the second part has begun is the word ἀλλά, "but." One of the main ideas of this section is that the new covenant is a "covenant beyond the senses." This parallels and develops the idea that "the reality of the unseen is a controlling theme" in chapter 11.⁴⁵ It is beyond the senses because nothing about it is perceivable, touchable, visible, or audible (at least from earth). At the same time it is easily approachable by anyone at any time. Again, this argument stresses the role of the parallel phrases in 12:18 and 22. In verse 22 the perfect tense verb "you have come" indicates that this approachable relationship to God, his covenant, his mountain, his city, and his Son is permanent.⁴⁶ None of the

⁴³ "Der Akzent liegt vielmehr auch hier wieder allein auf der Erscheinungsseite des Geschehens, konkret also auf der den menschlichen Sinnen wahrnehmbaren φωνῇ ῥημάτων" ("The emphasis lies alone on the appearance side of things, specifically on the 'sound of words' perceptible to the human senses") (Hans Friedrich Weiss, *Der Brief an die Hebräer*, Kritisch-exegetischer Kommentar über das Neue Testament [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991], 672).

⁴⁴ Thompson, *Hebrews*, 262.

⁴⁵ Hagner, *Hebrews*, 187.

⁴⁶ For comments on the possibility of apostasy and the perfect tense verbs in verses 22 and 23, see Allen, *Hebrews*, 593.

seven items in the second side of the comparison is perceivable by the five senses, however.

THE CITY OF GOD

The first item on the list in verse 22 is the “city of God,” identified as “the heavenly Jerusalem.”⁴⁷ The adjectival quality of being “heavenly” would have discouraged the original audience from overdoing the typological importance of the earthly Jerusalem. The adjective ἐπουράνιος clarifies that what has been approached is not of this world and not perceivable by the senses. The spatial aspect of the city being in heaven cannot be totally separated from the fact that this city is invisible. The explanatory aside in verse 22 makes it clear that the city of God is not on earth and is unperceivable.

INNUMERABLE ANGELS

After the location of the city of God has been defined in the first part of verse 22, the rest of the verse defines its inhabitants. The Greek syntax uses a dative of destination to connect Mount Zion, the city of the living God, with the myriad angels.⁴⁸ Despite the fact that angels have a long record of appearing to people (such as Mary), these angels are unperceivable because they are in heaven. One commentator notes, “Myriads of angels are present only where God is. This must be His dwelling place.”⁴⁹ The angels here are unperceivable to those presently on earth.

THE ASSEMBLY OF THE FIRSTBORN

The second group of inhabitants of the city of God is the “assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven” (v. 23). There is some interpretive difficulty surrounding the identity of the “firstborn.” They are either humans or angelic beings.⁵⁰ For our purposes, their

⁴⁷ The identity of “the heavenly Jerusalem” as “Mount Zion and the city of the living God” cannot be made on syntactical grounds alone as there are “no absolute structural clues for determining whether a case is appositional or parallel” (Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996], 153).

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 148.

⁴⁹ Cockerill, *Hebrews*, 290.

⁵⁰ For the view that they are humans who will be a part of the complete company of the “faithful of all ages,” see Isaacs, *Reading Hebrews and James*, 150; also Cockerill, *Hebrews*, 290. Attridge finds the language of “enrolled in heaven” to be decisive in favor of humans because it reflects heavenly registry language found elsewhere in Scripture (*Hebrews*, 375).

identity matters little; whoever they are, they are “in heaven.” The angelic and human inhabitants of the city of God are in heaven and unperceivable by this world.

GOD

God, “the judge of all” (v. 23), is also as unperceivable as heaven itself. The totality of God’s judgment makes it doubtless that this is the God of heaven—the God who is spirit (cf. John 4:24).⁵¹ Since no condemnation is in view, it seems best to understand “the judge of all” to emphasize that this is God who is in heaven with those who are “enrolled in heaven.”⁵² This idea approximates what is stated just below in verse 25: “him who warns from heaven.” There is no doubt that God is spirit and unperceivable.

SPIRITS OF THE RIGHTEOUS

The reference to “the spirits of the righteous made perfect” in verse 23 is curious because it seems to simply repeat the “firstborn who are enrolled in heaven.”⁵³ If they are identical groups of people, there is no doubt they are spatially in heaven. But this group is also approachable in the sense that all who have faith will one day live in the full reality of the perfecting sacrifice of Christ. The paradox of faith is that it allows those who are not currently glorified on earth to possess a glorified and perfected future with all of God’s people.⁵⁴ The paradox of inaugurated eschatology points to the fact that this group is currently unperceivable without faith.

JESUS

Those who have approached Mount Zion have come to Jesus, who is the “mediator of a new covenant” (v. 24). This mediation is superior to that of Moses because even Moses himself trembled with fear before God. Jesus is both approachable and unperceivable. Of course, this status, like that of everything else on the list, is conditioned upon a timeline that includes an eschatological shaking of the earth (vv. 25–29). Jesus has a physical human body for eterni-

⁵¹ For a parallel understanding that “God is a spirit” see John 4:24.

⁵² Attridge also takes this approach, noting the description of the judge as “God of all” is part of the “positive portrait” in this verse (*Hebrews*, 376).

⁵³ Attridge also views the firstborn and the spirits of the righteous as “parallel” (*ibid.*, 376).

⁵⁴ The believers “are on earth; their names, however, are written in heaven” (Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 394). This now-and-not-yet reality is the essence of inaugurated eschatology.

ty, but until that great day he is in heaven and unperceivable by the five senses.

THE SPRINKLED BLOOD

The “blood of Abel” cried out for justice in the face of murder—an eye for an eye. But the “sprinkled blood” of Jesus “speaks a better word” because it is a word of mercy (Heb. 12:24). The word “better” (κρείττον) also links this section to the superiority of the new covenant (7:19, 22; 8:6; 9:23; 10:34; 11:16, 35).⁵⁵ The blood of Jesus frees the sinner from the penalty of death. This blood of Christ was not sprinkled on the altar in the earthly temple in Jerusalem; rather, it was sprinkled on the altar in heaven. The earthly temple and altar were a shadow and type of the heavenly reality. The heavenly realities that contain the sprinkled blood of Jesus are not presently visible to those on earth.

SUMMARY

In summary, the new covenant can be approached by anyone at any time because it is heavenly and otherworldly. Theologically and conceptually, the heavenly Jerusalem is defined by inaugurated eschatology. The heavenly Jerusalem currently exists in heaven, but one day it will appear and merge with the earth. Until that final eschatological moment it is inaccessible to the senses except to those who are in heaven. As such, the city of God requires a sense that is not for the elements of this world—faith.

THE SIXTH SENSE AND THE QUESTION OF APPLICATION

As noted above, commentators find that Hebrews 12:18–24 is part of the apex of the epistle’s argumentation. But to what end? Hebrews “intends to present a new and authentic form of worship available through the death of Christ to the Jewish readers.”⁵⁶ But what does this new form of worship look like practically? What are the readers supposed to do? One writer states, “In the immediate context, the author does not explain *how* the readers ‘have approached’ the heavenly city.”⁵⁷

The question of application can be answered by looking at the wider context of Hebrews 12:18–24, which gathers ideas from the

⁵⁵ Thompson, *Hebrews*, 263.

⁵⁶ King L. She, *The Use of Exodus in Hebrews* (New York: Peter Lang, 2011), 47.

⁵⁷ Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 678, emphasis added.

entire sermon, starting with chapter 1.⁵⁸ The textual unit of 12:18–24 is the third and final section of an argument that began with the “hall of fame of faith” in 11:1–40 and continued in 12:1–17.⁵⁹ The first section uses the motif of faith to unify the contents. The second section uses athletic images as bookends for a discussion of “parental instruction.”⁶⁰

The question of application can also be answered to some extent by the parallel phrases in verses 18 and 21 and the action of “coming” or “approaching.” The contrast of Hebrews 12:18–24 prompts the question, How did we come to approach the heavenly Jerusalem and all of its invisible and unperceivable qualities? It is significant that the third section does not use the word “faith” at all. But this does not mean the concept of faith is absent. The implied reader who has the faith referred to in 11:1–40 and 12:1–17 is equivalent to the person who has approached Mount Zion in 12:21. The answer can only be: by faith.

First, faith stands in opposition to the apostasy that plagued the original audience of the epistle. Those who have faith find themselves in the presence of Mount Zion. Likewise, those who are apostate find themselves under the judgment and doom that characterized Mount Sinai. While verses 18–24 constitute an *exposition* as opposed to an *exhortation*, the concept of faith lies on the surface, ready to be appropriated by verses 25–29, which exhort the audience not to reject “him who is speaking” (v. 25).

Second, faith allows a person to experience the heavenly, ethereal realm of the city of God where Jesus has sprinkled his blood on the altar. The practical exhortation is that one must see by faith and approach the city of God without fear. According to this section of Hebrews, this is the reason that the New Covenant is superior to the Old Covenant. To perceive through the senses brought fear of judgment; but to perceive through the eyes of faith brings unfettered access to the joy of heaven’s mercies.

Thus, faith is the sixth sense of heaven’s citizens on earth because it allows a person to do things no “normal” human can do. It allows people to enter heavenly cities, join collectively with those of other ages, and approach God himself through the mediation of Jesus’s blood sprinkled in heaven. It allows a person to participate

⁵⁸ Andrew H. Trotter Jr., *Interpreting the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 92.

⁵⁹ Craig R. Koester, *Hebrews*, Anchor Bible (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 471.

⁶⁰ Koester, *Hebrews*, 471.

in the currently unseen and unperceivable reality of the city of God.⁶¹

This relationship between faith and spatiality also sets up the reader for the next section, Hebrews 12:25–29. As one commentator notes, the “city of the living God” in verse 22 is the same as the “unshakable kingdom” in 12:28.⁶² The “real” things of this earth are subverted by the fact that they are but shadows of the heavenly realities. All of creation is turned upside-down. What is real in this world is “unreal” in that it is passing away, while what is unperceivable is the most “real” thing because it is eternal.

CONCLUSION

The contrast in Hebrews 12:18–24 focuses on the concepts of *perceiving* and *approachability*. The key to understanding the language of Hebrews 12:18–24 is not just the *spatial* (what we call approachability), as Ellingworth and Isaacs conclude.⁶³ What interpreters have missed thus far is the equally important concept of *sensory experience* that works in tandem with approachability to create the contrast between Mount Sinai and Mount Zion. Hebrews 12:18–24 develops the centrality of faith that appeared so prominently in Hebrews 11. The concept of faith is developed in a way that emphasizes the *objects* that faith apprehends. This is accomplished not through explicit references to faith but through the language of perceiving and approaching. The act of approaching or coming near (12:22) is the conceptual equivalent of exercising the heavenly “sixth sense” of faith in the unseen.

⁶¹ Lane notes that the expression “heavenly Jerusalem” “stands in apposition to ‘city of the living God’” (*Hebrews*, 441).

⁶² O’Brien, *Hebrews*, 483.

⁶³ Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 669; Isaacs, *Reading Hebrews and James*, 147–48.