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UNDERSTANDING DISPENSATIONALISTS

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HEBREWS 12:22-24

Previously I argued that the Book of Hebrews is the single most important text to consider in a discussion of dispensationalism. More than any other part of the Bible, it reflects explicitly and at length on the crucial question of the relation of the Old Testament to the New Testament. Moreover the Book of Hebrews contains the most explicit discussion of the views on typology that I have developed in the previous chapter.

Unfortunately to discuss the Book of Hebrews as a whole would take too long. I would therefore like to concentrate on a single passage: Hebrews 12:22-24. This passage has not received much attention in dispensationalist debates. By itself I do not suppose that it is capable of settling the debates, but it is of considerable value because of the way it speaks of Christian participation in the heritage of "Mount Zion" and "Jerusalem." Hence I think it may help dispensationalists to loosen up the rigidity that has sometimes characterized the affirmations concerning separate parallel destinies for the church and Israel and concerning the nonfulfillment of prophecy in the church. Perhaps precisely because it has not received much attention yet, it will be a fruitful starting point for some fresh developments.

FULFILLMENT OF MOUNT ZION AND JERUSALEM

Our central concern is the significance of the mention of Mount Zion and heavenly Jerusalem in Hebrews 12:22. What

motivates the author of Hebrews to speak in this way concerning Christian privileges? In particular does Hebrews mean to imply that we can speak of Christians coming to Mount Zion as fulfillment of Old Testament prophetic passages like Isaiah 60:14 and Micah 4:1-2?

Mount Zion and Jerusalem have religious significance in the Old Testament primarily because they are the place where the temple of God was built, by God's own direction. Because of their close relation to the temple, they share in the typology that we associate with the temple.

In the Book of Hebrews much is made of the fact that the tabernacle (or temple) on earth is a copy and shadow of God's heavenly dwelling. When Christ came he introduced a "better sacrifice" that brought cleansing to the heavenly original (Heb. 9:13-14, 23). Christ gives us access into the presence of God in heaven (Heb. 10:19-20). Mount Zion and heavenly Jerusalem in Hebrews 12:22 must likewise be the heavenly originals of which the Mount Zion and Jerusalem in the Old Testament were "copies and shadows."

Many dispensationalists (classic dispensationalists as well as modified dispensationalists) would agree with me up to this point. In the past they have had no trouble seeing typological significance in Old Testament historical passages about Mount Zion and Jerusalem. But dispensationalists may have hesitancy about further steps that I suggest. To begin with, the appearance of the antitype of a type is very like the fulfillment of a prophecy. For example Christ's sacrifice, according to the whole Book of Hebrews, is the antitype of Old Testament animal sacrifices, which were types pointing forward to it. Christ's sacrifice is the endpoint, the finished product, to which Old Testament historical sacrifices pointed. Christ's sacrifice is also the fulfillment of prophecies of a perfect sacrifice, not only Isaiah 53, but the phrase of Daniel 9:24: "to atone for wickedness."

Can we draw an analogy between the situation concerning sacrifices and the situation concerning Jerusalem? The heavenly Jerusalem in Hebrews 12 exists by virtue of the presence of Christ as high priest with his sprinkled blood (Heb. 12:24). Hence it would appear to be the antitype to which the Old Testament historical Holy City, Jerusalem, pointed as a type. Therefore we may also expect that it is simultaneously the fulfillment of prophecies about a perfect, restored Jerusalem

(Isa. 60:14; Mic. 4:1-2). According to my arguments in the previous chapter, this is by no means a violation of grammatical-historical interpretation. Grammatical-historical interpretation, having discerned some of the symbolic significance of sacrifice, temple, and city in the Old Testament, would also see symbolic (typological) significance in prophetic material concerning Jerusalem.

ABRAHAM'S HOPE

We can arrive at a similar result by a route more acceptable to dispensationalists. Let us lay aside for the moment the question of whether we want to speak of anything within the New Testament era as fulfillment. There are nevertheless Old Testament prophecies concerning a heightened glory, wealth, and purity to Mount Zion, to Jerusalem, and, indeed, to Palestine as a whole. These prophecies fill out and deepen the foundational promises made to Abraham concerning his inheritance of the land.

What then did Abraham hope for on the basis of God's promises? Hebrews asserts that Abraham was "looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (11:10). A few verses later Hebrews explains further. Abraham was a sojourner who did not inherit the promised country in his own lifetime. "They [Abraham and his descendants] were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them" (v. 16). Abraham himself, therefore, understood the promise as involving entering into possession of a heavenly Jerusalem mentioned in Hebrews 12:22. Moreover Abraham even now belongs to the city, since he is included among the "spirits of righteous men made perfect" mentioned in Hebrews 12:23.

Hence Hebrews 12 shows that there is, within this age, a fulfillment of the promise made to Abraham. It is not the final endpoint or most extensive realization of fulfillment; that will be later. But it is nevertheless fulfillment, fulfillment that has come to Abraham and the patriarchs themselves. But what about Jewish Christians? Do they presently share in Abraham's inheritance? They "have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem" (v. 22). That is, they have come to live in the very city that Abraham was looking for in fulfillment of promise.

Jewish Christians have not become *less* Abraham's children by believing in Christ. They have not somehow been disinherited precisely because they have imitated Abraham's faith! Hence their presence is also an aspect of fulfillment of the promise to Abraham.

Next, what about Gentile Christians? Are they able to come to Mount Zion? Surely they are, because under the gospel they have equal access to the Father with Jewish Christians (Eph. 2:18-19). They share in the blessing to Abraham. This conclusion is exactly in accord with the promise to Abraham: "All peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Gen. 12:3). The apostle Paul develops this very argument in Galatians 3:7-9, 26-4:7. Thus the coming of Gentile Christians to Mount Zion in Hebrews 12:22 is a fulfillment of the promise to Abraham.

Some dispensationalists might say, "This is a beautiful application, but not actually a *fulfillment*." As we have seen, that reply is always available within the dispensationalist system. But it looks as if we are then disagreeing with Abraham's own understanding. Hebrews says that Abraham was expecting this city, and the promise to Abraham says that Gentiles are to be included in the blessing. Abraham himself would have seen it as fulfillment, and who are we to say otherwise?

Dispensationalists nevertheless have an important point to make. This fulfillment in Hebrews 12:22 is "a" fulfillment, but not the greatest, broadest, most climactic realization of the promises to Abraham. Such fulfillment is still future. We err if we minimize this. On the other hand, some (fortunately not all) dispensationalists have erred in the reverse direction by a point-blank denial of fulfillment in Gentile Christians.

THE NEW JERUSALEM IN REVELATION

All premillennialists believe that the promises to Abraham will find fulfillment in a more complete way in the millennial period, following the return of Christ. Let us assume for the sake of the argument that they are right. Yet even that fulfillment is not the whole story. The promises are still to be fulfilled in the new heaven and the new earth of Revelation 21:1-22:5. This final fulfillment is important because of its links with Hebrews 12:22.

Already there is a difficulty. Dispensationalists disagree

among themselves concerning the nature of the material in Revelation 21:1-22:5. Almost everyone agrees that Revelation 21:1-7 describes the "eternal state," but Revelation 21:9-22:5 is variously interpreted (cf. Pentecost, pp. 563-83). Some dispensationalists think 21:9-22:5 also describes the eternal state. Others think it describes the Millennium. Pentecost prefers to see it as a combination: the heavenly Jerusalem of Revelation 21:9-22:5 will be the eternal abode of all saints, but it is described as it exists during the millennial period.

Everyone agrees that there is a close relation between Revelation 21:9-22:5 and Revelation 21:1-7. Therefore unless there are factors pointing the other way, grammatical-historical interpretation would conclude that both describe the same situation. If we keep firmly in mind that the eternal state includes a new *earth*, the apparently earthy character of some aspects of 21:9-22:5 is quite in harmony with the eternal state. Even the mention of the healing of the nations in Revelation 22:2 goes little beyond the mention in Revelation 21:4 of wiping all tears away. Both are a counterpoint to the suffering and imperfections in the main part of the Book of Revelation. In fact there are no good arguments against Revelation 21:9-22:5 being the eternal state, unless one begins with dogmatic assumptions that the eternal state *must* have few features in common with the Millennium.

It is not even necessary, however, to establish that Revelation 21:9-22:5 describes the eternal state, provided we at least admit that the Jerusalem mentioned there is an earlier stage of the Jerusalem coming down from heaven in the eternal state (Rev. 21:1-7). All must admit this much, because the heavenly Jerusalem is indestructible (Heb. 12:28; see Pentecost, p. 580). Whichever option we use in interpreting Revelation 21:9-22:5, the New Jerusalem described in both 21:1-7 and 21:9-22:5 is in fundamental continuity with the heavenly Jerusalem of Hebrews.

Of course the New Jerusalem of Revelation 21 describes the situation at a later point in time than does Hebrews. Between now (Hebrews) and then (Revelation) we know that there is an advance in revelation and in the working out of God's purposes. But nevertheless there is a continuity between the two. In favor of this continuity notice the following: (1) the designation as "Jerusalem" shows a close connection; (2) the New Jerusalem of Revelation 21 "comes down from heaven,"

the location of the Jerusalem of Hebrews 12:22, which will not pass away even with the shaking of heaven and earth; (3) Hebrews tells us that Abraham was looking for the heavenly Jerusalem (11:10, 16), and within Revelation Abraham's destiny must be in the New Jerusalem; hence the two are the same; (4) dispensationalist commentators themselves find no trouble in identifying the two (Kent, p. 272; Newell, p. 426; Pentecost, p. 579; Walvoord, *Millennial Kingdom*, p. 326).

Since Christians share in Abraham's inheritance of the heavenly city now, they will share in it then also: It is legitimate to distinguish Jew and Gentile as peoples with two separate origins. But their destiny (if they come to trust in God's promises) is the same: they share in the inheritance of the New Jerusalem coming down from heaven. Hence the idea of two parallel destinies, heavenly and earthly, falls away.

THE NEW EARTH

Some dispensationalists might object that our argument does not pay attention to the proper distinction between heaven and earth. Christians participate in the heavenly Jerusalem, but Israel must yet have an earthly fulfillment in an earthly Jerusalem in the Millennium.

In Revelation 21, however, the New Jerusalem comes down from heaven *to earth*. The earthly fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy finds its climax in Revelation 21-22. Abraham certainly participates in this earthly fulfillment. Other Jews will participate. Jewish Christians are not disinherited from their Jewish heritage just because they imitate Abraham's faith. Hence they participate. But then Gentile Christians must also participate, because they are coheirs by virtue of union with Christ the Jew (Eph. 3:6). In Revelation 21-22, therefore, a strict isolation between heavenly and earthly "destinies" is not possible. In the new earth Christians are related to the *earthly* realization of the Abrahamic promises. Thus since they enjoy membership in the heavenly Jerusalem, they are experiencing the first installment in the Abrahamic promises.

If some of us reject the idea of Christian participation in fulfillment, it is not because we insist on literal fulfillment. The Jerusalem in Revelation 21:1-22:5 can be interpreted as literally as one wishes, and it says nothing against Christian participation. If we deny Christian participation, it is rather because of

wanting to maintain a strict separation of heavenly and earthly destinies. The claim of separate *destinies* says something more and different from the (correct) claim that the peoples have separate origins. The idea of separate destinies in fact has come into systematized theories without having any textual support at all.

Some dispensationalists are now admitting that the idea of strict compartmentalization of heaven and earth is a mistake. Kenneth Barker (p. 12) says:

Strictly speaking it is also incorrect to call Israel God's earthly people and the Church God's heavenly people, since in the eternal state we will all live together sharing in the blessings of the New Jerusalem and the new earth. . . .

So, then, there is a greater unity or integration in God's grand design and in his overall purpose and comprehensive program for this earth and its people than many dispensationalists have been willing to acknowledge. In the past some of us have not been able to see the forest for the trees. We have compartmentalized too much.

THE IMPORTANCE OF HEBREWS 12:22

In summary, then, the passage in Revelation 21-22 is valuable to our discussion because its emphasis on the new earth shows that the final destiny of Christians and of Israel is similar. This is already a challenge to the most rigid forms of dispensationalism, which emphasize the idea of two distinct destinies, as different as heaven and earth. Hebrews 12 is valuable because it shows that Christians already experience a foretaste of the fulfillment of Revelation 21-22, and hence they are related to Old Testament "Jewish" promises.

Finally, Hebrews 12 is also valuable because of the way that it relates heaven and earth. Classic dispensationalism construed heaven and earth simply as two separate spheres in which the two separate destinies of the church and Israel were realized. But Hebrews 12 sees the two as related to one another in terms of shadow and reality, historical anticipation and fulfillment. It therefore presses dispensationalists away from a vertical alignment of church and Israel running on parallel tracks and towards a historical, typological alignment of church and Israel as belonging to successive historical stages.

One should note, however, that these arguments based on Hebrews 12:22-24 have the most weight against more rigid forms of dispensationalism that deny absolutely that any Old Testament prophecies are fulfilled in Christians and the church. Erich Sauer and others do acknowledge fulfillment in the church, though they see the most literal fulfillment in the Millennium. Such positions have already digested some of the primary implications of Hebrews 12:22-24. Further reflection about the unified nature of fulfillment for Abraham and for Christians in the Millennium might lead to an even greater move toward seeing a fundamental unity in destiny and inheritance of the people of God in all ages.