Hope in suffering:

The Identity of 'the Spirits of Just Men Made Perfect' in Hebrews 12:23

in Light of Hebrews 11

Ty Woznek, Heartland Church

Intro

It is our turn, but God is with us. While first person is not the norm for academic papers, there is no other way to state the weight of what the writer of Hebrews asserts in Hebrews 12:22-24. In the totality of human history marked by men of faith, the writer's exhortation pointedly asserts that living in our dispensation also means it is our turn to endure, but God is present. The comfort and model for this hope in endurance is found in "the spirits of just men made perfect."

The contention of this paper is that "the spirits of just men made perfect" are the Old Testament saints spoken of in Hebrews chapter 11. Views on who these spirits are vary as the interpretations of Hebrews itself. They can be people who already died and are in heaven to the specificity of OT saints. In dealing with the identity of these spirits, this paper will also demonstrate that a distinction between Israel and the church does not equal disunity, but there is an eternal distinction made. The passage in question requires a distinction for the writer's argument to make sense. Practical ramifications of these verses, mainly hope in endurance, will also be discussed. The spirits of just men made perfect give God's people hope and a model to follow while they endure the trials set before them until the eschatological fulfillment of the New Covenant.

Context of passage in question

Hebrews is an intricate book that eludes scholars as to author, audience, and structure. What can be said with certainty is the book is comparing the Old Covenant with the New

Covenant, in a pastoral sense of exhortation, to live in light of the New Covenant because of the greater and perfecting work of Christ. Books and articles devoting themselves to these topics go far beyond the scope of this paper, but the areas must be addressed. The position of this writer is that Hebrews was written by a close associate of Paul, possibly Luke, to a Jewish-Christan audience struggling between the choice of enduring persecution or moving forward in faith. As for structure and genre, it is the position of this paper that Hebrews is a recorded sermon and that defining the structure elusive given the books complexity. The complexity is derived from the warning passages, as will be illustrated when discussing if the book is exhortation or exegetical as primary. Bruce states there are seven arguments from which he structured his commentary.[1] In evaluating structural considerations, his seemed most sound, basing them off the arguments he saw presented in the book:

I. The finality of Christ 1:1-2:18
II. The true home of the people of God[2] 3:1-4:13
III. The high priesthood of Christ 4:14-6:20
IV. The order of Melchizedek 7:1-28
V. Covenant, sanctuary, and sacrifice 8:1-10:18
VI. Call to worship, faith, and perseverance 10:19-12:29
VII. Concluding exhortation 13:1-25[3]

Many, when writing concerning authorship of Hebrews, point to Origen's comment "but as to who actually wrote the epistle, God knows the truth of the matter."[4] Given the strong usage of the Old Testament, unpacking of the New Covenant, and even style of thought, the writer would need a strong Jewish background.[5] One character in the NT that fits Jewish knowledge,

[1] F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1990). p.xix-xxii
[2] "People of God" is Bruce's term. This writer would have preferred a different phrase, but given the Jewish audience and focus, the phrase is appropriate in context.
[3] Ibid, p.vii-x
[4] Ibid, p.20
[5] William L. Lane, *Hebrews* (Paternoster, 1991). p.xlix-l

association with Paul, as well as understanding the struggle between Old and New Covenant adherents is Luke, a probable candidate for authorship. If so, Luke-Acts would give the historical argument, and Hebrews the exegetical argument. Hebrews 11:35-38 points to persecuted people who lived by faith. In the travel narrative of Luke 9-19, Luke records how Jesus wept over Jerusalem who "killed all those sent to you."

The audience are believers who understand Jewish tradition and who are also undergoing persecution. Some, looking from a covenantal standpoint, assert a gentile audience. Dr. Decker, in writing on the background information of Hebrews concludes:

> It appears quite certain that the addressees of Hebrews are primarily Christians from a Jewish background. This best explains the tone and content of the letter. It is not nearly as certain that these believers comprised a house church in the area of Rome. That, however, accounts for the evidence available and also allows a very realistic and feasible reconstruction of the circumstances of Hebrews.[6]

Given the exhortation aspect of Hebrews, viewing it as a sermon exhorting people to move forward in the New Covenant seems most sound. William Lane, in his extensive introductory materials, gives multiple possibilities for the structure. In an addendum, he touches on Guthrie's work on structural dynamics, especially anchor words.[7] A key word that concerns this paper is the Τελειόω which ties in the work of Christ in 10:14, 11:40, 12:1-2, and 12:23-24. This braids a theological and historical argument to the final warning passage in 12:15-29. The final warning passage is one of five in Hebrews, the others being v2:1-2; 3:12-4:16; 5:11-6:10, and 10:26-31. This raises the question of whether the exhortation or the exegetical work of the writer is primary? Decker, in wrestling with that question, concludes:

---

[6] Rodney J. Decker, "The Original Readers of Hebrews." *Journal of Ministry and Theology* 3, no. 2 (Fall 99): 46.

[7] Lane, p.xcii

> Hebrews is written for the purpose of exhorting the addressees to persevere in their confession of faith despite the imminent persecution that they faced. To achieve this end, the writer employs direct exhortations as well as doctrinal exposition which also serves his hortatory purpose.[8]

Decker's conclusion is align with a final word from the author when he stated: "I appeal to you, brothers, bear with my word of exhortation, for I have written to you briefly."[9]

Given the author, audience, and structure of the book, Hebrews is a pastoral exhortation to a primarily Jewish Christian audience by an associate of Paul. Lane states:

> The central theme of Hebrews is the importance of listening to the voice of God in Scripture and in the act of Christian preaching. The opening lines of the homily focus attention upon the God who speaks. The characterization of God as the one who intervened in Israel's history through the spoken word serves to introduce the characterization of the sun as the one through whom God has spoken the ultimate word (1:1-2a). That theme is sustained with variations throughout the homily (2:1-4; 3:7b-4:13; 5:11; 10:23, 35-39; 11:11). It is recapitulated in a climatic warning, "be careful that you do not disregard the one who is speaking" (12:25a). The redemptive accomplishment and transcendent dignity of the son, through whom God has spoken the final word demonstrates that it will be catastrophic to ignore the word of salvation delivered through the son (2:1-4).[10]

Hebrews is a book of exhortation supported by exposition. Possibly written by Luke, or another associate of Paul, it's primary audience is to Jewish Christians. The focus is the benefits of the New Covenant because of the greatness of Christ. While the overarching structure is elusive given the wide variety of views by scholars, it is clear in its warnings and supporting exposition.

Translation of 12:22-24

---

[8] Rodney J. Decker, "The Intentional Structure of Hebrews." *Journal of Ministry and Theology* 4, no. 2 (Fall 00): 105.

[9] Hebrews 13:22 ESV

[10] Lane, p.cxxvii

But you *all* have *positionally* come to Mount Zion and the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels' joyful gathering, and to the church of the firstborn who have been registered in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to spirits of righteous *men* who have been perfected, and to *the* mediator of the new covenant, Jesus, and to sprinkled blood speaking greater beside Abel.

Grammatical analysis

Hebrews 12:22-24 is strongly worded given its heavy usage of the perfect tense/stative aspect. The sentence is a contrast of the Old Covent description in 12:18-21. It is straightforward in the main clause "you all are *positionally* come to Mount Zion" followed by six parallel statements describing it. Scholars try to juxtapose or build upon the order of the statements, but there is no grammatical reason to do so. Because of this, it is best to take each statement on its own to understand what "you all are *positionally* come to Mount Zion" involves.

Main Clause: "But you have *positionally* come to Mount Zion"

This is contrast to Hebrews 12:18 which describes where the saints are not (Οὐ γὰρ προσεληλύθατε). *Positionally* is supplied to reflect the stative aspect of προσεληλύθατε as well as the spiritual standing the audience has. They are not physically in heaven, but their state of position exists in reality not metaphorically. This positional location is similar to Paul's reference for being seated with Christ in Ephesians 2:6.

Parallel Statement 1: "and the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem"

This gives information describing Mount Zion, which the audience is positionally. Mount Zion and the heavenly Jerusalem have eschatological implications since the promises of Hebrews

11 have not yet been fulfilled. Mount Zion is used primarily to stand in contrast with Mount Sinai description in v12:18-21. Mount Zion and Jerusalem should be viewed as synonymous.[11]

Parallel Statement 2: "and to myriads of angels' joyful gathering"

This large group of heavenly beings are at a festival. This carries a joyful connotation even though the audience of Hebrews is struggling with their current situation. The joyous gathering communicates hope of victory already positionally held.

Parallel Statement 3: "and to the church of the firstborn who have been registered in heaven,"

This indicates the church, as the audience in Christ are firstborn with Christ. Given the firstborn modifier it is likely the universal church is in mind for ἐκκλησίᾳ and not a mere assembly.[12] The church is distinct as a group from both angels and the spirits of the righteous men who have been perfected. Given the audience is a church, indicating a positional presence with the universal church gives comfort of not being alone. Further, this group is registered in heaven, communicating a secure position. This secure state is clear with the usage of the stative aspect of ἀπογεγραμμένων. Jews saved in this dispensation would be considered part of the church given the *us* statement in v11:40.

Parallel Statement 4: "and to God the judge of all"

The audience of Hebrews have a direct relationship with God. In the New Covenant one is with God in contrast to the fear and separation in verses 18-21, and the seeking of God in Hebrews 11:6. As God was sought after, at Mount Zion He has been found. In a positional sense, the readers have arrived, though they are called by the author to continue to live by faith. As God is judge, his presence with them demonstrates relief of concern.

[11] Psalm 87:2-3
[12] Colossians 1:18

Parallel Statement 5: “and to spirits of righteous *men* who have been perfected.”

Similar to the picture of Revelation 7:9-17, the spirits of the OT saints are with God in heaven. This is consistent with Paul’s expression “to be absent from the body is to be home with the Lord.”[13] Thus, the word *men* is added to give clarity. Given the OT saints are in spirit form, there is a sense of a final eschatological fulfillment yet to take place. “Who have been perfected” modifies the spirits of the righteous. Most likely referring to those of Hebrews 11. These saints lacked perfection in v11:40 and had become perfect in v12:23, the difference being Christ’s sacrifice in v10:14. Τετελειωμένων being in a stative aspect, the writer again adamantly declares the superiority of the New Covenant. Under the Old Covenant the OT saints were not perfect. In the New Covenant, they become complete. The challenge is if Τελειόω is referring to their sinlessness or the completion of all those to be gathered at Mount Zion. As Christ’s sacrifice makes the gathering possible, and is singular for all time, perhaps both views should be in view, their completion because of the work of Christ and also the complete assembly at Mount Zion.

Parallel Statement 6: “and to *the* mediator of the new covenant, Jesus”

Hebrews 10 describes the priestly role that Jesus plays in the New Covenant. Here again, rather than pursuit of Christ, the audience is declared to be with Christ by the writer. This communicates a closeness and intimacy with God that was lacking in the prior dispensation. It also clarifies having direct access to God through Christ.

Parallel Statement 7: “and to sprinkled blood speaking greater beside Abel.”

The writer comes back to the beginning, setting up an inverse flow of thought from Hebrews 11 which started with Abel. Abel, who dead still speaks, is not as good as the shed blood of Christ. As Abel’s blood cried out for justice, Christ’s blood in the New Covenant cries

[13] 2 Corinthians 5:8 NASB

out forgiveness. As Jesus died once for all sin, Jesus gives the fulfillment one needs. By ending this with Abel, as the faith discussion in Hebrews 11 started, the discussion is what the audience will do in their time in history. The audience of the Hebrews is the central focus when comparing Hebrews 11 with Hebrews 12:22-24.

As the concern with this paper is specifically "and to spirits of righteous men who have been perfected" seeing this clause in light of the whole sentence points to a permanent distinction between Israel and the church while also seeing a unity between the two. All are positionally at the eschatological Mt. Zion. But this gathering has distinct groups. The church of the first born whose names are in heaven is distinct from and the spirits of righteous men who have been perfected. Walvoord states:

> In the heavenly city according to this passage are the angels, the church, Jesus Christ as the Mediator, and the spirits of just men made perfect, a reference to other saints. It should be noted that while saints of all ages will be in the heavenly Jerusalem, which city will be the principal feature of the new heavens and the new earth, saints nevertheless retain their corporate identity, that is, Israelites remain Israelites, Gentiles remain Gentiles, the church remains the church, and angels remain angels.[14]

The phrase in question, "and to spirits of righteous *men* who have been perfected," is one of seven parallel statements describing the celebration at Mount Zion. Distinct groups are mentioned with Angels, God the Father, and the Son respectably dispersed amongst the identified groups. This indicates an intimacy with God which was missing prior to the New Covenant. The term Mount Zion is primary over the New Jerusalem to contrast with Mount Sinai of Hebrew 12:18.

Τελειόω (perfect) as a key word

[14] John F. Walvoord, "The Future Work of Christ." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 123, no. 492 (Oct 66): 298.

As stated earlier, Τελειόω is an anchor word in the passage in Hebrews and is the critical point to understand who the spirits of righteous men are who have been perfected. The word τελειόω, used nine times in Hebrews, is often translated "perfect" and describes the concept of completion or overcoming unto completion.[15] The usage regarding completion and overcoming is a theme concerning Christ's work for people. "For He… should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering,"[16] introduces the concept in Hebrews. Suffering and perfection are tied together. "For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified"[17] again bringing up the concept tied to Christ and his sacrificial suffering. The next key usage of the term is at the end of Hebrews 11 where the writer states "that apart from us [the writer and audience] they [those of Hebrews 11] should not be made perfect (τελειωθῶσιν). The church was needed for the men of faith in Hebrews 11 to be complete. The work of Christ, described in Hebrews 10:14, is a once for all time sacrifice to complete the work of removal of sin and guilt, something not achievable in the Old Covenant. Given this connection, it is best to view the sinlessness and the completed number of those to be gathered at Mount Zion in view. As Hebrews 11:39-40 wraps up the historical argument for faith, it may coin a usage of the concept in Hebrews 2:2 "looking to Jesus, the founder and perfector (τελειωτὴν) of our faith…" Lane states:

> The descriptive term τελειωτὴν not found elsewhere in the Greek Bible and is unknown from other literature of the period. As a noun of agency [it] bears the nuance of "accomplisher," "finisher," "perfecter" (LSJ 1770; BAGD 810; LPGL 1384). The importance of the idea of perfection…suggest that the writer may have coined the term to form a Christological complement for [founder] (so Moulton and Howard, Grammar, 2:365). [18]

[15] L&N, s.v. "τελειόω," 151.; BDAG "τελειόω," 996
[16] Hebrews 2:10 ESV
[17] Hebrews 10:14 ESV
[18] Lane, p.411

The concept of perfection closes with the passage of interest for this paper, “and to spirits of righteous men who have been perfected.” The writer moves from a perfecting offering to be made in chapter 2 to the completing of that work in chapter 10, and to thus perfecting those in the OT in Chapter 11 and today’s saints in chapter 12. This leaves the discussion as to who are the “spirits of righteous men who have been perfected.” Lane states:

> The key to the interpretation of the participle, however, must be supplied by the writer's prior use of the verb [perfect]. The verb is used specifically with reference to all who have been "perfected" by the sacrifice of Jesus in 10:14. The description of the righteous dead in v 23b as [perfect] reinforces the declaration in 10:14 that Jesus "by means of one sacrifice perfected forever those who are being consecrated to God." That the participle is used in v 23b rather than the adjective "perfect" decisively favors the soteriological interpretation of the expression (following Peterson, "Examination," 284-86).[19]

Τελειόω, a possible anchor word, carries the meaning of completion or finishing. In Hebrews, the word is used to tie the work of suffering with the finished work of sanctification. All groups, including Christ himself, went through this process. The point of Hebrews is that it is the church’s turn. Christ is the one who makes this happen, and it is fully realized in the New Covenant. Τελειόω indicates that the lack of perfection in v11:40 for OT Saints and their subsequent obtaining of it in v12:23 shows that it is Christ’s one sacrifice for all time that brings this altogether, v10:14. This word connects those in v11:40 with those in 12:23, while also creating a stark distinction between the audience and the saints of old. Christ perfects all, demonstrated by all at Mount Zion. The nature of the sacrifice is once for all time, so Τελειόω caries a sinless viewpoint. Given the *us* in v11:40 is future to the saints of that chapter, the word

[19] Lane, p.471

also carries the viewpoint of the totality of those assembled. This them/us language demonstrates an eternal distinction between the church of the firstborn and the righteous spirits.

To summarize, Τελειόω, as used by the writer of Hebrews, communicates the once for all time work of Christ removing sin and guilt so God's plans for various people groups are found to be finished at Mount Zion. It is both the sacrificial work of Christ along with all groups assembled together that brings perfection. Without Christ one is lost for "both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make the worshiper perfect (τελειῶσαι) in conscience."[20] Without *us*, the saints of the OT are left incomplete (τελειωθῶσιν).[21] Hence, the spirits of righteous men are complete (τετελειωθῶσιν) at Mount Zion through the blood of Christ and the church's presence.[22]

Saints of prior dispensations as the most likely meaning

There are two likely definitions for the "spirits of righteous men who have been perfected." First, there is the idea that it merely states that those who died before and are in heaven. Second, there is the idea that the concept of perfect connects to those mentioned in Hebrews chapter 11, the contention of this paper. Guthrie offers a third option of the elect referring to OT saints, and the spirits as those who have been martyred:

> The use of the word *spirits* is suggestive because the writer has earlier in the chapter described God as the Father of spirits (verse 9). Moreover, the angels are described as 'ministering spirits' in 1:7 (from Ps. 104:4). Clearly the expression is being used in the sense of spiritual beings. In the present case, however, they are distinguished from angels by the description *just men made perfect*. The phrase 'just men' describes what they have come to be and does not indicate the grounds of their perfection. They have become *just* by virtue of what Christ has done for them. The word *perfect* should be understood in the sense of completed; all that God designed for these people is now fulfilled. It has been suggested that the 'just men made perfect' are the pre-Christian saints mentioned in

[20] Hebrews 9:9b NASB
[21] Hebrews 11:40
[22] Hebrews 12:23-24

> 11:40. But there is no indication in this context that requires this interpretation. Another suggestion is that the 'enrolled' are the elect under the old covenant and the 'just made perfect' are the Christian martyrs (cf. Rev. 6:9). Nevertheless, Jesus spoke of his followers' names 'enrolled in heaven' (Luke 10:20); so this reference seems to include all believers. The one who carries out the perfecting of his people has already been identified as Jesus in verse 2.[23]

While Guthrie's statement is helpful to see the various views, his work focuses on theological rather than exegetical distinctions. He, and others, seem to gloss over the usage of Τελειόω, which runs throughout the book connected to the person of Christ and his plan for Old Covenant saints specifically. This contextual alignment shows his assertion "all that God designed for these people is now fulfilled" is done so with the presence of the church, which the Jewish believers are now a part of.

Some see the spirits as merely those who have died before the audience, focusing on heavenly implications rather than the message of the passage.[24] They also view the church as all of God's elect throughout time.[25] This is an odd juxtaposition on the passage. Why would the writer include two synonymous descriptions for the same group? One could then paraphrase the sentence "and with God's elect … and with God's elect…" Viewing the passage as teaching the church is Israel obliterates the clear distinction between the church and the spirits. The point of the distinct groups is the audience is not alone, bolstering the mission of the church. Ignoring or

---

[23] Donald Guthrie, *Hebrews: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 15, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 263–264.

[24] David Brown, A. R. Fausset, and Robert Jamieson, *A Commentary, Critical, Experimental, and Practical, on the Old and New Testaments: Acts–Revelation*, vol. VI (London; Glasgow: William Collins, Sons, & Company, Limited, n.d.), 576. For two examples of the one people viewpoint.; Jay E. Adams, *The Christian Counselor's New Testament and Proverbs*, ed. Donn R. Arms, Fourth Revised Edition (Cordova, TN: Institute for Nouthetic Studies, 2019), 461.;

[25] Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*, vol. 2 (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997), 478.

glossing over the distinctions misses a key concept of perfection that is strewn throughout the book. Distinguishing the church as unique, Radmacher states:

> The foregoing examination of this passage has been set forth to demonstrate that the ekklesia mentioned in Hebrews 12:23 is presently in existence. It is obvious to all, however, that this ekklesia has never had a physical assemblage on Earth. Thus, this is another example of the metaphorical usage of ekklesia, which usage stresses the spiritual unity apart from any present physical unity. It gives the heavenly charter of the church below, the invisible side of sonship and citizenship.[26]

As the church is distinct in the passage using the theological understanding of the term, it would seem that spirits of righteous men who have been perfected would be a distinct group as well. While there is unity in the passage in question, all positionally at Mount Zion, there are distinctions as well and each group is named with specificity.

Others besides dispensationalists, for example Pink who is not a friend of dispensationalism, and this writer view the spirits as referring to OT saints.[27] Lioy, not a dispensationalist, states:

> According to Hebrews 12:23, those who share in this eternal, glorious inheritance include "the spirits of the righteous made perfect." Most likely, these are believers from the Old Testament era, such as the men and women mentioned in chapter 11. They have been made perfect in the sense that their souls have been cleansed of sin through faith in the Son (cf. 11:40). [28]

Compton points to this distinction as well when discussing whether there are two new covenants or just one. To emphasize that there is one New Covenant, he points to the passage in question:

---

[26] Earl D. Radmacher, *The Nature of the Church* (1972). P. 154

[27] Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of Hebrews, An* (Baker Books, 2003). p.1054

[28] Dan Lioy, 3. The Unity of the Covenant People of God throughout Salvation History." *Conspectus* 1, no. 1 (March 2006): 97.

> There is no passage in the New Testament which specifically mentions two new covenants or distinguishes between a new covenant for the church and one promised to Israel. One passage, Hebrews 12:23–24, does mention both Old Testament believers ("the spirits of righteous men made perfect") and the church ("the church of the firstborn"), yet only one new covenant is mentioned. In addition, at least twice when referring to new covenant benefits enjoyed by the church, the New Testament identifies the new covenant in view as the one promised in Jeremiah (Heb 8:8–12; 10:15–18).[29]

With that distinction now established, how does that connect with the argument the writer of Hebrews is making? Hebrews 11 and Hebrews 12:22-24 have a flow to them. Hebrews 11 starts with Abel and works towards the present audience, with interposed descriptions of faith as a pursuit. Hebrews 12:22-24 works from the present audience out to Abel, with descriptions of heaven or God interspersed between the earthly groups. What stands out to this writer is that rather than viewing history through the lens of covenant, he pivots to view history through the lens of faith in chapter 11 and position in Hebrews 12:22-24. And this after discussing the details of the New Covenant in Chapters 8-10. In the plight of the Jewish believers, the author is stating unequivocably that they are not alone in their struggle. The great cloud of witnesses in Hebrews 12:1-2 that surround them are also positionally with them at Mount Zion in Hebrews 12:22-24. They do not merely surround them; they are with them. Because of the finished work of Christ perfecting those OT saints, whom without "us" would be left incomplete[30] they can rest assured of the victory they already have possession of. While unified at Mount Zion, the groups stand as encouragement to the bewildered audience.

In his discourse, the writer moves beyond the Old Covenant vs New debate to write about all history. We see this in the mention of a key figure, Abel. It is not merely those of the Old

[29] R. Bruce Compton, "Dispensationalism, The Church, And The New Covenant." *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* (Fall 03): 38.

[30] Hebrews 11:40

Covenant left imperfect prior to the church, it includes saints prior to both the Abrahamic and Mosaic Covenants; Abel, Enoch, and Noah in Hebrews 11, and only Abel in Hebrews 12:22-24. As groups are in mind in the sentence, not merely church age saints are found on Mount Zion, but saints from all dispensations. These distinctions made in the history of the one Gospel of Jesus Christ form a celebratory assembly. As dispensationalism sees a distinction between Israel and the church, people were saved prior to Israel. Other theological perspectives would view this through a covenant of grace, works, and redemption, watering down not only their distinctions, but their faith story as well. Rather than over-simplifying people into one group, defining people soteriologically, dispensationalists see God working multiple plans together to apply Jesus' one sacrifice for all time.

While there are divergent views regarding the spirits of righteous men who have been perfected, it is most probable they are the saints of the Old Testament. The connecting concept of 'perfection' ties the work of Christ together with the argument that the audience is not alone in their struggle. This positional location of Mount Zion gives encouragement when accepting the discipline of the Lord. The larger concern is to maintain the distinctions of the groups for the argument of Hebrews to make sense.

Theological implications

There are multiple theological issues raised in this passage. Given the restraints of the title, the distinctions between Israel and the church will be the focus. As discussed in the saints of prior dispensations as the most likely meaning section, there are differing views as to spirits of righteous men who have been perfected. Are these righteous men a typological reference to the church or a literal group distinct from the church? There is unity as all are at Mount Zion, but they are listed as distinct groups for eternity. Does this unity indicate spiritual Israel or an a-

millennial spiritual reign? A dispensational contention would be equating distinct groups as meaning disunity over simplifies the work of Christ for saints of all time.

Stallard raises the importance of this passage by pointing to Poythress' work, stating:

> An example of how this can be seen is Poythress' claim that the dispensational view of the Old Testament is altered (if not eliminated) by applying the grammatical-historical method of interpretation to the Book of Hebrews, especially Hebrews 12:22–24. He remarks 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."[31]

Bock, adding to the discussion concerning Poythress states:

> This leads to the treatment of texts. Poythress examines two passages in detail (1 Cor 15:51-53; Heb 12:22-24) alongside a discussion of typology and the use of the term "Israel." He picks these texts because he believes they illustrate clearly how the NT handles itself and the themes of the OT. He believes the key to the issue is seeing how the book of Hebrews in particular handles the use of the OT, since it treats this area more fully than any other NT book (p. 70). What is seen is that the "literal" sense is superseded by the "typological-spiritual" (pp. 114–115), so that one need not look for the "shadow" of the earthly reality anymore. I do not know of a better place to find a succinct definition of the hermeneutics of amillennialism than here, including the effort to ground it in Scripture. He closes with the observation that if Scripture gives us this principle through the use of typology, which everyone acknowledges is present, then certainly one can apply this hermeneutic to the entire canon.[32]

Viewing Israel as the prototype of the church[33] takes away from the weight and argument of the writer of Hebrews. First, there is the lack of fulfillment of promises made to the Hebrews 11 saints. In references to them the writer earlier proclaims the steadfast hope found in God, "in

---

[31] Mike Stallard, "Literal Interpretation, Theological Method, and the Essence of Dispensationalism." *Journal of Ministry and Theology* 1, no. 1 (Spr 97): 19-20

[32] Darrell L. Bock, "Book Reviews." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 32, no. 4 (December 1989): 543.

[33] Morton H. Smith, "The Church And Covenant Theology." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 21, no. 1 (March 1978): 60-61.

which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us."[34] Regarding the fulfillment of promises made, Pettegrew's paper on the New Covenant discussed how the benefits of the New Covenant helped even those in the in Old Covenant.[35] His conclusion on the New Covenant states:

> This essay has emphasized that the relationship of Christ to the New Covenant and the church to Christ does not in any way negate the future fulfillment of the New Covenant with Israel. The Lord made the New Covenant with Israel and presented it to Israel as a foundation of the messianic kingdom program. But the [*MSJ* 10:2 (Fall 99) p. 270] nation rejected the Messiah and His kingdom. Thus the New Covenant will not be fulfilled with Israel until the Day of the Lord events when the nation in repentance accepts the One whom it previously considered to be "stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted" (Isa 53:4; cf. Zech 12:10–14). [36]

Second, seeing unity within Hebrews 12:22-24 as Israel being the prototype to the church strains the text. For example, are angels and the church one? Because there is unity at Mount Zion does not mean the church is Spiritual Israel or the anti-type to Israel. Walvoord's statement earlier demonstrated this point 'Israel is Isreal, the church is the church.'[37]

Third, as demonstrated in the discussion of Τελειόω, the work of Christ pertains to the perfection of all saints, even those beyond the Old vs New Covenant discussion. Through Christ's sacrifice to remove sin and guilt, plans for various groups in history are able to be assembled at Mount Zion. Again, the writer of Hebrews zooms out to the whole of history. Past saints lacked completion requiring the presence of the church, so all saints could be at the New Jerusalem because of the one sacrifice for all time, Jesus.[38] In Hebrews 12:23, those saints are perfected by Christ, as are all in the current dispensation. These various plans of God require all

---

[34] Hebrews 6:18 ESV
[35] Larry D. Pettegrew, "The New Covenant." *Master's Seminary Journal* 10, no. 2 (Fall 99): 257.
[36] Ibid, 269-270.
[37] Walvoord, p.298.
[38] Hebrews 11:40; 12:23; 10:14.

Christians to be redeemed and each other redeemed group of all dispensations to thus be complete. This also points to an eternal distinction between saints of today and OT saints. To this point of perfection, in arguing for celebrating All Saints Day, Carlton states:

> The writer of Hebrews reminds us that "we are encompassed about with a great cloud of witnesses." In the eleventh chapter of that letter he rises to a mounting crescendo as he recounts the mighty deeds of heroes and heroines of faith ("of whom the world was not worthy," he reminds us). Then in a stirring summation the chapter concludes: "And all these, though well attested by their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had foreseen something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect" (Heb. 11:39–40). Their completion depends upon us; their perfection waits on our fidelity. In "the communion of saints" we have a charge to keep.[39]

The clear "us-them" dichotomy requires distinction. Given the positional location is the Mount Zion, the New Jerusalem, these distinctions are eternal. The writer did not say the audience is a continuation of those saints. He explicitly demonstrated that they are a unique group upon which the baton of the Gospel is passed, encouraged by the spirits of just men of the OT.

Finally, to answer Poythress' and other's charge that the literal hermeneutic destroys a dispensational understanding of the OT, a brief summarization of points is prudent. Hebrews 12:22-23 encourages redeemed Jews, meaning continuity would be expected as the Gospel is "to the Jew first."[40] The encouragement of the sentence is found in the context of the final warning passage to live considering the New Covenant and the superiority of Christ. The encouragement comes from the audience's forefathers who lived by faith in Hebrews 11, and not only them, but saints prior to the Old Covenant. In this encouragement there is the concept of Τελειόω that is demonstrated through suffering by those saints of old, by Christ, and now those in the current

[39] John W. Carlton, "Keeping Up With The Saints." *Faith and Mission* 1, no. 1 (Fall 1983): 78.
[40] Romans 1:16 ESV

dispensation. The concept requires distinction. Given the status of spirits of righteous men who have been perfected as spirits in Christ, there is still the obtaining of promises made to them. The clarion message was that it is the audience's turn to endure suffering, surrounded by not only angels and the Trinity, but also the whole church and the perfected spirits of righteous men. To treat the passage as typology is to undermine the message of the author. More so, the passage requires a dispensational view of the Old Testament for the stories of faith to make sense, as well as the distinctions of the groups positionally at Mount Zion. The typological view diminishes the stories of past saints and their present enjoyment with God as they await the promises yet due them.

Practical implications

This passage's primary application is encouraging endurance and a godly attitude in dire circumstances. There is purpose in suffering, the perfection of one's faith. This is no small matter. God the Father uses this for saints of old, for Christ, for the audience of Hebrews, and for those in the present dispensation. In suffering, there is a stewardship responsibility to endure. This call of stewardship is not cold or calculated for it comes with the intimacy of one's position at Mount Zion. Living in light of the New Covenant, God is not one who is afar, but one who is very present and active in the struggle. This encouragement is more than that the whole church, and the saints of old, even the angels celebrating, are present. The victory party has already begun. There is nothing more profound than to say: You are not alone!

This point of encouragement raises the bar for church gatherings. For when the church gathers to worship, it is not merely one's local church that is present. The passage in question reminds the church of the Great cloud of witnesses that surround her. That she is positionally at Mount Zion along with the righteous spirits made perfect. Even in gloomy times, worship can be

celebratory for the victory is already secured in Christ, as well as one's position at home in New Jerusalem. The assembling of the church should embolden endurance for the baton is in her hand until the race is complete. There is nothing more urgent than to say: Don't quit!

Conclusion

The spirits of righteous men who have been perfected are the Old Testament saints. They needed perfection in Hebrews 11:40, obtained perfection in Hebrews 12:23, and this though Christ, as stated in Hebrews 10:14. These men are a separate category from the saved Jews the writer of Hebrews addresses. Those Jews and all redeemed Jews of this dispensation are part of the church. Viewing Hebrews as proof of no distinction between Israel and the Church is at odds with the book given the audience is Jewish Christian's. But this does not mean there is disunity because all people are saved by the one Gospel of Jesus Christ according to Hebrews 10:14: the pre-mosaic saints like Abel, the patriarchs like Abraham, those of the Old Covenant Israel, and the church of the firstborn. These distinctions are eternal given all are gathered at Mount Zion. The clarion message of the righteous men made perfect is to complete one's ministry, endure trials, and to look to Jesus who is perfecting one's faith, until all are home. The spirits of righteous men made perfect receive their promises in the millennial kingdom, yet to be received according to Hebrews 12:28. Until that time, the exhortation is: We are not alone, don't quit, for it is our turn, but God is with us.

Works Cited

Adams, Jay E. *The Christian Counselor's New Testament and Proverbs*, ed. Donn R. Arms, Fourth Revised Edition. Cordova, TN: Institute for Nouthetic Studies, 2019

Bauer, Walter. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. University of Chicago Press, 2001.

Bock, Darrell L. "Book Reviews." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 32, no. 4,

December 1989

Brown, David, A. R. Fausset, and Robert Jamieson, *A Commentary, Critical, Experimental, and Practical, on the Old and New Testaments: Acts–Revelation,* vol. VI, London; Glasgow: William Collins, Sons, & Company, Limited, n.d.

Bruce, F. F. *The Epistle to the Hebrews*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1990.
Carlton, John W. "Keeping Up With The Saints." *Faith and Mission* 1, no. 1, Fall 1983

Carlton, John W. "Keeping Up With The Saints." *Faith and Mission* 1, no. 1, Fall 1983

Compton, R. Bruce. "Dispensationalism, The Church, And The New Covenant." *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal*, Fall 03

Decker, Rodney J. "The Original Readers of Hebrews." *Journal of Ministry and Theology* 3, no. 2, Fall 99

-- "The Intentional Structure of Hebrews." *Journal of Ministry and Theology* 4, no. 2, Fall 00

Guthrie, Donald, *Hebrews: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 15, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983

Jamieson, Robert, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*, vol. 2, Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997

Lane, William L. *Hebrews*. Paternoster, 1991.

Louw, Johannes P. and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 126.

Lioy, Dan. 3. The Unity of the Covenant People of God throughout Salvation History." *Conspectus* 1, no. 1, March 2006

Pettegrew, Larry D. "The New Covenant." *Master's Seminary Journal* 10, no. 2, Fall 99

Pink, Arthur W. *Exposition of Hebrews, An*. Baker Books, 2003.

Radmacher, Earl D. *The Nature of the Church*, 1972.
Smith, Morton H. "The Church And Covenant Theology." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society.* 21, no. 1, March 1978

Stallard, Mike. "Literal Interpretation, Theological Method, and the Essence of Dispensationalism." *Journal of Ministry and Theology* 1, no. 1 (Spr 97): 19-20

Walvoord, John F. "The Future Work of Christ." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 123, no. 492, Oct 66