

CHRISTOPHER T. HOLMES

# The Function of Sublime Rhetoric in Hebrews

*Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen  
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465

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465





Christopher T. Holmes

# The Function of Sublime Rhetoric in Hebrews

A Study in Hebrews 12:18–29

Mohr Siebeck

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*for Jenelle*



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Christopher T. Holmes  
Atlanta, GA

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## Abbreviations

Greek citations from the New Testament come from the *Novum Testamentum Graece*, the Nestle-Aland 28th edition. Abbreviations of biblical writings correspond to those listed in *The SBL Handbook of Style*, 2nd ed. (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014). Additional abbreviations based on *The SBL Handbook of Style* include the following:

<i>1–2 Amm.</i>	Dionysius of Halicarnassus, <i>Epistula ad Ammaeum i–ii</i>
<i>1–3 [4] Philip.</i>	Demosthenes, <i>Philippica i–iv</i>
<i>1–3 Olynth.</i>	Demosthenes, <i>Olynthiaca i–iii</i>
AB	Anchor Bible
ABD	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i> . Edited by David Noel Freedman. 6 vols. New York: Doubleday, 1992.
<i>Abst.</i>	Porphyry, <i>De abstinence</i>
AcBib	Academia Biblica
<i>Adol. poet. aud.</i>	Plutarch, <i>Quomodo adolescens poetas audire debeat</i>
Aen. Tact.	Aeneas Tacticus
<i>Aet.</i>	Philo, <i>De aeternitate mundi</i>
<i>Aeth.</i>	Heliodorus, <i>Aethiopica</i>
AGJU	Arbeiten zur Geschichte des Antiken Judentums und des Urchristentums
<i>Agr.</i>	Philo, <i>De agricultura</i>
<i>AJP</i>	<i>American Journal of Philology</i>
<i>Alex.</i>	Plutarch, <i>Alexander</i>
<i>Amic. mult.</i>	Plutarch, <i>De amicorum multitudine</i>
AnBib	<i>Analecta Biblica</i>
<i>Andr.</i>	Demosthenes, <i>Adversus Androktionem</i>
<i>Ant.</i>	Josephus, <i>Antiquitates judaicae</i>
<i>Ant.</i>	Plutarch, <i>Antonius</i>
<i>Ant. rom.</i>	Dionysius of Halicarnassus, <i>Antiquitates romanae</i>
<i>Apol.</i>	Apuleius, <i>Apologia (Pro se de magia)</i>
<i>Apol.</i>	Plato, <i>Apologia</i>
<i>Arat.</i>	Plutarch, <i>Aratus</i>
<i>Archid.</i>	Isocrates, <i>Archidamus</i> (Or. 6)
<i>Arg.</i>	Apollonius of Rhodes, <i>Argonautica</i>
<i>AsTJ</i>	<i>Asbury Theological Journal</i>
<i>Ath. pol.</i>	Aristotle, <i>Athēnaiōn politeia</i>
AUSS	<i>Andrews University Seminary Studies</i>
<i>B.J.</i>	Josephus, <i>Bellum judaicum</i>
BDAG	Danker, Frederick W., Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich. <i>Greek-English Lexicon of the New</i>

	<i>Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> . 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000 (Danker-Bauer-Arndt-Gingrich).
BibInt	Biblical Interpretation
<i>Bis. acc.</i>	Lucian, <i>Bis accusatus</i>
BJS	Brown Judaic Studies
BNP	<i>Brill's New Pauly: Encyclopaedia of the Ancient World</i> . Edited by Hubert Cancik. 22 vols. Leiden: Brill, 2002–2011. Online version, 2015.
BR	<i>Biblical Research</i>
BSac	<i>Bibliotheca Sacra</i>
<i>Cat.</i>	Lucian, <i>Cataplus</i>
<i>Cat. Min.</i>	Plutarch, <i>Cato Minor</i>
CB	<i>Cultura Biblica</i>
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
<i>Chers.</i>	Demosthenes, <i>De Chersoneso</i>
CJ	<i>Classical Journal</i>
ClAnt	<i>Classical Antiquity</i>
ClQ	<i>Classical Quarterly</i>
<i>Cohib. ira</i>	Plutarch, <i>De cohibenda ira</i>
<i>Comm. Rom.</i>	Origen, <i>Commentarii in Romanos</i>
<i>Comp.</i>	Dionysius of Halicarnassus, <i>De compositione verborum</i>
<i>Comp. Arist. Cat.</i>	Plutarch, <i>Comparatio Aristidis et Catonis</i>
<i>Comp. Arist. Men. compend.</i>	Plutarch, <i>Comparationis Aristophanis et Menandri compendium</i>
<i>Comp. Demetr. Ant.</i>	Plutarch, <i>Comparatio Demetrii et Antonii</i>
<i>Cor.</i>	Demosthenes, <i>De corona</i>
CR	<i>Classical Review</i>
CTM	<i>Concordia Theological Monthly</i>
CurBR	<i>Currents in Biblical Research</i> (formerly <i>Currents in Research: Biblical Studies</i> )
<i>Curios.</i>	Plutarch, <i>De curiositate</i>
<i>De pace</i>	Isocrates, <i>De pace</i> (Or. 8)
<i>De. or.</i>	Cicero, <i>De oratore</i>
<i>Def. orac.</i>	Plutarch, <i>De defectu oraculorum</i>
<i>Dem.</i>	Dionysius of Halicarnassus, <i>De Demosthene</i>
<i>Demetr.</i>	Plutarch, <i>Demetrius</i>
<i>Deor. conc.</i>	Lucian, <i>Deorum concilium</i>
<i>Descr.</i>	Pausanias, <i>Graeciae descriptio</i>
<i>Det.</i>	Philo, <i>Quod deterius potiori insidari soleat</i>
<i>Deus</i>	Philo, <i>Quod Deus sit immutabilis</i>
<i>Dial.</i>	Tacitus, <i>Dialogus de oratoribus</i>
<i>Diatr.</i>	Epictetus, <i>Diatribai (Dissertationes)</i>
<i>Din.</i>	Dionysius of Halicarnassus, <i>De Dinarcho</i>
<i>Dion</i>	Plutarch, <i>Dion</i>
<i>Doctr. chr.</i>	Augustine, <i>Teaching Christianity/De Doctrina Christiana</i>
<i>E Delphi.</i>	Plutarch, <i>De E apud Delphos</i>
<i>Ebr.</i>	Philo, <i>De ebrietate</i>

EKKNT	Evangelisch-katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament
<i>Eloc.</i>	Demetrius, <i>De elocutione (Peri hermēneias)</i>
[ <i>Erot.</i> ]	Demosthenes, <i>Eroticus</i>
<i>Evag.</i>	Isocrates, <i>Evagoras</i> (Or. 9)
<i>EvQ</i>	<i>Evangelical Quarterly</i>
<i>ExpTim</i>	<i>Expository Times</i>
<i>Fac.</i>	Plutarch, <i>De facie in orbe lunae</i>
<i>Fals. leg.</i>	Demosthenes, <i>De falsa legatione</i>
<i>Flacc.</i>	Philo, <i>In Flaccum</i>
<i>Frag.</i>	Musonius Rufus, <i>Fragmenta</i>
<i>Frat. amor.</i>	Plutarch, <i>De fraterno amore</i>
<i>Fug.</i>	Philo, <i>De fuga et inventione</i>
<i>Gen. Socr.</i>	Plutarch, <i>De genio Socratis</i>
<i>Geogr.</i>	Strabo, <i>Geographica</i>
<i>Gramm.</i>	Sextus Empiricus, <i>Adversus mathematicos</i>
<i>GTJ</i>	<i>Grace Theological Journal</i>
<i>Gymn.</i>	Philostratus, <i>De gymnastica</i>
<i>Hel.</i>	Gorgias, <i>Helena</i>
<i>Her.</i>	Philo, <i>Quis rerum divinarum heres sit</i>
<i>Herm. Sim.</i>	Shepherd of Hermas, <i>Similitudes</i>
<i>Hermot.</i>	Lucian, <i>Hermotimus (De sectis)</i>
<i>Hist.</i>	Diodorus Siculus, <i>Historiae</i>
<i>Hist.</i>	Polybius, <i>Historiae</i>
<i>Hist.</i>	Herodotus, <i>Historiae</i>
<i>Hist.</i>	Thucydides, <i>History of the Peloponnesian War</i>
<i>Hist. an.</i>	Aristotle, <i>Historia animalium</i>
<i>Hist. eccl.</i>	Eusebius, <i>Historia ecclesiastica</i>
<i>Hist. rom.</i>	Dio Cassius, <i>Historiae romanae</i>
HKNT	Handkommentar zum Neuen Testament
HNT	Handbuch zum Neuen Testament
HNTC	Harper's New Testament Commentaries
<i>Hom. Heb.</i>	John Chrysostom, <i>Homiliae in epistulam ad Hebraeos</i>
<i>Hom. Josh.</i>	Origen, <i>Homiliae in Joshua</i>
<i>Hom. Num.</i>	Origen, <i>Homiliae in Numeros</i>
HSCP	<i>Harvard Studies in Classical Philology</i>
HSM	Harvard Semitic Monographs
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
ICC	International Critical Commentary
<i>Ign. Smyrn.</i>	Ignatius, <i>To the Smyrnaeans</i>
<i>Inst.</i>	Quintillian, <i>Institutio oratoria</i>
<i>Int</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
<i>Ios.</i>	Philo, <i>De Iosepho</i>
<i>Is.</i>	Dionysius of Halicarnassus, <i>De Isaeo</i>
<i>Is. Os.</i>	Plutarch, <i>De Iside et Osiride</i>
<i>Isocr.</i>	Dionysius of Halicarnassus, <i>De Isocrate</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JES	<i>Journal of Ecumenical Studies</i>
JHI	<i>Journal of the History of Ideas</i>



JSJSup	Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism
JSNT	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
JSNTSup	Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement
JTS	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
Leg.	Philo, <i>Legum allegoriae</i>
Legat.	Philo, <i>Legatio ad Gaium</i>
LEH	Lust, Johan, Erik Eynikel, and Katrin Hauspie, eds. <i>Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint</i> . Rev. ed. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2003.
Leocr.	Lycurgus, <i>Against Leocrates</i>
Let. Aris.	Letter of Aristeas
[Lib. ed.]	Plutarch, <i>De liberis educandis</i>
Lives	Diogenes Laertius, <i>Lives of Eminent Philosophers</i>
LNTS	The Library of New Testament Studies
LSJ	Liddell, Henry George, Robert Scott, Henry Stuart Jones. <i>A Greek-English Lexicon</i> . 9th ed. with revised supplement. Oxford: Clarendon, 1996.
LW	<i>Luther's Works</i> . Edited by Jaroslav Pelikan et al. 79 vols. Saint Louis: Concordia, 1955–2016.
Lyc.	Plutarch, <i>Lycurgus</i>
Lys.	Dionysius of Halicarnassus, <i>De Lysia</i>
Marc.	Plutarch, <i>Marcellus</i>
Memor.	Xenophon, <i>Memorabilia</i>
Meth. med.	Galen, <i>Methods of Medicine</i>
Mnemosyne	<i>Mnemosyne: A Journal of Classical Studies</i>
Mos.	Philo, <i>De vita Mosis</i>
NA28	<i>Novum Testamentum Graece</i> . Edited by Eberhard Nestle, Erwin Nestle, Barbara Aland, Kurt Aland, and Holger Strutwolf. 28th ed. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2013.
Nat. fac.	Galen, <i>On the Natural Faculties</i>
NETS	<i>A New English Translation of the Septuagint</i> . Edited by Albert Pietersma and Benjamin G. Wright. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.
NLH	<i>New Literary History</i>
Notes	<i>Notes on Translation</i>
NovT	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
NovTSup	Supplements to Novum Testamentum
NPNF <sup>1</sup>	<i>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers</i> , Series 1. Edited by Philip Schaff. 1886–1889. 14 vols. Repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994.
NPNF <sup>2</sup>	<i>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers</i> , Series 2. Edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. 1890–1900. 14 vols. Repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994.
NRTh	<i>La nouvelle revue théologique</i>
NTS	<i>New Testament Studies</i>

<i>Num.</i>	Plutarch, <i>Numa</i>
OECS	Oxford Early Christian Studies
<i>Opif.</i>	Philo, <i>De opificio mundi</i>
<i>Opt. gen.</i>	Cicero, <i>De optimo genere oratorum</i>
<i>Or. Brut.</i>	Cicero, <i>Orator ad M. Brutum</i>
<i>Orat.</i>	Dio Chrysostom, <i>Orationes</i>
<i>Orat.</i>	Libanius, <i>Orationes</i>
<i>Paneg.</i>	Isocrates, <i>Panegyricus (Or. 4)</i>
<i>[Pass.]</i>	Andronicus, <i>De passionibus</i>
<i>Per.</i>	Plutarch, <i>Pericles</i>
<i>Phaedr.</i>	Plato, <i>Phaedrus</i>
<i>Philip.</i>	Demosthenes, <i>Philippica</i>
<i>Phoc.</i>	Plutarch, <i>Phocion</i>
<i>[Physiogn.]</i>	Aristotle, <i>Physiognomonica</i>
<i>Plant.</i>	Philo, <i>De plantatione</i>
<i>Poet.</i>	Aristotle, <i>Poetica</i>
<i>Pol.</i>	Aristotle, <i>Politica</i>
<i>Pomp.</i>	Dionysius of Halicarnassus, <i>Epistula ad Pompeium</i>
	<i>Geminum</i>
<i>Praem.</i>	Philo, <i>De praemiis et poenis</i>
<i>Praep. ev.</i>	Eusebius, <i>Praeparatio evangelica</i>
<i>Pre. Pet.</i>	Preaching of Peter
<i>Prob.</i>	Philo, <i>Quod omnis probus liber sit</i>
<i>[Probl.]</i>	Aristotle, <i>Problemata</i>
<i>Progym.</i>	Aelius Theon, <i>Progymnasmata</i>
<i>Protrep.</i>	Clement of Alexandria, <i>Protrepticus</i>
<i>Prov.</i>	Philo, <i>De providentia</i>
<i>PRSt</i>	<i>Perspectives in Religious Studies</i>
<i>QG</i>	Philo, <i>Quaestiones et solutiones in Genesin</i>
<i>Ran.</i>	Aristophanes, <i>Ranae</i>
<i>RB</i>	<i>Revue biblique</i>
<i>Resp.</i>	Plato, <i>Respublica</i>
<i>RevExp</i>	<i>Review and Expositor</i>
<i>Rhet.</i>	Aristotle, <i>Rhetorica</i>
<i>Rhet. Her.</i>	<i>Rhetorica ad Herennium</i>
<i>RHPR</i>	<i>Revue d'histoire et de philosophie religieuses</i>
<i>RP</i>	Reworked Pentateuch
<i>SBT</i>	Studies in Biblical Theology
<i>SEÅ</i>	<i>Svensk exegetisk årsbok</i>
<i>Sera</i>	Plutarch, <i>De sera numinis vindicta</i>
<i>Sib. Or.</i>	Sibylline Oracles
<i>SNTSMS</i>	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series
<i>Soll. an.</i>	Plutarch, <i>De sollertia animalium</i>
<i>Somn.</i>	Philo, <i>De somniis</i>
<i>Spec.</i>	Philo, <i>De specialibus legibus</i>
<i>ST</i>	<i>Studia Theologica</i>
<i>ST</i>	Thomas Aquinas, <i>Summa Theologiae</i>
<i>StudNeot</i>	<i>Studia Neotestamentica</i>
<i>Subl.</i>	Longinus, <i>De sublimitate</i>

SymS	Symposium Series
[Syntax.]	Demosthenes, <i>Peri syntaxeōs</i>
TAPA	<i>Transactions of the American Philological Association</i>
TD	<i>Theology Digest</i>
TDNT	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i> . Edited by Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich. Translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley. 10 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–1976.
<i>Theaet.</i>	Plato, <i>Theaetetus</i>
[Theocr.]	Demosthenes, <i>In Theocrinem</i>
Theom.	Lysias, <i>Against Theomnestus</i>
Thuc.	Dionysius of Halicarnassus, <i>De Thucydide</i>
Tim.	Lucian, <i>Timon</i>
Timocr.	Demosthenes, <i>In Timocratem</i>
TJ	<i>Trinity Journal</i>
TJT	<i>Toronto Journal of eology</i>
Tranq. an.	Plutarch, <i>De tranquillitate animi</i>
TSK	<i>Theologische Studien und Kritiken</i>
TynBul	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
Virt. prof.	Plutarch, <i>Quomodo quis suos in virtute sentiat profectus</i>
[Virt. vit.]	Aristotle, <i>De virtutibus et vitiis</i>
Vit. Apoll.	Philostratus, <i>Vita Apollonii</i>
Vit. soph.	Philostratus, <i>Vitae sophistarum</i>
Vita	Josephus, <i>Vita</i>
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WTJ	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
ZNW	Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche

## Chapter 1

# Problems and Prospects in Hebrews 12:18–29

Hebrews 12:18–29 has been lauded as the “grand finale,”<sup>1</sup> climax,<sup>2</sup> and the hermeneutical key to the composition.<sup>3</sup> For some, in fact, this passage signifies not only the climax of the argument of Hebrews but also the proper conclusion to the epistle. The content and tone of Heb 13 lead some interpreters to suspect that all or part of Heb 13 derives from later scribal activity.<sup>4</sup> Despite the prominent place afforded to it, many interpretations fail to account adequately for two significant aspects of the passage: its function within its immediate literary context and the nature and intended effects of its style. In this chapter, I provide an initial reading of Heb 12:18–29 that pays more attention to these two aspects of the passage, exploring how it is *both* distinct from its literary context *and* embedded within it. Then, I conduct a survey of previous interpretations of the passage, noting the general tendency to ignore or downplay the significance of this passage’s rhetorical and stylistic features. This neglect prompts a review of previous stylistic and rhetorical critical analyses of Hebrews. My initial reading of Heb 12:18–29 and the survey of previous interpretations of it prompts further reflection on the difficulties of accounting for the “radical rhetoric” of Hebrews and of the New Testament more generally in the final section of the chapter.

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<sup>1</sup> Barnabas Lindars, “The Rhetorical Structure of Hebrews,” *NTS* 35 (1989): 401.

<sup>2</sup> Craig R. Koester, *Hebrews: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 548.

<sup>3</sup> Kiwoong Son, *Zion Symbolism in Hebrews: Hebrews 12:18–24 as a Hermeneutical Key to the Epistle* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., George Wesley Buchanan, *To the Hebrews*, AB 36, 2nd ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1980), 227: “Heb 12:29 seems to be the conclusion of the whole document, and it has no transition sentence that leads neatly to chapter thirteen.... Chapter thirteen seems to be a collection of material which an editor has put together.... Some of the views of chapter thirteen contradict those of 1:1–12:29. Therefore, it seems not to have been a part of the original composition and should be examined separately.” The case for the authenticity of Heb 13 to the original letter of Hebrews has been argued vigorously by Floyd V. Filson, “Yesterday”: *A Study of Hebrews in the Light of Chapter 13*, SBT 4 (Naperville, IL: Alec R. Allenson, 1967). See also the concise summary of the debate in Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 384.

## A. A Moving Vision: Considering the Place and Style of Heb 12:18–29

### *I. A Distinct Moment*

Framed by the hortatory material of Heb 12:1–17 and the collection of exhortations in Heb 13, the passage stands out in its literary context because it functions as what Tom Long calls a “travelogue.”<sup>5</sup> The author begins by describing a location reminiscent of Mount Sinai or Mount Horeb, insisting that the audience has not come to such a place.<sup>6</sup> He locates them instead at Mount Zion, the site of the heavenly Jerusalem, and then depicts the heavenly entourage that is there. The author’s imaginative lens focuses now on angels in festive gathering, then on God, the judge of all; it moves from the assembly of the first born to the mediator of the new covenant, Jesus (Heb 12:22–24). The arrangement of words, the repetition of similar-sounding endings, and word length invite the hearers to linger over the images presented in the passage; these stylistic features encourage the audience to inhabit, if only for a moment, the envisioned scene.

The author’s depiction of Mount Zion and its environs in 12:22–24 stands in stark contrast to the description of the “sensible” (ψηλαφωμένῳ) mountain evoked by Heb 12:18–19.<sup>7</sup> Compared to the ethereal picture of Mount Zion, the sensible mountain appears through a dizzying combination of sights (fire and darkness) and sounds (whirlwind, the sounding of a trumpet, and the sound of voices). The strongly sensory presentation, nevertheless, is somewhat elusive. How can the mountain be surrounded with fire and yet also covered in darkness? Who sounds the trumpet and whose voices are overheard? The descriptions appear in rapid succession as the author moves quickly, nearly chaotically, from one detail to the next. Short, strange words peppered with the conjunction καί accentuate the ominous portrait of God’s fiery, thundering presence at the mountain. Though the manner of presentation differs, the description of the tangible mountain also seeks to move the hearers into the scene described.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas G. Long, *Hebrews*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox, 1997), 137.

<sup>6</sup> Hebrews 12:18–21 presents a composite picture of God’s speech from the mountain derived from LXX Exod 19 (Sinai) and LXX Deut 4 (Horeb), although the word “mountain” does not appear in our best manuscript witnesses. To retain some of this ambiguity, I have elected to refer to this mountain as the “sensible” mountain because of the author’s addition of the adjectival participle ψηλαφωμένως. For further discussion, see discussion in chapter four of this study.

<sup>7</sup> The verb ψηλαφάω literally means to touch or handle something or someone. “Touchable” would be the most literal translation of the participle in Heb 12:18. The details associated with the description, however, imply more than the sense of touch alone. It is better, then, to speak of the location described in 12:18–21 as “sensible” or “empirical.”

The focus of comparison shifts slightly in Heb 12:25, and the function of the twinned scenes in 12:18–24 becomes more apparent. The author warns, “Make sure that you do not resist the one who is speaking” (Heb 12:25). The author adopts the imperative mood and jerks the audience’s perspective from the two mountains to the two groups gathered at each. For all their differences – visible and invisible, chaotic and expansive – the two scenes share two important details: God speaks from each mountain and those gathered at each respond. The depiction of the two mountains in Heb 12:18–24, with all of its verbal artistry, thus cannot be separated from the turn to the imperative in 12:25. Likewise, the force of the author’s command (βλέπετε) depends on the dense and sensory description in 12:18–24.<sup>8</sup>

The two mountains emphasize the different locations of God’s speech and the disposition of the respective hearers. At first glance, the hearers at the sensible mountain appear to display a polite resistance to God’s word. They beg (παρητήσαντο) God to stop speaking, to cease from adding “even another word” (12:19). The command to keep the mountain clear of wild animals (12:20; compare this with the command in Exod 19:12–13) proves too difficult. The hearers are not able to endure (οὐκ ἔφερον) what is demanded of them. The author’s injunction in 12:25a, however, recasts the disposition of the first hearers as more rebellious. Their desperate pleading becomes outright resistance, and the request for the cessation of God’s speech becomes a futile attempt to flee from the one who warns them (12:25b). Finally, with *those* hearers in purview, the second group of hearers – the hearers of Hebrews – is warned against turning away from or rejecting (ἀποστρέφω) God.

Why has the depiction of the first hearers taken such a negative turn? How does fearful pleading become rejection and refusal? Here again the author’s artful use of language is apparent. The author repeats forms of παρατείναι in 12:19 and 12:25, but he draws on the verb’s two different meanings to highlight the negative disposition of the first hearers. The repetition of the verb connects the need for proper hearing in 12:18–24 with the set of warnings in 12:25–27. The comparison distinguishes the location or origin of the one who addresses the two sets of hearers. The parallelism in 12:26 suggests that the one who warned (τὸν χρηματίζοντα) the first group of hearers did so on earth; the second group of hearers, however, is warned from heaven.

The voice of warning, whether issued on earth or from heaven, results in a similar phenomenon: the shaking of the created order. In the former time (τότε, 12:26), the voice of warning shook the earth. The author of Hebrews here strays from the traditions found in Exodus and Deuteronomy associated with God’s appearance and speech at a mountain. Elsewhere in Israel’s scriptures, however, God’s appearing to or addressing humanity is connected with

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<sup>8</sup> For further discussion, see the analysis of Heb 12:18–29 in chapter four and further discussion in chapter five.

the shaking of the created order (see, for example, LXX Judg 5:4, Ps 67:9, Amos 1:14, and Joel 2:10).

At this point, the author's pairing of the dispositions of the two hearers with the two shakings introduces important differences between the two locations of God's speech. First, the shaking envisioned in 12:26b–27 is based on a prophetic utterance in the past (ἐπήγγελται) that awaits fulfillment in the future (ἐγὼ σείσω). In contrast, the shaking associated with the first hearers coincides temporally with the moment of hearing and response. Furthermore, the future shaking is more comprehensive. The first voice shook the earth; the promised voice will shake not only the earth but also heaven. The author cites Hag 2:6, which indicates (δηλοῖ) that this shaking will transform or remove (μετάθεσις) everything that is shakable, which the author links to the created order.

The author thus bases his admonition that the audience members pay attention to the nature of their own hearing, presumably in the present, by employing a scriptural citation and imagery based on the results of God's activity in the future. While the actual shaking is reserved for some time in the future, the voice that warns from heaven, and especially the audience's proper disposition to that voice, remains of utmost importance in the present.

Reference to the shaking of earth and heaven encourages the audience to enter, albeit imaginatively, into the scenes described.<sup>9</sup> Here the author is more oblique than in the previous description of the sensible elements of the visible mountain (12:18–21). The author's reference to shaking may evoke the sights, sounds, and emotions associated with an earthquake but only implicitly. In addition, the author uses words that are visual in nature. The shaking of all the things that have been made (πεποιημένων) may allude to God's activity at creation or to the things made with human hands. Likewise, there is something visual about the removal or transformation (μετάθεσις) of the created order. As the author pictures Enoch being plucked (μετατίθημι) from the earth in Heb 11:5, so here there is almost a pictorial sense of the removal of the created order.

Though the images associated with this final shaking are less developed, even their ambiguity contributes to the intended effect of these verses. The lack of specific images invites the audience to imagine the shaking of the earth and heaven more freely. In this sense, both Heb 12:18–21 and 12:26–27 draw on the faculty of the imagination, although the mental pictures generated by the first derive from more concrete images in the text.

In Heb 12:28–29, the author again draws on striking imagery to convey his message. The author grounds his use of the hortatory subjective (ἔχωμεν, λατρεύωμεν) in 12:28 with an evocative and ominous image of God: "Our

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<sup>9</sup> For further discussion of the "dislocating" capacity of sublime rhetoric, see chapter five below.

God is a consuming fire” (12:29).<sup>10</sup> The image of God as a consuming fire likely alludes to the description of God as “a consuming fire, a jealous God” in LXX Deut 4:24. In Deuteronomy, the dual image of God’s fiery nature and zeal for the people undergirds the Israelites peculiar relationship to God. In the immediate context (Deut 4:14–19, 23), Moses has just commanded the people to maintain covenant fidelity to God and to refrain from constructing graven images. In addition, the image of God as a consuming fire recalls God’s presence on the flaming Mount Horeb when Moses received the commandments (4:9–14). In this way, the physical manifestation of God’s presence on the mountain (burning fire, darkness, gloom, and tempest) partially conveys God’s nature as a consuming fire.

The author’s use of Deut 4 in Heb 12 is complex. On one hand, the language describing God’s presence at Mount Horeb in Deut 4:9–14 stands in contrast to the mountain to which the audience members of Hebrews have drawn near (Heb 12:18–21). On the other hand, the author retains the image and nature of God from Deut 4. Both the Israelites *and* the audience members draw near to God, who is a consuming fire. The God who speaks from the midst of the fire in Deut 4 is the same God who promises to shake the whole created order, both earth and heaven (Heb 12:26; LXX Hag 2:6).<sup>11</sup> Even if the audience members do not hear God speaking with the same physical manifestations that accompanied God’s awesome presence in the Exodus traditions, God’s image, nature, and presence in Heb 12:28–29 are no less awe-inspiring.

This short analysis of Heb 12:18–29 has emphasized several features of the passage’s distinctive use of language and imagery:

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<sup>10</sup> The textual tradition of Heb 12:28 demonstrates instability surrounding the mood of both ἔχωμεν and λατρεύωμεν. Among other witnesses, p<sup>46</sup> shows the scribes’ uncertainty regarding the proper form of ἔχω. Though it originally had the present indicative form (ἔχομεν), a subsequent corrector restored it to the present subjunctive form (ἔχωμεν). Beyond support of the indicative form in p<sup>46</sup>, there are early and important witnesses supporting the subjunctive form (A C D L Ψ). The form of λατρεύω in the manuscript tradition also has some variety. P<sup>46</sup> has the aorist subjunctive form (λατρεύσωμεν), which is not corrected by a subsequent hand. Some witnesses have the present indicative (λατρεύομεν), but several early and reliable witnesses contain the present subjunctive (A D L).

<sup>11</sup> It is possible that reference to God as consuming fire evokes similar images of God elsewhere in Israel’s scriptures. For example, the image of God as consuming fire in Zephaniah plays a similar world-obliterating role as God’s promised shaking in Heb 12. In Zephaniah, the image evokes the ominous day of the Lord when God’s wrath and zeal will consume not only the impious but the whole created order (Zeph 1:18, 3:8). Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, this image of God as consuming fire is used in ways similar to that of Zephaniah, both as a signal for God’s wrath (Esth 16:24) and for the punishment of the impious (Wis 16:16, Sir 45:19; cf. Deut 9:3).



(1) These verses burst with powerful imagery: circling flames, shaking mountains, a myriad of angels, and so forth. The dense, sensory-rich imagery invites the audience into the scenes described.

(2) In several places, the language aligns with the images or subjects being discussed. The language used to describe the tangible mountain in 12:18–21 mirrors the chaotic, terrifying scene described therein. Likewise, though not entirely devoid of fear, the description of Mount Zion and the heavenly Jerusalem invites the audience to linger from one image to the next. The composition and choice of words infuse the things described with an expansive, even enduring quality. Hebrews 12:25–27 describes the two shakings more allusively, but this may allow the audience greater freedom in picturing the events and images represented therein. Hebrews 12:28–29 thus grounds the proper response to God’s speech in striking imagery that indicates God’s nature.

(3) Though often separated from each other in modern editions of the New Testament and in modern commentaries, the comparison of the two mountains in Heb 12:18–24 and the warnings in 12:25–27 build on each other. Putting the verses together allows one to see the central emphasis on God’s speech and the disposition of those who hear God’s speech: the two mountains function as the locations of God’s speech that reveal the hearers’ true disposition to that speech. Hebrews 12:28–29, then, and much of Heb 13, as I plan to show, signal the actions and dispositions that arise from the proper response to God’s speech.

I have provided this initial reading of Heb 12:18–29 to highlight how it stands out from its immediate literary context, a feature of the passage that relates in no small part to the distinctive features of its style. By interweaving several sets of comparisons (two mountains, two hearers, two shakings) and crafting the passage in a way that invites the audience to enter imaginatively into the scenes described, these verses focus attention on the nature and location of God’s speech and the proper response of those who listen to that speech. The tone and powerful imagery reveal its distinctiveness. But this passage is not only distinct from its surrounding context; it is also deeply embedded within it. Greater attention to the structure and progression of Heb 12 will demonstrate that Heb 12:18–29 is more closely related to its literary context than typically assumed.

## *II. An Embedded Moment*

The inferential particle *τοιγαροὺν* (“therefore”) in Heb 12:1 connects the verses that follow with what has just been stated in Heb 11. The participial phrase that follows (*ἡμεῖς τοσούτον ἔχοντες περικείμενον ἡμῖν νέφος μαρτύρων*) makes this all the more clear: the crowd surrounding the audience consists of the heroes of faith lauded in Heb 11. Following the exhorta-

tion to run with endurance (12:1), the author holds up Jesus as a model of the type of endurance required (12:2–4). Then, the author draws an analogy between the audience’s struggle and God’s discipline. Although this discipline is uncomfortable in the present moment, it proves that the audience members are indeed children of God (12:5–11).

The inferential conjunction διό in 12:12 draws a hortatory conclusion from the characterization of suffering as God’s pedagogical program. Though weary, the audience members are pushed to pursue peace with others, to retain holy living, and to remain faithful to God (12:12–17). The author’s terminology here depicts the audience as athletes on the verge of exhaustion and giving up. Similar to the exhortation in 12:1–2, the author exhorts the audience to do whatever is needed to continue their struggle.

The audience’s need to endure stands in contrast to the example of Esau (12:15–17). Unlike the author’s hope for the audience members, Esau abandoned his birthright (πρωτοτόκια) for a single meal. Esau functions as a negative foil to those who, by enduring God’s instruction, prove themselves to be God’s legitimate children (see 12:8). Esau’s choosing the tangible (βρώσις μίαν) over the intangible (τά πρωτοτόκια) also anticipates the contrast in 12:18–24 between the sensible mountain and the intangible one.

Interpreters are divided on the function of the inferential particle διό in 12:28, whether it marks the conclusion of a section or the introduction of a new section.<sup>12</sup> I prefer to read διό as a signal to a conclusion or deduction that emerges from Heb 12:18–27 or perhaps from the chapter as a whole. *Because* they are receiving an unshakable kingdom, the audience members must hold on to grace (ἔχωμεν χάρις),<sup>13</sup> which enables them to offer worship that is pleasing (εὐαρέστως) to God through reverence and prayer. The awe-inspiring image of God as fire (discussed above) provides the basis for the author’s exhortation to retain their fidelity to God.

Though more general in nature, the hortatory tone of Heb 13 elaborates more on the dispositions and behaviors commensurate with fidelity to God as well as those behaviors that demonstrate solidarity with the gathered commu-

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<sup>12</sup> Attridge suggests that διό is a “paraenetic conclusion” (Attridge, *Hebrews*, 382). Moffatt finds in vv. 28–29 “the final word” upon the prospects and responsibilities of the “unshakable kingdom”; see James Moffatt, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, ICC (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1924), 222. Similarly, Spicq suggests the particle “introduit la conclusion pratique”; see Ceslas Spicq, *L’épître aux Hébreux*, 2 vols. (Paris: J. Gabalda, 1952–1953), 2:412. In contrast, Koester suggests διό here “introduces a new phase of the argument” (12:28–13:21), which he identifies as the peroration (Koester, *Hebrews*, 557).

<sup>13</sup> It is also possible to understand the phrase ἔχωμεν χάριν as “Let us have (or keep) grace,” although most interpreters prefer to understand it as “Let us be thankful.” Hebrews 12:28–29, including the meaning of this phrase, will be discussed more fully in chapter four.