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“The Spirits of Just Men Made Perfect”

by W. J. Dumbrell

The identity and interrelation of the places and persons to which or to whom the people addressed in Heb. 12: 22-24 are said to “have come” present exegetes with a perennial problem. Dr. Dumbrell, a graduate of Harvard Divinity School and now Senior Lecturer and Director of Studies in Moore Theological College, Sydney, offers a cogent solution of the problem, with special reference to “the spirits of just men made perfect”.

THE meaning of this phrase in its context has occasioned not inconsiderable difficulty, and proposals have ranged¹ from the Old Testament saints whose representatives are referred to in the previous chapter, Christians already dead, Christian martyrs, the Apostles, to the perfected of both Testaments. The difficulty which all these suggestions encounter is, as Michel has pointed out,² that we appear to have an explicit statement in Hebrews 11: 40 that the notion of perfection to which the writer there alludes is a concept to apply to some future situation and to be shared presumably with believers generally and with the recipients of Hebrews specifically. *Mutatis mutandis* Michel's objection applies to all proposals so far put forward, while Michel's own proposals, to which we shall later allude, are no more satisfactory.

There is, however, a further possibility which may be sustained by an examination of the immediate context of these few verses. It is clear that the section Heb. 12: 18-24 is divided into two contrasting halves, each of which is introduced by the verb προσέρχουμαι. In verses 18-21 the conclusion of the Sinai covenant is on view. We are directed to the holy mountain, symbol of the dwelling-place of the deity in the Old Testament, surrounded by the terrifying notes of the theophany, and we are reminded that it was a scene before which even the covenant mediator, Moses, quailed. How unlike this is the prospect which is presented in verses 22-23. The addressees have “come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and

¹ C. Spicq, *L'épître aux Hébreux* (1953), pp. 407 ff., offers a comprehensive summary of scholarly opinions.

² Cf. Otto Michel, *Der Brief an die Hebräer* (12. Auflage, 1966), pp. 467 ff.

to a judge who is God of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect” (RSV).

E. Käsemann³ and others, noting the exalted character of the language here, assume that the setting is cultic and argue that the use of the verb προσέρχομαι in the epistle is uniformly liturgical. Michel is representative of this position when he remarks, “Dies ‘Nahen’ bleibt ein kultisches Ereignis”.⁴ One must agree, however, with C. K. Barrett⁵ that the passages in Hebrews in which the verb occurs in what is generally taken as a liturgical sense (Heb. 4: 16; 7: 25; 10: 22; 11: 6) are more simply to be construed as exhortations to a faith-approach. In short, in the use of this verb in the epistle, there is a reference to what is involved in a profession of faith and no doubt its use in verses 18-24 here is to point this pilgrim group to the faith actuality which is presently theirs.

Little time need be spent upon the explication of the heavenly Jerusalem theme.⁶ What must engage us is the description of the inhabitants of the eschatological Zion. To the point here is how the last three words of verse 22 and the first two words of verse 23 are to be grouped and particularly, whether the noun πανήγυρις is to be taken with what precedes, or whether it is to be read with the phrase καὶ ἐκκλησίᾳ πρωτοτόκων which follows.

A survey of the possibilities⁷ reveals the following options:

1. “and to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect” (AV; cf. RSV margin and RV).
2. “and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to a judge who is God of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect” (RSV).
3. “and to innumerable hosts, the general assembly of angels, and the church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect” (RV margin).

It is to be noted that the determinant is the construction placed on πανηγύρει, occurring only here in the New Testament. AV

³ E. Käsemann, *Das wandernde Gottesvolk* (4. Auflage, 1961), p. 31.

⁴ Op. cit. p. 461.

⁵ Cf. C. K. Barrett, “The Eschatology of the Epistle to the Hebrews” in *The Background of the New Testament and its Eschatology* (C. H. Dodd *Festschrift*), ed. W. D. Davies and D. Daube (1956), p. 376.

⁶ Cf. J. C. De Young, *Jerusalem in the New Testament* (1960), pp. 142 ff., for the use of this theme in Heb. 12: 18-24.

⁷ Again, reference is made to the detailed survey in Spicq, op. cit. pp. 406 ff.

groups the word with ἐκκλησία; RSV with ἀγγέλων; RV margin similarly takes it with ἀγγέλων but takes μυριάσιν as an introductory reference to the gathering which is then explicated in terms of components. By derivation and usage⁸ πανήγυρις lays emphasis upon the number and diversity of those present, while the concept of "plenary gathering" is usually to be associated with it. If secular analogies are applied the term would best refer to the ἐκκλησία on view here and would point to the special character of this ἐκκλησία as opposed to possibilities with which the addressees may be more familiar. To attach πανηγύρει to ἀγγέλων would seem tautologous in depicting a scene of this character, for one would imagine that their heavenly character is always that of "a festal gathering" though in the case of the ἐκκλησία the pilgrim encounters in worship to which the recipients were accustomed would only represent a dim adumbration of that final gathering to which attention is here being directed.

The word πανήγυρις has also the secular connotation of "festal gathering" and was related to special occasions in Greek political or cultural life, situations to which the word ἐκκλησία, invested with stricter political overtones, could not be suitably applied. That is why in the Greek Old Testament the word can frequently be used of cultic occasions (cf. Amos 5: 21, Hosea 2: 11; 9: 5, Ezekiel 46: 11) and the nature of the occasion here as that of covenant conclusion makes the reference to ἐκκλησία particularly apposite. Contra Spicq,⁹ to associate the term with ἀγγέλων in a cultic sense here would hardly convey the emphasis intended by our context for presumably a cultic assembly of angels would not be an uncommon heavenly phenomenon. Spicq himself makes the good point¹⁰ that πανήγυρις is often found in connection with Greek olympiads etc., and such an association is entirely consonant with the imagery of Hebrews 12: 1 ff. to which, following the exhortation of 12: 14-17, verses 18-24 would form a fitting conclusion. In short, it is the attachment of πανηγύρει to ἐκκλησία which makes the best sense in this context and what appears to be presented is the end-time picture of the totally redeemed community, which things, after all, angels earnestly desire to look into (1 Peter 1: 21). In imagery strikingly similar to Rev. 7: 9-11¹¹ the great company stands before

⁸ Cf. "Panegyris", by L. Ziehen, in *Pauly-Wissowa-Kroll Real-Encyclopädie der Classischen Altertumswissenschaft*, Vol. 18, pt. 3, pp. 581 ff.

⁹ Op. cit., pp. 406 ff.

¹⁰ Cf. "La Panégyrie de Hebr. XII, 22" *Studia Theologica* 6 (1953) pp. 30-38, esp. pp. 32-33.

¹¹ Not, however, to Rev. 14: 1-4, as is often suggested, for a strong case can be made out for the reference of that context to redeemed Israel in view of the mention there of the 144,000 as "first fruits" and thus the correlation of that passage with Rev. 7: 1-8.

the throne, the Judge and the Son in the assembly of the end-time ἐκκλησία.

This heavenly assembly is further differentiated by what follows in verse 23. The members are “first-born” and “enrolled” in heaven. Spicq,¹² appealing to such biblical passages as Job 38: 7, Psalms 82: 1; 89: 5, refers the title first-born on this negligible Old Testament support to angels but as Michel¹³ and others have noted the notion of enrolment is difficult to apply to angels. Calvin¹⁴ and others refer the term to the patriarchs and other prominent members of the Old Testament Church, yet such a view seems inadmissible in the light of Heb. 11: 40. Spicq¹⁵ correctly notes that the term as applied to Christian martyrs at that stage would be difficult, for not only does the epistle know nothing of Christian martyrdom but also there is the fact that there would have been too few of them at that period to have warranted the significance which is attached to the term here. F. F. Bruce¹⁶ is certainly correct in asserting that “first-born” is a general term for elective privilege as is Michel,¹⁷ who relates the privilege more narrowly to association with Christ. Michel errs, however, in restricting the ἐκκλησία here to the earthly community, since obviously a heavenly scene is presented and the reference to God as judge is, as Michel concedes, difficult to deal with on his view. Bruce is thus to be followed, though somewhat inconsistently, having opted for the reference to the Church militant and triumphant, he then prefers to treat the reference to the spirits of just men made perfect as a reference to the Old Testament saints, i.e., as a component within his previously selected more general concept. He is also unable to do more with the phrase “God the Judge of all” than to suggest that it is designed to express the solemnity of the Christian’s responsibility and thus does not integrate it fully into the obvious covenant context in which it is set.

Who then are the spirits of just men made perfect? They can hardly be the Old Testament saints, for as Käsemann notes,¹⁸ Heb. 11: 40 argues against that. Käsemann suggests that the difficulty would be resolved if we were to refer the phrase to Christian martyrs but admits that Hebrews knows nothing of Christian martyrdom.

¹² *L'épître aux Hébreux*, p. 407 ff.

¹³ *Op. cit.*, p. 464.

¹⁴ J. Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Eng. tr. by W. B. Johnston (1963), *ad loc.*

¹⁵ *L'épître aux Hébreux*, p. 407.

¹⁶ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (2nd ed., 1967), pp. 376 ff.

¹⁷ *Op. cit.* p. 464. It is sometimes suggested that “enrolled” in scripture only refers to living agents, and that thus the “assembly” must be an earthly group. But enrolment in scripture is regarded as a thing completed in the purposes of God before the call of any of the agents involved (cf. the use of the Greek perfect at Luke 10: 20; Rev. 13: 8; 17: 8; 20: 12; 21: 27).

¹⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 28, n. 3.

Michel¹⁹ is also troubled by the phrase and argues that "spirits" must be the dead of some class, but admits there is the unresolved conflict of Heb. 11: 40.²⁰ We can hardly, as Michel inclines to do, take the verb τελειῶω in two senses in these two passages, namely as eschatological at 11: 40 and as soteriological at 12: 23, nor can we be satisfied with Käsemann's resolution of the problem: "andererseits scheint 12, 22 ff. einer anderen Tradition als 11, 13. 39 f. zu entstammen".²¹

Perhaps the difficulties of this passage may be overcome by reminding ourselves that it is covenant conclusion, modelled on the Sinai definitive pattern, to which we are being directed. There are thus involved angels, assembled participants, a presiding Deity, a scrutiny and a mediator. Clearly the ἐκκλησία here recalls the *qahal-Yisra'el*, assembled for approval at Sinai, and the recipients are reminded that what stretches before them in prospect as God's people on the move is eschatological acceptance into final covenant conclusion, vividly presented in this context on striking analogies drawn from the conclusion of the old covenant.²² Jesus, perfected, having led many sons into glory, stands in the company of the congregation of his many brethren.²³ What had been anticipated liturgically at Heb. 2: 12 is spelt out with programmatic precision in this context.

Perfected through the sacrifice, or rather, to press the covenant analogy, the sacrificial blood of the mediator, the assembly stands, awaiting covenant conclusion. The word order seems to demand, in verse 23, the translation, "to the God of all as Judge"²⁴ and the great company of the redeemed, like Israel at Sinai, stands before the Deity awaiting divine scrutiny. Since the passage seems to exhibit progression, and indeed, carefully staged progression, the formal approval for which the assembly of Heb. 12: 23 stands convened may be expressed in the next phrase, "the spirits of just men made perfect". In the light of Heb. 11: 40 it is difficult to

¹⁹ Op. cit., pp. 466 ff.

²⁰ That the phrase "spirits of just men made perfect" caused early exegetical difficulty is shown by the attempt of D* to resolve the problem in trinitarian terms by reading a singular πνεύματι.

²¹ Op. cit., p. 28, n. 3 ("On the other hand 12: 22 ff. seems to be derived from another tradition than 11: 13, 39 f.")

²² Cf. D. W. B. Robinson, *The Church of God, Its Form and Its Unity* (1965), p. 13, who aptly notes the relationship between Israel assembled on Sinai to meet God and the addressees here who have "come to a better assembly, a better Moses, a better covenant."

²³ Cf. Heb. 2: 12-13, where the Old Testament citations from Psalm 22: 23 and Is. 8: 17-18 are picked up.

²⁴ As B. F. Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (2nd ed., 1892), *ad loc.*, argues. 'Judge' is hardly to be taken in the Old Testament sense of 'ruler' as J. Héring, *L'épître aux Hébreux* (1955) *ad loc.* suggests.

conceive how this phrase could be applied to anything other than the total redeemed community, and the festal mood of the immediate context must express the conviction that the verdict to be pronounced upon those assembled can be nothing else than complete divine favour and acceptance, a verdict which has already been anticipated in the experienced gift of Christian forgiveness. But, it is to be noted, they are "spirits" of just men made perfect,²⁵ for the final event in the great eschatological drama has not yet taken place—the New Jerusalem has not yet descended.²⁶

Thus, the writer appears to be at pains to stress that the Sinai pattern has repeated itself, where Israel, the first-born, was called, having been chastened by discipline, was assembled at Sinai, was approved by God, was sprinkled with covenant blood by the interposition of a mediator²⁷ and was then drawn into fellowship. The writer has taken us as far as we can go, and the remainder of the epistle is given over to exhortation. In striking imagery he has sketched out the goal towards which the pilgrim church is moving. The paradox which is so characteristic of Hebrews is that these pilgrims in their conversion have come to that city (Heb. 12: 22) for which they still seek (Heb. 13: 14). It is this paradox which enables us to dismiss the usual dichotomy which is made between the components of Heb. 12: 23-24 and those to whom this word of exhortation was addressed. Speaking of the general eschatological thrust of Hebrews, C. K. Barrett has noted of the pilgrims that "their life is one of hope and struggle, in which they are sustained by the fact that that for which they strive has already been achieved for them, and they have already begun to enjoy it".²⁸ The consummation of the biblical history of salvation will be the heavenly conclusion of the new covenant and yet in the great atoning sacrifice of the new mediator, of which sacrifice Hebrews has so much to say, the basis for this covenant conclusion has already been laid and in Christian experience its end-time benefits are presently being enjoyed.

Moore Theological College, Sydney, N.S.W.

²⁵ For the semantic range of πνεύμα in the New Testament period cf. W. J. Dalton, *Christ's Proclamation to the Spirits* (1965), pp. 145 ff.

²⁶ On the descent of the New Jerusalem cf. De Young, *op. cit.*, pp. 145 ff.

²⁷ In Hebrews, Jesus is not described as the mediator between God and man, but rather as the mediator of a new covenant and as such its guarantor. He is thus a better mediator since the reference to his blood here assures us that the character of the assembly on view can be festal. On the word μεσίτης in Hebrews cf. A. T. Hanson, "The Mediator", in *Studies in the Pastoral Epistles* (1968), pp. 56-64.

²⁸ Cf. C. K. Barrett, *op. cit.*, p. 365, and his stimulating discussion of the eschatology of Hebrews in the course of his essay. In view of such eschatological anticipation within tension there is no need, as we have noted, to view the ecclesia as merely "enrolled" and thus as opposed to "the spirits of just men" who are the faithful departed.