

Sinai and Zion

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Sinai & Zion

There are two mountains that dominate not only the geographical landscape of the Bible but also the theological landscape. They are Mt. Sinai and Mt. Zion, or to put it differently, the law and the temple and the traditions of Moses and David. An exploration of these two mountains and what happened at them, the significance and heritage of these mountains for succeeding generations in Israel, their loss, the hope for their restoration, and finally, the Christian assessment of them in the NT provides a distinctive and penetrating perspective into the history of salvation.

Mt. Sinai

Mt. Sinai (also called Horeb) is the mountain of God's covenant with the nation Israel in the exodus.¹ The first mention of Sinai in the OT is in the description of the burning bush, which was at "Horeb, the mountain of God" (Ex. 3:1-6). Though Moses did not yet see God's face (Moses covered his eyes), he heard the voice of Yahweh, received the commission to go to Egypt and lead God's people out (Ex.

3:7-10). Here he was given the special significance of Yahweh's name (Ex. 3:13-15), and was given the sign that the people would come to worship on this mountain (Ex. 3:12). It was at this same mountain that Moses was joined with his spokesman and brother Aaron before their trip to Egypt (Ex. 4:27). Thus, Sinai became the point of beginning for the greatest salvation event of the OT, the exodus.

The Law at Sinai

Sinai, Moses and Torah are closely bound together, so closely that their names are virtually interchangeable. Just as Yahweh had promised, the Israelites came to Sinai to worship (Ex. 19:1-2). From the mountain, Yahweh defined the purpose for Israel's existence (Ex. 19:3-8) and determined to speak to his people

¹ The precise location of Mt. Sinai is not known, though Jebel Musa near the southern tip of the Sinai peninsula is the favored site for most scholars, cf. I. Beit-Arieh, "Fifteen Years in Sinai," *BAR* X, 4 (July/August 1985) 26ff.; A. Perevolotsky and I. Finkelstein, "The Southern Sinai Exodus Route in Ecological Perspective," and "Has Mt. Sinai Been Found?," *BAR* XI, 4 (July/August 1985) 26ff. and 42ff.

directly (Ex. 19:9-15). In power and majesty, Yahweh descended to the top of Sinai and spoke to Moses face to face (Ex. 19:16--20:21). At Sinai, Moses was privileged to see the glory of God as a confirmation that Yahweh's Presence (lit., *panim* = face) would travel with his people to Canaan (Ex. 33:1-3, 12--34:9, 27-35).

The Journey from Sinai

The journey of Israel from Sinai to Canaan was not merely the journey of the nation alone, but in a sense, it was also the journey of Yahweh with them. At Yahweh's instruction, Israel made a portable Tent of Meeting (Ex. 25:8-9; 26:30; 33:7-11). In it was the chest of the covenant above which Yahweh revealed his glory (Ex. 25:10, 21-22; 40:34-35). When Israel broke camp to move, Yahweh's presence moved with them (Ex. 40:36-38; Nu. 10:11-13, 33-36). The Tent of Meeting and the chest within it became the enduring symbol of Yahweh's manifestation at Sinai. It represented the *panim* (= face) and the *kavod* (= glory, heaviness) of Yahweh among his people, and it contained the tables of stone that God gave to Moses as his covenant with Israel. In the trek to Canaan, Yahweh was not left behind at his mountain; instead, Yahweh accompanied his people to their new home (Jg. 5:4-5; Ps. 68:7-10).

The Heritage of Sinai

Though Sinai was never within the national borders of Israel, it belonged to the Israelites in a special sense. Yahweh's Presence and his Torah were the enduring realities of Sinai, and in the periodic renewals of the covenant, Israel was, ritually speaking, once again at the foot of the mountain of God. This is to be seen especially in the words of Moses in the transjordan just prior to his death. Even though the original nation was dead (with a couple of exceptions), Moses firmly declared that it was "with us, the living" that the Sinai covenant was made (Dt. 5:1-5). In the renewal of the covenant, Israel actualized for them the Sinai revelation. In periodic reaffirmations of the covenant, the whole exodus experience was appropriated to the living nation (Jos. 24:1, 5-7, 14-27). Every 7 years, Torah was to be publicly read at the Feast of Booths (Dt. 31:10-13). The exodus and Sinai became the anchor point for Israel's celebrations (Ps. 81, 95).²

Mt. Zion

Mt. Zion was originally the fortified hill of pre-Israelite Jebus (Jerusalem). It is first mentioned in the OT in connection with the Jebusite fortress captured by David shortly after he assumed full control of the kingdom (2 Sa. 5:6-10). Here

² Both psalm 81 and 95 are probably covenant reaffirmation festival songs, cf. A. Anderson, *Psalms (73-150)* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) 11.586-587, 676-677.

David built his new capital and called it the City of David. Thus, Zion and the City of David are virtually synonymous (1 Ki. 8:1).³

Zion Becomes the Religious Center for Israel

The beginning of Zion's major religious significance occurred when David brought the chest of the covenant to Jerusalem after being temporarily captured by the Philistines (1 Sa. 4:1-11; 5:1--7:2; 2 Sa. 6:1-17). Here it resided in a special tent, which David prepared for it. Appropriate choirs and orchestras were also set up (1 Chr. 6:31-32; 16:7, 37-42). Yet this was not sufficient for David, because he longed to build a permanent residence for the central shrine of Israel's faith (2 Sa. 7:1-3) after the pattern indicated in Deuteronomy, a place that Yahweh would himself choose (cf. Dt. 12:5, 11, 14, 18, 26; 14:23-25; 15:20; 16:2, 6-7, 11, 15-16; 17:8, 10; 18:6; 26:2; 31:11).

However, Yahweh forbade David to personally construct such a building, but reserved the privilege for David's son (2 Sa. 7:4-7, 12-13; 1 Chr. 22:6-10).

Yahweh's Covenant With David

Though Yahweh did not allow David to build a temple, he did make some very profound promises to David in what is often called the Davidic covenant. This covenant included a promise of national permanence, a perpetual dynasty, and a favored son whom Yahweh would adopt as his own (2 Sa. 7:8-16). This covenant was different than the Sinai covenant. At Sinai, the covenant was conditioned upon obedience. David's covenant was a grant with no apparent conditions attached.

The Temple on Mt. Zion

In anticipation of the building of a permanent house for Yahweh by his son, David bought a threshing floor on Zion (1 Chr. 21:22--22:1). Elaborate plans were made for construction (1 Chr. 22:2-5; 28:11-19; 29:1-9), and upon David's death, Solomon began and completed the work (2 Chr. 2:1-2; 3:1; 5:1; 6:1-2). Yahweh's choice of Zion, David and the temple marked a tremendous transition in Israel's worship (2 Chr. 6:3-11). Sinai, Moses and the law were not left behind, but in the tables of stone and the chest of the covenant, the visible reminders of Sinai now rested on a new mountain, Mt. Zion (2 Chr. 5:7-10).

Zion Absorbs the Sinai Tradition

One of the results of establishing the new center of Israelite faith on Zion was

³ For an archaeological assessment of the City of David, see H. Shanks, "The City of David after Five Years of Digging," *BAR* XI, 6 (November/December 1985) 22-38.

the transfer of imagery, which once belonged to Sinai over to the new mountain. The pyrotechnics that accompanied Yahweh's descent to Sinai were now associated with Zion (Ps. 97:1-9). Just as Yahweh was described as a warrior coming from Sinai (Ps. 68:7-8), he was now coming from Zion (Ps. 50:2-4; 76:1-3). Yahweh had made the trek from Sinai to his permanent dwelling on Zion (Ps. 68:15-18).

Some amount of justification for this shift is to be seen in Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac (Ge. 22:2; 2 Chr. 3:1) and in the Song of Moses by the Red Sea (Ex. 15:13-18). Not only Sinai, but Zion (Moriah), also, was the "mountain of Yahweh"

David's Dynasty and Zion

The fundamental connection between David himself and Zion, David's city, became stronger as time passed. The Davidic covenant came to be firmly associated with the temple on Zion (Ps. 2:6-9; 78:65-72; 132:10-18).

Zion, the Center of Worship

So important did Zion become that it was heralded as the special home of Yahweh (Ps. 9:11; 48:1-14; 87:1-2; 99:1-3). The deep desire of every Israelite was to make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem to worship Yahweh on Zion (Ps. 84:1-2, 5-7). Even more to the point, the vision of ideal spiritual life was to live within the temple precincts (Ps. 23:6; 27:4; 84:3-4, 10). The psalms that have been labeled "songs of ascents" (120-134) were associated with such pilgrimages to Jerusalem and the holy mountain (cf. Is. 30:29).⁴ The essence of true worship was purity (Ps. 24:3-6; 15:1-5).

The Eternal, Cosmic Mountain

Because of God's covenant with David and the association of this covenant with Zion, Zion came to be regarded as eternally secure (Ps. 46:1-7; 45:4-14; 125:1-2; 133:3; 146:10). Furthermore, it was conceptualized as the center of the world (Eze. 5:5), the navel of the earth (Eze. 38:12), and the earthly manifestation of the heavenly temple (Ps. 11:4).

The Divided Monarchy and Zion Theology

When the nation split at the accession of Rehoboam, Solomon's son (1 Ki. 12), a sharp tension arose. It was not politically feasible to allow the citizens of the northern nation to make religious pilgrimages to the southern nation for the annual worship festivals. The association of David's family with Zion and the temple is

⁴ D. Kidner, *Psalms 1-72* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1973) 43.

never so clearly apparent as when Jeroboam set up alternate worship centers at Bethel and Dan (1 Ki. 12:26-33). This action was probably an effort to capitalize on the religious significance of these shrines in ancient times, especially in relation to Jacob (Israel), the northern nation's namesake (Ge. 12:8; 28:10-19; 31:13; 35:1-3, 14-15).

The prophets took a dim view of this alternate religious cult (1 Ki. 13:1-3; Ho. 10:5; Am. 3:13-14; 4:4; 5:5-6), for to them it represented a broken covenant (Ho. 8:1-6). The northern kings, as would be expected, defended it (1 Ki. 13:4-5; Am. 7:10-13), but ever afterward, Jeroboam was held up as the prototype for Israel's sin (1 Ki. 13:33-34; 14:14, 16; 15:30, 34; 16:2, 7, 19, 26, 31; 22:52; 2 Ki. 3:3; 10:29, 31; 13:2, 6, 11; 14:24; 15:9, 18, 24, 28). The eventual exile of the northern nation under Assyria was traced directly backward to Jeroboam's alternate cult (2 Ki. 17:18-23). Both in the north and in the south there were elements, which continued to remain loyal to the Sinai ideal, and these can be seen in the trip of Elijah to Sinai and in the Recabites of Judah in the 7th century.

Elijah's Trip to Sinai

It is not unlikely that the general practice of even faithful Israelites in the northern nation was to emphasize the Sinai covenant and to de-emphasize the Zion theology. Certainly Zion was no longer available to them as a worship center. Elijah's trip to Horeb (Sinai) and the accompanying collection of images that parallel the original Sinai experience may point toward an effort on his part to renew the Sinai faith (1 Ki. 19).⁵ The record is quite clear that there were faithful Israelites who were true to Yahweh regardless of the loss of Zion (1 Ki. 19:18).

The Recabites

The clan of the Recabites was an extremist group who had dedicated themselves to a radical return to the Sinai desert pattern of living. Apparently inspired by the Yahwist zeal of Jehu (2 Ki. 10:15-28), this clan completely denied themselves the agrarian culture of settled life in Canaan, preferring instead to live the nomadic way their ancestors lived in the sojourn (Je. 35:6-10). They existed as a throwback to pre-Zion times.

The Theological Tragedy

When the northern nation collapsed under the invasion of Shalmaneser and his successor, Sargon II⁶ the southern nation of Judah clung tenaciously to her Zion

⁵ B. Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966) 217.

⁶ F. Bruce, *Israel and the Nations* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963) 66.

theology and the belief that she would have unconditional protection from Yahweh whose home was on Zion. This bold confidence was misplaced, however, as Micah made clear (Mi. 1:2-5, 8-9, 12; 2:6, 11; 3:5-7, 9-12). To be sure, there was a temporary respite because of the Davidic covenant (Is. 36:1; 37:9b-11, 14-17, 21-23, 33-37); however, Jeremiah declared that the notion of unconditional protection based on a Zion theology was deceptive (Je. 4:10; 5:12-13; 6:13-14; 7:1-15; 8:10-11; 22:1-9; 26:1-19). The tragic end did occur, just as Yahweh had said. Jerusalem was razed, and Zion was burned (2 Ki. 25:1-11). There were those who predicted that Zion would be restored within a couple of years, but their prophecies were only wishful thinking (Je. 28:1-17; 29:1-9, 15-23). Zion lay in ashes (La. 1:1, 4, 6, 17; 2:1, 4, 6-10, 13-14, 18-21).

Strange Songs from a Strange Land

The emotional, cultural and theological devastation resulting from the loss of Zion is captured in some of the psalms of the exile (Ps. 74:1-11; 79:1-5; 137:1-9).⁷ The loss of Zion was far more than the loss of a piece of geography. It represented the loss of the entire homeland, the capital, the dynasty of David with its promises, the culture of several centuries and the religion as it had been traditionally practiced (Je. 8:19; Is. 64:8-12).

The Hope of a Nation in Exile

One of the primary concerns of the prophets who preceded the exile was to address the theological emergency, which was looming on the horizon. Dire calamity might leave the dynasty of David like a felled tree, but the stump was not dead (Is. 11:1-3). Zion would once more be restored (Is. 4:2-6), and a remnant of the faithful would return (Is. 10:20-25; 37:30-32). In graphic illustration, Isaiah named his two sons with names pointing to the calamity and the restoration to follow (Is. 7:3; 8:1). A new Davidic son would arise (Is. 9:6-7; Mic. 5:2-4; Je. 23:5-6). The hope inspired by this prophecy was directed quite literally toward the original Mt. Zion (Je. 24:1-7; 29:10-14; Eze. 11:16-20; Ps. 69:34-36; 102:12-22; Je. 50:4-5). The expectation of a regained national prominence was strong (Is. 60:1-5, 10-14). The duty of the exiled nation was to wait patiently for Yahweh to act in his own time (Is. 40:1-2, 9-11, 27-31), and in his time Zion would be restored (Is. 51:3, 11; 52:1-3, 7-10; 62:1, 11-12; Je. 31:3-6). When it was restored, it would become the center of worship for all the nations (Is. 56:6-7; 66:18-21)

⁷ The dating of individual psalms is a precarious and often subjective business, but these are generally agreed upon as reflecting the exile, cf. A. Weiser, *The Psalms* [OTL] (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962), lcc. cit.

The Hope Deferred

When the exiles made their trek back to rebuild their temple on Zion in Jerusalem (Ezr. 1:1-4, 7-11; 6:3-5), the first flush of excitement was intense (Ps. 126:1-6). But the actual restoration quickly became a bitter disappointment. The repatriated exiles were dogged with a series of bad crops, because they were delinquent in building the new temple (Hg. 1:2-22). They confronted obstinate neighbors (Ezr. 4:1-5). Even when the temple was finally completed, it was received with mixed emotions (Ezr. 3:10-13; Hg. 2:3).

The rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem also languished (Ne. 2:17), and when the repatriates finally set themselves to complete the task, they were forced to do so at half speed because of opposition (Ne. 4:16-23). All this seemed far from fulfilling the golden prophecies of restoration. Once again, the hope of Zion's glory was pushed ahead to a distant time when the king would return (Zec. 6:12-13b, 15; 8:1-3; 9:9-10). The final note of the OT pointed toward that future day when Yahweh's messenger would come to the temple on Zion (Mal. 3:1-4)

The Emergence of Judaism

The Jewish nation never completely recovered from the exile. Many survivors from the northern nation apparently were absorbed into the southern nation.⁸ Other northerners intermingled with the colonists, which the Assyrians moved into the land of Palestine to replace them (2 Ki. 17:24-41). Those who went into exile from the northern nation disappeared for all practical purposes.⁹ Many of the exiles in the southern nation chose not to return to Palestine, and they were instrumental in proselytizing members from other nationalities into the Jewish faith (Est. 8:17).¹⁰ Though a remnant did return to Palestine, they never really escaped the domination of the empire-builders. Over the next several centuries, they were shuttled between the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks and the Romans. Finally, in the late first century A.D., the Romans dispersed them for good.

For most of Israel, then, a tradition had to be fashioned that could function in a world without a temple, without Zion and without a native land. This tradition, called Judaism, replaced the temple with the synagogue, the daily sacrifice with prayer and the altar with the family table. The Jewish home acquired the centrality

⁸ Archaeological excavations suggest that many northerners fled south into the neighboring Kingdom of Judah in order to escape the Assyrian onslaught even before the fall of Samaria. Jerusalem underwent a major expansion in the 8th Century B.C. by a factor of three or four times its former size, cf. M. Broshi, "Part of the Lost Ten Tribes Located," BAR (Sept. 1975) 27, 32 and "The Expansion of Jerusalem in the Reigns of Hezekiah and Manasseh," *Israel Exploration Journal*, 24 (1974) 21

⁹ Theories exist as to what became of the so-called "lost ten tribes," but there is no certain answer.

¹⁰ H. Flanders, Jr., and B. Cresson, *Introduction to the Bible* (New York: John Wiley, 1973) 221.

that Zion once held.¹¹ After the destruction of the second temple by the Romans in 70 A.D., all Jews, even Palestinian ones, were forced to accept this shift in tradition. To be sure, there has arisen in more modern times a Jewish movement back toward the actual land of Palestine (called Zionism), but this has won only a part of the Jewish constituency.

The Christian Answer

Christianity, which began within Jewish circles in the first century A.D., provided a solution to the unfulfilled predictions of Zion's restoration. The Christian fulfillment was in Jesus of Nazareth. It not only included a broadening of the definition of Zion, but it also included a broadening of the definition of the people of God.

Jesus, the New Center of Faith

The faith of the NT shifted the emphasis away from Sinai and Zion and toward the person of Jesus Christ. It was not that Sinai and Zion were rejected as much as they were fulfilled and completed in Jesus. One of the most important declarations of the gospels was that Jesus was the descendent of David (Mt. 1:1-17; 12:23; 21:9; Mk. 11:9-10; Lk. 2:4, 11, 31).

David's descendent was understood to be the instrument of restoration (Lk. 1:32, 67-75), and the early church considered this to be an indispensable part of the gospel (Ro. 1:2-3; 2 Ti. 2:8). All the promises of God found their "yes" in Jesus (2 Co. 1:20).

Matthew, especially, serves as a model of this shift in emphasis, for he shows that Jesus embodies all that Israel means. He went down into Egypt to avoid destruction (Mt. 2:13; cf. Ge. 45:4-8) and was brought up again as God's Son (Mt. 2:15; cf. Ex. 4:22; Ho. 11:1). He passed through the waters (Mt. 3:13-17; cf. Ex. 14:22) and was tempted in the desert (Mt. 4:1-11; Dt. 8:3). Just as Moses ascended Sinai to receive Torah, Jesus sat on a mountain to give God's authoritative interpretation of Torah (Mt. 5:1-2, 17, 21-22, 27-28, 31-32, 33-34, 38-39, 43-44; cf. Ex. 20:1-17). The new and greater Moses was transfigured just as the original Moses (Mt. 17:1-3; cf. Ex. 34:29-35). It was no accident that in Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem he was hailed as the new king who would ascend to Zion (Mt. 21:1-5; Zec. 9:9-10). He was the stone rejected by the builders but destined to be the capstone (Mt. 21:42; Ps. 118:22-23). The old center of faith on Zion would be thrown down (Mt. 24:1-2), and the new center of faith was to be Jesus the Messiah, God's Son (Mt. 16:13-18).

¹¹ J. Levenson, Sinai & Zion (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1985) 180-181.

John's gospel reinforces the concept that neither geographical Zion nor any other geographical mountain would any longer serve as the central shrine (Jn. 4:20-24).

Sinai, Zion and Jesus

The history of God's redemptive action in the Bible may be seen in different ways, but one important way may be observed in Stephen's discourse before the Jewish Sanhedrin. From Mt. Sinai (Ac. 7:30-38) to Mt. Zion (Ac. 7:44-50) to Jesus (7:51-53) was a natural transition for Stephen according to the Christian perspective.

Just as the images of Sinai were transferred to Zion in the time of David, so the images of Zion were transferred to Jesus. The restoration of David's family in Jesus Christ (Ac. 15:13-18), the surpassing glory of Jesus over Moses (2 Co. 3:7-18), Christ the stone of stumbling in Zion (Ro. 9:33; 1 Pe. 2:6-8), Jesus the salvation which comes out of Zion (Ro. 11:26-27), the free Jerusalem as opposed to the Jerusalem in bondage (Ga. 4:24-26), and the spiritual Zion which is the kingdom of God (He. 12:18-24, 28-29) all point to this transfer. Zion is still the hope of God's people. But it is not a geographical but a spiritual Zion toward which the Christian looks (Re. 14:1). Here Christians have no enduring city (He. 13:14), but they seek the city of God, which is to come (Re. 21:1-4).