

*Zion Symbolism in Hebrews:  
Hebrews 12:18-24 as a Hermeneutical Key to the  
Epistle*

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**SUMMARY**

This study argues that the theology and hermeneutics of Hebrews find their central theme in the Sinai and Zion symbolism of Hebrews 12:18-24. The author contends that citations of the Old Testament, the rhetorical features, and the structure of Hebrews are all indebted to the Sinai/Zion contrast. Hebrews is not an expression of Platonism or Gnosticism, but has its backgrounds in Jewish reflections on Zion and in apocalyptic hopes for restoration.

**ZUSAMMENFASSUNG**

Die Studie argumentiert, dass die Theologie und die Hermeneutik des Hebräerbriefes ihr zentrales Thema im Symbolismus von Sinai und Zion in Hebräer 12,18-24 finden. Der Autor behauptet, dass die alttestamentlichen Zitate, die rhetorischen Merkmale und die Struktur des Hebräerbriefes sich alle dem Sinai/Zion Gegensatz verdanken. Der Hebräerbrief sei kein Ausdruck von Platonismus oder Gnostizismus, sondern habe seinen Hintergrund in jüdischen Reflektionen über Zion und in apokalyptischen Hoffnungen auf Wiederherstellung.

**RÉSUMÉ**

L'auteur tente de montrer que la théologie et l'herméneutique de l'épître aux Hébreux ont pour thème central le symbolisme du Sinaï et de Sion exposé au chapitre 12 (v. 18-24). Il soutient la thèse que les citations de l'Ancien Testament, les procédés rhétoriques, la structure de l'épître découlent du contraste entre le Sinaï et Sion. La teneur de l'épître n'est donc ni platonique, ni gnostique, mais elle a ses racines dans les réflexions du judaïsme sur Sion et dans l'espérance de restauration nourrie par l'apocalyptique.

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In his opening chapter Son examines the use of the Old Testament in Hebrews, the background of Hebrews, and the central theme and structure Hebrews. For Son, the hermeneutics of the author of Hebrews can only be evaluated (and thus potentially replicated) if one has already identified the theological presuppositions which make his exegesis appropriate. Rather than posit the background of Hebrews in any single direction (e.g. Philo, Platonism, Gnosticism, etc), Son argues that Hebrews should be set against the backdrop of the socio-history of the first century context since no single source/influence can adequately describe the whole framework of the epistle. He regards Hebrews as a multi-themed letter whose coherence is grasped through a text-linguistic approach that illuminates the single task of the letter.

Chapter two gives a historical survey of the Sinai and Zion symbolism of Hebrews. Son overviews the Sinai

symbolism against its background in Israelite religion and surveys Zion symbolism against its background in the OT, Judaism, and the NT. He concludes that Zion evokes a cluster of symbols that expresses the religious and political ideology of Israel and their relationship with Yahweh in the world. Sinai on the other hand was symbolic of Israel's disobedience and the judgment they were to receive if they disobeyed the law. Son notes the rise of a tradition that attributed a transcendent quality to Zion over Sinai which was frequently described in spatial terms as a contrast between heaven and earth. In Hebrews the Zion symbolism serves to show the superior nature of Jesus Christ over various institutions and figures from the OT.

In chapter three Son attempts to demonstrate the relationship of the Sinai and Zion symbolism to the themes, background, and hermeneutics of the letter. It is Son's contention that the Sinai/Zion symbolism can be related to the structure and rhetoric of Hebrews, most of the theological subjects can be derived from this Sinai/Zion symbolism, and the background of Hebrews lies not in platonic metaphysics but in apocalyptic traditions concerning the restoration of Zion.

The contents of chapter four centers upon "The Son as the King of Zion is Superior to the Angels of the Sinai Revelation". Son investigates why the Son has to be superior to the angels and how the author of the letter proves that it is so. The mention of angels according to Son is not related to angel worship but to their role as mediators of the Sinai revelation. Jesus is superior to them just as he is superior to other Sinai figures like Moses, Aaron, the old covenant, the instituted sacrifices, and the tabernacle. Jesus' superiority to the angels is established by a christological interpretation of several royal Psalms as the King of the heavenly Zion.

Son focuses on "The Superiority of Jesus to Moses in Hebrews 3:1-4:13" in chapter five. The Sinai theme is reflected here more strongly than any elsewhere in the letter, as Jesus emerges as the figure who leads the Christian community into their heavenly Sabbath-rest. In Son's view, the Sinai/Zion contrast underpins the contrast of Jesus and Moses and the concept of rest. Much the same continues in chapter six "Zion and the High Priesthood of Jesus (Heb. 4:14-7:28) where Son argues that Jesus' priesthood is according to the pattern of Melchizedek and anchored in a Zion/Sinai contrast over and against the Levitical priesthood.

The final segment, chapter seven, looks at "Zion and the Temple Symbolism in Hebrews". Son argues that the background to Jesus as the priest/king and the superior nature of the heavenly temple is to be found in Ps. 110:1 and Jer. 31:31-34. Zion is the essential locus of both the Son's exaltation to the heavenly sanctuary and the eschatological restoration of the new covenant. This enables the author of the epistle to provide assurance to his readers based on the superior nature of the Christian faith (Heb. 9:24-25) and also to encourage/warn his readers to remain faithful until Christ appears again (Heb. 9:27-28).



In the conclusion, Son summarizes his findings as: (1) Sinai and Zion are theological symbols that embrace all the theological subjects discussed in the epistle especially in terms of explicating the person and ministry of Jesus, the high priesthood, the new covenant and the new temple. (2) Sinai and Zion are invested with cosmological and eschatological symbolism. Jesus has entered the heavenly sanctuary and there is no going back to the old order of things. Thus, believers must complete their journey until they enter their final "rest". (3) The Sinai and Zion imagery possesses rhetorical implications as it shows the superiority of Zion over Sinai. Sinai is earthly whereas Zion is heavenly and the ministry of Zion is qualitatively superior to that of Sinai.

This is a well-written thesis that makes a significant contribution to the background of Hebrews. Some elements of the Zion/Sinai typology that Son posits throughout the epistle are stronger than others (e.g. importation of the Sinai theme in Hebrews 1-2 via the role of angels as mediators of the Sinai revelation is considerably weaker than his exposition of the contrast between Jesus and Moses in Hebrews 3-4). I also think that the platonic philosophical background, while often over-emphasized in scholarship, probably has a lot more mileage in it than what Son allows. Nonetheless, Son successfully moves the debate about the background, hermeneutics, and theological framework of Hebrews forward. Moreover, he shows through careful exegesis that *Jesus is better*.

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### ***Faith: A Practical Theological Reconstruction***

**F. Gerrit Immink**

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003, 301pp., pb/\$32.00

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#### **SUMMARY**

Utrecht Professor F. Gerrit Immink's book evidences a wide-ranging familiarity with the many strands of Anglo-American and German practical theology while being grounded in the classic Christian tradition of Reformed doctrinal theology. The focus of this book is on faith as a practice, and Immink develops this idea as a methodological background for the various empirical and practical sub-disciplines that make up practical theology. This is a doctrinally if not materially rich account of a discipline that in English treatments is most often marked by the opposite priority.

#### **ZUSAMMENFASSUNG**

Das Buch des Utrechter Professors F. Gerrit Immink zeigt eine weitreichende Vertrautheit mit den vielen Strängen anglo-amerikanischer und deutscher praktischer Theologie und ist gleichzeitig in der klassischen christlichen Tradition der reformierten dogmatischen Theologie verwurzelt. Das Augenmerk dieses Buches liegt auf dem Glauben als einer Sache der Praxis, und Immink diese Vorstellung als

methodischen Hintergrund für die verschiedenen empirischen und praktischen Gebiete, aus denen die praktische Theologie besteht. Das Buch ist eine dogmatisch, wenn auch nicht material reiche Darstellung eines theologischen Gebietes, das in englischen Abhandlungen oft mit den entgegen gesetzten Prioritäten dargestellt wird.

#### **RÉSUMÉ**

F. Gerrit Immink, professeur à Utrecht, fait preuve dans ce livre d'une connaissance étendue des nombreuses tendances de la théologie pratique anglo-saxonne et allemande, tout en étant lui-même bien enraciné dans la tradition classique de la dogmatique réformée. Il s'intéresse ici au thème de la pratique de la foi et le développe pour en faire le socle des diverses branches empiriques et pratiques de la théologie pratique. Il aborde ainsi sa discipline sous un angle doctrinal riche alors que celle-ci est le plus souvent traitée dans le monde anglophone avec la priorité opposée.

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The Dutch have always played a bridging role in European culture, and happily their strong Reformed heritage and their proximity to German theology has become all the more accessible with their recent shift to writing in English. Utrecht Professor F. Gerrit Immink's book evidences a wide-ranging familiarity with the many strands of Anglo-American and German practical theology while being grounded in the classic Christian tradition of Reformed doctrinal theology. If nothing else, we can be thankful for this introduction that discussion in English, and to many modern (and untranslated) Dutch works in practical theology.

The book's first part lays out a theological account of faith that begins with God's prior act, but insists that human faith is an act imbedded in the human mind and social activity. Faith is *human* and must be *formed*, but Immink's Reformed reservations about ritualistic and institutional elements of the church turns his attention away from currently popular approaches in which point the church's worship is the main location of this formation by the Spirit. He makes the suggestive allusion that this happens in the church's diaconal ministry in the world, in which the church learns lessons that it may, in turn, bring to the task of reforming its intuitional structures.

The book's second part deploys the traditional Reformed concepts of justification and sanctification to clarify how God works to reform human lives in the activity of faith. This discussion ends with an illuminating comparison of Reformed and Puritan-Methodist accounts of sanctification and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Whereas the Puritan-Methodist strand of evangelical theology deploys definitions of sanctification which emphasise the concepts of development and growth, and so assume a receding prominence of sin in the life of believers, the Reformed work from concepts of restraint and discipline to yield a picture of sanctifica-