

THE LIMITED USE OF “ZION” BY NEW TESTAMENT WRITERS¹

Overview. This paper will examine the infrequent use in the New Testament of a vibrant tradition about Mount Zion in the Hebrew scriptures. After an overview of the Old Testament background, the seven occurrences by writers of the New Testament will be examined. Then a few reasons why the New Testament does not make greater use of “Zion” will be proposed.

Introduction. The word “Zion” occurs 210 times in the English Bible, and this includes 167 uses in the Old Testament, 36 uses in the Apocrypha, and only seven uses by writers in the New Testament. Of these 167 occurrences of Zion in the Hebrew scriptures, 154 of these (or 92 percent) come from Isaiah, Jeremiah (including Lamentation), the Psalms, and Joel, Micah, and Zechariah.

In the writings of the New Testament, the paucity of seven total references is somewhat surprising, since the New Testament mentions Jerusalem by name 146 times (cf. 651 times for the Old Testament and 204 times for the Apocrypha). The more persistent use of the name of the Holy City, however, does not appear to translate into any controlling theme about Mount Zion. Paul and John each refer to Zion only two times, and Matthew, Peter, and the writer of Hebrews each make reference to Zion only once. With the prevalence of information about the Zion tradition coming from the Latter Prophets (especially Isaiah) and the Psalms, writings that New Testament writers quote often, it appears that there might be selective use of or reevaluation of the Zion heritage by the early disciples of Jesus.

Zion Begins. The word “Zion” occurs for the first time in the Hebrew scriptures as “the stronghold of Zion” that David defeated and took from the Jebusites (2 Samuel 5.7; cf. 1

Chronicles 11.5). The ancient town of Jebus and its “zion” thus became the location for David’s royal residence and his center for administration of the tribes of Israel—“the city of David.”

David well understood both the political and the spiritual power of Israel’s ancient institutions and symbols. With great fanfare and celebration, the Ark of the Covenant was installed on Zion, and there it stayed until Solomon transferred the “Ark of God” from “the city of David, which is Zion” to his new temple (see 1 Kings 8.1; 2 Chronicles 5.2).

David, who built a house or palace for himself soon after taking the Jebusite stronghold (2 Samuel 5.11; 7.1), apparently had been prohibited by a prophetic oracle from erecting a more permanent dwelling for the Lord. This objection subsided with the accession of Solomon to Israel’s throne. In the fourth year of his rule, Solomon began in earnest to build a temple for the Lord as well as his royal palace (see 1 Kings 5–7; cf. 2 Chronicles 2.1–5.1). Then, as David had sanctioned the divine origin of his rule over Israel with the presence of the Ark in Zion, so Solomon moved the Ark of the Covenant to the newly completed temple (1 Kings 8–9; 2 Chronicles 5.2–7.22).

The geographical precision in the text for the movement of the Ark indicates the growth of Jerusalem during David’s reign and its further expansion to higher elevation (i.e., toward the north) under Solomon. Solomon directed the key leaders of Israel “to bring up the ark of the covenant of the Lord out of the city of David, which is Zion” (1 Kings 8.1; 2 Chronicles 5.2). David’s men had conquered Jebus which was situated on a narrow ridge (cf. the Ophel ridge) southeast of today’s Old City. Solomon enlarged the city toward the north and built his temple on the area of an old threshing floor that David bought from Araunah the Jebusite (see 2 Samuel 24.18-25). Once the new temple had been dedicated, Zion—the designation for the city of David

and now for the city of King Solomon—simply progressed with the Ark of God that was securely established in its new resting place. The hill to the north on which the temple stood “became known as Mount Zion.”

Celebration of Zion, Its King, and The Lord. *The Psalms.* That the leaders of Israel’s liturgical resources referred so often to “Zion, my holy hill” or “Mount Zion” or “daughter Zion” or simply “Zion” is no surprise. Very early the connection was made between Mount Zion, the Lord God who dwelt in the temple there, and Israel’s king whom the Lord installed there. It was quite natural, therefore, to connect Zion, the locale of the central temple apparatus, to Zion’s king and to Zion’s God. By the dynamics of the power of place, “Zion” represented or stood for the presence of the Lord God in the midst of his people through the sanctuary of the nation’s sacerdotal activities as well as the sanctuary (i.e., royal palace) of the nation’s political activities. Consequently, Mount Zion, the Lord’s presence, the divine king, the covenant people—the ideas seem to cross over, to blend, or to merge into the other, which makes it difficult sometimes to define precisely what “Zion” refers to in certain texts.

Similarly, the name itself seems to be infused in the liturgical corpus of the Psalms that spans so many generations of the Lord’s people. Mention of Zion in the Psalter appears to be spread evenly throughout the whole collection.

These profuse and lavish connections between Zion (i.e., Jerusalem, the city of David), its Creator or Lord, its earthly king, and the people of God are by no means accidental. In Israel’s “Psalmbook” or Psalter, the imagery consistently and intentionally calls out for the Lord God and Zion itself to be glorified and praised. But this makes it challenging to understand why the followers of Jesus in the first century do not make greater use of “Zion” in their writings when

they quote or allude to any of the Zion psalms. The disciples who wrote gospels about Jesus and letters to his churches were Jewish (except for Luke), and they were intimately aware of and fond of Jerusalem (e.g., Mark 13.1; Luke 21.5). They quote from the Psalms more than any other writing of the Hebrew scriptures, and they quote from Psalms where the heightened, symbolic name for the Holy City—Zion—is highlighted. But they rarely refer to Zion by name when they quote or allude to a particular psalm.

Zion Destroyed, Lost, But Restored by the Lord God. In the Latter Prophets, the Zion tradition stays vibrant and remains a pertinent theme for the security and good fortune of God’s covenant people. But as a result of Israel’s stubborn rebellion against the Lord God and the nation’s apostasy, Zion is destroyed by the Assyrian and Babylonian world powers, is lost, but eventually is restored. Many of the Latter Prophets echo the sentiments of Israel’s singers and supplicants in their thoughts about “Zion.” In the writings of the two major prophets—Isaiah and Jeremiah—who call upon “Zion” in reference to Jerusalem, the prophetic themes of Zion’s glory, its destruction, and its eventual restoration remain persistent.

If Jeremiah seems to be the most emotional of the Latter Prophets who talk about “Zion” in their writings, Isaiah perhaps is the most prolific and no less impassioned. Isaiah refers to Zion about 54 times which is more than any other writing in the Old Testament. Isaiah also refers to “Jerusalem” 53 times, to “Israel” 95 times, and to “Judah” 31 times. This prevalence of Zion and Jerusalem in the oracles of Isaiah simply could be due to the sheer abundance of material produced by Isaiah during his lengthy career. The language used by Isaiah, as well as Jeremiah, is intense and spirited, as it addresses a variety of contexts and situations to which each one speaks.

To be sure, Isaiah is faithful to his calling as the one who witnessed the holy Lord in his temple and who gave testimony to his glory, his majesty, and his divine judgment (see chapter 6). What is striking, though, is the emphasis in Isaiah about Zion's "redeemer" (14 of 20 Old Testament occurrences; cf. his 29 uses of "redeem") and Zion's "savior" (8 of 15 Old Testament occurrences; cf. his 23 uses of "salvation" and 7 uses of "saved"). It is little wonder, due to Isaiah's stress on the Lord's redemption and salvation of Israel, that he is the favorite Hebrew prophet of the writers of the New Testament. He is quoted more often than any other prophet, and he is mentioned in the New Testament by name twenty-two times.

Zechariah, one of The Twelve, also is a choice prophetic source for New Testament writings and referred to or quoted frequently. The prophet's name means "the one who Yahweh (the Lord) remembers," and he speaks to the Judean exiles (ca. 520 BC) who had returned to their homeland and had great hopes for a reconstructed temple in Zion. But Zechariah's prophetic "word of the Lord" (1.1) goes beyond any rebuilding of an earthly temple or a temporal restoration of Zion (i.e., the return of the Lord to "Zion"; 8.1-17). In apocalyptic fashion, the perceptive seer predicts magnificent "joy and gladness" for Judah and Jerusalem when "many peoples and strong nations" will "seek the Lord of hosts in Jerusalem" and "entreat the favor of the Lord" (8.18-23). And this universal transformation will be accomplished for Zion by the Lord through his "Divine Warrior."

In anticipation, the prophet extols, "Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey" (9.9). The Divine Warrior (cf. 9.14) comes humbly to Zion, disarms the nations and commands peace, reestablishes his covenant with his

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people, and restores scattered Israel (9.1–11.17). “On that day” (i.e., the day of the Lord), after Jerusalem is purged (12.1–13.6), the shepherd and associate of the Lord will be stricken and his sheep will be scattered (13.7-9). Then, a great battle between the nations and Jerusalem, with plagues and earth-shattering catastrophic events, will be won by the Lord. And the Lord of hosts, with his heavenly hosts and his reconstituted people, will be victorious and will enjoy complete union and bliss (14.1-21).

Zion Awaits Its King. As in the Psalms, the Latter Prophets of Israel and Judah, such as Zechariah, Isaiah, and Jeremiah, communicate a glorious as well as a disastrous history and tradition about Zion and its king. There is much contained in the sacred writings to draw from, but the writers of the New Testament leave most of it untouched. Certainly, the city of Jerusalem itself, its people, and the nation undergo upheavals and drastic changes after the destruction and deportations by the Babylonians in the early sixth century BC. The postexilic recovery and rebuilding under Nehemiah unquestionably gives shape to Jerusalem, and to hope for Zion, during the Persian, Hellenistic, and Hasmonean periods. But the most significant developments for the Jerusalem of Jesus and his disciples happen in the pre-Herodian and Herodian eras.

It seems that the earliest followers of Jesus (i.e., writers of the New Testament) would have considered Zion to be the ancient city of David and Solomon and its temple complex. But because of the lack of substantial evidence, it may be impossible to know for sure whether Jews and Christians in Palestine during the first century AD think of Jerusalem, or any section thereof, as Mount Zion, apart from references in the Hebrew scriptures to the Holy City as Zion. This is not to say that these descendants of Abraham and the Israelites feel no attachment to Zion, or

Jerusalem (and its people and nation), as part of their heritage. They do, and they make reference to Zion in their religious writings (if only minimally, as seems to be the case for the New Testament). But it is not the same intensity, the same “theology of place” for Zion that is in the Psalms and the Latter Prophets.

For the earliest disciples of Jesus, though, a notable change had occurred that made a rich and vibrant “theology of place” about the Zion (i.e., Jerusalem) of the Hebrew prophets less attractive. As D. C. T. Sheriffs aptly notes:

The New Testament describes Zion in terms which leave behind the ethnic, territorial, and economic framework of David’s kingdom. Instead of a physical Temple and acropolis to make visible the reality of God’s kingdom, there is Jesus (cf. John 4.20ff.). By entering the new covenant, believers have already joined heavenly worshippers and ‘have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God’ (Hebrews 12.22; cf. Revelation 14.1). There is no sacred city, shrine, or site on earth which gives access to God’s presence as did Old Testament Zion.

Though Paul foresees the national conversion of Jews when ‘the deliverer will come from Zion’ (Romans 11.26), the New Testament knows nothing of Zion as a rebuilt earthly Temple or world capital, or focus of national ideology. When dispensational theology reads Old Testament Zion eschatology in a literalist manner, it appears to misconstrue its poetic symbolism, its contextual polemic, and its re-interpretation by Jesus and the New Testament. ‘The heavenly Jerusalem’ and all forms of earthly Zionism are disconnected by the New Testament.²

This “spiritualization” of Zion by the New Testament seems to explain the limited use of “Zion” in Old Testament passages that are quoted by writers of the New Testament. But it does not negate the connections, admittedly in a new and different sense, between Zion, Jerusalem as the dwelling place of the Lord, the Davidic king who comes to reign in Zion, and the faithful who come to Zion to experience, as his people, the presence of the Lord. The old Zion themes, even though they are found in just a few texts, remain consistent in the New Testament.

Zion’s King Returns, Is Striken, but Overcomes. *Matthew 21.1-11.* Matthew uses Isaiah 62.11 and Zechariah 9.9 in his Zion quotation that gives prophetic legitimacy to what has been

called the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. This triumphal entry concludes the journey of the Messiah to Jerusalem (19.1–20.34) and highlights the Messiah’s final week in the Holy City (21.1–28.20).

Matthew calls our attention to the humble arrival of Jesus in Zion (21.1-11) and the marvelous acclamation by “a very large crowd” who shout out:

Hosanna to the Son of David!
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!
Hosanna in the highest heaven!

There is a lot of shouting about the “Son of David” in Matthew’s narrative at this point (e.g., 20.30, 31; 21.9, 15). And this exuberant approval by the common people who were in Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover festival causes turmoil in “the whole city” over the issue of the identity of Jesus (i.e., “Who is this?” in verse 10). Matthew indicates without hesitation that the commoners (i.e., “the crowds”) knew the answer, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee” (verse 11).

In order to emphasize the activity of the Lord and his followers at Bethphage on the Mount of Olives (verse 1), Matthew brings to the recollection of his hearers (i.e., readers) the words of the prophet Zechariah. Jesus tells “two disciples” to go into the village and fetch a donkey and its colt for him to use as his means of conveyance from Olivet into the city. And, if anyone gives resistance to their apparent pilfering of the animals, he adds, “just say this, ‘The Lord needs them’” (verse 3). To this assertion, Jesus explains, “he will send them immediately.” All this seems prearranged, as it is told by the evangelist, as if Jesus himself intentionally directs matters “to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet” (verse 4; cf. verse 6).

Matthew prefaces the Zechariah prediction with a quote from Isaiah 62.11–“Tell the daughter of Zion”—in which Isaiah combines the coming of Israel’s Savior to Zion with universal recognition (i.e., “the Lord has proclaimed to the end of the earth”) of the Lord’s saving work (i.e., “his reward . . . and his recompense”). Zechariah’s oracle (Zechariah 9.1–11.17) also connects Zion, Jerusalem, and the coming of Israel’s King or Savior:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!
Lo, your king comes to you . . .

The prophet spotlights the initial arrival of the Lord’s divine warrior, not as one who wages war and brings about destruction (although that will come later), but as a “triumphant and victorious” king who is “humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” In his coming, this king will “command peace to the nations” and “his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth” (Zechariah 9.9-10).

Matthew simply echos the two prophets, and possibly Jesus himself, in tying together his themes. Throughout his narrative, Matthew stresses the connections between Jesus of Nazareth (i.e., the one whom they have learned to call “Lord”), the Son of David or God’s anointed one—the Christ or Messiah, and the king who comes or returns to Israel. That Jesus is this king who comes to lead God’s people (i.e., daughter of Zion) is accentuated by the fact that he comes humbly or meekly by riding a lowly beast of burden into the city.

This connection, too, is no accident; it is in fulfillment of the prophetic word. Jesus the humble king comes to Zion, according to the words of the prophet, to command peace. But very soon, as Matthew will relate, he will be stricken but will overcome (see Matthew 26.31-32; cf. Zechariah 13.7).

John 12.12-19. John also reminds his hearers (i.e., readers) of the prophecy of Zechariah and the Zion legacy in his account of the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. For this final visit to Jerusalem for the Passover celebration, John elucidates the Lord as the resurrection and the life (see 11.25-27) and uses the works and the words of Jesus as preparation for his Passion and his return to the Father.

John's section about the Lord's triumphal entrance of Zion is preceded with the work of Jesus in calling Lazarus from the dead (11.1–12.11) and is followed by the words of Jesus about his hour of glory (12.20-50). The unifying thread seems to be the various reactions of the Jewish leaders (i.e., chief priests, Pharisees) in Jerusalem and the "crowd" or "great crowd" that had gathered in Jerusalem for the Passover festival. John clearly sets his use of Zechariah in the context of the Messiah's return to Zion and eventually to the Father and the overall conflict between belief and unbelief (which also includes the doubts and uncertainties of the disciples).

John does not belabor the point about the entry of "the King of Israel" into Zion nor does he mention the directive of the Lord and the work of the disciples in the acquisition of the donkey. In a quick, matter-of-fact way, John describes the arrival of Jesus in Jerusalem with two passages of scripture, Psalm 119.25-26 and Zechariah 9.9. He writes (12.12-16 below):

The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting,

"Hosanna!
Blessed is the one who comes
in the name of the Lord—
the King of Israel!"

Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; as it is written:

“Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion.
Look, your king is coming,
sitting on a donkey’s colt!”

His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him.

John, like Matthew, combines the themes of Zion, the coming king of Israel, and the Messiah with his reference to the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. And he, like Matthew, explores the issue of the identity of Jesus in the larger context (e.g., “Son of God” in 11.4, 27; cf. 10.22ff.; “I am . . .” in 11.25; “Son of Man” in 12.23, 34). John uses his sources from the Old Testament selectively, and he quotes freely. But that is of little consequence. Even though he does not emphasize the royalty of Jesus as “Son of David” as does Matthew, John nevertheless remains faithful to the prophetic theme of the exaltation of the Lord’s chosen king who comes humbly to Zion to bring peace, to gather together the remnant from scattered Israel (cf. 11.52; 12.20, 24), and to establish his universal dominion. To do this, as John proceeds to show, the king first will be stricken, his sheep will be scattered, and he will overcome.

God’s “Stone” and “Rock” Set in Zion to Rescue the Nations and the Remnant of Israel.
Romans 9.33 and 11.26-27. In his letter to the Christians at Rome (see 1.7; 16.1ff.), the apostle Paul refers twice to “Zion” with Old Testament quotations close to the beginning and near the ending of his section about God’s treatment of Israel (chapters 9–11). These two references are Paul’s only use of “Zion” in all of his letters.

The bottom line for Paul is that Israel was unable to attain the righteousness of God through the Law, but the Gentiles were able to attain God’s righteousness through faith. He writes in 9.30-33:

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What then are we to say? Gentiles, who did not strive for righteousness, have attained it, that is, righteousness through faith; but Israel, who did strive for the righteousness that is based on the law, did not succeed in fulfilling that law. Why not? Because they did not strive for it on the basis of faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone, as it is written,

“See, I am laying in Zion a stone
that will make people stumble,
a rock that will make them fall,
and whoever believes in him
will not be put to shame.”

Paul here does not identify “the stumbling stone” which elsewhere in the New Testament refers to Jesus (Matthew 21.42; Acts 4.11; 1 Peter 2.6-8). But he does continue his argument about “the righteousness that comes from God” that is based on faith in Jesus as Lord (e.g., 10.6–13). So he affirms, “For Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes” (10.4). From this, it seems clear that Paul refers to Christ, or the Messiah, as “the stumbling stone” that was set in Zion by the Lord himself. And this is the theme for the next section where Paul explains Israel’s rejection as “a disobedient and contrary people” (10.14-21). The “stone” or “rock” that Israel refused to accept allowed “the word of Christ” to go out “to all the earth” and “to the ends of the world.” In this manner, the Lord provoked Israel to jealousy and revealed himself to those “who did not seek” him and to those “who did not ask” for him (i.e., the Gentiles).

Paul does not dwell on other connections between “Zion” and “Jerusalem” or traditions about Zion, except that the Messiah (i.e., the Christ) has become “a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense” (9.33; ESV). This is the cause of Israel’s failure or fall, and it is the reason for the inclusion of the Gentiles as “children of the living God” along with the remnant of Israel (9.26, 27; cf. 11.5). But while the apostle does not emphasize Jesus as “Son of David” who

comes as king to Zion, surely the idea of the Lord's righteous king is in Paul's mind here as he identifies Jesus as "Lord" and "Christ." Furthermore, the apostle does stress to the Romans the gracious and mysterious (see 11.33-36) work of the Lord in bringing "out of Zion" (11.26) the Deliverer for both Gentiles and Israel. He continues to unfold his argument—layer by layer and scripture by scripture—in order to communicate his conclusion in chapter 11, that is, in spite of disobedience and rejection, "all Israel will be saved" (11.26).

For Paul, as he brings to completion this section of his letter about Israel's rejection, this is all a mystery, this "hardening . . . upon part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles has come in." "And so," he acknowledges, "all Israel will be saved."

As it is written,
"Out of Zion will come the Deliverer;
he will banish ungodliness from Jacob."
"And this is my covenant with them,
when I take away their sins."

The combining of Old Testament passages is not unusual for Paul. But when the apostle quotes the scriptures and calls up the Zion tradition about the Deliverer as proof that "all Israel will be saved," it is hard to know for sure if the apostle still is making distinction, as he did earlier, between Israel "according to the flesh" and the "true descendants" of Abraham.

So how does Paul make use of "Zion" in his letter to the Romans? He adheres to Old Testament traditions about Jerusalem and the people of God with quotations from the prophet Isaiah and possibly the Psalms. He identifies the Messiah as "a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense" (9.33; ESV) that has been set or placed in Zion by the Lord himself. This stone or rock in Zion has been believed, confessed, and has saved Gentiles and a remnant in Israel. He also highlights the Messiah as "Deliverer . . . from Zion" who has banished "ungodliness from Jacob"

and has established a covenant with Israel to “take away their sins” (11.26-27; ESV). In this way, due to the Lord’s work of righteousness in and out of Zion, Paul affirms that “all Israel will be saved.” Paul, in principle, does not add anything new to the Zion tradition, but he no doubt gives it a Messianic interpretation to the benefit of the Gentiles and Israel. And it is of interest that Paul makes use of “Zion” only in this section of his letter where he also conveys his thoughts to the Christians at Rome with deep expressions of emotion for his heritage as an Israelite (9.1-5; 10.1; 11.1).

God’s Chosen and Precious “Stone” or “Rock” Set in Zion to Build A Spiritual House that Is A Royal Priesthood. *1 Peter 2.6.* Peter writes to his fellow exiles and aliens, who are dispersed in various provinces of the Roman empire, to encourage them to stand firm in their faith (see 5.12). For the purpose of this study, the section to “come and be built” (2.4-10) at the end of Peter’s exhortation to be transformed, which transitions to his next section about good conduct, is of importance. This is where the apostle makes reference to the Old Testament tradition about Zion.

The apostle’s words about being transformed (1.13–2.10) are filled with quotations and allusions from the Old Testament. In his exhortation for his hearers (i.e., readers) to “come” and “let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ,” he quotes from Isaiah 28.16 and Psalm 118.22 (cf. Isaiah 8.14). “See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.” Peter firmly grounds in the Old Testament his thinking about the work of God the Father through Jesus the Messiah and the redemption and protection of these exiles in the dispersion to whom he writes. This includes his call to come to

Zion, a prominent theme in the Old Testament tradition about Zion (e.g., Isaiah 2.3; 35.10; 51.11; 59.20; Jeremiah 31.6; Micah 4.2; cf. Hebrews 12.22).

Some scholars think that Peter here depends on an early Christian collection of Old Testament texts about the “stone” (Greek *lithos*) that the Lord himself uses to build his house in Zion. This stone, as Peter puts it, is the “cornerstone” or “capstone” (Greek *akrogoniaios*; cf. Ephesians 2.20) and is “a living stone . . . chosen and precious in God’s sight” that is used to fashion other “living stones . . . into a spiritual house” (2.4-5). And the purpose for this vital stonework is God’s construction of “a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (2.5). But, he asserts, the builders rejected this chief stone that was laid for the construction of a new Zion. The Greek word for “reject” is *apodikimadzo* and means to discard or to reject after examination (2.4, 7). The builders (literally, “the ones building a house or a structure”; cf. Acts 4.11) simply cast God’s chief stone aside to the heap of rubble for later removal and destruction. For these human builders, this stone would cause a person to stumble or fall. But they themselves tripped over the “stone of stumbling” and the “rock of offense,” since “they disobey the word, as they were destined to do” (2.8).

Nevertheless, God overruled the builders and by the power of his word (“for it stands in scripture” in 2.6) placed his “chosen and precious” stone in Zion. The Greek word for “chosen” is *eklektos* and means to be favored with select status. Of Jesus, who is referred to here in the imagery of a stone in a building, it indicates “God’s exceptional choice” (verses 4, 6; cf. Luke 23.35; John 1.34 in some manuscripts). The Greek word for “precious” is *entimos* which means distinguished, important (“of status”) or valuable, precious (“of worth”). Peter uses this expression—“chosen and precious”—twice to highlight Jesus the Messiah as the stone that the

builders rejected but the one whom God and his hearers (i.e., readers) have accepted. And while he does not specifically state that Jesus is the king who comes to Zion (as do Matthew and John), he implies such in his lavish epithets for the “living stones” who “come to him, a living stone” to be built into “a spiritual house” (2.4).

They are “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people” (2.9). Like the stone who is chosen, they are a select race (Greek *genos*). Like the one who is both king and priest, they are both royal and priestly (Greek *basileion hierateuma*). Like he who is holy, they have been formed into a holy nation (Greek *ethnos hagion*), a people for God’s possession, in order to proclaim the virtues (Greek *aretas*) of the one who called them out of darkness into his marvelous light.

However, in his use of Zion and the Old Testament prophecies about God’s restoration of Israel, Peter does not refer to “Israel” directly (as does Paul). The apostle moves away from earthly or this-worldly thinking about Zion. He points out to his fellow exiles and strangers, who are scattered across the Roman Empire, the “spiritual” (Greek *pneumatikos*; 2.5) nature of their calling to a new life in Jesus the Messiah. In this, we see continuity with but radical departure from the Old Testament Zion tradition. Exactly how we label or categorize this “new meaning” placed on Old Testament concepts about Zion may be a matter of debate, but the shift in understanding occurred with the life and work of Jesus that compelled his followers to call him Messiah and Lord (e.g., Peter’s confession of Jesus as the Messiah; Matthew 16.13-20; Mark 8.27-30; Luke 9.18-21; John 6.67-71).

Believers in Christ, Who Is Superior as High Priest and Son of God, Called to Hold Fast to Mount Zion, the City of the Living God, the Heavenly Jerusalem. *Hebrews 12.22.* In his

extended homily, the writer of the book of Hebrews, like Peter, echoes the Old Covenant theme of coming to or going up to Mount Zion. But he gives more than an invitation and emphasizes that his hearers (i.e., readers) already have come to Mount Zion. This pronouncement, that comes near the conclusion of the letter, provides a fitting climax to his message about the superiority of Christ. It is the last extended section about “the new and living way” (10.19–12.29), prior to the final exhortations in chapter 13, that the preacher draws the attention of his listeners to Mount Zion.

The connecting thread to his Zion passage from what goes before and what comes after seems to be his mention of “the city” (Greek *polis*; 11.10, 16; 12.22; 13.12, 14). The analogy that the author makes about Jerusalem or Zion is that the city is not earthly, as Mount Zion of old, but is heavenly and eternal, that is, built by God and inhabited by God. It is a dwelling or habitation that is anticipated (i.e., “to come” but not yet here or attained). Further, it has little to do in a beneficial way with that Zion of old (i.e., “here . . . no lasting city”), as both Jesus and his followers have been removed and persecuted “outside the camp” or “outside the gate.”

This concluding word, like the entire epistle, oozes with allusions to the Old Testament. But rather than emphasize the role of Jesus as king who comes humbly to Zion (as Matthew and John) or as stone and rock set by God in Zion (as Paul and Peter), Hebrews stresses the other-worldly, transcendence of Mount Zion—it is “the city of the living God”; it is “the heavenly Jerusalem.” It is here, according to the author, that Jesus as high priest “entered into heaven itself [i.e., “not into a sanctuary made with hands”; RSV] . . . to appear in the presence of God on our behalf” (9.24). It is here that Jesus sat, or took his proper place, “at the right hand of God” or “at the right hand of the throne of God” (10.12; 12.2). It is here, in heaven, that Jesus was

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enthroned next to (i.e., “at the right hand of”) “the Majesty on high” or “the Majesty in the heavens” (1.3, 13; 8.1). And it is here that “of the Son” or “to the Son” (NKJV), God says:

Your throne, O God, is forever and ever,
and the righteous scepter is the scepter of your kingdom.
You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness;
therefore God, your God, has anointed you
with the oil of gladness beyond your companions (1.8-9; cf. Psalm 45.6-7).

All this implies not only the royalty of the great high priest Jesus who enters heavenly Zion but his divinity as well. And while this draws on the Old Testament tradition, it goes well beyond to a mountain “in heaven” (12.23) that cannot be touched. There is nothing quite comparable in the Old Testament tradition to a heavenly Zion which is what the writer is asserting here.

Further, the preacher avers for his listeners, in verses 18-21, that they:

have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them. (For they could not endure the order that was given, “If even an animal touches the mountain, it shall be stoned to death.” Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, “I tremble with fear.”)

This recalls the terrifying descent and presence of the Lord God on Mount Sinai when the ten commandments were given to Moses and the children of Israel (Deuteronomy 4.11-12; 5.22-26; 9.1ff.; Exodus 19.12-13, 16). The contrast to be made with the situation of believers in Jesus who is “the mediator of a new covenant” is plain (12.22-24). In Jesus, they “have come” to the heavenly dwelling of God—his city, his Zion, his Jerusalem—where there are “innumerable angels in festal gathering” and “the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven” and “the spirits of the righteous made perfect.” They have come to “God the judge of all” and “to Jesus” who by “the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel” has intervened with “a new covenant” between God and sinful humans.

Thus, the imperative that Hebrews enjoins upon its hearers (i.e., readers), in verses 25-29, is clear, “Do not refuse the one who is speaking” (i.e., God; cf. 1.1). If they (i.e., the Israelites at Mount Sinai) “did not escape when they refused the one who warned them on earth, how much less will we escape [i.e., who have come to the heavenly Mount Zion] if we reject the one who warns from heaven!” And it is all the more vitally important to hear and to heed, since the one whose voice previously “shook the earth . . . now . . . has promised, ‘Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heaven’” (Haggai 2.6; cf. 1.10-12; Psalm 102.25-27). The writer goes on to explain that “created things” or “what is shaken” will be removed “so that what cannot be shaken” will remain (verse 27). These eternal, unshakeable promises of God are, in the concluding words of the author in this section, “a kingdom that cannot be shaken” which followers of Jesus “are receiving” and therefore should “give thanks [and] . . . offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe; for indeed . . . God is a consuming fire” (verse 28). For Hebrews, Mount Zion is heavenly; Mount Zion is the abode (i.e., city) of “the living God”; Mount Zion is the kingdom that “cannot be shaken.” None of this contravenes the Old Testament tradition about Zion, but it does take the Zion tradition to a new and glorious level.

The Lion of Judah, Who Is the Lamb that Was Slain, Has Conquered and Stands on Mount Zion with His and His Father’s 144,000 Ready for the Hour of His Judgment. *Revelation 14.1.* In his prophetic book of apocalyptic visions, John writes seven short letters “to the seven churches that are in Asia” (1.4; 2.1–3.22) about his “revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place” (1.1). John’s message to the churches is from the highest authority. His language makes it difficult to miss the point about the sovereign rule over all things of God, Jesus, and the Spirit. This would be important for his recipients who

were, or soon would be, facing the most difficult circumstances imposed upon them by the political religion of Imperial Rome.

John himself is suffering persecution “on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus” (1.9). He was “in the spirit on the Lord’s day” (1.10) and writes in response to the heavenly command. Jesus Christ, through his servant John, wants to exhort and encourage his persecuted people to faithfulness. The book possibly was written during the Neronian persecution of Christians (ca. AD 65) or, more likely, during the persecution of Christians under Domitian (ca. AD 95). Apart from the relatively comprehensible first three chapters (i.e., “what you have seen” in 1.9-20 and “what is” in 2.1–3.22), where in the letters to the churches the beleaguered saints are urged to “conquer” or “overcome,” the remainder of the book (i.e., “what is to take place after this” in chapters 4 through 22) is full of highly figurative and symbolic language and has been interpreted variously by different schools of thought. Unmistakably, though, the book is a revelation of the coming of the “Son of Man” and of judgment on earth that emanates from the heavenly throne (chapters 4 and 5).

The judgments, as John describes them, occur with the opening of the seven seals (chapters 6 and 7), the blowing of the seven trumpets (chapters 8–11), and the outpouring of the seven bowls of wrath (chapters 15 and 16). These precede the seer’s narration of concluding judgment on wicked Babylon (chapters 17–20) and his vision of “a new heaven and a new earth” (chapters 21 and 22). In between the seven trumpets and the seven bowls of wrath is an interlude of visions about the enemies of God and his people and his judgment upon them (chapters 12–14). In this interlude, there is the struggle between the woman, her child, and the dragon that is followed by “war . . . in heaven” that results in the dragon being “thrown down to the earth”

where he continues to pursue the woman, her child, and “the rest of her children” (12.1-18).

There is the “beast rising out of the sea” whom “the whole earth followed,” and the beast spoke “haughty and blasphemous words” against God in heaven and waged “war on the saints” on earth in order “to conquer them” (13.1-10). There is the “beast that rose out of the earth” that “exercises all the authority of the first beast on its behalf,” and “performs great signs” and “deceives the inhabitants of the earth” and causes “those who would not worship the image of the beast to be killed” (13.11-18). Then there is the image of “the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion” with his and his Father’s “one hundred forty-four thousand” who are “blameless” and “have been redeemed from the earth” and “sing a new song before the throne” of God (14.1-5). Finally, the interlude concludes with John’s vision of messages of judgment from three angels that are followed by his vision of “one like the Son of Man” who has “a golden crown on his head, and a sharp sickle in his hand” in order to harvest the earth (14.6-20). All in all, it is difficult to know whether John in his grand epic drama intends these portrayals in the interlude (chapters 12–14) as something past, something present, something future, or some combination of chronological arrangement. Time seems to be suspended in these visions. But maybe a precise chronological understanding is not necessary, since the main thrust seems to be the judgment of God’s enemies and the victory of the Lamb who is standing on Mount Zion and of his people (i.e., the 144,000) who are with him.

This striking vision of victory and judgment, a fitting last use of “Zion” in the canonical New Testament, echoes the vision of chapters 4 and 5 where John sees the “one seated on the throne” (see 4.2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 9, 10) in great splendor who is surrounded by four living creatures and by twenty-four elders.

This opening vision of glory, honor, and worship of the Lamb in chapters 4 and 5 provides the setting for the remainder of John's revelation and especially for his vision of the Lamb and the 144,000 standing on Mount Zion in chapter 14. John's theme of "the Lamb" runs throughout the book from 5.1 onward. This is "the Lamb" that John illuminates in his revelation, whom he identifies as "the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David" (5.5) and who stands with his 144,000 on Mount Zion (chapter 14).

This Mount Zion, from where John heard "a voice from heaven" like "many waters" and "loud thunder," is depicted here as the very throneroom of God (i.e., where he lives, where he rules, and from whence he executes judgment). The kingly Lion/Lamb from Judah and David is "standing on Mount Zion" with the 144,000 (i.e., either the full compliment of God's people or perhaps those martyred for their devotion to the Lamb). They are sealed with the name of the Lamb and his Father "written on their foreheads," and they are ready to do battle against the enemies of God and his people. With the accompaniment of "harpists playing on their harps" (cf. 5.8; 15.2), they "sing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and before the elders" (cf. chapters 4 and 5). Only they (i.e., the 144,000) "could learn that song." They "have been redeemed from the earth"; they "have not defiled themselves with women . . . they are virgins"; they have "in their mouth no lie . . . they are blameless"; they "follow the Lamb wherever he goes." And those who stand with the Lamb on Mount Zion, John says, have been "purchased from men as firstfruits to God and to the Lamb" (14.4; NGEI). They sing, and they wait and watch as judgment is meted out "on the earth."

After a series of angelic announcements and the reaping of the earth by one like the Son of Man, John sees an angel who gathers "the vintage of the earth" and throws "it into the great

wine press of the wrath of God” where the blood was pressed “outside the city” and came out “up to the bridles of the horses, for one thousand six hundred stadia” (14.20; NGEI). With this gruesome sight that portrays the total and irrevocable defeat of God’s enemies, the image of the Lamb with the 144,000 on Mount Zion is complete. The stage is now set for the conclusion of God’s judgment with the seven plagues from “the seven golden bowls full of the wrath of God” (15.1ff.). But there can be no doubt, from the language employed by the seer and by the origin of the activity of the heavenly messengers, that Mount Zion is the otherworldly locale (i.e., the heavenly dwelling place or temple of God and the Lamb) from whence judgment is hurled upon the earth.

So how does John “the Revelator” discern the Zion tradition? To encourage “the endurance of the saints” (14.12; cf. 13.10), he sees the Lamb, who is the Davidic King, who was slaughtered but conquered Death and Hades, standing victoriously with his people on Mount Zion. He depicts the harvesting or reaping of the earth and judgment on the enemies of God and his people (e.g., Babylon, those who worship the beast) from Mount Zion. He indicates that this judgment on the earth is executed by “one like the Son of Man” and is announced and mediated by angelic messengers that come from where God and the Lamb dwell, that is, from Mount Zion (e.g., from heaven, the throne, the temple, the altar). Further, John notes that these antagonists would be destroyed in “the great wine press of the wrath of God” that is “outside the city” (14.20; cf. 3.12; 11.2; 22.15) or outside Mount Zion. As in Hebrews, “the city” is important to John’s reference to Mount Zion. Previously, to the angel of the church in Philadelphia, the one “who has the key of David” (3.7; cf. Isaiah 22.22) spoke through the seer and said:

“I am coming soon; hold fast to what you have, so that no one may seize your crown. If you conquer, I will make you a pillar in the temple of my God; you will never go out of it.

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I will write on you the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem that comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name” (3.11-12).

Later, in his conclusion, the seer illuminates “the beloved city” that had been attacked by the minions of Satan, Gog and Magog, whom God destroyed (20.7-10; cf. 11.2). The challenge to God and his people by “the great city that is prophetically called Sodom and Egypt” (11.8) had been thwarted. God would now incorporate his people in his own city, that is, on Mount Zion. All along, God had been preparing his people for a city or, more precisely, to be a city which John calls “the holy city, the new Jerusalem.” There, in this city (i.e., Mount Zion), God and the Lamb would live with his people forever. John observes:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband (21.1-2).

In all this, the seer’s vision of Mount Zion is remarkably consistent with the Old Testament tradition and with the other writers of the New Testament who refer to Zion. But with the final word in the canonical book of books (see 22.16-21), he takes it to a glorious and heightened climax.

Conclusion. Quoting from Zechariah, Matthew and John tell us about the King who comes in a humble manner (i.e., riding on a donkey) to “daughter of Zion” (i.e., Jerusalem). Matthew explicitly and emphatically states that Jesus is the Messianic King (i.e., “Son of David”). John portrays Jesus as “King of Israel” and emphasizes his identity as “Son of God” and “the resurrection and the life” (but notice his mention of “palm branches” in John 12.13). Both Matthew and John begin “the passion” of Jesus with this triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

Here, in Zion, the shepherd will be stricken but will overcome and will gather his people (so Zechariah).

Paul and Peter, who quote from Isaiah and the Psalms, tell us about the work of the Lord who lays a stone or rock of distinction in Zion. It causes some to stumble or fall, if they reject the stone. But it causes others who believe to “be built into a spiritual house” upon the cornerstone and become “God’s people” (Peter) and “to not be put to shame” (Paul). Both Paul and Peter identify this stone or rock as Jesus the Messiah. Neither explicitly say that Jesus is the Davidic King, but such is implied. Paul goes on to state that “the Deliverer” who “will banish ungodliness from Jacob” will come “out of Zion.” Peter lays stress on the kingly nature of God’s work in Zion (i.e., to build “a royal priesthood”). Neither identify Zion as Jerusalem, but such seems to be implied in the notion of a foundation for God’s new building. However, for Peter and Paul, there may be more than the idea of Jerusalem to their concept of Zion (e.g., the inclusion of the Gentiles as well as believing Jews). This broadening of “Zion” in meaning certainly corresponds with the Old Testament themes of Zion concerning God’s work to gather together a remnant, something definitely elaborated by Paul and implied by Peter.

Finally, Hebrews and Revelation take Zion to the heavenly level (i.e., the “city” where God and his Lamb dwell). Through their belief in Jesus as the Messiah, Christians already “have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God.” This is “the heavenly Jerusalem” according to Hebrews. It is where there are “innumerable angels in festal gathering.” It is the place of “the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven.” It is the locale of “the spirits of the righteous made perfect” and of “Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant.” This, no doubt, is an eschatological understanding of Zion by the writer of Hebrews. John in Revelation shows us

Jesus (i.e., the Lamb) with his 144,000 standing on Mount Zion. John's understanding of Zion is apocalyptic. But this Lamb is a Lion ready to do battle against the enemies of God and his people and to execute judgment. This judgment, with all its cinematic splendor, comes from heaven and is carried out upon the earth. It would be hard to misconstrue John's portrayal of Zion as anything but heavenly. Hebrews and Revelation do not state explicitly in their Zion passages that Jesus (the Lamb for John) is the Messianic King (although notice the mention of "palm branches" in Revelation 7.9). But the context of each book overall makes that connection firmly and unmistakably.

As to why the New Testament writers do not make more use of "Zion" in their writings, a few suggestions are in order. First, Jesus does not refer to Zion in the Gospels, but he often mentions Jerusalem. Jesus also uses "temple" (Greek *hieros* or *naos*) to refer to his own body, his own person. Such a reference to the temple in his day (i.e., the Second Temple Period, ca. 516 BC to AD 70) typically was to Herod's temple in Jerusalem, but Jesus changes or advances the meaning of "temple" in relation to himself. This is in perfect accord with the Old Testament connection between Zion and the dwelling place of God (i.e., in his temple), if we accept the assertion of the Gospels that Jesus is "Son of God" or God Incarnate. Concerning Herod's temple, Jesus predicts or prophesies the catastrophic destruction of both the temple and the city of Jerusalem (Matthew 24; Mark 13; Luke 21). Like Jesus, the earliest followers of Jesus and the people, in the Gospels and Acts, do not refer to Zion. Also, the Jewish religious leaders (e.g., scribes, priests, Pharisees, Sadducees), in the Gospels and Acts, do not refer to Zion. While this is an argument from silence as well as in retrospect (i.e., the narratives were written down after the events), it does seem to indicate a shift in meaning for both "temple" and "Jerusalem" that

trends away from material or physical (e.g., this-worldly) understandings of Zion that are basic to the Old Testament tradition.

Second, Jesus himself and his earliest disciples were from Galilee not Judea (John 1.35-51; Matthew 4.18-22; Mark 1.16-20; Luke 5.1-11), and the works and words of Jesus are presented in the Gospels as having occurred first in Galilee (John 2.1-12; cf. Matthew 4.12ff.; Mark 1.14ff.; Luke 4.14ff.). This priority, however, does not negate the important work of John in the wilderness of Judea in preparing the way for Jesus and his ministry (the baptism of Jesus, his temptation, and his early appearances in Judea and Samaria; see Matthew 3.1–4.11; Mark 1.1-13; Luke 3.1–4.13; John 2.13–4.42). But the order of the ministry of Jesus does seem to be first to Galileans, to Judeans, and then to those “outside” (the Gentiles). This may have contributed to the reluctance of the disciples (his eyewitnesses) to put any emphasis on the emotive and potentially volatile Zion tradition (again, after the fact in their writings) that could be misconstrued as connecting the ministry of Jesus with the establishment of a kingdom in Judea (i.e., the city of Jerusalem or Zion; cf. John 18.36 to the contrary).

Third, the Holy Spirit led the way in guiding the apostles and the early Christians, who were Jewish, to welcome the Gentiles into the family of God. This gathering in of the Gentiles clearly is a chief concern of the author of Acts of Apostles as he develops the mission of Peter, John, Paul, and many others to those “outside” the traditional boundaries—physical and spiritual—of the Zion tradition. It is also relevant to this observation that the author of both the Gospel of Luke and Acts of Apostles abundantly, more than any other New Testament writer, refers to “Jerusalem” but never once mentions “Zion.” There is ample opportunity for the author of Luke–Acts to make the connection between what is happening “on the ground” with believers

in Jesus in the years of the Lord's ministry and after his ascension and what is said about Zion in the Old Testament. But he fails to do so. Perhaps he feels that to do so would contravene the important work of God and his Holy Spirit in the mission to the Gentiles.

Finally, the eschatological interpretation of the Zion tradition by the writer of Hebrews and the apocalyptic vision of Mount Zion by John in the book of Revelation direct those who seek the dwelling place of God and his Christ to look well beyond the old Zion. The true Zion now is a heavenly or other-worldly locale. No doubt, other-worldly spatial concepts, such as "heaven," may fail fully to satisfy those whose hearts (both body and mind) are geared toward what is discernable by empirical senses. But what is real according to Hebrews is what can be seen by "the eye of faith," since the present world is but a shadow or a copy of that reality to come (see Hebrews 9.24; 11.1, 3; 12. 18, 27; cf. 2 Corinthians 4.18; 5.7; Romans 8.24).

ENDNOTES

1. Complete, unabridged version of this paper with notes and bibliography is published online at: <www.davidwfletcher.com/religion-files.php>.
2. "Zion," *New Dictionary of Theology*, edited by Sinclair B. Ferguson and David F. Wright (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press), 734-735.