

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_expositor-series-1.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php)

COVENANT OR TESTAMENT? A NOTE ON  
HEBREWS IX. 16, 17.

No one who reads the passage cited at the head of this paper, whether in the Authorized Version or in the Revised Version, will fail to admit that the introduction of a fresh illustration at a critical point disturbs the argument, and seems out of place. On referring to the Greek text the reader will see that it is the English rendering, and not the Greek word employed in the passage, that necessarily brings in the fresh and disturbing illustration. He will see that the same Greek word, *διαθήκη* (*diatheké*) is used throughout, and that the change to the rendering "will" or "testament" is supposed to be necessitated by the context, and, to say the least, may not have been intended by the writer of the Epistle.

The question turns, in the first instance, on the usage of the word *διαθήκη* in the classics and the LXX and the New Testament, and especially in the Epistle to the Hebrews.

In the Classics the meaning of disposition by will or testament stands almost without exception.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, in the LXX and in the New Testament, with the doubtful exception of the passage under discussion, and the still more doubtful exception of Galatians iii. 15 (where see Lightfoot), the word is used to translate the Hebrew *berith* or "covenant"; and in the Epistle to the Hebrews the argument so largely depends on the contrast between the old and the new covenants that the use of the word in a different sense is *primâ facie* most improbable.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> One instance only is cited from the Greek classical writers, where *διαθήκη* is used in the sense of a covenant or agreement, viz., Aristoph. *Aves*, 439.

<sup>2</sup> A writer in a recent number of the *EXPOSITOR* has spoken of *διαθήκη* as "not only a keyword in the Epistle but almost *the* keyword" (*EXPOSITOR*, vol. v., Seventh Series, p. 348).

It is also to be noted that not only is *διαθήκη* found in about 330 passages of the Greek Bible in this one sense of "covenant," but that the phrase itself here used, *διαθήκην διαθέσθαι*, is of very frequent occurrence and would undoubtedly be suggestive of a "covenant," and of a "covenant" only, to the Hebrew readers of this Epistle. Such a passage as : *ἰδοὺ τὸ αἷμα τῆς διαθήκης ἧς διέθετο κύριος* (behold, the blood of the covenant which the Lord hath made), Exodus xxiv. 8, is doubly suggestive.

An even stronger argument for the sense of "covenant" is derived from the position of the word in the text of the Epistle.

The writer has been treating of the sacrificial death of Christ and of the offering made by His own blood. He indicates the far greater efficacy and value of the blood of Christ as compared with the blood of bulls and goats. In this way Christ is the Mediator of a new covenant, "a death having taken place for the redemption of the transgressions that were under the first covenant" (v. 15). Then, without any break in the argument, he proceeds to say (*διαθήκη* being taken in the same sense as in the preceding verse), "For where a covenant is there must of necessity be the death of him that made it. For a covenant is of force (*βεβαία*) where there hath been death ; for doth it ever avail (*ισχύει*) while he that made it liveth ?" (vv. 16, 17). In the next verse again without any break in the argument, and with a connecting particle (*ὅθεν*), the writer continues : "Wherefore even the first *covenant* hath not been dedicated without blood."

Instead of this rendering of verses 16 and 17 the Revised Version, with which the Authorized Version is in substantial agreement, has : "For where a<sup>1</sup> testament is there must of necessity be the death of him that made it" (the testator, A.V.). "For a testament is of force where there hath been death, etc."

First of all it may be noted that the changed rendering of *διαθήκη* in these verses can only be due] to a difficulty of the other rendering in relation to the context.

Accordingly it must be shown by any one who desires to carry on the meaning of "covenant" into verses 17 and 18, (a) that the difficulty indicated, though it exists, is not insuperable, and (b) secondly, that the rendering "testament" involves difficulties of its own not easily to be surmounted.

The difficulty in retaining the meaning of "covenant" lies chiefly in the two phrases, "the death of him that made it" (*τοῦ διαθεμένου*), and, "while he that made it liveth." But in interpreting these words it must be remembered that the covenant referred to differs from all other covenants in that "He who made it" is at once the Mediator, the Priest and the Victim whose blood ratified the covenant. In the mind of the writer the thought is of the personal Christ who made the covenant and ratified it by His death, and the difficulty of interpretation has arisen through overlooking the distinctive and unique character of the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross. For once, in this one true sacrifice, the Victim is not, as in the typical sacrifices, a representative of the offerer, it is the offerer Himself. While generalizing the binding element of a covenant by a death the conception of this special covenant and this special Victim is to be expressed, and the masculine form *ὁ διαθέμενος* becomes the natural one to use.

In regard to the second phrase which seems to create a difficulty in the interpretation of "covenant," 'Doth it ever avail (*ἰσχύει*) while he that made it liveth?' it may first be noted that these words are explanatory of the preceding clause, "For a testament is of force (*βεβαία*) where there hath been death," and are thought to point conclusively to the conception of a will or testament rather than to a "covenant." But here it may be observed that

while it is true to say of a covenant that it is not of force or ratified except on the condition of the victim's death (*ἐπι νεκροῖς*), it cannot be affirmed that a will is only of force on the death of the testator. A will properly drawn up and attested is valid or of force during the testator's lifetime, unless revoked, although it does not take effect or become operative until after his death.

This will be seen by a consideration of the terms used. *Βέβαιος* signifies "firm," "assured," "valid." It is applied to the divine promise (Rom. iv. 16), to a steadfast hope (2 Cor. i. 7), to the security of the Christian calling (2 Peter i. 10), and in four passages of the Epistle to the Hebrews in addition to its occurrence here. In all these instances the firmness or security is a quality inherent in that of which it is predicated. The promise, for instance (Rom. iv. 16), is sure at the time it is made, not at the time of its fulfilment. Similarly *ισχύει* is used of existing power or validity. See Matthew v. 13 : "Salt that has lost its savour is good for nothing" (*εἰς οὐδὲν ἰσχύει*). It is often used of power or ability to do a thing—power which exists although it may be latent. Therefore, as used in this passage, both *βέβαιος* and *ισχύει* are more applicable to a covenant at the time of its ratification than to a will or testament after the death of the testator.

But, apart from the serious interruption to the argument involved in the generally accepted rendering of *διαθήκη* by "testament" in this passage, there are further difficulties to be considered.

It will be admitted that throughout the passage it is the sacrificial death of Christ upon the cross which is present to the writer, and which he compares with the sacrifices of the old covenant. But it is not so much death as the bloodshedding which was an accompaniment of the sacrificial death that is the prominent thought. The author of the

Epistle is leading up to the conclusion that "without shedding of blood is no remission" (v. 22). But in the case of the death of a testator this essential element is entirely absent. And yet the "death" (*θάνατος*) of verses 16 and 17 must be closely connected with the "death" of the preceding verse. For how else can we explain the *γάρ* (for) of verse 16? And the deduction made in verse 18 (introduced by *ὅθεν*) is only explicable on the supposition that the "death" named in the preceding verses is a death by blood-shedding.

Another weighty consideration is that this illustration of a will made operative by the death of a testator, and that testator Christ, introduces a new conception into the Christology of this Epistle, if not of the New Testament generally. And how vastly inferior is that conception to the inspiring thought in this Epistle of the risen and ascended Christ, "ever living to make intercession for us"; whereas one who makes a will and by his death brings it into operation necessarily ceases to act or exercise influence. He has bequeathed his life's work as well as his possessions to others.

It is sometimes stated in support of the current interpretation of this passage that in St. Luke xxii. 29, 30, Christ is described as making a bequest to His disciples. The words are: "I appoint (*διατίθεμαι*) unto you a kingdom, even as my Father appointed unto me." But in that passage, as Dr. Plummer remarks, "the verb does not necessarily mean 'covenant to give' or 'assign by bequest,' which would not fit *διέθετο* here, but may be used of any formal arrangement or disposition." It is the gift of a living Christ to His disciples. There is no thought there of death.

In conclusion it may be said that the passage discussed must always remain one of some difficulty, but if the above explanation is of any weight, it will have helped to clear

away the difficulty already stated of an illustration introduced into the argument without elucidating it. It will have helped to vindicate the continuity and sustained reasoning of this great Epistle.                   ARTHUR CARR.

*PRIMITIVE CHRISTIANITY AND THE LOWER CLASSES.*

III.

BUT we should be giving a very one-sided picture if this were the one thing that we had to say on the subject of "Primitive Christianity and the Lower Classes." Primitive Christianity was a *religious* movement of the lower classes—that is the next point to be insisted on. It was not a speculative movement in support of some new theory of life and the universe, nor was it an emancipatory movement with a tendency to communism. The celebrated passage in the Acts of the Apostles about the community of goods in the church at Jerusalem (Acts iv. 32 ff.) has been greatly exaggerated in historical importance, because the moral emphasis with which it is formulated has been mistaken for the language of an official inquiry into social conditions. The Primitive Christian expectation of the kingdom of God was doubtless of decisive influence in worldly affairs in so far as it was the expectation of a renewal of this earth by God and His Anointed and the hope of a great adjustment of inequalities at the Last Judgment. But Primitive Christianity never sought to organize the proletariat and so bring about the ideal State by fighting for political power. All that was to come—and they expected much—was expected from God. Man's contribution towards the mighty revolution of things that should come with the kingdom of God consisted in fitting his own soul for it by inward reform, self-denial, and self-sacrifice for the brethren.