

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

are detrimental to their work and usefulness, and that (as saints have confessed, and as physiologists are well aware) it acts on many temperaments as a direct stimulus to bodily temptations, instead of as a means of controlling them. When the latter is the case, it is surely better to substitute for physical fasting some other form of self-denial which is directly conducive to our own spiritual health and to the good of others. There is a note of deep warning in the words of St. Paul, which the R.V. first correctly rendered for English readers. "If ye died with Christ from the rudiments of the world, why, as though living in the world, do ye subject yourselves to ordinances, Handle not, nor taste, nor touch (all which things are to perish with the using), after the precepts and doctrines of men? Which things have indeed a show of wisdom in will-worship, and humility, and severity to the body; *but are not of any value against the indulgence of the flesh.*"

F. W. FARRAR.

THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS.

XVII. THE NEW COVENANT (CHAP. IX. 15-28).

ONE is inclined to wonder that our author did not close his statement concerning the priestly ministry of Christ with the magnificent thought contained in chap. ix. 14, and pass on at once to the exhortation to Christian confidence and steadfastness which begins at chap. x. 19. The language of the exhortation (x. 19-23), fits exactly to the terms of the doctrinal statement (ix. 14), the free access in the blood of Jesus answering to the deliverance by the same blood from all that disables for the service of the living God, and the heart sprinkled from an evil conscience answering to the purging of the conscience from dead works. Indeed so close is the correspondence between the

two passages, that one is tempted to indulge the conjecture that in the first draft of the epistle they stood in immediate contact, and that all lying between is an interpolation subsequently inserted by the writer in the final revision.

The introduction of this intervening train of thought, which contains some obscurities, and in which the interest seems to sink below the high-water mark reached in chap. ix. 14, like so much more in the epistle, is best understood in the light of apologetic aims and exigencies. In the section commencing with chap. viii. the writer has been putting two great thoughts before the minds of his readers: a better covenant than the Sinaitic, a better ministry than the Levitical, brought in by the Christian religion. Both these thoughts are new and unfamiliar to them, and to their conservative temper unacceptable, as involving religious innovation or revolution. Had either been familiar and accepted, it could have been used for the establishment of the other, which being done, there would be nothing more to be said. But both being unfamiliar, each must be used in turn to justify the other. From the better covenant prophesied of by Jeremiah, and assumed to be legitimised by his authority, it is inferred that there must be a better ministry, which, whatever its precise nature, shall be supremely effective. What that better ministry is chap. ix. 14 declares. On the strength of that statement the infinitely valuable self-sacrifice of Christ is next assumed to be the truth conceded, and from it in turn is deduced as a corollary the inauguration of a new covenant (ver. 15). The idea of the new covenant again is employed to throw light on the death of the Inaugurator, the writer being well aware how slow his readers are to take in the thought that the thing which this Man has to offer is *Himself*. Hence in this interpolated train of thought, if we may so call it, the emphasis with which is iterated and reiterated, in reference to Christ's death,

the sentiment, "*Once, but once only.*" This alternate use of two unaccepted truths to prove each other is reasoning in a circle, but there is no help for it; and the fact that the writer is obliged to have recourse to it shows conclusively how true is the assumption on which I have been proceeding in my exposition of the epistle, that the whole system of ideas embodied in it was strange to its first readers.

"*For this cause He is mediator of a new covenant*" (ver. 15). "From the better covenant I inferred a better ministry, and I have just told you what the better ministry is. Judge for yourselves of its excellence. If what I said of it be true, the priestly Minister of the Christian faith is well entitled to inaugurate a new covenant involving the supersession of the old; nay, the direct effect of His ministry is to establish such a covenant, for the purification of the conscience from dead works to serve the living God is just the improved state of things to which Jeremiah's oracle pointed. It imports all sin forgiven, the law written on the heart, God truly known in His grace, and close relations subsisting between Him and His people." Such is the connexion of thought. To make the new covenant welcome, its novelty notwithstanding, the writer hastens to specify two important benefits it brings: full redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant, and the consequent actual, effective attainment of the inheritance. To understand the former we must keep in mind the writer's doctrine as to the valuelessness of legal sacrifices. He conceives of the uncanceled iniquities of the covenanted people as going on accumulating, these sacrifices notwithstanding. In spite of annual expiations designed to clear the "ignorances" of the past year, in spite of the blood of goats and bulls profusely shed, in spite of countless sin-offerings presented by individual offenders, the mass of unpardoned sins went on increasing, till it had become a great mountain rising up between Israel and God, loudly

calling for some Mighty One who could lift it and cast it into the sea. Christ is the Mighty One. Or, to use a figure more in keeping with the language of the text, the first benefit He confers is, that He pays off the immense mass of debts with which the promised inheritance is so burdened that it is hardly worth possessing, being an inheritance of pecuniary obligation rather than of a real, substantial estate.

This accomplished, there follows of course the second benefit: the heir enters on a not merely nominal but real possession of his inheritance. "*They that have been called receive the promise of the eternal inheritance.*" They get not only the promise, but the thing promised, real fellowship with God now, with the certain hope of completed fruition in the great hereafter, when, following the Captain of salvation, they shall have passed through death to the promised land.

Having thus used Christ's death to justify the establishment of a new covenant, the writer proceeds to use the idea of a covenant to justify or explain Christ's death. It was fitting and needful that the Inaugurator of the new covenant should die once, but once only; such is the drift of what remains of the ninth chapter. In entering on this line of thought the writer makes a statement which it is difficult to understand unless we assume that he uses *διαθήκη* in vers. 16, 17 in the specific sense of a testamentary disposition, in one simple word, a will, or deed of gift by which a man disposes of his property to his heir. The Greek word bears this specific sense, as well as the more general one of an agreement between two parties. The two meanings are not exclusive of each other, for the same thing may be at once a covenant and a testament. The new constitution on which our Christian fellowship with God is based is both. It is a covenant; a rather one-sided one indeed, a covenant of promises or of grace,

still a covenant thus far, that the promises of God are given to faith. It is also a testament or will; for the peace of the new dispensation was bequeathed by Christ to His disciples on the eve of His death, and it was in the same solemn circumstances that He said to them, "I appoint¹ unto you a kingdom." It is easy to see why at this point the "new covenant" becomes a testament, and the Mediator a Testator. It is because under that aspect it becomes apparent why the death of the Inaugurator should precede the actual obtainment of the inheritance. For in the case of wills, though not in the case of covenants, it is true that a death must occur, the death, *viz.*, of the testator. Of this fact the writer takes advantage as a means of showing the congruity of death to Christ's position as Mediator of the new covenant. The view here presented of Christ's death is by no means so important as that given in the previous context; for the death of a testator is not sacrificial: it is enough that he die in any way, in order that the heir may enter into possession. But it was something gained if it could be made to appear that in some way or other, on one ground or another, Jesus as the Christ behoved to die. One wonders at the introduction of so elementary and inferior a view close upon the grand conception of ver. 14. But remember to whom the writer is addressing himself. He is not at all sure that his grand thought will strike his readers as it strikes him, and so he falls back on this cruder view as more level to childish apprehension. In patient condescension he steps down from the sublime to the commonplace. For lack of attention to his aim it may readily happen that what he meant to simplify his argument may create for us confusion and perplexity. We have difficulty in understanding how a man could at this stage in his discourse say anything so elementary.

¹ Luke xxii. 29 : *διατίθεμαι*, the verb corresponding to the noun *διαθήκη*.

The two views of Christ's death, though quite distinct, and of very different degrees of importance, are yet closely connected. It is because Christ's death is sacrificial, and in that capacity of infinite virtue, that it is also the death of a testator. In other words, because Christ through the spirit offered Himself a spotless and most acceptable sacrifice to God, therefore He hath an inheritance to bequeath, and might say, "I appoint unto you a kingdom, as My Father hath appointed unto Me."

The writer goes on to mention the fact that the Sinaitic covenant was inaugurated by sacrifice, still by way of showing the close connexion between death and covenanting, and the congruity between Christ's death and His position as the Inaugurator of the new covenant (ver. 18). In doing so he seems to drop the specific idea of a testament that had been suggested to his mind by the word "inheritance" (ver. 15), and to return to the more general meaning of the term *διαθήκη*. Such a sudden transition, without warning, from one sense to another of the same word is, from a logical point of view, unsatisfactory, and one is tempted to try whether the old sense cannot be made to fit into the new connexion of thought. In that case the covenant at Sinai would have to be regarded as a testamentary one, by which God bestowed on Israel a valuable inheritance. The victim slain in sacrifice would represent the testator shedding his own blood as the condition of the heir obtaining possession of the inheritance. In support of this view stress might be laid on the deviation from the original Hebrew and from the Septuagint in the report of the words spoken by Moses to Israel when he sprinkled the blood. "*Behold* the blood of the covenant," he said. In our epistle the words are altered to, "*This* is the blood of the covenant," which sound like an echo of the words spoken by Jesus in instituting the holy supper: "This is My blood of the new testament." But this interpretation,

besides putting on the first covenant a sense foreign to Hebrew customs, would involve us in a very complicated typology. Christ would have to play many parts, being at once testator, mediator, priest, and victim; God, Moses, young men, and sacrifices, all in one.¹

In stating the facts connected with the ratification of the covenant at Sinai the writer is not careful to keep close to the narrative in Exodus. He says nothing of the burnt-offerings and peace-offerings made by the young men, first-born sons acting *pro tempore* as priests, but mentions only the sacrificial acts of Moses. On the other hand, he adds particulars from tradition or conjecture to make the description as vivid as possible; the added particulars being the water, scarlet wool, and hyssop. Further, in the original narrative there is no mention of the sprinkling of the book, nor are goats alluded to as being among the victims slain. These discrepancies are of trifling moment. The phrase "calves and goats" is a convenient expression for all bloody sacrifices. The water, wool, and hyssop were doubtless used on the occasion: the water to dilute the blood, a hyssop wand whereon to tie the wool, the wool to lick up the blood and be the instrument for sprinkling. That the book was sprinkled is probable when we consider the fact stated in ver. 22, that almost all things were by the law purged with blood, and the reason of the fact, that all things with which sinful men had to do contracted defilement, no matter how holy the things in themselves might be, the very holy of holies standing in need of purification.

This copious use of blood in connexion with the inauguration of the covenant naturally leads the writer to mention other instances of blood-sprinkling, and to make

¹ Alford holds that the writer conceives of the Sinaitic covenant as also in a sense testamentary, and vindicates the logical relevancy of *θευ* in ver. 13 by putting on it this sense: "Whence, *i.e.* since the former covenant also had its testamentary side, and thus was analogous to as well as typical of the latter."

the general observation that under the law almost everything was purged with blood,¹ and especially that the important matter of remission of sin never took place except in connexion with blood-shedding² (vers. 21, 22). The reference in ver. 21 appears to be to the ceremonies connected with the consecration of Aaron and his sons, and also to those connected with the consecration of the tabernacle, events which probably took place at the same time, though they are described in different places.³ Here again we have an addition to the rites. There is no mention in the history of the sprinkling of the tabernacle and its vessels with blood, but only of an anointing with oil. It is to be noted however that both blood and oil were used in the consecration of holy *persons*,⁴ which makes it probable that both were used in the consecration of holy *things*. The emblematic significance of the elements justifies such an inference. Blood-sprinkling signified sanctification in the negative sense of purging away the uncleanness of sin; the anointing with oil signified sanctification in the positive sense of infusing grace, or the spirit of holiness. Now sacred things admitted of the former sort of sanctification more obviously than of the latter, which seems appropriate only to persons. The inference that the blood was sprinkled on the tabernacle and its furniture is justified by Josephus, who states that Moses, when he had rewarded the artificers who had made and adorned these things, slew a bullock and a ram and a kid in the court of the tabernacle as God had commanded, and thus with the blood of the victims sprinkled Aaron and his sons with their vestments, purifying them with

¹ Literally "one may almost say (*σχεδόν*) that, according to the law, all things are cleansed in blood."

² *αἱματεκχυσίας*, blood-shedding, or blood-outpouring. Mr. Rendall contends for the latter; but, as Professor Davidson remarks, "so far as the author's purpose here is concerned, which is to show the necessity of a death for remission of transgressions (ver. 15), it is immaterial to decide which is meant."

³ Lev. viii. and Exod. xl.

⁴ *Vide* Lev. viii. 30.

spring water and oil, that they might be the priests of God. In this way he sanctified them for seven days in succession. The tabernacle likewise and all its vessels he sanctified, anointing them with fragrant oil, and sprinkling them with the blood of bulls and rams and goats.¹

From this extensive use of blood under the law an inference is drawn as to the probability of its use under the new covenant (ver. 23). If, it is argued, the cosmic tabernacle, with all that belonged to it, required to be purified by the blood of victims slain for that end, it stands to reason that the heavenly things of which these were the rude emblems should have their sacrifices also, only *better* than the legal ones. Why better is thus explained: "For not into a holy place made with hands, a copy (*ἀντίτυπα*, literally antitype) of the true, is Christ entered, but into heaven itself, now to appear before the face of God for us" (ver. 24). The point insisted on is: the tabernacle into which Christ hath entered being not the material, man-made one, but the spiritual, heavenly one, His sacrifice must be in keeping with the dignity of the sanctuary wherein He officiates, must, in fact, possess attributes to be found only in *Himself*; for the aim is still to press home the truth that that is what this Man has to offer.

With regard to this line of argument these observations may be made. First, seeing that blood-shedding and blood-sprinkling were so prominent features under the law, it was to be expected that there would be a sacrifice of some kind under the new dispensation. Wherever there is a shadow there must be a body that casts it. The sacrifices of the law were shadows of something better of the same kind, of a rare, perfect sacrifice offered for the same purpose, the purification of sin. Second, for the new dispensation better sacrifices (or one better sacrifice) were required. The blood of bulls and goats might do for the cosmic sanctuary,

¹ *Antiquities* iii, 18, 6.

but not for "the true tabernacle which the Lord pitched, not man." One cannot read the directions for sacrifice in the law without feeling, "This is a system of beggarly elements, of rude, barbaric ritualism, in which flesh and blood are very prominent, and spiritual import very hidden and obscure. There must surely be something better than this to come, a sacrifice of moral and not merely ritual value." Third, that the new covenant sacrifice (for though the plural is used in ver. 23 to suit the parallelism of thought, there is and can be only one sacrifice), Christ *Himself*, is better than any sacrifice under the law, better than all of them put together, the best conceivable, it being absolutely impossible to imagine any quality of excellence not found in the sacrifice Christ made of Himself through an eternal spirit. There is only one point in the inference contained in ver. 23 that we may reasonably have difficulty in understanding, *viz.* the implied assertion that the heavenly things needed to be purified by sacrifice. Various modes of meeting the difficulty have been suggested. We are told, *e.g.*, that the heavenly things do not mean heaven proper, but only the things of the new covenant, the new testament Church, or something of that sort, the sphere and the means of men's relations to God; that purifying is predicated of heaven, only to make the second half of the sentence correspond to the first; that even heaven itself does need or admit of purification in the sense that it needs to be made by Christ's entry therewith or through His own blood approachable to sinful man, by the removal of the shadow cast on God's face by human guilt. For my own part, I prefer to make no attempt to assign a theological meaning to the words. I would rather make them intelligible to my mind by thinking of the glory and honour accruing even to heaven by the entrance there of "the Lamb of God." I believe there is more of poetry than of theology in the words. For the writer is a poet as well as a theologian,

and on this account theological pedants, however learned, can never succeed in interpreting satisfactorily this epistle.

Thus far the leading thought has been, It behoved Christ to die once. Of what remains, the burden is, *once only*. It is not a new thought, but the repetition of a thought more than once already enunciated (vii. 27, ix. 12), iteration being forced on the teacher by the dulness of his pupils. But while not new in itself, the truth is enforced by a new argument, drawn not from the same source as the argument for the necessity of Christ's dying once, the analogy between the old and the new covenants, but from an analogy between the course of Christ's experience and that of men in general. It behoved Christ as a Mediator to die once, for even the first covenant was inaugurated by death; but it behoved Him to die once only, because it is appointed unto all men to die once only. The writer could find nothing in the Levitical system, or in the history of the old covenant analogous to the "once-for-all" attribute of Christ's death; and it was this fact that made it hard for the Hebrews to be reconciled to the solitary sacrifice of the Christian dispensation. He makes here a last effort to enlighten them, skilfully seeking in the history of the human race what he could not find in the history of the Sinaitic covenant, an analogy fitted to popularize the truth he is bent on inculcating.

These verses (25-28) may be paraphrased thus: Christ has entered into the heavenly sanctuary to appear in the presence of God for us, and *to abide there*, herein differing from the Levitical high priest, who went into the most holy place, and came out, and went in again, repeating the process year by year, and making many appearances before God, with the blood of fresh sacrifices. Christ presents Himself before God once for all, remaining in the celestial sanctuary, and not going out and coming in again and again. It must be so; any other state of things would in-

volve an absurdity. If Christ were to go in and come out, go in and come out, again and again, that would imply His dying over and over again; for the object of the repeated self-presentations in the presence of God on the part of the Jewish high priest was to offer the blood of new victims: but as Christ's sacrifice was Himself, each new self-presentation would in His case imply a previous repetition of His passion. He must often on that supposition have suffered death since the foundation of the world. But such an idea is absurd. It is contrary to all human experience, for it is appointed to men to die once only. After death comes no new return to life, to be followed by a second death, and so on times without number. After death once endured comes only the judgment. In like manner it is absurd to think of Christ as coming to the earth to live and die over and over again. He will indeed come once again, a second time; not however as a Saviour to die for sin, but as a Judge. As for us men, after death comes at the end of the world the judgment; so for Him, after His passion comes, at the end of the world, the work of judging: that is to say, in the case of those who believe in Him and look for Him, the work of assigning to them, by a judicial award, the end of their faith, even eternal salvation.

To minds enlightened in Christian truth this train of thought is by no means so important as that contained in vers. 13, 14, where the sufficiency of Christ's one sacrifice of Himself to accomplish the end of all sacrifice is proved from the infinite moral worth of that one sacrifice. But though of little value intrinsically, because giving no insight into the *rationale* of non-repetition of sacrifice, this final argument is of a more popular character, and fitted to tell on minds unable to appreciate arguments of a higher order. Their need is its justification.

Three points here call for a few sentences of additional explanation:

1. In the statement that repeated self-presentation on Christ's part before God, after the manner of the Levitical high priest, would imply frequent experience of death, the date from which these hypothetical experiences are made to begin is remarkable. "Since in that case it would have been necessary that He should suffer often *from the foundation of the world.*" Why go back so far? why not rather say, "Then must He suffer again and again hereafter"? The answer to the latter part of the question will appear when we come to the second point I mean to notice; but as for the former part of the question, it admits of a satisfactory answer offhand. When we consider the purpose for which Christ died, it becomes clear that if one dying was not enough, then the commencement of the series of His self-sacrifices would require to be contemporaneous with the origin of sin. If by a single offering of Himself He could take away the sin of the world, then it did not matter when it was made. It might be presented at any time which seemed best to the wisdom of God. For its efficacy in that case would be spread over all time; it would avail for the ages before Christ's advent as well as for the ages that might come after, in virtue of the eternal spirit by which it was offered. But if by one offering Christ could not take away absolutely the world's sin; if the efficacy of His blood, like that of legal victims, was only temporary, limited, say, to a generation, as that of the victims slain on the day of atonement was to a single year,—then He must either die for each successive generation, or the sins of the world, those of one favoured generation excepted, must go unatoned for.

It is thus clear that if one offering had not sufficed Christ would have had to begin His series of incarnations and atonements from the date of Adam's fall, and to carry them on as long as the world lasted. This is what the writer intended to say in the statement above quoted. But the

same idea might have been expressed thus: "Then must He continue to offer Himself from time to time till the end of the world." The difference between the two ways of putting the matter is, that in the one it is virtually stated that the experience which Christ underwent eighteen centuries ago could not (in the case supposed) have been the first; while in the other it would be virtually stated that that same experience could not be the last, the whole truth being that it could neither be the first nor the last.

2. But why then not say, "Then must He often suffer hereafter"? The answer to this question is, that as the writer conceived the history of the world there was no room left for future incarnations and passions. The world's history was near its end. This view comes out in these words: "But now once for all, at the end of the ages, hath He been manifested for the cancelling of sin by the sacrifice of Himself" (ver. 26); and it is the second point calling for remark. Now as to the belief held by the writer in common with all who lived in the apostolic age, that the end of the world was at hand, there is nothing to be said about it, save that he and his contemporaries knew no better. They had no revelation on the subject, but were left to their own impressions, which have turned out to be mistaken. The one true element in them was, that the Christian dispensation is the final one, so that we look for no new era, but only for the *συντέλεια τῶν αἰώνων*. But it is worthy of remark, that the conception of Christ's death, resulting from this belief, as taking place at the end of the world, is in its own way very impressive. The history of redemption implied therein is something like this: The sins of the world go on accumulating as the successive generations of mankind appear and disappear. In spite of all that legal sacrifices can effect the mass grows ever bigger. At the end of the ages Christ makes His appearance on the earth to annihilate this immense accumulation of sins, to lift the load on His strong

shoulders, and cast it into the depths of the sea, and so to bring in the new heavens and the new earth wherein dwelleth righteousness. Surely a sublime mode of conceiving Christ's work; not less so than that which is more natural to us living far down in the Christian centuries, according to which Christ, in His earthly life, bisects the course of time into two parts, appearing as the central figure in the world's history, spreading His healing wings over the whole race of Adam, one wing over the ages before He came, the other over the ages after.

3. The third point calling for mention is the representation of Christ as appearing in His second advent *without sin* (*χωρὶς ἁμαρτίας*, ver. 28).

The expression, "without sin," used in reference to the second coming implies that in some sense Christ came with sin at His first advent. And, however hard the idea may be, the writer certainly does mean to represent Christ as appearing the first time with sin. His own words in the immediately preceding context explain the sense in which he understands the statement, "Christ, once offered to bear the sins of many." Christ came the first time with sin, but not His own: with the sins of the many, of the world, of all generations of mankind; with sin on Him, not in Him; came to be laden in spirit, destiny, and lot with the world's guilt, so that He might truly be called "the Lamb of God who taketh away the sin of the world." To say that Christ appeared the first time with sin is equivalent to saying that He came to be a Redeemer from sin. The difference between the two comings therefore is this: in the first, Christ came as a Sin-bearer; in the second, He will come as a Judge. After the first coming no more sacrifice for sin is needed; all that remains to be done is to gather up the results of the one great sacrifice.

A. B. BRUCE.