

WHAT MORE CAN GOD SAY? (Studies in the Letter to the Hebrews)

Study 8

"What's So New About the New Covenant?" (Hebrews 8:1-13)

VERSES (to ponder and/or memorize)

"But in fact the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is the mediator is superior to the old one, since the new covenant is established on better promises . . . By calling this covenant 'new,' he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete is outdated and will soon disappear" (Heb 8:6, 13).

WHAT?

Overview

The Writer is now well into his stride. He has established that Jesus, as a high priest in the order of Melchizedek, exercises a permanent ministry and provides a complete salvation. He is about to elaborate on those claims and show, among other things, that his ministry was no afterthought.

Chapter 8 falls naturally into two parts, with verse 6 forming a transition between the two. In the first he continues the discussion of Jesus' high priesthood, which is superior to the Levitical priesthood, and in the second he shows how much better the (new) covenant is than the old. The key word that applies to both sections is, "SUPERIOR!"

The Teaching of the Chapter in a Nutshell (a paraphrase)

Here's the point: Our High Priest is so great that he sat down at the Father's right hand and now serves in the true sanctuary in heaven. Earthly high priests need to have something to offer; similarly, this high priest had to have something to offer. Of course, we've already established that he wouldn't qualify to be a high priest on earth (under the old system). But we have to understand that the earthly

sanctuary is a copy (and only a shadow, at that) of the heavenly one, which is vastly superior to it. Because it pointed to a greater reality, Moses had to follow precise instructions when building it. This greater reality entails a superior Priest who mediates a superior covenant that is established on superior promises.

Clarification #1: Is there a *literal* sanctuary in heaven?

Clearly not! The readers would have "got it." We do not imagine that Jesus took his blood into heaven (some extreme literalists have insisted that he did) and sprinkled it on a heavenly altar. The whole tenor of the teaching here indicates that the sacrificial system *depicts* a greater reality; it does not *duplicate* it. Donald Hagner asks: "Does the author believe in the existence of an actual sanctuary somewhere 'in heaven' of which the earthly sanctuary is a copy? . . . In our passage the point being made is that the true and finally efficacious atonement transcends the tabernacle and its ritual because now God's purpose has been realized. What took place in that ritual of the historical tabernacle only through pictures and symbols, actually takes place in the sacrificial work of Christ."¹

Now (continuing the paraphrase), let's talk about this covenant. God would never have spoken about a "new" covenant if the old one had been all right. But the old one didn't work on account of the inherent weakness of the people. Although he took them by the hand and gave them every opportunity, they demonstrated their inability to abide by the conditions of the covenant. Despite their avowed good intentions, they were blatantly unfaithful to it. Clearly a different kind of arrangement was needed.

So God promised to establish a *new* covenant that would be essentially different. Instead of the law being written on tables of stone and on scrolls, he promised to write it in their minds and on their hearts. Instead of some having to exhort others to "know the Lord," every last one of them would know him. Instead of repeated offerings for sins, God would, once and for all, "forgive their wickedness and remember their sins no more."

Just think of it! By calling this covenant "new," God is making a declaration about the first one. He is saying that it is obsolete. As such it is outdated and will soon disappear.

Clarification #2: To whom does the New Covenant apply?

¹Donald A. Hagner, *Hebrews*. NIBC. (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1990), 116-7.
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Interesting! Some may think that this is a "no-brainer." The Writer has no hesitation in linking the New Covenant with the ministry of Jesus, and we rightly understand that we are the recipients of its blessings. The covenant is with "the house of Israel and the house of Judah." Some extreme dispensationalists go as far as to say that it has nothing to do with us. Others see us as deriving some of its benefits (e.g. God works within us; we know the Lord; our sins are forgiven; cf. Rom 8:1-17; 2Cor 3:1-18), but still insist that it applies to national Israel rather than spiritual Israel (Gal 6:16; 1 Pet 2:9-10). With due respect, I think they miss the plot. Whatever future dimensions there may be in relation to national Israel, we need to recognize that God has a single plan of redemption and that he had the salvation of Gentiles in mind when he called Abram (Gen 12:1-3; Gal 3:14-16, 29; Eph 3:4-6). It really is a question of how central Jesus is to our understanding of God's plan of redemption. God does not have a plan into which Jesus fits; Jesus *is* the plan, and God's "programme" is arranged around him. **The short answer: As those who enjoy the benefits of the high priestly ministry of Jesus, we most certainly are heirs to the benefits of the new covenant.**

Covenants in General

A covenant is like a contract but there are significant differences. Scholars point today to the similarities in form between the biblical covenants and "treaties between a superior, imperial power and its vassal states in which the 'benefits,' protection and services of the conqueror were granted in exchange for political and military loyalty and allegiance."² The important similarity is that these arrangements were not 'parity' contracts in which the terms were negotiated in a give-and-take manner. God made covenants with his people. In grace, he bound himself to his undertaking in those covenants. "They *call* for human response, but they are not *based* on it, nor motivated by it."³

More than a contract

Without overdoing the difference in nuance indicated by prefixes, it is interesting that the word translated covenant is *diathēkē*, not *sunthēkē*. *Sunthēkē* was the usual word used to describe *parity* covenants, in which the contractors negotiated the terms ("sun" means together). Interestingly, this word is never used in the New Testament. In the Greek translation of the Old Testament (LXX), it is used to describe negotiated alliances between nations (Isa 28:15; 30:1; Dan 11: 6, 17).

²Christopher J. H. Wright, *Knowing Jesus through the Old Testament* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1992), 77.

³Ibid., 79.
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Diathēkē, on the other hand, is the word ordinarily used to describe a last will and testament. It is used here both of the Old and the New Covenants. In this context, its use underlines the unilateral nature of God's covenant (cf. Gal 3:15). In a will, the beneficiary does not ordinarily get to negotiate the provisions with the benefactor. Since the benefactor owes the beneficiary nothing at all (it is her money to dispose of as she pleases), she can determine the terms of the will. Sometimes there are stipulations as to when and under what conditions the inheritance may be paid (e. g. upon reaching a certain age). The beneficiary may decline the benefits outright, or refuse to meet the conditions of the will and so forfeit the benefits, but she does not get to negotiate the conditions of the will.

The Old Covenant (Ex 19:3-6; 24:1-8; Deut 28-30)

God made a covenant with his people at Sinai (Ex 19:3-6; 24:1-8). That covenant was renewed, not replaced, when they were about to enter the Promised Land (Deut 28-30). Much could be said about the Old (Sinaitic) Covenant that is not pertinent to our purpose here. (For example, in important respects, it was a development of the covenant with Abraham. It was national, but it had the other nations in view). *Here* it is important to note the conditional nature of the Old Covenant. Blessing, under this covenant, was contingent upon obedience (notice the repetition of the word "if" in Leviticus 26).

The New Covenant (Jer 31:31-34; Luke 22:20; Heb 8:7-13; 10:15-18)

Despite their miserable failure under the terms of the Old Covenant, and the warnings and announcements of judgment by the prophets, God's gracious intention does not change. The same prophets who pronounce judgment also express hope: God's purpose will not be thwarted; he will bless his people. As a nation, Israel may have failed in her mission to the nations (Ex 19:5, 6; Psa 67; Rom 2:17-24), but God has not abandoned his plan of salvation. There are promises that anticipate a better day (e. g. Ezek 36:26-28; Joel 2:28-32). Through Jeremiah, the weeping prophet, who announced God's judgment on the nation and lived to see it enacted, God spoke these words of hope:

³³ "The days are coming," declares the LORD,
 "when I will make a new covenant
 with the house of Israel
 and with the house of Judah.

³² It will not be like the covenant
 I made with their ancestors
 when I took them by the hand
 to lead them out of Egypt,
 because they broke my covenant,

though I was a husband to them,
declares the LORD.

³³ "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel
after that time," declares the LORD.

"I will put my law in their minds
and write it on their hearts.

I will be their God,
and they will be my people.

³⁴ No longer will they teach their neighbours,
or say to one another, 'Know the LORD,'
because they will all know me,
from the least of them to the greatest,"
declares the LORD.

"For I will forgive their wickedness
and will remember their sins no more"
(Jer 31:31-34).

The Difference

Well, here's what the Writer wants us to see. There was something wrong with the Old Covenant. The weakness was not in the terms of the covenant, but in the failure (inability) of the people of God to keep it (cf. Rom 7:7-13). His reasoning here (in Heb 8:7) is similar to his reasoning concerning the new order of priesthood. The very fact that a *new* covenant is mentioned implies that the old could not deliver what was needed.

The New Covenant (under which we relate to God through Jesus) contains major benefits that were not experienced under the Old:

- It will not end in failure. This covenant has success written all over it. There is no "if."
- It will succeed because it involves the work of God *in* us (cf. Rom 8:9-11; 2 Cor 3:3).
- It is characterised by a real knowledge of God (Gal 4:8-9; 1 Pet 1:8; 2 Pet 1:3; 1 John 2:3; 4:6-8).
- Sin is decisively and permanently dealt with (2 Cor 5:21; Eph 1:7; 1 John 3:5; cf. Heb 10:1-4, 15-18).

In view of these benefits, it is no wonder that the Writer concludes, "By calling this covenant 'new,' he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete is outdated and will soon disappear" (Heb 8:13).

Clarification #3: The Culmination of All the Other Covenants

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It is the *difference* between the Old and New Covenants that is in view here, but we should not lose sight of the way in which the promises of God, made under the other covenants (Noahic, Abrahamic, Sinaitic [Old], and Davidic), are brought together in the New Covenant. Clearly, the New Covenant is not an afterthought or an emergency measure. In his dealings with mankind, God built cumulatively. Promises made under the other covenants converge and find their ultimate fulfillment in the New Covenant. That's because all God's promises are ultimately fulfilled in Jesus: "For no matter how many promises God has made, they are 'Yes' *in Christ*" (2 Cor 1:20). Although Jeremiah 31:31-34 is cited in Hebrews 8 and 10, many prophetic passages refer to the same reality (e. g. Isa 40-55; Ezek 34, 36, 37). So we hear echoes of all four historical covenants in the New Covenant.

God's covenant with **Noah** (Gen 9:1-17) is explicitly mentioned in Isa 54:9-10. That covenant includes God's promise to restrain the ravages of nature (Gen 9:11). Jeremiah cites the regularity of nature as a guarantee of God's intention to maintain his covenant (Jer 31:35-37; 33:19-26). Ezekiel looks forward to a situation under the New Covenant in which there is harmony in nature (Ezek 34:25-27, 29; 36:30, 33-35). Paul ties the complete fulfillment of this promise to God's redemptive work in Christ (Rom 8:18-25).

God's covenant with **Abraham** (Gen 12:1-3; 15:1-21; 17:1-27) is universal in its scope. We encounter this universalism, especially in Isaiah (40-55), and in passages like Joel 2:28-32. The good news concerning Abraham's ultimate Son would be proclaimed to all nations (Matt 1:1; 24:14; 28:19-20 Acts 17:30).

God's covenant with Israel at **Sinai** was more than an interim measure. Its purpose was the salvation of humanity (Ex 19:6). The New Covenant accomplishes what the Old could not on account of the failure of the people to keep it. The *contrasts* between the Old and New Covenants are also *echoes*. In keeping with Jeremiah's message, God's law is written in hearts, and the true knowledge of God is experienced. In keeping with Ezekiel's message, sins are forgiven and God dwells among his people. In keeping with Isaiah's message, a new exodus takes place, there is liberation from bondage, and justice is administered for the nations.

God's covenant with **David** (2 Sam 7, 23:1-7, Psalms 89, 132) is also integral to the New Covenant. The new order presupposes the administration of righteousness by a Davidic king, referred to as the Branch (Isa 11:1-5; Jer 23:1-6; 33:15, 16). Isaiah anticipates a leader and commander of the peoples (Isa 55:3-4), and Ezekiel a True Shepherd (Ezek 34).

In a way, Jeremiah 31:31-34 is like the tip of an iceberg. It represents other Old

Testament passages that look ahead to a day when God's gracious purpose for mankind is realised in Jesus, the inaugurator and the basis of the New Covenant ("This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you." Luke 22:20).

So, what *is* so new about the new Covenant?

We can certainly 'overdo' the fine distinctions between Greek words (as indicated earlier), but the choice of a particular word rather than a similar one is often significant. There are two words that are translated "new" in the Bible. The one, "*neos*," means recent, new in terms of time. One can think of a loonie that has just been minted. It is clean and shiny, but it is not *essentially* different from a loonie minted several years ago. Suppose, however, it was decided to replace the loonie with a coin containing an entirely new design or with a one-dollar bill (as they have in the US), it would be a "*kainos*" loonie. It would be essentially new, different in quality. So, when Jesus says, "No one pours new wine into old wineskins" (Mark 2:22), he is referring to *neos* wine, recently produced wine, not to a different kind of beverage. But when God speaks of the new heavens and the new earth, and says, "I am making everything new" (Rev 21:5; cf. 2 Pet 3:13), he is referring to a *kainos* creation, not merely recent in time, not more of the same, but something *essentially* different, and much, much better.

The new covenant is a *kainos* covenant. It is qualitatively different because it is founded on the complete work of the perfect High Priest. What was impossible under the Old Covenant is now possible under the New. Again, we must get the order right. We don't have Jesus because we have a New Covenant; we have a New Covenant because we have Jesus. It is his coming (and what his coming implies: incarnated life, substitutionary death, victorious resurrection, glorious ascension, and the powerful outpouring of the Holy Spirit) that makes all the difference. This is all implicit in the very first statement of the letter: "In the past, God spoke to our ancestors at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son . . ."

SO WHAT?

1. Do you think that there is a literal sanctuary in heaven containing an ark and an atonement cover (mercy seat) on which Jesus sprinkled his blood? If not,

what point is the writer making? In what way was Jesus' death like the death of a sacrificial lamb (cf. Isa 53:5-7; Eph 1:7; 1 Pet 1:18; Rev 1:5; 5:9)?

2. How is a biblical covenant different from a "parity" contract?
3. What was wrong with the Old Covenant?

NOW WHAT?

1. What advantages do we enjoy under the New Covenant that were not available under the Old?
2. How important is it for the living of the Christian life that we are indwelt and filled by the Holy Spirit? (Rom 8:4-17; 1 Cor 3:16; Gal 3:14; 5:16, 22-26; Eph 5:18) Are you experiencing the liberating and enabling work of the Spirit in your life? Should you be? Should we settle for anything less?
3. Would you say you *know God*? As imperfect as that knowledge may be, think of indications in your own life that you do know him.
4. How about your sins? How sure are you that they have been decisively dealt with and are completely forgiven?