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ESCHATOLOGICAL DOXOLOGY OR DOXOLOGICAL ESCHATOLOGY?
THE NEW COVENANT AND WORSHIP IN HEBREWS 8-10

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Eschatological Doxology or Doxological Eschatology: The New Covenant and Worship in Hebrews 8-10

*Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future
And time future contained in time past.¹*

Contrary to many interpreters of the book of Hebrews, Geerhardus Vos brought the focus of the book from the priesthood of Christ to the idea of the covenant.² Not only did he see it as the “linchpin [of] the work’s structure,”³ but he believed it to be eschatological in its revelation rather than soteriological; that the New Covenant fully reveals that the eschatological age is now upon us and that the final act of God’s dealings with humans is now put on display.⁴ In fact, he goes on to say that the Old Covenant is the *same in substance* as the New, and that there existed a “transcendental bond” between the two where the Old Covenant participated in the New Covenant, and the New Covenant was in effect even in the Old Covenant.⁵ Using language from the epistle, Vos states that “the shadow is a shadow not of something that comes after, but of something that lies above.”⁶

However, is it merely eschatological? If it is eschatological more than soteriological, this paper makes the claim that it is eschatological insofar as it is doxological. The New Covenant, as it is presented in Heb 8-10, is a fulfillment of our worship to the living God as it ushers in the last days. We will first give a brief summary of the preceding verses in Heb 7 and the opening verses

¹ T.S. Eliot, “Burnt Norton,” in *The Four Quartets*.

² Susanne Lehne, *The New Covenant in Hebrews*, JSNTSup 44 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1990), 94–95.

³ Ibid., 94.

⁴ Geerhardus Vos, “Hebrews, Epistle of the Diatheke, Pt. II,” *PTR* 14, no. 1 (1916): 3–5.

⁵ Ibid., 12.

⁶ Ibid., 13.

of Heb 8, we will then briefly explore the question of how the old covenant was not ἄμεμπτος (without fault), we will then explore how Christ’s death is described in Heb 9:1-14, and finally we will see how the Day of Atonement is of specific interest for the passage in question.

Context

In the New Testament, the idea of the New Covenant is given its clearest exposition within the book of Hebrews, specifically within chapters 8-10. While the apostle Paul explicitly mentions it only twice in I Cor 11:25 and II Cor 3:6, the author of Hebrews makes it the capstone of his argumentation.⁷ The Greek word beginning chapter 8, “Κεφάλαιον,” makes plain that these chapters are the main point, the “summa” of all the arguments rising up to it;⁸ it stands as the peak of the logical progression for the preceding verses.⁹ Yet it also presents a quandary as to what exactly is “new” with the New Covenant.

As the author of Hebrews seeks to unfold how exactly Jesus is “the guarantor of a better covenant (κρείττονος διαθήκης)” (Heb 7:22), he places the entire discussion in the proceeding section, Heb 8-10, within the realm of the sacrificial priestly system.¹⁰ After connecting Melchizedek and Christ, the high priest who “holds his priesthood permanently” (Heb 7:24), he

⁷ While Paul only mentions it twice, Herman Ridderbos is quick to point out that “the idea of the New Covenant in Paul’s conception of the New Testament church and the salvation given to it plays a much greater role than may be gathered from the sparing use of this datum of revelation and from the slight attention that has been paid to it in the history of interpretation.” *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, trans. John Richard De Witt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 335. See pgs. 333-341 for a fuller explication of Paul’s understanding of the New Covenant particularly as it pertains to the church.

⁸ Scott W. Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant: A Canonical Approach to the Fulfillment of God’s Saving Promises*, Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library (New Haven: Yale University, 2009), 305.

⁹ George H. Guthrie, *The Structure of Hebrews: A Text-Linguistic Analysis*, Biblical Studies Library (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 127.

¹⁰ Two fascinating studies are: Susan Haber, “From Priestly Torah to Christ Cultus: The Re-Vision of Covenant and Cult in Hebrews,” *JSNT* 28, no. 1 (2005): 105–124; James W. Thompson, “Hebrews 9 and the Hellenistic Concept of Sacrifice,” *JBL* 98, no. 4 (1979): 567–578.

uncovers exactly how Christ is our high priest, and how this new high priest “enacts” (*νενομοθέτηται*) a new covenant on better promises (Heb 8:6).¹¹ The promise is found all the way back in Jeremiah 31:31-34 which the author finds as the basis for his claim of the “new covenant.” The promise was not a new thing altogether in that it sprung suddenly from the mind of God as a sort of “option B.” The new covenant was something that had been in the historical pipeline since God had made his first promise to Abraham.¹² We must be careful, however, to not fall into the trap that somehow this new covenant gave *different* promises. They were the *same* promises given, only in a new and more sure form. Calvin makes the distinction that this “comparison made by the Apostles refers to the form rather than to the substance; for though God promised to them the same salvation which he at this day promises to us, yet neither the manner nor the character of the revelation is the same or equal to what we enjoy.”¹³ It is a “re-ordering” of the divine-human relationship, where Christ now stands as the high priest and mediator and the promises stand beneath him,¹⁴ but it is not a new ordering in the sense that it stems from other promises. “The Epistle to the Hebrews,” says Jeong Koo Jeon, “attests to the fact that the New Covenant is the realization of the promise *par excellence*.”¹⁵

The Fault of the Old Covenant

¹¹ *νενομοθέτηται* indicates a *legal* ordination of this *διαθήκη*. It is fixed as law. *BDAG*, “*νομοθετέω*,” cf. John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries*, trans. John Owen, vol. XXII, *Calvin’s Commentaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 185.n1. “firmly and irrevocably fixed.”

¹² Cornelis P. Venema, *Christ and Covenant Theology: Essays on Election, Republication, and the Covenants*. (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2017), 270.

¹³ Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries*, XXII:185.

¹⁴ Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 409.

¹⁵ Jeong Koo Jeon, *Covenant Theology: John Murray’s and Meredith G. Kline’s Response to the Historical Development of Federal Theology in Reformed Thought* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1999), 129.

Before we can say that the New Covenant transforms our worship, we must first wonder why Hebrews 8:7 seems to suggest that there was something wrong with the old covenant. Was there fault *in* the old covenant? Was the need for a new covenant grounded in an inherent fault? It would be easy to say “yes” were it not for 8:8a: “μεμφόμενος γὰρ αὐτοὺς λέγει”. The plural accusative masculine article “αὐτοὺς” translates to: “For he finds fault with *them* when he says:”. There is something of a text-critical issue here. There are a number of manuscripts which witness to the use of “αὐτοῖς” rather than “αὐτοὺς.” Richard Hays believes this variance is enough to change the meaning of the text “For he finds fault (with it) when he says *to them*”,¹⁶ however, Paul Ellingworth is surely right when he notes the correction merely to be a later scribe to take the dative with λέγει and thus, “There is no difference in meaning.”¹⁷ It is not the first covenant that is ἀμεμπτος, as if it itself was judged as wrong or at fault; it is the Israelites, αὐτοὺς, who are deemed as having transgressed the covenant. It was not fault with the Old Covenant, *per se*, but it was an act of condemnation on the people of Israel who had broken the covenant with God.¹⁸ There is, then, the need for a “new covenant.” It is because of this that we can disagree with such statements as the old covenant being “defective.”¹⁹ It is not that it is defective, but that it is ineffective.²⁰ Later on in Heb 9:9-10 and 10:1 the reader will find out that the old covenant

¹⁶ Richard B. Hays, “‘Here We Have No Lasting City’: New Covenantalism in Hebrews,” in *The Epistle to the Hebrews and Christian Theology*, ed. Richard Bauckham et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 159–162.

¹⁷ Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 415.

¹⁸ Grundmann, “μέμφομαι κτλ.” *TDNT*, 572

¹⁹ Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant: A Canonical Approach to the Fulfillment of God’s Saving Promises*, 306.

²⁰ The first covenant was ἀμεμπτος “not due to its being a sacrificial system. It was due to its sacrificial system being imperfect.” Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 411.

arrangement of yearly and daily cultic sacrifices were never meant to take away sin. The old covenant was merely “a shadow of the good things to come.”²¹

The first chapter of our survey then contains two aspects of the new covenant, first, it is mediated by Christ, and second, it is founded on better promises which reach back into the Old Testament, even into the very plan of God, and now makes obsolete the system of the old covenant. This does not mean that the new covenant is different in substance from the old, nor does it mean that the old covenant was inherently flawed. The “better”-ness of the promise and covenant which Christ now mediates is found in their eternality: “The eternal world has become actual in them.”²² All that has been displayed is that the new covenant now stands as the pinnacle of biblical revelation.

The Death of Christ in the New Covenant

At the outset of this summary section, the author of Hebrews begins his point by grounding Christ’s work and covenant not only in the priesthood, but also in the tabernacle. Moses built it as a “copy and shadow of heavenly things,” (Heb 8:5) but Christ operates in the heavenly tabernacle (Heb 9:11).²³ As John Kleinig notes, the author does not follow Heb 8 with a discussion of Jeremiah’s prophecy just given, but instead he goes back to the tabernacle language

²¹ Calvin believes that the violation of the covenant was properly assigned to the people, but that the “weakness of the covenant is also pointed out, because it was not written in their hearts.” *Calvin’s Commentaries*, XXII:186. Cf. Barry C. Joslin, *Hebrews, Christ, and the Law: The Theology of the Mosaic Law 7:1-10:18*, Paternoster Biblical Monographs (Colorado SPRings: Paternoster, 2008), 173–174. However, the *total* lack of the law upon the hearts of the people would seem to contradict Deut 30:14 where Moses declares that “the word is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your *heart* so that you can do it.” Paul, in Rom 10:9, suggests that this is in fact the same law of faith we have had all along: the law written on their hearts at Sinai was the law pointing to Christ which pointed them to faith in Jesus Christ. Cf. C.E.B. Cranfield, *Romans*, vol. II, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1979), 526.

²² William Manson, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: An Historical and Theological Reconsideration* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1957), 126.

²³ For a discussion of this first and second tabernacle, see Otfried Hofius, “Das ‘erste’ Und Das ‘Zweite’ Zelt: Ein Beitrag Zur Auslegung von Heb 9:1-10,” *ZNW* 61, no. 3–4 (1970): 271–277.

found in those opening verses of ch. 8.²⁴ In this second discussion of the tabernacle, the author points out that “even the first covenant had regulations for worship and an earthly place of holiness.” The placement may seem strange, but this seems to be due to the translation of *καὶ* as “even” in the ESV. “Even” in this context would seem to place emphasis on the old covenant to lead to a translation such as “*even* an old, ineffective covenant had regulations...how much more so a new covenant.” Much more likely is the translation of *καὶ* as “too/also”²⁵—“the first one, then, also has”—leading the reader to see that these ordinances and regulations for worship have also been abrogated with the advent of the new covenant.²⁶ There is also a highlight of the continuity between these two covenants as shown in the following verses. The old as well as the new had the presence of God. What is unique about the new is the condition and ability for *access* to the presence of God.

The conversation about the tabernacle quickly turns toward the work and offering of the priests. The priests attend “regularly [in] the first section” where the rituals take place, but they can only go into the second section “but once a year, and not without taking blood,” (Heb 9:6-7). Though the people toiled in ritual day-after-day, the opportunity to come into the presence of God was offered only on the Day of Atonement. And even on that day, the author makes clear in the following verse, the access was not *true* access. “By this the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the holy places is not yet opened as long as the first section is still standing.”²⁷ Why?

²⁴ John W. Kleinig, *Hebrews*, Concordia Commentary (St Louis: Concordia, 2017), 419.

²⁵ Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 420.

²⁶ cf. Calvin, *Hebrews, I Peter, I John, James, II Peter, Jude*, XXII:194–195.

²⁷ The author makes a parenthetical at the beginning of v. 9 “which is symbolic for the present age” which bears further credence to the new covenant marking *eschatological* significance rather than *soteriological*. For a a discussion of the interpretation, see Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 440–441; Craig R. Koester, *Hebrews*, AYB 36 (New Haven: Yale University, 2001), 398.

Because those sacrifices and regulations of the old can and could never make perfect “the conscience of the worshipper.” With this statement, the author of Hebrews makes clear that the concern of the people of Israel—both priest and laity—was the cleansing of their consciences before God.²⁸ Both of these things, then, a perfected conscience and clear access will be made available by the new covenant: the people will be “set free from the burden of unforgiven sins,” and they will be “renewed in faith and sincerity towards God.”²⁹

As the old covenant was based on daily and insufficient work, the new covenant is based on the once-for-all perfective work of Christ which secures for us an “eternal redemption” (Heb 9:12). This work is described by the author as his entrance first, “as a high priest of the good things that have come,” and “*then* through the greater and more perfect tent” (Heb 9:11). There is a double-motion in the work of Christ, first is his appearance and then his entrance into the heavenly tabernacle. The stark nature of the first clause is found by numerous other manuscripts which contain “the good things which *will* come” instead.³⁰ However, going with the text given in the ESV, this points to the eschatological blessings of the New covenant coming in the person of Christ, and then sealed for us when he entered the heavenly tent. And it was this entrance into the heavenly tent, by his own blood, that now accomplishes what the old order was never able to accomplish: to cleanse, purify, and finally enliven us that we might serve the living God.

It is this enlivening, promised in 9:14, that we see the peak of the New covenant. We must turn back to the exodus to see this promise coming out. This Christ will finally be able to make possible what was promised in the exodus and commanded at Sinai: serve, or worship, the

²⁸ David Peterson, *Hebrews and Perfection*, SNTSMS 47 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 134. See pgs 134-135 for discussion on the term “conscience.”

²⁹ Ibid., 136.

³⁰ William L. Lane, *Hebrews: 9-13*, WBC 47b (Dallas: Word, 1991), 229.

living God, λατρεύειν θεῷ ζῶντι. At the outset of God’s conquest of Egypt, he commands Pharaoh to let his people go “that they may hold a feast to me in the wilderness,” and “sacrifice to the LORD our God” (Ex 5:1,3. The sum of his demand is that Pharaoh let his people go ἵνα μοι λατρεύσῃ, “in order that they may *serve* me” (Ex 7:16 LXX). Then at Sinai, we see the Lord making a similar demand of his people, only it is now given as demand as a consequence to his gracious deliverance. It is now that because he is the LORD, and he has delivered Israel from Egypt, out of the house of bondage, they are to worship him. Of course, there is no direct quotation from either of these passages, but certainly the Jewish audience of this passage would see this connection. Thus redemption, eternal redemption—αἰωνίαν λύτρωσιν—is found in the offering up and priesthood of Christ.

The demands of the cultic law made demands for the people to be able to worship the Lord in an acceptable manner. Day after day, year after year, they offered sacrifices leading up to that great Day of Atonement. However, those offerings were never able to make full appeasement for our “dead works.” In the New Covenant we are made fully alive to worship and serve the living God. As we have already said, following Vos, this new covenant is not a covenant which develops a soteriological system, but “it brings the covenant-idea into connection with eschatology and by doing this first introduces into it the breadth and absoluteness that pertain to the eschatological outlook.”³¹ Yet even this might be too broad a statement as verse 14 seems to pinpoint the exact eschatological element that is made most clear in the New Covenant. This covenant, of which Jesus is the mediator, is eschatological insofar as it is doxological. In this new age which we now stand in, we are made pure worshippers through our one pure λειτουργὸς.

³¹ Vos, “Hebrews, Epistle of the Diatheke, Pt. II,” 3.

As the next verse makes clear, this service to the living God is what clarifies Christ as the high priest of the new covenant. “Therefore,” the ESV reads, or in the Greek, *Kai διὰ τοῦτο, “And on account of this he is the mediator of the new covenant”*.³² This prepositional phrase “explicitly links the statement concerning Christ’s mediation of a new covenant to the character of his priestly work.”³³ The purpose of this priestly work is further expounded: “so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance,” (9:15b) and then the how is further clarified, “since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first.” (9:15c). If the reading of the opening prepositional phrase is correct, then “the promised eternal inheritance” might accurately be portrayed as full and complete service to the living God; that is, true worship offered by God’s people unto God. The “transgressions” from which God’s people have now been redeemed are thus not simply that guilt of Adam’s first transgression and the actual sins which proceed from it³⁴, but it is specifically the transgressions which they received at Mt. Sinai.³⁵ Indeed, they are transgressions of those regulations which were made mention of in the opening verse of the chapter: “Now even the first covenant had regulations for worship and an earthly place of holiness.” The people of God, under the new covenant have new regulations and a new high priest that they might worship and serve the

³² Translation mine. This causal use of *διὰ* places the emphasis back onto the antecedent of *τοῦτο*: the act of purifying our conscience and freeing us from dead works to serve the living God. cf. Stanley E. Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1992), 150.

³³ Luke Timothy Johnson, *Hebrews: A Commentary*, NTL (Louisville: WJK, 2006), 239.

³⁴ WSC Q. 18

³⁵ Johnson, *Hebrews: A Commentary*, 239.

living God accordingly. And the death of Christ, the death that has opened the doors of our inheritance, is the death which perfects the God's people *as* worshippers (Heb 10:14).³⁶

The Eternal Day of Atonement

It must be left to the reader to see the continual unfolding of the doxological focus of the New Covenant in Hebrews 10 in detail. However, it must be noted that starting with 9:23-10:10, the author returns to the language of the Day of Atonement. In 9:7 the author notes that this Day was the *one* day of the year where the priests were allowed access into the most holy of holies, and in 9:23 the author shows that Christ has entered into *the* holy of holies, “into heaven itself,” (9:24). But this offering was not that offering which was offered year after year (9:25, 10:1,3), nor was it the offering which was offered day after day.³⁷ Christ’s sacrifice was, indeed, the last

³⁶ While it is outside the scope of this paper to delve into the many interpretations of Heb 9:16-17 and the translation of διαθήκη as either “covenant” or “testament,” it is worth noting the two primary views to date. The first is that these two verses present the switch in semantics of the word from “covenant” to “testament.” This is due to introduction of the idea of an inheritance in v. 15 and thus bringing into purview the whole scope of the semantic range of the word. Johnson, 240; cf. Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 462-63. Contrary to that is a more hypothetical use of διαθήκη—that instead of speaking about a past death bringing in an inheritance, there is rather the nuance of in a hypothetical covenant, there requires the *figural* death of the covenant-maker. Cf. O. Palmer Robertson, *Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1980), 138–39. Another view which has only recently been put forward is that of Scott Hahn. He believes that Robertson and those who follow his thought are getting on the right foot, however, it is not a hypothetical covenant in question, but an actual covenant which has been broken and now requires death. The covenant which is enforced is not the covenant given at Sinai, rather it is the covenant with Abraham. Therefore, in Heb 9:16-17 the author is showing that Christ has fulfilled the self-maledictory oath which was enacted by the flaming-pot between the birds. While this view is fascinating and has a level of attraction to it, the genuine novelty which it seems to hold gives the current author pause about its validity. cf Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant: A Canonical Approach to the Fulfillment of God’s Saving Promises*, 314–17; see also “Covenant, Cult, and the Curse-of-Death: Διαθήκη in Heb 9:15-22,” in *Hebrews: Contemporary Methods—New Insights*, ed. Gabriella Gelardini (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 65–88. For a thorough discussion for the term διαθήκη and discussion on the translation as “will/testament” or “covenant,” see also, Geerhardus Vos, “Hebrews, Epistle of the Diatheke, Pt. I,” *PTR* 13, no. 4 (1915): 587–632; Scott R. Murray, “The Concept of Διαθήκη in the Letter to the Hebrews,” *CTQ* 66, no. 1 (2002): 41–60; G.D. Kilpatrick, “Διαθήκη in Hebrews,” *ZNW* 68, no. 3 (1977): 263–265. For a fascinating analysis of the term between its use in Hebrews and in Galatians see, John J. Hughes, “Hebrews 9:15ff and Galatians 3:15ff: A Study in Covenant Practice and Procedure,” *NT* 21, no. 1 (1979): 27–96.

³⁷ While the Day of Atonement is the primary sacrifice in view during this passage, this switch to “every priest stands daily” in 10:11 widens the circumference of Christ’s redemptive work to include *all* the sacrifices of the Levitical cult, and not merely that of the Day of Atonement.

and true effective sacrifice. Just as there has been an eschatological shift brought about by this sacrifice and the new covenant, there has also now been a shift in time.

In the eschaton, we have been brought into the eternal “today” (Heb 3:13, 15) and it is in this “today” where our new high priest, the one after the order of Melchizedek continually intercedes for us (7:23).³⁸ And “he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.” (Heb 9:26) As this sacrifice has sanctified us for worship, Christ’s priesthood brings us into the Holy of Holies—the true of Holy of Holies. “The atoning sacrifice is therefore a single, completed, past event (9:11, 27f), but ‘Today’ is still the Day of Atonement, for time has stood still.”³⁹ In the new covenant administration, we stand forever on the Day of Atonement before the very presence of God. While we still wait for the final consummation of this new age, we are, now and forever, truly washed and presented before the presence of God in the heavenly places. And even though we await that final consummation, we can have “confidence to enter the holy places” and offer true worship to the living God (Heb 10:19). As the church is the new, eschatological people of God, “the continuation and manifestation of the true people of God in the redemptive-historical sense of the word,”⁴⁰ so they are the true Israel which now worships in full.

Conclusion

Though the saints of old were really and truly *saints*, they worshipped the living God in shadow and type. They were part of the people of God, but they were not able to come before his full presence but once a year on the Day of Atonement. However, with the revelation of the New

³⁸ John Dunnill, *Covenant and Sacrifice to the Letter to the Hebrews*, SNTSMS 75 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 135.

³⁹ Ibid., 140.

⁴⁰ Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, 333.

Covenant, the people of God have been sprinkled with the blood of Jesus that they might once for all time enter the holy of holies with their new high priest and offer worship to God.⁴¹

Continual sin had barred the way, but the new covenant made plain that “a new way was consecrated for us, that is, complete liberty purchased, and full right to the heavenly sanctuary.”⁴² It made plain that God has fully disclosed himself to his people not only in the person of Jesus Christ, but also in the new and perfect access which we are granted as worshippers of the living God.⁴³ The eschaton has indeed broken in through covenant, but the eschaton is an age marked by true and perfect service: the New Covenant is indeed eschatological, but is eschatological insofar as it is doxological.

⁴¹ The new rite which now declares one a “priest” in the new covenant, in the order of Melchizedek, is no longer the sprinkling of blood, but the sprinkling of baptism. See Peter J. Letihart, “Womb of the World: Baptism and the Priesthood of the New Covenant in Hebrews 10.19-22,” *JSNT* 78 (2000): 49–65.

⁴² Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1990), I.216.

⁴³ “[T]he covenant-idea is an eminently historical idea, most intimately associated with the gradual unfolding of God’s self-disclosure to his people.” Vos, “Hebrews, Epistle of the Diatheke, Pt. II,” 2.

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