

to the absence of the New Covenant idea in the Second Temple Period. 'The fate of the New Covenant in Early Rabbinic Literature is similar ... we find no trace of a New Covenant notion.'<sup>3</sup>

#### *The 'New Covenant in the Land of Damascus'*

The only exception occurs in the Essene community, where the surprising and somewhat mysterious term 'new<sup>4</sup> covenant in the land of Damascus'<sup>5</sup> appears in the Damascus scroll (VI, 19; VIII, 21 = XIX, 33/34 and XX, 12). The context reveals that the Essene author looks to the past and describes the progenitors of the Essene fellowship. From that perspective, the 'new covenant in the land of Damascus' is seen as older than their current 'covenant of God'. Correct Torah observation is the main obligation for this early group, and this activity is perhaps the *raison d'être* for the creation of the 'new covenant in the land of Damascus'.

The Qumran writings never contrast the 'New' and the 'Old' Covenant, as did the New Testament writers. 'New' in the phrase 'new covenant in the land of Damascus' does not mean that it was understood as oppositional to the Sinai covenant, but rather that the Qumran community understands its specific interpretation of the law as *the genuine re-installment of the Mosaic Torah, predicted by the prophets* (cf. the 'fallen Sukkat of David', CD VII, 16–17). Hence, one can speak of Qumran as a community of the 'renewed covenant'.<sup>6</sup>

The concept of the 'New Covenant' was, therefore, *not* understood by the Qumran community, as it would be for the Christians, in terms of the all important foundational text of Jer. 31.31–34.<sup>7</sup> Qumran's 'New Covenant' stood: (1) not for all of Israel, but for the faithful remnant who separated from the Israel that has broken the covenant; (2) not for a Torah written upon the heart, but for a Torah knowledge gained by eager study; and (3) not for direct intimate knowledge of Yahweh, which is

3 Susanne Lehne, *The New Covenant in Hebrews* (JSNTSup, 44; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), p. 56.

4 Or 'renewed', cf. Shemaryahu Talmon, 'Eschatologie und Geschichte im biblischen Judentum' in R. Schnackenburg (ed.), *Zukunft: Zur Eschatologie bei Juden und Christen* (SKAB, 98; Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1980), pp. 13–50 (34–35).

5 'Land of Damascus' is a cryptic name for the location of their exile in the desert of Qumran (cf. Lundbom, 'New Covenant' in *ABD* 4, p. 1090).

6 Hermann Lichtenberger and Armin Lange, 'Qumran' in *TRE* 28, p. 71.

7 Cf. Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, 'The New Covenant in the Letters of Paul and the Essene Documents', in Maurya P. Horgan and Paul J. Kobelski (eds), *To Touch the Text: Biblical and Related Studies in Honor of Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J.* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), pp. 194–204 (200); cf. also Collins, 'The Berith-Notion of the Cairo Damascus Document and its Comparison with the New Testament', *ETL* 39 (1963), pp. 555–94 (556–65).

## Chapter 10

### THE NEW COVENANT AND CHRISTIAN IDENTITY IN HEBREWS

Peter Gräbe

#### 1. Introduction

##### *A Tension*

The covenant concept belongs, in its origin, to the *Jewish* tradition. It is, therefore, understandable that the process through which the New Covenant concept became part of a specifically *Christian* identity was marked by certain tensions.<sup>1</sup> Within the New Testament itself, tension exists between the importance of the New Covenant (for example, in the Eucharist tradition) and the fact that, apart from the epistle to the Hebrews, the concept occurs infrequently.<sup>2</sup> The concept of a New Covenant has, however, had an important *Wirkungsgeschichte* in early Christian literature. Hebrews, the epistle of Barnabas, and the writings of Justin point to a high tide of early Christian covenant theology (cf. Backhaus: *frühkirchliche Schwellenzeit*). The covenant concept also played an important role in the writings of Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria, as well as in the theology of the early-third-century Syrian church father, Aphrahat.

#### 2. The New Covenant Concept in the Second Temple Period

The Old Testament message of a New Covenant (see, e.g., Jer. 31.31–34) was developed in two contrasting directions: (1) within the context of early Christian theology and (2) in early Judaism. Susanne Lehne points

1 Knut Backhaus, 'Das Bundesmotiv in der frühchristlichen Schwellenzeit: Hebräerbrief, Barnabasbrief, Dialogus cum Tryphone' in Hubert Frankemölle (ed.), *Der ungekündigte Bund? Antworten des Neuen Testaments* (QD, 172; Freiburg/Basel/Wien: Herder, 1998), pp. 211–31 (212).

2 Cf. März, 'Bund III. Im Neuen Testament' in *LTK*, p. 786: '...statistical findings are remarkable and seem to indicate, at least for some parts of the New Testament, a certain hesitance toward a formal reception of covenant theology'.

mediated by the Spirit, but for a commitment to an authoritative interpretation of the Torah (especially pertaining to the cultic calendar).

### 3. Jeremiah 31.31-34

The only way in which Jer. 31.31-34 functions in early Judaism seems to be in the rabbinic speculation on what will happen to the Torah in the future. The rabbis seem to agree that the Torah is not expected to change in the Age to Come, apart from negligible changes in details and a better understanding on the human side because of divine instruction.<sup>8</sup>

How can it be explained that early Judaism seems to have ignored a passage that found such a rich history of impact in early Christianity? Lehne points out that the disturbing implication of a New Covenant affected the *divine* side of the relationship.<sup>9</sup> Old Testament history is well acquainted with human failure and breaking of the covenant. A New Covenant initiated by God – in contrast to the periodic renewals of the Old Covenant – may have profound implications, implications with which the theologians of Second Temple Judaism and the early Rabbinic period did not feel obligated to deal.

### 4. The New Covenant Concept in Hebrews

The New Covenant concept occurs more in Hebrews than in any other New Testament book. In this paper I attempt to cast more light on the way the New Covenant concept functions to strengthen Christian identity and to serve the main thrust of this epistle.

It seems that the majority of those to whom Hebrews was addressed had come to faith in Christ from Judaism (the important role that Jewish cultic traditions play in the text does not, however, necessarily point to Jewish Christians as addressees).<sup>10</sup> They may have lived in cities such as Rome where Judaism (but not Christianity) enjoyed official recognition. In such circumstances there was a tendency to play down, or even betray, the different and specifically Christian dimension of their faith. Against this background, the author of Hebrews places his main emphasis on

<sup>8</sup> Lehne, *New Covenant*, p. 57.

<sup>9</sup> Lehne, *New Covenant*, p. 58.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), p. 12. Michael Theobald, 'Zwei Bünde und ein Gottesvolk: Die Bundestheologie des Hebräerbriefs im Horizont des christlich-jüdischen Gesprächs', *TQ* 176 (1996), pp. 309–25 (311–13), also believes that it is not yet satisfactorily proven that the addressees of the epistle were primarily *Jewish Christians*. One cannot read Hebrews as a *Tractatus contra Judaeos*.

'Christ as the essential and inseparable culmination of God's purposes for his own people'.<sup>11</sup>

The nature of the addressees (who they were and where they lived) is unknown. The text makes it clear, however, that the author viewed the threat to the community in two broad categories, namely 'external pressure or "persecution" (10.36–12.13) and a waning commitment to the community's confessed faith'.<sup>12</sup> The author, therefore, responds with stern warnings and emphasizes the importance of a renewed and deepened understanding of the Christian confession.

In striving to persuade his readers, the author of the epistle to the Hebrews often uses the rhetorical device, *a minore ad maius* – 'from the lesser to the greater' – or, in its Jewish form, *qal we chomer* – 'the light and the heavy'.<sup>13</sup> The comparative adjectives κρείσσων/κρείττων and the comparative adverb κρείττον, meaning 'of higher quality' or 'better', appear 12 times in the epistle and are of decisive significance for its argumentation. This intensification is observed primarily in relation to the New Covenant (8.6–13), the new priesthood (7.1), and the new sacrifice (10.5–10).<sup>14</sup>

### A Better Covenant (Hebrews 7.20–22)

The term 'covenant' (διαθήκη) appears in the epistle to the Hebrews for the first time in 7.20–22 – quite abruptly without any preparation or further explanation. It is a characteristic of the composition of Hebrews that important themes are mentioned first and are then only later in ensuing passages systematically developed.<sup>15</sup> The main focus of Heb. 7.20–22 is not the covenant as such, but a covenant that is 'better' by virtue of its *christological significance*. Jesus is the guarantor of this better covenant.<sup>16</sup> He is juxtaposed with the Levitical priests by way of an antithetical parallelism. The old salvation order they represent is not discarded or condemned, but considered temporary or provisional.<sup>17</sup> The point of reference of this comparison, at first structurally oriented, finally becomes *the person of Jesus as the new High Priest*.<sup>18</sup> The proper name

<sup>11</sup> Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), p. 80.

<sup>12</sup> Attridge, *Hebrews*, p. 13.

<sup>13</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, rev. edn, 1999), p. 463.

<sup>14</sup> William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1–8* (WBC, 47A; Dallas: Word Books, 1991), pp. cxxix–cxxxv.

<sup>15</sup> See Knut Backhaus, *Der neue Bund und das Werden der Kirche: Die Diatheke-Deutung des Hebräerbriefs im Rahmen der frühchristlichen Theologiegeschichte* (NTAbh; Münster: Aschendorff, 1996), p. 74.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 75, 80–82.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

'Jesus' is further highlighted by its placement at the end of the sentence. From its first appearance, 'covenant' (διαθήκη) presents itself as the function of the cultic and priesthood theology of Hebrews.<sup>19</sup> The 'better covenant' is the covenant of the *forgiveness of sins* because God's salvation has finally been realized. Therefore, the first covenant is 'old' because it failed in exactly this decisive point (8.13).<sup>20</sup>

The qualification of this covenant (διαθήκη) as 'better' (κρείττων) is illustrated by the association of Jesus as High Priest with the order of Melchizedek's priesthood. This priesthood, and the covenant it represents, is better because it is heavenly rather than temporal. To it belongs such eschatological gifts as rest (4.11), an eternal homeland (11.14), an enduring city (13.14), and a heavenly cult established and guaranteed by the blood of the eternally living priest (cf. 8.6; 9.14-15; 12.24; 7.25).<sup>21</sup>

...Based on Better Promises: Hebrews 8.6

The contrast in 8.1-6 between the heavenly and the earthly cultic order parallels the contrast in chapter 7 between the eternal validity of the one cult order and the transitory validity of the other and between the one eternal priest and the many mortal priests (7.12, 16, 23-25). On the basis of these comparisons, 8.6 concludes that the ministry Christ has received is ontologically superior (διαφορώτερον) to that of lesser priests, and that the covenant (διαθήκη) of which he is mediator is founded on better promises (ἐπαγγελίαι)<sup>22</sup> than the old one – and is thus superior to it.

The three comparative expressions in 8.6 are worth noting: superior ministry (διαφορωτέρα λειτουργία), superior covenant (κρείττων διαθήκη), and better promises (κρείττονες ἐπαγγελίαι). 'Better promises'<sup>23</sup> is emphasized by its position at the end of the construction of 8.6.

The two qualities that constitute the superiority of the covenant of 'better promises' are (i) it is heavenly in rank, because it is based on the ministry (λειτουργία) of the heavenly High Priest; (ii) unlike the Levitical cult, it – through Christ – is able to accomplish, the ministry (λειτουργία) of forgiveness of sins. The superior quality of the New Covenant flows

19 *Ibid.*, p. 111.

20 Erich Gräber, *An die Hebräer* (EKKNT XVII/1-3; Zürich: Benziger; Neukirchen-Fluyn: Neukirchener, 1993), II, p. 56.

21 See Gräber, *An die Hebräer*, II, p. 57. He points out (n. 38) that the closeness to the cult is determined by the Old Testament כְּבֹד (covenant): the priestly privileges (Num. 25.13), the atonement cover (Exodus 31.7), the curtain (Exodus 27.21) and the blood of the sacrifice (Exod. 24.8) are all linked with God's covenant.

22 See Jörg Frey, 'Die alte und die neue διαθήκη nach dem Hebräerbrief', in Friedrich Avemarie und Hermann Lichtenberger (eds), *Bund und Tora* (WUNT, 92; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1996), pp. 263-310 (275).

23 See Backhaus, *Der neue Bund*, p. 151 on the relationship between ἐπαγγελία and διαθήκη.

from the soteriological effectiveness of Christ's atoning death (cf. 9.15).<sup>24</sup> Jesus is thus the mediator of the New Covenant. This characterization of 'covenant mediator' (διαθήκης μεσίτης) is of great significance for covenant Christology (cf. 8.6; 9.15; 12.24). Jesus establishes a new relationship between God and his people in that his atoning death makes possible new soteriological provisions from God. In this, Christ parallels Moses as the 'mediator of the first covenant'.<sup>25</sup>

Jeremiah 31[38].31-34. The New Covenant and the Forgiveness of Sins  
(Hebrews 8.1-7 and 10.15-18)

The first order heuristic value of the Jeremiah passage is not the author's concern.<sup>26</sup> His focus is not the promise of the New Covenant, but to critique the Old Covenant. In verses 7-13 the author underscores the reasons for the need for a change from the first to the 'second' and from the old to the 'new' salvation provisions. The framing verses 8.7 and 13 primarily contain statements about the New Covenant. Forgiveness of sins, the subject upon which the author wishes to focus, appears in 10.16-17. The central part of the Jeremiah quote receives no emphasis or attention. The author does not touch on the Torah being written in the heart, knowledge of God, or the covenant formula. In contrast to the epistle of Barnabas, the motif of the breaking of the covenant does not take centre stage.<sup>27</sup>

The focus of the author of Hebrews is the 'new' that characterizes the New Covenant, and *that newness is the reality of the forgiveness of sins*. The promise 'for I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more'<sup>28</sup> comprises the final lines of the quote in Heb. 8.12 and is re-emphasized in 10.16-17.<sup>29</sup>

It is remarkable to note the modifications of the Jeremiah quote in 10.15-18, as compared to 8.8-12. In 8.8-12 the quote is introduced as a direct address of God and is understood as a verdict against the 'Old' Covenant. In 10.15-18 it appears as a current testimony of the Holy Spirit spoken to the Christian church (cf. v. 15. μαρτυρεῖ δὲ ἡμῖν). The 'house of Israel' and the 'house of Judah' (8.10) are substituted in 10.16 with the

24 See Frey, 'διαθήκη', p. 272.

25 See Backhaus, *Der neue Bund*, p. 156. Cf. also Attridge, *Hebrews*, p. 221. 'In Judaism various mediators were envisioned including intercessor angels and the spirit. The primary mediator was, of course, Moses in his role as agent of the Sinai covenant.'

26 Cf. Backhaus, *Der neue Bund*, p. 180.

27 This motif is linked in the textual tradition of LXX (in contrast to the MT) with an explicit statement of rejection: 'They did not remain faithful to my covenant (διαθήκη), and I turned away from them (καὶ ἐγὼ ἠμέλησα αὐτῶν). Hebrews 8.9 cites this version. (Frey, 'διαθήκη', 278-79).

28 ὅτι ἴλεως ἔσομαι ταῖς ἀδικίαις αὐτῶν καὶ τῶν ἀμαρτιῶν αὐτῶν οὐ μὴ μνησθῶ ἐτι (Jer. 31[38].34b).

29 Frey, 'διαθήκη', p. 279.

more general πρὸς αὐτούς. The promise about the Torah is, as in 8.10, included without any special emphasis; the covenant formula and the promise of the knowledge of God are left out completely. The expression 'and their lawless acts' (καὶ τῶν ἀνομιῶν αὐτῶν) in verse 17, which expands beyond Jeremiah 31(38).34 and Hebrews 8.12b, points to the significance of the promise of the forgiveness of sins, which then is also confirmed by the conclusion in verse 18.

In short, a new provision for forgiveness of sins came into being when Christ entered the heavenly sanctuary as the High Priest and once and for all offered his own blood as an atoning sacrifice (cf. Heb. 1.3; 2.17; 9.11-12; 10.12-14). 'In the reality of the *forgiveness of sins* and in *free access to God himself* (7.19) lies the 'better' (κρείττον), the superiority of the New Covenant in comparison with the Levitical cult, stated as thesis in 7.22 and 8.6.<sup>30</sup>

*The Soteriological Foundation of the New Covenant (Hebrews 9.15-22)*  
As Backhaus explains,

*The passage 9.11-22 represents a soteriological...explication of the διαθήκη [covenant] motif which elaborates the basic thesis of 9.15a from a legal metaphorical as well as cult typological perspective: God constitutes in Christ's atoning death the 'legal status' of the New Covenant as an anti-type to the Sinai covenant... While further covenant statements simply vary the thesis of 9.15 (cf. 10.15-18, 29; 12.22-24; 13.20), this verse [9.15] represents not only the climax, but also the sum of the whole covenant theology of Hebrews.<sup>31</sup>*

The covenants can be compared in tabular form:

<i>The First Covenant</i> <sup>32</sup>	<i>The New Covenant</i>
The earthly, 'man made' 'imitation' sanctuary (9.24)	The true, original, heavenly sanctuary (9.24)
The 'tabernacle' of the wilderness period with its furniture (9.1-5; cf. 8.5)	The 'greater and more perfect tabernacle' (9.11), that is not made with hands and does not belong to this creation (9.11)

30 Cf. Frey, 'διαθήκη', pp. 279-80.

31 Backhaus, *Der neue Bund*, pp. 185-86.

32 Petrus J. Gräbe, *New Covenant, New Community: The Significance of Biblical and Patristic Covenant Theology for Current Understanding* (Carlisle: Paternoster Publishing, 2006), p. 132.

The worship of Levite priests and the yearly sacrifice of the High Priest on the Day of Atonement (9.6-7)	The 'better' (9.23) sacrifice of the High Priest Christ made once and for all in the heavenly sanctuary (9.11-12, 24-25)
Sacrifices made with the 'foreign' blood of animals that, according to the author of Hebrews, can never really take away sin (9.25; 10.2)	Christ enters the heavenly sanctuary by virtue of his own blood and is sacrificed, effecting eternal salvation (9.12; cf. 9.15), forgiveness (9.22; 10.18) and true separation from sin (9.26)
Earthly external regulations of the 'flesh' (9.10), such as food regulations and ceremonial washings, causing only external purity of the flesh (9.13)	Purity of conscience (9.14) and forgiveness of sins; the perfection (τελείωσις; cf. 9.9; 10.14) wrought by the blood of Christ, which provides access to the heavenly sanctuary and the presence of God

In 9.11-20, as in 7.22 and 8.6, the author of Hebrews links High Priest Christology with covenant terminology. Frey points out that the two soteriological statements found in 9.11-12 and 15 summarize the theology of the whole epistle: (1) Christ, as High Priest, has once for all entered the heavenly sanctuary by virtue of his blood and, through his sacrifice, achieved an everlasting salvation (αἰώνια λύτρωσις); (2) as a result, he has become the 'mediator' (cf. 7.22) of the New Covenant so that through the absolution (ἀπολύτρωσις) of sins achieved by his death, the elect (κεκλημένοι) can receive the promised eternal inheritance.<sup>33</sup> It is noteworthy that these key statements appear at the compositional centre of Hebrews (8.1-10.18).

The New Covenant was established by the same act through which eternal redemption was achieved. Christ's sacrificial death is an atoning offering and a covenant-inaugurating event. The author of Hebrews begins with the presupposition that a covenant can only be established through a sacrifice of purification. This argument (v. 15) is developed in verses 16-20 in two stages. Verses 16-17 are more analytical and verses 18-20 more exegetical.<sup>34</sup>

In 9.16-17 the author advances his argument rhetorically<sup>35</sup> by arguing that any διαθήκη (in the sense of 'covenant') is only inaugurated through

33 Frey, 'διαθήκη', pp. 282-83.

34 Attridge, *Hebrews*, p. 253.

35 Attridge, *Hebrews*, p. 254, n. 6 points out that a similar playfulness is found in 7.9.

death, because no διαθήκη (in the sense of 'testament') is valid until the testator dies. Although Christ has before been called the mediator and guarantee of God's covenant, he is here shown to be its testator as well. Verse 18 transitions from a legal to a cult typology, because a διαθήκη (will) becomes effective only in case of death; 'not even the first covenant was inaugurated without blood' (οὐδὲ ἡ πρώτη χωρὶς αἵματος ἐγκεκάνισται). In verses 18–21 the author's main purpose is to explicate the fundamental meaning of Jesus' death according to the blood ritual recorded in Exodus 24. The discussion is framed by 'blood' (αἷμα, v. 18) and 'blood shedding' (αἱματεκχυσία, v. 22), indicating the theme of the passage.

### 5. Conclusion

The historian Eusebius mentions that Irenaeus (c. 140–200 CE) was praised in a letter to the Bishop in Rome as 'a zealot of the *covenant of Christ*' (ζηλωτὴν ὄντα τῆς διαθήκης Χριστοῦ).<sup>36</sup> Irenaeus' Christian identity and commitment was commended in terms of the 'covenant of Christ'.

The author of Hebrews has chosen the term 'New Covenant' in order to confirm the self-understanding of the church he addresses. This identity has roots in the cultic heritage of Israel. Hebrews, however, gives primacy to the fact that the church participates in a new, qualitatively *superior*, worship and identity rooted in a heavenly reality.

The New Covenant concept builds the conceptual bridge with the continuity and discontinuity of the readers of Hebrews' Jewish origins in two ways: (1) through a creative re-interpretation of the covenant term from a *cultic* perspective the author succeeds in describing the *continuity* of the Christ event with the cultic background of Israel. The Christ event is the final fulfillment of the cultic heritage of Israel; (2) the *discontinuity* of the *newness of the covenant* lies in the final, lasting, and superior status of the salvation established by Christ as the summation of the soteriological heritage of Israel.<sup>37</sup> The author of Hebrews attributes special significance to Scripture verses such as Jer. 31(38).31–34 and Exod. 24.8. The history of the effect of the Lord's Supper tradition seems also visible in Hebrews. The author of Hebrews develops this tradition in a unique way. The reality of the forgiveness of sins is granted to those who participate in the New Covenant. They are assured of eschatological salvation, entrance to

<sup>36</sup> *Historia Ecclesiastica* V.iv.2 (Lake, *Eusebius. The Ecclesiastical History* [LCL; London: William Heinemann; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965], p. 444).

<sup>37</sup> See Lehne, *New Covenant*, p. 119.

the heavenly city and heavenly sanctuary and participation in the everlasting Shabbat celebration of the people of God.<sup>38</sup>

As Hebrews has it,

But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a New Covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel (12.22-24).

Through the covenant concept the author of Hebrews adds weight to his admonishment in 10.29 and embellishes his word of encouragement in 13.20.

How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the *blood of the covenant that sanctified him*, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? (10.29).

And:

May the God of peace, who through the *blood of the eternal covenant* brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen (13.20-21).

<sup>38</sup> Frey, 'διαθήκη', p. 296. I am mainly following Frey, pp. 297–305 in this context.