

# OLD COVENANT VS. NEW TESTAMENT

## The Dynamics of Covenant Theology

### from בְּרִית to διαθήκη

Rev. Dr. R. Dean Anderson (last revised 11 November 2016)

The doctrine of the covenant/testament is central to understanding God's history of salvation worked out in the incarnation, death, and resurrection of his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. It is also central to understanding the nature of the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. It is hoped that the ensuing study will help to clarify these matters and further enrich our praise to God for his gracious dealings with sinful mankind. I approach the topic inductively, tracing the way in which God's relationship with His people is expressed in covenantal terms through the biblical history.

### The Covenant with Abraham

*Covenant as oath-ritual*

Although God's gracious relationship with fallen man began already when He called for Adam and Eve in Paradise, it is at the calling of Abraham that God first chose to seal this relationship in the form of a "covenant." The "covenant" which God made with Abraham is considered throughout the Bible as foundational for salvation history. In Genesis 15 we read how God came to Abraham in a vision at a time when Abraham had begun to be uncertain as to how God would fulfil the promise of descendants earlier made to him. Abraham already stood in a relationship with God, who had called him out of the heathen city of Ur and brought him to the land of Canaan. Abraham's relationship with God was one of trust, confirmed in the sacrifices he made to God in that new land. Just as in pagan religion, Abraham knew that God needed to be appeased for his sins through sacrifice. And so when God came to Abraham in the vision of Genesis 15, we cannot say that God only now entered into relationship with him, or even that God gave him new promises. Abraham had already received from God the promises of a multitude of descendants who would inherit the land in which he now sojourned. He had received the promise that all nations would be blessed in him, that is, in his "seed" (Gen. 12:3). When God again came to him in the vision it was to *confirm* these promises by way of a covenantal oath ceremony.

In this ceremony, literally described as the "cutting of a covenant," we see an old ritual whereby parties who make promises to each other by oath cut animals in two and walk through the two halves to seal the promise made. The significance of walking between the parts of the dead animal is to symbolise the death of the promise-maker should he renege upon his promise.<sup>1</sup> God, who is called upon as a witness to the oath, is thereby asked to kill the promise-breaker. Such a covenantal oath ritual is described in Jeremiah 34:17-20, where God, who was called upon to witness the oath, threatens to carry out the death of the promise-breakers symbolised in the cut animals.<sup>2</sup>



Jer. 34:17-20

*Therefore thus says the LORD, 'You have not obeyed Me in proclaiming release each man to his brother, and each man to his neighbour. Behold, I am proclaiming a release to you,' declares the LORD, 'to the sword, to the pestilence, and to the famine; and I will make you a terror*

*to all the kingdoms of the earth. And I will give the men who have transgressed My covenant, who have not fulfilled the words of the covenant which they made before Me, when they cut the calf in two and passed between its parts—the officials of Judah, and the officials of Jerusalem, the court officers, and*

<sup>1</sup> See the quotation from Jeremiah below and also a similar reference to a Babylonian covenant in Leon Morris, "Covenant" in *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (third ed. Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1965) 69. The terminology of 'cutting' a covenant and the use of 'cut' animals was common in the ancient world, see M. Weinfeld, בְּרִית, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren, transl. J. T. Willis (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, revised ed. 1977) 259.

<sup>2</sup> A covenant, in this sense, is by definition a promise or promises formally sealed by an oath. The covenant between David and Jonathan (cf. 1 Sam. 18:3; 20:8; 23:18) also involved an oath (2 Sam. 21:7), as did that between Jacob and Laban (Gen. 31:43-55) where both sides explicitly take an oath. Compare also the covenant between Zedekiah and the Babylonian king, Ezek. 17:11-21.

*the priests, and all the people of the land, who passed between the parts of the calf—and I will give them into the hand of their enemies and into the hand of those who seek their life. And their dead bodies shall be food for the birds of the sky and the beasts of the earth.'*

It is important to note that the covenant ritual with which God comes to Abraham in Genesis 15 is a unilateral ritual, that is to say, God is the only party which makes promises and therefore it is only God, in the form of a smoking oven and flaming torch, who passes between the pieces of the animals. This, however, does not mean that the promise was not conditional. Genesis 18:17-19 (cf. Gen. 17:1) makes clear that faithful obedience was required by Abraham and his descendants in order for this covenantal promise to remain valid. In fact, God added an important symbolic condition for maintaining this covenantal relationship some years later in the form of circumcision. Circumcision was to be a sign of this special relationship with God, who had made special promises to the seed of Abraham.

*In summary:*

- the covenant is a promise ratified by an oath ritual
- God makes a promise to Abraham (not the other way around)
- this promise has a condition: the obedience of faith

### **The Covenant Mediated by Moses** *Covenant as relationship by sacrifice*

In Exodus 24 we read that Moses, having returned from the mountain and received the details of God's law there, recounts these to the people, who agree to follow God's word. The chapter then proceeds to recount the worship service the following morning:

Exod. 24:4-8

*And Moses wrote down all the words of the LORD. Then he arose early in the morning, and built an altar at the foot of the mountain with twelve pillars for the twelve tribes of Israel. And he sent young men of the sons of Israel, and they offered burnt offerings and sacrificed young bulls as peace offerings to the LORD. And Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and the other half of the blood he sprinkled on the altar. Then he took the book of the covenant and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient!" So Moses took the blood and sprinkled it on the people, and said, "Behold the blood of the covenant, which the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words." (A description of a sacrificial meal follows)*

An altar of (uncut) stone



We may ask what the significance of this special blood ritual is, and what relationship this bears to the concept of covenant. The words of v.8 were used by the Lord Jesus Christ when he instituted the Lord's Supper and in this application of them we are also enabled to understand his interpretation. *For this is my blood of the covenant, which is to be shed on behalf of many for forgiveness of sins.* (Matt. 26:28)

It is clear that Jesus interpreted the "blood of the covenant" to be expiatory, that is, a substitutionary punishment for sins committed against God. It appears that the apostle Peter held the same view, since the phrase concerning sprinkling with blood in the following quotation probably refers to Exodus 24.

*Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those ... who are chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, that you may obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood.* (1 Petr. 1:1-2)

It is clear that the blood of the sacrificial animals in Exodus 24 has a different function to that of the animals cut in two in Genesis 15. We may add that the animals involved in a covenantal oath ritual are not sacrificed on an altar. In Exodus 24 the *sacrificial* ritual is emphasised by splashing the blood over the people. God's work of cleansing the people to seal this covenantal relationship is in the foreground, as well as the people's willing obedience in thankfulness. These are two elements which were also present in the Abrahamic covenant, namely, Genesis 15:6, when God *reckoned* Abraham's faith for righteousness (see Paul's explanation of this verse in Rom. 4:1-18), and the implied obedience which is later explicitly referred to in Genesis 18:17-19. It is important to note that, despite the promise of obedience made by the people, the covenant in Exodus 24 is the LORD's covenant made with his people (v.8) and not *vice versa*. The actual promises of the Lord are not further stipulated in Exodus 24. Given that salvation out of the slavery of Egypt was part of the covenantal promise given to Abraham and his seed in Genesis 15, coupled with the promise of land and a multitude of descendants, we may see a reference to the continuation of these covenantal promises in the whole context of this worship service (cf. Deut. 1:8). The essence is, of course, the promise that God will be a God to the people of Israel (Gen. 17:7, cf. Exod. 19:5-6; Lev. 26:9-12), that is, to protect them in the land they are to receive and to bless them when the covenantal conditions are met. This sacrificial ceremony is highlighted by Jesus especially in the element of the forgiveness of sins (cf. Matt. 26:28) which is crucial to maintaining a relationship with a holy God.

As such every Old Testament act of sacrificial worship is a kind of re-enactment of the covenantal ceremony at Sinai. The covenant is (re-)confirmed by God's willingness to cleanse his people from their sins through the blood of bulls and goats. This is made explicit in Psalm 50:5 where God says: *Gather my godly ones to me, those who have made a covenant with me by sacrifice.*

It is also reiterated by the apostle Paul in Rom. 11:26-27 (on the basis of Isa. 59:20-21).

*Just as it is written: "The deliverer will come from Zion, he will remove ungodliness from Jacob. And this is my covenant with them, when I take away their sins."*

We should also note that regular covenants made between men frequently closed with a sacrifice to God (or the gods) and a sacrificial meal (cf. Gen. 31:43-54 [Jacob and Laban] and Exod. 34:15 [forbidding covenants with unbelievers because they would entail sacrifices to their gods]). In a regular covenant between men, God functioned as a witness to the oath which was made in his name. The relationship with God was therefore confirmed in the sacrifice and peace-offering meal which followed, confirming the covenantal relationship between God and the partners of the human covenant just enacted.

*In summary:*

- through its sin, God's people does not fulfil the condition of the obedience of faith
- the covenant is repeatedly ratified by the blood sacrifices for the forgiveness of sins

### **Prophets speaking of God's Marriage**

#### *Covenant as marriage-relationship*

Many of the prophets pictured this covenantal relationship of God with his people as a marriage-covenant. It is clear that in Old Testament times a marriage was considered a form of covenant (בְּרִית), as Malachi 2:14 makes clear when it speaks literally of the "wife of your covenant (בְּרִית)" (cf. Ezek. 16:8). At the institution of a marriage man and wife make public vows (promises under oath) of faithfulness to each other. This image is therefore used by the prophets to highlight the spiritual adultery of Israel in serving other gods (cf. Hos. 1-3). The image is also frequently adjusted to the situation of the divided kingdom. Yahweh is then said to be the husband of the two sisters, Israel and Judah, who have committed adultery. As a result the laws for divorce are applied, referring to the exile, first of Israel, and then later also of Judah (cf. Jer. 2:2, 20; 3:1 ff.; Ezek. 16; 23; Isa. 50:1). When the Judean exiles are called upon to return, this is pictured as the restoration of the marriage relationship (cf. Isa. 54:5-8; 62:4-5).

**Vow:** *promise made by oath (i.e. by swearing in God's name).*

**Covenant:** *promise made by oath which is emphasised by an oath-ritual.*

Although it is clear that this imagery is used with respect to the relationship of God with his people and therefore with respect to the specific covenantal relationship under discussion, the connection between the marriage imagery and the covenant made with Abraham and confirmed under Moses is never specifically made. This point is of importance when considering the way the New Testament speaks of the "covenant" or "testament." For although the New Testament clearly also uses the imagery of marriage to describe the rela-

tionship between Jesus Christ and his church (see Eph. 5:22-32 and Rev. 21, which has Isa. 54 as its background), it does not specifically connect this image to the concept of "covenant" or "testament."<sup>3</sup> The way in which covenant/testament is spoken of in the New Testament is, in fact, highly influenced by the Septuagint translation.

### The Septuagint Translation

#### *Covenant as testament between God and his children*

During Hellenistic times, about the third century BC, Jewish translators working in Alexandria began work on what was later to become the standard Greek translation of the Old Testament used by Jews throughout the world, known today as the Septuagint. It is significant for our topic that the various translators chose to render the Hebrew word for “covenant” (בְּרִית) with the common Greek word for “testament” (διαθήκη).<sup>4</sup> At first sight this seems rather strange given that biblical Hebrew does not use the word בְּרִית when referring to testamentary contracts. A testament is, of course, a very specific kind of contract, whereby one’s assets are promised to a particular party (or parties) at a certain date (usually the death of the testator). There is no reason why a testament may not have been sealed with an oath-ritual (*i.e.*, covenant), but there is no evidence for this practice. It would, however, be all too facile to simply state that the translators made a mistake. The difference between a בְּרִית and a testament is too obvious for this strange translation to be anything other than deliberate. Although there is no possibility of achieving certainty, there are a number of considerations which may have led the translators to highlight the important biblical concept of ‘covenant’ in this way. By using the term διαθήκη (‘testament’) the translators seem to have wished to stress the promissory nature of the covenant which God made with his people. They were possibly also influenced by the fact that God’s relationship with his people is sometimes characterised by the relationship of a father to his son(s) (*e.g.*, Exod. 4:22-23; Deut. 14:1; 32:5-6; Hos. 11:1).<sup>5</sup> Strictly speaking, the term “testament” (διαθήκη), as applied to the covenant with Abraham and its further application in the Old Testament, is used in the sense of a contractual promise (*i.e.*, in the Old Testament sense, a promise made with an oath ritual) to distribute certain “goods” or “assets” to the beneficiary at a certain time. A “testament” does not need to imply that distribution of the promised goods only occurs upon the death of the testator, as Galatians 4:1-2 and Jesus’ parable of the lost son (Luk. 15:11-12) make clear.

**Septuagint:** *A translation of the Old Testament from Hebrew to Greek. This translation was made around the third century BC and was in general use among the Jews in the time of the New Testament. The word “septuagint” means “70” and was used because of a tradition that the Pentateuch had been translated by 70 men.*

This Greek translation of the term “covenant” (*i.e.*, promissory oath ritual) in the specific sense of “testament” had far-reaching implications for the way in which Jesus and the apostles speak of God’s covenant, or better, “testament,” with his people and of the promised “*new* covenant/testament.”<sup>6</sup> The New Testament consistently follows the Septuagint in using the word “testament” and not “covenant.” For many New Testament expositors, who interpret בְּרִית broadly in terms of a “contract” or “covenant,” this has caused considerable embarrassment. It has therefore been popular to interpret the word διαθήκη in the broad sense of “con-

<sup>3</sup> The Gospels show that both John the Baptist and Jesus himself spoke of Jesus as a “bridegroom,” but it is not clear that this image is used to picture the relationship between Jesus and his church, cf. Joh. 3:29; Matt. 9:15; Mark 2:19-20; Luk. 5:34-35. In fact, when Jesus used the image his disciples were characterised as the bridegroom’s attendants. Later Jesus also used the image in a parable, but here the point of the image is not to describe his relationship with his church, Matt. 25:1-13.

<sup>4</sup> See Gottfried Quell and Johannes Behm, “διαθήκη” (*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. G. Kittel *et al*, transl. G. W. Bromiley [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964] 2.107) where only four exceptions are noted, two of which result from different readings of the Hebrew. The translators evidently chose to work with a very literalistic concordant translation for what was considered to be an important theological term. For this reason we find the term “testament” used even for bipartite treaties such as that between Jacob and Laban in Genesis 31 and for marriage covenants (*e.g.* Mal. 2:14). Strictly speaking such a treaty or marriage covenant has nothing to do with a “testament” and should have been translated with a term such as συνθήκη (usually used in the plural), as later Jewish translators in fact did.

<sup>5</sup> Another possibility is present, namely that the translators used the word “testament” in consideration of the oath-ritual with slaughtered animals. As explained above, the slaughtered animals mirrored the death of those who dared to break their contractual promise. Considered in this light, one does indeed make a sort of testament when a covenant is contracted.

<sup>6</sup> In fact, it would appear that even Jewish experts on the law could speak in terms of ‘inheritance’ (implying a testament) around the time of the New Testament, cf. Luke 10:25.

tract,” despite all the lexical evidence to the contrary.<sup>7</sup> The New Testament, which emphasises the death of the testator (Hebr. 9) and the terminology of inheritance (cf. Gal. 3:15-18), clearly understood the term διαθήκη (“testament”) in its normal sense. It amounts to special pleading to take the term otherwise, although many have succumbed to this. For this reason many translations of the New Testament frequently use the word “covenant” to translate the Greek “testament.” This, however, not infrequently leads to considerable confusion. A good example is Hebrews 9:15-18 where the author consistently uses the word “testament,” but translations translate the same word sometimes with “covenant” and sometimes with “testament.” If we read this passage with the concept of a testament in mind we see how clearly the author speaks:

*And for this reason he [i.e. Jesus] is the mediator of a new testament, in order that since a death has taken place for the redemption of the transgressions that were committed under the first testament, those who have been called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance. For where a testament is, there must of necessity be the death of the one who made it. For a testament is valid only when men are dead, for it is never in force while the one who made it lives. Therefore even the first testament was not inaugurated without blood.*

*In summary:*

- every time you read the word ‘covenant’ in a translation of the New Testament, you ought to read the word ‘testament’.

### **The Promise of a New Testament**

It was the advent of the Babylonian captivity that put an end to the “old” testament. The people had broken the covenant by not putting their trust in the Lord and following him (Lev. 26:15; Deut. 31:16, 20). The LORD therefore abandoned his temple and ejected his people from the promised land for their failure to uphold the conditions of the ‘testamentary’ promises. They thus reaped the covenant curse as outlined in Leviticus 26:14-45 and Deuteronomy 27—28 (see esp. Deut. 28:64-65). And yet the LORD would not break the oath/covenant he had made to preserve a seed for Abraham (cf. Lev. 26:44; Jud. 2:1; Rom. 3:3). The line of Abraham would not be totally wiped out by the exile. At that time the LORD also promised that He would make a *new* “testament” with a remnant of his people. In this new testament (Jer. 31:31-34; Hebr. 8:8-13) the law would not only be written on stone tablets, but upon the heart (just as was the intention in the old testament, cf. Deut. 30:6). This testament would be eternal, that is, no longer a testament that would have to be broken due to unbelief (cf. Jer. 32:40; 50:5; Isa. 54:9-10; 55:3 etc.).

This testament was to be expected upon the return out of exile (Isa. 40). But did the new covenant/testament really come at that time? The Israelites were confronted with a problem. On the one hand, the covenant/testament was reinstated at the time of the return, but on the other hand it was not yet everything which had been promised. Where was the *shechinah* (the appearance of the glory of the Lord in the cloud) at the dedication of the new temple? Shortly before the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar Ezekiel had seen God’s glory depart from the old temple (Ezek. 10:18-19; 11:22-23). The Lord had promised that His glory would return to the new temple of the new testament (Ezek. 43:1-5). But that did not happen. And where was the ark of the covenant? Why was the new temple not according to the dimensions of Ezekiel’s vision (Ezek. 40-48)? Where was the Messiah? The Israelites had to wait! The return from exile was in many ways a disappointment. Although many may have been inclined to believe that Isaiah 40 and Jeremiah 31 (etc.) had been fulfilled in the return, other prophets clearly show that this was not the intention. Towards the end of the period of exile, Daniel became very disturbed when it was revealed to him that the eternal kingdom of God with his people would not arrive immediately upon the return from exile. He learned that the kingdom would arrive in its glory only after several kingdoms (symbolised by beasts) had come and gone (see Dan. 7-12). Even the last prophet of the old testament shows us that the promises concerning the new testament had not yet been fulfilled. The Lord God had not yet returned to his temple among his people (and for this reason the *shechinah* and the ark were absent). Through the prophet Malachi the Lord promised that He would—sometime in the future—return to his temple ...

*Behold, I am going to send my messenger, and he will clear the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant (= testament), in whom you delight, behold, He is coming,” says the LORD of hosts. (Mal. 3:1)*

---

<sup>7</sup> A passage such as Ps.Sol. 8:10 (“covenants with an oath”, συνθήκας μετὰ ὄρκου) shows that Jews at this time could use the correct term for “covenant” if they so desired.

How should we then describe the period of the second temple (*i.e.* the period after the return from exile)? Was it an imperfect start to the new testament, or a temporary continuance of the exile? The people *at that time* lived, in any case, in great tension. They probably viewed the situation as that of an imperfect new testament. And yet when the Messiah (*i.e.* the anointed king) finally came, the prophecies of a new age began to receive their genuine and complete fulfilment. For this reason Isaiah 40 (the voice calling in the wilderness) receives its genuine fulfilment with the appearance of John the Baptist and his announcement of the coming of Jesus (Mark 1:1-4). For this reason the fact that Rachel cried for her children (Jer. 31:15, originally the children lost in the exile) receives a new fulfilment at the murder of the children in Bethlehem (Matt. 2:17-18). For this reason the Gospels speak of the necessity of *entering* God’s kingdom. (The concept of the restoration of the kingdom is essentially equivalent to that of the new covenant/testament) In other words, the kingdom / the new covenant was not yet present (*e.g.* Matt. 5:20; 7:21; 23:13; Jn. 3:5). The testamentary history can therefore be schematically presented as in Figure 1.

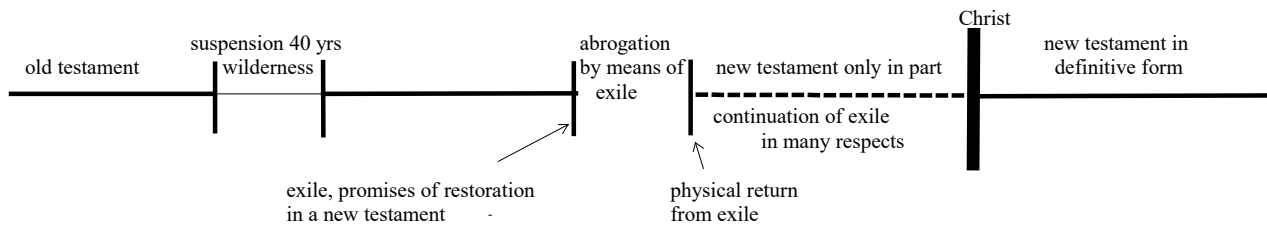


Figure 1. Schematic of Testamentary history

### *Jesus Leaves Us a Testament: The New Testament in Jesus’ Blood*

The LORD in his glory (*shechinah*) finally returned to his people in the person of his only begotten Son, Jesus the Anointed (*i.e.*, Christ). The apostle John alludes to this aspect of Jesus’ incarnation when he speaks of the Word which was God (Joh. 1:1) and which became flesh and “tabernacled” among men who beheld his glory (Joh. 1:14). Jesus himself announced the inauguration of the new testament in his blood when he instituted the Lord’s Supper among his disciples at the Passover meal before his crucifixion. According to Luke 22:20 Jesus spoke specifically of the *new* testament in his blood. We have already seen above how Jesus alluded to the covenant ceremony in Exodus 24 and to the expiation his blood would provide for sin. The disciples, having grown up with the Greek Septuagint translation, will have been accustomed to thinking of the old covenant in terms of a testament. Jesus, at the last supper, added a new dimension when he spoke of the new testament in his own blood. The term “testament” now receives most appropriately its proper significance—he would die in order that they might inherit!

### ***Jesus Inherits a Testament: Paul’s Interpretation of Testamentary History***

The apostle Paul also knew of the tradition of Christ inaugurating the *new* testament in his blood at the last supper and quotes Christ’s words in 1 Corinthians 11:25 in reference to the celebration of the Lord’s supper. In this context, however, Paul is not concerned with expanding on what this means theologically. In 2 Corinthians 3, in reference to Ezekiel 36:26 where the renewal of the covenant is characterised by believing hearts of flesh over against the old hearts of stone, Paul characterises the new testament by the presence of God’s enlivening Spirit, who directs the believer to Christ. And yet, in the only passage where he deals with testamentary history at length, namely Galatians 3—4, Paul does not use the contrast between ‘old’ and ‘new,’ known from both the prophets and Jesus himself, nor does he connect the concept of testament with Christ’s death.

In the letter to the Galatians, Paul, whilst combating the heresy of the Judaisers, explains the relationship between God’s testament with Abraham, the ritual Mosaic laws, Jesus Christ, and the position of the Gentiles before God. In Galatians 3:15-18 he argues that Jesus, as the true promised “seed” (singular) of Abraham inherited the promises of the testament made to him “and his seed,” promises of which the land of Canaan and the great number of Israelites were not complete fulfilments. After all, God had promised that all nations would be blessed in Abraham (Gen. 12:3, cited in Gal. 3:8). According to Paul, the ritual system of laws given at the time of Moses was not designed to provide a new way of salvation, but to keep Israel separate and aware of the need for God’s grace until the promised “seed,” Jesus, should arrive. Jesus would inherit. And by becoming part of Jesus’ body through faith, all believers, of whatever race or position in life, could inherit

God's promises in him (Gal. 3:29).<sup>8</sup> It is important to note that Jesus' inheritance of the promises does not imply the death of his Father, for Paul is working within the paradigm of an inheritance which a father can distribute at a previously determined date (Gal. 4:1-2, cf. Tob. 8:21; Sir. 33:20-24).

We may be led to ask just what the promises which Jesus inherited were. The quotation which Paul introduces in Gal. 3:16 "and to your seed" occurs in a number of places in the history of God's dealings with Abraham. Foremost in these quotations is the promise of land (Gen. 12:7; 13:15; 24:7), although the promise to be a God to Abraham and his "seed" is also represented (Gen. 17:7). Jesus, through the lineage of David, inherited a kingdom, that is, a promised land over which he would rule. This land turned out to be much more than the land of Canaan, which was only a type or symbolic foreshadowing of the kingdom of the universe which Jesus inherited. We might also say that Jesus inherited all the true descendants of Abraham, who believe in him.

It is clear that this explanation in the letter to the Galatians varies greatly with the tradition in the prophets and with Jesus of the coming of a "new" testament. Although Paul does not neglect the significance of Christ's death in Galatians three (cf. v.13), he does not connect it with the concept of testament as Jesus does, and nor would we expect him to. Jesus' use of the concept of "testament" at the last supper stands in the tradition of the promised "new testament," and it is precisely this tradition that is ignored in the letter to the Galatians.

We do not really know how Paul would have related his explanation in the letter to the Galatians with the tradition of the promised "new testament" and its connection with Christ's death and the Lord's supper. It seems probable that Paul regarded God's testament with the people mediated by Moses in Exodus 24, although related to and building upon the testament with Abraham, as a distinct entity which he chose not to discuss. The "new testament" realised in Jesus' blood, being directly related to the testament mediated by Moses, is therefore not relevant in the context of his argumentation.

<b>Two ways of looking at the testament</b>	
<b>Paul's letter to the Galatians</b>	<b>The prophets, Jesus and the letter to the Hebrews</b>
<p><i>Testator:</i> God  <i>Heir:</i> Jesus ("the seed")  <i>Inheritance:</i> kingdom of heaven and earth (many descendants)  <i>Manner of inheritance:</i> on a stated day</p> <p>(In this paradigm there is no contrast between old and new. There was always only one testament, see Gal. 3. Believers inherit together with Jesus because they are identified with Him through faith)</p>	<p><i>Testator:</i> Jesus  <i>Heir:</i> believers  <i>Inheritance:</i> eternal life in glory (forgiveness, etc.)  <i>Manner of inheritance:</i> by the death of the testator</p> <p>(In this paradigm we encounter the new testament of which the old testament was a shadow, see Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:23-26; 2 Cor. 3)</p>

### ***Jesus Leaves a Testament: Testamentary History in the Letter to the Hebrews***

The letter to the Hebrews, otherwise than Paul's letter to the Galatians, deals explicitly with the contrast between the old and the new testaments. The old testament is viewed as a shadow or copy of the new testament (Hebr. 8:4-5; 9:23-24). Just as a shadow vaguely gives the form of a real person, in the same way the things of the old testament are but a shadow of the things of the new testament. The tabernacle was, for example, merely a copy and shadow of the true temple in heaven. The promises of the old are types or shadows of the promises of the new (Hebr. 8:6). In this way Hebrews can contrast the promise of ritual cleansing through the blood of animals, with the cleansing of the conscience by the blood of Christ (Hebr. 9:13-14). Jesus' sacrifice of himself on the cross is therefore what provides the true redemption for transgressions, including those committed in the time of the old testament (9:15). Believers inherit the promises from Jesus, who died to ratify his testament. His death is therefore both to pay the penalty for sin and to validate the new testament. The letter to the Hebrews treats the concept of testament here more strictly than Paul when it re-

<sup>8</sup> For a more detailed analysis of Paul's argumentation in Gal. 3 see my article "An Argumentation Analysis of Gal. 3." For a discussion of the nature of the Judaistic heresy Paul is combating in this letter see my article "Pharisees, Judaisers and Paul."

quires the death of the testator for ratification (9:16-17). The death of the sacrificial animals under the old covenant were copies and symbols of the death of Christ (9:18 ff.).

The comparison of the old and new testaments in this letter show up the superiority of the new testament in Jesus. The weakness of the old testament is illustrated through the fact that the whole covenant relationship twice had to be suspended or terminated because of unbelief and hardness of heart. The first time was the suspension of the 40 year sojourn in the wilderness,<sup>9</sup> the second time was the termination with the Babylonian captivity.<sup>10</sup>

In Hebrews eight the prophet Jeremiah is quoted from the passage where he prophesies the coming of a new testament. In this passage the failings of the old testament are delineated. Jeremiah speaks, among other things, of a change in the hearts of men so that they will truly know the Lord and follow his laws. This promise of an inner renewal in the new covenant/testament is also given in Isaiah 44:1-4 where it is connected with the work of God's Spirit. It is however noteworthy that, although Jeremiah speaks in terms of spiritual renewal in the hearts of men (in the new testament everyone shall believe), this is not the emphasis of the letter to the Hebrews. Indeed, this letter presumes that in the new testament there is still a possibility that someone will harden his heart (3:13). Although this promised spiritual renewal of men as part of the new testament must not be denied, the difference and superiority of the new testament lie more in the heavenly temple (in opposition to the earthly temple) and foremost in its high priest, Jesus Christ, who fulfils an eternal priesthood which is in every way better, enacting a real reconciliation with God the Father. This is the source of the eternal and unbreakable character of the new testament church. This also has to do with the fact that the new testament churches are *local* congregations with a direct relationship to a firm and perfect temple in heaven. The community of this temple can never again be infected by unbelief. People who come to this temple (in faith through prayer and petition for forgiveness) are all genuine believers.<sup>11</sup> A local church which degenerates into unbelief is, in time (if repentance does not follow), no longer recognised by Jesus (see Rev. 2:5; 3:16).<sup>12</sup> But there will always be true churches of Christ through the work of God's Spirit in the hearts of men.

Parallel to these differences is the statement that the new testament rests upon better promises (Heb. 8:6). In Hebrews 9:5 the promise of the new testament is characterised as an "eternal inheritance." In this way the promise of the earthly land of Canaan (cf. 11:8-9) is contrasted with that of the new heaven and earth. Just as the earthly temple was a foreshadowing of the heavenly temple, so the promise of the earthly land of Canaan was a foreshadowing of the promised new heavens and earth in glory (cf. 11:14-16). The full richness of the new testament is thus still future.

The perfections of the new testament, according to Hebrews, are not so much to be found in the believer himself, but in the new temple and its new high priest. They may be summarised as follows:

<sup>9</sup> See my article "Het Geestelijk Welzijn van de Generatie die stierf in de Woestijn."

<sup>10</sup> In Jer. 3:1-10 the disruption of the covenant between God and His people is compared to a divorce procedure. In Jer. 2:9 the Lord declares a court proceeding against His "wife" Judah. God presents evidence of adultery (*i.e.* idolatry) and cites the law of Deut. 24:1-4 (Jer. 3:1). Judah is hereby threatened with divorce. She has already seen the results when God sent her sister Israel away in exile with a bill of divorce (Jer. 3:8; cf. Hos. 1-2). Isa. 50:1 also refers to this divorce.

<sup>11</sup> In Reformed circles there are two common interpretations of the absolute character of the promise of Jer. 31 that "nobody will again say 'Know the Lord.'" The traditional (scholastic) interpretation is to connect this promise with the elect. Others (*e.g.*, J. Ridderbos and K. Schilder) have quite rightly criticised this interpretation because this was also true of the old testament (*i.e.*, that all the elect know the Lord). We are concerned here with a *difference* between the old and the new testament. They argue that this promise for God's church in the new testament has been in principle fulfilled at Christ's coming, but that it only receives a complete fulfilment at Christ's return. The problem as I see it is that both sides read the doctrine of divine election into this promise of Jer. 31. Read in this way, the text must mean that there is no possibility that any individual in the new testament could not truly know the Lord. It is clear that the letter to the Hebrews does not interpret the passage in this way, for that would completely invalidate the warnings given in the letter about falling away from the faith (*e.g.*, Hebr. 6, 10 and 12). The point that Hebrews makes is that in the *new* testament we have a reality, where formally there was only a shadow pointing to that reality. A direct application of Jer. 31:34 (= Hebr. 8:11-12) is not provided in the letter. In the context of this letter and the prophecy concerned, however, it is clear that the point is that the *new* testament will never be abrogated such as the old testament had to be by means of exile. The reason for that abrogation was general widespread unbelief and worship of other gods. Later in this letter the church of the new testament is characterised as a gathering of the first-born (*i.e.* priests) who stand at the heavenly Jerusalem to worship God. The worship around the heavenly Jerusalem will *never* be adulterated by unbelief and idolatry. While it is possible that church discipline may need to be exercised against individuals, and even that local churches may be cut off by Jesus' refusal to recognise them, this in no way threatens the livelihood of the new testament community of churches which derive their strength and sustenance from an unassailable heavenly temple with its perfect high priest. Concerning the conflict in the Netherlands in the 1930s and 40s on the doctrine of the covenant, especially with respect to the question as to whether or not the covenant should be connected to election, see J. Kamphuis, *An Everlasting Covenant*, transl. G. van Rongen (Launceston, Tas.: Publication Organization of the Free Reformed Churches of Australia, 1985).

<sup>12</sup> See further my article "Christ's Church and our Calling."



- Christ remains high priest forever (there is no succession of priests anymore)
- The heavenly temple was made by God Himself.
- Christ is always in God's presence (the Levitical high priest came once a year in God's presence)
- Christ offered his own blood, not that of animals.
- Christ's sacrifice is once for all, and needs no repetition.
- Christ's blood made entrance into the holy of holies possible for us (not the case in the old testament)

The believers are now directed much more pointedly to God's work of salvation. The punishments for breaking God's testament are therefore more severe (Hebr. 10:29). But the same righteous law is maintained.

### **The Promise and Work of God's Spirit in the New Testament Dispensation**

Another important aspect of the difference between the old and new testaments is the promise of the outpouring of God's Spirit made, for example, in Ezekiel 36:26-27, Isaiah 44:1-4 and Joel 2:28-29. It is therefore important that we properly understand what the promise of the Spirit for the new testament means. This promise of the outpouring of God's Spirit was a fundamental aspect of the prophecy of a new testament. It can not, however, simply refer to the regenerating work of the Spirit in the heart, for even in the old testament period the Spirit was active to regenerate the hearts of believers like Abraham. During the old testament period this regenerating work of the Spirit was described, not in terms of a work of the Spirit, but in various other ways, for example, God's work in the circumcision of the hearts of men (*e.g.*, Deut. 30:6), which Paul specifically refers to as a work of the Spirit (Rom. 2:29). If we realise this, then we realise that the outpouring of God's Spirit does not mean that the Spirit was not present with God's people before. There is indeed the promise that the new testament would be a time of spiritual renewal when God's people would learn anew to trust in God and follow his laws (Isa. 44:1-4; Ezek. 36:26-27), in contrast to the sinful people which was sent into exile. In Joel 2:28-29 God promises in addition that his Spirit will come upon all flesh, in other words, that the Gospel will penetrate the hearts, not only of Jews according to the flesh, but also those of people from all nations. This new enlargement of the working-space of God's Spirit would be characterised by special gifts such as prophecy. Another facet of the promised outpouring had a special bearing on the work of the apostles. In his speech to the disciples at the last supper, Jesus promised that He would send them the Comforter, who would, among other things, bring to recall everything that he had ever said to them (Joh. 14:26). The Spirit would help them in their task to be eye-witnesses of Jesus (Joh. 15:26-27), lead them and provide them with the necessary information concerning the future (Joh. 16:13). The work of the Spirit among men in the new testament, after the outpouring, has also especially to do with binding the believers to Jesus Christ. In this respect we need to appreciate the difference between faith in the time of the old testament and faith after the special sending of the Spirit at Pentecost.

Before Pentecost the nature of faith could be characterised as trust in God and in His Word. This included, of course, trust in the promise of the Messiah. But from the Gospels (see especially John 14–16) we learn that the disciples, before Pentecost, had never properly understood what the person and work of Jesus Christ meant. They were crushed by the crucifixion of Jesus. And even after the resurrection they show no evidence of understanding what the purpose of the crucifixion and resurrection was. Only after they received the Holy Spirit at Pentecost did they finally understand everything. Jesus had promised that the Spirit would teach them everything and bring to remembrance everything He had said (Joh. 14:26). The coming of the Spirit would mean that the Father and the Son would dwell in their hearts. The indwelling of the Father and the Son in the heart of the believer is therefore something which only belongs to the nature of true faith *after* Pentecost. After Pentecost this indwelling is even characterised as a *mark* of true faith. Paul says in 2 Cor. 13:5.

*Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognise this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you—unless indeed you fail the test?*

If we cannot say that Jesus is in us, then we are not in the faith! After Pentecost true faith is a faith that understands who Jesus really is and what the meaning of His crucifixion and resurrection is. This new trust in the person and work of Christ is to be directly attributed to the special sending of the Spirit by Jesus Christ at Pentecost.

There is also another aspect of the work of the Spirit in the new testament that is important. The prophecies indicate that the Spirit would work in a special way upon the Messiah himself (Isa. 61:1). Jesus was of course not regenerated by the Spirit, but he was equipped for the work of His office. The Spirit was given to

him at his baptism (cf. Luke 3:21-22; 4:1, 16-21). It is the same Spirit that the Lord Jesus promised to send his disciples as the “Comforter” (John 14-16)—again, not to regenerate the disciples, but to equip them for the work of their office as apostles (see above). When Jesus sent his Spirit at Pentecost this was both a fulfilment of his promise to the disciples, as well as a fulfilment of the prophecy of Joel that God’s Spirit would be poured out upon all flesh. The special gifts of the Spirit were, in the first place, poured out upon the apostles who on that day spoke in foreign tongues (languages).<sup>13</sup> They also received the power to distribute these gifts to others who came to faith (itself a work of the Spirit). The imparting of these special gifts of the Spirit came by the apostolic laying on of hands (see Acts 2:38; 8:1-19; 19:6). Through the spreading of these special gifts of the Spirit, the Lord allowed the young church to clearly appreciate the fact that His Gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ was indeed meant for *all* flesh (see Acts 10:44-48; 11:15-17).<sup>14</sup>

In conclusion, let us learn anew to appreciate the great richness of the new testament. Then we will not be so inclined to take the indwelling of the Father and the Son through the Spirit in our hearts for granted. The special name of Jesus, Immanuel (God-with-us), will mean so much more to us. The richness of a faith in Jesus Christ, who has conquered death for us, shows us God’s fatherly love and mercy in a way that was not possible in the old testament. Appreciation of this richness brings with it, naturally, a fitting measure of thankfulness!

### Literature cited

Anderson, Roger Dean, “Acts 2:38-39: The First Preaching of the New Covenant in Christ’s Blood.”  
<http://anderson.modelcrafts.eu/articles>

– “An Argumentation Analysis of Gal. 3.” <http://anderson.modelcrafts.eu/articles>

– “Christ’s Church and our Calling.” <http://anderson.modelcrafts.eu/articles>

– “Het Geestelijk Welzijn van de Generatie die stierf in de Woestijn.”  
<http://anderson.modelcrafts.eu/artikelen>

– “Pharisees, Judaisers and Paul.” <http://anderson.modelcrafts.eu/articles>

– “The Laws for Uncleaness in the Pentateuch and NT Baptism” (Section 2.4). <http://anderson.modelcrafts.eu/articles>

Kamphuis, J., *An Everlasting Covenant*, transl. G. van Rongen (Launceston, Tas.: Publication Organization of the Free Reformed Churches of Australia, 1985).

Morris, Leon, “Covenant.” In *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, third ed. (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1965).

Quell, Gottfried and Johannes Behm, “διαθήκη.” In *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. G. Kittel *et al*, transl. G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964) 2.106-34.

Van Bruggen, Jakob, *Ambten in de Apostolische Kerk: Een Exegetisch Mozaïek* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1984).

---

<sup>13</sup> The word “apostles” in Luke needs to be understood in a broad sense. He uses this term not only for the 12 apostles whom Jesus had chosen out of the others, but also for the 70 whom he “sent out” (the literal meaning of “apostle”). In Luke 6:13 we read of the choosing of the 12 who were called apostles (= “those who are sent out”). In Luke 9:1 ff. they are actually sent out. In Luke 10:1 Jesus sends “70 others” out, that is to say 70 other apostles. This way of speaking can also be seen elsewhere in the Gospel. In Luk. 24:9-10 the women tell of the resurrection to the eleven and the “others,” *i.e.*, the other apostles. If we pay attention to what follows (see Luke 24:33, 48-49) we see that Jesus gives the missionary commission to this broad group of apostles. This broad group of about 82 apostles were instructed to wait for the sending of the Holy Spirit (*cf.* Acts 1:12). See also 1 Cor. 15:5, 7 and Acts 14:4, 14. For further literature see J. van Bruggen, *Ambten in de Apostolische Kerk: Een Exegetisch Mozaïek* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1984) 9-64.

<sup>14</sup> See further my articles “Acts 2:38-39: The First Preaching of the New Covenant in Christ’s Blood” and “The Laws for Uncleaness in the Pentateuch and New Testament Baptism” (Section 2.4).

Weinfeld, M., “בְּרִיחַ.” In *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren, transl. J. T. Willis (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, revised ed. 1977) 253-79.