

HEB 13:20: COVENANT OF GRACE OR NEW COVENANT? AN EXEGETICAL NOTE

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The recently released *New Geneva Study Bible*, which champions the theological school of "covenantalism," proposes that "God . . . revealed His covenant of grace by promising a Savior (Gen. 3:15). . . . The covenant of Sinai . . . was a continuation of the covenant of grace (Ex. 3:15; Deut. 7:7, 8; 9:5, 6). . . . As Heb. 7-10 explains . . . God inaugurated a better version of His one eternal covenant with sinners (Heb. 13:20). . . ." ¹ But, does the phrase $\delta\iota\alpha\theta\eta\kappa\eta\ \alpha\iota\omega\nu\acute{\alpha}\iota\omicron\upsilon$ (*diathekē aiōniou*, "eternal covenant") in Hebrews 13:20 actually refer to "one eternal covenant"? ²

¹"God's Covenant of Grace," *New Geneva Study Bible*, R.C. Sproul, ed (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995) 30. Interestingly, the explanatory note on Heb. 13:20 (1957) identifies the phrase as referring to the New Covenant, but says nothing about an eternal covenant of grace. For concise overviews of "covenantalism" as a distinct theological school, see Morton H. Smith, "The Church and Covenant Theology," *JETS* 21/1 (March 1978):47-65, and Mark Futato, "Covenant: Let The Reader Understand," *Coram Deo* 19/8 (August 1995):8-12. These articles delineate the thinking of covenantalists which leads them to see all of the covenants as though they were one.

²Among covenantalists there have generally been at least three views in regard to the supposed pre-creation covenant(s) of redemption/grace. First, O. Palmer Robertson (*Christ of the Covenants* [Phillipsburg, N. J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980] 54) argues that to embrace this concept as exegetically taught ". . . is to extend the bounds of scriptural evidence beyond propriety," as does Reformed Baptist John Zen in "Is There A `Covenant of Grace?'" *Baptist Reformation Review* 6:3 (Autumn 1977) 43-53. Second, John Dick (*Lectures on Theology* [Cincinnati: Applegate, 1856] 258) insists on one covenant in eternity past. Third, Robert C. Dabney (*Systematic Theology*, 2nd ed. [reprint, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1985] 432-33), Charles Hodge

(*Systematic Theology* [reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975] 2:358-59), and Herman Witsius (*The Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man* [reprint, Escondido, Calif.: The den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1990] 1:165) strongly distinguish between the covenant of redemption and the covenant of grace, albeit they supposedly existed initially as one pre-creation agreement between the Father and the Son. See John Murray, "Covenant Theology," in *The Encyclopedia of Christianity* (Marshallton, Del.: The National Foundation for Christian Education, 1972) 3:204-15, for a brief history of these variations within "covenantalism." Interestingly, nowhere in his volume *The Covenant of Grace* (Phillipsburg, N. J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1953) does Murray mention the deduced or inferred covenant(s) of redemption/grace, most likely because his was a "biblico-theological study" which found no explicit biblical data—i.e., that derived inductively/exegetically—referring to the hypothetical covenants.

THE ISSUE

Reformed commentators of another era—e.g., Gouge³ (1587-1653), Henry⁴ (1662-1714), Owen⁵ (1616-1683), and Poole⁶ (1624-1679)—equated Hebrews 13:20 with the alleged "covenant of grace," as did theologian Dabny⁷ (1820-1898). In contrast, John Calvin (1509-1564) spoke of this text in conjunction with the New Covenant,⁸ although one might have guessed he would have linked this text to the covenant(s) of redemption/grace if pressed for a more thorough explanation.

More recent commentators uniformly relate Hebrews 13:20 to the New Covenant without mentioning the covenant of grace—e.g., Brown,⁹ Bruce,¹⁰ Cranfield,¹¹ Ellingsworth,¹² Hughes,¹³ Kistemaker,¹⁴

³William Gouge, *Commentary on Hebrews* (reprint, Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1980) 1116.

⁴Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary* (reprint, Marshallton, Del.: The National Foundation for Christian Education, n.d.) 3:1285.

⁵John Owen, *An Exposition of Hebrews* (reprint, Marshallton, Del.: The Foundation for Christian Education, n.d.) 4:475-76.

⁶Matthew Poole, *A Commentary on the Holy Bible* (reprint, McLean, Va.: MacDonal Publishing, n.d.) 3:878.

⁷Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, 435.

⁸John Calvin, *Hebrews* (reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989) 412.

⁹John Brown, *Hebrews* (reprint, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1976) 718-19.

¹⁰F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964) 411.

¹¹C. E. B. Cranfield, "Hebrews 13:20-21," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 20/3 (1967):437-41.

¹²Paul Ellingsworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, in *CGT* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 729-30.

¹³Philip E. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 589-90.

Lane,¹⁵ Morris,¹⁶ Pink,¹⁷ and Westcott,¹⁸ but most likely with silent covenantal overtones. Non-covenantalists such as Kent¹⁹ and MacArthur²⁰ also relate Hebrews 13:20 to the New Covenant, but without assumptions in regard to any alleged covenant(s) of redemption/grace.

A fresh look at the phrase "eternal covenant" in Hebrews 13:20 is appropriate in view of the less-than-unanimous conclusions put forth by commentators and theologians of various theological persuasions. Are there "covenantal" overtones in the verse that find their roots in a pre-creation, eternity-past covenant of redemption which may or may not have a connection with a supposed subsidiary or subsequent covenant of grace? Or, does Hebrews 13:20 refer exclusively to the New Covenant, which is the dominant theme of Hebrews, with no reference to or assumptions concerning the presupposed foundational elements of covenant theology?

THE EXEGETICAL FACTS

At least six textual/contextual observations are germane in answering the question, "To what does 'the blood of the eternal covenant' in Hebrews 13:20 refer?"

¹⁴Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews in NTC* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984) 430-31.

¹⁵William L. Lane, *Hebrews 9—13*, in *WBC* (Dallas: Word, 1991) 47B:563.

¹⁶Leon Morris, "Hebrews," in *EBC*, Frank E. Gaebelin, gen. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981) 12:155.

¹⁷A. W. Pink, *An Exposition of Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1954) 3:375.

¹⁸B. F. Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 448.

¹⁹Homer A. Kent, Jr., *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Winona Lake, Ind.: BMH, 1972) 293.

²⁰John MacArthur, *Hebrews* (Chicago: Moody, 1983) 389.

1. "Eternal" (*aiōnios*) in the NT does not necessarily mean "eternity past."²¹ Consider *eternal* life in John 3:15-16, 36, for example. Further, only five of the over seventy appearances of *aiōnios* in the NT clearly refer to "eternity past" (Rom 16:25-26; 2 Tim 1:9; Titus 1:2; Heb 9:14). Therefore, the initial assumption should be that *aiōnios* has the sense of (1) eternity future or (2) an indefinitely long period of time, unless obvious features of the context indicate otherwise. No such indications occur in Hebrews 13:20.²²

2. No explicit, uncontested exegetical evidence in either the Old or New Testaments refers to any covenant(s) made in eternity past.²³ Deduced or inferential evidence is not sufficient foundation for something as important as the supposed "covenant of redemption" or "covenant of grace." Rather direct, unquestioned declarations of Scripture should establish that foundation, the kind that establish explicitly revealed covenants—e.g., the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen 17:7), the Davidic Covenant (2 Sam 23:5), and the New Covenant (Jer 32:40). It is inconceivable for Hebrews 13:20 to be the first and only outright mention of a heretofore unrevealed covenant

²¹J. Guhrt, "αἰών," *NIDNTT* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975) 3:829.

²²Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) 102. Louis Berkof, *Systematic Theology*, 278, admitted this openly when writing about the covenant of grace. "When we speak of it as an eternal covenant, we have reference to a future rather than to a past eternity, Gen. 17:19; II Sam. 23:5; Heb. 13:20. Past eternity can be ascribed to it only if we do not distinguish between it and the covenant of redemption." Many covenantalists connect the two covenants, thereby making a serious lexical error when they refer Hebrews 13:20 to eternity past.

²³Although proponents cite numerous biblical texts in support of the covenant(s) of redemption/grace, they all assume the fact of these covenants and the covenantal hypothesis of their origin. However, the unvarnished truth is that no clear and uncontested biblical texts mention a "covenant of redemption" or a "covenant of grace." Nor do any undisputed texts describe these covenants in a unified relationship to each other. Additionally, the biblical fact of God's predetermined plan of election to salvation in eternity past (Eph 1:4-5) does not need the theory of "covenantalism" to account for it.

made in eternity past or later.

3. In noticeable contrast to the absence of exegetical evidence for either a covenant of redemption or a covenant of grace, the OT clearly and specifically calls five different covenants "eternal" or "everlasting":

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| A. Noahic Covenant - | Gen 9:16. |
| B. Abrahamic Covenant - | Gen 17:7, 13, 19; 1 Chr 16:15, 17; Pss. 105:8, 10; 111:5, 9; Isa 24:5. |
| C. Priestly Covenant - | Lev 24:8; Num 18:19. |
| D. Davidic Covenant - | 2 Sam 23:5; Ps 89:3-4, 28-29, 36. |
| E. New Covenant - | See biblical references in the next paragraph. |

Therefore, one of these five covenants is the most obvious candidate to be identified as the covenant mentioned in Hebrews 13:20.

4. Of the five covenants called eternal/everlasting in the OT, the New Covenant is mentioned in more separate texts than any of the other four.

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| A. Isa 55:3 | E. Jer 50:5 |
| B. Isa 59:21 | F. Ezek 16:60 |
| C. Isa 61:8 | G. Ezek 37:26 |
| D. Jer 32:40 | |

Therefore, the New Covenant should be the interpretative option-of-choice in Hebrews 13:20, especially if further evidence strengthens the likelihood of that probability.

5. The book of Hebrews explicitly mentions only two covenants—the Old Covenant (Heb 8:9) and the New Covenant (Heb 8:8). Of the two, the OT calls only the New Covenant eternal/everlasting.²⁴ Therefore, the covenantal context of

²⁴Kent, *Hebrews*, 293, notes, "It is eternal in the sense that it secures eternal life for its beneficiaries and will never be invalidated nor superseded."

Hebrews points to the New Covenant as the "eternal covenant" to which Hebrews 13:20 most likely refers.

6. Hebrews links "blood" and "covenant" closely on four occasions, one in the text under consideration. The first text refers to the Old Covenant (9:20), but the second and third refer to the New Covenant (10:29; 12:24). Therefore, as one encounters the phrase $\alpha\omicron\mu\alpha\tau\iota\ \delta\iota\alpha\theta\eta\kappa\eta\varsigma\ \alpha\iota\omega\nu\iota\omicron\upsilon$ (*haimati diathekes aioni-ou*, "blood of [the] eternal covenant") in 13:20, the New Covenant is the only contextual possibility.²⁵

A REASONABLE CONCLUSION

This note has considered the following six features of the phrase "blood of the eternal covenant" in Hebrews 13:20:

1. The predominant NT use of *aiōnios* to mean a period of indefinite length or "eternity future."
2. The total absence of any OT/NT explicit mention of a covenant(s) made in eternity past.
3. The specific identification of five OT covenants called "eternal/everlasting" that point ahead in time, not back.
4. The dominant frequency of the New Covenant among the five OT covenants cited above.
5. The appearance of only two covenants in Hebrews—the Old and the New, which provides the contextual limits of interpretive options.
6. The linking of "blood" with an "eternal covenant" in Hebrews,

²⁵This is also the conclusion of Johannes Behm, "diat̄uhmi, diaūthkh," *TDNT* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964) 2:132, and J. Guhr, "diat̄uhkh," *DNTT* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975) 1:371.

which leads decisively and exclusively to the New Covenant.

Therefore, the most textually/contextually consistent and natural understanding of the phrase "the blood of the eternal covenant" in Hebrews 13:20 points to "the blood of Jesus Christ shed as the New Testament propitiation which provides the future, permanent, and eternal expectation of personal redemption." This clear interpretation does not depend on any assumptions made or inferences drawn about a supposed covenant(s) of redemption/grace.