

# COVENANT RENEWAL

Genesis **1:26-28**

Matthew **28:18-20**

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## THE COVENANT IN HEBREWS

The following study of Hebrews was written by one of the I.C.E. readers: Andrew Lohr of Look Out Mountain, Georgia. It is his treatment of the covenant pattern in the Book of Hebrews. It is his attempt to work with a simple, yet obvious sequence in the Bible. I commend him for I think he has done an excellent job. I may differ slightly on some of his divisions, but all in all I agree with his conclusions. His insight about Hebrews being a covenant **memorandum** is extremely helpful and worth the entire essay.

I reproduce his work not only to show another place where the covenant appears, but to demonstrate what can be done with this powerful, Biblical and **covenantal** para-

digm. But what is often obvious to cursory reading of the Bible escapes the tediousness of modern nominalistic scholarship; you know, the you-can't-see-the-forest-for-the-trees problem.

Keep in mind that Mr. Lohr's work is not an effort to present a completely air-tight argument, even though his section on "Signs Marking Transition Points" evidences true scholarly ability. Rather, he has merely observed the basic covenantal pattern and recorded what he has noticed. Through it, he has triggered my own thinking. After his comments, I will try to discuss my understanding of Hebrews' covenant pattern.

## THE COVENANTAL STRUCTURE OF HEBREWS

Lohr

I have probably read around 2000 books. Yet, the one that has given me more knowledge of Holy Scripture is Dr. Ray R. Sutton's *Covenant*.<sup>1</sup> Since writing *TYMP*, Sutton has taken up writing a monthly newsletter on the covenant and some of his - fans? - have sent him studies they've done using his model. I see in particular the covenant pattern in the Book of Hebrews. I have attempted to refine his position a bit in this study, but I only want to improve on it in minor details. All Bible commentaries in my opinion that do not refer to Sutton's work on the covenant are obsolescent.

Sutton, following on Meredith Kline as Calvin on Luther, sees in Scripture a 5-point covenantal pattern: (1) Transcendence, (2) Hierarchy, (3) "Ethics" (1 say "Edibles," i.e. provisions whether spiritual or temporal), (4) "Oath" (1 say "Output" - feedback, but not final and definitive.), and (5) Succession/inheritance forming a handy acronym (T-H-E-O-S). Sutton notes several examples. First, the Ten Commandments are organized according to the covenant, repeating the structure twice. Commandments 1 and 6: God alone is the Most High and don't assail His image. Commandments 2 and 7: Don't mess with God's system for approaching Him nor with the earthly hierarchies God has set up. Commandments 3 and 8: Don't manipulate God or your neighbor (Sutton) to get what you want or need (Lohr). Commandments 4 and 9: Receive God's blessing of rest and give your neighbor his just rewards. Commandments 5 and 10: Inherit in a Godly

way and don't mess with your neighbor's inheritance.

Other passages that show this 5-point pattern are Deuteronomy (Kline), Psalms (5 books), Revelation (the transcendent Christ, the 7 churches, the 7 seals, the 7 trumpets, and the 7 vials), Isaiah 52:13-53:12 (three verses per point), Hosea, Matthew, Romans, Leviticus - and Hebrews.

Sutton also finds the covenant pattern in smaller sections of Scripture such as Hebrews 8. There are sometimes covenants within covenants. For example, each letter to a church in Revelation 2-3 starts with the transcendent Christ and ends with what the overcomes inherit.

### The Book as a Whole

The entire Book of Hebrews, however, also follows the covenant sequence. Each point of transition is marked by indicators in the text, as well as by content. Hebrews 1 declares Christ transcendent; Hebrews 2 declares Him supreme; Hebrews 3:1-10:18 declares Him the true Provider; Hebrews 10:19-11:40 declares Him the rewarder of them that seek Him; and, Hebrews 12:10-13:25 declares that his kingdom alone is everlasting. Amen.

### Transcendence

Chapter 1, the transcendent Christ. I suppose anyone not already convinced of the deity of Christ would be convinced by this argument, but both Hebrews and Revelation begin by presenting Christ as transcendent, i.e. as God. "Let all the angels worship Him."

### Hierarchy

Chapter 2 (and possibly through 4:13). Christ is presented as the giver of orders, supreme not just in His own being (Chapter 1) but in His position in the hierarchy that

1. Dr Sutton recently earned his doctorate through the Central School of Religion, Worcester, England, an evangelical school found in 1894. He was awarded the degree on the basis of his covenant studies: books and essays.

works in history. “For unto the angels bath He not put in subjection the world; in that He put all in subjection under Him, He left nothing that is not put under Him.”

### Edibles

Central chapters. Christ (not the Levitical sacrifices) is God’s true provision for the remission of our sins. “He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by His own blood.”

### output

Chapter 11 and possibly surrounding portions. Those who live by faith are rewarded; those who don’t have it worse. “By faith he sojourned in the land of promise as in a strange country . . . for he looked for a city which bath foundations.”

### Succession

Chapters 12 (?) and 13. Stick with Jesus, for “We are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken.”

Did the human author of Hebrews know his writing fell into a **covenantal** pattern? He may or may not have; I’ve had the experience of following a pattern I hadn’t heard of. When I read James B. Jordan’s remark that Louis Bouyer said the Biblical pattern of prayer had three parts – praise for creation, praise for redemption, and petition for the building of God’s kingdom in various ways – I recognized that many of my prayers did indeed follow this pattern of which I had never heard. Probably I had **unconsciously incorporated** the pattern from Scripture. So if the human author of Hebrews knew his Old Testament – which he did – he may have absorbed and followed the **covenantal** pattern without consciously knowing it; or he may have been more conscious of it than we might guess. I can’t say.

### Signs Marking Transition Points

Are there any indications in the text which might mark the divisions between sections more precisely than I have done above (if precise divisions exist)? I suspect a three-fold pattern at each transition point: “Therefore” or a synonym; a reference to “we” or to “brothers”; and an exhortation to look at Jesus.

These structural indicators appear in the following:

2:1: “Therefore [**dia**: connecting particle] we [**hamas**: identification by pronoun] must pay careful attention to this salvation which was first announced by the Lord [**exhortation**: not by angels as in the Old Testament].”

3:1: “Wherefore [**Hothen**: connecting particle] brothers [**adelphoi**: identification] fix your thoughts on Jesus [**exhortation**].”

10:19: “Having therefore [**ekhontes oun**: connecting particle] brothers [**adelphoi**: identification] confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus let us draw near to God [**exhortation**].”

12:1: “Consequently [**Toigaroun**: connecting particle, a word brewed up out of **three** synonyms for ‘therefore’], and [**kai**: usually translated ‘and’ but here also with a sense of ‘therefore’] we [**hameis**: identification] should lay aside every weight and the sin which cloth so easily beset us, looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith [**exhortation**].”

Other places marked by “therefore” – this list may not be complete – include 4:1 (no explicit “we” nor clear pointer to Jesus); 4:14 (no explicit “we”); 6:1 (no explicit “we”), 10:5 (no explicit “we”); 12:12 (no explicit “Jesus”; an explicit “your” [**humon**] however); and 12:28 (no explicit “we” until verse 29, and no explicit “Jesus”). Of these

points, 4:14 and 12:28 are **perhaps** the strongest candidates for transition points (alternatives to 3:1 and 12:1).

The debatable passages, then, would be 3:1-4:13 and 12:1-28. 12:1 is more strongly marked than 12:28, and the content of chapter 12 seems to me more concerned with succession, with inheritance, than with output (sanction or results along the way); so I put chapter 12 under “succession,” with the transition point at 12:1.

### The Debatable Passage: 3:1-4:13

**3:1-4:13 is more debatable.** 3:1 is more strongly marked than 4:14, but the content of the intervening passage seems more involved with who you are under (**hierarchy/history**) than with how you’ve provided for material or redemptive edibles.

Another test (besides markers and content) is that of dividing the relevant passages themselves into a covenant format. In other words, if there is a covenant within a covenant (as in the covenantal letters under **hierarchy** in Revelation 2-3), can the shape of the smaller covenant clarify the shape of the larger one? Specifically, is it easier to see the covenant structure in chapter 2 and again in 3:1-10:18, or easier in 2:1-4:13 and again in 4:14-10:18?

I find the first easier. Note the following structure in chapter 2:

2:1-4: transcendence; w. 5-9: hierarchy; v. 10: redemptive edibles; vv. 11-13: output; vv. 14-18 succession.

Then, the covenantal structure repeats itself again in 3:1-10:18.

3:1-6: transcendence; 3:7-4:13: hierarchy (Who are you under?); 4:14-5:14: edibles; 6:1-7:10: output (Sutton’s term “Oath” is attractive here); and, 7:11-10:18: succession, a disproportionately long section because the supersession of the Mosaic economy by the Christ is the theme of Hebrews, and of great practical importance to Hebrew Christians tempted to lapse back into Judaism. (The importance of this theme, the replacement of animal sacrifices by Calvary is too little known today; see David Chilton’s

### Hebrews: Covenant Lawsuit?

The term **covenant lawsuit** has become well known in some places. Would one call Hebrews, with its covenant structure, a covenant lawsuit? I would not, but I’d call it a covenant “legal memorandum.” It is not a suit against people who have done wrong, but a warning to people who are considering doing wrong. Similarly, Hebrews is not a covenantal divorce, but a bit of marriage counseling. The Book of Revelation is God’s covenant divorce of anti-Christian Judaism.

What is the practical importance for us of the **covenantal** structure? Abstractly, it appears to me to integrate better the one and the many, and the transcendent and the immanent, than unstructured or artificially structured theologies (or **atheologies**); to show better how God relates to man. But of key importance – all the rest depends on this – is transcendence. Who is our God – Jesus the Christ or another? If the Christ, then we must listen to Him, obey Him, trust Him and above all worship Him. We love Him because He first loved us, and we love the Bible because it is His Word; it is more important than any other earthly source. If another be our god, then there would be no need to heed Jesus or the Bible, except as a matter of expedience. The covenant structure brings the question of transcendence to the fore and makes the rest depend on it, keeping it foremost throughout, as unstructured or artificially structured theologies and **atheologies** do not.

## Covenant Witness: Keeper of the Grant

The key to unlocking a book of the Bible rests in finding its purpose. Discover it and the text opens up, detail after detail taking on meaning. The student can not only answer the question, "Why is this here?" but he can determine "Why is this here, as opposed to some other place?" The particulars make no sense apart from the whole.

Interestingly, the student never knows which particular theme will lead him to the purpose, even though every theme of necessity points to some sort of over-arching thesis. He may find it in a major or minor theme. Sometimes, he uncovers the purpose in a secondary theme. Hebrews is a case in point. It consistently emphasizes the **supremacy of Christ, and there are a number of important commentaries to substantiate this fairly obvious fact.**<sup>2</sup> But the question is: "Why is the author of Hebrews [the Apostle Paul in my opinion] so heavy on Christ's supremacy?"

### The Witness Theme

The secondary theme of witness in Hebrews provides the answer. The book uses several witness words, as Allison A. Trites' invaluable study demonstrates. He summarizes the number of references in Hebrews:

The idea of witness appears a number of times in the Epistle to the Hebrews, a fact suggested by the use of words drawn from the vocabulary of witness. Thus *martus* [witness] appears in a reference to the Old Testament law of evidence (10:28) and also in connection with the "cloud of witnesses" (12:1). Similarly, *marturion* is used with reference to Moses's testimony to the "things that were spoken later" (3:5), and both *marturein* (10:15; 11:4) and a number of cognate verbs (*martureisthai*: 7:8, 17; 11:2, 4, 5, 39), *sunepimartureisthai* (2:4) and *diamartureistha* (2:6) are used. In addition to all these words, the noun and verb for "confess," which elsewhere in the New Testament can have a juridical significance (e.g., Lk. 12:8; Jn 1:20; Rev. 3:5), appear several times in the vocabulary of Hebrews (3:1; 4:14; 10:23; 11:13; 13:15). Note also the use of *arneisthai* (11:24), which similarly appears at times in juridical contexts (e.g., Mt. 10:23; Lk. 12:9; Acts 3:13f.). All of this information would seem to indicate that witness is a prominent theme in Hebrews.<sup>3</sup>

Trites also adds that witness words such as "judgment" (6:2; 10:30; 13:4; 9:27; 10:27; 12:23; 11:7) and "oath" (6:13ff.; 7:20, 21, 28) play a major role. On "oath" he adds,

Hebrews 6: 13ff. is interesting on several accounts. A forensic situation is envisaged in which God, having no one Greater to swear by, swears by himself (Heb. 6:13ff.; cf. Isa. 45:23; Jer. 22:5). The preposition *kata* [according to] is followed by a noun in the genitive to signify the guarantee of an **oath** (*omosein kath' heautou*; cf. Gen. 22:16), and the oath itself is introduced by *ei mein*, which has the effect of intensifying the juridical solemnity of the act. The divine practice on this occasion is then compared to human judicial practice where "an oath is final for confirmation" (Heb. 6:16ff.; cf. Phi lo,

*Plant.* 82). In this passage, as in the LXX, *horkos* is used for "oath," *antilogia* for "dispute" (cf. Prov. 18:18; Jos., *Ant.* omneuein for "swear," mesiteuein for "guarantee," epideiknunai for "demonstrate" or "prove" (cf. Acts 18:28) and *bebaisios* for "confirmation" or "legal guarantee." No wonder Adolf Deissmann was led to remark that "the context is permeated with juristic expressions."

The divine oath is mentioned again in Heb. 7 in a similar connection. The priesthood of Christ is superior to the Levitical priesthood because it has been inaugurated by an oath taken by God himself (*horkomosis*, 7:20, 21, 28). The comment of Alan Stibbs brings out the juridical significance of this oath: "This is witness that the new order of priesthood is a divine undertaking, and one that is thus doubly pledged by God's word and God's oath (cf. vi. 13-18). Therefore it cannot fail like the old . . . The divine oath implies something final, eternal and unchangeable."

The Epistle to the Hebrews, then, has some valuable things to say about witness. It recognizes the Jewish law of evidence, the importance of signs and wonders as offering confirmatory testimony, and the testimony of God through the Scriptures.<sup>4</sup>

**Witness** words have a definite emphasis in Hebrews. Why? Hebrews presents Christ as a superior **priest** because He has a **double witness** of God's Word and oath. And the church is called to be a witness consistent with God's double witness. Specifically, the **witness is the church, for it holds the title-deed to God's covenant grant, the inheritance of the covenant.** Hebrews 11:1 reads, "Faith is the substance [hupostasis] of things hoped for, the evidence [juridical term: *elenkein*] of things not seen." Notice that faith is the **evidence**, what a witness brings to the courtroom, and this faith is also defined as the "**substance** of things hoped for." The commentator H.C.G. Moule interprets "substance" to mean **title-deed** in the following:

Recently discovered papyri, which, although a relatively small part of them only has been read as yet, have thrown much deeply interesting light on the character and the vocabulary of Greek as used by the New Testament writers, the word *hupostasis* [substance] is found with the meaning of "title-deeds." On the hypothesis of such a meaning here [we can only speak with reserve], we may paraphrase: "Faith enables us to treat things hoped for as a property of which we hold the deeds."<sup>5</sup>

In other words, **faith is the title-deed to the inheritance of the covenant, the world (the new land).** The **witness** holds the title-deed and when he acts in good faith he brings the evidence to bear, cashing in on his inheritance.

### Covenant Grant

Suzerainty treaties were between suzerains, great kings of the ancient world, and their vassals. Meredith Kline observes that parts of Hebrews contain suzerainty treaty themes. On Hebrews 9:16ff., he discusses whether a particular Greek word should be translated "covenant" or "testament." He says,

[If] One might assume that the author's parenthetical allusion in these verses is to the dynastic-testamentary aspect of ancient suzerainty covenants and especially of the Old Covenant as exemplified by Deuteronomy,

2. Philip Edgcumbe Hughes. *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977). Hughes' commentary is excellent. He takes a historical approach to exegesis; he verse by verse interprets by comparing all the commentaries that have ever been written. He also includes a nearly complete list of all the major commentaries ever written on Hebrews. He even refers to C. Spicq, *L'Épître aux Hébreux* (Paris: Etudes Bibliques, 1952), who has an exhaustive bibliography,

3. Allison A. Trites, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 217.

Trites, *The New*  
ets mine.

5. H.C.G. Moule, *Studies*  
1977), p. 68. Bold face mine.

pp. 219-221. Brack-

(Grand Rapids: Kregel, [1909]

the way would be open to a satisfactory solution [since one of the recurrent themes of the epistle is] dynastic appointment and perpetuity (cf. 1 :2ff., 8; 5:6ff.; 6:20ff.), the precise area of covenantal administration for which the merging of the covenantal and the testamentary is attested.<sup>6</sup>

Aside from the issue of "covenant" versus "testament," Kline makes an important comment in his overall evaluation that Hebrews bears the markings of suzerainty treaties, particularly the feature of **dynastic appointment**. What was it? When the great suzerain was about to die, he would call his heirs to him and choose a successor. This kind of action is reflected in the statement at the beginning of Hebrews:

God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world (Hebrews 1:1-2).

Notice the **dynastic appointment** language. In the last days God speaks through the Son who is the heir. This language casts Hebrews entirely in the light of a suzerainty treaty. God is portrayed as the Great Suzerain who appoints His Heir, Jesus Christ. He holds title to the estate, the world (Hebrews 1 :2). This has the effect of a **covenant grant**.

Frequently, the suzerain would reward a faithful vassal with a covenant grant, a special gift or a piece of the estate; Abraham, for example, was given a covenant grant of the land of Israel because he "believed God" (Genesis 15:6-21). Always however, the condition for the reward was being a faithful witness to the covenant arrangement.

The language of Hebrews refers to the same concept, bringing us to the relationship between the **supremacy of Christ** and the theme of **witness**. The church is the witness to Christ who has been given the new covenant grant. Throughout the Book, the Hebrews are reminded that Christ has the title-deed, not the prophets, angels, Moses or Aaron, who were all individuals and groups who at one time held title to covenant grants. They were witnesses who held title to the land.

For example, the prophet was once given title to the land, the inheritance, in the Old Testament. Jeremiah says,

The word of the Lord came to me, saying, "Behold, Hanamel the son of Shallum your uncle is coming to you, saying 'Buy for yourself my field which is at Anathoth, for you have the right of redemption to buy it.' Then Hanamel my uncle's son came to me in the court of the guard according to the word of the Lord, and said to me, 'Buy my field, please that is at Anathoth, which is in the land of Benjamin; for you have the right of possession and the redemption is yours; but it is for yourself.' Then I knew that this was the word of the Lord.

And I bought the field which was at Anathoth from Hanamel my uncle's son, and I weighed out the silver for him, seventeen shekels of silver, And I signed and sealed the deed, and called in witnesses, and weighed out the silver on the scales, Then I took the deeds of purchase, both the sealed copy containing the terms and conditions, and the open copy; and I gave the deed of purchase to Baruch the son of Neriah, the son of Mahseiah, in the sight of Hanamel my uncle's son, and in the sight of the witnesses who signed the deed of purchase, before all the Jews who were sitting in the court of the guard. And I commanded Baruch in their presence, saying, "Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, 'Take these deeds, this sealed deed of purchase, and this **open deed, and put them in an earthenware jar, that they may last a long time.**' For thus says the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel, 'Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land'" (Jeremiah 32:6-15).

Jeremiah was the prophet, the embodiment or pre-incarnation of the Word. He was given title to the land, a **new** covenant grant. At the sale of the land, however, he called witnesses such as Baruch. He expected them to attest to the fact that he was the true owner of the land, not the tribe of Benjamin and certainly not the Chaldeans. Benjamin's grant represented the old covenant grant and the Chaldeans' grant was a false new covenant grant.

This covenant grant theology is pulled into the New Testament, and primarily taught in the Book of Hebrews. Christ is presented as the one who holds title, not the prophets, angels, Moses and Aaron; in fact He is also the living, what Jeremiah called the "open," covenant document. He is the supreme suzerain, the Priest-King of the New covenant grant. Like Jeremiah, He too called upon witnesses to testify to the fact that He possesses the grant. Evidently, the Hebrews were reverting back to the original covenant. They, like the Jews of Jeremiah's day, were ignoring the covenant preserved in the earthen time capsule; only now, the time capsule is Jesus. They were attempting to claim the land by way of the older covenant. They were needed to be reminded of their role as **witnesses** for Him, preserving their **title-deed** as co-heirs with Him.

Here is the warning and message of Hebrews. The book is a **covenant document** sent by God to **warn the Hebrews of the danger of forfeiting their covenant grant**. **Warning passages abound (2:1-4; 3:7-19; 5:11-14; 10:26-31)**. Each time the writer warns of the possibility of losing the grant by referring to other times in Biblical history where such an event took place. For example, in the third chapter he speaks about the wilderness wandering of the older covenant people, a time where an entire generation fell away because they were unfaithful witnesses to the covenant grant that had been given them. Thus, Hebrews is a covenant warning document to the witnesses of God, established further by not only these themes but the covenant structure of the document itself; a full treatment of the covenantal structure is the subject of another newsletter.