

Old-Covenant Terms in the New

I have accused the Fathers of changing the *ekklēsia* by going to the old covenant (and paganism), but is it not true to say that the New Testament uses old-covenant language? It certainly is! But the question is, of course, how does it use that language? Think of ‘temple’, ‘priest’, ‘sacrifice’, ‘sabbath’, ‘circumcision’, ‘redemption’, ‘law’, and so on. The New Testament uses all these terms, but, when referring to the new covenant, it uses them in a new-covenant sense. The very newness of the new covenant demands it!¹ Of course it does! Christ has fulfilled the old covenant, rendering it obsolete (Heb. 7:19,22; 8:13), so that the shadows of the old covenant have all given way to the reality in Christ (Col. 2:17; Heb. 8:5; 10:1).² Clearly, therefore, while, when referring to the old covenant, the New Testament uses old-covenant language and terms in an old-covenant sense, when referring to the new covenant, it uses that same language in a new-covenant, spiritual sense. This distinction, this nuance, must be maintained at all times.

Take the New Testament use of *latreuō*. The word means:

To render religious service or homage, to worship, to worship God, to perform religious services, to offer gifts, to

¹ It may be obvious to state it (though it is so often denied, forgotten or ignored), but Christ established a new covenant, not an old covenant buffed up. The two covenants – the old and the new – are not (contrary to Reformed covenant-theology) two administrations of one covenant, but two different, contrasting covenants. See my *Christ*. For far too long, John 1:17 has been underplayed, and whole tracts of Scripture – such as Romans 6 – 7, Galatians and Hebrews 7 – 10 have not been fully appreciated, let alone acted on. The consequences have been grim. While there is, of course, a measure of continuity between the old and new covenants, Scripture overwhelmingly comes down on the discontinuity between them.

² See my *Christ*.

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worship God in the observance of the rites instituted for his worship, [priests] to officiate, to discharge the sacred office.³

Consider its use – or the use of one of its derivatives – in the following:

[Anna] did not depart from the temple, worshipping with fasting and prayer night and day (Luke 2:37).

[The] twelve tribes... earnestly worship night and day (Acts 26:7).

[The levitical priests] serve [are offering divine service] [with and in] a copy and shadow of the heavenly things (Heb. 8:5).

Gifts and sacrifices are offered (Heb. 9:9).

Since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near. Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered (Heb. 10:1-2).

We [believers] have an altar from which those who serve the [tabernacle] have no right to eat (Heb. 13:10).

All these passages refer to the old covenant; consequently, they use *latreuō* or one of its derivatives in an old-covenant sense.

But now consider the way in which Paul uses a form of the word when he warns the Philippians not to yield to the Judaisers, with their call for believers to go back to the old covenant. Look how he opens his powerful argument to persuade them to remain true to Christ:

For it is we who are the circumcision [that is, the real, true Israel, ‘the Israel of God’ (Gal. 6:16)], we who serve [worship (AV), *latreuontes*] God by his Spirit, who boast in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh (Phil. 3:3).

³ Thayer.

Is Paul telling his readers that believers ‘worship God’ in the ‘proper’ (as the Judaisers would insist) – old-covenant – way? Not at all! Rather, he is saying that while the Jews kept the rituals of the old covenant, they were only serving God in shadow: it is believers – and believers only – who worship God in the Spirit (John 4:21-24). And this spiritual worship is radically different from old-covenant worship, even though Paul used the same word, *latreuō*, to describe it.

The same applies to ‘temple’, ‘priest’, and all the rest. Christendom, alas, largely forgets or ignores this.

John Gill, commenting on Philippians 3:3, put the ‘accepted’ view of ‘worship’, the standard theological, Christendom view:

‘Worship’ is either inward or outward; inward worship lies in the exercise of the grace of God, as of faith, hope, love, fear, *etc.*; outward worship is the performance of certain external actions required by God... Both are to be performed. And [worship] is also either private or public; private worship is in one’s own room,⁴ or in the family, and consists of praying, singing of praises, *etc.*; public worship lies in the observance of the outward ordinances of preaching, praying, hearing, singing, *etc.*, in the church of God; even all such ordinances as God has appointed, which are recorded in the Scriptures, and are confirmed by the authority of Christ. The manner in which worship is to be performed is ‘in the Spirit’ – [that is,] in and with the Spirit of God – without whose grace and assistance no part of it can be performed well.

Note Gill’s use of ‘performance’ or its equivalent four times in that short extract!

Jamieson, Fausset and Brown on the same verse did not make the mistake of thinking of *latreuō* in an old-covenant sense, but drew the proper – scriptural – contrast between the old and new covenants:

⁴ Original ‘closet’.

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Legal worship [that is, old-covenant worship] was outward, and consisted in outward acts, restricted to certain times and places. Christian worship is spiritual, flowing from the in-workings of the Holy Spirit, not relating to certain isolated acts, but embracing the whole [of] life (Rom. 12:1).

Spot on!

* * *

But what of Hebrews 9:1?

There is no doubt that, in the days of the old covenant, Israel gathered in the ‘temple’ for ‘worship’, and that ‘worship’ was performed according to the revealed will of God in the law:

Now the first covenant had regulations for worship [*latreias*] and also an earthly sanctuary (Heb. 9:1).

As Paul put it when writing to the Romans:

Theirs [that is, Israel of old] is the adoption to sonship; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship [*latreia*] and the promises (Rom. 9:4).

In the AV (KJV) it reads:

...Israelites; to whom pertain the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God [*latreia*], and the promises (Rom. 9:4).

So, what’s the problem?

Alas, some versions of Hebrews 9:1, even if they don’t use the word, give the impression that ‘even’ the first covenant had regulations for worship in services – leaving the reader to deduce that the new covenant, likewise, ‘also’ has regulations for worship in services: as for the old Israel, so for the new!

The ESV:

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Now even the first covenant had regulations for worship and an earthly place of holiness... the priests... performing their duties... (Heb. 9:1,6).

The AV (KJV):

Then verily the first covenant had also ordinances of divine service, and a worldly sanctuary... the priests... accomplishing the service of God... that could not make him that did the service perfect (Heb. 9:1,6,9).

The NKJV:

Then indeed, even the first covenant had ordinances of divine service and the earthly sanctuary... the priests always... performing the services... which cannot make him who performed the service perfect (Heb.. 9:1,6,9).

The NASB:

Now even the first covenant had regulations of divine worship and the earthly sanctuary... the priests are continually... performing the divine worship (Heb. 9:1,6).

The Christian Standard:

Now the first covenant also had regulations for ministry and an earthly sanctuary... the priests... performing their ministry (Heb. 9:1,6).

But this – just as the old covenant had its performance of worship so does the new – is not what the writer to the Hebrews was saying. Moreover, the chapter division here is appalling, encouraging that wrong view.

Here is a better rendering, one which ignores the dreadful chapter break:

By calling this covenant ‘new’, [God] has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and outdated will soon disappear. Now the first covenant had regulations for worship and also an earthly sanctuary (Heb. 8:13 – 9:1).

As always, we must not miss the big picture. And the big picture here is the change of covenants in Christ, his fulfilment of the old, the new superseding it, the contrast, the

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discontinuity, between the two, and the superiority of the new covenant over the old. Hebrews 8:13 is the punch line: the old covenant has been rendered obsolete by Christ.

But the writer had not finished with his examination of the old covenant. Far from it. He had much more to say in drawing the contrast, point by point, between the old and new covenants, the new, being infinitely superior, having superseded the old. Of course, as the writer immediately went on to admit, the old covenant had its God-given form of worship in ‘the sanctuary’ – the tabernacle or temple – with all the prescribed furniture and priestly activity, but none of it was effective, just a shadow. And this led him to his climax:

But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption... For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf... The law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities.

And so to his application of the argument:

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the day drawing near (Heb. 9:1 – 10:25).

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The argument is crystal clear. The old covenant has given way to the new; the external, ineffective shadows of the old have been superseded by the inward, effective, spiritual realities of the new covenant in Christ.

John Brown, commenting on Hebrews 9:1, got it right:

The object of the writer is to show that Jesus, the Mediator of the new covenant, has ‘a more excellent ministry’ than Aaron and his sons, who were the mediators of the old covenant... The particles ‘then verily’, ‘also’, are mere particles of transition.

In other words, the Greek *oun kai* – a phrase which bears a wide range of meanings – must not be translated in such a way (as in the AV, NASB, ESV, and so on) as to convey the above-mentioned wrong impression. The writer to the Hebrews is not saying – he is not saying, I stress – that the believer ‘worships’ in the same – or similar – manner as Israel in the old covenant, that ‘even as’ Israel had such a system, ‘even so’ do believers. Not at all! He is talking about two contrasting epochs or ages – the time of the old covenant and the time of the new.⁵

Brown went on:

‘The first covenant had ordinances of divine service’ – literally, ‘ordinances of ministry’; that is... an ordained or divinely appointed ministry – a divinely instituted set of public religious functions to be discharged by those who were its mediators.

Quite! The old covenant certainly had its God-ordained sacerdotal priests who, in the appointed ‘holy place’ and at the appointed time, performed the stipulated religious rites

⁵ Many make the same mistake in Gal. 3:23-25. But this passage has suffered from appalling mistranslation. Paul is not saying that in our unregenerate days we were under the law which guided, prepared and led us personally to trust Christ. No! Far from talking about individual experience, he is dealing with the two covenants – the age of the law which lasted until the coming of Christ, who fulfilled the law and brought in the new covenant. See my *Three*.

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for the many who watched them carry out their duties on their behalf.⁶ *But the new covenant could not be more different.* This is what the writer was saying.

There is yet another translation issue. Those versions which use ‘service’, or ‘divine service’, instead of ‘ministry’, once again give a misleading impression. Brown:

By changing the word, which is the same in the original, from ‘ministry’ into ‘divine service’, the connection of the writer’s thoughts is obscured. A mere English reader does not see how these two statements hang together: ‘Jesus, the Mediator of the new covenant, has received a more excellent ministry than Aaron and his sons, who were the mediators of the old covenant. The old covenant had ordinances of divine service’.

No, it certainly does not make sense. Getting the translation right, however, brings the writer’s argument sharply into focus. Brown:

But the coherence of the thoughts is at once perceived when the statement is made thus: ‘The old covenant had indeed a divinely appointed ministry; but that ministry was far inferior to that which Jesus has obtained’.

There is more to be said. Brown:

The old covenant had not only a divinely instituted set of public religious functions to be performed [note the word] by its mediators, the Jewish high priests, but it had also a divinely appointed place in which these functions were to be performed [note the word]. This is termed in the passage before us, ‘a worldly [that is, an earthly] sanctuary’. As to the word ‘sanctuary’ there can scarcely be a difference of opinion. It indicates the place sanctified – that is, set apart, appropriated by divine appointment – for the performance [note the word] of the ordained public functions of the high priest under that economy...

⁶ Except, of course, on those rare occasions when the high priest alone entered the Most Holy Place (Heb. 9:7,26).

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That is to say, the old covenant had a sacred place, a building – the temple – where ‘the worship of God’ was conducted or ‘performed’. The new covenant does not. The old covenant had its sacerdotal priests who ‘worshipped’ on behalf of the people. The new covenant does not.

And here we get to the heart of the Fathers’ mistake in going to the old covenant – though it was rendered obsolete by Christ – and taking it into the very heart of its system – with its emphasis on ‘place’ and sacerdotal, ordained ‘priests’. They warped the *ekklēsia* into the ‘place’ where ‘divine worship’ in ‘church services’ is ‘performed’ by a special class for the majority who watch or listen. The new covenant could not be more different.

Let Brown bring this to a close:

The first covenant had these things, but the new covenant does not.⁷ Its appointed set of functions has no divine authority, and its ‘worldly sanctuary’ has lost even that species of holiness which once belonged to it. It was never anything but ‘shadow’, and it is now but a shadow of a shade.

⁷ Original ‘but it has them no longer’. Christ has fulfilled and rendered the old covenant obsolete (Heb. 7:19,22; 8:13).