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Pauline Corpus and Hebrews (Lecture Three)

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Lecture Three: Pauline Corpus and Hebrews

by Donald Hagner

1 Corinthians

In 1 Corinthians, we find the same attitude toward the law that we encountered in Galatians and Romans. Paul quotes a motto he probably had taught the Corinthians but which they were abusing. He qualified it each time. “All things are lawful for me, but not all things are beneficial. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be dominated by anything” (6:12).¹ And “All things are lawful, but not all things are beneficial. All things are lawful, but not all things build up.” That this involves freedom from the law is especially evident from Chapters 7-9.

In Chapter 7, we see freedom from circumcision: “Was anyone at the time of his call circumcised? Let him not seek to remove the marks of circumcision. Was anyone at the time of his call uncircumcised? Let him not seek circumcision. Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing; but obeying the commandments of God is everything.” (7:18-19)

Some have regarded the last sentence as one of the strangest in the NT. How can Paul say that circumcision (an important commandment of the law) is of no consequence yet at the same time say that obeying the commandments of God is everything? We have already seen this judgment about circumcision in Galatians 5:6 and 6:15.² There the counterbalancing idea about what really only matters is “faith working through love” and “a new creation.” We are in a new situation where the specific commandments of the law are no longer binding. Here what matters is righteousness. We now have a new way to the righteousness that the law has as its goal and that can be manifested apart from the law.

¹All Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), unless otherwise noted.

²Here, as in Gal 6:15, there is no Greek equivalent to the words “is everything.” Something must be supplied to make the thought complete—perhaps something like “what *does* matter is obeying the (more weighty) commandments.” Some redefinition of righteousness seems also to be in view.

In Chapter 8, something similar is said about the food laws. The issue concerns not merely food, but food offered to idols. We discover here (as also in 10:14 and 12:2) Paul using the standard Jewish polemic against idol worship. In contrast to the “many gods and many lords” of the pagans, there is but one God, as the Jews confessed everyday in the Shema. Idols have no real existence. The first half of 8:6 was familiar territory to the Jews—“For us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist.” The second half of the couplet, however, was another matter—“and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.” To name Jesus Christ as Kyrios (another title for God) and to put him alongside God as Creator in the same breath was to break new ground, moving into what has been termed *Christological Monotheism*. This high Christology, as we have previously noted, is part and parcel of the eschatological newness brought about by the dawning of the Kingdom in the person of Jesus.

Returning to the food question, Paul seems to extend the discussion beyond food offered to idols and to generalize in a way that makes one think of the food laws concerning clean and unclean foods—i.e., the dietary law (*kashrut*). Food will not bring us close to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat and no better off if we do” (8:8). With this may be compared Paul’s similar statements about circumcision (7:19; Gal 5:6; 6:15).

In Chapter 9, Paul articulates his position on the entirety of the Mosaic law:

For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law) so that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings (9:19-23).

In these remarkable words, Paul unequivocally indicates his “freedom” from the commandments of Torah: “I myself am not under the law.” The complexity of Paul’s attitude to the law was dictated by the exigencies of the twofold mission of the Church, to Gentiles and

Jews. Paul was deliberately inconsistent “for the sake of the gospel.” His break with the law was clear, but that did not mean he didn’t live righteously, even though he was no longer under the law. Instead, a new standard of righteousness—the teaching of Jesus—now governed his life. It is not a matter of merely shifting from one set of commandments to another. The dawning of a new age brings with it a new dynamic, with the law internalized, being written on the heart and enabled by the empowering of the Holy Spirit.

It is worth noting that English translations often mislead by having Paul say that he is “*under* the law of Christ.” Paul, however, does not use *hypo ton nomon tou Christou*, but rather *ennomos Christou*. *Ennomos*, which occurs only here in the Greek NT, is difficult to translate but means something like “in accordance with the law (of Christ).” The difference may be subtle but is important, reflecting a new reality. The latest edition of Bauer’s lexicon, edited by F. W. Danker, suggests the following translation of the sentence—“I identified as one outside Mosaic jurisdiction with those outside it; not, of course, being outside God’s jurisdiction, but inside Christ’s” (BDAG 338a). The law for Paul remains a negative force. In the famous passage about death being “swallowed up in victory,” he summarizes it by saying, “The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law” (15:56).

The newness of the gospel enables “new readings” of Scripture, as can be seen throughout the NT. The justification for these new readings is the conviction that the dawning of the Kingdom brings us to the (initial) fulfillment of the goal of the OT. Paul, therefore, writes, “Now these things occurred as examples for us” (10:6). And again, “These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come” (10:11).

In 10:32, Paul orders the Corinthians to “Give no offense to Jews or Greeks or to the church of God.” He thus makes the Church a separate entity, parallel to the Jews and Greeks. Already in the 50s AD, the Church is growing into its identity as the new people of God. The community of the Church, in effect, is a new society, a third race, in which Jews and Gentiles are no longer distinguished but form a single new fellowship. Paul expresses this new unity thusly, “For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit” (12:13).

2 Corinthians

Emphasis on the newness of fulfillment is found also in 2 Corinthians. An interesting passage occurs toward the beginning of the letter—"For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you, Silvanus and Timothy and I, was not 'Yes and No'; but in him it is always 'Yes.' For in him every one of God's promises is a 'Yes.' For this reason it is through him that we say the 'Amen,' to the glory of God." (1:19-20) This is the continuity between promise and fulfillment.

Undoubtedly the most important passage in 2 Corinthians for our subject is Chapter 3. Here, more than anywhere else, Paul explicitly contrasts the new and the old, emphasizing the superiority of the new and, hence, discontinuity with the old. He begins by speaking of the Corinthian Christians as "his letter of recommendation—a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts" (3:3). The idea of writing with the Spirit of God on the tablet of the human heart reflects Jeremiah's new covenant promise where the law is internalized—"I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts" (Jer 31:33), in contrast to the law of Moses, which was written on "tablets of stone." Paul describes himself and his co-workers as "ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life." (3:6) The explicitly *new* covenant, promised in Jeremiah 31:31 and now in effect, is described as "of the Spirit," who gives life, in stark contrast to the letter of the law that kills.

Paul continues the contrast between the old and the new, focusing on the surpassing glory of the new. "Now if the ministry of death, chiseled in letters on stone tablets, came in glory so that the people of Israel could not gaze at Moses' face because of the glory of his face, a glory now set aside, how much more will the ministry of the Spirit come in glory?" (3:7-8).

Several points to be noted. The old is described as a "ministry of death;" the reference to letters chiseled on stone tablets is an obvious allusion to the law. Paul does not minimize the glory associated with the giving of the law and a glory shining from Moses' face, but he explicitly says it is "a glory now set aside." Indeed, it is surpassed by the new, the "ministry of the Spirit."

Continuing to draw a contrast between the old and new, Paul next refers to the dispensation of the law as a "ministry of condemnation," in contrast to the "ministry of justification," which abounds more in glory. Yet again, Paul calls attention to the transitory character of the old compared to the permanence of the new. "Indeed, what once had glory

has lost its glory because of the greater glory; for if what was set aside came through glory, much more has the permanent come in glory!" (3:10-11).

Drawing out the analogy even further, Paul turns to the veil Moses put over his face, taking the reason for the veil to be the desire to keep people from seeing the fading of the glory on Moses' face, "the end of the glory that was being set aside" (3:13). The discontinuity could hardly be more pronounced than here.

From Paul's viewpoint, just as the minds of the Jews were hardened in the time of Moses, so down to the present, "indeed, to this very day," a veil lies over the minds of the Jews when they read the Scriptures of the old covenant. "Only in Christ is it set aside" (3:14-15). He continues, "But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed" (3:16). The new era is the era of the Spirit, "and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (3:17). The exact sense of "freedom" here is not clear; but it must, in some sense, be freedom from the old, freedom from the dispensation of condemnation and death, from the law and its effects, and thus freedom to live in remarkable new ways. Christians "with unveiled faces" are enabled to see "the glory of the Lord, as though reflected in a mirror," and are thereby "transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another" (3:18; cf. 4:6).

The newness of the new era is very much in Paul's mind in 5:17, which says, "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"³ This motif of realized eschatology occurs again in 6:2, where he quotes Isaiah 49:8, with its reference to "a day of salvation" and then adds, "See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!"

Philippians

The incarnation as described in the Christ Hymn of Philippians 2 is, of course, essential to the newness of the NT. Paul (or at least the hymn he borrows, if he did not compose it himself) here presents a three-stage Christology. The first stage is the existence of Christ "in the form of God" and equal to God (2:6). The second stage involves his humiliation, where he "emptied himself" and took human form, indeed, "the form of a slave," and "humbled himself" to the extent of dying on the cross, obedient to his Father (2:7-8). In the third stage, "God also

³To be sure, NRSV here exaggerates the statement, which literally would be translated, "So that if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: the old things have passed away; see, new things have come." Only some inferior and late manuscripts have "everything" in the last clause of the sentence. But the basic point remains—with the coming of Christ, a dramatic change has occurred, moving us from the old to the new.

highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (2: 9-11).

Much in the hymn alludes to, or is in accord with, OT anticipation. The third stage particularly ascribes to the resurrected Jesus the worship accorded to YHWH in Isaiah 45:23 (identified as God in Isa 45:22). This material is, then, both continuous with the OT, being alluded to in the Scriptures, and discontinuous with the past, in its actual fulfillment in Jesus of Nazareth.

As in Galatians and Romans, Paul argues against the Judaizers. Circumcision is fully spiritualized. “For it is we who are the circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh” (3:3). Paul has all the Jewish credentials, including his accomplishments as a Pharisee (“as to righteousness under the law, blameless,” [3:6]) yet counts them of no more value than rubbish so that he might be found in Christ, “not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith” (3:8-9).

Here again is the familiar contrast between the old and the new, illustrated in Paul’s own life. The present fulfillment of realized eschatology by no means excludes a future eschatology, as can be seen from 3:20-21—“But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself.” A few lines later Paul says, “The Lord is near” (4:5).

Ephesians

Even if Ephesians is not by Paul (which is far from certain), it clearly reflects Pauline theology. In the grand scope of Chapter 1, we read—“With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (1:8-10). That plan has now reached a new level of fulfillment on the way to its final fulfillment. Paul prays that the Ephesians:

. . . May have the eyes of their hearts enlightened so that they would know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and

what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all (1:18-23).

According to Ephesians, Christians have been made alive together with Christ, have been raised up with him, and are seated with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus (2:5-6). Note the (prophetic) past tenses. This affirms a highly realized eschatology, short of the consummation.

Paul's gospel is clearly stated in 2:8-9, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast." The polemic against the law is implied here rather than expressed. It is articulated clearly in the last half of Chapter 2.

Before the coming of Christ, the Gentiles were in dire straits, ". . . being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world" (2:12). But now, "by the blood of Christ, the Gentiles have been brought near." The consequences of this new situation are spelled out in all clarity. Christ is our peace and has made Jews and Gentiles a single group:

In his flesh he has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom

you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God. (2:14-21)

All this is dramatically new. The commandments and ordinances of the law are abolished. The wall of hostility (an allusion to the wall in the temple dividing the court of the Jews from the court of the Gentiles) has been torn down. The differences between Jews and Gentiles have become insignificant. He “has made both groups into one,” “one new humanity in place of the two.”

This is “the mystery of Christ” (3:4), not known until it was revealed to the apostles and (NT) prophets—“That is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (3:6). All of this is the working out in history of God’s eternal purpose—“That through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places” (3:10-11). As Paul goes on to say, the Church, consisting of Jews and Gentiles, forms one body, one great unity—“There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all” (4:4-6).

Hebrews

Because so much of the Book of Hebrews is devoted to comparisons of the old and the new, it is exceptionally rich in both continuity and discontinuity. Again, as we have repeatedly seen in our survey, a strong and important continuity underlies—and indeed, sharpens—the discontinuities revealed in this book. The unknown author was a brilliant theologian, with a thorough grounding in the theology and Scriptures of the old covenant, as well as a rich grasp of Christian theology.

Already in the opening words, we see the juxtaposition of old and new and the superiority of the latter—“Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son.” From the outset, we see the definitive character of the new, which has come in the newly inaugurated eschatology of “these last days [*ep’ eschatou tōn hēmerōn toutōn*],” literally, “at the end of these days” (cf. 6:5). We have here not two stories, but one. And what has come in Christ is the fulfillment and climax of the first part of the story.

But who is this Son of God? This is not one son of God among others, but *the* Son of God (so rightly the margin of the NRSV);

namely, the one whom God appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs (1:2-3).

The remainder of the chapter strings together a series of seven OT quotations, six of which refer to the Son, one addressing the Son as God (1:8, a quotation from Ps 45:7), the last and climactic being Psalm 110:1: "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet." The coming of the Son, the accomplishment of atonement, and his ascension to the right hand of God amount to a dramatic manifestation of the newness of the present era.

In 2:2, the author agrees with the view that the law, "the message declared through angels," was valid. Still greater, however, is the salvation that has come "through the Lord," confirmed by God with "signs, wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit, distributed according to his will" (2:3-4). The author asks, "How can we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?"

In a midrashic treatment of Psalm 8:5-7, our author comments, "But we do see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone" (2:9).

Jesus and Moses

Our author proceeds to draw a parallel between Moses and Jesus. While both were faithful to God, Jesus (identified as "the apostle and high priest of our confession") "is worthy of more glory than Moses, just as the builder of a house has more honor than the house itself" (3:1-3). Moses was faithful "as a servant, to testify to the things that would be spoken later;" Christ was faithful "as a son" (3:5-6).

Turning to the dangers of unbelief, the author reminds the readers of the Israelites who, under Moses' leadership, rebelled in the wilderness. (The account is found in Exod 17:1-7; cf. Num 14:20-35; 20:1-13). He quotes Psalm 95:7-11 in 3:7-11 and then quotes portions of this passage again in 3:15, 4:3, and 4:7. In 3:12-4:11, he proceeds to comment via an extensive midrash on the Psalm passage. The Psalmist took the story and applied it to his readers centuries later—"Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, as on the day of testing in the wilderness," God saying to *that* generation,

“They will not enter my rest.” Just as the Psalmist applied the passage to his generation, so too the author of Hebrews contemporizes it for *his* readers, saying they must not allow their hearts to be hardened in unbelief. He makes the point from the Psalm passage that, “The promise of entering his rest is still open” (4:1), reiterated in 4:6.

Just in passing, he comments, “For indeed the good news came to us just as to them; but the message they heard did not benefit them, because it did not meet with faith in the hearers” (4:2).⁴ The reference to the good news [*euēγγελισμενοι*] that came to us, and coming also to that generation, provides a strong underlying note of continuity between the past and present.

Since David, “much later,” renews the invitation to enter rest, the promise remains to be appropriated (4:7). If the Israelites had entered rest through Joshua,⁵ “God would not speak later about another day.” Our author continues, “So then, a Sabbath rest still remains for the people of God” (4:8-9). Here he shifts from the word for Sabbath used thus far, *katapausis*, to *sabbatismos*, a special word emphasizing that this rest is of a different order—namely an eschatological rest of the same type as God’s own Sabbath-rest (cf. 4:10). Remarkably, the author writes, “For we who have believed enter that rest” (4:3).

Jesus and Melchizedek

Among the brilliant insights of our author, none is more impressive than his argument in Chapter 5 concerning Jesus as high priest of the order of Melchizedek (in the NT mentioned only in Hebrews). At the heart of the book’s argument is the work of Christ as high priest (already mentioned in 2:17; 3:1; and 4:14-15). A key obstacle to this argument is the simple fact that Jesus, born of the tribe of Judah (not the tribe of Levi), does not qualify to be a priest at all. The author is well aware of the problem, writing, “For it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah, and in connection with that tribe Moses said nothing about priests” (7:14). Furthermore, “One does not presume to take this honor, but takes it only when called by God, just as Aaron was” (5:4).

The author continues, “So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest but was appointed by the one who said to him, ‘You are my Son, today I have begotten you’ [Ps 2:7]; as he says also

⁴Following the RSV for the last clause, a translation which NRSV puts in the margin.

⁵In Greek, the names Joshua and Jesus are spelled exactly the same, *Iēsous*. The promised rest not reached through the first Jesus is entered through the agency of the second Jesus.

in another place, ‘You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek’ [Ps 110:4]” (5:5-6). The passage that explains the connection of these verses is Psalm 110:1 (one of the most frequently quoted OT texts in the NT), which says, “The Lord says to my lord, ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.’” Although not quoted here, the verse is quoted in 1:13 and alluded to in 1:3, 8:1, and 10:12-13. This Jesus, the author concludes, “became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek” (5:9-10; cf. 6:20).

In 5:11 he interrupts the discussion of Melchizedek for a digression on the dangers to the readers of unbelief. In this intervening section, a discussion of the promise to Abraham leads to this statement that shows the author’s commitment to the continuity of God’s purposes—“When God desired to show even more clearly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it by an oath, so that through two unchangeable things in which it is impossible that God would prove false, we who have taken refuge might be strongly encouraged to seize the hope set before us” (6:17-18).

In Chapter 7, he resumes his discussion of Melchizedek in some detail. As a king and priest, Melchizedek is a type of Christ, not a pre-incarnation manifestation of Christ. The description of Melchizedek as being “without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life” refers most probably to the fact that his origins are unknown (cf. 7:6), as are the dates of his life and death. (Note well that he *resembles* the Son of God [cf. 7:15], not that he *is* the Son of God.) Our author then exclaims the greatness of Melchizedek (7:4), who blessed Abraham and received a tithe from him. Even Levi, “in the loins of his ancestor” Abraham, could be said to have paid a tithe to Melchizedek (7:10).

Beginning in Chapter 7 and continuing through Chapter 10, the author begins to speak of the discontinuities that are implicit in his argument. It is this material that makes Hebrews so important for our subject. Thus, regarding the importance of the Melchizedekan priesthood, he writes, “Now if perfection had been attainable through the levitical priesthood—for the people received the law under this priesthood—what further need would there have been to speak of another priest arising according to the order of Melchizedek, rather than one according to the order of Aaron?” (7:11). He then proceeds to draw the obvious conclusion—“For when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well” (7:12). Along with the change of the old to the new, he begins to speak of the new as better than the old that it supersedes. “There is, on the one hand, the abrogation of an earlier commandment because it was weak and

ineffectual (for the law made nothing perfect); there is, on the other hand, the introduction of a better hope, through which we approach God” (7:18-19, cf. 12:18-24).

The author calls attention to the fact that Christ’s priesthood is eternal and is backed up by God’s oath:

This one became a priest with an oath; for others who became priests took their office without an oath, but this one became a priest with an oath, because of the one who said to him, “The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, You are a priest forever”—accordingly Jesus has also become the guarantee of a better covenant (7:21-22).

The contrast between the old and the new is then emphasized—“Furthermore, the former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office; but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever” (7:23-24). The superiority of the high priest Jesus applies also to his once-for-all sacrifice:

Unlike the other high priests, he has no need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins and then for those of the people; this he did once for all when he offered himself. For the law appoints as high priests those who are subject to weakness, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever (7:27-28).

Alongside this passage should be put 10:11, which says, “And every priest stands day after day at his service, offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins.”

The New Covenant

One of the strongest notes of discontinuity in Hebrews and, indeed, in the whole of the NT is found in the discussion of the new covenant in Chapter 8. Our author begins with a contrast between the priests who perform their duties in an earthly sanctuary (a mere copy and shadow of the heavenly sanctuary), and Jesus, our high priest, who, seated at the right hand of God in the heavens, is “a minister in the sanctuary and the true tent that the Lord, and not any mortal, has set up” (8:1-2). The point is this—Jesus has now obtained a more excellent ministry and, to that degree, is the mediator of a better covenant, which has been

enacted through better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no need to look for a second (8:6-7).

Thereupon, the author quotes the entirety of Jeremiah's passage concerning the new covenant (Jer 31:31-34, following the text of the Septuagint [LXX]), this Scripture being very important to him. A part of the passage is quoted again in 10:16-17 and is clearly alluded to in 9:15. It is ideal for his purpose, underlining both continuity and discontinuity at the same time, although, to be sure, the emphasis is on the latter.

The author reveals the tension in his introduction of the passage. Whereas, as we have seen, he clearly implies that the first covenant was not faultless, he introduces the quotation with these words—"God finds fault with *them* when he says . . ." (8:8). As with Paul (cf. Rom 7:11-12), so here too the problem is finally not so much in the law or covenant but in the sinfulness of the people.

Nevertheless, the old covenant (i.e., the Law of Moses) had come to its end, for after the Jeremiah quotation, the author adds this—"In speaking of 'a new covenant,' he has made the first one obsolete. And what is obsolete and growing old will soon disappear" (8:13). In other words, the coming of the new cancels out the old, which has served its (limited) purpose.

The Jeremiah passage provided our author with an important argument—namely, that the old covenant itself anticipated its limited "shelf-life" and spoke of a better covenant to come. This fact justifies the conclusion that the considerable discontinuity explored by the author rests upon a presupposed and real underlying continuity. The new, the better, has come, but it was nothing other than what the old pointed to and for which the old had prepared the way.

Further criticism of the law occurs in Chapter 10, where our author writes that. "The law has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the true form of these realities," and so, "It can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered year after year, make perfect those who approach" (10:1). In 10:5-7, he makes Jesus the speaker of Psalm 40:7-9 and then comments on the passage as follows:

When he said above, "You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings" (these are offered according to the law), then he added, "See, I have come to do your will." He abolishes the first in order to establish the second. And it is by God's will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all (10:8-10).

Sacrifices and the Definitive Sacrifice

In Chapter 9, our author begins to compare and contrast the sacrifices of the old covenant and the sacrifice of Christ. In the old dispensation, “Gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper” By contrast, “When Christ came as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation), he entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption” (9:11).

A few lines later, the author writes, “For this reason he is the mediator of a new covenant so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, because a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions under the first covenant” (9:15). He then repeats and elaborates the contrast in 9:23-26:

Thus, it was necessary for the sketches of the heavenly things to be purified with these rites, but the heavenly things themselves need better sacrifices than these. For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands (a mere copy of the true one), but he entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. Nor was it to offer himself again and again, as the high priest enters the Holy Place year after year with blood that is not his own; for then he would have had to suffer again and again since the foundation of the world. But as it is, Christ has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself.

The contrast between the old sacrifices and the new sacrifice continues in 10:11-18, with quoted material from Psalm 110:1:

And every priest stands day after day at his service, offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, He sat down at the right hand of God,” and since then has been waiting “until his enemies would be made a footstool for his feet.” For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified.

This is followed immediately by repeated quotation of a portion of the new covenant in Jeremiah 31:33-35 and ending with, “I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more,” to which our

author appends this concluding comment—“Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin” (10:18).

A section of application to the readers follows this material; and in it the author refers to the accomplishment of Jesus, “a great priest over the house of God,” who opened “the new and living way” of access to God “through the curtain (that is, through his flesh)”⁶ (10:19-21). Here we see the stress on the newness, both in means and effects, of what is accomplished in the work of Christ.

The Faith of Our Ancestors

Chapter 11 is one of the best loved portions of the NT. Its praise of faith unites the testaments and provides a fundamental aspect of underlying continuity. At the same time, it is clear that the OT examples look beyond their own circumstances to what lies ahead, to the future realization of what is new and even eschatological in character.

The OT examples exhibit continuity with the present because they “still speak” through their faith (11:4), as in the case of Noah who, by his obedience, “became an heir to the righteousness that is in accordance with faith” (11:7). At the same time, however, there is discontinuity because of future expectations. Thus, Abraham looked beyond his own horizons; he “looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (11:10). Our author generalizes:

All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them (11:13-16).

At the end of his catalog of the faithful, the author makes this summarizing comment—“Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had

⁶The curtain, identified as the “flesh” of Christ, is an allusion to the curtain that divided the Holy of Holies from the remainder of the sanctuary. The tearing of the curtain symbolizes the opening of direct access to God’s presence (cf. Mk 15:38), made possible by the crucifixion of Christ.

provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect" (11:39-40). The readers are reminded in 10:34 that "You yourselves possessed something better and more lasting."

The OT saints were people of faith in their own specific contexts; but they also knew that they were on the way to something else, something better. Here we have continuity and discontinuity together, the old and new together, the fulfillment of the former by the latter.

Mount Sinai and Mount Zion

By means of a fascinating contrast, a climactic passage in Chapter 12 brings together some of the main themes of Hebrews. The old—Sinai—is contrasted with the new—Zion. The stress now is on discontinuity:

You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them. (For they could not endure the order that was given, "If even an animal touches the mountain, it shall be stoned to death." Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear.") But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel (12:18-24).

Our author describes the present status of the Christian in the language of realized eschatology. "You *have come* to Mount Zion," defined as "the heavenly Jerusalem," the city of eschatological joy and perfection. The contrast between the gloom and forbidding character of Mount Sinai with the bright, festal gathering of a vast number of angels could hardly be more stark. The key, of course, is that Jesus is "the mediator of a new covenant." The difference, together with a similar stress on discontinuity, has already been articulated in 7:18-19. The new covenant is better than the old (7:22; 8:6).

Encouraging the readers to persevere in their faith, the author tells them that God will shake earth and heaven in judgment and that "Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with

reverence and awe; for indeed our God is a consuming fire” (12:28-29). The Kingdom that Christians presently receive is secure because it depends on the work of Christ.

Chapter 13 is more of an appendix containing various exhortations than a vital part of the book that furthers its argument. Nevertheless, a few themes from the preceding chapters do re-emerge. The author writes that, “It is well for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by regulations about food, which have not benefitted those who observe them” (13:9). This is similar to 9:10, although here “strange teachings,” rather than the Mosaic law, are in view.

Typological correspondence is in view in 13:11-13: “For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp. Therefore Jesus also suffered outside the city gate in order to sanctify the people by his own blood. Let us then go to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured.”

The priests bring the blood of animals into the sanctuary “as a sacrifice for sin;” by comparison and contrast, the high priest Jesus brings his own blood into the heavenly sanctuary to sanctify the people (9:11-12). As the bodies of the slain animals were burned outside the camp of Israel, so Jesus was crucified outside the city wall (cf. Jn 19:17, 20).

The author then adds an application to the readers to go to him outside the camp and suffer abuse as he did—i.e., to leave the camp of Israel and Judaism, and to endure the persecution that was coming their way (cf. 10:32-39; 12:3-11). Lastly, he adds that the readers’ home is not in the camp of Israel, nor indeed in this world, “For here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come” (13:14).

The closing benediction of the book centers on Christ’s unique atoning work:

Now may the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, make you complete in everything good so that you may do his will, working among us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen (13:20-21).

Hebrews is an extremely rich book for our purposes, and equally problematic for those who would stress only continuity. It again and again emphasizes the inferiority of the old compared to the new. The stress is continually on the fact that the new is *better* than the old—a better covenant, better promises, a better sacrifice. In Jesus we are told

of a unique high priest of the order of a non-Levitical priest named Melchizedek, who offers his own blood in a once-for-all, fully sufficient sacrifice to secure an eternal redemption, as the ground of an eternal covenant.

The very content of the overall argument of Hebrews is such that it involves the realization and articulation of a discontinuity of the highest proportion and greatest intensity. No NT book surpasses it in this regard. Yet paradoxically, it too presupposes and rests upon a bedrock of continuity. What is accomplished in Christ and in the establishment of the new covenant is the fulfillment of the purposes of God from the beginning and throughout the history of Israel.