

Hebrews

Series 2

Lesson 10

“Hebrews Chapter 9”

Objective: To explore the ancient text of Hebrews in order to understand how this product of the mature early Christian movement interpreted Christological understandings. In doing this it is the aim of this study to encourage, enable and inspire people to live a more Christ-centered existence.

It is also the hope and the design of this material to provide materials for the use of small groups as well as in Sunday morning Bible classes. A new section has been added at the end that can be used either with the family or with a small group.


Materials: The Bible, Commentaries, journal articles, dictionaries, the internet and other resources as may be appropriate.

Procedures

1. To explore this text first as it would have been understood by its original audience, in its original context.
2. Next we will hope to understand more fully the nature of our God and in so doing comprehend his call upon our existence in order to fulfill our destiny as image-bearers.
3. We will seek to find practical guidance in these ancient words that will empower, enlighten and inspire us as we live in a twenty-first century world dominated by a focus on self and the individual. We are called as God's people to live in community as a people that unleashes His compassion in a world filled with pain and suffering. God is the only hope for a better world.
4. Provide a sheet to take home as a reminder of what has been examined and to provide additional opportunities for consideration of God's word and application in our daily living out of our eternal destiny beginning now.


As we come to chapter 9, we come to a chapter that presents unique and substantial difficulties for a modern audience. These same difficulties would not have been nearly as challenging for the original audience, but due to differences in culture and practice they are incredibly hard for us. Perhaps it is the case that some of you have some experiences with other cultures that differ markedly from your own? Those differences can make true communication and understanding much more difficult than they otherwise would be. This is especially the case as at one level the communication seems to be happening very well. The problem is that two cultures use the same words to mean different things. This creates a level of complexity that is difficult to overcome without extended dialogue and reorientation. Some of this will be necessary in this chapter in order for us to understand the message for us today from the Book of Hebrews.

Of critical importance in this process of reorientation will be the need for us to continually be reminded of the original context, not only of the author, but also the proposed context of the audience (a Hellenistic Christian-Jewish audience). The author writes from a position of knowledge and familiarity with the



ancient rites and practices of the tabernacle as well as ancient covenant practices that challenge us to let go of modern perspectives in order to comprehend his message. It is all too easy for us to interpret what has been written in light of our modern understanding and strip the context away and thus create a new message that is a distortion of the message originally intended by the author. Most of our modern translations add greatly to this distortion by the manner in which they translate some of the words in this chapter. This in itself leaves most readers no way open to comprehend the original intent of the author and it creates a level of complexity that is well beyond the abilities and aspirations of most readers.

I have repeatedly heard that, “The Bible means what it says, and says what it means,” but when the translation is poor how can we even begin to know what it means? This chapter, as much as any that we have encountered is one where having access to good source material is essential for understanding this text. In light of this, we need to begin by being reminded of the most likely audience for this writing. It was most likely an audience primarily of Hellenistic Jewish background who had become Christians and



now appear to be faltering in that decision and considering a return to more orthodox Judaism. In light of that, as we come to chapter 9, the immediate context is focused on the covenant of Moses and the regulations given with regard to worshipping in the tabernacle. The community of believers that this work is addressed to, used the Old Greek Translation (the Septuagint) of what we call the Old Testament as their authoritative Scriptures. This fact too is of critical importance as we examine translations of Greek words into English words for this chapter.

In the Septuagint then, there is often a common way that that translator will translate the Hebrew text using certain Greek words. This commonality then creates for us a dictionary of sorts for how the translator of the Septuagint chose to use a certain Greek word in order to translate a certain Hebrew word, or words. This then becomes a contextual framework that can aid us in understanding the message of the author of Hebrews. His usage of Greek, especially when he is referring to biblical concepts, appears to be rooted deeply and firmly in the contextual framework of the Septuagint. Almost, exclusively when he quotes, or refers to, Scripture he uses the Septuagint, even when the


Septuagint does not align completely with the Hebrew text (the Masoretic text). His focus too tends to be on the original house of worship (the tabernacle) and not on the first, or second temple.

In part, this is because he is trying to make points that relate to what God delivered to Moses. His premise is that God conveyed (perhaps showed) Moses the heavenly originals and then these were replicated as closely as was possible by the artisans and lawyers that followed. His point is to connect, in his discussion, the idea that these things were a “type” of the heavenly original; they were indeed a replica and not the original. Even in our thinking today, it is the case that the original is considered better and more valuable than a copy, or replica. This too is the point of the author of Hebrews. Chapter 9 begins with a discussion regarding the first covenant and its regulations. These were given to Moses in order to prepare us in our understanding and comprehension regarding the heavenly tabernacle, its function and its importance in salvation history as well as how it relates to our relationship with God. He maps out for us, in the first 5 verses, the layout of that tabernacle with its main features. The separation of the Holy of holies is of particular importance,

especially as it relates to the presence of God and as a point of contact between God and the priests, but also highlighted is the element of separation. The realm of men and the realm of God are separated.

Even as we are being led through these features of the old, the first covenant, it is apparent that this is not the true focus of this chapter. The true focus of this chapter is upon the new, the second covenant. Even at verse 1, we are given some indication of the inferior nature of the first covenant and particularly its sanctuary, which is described as “earthly” (κοσμικόν) in contrast to the sanctuary of the new covenant which is “heavenly.” The discussion will move to its focus, which is that the blood of animals is not an adequate sacrifice for sins.¹ In coming to this point our author sets the stage and sets up the comparison that he is making between the first covenant and second covenant and the sacrifices that are offered in each. In some senses, the grandeur and the detail of the first covenant are things that seem to pull humans toward them in powerful and compelling ways. We seem to be powerfully drawn toward liturgy and structure in worship.

¹ James W. Thompson, “Hebrews 9 and Hellenistic Concepts of Sacrifice,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 98:4 (1979), pp. 567-578.



They are filled with deep and rich meaning that forms our thoughts and more importantly touch our soul and our heart.

These practices become a central part of the thinking and form a conceptual reality framework for seeing the world and especially for seeing the problems and potentials for relationship with God.²

In the church, we talk a lot about discipleship and so often what discipleship has become for us is a providing of the right information. There is a sense that even in our educational systems we see this tendency in the way some systems and teachers teach. In some senses, our modern testing regimes can cater to a system that measures the retention of information more than the ability to process and access information in functional and powerful ways. Discipleship, as Jesus seems to see it, focuses more on the heart and the soul than upon the head and upon information. James K. A. Smith describes the discipleship of Jesus in these terms, “Discipleship, we might say, is a way to curate your heart, to be attentive to, and intentional about, what you love.”³

Already in the first century A.D., within the context of the Hellenistic world, there was the sense that the blood of animals

² James K. A. Smith, *You Are What you Love* (Grand Rapids MI: Brazos Press, 2016).

³ James K. A. Smith, *You Are What you Love*, p. 2.

was inadequate as a sacrifice for the sins of men. In addition, within an old Palestinian tradition that extended to the psalms and prophets there was condemnation of any belief in the automatic efficacy of sacrifices. In this tradition, there was a demand that in the place of animal sacrifices should come a “sacrifice of thanksgiving, or deeds of mercy.”⁴ True discipleship will become a part of the heart not just something that is external. Killing animals can become something that does not truly affect the heart, and the conscience of the people. In that instance they are not truly disciples of Christ.

The role of Old Covenant was intended to impact the heart of the people and turn them toward God as true disciples. The imagery of the ancient cultic practices was a tool used by God to draw them into discipleship. As the author of Hebrews explains how this was supposed to work he lays out his case for understanding this concept. So he sets about giving the layout of the tabernacle in verses 1-5 and then in verses 6-7 he briefly sketches out the priestly activity in the first compartment and then on into the second compartment of the tabernacle (the Holy

⁴ James W. Thompson, “Hebrews 9 and Hellenistic Concepts of Sacrifice,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 98:4 (1979), pp. 567-578.

of holies). When we get to verse 7, the important activity of the high priest on the Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*) is expounded. He goes in only once a year and even then he must take blood that first of all must be offered on behalf of him and then an additional animal is offered for the sins of the people; those that were committed unintentionally. This issue of unintentional sin is one that is important; intentional sin will be addressed again in chapter 10 (verse 26). These categories are to be found in the Law of Moses too (Numbers 15:22,⁵ 30-31⁶). In the context of the sacrifices on the Day of Atonement, two sacrifices were offered: The first was the sacrifice by the high priest of a bull with the sprinkling of its blood on the ark for the sins of the high priest and his family (Leviticus 16:6, 11, 14). The second was the sacrifice of the goat and the offering of blood for the sins of the people (Leviticus 16:15, 30).⁷

⁵ **But if you unintentionally fail to observe all these commandments that the LORD has spoken to Moses—** NRSV.

⁶ **But whoever acts high-handedly, whether a native or an alien, affronts the LORD, and shall be cut off from among the people.** ³¹ **Because of having despised the word of the LORD and broken his commandment, such a person shall be utterly cut off and bear the guilt.** NRSV.

⁷ Edgar Mcknight and Christopher Church, *Hebrews-James*, in the Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary series (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2004), p. 192.

When we come to verses 8-10, there is the indication that the earthly sanctuary and its worship have a deeper meaning than was at first apparent on the surface. The author will use temporal language in order to break down into categories the various elements in order to disclose this deeper meaning. At verse 8, the author highlights the role of the Holy Spirit who is the supplier of the insight, or the revelation that he has regarding what the earthly sanctuary means. It has been the case, that early in the Book of Hebrews, the Holy Spirit was perceived as the one inspiring Scripture. Here, the indication is that the Holy Spirit is seen in the role of revealing what has not been understood, even from Scripture.⁸ The Holy Spirit “declares,” or “makes clear” (δηλοῦντος), what has not been “made known,” or “revealed” (πεφανερῶσθαι) as long as the tabernacle of the Exodus was still standing.⁹

There are number of terms that are critical in helping us to understand the message of the author in this chapter:

⁸ Edgar Mcknight and Christopher Church, *Hebrews-James*, pp. 192-193.

⁹ Steve Stanley, “Hebrews 9:6-10: The “Parable” of the Tabernacle,” *Novum Testamentum* 37:4 (1995), pp. 385-399.

1. The word “parable” (παράβολή): A parable is a comparison that requires readers to see relationships that are not readily apparent. As we have spoken of previously the author of Hebrews sees a great many things as “types.” The Old Testament things are fulfilled in the New Testament with their substantive reality, whereas the Old Testament images were a “type” or a “parable” that we are to compare to the greater reality.

2. The word “conscience” (συνείδησις): This word was commonly used in the Hellenistic world to refer to an awareness in both the “moral” and in the “nonmoral” sense. In the context here in Hebrews, the word is used in a manner that certainly includes a moral awareness, but the cleansing that comes through the sacrifice of Christ is broader than simply cleansing the burden of guilt. It refers also to the hope and promise of the new covenant that would bring with it an internal change of the heart.¹⁰ In this way our author connects the heart with the concept of conscience.

3. The term “covenant” (διαθήκη - *diathekes*), which is a word that is reflected throughout Hebrews and in the New

¹⁰ Edgar Mcknight and Christopher Church, *Hebrews-James*, p. 193.

Testament in general serves as an equivalent to the Hebrew term **ברית** (*Berith* - Covenant). In the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament, the term **διαθήκη** (*diatheke*) occurs 270 times as the translation of the Hebrew term **ברית** (*Berith*). Only rarely is it used to translate any other term. There is virtually exclusive connection of these two terms in Hellenistic usage as a translation of the Old Testament term **ברית** (*Berith*) in the Septuagint.¹¹ This then enables us to understand the meaning that the writer of Hebrews attaches to the term **διαθήκη** (*diatheke*) in his epistle.

4. The author of Hebrews uses an unusual term for “sins” at verse 7 (**ἀγνοημάτων** - *agnoematon*). This is a term that is used in the Septuagint translation only at Genesis 43:12 where it is translated as an “error,” or a “mistake.”¹² As we shall see later he uses this term in order to make a distinction between sins committed intentionally and those committed unintentionally. This unique usage of **ἀγνοημάτων** - *agnoematon* must serve as a signal of noting this unusual word and its usage in the Septuagint as something far different than deliberate sin.

¹¹ John J. Hughes, “Hebrews 9:15ff. and Galatians 3:15ff.: A Study in Covenant Practice and Procedure,” *Novum Testamentum* 21:1 (1979), pp. 27-96.

¹² Steve Stanley, “Hebrews 9:6-10: The “Parable” of the Tabernacle,” *Novum Testamentum* 37:4 (1995), pp. 385-399.

Now as we move on, at verse 9, Stanley indicates that the “parable:” a reference to the tabernacle; is a “parable,” or comparison that particularly gives modern readers difficulty in interpretation because of their unfamiliarity with the tabernacle and its cultic rituals. The word “parable” (παράβολή) is used at verse 9, though it might not at first be apparent to English readers as the NRSV translates the word as “symbol” as does the NET. Hebrews 9:6-10, comprises one compound and complex sentence in the Greek text.¹³ The word “parable” is an appropriate translation here. In the context of Hebrews, the “holy place” of the tabernacle is a “parable” of the “present time” by comparison to the “age to come.” The present time, with its limitations, has been superseded by the coming time, the “time ... to set things right.” The gifts and offerings that are offered in the present time, and in the present sanctuary, are not sufficient to “perfect” (τελειῶσαι) the “conscience” of the worshiper.¹⁴

The tabernacle then stands as a “parable” (a type illustration) for those in the new age. It could be translated here

¹³ Steve Stanley, “Hebrews 9:6-10: The “Parable” of the Tabernacle,” *Novum Testamentum* 37:4 (1995), pp. 385-399.

¹⁴ Edgar Mcknight and Christopher Church, *Hebrews-James*, p. 193.

as “type” instead of “parable” and it would still have very much the same overall meaning. As we have mentioned earlier the writer uses the ideology of type prominently in his composition. He intends to communicate to his audience that there is something in the Old Covenant to be learned about the New Covenant. The old is an illustration of the new. For those who see no use in studying the Old Testament this puts them directly, and completely, at odds with the claim of the writer of Hebrews. His claim is that the message that is contained in the Old Testament is inspired by God as indeed is the message of Hebrews (Psalm 95, Hebrews 3:7). Scripture is seen by the author of Hebrews as the equivalent of the words of the Holy Spirit. The writer wants his audience to understand that the old system with its provisions under the Mosaic covenant were limited and anticipatory, and this can now be seen more clearly from the perspective of the new age, the Christian age.¹⁵


Addressing an additional issue that is in some ways perhaps forecast in this chapter, as mentioned earlier, the author uses the unusual term for “sins” (ἀγνοημάτων - *agnoematon*) at Hebrews

¹⁵ Steve Stanley, “Hebrews 9:6-10: The “Parable” of the Tabernacle,” *Novum Testamentum* 37:4 (1995), pp. 385-399.

9:7, it is likely the case that the author intends to distinguish in his writing between sins committed in ignorance and deliberate sins as is also done at Numbers 15:22-31. This is especially likely in light of what the author of Hebrews wrote in 10:26 regarding sins.¹⁶ At 10:26 the normal word for sins is used (ἁμαρτιῶν - *hamartion*) and not the word used at 9:7. This is not apparent in the English translation and so hides from us this distinction held by the author of Hebrews and leads to misunderstanding. We will address this more in the next chapter, but it is important to recognize this distinction here in order to understand chapter 10.

The implication of the message of Hebrews 9:6-10 then is disclosed in verse 11. When Christ came as high priest the new era was now opened up with all the implications that this fact brings. For the writer's audience, one important implication then is apparent, which is, that since Jesus has now entered into the heavenly tent, the earthly sanctuary (along with the Old Covenant rituals) has no standing in the redemptive work of God, it has been superseded in that function because Jesus has now entered into the heavenly sanctuary. The Old Covenant rituals and sacrifices

¹⁶ Steve Stanley, "Hebrews 9:6-10: The "Parable" of the Tabernacle," *Novum Testamentum* 37:4 (1995), pp. 385-399.



have fulfilled their function, which was to point ahead to the ministry of Christ. The earthly sanctuary touched upon the external needs of the worshippers (not the heart, or conscience), but now the significant priestly function of bringing forgiveness of sins is fulfilled by Christ in the true, the heavenly, sanctuary. The role of that earthly tabernacle was to teach something about the heavenly sanctuary and the sacrifice of Christ that were still to come for those living under the Mosaic Covenant. Now that this function has been fulfilled in the ministry of Christ the levitical sacrifices of the earthly sanctuary are no longer valid. There is true genius in how the divisions within the old legal system are highlighted to enable the audience to see the true significance of the New, Christian, system.¹⁷

As we come to verse 12, we come fully to the issue of the matter of sacrifices and their purpose. It has been my experience that the ideology of sacrifice and what sacrifices accomplish are areas of extreme misunderstanding. This misunderstanding often has not been helped as it should by this powerful and compelling passage in Hebrews because of the mistranslations here. A large

¹⁷ Steve Stanley, "Hebrews 9:6-10: The "Parable" of the Tabernacle," *Novum Testamentum* 37:4 (1995), pp. 385-399.

part of this comes from our failure to understand the nature of covenant. So often we equate covenant with contract and although there are some things that are similar there are far more things that are substantively different in nature. In our understanding, the concept of “treaty” perhaps comes closer to the idea of “covenant” than does the concept of “contract.” Despite the fact that **διαθήκη** (*diatheke*) is virtually universally used as the equivalent for the Hebrew concept of covenant (**ברית** - *berith*) most translators of Hebrews still choose to translate the usage in Hebrews 9:16-17 **διαθήκη** (*diatheke*) as “will,” or “testament.”¹⁸

Translating **διαθήκη** (*diatheke*) as “will,” or “testament” is filled with a great many difficulties. If you want a full treatment of all of these difficulties I would refer you to the full article of Scott Hahn in the footnote below. He provides detailed information that highlights the difficulties with the majority opinion of twentieth century scholars on the translation of this term as “will,” or “testament.”¹⁹ It is not only this one word that is problematic in verses 16-17, but many other words in these verses that are often

¹⁸ Scott Hahn, “A Broken Covenant and the Curse of Death: A Study of Hebrews 9:15-22,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 66:3 (2004), pp. 416-436.

¹⁹ Scott Hahn, “A Broken Covenant and the Curse of Death: A Study of Hebrews 9:15-22,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 66:3 (2004), pp. 416-436.

used in very technical and specific ways in association with covenants and the making of covenants. It is not possible to explain all of these in detail here, but they can be found in detail in the articles used in this lesson and footnoted.

Of critical importance in seeking understanding of this work is the context of the Epistle to the Hebrews itself. It is virtually universally agreed that this a writing composed for an audience of Hellenistic-Jewish Christians. If that is indeed the case why would the author shift the meaning of this term over to concepts that are largely alien to that audience without explanation, or warning them. Throughout the remainder of the writing (8:6, 8, 9, 10; 9:4, 15; 10:16; ; 10:20; 12:24 and more) the term **διαθήκη** (diatheke) is used in a manner that would be consistent with its usage in the Septuagint as an equivalent for the Hebrew term **ברית** (*Berith* - Covenant). One example that is especially relevant is that in 9:4; where it seems certain that the reference is to the “ark of the covenant,” and not to the “ark of the will.” Surely in 9:4 the reference is to the Old Testament cultic political order called “covenant” (**ברית** - *Berith*) and not to a “will.”²⁰

²⁰ John J. Hughes, “Hebrews 9:15ff. and Galatians 3:15ff.: A Study in Covenant Practice and Procedure,” *Novum Testamentum* 21:1 (1979), pp. 27-96.

Out of all the words that possibly could have been used to translate the concept of *Berith* (the Hebrew word for “covenant”), the scholars who translated the Septuagint chose this word to express the Old Testament concept of “covenant.” It seems to me that there would need to be some extraordinarily compelling reason to expect the author of Hebrews to use *διαθήκη* (diatheke) in a manner significantly different than its usage in the inspired Septuagint. The Septuagint was the authorized Greek translation for the use of Hellenistic Jews in the first century, at least the early part, as well as more than a century earlier. In addition, surely the context of Hebrews itself should define the meaning intended for *διαθήκη* (diatheke). The meaning of *διαθήκη* (diatheke) in the context of verses 16-17 surely must reflect the context in verse 15 and the usage of the term *διαθήκη* (diatheke) in that verse is absolutely aligned with that of the term *Berith*, the Hebrew term

for covenant. Verses 16-22 explain why it was necessary for Christ to die as the mediator of the new covenant.^{21,22}

The normal procedure in initiating a covenant in the Ancient Near East often required a self-maledictory oath ritual that involved the bloody dismemberment of representative animals. We see this in a number of passages from the Old Testament,²³ as well as from other writings from ancient Israel.²⁴ When making a covenant in the Ancient Near East it was common for the two parties to take an animal, or animals, and split them in two creating a path between the parts that was often filled with the blood from the carcasses. In the making of a covenant, the two parties would pass between the animal parts, perhaps splashing


²¹ John J. Hughes, "Hebrews 9:15ff. and Galatians 3:15ff.: A Study in Covenant Practice and Procedure," *Novum Testamentum* 21:1 (1979), pp. 27-96.

²² To assume that the author switches meanings for *διαθήκη* (diatheke) cannot be justified syntactically, though it is possible that it could be justified on semantic grounds. In other words by demonstrating that the concepts and practices alluded to in verses 16-17 refer to procedures other than those of verses 18-22. However, such an argument is untenable. Although it is generally assumed that the concept of wills and testaments in the time of the New Testament corresponds with our modern understanding of these concepts, this is not a valid assumption. This is eisegesis and not exegesis in the first instance; it is a reading into the text instead of a reading out of the text. The validation of wills in Hellenistic, Egyptian and Roman law was not "over the dead (bodies)." Often we have too quickly assumed that modern and ancient testamentary practices were similar and therefore assumed that the statements of verses 16-17 described contemporary legal practice.

Scott Hahn, "A Broken Covenant and the Curse of Death: A Study of Hebrews 9:15-22," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 66:3 (2004), pp. 416-436.

²³ Genesis 15; Exodus 24; Jeremiah 34; Psalm 50:5.

²⁴ *Jubilees* 6:11; *Assumption of Moses* 1:9; 2:7; 9:17; 12:13; *Psalms of Solomon* 8:10; *Wisdom of Solomon* 18:22; *CD* 15:1ff.



blood on themselves and their witnesses as they passed through. First, the superior party would pass through and then secondly the inferior party would pass through. The message of this ceremony was that may what has been done to these animals happen to me if I do not keep the terms of this “covenant.” This is what strikes terror into the heart of Abraham in Genesis 15 as he contemplates making a “covenant” with the God of heaven. He is terrified, because he knows the greatness of the one with whom he makes a “covenant” and he knows that he will be unable to fully live up to his part of any “covenant” and therefore can expect to die.

Ancient covenants usually had 2 aspects to them: there was usually the aspect of transaction. This was what was being offered by both parties. In a covenant with God there is never any doubt about Him keeping His transactional obligations. The second aspect of covenant has to do with justice. Often this was a central feature for entering into a covenant, in order to insure justice. If a covenant was broken then the offended party was expected to enact the consequences clause of a covenant. Just as God could be expected to fulfill His obligations of benefit, or transaction, it was

equally expected that He could, and would, exact the consequences clause in the event of failure of the other covenant participant. The failure of a king, or a person of power by not enforcing the negative terms of a covenant would have been seen as weakness, dishonesty, and itself as an act of injustice. The parable Jesus gave of the unforgiving debtor does not apply here as the issue is the paying of debt and not the keeping of a covenant. It is an extraordinarily difficult task to be merciful and keep the terms of justice when a covenant is broken. That is what is at issue with Israel. Clearly, they broke the covenant. God is therefore obligated to inflict the curses of the covenant upon Israel, or else be seen as weak, unjust and unreliable as a covenant partner.

This is exactly the challenge that the author of Hebrews masterfully addresses here in Hebrew 9. I will translate 9:15-18 in order to help clarify this: ^{9:15} **And for this reason He is the mediator of a new covenant (διαθήκης), so that once a death took place for the redemption of transgressions under the first covenant those who have been called might receive the promised eternal inheritance.** ¹⁶ **For where there is a**

covenant (**διαθήκη**), it is necessary to bring forward the death of the one who introduces²⁵ it.²⁶ ¹⁷ For a covenant is secured upon dead corpses, since it is not valid while the one making the covenant lives. ¹⁸ Therefore even the first (covenant) was not consecrated without blood. This translation is quite literal to what is in the text and as you can see it differs considerably from what you will find in our English translations. Some may ask why? There are several reasons: 1. Translations are done by publishers who want to sell Bibles and changing a text usually means selling less Bibles. 2. The majority of scholars from the twentieth and twenty-first century would agree with the English translations.

I believe that they are wrong. I believe they are wrong because they fail to take account not only of the immediate context of verses 16-17, the wider context of the Book of Hebrews,

²⁵ 2 Peter 2:11; **whereas angels, though greater in might and power, do not bring (φέρω) against them a slanderous judgment from the Lord** NRSV. 2 Peter 1:21 **for no prophecy was ever borne of human impulse; rather, men carried (φέρω) along by the Holy Spirit spoke from God** NET; John 18:29 **So Pilate went out to them and said, "What accusation do you bring (φέρω) against this man?"** NRSV. The Greek word **φέρω** can have this representative nuance as can be seen in the three examples above. In Hebrews 9:16 this representative nuance is in its function of bringing into the picture the covenant.

John J. Hughes, "Hebrews 9:15ff. and Galatians 3:15ff.: A Study in Covenant Practice and Procedure," *Novum Testamentum* 21:1 (1979), pp. 27-96.

²⁶ John J. Hughes, "Hebrews 9:15ff. and Galatians 3:15ff.: A Study in Covenant Practice and Procedure," *Novum Testamentum* 21:1 (1979), pp. 27-96.


the wider biblical context, and also the context of the entire Ancient Near East with regard to the concept of “covenant. Assumptions are made that are unsustainable in changing the meaning of the term διαθήκη (diatheke) to mean “will” here instead of “covenant.” In all the immediate context, especially in verse 15 and verse 20 this word (διαθήκη - diatheke), as well as further afield, always means “covenant.” Those that would change the meaning here indicate that the author plays off of the potential double meaning of this word to then shift to a technical Hellenistic legal connotation that the author then expects the readers to follow.²⁷ The problem is that this is not strictly accurate in regard even to Roman-Hellenistic practice. The manner in which our English Bibles translate these verses makes no sense even against the background of Hellenistic practice as they would in fact refer to no known Hellenistic practice. The reason this argument seems to work for us is it seems consonant with modern practices regarding wills. This is different from both Hellenistic and Semitic practices.²⁸

²⁷ Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, in the *Hermeneia - A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible* series (Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 1989), pp. 253-257.

²⁸ John J. Hughes, “Hebrews 9:15ff. and Galatians 3:15ff.: A Study in Covenant Practice and Procedure,” *Novum Testamentum* 21:1 (1979), pp. 27-96.


This section of Hebrews is filled with Jewish cultic terms as can be seen from how the Greek words used in the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew terms. Surely we should see the Book of Hebrews in the light of its context and not in the light of our context. Actually, in my mind, our modern English versions only make sense with severe contortion of the text, and our contextual framework then distorts what is one of the most powerful and beautiful images in all of Scripture. I believe that the author is still focused on the issue of “covenant” and that here he references the context of making “covenants.” In this context, the one making the “covenant” would be expected to make vows over the bodies of dead animals, thus the plural (bodies); that meant that if he did not keep the “covenant” he should become like the animals, dead.

We see this played out in several places in Scripture, but one of the most powerful, and I believe relevant for this context, is Genesis chapter 15 where God passes through the carcasses twice, indicating, I believe, that he not only was standing as the superior participant in the “covenant,” but also he was going to guarantee Abraham’s part and stand in his place as guarantor too. This seems an impossible task, and for man it would be, but that is



exactly what happened in Jesus Christ. For mercy to be granted in a covenant without any thought of justice would have made any ruler, or leader, or even God, appear as unjust, unrighteous, and a poor leader to those observing. Justice is important to people and a necessary element in a “covenant.” How could God fulfill the justice of “covenant” while at the same time being merciful? He did that in Jesus Christ and through His life, justice was served and there is no cheap, tawdry grace that just ignores the “covenant” here; no there is payment made. The life of Jesus, the blood of Jesus, is given in order that justice might be served while at the same time granting great mercy and grace.


In this chapter, the author never moves away from the idea of “covenant.” As we turn to verses 19 and following the references are clearly to the First “Covenant” and verse 22 especially confirms this by speaking of the purifying affects of blood, the forgiveness that only comes through blood. Blood is life and it stands as a symbol for life. Jesus gave His life, His blood, to fulfill justice and to redeem us. The grace of God comes at a terrible cost, and through the willing sacrifice of Jesus on a cross, not to appease an angry God, but to maintain in tact the



reputation and integrity of a God who keeps His word no matter the personal cost. He is just. His love and compassion are greater than His care and concern for Himself and He calls us to this same standard in His kingdom, which is to be dominated by such love and concern for the other, the weak, the helpless and even the undeserving.

Scholars clearly recognize that verses 18-22 must be read in a cultic context. These verses expand in explaining the need for the shedding of blood in the establishment of “covenants” and therefore expound upon the relevance of the shedding of blood by Jesus for the audience of Hebrews. They do this by citing the traditions associated with the giving and implementation of the First Covenant. That covenant was made with blood (Exodus 24:8).²⁹ The New Covenant too was made with blood (cf. Matthew 26:28) and with this blood comes forgiveness. The blood that initiated the New Covenant is better than that of the blood of animals that had no choice in their death and offered in a better place, the heavenly sanctuary. There is no need for it to be offered over and over again (9:28). In this chapter we are also told that

²⁹ Edgar Mcknight and Christopher Church, *Hebrews-James*, in the Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary series (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2004), p. 206.




He will return a second time, “not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him. The sanctuary entered by Christ was not the one made by hands, it was not a mere copy, not a type, but the real sanctuary and as such it needed a better sacrifice. That better sacrifice has been given by Jesus, once and for all and now those that follow Him await His return.

Synopsis

This chapter presents modern audiences with challenges that are uniquely ours because of our culture and history. In order to more fully understand the Book of Hebrews it is essential that we do our best to maintain connection with the first century world of ancient Judaism. This book expects the audience to be extremely well versed in images that are drawn from the cultic history of Israel. This includes detailed understanding of the practices and the language associated with the cult, especially a familiarity with the Greek vocabulary of the Septuagint as the accounts of these things transformed God's message passed through history in Hebrew into the Greek language.

Understanding the role of the Holy Spirit in revealing the things of God is inherent in the fabric of this writing. This includes both the composition of the writings we know as the Old Testament as well as those we know as the New Testament. They are both inspired by the Holy Spirit. This chapter reveals how God is able to initiate a New Covenant that overcomes the weaknesses of the Old Covenant. The primary weakness of that Covenant is humanity, which is not able to fulfill its covenant obligations to



God. This chapter discloses the lengths and the ingenuity of God in overcoming these difficulties in His great plan.

He does this at a terrible cost to Himself. His solution cost Him that which was most precious and most valuable (His Son) to redeem that which was in truth without value and seemingly beyond redemption (humanity). God continues to reach out to His people and to challenge them to take up their role in the continued progress of the Kingdom of God toward completion. When that happens Jesus will appear a second time in order “to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.” This chapter sets side by side the challenges of love and justice and discloses for us the great solution of God. He gives of Himself, so much so that it causes His death. He challenges those that would follow Jesus to do the same.

Questions

1. What was the purpose of the covenant given to Moses?
2. What have you learned from your reading of the Old Testament?
3. What is the role of the Holy Spirit in conveying the message of God to people?
4. Why would someone want to go into the sanctuary of God?
5. What do you think it means for the “conscience” to be perfected?
6. What are some things that you do for your soul? Why?
7. What do you think it means for God “to set things right?”
8. What does it mean for something to not be of this creation?
9. Why do you think “blood” is offered as a sacrifice?
10. What does it mean to offer a sacrifice?
11. How do you think the blood of Christ purifies our conscience?
12. What are “dead works?”
13. How important is justice to you? Why?

14. What is the message of the “blood of the covenant” (verse 20)?

15. Why do you think blood is necessary for the forgiveness of sins?

16. What is the significance of the death of Christ for the way you live your life?
Why?

17. How do you know what “love” is?

To Take Home

What is Important to know?

It is important to know that the Old Testament is of crucial importance for understanding the message of Jesus Christ and the significance of His mission. It is also important to understand the Old Testament and its world in order to understand the message that Jesus came to bring to this earth as well as the significance of His death and resurrection. What are some ways that you seek to further your understanding of God and what He expects of you?

Where is God in these words?

In this chapter we see the great patience, endurance, and the plan of God for the redemption of humanity. It should be the case that this chapter helps us to comprehend more deeply the great love that God has for us and the lengths to which He has gone to save us from our sins. This chapter is filled with powerful images of the redemptive nature of God and of His efforts to communicate that message to His people. Where do you most powerfully see God in your life?

What does any of this mean for how I live my life?

This chapter should challenge us to live our lives in ways that bring justice and redemption more fully into the world. We should be both terrified and challenged by the words of this chapter. We can see here the awesome nature of God and how He, despite His great power, He brings to Himself suffering on the behalf of those He loves. What are some ways that you have seen people sacrifice on behalf of others?

What is the word of God calling us to do?

This chapter calls us to see the nature and the plan of God to redeem His people. It challenges us to be faithful in recognizing that no matter how long our journey is to salvation, God has been planning, acting, and suffering far more than we could ever imagine. Here we are called to recognize the nature of the sacrifice of Jesus and that its significance is far more wide reaching that it might first appear to be. These words are meant to call us to faith and to worship of God. They are also words of great hope as God continues to work out His plan. We are called to “eagerly” be waiting for Him. How do you determine what God calls you to do each day?