

III. New Testament

In the history of biblical reception, “covenant” is a concept rich in theological associations and full of spiritual connotations but neither clear-cut nor

rooted in a unilinear biblical tradition. Conventional models of understanding the biblical covenant under the premises of salvation history, e.g., the most influential supersedionist theory, normally tend to disregard the fact that it was *Barn.*, Justin the Martyr, and Irenaeus of Lyon – rather than the NT literature – that laid the ground for the Christian appropriation of covenantal theology. Quite importantly, the NT writers remain reluctant to embrace the covenant motif since it was connected closely to YHWH's election of Israel and to Israel's ethnic and social identity. The development of the covenant concept proves manifold, so due weight must be given to each particular writing. It is *Barn.* that rather dramatically illustrates how controversial the covenant motif could be in early Christianity.

With the exception of Hebrews (where it occurs 17 times), the noun *διαθήκη* is comparatively rare in early Christian literature (Paul: 8; Luke-Acts: 4; Mark, Matt, Eph, and Rev: once in each text); in the Apostolic Fathers, apart from *Barn.* (13 times), it occurs twice (1 *Clem.* 15.4; 35.7, each time in a quotation), in Justin's *Dial.* 31 times. For methodological reasons, the establishment of an overall structured covenantal theology, often based on HB/OT systematizations, proves difficult without any semantic ground in the NT.

In contemporary Greek usage, the normal meaning of *διαθήκη* was "testament" or "last will." However, with the exception of the inventive passages Gal 3:15–18 and Heb 9:16–17, the NT writings maintain continuity with the specific religious usage of the Septuagint, where *διαθήκη* designates, quite generally, the mutual relationship between God and his people, established sovereignly by YHWH to set a binding order of justice and peace.

The earliest tradition of the covenant motif in Christian context emerges in Jesus' word over the cup during the Last Supper. Whether Jesus himself spoke about God's covenant renewed in his death remains disputed. However, all strata of tradition witness to the covenant motif (Mark 14:24 par. Matt 26:28; 1 Cor 11:25; Luke 22:20), thereby meeting the criterion of dissimilarity, since the early church does not reveal any specific interest in covenant theology until Hebrews. If Jesus referred to God's covenant in the evening before his death and in the context of the temple action, he probably stressed YHWH's lasting faithfulness that abides with YHWH's people in spite of their rejecting the messenger, an adherence to God's saving will at an eschatological zero-point that had already marked the covenant message of the prophets (e.g., Jer 31:31–34; cf. Isa 54:8) as well as the beginning of Jesus' ministry, when he – against the background of John the Baptist's preaching – stressed God's unconditional initiative of mercy. In any case, the general meaning of the eucharistic tradition seems

clear: in Jesus' atoning death God establishes an everlasting covenant in eschatological newness, universal wideness, and individual nearness. In the Lord's Supper the faithful realize their participation in this new covenant, the passage Mark 14:24/ Matt 26:28 reflecting cultic typology, which controlled the further development of covenantal theology.

The Apostle Paul develops the covenant motif in the context of soteriological controversies on the one hand and in his striving for Israel's fate on the other hand.

(A) In Galatians and 2 Corinthians Paul elaborates the covenant motif in a polemical context and with an antithetical thrust, probably taking up a catchword of his antagonists. The thread guiding the line of thought is the Mosaic law insofar as it takes the place of Christ as guarantor of salvation. Whereas the covenant emerges as the flexible part of the argument, its center remains the Christ event.

In Gal 3:15–18 Paul introduces the term *διαθήκη* in a metaphorical way that mirrors contemporary laws of inheritance: As a confirmed testament cannot subsequently be changed by other parties, God's covenant with Abraham does not stand subject to any alteration by the subsequent νόμος. As God's "last will," the promise to Abraham has remained valid and finds its fulfilment in Jesus Christ. In Gal 4:21–31 Paul, in an allegorical manner, confronts Sarah and Hagar as paradigms of two "covenants," the covenant of Hagar producing slavery, to which Paul contrasts the liberty of "the Jerusalem above," hometown of God's free children.

In 2 Cor 3:14–18 Paul compares the ministry of the letter with the apostolic ministry of the Spirit, i.e., the ministry of the new covenant (3:6). Within this Christological framework he contrasts the soteriological principles of "death" and "life" as well as "condemnation" and "justification." The term "old covenant" (3:14), used for the first time here in Christian context, refers to the Torah that is read rather than understood in synagogue worship, since, for Paul, only he who turns to Christ may reach proper understanding, personal encounter, and spiritual transformation. The hermeneutical reference to the "hardened minds" of the Jewish reader had a fatal trajectory in later anti-Jewish polemics.

(B) Paul's "tract on Israel" (Rom 9–11) is framed by the covenant motif: among other tokens of election, the "covenants" represent Israel's salvific past and spiritual grandeur (Rom 9:4). In the conclusion, the apostle refers to the eschatological target of Israel's election, founding the hope for the salvation of all Israel on the promise by Isaiah (59:20–21 in combination with 27:9 [LXX]): the hardening of Israel serves the salvation of the Gentiles, but the deliverer will eventually banish all ungodliness

from God's elected people so that their sins will be forgiven (Rom 11: 26–27). Rooted in God's faithfulness, the covenant even of the disobedient elect remains in force. God will never repent of his calling and grace (cf. 11: 29). A witness to Paul's sensitive wrestling for his own people, these reflections have for long led an isolated life in the history of Christian theology, but they have been rediscovered in the recent Jewish-Christian dialogue.

In the other NT writings the covenant motif is only of marginal significance. Ephesians 2:12 recalls the covenants of promise to demonstrate how far from God's commonwealth the Gentiles "once" were. Similarly, in Luke-Acts the covenant refers to God's promising alliance of old (Luke 1:72; Acts 3:25; cf. Acts 7:8) that has reached its destination in the Christ event. At a climax of Revelation, the ark of the covenant is dramatically enacted (Rev 11:19), but the covenant motif does not play a significant role.

Not until Hebrews does the notion of *διαθήκη* serve – possibly in the soteriological context of the Lord's Supper – as a crucial concept. For the first time, the covenant motif is integrated into the whole of the christological confession, Hebrews elaborating this concept in view of the chasm between the shadowy earthly world and the heavenly reality of God's eternal being. Under the influence of both the ontological and psychological premises of middle-platonism, God's inaccessibility is a serious existential problem for the readers.

It is the personal sacrifice by the high priest able to sympathize with human weakness that bridges the chasm and opens the "new and living way" into God's transcendence (9:1–14; cf. 10:20). Hebrews explicates this christological concept of atonement in terms of cultic typology (cf. Rom 3:25). The "first covenant" encapsulates the earth-bound sacrificial cult of the Sinai torah. What is obsolete, then (8:13), is animal sacrifice, for it is unable to lead the worshippers into God's immediate presence. In the "new covenant" (8:7–12; 10:15–18 as quotations of Jer 38:31–34 [LXX]), whose guarantee and mediator is Jesus (7:22; 8:6), this access is given to those who believe. The "better," "new," and "eternal" covenant is the eschatological order, rooted in Jesus' death at the cross as an antitype to the sacrificial inauguration of the Sinai covenant (cf. Exod 24:8), indeed an everlasting covenant reaching into the heavenly transcendence, though the pilgrim people of God may participate in its salvific effects even when wandering through earthly deserts (cf. 9:11–22; 12:24; 13:20). However, insofar as the last perfection of the universe still lies ahead, this covenant takes the shape of promise, not fulfilment (8:6; 9:15). Thus, whereas the covenants stand for the discontinuity of flesh and conscience, earth and heaven, image and reality (notably not for church and synagogue), the continuity of all salvation his-

tory is based on God's word, on promise, and on faith (cf. 1:1–4; 11:1–12:3).

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