

Some reflections on the 'new covenant' in Hebrews 12:24



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In Hebrews 12:24 Jesus is called the Mediator of a διαθήκη νέα [new covenant], instead of a διαθήκη καινή, as elsewhere in the New Testament. This peculiar reference to the new covenant is investigated within its relation to 'the sprinkled blood that speaks of something better than the blood of Abel' (Heb 12:24). In the investigation considerations from the micro- and macrocontext of the structure of Hebrews are taken into account, as well as intertextual considerations. Special attention is given to the revelation-historical meaning of the blood of Abel who was murdered by his brother (Gn 4:1–16). The outcome of the investigation is that Hebrews 12:24 uses the phrase διαθήκη νέα since, in contrast to the rest of Hebrews, it does not compare the new covenant to the old covenant with Israel, but to the situation of humankind in their depravity after the fall into sin. Although God's promise of a seed (Christ) in Genesis 3:15 already brought a shimmering of hope for salvation to fallen humankind, the blood of the murdered Abel witnessed to the fact that in itself humankind was destined for God's judgement, without a possibility of reconciliation with God. However, in his covenant of grace, as already foreseen in the promised seed, God created a completely new possibility, namely the prospect that the blood of Christ will bring about complete reconciliation with God and salvation from his vengeance. Within the hopeless situation as witnessed by the blood of Abel, the covenant leading to the reconciliatory sacrifice of Christ was a completely new outcome – a διαθήκη νέα.

Introduction

In the book of Hebrews references to the new covenant appear quite frequently, in particular from chapter 7 onwards (cf. Heb 8:8, 13; 9:15; 12:24). In all of these instances the new covenant is referred to as a διαθήκη καινή, the only exception being Hebrews 12:24, where it is called a διαθήκη νέα. As a matter of fact, when all other New Testament references to the new covenant are considered (cf. also Lk 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25; 2 Cor 3:6), the διαθήκη νέα of Hebrews 12:24 proves to be a New Testament όμολογούμενον. For this peculiarity in Hebrews 12:24 scholars have attempted a variety of explanations.

With regard to the usual expression, διαθήκη καινή, scholars who work from reformed perspective agree that the new covenant is called a καινή covenant because of its special relation to the old covenant, i.e. a continuation of the old covenant in a renewed (καινή) form¹ (eg. Archer 1957:96; De Vuyst 1964:165; Robertson 1980:27–52, 280–286). The adjective νέα, however, is used rather to refer to something which is totally new, something which has come into existence very recently (cf. Louw & Nida 1988: subdomains 58 and 67). Therefore Grosheide (1959:303) suggests that the phrase διαθήκη νέα in Hebrews 12:24 refers to a characteristic of the new covenant, namely that it has received its validity very recently. Blass (cf. De Vuyst 1964:120) on the other hand regards διαθήκη νέα as a mere synonym for διαθήκη καινή, chosen by the author for stylistic reasons only. A third explanation, offered by *inter alia* Moffatt (1948:218) is that διαθήκη νέα in Hebrews 12:24 does not refer to a new covenant, although it is in harmony with the teaching about the covenant in Hebrews 7–10. Surrounded by so many different explanations, the question still remains unanswered: Why does Hebrews 12:24 speak of a διαθήκη νέα instead of a διαθήκη καινή?

The second peculiarity in Hebrews 12:24 is the unique way in which the new covenant is described. It speaks of Jesus 'as mediator of a new covenant' (διαθήκης νέας μεσίτη Ἰησοῦ) and makes a direct connection to the 'sprinkled blood' (αἵματι ῥαντισμοῦ). This description is in agreement with the rest of Hebrews (cf Heb 9:18–28), by comparing Jesus' blood to the blood of the sacrifices according

¹This article is written within the reformed paradigm, which includes a revelational-historical view that God did not make different covenants but only one covenant. In the history of God's revelation this covenant unfolds in different statures as it was established at the creation with Adam and renewed with Noah, Abraham, Israel and finally fulfilled in Christ (cf. Heyns 1978:207–215).

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to the Mosaic laws. However, in Hebrews 12:24 a new comparison is introduced: a comparison to the blood of Abel, by saying: 'We have now come to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel'.² In addition to its being out of the ordinary, this comparison also presents difficulty to commentators.

Stedman (1992:146), Peterson (1982:165) and Bruce (1975:379) suggest that in the comparison, this passage indicates that vengeance (called for by the blood of Abel) is opposed to peace and reconciliation (called for by the blood of Jesus). Archer (1957:96) finds that the comparison rather lies between guilt and love. De Vuyst (1964:239), however, rejects the idea of a comparison between two opposing ideas, saying that the sprinkled blood of Jesus and the blood of Abel do not speak of two different things (vengeance vs forgiveness), but of one and the same thing, viz. God's vengeance. Westcott (1914:419) suggests yet another solution, namely that *blood* in Hebrews actually means *life*, and that hence the blood of Abel refers to a life taken in vain and the blood of Jesus to the virtue of Christ's life offered in self-sacrifice.

Since these two matters – the meaning of διαθήκη νέα and the meaning of the comparison between the blood of Abel and the sprinkled blood of Jesus – are interwoven in the text, this article is an endeavour to explain the one from the other. A better understanding of the comparison between the blood of Abel and the sprinkled blood of Jesus, such is my thesis, leads to a better understanding for the peculiar formula διαθήκη νέα. Furthermore, in order to come to a better understanding of the comparison in Hebrews 12:24, it is necessary to give serious consideration to the revelational-historical function of the history of Cain and Abel (Gn 4).

A 'revelational-historical reading' of a text means reading the text within its scriptural context – from the microlevel to the macrolevel. This way of reading goes further than describing the structural place and function of the text within the particular book. It may be regarded as an intertextual reading, yet also as an intratextual reading of the text. The intratextuality stems from the fact that the entire Bible is taken as a unit. Therefore a revelational-historical reading is an attempt to describe the place and function of the text within the biblical message as a whole (cf. Coetzee 1995:48).

Accordingly this article firstly gives an account of the revelational-historical place and function of 'the new covenant' in the book of Hebrews, and from there it continues to consider its place and function within the Bible as a whole. Secondly, it investigates the place and function of the history of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4 in a similar manner. Finally, it relates the blood of Abel and the sprinkled blood of Christ, as compared in Hebrews 12:24, to relevant aspects of

the covenant in order to come to a better understanding of the expression διαθήκη νέα.

A revelational-historical reading of the new covenant in Hebrews

Remarks on the grammatical structure of Hebrews 12:24

In order to read Hebrews 12:24 within its broad revelation-historical context, it is firstly necessary to make sure of its grammatical peculiarities. In contrast to Mount Sinai to which Moses arrived (Heb 12:18–20), Hebrews 12:22–24 describes the heavenly destination of the believers in seven parts (cf. Kistemaker 1984:391), of which Hebrews 12:24 forms the conclusion. According to the Greek text, verse 24 says that the believers have also come διαθήκης νέας μεσίτη Ἰησοῦ καὶ αἵματι ῥαντισμοῦ κρείττον λαλοῦντι παρὰ τὸν Ἀβελ. The two dative nouns (μεσίτη καὶ αἵματι) do not indicate two separate destinations, for the καὶ is exegetical: the phrase καὶ αἵματι ῥαντισμοῦ serves as expansion and explanation of διαθήκης νέας μεσίτη Ἰησοῦ (Moffatt 1948:218). This explanation points to the fact that Jesus as mediator shed his blood, as fulfilment of the Law of Moses which stipulated that the blood of sacrificed animals should be sprinkled on the people as symbol of the forgiveness of sins (cf. Kistemaker 1984:395). So there is good reason to say that Hebrews 12:24 speaks of the blood of Jesus, even though the exact words are not mentioned in the verse.³

The above analysis also assists one to define the grammatical relations of the participle phrase κρείττον λαλοῦντι παρὰ τὸν Ἀβελ within the sentence. It shows that the dative λαλοῦντι does not qualify αἵματι only, but in fact it qualifies μεσίτη καὶ αἵματι as one concept. This means that the blood of Jesus which he shed in fulfilment of the sprinkled blood of the law for the forgiveness of sins, speaks of something better than the blood of Abel.

The Greek phrase, κρείττον λαλοῦντι παρὰ τὸν Ἀβελ, says only 'speaking of something better than Abel'. Yet it is translated as 'speaking of something better than the blood of Abel' in most modern Bible translations, including the Revised Standard Version (1952) and the New International Version (1984). This is the case because of the obvious use of brachylogy in this verse. For the sake of brevity and easier flow of the sentence, the word *blood* is not repeated, because its repetition is obvious from the first part of the sentence (cf. Jordaan 2013:168). So it proves that the blood of Jesus and the blood of Abel are two central concepts to Hebrews 12:24, even though these phrases do not occur in the verse literally.

Accordingly the grammatical relations between the components of verse 24 can be presented as follows:

Destination: μεσίτη Ἰησοῦ (dative, denoting destination):

3. These considerations explain the frequent references to 'the blood of Jesus in Hebrews 12:24' in this article.

2. The English translation is according to the New International Version (NIV) of 1984.

- Mediator of what?
διαθήκης νέας (genitive noun qualifying the μεσίτη Ἰησοῦ, in terms of the object of Jesus' mediation: a 'new covenant')
- What does 'mediator of a new covenant' mean? καὶ αἵματι ῥαντισμοῦ (exegetical qualification: it means that by his blood Jesus fulfilled the sprinkling of blood, thereby bringing forgiveness of sins, cf. Hebrews 9:18–22).

Comparison: κρεῖττον λαλοῦντι παρὰ τὸν Ἀβελ:

- The mediation of Jesus by his blood contains a message far better than the message that is found in the blood of Abel.

The structure of Hebrews

Suggestions regarding the overall structure of Hebrews has been presented by various scholars, some favouring a twofold division, others a threefold, others a fourfold and some even a sixfold division of the book (cf. Coetsee 2014: 41–42; Guthrie 1990:21). In the threefold division that is followed by Kümmel (1972:274) a striking feature of the sermon⁴ body of Hebrews is noted. Hebrews is organised by means of larger sections containing theological expositions about Christ, from time to time 'embraced' by means of paraenetical application (each time introduced by 'Therefore, since ...'), resulting in the following pattern:

| | |
|-------------|---|
| 1:5–4:13 | Jesus, Son of God, our great Apostle, superior to the angels and to Moses Paraenesis ('therefore, since ...'): 2:1; 3:1; 4:1; 4:11. |
| 4:14–10:18 | Jesus Christ, our High Priest and Mediator of the new covenant, superior in ministry to the priests of the old covenant. Paraenesis ('therefore, since ...'): 4:14; 6:1. |
| 10:19–12:29 | Jesus Christ, our Guide in suffering and endurance. Paraenesis ('therefore, since ...'): 10:19–22; 12:1; 12:12; 12:28. |

It seems that also the macrostructure of the sermon body is organised in this pattern of repeated exposition and application. As indicated above the first two main sections of the sermon provide an exposition of Jesus Christ as the Son of God and Apostle and then as High Priest and Mediator. This is applied in the third section: Endure your suffering with faith, your eyes fixed on Jesus.

Another structural feature identified by Guthrie (1990:717–721) is that in these exposition-and-application sections, Christ is repeatedly compared to something or somebody else. In each comparison the superiority of Christ to the old is emphasised:

4. In this article, the book of Hebrews is taken as belonging to the literary genre of a written sermon (Coetsee 2014:37–38; Koester 2001:80–81.). Various other theories about the genre of Hebrews are proposed. The traditional view that Hebrews is a letter by an unknown Christian author is upheld by Mitchell (2007:14). Buchanan (1972:xix) regards it as a homiletical *midrash* based on Psalm 110 (cf. also Bruce 1985:6; Nel 2004:109–114).

his superiority to the old manner of revelation (1:1–3); his superiority to the angels (1:4–2:18); to Moses (3:1–19); to Joshua (4:1–13); to the High Priests (4:14–7:28) and to the ministry of the old covenant⁵ (10:19–12:29). Therefore the structure of the sermon body can be presented as follows:

Exposition:

| | |
|------------|---|
| 1:5–2:18 | Christ as Son of God 1:4–2:18: superior to angels |
| 3:1–4:13 | Christ as Apostle of God 3:1–19: superior to Moses 4:1–13: superior to Joshua |
| 4:14–10:18 | Christ as our High Priest with the perfect ministry of reconciliation, 4:14–7:28: superior to the OT high priests 8:1–10:18: superior to the OT ministry (tabernacle, sacrifices), his blood being the ultimate and perfect reconciliation. |

Application (therefore, since ...):

| | |
|-------------|---|
| 10:19–12:29 | Therefore endure suffering - since in Christ we approach God in a way superior to the OT; - since in Christ our position before God is superior to the OT position. |
|-------------|---|

Thus it seems feasible that Hebrews 12:24 should be taken as a subsection of the application part of the sermon to the Hebrews. Hence also the comparison between the blood of Abel and the sprinkled blood of Christ can be taken as part of the application of the sermon. More specifically the comparison seems to contribute to the *since*-part of the application. It explains either how, being in Christ, we approach God in a way superior to the Old Testament believers; or it explains how, being in Christ, we are in a position before God which is superior to the Old Testament believers' position (cf. the exposition above).

The place of Hebrews 12:24 within the framework of Hebrews 10–12

The latter of the possibilities above is decided by looking at the structural place of Hebrews 12:24 on a microlevel, that is within its immediate context. As indicated, Hebrews 12:24 is part of the application section of the sermon, that is 10:19–12:29, which consists of an exhortation, summarised as: 'Endure suffering, the eyes fixed on Jesus' (cf. Opperman 1995:58–59). Based on an analysis of the thought structure, this exhortation section can be subdivided into the following pericopes:

5. Unless stated otherwise, references to the old covenant made in this article involve the Mosaic covenant, for the following reasons. As explained by Heyns (1978:207–215) God's covenant in the course of the Old Testament unfolds in different statures, with Adam, with Noah, with Abraham, with Israel in the time of Moses, et cetera. When Hebrews speaks of the old covenant, however, it is mostly related to the making of the tent or tabernacle by Moses (Heb 8:5; 9:1–5), and to the ministry and rituals performed by the priests. These stipulations were given by the Lord to Moses in the so-called Mosaic covenant (cf. Ex 26). So by the *old covenant* in Hebrews is meant the Mosaic covenant.

Basic exhortation:

10:19–39 Endure suffering with faith

Positive examples:

- 11:1–40 OT examples of those who endured suffering with faith
- 12:1–3 Jesus, the perfect example of endurance: author and perfecter of faith.
- 12:4–13 Examples of everyday life of suffering leading to endurance. Negative examples:
- 12:14–17 Warning: Esau as example of non-endurance – his godlessness and immorality
- 12:18–24 The position of OT Israel (Mount Sinai) compared to our position (Mount Zion)
- 12:25–29 Warning by means of a qal vachomer: If by their unfaithfulness OT Israel woke up God's wrath, how much more if we are unfaithful.

Thus it seems that Hebrews 12:24 is part of the pericope 12:18–24. The pericope is wedged between two other pericopes containing negative examples from the Old Testament – examples of non-endurance and unfaithfulness which are presented as warnings to the New Testament believers. In the Greek text both these warning pericopes are introduced by a verb of caution: ἐπισκοποῦντες μή (12:15) and βλέπετε μή (12:25). The relation of pericope 12:18–24 to the warning pericopes is indicated by the introductory particle γάρ in verse 18. Thus it seems that the reason why one should not follow the negative example of Esau and of the Old Testament Israel is explained in pericope 12:18–24.

The place of Hebrews 12:24 within the pericope

The position of Hebrews 12:24 within the thought structure of the pericope is illustrated by a structural analysis of the pericope's argument. The analysis is based on stylistic features of the pericope, including repetition and contrast of words or concepts. In the Greek text of Hebrews 12:18–24, as rewritten below, markers of the stylistic arrangement of pericope are identified (see Figure 1).

The antithesis between the two main verbs οὐ προσελήλυθατε (verse 18) and ἀλλὰ προσελήλυθατε (verse 22) divides the pericope into two sub-pericopes, viz. 12:18–21 and 12:22–24. The two sub-pericopes are also parallel in construction (marked in the above presentation respectively as A1 – A2 – A3 and B1 – B2 – B3):

- Both are introduced by the verb (οὐ) προσελήλυθατε (A1 – B1).
- In both the verb is followed by a description of the destination by means of a striking καί-polysyndeton (A2 – B2).

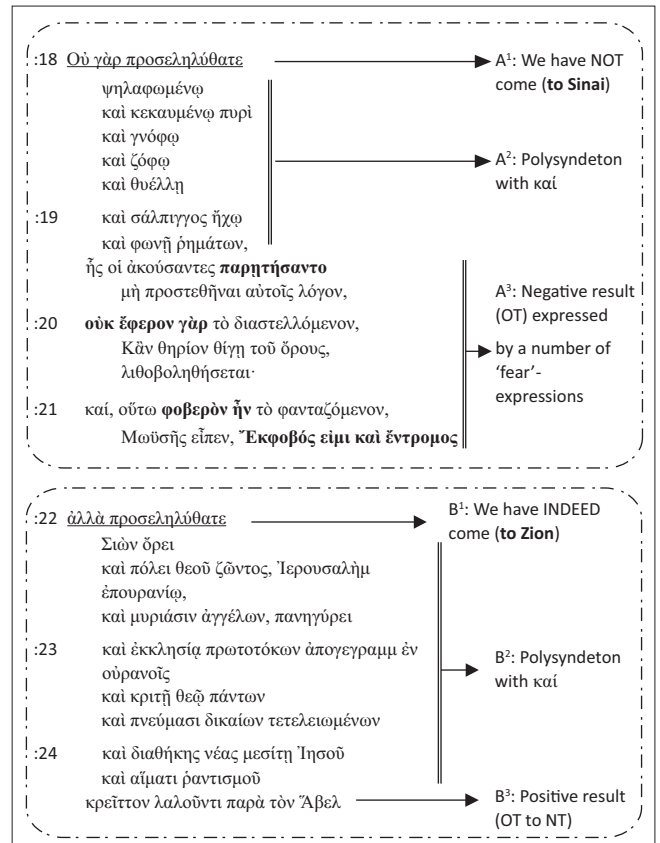


FIGURE 1: Hebrews 12:18–24.

- Both end in stating the result of arrival at their respective destinations (A3 – B3).

In the two subpericopes a comparison (οὐκ ... ἀλλά) is made between Mount Sinai (described in verses 18–21) and Mount Zion (named in verse 22). These mountains are used in metaphorical sense. Mount Sinai is used as metaphor for the revelational-historical position of the Old Testament Israel before God, as suggested by verse 19c: 'They entreated to hear no more ...' and verse 20a: 'They could not endure ...'. Mount Zion is used as metaphor for the revelational-historical position of the New Testament church before God, as suggested by the main verb in verse 22a: 'But you have come to Mount Zion ...'. So Hebrews 12:18–24 compares a situation under the Law of Moses to the current position of believers under the new covenant.

The position of Israel before God is described in verses 19c–21 as that of fear – even Moses said: 'I tremble with fear'. What was the basis or the reason for their fear? Verse 20 provides the basis: they could not face the consequences of having transgressed the will of God. God's vengeance on any creature that even so much as touched the mountain was so harsh that they trembled with fear.

The position of the New Testament church before God is described in verses 22–23 as being part of a festive gathering (verse 22c) in the presence of God (verse 23b): in the company

of miriads of angels⁶ (verse 22c) and of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven (verse 23a) and of the spirits of just men made perfect (verse 23c). Hence the New Testament church stands before God in joyful festivity, as opposed to Israel's position of fear.

What is the basis for the joy of the church? It is not stated explicitly (contrary to verse 20, where the reason for Israel's situation is explicitly stated, introduced by γάρ), but verse 24 seems to be the structural counterpart of verse 20–21, and hence can be taken as the basis for the rejoicing of the church. The church can join in joyful festivity at Mount Zion because they have arrived at 'Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks of better things than the blood of Abel' (RSV). It is indicated by Montefiore (1964:230–231) and Ellingworth (1991:130) that 'the myriads of the angels' and 'the general assembly of the firstborn' describe the company with whom the believers will be gathered, whereas 'God, the judge of all' describes the purpose of the gathering, i.e. that the believers will be counted among 'the spirits of men declared perfect'. Therefore the train of thought of Hebrews 12:22–24 can be summarised as follows:

- Where will the church be gathered?
Verse 22a: At Mount Zion, the city of God, the heavenly Jerusalem.
- In whose company will the church be gathered?
Verse 22b–23a: They will join the festive crowd of many angels and the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven.
- For which purpose will they gather?
Verse 23b: God's judgement: to be counted by Him, the Judge of all, as among those whom He had made perfect.
- For which reason will they be made perfect by God?
Verse 24: Because they arrived at Jesus as Mediator of the new covenant, and the sprinkled blood which speaks of better things than Abel.

The key words in verse 24 are mediator (μεσίτης), new covenant (διαθήκη νέα) the sprinkled blood (αἷματι ραντισμοῦ) and then of course the comparison with the blood of Abel. The key words μεσίτης, διαθήκη and αἷματι seem to be directly related to the topic of reconciliation, as is indicated in the following paragraph.

The preceding chapters of Hebrews, especially chapters 8–10, leave no doubt that *new covenant* speaks of the new covenant of reconciliation between God and his people. In chapter 8:10–12 his promise of the new covenant is described from Jeremiah 31: 'I will be their God, and they shall be my people', and again in Hebrews 10:17: 'I will be merciful and I will remember their sins and their misdeeds no more.' Thus the word διαθήκη in 12:24 is semantically

linked to the idea of reconciliation between God and his people.

Likewise the sprinkled blood (αἷματι ραντισμοῦ) seems to refer back to Hebrews 10:22 ('our hearts sprinkled clean') and especially to 9:13–14:

If the sprinkling of defiled persons with the blood of goats and bulls ... purifies the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, purify your conscience ... ?

The latter is an obvious reference to Leviticus 16:12–19, where the blood of goats and bulls was sprinkled over the atonement seat designating the purification of Israel towards reconciliation with God. Also Exodus 14:6–8 comes to mind, where the blood of the sacrifice was sprinkled first on the altar and then on the people, with the words: 'This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you.'

The title *Mediator* (μεσίτης) that is given to Christ in Hebrews 12:24 equally takes the reader back to chapters 8–10. In Hebrews 8:6 Christ is called 'Mediator of a better covenant' and in 9:15 'Mediator of a new covenant' (διαθήκης καινῆς). De Vuyst (1964:173–174) points out that in chapters 8–10 the contrast is not between the old and the new covenant, but between the old and the new ministry of the covenant. Through his priestly ministry (Heb 8:1–5), Christ is Mediator of the new covenant (διαθήκη καινή, 8:6; 9:15) in which his blood – superior by far to the blood of animals (9:11–26) – is shed as the final sacrifice (10:1–14) towards complete reconciliation with God (9:28; 10:16–18).

Thus it seems that through the key words διαθήκη, μεσίτης and αἷματι, Hebrews 12:24 is indeed an application of the preceding exposition-section (as indicated in the concise outline of the book of Hebrews above), especially of the exposition of Christ's new (superior) ministry of the covenant of reconciliation.

Since it thus turns out that these keywords are related to the topic of reconciliation, the question arises whether also the remaining elements of Hebrews 12:24 – that is the fact that the new covenant is referred to as a διαθήκη νέα, and the comparison to the blood of Abel – are related to the topic of reconciliation. Since διαθήκη νέα is a homologoumenon in the New Testament, no intertextual comparison is possible. The blood of Abel, however, does have an earlier link in the book of Hebrews, i.e. 11:4: 'By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain ...; he died, but through his faith he is still speaking.' Hebrews 11, however, does not deal with the topic of reconciliation but with the topic of faith (see exposition above). Nevertheless, it calls to mind the history of Abel and Cain, which has to be understood within its context in the Old Testament in Genesis 4.⁷

⁶The Greek (μυριάσιν ἁγγέλων πανηγύρει καὶ ἐκκλησίᾳ πρωτοτόκων) allows πανηγύρει to be taken either with the preceding μυριάσιν ἁγγέλων [a gathering of myriads of angels', e.g. RSV and NIV] or with the following καὶ ἐκκλησίᾳ πρωτοτόκων [to the assembly and congregation of the firstborn', e.g. NET]. Both readings make perfectly good sense in the context without any major effect on the meaning.

⁷Moffatt (1948:218) suggests that the background of the blood of Abel that speaks should be sought in Enoch 22:6, where the seer has a vision of Abel's spirit appealing to God for the extinction of Cain and his descendants. However, even if the author of Hebrews was familiar with this section of Enoch, it seems plausible that also the vision in Enoch had the history of Genesis 4 as *Vorlage*.

The blood of Abel and its revelational-historical meaning

Genesis 4 within the broad stucture of Genesis

On the basis of a historical analysis, most scholars (e.g. Leupold 1980:679) divide the book of Genesis into two main sections, namely Genesis 1–11, which is about the prehistory, mainly dealing with the creation, the fall and the flood, and secondly, Genesis 12–50, which deals with the history of Abraham and his posterity. The first main section is subdivided by scholars in various ways. According to the division suggested by Harrison (1977:548), Genesis 2:5–5:2 forms a separate unit within the first main section, dealing with the origins of humankind. Many scholars regard this subunit as dealing with the history of Adam and his sons (cf. Leupold 1980:679) and hence take 5:3–32 as a transitional pericope which connects the history of Adam to the history of Noah. Consequently, taking Genesis 2:5–5:32 as a subunit, the broad thought structure of the passage can be portrayed as illustrated in Figure 2.

Thus it seems that the history of Cain and Abel (Gn 4:1–16) is directly linked to the history of the fall into sin, as a description of the consequences that the fall had for humankind. The decay setting in for humankind is clearly illustrated by the murder of Abel by his brother Cain (Helberg 1980:29).

Thought structure of Genesis 4:1–16

The thought structure of Genesis 4:1–16 can be viewed in various ways. Wenham (1987:99) describes it in terms of a series of narratives and dialogues. The dialogue in the pericope contains a contrast between grace and punishment, as illustrated in Figure 3.

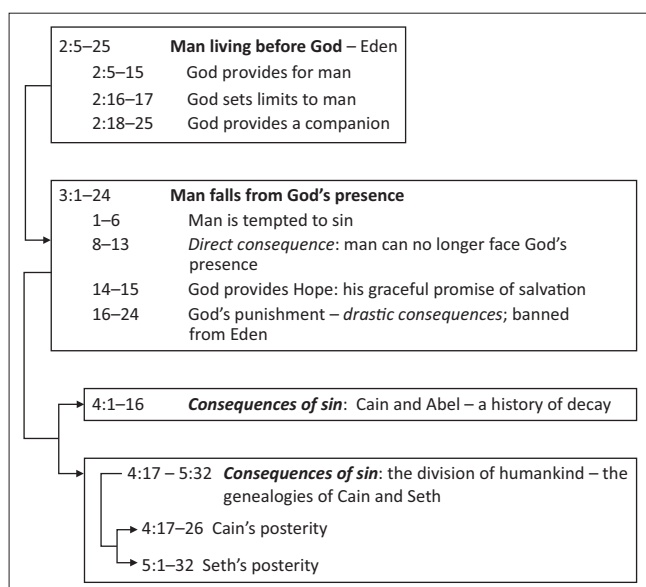


FIGURE 2: Thought structure of Genesis 2:5–5:32.

From the exposition the following features of the structure of Genesis 4:1–16 are evident:

- The main part of the pericope consists of a dialogue between the Lord and Cain (cf. underlined sections: 'The Lord said to Cain' x 3; 'Cain said to the Lord' x 2).
- On Cain's punishment, as announced by the Lord in 4:10–12, Cain's answer is structured in an almost parallel manner (cf. cursive phrases, with the words *ground* and *earth*):

Verse 11: 'now you are cursed from the ground'

14a: 'You have driven me this day away from the ground'.

Verse 12: 'you shall be a fugitive and wanderer on the earth'.

14c: 'I shall be a fugitive and wanderer on the earth.'

But Cain adds two matters which seemed not be part of the Lord's verdict and punishment:

Verse 14b: 'From your face I shall be hidden.'

Verse 14d: 'whoever finds me will slay me'.

The first of these involves Cain's relation to God; the latter his relation to people. God's answer to Cain (verse 15) only pertains to his relation to other people. Thus the Lord's grace and punishment (cf. verse 7) is given to Cain:

- in his divine grace the Lord sees to it that Cain can survive in this world (cf. cola connected by double lines);
- Cain's relation to God, however, is not corrected, since being 'hidden from God's face' (v. 14b) is the main punishment (the curse, cf. v. 14a) which Cain has brought upon himself through his sin (cf. cola connected by single lines).

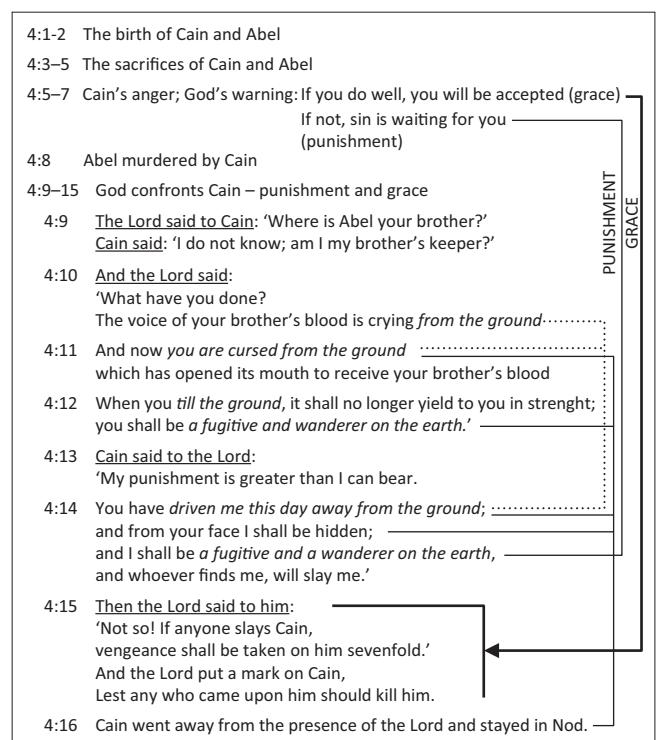


FIGURE 3: Genesis 4:1–16.

- The conclusive sentence in the passage (v. 16) confirms that the actual punishment of Cain was that he was sent away from the Lord's presence (cf. 'curse' in v. 11, and 'hidden from your face' in v. 14).

Revelational-historical meaning of the speaking blood of Abel

Mathews (1995:275) points out that there is a striking 'echo' of Genesis 3:1–24 (the history of the Fall) in the history of Cain:

- | | |
|----------|---|
| 3:9 | Adam and Eve having sinned, God asked them: 'Where are you?' |
| 4:9 | Cain having killed Abel, God asked him: 'Where is Abel your brother?' |
| 3:13 | Eve's sin having been revealed, God asked her: 'What have you done?' |
| 4:10 | Cain's sin having been revealed, God asked him: 'What have you done?' |
| 3:23, 24 | Eventually man was sent away from God's presence. |
| 4:14, 16 | Eventually Cain was sent away from God's presence. |

These parallels are an indication that the history of Cain is in a certain sense an extension of the history of the fall of Adam and Eve and should be read against the background of their fall. It is a history in which man has to face the consequences of his evil deeds. It is a history of crime and punishment. It is a history in which the consequences of the fall into sin extend also to the posterity. As a result of Cain's sin his descendants (cf. Gn 4:17–26) are associated with the line of unbelievers, in contrast to the descendants of Seth who generally are associated with the line of believers. This is the interpretation of Genesis 4, supported by both traditional Jewish and Christian interpreters (Byron 2011:8–17; 140–147; cf. also McEntire 1999–29 ff.), as a portrayal of the revelational-historical place taken by Cain within the Old Testament history of revelation.

A peculiarity pointed out by Mathews (1995:275) is that nowhere in Genesis are there any words spoken by Abel. Yet through his faith Abel continues to speak even after his death (Heb 11:4). Aalders (1933:157) indicates that, as reported in Genesis 4:10, it was in fact Abel's blood that kept on speaking after his death. By way of a metaphor God says to Cain: 'The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground.' What does Abel's blood speak about? Most scholars agree that his blood is crying for vengeance – that justice be done and Cain be rightfully punished for his crime (Aalders 1933:157; Hamilton 1991:48; Mathews 1995:275). The sin of Cain in fact called for the death penalty, in accordance with the stipulations in the work covenant that God made with man after the creation, namely that

disobedience will be punished by death (cf. Heyns 1978:207).⁸ The revelation-historical basis of this vengeance is that justice is called for by the righteousness of God. Therefore the message sent by Abel's blood through the ages is exactly what has been described above as Cain's revelational-historical place in the Old Testament: a message of crime and punishment, the message that man has to pay in full for his sins.⁹

The message coming from the blood of Abel again surfaces in Hebrews 12:24. About what does Abel's blood speak? From the above considerations we can conclude that 'Abel's blood' is in fact used as metonymy summarising the entire revelational-historical meaning of Cain and his history. Hence the 'blood of Abel' in Hebrews 12:24 can be taken as a reference to the fact that after the fall into sin, man was in the dire position where he had to pay for his sins. As Cain's crime called for vengeance, and was met by the punishment of being taken away from the graceful presence of God, likewise after the fall all humankind faced God's punishment because of their depravity and sins. The blood of the murdered Abel tells the story of sinful man in himself without hope of reconciliation with God, without a chance of ever returning to the graceful presence of God.

The sprinkled blood of Jesus and the speaking blood of Abel

This metaphoric way of speaking seems to have been taken up again in Hebrews 12:24 and transferred to the sprinkled blood of Jesus. The reason for the joyful festivities at Mount Zion is not the blood of Abel speaking, but now it is the sprinkled blood of Jesus which 'speaks of better things than the blood of Abel'.

What does the sprinkled blood speak about? In the section above the message of the sprinkled blood has been formulated as a message of reconciliation (cf. Ex 24:6–8; Lv 16:12–19). The blood of Jesus Christ brought about the perfect and complete reconciliation with God, as was preshadowed by the blood of animal sacrifices sprinkled over the atonement seat, the altar and the people in accordance with the requirements of the Law of Moses.

Now this message, says Hebrews 12:24, is better than the message spoken by the blood of Abel. And as we have seen above, the blood of Abel speaks a message of vengeance without any reconciliation. Thus these two messages are opposed in Hebrews 12:24. On the one hand, the message of Abel's blood is a message of no reconciliation, and on the other hand is the message of Christ's blood a message of graceful reconciliation.

8.Cf. Hosea 6:7.

9.Unless, of course, God provides a way of salvation from this deplorable situation and man responds in faith to God's provision of salvation.

Thus it seems that Hebrews 12:24 indeed is adding something new to the argument of Hebrews 8–12. It adds an aspect that up to this point has not been elucidated, that is the reality of no reconciliation without Christ.

Up to this point of the book the argument has been (both in exposition and application) that the sacrifice of Christ was superior to the Old Testament sacrifices. By his blood Christ renewed and completed the promised reconciliation of God's covenant which formerly had been ministered by the Levite priests in the blood of the Old Testament sacrifices. When Jesus came, he did not abolish the old covenant, but gave new meaning to it, and thus became the minister of a renewed (καινή) covenant.

However, in Hebrews 12:24 the blood of Christ is related to a totally different matter. It takes us back, but not to Israel under the Law of Moses, but to the situation of humankind after the fall, a situation where the blood of the murdered Abel cried out for vengeance. Without the grace of God who brought Christ as our reconciliation into the world, there is no possibility of being reconciled with God (cf. Witherington 2009:435).

Conclusion

Returning to the original question: Does διαθήκη νέα in Hebrews 12:24 refer to a renewed covenant (i.e. a mere synonym for διαθήκη καινή), or does it refer to a totally new covenant, as suggested by the adjective νέα? From the considerations above the following answer is formulated by way of conclusion: The phrase διαθήκη νέα in Hebrews 12:24 indeed refers to a totally new covenant, which had never existed before. After the fall, humankind lives in sin and corruption – a state of affairs where the blood of Abel calls for vengeance and justice. However, by his grace God brought his people back into an entirely new relation with himself. This relation is based on the promise of forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with God (cf. Gn 3:15). Throughout the Old Testament this reconciliation was portrayed by means of the blood of sacrificed animals, sprinkled on the altar and the people. But eventually Jesus, by his sacrificial blood, became the final and perfect Mediator of God's new covenant. In this manner, in contrast to the blood of the murdered Abel which cried out for vengeance, the blood of Jesus speaks of complete forgiveness of sins and of reconciliation with God. Since the cross of Christ, believers can by faith boldly enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus which speaks of better things than Abel, for our reconciliation is based on something totally new – a διαθήκη νέα (cf. Heb 10:19; 12:24).

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