Hebrews 9:15-28: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 19 September 2020

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[0:00] Hebrews chapter 9 verses 15 to 28. For when every commandment of the law had been declared by Moses to all the people, he took the blood of calves and goats, with water and scarlet wool and hyssop, and sprinkled both the book itself and all the people, saying, This is the blood of the covenant that God commanded for you.

And in the same way he sprinkled with the blood both the tent and all the vessels used in worship. Indeed, under the law, almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.
Thus it was necessary for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these rites, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.
Nor was it to offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the holy places every year with blood not his own. For then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world.
But as it is, he has appeared once for all, at the end of the ages, to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.
[1:50] The author of Hebrews concludes chapter 9 by comparing and contrasting the deaths by which the old and the new covenants were inaugurated. Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, a new order of affairs between God and humanity.

His death redeems those who have been called from their transgressions under the first covenant, and the judgment that had been upon them. Christ isn't just the broker of some new agreement, he is a redeemer.
Verses 16 to 17 are extremely challenging. The key question is whether the word translated as will in the ESV, diatheke, should be translated as will or testament, or whether it should be understood as covenant.
In verses 15 and 18 the word clearly refers to covenant. Of course it is entirely possible that the author of Hebrews is engaging in some wordplay in these verses. Both a covenant and a will involve death on some level.
There are many leading commentators that lean in both directions. However, Scott Hahn's treatment of the passage in a 2005 paper has tipped many commentators in favour of the covenant reading.
[2:53] There are a number of other difficulties or questions raised by these verses. For instance, the word translated as be established in the ESV, or be proven in some other translations in verse 16, in order to make sense of the reading as testament or will, is not the most naturally read in this manner.

The translation be born might be a better one. Verse 16 then could be rendered, For where there is a covenant, in the context clearly a broken covenant, the death of the covenant maker must be born.
This develops the point of verse 15. The transgressions of the people under the first covenant had to be dealt with in order for the covenant to be established. Verse 17, which literally refers to deaths, not just a singular death, a detail that causes some problems for reading the text as a reference to testaments or wills, then relates to the way that the covenant is not in force until it is enforced.

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The deaths of covenant breakers, or deaths bearing their sins, needed to occur before the covenant could be enforced. As long as the covenant breakers remained alive, the covenant was not truly in force.
The author of Hebrews describes the inauguration of the old covenant in the covenant ceremony of Exodus chapter 24 verses 4 to 8. And Moses wrote down all the words of the Lord. He rose early in the morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and twelve pillars according to the twelve tribes of Israel.
[4:15] And he sent young men of the people of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen to the Lord. And Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and half of the blood he threw against the altar.

Then he took the book of the covenant and read it in the hearing of the people. And they said, All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient. And Moses took the blood and threw it on the people and said, Behold the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you, in accordance with all these words.
If blood was needed to deal with the breach of the covenant, it was also needed for its inauguration. In the covenant ceremony, the blood of the burnt offerings and peace offerings were placed upon the altar and the people.
Various parts of the tabernacle were also purified with blood. Without shedding of blood, forgiveness of sins is not possible. Some party needs to die to release people from the judgment lying upon their sins, purifying them.
In verses 23 and 24, the author of Hebrews returns to the theme of the sanctuary. Christ is a minister of the heavenly, not the earthly sanctuary. He is a minister in the true and the archetypal sanctuary, not the humanly constructed earthly replica that corresponds to it.
[5:25] The rites of the earthly sanctuary, the shedding and placing of animal blood and the like, purify the copies of the heavenly realities. They symbolise the greater sacrifices that are necessary in the heavenly realm.

The need for better sacrifices to deal with the realities of the heavenly sanctuary underlines the importance of the greater sacrifice offered by Christ, our glorious high priest. There is an analogy between the operations of the heavenly sanctuary and the earthly sanctuary.
However, the heavenly sanctuary is the greater of the two, and the earthly sanctuary and its sacrificial rites therefore point to the need for better sacrifices than it is able to perform itself.
The earthly sanctuary needed cleansing on account of the sinfulness of the people, enabling access on their behalf to God's presence. The work of Christ objectively changes the situation of humanity relative to the greater sanctuary of heaven itself, removing the barrier of our sins that once prevented our access.
Christ deals with the problem of our sins, not simply in the replica of the heavenly, a limited representation of much higher and more mysterious things. Rather, he enters the very reality that they only symbolised, entering not merely into an earthly most holy place or inner sanctuary, but into heaven itself.
[6:40] Nor was this a process constantly to be repeated year on year, without ever being completed, like the high priest's annual entrance into the most holy place on the day of atonement, with sacrificial blood of some animal.

If this were the case, Christ's work would be an endlessly recurring cycle of entering and re-entering from the foundation of the world until its end. No, the sacrifice of Christ by which he enters is decisive and complete, is a once-for-all event that need not be repeated, an entrance achieved by his own blood.
We should probably recognise that the point of the blood of Christ here is not the mere physical cleansing provided by the blood of animals, for which animals of a certain kind were largely interchangeable.
Rather, the blood of Christ that saves us is not so much a physical bodily fluid as such. It's the offering of his uniquely faithful life, symbolised by the pouring out of blood.
He has been poured out to death for us, an offering applied to us and into which we are included.
Christ's sacrifice is not a constant cyclical movement. It's a definitive passage from one age to another.
[7:45] Christ deals with sin decisively at the end of the ages. Sin in its singular form. Sin as a dominant and determinative ruling force in the world. There is still sinfulness in the world, but the

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ruling power of sin has been nullified, and we need no longer live in its thrall.

In Christ, it no longer excludes us from God's presence. In Christ, the condemnation no longer lies upon us in the same way. Christ dealing with sin is a sort of a last day's appearance.
It is the great apocalyptic event that the recurring Day of Atonement always awaited and anticipated. As human beings, we die once, and judgment occurs after death.
Christ's work corresponds with our need. He bears the death due to us in his first coming, so that in his second coming, his coming in judgment, he might deliver us into enjoyment of God's promise, rather than having to deal with our sins once more.
A question to consider. How does Hebrews' contrast between the copies of the heavenly things and the heavenly things themselves help us better to understand how the earthly tabernacle and temple worked?
[8:53] [redacted]

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