

3-1-1954

## The Covenant of Blood

Paul M. Bretscher

*Concordia Seminary, St. Louis*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm>



Part of the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Bretscher, Paul M. (1954) "The Covenant of Blood," *Concordia Theological Monthly*. Vol. 25, Article 13.  
Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol25/iss1/13>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Print Publications at Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Concordia Theological Monthly by an authorized editor of Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. For more information, please contact [seitzw@csl.edu](mailto:seitzw@csl.edu).

# The Covenant of Blood

BY PAUL G. BRETSCHER

(Concluded)

## V

### THE BLOOD OF THE PASSOVER

The ceremonial and spiritual climax of the Old Testament religion was the Feast of the Passover; in the New Testament it is the Lord's Supper. In these two feasts, especially as the one merges into the other, the covenant of blood is revealed in its fullest clarity and beauty. The words that Jesus spoke that Passover night in the Upper Room, "This is My blood of the new Testament," are the simple key which confirms and summarizes the unity of the testaments in the covenant of blood. If this cup is the blood of Jesus Christ in the *new* testament, then there is or has been also a blood of the *old* testament. Now, however, the *new* fulfills the *old* and abolishes it. With the flow of the New Testament blood of Christ, the Old Testament flow of the blood of animals must cease forever.

It was the Old Testament Passover which Jesus was celebrating for the last time with His disciples in the Upper Room at Jerusalem. The feast had been instituted by God Himself, to be kept throughout the ages of Israel forever, a memorial of the mighty and gracious deliverance of God's people from the bondage of Egypt. If it became Jesus, though He was Himself without sin, to fulfill all righteousness for the sake of sinners, then this feast also He must keep, as He does with joy. Peter and John made all the arrangements. They secured the Upper Room as a place where Jesus in company with His disciples might keep the feast. They secured the lamb without blemish and had it sacrificed at the Temple. They struck the blood with hyssop on the frame and lintel of the door. The lamb was roasted with fire according to God's command, roasted whole, and brought for the meal— together with the unleavened bread, the spiced sauce into which to dip the meat, and the wine, which was a basic part of every meal. During the eating of this Passover meal, whose significance both He and His disciples understand, Jesus institutes that New Testa-

ment feast which is to remain the precious heritage of the Church "till He come." The disciples have been eating the body of the lamb they had sacrificed. Yet Jesus now offers them the bread, saying, "Take, eat, this is MY body, which is given for you." The disciples are very conscious of the central significance of the blood of the lamb, which is painted on the doorframe of the house. Yet Jesus now takes the cup of wine, offers it to them, and says: "Drink ye all of it. This is MY blood of the New Testament, which is shed for many, for the remission of sins. This do in remembrance of ME."

A number of interesting parallels can be drawn between the Old Testament feast and that of the New.

1. Each is instituted at the command of God. See Ex. 12:1 ff.: "The Lord spake unto Moses and Aaron . . . saying. . . . Ye shall keep it . . . throughout your generations." Also 1 Cor. 11:23 ff.: "The Lord Jesus . . . said. . . . This do. . . ."

2. Each feast involves the sacrifice of a lamb. In the Old Testament, see Ex. 12:27: "It is the sacrifice of the Lord's passover" (also Ex. 34:24; 23:18; Num. 9:7). In the New Testament note especially 1 Cor. 5:7: "For even Christ, our Passover [i. e., Passover Lamb], is sacrificed for us." Also the words "given" and "shed" in the institution of the Lord's Supper indicate a sacrifice.

3. In each feast the sacrifice consists in a lamb without blemish. Thus Ex. 12:5: "Your lamb shall be without blemish." In the New Testament see 1 Peter 1:19: "Ye are . . . redeemed . . . with the precious blood of Christ as of a Lamb without blemish and without spot." Also Heb. 4:15: ". . . yet without sin." The Old Testament lamb, being physically perfect, has no reason to die. Christ, our Lamb, is without sin and therefore not subject to death, for death is the wages of sin.

4. In each feast no bone of the sacrifice is broken. Thus Ex. 12:46: ". . . neither shall ye break a bone thereof." In the New Testament see John 19:33-36:

But when they came to Jesus and saw that He was dead already, they brake not His legs . . . that the Scripture should be fulfilled, A bone of Him shall not be broken.

Here John sees in Jesus again "the Lamb of God," the Fulfillment of the sacrifice of the Old Testament Passover lamb.

5. In both feasts, it is by eating the flesh of the sacrifice that the individual participates in the sacrifice and receives personally its benefits. Thus Ex. 12:47: "All the congregation of Israel shall keep it." See also 1 Cor. 10:18: "Behold Israel after the flesh, are not they which eat of the sacrifices partakers of the altar?" In the New Testament feast see the words of Jesus: "Take eat, this is My body, which is given for you."

6. In each feast the blood that is shed in death is highly central and significant. In the Old Testament the blood of the lamb is to be struck with hyssop against the doorposts and lintel of the house in which the feast is eaten (Ex. 12:7, 22). Old Testament Law, as we have seen, prohibits the eating of blood (Gen. 9:4; Lev. 17:10-14). In the New Testament, however, the blood becomes a part of the feast: "Take, drink ye all of it; this is My blood of the New Testament." The very suggestion that the blood of this *new* sacrifice is to be drunk indicates again that the covenant of blood has reached its fulfillment. The reverence for all blood, so soundly inculcated in the Old Testament, is now superseded forever by the higher reverence for the one blood of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The command of the church council at Jerusalem to the Gentile churches to abstain from things strangled and from blood was given for the sake of the conscience of the Jews, as is explained in Acts 15:20, 21:

... that they abstain from . . . things strangled, and from blood. For Moses of old time hath in every city them that preach him, being read in the synagogs every Sabbath day.

7. To each feast God attaches His promise. Thus Ex. 12:13: . . . when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and the plague shall not be upon you to destroy you when I smite the land of Egypt. (See also v. 23.)

To the Passover command God therefore attaches the promise to spare His people the plague of the death of the first-born, which He will visit upon the Egyptians. There are certain implications which we must not fail to see. It is apparent that in the judgment of God the people of Israel deserve death and destruction fully as much as did the Egyptians. Otherwise why is a sacrifice necessary

to spare them? The very pouring out of the life of the lamb into death, as always in the scheme of sacrifices, implies an atonement, the death of an animal for the death of man. Thus the Passover testifies to the powerful truth that man is a sinner and that the wages of sin is death. But the Passover is, above all, Gospel. The wrath of God falls, not on the man who deserves to die, but on the spotless lamb, and man is spared the destruction of God. Indirectly, therefore, the promise of forgiveness of sin and of God's grace inheres in the Passover sacrifice. In the Lord's Supper of the New Testament, forgiveness of sin is directly promised: "This is My blood, which is shed for you for the remission of sins."

8. Both the Passover and the Lord's Supper are given to man as a memorial feast. The people of Israel are to celebrate the Passover annually to remind themselves of God's wondrous deliverance of their fathers from the bondage of Egypt—therefore of the power, and mercy, and faithfulness of the Lord. Thus Ex. 12:14, 24-27:

And this day shall be unto you for a memorial; and ye shall keep it a feast to the Lord throughout your generations; ye shall keep it a feast by an ordinance forever. . . .

It shall come to pass when your children shall say unto you, What mean ye by this service?

That ye shall say, It is the sacrifice of the Lord's Passover, who passed over the houses of the Children of Israel in Egypt when He smote the Egyptians and delivered our houses.

The fact that the feast is to be kept year by year indicates again that the significance of the sacrifice of the lamb runs far deeper than just the one passing event of deliverance from Egypt. This is the blood of God's covenant of grace with His people for all their generations—by which blood they may always be assured of God's continued mercy and forgiveness as well as of His faithfulness, by which He will never desert them, even when they turn against Him, but will surely bring to pass the fulfillment of His covenant of redemption. It is interesting to observe how often in the Old Testament reference is made to the mighty manifestation of God's grace to His people in the Exodus. Throughout the history of Israel this is the great historical event on which faith in Jehovah

stands secure and to which in every tribulation memory returns for comfort and assurance of continued pardon and deliverance.

The New Testament Passover is also a memorial feast—no longer of deliverance from Egypt, however, but of Jesus Christ, who by His death is "the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world." Thus 1 Cor. 11:25, 26:

This cup is the new testament in My blood; this do ye, as oft as ye drink it, in *remembrance of Me*.

For as often as ye eat this bread and drink this cup, ye do *shew the Lord's death* till He come.

We, then, today, as we eat the body of Christ in the Lord's Supper and drink His blood, are to do so in remembrance of His death. The very fact that we eat His body is our guarantee that He really did die, just as the eating of the roasted Old Testament lamb was clear and obvious proof that the lamb had really shed its blood in death. Furthermore, our eating and drinking in this feast tells us that Christ died as a sacrifice—was not simply slaughtered as animals are slaughtered for meat, but died willingly and for a purpose, namely, for the remission of our sins, as the Substitute for our death. Finally, each communicant in that sacrifice, each person who eats and drinks thereof, has the positive assurance from God: "It is for you that He died, for your salvation and for your victory over death. For by such eating and drinking you become a participant in His sacrifice." He actually died; He died as a sacrifice; He died for me! All this is my personal assurance from God when I eat and drink in remembrance of Christ, showing the Lord's death till He come.

9. The ninth parallel between the Old and the New Testament Passover concerns the necessity of faith. Though the word "faith" is not mentioned in the account of the institution of the Passover, it is clearly implied. See, for instance, Ex. 12:27, 28:

And the people bowed the head and worshiped. And the Children of Israel went away and did as the Lord had commanded Moses and Aaron, so did they.

Compare also Ex. 4:31: And the people believed. . . .

The very obedience tells us that they believed. How easy it might have been to ridicule this strange command of God, to despise the blood and call it silly superstition to believe that blood on the door

would keep death out of the house! How wise might have been the wisdom of men who regarded it as impossible that in one single night, without warning, the first-born of all Egyptians, both men and cattle, and only the first-born, should be singled out for death! Yet Israel yielded to no such doubts. They took seriously both the threats of God and His promises. In humility they obeyed—and by the obedience of faith they were spared. The importance of faith in this event is recognized by the writer to the Hebrews, who comments (11:28):

Through faith he [Moses] kept the Passover and the sprinkling of blood, lest He that destroyed the first-born should touch them.

Contrast the reaction of many in the days of Hezekiah. When the king reinstated the Passover, neglected for decades, they "laughed the messengers to scorn and mocked them" (2 Chron. 30:10) because they thought the whole thing silly and unnecessary—because they did not believe.

So also in the New Testament a true spirit of humility, repentance, and faith is necessary to keep properly the Lord's Supper. Thus Paul warns: "Let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread and drink of that cup" (1 Cor. 11:28). He who eats and drinks lightly, carelessly, as if he were performing a religious work, as if he were giving something to God instead of receiving from God the most precious gifts and promises—that person brings upon himself a curse. He is "guilty of the body and blood of the Lord" and "eats and drinks damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body" (1 Cor. 11:27, 29), which body is discernible only to faith. He treads under foot the Son of God, counts the blood of the covenant wherewith he was sanctified an unholy thing, and despises the Spirit of grace (Heb. 10:29). Also in the Old Testament the wrath of God is turned against all routine, proud, faith-less observance of His ceremonial feasts. Thus Is. 1:14:

Your appointed feasts (including the Passover) My soul hateth.  
They are a trouble to Me. I am weary to bear them. . . .

10. The tenth comparison between the Passover of the Old Testament and the Lord's Supper of the New is rather a contrast, a contrast of values. The account of the institution of the Passover makes it clear that the blood of the lamb on the doorposts has no actual, intrinsic value. It is not a superstitious blood, which, because

it is blood, has some magic power to drive away the spirits of destruction. Rather the blood is called a "token." "The blood shall be to you for a token upon the houses where ye are" (Ex. 12:13). Thus the blood of the lamb has power to spare the lives of men, not because it is blood, but only because of God's command and promise. It has the power because God says it has such power. It is the covenant blood, the token of God's promise of grace. Because it is only a token, no one lamb is sufficient for this sacrifice. So many lambs must be slain that all Israel may eat and that the blood may be on every door. 2,000 bullocks and 17,000 sheep were involved in the sacrifices of Hezekiah's Passover (2 Chron. 30:24). Year after year the slaughter must continue, for the blood is a token of a price to come; it is not itself the redemptory price for freedom from the sin and death of man. (See Heb. 10:1, 2.)

How infinitely more precious, then, is the blood of the New Testament Passover! This is the blood of the Son of God, the blood of the New Testament, "which is shed for many for the remission of sins" (Matt. 26:28); not for a few, and not requiring to be shed again and again, but the one Sacrifice for all the sin of all the world. This is the blood of the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world. The blood of the Old Testament lamb is a token of God's covenant. The blood of the Lamb of God is the covenant, so that Jesus can rightly say, not "This betokens the new testament in My blood," but "This *is* the new testament." This cup is My blood, and this blood is the new testament, no longer a sign of grace and forgiveness, but the forgiveness, salvation, and victory itself!

11. The final comparison between the Passover and the Lord's Supper concerns their exclusiveness. Exodus 12 makes it clear that the Passover is not for everybody. See vv. 43-45:

. . . there shall no stranger eat thereof. But every man's servant that is bought for money, when thou hast circumcised him, then shall he eat thereof. A foreigner and an hired servant shall not eat thereof. . . . No uncircumcised person shall eat thereof.

The Passover feast is given exclusively to God's covenant people. Also non-Israelites, in fact, anyone who desires to enter that covenant, must do so through the rite of circumcision.



So also the Lord's Supper belongs to God's people only, to the Christian Church, to the one body in Christ. See 1 Cor. 10:17:

We, being many, are one bread and one body; for we are all partakers of that one bread.

Those who do partake of this meal to the glory of the one true God and Savior Jesus Christ dare not compromise the exclusiveness of this faith by participating in any other religious feast or fellowship. Thus 1 Cor. 10:20, 21:

I would not that ye should have fellowship with devils. Ye cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of devils. Ye cannot be partakers of the Lord's table, and of the table of devils.

Just as circumcision was a fundamental prerequisite for participation in the Feast of the Passover, so is Baptism a necessity for those who would receive Holy Communion. Though this is not directly stated, yet it is implied in the passages above, for they are linked with the missionary command of Matthew 28: "Go and teach [make disciples of] all nations, [by] baptizing them. . . ." The Lord's Supper is for Christians only; but the divinely ordained means of becoming a Christian is Christian Baptism.

These are the major parallels between the Passover and the Lord's Supper. Here again we see strikingly demonstrated how the New Testament grows out of the Old, sheds light on the Old, and is revealed already in the Old. For the religion of the Bible, Old Testament and New, is essentially one religion. And at the very heart of that one religion lies the concept of blood.

One thought we must elaborate further in this discussion of the covenant of blood as revealed in the Passover and the Lord's Supper. It is the significance of eating the flesh of the sacrifices. We have referred to this significance in point 5 above, but a few additional comments are pertinent here. The Passover was not the only sacrifice in the Old Testament blood religion which was eaten. Certain portions of certain sin and trespass offerings brought by the people were assigned for eating by the priests in the sanctuary (cf. Lev. 6:26, 29, 30; 7:6-9). The detailed regulations that governed such eating are not important for our present purpose. It is clear, however, that the eating of the sacrifices by the priests was more than just a means of supplying their physical needs. It had real religious significance. On one occasion, when Aaron and his

sons burned the goat of a sin offering instead of eating it, Moses sternly reproved them saying (Lev. 10:16-20):

*Wherefore have ye not eaten the sin offering in the holy place, seeing it is most holy, and God hath given it to you to bear the iniquity of the congregation, to make atonement for them before the Lord? (See also Ex. 29:33.)*

Thus the eating of the offering by the priests is part of the ritual by which atonement is made for the people.

The one offering, besides the Passover, which the common people themselves ate, was the peace offering. This was always a sacrifice of voluntary thanksgiving and praise to God for His blessings (Lev. 7:12, 16; 19:5). The person who brought the peace offering ordinarily killed the animal himself; the priest, however, burned the fat on the altar and received the shoulder and breast as his portion (Lev. 7:29-34). Then the offerer himself would eat the flesh, boiled (2 Chron. 35:13; Zech. 14:21), not roasted, as was the Passover lamb. Two clear laws governed such eating: (1) The meat must be eaten on the day it was offered (or, in the case of a vow, on the day following). Any meat left over beyond the limited time must be burned (Lev. 7:15-17). (2) No one morally or ceremonially unclean was permitted to eat the peace offering (Lev. 7:20, 21). That this eating also had religious significance is indicated indirectly in Lev. 7:18:

*If any of the flesh be eaten at all on the third day, it shall not be accepted, neither shall it be imputed unto him that offereth it. It shall be an abomination, and the soul that eateth of it shall bear his iniquity. (See also Deut. 15:20.)*

From this description we rightly infer that the peace offering when properly offered and eaten in faith is accepted by God, and forgiveness is imputed to him who offered it and eats of it.

The fullest significance of the eating is summarized in the words of St. Paul, in 1 Cor. 10:18:

*Behold Israel after the flesh. Are not they which eat of the sacrifices partakers [communicants] of the altar?*

Those who eat of the sacrifices are partakers of the altar. To eat the meat of the sacrificed lamb is to have the personal assurance that the lamb died vicariously for him that eats of it. Thus the Passover meal was God's personal and individual message of grace

to everyone who ate thereof. And thus in the New Testament, the eating of the Sacrifice gives to him who eats the highest individual assurance: "The Sacrifice was offered for me, for my sin — not for the world in general only, but for me in particular. By my eating the forgiveness merited by Christ becomes mine."

This has important implications for the doctrine of the Real Presence. A Lord's Supper in which the body and blood of the Sacrifice are not truly eaten and drunk has no sacramental significance whatever. It just isn't the Lord's Supper. It loses every bit of personal comfort and assurance that Christ wants to give to the sinner in this meal. It is as though a Jew would become offended at the bloodiness of the sacrifice of the Passover lamb and say: "I will eat bread, and let the bread represent the lamb." He would be guilty of rejecting God's covenant; for without the death of the lamb there is no sacrifice; and without the eating of the sacrifice there is no assurance for anyone that the sacrifice is his forgiveness and salvation. So also in the Lord's Supper. Substitutes, symbols, naked bread and wine will not do. Either we eat the real body of the real Sacrifice and drink the very blood that was shed for us — impossible as it may be to explain — or we may as well not eat and drink at all. For if we do not eat of the very Sacrifice, we make a farce of the Sacrament.

The argument of the Reformed that the body of Christ is localized in heaven and therefore cannot be truly present is here shown to be beside the point. We eat the body which is "given," "broken," that is, the body that has died. We drink the blood that is "shed," and the very shedding of blood means death. In the Sacrament we proclaim the death of the Lord Jesus until He come. It is the body and blood of the Lamb of God, our Passover, who is sacrificed for us, that we eat and drink in this Supper, and sacrifice means death. Here in the death of Christ lies His greatest glory and our eternal hope. This observation does not, of course, diminish the mystery. If it does anything at all, it adds to it: for we must recognize always that the dead Christ and the living Christ are one, inseparably and unchangeably one. Yet in the Sacrament the entire concentration of our attention is in His death for our sin, in the covenant (testament) of His *blood*.

To human reason all this is a fearful mystery. But to a simple, childlike faith it is a sublime mystery, a thing of surpassing comfort and of deepest joy.

This is the covenant of blood, one of the great themes that rings like a mighty chorus of glorious and harmonious music throughout Holy Scripture. God grant that this music of salvation through the blood may well up in our hearts more and more until we eat that new feast with Christ in our Father's kingdom.

New Orleans, La.