

Appendix:

Hebrews 9:1

There is no doubt that, in the days of the old covenant, Israel gathered in the ‘temple’ for ‘worship’, and that ‘worship’ was performed according to the revealed will of God in the law:

Now the first covenant had regulations for ‘worship’ [*latreia*] and also an earthly sanctuary (Heb. 9:1).

As Paul put it when writing to the Romans:

Theirs [that is, belonging to Israel of old] is the adoption to sonship; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple ‘worship’ [*latreia*] and the promises (Rom. 9:4).

In the AV (KJV) it reads:

...Israelites; to whom pertain the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the ‘service’ of God [*latreia*], and the promises (Rom. 9:4).

So, what’s the problem?

Alas, some versions of Hebrews 9:1, even if they don’t use the word, give the impression that ‘even’ the first covenant had regulations for ‘worship’ in ‘services’ – leaving the reader to deduce that the new covenant, likewise, ‘also’ has regulations for ‘worship’ in ‘services’: as for the old Israel, so for the new!

The ESV:

Now even the first covenant had regulations for ‘worship’ and an earthly place of holiness... the priests... performing their duties... (Heb. 9:1,6).

The AV (KJV):

Then verily the first covenant had also ordinances of divine ‘service’, and a worldly sanctuary... the priests... accomplishing

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the ‘service’ of God... that could not make him that did the ‘service’ perfect (Heb. 9:1,6,9).

The NKJV:

Then indeed, even the first covenant had ordinances of divine ‘service’ and the earthly sanctuary... the priests always... performing the ‘services’... which cannot make him who performed the ‘service’ perfect (Heb.. 9:1,6,9).

The NASB:

Now even the first covenant had regulations of divine ‘worship’ and the earthly sanctuary... the priests are continually... performing the divine ‘worship’ (Heb. 9:1,6).

The Christian Standard:

Now the first covenant also had regulations for ministry and an earthly sanctuary... the priests... performing their ministry (Heb. 9:1,6).

But this – just as the old covenant had its performance of ‘worship’ so does the new – is not what the writer to the Hebrews was saying. Moreover, the chapter division here is appalling, encouraging that wrong view.

Here is a better rendering, one which ignores the dreadful chapter break:

By calling this covenant ‘new’, [God] has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and outdated will soon disappear.

Now the first covenant had regulations for ‘worship’ and also an earthly sanctuary (Heb. 8:13 – 9:1).

As always, we must not miss the big picture. And the big picture here is the change of covenants in Christ, his fulfilment of the old, the new superseding it, the contrast, the discontinuity, between the two, and the superiority of the new covenant over the old. Hebrews 8:13 is the punch line: the old covenant has been rendered obsolete by Christ.

So far so good.

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But the writer had not finished with his examination of the old covenant. Far from it. He had much more to say in drawing the contrast, point by point, between the old and new covenants, the new, being infinitely superior, having superseded the old. Of course, as the writer immediately went on to admit, the old covenant had its God-given form of ‘worship’ in ‘the sanctuary’ – the tabernacle or temple – with all the prescribed furniture and priestly activity, but none of it was effective, just a shadow. And this led him to his climax:

But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption... 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... The law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities (Heb. 9:1 – 10:1).

And so to his application of the argument:

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the day drawing near (Heb. 10:19-25).

The argument is crystal clear. The old covenant has given way to the new; the external, ineffective shadows of the old have been superseded by the inward, effective, spiritual realities of the new covenant in Christ.

John Brown, commenting on Hebrews 9:1, got it right:

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The object of the writer is to show that Jesus, the Mediator of the new covenant, has ‘a more excellent ministry’ than Aaron and his sons, who were the mediators of the old covenant... The particles ‘then verily’, ‘also’, are mere particles of transition.

In other words, the Greek *oun kai* – a phrase which bears a wide range of meanings – must not be translated in such a way (as in the AV, NASB, ESV, and so on) as to convey the above-mentioned wrong impression. The writer to the Hebrews is not saying – he is not saying, I stress – that the believer ‘worships’ in the same – or similar – manner as Israel in the old covenant, that ‘even as’ Israel had such a system, ‘even so’ do believers. Not at all! He is talking about two contrasting epochs or ages – the time of the old covenant and the time of the new.¹

Brown went on:

‘The first covenant had ordinances of divine “service” – literally, ‘ordinances of ministry’; that is... an ordained or divinely appointed ministry – a divinely instituted set of public religious functions to be discharged by those who were its mediators.

Quite! The old covenant certainly had its God-ordained sacerdotal priests who, in the appointed ‘holy place’ and at the appointed time, performed the stipulated religious rites for the many who watched them carry out their duties on their behalf.² *But the new covenant could not be more different.* This is what the writer was saying.

¹ Many make the same mistake in Gal. 3:23-25. But this passage has suffered from appalling mistranslation. Paul is not saying that in our unregenerate days we were under the law which guided, prepared and led us personally to trust Christ. No! Far from talking about individual experience, he is dealing with the two covenants – the age of the law which lasted until the coming of Christ, who fulfilled the law and brought in the new covenant. See my *Three*.

² Except, of course, on those rare occasions when the high priest alone entered the Most Holy Place (Heb. 9:7,26).

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There is yet another translation issue. Those versions which use ‘service’, or ‘divine service’, instead of ‘ministry’, once again give a misleading impression. Brown:

By changing the word, which is the same in the original, from ‘ministry’ into ‘divine service’, the connection of the writer’s thoughts is obscured. A mere English reader does not see how these two statements hang together: ‘Jesus, the Mediator of the new covenant, has received a more excellent ministry than Aaron and his sons, who were the mediators of the old covenant. The old covenant had ordinances of divine “service”’.

No, it certainly does not make sense. Getting the translation right, however, brings the writer’s argument sharply into focus. Brown:

But the coherence of the thoughts is at once perceived when the statement is made thus: ‘The old covenant had indeed a divinely appointed ministry; but that ministry was far inferior to that which Jesus has obtained’.

There is more to be said. Brown:

The old covenant had not only a divinely instituted set of public religious functions to be performed [note the word] by its mediators, the Jewish high priests, but it had also a divinely appointed place in which these functions were to be performed [note the word]. This is termed in the passage before us, ‘a worldly [that is, an earthly] sanctuary’. As to the word ‘sanctuary’ there can scarcely be a difference of opinion. It indicates the place sanctified – that is, set apart, appropriated by divine appointment – for the performance [note the word] of the ordained public functions of the high priest under that economy...

That is to say, the old covenant had a sacred place, a building – the temple – where ‘the worship of God’ was conducted or ‘performed’. The new covenant does not. The old covenant had its sacerdotal priests who ‘worshipped’ on behalf of the people. The new covenant does not.

And here we get to the heart of the Fathers’ mistake in going to the old covenant – though it was rendered obsolete by Christ – and taking it into the very heart of its system – with its emphasis

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on ‘place’ and sacerdotal, ordained ‘priests’. They warped the *ekklēsia* into the ‘place’ where ‘divine worship’ in ‘church services’ is ‘performed’ by a special class for the majority who watch or listen. The new covenant could not be more different.

Let Brown bring this to a close:

The first covenant had these things, but the new covenant does not.³ Its appointed set of functions has no divine authority, and its ‘worldly sanctuary’ has lost even that species of holiness which once belonged to it. It was never anything but ‘shadow’, and it is now but a shadow of a shade.

³ Original ‘but it has them no longer’. Christ has fulfilled and rendered the old covenant obsolete (Heb. 7:19,22; 8:13).