

The Everlasting Covenant

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Introduction

The expression “the everlasting covenant” is a distinctly biblical expression. It occurs sixteen times in the Old Testament and once in the New Testament. The Hebrew phrase is *berith olam*, which in the Septuagint is translated with some form of the Greek words *diathēkē* and *aiōnios*. The word *berith* is of uncertain derivation; it is generally translated in English with the word covenant. It can refer to an agreement between two human beings as in Gen 21:27. More frequently, however, it refers to a covenant between God and humanity.¹ But, as becomes evident from a careful study of the Scriptures, the deepest meaning of the concept of the everlasting covenant is found in the covenant relationship between the Persons of the Godhead. Although the biblical evidence for this fact does not lie on the surface, it is a purpose of this paper to show that this intra-divine covenant relation is foundational to all divine-human covenant relationships. The primary focus for our study is Scripture. In an appendix we will briefly look at the subject in the writings of Ellen White.

The Everlasting Covenant in the Old Testament

It is widely recognized that the covenant is a very prominent concept in God’s dealings with humanity. Of the more than 285 occurrences of

¹ See entry on *berith* in Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, eds., *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros* (Leiden, The Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1958), 150-152.

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the word *berith* in the Hebrew Scriptures,² the large majority have to do with the covenant relationship between God and His chosen ones. The sixteen occurrences of the expression everlasting covenant all belong to this category.

The first reference to everlasting covenant is in Gen 9:16; “The rainbow shall be in the cloud; and I will look on it to remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.” This everlasting covenant is initiated by God, as is clear from Genesis 9:8-11. Verse nine is very emphatic, “And as for Me, behold, I establish My covenant with you and with your descendants [margin: seed] after you.” The promise of this covenant is that there will never again be a flood to destroy the earth (vs. 11) and to confirm the certainty of this promise God sets the rainbow in the clouds as a token of the covenant. This covenant pertains to all generations from the time of Noah until the present. Other promises included in this covenant are reminiscent of the original promises given to Adam and Eve but with certain qualifications and restrictions as a consequence of human sin (cf. Gen 8:15-9:7 with Gen 1:3-30).

In context not much is said by God about the foundation of this covenant. It is mentioned earlier that “Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord” (Gen 6:8), and from this it may be deduced that the everlasting covenant which God established with Noah and his seed is rooted in the grace of God.

The next three references to an “everlasting covenant” are found in Genesis chapter seventeen. Already in Genesis 15:18-19 we are told that “the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying: ‘To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates,’” but it is not until years later that there is an extensive account of the Lord’s covenant with Abraham as recorded in Genesis 17:1-22. The initiative, as in the case of the covenant with Noah, is entirely with God. We read in vss. 1-2 that the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, “I am Almighty God; walk before Me and be blameless. And I will make My covenant between Me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly.”

² For statistics of the Hebrew Old Testament, see Larry A. Mitchel, *A Student’s Vocabulary for Biblical Hebrew and Aramaic* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984).

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The word covenant occurs no less than 13 times in chapter 17 of Genesis. In the covenant God makes a number of promises to Abram, whose name is changed to Abraham because God will make him the father of many nations (vss. 4-5). Genesis 17:7-8 seems to express the heart of the covenant promises when God states clearly the scope and purpose of His covenant in these words, "I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you. Also I give to you and your descendants after you the land in which you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession; and I will be their God."

God's covenant with Abraham and his descendants (or seed) structures the relationship between Yahweh and His people. Through Abraham and his descendants God intends to bring blessing and salvation to all the nations on earth, in other words to the entire human race. This purpose is stated first to Abraham (Gen 12:3; 22:18), and is repeated to his son, Isaac (Gen 26:4), and to Isaac's son, Jacob (Gen 28:14). Of special significance is the expression "in your seed shall all nations of the earth be blessed," which is interpreted by the apostle Paul to refer to one seed, namely Christ (Gal 3:16). However, it is evident from Galatians 3:26-29 that the covenant promise of blessing applies to all who through faith in Christ are counted as seed of Abraham. In Christ they all are one (vs. 28) and are accepted as children of God. In and through Christ the purpose of the everlasting covenant with Abraham is realized.

While the explicit references to God's covenants with Abraham are found mainly in Genesis chapter 17, the promises made by the Lord throughout Abraham's life are all included in the covenant. It is, therefore, scripturally sound to say that the promises of Genesis chapters 12 and 22 are covenant promises, though the word covenant does not occur in these chapters.

That God's promises are basic to the covenant relationship with Abraham and his descendants did not mean that the human recipients were to remain passive. God expected a response. An important aspect of this response was circumcision. God said to Abraham, "This is My covenant which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you. Every male child among you shall be circumcised; and you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin, and it shall be

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a sign of the covenant between Me and you My covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant” (Gen 17:10, 11, 13). Whoever was not circumcised had broken the covenant and should be cut off from his people (vs.14). The covenant relationship meant total trust in God and commitment to God. The Lord said to Abraham, “I am Almighty God; walk before Me and be blameless” (vs.1).

It is evident from the New Testament that circumcision is not required of Christians. This is the clear decision of the Jerusalem council (Acts 15:24-29) and is stressed by the apostle Paul in his letters (1 Cor 7:10-19; Gal 5:6; 6:15; Col 3:10-11). What implications does this have in regard to God’s eternal covenant with Abraham and his seed? Does the abolition of circumcision mean that God’s covenant promises to Abraham also have come to an end? To the contrary! The Lord’s covenant with Abraham and the covenant promises pertain to all who have the same faith as Abraham. Jesus, marveling at a Roman centurion’s faith in the authority of Christ’s word, declared that many (who would manifest such faith) “will come from east and west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 8:11). The Lord clearly included Gentile believers among the recipients of the covenant blessings. This, of course, is fully in harmony with the original promises of God’s everlasting covenant with Abraham that in him and in his seed “all the nations of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen 12:3; 22:18).

Jesus’ words indicate that faith as the human response to the promises of God is crucial to the covenant relationship. Such faith manifests itself in trust in God’s mercy and obedience to God’s will. God testified of Abraham to his son Isaac, “Abraham obeyed My voice and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes, and My laws” (Gen 26:5). These words were spoken hundreds of years before God proclaimed His commandments, His statutes, and His laws to Moses and the people of Israel at the time of the Exodus. Though the Book of Genesis does not specify the content of God’s commandments, statutes, and laws, which Abraham obeyed, there is no reason to doubt that this referred primarily to the law of the Ten Commandments and included laws on sacrifice and circumcision.

Several centuries later, when the Israelites, the descendants of the patriarchs, were in bondage in Egypt, the Lord remembered His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and called Moses to lead God’s people

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out of Egypt and to bring them to the promised land (Ex 6:2-8). The Lord repeated that the purpose of His covenant with the patriarchs and with the Israelites was to establish a special relationship. “I will take you as My people, and I will be your God. Then you shall know that I am the Lord your God who brings you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians” (Ex 6:7).

At Sinai the Lord reminded the Israelites of the fact that He had indeed delivered them as he had promised and then invited them to accept the covenant relationship. “You have seen what I did to the Egyptians and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to Myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine. And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex 19:4-6). In other words, God was asking the Israelites to accept the everlasting covenant, which He had established with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The covenant promises and conditions were essentially the same for the Israelites as for their forefathers. The ultimate purpose was also the same.

The fact that God promised that Israel was to be a kingdom of priests signified that He intended to reveal Himself and His salvation through Israel to the other nations of the earth. This salvation was revealed both through prophets who prophesied of a Redeemer to come and through the sanctuary with its priesthood, sacrifices, and sacred feasts. Eventually God added to these the promise made to king David, that from him would come a seed, a son, whose kingdom would be established forever (2 Sam 7:12-16). David recognized the extraordinary greatness of the promise made by God and humbly accepted it, fully trusting in the veracity of God’s words (2 Sam 7:18-29). At the end of his life, David referred to this as an everlasting covenant that the Lord had made with him (2 Sam 23:5). Undoubtedly, God’s covenant with David was understood by David as fully in harmony with the everlasting covenant God had made earlier with the patriarchs and with Israel (1 Chr 16:14-18; Ps 105:7-11). But the realization of this everlasting covenant, confirmed by God to succeeding generations, was still future.

It is in the Book of Psalms that we find intimations that the Son of David, who will rule forever, not only over Israel but over all the earth, is more than merely a human being. In Psalm 2, it speaks of the kings of the earth and the rulers rebelling against the Lord and against His

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Anointed, determined to cast off their rule. The Lord responds to this rebellion with the declaration, “Yet I have set My King on My holy hill of Zion” (vs. 6); and the Son declares the decree, “The Lord has said to Me, You are My son, Today I have begotten You. Ask of Me, and I will give You the nations for Your inheritance, and the ends of the earth for Your possession” (vss. 7-8). Psalm 110 speaks of this same relationship, but here the promised King is referred to as Lord and priest. “The LORD said to my Lord, Sit at My right hand, till I make Your enemies Your footstool. The LORD shall send the rod of Your strength out of Zion. Rule in the midst of Your enemies;” and again, “The LORD has sworn and will not relent, You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek” (vss. 1-2, 4).

It is not possible to deal here with critical questions that have been raised in regard to these announcements. It is clear, however, that according to the New Testament, the words of Psalm 110:1 are understood by Jesus as referring to Himself (Matt 22:44; Mark 12:36; Luke 20:42) and are applied to the risen Christ in the rest of the New Testament, either by direct quotation (Acts 2:33-34; Heb 1:13) or by allusion (Rom 8:34; Eph 1:20; Col 3:1; Heb 1:3; 8:1; 10:12-13; 12:2; 1 Pet 3:22). The words of Psalm 2 are also quoted as referring to Christ (Acts 13:33; Heb 1:4; 5:5), as is the declaration of Psalm 110:4 (Heb 5:6, 10; 6:20; 7:17, 21). On the basis of Psalm 110:1, Jesus confronted the Pharisees with the enigmatic question how the Messiah could be both the Son of David and yet be acknowledged by David as Lord. They had no answer to that question, because they did not want to acknowledge that Jesus was more than a mere man, nor that He was the long-expected Messiah.

Further Light on the Everlasting Covenant Through the Prophets

It must be admitted that in the Old Testament the primary focus of the expression the everlasting covenant is the covenant that God makes with His chosen ones: Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, the people of Israel, and David. It is also clear that the ultimate goal of this covenant is universal in scope; the Lord intends that through Abraham and his seed all nations of the earth will be blessed. The initiative is completely with God, but the covenant relationship requires a response of faith and obedience. That was true for Abraham (Gen 15:6; 26:5) and that was true for all his descendants (Deut 5:26-29). Unfortunately, throughout their

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history, the people of Israel many times turned away from God and broke the covenant. But even in times of near general apostasy, the Lord reconfirmed the everlasting covenant. God's faithfulness to His covenant is a prominent feature in the messages of prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel.

The prophet Isaiah prophesied in the kingdom of Judah in a time of widespread apostasy. Through His prophet, the Lord strongly rebuked rulers and people for their unfaithfulness, their rebellion, and their hypocritical religion. There were also stern messages for many other nations, including Assyria, Babylon, Egypt, and Tyre. The prophet announces that the Lord will bring His judgments upon the earth. In chapter twenty-four of his book, Isaiah announces a universal judgment on the earth and its inhabitants and utters the divine indictment: "The earth also is defiled under its inhabitants, because they have transgressed the laws, changed the ordinance, broken the everlasting covenant" (Isa 24:5). While this prophecy may have had a primary application for Isaiah's own time, the universal scope of its language suggests that it has a wider global application. And, if the Lord indicts the inhabitants of the whole world for breaking the everlasting covenant, then it is clear that the everlasting covenant includes the entire human race.

A remarkable feature of Isaiah's prophecies is the inclusion of the Gentiles in the fulfillment of the covenant promise. Isaiah predicts the fulfillment of the Lord's everlasting covenant with David (Isa 55:3-4), the everlasting rule of a special Child, a Son, whose name is absolutely unique: "Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (Isa 9:6). He will govern "upon the throne of David and over His kingdom" yet, "the Gentiles shall seek Him" (Isa 11:10). In the latter part of Isaiah's prophecies, there are predictions of the Servant of the Lord, who is to bring Jacob back to God and to gather Israel to Him. But that is not enough. The Lord's purpose is global and includes all nations. "It is too small a thing that you should be My Servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also give You as a light to the Gentiles, that You should be My salvation to the ends of the earth" (Isa 49:6). The promised King and the promised Servant are the same Person, even the promised Seed of the everlasting covenant.

Through later prophets further light was revealed in regard to the everlasting covenant, especially through the prophet Jeremiah. While

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Jeremiah witnessed the collapse of the kingdom of Judah and the demise of the house of David, he predicted, like Isaiah, that the covenant promise of the Lord to David would yet be fulfilled. “Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, that I will raise to David a branch of righteousness; a King shall reign and prosper, and execute judgment and righteousness in the earth. In His days, Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell safely; now this is His name by which He will be called: The Lord Our Righteousness” (Jer 23:5-6; repeated in very similar words in Jer 33:14-16).

It was through Jeremiah that the Lord announced His intention to make a new covenant. “Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah” (Jer 31:31). While the Lord states that this covenant is not according to the covenant He made with their fathers at the time of the Exodus, the promises and the purpose of the new covenant do not seem to differ from those of the everlasting covenant. “This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord. I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. . . they shall all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more” (Jer 31:33-34).

In fact, in a later prophecy, while Jeremiah was shut up in the court of the king’s prison during the final siege of Jerusalem, the Lord refers to this new covenant as an everlasting covenant. He promises that, after the people of Israel have gone into captivity, He will gather them and bring them back to their place. “They shall be My people, and I will be their God; then I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear Me forever, for the good of them and their children after them. And I will make an everlasting covenant with them, that I will not turn away from doing them good; but I will put my fear in their hearts so that they will not depart from Me” (Jer 32:38-40). In a second message to Jeremiah in prison, the Lord repeats the promise that a Branch of righteousness from David will rule. He then compares His covenant with David with His covenant with the day and the night. Neither of them can be broken (Jer 33:20-21, 25-26).

The Everlasting Covenant in the New Testament

The expression “everlasting covenant” occurs only once in the New Testament (Heb 13:20). It is evident, however, that the everlasting covenant which God established with Abraham and his seed, with the people of Israel, and with king David, finds its fulfillment in the Person of Jesus of Nazareth. It is highly significant that the Gospel of Matthew, the first book of the New Testament begins with these words, “The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham” (Matt1:1). Immediately, the New Testament focuses on Jesus as the seed, promised by God when He established the everlasting covenant with Abraham and later with David.

While the expression “everlasting covenant” occurs only once in the New Testament, the Greek word *diathēkē* occurs thirty-three times in the Greek New Testament.³ This is in harmony with the Septuagint, which translates the Hebrew *berith* predominantly with the word *diathēkē*.⁴ The Vulgate translates the word *berith* in the Old Testament mostly with two Latin words, *foedus* and *pactum*, rarely with the word *testamentum*. Unfortunately, in its translation of the Greek New Testament, the Vulgate never translates *diathēkē* with *foedus* or *pactum* (although they are the common Latin words for a covenant or agreement); it only uses *testamentum* to translate the word *diathēkē*.⁵

The translators of the King James Version were influenced by the Latin text of the Vulgate and in a number of places, where it would have been correct to translate the Greek word *diathēkē* with the English word covenant, they opted to follow the Vulgate and used the word testament instead. Newer translations have corrected this confusing translation by a more consistent use of the word covenant in translating the word *diathēkē*. We will follow in this respect the *Revised Standard Version*.

In the announcement of the angel Gabriel to Mary that she would conceive and bear a son, who was to be called Jesus, he declared, “He

³ For statistics of the Greek New Testament, see Warren C. Trenchard, *The Student's Complete Vocabulary Guide to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992).

⁴ For an extensive discussion of the use of the word *diathēkē* in classical Greek, the Septuagint, and the New Testament, see Colin Brown, General Editor, *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975), 1:365-372.

⁵ See, e.g., *Biblia Sacra Iuxta Vulgatam Versionem*, 3rd ed., 2 vols. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1985).

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will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; and of his kingdom there will be no end” (Luke 1:32-33). In other words, God’s eternal covenant with David was to be fulfilled in Jesus, the Son of Mary. A similar thought is expressed in the words of Zechariah, the priest, who, moved by the Holy Spirit, prophesied that the Lord God of Israel had raised up a horn of salvation for His people in the house of His servant, David (Luke 1:67-69) “to perform the mercy promised to our fathers, and to remember his holy covenant, the oath which he swore to our father Abraham” (Luke 1:72-73). Again God’s eternal covenant promises to David and Abraham are recognized as meeting their fulfillment in Jesus of Nazareth.

The Gospels are permeated with evidence that in Jesus Christ the covenant promises are coming to fruition, although the word covenant, besides the one reference in Luke 1:72, is only found in Jesus’ words to his disciples at the last supper. “He took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink of it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins’” (Matt 26:27-28). Or, as recorded in the Gospel of Luke, “This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood” (Luke 22:20). From this we may conclude that Jesus refers to His death on the cross, when His blood would be poured out on the earth, as the decisive event by which the new covenant would be confirmed.

However, the disciples did not grasp the significance of Christ’s words until after His crucifixion and resurrection. On the evening of the resurrection day Jesus appeared to His disciples in the upper room. He reminded them of the words He had spoken before, that “everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled” (Luke 24:44). Next, He showed them from the Scriptures that “the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (Luke 24:46-47). Then they began to understand that the promises of the everlasting covenant, of which Moses, David, and the prophets had written, were fulfilled through their Lord, Jesus the Christ. That understanding would grow under the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit who, according to Jesus’ promise, should guide them into all truth (John 16:3).

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Throughout the rest of the New Testament there is ample evidence that the apostles believed that the promises of the everlasting covenant, as revealed to patriarchs and prophets, had been and were being fulfilled in the life, death, resurrection, ascension, and heavenly intercession of Christ at the right hand of God the Father. Also, in the proclamation of the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, first to the Jews and then to all nations. Peter on the day of Pentecost already showed that God's covenant promise to David had been fulfilled in the death, resurrection, and exaltation of Jesus at the right hand of God (Acts 2:22-36). Soon after, Peter in another address to the people of Israel repeated that "The God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified his servant Jesus," and that the predictions that the Christ (the Messiah) should suffer had been fulfilled in the crucifixion of Jesus (Acts 3:13-18). Peter then reminded them that they were "the sons of the prophets and of the covenant which God gave to your fathers, saying to Abraham, 'And in your posterity shall all the families of the earth be blessed'" (Acts 3:25). Peter proclaimed that the promises of the eternal covenant found their fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

The Everlasting Covenant in the Pauline Writings

The word covenant may not occur very often in Paul's letters, but the concept is certainly in his thought and ministry. It is evident that the death and resurrection of Christ are central to Paul's theology. He wrote to the Corinthians, "I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures" (1 Cor 15:3-4). In the same letter Paul reminds his readers of the words of Jesus at the last supper when He gave them the cup, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me" (1 Cor 11:25). God has called and enabled him and his fellow workers "to be ministers of a new covenant," (2 Cor 3:6) to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. They are ambassadors for Christ, for God through Christ gave them the ministry of reconciliation, namely that "in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself" (2 Cor 5:19).

In the Epistle to the Galatians, Paul further develops the idea that the covenant which God made with Abraham is fulfilled in Jesus Christ (Gal 3:15-18). According to Paul's epistle to the Ephesians, the wonderful

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news of the gospel is that Gentiles, who believe in Christ, are no longer “strangers to the covenants of promise,” but as Paul assures them, “now in Christ Jesus you who were once far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ” (Eph 2:12,13). From these passages we may deduce that the blood of Christ, which represents the death of Christ for our sins, is the blood of the new covenant of which God has made Paul a minister.

The fullest development of covenant theology in the New Testament is found in the Epistle to the Hebrews. For the purpose of this study we include a discussion of Hebrews under the Pauline writings, without trying to resolve the question of the Pauline authorship of this Epistle. It is evident that no other New Testament book treats the theme of the covenant so fully or provides us with a deeper understanding of Christ’s death and high priestly ministry as fulfilling the promises of the new covenant. Because Jesus Christ lives forever and is holy, blameless, unstained, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens, He is the surety and High Priest of a better covenant than the covenant made at Sinai “because it is enacted on better promises” (Heb 7:22-25; 8:6). This better covenant is the new covenant that was announced by the Lord through the prophet Jeremiah (Heb 8:8-12). As High Priest, Christ ministers in the greater and more perfect tabernacle, even the heavenly sanctuary, where He presents “his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption” (Heb 9:12). It is highly significant that the blood of Christ, the blood of the new covenant, is in the same Epistle referred to as “the blood of the everlasting covenant” (Heb 13:20). This shows that the new covenant is identical with the everlasting covenant. While it was already clear from the book of Jeremiah that the promises and purpose of the new covenant were the same as those of the everlasting covenant, it is in Hebrews that we find that it is Christ’s blood and His heavenly intercession as High Priest that brings those promises and that purpose to fulfillment.

It is evident that no other New Testament book deals so fully with the subject of the everlasting covenant. At the same time, there is good reason for investigating whether other books throw more light on the nature of that covenant without explicitly using the expression ‘everlasting covenant.’ Especially passages referring to the significance of the blood of Christ and the realization of God’s purpose through Christ, we may expect to provide further insight into the subject of our study.

More Light from the New Testament

The blood of Christ is the blood of the everlasting covenant. The apostle Peter speaks about that blood. He writes, “You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your fathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot” (1 Pet 1:18-19). Peter is talking about the blood of the everlasting covenant. Immediately he adds, “He [Christ] was destined before the foundation of the world but was made manifest at the end of the times for your sake” (1 Peter 1:20). The Greek word *proegnōsmenou*, in RSV translated as “was destined before,” can be translated as “was chosen before” (NIV) or as “was preordained” (KJV). This suggests that before the foundation of the world, before the human race was created, it was foreordained or destined beforehand that Jesus Christ would shed His blood, would die to redeem human beings from sin and its fatal consequence—death, eternal death. A similar thought is expressed by the apostle Paul in Eph 1:3-8. Here we are told that God the Father chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to be His sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of His will. This was accomplished because in Christ we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses.

These two passages show that the redemption we have through the blood of Christ was foreordained, was and is the outworking of God’s eternal purpose. This means that the everlasting covenant is primarily a covenant between the Father and Christ that Christ would take humanity and shed His blood to redeem humans from sin. According to Ephesians 1:5 this divine purpose is rooted in God’s love. It is not accidental that the announcement of the new covenant in Jeremiah 31:31-34 is preceded earlier in the chapter by a revelation of God’s everlasting love (Jer 31:3). The most famous text in the Bible—John 3:16—seems to reveal the same sequence. “For God so loved the world”—His everlasting love, “that He gave His only Son”—His everlasting covenant; “that whoever believes in Him”—result of the proclamation of the everlasting Gospel; “should not perish but have eternal life”—everlasting redemption through the blood of the everlasting covenant. John 3:16 does not use explicit covenant language, and yet it sums up the essence, the root, and the fruit of the everlasting covenant.

Appendix: Ellen White on the Everlasting Covenant

Ellen White referred quite often to the everlasting covenant. Such references can be found throughout her writings, but it is in the latter part of them that her fuller explanations of the expression “everlasting covenant” are found. In the earlier references, the phrase “everlasting covenant” occurs mostly in Scripture quotations containing that phrase. In the earliest version of her Great Controversy series, the four volumes entitled, *Spiritual Gifts* (1858-1864), there are such quotations from the book of Genesis (9:16 in 3SG 74; 17:7 in 3SG 102; 17:19 in 3SG 103). In the first volume of this series there is an interesting reference to the everlasting covenant in connection with the final deliverance of the saints shortly before Christ’s second coming. “And as God spake the day and hour of Jesus’ coming, and delivered the everlasting covenant to his people, he spake one sentence, and then paused, while the words were rolling through the earth. The Israel of God stood with their eyes fixed upwards, listening to the words as they came from the mouth of JEHOVAH, and rolled through the earth like peals of loudest thunder. It was awfully solemn.” (1SG 205-206).

It is in writings from a later date that Ellen White elaborates on the deep significance and eternal nature of the everlasting covenant. In an article entitled “Christ our Hope” (ST 8-24-1891), she places side by side the expressions “covenant of redemption,” “covenant of grace,” and “everlasting covenant,” and appears to use them as synonyms:

The terms of this oneness between God and man in the great covenant of redemption were arranged with Christ from all eternity. The covenant of grace was revealed to the patriarchs. The covenant made with Abraham four hundred and thirty years before the law was spoken on Sinai was a covenant confirmed by God in Christ, the very same gospel which is preached to us. (next, Gal 3:8-9 is quoted). The covenant of grace is not a new truth, for it existed in the mind of God from all eternity. This is why it is called the everlasting covenant.

In another article she wrote, “The covenant of mercy was made before the foundation of the world. It has existed from all eternity, and is called the everlasting covenant.” Then she adds this intriguing and very comforting thought, “So surely as there never was a time when God was

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not, so surely there never was a moment when it was not the delight of the eternal mind to manifest His grace to humanity” (ST 6-12-1901).

The everlasting covenant was first and foremost a covenant made between the Father and the Son. She describes how the angels, looking upon Christ dying on the cross asked with intense emotion, “Will not the Lord Jehovah save Him?” In response to that question these words were spoken: “The Lord hath sworn, and He will not repent. Father and Son are pledged to fulfill the terms of the everlasting covenant. God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (YI 6-14-1900). She then adds this explanation: “Christ was not alone in making His great sacrifice. It was the fulfillment of the covenant made between Him and His Father before the foundation of the world was laid” (Ibid.).

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