

GLAD TIDINGS

“And we bring you good tidings of the promise made unto the fathers...” (Acts 13:32)

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Covenant or Testament?

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Harmonizing various passages is essential in a proper understanding of the Bible. For example, the church is described as a “house” emphasizing the family relationship in the church (I Timothy 3:15), but it is also a “kingdom” (John 18:36-37, Colossians 1:13), emphasizing the rule of God in the church. We accept both characteristics. Because truth does not contradict itself, we must observe all that is said and see how the distinct passages harmonize together as the word of truth.

This exercise is necessary in understanding how God’s promise to justify all men through faith in Christ could be a covenant and a testament. The word “covenant” is the translation of the Greek word, “DIATHEKE” which is emphasizing “a disposition” or “appointment” or “to place separately” or “arrange something.” The word “testament” also translates the same Greek term in the following passage: “*For where a testament is, there must of necessity be the death of him that made it*” (Hebrews 9:16). The background of a covenant with the Jews is different from that of a

testament with the Greeks, thus causing some to question the use of “testament” in place of “covenant” in Hebrews.

The covenant or disposition of something among Jews was ratified by “dividing” a sacrificial calf (Jeremiah 34:18). The fact of death of the divided sacrifice which they “walked between” emphasized the solemnity of the appointment or disposition. However, the disposing of something through a testament or will among Greeks was different in that the death of the one disposing something must occur before the will could be carried out.

Because the emphasis in Hebrews 9:16 is upon the “death of the testator” instead of the covenant maker demanding a death of sacrificial victims (Genesis 15:10), this writer believes the Greek or Latin concept of a “will” or “testament” is under consideration in Hebrews 9:16-17. One should remember that the Jews were surrounded with Greek and Latin influence. Even the sign above Jesus’ head at his crucifixion outside of Jerusalem, and read by the Jews, was written in Hebrew, Greek and Latin (John 19:19-20).

They could have been aware of the Greek concept of “testament” even though they were Jews.

Harmonizing both concepts of *covenant* and *testament* lead us to a full and correct understanding. The covenant to Abraham was a “promise” that all men would be justified from sin through faith in Christ, the seed of Abraham (Acts 3:25, Galatians 3:15). In Hebrews 9 the “testament” is connected with the promise of “*redemption of transgressions*” and an “*eternal inheritance*” (Hebrews 9:15). The new covenant in Christ is contained in the New Testament, as the old covenant was contained in the writings of Moses (2 Corinthians 3:14). As the covenant was ratified by blood in the Old Testament (Hebrews 9:18), the new covenant is ratified by the blood of Christ and remembered when we partake of the Lord’s supper (I Corinthians 11:25). While death was connected with making a covenant; the death of the one making a will must occur before promises in a testament could be carried out. Jesus’ death fulfilled both concepts.