

SHORT STUDY

‘I Will Complete a New Covenant’ (Heb 8.8): Christology and New Creation in Hebrews

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Abstract

The use of συντελέω to speak of God’s ‘completion’ of the new covenant (Heb 8.8) has generated various explanations. Yet none of them factor in an important clue in Hebrews, namely, the rest discourse. By establishing literary and theological connections between Heb 3.7–4.13 and 8.8–12, this study argues that the promise of the completion of the new covenant evokes the completion of creation and its ensuing sabbath rest. Such an evocation brings to surface a logic of Christology and new creation embedded in Hebrews.

Keywords: Hebrews; Christology; completion; new creation; new covenant; sabbath rest

The Christological exposition of Hebrews is drawn to a climax with an *inclusio* formed by the quotation of Jer 31.31–4 (LXX 38.31–4) in Heb 8.8–12 and Jer 31.33–4 (LXX 38.33–4) in Heb 10.16–17. The new covenant inaugurated by Christ’s death (9.15–22) brings into effect the promise that God will complete (συντελέσω) a new covenant (8.8). The peculiar use of συντελέσω instead of the commonly attested διαθήσομαι has generated varying explanations.¹ The use may be stylistic;² it may denote the efficacy or finality of the new covenant;³ or it may reflect the perfection motif in Hebrews.⁴ Minimally, the use of συντελέσω

¹ Most LXX manuscripts attest διαθήσομαι except for Aquila (κοινω) and Symmachus (συντελεσω), which is also possibly reflected in the Syro-hexaplaric translation.

² E.g. F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (NICNT; rev. edn, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 186 n. 40; Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 416; William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1–8* (WBC 47A; Dallas: Word, 1991) 209; James Moffatt, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1952) 110; Hans-Friedrich Weiß, *Der Brief an die Hebräer* (KEK; 15th edn; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991) 445.

³ E.g. Erich Gräßer, *An die Hebräer (Hebr 7.1–10.18)* (EKKNT 17/2; Zürich: Benziger/Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1993) 98; and 98 n. 28; David Peterson, *Hebrews and Perfection: An Examination of the Concept of Perfection in the ‘Epistle to the Hebrews’* (SNTSMS 47; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982) 40–1 and 206 n. 86; Ceslas Spicq, *L’épître aux Hébreux II. – Commentaire (Ebib; 3rd edn.; Paris: Gabalda, 1953) 241*; Kenneth J. Thomas, ‘The Old Testament Citations in Hebrews’, *NTS* 11 (1965) 310; Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: The Greek Text with Notes and Essays* (2nd edn.; reprinted, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984) 221.

⁴ E.g. Harold Attridge, *Hebrews: A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989) 227; Craig R. Koester, *Hebrews: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 36; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010) 385–6; Alan C. Mitchell, *Hebrews* (SP 13; Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2007) 168.

bears no significance.⁵ At best, it echoes an important motif in the book. In all cases, its use makes little difference to the reading of Hebrews.

Yet it is intriguing that the author would opt for *συντελέω* in Heb 8.8. Nowhere else in Hebrews does *συντελέω* appear, and the author's choice leaves aside *τελειόω* and *ἐπιτελέω* attested in Hebrews.⁶ Either one of these verbs could convey stylistic variation, denote efficacy/finality, or reflect the perfection motif. Moreover, while the prefix *συν* is generally absent in nouns and adjectives that hold the root *τελ-* (*παντελής*, *τέλειος*, *τελειότης*, *τελειώσις*, *τελειωτής*, and *τέλος*),⁷ one finds an exception when Hebrews writes of the consummation (*συντέλεια*) of the ages (9.26). The relationship between *συντελέω* and *συντέλεια* will become clear towards the end. This short study contends that scholars have overlooked a clue within an earlier discourse in Hebrews, namely, the rest discourse. *Συντελέσω*, I submit, evokes the completion of creation and its ensuing promise of rest. The literary connections between Heb 3.17–4.13 and 8.8–12 will not only proffer an explanation for the use of *συντελέσω*, but also establish a theological connection between Christology and new creation.

The rest discourse (3.7–4.13) and the promise of the new covenant (8.8–12) share common words and concepts. The notion of day (*ἡμέρα*) gives temporal orientation to the readers – as epitomised with the word ‘today’ (*σήμερον*). In Hebrews 8 the quotation reads that the days are coming when God will complete a new covenant (8.8), which will be made with the house of Israel after those days (8.10). In Heb 3.7–4.13 *ἡμέρα* is used to describe the day of testing God in the wilderness (3.8), the day when God speaks, i.e. ‘today’ (*σήμερον*, 3.13, 15; 4.7)⁸ and the seventh day (4.4). The overlap is theologically driven. The contrast between the old days and the present day evokes (the continuity and) the uniqueness of God's speech through the Son in these last days (*ἐπ' ἐσχάτου τῶν ἡμερῶν τούτων*) (1.1–2), i.e. the consummation (*συντέλεια*) of the ages (9.26). Hebrews further highlights this contrast, by noting that the new covenant is not one that God made with the fathers when he led them out of the land of Egypt (8.9), that is, the Sinai covenant. Those fathers who had come out of Egypt provoked God and put God to the test (3.9, 16).⁹ By contrast, the new covenant promises that the people of the new covenant will be the people (*λαός*) of God (8.10), for whom remains a sabbath celebration (4.9). The shared words and concepts thus underscore God's promise for his people in these last days.

⁵ Some do not comment on this verb, e.g. Gareth Lee Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012); Susan E. Docherty, *The Use of the Old Testament in Hebrews: A Case Study in Early Jewish Bible Interpretation* (WUNT 11/260; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009); Jean Héring, *L'Épître aux Hébreux* (CNT 12; Paris: Delachaux & Niestlé, 1954); Luke Timothy Johnson, *Hebrews: A Commentary* (NLT; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006); Susanne Lehne, *The New Covenant in Hebrews* (JSNTSup 44; Sheffield: JSOT, 1990); Hugh Montefiore, *A Commentary on the Epistles to the Hebrews* (HNTC; New York: Harper & Row, 1964); Gert J. Steyn, *A Quest for the Assumed LXX Vorlage of the Explicit Quotations in Hebrews* (FRLANT 235; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011) 248–71; Georg A. Walsler, *Old Testament Quotations in Hebrews: Studies in their Textual and Contextual Background* (WUNT 11/356; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013).

⁶ In Hebrews, *τελειόω* is used to refer to the perfection of believers (7.19; 9.9; 10.1.14; 11.40; 12.23) and the perfection of Christ (2.10; 5.9; 7.28); *ἐπιτελέω* is used to refer to the completion of the tabernacle (8.5) and the performance of worship (9.6).

⁷ *Παντελής* is used to describe Jesus's salvific character (7.25); *τέλειος* is used to refer to mature/perfect believers (5.14) and the (more) perfect tabernacle (9.11); *τελειότης* is used to depict the goal of perfection that believers should strive for (6.1); *τελειώσις* refers to the perfection that the Levitical priesthood failed to bring (7.11); *τελειωτής* is used to designate Christ the perfecter of faith (12.2); *τέλος* is used to speak of an end in temporal terms (3.14; 6.8.11; 7.3).

⁸ This has been well-observed by others, e.g. Steyn, *Quest for the Assumed LXX*, 269.

⁹ Though lacking lexical overlap, the new covenant critiques the exodus generation who failed to remain in God's covenant (8.9). So Attridge, *Hebrews*, 227; Koester, *Hebrews*, 386.

God's promise, according to Heb 3.7–4.13 and 8.8–12, addresses an underlying, persistent issue: sin. Going astray in one's heart (3.10, 12) is resolved, as God writes his law on their hearts (8.10).¹⁰ Sin (ἁμαρτία, 3.13), which leads to the hardness of heart, will no longer be remembered (8.12). The completion of the new covenant, mediated by the great high priest (8.6; 9.15), enables God's people to enter into rest, which was available since the completion of creation. It is no wonder then that Hebrews frames the rest discourse with Christology (3.1–6; 4.14–5.10),¹¹ and that the motif of Christ runs through the rest discourse with wordplay. One might say that the faithful (πιστός) high priest (2.17; 3.2, 6) guards believers against having an unfaithful (ἄπιστία) heart (3.12); the one who was tempted (πειράζω), yet without sin, is able to help those who are being tempted (2.18; 4.15) on the day of testing (πειρασμός) like those in the wilderness (3.8).

Given such theologically driven connections, it is no surprise that LXX Jer 38.31, quoted in Heb 8.8, displays divergences that draw one to look back at the rest discourse. Stating that God completes a new covenant with the house of Israel and Judah, Hebrews uses a prepositional phrase, ἐπὶ τὸν οἶκον, rather than the dative τῷ οἴκῳ (LXX Jer 38.31). It may be the case that ἐπὶ is the natural preposition that follows συντελέω.¹² What is hard to ignore, however, is that the word οἶκος is concentrated in the pericope leading up to the rest discourse (3.1–6). Moses was faithful in (ἐν) the house of God (3.2, 5). Christ is faithful 'over the house (ἐπὶ τὸν οἶκον)' of God (3.6).¹³ The failure to enter into rest under the leadership of Moses will not be the same with Christ, who is over the house of God, so Hebrews seems to imply. Furthermore, when introducing the Jeremiah quotation, instead of saying, φησὶ[ν] κύριος (LXX Jer 38.31, 33), Hebrews says, λέγει κύριος (8.8, 10). It is true that λέγω is a common word in Hebrews, and it may be the case that λέγει results from the variant readings in Sinaiticus and Alexandrinus. It is nonetheless curious that the rest discourse begins with Διό, καθὼς, λέγει τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον (3.7; see also 3.10, 15; 4.3–4, 7). One way to understand these divergences is to say that those who hear God's voice 'today' are to remember the new covenant, inaugurated and mediated by the one who is 'over' them. Indeed, the one who is over God's people is the agent of God's speech in these last days (1.1–4); thus, God's people are to pay attention to what was heard (i.e. God's speech spoken through the Son) (2.1), and consider Jesus, the sent one (ἀπόστολος) and high priest (3.1).

In the same vein, the promise of completing (συντελέσω) a new covenant could have echoed a passage also echoed in Hebrews 4 – thereby echoing the idea of the completion of creation and its ensuing rest.¹⁴ According to Hebrews 4, unlike the disobedient Exodus

¹⁰ So observed by Koester, *Hebrews*, 392.

¹¹ The framing of the rest discourse with Christological motifs has been recognised by others, e.g. Koester, *Hebrews*, 276 n. 131; Jon Laansma, *I Will Give You Rest: The Rest Motif in the New Testament with Special Reference to Mt 11 and Heb 3-4* (WUNT 11/98; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997) 268–72; Nicholas J. Moore, 'Jesus as "The One who Entered His Rest": The Christological Reading of Hebrews 4.10', *JSNT* 36 (2014) 383–400.

¹² Attridge, *Hebrews*, 227.

¹³ Outside the Jeremiah quotations, οἶκος also occurs in Heb 10.21 (καὶ ἱερέα μέγαν ἐπὶ τὸν οἶον τοῦ θεοῦ), which probably refers back to Heb 3.1–6. Another instance is found in Heb 11.7, where Hebrews writes of Noah's preparation (κατασκευάζω) of an ark for the salvation of his household, which might refer to the motif of God as the builder (κατασκευάζω) of all things (3.3–4).

¹⁴ Following Richard Hays, I am using the term 'echo' as 'metalepsis', which 'places the reader within a field of whispered or unstated correspondences' (Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) 20; see also 14–21). Elsewhere he writes, 'Metalepsis is a rhetorical and poetic device in which one text alludes to an earlier text in a way that evokes resonances of the earlier text *beyond those explicitly cited*. The result is that the interpretation of a metalepsis requires the reader to recover unstated or suppressed correspondences between the two texts' (Richard B. Hays, *The Conversion of the Imagination: Paul as Interpreter of Israel's Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005) 2 (emphasis original)).

generation who had failed to enter rest, those who hear God's voice 'today' are called to strive to enter into rest (4.11). Explaining that such a rest was available from the foundation of the world (4.3), the author writes, *καὶ κατέπαυσεν ὁ θεὸς ἐν τῇ ἡμέρᾳ τῇ ἐβδόμῃ ἀπὸ πάντων τῶν ἔργων αὐτοῦ* (4.4; see also 4.10). The shared words (as others have observed) suggest that Heb 4.4 echoes Gen 2.2, the latter half of which reads, *καὶ κατέπαυσεν τῇ ἡμέρᾳ τῇ ἐβδόμῃ ἀπὸ πάντων τῶν ἔργων αὐτοῦ, ὧν ἐποίησεν* (Gen 2.2b).¹⁵ If this is the case, the statement that comes before Gen 2.2b would also have been evoked, that is, *καὶ συνετέλεσεν ὁ θεὸς ἐν τῇ ἡμέρᾳ τῇ ἕκτῃ τὰ ἔργα αὐτοῦ, ἃ ἐποίησεν* (Gen 2.2a). Based on the already established literary connections, we might then consider the possibility that God's completion (*συντελέω*) of the new covenant (8.8) echoes the completion (*συντελέω*) of God's creation and the rest that followed.

At the same time, the loose introduction to the echo, *εἶρηκεν [γάρ] πού*, allows us to examine another passage. Exod 31.17 resembles Heb 4.4 when it says *καὶ τῇ ἡμέρᾳ τῇ ἐβδόμῃ ἐπαύσατο καὶ κατέπαυσεν* (Exod 31.17b).¹⁶ This potential echo is noteworthy because the verses which lead up to v. 17 establish the sabbath as an everlasting covenant (*διαθήκη αἰώνιος*, Exod 31.16). Its evocation in Heb 4.4 would have prepared the readers for the motif of *διαθήκη καινὴν* (8.8), which is also described as *διαθήκης αἰωνίου* (13.20).¹⁷ To be sure, *συντελέσω* does not occur in Exod 31.17, yet the grounding of the observance of the sabbath on the account of creation presents reason to evoke the completion of creation. Echoing Gen 2.2 or Exod 31.17, *συντελέσω* evokes the completion of creation and its ensuing sabbath rest.

If the literary and theological connections of this study are valid, we are justified in believing that the motifs of rest and the new covenant are closely knitted, reflecting a logic embedded in Hebrews. God had created the world through Christ (1.2; 11.3), which had culminated in rest on the seventh day (Gen 2.2; Exod 31.17; Heb 4.4). In the consummation (*συντέλεια*) of the ages (9.26) God draws his people into rest through the same agent, Christ, who has inaugurated and now mediates the new covenant (8.6, 8; 9.15). What Hebrews envisions, since creation was completed in the beginning, seems to be a *new creation* that is incomplete yet being realized through the already 'completed' new covenant. In short, Christ who is the agent of creation is also the agent of new creation – a logic familiar to the early church.¹⁸ The God who created (*καταρτίζω*) the world (11.3) creates (*καταρτίζω*) his people anew (13.21). In these last days God does so through Christ, for whom a body was prepared (*καταρτίζω*) (10.5), so that he would participate in humanity and be a faithful high priest (2.14–18). But why covenant? Covenant points to God's operation *ad extra* through the 'two hands of God', to borrow the words of Irenaeus.¹⁹ Christ has inaugurated and mediates the new covenant, and 'today' the Spirit reminds the believers of God's law given on their minds and written on their hearts (3.7–4.13; 8.10; 10.16), drawing believers into rest.

¹⁵ Hebrews' divergences from Genesis (i.e. the addition of the subject ὁ θεός and the rendering of the dative τῇ ἡμέρᾳ τῇ ἐβδόμῃ into a prepositional phrase) is minor.

¹⁶ So Gabriella Gelardini, 'Hebrews, an Ancient Synagogue Homily for *Tisha be-Av*: Its Function, its Basis, its Theological Interpretation', *Hebrews: Contemporary Methods – New Insights* (ed. Gabriella Gelardini; BIS 75; Leiden: Brill, 2005) 120, though exclusively opting for the allusion to Exod 31.17b instead of Gen 2.2; see also *idem*, „*Verhärtet eure Herzen nicht*“: *Der Hebräer, eine Synagogenhomilie zu Tisha be-Aw* (BIS 83; Leiden: Brill, 2007).

¹⁷ Hebrews uses *αἰώνιος* to depict Christ's salvation (5.9; 9.12, 15), eternal judgment (6.2), and the eternal Spirit (9.14).

¹⁸ See Sean M. McDonough, *Christ as Creator: Origins of a New Testament Doctrine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

¹⁹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 4.20.1; 5.6.1.

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