

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Foedus and testamentum: Calvin's federal terminology in Hebrew 8–10

J. Brittain Brewer\*

Calvin Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, MI, USA

\*Corresponding author. Email: [bbrewer21@gmail.com](mailto:bbrewer21@gmail.com)

## Abstract

Calvin's significance in the development of federal theology has received much attention. Scholars have often neglected, however, the role that his exegesis played in his own construal of covenant ideas. More specifically, Calvin's reading of covenant in the book of Hebrews has played a negligible part in reconstructing Calvin's broader understanding of covenant. By looking closely at Calvin's exegesis and the terminological diversity in his commentaries on Hebrews 8–10, a more complex picture emerges. The federal terminology employed in these sections of his commentaries evidences exegetical sensitivity and doctrinal complexity. Calvin not only stands in the stream of Reformed covenant doctrine, but his exegesis represents an early instinct that noticed the tension at work in passages like Hebrews 8–10.

**Keywords:** John Calvin; covenant; exegesis; federal theology; Hebrews

In 1914, Paul Althaus wrote that 'in general, Calvin's federal doctrine held itself in a typical lack of clarity'.<sup>1</sup> The problem, for Althaus, was the relationship between the old and new covenants. On the one hand, Calvin views the old covenant, like the new, as a covenant of grace.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, Calvin also opposes the two in terms of law and gospel.<sup>3</sup> Since Althaus charged Calvin with unclarity, a great deal of effort has been expended by scholars to bring clarity to how Calvin's theology relates to ideas of covenant.<sup>4</sup> Much of the work has come in response to the alleged divisions in

<sup>1</sup>Paul Althaus, *Die Prinzipien der Deutschen Reformierten Dogmatic* (Leipzig: A. Deichertsche, 1914), pp. 153–4.

<sup>2</sup>John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), II.x.1–23.

<sup>3</sup>E.g. John Calvin, *Commentarius in epistolam ad Hebraeos*, ed. T. H. L. Parker, vol. XIX of *Ioannis Calvini opera omnia Opera exegetica Veteris et Novi Testamenti* [hereafter COE] (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1996), 127.10; John Calvin, *Praelectiones in Librum Prophetiarum Ieremiae*, ed. Nicole Gueunier, in COE VI/2: 1193.2048–51, 2075–88. References to Calvin's works in COE cite both page and line numbers.

<sup>4</sup>See e.g. Hans Heinrich Wolf, *Die Einheit des Bundes: Das Verhältnis von Altem und Neuem Testament bei Calvin* (Neukirchen: Buchhandlung des Erziehungsvereins Neukirchen Kreis Moers, 1958); Paul Helm, 'Calvin and the Covenant: Unity and Continuity', *Evangelical Quarterly* 54/4 (1982), pp. 65–81; Peter A. Lillback, *The Binding of God: Calvin's Role in the Development of Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), pp. 142–61.

© The Author(s), 2022. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Reformed theology identified by Leonard Trinterud, J. Wayne Baker, J. B. Torrance and others.<sup>5</sup> Lyle Bierma, representing those critical of the ‘two traditions’ hypothesis of federal theology, places Calvin squarely in the middle of the broad stream of Reformed theology and therefore sets him in broad agreement with questions of covenant and continuity as found amongst Zwingli, Bullinger and even later figures like Casper Olevianus.<sup>6</sup> The focus, however, has remained on Calvin as a theologian rather than on Calvin as an exegete. This article asks, how does Calvin make sense of the continuity and discontinuity of the covenants exegetically? Another way of asking this is, how does Calvin read and interpret portions of scripture that deal with the transition from one covenant to another? Some attention has been given to these questions, but, in the main, Calvin as exegete and Calvin as federal theologian seem to remain somewhat separated. A good test case for these questions is Calvin’s treatment of Hebrews 8:6–13. My thesis is that Calvin used key covenantal terms, namely *foedus* and *testamentum*, in his translations of and commentary on these verses in an effort to clarify the relationship between the old and new covenants.

### Covenant and testament in Calvin’s thought

The relationship between ‘testament’ and ‘covenant’ in Calvin and the broader Reformed tradition is widely controverted, and for good reason. The two terms affect the broader concerns of conditionality, immutability and continuity between old and new. Kenneth Hagen’s article on covenant and testament in the early sixteenth century surveyed Erasmus, Luther, Zwingli, Melancthon and Bucer to see how theology transitioned from a ‘testamentary perspective’ in Luther to a covenantal or federal model in Zwingli.<sup>7</sup> As Hagen describes it, this transition saw two significant changes. The first change was that a unilateral understanding of *testamentum* in Luther moved to bilaterality in Zwingli. That is, while for Luther the *testamentum* was based solely on the gracious dispensation and saving activity of God, apart from man’s ability to obey, Zwingli’s conception of the covenant relationship expanded Luther’s unilaterality to allow for conditions and stipulations. Zwingli’s perspective thus amounts to a move from an emphasis on discontinuity between testaments to continuity.<sup>8</sup>

While Luther may properly be termed a ‘testamentary’ theologian, Calvin’s relationship to testament and covenant has not been so straightforward. Some have argued that Calvin’s covenant more closely resembles a unilateral testament, akin to Luther.<sup>9</sup> A

<sup>5</sup>Lionel Trinterud, ‘The Origins of Puritanism’, *Church History* 20 (1951), pp. 37–57; J. Wayne Baker, *Heinrich Bullinger and the Covenant: The Other Reformed Tradition* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1980); James B. Torrance, ‘Calvin and Puritanism in England and Scotland: Some Basic Concepts in the Development of “Federal Theology”’, in *Calvin Reformer* (Potchefstroom: Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education, 1982), pp. 264–77.

<sup>6</sup>Lyle D. Bierma, ‘Federal Theology in the Sixteenth Century: Two Traditions?’, *Westminster Theological Journal* 45 (1983), pp. 304–21.

<sup>7</sup>Kenneth Hagen, ‘From Testament to Covenant in the Early Sixteenth Century’, *Sixteenth Century Journal* 3/1 (1972), pp. 1–24.

<sup>8</sup>Hagen, ‘From Testament to Covenant’, p. 24. Hagen develops this further in two later works: *A Theology of Testament in the Young Luther: The Lectures on Hebrews* (Leiden: Brill, 1974), pp. 55–61; and *Luther’s Approach to Scripture as Seen in his ‘Commentaries’ on Galatians, 1519–1538* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1993), pp. 87–97.

<sup>9</sup>Trinterud, ‘The Origins of Puritanism’, p. 49; Jens G. Møller, ‘The Beginnings of Puritan Theology’, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 14 (1963), p. 49; Charles S. McCoy and J. Wayne Baker, *Fountainhead*

more recent consensus has arisen, however, that Calvin's thought is more closely associated with 'covenant' than previously admitted, therefore maintaining not only unilaterality and bilaterality, but also continuity and discontinuity.<sup>10</sup> Although Calvin frequently makes use of testamental language throughout his commentaries and the *Institutes*, the emphasis remains, for Calvin, on the covenant as administered by God to his people.

Nevertheless, terms are important for Calvin. What makes something a 'testament' and another a 'covenant' are not inconsequential in Calvin's broader thought. The remainder of this article will focus on how Calvin relates the testament and covenant, specifically in his *Ad Hebraeos*. The exegetical and linguistic decisions there make clear that the relationship between testament and covenant are more complex than previous studies have recognised. Covenant and testament remain distinct, but a certain amount of overlap exists.<sup>11</sup> The old covenant can be related to a testament vis-à-vis administration, and, I will argue, the new testament can be related to a covenant vis-à-vis continuity.

### Calvin and Hebrews

Despite the interest in Calvin's commentaries, his work on Hebrews has received little attention. More often than not, his exegesis of Hebrews is included in surveys of reception history, and the few individual studies on Calvin and Hebrews that exist have focused elsewhere than on Hebrews 8.<sup>12</sup> Part of the neglect may be credited to the size of the commentary, which is dwarfed by later commentaries on Hebrews, such

---

of *Federalism: Heinrich Bullinger and the Covenantal Tradition* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1991), pp. 23–4.

<sup>10</sup>Anthony A. Hoekema, 'The Covenant of Grace in Calvin's Teaching', *Calvin Theological Journal* 2 (1967), pp. 133–61; Everett H. Emerson, 'Calvin and Covenant Theology', *Church History* 25 (1956), pp. 136–44; Peter A. Lillback, 'The Continuing Conundrum: Calvin and the Conditionality of the Covenant', *Calvin Theological Journal* 29 (1994), pp. 42–74; Nicholas Perrin, 'Was Calvin's a "Testamentary" Covenant?', *Presbyterion* 25/1 (1999), pp. 32–44. Gottlob Schrenk, decades before a debate over Calvin's place in covenant theology came into vogue, laid out the basic schema of what these other authors would follow in his *Gottesreich und Bund im Alteren Protestantismus Vornehmlich bei Johannes Coccejus* (Gutersloh: Bertelsmann, 1923), pp. 44–9.

<sup>11</sup>See explicitly Calvin, *Ad Hebraeos*, in COE XIX: 144.17–19: 'Nec obstat quod Deus cum populo suo foedus paciscebatur, quia foedus hoc simile testamento erat, quippe quod sanguine sanciebatur' (emphasis added). Here Calvin directly contradicts Perrin's, 'Was Calvin's a "Testamentary" Covenant?' Although what Perrin meant by that differs from Calvin's intention, it is nevertheless the case that, for Calvin, the Old Covenant was in some sense 'testamentary'.

<sup>12</sup>Bruce Demarest, *A History of Interpretation of Hebrews 7,1–10 from the Reformation to the Present* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1976), pp. 17–20; Kenneth Hagen, *Hebrews Commenting from Erasmus to Bèze, 1516–1598* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1981), pp. 58–65; T. H. L. Parker, 'Calvin's Commentary on Hebrews', in *Church, Word, and Spirit: Historical and Theological Essays in Honor of Geoffrey W. Bromiley* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), pp. 135–40; Cornelis Graafland, 'Alter und neuer Bund, eine Analyse von Calvins Auslegung von Jeremia 31:31–34 und Hebraer 8:8–13', in *Zwingliana*, 19/2, vol. 2 of *Reformiertes Erbe: Festschrift für Gottfried W. Locher Zu seinem 80 Geburtstag* (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1993), pp. 127–45; Gary Neal Hansen, 'Calvin as Commentator on Hebrews and the Catholic Epistles', in Donald K. McKim (ed.), *Calvin and the Bible* (Cambridge: CUP, 2006), pp. 257–81; Brian J. Lee, *Johannes Coccejus and the Exegetical Roots of Federal Theology: Reformation Developments in the Interpretation of Hebrews 7–10* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009), pp. 41–4; R. Michael Allen, 'The Perfect Priest: Calvin on the Christ of Hebrews', in *Christology, Hermeneutics, and Hebrews: Profiles from the History of Interpretation* (London: T&T Clark, 2012),

as those by Gouge and Owen.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, the epistle held a rather prominent place in Calvin's mature thought.<sup>14</sup> Calvin's own introduction of the book in the *argumentum* of his *Commentarius in Epistolam ad Hebraeos* describes just how important the book is for him. He writes: 'There is, indeed, no book in the Holy Scriptures which speaks so clearly of the priesthood of Christ, so highly exalts the virtue and dignity of that only true sacrifice which he offered by his death, so abundantly treats of the use of ceremonies as well as of their abrogation, and, in a word, so fully explains that Christ is the end of the Law.'<sup>15</sup> Much of Calvin's summary of Hebrews can be found in his treatment of the eighth chapter. As Calvin reads chapter 8, several themes coalesce in the discussion of the transition from the old covenant to the new covenant. My concern is Calvin's exegesis of this chapter, particularly vv. 6–13, and how Calvin uses key covenantal terms to make sense of the covenant transition.

### Calvin's use of *foedus* and *testamentum* in Hebrews 8:6–13

In the past, the complexity of Calvin's use of covenant terminology has been smoothed over by scholars. Perhaps the pre-eminent example is Peter Lillback's *The Binding of God*, in which Lillback argues that for Calvin the terms *foedus*, *pactum* and *testamentum* are synonymous covenant terms.<sup>16</sup> In order to defend this claim, Lillback uses almost exclusively the *Institutes* and only briefly references some of Calvin's commentaries, namely *Ad Galatas* and the *Praelectiones in Librum Prophetiarum Ieremiae*, not venturing beyond to see if Calvin's broader usage suggests uniformity as well.<sup>17</sup> Curiously, Lillback does not mention Calvin's commentary on Hebrews at all in his discussion, so his description of the terms in Calvin are ultimately unhelpful when Calvin's other works are read.<sup>18</sup>

At one point, Lillback quotes at length Calvin's treatment of Galatians 3:15–16, where Calvin distinguishes between *testamentum*, *contractum* and *foedus*. He correctly notes that Calvin uses several different terms to refer to the arrangement between God and Abraham. However, Lillback then overstates the case by concluding that '[Calvin] states that usually "testament" and "covenant" can be used

pp. 120–34; Jeff Fisher, *A Christoscopic Reading of Scripture: Johannes Oecolampadius on Hebrews* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2016), pp. 128–32, 170–4, 224–30.

<sup>13</sup>William Gouge, *A Commentary on the Whole Epistle to the Hebrews. Being the Substance of Thirty Years Wednesday's Lectures at Blackfriars, London*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1866); John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold, 24 vols. (London: Johnstone & Hunter, 1850), vols. 18–24. Compared to the prolixity of Gouge and Owen, John Calvin's modest commentary is a fine example of his principle of 'terse perspicuity' (see *Commentarius in Epistolam Pauli Ad Romanos*, in COE XIII: 3.8–9).

<sup>14</sup>The indices for the 1536 and 1559 editions in the Ford Lewis Battles translations show that Calvin made explicit reference to Hebrews over two hundred and forty times in the latter edition (John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion: Embracing Almost the Whole Sum of Piety & Whatever is Necessary to Know of the Doctrine of Salvation: A Work Most Worthy to Be Read by All Persons Zealous for Piety, and Recently Published*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 1536 edn, Bibliotheca Calviniana (Grand Rapids, MI: H. H. Meeter Center for Calvin Studies: William B. Eerdmans, 1986), p. 385; Calvin, *Institutes*, II.1589–90).

<sup>15</sup>John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews*, ed. and trans. John Owen, Reprint in *Calvin's Commentaries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1989), p. xxvi.

<sup>16</sup>Lillback, *Binding of God*, pp. 128–34.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., pp. 131, 133–4.

<sup>18</sup>Although Lillback argues for synonymity, he does allow for some distinctions for *testamentum*, which, he says, 'is a true synonym [in Calvin] for *foedus* and *pactum*, although it especially serves the purpose of indicating the administration of the covenant in a specific period of time'. Ibid., pp. 132–3.

interchangeably'.<sup>19</sup> Calvin actually says exactly the opposite. *Diathēkē* usually means testament, but sometimes or occasionally carries the notion of 'covenant' (*contractum*), and that usually when *diathēkē* is in the plural.<sup>20</sup> It is only regarding the particular context (*ad praesentem locum*) of Galatians 3 that Calvin admits indifference to the translation, whether covenant or testament, calling it an issue of little import (*parvi interest*).<sup>21</sup> Here Calvin prefers to understand it as the covenant (*foedus*) which God made with Abraham.<sup>22</sup> Curiously, Calvin takes up an unusual amount of space defending his translation and understanding of the wording in Galatians 3:15, which is hardly to be expected if covenant and testament are interchangeable for him.

In contrast to Lillback, Brian Lee argues that for Calvin *foedus* and *testamentum* are almost certainly *not* synonyms. Although Calvin seems to use them interchangeably, he is aware of the shades of meaning each one carries and does not exchange them indiscriminately.<sup>23</sup> On the one hand, *diathēkē* does carry with it the meaning of 'covenant', much in line with the Hebrew *berith*. On the other hand, *diathēkē* carries with it an additional nuance that goes beyond *berith* which makes it an uneven synonym.<sup>24</sup> Lee's analysis is improved by his examination of how Calvin treats *foedus* and *testamentum* in his Hebrews commentary. There, Calvin seems to hold the two close together without eliding differences between them or absorbing one completely into the other. The first place Calvin raises the issue is in the *argumentum*. While discussing the source language for the epistle, whether Hebrew or Greek, Calvin draws attention to the use of *diathēkē* in order to argue for a Greek original. If Hebrews had been written in Hebrew, then no mention of *testamentum* would be there, since, according to Calvin, *berith* cannot be understood to communicate anything like a *testamentum*. The two are distinct from one another.<sup>25</sup>

The issue for Calvin is philological, but his understanding of philology implicates his exegesis.<sup>26</sup> *Foedus* or *pactum* are the two words he chooses to translate the Hebrew *berith* throughout his commentaries.<sup>27</sup> Although some nuances exist between these two, it is safe to say that they are largely synonymous.<sup>28</sup> By contrast, the fact that

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 133.

<sup>20</sup>John Calvin, *Comentarii in Pauli Epistolas, Ad Galatas, et Al.*, ed. Helmut Feld, in *COE XVI*: 72.16: 'Porro ubi Latini ›testamentum‹ legunt, Graece est apud Paulum *diathēkē*. Quo verbo saepius Graeci testamentum significant, interdum etiam quemlibet contractum. Quanquam usitatio est numerus pluralis in secundo sensu.'

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 72.17–18.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 72.20–1: 'Hic malim simpliciter accipere pro foedere, quod Deus cum Abrahamo pepigit.'

<sup>23</sup>Lee, *Johannes Cocceius and Exegetical Roots*, pp. 41–4.

<sup>24</sup>Calvin, *Ad Hebraeos*, in *COE XIX*: 12.6–17.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 12.10–11: 'Nam *diathēkē* ambiguum apud Graecos significationem habet. *Berith* autem Hebraeis nonnisi foedus significat.'

<sup>26</sup>T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, 2nd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), p. 193.

<sup>27</sup>Of the 201 times Calvin translates *berith* in his Latin commentaries, homilies and lectures, he uses *pactum* 50 times, and *foedus* 151 times. See the appropriate locations in *Ioannis Calvinii Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia*, ed. Guilielmus Baum, Edward Cunitz and Edward Reuss, Reprint, 59 vols., Corpus Reformatum 29–87 (Brunswick, Germany: Schwetschke & Son, 1863).

<sup>28</sup>Although Calvin will often use *foedus* and *pactum* together in the same context, he only once puts the two words together in the same verse, Isa 28:15, *CO XXXVI*: 461: 'Percussimus foedus cum morte, et cum inferno fecimus pactum.' One of the major differences between the two terms, in Calvin's mind, appears to be a difference of administration. Only *foederes* can be 'struck' (*percutio*), which is how Calvin translates the Hebrew *karat*. See Richard F. Wevers, *A Concordance to the Latin Bible of John Calvin Along with the*

*testamentum* never appears in Calvin's Latin translations of the Hebrew Bible is evidence of differences that exist among the three terms. Two – *foedus* and *pactum* – are certainly synonymous. *Testamentum*, however, is unique to the New Testament, and its relationship to Calvin's more common translations requires further elaboration.

Calvin's comments on Hebrews 9 serve to strengthen the distinction between *berith* (*foedus*) and *testamentum* in Calvin's mind. After reiterating the dissimilarity between them,<sup>29</sup> Calvin then goes on to admit that, if no resemblance existed between the two, then a new testament or covenant would be unnecessary in the form of a death, particularly the death of Christ.<sup>30</sup> If *testamentum* and *foedus* are irreconcilable then, as Calvin understands, the argument of Hebrews seems to fall apart completely. In order to combat this, Calvin goes on to admit that, though the word *foedus* cannot carry connotations of *testamentum*, the old *foedus* nevertheless resembled a testament in some respects. Like the new covenant (*testamentum*), the old covenant (*foedus*) also was ratified by the blood of sacrifice.<sup>31</sup> For Calvin the resemblance lay in the similarity of rites (i.e., bloodshed), *not* in the terminology.<sup>32</sup>

Contrary to Lillback, then, we may say that Calvin uses *foedus* and *testamentum* similarly, but not synonymously. The distinction is not unimportant for Calvin: in Hebrews, Christ's death can be understood only along *testamentary* lines. When this distinction is kept in mind as one reads Calvin's treatment of Hebrews 8:6–13, a number of different questions come to the fore.

In his commentary Calvin divides Hebrews 8 between vv. 1–6 and vv. 7–13. The discussion of the transition in covenant history concludes the discussion on the priesthood and abrogation of the Levitical ceremonies. The old priesthood, typified by the ministry of Moses, stands in contrast to the new priesthood that Christ enjoys as mediator of the better covenant. The old covenant was made according to the pattern that Moses saw on the mountain and is therefore an 'example and shadow of the heavenly things'.<sup>33</sup> Christ's new spiritual priesthood abolished the legal priesthood of the old covenant, therefore proving itself to be better.

Calvin then moves to consider verse 6.<sup>34</sup> Following the Greek, *diakthēkē*, Calvin refers to the more excellent ministry as that of a Mediator of a better *testamentum*.<sup>35</sup>

---

*Biblical Text Itself Reconstructed from the Text of his Commentaries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Meeter Center for Calvin Studies, 1985), 5:55.P–57.P.

<sup>29</sup>Calvin, *Ad Hebraeos*, in COE XIX: 144.2–3: '*berith enim foedus Hebraeis, non testamentum significat*'.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, 144.6–11: '*Quoniam videtur Apostolus nimis infirmæ ratione inniti, ut nullo negotio refutari queat quod dicit. Neque enim testamentum condidit Deus sub Lege, sed foedus pepigit cum veteri populo: ita neque ex re, neque ex nomine colligere potuit necessariam fuisse Christi mortem. Nam si ex re inferat, oportuisse Christum mori, quia testamentum non nisi morte testatoris ratum sit. Prompta est exceptio, berith (quo nomine passim utitur Moses) foedus esse quod inter vivos percutitur, nec de re ipsa aliud sententium est.*'

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, 144.17–19: '*Nec obstat quod Deus cum populo suo foedus paciscebatur, quia foedus hoc simile testamento erat, quippe quod sanguine sanciebatur.*'

<sup>32</sup>Lee, *Johannes Cocceius and Exegetical Roots*, p. 43.

<sup>33</sup>Calvin, *Ad Hebraeos*, in COE XIX: 122.23.

<sup>34</sup>Calvin translates 8:6 as, '*Nunc autem excellentius obtinuit ministerium, quanto et potioris testamenti Mediator, quod super praestantioribus promissionibus promulgatum fuit*' (*Ibid.*, 122.27–9).

<sup>35</sup>Translating *diakthēkē* into *testamentum* was by no means to be expected. In one of his Latin translations of the Greek New Testament, Theodore Beza (trans., *Iesu Christi, d. n. Novum Testamentum, Additae Sunt Ab Eodem Summa Breves Doctrinae in Euangelistas, & Acta Apostolorum: Item, Methodis, Apostolicarum Epistolarum Brevis Explicatio* (London: Thomas Vautrollerius, 1587)) translates Hebrews 8:6 without reference to a *testamentum*: '*At nunc noster ille Pontifex eo excellentius ministerium fortitus*

Here Calvin agrees with Heinrich Bullinger, who also refers to a *testamentum*.<sup>36</sup> So far, nothing has been mentioned regarding blood, other than the implied ministry of the high priest in vv. 1–5. As Calvin goes on to comment on this *testamentum*, however, he uses the similar but distinct term, *foedus*. Christ is the Mediator and intercessor of the *potioris foederis*.<sup>37</sup> The gospel is a more excellent *foedus* than the law,<sup>38</sup> being a covenant founded on better promises.<sup>39</sup> Just a chapter later, Calvin will go on to distinguish the two terms at length. It is therefore reasonable to think that, although he does not elaborate here on the differences, the distinction between *foedus* and *testamentum* almost certainly remains in Calvin's mind.<sup>40</sup>

Elsewhere in Calvin's commentaries, he contrasts *testamentum* as it appears in Hebrews with its appearances at other places in the New Testament. Commenting on Galatians 3:15, Calvin references *testamentum* in Hebrews to contrast it with its appearance (and his translation of it) in Galatians. In Hebrews, *testamentum* is indubitably to be understood in the primary sense of 'last will or testament', whereas (as already noted) in Galatians Calvin does not see the term as carrying this level of precision.<sup>41</sup> It is possible to follow translators and understand Calvin to be referring specifically to various places in Hebrews, specifically 9:7, 16 or 17.<sup>42</sup> However, taking Calvin at face value, he seems to understand that the letter as a whole has in mind a testament when it uses the word *diathēkē*. This latter option makes better sense of Calvin's translation habits in relation to Hebrews. Read this way, Calvin's comments suggest that he approached Hebrews with the understanding that the testamentary denotation of *diathēkē* stood at the foreground.

---

est, quo praestantioris est foederis intercessor, quod praestantioribus promissis sancitum est.' This use of *foedus*, however, does not continue. In Beza's later translation, he replaces *foedus* in Hebrews 8:6 with *pactum* (cf. Immanuel Tremellius, Franciscus Junius and Theodore Beza, trans., *Biblia Sacra* (Amsterdam: Guiljel Ianssonium Blaeuw, 1633)). Beza, unlike Calvin, was more flexible with his terminology. For a broader survey of technical covenant terms in Beza, see Lee, *Johannes Cocceius and Exegetical Roots*, pp. 44–9.

<sup>36</sup>Heinrich Bullinger, trans., *Biblia Sacrosancta Testamenti Veteris & Noui* (Zurich: C. Froschovervs, 1543), ad loc.: 'Nunc uero hoc excellentius fortitum est ministerium, quo praestantioris est Testamenti intercessor, quod in praestantioribus promissis sancitum est.'

<sup>37</sup>Calvin, *Ad Hebraeos*, in COE XIX: 127.5.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, 127.10: 'quia et Euangelium foedus sit excellentius Lege'.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, 127.12: 'foedus Euangelii super melioribus promissionibus fuisse promulgatum'.

<sup>40</sup>By referring to the *testamentum* in Heb 8:6 as a *foedus*, Calvin falls in line with major Reformed commentators on Hebrews. Johannes Oecolampadius, in his commentary, ad loc., refers to the 'sublimius testamentum & foedus per [Christum] habemus' (*In Epistolam Ad Hebraeos, ut ex Ore Prelegentis Exceptae, per Quosdam ex Auditoribus Digestae Sunt* (n.p.: Matthias Apiarius, 1533), p. 85). Similarly, Theodore Beza refers to it as a 'nouum foedus' (*Annotationes Maiores in Nouum Dn. Nostri Iesu Christi Testamentum* (Geneva: Jérémie des Planches, 1594), p. 519).

<sup>41</sup>Calvin, *ad Galatas*, in COE XVI: 72.18–20: 'Parvi interest quantum ad praesentem locum, contractumne an testamentum exponas. Alia est ratio in Epistola ad Hebraeos, ubi Apostolus procul dubio ad testamenta alludit.'

<sup>42</sup>See John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians*, ed. John Owen, trans. William Pringle, reprint in *Calvin's Commentaries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1979), 93–4. Pringle inserted a cross-reference to Heb 9:16, 17 in his translation, suggesting that Calvin had in mind this particular location. Compare this to John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians*, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, trans. T. H. L. Parker, vol. 11 of *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1965), p. 56, where Parker inserts Heb 9:7.

This leads to a conundrum. Why would Calvin ever refer to the new *diathēkē* as a *foedus* rather than as a *testamentum* if, as has been shown above, the two are neither identical nor interchangeable? It would seem that the answer to that question is in the citation of Jeremiah 31 that follows Hebrews 8:6. When compared side by side, Calvin most often uses the word *testamentum* in his translation of Hebrews, as a more faithful rendering of *diathēkē*. However, the term *foedus* shows up in four places: Hebrews 8:8–10 (the Jeremiah quotation) and 9:4.<sup>43</sup> Breaking from his normal translation habit in Hebrews, Calvin, while working with the quotation from Jeremiah, translates *diathēkē* as *foedus*, in an attempt to be more faithful to the Hebrew *berith*.<sup>44</sup>

Based on his lectures concerning Jeremiah, it is clear that Calvin sees this text as a basis for connecting the old and new covenants together terminologically. Throughout his lecture on this section under discussion, Calvin regularly refers to it as the *Novum Foedus*, and this while discussing the pericope's relationship to Hebrews 8:8–12.<sup>45</sup> Other times, though, he also refers to a *Novum Testamentum*, as opposed to a *Vetus Testamentum*.<sup>46</sup> The passage under discussion has, for Calvin, almost a double referent, holding both testamentary and covenantal properties, thereby calling forth variation in his translation practice.<sup>47</sup>

The double-meaning of Jeremiah 31 is suggested by Calvin's translation of it elsewhere in Hebrews. As Brian Lee notes, Calvin's habit is never to translate *berith* in the Old Testament with *testamentum*, regularly changing the Vulgate's translations to *foedus*.<sup>48</sup> Yet in Hebrews 8:8–12, Calvin diverges from his usual recourse to *testamentum* and translates *diathēkē* as *foedus*. This use of *foedus* in translating the epistle's citation of Jeremiah 31 does not continue when Jeremiah 31:34 is cited again in Hebrews 10:16. Apparently, for Calvin, the context has shifted enough so as to warrant a new translation of *diathēkē*, for here he refers to it as a *testamentum*.

What sort of contextual change, though, explains the difference in translation? The most likely explanation is found in Hebrews 9. Before the author of Hebrews expounds on the dynamics of a *diathēkē*, the major contrast is between two largely opposed systems: the Old Covenant and the New Covenant. No particularly testamentary elements are necessarily in view. However, the introduction of the shedding of blood in Hebrews 9 changes the context significantly. Now the *diathēkē* must refer to a testament *de facto*. However, the change in terms suggests a change in specifics for Calvin.

As Calvin works through the text of Hebrews, a tension appears that causes some friction in his interpretation of 8:6–13. The terminological diversity is not a confusion on Calvin's part; he is quite clear on the differences between the two terms in his own mind. Nevertheless, his own translations and exegesis show Calvin struggling how best to describe the new covenant in relation to the old, and how best to categorise the new covenant. Is it a *foedus*, as Jeremiah 31 would suggest? Or is it a *testamentum*, following more closely to the Greek *diathēkē* and the implications of Hebrews 9?<sup>49</sup>

<sup>43</sup>Wevers, *A Concordance to the Latin Bible of John Calvin*, 3:86.F–87.F; 6:46.T–47.T.

<sup>44</sup>Calvin, *Ad Hebraeos*, in *COE XIX*: 127.24–31; cf. John Calvin, *Praelectiones in Librum Prophetiarum Ieremiae*, ed. Nicole Gueunier, in *COE VI/2*: 1188.1871–6, 1193.2044–7.

<sup>45</sup>Calvin, *Praelectiones in Librum Prophetiarum Ieremiae*, in *COE VI/2*: 1200.2257, 2258, 2274.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, 1200.2254, 2285, 2310.

<sup>47</sup>For a thorough analysis of Calvin's exposition of Jer. 31:31–4, see Joshua N. Moon, *Jeremiah's New Covenant: An Augustinian Reading* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011), pp. 82–97.

<sup>48</sup>Lee, *Johannes Cocceius and Exegetical Roots*, p. 42.

<sup>49</sup>The manner in which Calvin diverges from the Vulgate further contests the thesis put forward by Lillback (*Binding of God*, pp. 128–33) that *pactum*, *testamentum* and *foedus* are basically synonymous in

For Calvin, the answer to this question is 'both'. The new covenant can properly be called a *foedus* because of its connections to the new *berith* in Jeremiah 31, but it may also be called a *testamentum*, a new administration founded upon the shedding of blood. As Calvin elaborates on Hebrews 8:6, he states plainly that the opposition between the old and new testaments is one of administration and not substance.<sup>50</sup> Nevertheless, as a *foedus*, the new covenant stands contrary to the old in terms of degree. The first respect in which the two differ is relates to the category of mediator. The old covenant had a far weaker mediator in the person of Aaron, who, compared to Christ, fell short of his intended role. Now that believers are under the new covenant (*foedus*) in Christ, they find themselves guarded by a far better mediator.<sup>51</sup> The second manner in which the old *foedus* stands in opposition to the new is in terms of efficacy. The gospel is a far better covenant because it is efficacious to bring about the change necessary in the hearts of human beings.<sup>52</sup> As Calvin uses *foedus*, both continuity and discontinuity exist. Continuity exists by virtue of the shared substance of the covenant, which is none other than the doctrine of the gospel, to which the new covenant adds nothing that is not already contained in the law.<sup>53</sup> Discontinuity exists, however, because regeneration of the Spirit and a clearer manner of teaching are present in the *novum foedus*.<sup>54</sup>

Where *foedus* may refer both to continuity and discontinuity between the old and new covenants, *testamentum*, in Hebrews 8–10, is used when only discontinuity is in view. Calvin compares the two as testaments,<sup>55</sup> but referring to the testamentary nature of both points to the strong discontinuity between them. Inasmuch as the old *foedus* can be called a *testamentum*, it was founded upon the blood of bulls and goats. The new testament, however, is founded on the better promises of Christ's blood.<sup>56</sup> More specifically, the question that the *testamentum* answers is the remission of sins. Thus, as

---

Calvin's thinking. The Vulgate seems to use all three terms indiscriminately. Jer. 31:31–3 (Vg) initially reads *foedus novum* but then goes on to translate *berith* as *pactum*: 'non secundum pactum quod pepigi cum patribus eorum ... pactum quod irritum fecerunt ... Sed hoc erit pactum quod feriam cum domo Israel post dies illos'. Heb 8:8–10 (Vg) simply replaces both *pactum* and *foedus* with *testamentum* (citations of the Vulgate come from Edgar Swift and Angela M. Kinney, eds, *The Vulgate Bible: The Douay-Rheims Translation*, 6 vols., Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010)). For an overview of Calvin's Latin text and its relationship to the Vulgate and other Latin versions, see Parker, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, pp. 124–51.

<sup>50</sup> Calvin, *Ad Hebraeos*, in *COE* XIX: 127.16–17: 'Verum haec Apostoli comparatio ad formam potius quam ad materiam referenda est.'

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.3–6: 'Quemadmodum prius ex sacerdotii dignitate, praestantiam foederis colligebat, sic etiam nunc contendit excellentius esse Christi sacerdotium, quia potioris foederis interpretes sit ac mediator.'

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.10–11; Calvin, *Praelectiones in Librum Prophetiarum Ieremiae*, in *COE* VI/2: 1193.2055–61.

<sup>53</sup> Calvin, *Praelectiones in Librum Prophetiarum Ieremiae*, in *COE* VI/2: 1190.1944–50: 'Nunc videndum est cur promittat Foedus Novum populo. Non dubium est quin hoc referatur ad formam, sicuti loquuntur. Forma autem haec non tantum posita est in verbis, sed primum in Christo, deinde in gratia Spiritus Sancti, et tota docendi rationa externa: substantia autem eadem manet. Substantiam intelligo doctrinam, quia Deus in Evangelio nihil profert, quod Lex non contineat.'

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 1191.1962–6, 1970–1: 'Novum ergo foedus percussus est, ubi Christus in aqua et sanguine apparuit, et complevit re ipsa quod Deus sub figuris monstraverat, ut fideles gustum aliquem caperent suae salutis. Sed non satis erat Christum venisse nisi adjuncta fuisset regeneratio per Spiritum Sanctum ... Ratio etiam externa docendi nova fuit, quemadmodum satis apparet.'

<sup>55</sup> Calvin, *Ad Hebraeos*, in *COE* XIX: 144.17–19.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.10–11: 'Quia et Evangelium foedus sit excellentius Lege, et mors Christi sacrificium multo nobilius legalibus victimis.'

*foedus* the new covenant promises forgiveness, but as *testamentum* it achieves that forgiveness.<sup>57</sup> In this way, then, Calvin can translate *diathēkē* in two different ways in two different contexts (namely, Heb 8:8–12 and 10:16). He may speak in covenantal terms, thereby emphasising the presence of continuity and discontinuity in terms of substance and form; or he may speak in testamentary terms, emphasising discontinuity regarding the actual inauguration leading into the forgiveness of sins.

## Conclusion

Calvin's covenant terminology in Hebrews 8–10 adds some complexity to the standard description of Calvin's covenant concept. On the one hand, *foedus* and *testamentum* are not synonymous; they represent different things in God's economy. On the other hand, Calvin uses both terms in his description of the New Covenant, both as he translates the Greek *diathēkē* and as he comments on the Greek text. The picture presented in Calvin's commentary on Hebrews, while not contradicting his work in the *Institutes*, is far more complicated in terms of how the covenants relate to each other, both as *foederes* and *testamenta*.<sup>58</sup>

The test case of Hebrews 8–10 offers a fruitful case study in how Calvin uses specific terms in his translation, and then how he treats them in the following exposition. When Calvin exegetes and comments on scripture, he does so with precise language, never veering from what the context and words allow. As he reads Hebrews and uses different terms to describe similar entities, he does not do so without sensitivity to their different denotations and connotations. In fact, he is almost fastidious in his careful and deliberate word choice. The differences in his deployment of Latin terms require separate explanations and ultimately insinuate broader variations in Calvin's covenant thought. At times he speaks of *foedus* with certain things in mind; at other times he uses *testamentum*. But these are not arbitrary choices or stylistic felicities. Instead, Calvin, as I have argued, is gesturing towards the wider differences that he sees in God's covenant economy.

If my thesis is correct, then Calvin may stand at the beginning of a stream of Reformed interpretation that continued to explore the various ways that the old and new covenants are similar and dissimilar. Some Reformed commentators, such as Robert Rollock, tried to explain the covenant transition in Hebrews 8 by means of two different covenants at work in the old covenant.<sup>59</sup> Others, namely John Owen,

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., 161.19–26: 'Atqui Propheta, quasi novum quiddam at prius inauditum adferat, promittit nullam sub novo foedere peccatorum fore memoriam coram Deo. Hinc colligere licet, diverso modo nunc remitti peccata quam olim. Haec porro diversitas non in verbo nec in fide sita est, sed in ipso pretio remissionis. Nunc ergo peccatorum Deus non recordatur, quia innum sime facta est expiatio. Aloquin frustra diceretur a Propheta, fore hoc novi Testamenti beneficium, quod Deus peccatorum non recordabitur.'

<sup>58</sup>Basil Hall ('Calvin Against the Calvinists', *Proceedings of the Huguenot Society of London* 20/3 (1961), pp. 284–301) has argued that the *Institutes* represent a more reliable and well-rounded presentation of Calvin's thought, and should therefore be resourced above his commentaries. Although the final edition of the *Institutes* no doubt represents a more systematic form of Calvin's thought, I am unconvinced that they should necessarily take pride of place in scholarly assessment of Calvin's thought.

<sup>59</sup>Robert Rollock, *Analysis Logica in Epistolam Ad Hebraeos*, ed. Henry Charteris (Geneva: Jacob Stoer, 1610), pp. 102–3: 'Hic observa mentione fieri duorum foederum: veteris & novi. Veteris foederis nomine, non foedus legale tantum, quod conditione habuit operum legalium, neq; gratuitum tantum, quod cum foedere legali obscure propositum fuit, verum nomine veteris foederis intelligo utrumq; & legale, & gratuitum. Legale cuius expressa mentio facta est: Gratuitum cuius non nisi obscure meminit vetus Scriptura.'

explained the covenant relationship by reserving the word ‘covenant’ exclusively for the covenant of works and the covenant of grace, while using ‘testament’ for the Old and New Covenants.<sup>60</sup> What Calvin allows as an ambiguity is reified as later commentators go to greater lengths to resolve the tension between continuity and discontinuity between old and new. More work is required to explain how these later formulations may borrow or build on what Calvin is doing. This would further establish Calvin as an exemplary exegete of the Reformation.

---

Quod autem veteris foederis nomine utrumq; & legale, & gratuitum, accipiendum sit, vel ex eo apparet, quod hoc loco veteri foederi tribuat intercessores, h.e. Leviticos sacerdotes, qui totidem Christi fuerunt typi. Intercessor autem proprie est gratuiti foederis. Est quidem etiam foederis legalis: quia in repetendo foedere legali inimicitiae erant inter Deum & populum: ubi autem inimicitiae ibi intercessionis opus est. Atque ideo Gal. 3:19. Dicitur lex data esse per manum μεσίτου, Mediatoris, nempe Mosis. Hoc autem loco, quod dicitur sancitum esse novum foedus praestantioribus promissis, habetur ratio potissimum veteris foederis, qua legale est. Nam praestantiores sunt promissiones foederis gratuiti, quam sunt Legales.’

<sup>60</sup>Owen, *Works*, XXIII: 60–2.

**Cite this article:** Brewer JB (2022). *Foedus and testamentum: Calvin’s federal terminology in Hebrew 8–10*. *Scottish Journal of Theology* 75, 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930621000776>