Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit: Rejecting the Sign of the Covenant

Scott N. Callaham | ORCID: 0000-0002-2249-2603
Dean, The Institute of Public Theology, Cape Coral, FL, USA
ScottCallaham@instituteofpublictheology.org

Abstract

One of the notorious interpretive cruces within the Synoptic Gospels concerns blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. According to Jesus, this sin stands apart from and above all others as an unforgivable offense. Attempts to explain the internal logic of these sayings and their place within Jesus's teaching have left New Testament scholarship at an impasse. The present study advances a fresh perspective: that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit means radically rejecting the sign of the New Covenant, hence the offender experiences the covenant sanction of irrevocably being "cut off."

Keywords

blasphemy against the Holy Spirit – sign of the covenant – unforgivable sin – cut off – New Covenant

1 Introduction

Few sayings of Jesus more thoroughly vex exegetes than those that raise the specter of a unique, extreme, unforgivable sin: blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. These sayings naturally stimulate synoptic studies, for Matthew, Mark,  

---

and Luke differ in their wording and framing of Jesus’s speech. Taking full account of the context surrounding these sayings enables coming to terms, to some extent, with the roles that they play within unfolding narratives. In Matthew and Mark at least, blasphemy against the Spirit must entail attributing the Holy Spirit’s work to Satan.

Yet it does not seem self-explanatory from literary context why Jesus would focus upon blasphemy against the Spirit as unforgivable but pointedly not blasphemy against the Son of Man, to say nothing of blasphemy against Yahweh, in whatever way that New Testament authors would phrase such an offense. Furthermore, some interpreters find it puzzling that the Synoptic Gospels declare a limit on grace. Therefore an air of dissatisfaction and unease lingers in the reading of these texts. It is as if a key that once unlocked their original sense has gone missing, and even after an intensive search the key remains lost. One observable symptom of disorientation to the inner logic of the Spirit-blasphemy passages is the broad range of interpretive stances advocated in critical literature. For example, Evans claims that Jesus stops short of accusing his opponents of committing this grave sin, which in the end is a lack of capacity to receive forgiveness. Habets contrastingly asserts that Jesus directly

---


4 Blaspheming the name of Yahweh earns a half-Israelite, half-Egyptian death by stoning in Lev 24:10–16. Incidentally, proposing a single Aramaic saying or text lying behind both τοῖς υἱοῖς τῶν ἀνθρώπων “sons of men” = “people” in Mark 3:28 and τοῦ υἱοῦ τοῦ ἀνθρώπου “the Son of Man” in Matt 12:31 (cf. Luke 12:10) does not resolve tensions generated by linking the specific sin of blasphemy (not merely “lying to” or “testing” as in Acts 5:3, 9) to the specific target of the Spirit: a sin nowhere else mentioned in the New Testament. See Maurice Casey, Aramaic Sources of Mark’s Gospel, SNTSMS 102 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 12–13, 130–132.


charges his opponents with a specific, pernicious sin: refusing to acknowledge his messianic identity despite conclusive awareness that he is indeed the Messiah.\(^8\)

Departing from previous approaches to these texts, the present essay proposes that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, at its root, entails *rejecting the sign of the New Covenant*. To substantiate this hypothesis, the present study demonstrates that the covenant sign of each major biblical covenant—including the New Covenant—is essential to the establishment and continuance of each covenant. Repudiating the covenant sign means radically forsaking covenant, which decisively rules out access to the forgiveness one might otherwise receive within covenant relationship.

2 **Explicit Signs of the Noahic and Abrahamic Covenants**

The rainbow is the Noahic covenant sign within Gen 9:8–17, while circumcision is the sign of the Abrahamic covenant as defined in Gen 17:1–14. The specific texts identifying these covenant signs appear below.\(^9\)

Noahic covenant:

\[
\text{God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.”} \\
\text{Gen 9:12–13}
\]

Abrahamic covenant:

\[
\text{God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.”} \\
\text{Gen 9:17}
\]

---


\(^9\) Quotation of full biblical passages in the present study is from the NRSV, though citation of individual phrases and words are the author’s translation from the original language text.
Abrahamic covenant:

תִּמְלַטֵם אַתָּה בָּשָׁר עֲרַלְתֶּםוּ וְיהִי לָעֲאֹת בִּרְיָת בֵּינֵיכֶם:

You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you.

Gen 17:11

“Sign of the covenant” appears three times in close proximity within the Noahic covenant passages of Gen 9. Each time God’s direct speech centers the sign between God and the opposite covenant party, designated variously as “every living creature that is with you,” “the earth,” and “all flesh that is on the earth.”

Next the Abrahamic covenant in Gen 17 employs the “covenant sign” term once, and God’s direct speech again places the sign between covenant parties. On one side is God, and on the other, Abraham and his descendants. Both the second Noahic “covenant sign” phrase in Gen 9:12–13 and the Abrahamic “covenant sign” in Gen 17:11 lack the Hebrew article ה, with no apparent distinction in meaning.10

Following the command to circumcise in Gen 17, the term “covenant sign” never appears again in the Hebrew Bible. Therefore, it is possible that among all the major biblical covenants, the only covenants with characteristic signs are those that God establishes with Noah and Abraham. Alternatively, Hebrew Bible passages about the other major biblical covenants (those associated with Sinai, David, and the New Covenant in the prophets) could designate such signs yet refrain from use of “covenant sign” as a technical term. If so, it follows that the Noahic and Abrahamic covenant passages with their explicit “covenant sign” terminology can set a plausible pattern against which to evaluate candidate covenant signs for other covenants.

Fox’s landmark study of the term “sign” (אות) identifies the rainbow in Gen 9 and circumcision in Gen 17 as quite unlike other major categories of sign, namely “proof signs” that persuade through miracle-working or predictive prophecy on one hand, and “symbol signs” of resemblance and representation on the other. Fox further distinguishes the covenant signs from “identity signs” that “impart new knowledge by identifying something as belonging to a certain class.” Instead, the rainbow and circumcision are “mnemonic signs,” which

---

“bring to consciousness something already known.”11 By standing between covenant parties and reminding at least one party of the covenant, the mnemonic sign assists in maintaining the covenant relationship.12

Both the Noahic covenant and the Abrahamic covenant tie the covenant sign to an “everlasting covenant” (ברית עולם). Such an apparently strong affirmation of the covenant’s endurance does not imply that “everlasting covenants” are unbreakable, for refusal of circumcision results in breaking covenant and being “cut off” in Gen 17:14.13 In Gen 9:11, the presence of the rainbow ensures that “all flesh” will avoid precisely the same fate of being “cut off.”

To recapitulate: According to Gen 9 and 17, covenant signs serve a mnemonic function, bringing the covenant to mind. In a positive sense, the presence of covenant signs points to the “everlasting” character of the biblical covenants.14 In a negative sense, the absence of the covenant sign leads to being “cut off” and thus not participating in covenant relationship. These generalized common characteristics of covenant signs need not lead to exegesis that flattens out or ignores the unique contours of the various covenants and the covenant-specific meanings of their signs. However, proceeding forward on the assumption of broad continuity for the concept of covenant in the Hebrew Bible, the present study employs these common characteristics as a heuristic for identifying covenant signs in the other major biblical covenants.

12 Fox states that circumcision reminds God to keep his promise of providing descendants to Abraham during the procreative act, while Bernat believes instead that circumcision is a prompt to Israel “to observe the totality of YHWH’s dictates.” See Fox, “The Sign of the Covenant,” 595; David A. Bernat, Sign of the Covenant: Circumcision in the Priestly Tradition, Ancient Israel and its Literature 3 (Atlanta, Ga.: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 38. Whichever covenant party requires reminding of covenant, circumcision’s status as a “private” sign underscores that it exists as a sign for covenant parties and not others. See William Henry C. Propp, “Circumcision: The Private Sign of the Covenant,” BR 20 (2004): 22–29, 44–45, esp. 25.
3 Explicit Sign of the Sinaitic Covenant

In Exod 2:24 and 6:4–5 God remembers his covenant with Abraham and his descendants, setting in motion Israel’s rescue from Egypt and the eventual establishment of the Sinaitic Covenant. Hence the Abrahamic covenant serves as a necessary prelude to the Sinaitic Covenant, though the Abrahamic covenant sign of circumcision receives only slight mention after the establishment of the Sinaitic Covenant. There is no great modification of the meaning of the practice of circumcision as contemplated in the Sinaitic Covenant or its laws. For example, Lev 12:3 merely repeats the requirement of Gen 17:12 that circumcision must take place on the eighth day after a male infant’s birth.\(^\text{15}\)

As mentioned above, the expression “sign of the covenant” does not appear outside of the Noahic and Abrahamic covenant passages in Genesis. However, the word “sign” appears by itself elsewhere in the Pentateuch, for example in Exod 12:13 referring to the blood of the slaughtered Passover lamb.\(^\text{16}\) Potentially in keeping with this verse but not referring to it or any other specific biblical passage for evidence, Waters asserts that the Passover meal is the sign of the Sinaitic (or Mosaic) Covenant.\(^\text{17}\)

Although the Passover meal as covenant sign plays a crucial role in Waters’s theological argument, Passover does not match the pattern that the Noahic and Abrahamic covenants set for covenant signs. First, in Fox’s schema of signs, the Passover lamb’s blood serves as an “identity sign” for the Israelites.\(^\text{18}\) Second, while the observance of the commemorative Passover meal itself is indeed a mnemonic sign, the Passover meal commemorates not the Sinaitic Covenant but the exodus event (cf. Deut 16:3). Third, while observance of Passover (and the related Festival of Unleavened Bread) is indeed to take place “forever” like a covenant sign (cf. Exod 12:14, 17, 24) and there is a penalty of being “cut off” for eating leaven, it appears that this is a temporary sanction for the duration

\(^{15}\) Canonically placed before the Israelites’ escape through the sea in Exod 14 (and thus before the establishment of the Sinaitic Covenant), Exod 12:44, 48 require circumcision of non-Israelites in the community – already envisioned in Gen 17:12–13 for non-Israelite members of one’s household – so that they may eat the Passover meal. Leviticus and Deut appropriate physical circumcision for the metaphor of heart circumcision in Lev 26:41; Deut 10:16, 30:6.

\(^{16}\) The Feast of Unleavened Bread is also a “sign” according to Exod 13:9.


\(^{18}\) Fox, “The Sign of the Covenant,” 567, 574–75.
of the festival rather than a permanent one (cf. Exod 12:15, 19).\textsuperscript{19} Put another way, failure to observe Passover properly – or failing to observe it at all – is not a covenant-breaking act.\textsuperscript{20} Therefore the Passover meal is not the sign of the Sinaitic Covenant.

In contrast to the Passover meal, the Sabbath coheres well with the paradigm set by the Noahic and Abrahamic covenant signs according to statements about the Sabbath's identity as a “sign” and its placement between covenant partners in Exod 31:13, 17. In addition, in these same verses the Sabbath carries out explicitly mnemonic functions: first, recalling the people’s sanctification (v. 13), and second, creation (v. 17).\textsuperscript{21} While remembering creation would not necessarily bring to mind the Sinaitic Covenant, Yahweh's sanctification of the people is the result of Sinaitic Covenant obedience, for covenant-keeping makes the people “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” in Exod 19:5–6. Finally, in a positive sense “observing the Sabbath” in Exod 31:16 is an “eternal covenant.” Negatively, transgressing the Sabbath is indeed a covenant-breaking act, and its penalty is the most extreme “cutting off” possible: the twice-stated death penalty in Exod 31:14–15. In line with the catena of evidence above, identification of the Sabbath as the sign of the Sinaitic Covenant is relatively uncontroversial among exegetes.\textsuperscript{22} In fact, the Sabbath's only variance from the Noahic/Abrahamic covenant sign paradigm is its two-time designation as “sign” rather than “covenant sign.”

\[19\] Passover regulations in Lev 23:4–8, Num 28:16–25, and Deut 16:1–8 do not include the terms “forever” or “cut off.”

\[20\] According to 2 Kgs 23:21–23 there had been a long lapse in Passover observance from the time of the judges to the reign of Josiah, though 2 Chr 30 reports a Passover celebration by Hezekiah. 2 Chr 35:18 accounts for Hezekiah's Passover by stating that there had not been a Passover observance “like” Josiah’s “since the days of Samuel the prophet.”

\[21\] Commemorating creation is the reason for Sabbath observance mentioned in Exod's version of the Ten Commandments (Exod 20:11). In Deut the stated motive is celebrating freedom from slavery in Egypt (Deut 5:15). See William Johnstone, “Reading Exodus in Tetratext and Pentateuch,” in The Book of Exodus: Composition, Reception, and Interpretation, ed. Thomas B. Dozeman, Craig A. Evans, and Joel N. Lohr, 3–26, VTSup 164 (Boston, Mass.: Brill, 2014), 4.

4 Implicit Sign of the Davidic Covenant

 Unlike the Noahic and Abrahamic covenants but much like the covenant of Sinai, texts that set out the Davidic covenant appear in more than one location. One attestation of the covenant’s textually composite character is that the word “covenant” itself does not appear within the initial pronouncement of the Davidic covenant in 2 Sam 7.23 Though absent there, “covenant” is indeed the term for David’s relationship with God in 2 Chron 13:5, 21:7; Ps 89:3, 28, 34, 39; Ps 132:12; and Jer 33:21. In addition, David characterizes God’s covenant with him as an “everlasting covenant” in 2 Sam 23:5 (cf. Isa 55:3). Yet more importantly for the purpose of the present study, the word “sign” does not appear in any Davidic covenant passage, leading to suggestions that there is in fact no sign for the Davidic covenant.24 However, though certain other elements of the proposed covenant sign paradigm also appear to be absent from Davidic covenant texts (namely, placement between covenant parties and explicit designation of a mnemonic sign function), there is a candidate sign for which texts supply the remaining elements of the covenant sign pattern: the Davidic throne.

 In 2 Sam 7:13 and 16 (cf. 1 Chr 17:12, 14) as well as 1 Kgs 9:5 and 1 Chr 22:10, David’s throne – the throne David passes to his descendants – becomes established “forever.” Ps 89:4, 29, 36 also attest the eternality of the Davidic throne through metonymy, placing the eternally established Davidic dynasty in poetic parallel with the Davidic throne. This is the positive sense of a covenant sign, for which the presence of the covenant sign (the throne = the rule of David’s descendants) indicates that the covenant is in force.25 As for the negative significance of a covenant sign, there is indeed a passage relating the penalty of “cutting off”: 1 Kgs 9:6–7. If David’s descendants apostatize to the degree that

---

23 The “ark of God” from 2 Sam 7:2 becomes the “ark of the covenant of Yahweh” in 1 Chr 17:1, but the word “covenant” is not present elsewhere in 2 Sam 7 or 1 Chr 17.


25 Gosse asserts that the Davidic dynasty became the sign of the New Covenant in the prophets. See Bernard Gosse, Structuration des grands ensembles bibliques et intertextualité à l’époque perse, BZAW 246 (New York: de Gruyter, 1997), 122–23.
they “go and serve other gods and worship them,” then Israel's penalty is harsh. Yahweh tells Solomon, “I will cut off Israel from the land that I have given them.”

This particular incidence of “cutting off” requires special attention, for at first glance it appears that lack of faithfulness by a covenant party (the Davidic king) results in harm to a non-covenant party (all Israelites). However, much like the Abrahamic covenant, the Davidic covenant is actually a covenant for Israel, in that the effect of both of these covenants reaches far beyond the eponymous individuals Abraham and David. In the case of the Abrahamic covenant, application to all of Israel is immediately evident; they are Abraham’s descendants whose existence testifies to the faithfulness of God to the covenant. For the Davidic covenant, the ideology of the book of Kings ties Israel's standing to that of their kings, for good or ill.26 Thus a Davidic king's crime of serving and worshiping other gods (1 Kgs 9:6) brings the king's punishment upon all of the people. The Davidic throne, a mnemonic sign pointing to the rule of David and his descendants in faithful Yahwistic worship, would be “cast to the ground” (Ps 89:44) as Israel would experience being “cut off” from their land (1 Kgs 9:7). Interestingly, 1 Kgs 9:7 is more pointed than previous passive voice pronouncements of “being cut off” (Gen 9:11, 17:14; Exod 31:14). Here the “cutting off” penalty employs the active voice, the Hiphil binyan of כרית, perhaps signaling not just “cutting off” but “exterminating” or “destroying.”27

To review for the sake of comparison, the major Pentateuchal covenants establish covenant signs and place them between covenant parties in “eternal covenants.” Covenant signs carry out mnemonic functions, reminding at least one covenant party of the covenant. The presence of covenant signs attests to the “everlasting” or enduring nature of the covenants, and the absence of the signs leads to the fate of people being “cut off.” The Davidic covenant is the first of the major biblical covenants in the present study that appears outside of the Pentateuch, thus one expects coherence with the Noahic, Abrahamic, and Sinaitic covenants to be more conceptual than strictly related via verbal correspondence. Distributed among the various Davidic covenant texts are some but not all of the elements of the proposed covenant sign paradigm. In a word, in the Davidic covenant the neat covenant sign paradigm is in the process of breaking down.

Even so, no other feature within the Davidic covenant texts commends itself as well as the Davidic throne to the symbolic role of covenant sign. First, in both narrative and poetry the throne functions as a mnemonic symbol for the

---


27 HALOT, s.v. כרית; DCH, s.v. כרית.
righteous rule of David and his descendants in submission to Yahweh, which is the state-of-affairs idealized in the Davidic covenant. Second, in the “eternal covenant” with David, the throne itself is also “eternal.” Third, both positive and negative aspects of the covenant sign adhere to the Davidic throne. If the throne is “present” (meaning, David’s descendants are reigning righteously upon the dynastic throne), then the covenant is in force. Conversely if the throne is “absent” (meaning, David’s descendants have apostasized and worship other gods), then the people receive forceful covenant sanction; they are “cut off.” The throne – the faithful rule of the Davidic dynasty – is the covenant sign, the linchpin of the Davidic covenant.

5 Commonly Proposed Signs of the New Covenant


The sign of the New Covenant also carries implications for dogmatic theology. After all, if covenant signs serve a mnemonic function to cause at least one covenant party to remember the covenant, if they are “everlasting,” if their presence is crucial for the covenant to be in effect, and if their absence results in “cutting off” from covenant relationship, then the significance of the sign of the New Covenant for ecclesiology is difficult to overstate.

Yet no New Testament document explicitly identifies a New Covenant sign. Even so, the lack of this kind of specific designation in the New Testament does not restrain theologians from asserting that baptism, Communion, both baptism and Communion, or sacraments in general fulfill the role of a New Covenant sign.28 Limitations of space alone are sufficient to forbid adequate

---

interaction with these perspectives, for centuries of theological development have codified immutable sectarian doctrines that rest upon countless other theological propositions and assumptions. Furthermore, straying into the realm of systematic theology is well beyond the scope of this study. Instead, this work presents a positive case that the sign of the New Covenant is the Holy Spirit.

6 Implicit Sign of the New Covenant

Returning to Jeremiah’s New Covenant passage in Jer 31:31–34, Jeremiah expressly contrasts the New Covenant with the Sinaitic Covenant, identified as “broken” in v. 32. Enactment of the New Covenant results in God’s law written upon the heart and knowledge of Yahweh spreading to all the people. There is no designation of covenant sign in Jeremiah, so gathering information about the covenant sign requires examination of other texts. As seen previously, lack of the term “sign,” no explicit mention of sign placement between covenant parties, and covenant development across multiple texts need not deter the search for some element of the New Covenant that nonetheless functions as covenant sign. Yet before moving forward it is necessary to keep in mind that the prospective covenant sign should serve as a mnemonic pointing to the conditions of the covenant in Jer 31:31–34. Due to the covenant sign, at least one party to the covenant will remember the inscribing of God’s law upon the human heart, so that “from the least of them to the greatest,” every person in the covenant knows Yahweh.

The next most prominent New Covenant text after Jer 31:31–34 is perhaps Ezek 36:22–38. Like Jeremiah, Ezekiel employs the concept of the heart metaphorically, stating that Yahweh will place a new heart and new spirit within his people (vv. 26–27). The new heart would be a “heart of flesh” as opposed to a “heart of stone,” and the new spirit would specifically be the Spirit of Yahweh. In the end this heart and spirit transplant would enable obedience to Yahweh.

statutes and judgments, an effect similar to that of inscribing the law upon the heart.

Alongside Jeremiah and Ezekiel, the book of Isaiah also addresses the New Covenant. While Jer 31:31–34 features law written upon the heart together with enduring knowledge of God and Ezek 36:26–27 pairs heart and Spirit, Isa 59:21 also relates two enduring effects of the covenant. The Spirit of Yahweh and the words Yahweh places in the mouths of his people would remain “from now until forever.” As for the eternality of the covenant itself, the three prophets proclaim that in common with the Noahic, Abrahamic, Sinaitic, and Davidic covenants, the New Covenant would also be an “eternal covenant,” (Jer 32:40, cf. Jer 50:5; Isa 55:3, 61:8; Ezek 16:59–63, 37:26).

Thus far, examination of New Covenant passages has begun to assemble a case for the Spirit as prospective New Covenant sign. The placement of the Spirit of Yahweh “upon” (Isa 59:21) or “within” (Ezek 36:26) the people bears resemblance to the concept of a covenant sign placed between covenant parties. This deployment of the Spirit is “eternal,” and furthermore enables knowing Yahweh to a depth not possible before, hence serving a mnemonic function much like other covenant signs. If the Spirit is “present,” the people obey Yahweh (Ezek 36:27), and the words of Yahweh are in their mouths (Isa 59:27). Jer 31:31–34 does not mention the Spirit, but the concept of the law written upon the heart and knowledge of Yahweh throughout the covenant community seem at least conceptually harmonious with the covenant conditions accompanying the Spirit in Isaiah and Ezekiel. Thus, when the Spirit as sign of the New Covenant is present, the sign works its positive effect of fostering covenant relationship. The only part of the covenant sign model not addressed to this point is the negative aspect of the covenant sign: When the sign is absent, the people are “cut off.”

There is no passage in the prophets for which the verb כרת expresses a “cutting off” effect due to the absence of the Spirit. That said, at the conclusion of the account of the army of dry bones receiving new life in Ezek 37, the words placed in the mouths of Israel in v. 11 are, “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely,” (גזר). Already dramatized in the preceding vision of national resurrection, the solution appears in v. 14: “I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live”.

If there is a basic consistency in the concept of covenant throughout the Hebrew Bible – and the New Covenant passages’ appropriation of previous covenants’ motifs imply the prophets believed that there was such continuity – then one should look to prophetic New Covenant passages to identify the sign of the New Covenant. The prophets’ depictions of the Spirit of Yahweh fit the present study’s profile of covenant sign point for point.
Review: Covenants and Covenant Signs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Covenant</th>
<th>Covenant is “eternal”</th>
<th>Sign</th>
<th>Sign is present: “eternal”</th>
<th>Sign is absent: “cut off” penalty</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abrahamic</td>
<td>Gen 17:7</td>
<td>circumcision</td>
<td>Gen 17:13</td>
<td>Gen 17:14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sinaitic</td>
<td>Exod 31:16</td>
<td>Sabbath</td>
<td>Exod 31:17</td>
<td>Exod 31:14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Davidic</td>
<td>2 Sam 23:5 (cf. Isa 55:3)</td>
<td>throne</td>
<td>2 Sam 7:13, 16; others</td>
<td>1 Kgs 9:7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New</td>
<td>Jer 32:40; others</td>
<td>Spirit of Yahweh</td>
<td>Isa 59:21</td>
<td>Ezek 37:11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit as Unforgivable Sin

Having journeyed full circle to where the present study began, it is now time to begin applying covenant-centered thinking to the interpretive crux of the “Spirit-blasphemy” sayings in the Synoptic Gospels. These three passages (Matt 12:31–32, Mark 3:28–30, and Luke 12:10) certainly contain some varying details such as Jesus speaking to different audiences, but all of them declare blasphemy against the Spirit to be an unforgivable sin, and Matthew underlines the finality of this judgment; there will be no forgiveness “either in this age or in the age to come.” (Matt 12:32)

As for blasphemy, it is not necessary here to specify the acts that could constitute blasphemy against the Spirit, nor to determine how those deeds might differ from blasphemy against the Son of Man. These and other questions have occupied interpreters since the New Testament’s original cultural context slipped behind the veil of history. Instead, this work concerns a still more ancient lost “key” of interpretation, one that dates to the prophets who announced the New Covenant: the understanding that the Holy Spirit is the sign of the New Covenant. The presence of the Holy Spirit is positive proof that the New Covenant is active. Negatively speaking, the absence (here, conclusive rejection through “blasphemy”) of the Spirit results in a grave covenantal penalty: people are “cut off.”

Being “cut off” inherently entails placement outside the state of forgiveness of sin that consistently adheres to the New Covenant relationship in the
prophets. For example, Jeremiah states that an effect of the inauguration of the new covenant is forgiveness of sin: “I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more” (Jer 31:34). Likewise, Ezekiel envisions an effect of the New Covenant to be forgiveness of sin, using terms of cleansing and atonement. Surrounding the “new heart” and “new spirit” passage in Ezek 36:26 are mentions of Yahweh cleansing his people first from uncleannesses and idols (v. 25), and then from all their iniquities (v. 33). Also, in Ezek 16:62–63, following mention of the establishment of covenant, the Lord God promises to atone for shameful acts the people have committed. Lastly, in common with Jeremiah and Ezekiel, Isaiah foresees forgiveness of sin flowing from covenant relationship: “Let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon” (Isa 55:7). By forging a tight link between covenant relationship and forgiveness of sin in New Covenant passages, the prophets are by no means theological innovators. Exod 34:9 reports Moses’s plea: “If now I have found favor in your sight, O Lord, I pray, let the Lord go with us. Although this is a stiff-necked people, pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance.” Tellingly, the following verse carries God’s immediate response: “I hereby make a covenant.”

In light of the prophets’ binding together of the New Covenant with the Spirit as covenant sign and with forgiveness of sin as covenant effect, it is interesting what kind of sin Mark believes blasphemy against the Spirit to be: it is “eternal sin” (Mark 3:29). To review, positively speaking – according to the prophets – accompanying the “eternal” covenant sign of the Spirit is forgiveness. Then negatively speaking, according to Mark, blasphemy against the Spirit emphatically excludes forgiveness; this is contrastingly an “eternal sin.”

Yet does the “punishment” of everlasting exclusion outside the reach of forgiveness attainable in covenant relationship really fit the “crime” of rejecting the covenant sign through some act of slander? From the vantage point of biblical theology, can the meaning of the covenant sanction of being “cut off” plausibly include the eternal denial of all possibility of forgiveness? The following section suggests that there is indeed biblical precedent for maximal punishment in the case of one who repudiates the sign of the covenant and is thus “cut off” from forgiveness.

9 Rejecting the Sign of the Covenant

Previous searches for Hebrew Bible backgrounds to the Spirit-blasphemy passages have at times focused upon offenses against the Spirit such as “grieving”
the Spirit in Isa 63:10. Alternatively it is possible to focus investigation not upon the Spirit as the object of unforgivable sin, but directly upon the concept of “unforgivable sin,” dramatically embodied in the “high-handed” sin in Num 15:30–31. It is necessary to place this “high-handed sin” passage of Num 15:30–31 within the broader context of its unit of legal material in vv. 22–31 and the following narrative in vv. 32–36 to grasp why the “high-handed sin” is the Old Testament covenant offense that most closely parallels the New Testament “blasphemy against the Spirit.”

Numbers 15:22–26 constitutes the first block of text, and its concern is atoning for unintentional sins (שְׁגָגָה as a noun, שֶגֶג and שֵגֶה as a verb) that the entire community commits. Verse 26 brings relief: “All the congregation of the Israelites” (which is to say, the covenant community), as well as “the aliens residing among them,” shall be forgiven.

Verses 27–29 then narrow in focus. Here one person sins unintentionally, whether native-born or foreigner. Proper priestly atonement leads to forgiveness in v. 28.

If the narrowing trend were to continue, since previously mentioned sins were all unintentional and undefined, one might next expect guidance on how one person should go about making atonement and seeking forgiveness for an intentional sin whose character remains similarly unstated. While there are indeed provisions for atoning for intentional sin in Sinai Covenant texts, this passage is not one of them. Instead, as shown below, the next two verses have to do with an aggressively intentional sin of “high-handedness” that manifests a contrastingly well-defined character.

But whoever acts high-handedly, whether a native or an alien, affronts the LORD, and shall be cut off from among the people. Because of having

31 A generalized statement of the principle of requiring the same atoning acts from Israelites and “resident aliens” alike appears a few verses before in Num 15:15–16.
despised the word of the Lord and broken his commandment, such a person shall be utterly cut off and bear the guilt.

Num 15:30–31

The egregious “high-handed” sin constitutes an affront to Yahweh, because the sinner despises Yahweh’s word and breaks Yahweh’s commandment. These specific charges are serious enough on their face because they intimate that the “high-handed” sin is an attack upon Yahweh himself, as well as the word and commandment that have come from him. Yet the syntax of Num 15:30–31 highlights the especially grave nature of these charges even further. The verbal clauses containing the participle “affront” (מגדף) and the verbs “despise” (בזה) and “break” (פרה) all front their objects. Therefore, in context the three charges fall like hammer blows, something like “It is the Lord that he affronts! It is the word of the Lord that he has despised! It is his commandment that he has broken!”

Regarding the penalty for the “high-handed” sin, previous mentions in this study of the fate of being “cut off” have had to do with the absence or rejection of the covenant sign, so the appearance of the verb כרית should alert the reader to the covenant context of this passage. Yet the subject matter of the material immediately preceding Num 15:30–31 is not the covenant itself but atonement within the context of covenant relationship, specifically atonement for unintentional sins: the unintentional sins of the community at large (Num 15:22–26) and those of an individual (Num 15:27–29). Then, seemingly without warning or transition, typically verbose casuistic expressions give way to the much more direct language of Num 15:30–31. Here there is no provision to atone for “high-handed” sin. The “cutting off” penalty swiftly appears in verse 30 as a finite verb, and in the following verse the penalty pronouncement employs a paronomastic infinitive construction: the only paronomastic infinitive construction with the כרית verbal root in the Hebrew Bible. Thus, with three appearances of the verbal root כרית in just two verses, the main theme of the passage shifts from atonement to “cutting off”: from forgiveness achieved to forgiveness denied. The cumulative effect is a pronouncement like, “Not only shall he be cut off, but he must be cut off.”

Especially in view of the degree of effort necessary to atone for unintentional sins, it is difficult to avoid facing the clear implications of the passage for

---

the “high-handed” sinner. The “high-handed sin” passage communicates the impossibility of atonement and with unusual forcefulness mandates “cutting off” the “high-handed” sinner. As if to add an extra note of finality in judgment upon the sinner whose “cutting off” penalty is the most emphatic of any in the Hebrew Bible, the person who is decisively “cut off” retains guilt and thus remains unforgiven.

In case any doubts might remain about the fate of the most intentional of sinners, a brief illustrative narrative immediately follows in Num 15:32–36. A man gathers sticks on the Sabbath and receives the death penalty as a result: in modern eyes a mockery of justice for which the punishment seems utterly out of scale with the transgression. Of course, those modern eyes tend to read such texts atomistically, without regard for literary context or the unfolding of covenants within biblical theology. Attention to the immediately preceding literary context reveals that the wood-gatherer’s crime was doubly shocking. It was not only a sin committed with a “high hand,” but also an intentional act of desecrating the Sabbath, the sign of the Sinaitic Covenant. This attack upon the covenant sign, by virtue of its standing as the paradigmatic illustration of the “high-handed sin,” was a public display of contempt toward Yahweh and the terms of relationship with him (in v. 31, his word and his commandment). Viewed in these covenantal terms, it is little wonder that the gatherer of sticks had committed a sin for which humans could not atone. He had rejected the Sinaitic Covenant itself through a frontal assault upon its covenant sign: the quintessence of unforgivable sin.

10 Significance for the Spirit-Blasphemy Passages and Biblical Theology

The present study raises to the forefront of discussion an at once familiar but also all-too-often neglected aspect of biblical covenants: the covenant sign.

Le Peau appeals to “Middle Eastern exaggeration” to account for the extreme degree of punishment awarded to both the “high-handed” offender in Num and the blasphemer against the Holy Spirit in the Gospels. Andrew T. Le Peau, Mark through Old Testament Eyes: A Background and Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel, 2017), 82.

Milgrom states that the wood-gatherer’s sin must have been a “high-handed” act of open defiance (thus providing an immediate illustration of the previous legal text) for his severe penalty to make sense. See Jacob Milgrom, Numbers, The JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia, Pa.: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), 439–43.

Each biblical covenant has a characteristic mnemonic sign placed between covenant partners. Covenant signs are “eternal” like their associated covenants and positively foster the continuance of those covenants. From a negative standpoint, if a covenant sign is absent for whatever reason (such as through repudiation of the sign by a human covenant partner), then that covenant partner faces being “cut off” from covenant relationship with God. As shown in the example of the man who gathered sticks on the Sabbath, rejection of a covenant sign is a “high-handed” sin that communicates determined refusal to submit to covenant relationship. No forgiveness is possible for this greatest of covenant offenses.

The New Testament analogue for the Sabbath violator of Num 15 is one who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit. According to the prophets, under the New Covenant every human covenant member, “from the least of them to the greatest” (Jer 31:34) knows Yahweh and receives God’s own Spirit (Ezek 36:26–27). Simply put, the presence of the Spirit within every human covenant partner is indisputable evidence of the New Covenant, and rejection of the Spirit entails absolute refusal to participate in the New Covenant. Lost “key” in hand, exegetes can understand why Jesus would single out blasphemy against the Spirit as categorically beyond the pale. Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is unforgivable because it constitutes malicious defiance and repudiation of the entire framework of the New Covenant relationship with God.

As already suggested, the findings of this article can stimulate further research in several areas of theological inquiry. However, the scope of the present study only permits a few suggestive comments in closing. On the broad level of studies in New Testament theology, for example in Hebrews, the relationship between the sign and the mediator of the New Covenant deserves further study. In addition, identification of the Holy Spirit as the sign of the New Covenant should lead to further examination of the Synoptic Gospels’ “thick Spirit Christology” that unites the work of the Spirit and Jesus.37

As for the theology of the individual Synoptics, the Spirit seems to receive lesser prominence in the Gospel of Mark than in Matthew and Luke. In contrast, exorcism of demons is a prominent theme in Mark, and Mark 3:28–29 typically features in studies that focus upon this theme.38 Scribes charge that Jesus “has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons” in

Mark 3:22 and that “he has an unclean spirit” in Mark 3:30. In response Jesus injects the Holy Spirit into the heated disputation. This article suggests a need for further reflection upon the Holy Spirit’s role in the spiritual conflict of Jesus’s exorcisms.

As in Mark, Matthew’s version of the Spirit-blasphemy saying also arises from conflict, this time with Pharisees (Matt 12:24). While a special focus of Mark’s Gospel concerns exorcism, Matthew seems to give prominence to the topic of Jesus’s ministry of forgiveness. If it is valid to read a concern for this ministry of Jesus in Matt 12:31–32, then v. 32 seems to require that blasphemy against the Spirit entails the blasphemer’s definitive break not just with the Spirit but also with Jesus, for it negates the possibility of forgiveness that Jesus would otherwise bring “either in this age or in the age to come.”

Finally, among all the Synoptics Luke mentions the Spirit the most, and in several unique ways. For example, John the Baptist received the filling of the Spirit before birth (Luke 1:15), and soon thereafter, the Spirit would be the agent of Jesus’s conception (Luke 1:35). That said, John the Baptist’s proclamation about the coming Messiah’s connection with the Spirit, “He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” in Luke 3:16, then “casts its shadow” across the rest of Luke and Acts. Perhaps the most dramatic tie to Luke 3:16 appears in Peter’s Pentecost sermon. Luke depicts Peter identifying the pouring out of the Spirit in Joel 2:28–32a (Acts 2:17–21) as the present work of Jesus (Acts 2:33), proof of his identity as the Messiah and the inauguration of the new age. Fruitful avenues for research should include investigating the degree to which Luke’s pneumatology reflects both Spirit Christology and an understanding of the Spirit as the covenant sign that is indispensable for the realization of the New Covenant. For example, returning to Luke’s Spirit-blasphemy passage in Luke 12:10, it is notable that the Spirit immediately appears again in vv. 11–12 as a teacher of what to say: this just before someone in the crowd addresses Jesus as Teacher in v. 13.

39 John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2005), 504–6. Given the especially emphatic denial of forgiveness in Matt 12:31–32, it is somewhat puzzling that Nolland writes, “No doubt such blasphemy remains unforgivable only as long as it is sustained. It too may be repented of” (p. 525).

11 Conclusion

Recognizing the Holy Spirit as the sign of the New Covenant casts new light upon the Spirit-blasphemy passages Matt 12:31–32, Mark 3:28–30, and Luke 12:10. Blasphemy against the Spirit is a direct attack upon the covenant sign and thus strikes at the heart of the New Covenant itself. It is a covenant-breaking act that results in being eternally “cut off” from covenant relationship that would otherwise have enabled access to forgiveness.41

Bibliography


41 Ps 51 depicts a worshiper directly throwing himself upon the mercy of God to seek forgiveness, without recourse to the typical sacrificial means of atonement (see especially v. 16, Hebrew v. 18) under the Sinaitic Covenant. Even without considering that the psalm’s superscription casts the entire psalm as a prayer of David (a pivotal figure in the succession of covenants in biblical theology), God’s “mercy” in v. 1 (Hebrew v. 3) is חָסִד, typically an expression of covenant faithfulness.


Gileadi, Avraham. The Literary Message of Isaiah (San Diego, Calif.: Hebraeus, 1994), 74.


Kline, Meredith G. By Oath Consigned: A Reinterpretation of the Covenant Signs of Circumcision and Baptism (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1968).


