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Amen: The Seal of Faith

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There are several words which are the same in every Christian's vocabulary, no matter what his native tongue. These are the untranslated words of the Bible: Hallelujah, Hosanna, Messiah, Abba, Christ, Jesus, manna, and amen. The last one is the last word in most Bibles (Rev. 22:21).¹ Many people think that that is appropriate for they associate amen with the end of prayers, confessions of faith, and even sermons. It is unfortunate that Christians have allowed a careless and unthinking attitude to divest a Biblical term of its true meaning and significance.

Modern Christians are not the only ones who have misused this term. The Gnostics, who plagued the early Christians by placing an unbiblical emphasis on esoteric

knowledge, saw a special meaning in amen. By assigning a numerical value to each of its Greek letters—the value that these letters did indeed have *when* they were used as numbers—the Gnostics arrived at the value "99."² The rabbis too manipulated the word. Rabbi Chanina (ca. 225 A.D.) gave this interpretation to the Hebrew amen: "God is a king, a reliable one."³ That was arrived at by regarding the three consonants of the Hebrew amen as an acrostic: 'amen - 'el (God), m^el^ekh (King) and n^{ea}men (reliable).

However fascinating acrostics or numerical interpretations may be, they generally do not lead to the meaning intended by the original author. To arrive at that goal one must examine both the background and the use of the term.

The Form and Background of Amen

As has already been indicated, amen cuts across both sections of the Bible. Although we are probably more familiar with it from the New Testament, it is a Semitic term and appears early in the Bible, in Numbers and Deuteronomy.

Amen is an adjective of a regular formation common in Hebrew.⁴ The root is 'mn; representation of the first consonant is lost when the word is transferred to a non-Semitic language. Although the basic stem is little used in the Bible, two derived stems, the passive and the causative, are common. In fact, the prophet Isaiah based a word-play on the relation of these two stems. This play has survived remarkably in this translation,

If you do not stand firm in your faith
You will not stand at all.
(Isa. 7:9 NIV)⁵

From the passive stem are the meanings "be verified, confirmed, established." These in turn give rise to the adjectives "reliable, faithful, trustworthy." From the causative stem we find "stand firm," "believe," and "trust." God, as the *faithful* one, keeps his covenant:

Know therefore that the LORD your
God is God; he is the *faithful* God,
keeping his covenant of love to a
thousand generations of those who
love him and keep his commands
(Dt. 7:9)

I will maintain my kindness to him
[David] forever, and my covenant
with him *will never fail*. (Psa. 89:28)

Not only is God viewed as *faithful* (Jer. 42:5) but so are God's servants such as Moses (Num. 12:7). The latter verse is alluded to in Hebrews 3:2 where Jesus, like Moses, is called *faithful* (Greek *piston* reflects Hebrew *n^eamen*).

It is this background of faithfulness, reliability, and steadfastness that must be kept in mind as we consider the various contexts in which amen is used.

Amen in the Pentateuch

There are two places in the Pentateuch where amen is used: Numbers 5:22 and Deut. 27:15-26. In both places amen is used as a response to a curse. As the Deuteronomic account is classic we shall consider it first.

In connection with the reaffirmation of the covenant (by the children of those who had witnessed the Sinai covenant) the Israelites had to acknowledge both the blessings for keeping the covenant, and the curses for breaking it. There is a parallel structure in chapters 27 and 28. There are blessings and curses; strangely, however, the curses are more prominent. First there are the curses, then the blessings. Finally, curses are further elaborated in the second half of chapter 28. This pattern is seen in certain secular treaties, as D. J. Wiseman has shown.⁶

It is with the curses—not the blessings—that the amens are associated. Twelve times (once in each verse) the tribes gathered on Mt. Ebal to give the prescribed response to a particular curse. Amen means "may it be established," "may it be so." The earliest extant translation, the Septuagint, does not transliterate the word here but indicates its meaning by using *genoito*, "may it be [so]."

One notes that the response of the people is in the form of an oath. It is precisely this oath-response to a covenant [treaty] that is found in the Hittite treaty between Suppiliuma and the Mitanni leader, Matterwaza. The Hittite soldiers declare their agreement ("so be it," or "amen") after each curse.⁷

Similar to these instances of the amen of oath-response found in the Bible and its corresponding form in the Hittite treaties is the use, more than a millenium later, in the Dead Sea community. The Dead Sea *Manual*

of *Discipline*, the charter for that separate community, stipulates that those who enter the voluntary covenant of the community repeat their (double) amen "after those who bless and those who curse."⁸ The Jewish community was thoroughly aware of the force of amen as a response word and the use of it by the Essene (?) community was in line with the ancient practice.

Similarly the covenant curse-oath is the specialized use found in Numbers 5:22. A woman against whom charges of adultery have been brought had to submit to a trial-by-ordeal. She would bring on herself the curse of having a miscarrying womb and being barren.⁹ Her response to this prescribed curse was Amen! Amen!

Unfortunately, this double amen is obscured in one of the latest English translations. The New International Version—which elsewhere in the Old Testament retains the amens—translates it as "so be it." Not only is the double amen lost—this is the first place in the Old Testament where the twin amen occurs—but the expression "so be it" has a ring of resignation to it; this is not the mood of the text.

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It should be noted that this problem—whether to translate, or transliterate amen—has a long history. In reference to Dt. 27 we noted that the Septuagint translated it. But the Septuagint does not treat amen consistently; in some texts it is transliterated, in some it is *genoito*, and in one place it is rendered *alēthos* —

"truly."¹⁰ This ambivalence may be due to the Septuagint's being a translation produced by many (traditionally *seventy*) scholars, but that still leaves unanswered *why* a particular scholar retained the original form.

The Vulgate keeps the amens in all the Old Testament passages. Jerome, father of the Vulgate, produced a parallel translation of the Psalms, with one column based on the Septuagint and the other, translated directly from the Hebrew. In the latter he used amen, in the former, *fiat*, "may it be."¹¹

By the time of the New Testament, Greek-speaking Jews had become quite used to both ways of rendering amen. This is important for it seems that some amens were lost in the translation, or at least, in the composition, of the New Testament. Others have been eliminated in modern translations.

Amen in the Historical Books

The next appearance of amen is in I Kings 1:36. In response to the plans for crowning Solomon, Benaiah, a palace official, says, "Amen, may the LORD the God of my lord the king so declare it:"¹² Here the amen is used as an affirmation or agreement with a previous statement. Joined closely with it is a prayer that God declare his amen, as it were, to the plans.

In I Chronicles 16 a psalm (similar in part to Psalm 105) is "committed to Asaph and his associates" (v. 7). At the conclusion of the psalm, which ends with a doxology, it is said, "Then all the people said 'Amen' and 'Praise the Lord.'" By their amen the people of Israel recognized the canonical character of the psalm as a vehicle for expressing their praise.

Amen in the Conclusions to the "Books" in Psalms

The incident mentioned above serves to shed light on the use of amen in the book of Psalms, where it appears in only four places. The Psalms seem to imitate the structure of

the first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch, for Psalms also has a five-fold division. At the close of each section, except the last, there is a short doxology and an amen response. (These are found in Psalm 41:13, 72:19, 89:52 and 106:48.) Not one of the doxologies is the same as another; three of the doxologies are closed with the double amen, but only one amen is used in 106:48.

The ending of the fourth book of Psalms includes the liturgical direction, "Let all the people say 'Amen.'" This is similar to the statement in I Chronicles 16:36; together these create a strong presumptive argument for understanding the concluding amens of the previous Psalm Books (41:13, 72:19, and 89:52) the same way. Since all other amens in the Old Testament are responses expressed by a person (or a group) to someone else's statement, it would be unlikely that the amens of these Psalms are mere literary forms.

Jeremiah's Use of Amen

In Jeremiah 11 the word of the Lord charges the prophet to tell the people of Judah that they have broken the terms of the covenant. Both the curse of the covenant and the blessing of obedience are reiterated. The prophet Jeremiah responds with "Amen, Lord." There are echoes of Deut. 27 here; again, amen is in response to the sanctions of the covenant.

Jeremiah acknowledged that the Lord would bring judgment on the people who had broken his covenant. There were prophets in Judah, however, who in the name of the Lord spoke words of encouragement and foretold a time of peace! No harm would come to Judah, they prophesied. Hananiah, one of these false prophets, asserted that Nebuchadnezzar's yoke would be broken. King Jehoiachin would also be restored along with the exiles and the articles of the temple.

Jeremiah's response (28:6) was "Amen! May the LORD do so. May the LORD fulfill the words you have prophesied by bringing the articles of the LORD's house and all the

exiles back." This is the only place in the Scriptures where Amen! is apparently said in irony. It is obvious from the context that Jeremiah did not believe in Hananiah. Hananiah attempted to force belief in his prophecy by breaking the yoke on Jeremiah's neck. But Jeremiah replied that a yoke of iron would replace the yoke of wood; furthermore Hananiah would soon die.

Jeremiah 28:6 is not only unique in the way amen is used; it is also treated in an unusual way by the Septuagint translators. It is the only place the particle is translated by *alēthos*, "truly." The previous Jeremiah amen had been rendered *genoito*, "may it be."

Amen in the Post-Exilic Period

There are two post-exilic amens in the Old Testament, both in the book of Nehemiah. The reformers Ezra and Nehemiah attempted to bring the returnees into line with the demands of the covenant. Nehemiah declared opposition to the practice of usury. He exacted an oath from priests that they would agree to stop charging their brothers interest. Using the gesture of shaking out his garment, Nehemiah declared that God would shake out of his house those who would not obey Him. "At this the whole assembly said 'Amen' and praised the LORD" (Neh. 5:13).

Public reading of the law is an act of covenant renewal; this is so in Exodus 24:7f, Dt. 31:9-13, Joshua 8:34f, II Chron. 34:30ff.¹³ Although these texts do not elaborate, we may infer that the amen was part of the ceremony, for the chronicler writes,

Then he [Josiah] made everyone in Jerusalem and Benjamin *pledge themselves to it*; the people of Jerusalem did this in accordance with the covenant of God, the God of their fathers" (II Chron. 34:32, emphasis added).

When Ezra assembled the people for a covenant renewal ceremony, they sealed their agreement with amen:

Ezra praised the LORD, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded: "Amen! Amen!" Then they bowed down and worshipped the LORD with their faces to the ground" (Neh. 8:6).

When the dozen places where amen is used in the Old Testament are reviewed, we find a great diversity. The situations ranged from public declarations to a private confrontation. Amen is used to attest the works of divinely-inspired poets as well as to mock the vain boastings of an imposter prophet. It confirms the plans laid for the coronation of David's immediate successor but it also seals the destiny of an alleged adulteress.

Amen as Covenant Affirmation: Oath and Seal

Can we find a concept that will express the unity suggested by the use of the same particle in such diverse situations? Or is amen to be understood in so many different ways that the unity is only formal, i.e., the superficiality of employing the same word? While there are obvious references to covenant in Dt. 27:15-26, Jer. 11:5 and Neh. 8:6, covenant is less clearly seen elsewhere. Yet when one considers the continuance of the Davidic dynasty, the purity of the congregation and the ethical practice of the returnees—in all these situations it is the life of the covenant people that is in view. The chronicler seems to want the reader to understand that the approbation of a Psalm is also a covenantal act. Immediately following the people's amen-response to the new psalm (I Chron. 16:36), is the statement that Asaph and his associates ministered before the ark of the *covenant*.

That which unifies all the dozen amen passages is the concept of covenant affirmation. Amen is basically an affirmation

word, an oath. At times the oath is used with a specific curse (Num. 5:22 and Dt. 27 *passim*) At times it attests a specific statement (Jer. 28); at still other moments it attests the ancient word (Neh. 8) or the newly-spoken hymn of praise (I Chron. 16:36 and the Psalm book closings).

If we can be allowed to shift the idiom from the oral (an oath is *spoken* to the visual and tactile sphere, amen can also be viewed as a *seal*. Like an oath, a seal also attests a statement; neither an oath nor a seal imparts genuineness but the presence of either is normally associated with authenticity, reliability and sincerity.

The God of the Amen

There remains one text in the Old Testament which may involve amen. We find the following translation for Isaiah 63:16 in the New International Version:

Whoever invokes a blessing in the land
will do so by the God of truth;
he who takes an oath in the land
will swear by the God of truth.

The expression translated "by the God of truth" is *be'lohe-amen* "by/in the God of (the) Amen." Most translations are in line with the one quoted above. The Septuagint has "the true God," *ton theon ton alēthinon*. The Vulgate, however, has *in Deo amen*. *Biblia Hebraica*, the critical text, lists no textual variants, yet the editors suggest emending the text to produce a smoother translation.¹⁴ The New English Version has "the God whose name is Amen. . .the God of Amen." The Revised Version margin also allows for "the God of Amen." Other versions and commentators have seen that "God of (the) Amen" is the straightforward, if not fluent, translation of the expression.¹⁵ Yet the apparent awkwardness of the amen translation seems to have influenced translators to avoid the difficulty.

Such handling of the text is unconscionable! There are no textual variants

here; the verse is indeed unusual, but that is no ground for eliminating its uniqueness. Why could Isaiah not describe God—especially in an eschatological picture—in such terms? Further, it would seem that translators have been unaware of the use to which this name of God is to be put. The parallel statements speak of blessing and cursing; it is precisely in such a framework that amen is used! Even those who favor emending the text here call attention to the fact that as the verse stands it bears formal similarity to Rev. 3:14. "These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation."¹⁶

That God can be designated the God of the Amen suggests that amen itself is a surrogate for the name of God. To take the amen oath would then be equivalent to invoking the God who is faithful and true.

That God can be designated the God of the Amen suggests that amen itself is a surrogate for the name of God. To take the amen oath would then be equivalent to invoking the God who is faithful and true. Oath-taking always involves swearing by someone/something considered greater than the person doing the swearing (cf, Heb. 6:16). Unless that oath is taken in God's name it involves idolatry, for God has then been replaced. One is forced to admit—whatever translation is accepted in Isa. 65:16—that as an oath-word, amen refers to, and at times directly substitutes for, the Faithful One.

Amen in the New Testament

When one considers the use of amen in the New Testament it must be remembered that amen is always an untranslated term

inasmuch as the New Testament was not written in Hebrew or Aramaic. To put it differently, the presence of amen (and similar Hebrew or Aramaic terms) reveals how strongly the New Testament is influenced by the Semitic background of its authors and of its principal subject, our Lord Himself.

New Testament occurrences of amen can be divided into three main groups: 1) amen used at the end of benedictions and doxologies, 2) amen used by our Lord, and 3) statements about amen.

Amen in Doxologies and Benedictions

The doxologies and/or benedictions can further be separated according to their position; many are found at the end of a book. Others are embedded in the text of a letter. Due to textual problems those found in the conclusions of books deserve special attention.

If one were to read the New Testament in the Authorized Version and then read any of the newer translations one would be struck by the smaller number of amens in these modern translations. This is most evident at the conclusion of various books of the New Testament. Although some books do not close with a benediction or doxology, the question of the genuineness of the amen may be extended to include these as well.

The Authorized Version concludes twenty-four New Testament books by using the amen. The New International Version, only five. Only in Acts, James, and III John do both versions agree in not using the amen; in five (Romans, Galatians, II Peter, Jude, and Revelation) they agree in including amen. The high degree (more than 70%) of disagreement between these versions is due to their dependence on different manuscripts; most of the older, more reliable manuscripts had not been discovered in the early seventeenth century when the Authorized Version was made.¹⁷

This does not mean that in every instance the older manuscripts support the ending without the amen for there are differences

among some of the older manuscripts. Even Sinaiticus, which for the sake of argument one might consider the best single manuscript, exhibits differences between its original hand and subsequent "correctors." The problem is, of course, a complex one, far outside the domain of this study. It must suffice to give an outline of the situation.

First, undisputed conclusions involving the lack of amen occur only in Acts and James—both of which, incidentally, end without a benediction/doxology. Second, it is our judgment that better textual evidence is on the side of not employing the amens where some doubt exists. Third, transcrip-

tional probability favors adding an amen to a doxology/benediction rather than removing an existing one. Finally, early Christian writings show endings with and without amens.¹⁸

A more important matter, and one from which it is not necessary to try to disentangle a textual question, is the relation of the New Testament amen to the doxology with which it is used.¹⁹ The ultimate model would be the doxologies found at the end of the first four books of Psalms (*vide supra*). Below is a comparison of Psalm 41:13 (Greek text 40:14) with two doxologies from the letter to the Romans.

	Col. I	Col. II	Col. III	Col. IV
Psa. 41:13	<i>eulogētos</i>	<i>kurios ho theos Israel</i>	<i>apo tou aiōnos kai eis ton aiōna</i>	<i>genoito, genoito</i>
Rom. 9:5	<i>eulogētos</i>	<i>ho ὄn epi pantōn theos</i>	<i>eis tous aiōnas</i>	<i>amēn</i>
Rom. 1:25	<i>[estin] eulogētos</i>	<i>hos</i>	<i>eis tous aiōnas</i>	<i>amēn</i>

In the first column is the "blessing word," the second gives the divine name or reference, the third has reference to eternity, and the last column has the response. Usually the New Testament model does not express the verb; the reference to divinity is usually shifted into the dative. (This is probably a variant of the "dative of possessor" construction.)

More important for the purposes of this study at least, is another shift. When the conclusions to the four books of Psalms were considered, it was seen that one (Ps. 106:48) gave directions to the people to respond with the amen. From this and the reference in I Chron. 16:36 it appeared that the other Psalm amens were also to be taken as responses by the congregation. But how is one to understand the doxologies of the New Testament, which, formally at least, seem to correspond to those in the Psalms? These

doxologies are sometimes embedded in the text and the amens can hardly be considered liturgical responses to the entire preceding section of the text (as could the psalm responses).

There are two possible explanations. The writer could have used the Psalm doxology as his model, adapting it for his own purposes. The New Testament has many examples of Old Testament passages which are used in a way which would not have been obvious in the original setting.²⁰ One would then view the amen as an integral part of the doxology and without the "responsive" connotation.

The second possibility is that in taking over the Old Testament doxology model, the New Testament writer put himself in the place of the respondent; that is, in the amen the writer assumed the role of worshipper. He praised God in responding to the

statement he had just made. The advantage of this interpretation is that it does justice to the character of amen as a response word. Apocryphal, pseudepigraphal and Qumran literature, as well as the New Testament, all attest to the continuing use of amen as a response.²¹

The Use of Amen by our Lord

The greatest number of amens in the New Testament are unrecognized by most readers for the amens are lost in the translation. It is ironic that this word which has intruded not only the Greek of the New Testament but also the many languages into which the New Testament has been translated, has in its most prolific use, slipped away from the sight of all who do not read the New Testament in its original language. The only appearance of amen in the gospels is as a modifier of the verb *legō*, "to say"—and it is restricted to the introduction of sayings of the Lord.²²

This is a most remarkable use; one can find no precedent for it in the Old Testament, apocryphal, or other extra-Biblical literature pre-dating the New Testament. Further, it is only used in the Gospels and never taken up by other writers of the New Testament. As already noted, the rest of the New Testament employs amen as a response to benedictions and doxologies and makes additional statements about the use of amen in worship. Thus our Lord's use of amen stands out as unique.

Many questions can be raised concerning this strange use of amen. Why, for instance, does John always use the formula with the amen doubled: "Truly, truly I say to you"? The synoptic writers never employ the double amen. Some of these matters seem to defy explanation. (In the excursus, more attention is given to the details of the use; here we shall attempt to draw some conclusions concerning its general characteristics.)

It is possible to so dwell on the unusual nature of this construction that the force of amen itself becomes distorted. It should be

remembered that amen, both in the Old Testament and in the rest of the New Testament, is a particle of response. That characteristic cannot be removed from the *amēn legō* ("truly I say") construction, even though a new dimension has been added. The amen still retains a certain backward reference; the "saying statement" is itself a response to something.

The present writer selected at random twelve *amēn legō* or *amēn amēn legō* statements. Using the paragraphing and captions of sections adopted in the *United Bible Societies Greek New Testament* he made the following discovery. Each of the twelve introductory statements, taken from all four gospels, was either deeply embedded within a unit ("pericope") or came as the conclusion to a new topic²³

The use as a connective particle is important. The statement Jesus introduces with the formula is made against the background of an immediately preceding discussion or dialogue. Jesus' remark, introduced by the formula, is more properly considered a pronouncement than a statement. The content of the matter introduced by the formula is always rather startling: men will be able to move mountains, tax-collectors and prostitutes will enter the kingdom before "righteous" men; unless one is born again (or "from above") one cannot enter the kingdom of God.

The statements, however, are not all threatening: Jesus reveals the privilege his disciples have of being able to see and hear that which the ancient prophets longed to experience. Indeed, some in his presence would not die before they saw the kingdom of God come with power. All these statements are oracular and are spoken with authority. This note of authority, present even when the formula is not used, is emphasized by the use of amen. The amen in the formula is used by our Lord to affirm or corroborate his statement. There is no appeal to external authorities; on the contrary, the amen calls attention to the speaker himself.²⁴

“Yes” and “Amen”

That which clearly indicates the use of amen as a particle of affirmation is its association with *nai*, “yes.” This is seen in the book of Revelation, in the gospels and in Paul’s writings.

In the last chapter of the Bible the witness of the events says, “Yes, I am coming quickly” (Rev. 22:20a). The response is, “Amen, come Lord Jesus” (Rev. 22:20b). To translate, “Yes, come Lord Jesus” would certainly be idiomatically correct.

The liturgical use of amen was so well established in the New Testament church that Paul used the practice to chide those glorying in their esoteric tongue speaking. In I Cor. 14:16 he asks, “If you are praising God with your spirit, how can one who finds himself among those who do not understand say ‘Amen’ to your thanksgiving, since he does not know what you are saying?” In other words, the amen response had to be an affirmation of an intelligible faith-statement, not an emotive ejaculative response.

“Yes” and “Amen” are closely paralleled in Rev. 1:7 “. . . and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him. So shall it be! Amen.” If one were unaware of the underlying text, one might conclude that the first response was an alternate for an *amēn*. But the Greek is *nai, amēn*. Thus in Rev. 1:7, *nai*, “yes,” can be translated like *amēn* “so be it,” and in Rev. 22:20, *amēn* could have been rendered “yes.”

As is indicated in the excursus, Luke prefers other saying formulas, using the *amēn legō* construction the least of all gospel writers. One of the substitutes he employs is *nai, legō humin* “Yes, I say to you.” Luke and Matthew both detail the statement con-

cerning the greatness of John the Baptist. Both use *nai, legō humin* to introduce the first statement concerning John. A second pronouncement concerning the Baptist is introduced by *amēn legō* in Matthew, and probably—there is a textual problem at this point—by a mere *legō* in Luke.²⁵ Whatever one makes of the Lucan sequence, the Matthean account clearly follows this pattern: *nai, legō humin*, “Yes, I say to you”. . . , *amēn legō humin*, “Amen I say to you.” Further, a Luke-Matthew parallel (Luke 11:51, Matt. 23:35) shows *nai, legō* (Luke) substituting for *amēn legō* in Matthew.²⁶

A key passage relating “yes” and “amen” is II Cor. 1:20. In the verses preceding this text Paul indicated that the gospel message he and Silas preached was not “yes” and “no.” That is, Paul denied that the message was equivocal; Christ was always presented positively, as the affirmation, the “yes,” to all the promises of God. Then Paul said, “And so through him the ‘Amen’ is spoken by us to the glory of God.”

The Liturgical Use of Amen

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In II Cor. 1:20 Paul connected the liturgical response, Amen! to Christ. “Why,” Paul asked in effect, “do you use Amen! as a response (to doxologies, prayers and readings of Scripture)? How can you say, ‘May it be so?’” It is because Christ is the consummating “yes” to all God’s promises. The Amen! is the Christian’s proper response to God’s revelation because its truth and surety rest not on the believer’s confidence as

much as in their faithful Lord Christ.

The amen is spoken "through Christ." It is possible that Paul, too, was aware of our Lord's predominant use of amen to introduce his pronouncements. The amen is spoken through the one who so frequently applied amen to his own statements. Yet Paul stops short of calling Christ the Amen. That equivalency of yes and amen, which has already been noted, brings one to the point of seeing the Yes of Christ, through whom the Yes-equivalent amen is spoken, as the *Amen*.

Christ as the Amen

The explicit statement is found in the Apocalypse. With Rev. 3:14 we are back in the territory marked out by the prophetic word of Isaiah (Isa. 65:15). "These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation." There can be no doubt that this makes clear what the preceding material has hinted at. The Christ who uses amen to seal his statements with authority, the Christ through whom the believers' own amen gets its validity, is the faithful and true (note the adjectives) witness, the Amen par excellence.

It is to be noted that the expression in Rev. 3:14 is *ho Amēn* not to *Amēn*. The use of *ho*, the masculine article, makes the expression personal. All the amens voiced in worship by the faithful are meaningful only through the One who is Himself their response to God's demands and promises. There can be no greater assurance of divine faithfulness than that.²⁷ The original use of amen was to confirm a curse (Dt. 27:15-26, Num. 5:22). The New Testament has very few references to curses—and most of them are oblique references, at that; therefore, few occasions exist in which amen might have appeared. Nevertheless, one cannot dismiss the matter of why a curse-confirming amen does not appear in the New Testament.

It is proper to relate the paucity of curse references to the positive emphasis of Christ. The Sermon on the Mount is, as it

were, delivered on Mt. Gerezim, not Mt. Ebal. One remembers the Sermon for its Beatitudes, not for its maledictions. The closest to curses are strong warnings issued to those who do not practise the ethics of the kingdom of God. Christ came, not to condemn, but to fulfill the law.

The Curse-Seal Turned into the Seal of Blessing

This fulfilling, indeed, involved Christ's becoming a curse (Gal. 3:13). He, in turn, cancelled—for those who trust in Him—the curse which rests on all who do not keep the law. (Gal. 3:10 alludes to Dt. 27:26—the last, and comprehensive, curse.) Christ thus is the seal of God's curse—and of God's blessing. Paul sensed this antithesis so intensely that he said, "A curse on those who do not love Christ (I Cor. 16:22). To pervert the gospel is to bring people back to the curse of the law; Paul in his hyperbole extended that curse even to angels (Gal. 1:8). The curse-seal confirms a curse on those who act as if law-keeping will provide their access to God. The curse God brought on Christ removes the curse for those who now trust in Christ. Thus the amen-seal becomes the seal of blessing and of faith. Christ, the seal of God's promise is the guarantee of blessings yet to come. We look to Him expectantly and echo the Apostle John's response: "Amen! Come Lord Jesus" (Rev. 22:20).

Excursus: The *Amēn* *Legō* Formula in the Gospels

Our familiarity with amen may blind us from noticing that, in the New Testament, amen is a foreign word. Whether one considers it Hebrew, its ultimate source, or Aramaic, the language of the Jews of first century Palestine is beside the point. Several Hebrew or Aramaic words—even whole clauses—are retained in the Greek New Testament. Their retention—most of them are translated—seem to be bound up with an impression these terms made on the writers.

Being familiar with the Septuagint, the

gospel writers knew that the Hebrew amen was sometimes translated *genoito*, once *alēthos*, and sometimes kept untranslated as *amēn*. Obviously *genoito*, "let it be," would be out of the question for the *amēn legō* construction. Luke, who uses *amēn* the least, does indeed employ *alēthos* with the *legō* formula. By keeping the *amēn* instead of using *alēthos*, the evangelists provided a conscious, close connection with the Old Testament and the response-use of amen in the synagogue.

The formula contains the first use of amen in the New Testament and the only indisputable amens in the gospels. Its restricted use—only on the lips of our Lord—serves to focus attention on the one who introduces his startling statements in such a singular way. So carefully did the New Testament writers guard this clause that even when they wished to assert their own (though admittedly, derived) authority they dared not use it.²⁸ Whenever it is used by the Lord—even in parables—it always refers to Himself.²⁹ The overwhelming evidence indicates that the explanation of this exclusive reference is bound up with unique person Christ is.

Further, in reading the gospels one is struck by the "unnecessary" retention of saying-formulae, whether the *amēn legō* introduction or other formulae. They are often "unnecessary" since the saying could have been attached to the previous clause. Note, for instance, Matthew 26:34, "I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "this very night, before the cock crows, you will disown me three times. This could certainly have been stated: Jesus answered, "This very night, before the cock crows, you will disown me three times." Unless, of course, the *amēn legō* formula was seen (as we think it was) to be an indispensable part of the statement! If that was the case, then part of the explanation for the retention of the formula with so many incidents—sixty-three separate situations throughout the gospels—is the evangelists' desire to emphasize the Lord's authority. The say-er gives the say-ing its validity.

The particulars of the use of the formula are significant. Luke, who has the most literary, polished style, uses the formula least. In forty-one places where he employs some other *legō* introduction, there are no less than thirteen variants. His use of *amēn legō* constitutes only 12.8% of his introductory clauses. Matthew's percentage is 54.5%, Mark's 76.4% and John's 86.2%.³⁰

The formula is always used with the dative of personal object; it is never "truly I say" but always "truly I say to you." The person is usually in the plural. Five statements referring to a singular occur in John: the Nicodemus encounter (3:3, 5, 11), Peter's denial (13:38), and Peter's restoration (21:18). The denial account also occurs in Matt. 26:34 and Luke 14:30. The remaining singular "you" objects are found in Jesus' remarks to the penitent thief (Luke 23:43) and in the saying about agreeing quickly with an adversary (Matt. 5:26).

The greatest number of *amēn legō* introductions in any gospel is found in Matthew (30). John—who uses *amēn amēn legō*—is next with twenty-five, Mark has thirteen and Luke only six. The twenty-five occasions in which John uses his formula include only two also found in the synoptic gospels: Peter's denial and the announcement that "one of you will betray me." Further, there are only eight incidents, taking all four gospels together, where the formula is used by more than one evangelist.

That two incidents are reported by John with his double amen formula when Matthew and Mark use the single amen (John 13:16, Matt. 26:21, and Mark 14:18; John 13:38, Matt. 26:34, and Mark 14:30) serves to introduce the question: What did Jesus actually say? Did Jesus use one or two amens? The question is similar to that which arises when we note that Luke rarely used the formula. Luke, for instance, has *legō soi*, "I say to you," in the parallel to the foretelling of Peter's denial found in John 13:38, Matt. 26:34, and Mark 14:30. For the purposes of this paper we are content to let the question rest, considering each of the formulas

adequate to convey the force of the original expression.

Some of the other introductory expressions used by the evangelists are *idou lego humin*, *legō de humin*, *legō gar humin*, *palin de legō humin* and *alēthōs legō humin*. Matthew, who uses the *amēn legō* formula more than any other evangelist, prefers *egō de legō humin* in the Sermon on the Mount.

To pervert the gospel is to bring people back to the curse of the law; Paul in his hyperbole extended that curse even to angels (Gal. 1:8). The curse-seal confirms a curse on those who act as if law-keeping will provide their access to God. The curse God brought on Christ removes the curse for those who now trust in Christ. Thus the amen-seal becomes the seal of blessing and of faith. Christ, the seal of God's promise is the guarantee of blessings yet to come. We look to Him expectantly and echo the Apostle John's response: "Amen! Come Lord Jesus" (Rev. 22:20).

In Matt. 5:21 a section begins in which the expression, "You have heard that it was said" (or a slight variant of this expression) is used six times (verses 21, 27, 31, 33, 38 and 43). The response each time is, "But I say to you." Although this striking formula is used only here, the *amen* formula is not absent from this sermon. It is found in verse 18, and in verse 26, at the end of the paragraph which began with verse 21. The point of the *ego* . . . introductions is obvious: the contrast is between the authority of the ancient interpreters of the law and the Lord Himself. Jesus places *his* word against theirs. The special formula is used for a special purpose.

More questions can be generated by a con-

sideration of the data of the amen formula usage than one can answer with certainty. One intriguing question is this: With how many sayings of Jesus should the amen formula be associated? Of approximately 148 sayings introduced by a formula of saying, half (or 74) use *amen* or *amēn amēn*. At times, when parallel accounts are compared, we note differing treatments of what had originally been expressed. For example, Matt. 8:10 uses the formula while its Lucan parallel, Luke 7:9 does not. There are also places within a particular gospel where *palin legō*, "again I say," seems to carry the force of a previous *amēn legō*.¹¹ Sometimes a saying is joined to another without repeating the formula. This is the case with the saying about forsaking houses and brothers; Luke (18:29) and Mark (10:29) use the formula but Matthew employs no formula at all (Matt. 19:29).¹² From this, one can move to the question: If one gospel can have an "orphan" saying (that is, one introduced without a formula) where the other gospels do employ the formula, may there be more "orphan" sayings which originally had the declarative introduction?

Very likely, then, the number of sayings with which we associate *amēn legō* is much greater than that which a cursory reading of the gospels indicates.

Notes

¹Certainly amen is to be read in Rev. 22:20. There is a textual problem with Rev. 22:21 and one cannot say with absolute certainty—however convenient that might be for this article—that amen is the last word of the Bible.

²G. W. H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), *in loc.*

³Hermann L. Strack and Paul Billerbeck, *Kommen-tar zu Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch*. Erster Band (Hildesheim: Georg Alms Verlag, 1962), p. 464. It is a *qatil* form in which are found both primary adjectives and, like amen, adjectives derived from verbs.

⁴The irony of the verse is lost in the Authorized Version: "If ye will not believe, surely ye shall not be established."

⁵Donald J. Wiseman, *The Vassal-Treaties of Esarhad-don* (London: The British School of Archaeology in

Iraq, 1958), p. 26.

⁷Cited in Wiseman p. 26 and in Meredith G. Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), p. 134.

⁸IQSI, 20; IQSII, 10; IQSII, 18. The three texts are similar, but not identical; blessing and cursing are explicit only in IQSII, 10.

⁹This reflects the marginal reading of the NIV. The text "so that your abdomen swells and your thigh wastes away" may be more literal but it does not convey the sense very well. The threat of repeated miscarriages and resulting barrenness was much more abhorrent to women of ancient times than it is today.

¹⁰Henry Barclay Swete, *An Introduction to the Old Testament in Greek* (Cambridge University Press, 1902), pp. 317f notes that this diverse rendering of amen is similar to the treatment of proper names; Swete believes this supports the idea of a plurality of translators.

¹¹This is indeed noteworthy since in the Psalms the critical Septuagint editions read amen, not *genoito*. Obviously Jerome's Greek text varied from the texts which modern editors have considered most reliable.

¹²The Septuagint translates the amen (*genoito*) and adds "thus" (*houtos*). This indicates that the LXX translators were not following the tradition which is found in the Massoretic accents. These indicate that *ken*, "thus," goes with the following clause.

¹³II Kings 23:1-3 is the parallel to II Chron. 34:3-ff. Compare also Neh. 9:3ff, 10:23.

¹⁴Biblia Hebraica suggests reading either 'emun or the rarer 'omen instead of 'amen. Either emendation would produce "the faithful God" or "the God of faithfulness."

¹⁵The Berkley Version (1959) uses "God of truth" in the text but includes this confusing note: "Literally the 'Amen of Truth.'"

¹⁶Francis Brown, S. R. Driver and Charles A. Briggs *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1906), *in loc*.

Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *Hebraisches und Aramaisches Lexikon zum alten Testament* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1967), *in loc*.

¹⁷The percentage of disagreement between the Authorized Version and the best modern critical judgment of the state of the text (as regards the final amens) could be higher. The New International Version retains the amen in Rev. 22:21 and II Peter 3:18. The United Bible Societies Greek text does not retain the amen in Rev. 22:21 and considers its retention in II Peter 3:18 most doubtful, assigning it only a "D" grade.

¹⁸The amen is quite common, appearing at the end of I Clement, the Epistle of Barnabas, the Acts of Thaddeus, the Epistle to Diognetus, the Martyrdom of Polycarp, to mention a few examples. The Didache, however, ends without a benediction, doxology or amen. The Vaticanus manuscript of Hermes, Similitudes has a different ending—without amen—from the main text (which has no doxology/benediction but does have an amen).

¹⁹Benedictions and doxologies are closely associated

and sometimes "benediction" is used to cover both. Some might object that we cannot "bless" God—it is only the greater who blesses the lesser—thus an ascription of blessedness to God is a doxology, not a benediction.

²⁰For an example, one of the first references of this type in the New Testament is Matt. 2:15: "Out of Egypt have I called my son." This quote from Hosea 11:1 is adapted to refer to the Christ-child but in Hosea it refers to taking the nation Israel from Egypt.

²¹The Qumran evidence has already been cited; the most relevant New Testament texts are I Cor. 14:16 and II Cor. 1:20; these will be discussed later. The following apocryphal works are in point: I Esdras 9:47, Tobit 8:8, Judith 13:20. Compare, in the pseudipigrapha, Jubilees 4:5.

²²This assumes the correctness of the U.B.S. Greek Text (followed, for the most part, by the New International Version). In the Authorized Version the endings of the gospels and the traditional doxology of the Matthean version of the Lord's Prayer all have concluding amens.

²³Further investigation corroborates this; the only exception seems to be at John 10:1. John 10:7, at the beginning of a paragraph, obviously refers to the theme found in John 10:1-6.

²⁴See remarks in the excursus re: "but I say to you."

²⁵Some of the best manuscripts present evidence conflicting with each other: X has *amēn legō*, D reads *legō*, *de* and A lists *legō gar*. The last two expressions, along with the *legō* adopted in the UBS text, represent common Lucan substitutes for *amēn legō*.

²⁶The verses are not exactly parallel—even discounting the *legō* problem—but they do exhibit a parallelism of theme.

²⁷Phillip Edgecombe Huges, *Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, London Commentary Series (London Edinburgh: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1962), pp. 37f.

²⁸The closest that Paul, who frequently asserted his right to speak, came to using the formula is probably "speaking the truth in Christ" (Rom. 9:1) cf. I Tim, 2:7. Other Pauline statement-introductions worthy of note are found in Rom. 12:3, I Cor. 7:12, Gal. 1:9, Eph. 4:17, and I Thess. 4:15.

²⁹Curiously the only use in parables is found in Matthew, chapter twenty-five, and there three times! (Matt. 25:11, 40, 45). In both stories—v. 40 and v. 45 are antithetic parallels—it is apparent that the speaker who uses *amēn legō* is a figure who represents the Lord.

³⁰These percentages are based on the U.B.S. Greek Text, 2nd edition. Variant readings could alter the figures slightly.

³¹Matthew 19:23: *amēn legō*, Matt. 19:24: *palin de legō*, also Matt. 18:18, 19.

³²Compare also Matt. 13:57 and Mark 6:4—both without any formula—with Luke 4:24: *amēn legō*; also Mark 10:29, Luke 18:29—both use *amēn legō*—with Matt. 19:29, which has no formula but which is attached to verse 28 where the formula is used.