

## The Newness of the New Covenant

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A biblical covenant is the legal establishment of a relationship between God and His people. God takes the initiative, institutes this close relationship, and secures it personally. He makes the first step and does it because of His love for His children. The covenants He cuts are based on His love, grace, and faithfulness, and rooted in God's eternal covenant established within the Trinity before the foundation of the world to save humankind in case they would fall into sin (Eph 1:3-4; 2 Tim 1:9; Titus 1:2; 1 Peter 1:20; Rev 13:8).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The following excellent resources are worthy to study in regard to God's covenants: Daniel I. Block, *Covenant: The Framework of God's Grand Plan of Redemption* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021); William J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation: A Theology of Old Testament Covenants* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1984); Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012); Bradley G. Green, *Covenant and Commandment: Works, Obedience and Faithfulness in the Christian Life* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014); Gerhardt F. Hasel and Michael G. Hasel, *The Promise: God's Everlasting Covenant* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2020); Scott J. Hafemann, *Paul's Message and Ministry in Covenant Perspective: Selected Essays* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015); Skip MacCarty, *In Granite or Ingrained? What the Old and New Covenants Reveal About the Gospel, Law, and the Sabbath* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2007); Thomas E. McComiskey, *The Covenants of Promise: A Theology of the Old Testament Covenants* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985); Steven L. McKenzie, *Covenant* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2000); Benjamin L. Merkle, *Discontinuity to Continuity: A Survey of Dispensational & Covenantal Theologies* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020); O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1980); David VanDrunen, *Divine Covenants and Moral Order: A Biblical Theology of Natural Law* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014); John H. Walton, *Covenant: God's Purpose, God's Plan* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994); Guy Prentiss Waters, J.

### MOSKALA: THE NEWNESS OF THE NEW COVENANT

In the epistle to the Hebrews, the apostle Paul<sup>2</sup> makes a clear distinction between the “first” and the “new” covenants and states that if there had been nothing “deficient” or “inadequate” with the first one, the “second” or “new” would be not have been needed. The new covenant was first stated by Jeremiah (33:31–34), explained by Ezekiel (36:22–32; 37:23–28), and then repeated by Paul in Hebrews (8:8–12), which is the longest quotation of an Old Testament passage in the New Testament.

Paul discusses the new covenant in the setting of Christ’s ministry in the heavenly sanctuary as our High Priest in comparison to sanctuary services in the earthly tabernacle with the animal sacrifices and the Levitical priesthood. He speaks about the “better covenant” (7:22; 8:6), and this better covenant is the “new covenant” (8:8; 9:15; 12:24; [see also Luke 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25; 2 Cor 3:6] or the “second” one (8:7). The key adjective “better” is a comparative of “good,” thus Paul compares the first covenant which was “good” to the new covenant which is “better.” It is important to remind ourselves that Paul’s purpose for writing the epistle to the Hebrews is to admonish his readers to stay faithful to Jesus and not abandon their faith in Him because in Christ everything is better and superior in comparison to the previous sacrificial system full of rituals.<sup>3</sup>

#### What Was the First Covenant?

One needs to ask what Paul means when he speaks about the “first covenant” (the full phrase is used only in Heb 9:15; but see also 8:7, 13; 9:1, 18). To what covenant is he referring? It is interesting that Paul in Hebrews never once uses the term “old covenant” to describe the first covenant. Paul uses the phrase “old covenant” only in 2 Cor 3:14 in reference to the reading and understanding of Old Testament revelation without acknowledging Christ as the key to interpret it. He stresses that

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Nicholas Reid, and John R. Muether, eds., *Covenant Theology: Biblical, Theological, and Historical Perspectives* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> For the reasoning why Paul may be the author of the epistle to the Hebrews, see Felix Cortez’s article, “Authorship of Hebrews: The Case for Paul,” *Spectrum* (February 9, 2022): n.p. Online: <https://spectrummagazine.org/sabbath-school/2022/authorship-hebrews-case-paul>.

<sup>3</sup> The word “better” is used 19 times in the New Testament and out of these occurrences it is employed 13 times in the book of Hebrews (1:4; 6:9; 7:7, 19; 7:22; 8:6 [twice]; 9:23; 10:34; 11:16, 35, 40; 12:24).

*JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY*

Christians are “ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2 Cor 3:6 ESV).<sup>4</sup>

In the new covenant passage, the Lord explains that the new covenant will not be “like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt” (Heb 8:9 NIV). The reference is plainly to the Sinaitic or Mosaic covenant that God made with Israel after the Exodus (Exod 19–24). This covenant was established at Mount Sinai (19:3–8; Heb 12:18–21), ratified by the blood of animal sacrifices (Exod 24:4–8), and renewed by the merciful Lord after the golden-calf Apostasy (Exod 34:10–11) as the forgiving Lord demonstrated on multiple occasions that He is the God of love (Exod 19:4; 20:2; 34:6–7). Paul speaks about this Sinai experience in Heb 9:18–20, and Jeremiah contrasts the new covenant with the Sinaitic covenant too (Jer 31:32). So, the first covenant referred to here by Paul was not a covenant with Adam, Noah, or Abraham, but with Israel at Mount Sinai. It is also clearly declared by the author of the book of Hebrews: “The first covenant had regulations for worship and also an earthly sanctuary” (9:1 NIV).

A tabernacle with its services was an integral part of this Mosaic covenant and this means that the ceremonial or cultic laws were tied to the first covenant. The first covenant’s sacrificial system pointed to Jesus, who was the Passover Lamb and greater than the temple (Exod

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<sup>4</sup> See perceptive insights by Scott J. Hafemann about the experiential deficiency and efficacy of “the law” in the Sinai covenant and the new covenant: “Paul is careful in [2 Cor] 3:6 *not* to establish a contrast between the law itself and the Spirit. Nor is the Spirit to be read as a code-word for the gospel, so that the letter/Spirit contrast is transformed into a law/gospel contrast. The problem with the Sinai covenant was not with the law itself, but, as Ezekiel and Jeremiah testify, with the people whose hearts remained hardened under it. The law remains for Paul, as it did for the Jewish traditions of his day, the holy, just, and good expression of God’s covenantal will (Rom. 7:12). Indeed, Paul characterizes the law itself as ‘spiritual’ (7:14). As the expression of God’s abiding will, it is not the law per se that kills, or any aspect or perversion of it, but the law *without the Spirit*, that is, the law as ‘letter.’ Devoid of God’s Spirit, the law remains to those who encounter it merely a rejected declaration of God’s saving purposes and promises, including its corresponding calls for repentance and the obedience of faith. Although the law declares God’s will, it is powerless to enable people to keep it. Only the Spirit ‘gives life’ by changing the human heart. In this regard, Paul can say that the gospel too kills when it encounters those who are perishing (cf. 2:16!)” (*2 Corinthians, The NIV Application Commentary: From Biblical Text . . . to Contemporary Life* [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000], 132)

### MOSKALA: THE NEWNESS OF THE NEW COVENANT

12:13; Isa 53:7; Dan 9:27; Matt 5:17–18; 12:6; 27:51; John 1:29; 1 Cor 5:7).<sup>5</sup> This represents the discontinuity aspect of the first covenant.

Thus, in the context of Paul's discussion of the covenants in Hebrews, the first covenant had two inseparable parts: (A) the ceremonial or cultic—the sacrificial system with its regulations, and (B) the moral or spiritual with God's four timeless promises. These four elements God had already given to Israel at Sinai (and even earlier as they are key principles or promises of harmonious spiritual life), and were reemphasized by prophets: (1) The presence and cultivation of God's law in heart and mind (Exod 20:2, 6; Deut 6:5–8; 30:11–14; Josh 1:6–9; Pss 1; 37:30–31; Prov 3:4–7; Isa 51:7); (2) the close covenantal relationship with the Lord (Exod 6:6–7; Lev 26:12); (3) the existential knowledge of the Lord (Exod 16:6; 29:46; 33:13); and (4) the forgiveness of sins (Exod 20:6; 34:6–7; Pss 32:1–2; 51:1–4, 10–12; Isa 1:18–19). This content of the new covenant was nothing new; it was only the renewed appeal to internalize God's law, thus the continuity of this covenant is underscored. This is exactly what Jesus was doing when He explained the true meaning of the Old Testament's teachings in the Sermon on the Mount of Beatitudes (Matt 5:17–48).<sup>6</sup>

From this perspective, it is significant to realize that the new covenant has no curses, but only blessings. God's promises are rooted in a renewed relationship with God, in what God can do for and in us when we let Him. The complete solution to the problem of sin comes when sin will be no more, when our transgressions will be no longer be remembered (Heb 8:12; cf. Rev 21:3–7).

#### What Was Going Wrong?

Paul states that “if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another” (Heb 8:7 NIV). It is interesting that many Christians, when reflecting on the first or old covenant, automatically assume that the Sinaitic covenant was improper

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<sup>5</sup> It is noteworthy to mention that the offering of sacrifices did not begin with the Sinaitic covenant because this practice was already known to Cain and Abel (Gen 4:3–4), Noah (Gen 8:20), and Abraham (12:7–8). Sacrifices pointed to the ultimate atoning sacrifice of Jesus on the cross for our sins (Isa 53:3–12; John 12:32; Rom 3:24–26; 1 Cor 15:4; 1 John 2:2).

<sup>6</sup> “Just as the new covenant of Jeremiah promised the facilitation of obedience by the internalization of the law, so the new covenant of Ezekiel would secure obedience through the presence of God's Spirit in the heart” (McComiskey, *The Covenants of Promise*, 90).

*JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY*

and bad, so they pose an important question: What was wrong with the old covenant? However, we need to stress that this is a false question, because the adverb “wrong” is an incorrect translation of the Greek term *amemptos* that means “faultless,” “blameless,” or “without defect,” and not “wrong” as the NIV translators put it. Nowhere does the Bible state that the old covenant was a mistake.

Paul argues that in the first covenant something was insufficient, lacking, deficient, and faulty (8:7–8), thus inadequate, but not wrong. The first covenant was good but older and aging (8:13) and had regulations that were “weak and useless” (7:18). It was characterized as “obsolete” (Greek verb *palaioein* means “declare as obsolete;” “make or become old”), signifying that the first covenant was vanishing, disappearing, and aging, thus, no more relevant. Why?

The Sinaitic covenant with all its specific ceremonies and sacrifices was an illustration (9:9; cf. 8:5), an object lesson of how God saves repentant people, and how He deals with sin, and destroys evil. This presentation of God’s plan of redemption included things which were teaching tools before the reality came in Christ Jesus. It required: (1) offering sacrifices and the blood of the animals which could not forgive sins (Heb 9:23; 10:4) nor bring perfection, cleanse the consciences of people, and assure salvation (7:11; 9:9–10); (2) the services of the priests who were sinful and mortal and, consequently, they needed to repeatedly sacrifice for themselves as well as for people (5:3; 7:23, 27; 9:7); (3) Levitical priesthood (7:5, 9, 11) in contrast to the priesthood according to the order of Melchizedek (6:20; 7:24, 26–28); and (4) regulations for worship and an earthly sanctuary (9:1). Thus, a better sanctuary than the earthly one was envisioned (8:1–2; 9:11–12), a better sacrifice and blood was offered (9:12–15, 23, 25), a better foundation of promises was needed (8:6) and a better hope was projected (7:19).

In other words, nothing was wrong with the Sinaitic covenant itself. The new covenant was part of the *eternal* covenant of God with His people (Heb 13:20; cf. Isa 55:3; Jer 50:4–5; Ezek 37:26). It was the Lord Himself who initiated and entered into a covenantal relationship with them. Neither was the fault with God. He did not trick them nor gave them something inappropriate. The deficiency was not on God’s side. He was not misleading His Old Testament people, nor was He unfair to the Israelites by giving them the Sinaitic covenant.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Do not confuse the discussion between old and new covenants in the book of Hebrews with issues presented in Gal 4:21–31 where Paul explains different problem,

MOSKALA: THE NEWNESS OF THE NEW COVENANT

Roots of the new covenant can be traced back into antiquity. All four principles mentioned in the new covenant are present in the Sinaitic covenant (see above) and can also be detected in the Abrahamic, Noahic, and Adamic covenants. After God's inauguration of His Covenant of Grace with the protoevangelium (Gen 3:15), every subsequent covenant grandfathered in the gospel truths of His previous covenant(s) while adding new elements to the progressively revealed divine covenant, culminating in the new covenant.<sup>8</sup> God's everlasting covenant of grace is actually built on the covenant between the Father and the Son, Jesus Christ, when they covenanted to redeem humanity in case Satan would deceive humans into sin (Eph 1:3-4; 3:10-11; 2 Tim 1:9; Titus 1:2; 1 Peter 1:20; Rev 13:8; cf. Luke 22:29; John 5:30, 43; 6:38-40; 17:4-12; Isa 42:6; Zech 6:12-13).<sup>9</sup>

The *NIV Study Bible* rightly comments on the connection between the Abrahamic covenant and the Sinaitic covenant: "The covenant between God and Israel at Mount Sinai is the outgrowth and extension of the Lord's covenant with Abraham and his descendants 600 years earlier. Participation in the divine blessings is conditioned on obedience added to faith."<sup>10</sup> Sailhamer depicts several parallels between Noah's altar and

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namely legalism on the basis of two different responses to and experiences with the Gospel. He compares the right and wrong roles and attitudes toward God's law. He contrasts the old covenant, i.e., legalism (the attempt to earn and secure salvation by obedience and keeping of the law) with the new covenant, i.e., living by the power of God's grace, because we are not under the curse of the law but under God's grace for Christ set us free from the slavery to sin. See MacCarty, 92-99, 267-284.

We are also not dealing with the contrast between Mount Sinai and Mount Zion in Heb 12:18-24. Wenkel convincingly argues that Mt. Sinai is "unapproachable yet perceivable by the senses," but Mt. Zion is "unperceivable by the five senses while being approachable" (219). See David H. Wenkel, "Sensory Experience and the Contrast Between the Covenants in Hebrews 12," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 173 (April-June 2016): 219-234.

<sup>8</sup> See, the excellent study regarding the continuity of God's covenants in McComiskey, *The Covenants of Promise*, esp. 59-80.

<sup>9</sup> This important fact is also underlined by Ellen White as she paints a picture of the Father and Jesus Christ shaking hands in making the covenant to redeem humankind. She writes in the *Desire of Ages*, 834: "Before the foundations of the world were ever laid, the Father and the Son had united in a covenant to redeem man if he should be overcome by Satan. They had clasped their hands in a solemn pledge that Christ should become the surety for the human race. This pledge Christ has fulfilled." See also Max F. Rogland, "'Striking a Hand (*ṯq' kp*)' in Biblical Hebrew," *Vetus Testamentum* 51 (2001): 108: "The handshake is understood as sealing an agreement."

<sup>10</sup> *The NIV Study Bible, New International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1985), 114.

*JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY*

Moses's altar at Mount Sinai and then wisely concludes on the close relation between the Sinaitic and Noahic covenants: "These observations suggest that the author intentionally draws out the similarities between God's covenant with Noah and the covenant at Sinai. Why? The answer that best fits with the author's purposes is that he wants to show that God's covenant at Sinai is not a new act of God. The covenant is rather a return to God's original promises."<sup>11</sup> The principles of the new covenant are already alluded to in the Adamic covenant: (1) God's law in the heart (Gen 1:28; 2:2–3); (2) belonging to God and in close connection with Him (1:27; 2:7, 21–22; 3:8–9); (3) personal knowledge of God (Gen 1:28; 2:15–17), and (4) forgiveness of sins (3:15, 21; cf. Eph 1:4; Rev 13:8). God's goodness was presupposed because He is the Creator and obedience was always required (Gen 2:15–17; 6:9, 22; 17:1–2; 22:12; 26:5; Exod 19:5; 20:1–17; 34:11). The promise of eternal life was connected to the gift of salvation accepted by faith (Gen 3:15; 15:6).

Paul gives an explicit answer to our question of what went wrong with the first covenant. The problem was with the people's reception of the covenant and their response toward it: "God found fault [*memphomai*, finding fault or blame] with the people" (8:8). People transgressed the first covenant, and this was one of the reasons why God gave the new covenant. This is a very significant observation: people were to blame, not God or the covenant. Remember, people requested that Moses would speak to them directly, and not the Lord (Exod 20:18–20), even though God invited them to go up to Mt. Sinai to meet Him after He gave them the Decalogue (Exod 19:13; Deut 5:5); so, Moses became the mediator of the first covenant (Deut 5:24–27; Heb 9:19–20; 12:18–21; cf. Acts 7:38). Most importantly, the Israelites worshiped the golden-calf (Exod 32:4–6, 19–20), and later people sacrificed to goat-idols in the wilderness (Lev 17:7). They took God's law merely as a command, discounting its promissory potential and accepted His covenant as something they had to do in order to be righteous and holy instead of keeping God's precepts out of gratitude for His kindness toward them. The Decalogue became the performance of work, hard obedience to God's stipulations to earn God's favor, and was not received as God's promise.<sup>12</sup> The law became a burden, an external duty

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<sup>11</sup> John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 129.

<sup>12</sup> For example, the original Hebrew and Greek translation of the OT never refers to the "Ten Commandments" but the "Ten Words" (the literal meaning also of the term

### MOSKALA: THE NEWNESS OF THE NEW COVENANT

to keep without a deep understanding of internalizing and living it out of thankfulness for God's experienced goodness. Three times they responded to the establishment and ratification of the covenant: "We will do everything the LORD has said" (Exod 19:8 NIV; 24:3, 7), but their hearts were not converted. They did not realize the sinfulness of their hearts and their inability to obey God by their own power (Josh 24:19). Obedience is possible only when people are enabled to do so by the power which comes to them from outside of themselves springing from God's grace, His Word, and the Spirit (Ezek 36:27; 1 Cor 15:10; Gal 2:20; Heb 13:20-21; 1 Pet 1:23).

#### What is New in the New Covenant?

Several crucial aspects need to be highlighted to answer our question. First, the new thing is the historical ratification of the new covenant by Jesus Christ's death. He is the guarantee of this covenant (7:22) because He secured and sealed forgiveness and salvation for His followers as well as for believers who lived during Old Testament times in anticipation of the cross (9:15). This proleptic hope was ratified once for all. Secondly, Jesus's ultimate sacrifice *fulfilled* the sacrificial system (Dan 9:27a; Matt 27:51; John 1:29; 1 John 2:2), so no longer were animal sacrifices and their blood, the Levitical priesthood and the earthly sanctuary needed. These rituals and cultic ceremonies performed by human priests were imbedded in the earthly sanctuary. It is transparent that the author of Hebrews proclaims that the cultic elements of the first covenant are no longer relevant to a Christian because of Christ's sacrifice on the cross. Thirdly, it means that *only* the ceremonial or cultic part of the first covenant ceased to exist. This is the part which consists of sacrifices and the blood of animals, mortal Levitical priesthood, and services in the earthly sanctuary. Offered sacrifices "were not able to

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"decalogue"). In the book of Exodus, the Decalogue is called "the Testimony" (Hebrew: *'edut*; Exod 31:18); and in the book of Deuteronomy, it is named "the words of the covenant" (Hebrew: *dibre habberit*; Exod. 34:28). Neither of the books uses the term "the Ten Commandments" (Hebrew: *mitswah*; however, see Exod 20:6), but rather, three times call it "the Ten Words" (Hebrew: *'aseret haddebarim*, definite plural form of the term *dabar* meaning word, sentence, matter, thing, speech, story, promise, utterance; see Exod 34:28; Deut 4:13; 10:4). The Hebrew, *dabar* and the Greek, *logos/rhema*, can be also translated as "command" or "promise" depending on the context. The Hebrew term *dabar* can have the meaning of a promise as well as in its verbal root. It depends on the English versions, but see, for example, *dabar* (promise) as a noun (1 Kgs 8:56; 1 Chr 1:9; Neh 5:12-13; Ps 102:42); and *dabar* as a verb with the same meaning of promising (Deut 1:11; 6:3; 9:28; Josh 9:21; 22:4; 23:5).



*JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY*

clear the conscience of the worshiper” (Heb 9:9 NIV), but the blood of Christ was able to cleanse “our consciences from acts that lead to death” (Heb 9:14; cf. 10:22). The imperfection of the Levitical priests is contrasted by Paul with the perfect life and obedience of Jesus (Heb 2:10; 4:15; 5:8–9; 7:26).

In Jesus Christ everything is better and superior to the previous old covenant era. He is superior to prophets (1:1–2), angels (1:4), Abel (12:24), Moses (3:3), and Joshua (4:8). Christ is better because He is fully divine (1:3) as the Son of God (1:2–5; 4:14; 7:3), and yet He is also fully human, like us but without sin (2:14; 4:15). He became our Brother (2:11–12, 17). In Christ we have the better priesthood (7:15–16, 24–28), the better sanctuary (8:2), the better hope (7:19), the better promises (8:6), the better blood (9:12; 12:24), and the better sacrifice (7:27; 9:23, 28). He provides perfect rest (4:3; Matt 11:28). Christ is above all, holy, blameless, and pure (7:26), He lives forever (7:24), is worshipped by angels (1:6), is faithful (3:2) and merciful (4:15–16), He suffered (2:10, 18; 5:8), obeyed (5:8), became perfect (5:9; 7:28), always ready to intercedes for us (7:25), so He is the Author and Source of eternal salvation (2:10; 5:9), the Author and Perfector of our faith (12:2), the Apostle (3:1), the great Shepherd (13:20), and the High Priest in the heavenly sanctuary (3:1; 8:1–2). Because of His resurrection, we are waiting for a “better resurrection” at the second coming of Jesus (11:35; 1 Cor 15:12–23). This Christological context is the background to understanding the nature of the “new” covenant and discovering its newness.

No longer Moses but Jesus is the mediator of the new covenant (8:6; 9:15; 12:24). The atoning death of Jesus Christ on the cross as a ransom for our sins brought this radical change: the security and guarantee of salvation (2:10; 5:9; 9:15; 12:2). Christ had to die to put into effect the new covenant (9:16–17), and as the blood inaugurated the first covenant (9:18) so Christ’s blood sealed the new covenant (Heb 7:22; cf. Matt 26:28; Luke 22:20).

The cycle of perpetual animal sacrifices for people and priests has been broken. The pattern has been disrupted and fulfilled by Christ, thus abrogated. Jesus’s sacrifice “once for all” is all-sufficient and brings salvation to those who believe in Him (Heb 7:27; 9:12, 26, 28; 10:10). The benefits of the cross are now applied to all devotees during Christ’s ministry as our High Priest in the heavenly sanctuary. The unique and irreversible nature of Calvary is now celebrated.

MOSKALA: THE NEWNESS OF THE NEW COVENANT

One must make a difference between the external rituals and the inner content related to the Mosaic covenant. The cultic/ceremonial part of the first covenant was temporary: the regulations, sacrifices, priests, and earthly sanctuary were fulfilled by Christ's death because He fulfilled the sacrificial system on the cross (Dan 9:27). In this sense, "He takes away the first that He may establish the second" (Heb 10:9 NKJV; cf. 8:13).<sup>13</sup> From this angle, discontinuity is stressed in the book of Hebrews and the covenant is characterized as "new."

However, as for the content, nothing is new in the new covenant as the same four principles or promises are present in both covenants. The law in the new covenant is not taken away, abrogated, or cancelled, but is internalized (Matt 5:17–48) even as it was in the hearts of the OT believers (e.g., Deut 30:14; Ps 37:30–31; 40:8; Isa 51:7). To use a soccer analogy, the Decalogue is not "kick out" but "kick in." God's law is put into the heart with loving knowledgeable consent. Obedience springs from the grateful, regenerated, and circumcised heart (Deut 10:16; 30:6; Jer 32:31; Ezek 11:19; 18:31; 36:26).<sup>14</sup> Only by the power of the Holy Spirit are we able to obey God's teachings, His law and will (Ezek 36:27). Perfect obedience is only through Christ (Heb 2:10, 17; 4:15; 5:9; 10:5–6) and in Him it is given to the believers (Heb 2:10–11, 18). This

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<sup>13</sup> See Roberto Ouro for a thorough discussion of Dan 9:27 and its typical/antitypical connection to Heb 10 ("Daniel 9:27a: A Key for Understanding the Law's End in the New Testament," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, 12, no. 2 [Autumn 2001]: 180–198). "Since the OT in anticipation, saw the sacrifice of the Servant of Yahweh as vicarious and final (Isa 53), and the NT interprets only the death of Christ as ending the OT sacrifices (Heb 10), then the event of Christ's death must be the event that would cause sacrifices and offerings to cease, as mentioned in Dan 9:27a" (ibid., 192). Indeed, Heb 10:1–14 refers to the OT sacrificial system twelve times in rapid fire succession to leave no doubt that the entire system had been replaced simultaneously and "for all time" (v. 12) by "the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (v. 10).

<sup>14</sup> "The movement of thought from Jeremiah 31:32 to 31:33 reveals that the covenant relationship between God and his people, whether under the Sinai covenant or the new covenant to come, is maintained by keeping the law *in response* to God's prior act of redemption. It must be emphasized that this is no truer of the new covenant than it was of the Sinai covenant before it (cf. Deut. 6:20–25). Rather than suggesting that the law is somehow negated or replaced in the new covenant, Jeremiah 31:31–33 emphasizes that it is the ability to keep the law as a result of having a transformed nature, not its removal, that distinguishes the new covenant from the covenant at Sinai. The contrast between the two covenants remains a contrast between two different conditions of the people and their correspondingly different responses to the same law" (Hafemann, 2 *Corinthians*, 135).

*JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY*

perspective underlines the continuity of the four foundational aspects of the Sinaitic covenant.

This interpretation is fully in harmony with the term “new” (Hebrew *khadash*, Greek *kainos*) which should be translated “renew” in the given biblical context. God always desired to build a new community of faith.<sup>15</sup> Jesus’s statement about the new commandment means the renewal of the commandment of love (John 13:34). When John the Revelator affirms that God will create a new heavens and a new earth, he states that our Lord will renew life on earth as originally intended with totally new conditions, namely life without sin, death, violence, suffering, pain, sickness, and calamities. Thus, the term “new” points to the *renewal* of the original intent of the covenant God made with His people as well as to its *continuity*.<sup>16</sup>

The first covenant was written on stone but should have been internalized in the same way as the new one is to be implanted in the heart (Deut 6:5; 30:10–14; Ps 40:8; 37:30–31; Isa 51:7; Heb 9:15). The new covenant was sealed by the blood of Jesus (Heb 7:22; 10:19–20; 12:24). When Christ established the Lord’s Supper as a commemoration of His death, He said about the fruit of the vine: “This cup is the new covenant in my blood” (Luke 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25). Christ is the Author of salvation (Heb 2:10) and “the Source of eternal salvation” (5:9). He is the Goal, the Purpose, the Content, or “the culmination of the law so that

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<sup>15</sup> It is significant that Jeremiah 23 times uses the verb “to build” which is usually connected to building houses, palaces, cities, or kingdoms (1:10; 7:31; 12:16; 18:9; 19:5; 22:13, 14; 24:6; 29:5, 28; 30:18; 31:4 [twice], 28, 38; 32:31, 35; 33:7; 35:7, 9; 42:10; 45:4; 52:4). However, this term is surprisingly employed in the context of the new covenant for *building people* when they returned from the Babylonian captivity: “Again I will build you, and you shall be built, O virgin Israel!” (Jer 31:4 ESV; see also 24:6; 33:7; 42:10). God desired to give them a new heart and mind, to restore them to a vibrant relationship with Him, to make them a new creation (Ezek 11:19; 18:31; 36:24–28; cf. 2 Cor 5:17).

<sup>16</sup> Daniel Block rightly states: “When we explore the essential features of the ‘new’ covenant more closely, we discover that none of these features was actually new. There had always been ‘new-covenant’ Israelites who had the Torah of God in their hearts/minds, who delighted in covenant relationship with God (Exod. 29:45; Lev. 26:12), who knew God (Exod. 33:13; cf. Judg. 2:10), and who rejoiced in the knowledge of sins forgiven. . . . Jeremiah envisioned the renewal of the Israelite covenant” (285).

The new or renewed covenant helps us to understand what the original intent of the Sinaitic covenant was, and in principle the intent of all covenants God made with humanity or His people. It was always about building, securing, and cultivating a meaningful, relevant, and lasting relationship between God and His people. This fellowship should be a faithful and joyful friendship.

*MOSKALA: THE NEWNESS OF THE NEW COVENANT*

there may be righteousness for everyone who believes” (Rom 10:4 NIV), and not its termination.<sup>17</sup>

As the Fulfiller of the covenant, which Moses mediated, “Christ is the mediator of a new covenant” (Heb 9:15). Already Old Testament prophets called for repentance and renewed commitment to the Lord (see, e.g., Joel 2:12–14; Isa 1:16–20; Jer 31:31–34; Jer 32:36–42; 33:6–13; Ezek 11:18–20; 18:30–32). They wholeheartedly warned people, before the Assyrian captivity (Amos, Hosea, Isaiah) and before the Babylonian captivity (Zephaniah, Habakkuk, Jeremiah, Ezekiel), that if they repented and acquired a new heart the predicted calamities would not happen. However, they did not and would not listen. Then Jesus came to renew this covenant in person, by His blood and sacrifice. Whoever accepted Him could receive forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life (John 5:24; Rom 8:1) resulting in a new life here on earth (Rom 12:1–2; 2 Cor 3:18; 5:17) and through eternity in that city He has prepared for them “whose builder and maker is God” (Heb 11:10, 16).

The new covenant is not actually new, it is only a *renewal* of the original intent of God’s first covenant God established with His people at Mount Sinai. The new covenant, which is eternal in nature (Heb 13:20), was a theological and spiritual reality before the first coming of Christ and existed in anticipation of Christ’s sacrifice and its benefits, but after the cross it is now also a historical reality, thus sealed, ratified, secured, and guaranteed by the blood of the sinless, eternal Jesus, our Brother, Shepherd, Author and Perfector of our faith, and the High Priest who serves in the heavenly sanctuary on our behalf.

### **Conclusion**

God loves people with an everlasting love (Jer 31:3) and made an everlasting covenant with His people (Jer 32:40; Ezek 37:26; Heb 13:20), which is founded in the eternal covenant between the Father and the Son to save humanity (Eph 1:3–4; 3:10–11; 1 Peter 1:20).<sup>18</sup> He initiated a covenant with Israel (Exod 19:4–6) and renewed or confirmed it (Exod 24:3–7; 34:10–11). He does this because He wants to deepen the

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<sup>17</sup> “It is difficult to assert that Christ terminated the law” (McComiskey, *The Covenants of Promise*, 121).

<sup>18</sup> God’s plan of salvation is grounded on the everlasting covenant based on the promise made between the Father and Son to redeem humankind. This covenant was established from before the foundation of the world (2 Tim 1:9; Titus 1:2; Rev 13:8). See McComiskey, 179–188.

*JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY*

covenantal relationship between Himself and His people and encourage them to be faithful to Him through all life's circumstances in the Promised Land. He gave the Sinaitic covenant as an illustration of what will come in fullness through Christ. The new covenant is built on a better priesthood, better sanctuary, better blood, better promises, better sacrifice, better forgiveness, and better Person, the Son of God, and our Shepherd. Because of Christ, the believer in Him receives all the benefits of this new covenant: direct access to God (4:16; 10:19–22), grace (4:16), salvation (2:10; 5:9; 7:25; 12:2), help in temptations (2:18), clean conscious (9:14), freedom and forgiveness (9:15, 28), holiness (10:10, 14), perfection (10:14), eternal inheritance (9:15), glory (2:10), and an unshakable kingdom (12:28).

The newness of the new covenant is not connected to the content of the covenant but to Christ's efficacy and achievements on the cross where He ratified the covenant by sacrificing His life as a ransom for us (9:15), thus becoming the guarantor of the new covenant (7:22). He is "the mediator of the new covenant" that believers in every historical era can receive "the promised eternal inheritance" (9:15; 12:24). He offered His life once for all as a better sacrifice that secured forgiveness of our sins and guaranteed better promises because as the immortal, perfect, and holy High Priest He ratifies the new covenant. What was done proleptically, in anticipation in the Old Testament, is now historically secured (Heb 9:15; cf. Rom 3:22–26; Eph 1:4; Rev 13:8). Christ died "once for all" (Heb 7:27), not repeatedly as it was with the death of the animals that could not secure forgiveness. They were only pointing to the forgiveness available through Jesus Christ.

We are no longer under the obligations of the earthly sanctuary, sacrifices, and Levitical priesthood. Yet, the benefits of God's promises are the same in both the first and the new covenants: knowing God personally, experiencing forgiveness of our sins, accepting the gift of salvation, and receiving eternal life. Before the reality came through Christ Jesus, by the Sinaitic covenant God gave the Israelites the illustration of the plan of redemption, an object lesson so they could understand the terrible nature of sin and how God saves repentant sinners (9:9; cf. 8:5). The new covenant is built on a better sanctuary, a better sacrifice, a better priesthood, and better promises. The promises proper are not better in quality but are better by the performance of Jesus Christ Himself; they are the same promises of forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life but are better due to the fact that they were fulfilled in His

*MOSKALA: THE NEWNESS OF THE NEW COVENANT*

life, ratified by the cross, and guaranteed by Christ's blood. The cultic dimension of the first covenant is discontinued while the promises continue.

At the heart of the new covenant occurs the core statement: "I will be their God, and they will be my people" (Jer 31:33 NIV, and then quoted in Heb 8:10). This covenant formula describes God's intimate relationship with His people during all time and expresses His desire to have a close fellowship with them. This specific phrase slightly varies in different texts but is at the heart of the Old Testament covenant. For the first time this formula occurs in Exod 6:7, and then it runs throughout the entire Bible and occurs in many key passages (Lev 26:12; Jer 24:7; 31:33; 32:38; Ezek 11:20; 37:23; Zech 8:8; Heb 8:10; Rev 21:3). At the center of the prophet Ezekiel's theological message, he emphasizes God's proclamation: "You will be my people, and I will be your God" (Ezek 36:28 NIV). God's intention was and always was the same, namely living in a vibrant relationship with His faithful followers. Praise the Lord for this renewal of His relationship with us through the new covenant.

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