

God's Eternal Covenant and the Sabbath

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Traditionally, covenant has been defined as a formal agreement¹ between God and his people consisting of God's promises to them of blessings and salvation. The people were then required to perform some actions that in the Old Testament mostly related to rituals in connection with the sanctuary. It was ratified or confirmed through an oath and/or sacrifice. Failure to perform these rituals was seen as a breach of the covenant. Unfortunately, little by little the popular emphasis became focused on the actions: if you performed them, you were right and acceptable, but if you didn't, you had failed. Ultimately, in the eyes of the people, perfect performance came to mean acceptance or salvation, while failure meant rejection or being lost.

The problem with this understanding is that salvation by works has never been a part of God's plan, neither in the Old nor the New Testament. No human being has ever been saved by his/her works . . . "for in thy sight no man living is righteous" (Psa 143:2)² and "by the works of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight" (Rom 3:20). But the Jewish leaders failed to understand this and therefore misapplied God's instructions and began to see the activities as an end in themselves, the performance of which would lead to acceptance by God. That attitude resulted in one of the key messages of the prophets: "Stop this empty performance. God is not interested in it" (see Isa 1:11–14; Amos 5:21–22). It was not because they were doing something wrong or because God had suddenly changed his mind, but in many cases the performance had become an empty ritual and was no longer an expression of the people's inmost desires. God had always wanted all their actions to be an expression of their hearts' desire; even an external act such as circumcision was to be an expression of an inner attitude of love and servitude (Deut 10:16; 30:6).

¹ Cf. *Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary*, "A written agreement or promise usually under seal between two or more parties especially for the performance of some action."

² All scriptural citations are taken from the NASB.

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What does this have to do with the covenant? “Covenant” is translated from the Hebrew term *berit*, the basic meaning of which is still uncertain. Scholars generally believe, however, that it refers to some kind of a bond or a binding agreement between two partners.³ The English word “covenant” conveys quite well what it is all about: *co[n]*, meaning “together,” and *venant*, from the Latin *venire*, meaning “to come.” Covenant is thus the formalization of a decision by two partners to “come [and stay] together,” based on a preceding action of goodwill by the initiator through which he shows his care or concern for the recipient.

Recently, the attention of scholars has been drawn to this relational aspect of the covenant. In what has been referred to as a “groundbreaking article,” one scholar has pointed out that rather than being a dry formality between strangers, covenants are about kinship and originated as a “legal means by which the duties and privileges of kinship may be extended to another individual or group,” and it is in that context that we should also understand ancient Israelite marriage: it is the means by which a bride enters a kinship relationship with the groom’s kin.⁴

As God introduced his plan of redemption to Moses, he expressed the essence of the covenant—“I will take you for my people and I will be your God” (Exod 6:7).⁵ This expression and variations of it is repeated more than thirty times in the Bible, usually with the concept of the covenant being either explicit or implied in the context.⁶ It expresses a close personal relationship similar to that of a family. In many respects a covenant is like a marriage. Both involve a commitment, which is expressed by the man when he, in effect, says to his partner, “I want you to be my wife, and I will be your husband,”⁷ which, again, is parallel to the covenant formula: “I’ll be your God, and you will be my people.” This is why marriage is the most frequently used illustration in the OT of the

³ See M. Weinfeld, “ברית·*berith*” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 253–56.

⁴ Frank M. Cross, *From Epic to Canon* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1998), 3–21. See also Nelly Stienstra, *YHWH is the Husband of His People* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1993); Gordon P. Hugenberger, *Marriage as a Covenant: Biblical Law and Ethics As Developed from Malachi* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998); and Rolf Rendtorff, *The Covenant Formula* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998).

⁵ See also Deut 29:12–13.

⁶ Most frequently found in Jeremiah and Ezekiel (seven times in each book).

⁷ See Jer 3:14 and Ezek 16:8 and its opposite divorce formula in Hos 2:2. The same formula is also found in documents from a Jewish community at Elephantine in Egypt from the 5th century BC: “I have come to your house and asked of you the woman Yehoyisma, your sister, for marriage. And you gave her to me. She is my wife and I am her husband from this day and forever. . . . If tomorrow or another day Anani shall rise up . . . and say, ‘I divorce my wife Yehoyisma, she shall not be to me a wife’ the divorce money is on his head. . . . And if Yehoyisma divorces her husband Ananiah and says to him, ‘I divorce you, I will not be to you a wife’ the divorce money is on her head” (Papyrus 7, lines 3, 4, 21, 22, 24, 25).

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relationship between God and his people,⁸ and unfaithfulness is seen as adultery.⁹

The day on which this commitment is formalized then becomes a reminder/memorial of that relationship. In the case of marriage that day is the wedding day; in the case of the covenant the Scriptures identify it as the Sabbath, the sign of the covenant (Exod 31:13, 17).¹⁰ These days represent historical facts that nothing or no one can change any more than they can change a birthday. No day or institution can replace a wedding day for two lovers as long as they remain in a faithful relationship with each other. It is only if either partner decides to shift his/her loyalty to a different partner that the “memorial” of their union can be changed. The same is true of the Sabbath. As long as people recognize and accept what the covenant stands for, nothing and no one can replace the significance of the Sabbath, which represents the essence of the covenant—“I am your God, you are my people.”¹¹ Even the Roman Catholic Church, which assumes the credit for having transferred the sanctity of the Sabbath to Sunday, sees this significance of the Sabbath and also acknowledges that the seventh day is the Biblical memorial of creation and redemption.¹²

God has always worked with humanity within the context of a covenant, from the time of Adam at Creation (Hos 6:7) to the Earth made new (Rev 21:7). Its essence has always been the same: “I am your God; you are my people.”

⁸ See, for instance, Jer 31:32, “. . . my covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them.”

⁹ A good example is Ezek 16:15–59 and Hos 2:2–13.

¹⁰ See, for instance, Meredith D. Kline, *Treaty of the Great King* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 18–19: “[I]t is tempting to see in the sabbath sign presented in the midst of the ten words the equivalent of the suzerain’s dynastic seal found in the midst of . . . the international treaty documents. . . . By means of his sabbath-keeping, the image-bearer of God images the pattern of that divine act of creation which proclaims God’s absolute sovereignty over man, and thereby he pledges his covenant consecration to his Maker.” It is also interesting to note the sequence and timing in Exod 24. In view of E. G. White’s comment in *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 313, that Moses was summoned to meet with God on the mountain on the Sabbath (vs. 16–18), it appears that the formal ratification of the covenant (vs. 4–8) may have taken place on the previous Sabbath.

¹¹ See Kline, 18–19: “By means of his sabbath-keeping, the image-bearer of God images the pattern of that divine act of creation which proclaims God’s absolute sovereignty over man, and thereby he pledges his covenant consecration to his Maker. The Creator has stamped on world history the sign of the Sabbath as his seal of ownership and authority.”

¹² See the Papal Letter *Dies Domini*, 1998 §§ 12, 14: “[T]he Old Testament . . . links the ‘*shabbat*’ commandment not only with God’s mysterious ‘rest’ after the days of creation (cf. Ex 20:8–11), but also with the salvation which he offers to Israel *in the liberation from the slavery in Egypt* (cf. Deut. 5:12–15). The God who rests on the seventh day, rejoicing in his creation, is the same God who reveals his glory in liberating his children from Pharaoh’s oppression. Adopting an image dear to the Prophets, one could say that in both cases *God reveals himself as the bridegroom before the bride* (cf. Hos. 2:16–24; Jer. 2:2; Isa. 54:4–8).” “If God ‘sanctifies’ the seventh day with a special blessing and makes it ‘his day’ *par excellence*, this must be understood within the deep dynamic of the dialogue of the Covenant, indeed the dialogue of ‘marriage’.”

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Therefore it is referred to as the eternal covenant.¹³ But whenever there has been a major change in human experience that has affected humanity's relationship with God, God has adjusted some of its application details to meet human needs at that time.¹⁴ That is why we find God establishing a covenant with Noah at the time of the flood, a time of new beginnings in a new world environment (Gen 9:9–17). Then God adjusted it to meet a new situation as he called Abram to be the father of a great nation (Gen 15:18), and again as he called Israel out of Egypt and formed it into his special people at Mt. Sinai (Exod 19–24). Later, when Israel no longer wanted to be under the direct control of God through his prophets and judges but requested to be led by a king like the other nations, God confirmed his covenant with David (2 Sam 7:4–17). Again, as the monarchy was coming to an end, God indicated that the Jewish nation would no longer be his special covenant people, and the access to the covenant would be extended to all nations on an individual, personal basis. He proclaimed a “new” covenant with his people because of *their* failure to be faithful to God, even though he was their “husband” (Jer 31:31–33). It was then ratified and accepted by Christ on man's behalf when he came to live among men,¹⁵ and it would be open for anyone who wished to “enter”/join through acceptance of Him.¹⁶ The ultimate purpose of the covenant will be achieved when God completes the re-creation of the earth at the end of the age (Rev 21:7).

Many believe that the Sinai covenant, or the Old Covenant as it is usually called, was made exclusively with the Jewish nation and limited to it alone. Closer investigation, however, reveals that God meant for it to be more inclusive. As Moses reviewed the history and experience of Israel before entering the Promised Land, he said about the Sinai experience:

You stand today, all of you, before the Lord your God: your chiefs,
your tribes, your elders and your officers, even all the men of Israel,

¹³ Fifteen times in the Old Testament: in Gen 9:16; 17:7, 13, 19; Lev 24:8; 2 Sam 23:5; 1 Chron 16:17; Psa 105:10; Isa 24:5; 55:3; 61:8; Jer 32:40; 50:5; Ezek 16:60; 37:26; and once in the New Testament, in Heb 13:20. It is also significant to note that the Old Testament never speaks of covenants in the plural—only singular, even though it is associated with various individuals, which supports the idea that God only had one covenant which he adapted to the needs of the different individuals and times.

¹⁴ These “adjustments” did not affect the contents of or the commitment to the basic, eternal covenant of which the Sabbath is a sign.

¹⁵ Cf. Luke 1:72–74 and Heb 8:6. It is interesting to notice that the word for “make (a new covenant)” in Heb 8:8 is *synteleo*, one of the key meanings of which is “carry out or bring into being something that has been promised or expected,” which implies that the covenant already existed, but was now “fully realized” or “consummated” in Christ in fulfillment of the prophecy in Dan 9:27 that the coming Messiah would “confirm a covenant with many in one week.”

¹⁶ Cf. Paul's “in-Christ” theology, such as: access to God being available in him (Eph 2:12); forgiveness of sins only available in him (Eph 4:32); and the totality of salvation only being available in Christ (2 Tim 2:10; Acts 4:12). See also G. E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 481–83.

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your little ones, your wives, *and the alien who is within your camps, from the one who chops your wood to the one who draws your water,* that you may enter into the covenant with the Lord your God, and into His oath which the Lord your God is making with you today, in order that *He may establish you today as His people and that He may be your God,* just as He swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Now not with you alone am I making this covenant and this oath, but both with those who stand here with us today in the presence of the Lord our God and with those who are not with us here today. (Deut 29:10–15, emphasis added)

This is also confirmed in texts like Isa 56:1–8, which points out that the Sinai covenant¹⁷ was to be open for everyone to join by personal choice—even those who were usually classified as outcasts, such as eunuchs and foreigners. Both they and their sacrifices were to be fully accepted in the temple, and the temple itself was to be “a house of prayer *for all the peoples*” (v. 7, emphasis added), and not just for the Jews alone. Unfortunately, many of the Jewish leaders failed to recognize this fact and saw the covenant as a proof of *their* exclusive status with God to the exclusion of everyone else.

The “old” covenant at Sinai is also usually associated with works, sometimes even spoken of as a covenant of works,¹⁸ referring mostly to the external ritualistic requirements related to the sanctuary, but also including many aspects of daily life. The Biblical picture, however, is somewhat different. The Sinai covenant was not just about sanctuary rituals and works; it was much more inclusive. According to Deut 4:13, 9:11, and Exod 34:28, it was written on “two tablets of stone” and consisted of ten “commandments.”¹⁹ This means that what we usually perceive as requirements or commandments in actual fact are primarily statements about a relationship. This agrees with what we have already seen, that the covenant is primarily about a relationship between individuals or nations.

The basis for the covenant is love being revealed in actions that precede the covenant-making (see Deut 7:6–8) and call for a response of love (see Deut 6:4–9). As God prepared the people for entering into the covenant with him, he reminded them, “You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself” (Exod 19:4). Scholars have also noted that the “ten words” come as a response to the introductory

¹⁷ See the comments by E. G. White in *Review and Herald*, June 23, 1904: “I have been instructed to direct the minds of our people to the 56th chapter of Isaiah. This chapter contains important lessons for those who are fighting on the Lord’s side in the conflict between good and evil. . . . ‘and taken hold of my covenant’. This is the covenant spoken of in . . . [Exod 19:5–9]. . . . God includes in his covenant all who will obey him.”

¹⁸ See for instance Ralph Allan Smith, “The Covenant of Works: A Litmus Test for Reformed Theology?” <http://www.berith.org/essays/litmus/>, 2003.

¹⁹ The Hebrew does not actually refer to them as “commandments” but rather as “words,” “expressions,” or “statements.”

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statement in Exod 20:2—“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery”—and the grammatical form used in the “commandments” can either be translated as commands (“You *shall* not . . .”) or as descriptors (“You *will* not . . .”), thus describing what God expects to see in the life of individuals who accept the reality that God has redeemed them from their place of slavery. They are thus not restrictive requirements or demands, but rather a guideline or a list of expectations as to what would be an appropriate response to the experience of having been redeemed.²⁰

The Ten Words are not commands, nor are they couched in command (i.e., imperative) language. They are simple future indicative verbs that indicate the future action that is the expected consequence of the preceding prologue: ‘I am Yahweh your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt . . . , (and therefore) you will have no other gods before me . . .’ etc.²¹

The Sinai covenant did contain regulations concerning various external actions and activities, mostly associated with the sanctuary—among them circumcision. These acts, however, were never meant to be an end in themselves or even a means to an end. Rather, they were to be an external evidence of inward attitudes. This is clear from texts such as Deut 10:16, where God says of circumcision, “Circumcise then *your heart*, and stiffen your heart no more” (emphasis added). This is further clarified by Moses as he says, “Moreover the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, [i.e.] to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul” (Deut 30:6).²²

A similar holistic instruction is found concerning the Sabbath. The parallelism in Isa 56:2 indicates that “keep[ing] from profaning the Sabbath” is about “keep[ing one’s] . . . hand from doing *any evil*” (emphasis added). Ezekiel confirms the same when he says “they [the people] . . . profaned my sabbaths, for their heart *continually* went after their idols,” and “they profaned my sabbaths, [as] their eyes were [fixed] on the idols of their fathers” (Ezek 20:16, 24; emphasis added). These texts indicate that any neglect of the ideals of the covenant is regarded as a breach of the Sabbath in the same way as any marital unfaithfulness is a breach of the marital vows given on the wedding day. Observance of a fixed day does not replace failed relationship. Being unfaithful to God in the

²⁰ See Dennis J. McCarthy, *Treaty and Covenant: A Study in Form in the Ancient Oriental Documents and in the Old Testament* (Rome: Biblical Institute, 1978), 297. On the role and function of the ten “words” he makes the following observation: “The God whose saving will is manifested in history has already made Himself a people. This is what history is about. What is wanted is a means of response, a commitment to the sovereign, and a response which can be lived. Hence the stipulations which serve to define the already extant relationship so that it can be lived out in one’s ordinary life. One does not earn a contracted reward, one lives a covenanted relationship. As a faithful vassal one gives tribute, a mark of submission, and willing service.”

²¹ George E. Mendenhall and G. A. Herion, “Covenant,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 1:1184.

²² See also texts such as Deut 6: 5–6; and 10:12.

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week negates the bond of which the Sabbath is a sign. True Sabbath-keeping is thus not limited to 24 hours of not-working or church attendance on Sabbath morning. It involves more than that. It actually involves a particular kind of a lifestyle, influenced by a close personal relationship with God, of which the Sabbath-day is a weekly memorial. The way the Sabbath-day is observed becomes a reflection of one's relationship with God through the week, in the same way as a celebration of a wedding anniversary is a reflection of the relationship married partners have had with each other through the year, but is not limited to their "feeling" on the anniversary itself. Also, observing the Sabbath is not something that *has* to be done *in order to obtain* something from God or to please him, but it is kept in recognition of the fact of having been saved (cf. Exod 20:2), and in *response* to the benefits being enjoyed from the relationship with Him. At the same time, it is also a sign of *God's* commitment to the covenant—He is, and will remain, our God-Creator-Husband-Redeemer.

The question might be rightfully asked as to where the "new" covenant fits in.²³ A theologian has pointed out that what was new about the "new" covenant was not its contents, but the fact that the people had lost sight of what God's eternal character was all about.²⁴ A superficial reading of Jer 31 and Heb 8 seems to indicate that the "old" covenant was to be replaced by a "new" one because the former was faulty. A more careful reading, however, reveals that this was not the case. There was no problem with the covenant that necessitated its replacement. The problem was with the people—they failed to remain faithful to God, their "husband" and savior.²⁵ The essence or substance of both—"I will be their God, and they shall be my people"—is the same (Jer 31:33; cf. Deut 29:12–13); so also is their purpose and expectations. The purpose of both is the people's salvation, well-being, and acceptance/forgiveness,²⁶ and both expect obedience to God's statutes and ordinances.²⁷ Their differences are usually found to be mainly in the people to whom they were directed and where they were recorded. It is true that the "old" was given to the nation of Israel,²⁸ whereas the "new" was directed to mankind in general because the wall of separation had been broken down.²⁹ However, as has been pointed out above, the "old" was meant to be open for all, even though it was to be mediated through

²³ It is not within the scope of this paper to deal with a detailed comparison/evaluation of these covenants, but only to highlight some key issues as they relate to God's "eternal" covenant.

²⁴ E. G. White, *Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing* (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1955), 74. The same is true about the "new" commandment. Its contents were already present in the Old Testament (see Lev 19:18 and Deut 6:5), but had been largely forgotten by the people by the time of Jesus.

²⁵ "My covenant which *they* broke" (Jer 31:32); "... finding fault with *them*" (Heb 8:8; emphasis added).

²⁶ Compare Exod 6:7; 20:2; Deut 6:24; Jer 31:34; Ezek 36:26–27.

²⁷ Compare Exod 19:5; Deut 4:13; and Ezek 36:27; 11:20.

²⁸ Exod 19:1–6;

²⁹ See Eph 2:11–15.

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the nation of Israel. But because of their failure to do so, the “new” was no longer to be committed to or mediated through a single nation. It is also true that the “new” was to be written on the heart,³⁰ whereas the “old” was written on two tablets of stone,³¹ but God expected the people to “transfer” it to their heart, so that their obedience would be from their heart and not just a blind following of an external list of requirements.³²

God has always wanted a heart religion, not just external conformity (see Deut 6:6; 11:18).³³ When the people failed to internalize God’s instructions but held on to the required rituals detached from their original relational roots, they were no longer acceptable to God—they had become meaningless, just as an anniversary is meaningless if there is no relationship to commemorate (see Isa 1:11–15; Hos 2:11; Amos 8:4, 5, 10). Paul seems to emphasize the same truth in Col 2:17, where he points out that any festival or religious ritual is just an empty shadow if Christ (“the body”) is not in it, for Christ is the one who gives meaning to whatever we do.³⁴ Apart from him, everything is meaningless—no matter how well or how long it is “performed.” Therefore, Paul says, “Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all to the glory of God” (1 Cor 10:31).

Sabbath is like a wedding anniversary that only has meaning for those who are married and have a loving relationship with their spouses. And the closer the relationship, the deeper significance the wedding anniversary will have. In the same way, the closer the relationship is with God, the deeper and more significant meaning will the Sabbath and any other “covenant-activity” have. Also, within God’s eternal covenant there is life and blessings, but outside there is death, for God alone is the source of all life and bounty. The plan of salvation, however, is about God’s efforts to bring man back from the domain of darkness into the kingdom of his Son (Col 1:14). Then the purpose of the covenant will be fully realized; God shall finally dwell among men forever, they shall be his people, and he will be their God (Rev 21:3, 7), a fellowship they will commemorate

³⁰ Jer 31:33.

³¹ Deut 4:13; 9:9–10; Exod 34:28.

³² See Deut 11:18, 16; 8:2; 10:12.

³³ This was also true of the ancient Near Eastern international treaties, the structure and vocabulary of which probably formed the basis for the biblical covenant. The word for love, for instance, was part of diplomatic parlance in these treaties. In a treaty of Esarhaddon, king of Assyria, vassals had to swear concerning Ashurbanipal, his heir, to “love him as yourselves.” In a document from king Ashurbanipal he speaks about someone “whose heart is whole to his master, (who) stood before me with truthfulness, walked in perfection in my palace . . . and kept charge of my kingdom. . . . I took thought of his kindness and decreed . . . his gift” (see Weinfeld, I:253–279).

³⁴ The concept of a “shadow” does not necessarily imply “type vs. antitype” but is often used in Greek to contrast what is empty by itself to that which is real and gives meaning to the empty shell (cf. a house and its shadow). See also Samuele Bacchiocchi, *From Sabbath to Sunday* (Rome: Pontifical Gregorian UP, 1977), 339–369; Herold Weiss, “The Law in the Epistle to the Colossians,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 34 (1972): 292–314; and Roy Yates, “Colossians 2,14: Metaphor of Forgiveness,” *Biblica* 71/2 (1990): 248–259.

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weekly “from sabbath to sabbath [as] all mankind will come to bow down before [him]” (Isa 66:23) in eternal thankfulness.

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