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What is New in the New Covenant?

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What is **new** in the new covenant?

A biblical covenant is the legal establishment of a relationship between God and His people. God takes the initiative, institutes this relationship, and secures it. His covenants are based on His love, grace, and faithfulness, and they are rooted in His eternal covenant—established within the Trinity before the foundation of the world—which was to save humankind in case they would fall into sin (Eph. 1:3, 4; 2 Tim. 1:9; Titus 1:2; 1 Pet. 1:20; Rev. 13:8).¹

The author of Hebrews, commonly thought to be the apostle Paul, distinguishes between the “first” and the “new” covenants; he states that if nothing had been “deficient” or “inadequate” with the first one, the “second” or “new” would not have been needed. 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” (Heb. 7:22; 8:6) and says this better covenant is the “new covenant” (Heb. 8:8; 9:15; 12:24; [see also Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25; 2 Cor. 3:6], or the “second” one [Heb. 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.”

What was the first covenant?

What does Paul mean by the “first covenant”? (The full phrase is used only in Hebrews 9:15, but see also 8:7, 13; 9:1, 18.) In Hebrews, Paul never uses the term *old covenant* to describe the first covenant (he uses the expression *old covenant* only in 2 Corinthians 3:14). The Lord explains that the new covenant will not be “like the covenant / I made with their ancestors / when I took them by the hand / to lead them out of Egypt” (Heb. 8:9, NIV). The reference is to the Sinaitic or Mosaic covenant, which God made with Israel after the Exodus (Exod. 19–24). This covenant was established at Mount Sinai (Exod. 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. 34:6, 7, 10, 11). Paul speaks about this Sinai experience in

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Hebrews 9:18–20, and Jeremiah, too, contrasts the new covenant with the Sinaitic covenant (Jer. 31:32). So, the first covenant referred to by Paul was not a covenant with Adam, Noah, or Abraham but with Israel at Mount Sinai. Paul also clearly declared: “The first covenant had regulations for worship and also an earthly sanctuary” (Heb. 9:1, NIV).

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 underscoring the continuity of this covenant. This is exactly what Jesus was doing in the Sermon on the Mount when He explained the true meaning of the Old Testament’s teachings (Matt. 5:17–48).

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). When reflecting on the first, or old, covenant, many Christians automatically assume that the Sinaitic covenant was bad. However, the adjective “wrong” is an incorrect translation of the Greek *amemptos*, which means “faultless,” “blameless,” or “without defect.” It is not “wrong” like the New International Version translators put it.

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

The Sinaitic covenant, with all its specific ceremonies and sacrifices, was an illustration


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

The problem, instead, was with the people’s reception of the covenant: “God found fault [*memphomai*, finding fault or blame] with the people” (Heb. 8:8, NIV). People transgressed the first covenant, which is one reason God gave the new covenant (see Exod. 20:18–20; 32:4–6, 19, 20; Lev. 17:7). They took God’s law merely as a command, something 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 and hard obedience to God’s stipulations, and it was not received as His promise. The law became a burden, an external duty to keep as opposed to an expression of thankfulness for God’s goodness.

What is new in the new covenant?

First, the new thing in the new covenant is the historical ratification of the new covenant by Jesus Christ’s death. He is the guarantor of this covenant (Heb. 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 (Heb. 9:15). Second, Jesus’ ultimate sacrifice on the cross



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fulfilled the sacrificial system (Dan. 9:27a; Matt. 27:51; John 1:29; 1 John 2:2), so animal sacrifices and their blood, the Levitical priesthood, and the earthly sanctuary were no longer needed or relevant. Third, it means that *only* the ceremonial or cultic elements of the first covenant ceased to exist: the animal sacrifices, the Levitical priesthood, and the earthly sanctuary services. Offered sacrifices “were not able to 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” (v. 14, NIV; cf. 10:22). The imperfection of the Levitical priests is contrasted with the perfect life and obedience of Jesus (Heb. 2:10; 4:15; 5:8, 9; 7:26). The cycle of perpetual animal sacrifices for people and priests has been broken. Jesus’ 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).

Thus, one must observe a difference between the external rituals and the inner content related to the Mosaic covenant. The cultic and 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). 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 because the same four principles or promises are present in both covenants. The law in the new covenant is not abrogated but, instead, internalized (Matt. 5:17–48), even as it was in the hearts of the Old Testament believers (e.g., Deut. 30:14; Pss. 37:30, 31; 40:8; Isa. 51:7). God’s law is put into the heart with loving, knowledgeable consent. Perfect obedience is only through Christ (Heb. 2:10, 17; 4:15; 5:9; 10:5, 6), and in Him, it is given to believers (Heb. 2:10, 11, 18). This perspective underlines the continuity of the four foundational aspects of the Sinaitic covenant. The term “new” (Hebrew *khadash*; Greek *kainos*) should be translated as “renew” in the given biblical context; it points to the *renewal* of the original intent of the covenant God made with His people as well as to its *continuity*.

Historical reality

The newness of the new covenant is not connected to the content but to Christ’s efficacy and achievements on the cross, where He ratified the covenant by sacrificing His life as a ransom for

us (Heb. 9:15), thus becoming the guarantor of the new covenant (Heb. 7:22). He is “the mediator of the new covenant” that believers in every historical era can receive “the promised eternal inheritance” (Heb. 9:15, NIV; 12:24). He offered His life once for all as a better sacrifice that secured forgiveness of our sins. What was done 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.

Although we are no longer under the obligations of the earthly sanctuary, God’s promises are the same in both covenants: knowing God personally, experiencing forgiveness of our sins, 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 as an object lesson so they could understand the terrible nature of sin and how God saves repentant sinners (Heb. 9:9; cf. 8:5). The new covenant is built on a better sanctuary, a better sacrifice, a better priesthood, and better promises.

At the core of the new covenant occurs the special statement, “I will be their God, and they will be my people” (see Rev. 21:3). This covenant formula describes God’s intimate relationship with His people and invites you to enter into this close covenantal fellowship with Him, which will continue for eternity.



1 For a more detailed analysis, see my article “The Newness of the New Covenant” in *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 32, nos. 1–2 (2021): 1–14, containing references and additional material.

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