

## The New Covenant in the Old Testament

The Old (Mosaic) Covenant constituted the Nation of Israel as a theocratic kingdom for service to God. It was how God would administer the kingdom. But, except for aspects of the Conquest, the Nation failed in its calling. The Monarchy was a near total failure. All Israel failed. Moses had identified the problem at the very outset: the people didn't have a "circumcised heart." So the curses of the Old Covenant went into effect and Israel eventually was thrown into Exile. Yet, in love and to keep the promises He'd made at the outset, God declared that there would be, in the future, a new relationship with His people. There'd be a new covenant that would deal with the problem of the heart.

As the crisis in the Monarchy deepened, the writing prophets declared in various places the terms of this new relationship. Only Jeremiah in one place (Chapter 31) revealed the name of this, the "New Covenant," but the specifics of this new relationship are widely scattered in Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, and Zechariah. We read what the nature of the new covenant is (a formal, legal, contractual instrument); who the participating parties are (God, and Israel and Judah); what the benefits are; and where and when its formal ratification will be (in the distant future, after exile, when the Davidic Kingdom is restored).

Two things this New Covenant is not: (1) The New Covenant is neither a promise nor a prophecy, it's a *covenant*. Yes, promises are associated, but it is in essence a legal contract. God reveals Himself to us using language, and He deals with us—*He solemnly swears to us*—using arrangements and relationships with which we're familiar. So, covenant. And (2), the New Covenant is not soteriological. God has always been free to forgive sins, and He can do it in justice because of the eternally effective, atoning sacrifice made by the Son. So although forgiveness of sins is a feature of this New Covenant, on offer is *national* forgiveness, that is, for the entire nation, not just for certain individuals within Israel. Now, what the New Covenant *is*:

- This New Covenant provides for supernatural restoration of a united Israel to the Land, with Jerusalem as its capital and a restored temple, and a King who rules with total authority over the whole world, as well as prosperity for the nation of Israel.
- This New Covenant (as with all other legal instruments) stipulates its participants, and they are Israel and Judah. This excludes everyone else. No Gentiles are participants, although they can be (will be) associated with Israel in an indirect way—and that only after the covenant is ratified. Gentile involvement will occur, but it is tangential or "trickle-down." Gentile nations will be blessed only as they relate to Israel (and Israel's God). One of the purposes of any covenant is to create a formal, bonded relationship between certain specified parties and *not* with others.
- This New Covenant (as with all other legal instruments) is not in effect until it is ratified. As it's a covenant, the ratification involves an oath. It's the participants' oath that ratifies a covenant. (See Exodus 24:4-8.) The covenant is "cut" (ratified) by an oath, just as a marriage is created by oaths ("vows"); and until it is cut, the terms, conditions and benefits are not and cannot be experienced. (The ratification is described in Jeremiah 31:31; Ezekiel 20: 33ff, 34:25 and 37:26; and Hosea 2:18.)
  - I digress: The sacrifice of the Son on the cross did not and could not ratify the New Covenant. The ratification is described in Ezekiel and Hosea as occurring in the future, when the King returns and the Kingdom is restored. The blood sacrifice of Jesus guarantees that the New Covenant will be fulfilled and it makes

Israel fit to be in the New Covenant. Jesus is the Mediator of the New Covenant just as Moses was the mediator of the Old, but the sacrifice of Jesus did not “ratify” or “enact” or “inaugurate” the New Covenant; and no oath was sworn at the cross. Without the death of the Son, however, no New Covenant would be possible.

- I digress again: The life and atoning sacrifice of the Son on the cross, with His resurrection and Ascension, makes salvation by grace possible for individuals everywhere at all times in all history, if such persons respond with faith to what God has revealed. But salvation because of the blood of Christ does not mean such people are in the New Covenant. The New Covenant doesn’t save, Jesus does. The New Covenant stipulates that, in the future, the Nation of Israel—*as a nation*—will be saved, and that by the blood of the cross.
- This New Covenant places obligations on God: reversing the alienation due to treachery and idolatry, removing the curses from the Old Covenant, re-gathering all Israelites to the Land, cleansing them and renewing or regenerating them, and gifting them with His Spirit (Ezekiel 36:22-39). He will cause their cities to be rebuilt, their population to expand, and they will all know Him. And their sovereign Kingdom will be restored.
- This New Covenant places obligations on the Nation of Israel: worship at the temple with sacrifices and offerings, and obedience to the Law. Yes, Law! New Covenant law is Mosaic Law. The difference in the New versus the Old is that in the New, the Law will be internally placed and Spirit-enabled. In Torah (Exodus 31:16), the Sabbath is said to be “eternal,” so Sabbath observance will probably return, although the prophets don’t mention that. Feast days, though, will return.
  - I briefly (but very significantly) digress: Believers in the Church are delivered *from* the Law (Romans 7:4, and elsewhere). We are to obey the Law of Christ, which is essentially the law of love.
- The Hebrew word translated “new” is *hadash*, which also means “renewed.” So the New Covenant is like a renewed Sinai Covenant though with better features, necessary because the Exile would be over. This New (or renewed) Covenant would replace the Old in the sense that it *re*-constitutes the Nation of Israel as a theocratic kingdom for service to God, with regeneration and Spirit enablement, and with promises of safety. This relationship will continue *forever* (it’s an “everlasting covenant,” Jeremiah 50:5). The reason the Old has to be replaced is not entirely because of Israel’s past failures but because the Son fulfilled the Old; He made the Old obsolete.

It cannot be clearer, once we know what the New Covenant is, that the Church is not under the New Covenant. It doesn’t participate in it, nor does it derive its blessings from it. The Church is the Body and Bride of the Son. Believers in Jesus in this Church era are, by grace, *in Christ*; they are a new creation, a new humanity in the image of Christ.

No amount of allegorizing or “spiritualizing” of the Old Testament texts, or dividing up of its terms and benefits into “spiritual” and “physical,” can change what is abundantly clear: The New Covenant is for a future, regenerated and restored Nation of Israel. It is not for the Church.

The Church is a unique body of people for a unique inter-Advent era, with a unique identity and with unique blessings. God doesn’t “covenant” with the Church, He indwells it. It doesn’t get better than this, at least, not on this side of glory.