

Covenants: Old and New

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The term "testament," as used in our expression "Old Testament" and "New Testament," is drawn from the Greek word *diatheke*, which, in the Greek speaking Mediterranean world of the first century, was, "a last will and testament concerning the distribution of property, etc." It is taken from the Greek verb *diatithemi*, which means, "to distribute." The Greek word for a pact, agreement, or contract was *suntheke*, which means, "to agree with, or agree to something," hence, a "covenant."

The Old Testament word for "covenant" is the Hebrew *b'rith*, which meant "a solemn agreement." This word is translated in the Greek Old Testament (Septuagint), not by the Greek *suntheke* as one would expect, but rather by *diatheke*. The reason being that this "covenant" is not an agreement made between two equal participants, rather, it is a statement made by one party concerning promises made to another party. Thus, the Hebrew Scriptures came to be known to Greek speaking Jews as "the *diatheke*" (the covenant), but the basic meaning of the word in Greek was "testament."

So, in essence, both concepts are present in the use of the term *diatheke*, especially as it appears in the NT. It is not a matter of "either/or" (i.e., *either* a covenant *or* a testament), rather, it is "both/and" (i.e., *both* a covenant *and* a testament). It is a covenant in the ancient Hebrew sense of the word and it is a testament in the Greek sense of the word. This often happens when Hebrew terms are baptized into the Greek language. The result is a Semitism which is a Hebrew idea in Greek dress, and that is precisely what we have in the NT term "*diatheke*" (covenant/testament).

The Old Covenant and the Hebrew Scriptures

A covenant may be made between two persons as with Laban and Jacob (Gen 31:44-45) or David and Jonathan (1 Sam 18:3; 23:18), between a husband and wife (Malachi 2:14) or, as with the Sinai Covenant, between God and a nation (Exod 19:2-7). This covenant was given from God through Moses and was made exclusively with Israel :

Moses summoned all Israel and said: Hear, O Israel, the decrees and laws I declare in your hearing today. Learn them and be sure to follow them. The Lord our God made a covenant with us at Horeb. It was not with our fathers that the Lord made this covenant, but with us, with all of us who are alive here today. (Deut 5:1-3.)

Covenant in the Ancient Near East

The making of a covenant in the ancient Mediterranean world was a very serious undertaking. One was often bound by it until death and because covenants were often considered the equivalent of law the violation of these covenants often carried the penalty of death.

The making of a covenant in the ancient Eastern world usually consisted of the following particulars. There were **stipulations** (i.e., the matters agreed to or the promises made, codes given regulating the covenant, etc.), **witnesses** (i.e., those who could hold both parties to their word), **blessings and the curses** (i.e., the benefits resulting from keeping the agreements and the consequences of violating them), **the ceremonial meal** (i.e., a meal celebrating the new relationship entered into by the parties involved, often associated with a covenant sacrifice), and **the presentation and deposit** of the record of the covenant at the feet of an authoritative figure or in a sacred place.

The Sinai Covenant

These characteristics are present in the Sinai Covenant between God and Israel found recorded in Exodus and Deuteronomy. **The stipulations** (Exod 20:3-23:33; Deut 5:1-6:25), **the witnesses** (Deut 4:26; 30:19; 31:28), **the blessings and the curses** (Deut 11:26-29), **the ceremonial meal** (Exod 24, c. v 11), and **the deposit** of the record of the covenant (the stone tables and later the scrolls of the covenant (Exod 25:16; Deut 10:1-5; 31:24-26).

Between Me and Thee

The parties of the Sinai Covenant were *Yahweh* and the nation of Israel. The parties stipulated in the record of this covenant are *Yahweh* and the people he named Israel (i.e., the Hebrews/Jews). The stipulations and promises were made by the primary party, God, and the secondary party, Israel. The witnesses were those who observed these promises made by God and Israel. The blessings of the covenant were to be received by Israel if they kept their promises, the curses, likewise, were to be received by Israel if they violated the covenant. The ceremonial meal was celebrated by God and representatives of Israel, and the deposit of the record of the covenant was entrusted to Israel.

In the New Testament this covenant is referred to variously as: the law, the law of Moses, the first covenant, the Scriptures, the sacred writings, the word of God, and the oracles of God. This covenant began as two tables of stone, then the five books or scrolls of Moses, and eventually grew, over a period of 1,500 years, to a collection of covenant writings consisting of thirty-nine different books, written in Hebrew and tenaciously preserved by a guild of scribes known as the *Sopherim* (later called the *Massorettes*). Each writing added to the original record of the Sinai covenant (the Pentateuch) was considered revelation from God to Israel, and each part of the collection related to "the covenant;" i.e., telling of Israel's struggles with the covenant, giving a history of Israel's interpretation of it, God's punishment of Israel for their violation of the covenant, or foretelling a future time when God would establish a new

covenant.

By the first century AD, this whole collection of covenant writings had become known as "*Ha Torah*/the Law." This may be seen from such passages as John 10:34 (quoting Psalms 82:6), "Jesus answered them, 'Is it not written in your Law, 'I have said you are gods?'" So also in John 12:34 (quoting Psalms 110), "The crowd spoke up, 'We have heard from the Law that the Christ will remain forever, so how can you say, 'The Son of Man must be lifted up'? Who is this 'Son of Man?'" And in 15:25 (quoting Psalms 69:4), "But this is to fulfill what is written in their Law: 'They hated me without reason.'" Although none of these passages from the Psalms were from the Law proper (i.e., the Pentateuch), they were yet considered covenant writings. This is seen also in the writings of Paul, especially in Roman and Galatians. In Paul's writings "the law" refers not just to "the covenant writings," but to the system of rabbinic interpretation (the traditions) which had become associated with them (cf., Matt 15:1-20 and also Matt 23).

Fulfillment of the Covenant

That the first covenant would be fulfilled and a new covenant given was foretold by the prophets of Israel. That the first covenant (the law) would be fulfilled or accomplished was taught by Jesus.

The time is coming," declares the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah . It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt , because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the Lord. "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the Lord. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the Lord. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." (Jer 31:31-34; see also Isa 42:5-9 and 43:18-21, 25-28; 62:1-2; 65:13-17.)

*Do not think that I have come to abolish **the Law or the Prophets**; I have not come to abolish them but **to fulfill them**. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law **until everything is accomplished**. (Matt 5:17-18.)*

The Law and the Prophets were until John. Since that time, the good news of the reign of God is being preached, and everyone is rushing into it. (Luke 16:16, my trans-mwl.)

If one listens carefully, he can hear the terminal language in Jesus' words. The "Law and the Prophets" (the first covenant) were in force and authoritative until they were fulfilled and would not disappear until they had accomplished their purpose. How were they to be fulfilled? For something to be fulfilled it must accomplish its purpose. The purpose of the law was to give moral instruction to a people who had been delivered from a 400-year slave culture, a culture ruled by a survival mentality. The Sinai Covenant consisted of laws, codes, statutes, judgments, and commandments. These were for the purpose of developing in the children of Israel a sense of right and wrong, which is essential to the development of moral character.

Jesus' words, "I came not to abolish but to fulfill them (i.e., the Law and the Prophets)," are best understood in the Apostle Paul's development of this whole theme in his letter to the Romans. In abbreviated form, his understanding of how Jesus fulfilled the intent of the Scriptures is that in Christ's role as one of us, (a son of man, *ben Adam* - son of Adam, a human being), the purpose of the first covenant was fulfilled or accomplished. Jesus, according to Paul, was the second Adam. Where Adam had failed in his temptation with sin, Jesus did not fail. Rather than defy the will of God in the service of his own will, as was the case with the first Adam, Jesus fulfilled his life with the words, "not my will but thy will be done."

Paul's development of this theme provides us with one of the most enlightening theological presentations to be found in the whole of Scripture. He sees Jesus as the second Adam, functioning as the "representative man," who fulfilled in his life everything the law was

intended to accomplish. The law was given to control human behavior and condemn the transgressor when he violated the law. The intent of the law was to develop in man a realization of the consequences of defiance of the will of God. Jesus was a paradigm of what man is supposed to be when the law accomplished its purpose of developing in him a sense of right and wrong to the end that his behavior is controlled by his moral character rather than a fear of the consequences of wrong behavior; i.e., condemnation for transgression of the law. God's intent was to bring man to a stage of moral maturity through the first covenant, and then establish a new covenant with him based on the moral character for the man transformed "in Christ," rather than behavior controlled by fear of the consequences of violation of the law. This theme is developed throughout the writings of Paul, but this explanation will suffice to introduce this very profound concept of God's work of redeeming the human race from the self-destruction it had brought upon itself.

When the first covenant had been fulfilled and had accomplished its purpose, a new covenant was to be made with the whole human race. Where the first covenant consisted of law, the second would consist of grace and truth. John contrasts these very concepts - the law with the covenant given through Moses, grace and truth with the arrival of Jesus of Nazareth:

*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, **full of grace and truth**. John bore witness of Him and cried out, saying, "This was he of whom I said, "He who comes after me is preferred before me, for He was before me." And of His fullness we have all received, and grace for grace. For the law was given through Moses, but **grace and truth** came through Jesus Christ. (John 1:14-17)*

In the institution of the Lord's Supper, Jesus spoke of a new covenant:

When the hour came, Jesus and his apostles reclined at the table. And he said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it

*finds fulfillment in the kingdom (reign) of God ." After taking the cup, he gave thanks and said, "Take this and divide it among you. For I tell you I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom (reign) of God comes." And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is **the new covenant** in my blood, which is poured out for you. (Luke 22:14-20.)*

This same expression is found in the Apostles Paul's account of this event:

*For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is **the new covenant** in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." (1 Cor 11:23 -25.)*

Ministers of the New Covenant

That the Law (Sinai covenant) was fulfilled and a new covenant given was part of the beliefs of the earliest Christianity. This was the teaching that so infuriated the Jewish leaders of the synagogues. Although Paul did continue to observe those teaching which were a part of his Jewish heritage, he did observe the Law as authoritative for himself or others.

*And we have such trust through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God, who also made us sufficient **as ministers of the new covenant**, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. (2 Cor 3:4-6)*

*So, my brothers, you also **died to the law** through the body of Christ that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit to God. (Rom 7:4.)*

All who rely on **observing the law** are under a curse, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in **the Book of the Law**." Clearly no one is justified before God by **the law**, because, "The righteous will live by faith." **The law** is not based on faith; on the contrary, "The man who does these things will live by them." Christ redeemed us from **the curse of the law** by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree." (Gal 3:10-13.)

What, then, was **the purpose of the law**? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come. **The law** was put into effect through angels by a mediator. A mediator, however, does not represent just one party; but God is one. Is **the law**, therefore, opposed to the promises of God? Absolutely not! For if a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by **the law**. But the Scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe. Before this faith came, we were **held prisoners by the law**, locked up until faith should be revealed. So **the law was put in charge** to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith has come, **we are no longer under the supervision of the law**. (Gal 3:19-25.)

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is **obligated to obey the whole law**. You who are trying to be **justified by law** have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. (Gal 5:1-4.)

For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority. In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the flesh, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried

*with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, **having canceled the written code, with its regulations**, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; **he took it away**, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross. Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ. (Col 2:9-17.)*

*But the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as **the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one**, and it is founded on better promises. For if there had been nothing wrong with **that first covenant**, no place would have been sought for **another**. But God found fault with the people and said: "The time is coming, declares the Lord, when **I will make a new covenant** with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will **not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers** when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they did not remain faithful to my covenant, and I turned away from them, declares the Lord. **This is the covenant I will make** with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." **By calling this covenant "new," he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear.** (Heb 8:6-13.)*

*And for this reason He is **the Mediator of the new covenant**, by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions under **the first covenant**, that those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance. ¹⁶ For where there is **a testament**, there*

*must also of necessity be the death of the testator.*¹⁷*For a testament is in force after men are dead, since it has no power at all while the testator lives. (Heb 9:15-17.)*

The Apostle Paul considered himself to be a minister of a new covenant.

He also made us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. But if the ministry of death, written and engraved on stones, was glorious, so that the children of Israel could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of the glory of his countenance, which glory was passing away, how will the ministry of the Spirit not be more glorious? For if the ministry of condemnation had glory, the ministry of righteousness exceeds much more in glory. For even what was made glorious had no glory in this respect, because of the glory that excels. For if what is passing away was glorious, what remains is much more glorious. (2 Cor 3:6-11)

The Law Was Given Through Moses

What was given through Moses (the Old Covenant) was law - what was given through Jesus (the New Covenant) was grace and truth. From the prologue of the Gospel of John we read, "And of His fullness we have all received, and grace for grace. For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." (John 1:16-17)

The Law and Code Ethics

The Law represented legislated moral and ritual behavior (a system of code ethics). In idea the Law was good (cf., Psa 1:2; 19:7-11). The problem with the Law, however, was man and his misuse and abuse of what God had given him, and his inability to interpret the letter of the Law in keeping with the spirit of the Law.

Man's response to the Law was "lawkeeping." The Law defined and interpreted human behavior as good or bad and

condemned all bad behavior, which cancelled out all good behavior. One thousand "thou shalts" weighs no more than one violated "thou shalt not." Transgression in one point makes one guilty of it all. In James 2:10 we are told, "For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it." Paul uses the same reasoning in Gal 5:3, "Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law." Sounds unfair, but that's what law is all about. It's primary function is to control our behavior and then condemn us when our behavior gets out of control. The Law, then, doesn't make us holy or good, it only condemns us when we fail to conform to the moral/ethical and ritual codes contained in the Law.

Jesus and Character Ethics

The gospel (good news) of Paul is that God has given us another and better means of attaining holiness and goodness. Rather than being conformed to a set of codes, which is the means of attaining righteousness/holiness under the Law, we are to be transformed by a relationship we enter into through belief.

The intent of God in giving man the Scriptures was to reveal his identity and nature to man. Then man, as a being created in the image of God, would know who he was to be. The problem was that the Jews viewed their Scriptures not as a body of revelation given to provide man with insight into the nature of God but, rather, they saw the Scriptures as a body of law given to provide man with codes (statutes, judgments, and commandments) to control his behavior.

God's revelation of himself in the person of Jesus of Nazareth was to the same intent as his original revelation in the old Hebrew Scriptures - to reveal who he was to man, to the end that man would know who he was to be to as a being created in the image of God. Here is where the revelation that serves as the basis of Judaism is different from the revelation that informs the faith of Christianity. In the religion of Judaism, God is seen as having revealed his word on stones and in parchment scrolls, in the religion of Christianity, God is seen as having revealed himself in human flesh - in the historical

person we know as Jesus of Nazareth (John 1:1-2, 14; 16-18; 14:6-10).

Conclusion

Jesus was the very expression of God's holiness and goodness and is for us a paradigm or exemplar of who we are to be if we are to achieve holiness and goodness. Rather than being conformed to the dictates of law, we are to be transformed into the image of the one who was God with us: "He is **the image of the invisible God**, the firstborn over all creation." (Col 1:15.)

*The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, **who is the image of God**. For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. (2 Cor 4:4-6.)*

It is the face of Jesus that we see God, and it is there that we see ourselves as we are supposed to be a beings created in the image of God, "And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, **are being transformed into his likeness** with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit" (2 Cor 3:18).

Through his conversion to Christ one dies to his existence "in Adam" and is transformed into new existence "in Christ." In his new spiritual existence "in Christ" one is under the reign of grace rather than the reign of sin and death, which is man's destiny "in Adam," under the law where transgression of the law condemns the transgressor to death. This is Paul's argument in his letter to the Romans. As sin reigns in death (i.e. the death of all those who transgress the law), grace reigns in life (i.e., the life of all those under the authority of the message Christ rather than the authority of the law).

Moreover the law entered that the offense might abound. But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more, so that as sin reigned in

death, even so grace might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. (Rom 5:20-21)

MWLIII

Questions For Discussion

1. What do you understand by the terms: "covenant" and "testament?"
2. Why do the Jews refer to the Hebrew Scriptures as a "covenant?"
3. To whom was the Old Covenant given or with whom was the first covenant made?
4. Why is the Old Testament called "the Law" in the New Testament?
5. What Old Testament books constitute "law" and why are they so called?
6. Why are the Old Testament books that are not part of the Pentateuch referred to as a part of "the Law?"
7. How was the first covenant fulfilled by Christ?
8. What according to Jer 31:31-34 was to be the difference between the first covenant and the new covenant?
9. If the old covenant (Old Testament) was fulfilled and done away, are we yet bound by the teachings of the Old Testament; e.g., the ten commandments, the teachings of Psalms and Proverbs, etc. If so, Why? If not, why not?
10. If Psalms 119:7-11 says that the Law was perfect, why was there a need for a new covenant?