

The New Covenant

During the time of the Exodus the Israelites became fearful of God speaking directly to them and petitioned Moses to be their mediator with God: ¹

Now as all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the blast of the shofar and the mountain smoking, they became afraid and trembled. So they took up a position farther away and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we shall die." Moses answered the people, "Do not be afraid, for God has come only to test you and put the fear of him upon you so you do not sin." So the people remained at a distance, while Moses approached the dark cloud where God was.

Moses continued to teach the people explaining to them the Law, however sin continued and the Mosaic Covenant would be replaced by a new and different one that speaks directly to the hearts of the people, one that overcomes the people's stubbornness and hard heartedness, and is described by Jeremiah's eschatological proclamation:²

The days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a New Covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their fathers the day I took them by the hand to lead them forth from the land of Egypt; for they broke my covenant and I had to show myself their master, says the LORD. But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD.

I will place my law within them, and write it upon their hearts;

I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³

No longer will they have need to teach their friends and kinsmen how to know the LORD.

All, from least to greatest, shall know me, says the LORD,

for I will forgive their evildoing and remember their sin no more.

According to Jeremiah, the makings of this New Covenant that make it different from the old are:

- (i) *It will not be broken, but will last forever; (ii) Its law will be written in the heart, not merely on tablets of stone; (iii) The knowledge of God will be so generally shown forth in the life of the people that it will no longer be necessary to put it into words of instruction.⁴*

Therefore, this New Covenant will not be abrogated but be eternal; its law is to be imprinted upon the hearts of the people and not like the commandments given to Moses and chiseled on stone tablets; God's knowledge will so saturate the hearts of the people that their exemplary lifestyle will visibly permeate the culture making written laws and commands unnecessary since following God's will is to be a natural part of daily life. In the fullest sense it is Jesus who will fulfill this prophecy.



¹ Exodus 20:18-22, New American Bible, St. Joseph Edition

² Jeremiah 31:31-34. In the Mosaic covenant Yahweh does not forgive sins but punishes the sinner. (Joshua 24:19-20)

³ This short one-line phrase is repeated over fifty times in the Bible and sums up the covenant of Sinai.

⁴ Footnote on the New Covenant passage. New American Bible.

*"Just as the heart is central in the human biology of a person there was a transition for the word "heart" to stand for a person's entire mental and moral activity, both the rational and emotional elements. In other words, the heart is used figuratively for the hidden springs of the personal life;"*⁵ whereas now we may think of "mind" as the very essence of a human being.

Jeremiah continues to reinforce the New Covenant concept:⁶

They shall be my people, and I will be their God. One heart and one way I will give them, that they may fear me always, to their own good and that of their children after them. I will make with them an eternal covenant, never to cease doing good to them; into their hearts I will put the fear of me, that they may never depart from me. I will take delight in doing good to them: I will replant them firmly in this land, with all my heart and soul.

Ezekiel underscores the essence of the New Covenant when he gives the people God's message:⁷

I will sprinkle clean water upon you to cleanse you from all your impurities, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. I will give you a new heart and place a new spirit within you, taking from your bodies your stony hearts and giving you natural hearts. I will put my spirit within you and make you live by my statutes, careful to observe my decrees. You shall live in the land I gave your fathers; you shall be my people, and I will be your God.



Yahweh the Teacher, who in the past allowed the unfaithful to remain blind and deaf as noted in the prophetic message⁸ and who in his anger hid his face from the Israelites⁹ shall in the future help them to understand his covenant teaching clearly.

*The Lord will give you bread in adversity and water in affliction. No longer will your Teacher hide himself, but with your own eyes you shall see your Teacher, and your ears shall hear a word behind you: "This is the way; walk in it, "when you would turn to the right or the left."*¹⁰

Covenants were sealed (Exodus 24) with a blood sacrifice and the blood united the partners of the covenant in one relationship. The New Covenant was eventually brought to completeness and sealed by Jesus' blood.¹¹ At the Passover with the Twelve he proclaims after they had eaten: *"This cup is the New Covenant in my blood, which will be shed for you."*

⁵ Vine, Unger, White, Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of the Old and New Testament, Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1985.

⁶ Jeremiah 32:38-40

⁷ Ezekiel 36:25-28

⁸ Isaiah 6:1-11, Matthew 13:13-15, Acts 28:25-27, John 12:40

⁹ Isaiah 8:17

¹⁰ Isaiah 30:20

¹¹ Luke 22:14-20, 1Corinthians 11:25

Jesus is the Holy One who promised eternal life and the Holy Spirit gifts the believer with the knowledge embedded in the heart and made known to the believer of the New Covenant.

Let what you heard from the beginning remain in you. If what you heard from the beginning remains in you, then you will remain in the Son and in the Father. And this is the promise that he made us: eternal life. I write you these things about those who would deceive you. As for you, the anointing that you received from him remains in you, so that you do not need anyone to teach you. But his anointing teaches you about everything and is true and not false; just as it taught you, remain in him.¹²

Jesus brings in further clarity when he says: *It is written in the prophets: 'They shall all be taught by God.' Everyone who listens to my Father and learns from him comes to me.¹³*

Paul notes in his letter to the Hebrews:¹⁴ *But this is the covenant I will establish with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their minds and I will write them upon their hearts. I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall not teach, each one his fellow citizen and kinsman, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for all shall know me, from least to greatest. For I will forgive their evildoing and remember their sins no more." When he speaks of a "new" covenant, he declares the first one obsolete.¹⁵ And what has become obsolete and has grown old is close to disappearing.*

As indicated earlier Moses was the mediator for the people who were too frightened to have God speak to them, but now Jesus is the Teacher and mediator of the New Covenant:

But when Christ came as high priest of the good things that have come to be, passing through the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made by hands, that is, not belonging to this creation, he entered once for all into the sanctuary, not with the blood of goats and calves but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption. For if the blood of goats and bulls and the sprinkling of a heifer's ashes can sanctify those who are defiled so that their flesh is cleansed, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from dead works to worship the living God. For this reason he is mediator of a New Covenant: since a death has taken place for deliverance from transgressions under the first covenant, those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance.¹⁶

Jesus is now the mediator of the New Covenant by virtue of his death on the cross, once and for all, the sacrifice that purifies human consciences. The New Covenant¹⁷ is something new for everyone from the least to the greatest; it is an



¹² 1John 2:24-27

¹³ John 6:44-51

¹⁴ Hebrews 8:10-13. An abbreviated form of his statement is given in Hebrews 10:16-17

¹⁵ This slightly differs from Paul in Galatians and Romans where the old covenant is not annulled by the succession of the new, but rather fulfilled. McKenzie, J L, S.J., Dictionary of the Bible MacMillan, 1965, p. 165.

¹⁶ Hebrews 9:11-15

¹⁷ See the Anchor Bible Dictionary, 1992, Vol.4, K-N, pp.1088-1094 for a thorough analysis of the New Covenant.

interior principle of personal reinvigoration and those who instruct the faithful in their spiritual and moral obligations may need dramatic changes in thinking. This is also a heavier responsibility upon the individual who will not be able to blame false teaching for personal missteps and also on spiritual leaders who must develop ways to appreciate and enhance a knowledgeable lay apostolate. As indicated in the beginning of this article such a personal intimacy with Yahweh caused the Israelites to balk in accepting this responsibility....do we know ourselves well enough to know and accept our response? It is interesting to consider a comment attributed to Pope St. John Paul II which indicates that knowing ourselves and knowing god are interrelated:

"Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth; and God has placed in the human heart a desire to know the truth - in a word, to know himself - so that knowing and loving god, men and women may also come to the fullness of truth about themselves."

"Blood of Christ of the new and eternal Covenant, save us."
(From the Litany of the Most Precious Blood of Jesus.)

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