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The New Covenant of Exodus

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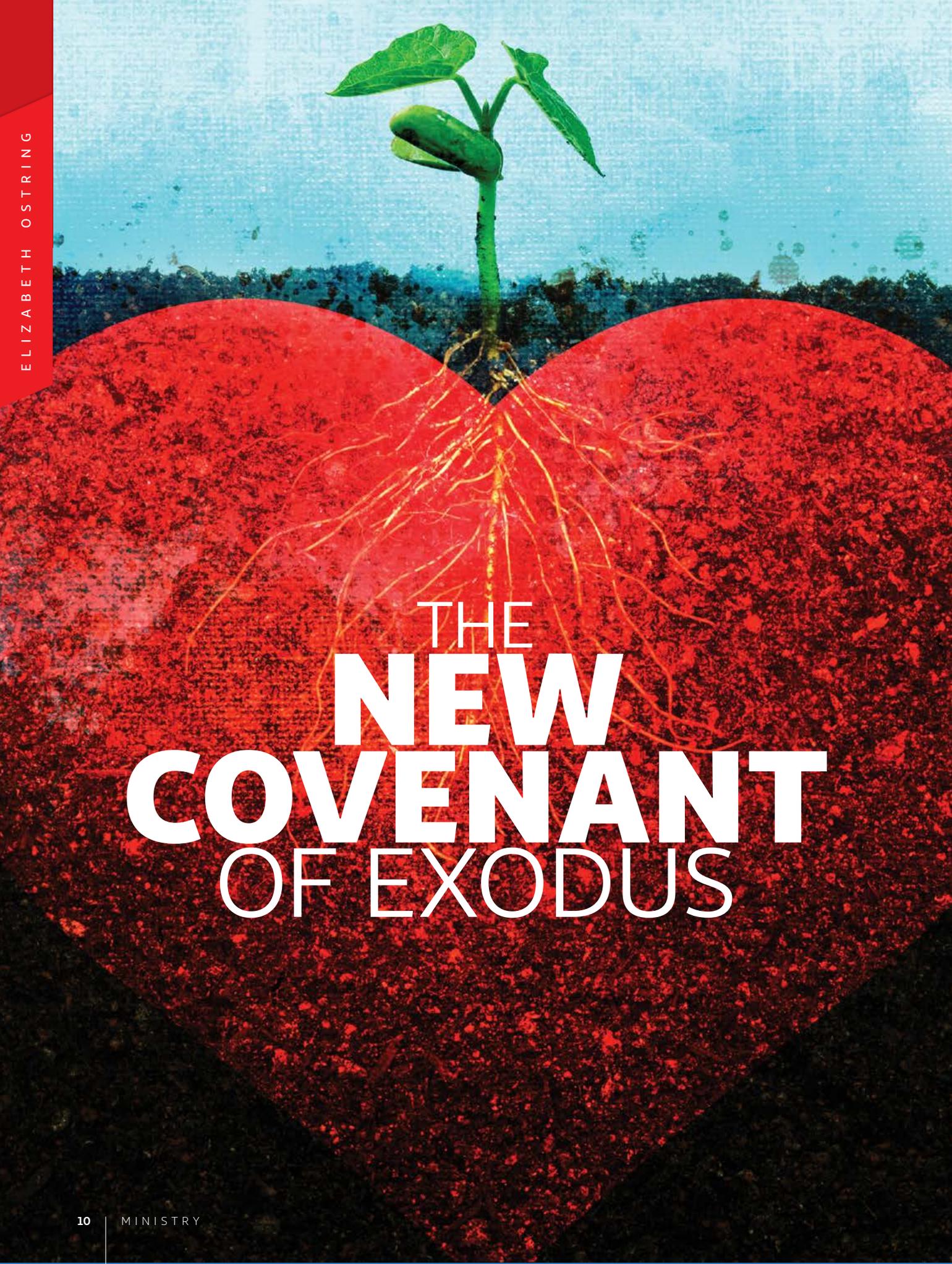


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THE
NEW
COVENANT
OF EXODUS

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SCAN FOR AUDIO

While the concept of the new covenant is well testified to and expressed in the New Testament, it is directly mentioned only once in the Old Testament (Jeremiah 31:31–34). Yet a careful reading of the book of Exodus indicates that the new covenant was actually declared and offered to God's people as they camped at the foot of Mount Sinai and is therefore deeply embedded in God's approach to His chosen people throughout history. While two excellent recent studies on God's covenants explore the concepts involved admirably, neither study locates the new covenant in the Sinai setting.¹

Jeremiah and Moses

As with any biblical text, the context of Jeremiah 31:31–34 is important. Jeremiah, who apparently introduces the idea of a new covenant, prophesied that when the sins of Israel had reached a certain point, God would have to allow them to return to captivity reminiscent of the Egypt experience, although this time in Babylon. William Holladay noted the marked references, allusions to, and echoes of Exodus in the book of Jeremiah.² Of special note is the fact that both Moses and Jeremiah were reluctant to accept their call from God, because they believed that they could not speak well (see Exod. 4:10; Jer. 1:6).

Robert P. Carroll also noted similarities between Exodus and Jeremiah and observed that although Jeremiah does not employ the word "covenant" in his other discourses, he used many covenantal concepts, such as son, bride, or wife.³ However, one significant point of difference is that whereas Moses was called to "my people, the sons of Israel" (Exod. 3:10, RSV), God summoned Jeremiah to be a "prophet to the nations" (Jer. 1:5, RSV). Of particular note, as it is found in the same chapter that introduces the idea of "new

covenant," is Jeremiah 31:2, 3 which reads, "Thus says the LORD: 'The people who survived the sword *found grace in the wilderness*; when Israel sought for rest, the LORD appeared to him from afar. I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you'" (RSV, emphasis supplied).

The "old" covenant of Sinai

After a description of the dire plight of the Israelites in Egypt in Exodus 1 and the abortive attempts of Moses to come to their rescue in chapter 2, attempts which leave him apparently stranded in the wilderness with no ability to do anything for his people, the narrative reveals what God is about to do. "During those many days the king of Egypt died, and the people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help. Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. God saw the people of Israel—and God knew" (Exod. 2:23–25, ESV). So, the covenant with Abraham was the basis for God's intervention to rescue Israel from Egypt.

Thus, the incredible story of Israel's Passover and exodus from Egypt and God's typological salvation of His people was clearly the result of covenantal promise. And that is unmistakably the background God alludes to in His preamble to the Ten Commandments, a preamble often sadly omitted from what is regarded as the core of the Old Covenant: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Exod. 20:2, ESV). Here, we see that loving deliverance came before the law.

But, as the narrative unfolds, we learn that the people of Israel clearly thought God was presenting them with an agreement between equals, and although they liked, appreciated, and were very

grateful for what God had done in rescuing them from Egypt, they honestly believed they were capable of holding up their side of the contract. Three times they declared, “All that the LORD has spoken we will do” (Exod. 19:8; see also 24:3, 7, ESV).

After a series of social and religious regulations clearly designed to radically differentiate the culture of Israel from that of the surrounding people groups (something contemporary Christians could note), the Sinai covenant was impressively ratified in a ceremony that involved rereading the words of the agreement and sacrificing an unspecified number of bulls whose blood was literally thrown over the people (vv. 3–8) to indicate that the covenant had indeed been “cut,” or ratified. The ceremony ended with the amazing experience of 74 men ascending Mount Sinai and “seeing” and eating with God, or more precisely, seeing God’s feet and the pavement on which they rested (vv. 9–11). Moses then left the people in the charge of Aaron and Hur while he returned to God to receive instructions about the sanctuary in which the God of the covenant was actually planning to dwell among His covenant people (Exod. 25:8).

The “new” covenant of Sinai

The enormous tragedy of the molten calf episode only 40 days after the ratification of the covenant (because the people could not cope without a visible leader [Exod. 32:1]), the subsequent loss of Moses’ temper, and the shattering of the tables of the covenant and then Moses’ amazing offer to sacrifice himself for the reinstatement of his people (Exodus 32; 33) are well known. Commentary author Peter Enns makes an insightful comment: “The Christological dimension of this interchange between God and Moses is obvious. . . . Moses’ offer is not simply a flash forward to the time of Christ. Rather, at the very inception of the sacrificial system it is a glimpse into the heart of the heavenly reality to which the sacrificial system points.”⁴

The whole covenantal agreement of Exodus 19 to 24 was irretrievably destroyed, demolished by Israel’s failure. Interestingly, throughout his commentary on the golden calf episode, Jewish scholar Benno Jacob refers to Abraham’s failure in Genesis 16, which occurs between the “two” covenants that God made with him.⁵ God apparently backed out of the arrangement with Israel but mercifully offered to send an angel with the people so that they could still proceed to Canaan (Exod. 32:34; 33:2, 3).

Moses, however, was not satisfied, and neither were the now very contrite people (vv. 4–6, 12–16). Israel’s leader pled to see God, clearly hoping that a face-to-face encounter would soften God’s refusal to continue with “His people.” God first (and significantly) asked Moses to make a new set of stone tables (Exod. 34:1) and agreed that He would show Moses His glory.

After Moses was hidden in “the rock” (highly symbolic), there follow words that the Old Testament professor James Bruckner says that it is “hard to overemphasize the importance of [Exod. 34:6, 7],” which he regards as the center of the book of Exodus,⁶ words that are the clearest description of God’s character in the whole Bible. “The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, ‘The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children’s children, to the third and fourth generation’” (Exod. 34:6, 7, RSV).

Echoes of this splendid passage and its message of forgiveness frequently appear throughout the Bible, including the New Testament (e.g., John 1:14; Matt. 1:21; and John 1:29). Moses’ response to this incredible revelation is to make haste to bow and worship (Exod. 34:8). These beautiful words introduce an entirely new concept into the previously agreed-upon covenant. The people had thought they could, in their own ability, keep their side of the agreement, but they failed miserably. Now it is revealed that the only way the agreement can continue is through the new and amazing concept that God will actually forgive them. Jacob makes a beautiful comment on Exodus 34:5–7: “God took the guilt upon Himself and let it sink into the fire of His holiness and love. He bore it out of the world.”⁷

Exodus 34:10 clearly shows that this is not a simple renewal of the previous covenant, as commonly assumed. “And he said, ‘Behold, I am making a covenant. Before all your people I will do marvels [miracles], such as have *not been created* [Hebrew *nibaru*, related to *bara*; “to create,” as in Genesis 1:1] in all the earth or in any nation. And all the people among whom you are shall see the work of the LORD, for it is an awesome [fearful, amazing] thing that I will do with you’ ” (Exod. 34:10, ESV; emphasis added). Terence Fretheim also recognizes this and notes, “What God is doing for Israel is an act parallel to the creation of the world! . . .

“This suggests that verse 10 does *not*, strictly speaking, refer to a renewal of the covenant of chapters 19–24. . . . At least one decisively new element in this text is not present in chapters 19–24. . . . This is a *new* covenant grounded in a new act of God on behalf of Israel. God places the relationship with Israel on a new footing. It is now grounded in . . . undeserved divine forgiveness for an apostate people.”⁸

It is also highly significant that the Bible presents *bara*, “to create,” as an activity belonging to God alone, whereas the word *asa*, meaning simply “made,” applies to the things humans “create.” Of course, God had forgiven the people many times earlier for their repeated grumbling and complaining, but clearly, it took a disaster as horrendous as the golden calf failure to force them to see that their status with God depended entirely on His mercy and forgiving love, His *hesed*. God did not lower the standard. Exodus 34:11–26 clearly reiterates a summary of the same laws given earlier but now covered by divine, forgiving grace.

It is worth noting that years later, when Moses reports these stupendous events to the new generation of Israel about to enter the Promised Land, he uses the word “fire” (Hebrew *esh*) no less than 14 times to describe the events around the giving of the Ten Commandments (see Deut. 4; 5). But when describing the situation after the golden calf episode (Deuteronomy 9:13–29), the dominant word becomes *love* (Hebrew *ahab*), repeated seven times in chapters 10 and 11, and also seven times in chapters 6 and 7 (including one instance of *hesed*, steadfast love). Most significantly, in this passage, Moses encourages Israel to circumcise the foreskins of their hearts (Deut. 10:16), a very New Testament, new covenant, concept.

Jeremiah’s old new covenant

So, when Jeremiah talks about a new covenant, he is not introducing a new concept but simply reminding Israel of their desperate need for God’s forgiveness, as after the golden calf, of their need to be reinstated into their relationship with God. The only difference between the new covenant of Sinai and that of the New Testament is a powerful demonstration of just how much it actually cost God to provide for Israel’s (and our) forgiveness. At Sinai, after the golden calf incident, Israel knew with absolute clarity that the covenant between them and God was utterly dependent on His mercy and His gracious forgiveness. The whole Sinai covenant itself amply demonstrates this.

And now?

But as history demonstrates, many, if not most, in Israel succumbed to errors that are just as easy to make today. People may mistakenly consider themselves able to conform to God’s standards in their own strength, a tragic misconception that the Gospels reveal regarding the leaders of Israel. The astonishing behavior of the ardent keepers of the law who destroyed the only One who could take away their sins (John 1:29) is a powerful reminder that we must recognize just how great is our need and that, as our Savior Himself said, without Him, we can do nothing (John 15:5). But it is just as tragic for people to presume on God’s mercy and think His love will automatically forgive any behavior and thus block the Holy Spirit’s transforming power in their lives.

The Revelation of Jesus Christ declares, “Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus” (14:12, RSV). The commandments and faith are both needed. The new covenant, located in both testaments, weaves together law and grace. Jesus said, “For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished” (Matt. 5:18, ESV). And we will always need God’s amazing grace.



- 1 Skip McCarty, *In Granite or Ingrained? What the Old and New Covenants Reveal About the Gospel, Law, and the Sabbath* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2007); Gerhard F. Hasel and Michael G. Hasel, *The Promise: God’s Everlasting Covenant* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 2020).
- 2 William Holladay, *Jeremiah: A Fresh Reading* (New York, NY: Pilgrims Press, 1990), 14–20.
- 3 Robert P. Carroll, *From Chaos to Covenant: Uses of Prophecy in the Book of Jeremiah* (London, UK: SCM Press, 1981), 46, 217.
- 4 Peter Enns, *The NIV Application Commentary: Exodus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 589.
- 5 Benno Jacob, *The Second Book of the Bible: Exodus*, trans. Walter Jacob (Hoboken, NJ: KTAV Publishing House, 1992), 984.
- 6 James Bruckner, *Exodus*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 300.
- 7 Jacob, *Second Book*, 978.
- 8 Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 308; emphasis in original.

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