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God's divine covenants ratified by blood

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From the creation of humankind, Yahweh was involved with his people and continuously built a relationship with them. As an indication of how serious he was, Yahweh entered into a multi-covenant process with his people. Whereas some covenants were (seemingly) bloodless, others were ratified by blood. Four of these covenants that Yahweh established with his people during the Old Testament times are discussed in this article, being part of a compendium of covenants that Yahweh made with his people. It is then suggested that all these covenants in fact formed part of one comprehensive covenant that Yahweh has established with his people. The continuation of that broad or complete covenant in the New Testament is Jesus, who shed his blood for his followers on the cross. Jesus' blood acted as the sign of the consecutive ('new') covenant, symbolised by the cup that he shared with his disciples at the Last Supper that we are still sharing with each other at the Holy Communion today. He himself then became the sacrifice whose blood was shed to seal the covenant.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This is an historical and Bible-based article utilising canonical criticism as methodology, linking with Philosophy and Practical Theology. It involves both the Old Testament and the New Testament. By drawing a line of continuity between the two Testaments, it becomes clear that Yahweh's first covenant with his people continued in a consecutive 'new' covenant with Jesus as the main focus.

Keywords: covenant; new covenant; blood; Last Supper; Jesus.

The Doctrine of the Divine Covenant lies at the root of all true theology

(Spurgeon 1912)

Introduction and *Modus Operandi*

The primitive rite of blood-covenanting was a well-known symbol for the people living in the Ancient Near East, specifically during biblical times. Trumbull (1893) correctly asserts:

> The Bible is an Oriental book, written primarily for Orientals, and therefore to be understood only through an understanding of Oriental modes of thought, it is also a record of God's revelation to the whole human race. (pp. 3–4)

Smith (2006:11) adds, 'The people who populate the pages of our Bible lived in the atmosphere of covenants as the air they breathed'. According to Cobb (2022:161), 'the covenant formed a central theological concept in Jewish scripture'. Blood formed an integral and ratifying part of most of Yahweh's covenants with his people, as it was sacred for him and his people.

In the Bible, specifically in the Old Testament (OT), we find covenants between Yahweh and his people, as well as covenants between people and individuals. There is a difference between the covenants that Yahweh made with his people and those made by humans among themselves.[1] The human covenants were made for mutual benefits, whereas Yahweh made covenants for his people to benefit from them. These covenants were divine declarations:

> [O]f the way of receiving the love of God as well as the union and communion of becoming a partaker in Him. If man makes use of this way, he is in the friendship of God … God is his own in a personal way (Gn 17:7), and he is one spirit with God (1 Cor 6:17), who is one with him (John 17:21). (Cocceius [1648] 2016:22)

A covenant was 'an elected, as opposed to natural, relationship of obligation established under divine sanction' (Hugenberger 1994:215), especially between Yahweh and his people. The covenants 'with its promises and obligations' (Lewis 2006:342) were sealed with sacred meals,

1.What makes covenants different from contracts is that the covenants were relational, personal (cf. Woollard 2018) and everlasting.

Note: The manuscript is a contribution to the themed collection titled 'Meeting the Biblical Jesus Afresh' under the expert guidance of guest editor Prof. Erna Oliver.

oaths and an invocation, blessings and curses (cf. Tilahun 2020:55). The biblical tradition was also familiar with covenant meals. In many instances, these formed a significant part of the sealing of a covenant or alliance (cf. McCarthy 1978:253; Moran 1992:250). In the covenants between Yahweh and his people, Yahweh took the initiative in which he instituted a close relationship with his people, and then he secured it personally (Moskala 2021:50). It still was a bilateral covenant where each party had specific tasks to fulfil (cf. Spendlove 2023:131). What makes these covenants so special and extraordinary is that Yahweh went one step further by stating that he has become the *Father* of his people (cf. Dt 32:6; Is 64:8), while he referred to them as his *children*, therefore part of his divine *household* (cf. e.g. Ex 4:22).

The three covenants act as examples of covenants between Yahweh and his people or mutually between people in the Bible where blood was not mentioned. The three covenants are:

- The first action we find in the Bible containing covenantal elements is in Genesis 2:16–17. This 'covenant', called the 'covenant of works' first by Fenner (1585:87ff)[2] and also by the Westminster Confession of Faith 7.2 (cf. Westminster Assembly of Divines 1644–1646), between Yahweh Elohim and Adam included an obligation, as well as blessings and curses (cf. Van Chien 2024:983): The *obligation* was that Adam had to work in the garden of Eden and take care of it (Gn 2:15). The *blessings* were that Adam had the whole garden to eat from and seemingly eternal life (as death was not yet mentioned). The inherent *curse* was: Leave out the tree containing the knowledge of good and evil, or you will die (Gn 2:17).
- The covenant (treaty) between Isaac and Abimelek (Gn 26:28–31) included the taking of an oath and a 'sacred meal', in fact a feast (Gn 26:30).
- The covenant between David and Jonathan seemingly did not contain any of the abovementioned covenantal elements. 1 Samuel 18:3–4 refers to the 'sealing' of the covenant where Jonathan gave David his robe, his tunic, his sword, his bow and his belt. At that stage, David did not give anything to Jonathan in return (cf. Kwakkel 2022:25).[3]

Then there were the covenants between Yahweh and his people ratified by blood. The concept of covenant is central to the narrative plot structure that we find in the Bible (Gentry & Wellum 2012:21). According to Vos (2014:n.p.), 'the outstanding characteristic of a *berith* is its unalterableness, its certainty, its eternal validity … something not subject to abrogation'.

The biblical covenants involving blood signified a cooperative relationship between two parties, including specific conditions and agreements and focusing on a common goal. The covenants that Yahweh made with his people therefore envisaged a relationship between him and his people ('human partner or partners') in which it was usually Yahweh who made binding promises and in turn requested his people to act in specific ways. In the Bible, these covenants were often accompanied by explicit oaths, certain signs and a ceremony and were mostly ratified with blood. Most of them were established and sealed where the two parties cut some animals in half, implying that this would happen to the party who breaks the covenant[4] – a 'pledge to the death' (cf. Robertson 1980:n.p.; Cocceius [1648] 2016:20; Peter 2026). Jeremiah reminded his people about this ritual with the words of Yahweh: Those who have violated my covenant and have not fulfilled the terms of the covenant they made before me, I will treat like the calf they cut in two and then walked between its pieces (Jer 34:18).

Eichrodt describes these covenants between Yahweh and his people as biblical icons, referring to the term בְּרִית as a mutual relationship (Eichrodt 1961:9; cf. also Kwakkel 2022:21). Craigie (1983:367) refers to the biblical covenant as 'the very heart of the religion of Israel'. Kenyon (1969:7) claims that 'this Blood Covenant was the basis of all primitive religions'.[5] Strong (n.d.) puts it even stronger:

> בְּרִית unites the entire canon, revealing God's unwavering resolve to dwell with His people through sworn promise, sacrificial blood, and transforming grace, reaching ultimate realization in the eternal covenant secured by Jesus Christ. (p. 1285)

Manurung and Hendriks (2024:1 of 15) add, 'These covenants are not merely historical documents; they are theological constructs that reveal God's character, His intentions for humanity, and the means by which salvation is offered'. Lewis (2006:342–343) refers to the 'covenant of blood [as the] most intriguing covenant ritual in the Hebrew Bible [adding that t]he juxtaposition of blood and covenant seems to be a strange combination'.

First of all, this article discusses four of the covenants between Yahweh and his people, which were specifically ratified by blood (as part of all the covenants that he has made with his people), as described in the OT and then adds the *new* covenant through Jesus in the New Testament (NT). The Hebrew text refers to the making of a covenant between Yahweh and his people as כָּרַת בְּרִית,[6] which could be translated with 'to come to an arrangement', 'to bind or to fetter; a binding obligation' (Smith 2006:12), while it literally means 'to cut a covenant'. The four covenants in the OT being discussed are as follows:

- Genesis 15: Yahweh promised Abram to be the God of his people, while he expected them to be his people and serve him alone.
- Genesis 17: The circumcision. Yahweh ordered Abram to circumcise himself and every male with him.

2.Bullinger was the first Reformed theologian who 'extensively developed the biblical covenant concept' (Hildebrand 2022:254).

3.David and Jonathan also made a second covenant described in 1 Samuel 23:18.

4.The Hebrew term כָּרַת בְּרִית, if it is literally translated, means 'to cut a covenant' therefore implying blood.

5.Lewis (2006:341) opines that this kind of covenant between a deity and their people was not general practice outside Israel, specifically the Ancient Near East.

6.According to Strong (n.d.:1285), in only two passages in the Bible this is not the case, namely Jeremia 34:10 and Daniel 9:27.

- Exodus 12:1–20: The establishment of the Passover. Yahweh freed his people from Egypt.
- Exodus 24:7–8 (within the context of Ex 19–31, 34): With the Ten Commandments of Exodus 20 (and the laws [*mišpāṭim*] of Ex 21–31)[7] as the content of this covenant.

Although there is a substantial possibility that Genesis 15 and 17 constituted one (comprehensive) covenant where blood was twice involved (cf. Gentry & Wellum 2012:258), this article opts, in line with Hahn (2009:104), for two separate covenants, based on the fact that the Bible inserts the narrative of Hagar and Ishmael between the two chapters.

After the methodology and research question, this article will discuss these covenants in the OT and their continuation in the NT, ending with a conclusion.

Research methods and design

This article refers to the previous mentioned covenants as *covenants ratified by blood*, rather than blood covenants. The reason behind this is that the blood covenant does not constitute a widely accepted category within biblical (both OT and NT) covenant studies, including Ancient Near Eastern studies. As this is rather a popular theme found in certain devotional and charismatic Christian literature, most critical biblical scholars avoid or reject the terms 'blood covenant' and 'blood-friendship' as a hermeneutical category and refer to these as 'fictive kinship' (cf. Wininger 2023). The Bible also does not explicitly describe individuals who cut themselves or mixed their blood, in this way becoming 'blood brothers' to seal a friendship. It is not even reported that David and Jonathan did it although it could be possible. With this in mind, we will discuss the covenants where blood was involved in both the OT and the NT.

Scholarship on covenants where blood was involved can mostly be divided into two categories: Cultural-anthropological studies focusing on the history and sociology of these ancient covenants, and biblical covenant theology with a focus on the role of blood and sacrifices in divine covenants.[8] This article will focus on the latter. To start with, a viable definition of a covenant is needed. Robertson (1980:n.p.) gives such a definition: 'When God enters into a covenantal relationship with men, he sovereignly institutes a life-and-death bond … [*this*] covenant is a bond in blood, or a bond sovereignly administered:'

- A *bond* is something inviolable that binds two parties together. This includes a verbalised declaration about the format and character of the bond, committing two parties to each other. It also consists of a binding verbal oath (Gn 21:23–24), symbolic actions like the granting of a gift (Gn 21:28–30), the eating of a meal (Gn 26:28–30), the setting up of a memorial (Gn 31:44–45), the sprinkling of blood (Ex 24:8), passing under the rod (Ez 20:37) or the dividing of animals (Gn 15:10, 18).
- The phrase *bond in blood* can also be translated as 'bond of life (and death)' and stipulates the ultimacy within the covenantal context of the commitment on the sides of both God and his people. The implication is that God never entered into a relaxed covenant with his people. His covenants consisted of both life and death; therefore, it is mostly translated with 'to cut a covenant'.
- The covenant as a *bond sovereignly administered*: Yahweh himself dictated the terms and conditions of his (unilateral) covenant with his people. He did not bargain, barter or try to make a contract with his people. His covenants were filled with promissory or legal aspects and thereby sovereignly administered.

Smith (2006) supplies us with another workable definition:

> A covenant is a binding, unbreakable obligation between two parties, based on unconditional love sealed by blood and sacred oath, that creates a relationship in which each party is bound by specific undertakings on each other's behalf. The parties to the covenant place themselves under the penalty of divine retribution should they later attempt to avoid those undertakings. It is a relationship that can only be broken by death. (pp. 12–13)

This is a historical and Bible-based article utilising canonical criticism as methodology. This implies that the Bible should be read from the vantage point of the canon (Kruger 1994:181) against its historical and biblical background. Read within its historical background, the canonical form of the Bible is regarded as an entity with integrity and sense. This makes this corpus worthy of being studied afresh (eds. Coats & Long 1977:xi–xii). Childs (1984:41; cf. also Callaway 1999:142) explains that 'canon' entails a historical process in ancient Israel where they collected, selected and ordered a fixed body of consecrated writings and considered them as normative. Callaway (1999:142) claims, 'It is this dynamic quality of scripture in interactive formation with the believing communities that canonical criticism addresses'.

When referring to the terms 'old' and 'new' (covenants), in line with Bullinger (1534), I do not mean that the latter (covenant) has replaced the former (as suggested in Heb 8:13), but rather that the *new* is a continuation of the *old*, that the new builds upon the basis of the old and confirms or expands the old.[9] This applies to the term 'Testament' as well: the NT is just a continuation of the OT and in no way a replacement. This is why the two compendiums of books in the Bible that we have should rather be called the *First Covenant* and the *Second Covenant* (cf. Smith 2006:11, who refers to these as the Old Covenant and the New Covenant). According to Bullinger (1534), 'the whole biblical narrative comprehends the Old and New Testaments as the unfolding of *one single and eternal covenant*' (cf. Hildebrand 2022:254). The terms 'old' and 'new' therefore unambiguously distinguish 'specific stages in God's plan of salvation' (cf. Van Chien 2024:982). To refer to 'old' and 'new' creates the impression that the former is replaced by the latter, while this article is not of that idea.

7.According to Edenburg (2019:157), this does not include the laws (*mišpāṭim*) of Exodus 21 because Exodus 24:4 is an echo 'of the introduction to the Decalogue'.

8.Not much recent literature could be found on this specific topic.

9.The only way in which we can refer to an old and new covenant is the means of salvation, as in the new covenant Jesus mediated it and established it by his blood (Smith 2006:12).

The research question is: *In which way are the OT covenant(s) sealed with blood between Yahweh and his people maintained in the NT*? The work of Trumbull (1893) plays a significant role in this article, as he is regarded as 'one of the primary catalysts for the "scholarly blood debate"' (Kuma 2010:n.p.).

Origin of covenants ratified by blood

This primitive rite's origin goes back to time immemorial. In these covenants, two individuals entered 'into the closest, the most enduring, and the most sacred of compacts … through the inter-commingling of their blood, by means of its mutual tasting, or of its inter-transfusion' (Trumbull 1893:4–5). By drinking the blood of one another, the one party absorbed the nature of the other one into their own (Smith 1927:313).[10] Afterwards, they would call each other 'friend' – a very honourable title (cf. Smith 2006:20).

The first covenant being recorded where blood was involved was between two men in Syria who vowed to be brother-friends forever. After sharing their blood, they declared: 'We are brothers in a covenant made before God: Who deceiveth the other, him will God deceive' (Trumbull 1893:6). This covenant implies an indissoluble tie or a union and is still to some extent held in the East, Africa and even in Europe and China, denoting a closer relationship than kinship between two individuals (Trumbull 1893:6ff, 12ff, 39ff, 43ff).

In the 5th century BCE, Herodotus (484–425 BCE) in his *Histories* 4.70 (Herodotus 2013:270) already described covenants where blood was involved, where the Scyths filled a large bowl with wine and the parties would drop some of their blood in it, and after a ceremony, they would each drink a draught from the bowl together with the high-ranked men among their followers (cf. Smith 1929:317). Tacitus (56–120 CE) in his *Annals* 12.46 (Church & Brodribb 1921) referred to covenants where blood was involved when Rhadamistus and Mithridates went into such a covenant:

> [*U*]nite their right hands and bind together the thumbs in a tight knot; then, when the blood has flowed into the extremities, they let it escape by a slight puncture and suck it in turn. Such a treaty is thought to have a mysterious sanctity, as being sealed with the blood of both parties. (pp. 218–219)

In his *Toxaris* 37 (Bottenberg [2021] 2022:94), Lucian of Samosata (ca. 120–180 CE) also related a friendship built on the sharing of blood.

The Old Testament covenants between Yahweh and his people

The contents of Yahweh's covenants with his people

The general terms in which Yahweh's covenants with his people are depicted are included in his Covenant Formula (*Bundesformel* – cf. Smend 1963) with his people: 'I will be your God [*Yahweh's commitment*] and you will be my people [*his people's reciprocal commitment*]'. Although these exact words are nowhere to be found in the OT, texts (not forming part of a covenant, but with the covenant in mind) that come close to these are, either with Yahweh first and his people second or in reverse order: Exodus 6:7; Leviticus 26:12; Deuteronomy 29:13; Jeremiah 7:23; 11:4; 24:7; 30:22; 31:1, 33; 32:38; Ezekiel 11:20; 14:11; 34:30; 36:28; 37:23, 27 and Zechariah 8:8; 13:9. In certain verses, we read only about Yahweh's commitment, like Genesis 17:7: 'I will establish my covenant … to be your God and the God of your descendants after you' (cf. also Ex 6:7; Ex 29:45–46; 2 Sm 7:24; 1 Chr 17:22; Ez 34:24). Verses like Genesis 7:9 explicate the people's part, where Yahweh said to Abram: 'As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come'. In verses like Exodus 19:5–6; Deuteronomy 7:6; 14:2 and 26:18, Yahweh promised his people that if they obey him fully and keep his covenant, then out of all nations they will be his *treasured possession*. The four covenants will now be discussed.

The four covenants

Genesis 15

The narrative in Genesis 11 and 12 acts as background for this covenant. 'Not too long' after the story of Noah, the 'whole world' has seemingly forgotten Yahweh. Yahweh (once again)[11] intervened by choosing Abram, who remained in Harran after his father's death (Gn 11:32). At that stage, Abram did not know Yahweh. First of all, Yahweh commanded him to leave his country (Gn 12:1) and furnished him with the following promises (Gn 12:2–3):

- I will make you into a great nation.
- I will bless you.
- I will make your name great.
- You will be a blessing.
- I will bless those who bless you.
- Whoever curses you I will curse.
- All people on Earth will be blessed through you.

Abram and his nephew Lot then moved away and arrived at the great tree of Moreh at Shechem (Gn 12:6) where Yahweh gave him a follow-up promise: To your offspring I will give this land (Gn 12:7).[12] After some time, Abram arrived at Bethel, where he called on Yahweh's Name (Gn 13:4). There he and Lot separated ways from each other.

In Genesis 15, we read that Yahweh decided to make a covenant with his 'people' – at that stage presented by Abram – the first reported covenant in the Bible sealed by blood. Genesis 15:6 reports that Abram believed Yahweh. This verb refers to a very close and confidential relationship between two parties, indicating that Abram was ready to enter into a relationship with Yahweh (cf. Ja 2:23; Trumbull 1893:221).

10.Smith (2006:18) makes the sweeping statement that '[*a*]t the making of a covenant, there was always the shedding of blood'. This does not ring true for *all* covenants.

11.Yahweh's first intervention is recorded in Genesis 6:11–13.

12.In Gn 13:14, God repeated this promise, adding *I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth*.

Here Yahweh demanded Abram to bring a 'heifer, a goat, and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon' (Gn 15:9). Abram then 'brought all these to him, cut them in two and arranged the halves opposite each other; the birds, however, he did not cut in half' (Gn 15:10). Yahweh apparently was the only actant in this ritual, as Abram fell asleep after he prepared everything as stated above (Gn 15:12). After sunset, 'a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces' (Gn 15:17), as Yahweh 'made a covenant with [the sleeping?]' Abram and said, 'To your descendants I give this land' (Gn 15:18–20). This covenant set the tone for the covenants to come.

Genesis 17

Abram (Abraham) – and only he – was called God's friend in the Bible (2 Chr 20:7; Is 41:8; Ja 2:23).[13] This title is the proof that Yahweh already had a covenant with him where blood was involved (cf. above). This acts as an indication that Abram twice went into a covenant of blood with Yahweh.

Yahweh's second covenant with Abram is found in Genesis 17. Here he referred to himself as *El Shaddai* [God Almighty]. This was the covenant of circumcision. Yahweh changed Abram's name to Abraham (Gn 17:4). He also changed Sarai's name to Sarah (Gn 17:15). The condition of the covenant was: 'Every male among you shall be circumcised' (Gn 17:10). Circumcision of every male by giving his personal blood ('at the very source of paternity' Trumbull 1893:217) was therefore the sign of this covenant between Yahweh and Abraham (Gn 17:11). Within the Israelite tradition male babies were from then on circumcised[14] as a sign of the covenant that Yahweh established with Abraham. The circumcision took place 8 days after a boy child's birth (cf. Gn 17:12; Ac 7:8), confirming the words of Yahweh in Genesis 17:13b: 'My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant'. This circumcision was the mark of God's people's devotedness to him (Trumbull 1893:218).

This covenant also applied to the 'generations [*of Yahweh's people*] to come' (Gn 17:12). Yahweh promised Abraham that he would be his God as well as the God of his descendants (Gn 17:7). No animals or animal blood were used here as a sign for the covenant but only the human blood of the circumcision. The cutting or removing of the foreskin (of human male babies) caused that blood to flow.

The spiritual value of this covenant with Yahweh was centred in its 'symbolism of the implicit surrender of the whole life and being, in hearty covenant with God' (Trumbull 1893:256). Yahweh explicated this in Deuteronomy 10:16 when Moses told the people of Yahweh that they should actually 'circumcise their hearts' to Yahweh. The circumcision of the flesh therefore implied or *had to become* a circumcision of the heart.

13.Exodus 33:11 compares Moses to a friend of God without stating that this was the case.

14.According to Popovsky (2010:153–154), circumcision was regarded in the same vein by the Ancient Near East people. Today, Jewish men are still circumcised, as well as a few other religions like the Muslims (regarding Ishmael, the oldest son of Abraham as their ancestor), who call it 'khitan' (BBC 2009). For a literary analysis of Genesis 12–17 focused on circumcision, cf. Hegg (1990).

Not long afterwards (in Gn 22:1–14), Yahweh tested (Gn 22:1) Abraham to see whether he would stay true to his covenant with him. 'Only a faith that would neither question nor reason, only a love that would neither fail nor waiver, could meet an issue like that' (Trumbull 1893:226). Here it is very important to state that an Ancient Near Eastern father prized his son's life far more than his own, as it was regarded as terrible for a father to die without a son. To give his son under these circumstances was to give more than his own life (cf. Heb 11:17–19; Trumbull 1893:225). Abraham, well knowing what was at stake, stayed true to his covenant with Yahweh. Abraham was put to the test, and he passed his covenantal obligations.

Exodus 12:1–20

The beginnings of this covenant go back to where Yahweh's people were still in Egypt, more specifically the day before they would be released from their slavery by Faraoh. With this, Yahweh continued his covenant with Abraham, where he promised that his descendants would inherit Canaan, by releasing them from Egypt and preparing them to take over the promised land.

On the command of Yahweh, the Israelites would celebrate the 10 plagues and their subsequent exodus from Egypt at the hand of Moses on an annual basis. The name of the feast was פֶּסַח (*pesach* – Hebrew; πάσχα: *Pascha* – Greek). The month in which they left Egypt became the 'first month of their religious year' (Ex 12:1; Hodges 2025:24), called Abib or Aviv (Dt 16:1). Trumbull (1893:231; original emphasis) refers to the feast of the Passover as follows: 'There came, again, a time when the Lord would give fresh evidence of his fidelity to his covenant of blood-friendship with Abraham'. Most of the time, the Festival of Unleavened Bread, where the Jews celebrated their liberation from Egyptian slavery, was celebrated together with the Passover.[15]

On the 10th day of Aviv, each family had to choose a 1-year-old male lamb without any blemishes or defects and separate it from the flock (cf. Hodges 2025). Four days later (the 14th day), the family would slay the lamb at nightfall. They would then take the blood (which would act as a token of Yahweh's covenant with Abraham; Trumbull 1893:232)[16] and sprinkle it on both the doorposts and lintel of their residence. This act consecrated Yahweh's people to him. Then they had to roast the whole lamb with its unbroken legs and head. They had

15.Luke 22:1 equates the two feasts: *Now the Festival of Unleavened Bread, called the Passover, was approaching*. During Jesus' time, the Jews (specifically the men) gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate that God has rescued them *out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery* (cf. Ex 20:2). On the day of Unleavened Bread, the people of God sacrificed the Passover lamb (Lk 22:7). During the feast, no yeast (leaven) was tolerated to be added to the bread – therefore *unleavened bread*. That bread had to be eaten for the next seven days (cf. Ex 12:19).

16.Trumbull (1893:232) states that, during his days, the Samaritans on Mount Gerizim still observed this blood covenant: They caught up in basins the spurting blood of the consecrated lambs, then they marked all their tents promptly. Additionally, they also marked every child on their forehead between their eyes as evidence to their covenantal relationship with Yahweh. This is one of the reasons why the Jews still have the custom to (sometimes) wear a small leather case ('phylactery') upon their foreheads and/or their arm, also called *tefillin* containing Hebrew parchment scrolls from the Torah, mostly Exodus 13:3–10, 11–16 or Deuteronomy 6:4–9, 13–22. In light of Isaiah 49:16 (*I have engraved you on the palms of my hands*) and 62:8 (*The Lord has sworn by his right hand and by his mighty arm*) (cf. also Smith 2006:19), certain Rabbis claim that Yahweh himself is also wearing phylacteries (Hackett & Abbot 1883:833–834). Even King Saul was wearing a *crown that was on his head and the band on his arm* (2 Sm 1:10).

to eat it (in Yahweh's presence) with bitter herbs added (Ex 12:8). Exodus 12:11 indicates how a family should eat the Passover lamb and herbs:

> This is how you are to eat it: With your cloak tucked into your belt, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand. Eat it in haste; it is the Lord's Passover.

If there were any leftovers, it had to be burned.

The Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread were regarded as a 'lasting ordinance' (Ex 12:24) and 'ceremony' (Ex 12:25) and were held as an annual feast – where Yahweh's people had to adhere to specific instructions as indicated in Exodus 12:1–11, 43–50.

Exodus 24:7–8 within the context of Exodus 19–31, 34

After Yahweh liberated his people from slavery in Egypt, they faced the wilderness (desert) on their way to the promised land as Yahweh met Moses in person at Mount Sinai. There he gave his people the Ten Commandments (Ex 20) and other laws (Ex 20–31). These were called the covenant law (cf. e.g. Ex 16:34; 25:16; cf. also Dt 4:13) contained in the Book of the Covenant (cf. Ex 24:7), the Mosaic Law, also called the Sinai Covenant (Van Chien 2024:983). Here the people of Yahweh entered a new era and received a divine charter from Yahweh about how the covenant would proceed (Trumbull 1893:238).

First of all, Moses gave the people all Yahweh's words and laws, and they committed themselves to live accordingly (Ex 24:3). The next morning he took the 'Book of the Covenant and read it to the people' (Ex 24:7). Once again, they committed themselves to do everything that Yahweh asked of them. Moses then built an altar under the mountain and set up 12 stone pillars, one each for every tribe (Ex 24:4). Afterwards, young Israelite men 'offered burned offerings and sacrificed young bulls as fellowship offerings to Yahweh' (Ex 24:5) – 'not sin offerings are named, but burnt-offerings, of consecration, and peace-offerings of communion' (Trumbull 1893:239). In Exodus 24:8, Moses sprinkled the blood of bulls on the people, stating 'This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words' (referring to all Yahweh's commandments). Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, as well as 70 elders of Israel, went up the mountain and ate the covenantal meal with Yahweh – they saw him, and they ate and drank (Ex 24:9–11). This formed part of the 'social inter-communion, which commonly accompanies the rite of blood-friendship' (Trumbull 1893:240). Notably, this covenant did not form part of the Ten Commandments but was the reason behind it (Kenyon 1969:22). Therefore, the Ten Commandments formed part of this covenant.

The covenant discussed above is called Yahweh's 'Book of the Covenant' or Covenant Code (cf. Edenburg 2019, 157) with his people at Sinai, also called the 'blood of the covenant' (Ex 24:8), forming the central or pivotal part of his covenant relationship with his people. This covenant was repeated in Exodus 34:1–28.

The importance of blood

Yahweh (Elohim) was the Author and Creator of life, which was depicted by blood (cf. Peter 2026). Leviticus 17:11 explicates this:

> For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life.

Whereas the sacrificed animal's life was in its blood, the people of Yahweh were forbidden to drink blood (e.g. Lv 3:17, 7:26). This was also true in NT times, where the Christians were forbidden to drink blood (cf. Ac 15:29). During the journey through the desert, Aaron had to make atonement on the altar's horns once a year. The atonement was made with blood and was most holy to Yahweh (Ex 30:10). Sacrifices were also naturally accompanied by the blood of the sacrificed animal, which was poured out around or upon the altar or sprinkled upon the altar (Trumbull 1893:213).

Here it is important to look at the blood being used: Abram entered into his first covenant with Yahweh where the blood of a few animals was involved. When Abraham (in Gn 17) entered into the next covenant with Yahweh, he devoted his own blood to Yahweh (circumcision); at the Passover, Yahweh recognised his covenant anew with the seed of Abraham, this time with the substitute blood of a lamb; at Mount Sinai, the people of Yahweh was inducted into the privileges of his covenant with half of the blood coming from the one party and the other half from the other party to form the sacred compact – 'both portions being supplied from a common and a mutually accepted substitute' (Trumbull 1893:240).[17]

The importance of blood was pivotal as Yahweh made a very symbolic but existential link between blood and life (indicated above; cf. Lv 7:26, 17:10–14). Here we see the people of Yahweh, who were doomed to death through Adam, entered a 'new life' by means of a blood covenant with the Author of life by sharing the 'life of him who is life … finding atonement in the cleansing flow of the new blood thus applied' (Trumbull 1893:242). This calls Romans 6:23 to mind, stating: For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord, also with reference to the new covenant being instituted by Jesus himself. In this way, Yahweh's people surrendered themselves to him with substitute blood, symbolising communion and union with Yahweh through the blood of the eternal covenant (cf. Heb 13:20).

Four-in-one

These are four covenants and four ways in which blood was utilised as the sign to seal these covenants: As mentioned earlier, in the first covenant, it was the blood of different

17.Within the laws that Yahweh gave to his people, he also included the Sabbath (Ex 31:16) referring to it *as a lasting covenant*.

slaughtered animals; in the second, the blood of God's people; in the third, the blood of a lamb on the door posts and lintel of each residence and in the fourth, the blood of bulls sprinkled on the people of Yahweh. Although these are four separate covenants, they cannot be separated and actually form part (together with the rest of God's covenants with his people) of one blood relationship covenant with Yahweh, in fact therefore one comprehensive covenant, containing distinguishable components (cf. Robertson 1980:n.p.). Manurung and Hendriks (2024:1–2 of 15) refer to this as an 'interconnectedness' and 'interrelatedness' of the covenants. It can be schematised as where one covenant naturally 'flows' into and actually forms part of the next one (see Figure 1).

When we look at the history of Israel, we see how Yahweh remembered his *covenant* with his people, not referring to his different *covenants* with them separately, but to *his comprehensive covenant* – the unified character of these biblical covenants (Robertson 1980:n.p.). The reason is that all these covenants ultimately united into a single relationship with Yahweh (Robertson 1980:n.p.). When Yahweh's people were in Egypt, he heard *their groaning, and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob* (Ex 2:24; 6:5). In Judges 2:1–2 and 20, Yahweh stated that his people (again) broke the *covenant* with him, referring to them being disobedient towards him. When Judah was in exile in Babylon, Nehemiah called on the *awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments* (Neh 1:5), whereupon Yahweh freed his people from the Persians. This is why Yahweh declared in Jeremiah 31:31–33:

> The days are coming when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors 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.

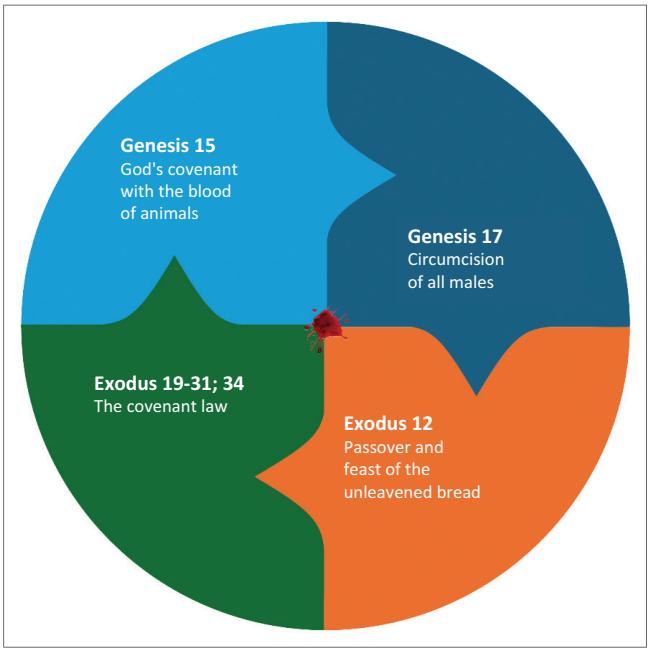

FIGURE 1: Yahweh's one comprehensive covenant with his people.

Yahweh declares:

> This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time, 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.

1 Chronicles 16:15 (cf. Ps 105:8) confirms that Yahweh remembered his covenant with his people forever. This term called into remembrance all Yahweh's covenants (as a whole and a unity) with his people, with the focus on the Mosaic law as a 'universal condition' (cf. Spendlove 2023:131).

Let us now move over to the NT for the continuation of God's covenant with his people.

God's covenant continued in the New Testament[18]

During the NT times, God has transcended by giving his one and only son, Jesus, as a sacrificial offering to his people, thereby making the symbol of the covenant a reality for the NT people (cf. Trumbull 1893:273). Just as Abraham has given his own blood through circumcision, God now gave his own blood through his son, Jesus as the blood of the eternal covenant (Heb 13:20).19 Jesus, who is God's son, therefore also God, has become one with humankind – a human (Jn 1:14). He had the life of God as well as the life of humankind in his own blood. John 1:4 explicitly states: In him was life, and that life was the light of all humankind. As blood equals life, that life could be a reference to the sacrificial blood that Jesus had in himself (cf. Heb 13:20 above). Jesus, having both a divine and human nature in himself, was able to share his divine nature with his followers (cf. below).

The NT still reflects the OT covenant between God and his people because the covenant words did not change: 'I will be your God and you will be my people' (cf. 2 Cor 6:16; Heb 8:10; 1 Pt 2:9; Rv 21:3, 7). However, the sign linked to the covenant has changed. What was the new sign then?

In the OT, Yahweh's covenant with his people was sealed with blood as the sign of the covenant. The NT clearly indicates to us that the new sign of God's covenant is Jesus' blood that he has shed for us on the cross. Recalling the OT covenant, specifically referring to Abraham who had to sacrifice his only son, we see how God was willing to sacrifice his only son in a covenant with his followers to prove to them how serious he was (and still is) about them – the true covenant of blood.

As discussed earlier (Trumbull 1893):

> In the primitive rite of blood-covenanting, men drank of each other's blood, in order that they might have a common life; and

18. Over against the OT that was drenched with the term 'covenant', this is not the case with the NT. In the NT, it occurs just more than 30 times of which Hebrews accounts for almost half of them (cf. Cobb 2022:151).

19. Only with the covenant of circumcision, it was not the blood of animals that was shed, but a human's blood; so with Jesus' new covenant, it was again a human's blood, in fact God's blood that was shed.

> they ate together of a mutually prepared feast, in order that they might evidence and nourish that common life. (p. 274)

At the Last Supper (a covenantal meal within the context of the Passover; Robertson 1980:n.p.; Smith 2006:20[20]) that Jesus held with his disciples, he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to his disciples, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the new[21] covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins' (Mt 26:27–28; cf. Mk 14:24; Lk 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25). When his disciples drank that wine (symbolising Jesus' blood), 'they had entered into the strongest, most sacred Covenant known to the human heart' (Kenyon 1969:37) – on behalf of all Jesus' followers.[22] After Jesus had gone into this covenant with his disciples, he naturally called them friends (Jn 15:14).[23] Hili (2024:99) correctly refers to the Last Supper 'as part of a represented Sinai event'[24] and to Jesus as the new Moses (Hili 2024:104; cf. Tilahun 2020:50 who calls Jesus the 'Moses-like Saviour').

During the OT times, the people poured out substitute blood for the sacrifice, and then they ate the animal's meat as a symbol to share life with God. Jesus made this symbol a reality by becoming the true Paschal lamb, the lamb who was slain from the creation of the world (Rv 13:8).[25] The first sacrifices were continued by the second sacrifice. The blood that Jesus has shed for us was life itself – eternal life (Jn 6:54; 1 Jn 5:11). In contrast to the first sacrifices that had to be repeated annually, the blood of Jesus was a once-off offering for everyone who spiritually wanted a 'divine-human inter-union and a divine-human inter-communion' (Trumbull 1893:275–276). What we see here is that Jesus as God did not only cut the covenant with his people but also became the sacrifice of that covenant by giving his own body 'to be eaten' by his followers.

When Jesus shed his blood on the cross, he saved 'his people from their sins by dying for them and so [initiated] a new relationship with God' (Davies & Allison 1997:474). Woollard (2018) conclusively states, 'To tell the story of God redeeming humanity through Jesus is to tell the whole story of God's covenantal relationship with humans'. Jesus' death is therefore to be understood within the context of a covenantal death, a substitutionary sacrifice, as Jesus died as a substitute for God's covenant-breaking people (Robertson 1980:n.p.).

Here it serves to mention that with God's covenant made with his followers, he invited them to 'participate in the most intimate relationship and unbreakable bond known among humans or capable of being expressed in any language' (Smith 2006:22). This invitation to covenant friendship gives his followers the opportunity to enter into his circle of friendship where he ties himself to them in an intimate love union.

This covenant made Jesus' followers ministers of the new covenant where the Holy Spirit gives life (2 Cor 3:6) – called the ministry of the Spirit (2 Cor 3:8) that brings righteousness (2 Cor 3:9). This made his followers 'chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession' (1 Pt 2:9; cf. treasured possession in Ex 19:5–6; Dt 7:6; 14:2; 26:18). The new covenant did not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus [*did*] away with the promise (Gl 3:17) – referring here to God's covenant and promise to Abraham and his followers – but was an extension and continuation of it. This new covenant is also called by some scholars the *Charter of the Kingdom of Heaven* (cf. Van Chien 2024:984).

According to Hebrews 7:12, Jesus became the Guarantor of a better covenant, the High Priest who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in Heaven (Heb 8:1), the Mediator of a new covenant (Heb 9:15). The new covenant is established on better promises (Heb 8:6, 8). Because God's people did not remain faithful to Yahweh's covenant (Heb 8:9), God has intervened once again (just like in OT times) and established a successive covenant, stating I will put my laws in their minds/hearts and write them on their hearts/minds (Heb 8:10; 10:16; cf. Dt 10:16).

The Last Supper that Jesus and his disciples celebrated in Jerusalem in a *large room upstairs* (Mk 14:15) of most probably Mary's house (cf. Ac 12:12) was not a new practice instituted by Jesus, but the traditional Passover (Lk 22:1). However, Jesus' words in Luke 22:20 ('after the supper he [Jesus] took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you"') took a new turn, where Jesus applied Exodus 24:8 ('Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, "This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words"') on himself. This is much in line with John 6:53, where Jesus told his followers, 'Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you' (cf. also Nel 2024:91).

In Table 1, the old and new covenants are compared with each other to indicate both the continuation, development and extension of God's covenant with his people between the two Testaments.[26]

20.Smith elaborates on the same page: 'The meal declared the covenant, as the two representatives would eat of the same bread and drink of the same wine telling the world that they were one, partaking one of another'.

21.Many codices and manuscripts, like A, C, D, K, W, Δ, Π, 074, f^{1}, f^{13}, et al. read καινῆς διαθήκης, in line with Luke 22:20.

22.This was the consummation and realisation of humankind's longing of inter-union and inter-communion with God at a common table with Jesus Christ (cf. Trumbull 1893:282).

23.This is why Jesus told his disciples: *Remain in me* and *remain in my love* (Jn 15:4–9) and why he prayed the Father that they may stay one (Jn 17:11).

24.Hili (2024:99) substantiates his point of view: 'Just as Moses threw the victims' blood onto the assembly to ratify their relationship with God, so "all the people" call for Jesus' blood upon themselves and their children [Mt 27:25], uttering words that similarly incorporate them into his redemptive work'.

25.Firstly, Jesus was circumcised in order to become part of the blood covenant between God and Abraham (and his descendants), whereafter he shed his own blood on the cross as the reality of God's covenant with his followers. Trumbull (1893:280) claims: 'Because of his God-ward purpose of bringing men into a loving covenant with God, Jesus gave of his blood in the covenant-rite of circumcision. Because of his man-ward sympathy with the needs and the trials of those whom he had come to save, and because of the crushing burden of their death-bringing sins, Jesus gave of his blood in an agony of intercessory suffering'.

26.Yahweh has already promised this to his people returning from exile (Dt 30:6). Cf. also Jeremia 4:4.

TABLE 1: Comparison between Old Testament and New Testament covenant.

The Old Covenant	The New Covenant
This covenant only applied to Yahweh's people, the Jews	This covenant only applies to God's followers – people of the Way (Ac 9:2; 19:9) – Christians
The covenant was sealed with blood (males and animals)	The covenant was sealed by Jesus' blood that he poured out on the cross for his followers (cf. Tilahun 2020:54), symbolised by the cup that Jesus shared with his followers (Mt 26:27–28) and that all God's people are sharing on a regular basis up to this very day
The covenant blood provided atonement for God's people (Ex 29:36)	Through his blood, Jesus forgives the sins of his followers (Mt 26:28)
The covenant depended on Yahweh's people to keep their part	The covenant is 'everlasting and irrevocable' (Pettegrew 1999:254)
At Mount Sinai, Moses sprinkled blood on the people and said, 'This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you' (Ex 24:8)	At the Last Supper, Jesus referred to the cup as follows: 'This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins' (Mt 26:28)
The covenant was applied by the Levitical priesthood (Ex 29:9)	The covenant was instituted by Jesus as our High Priest (Heb 3:1) and by his followers as the royal and holy priesthood (1 Pt 2:1–10; cf. Ex 19:6)
The Levitical priesthood had a tabernacle (Ex 26) with the inner part, the Holy of Holies, designated as Yahweh's dwelling with the Ark of the Covenant in it (Ex 40). Later Solomon built a temple for Yahweh (1 Ki 6)	Now the body of each of God's followers is the temple of God (1 Cor 6:19–29)
Yahweh was the surety of the covenant. He could swear by himself (Gn 22:16; Is 45:23)	Jesus is the Guarantor of this covenant (Heb 7:22), being the only way to salvation by God (Jn 14:6)
The covenant had one act where blood was poured (e.g. circumcision), and all God's followers (men) partook in that sign	This covenant has one act where blood was poured (Jesus' crucifixion), and all God's followers (women and even children included) (cf. Allister 1999) partake in this sign (Holy Communion, specifically the cup)
As part of the covenant, the male children were circumcised	In this covenant, God has circumcised the hearts of his people[26]
These covenants were made separately although they were not separated from each other and acted as a combined covenant	This covenant is a combination and continuation of the old covenant(s), where Jesus became the Passover lamb, using the words of the covenant in Exodus 24:8. The combined old covenant has therefore culminated in Jesus
Most parts of the covenant were once-off acts, except the Passover that was celebrated annually	The covenant is celebrated whenever God's people can and want to, in remembrance of Jesus (cf. 1 Cor 11:25)

Conclusion

The people of God stand in a close friendship constituted by blood with him – God calls them 'friends'. This relationship was already established by Yahweh in the OT, and it culminated in Jesus in the NT. In the OT Yahweh chose his people (through Abram) and cut a covenant with him in Genesis 15. That covenant was later followed by the sign of circumcision (Gn 17). Those two covenants established the blood friendship between Yahweh and his people and continued with Isaac and Jacob. Then Yahweh's people went to Egypt for some 400 years before he freed them and established two more covenants with them in the wilderness – the Passover, including the Feast of the Unleavened Bread, as well as the Sinai Covenant (Ex 19–31). These covenants in combination determined the lifestyle of Yahweh's people up to the NT times when Jesus eventually died on the cross for his followers. During the Last Supper, when Jesus took the cup, he made a *new* (successive) covenant with his followers, indicating to them that the combination of the OT covenants has culminated in him, that hé was in fact the (new) covenant himself. This then answers the research question: *In which way are the OT covenant(s) sealed with blood between Yahweh and his people maintained in the NT*? The covenant was not replaced, but confirmed and expanded by Jesus, as Jesus only required faith in him (Jn 3:16) from people to become his followers.

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