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Jesus and the Jewish covenants

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Jesus established a New Covenant which we commemorate regularly at the Holy Communion. This New Covenant can only be fully appreciated in the context of the Old Testament (OT). This article explores the links between the New Covenant and the relevant covenants in the OT: the Noahic Covenant, the Abrahamic Covenant, the Sinai Covenant (including the Priestly Covenant), the Davidic Covenant and the prophecies of a New Covenant. Different tables illustrate the contents, the partners, the obligations and the signs of the individual covenants. The article discusses the connections between the different covenants to develop a comprehensive history of the covenants throughout the Bible. It begins in Genesis and concludes in the Book of Revelation. Particular focus is given to the so-called 'covenant formula'. It is argued that, while the New Covenant annuls the Sinai Covenant, the Abrahamic and Davidic Covenants live on it.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This article illustrates that the life and work of Jesus cannot be understood without reference to his Jewish heritage. It therefore becomes clear that de-Judaising the Bible is simply impossible.

Keywords: Noahic Covenant; Abrahamic Covenant; Sinai Covenant; Davidic Covenant; New Covenant; covenant formula.

Introduction

This article explores the links between the New Covenant and the relevant Old Testament (OT) covenants. The key question it addresses is: *Which covenants in the Old Testament are the most relevant, and how are they linked to the New Covenant?* The aim is to develop a deeper understanding of the New Covenant and its roots in the OT.

The latent temptation to try to de-Judaise the Bible

From time to time, anti-Semitic tendencies emerge within Christianity, seeking to sever ties with Jewish roots and create a 'pure, non-Jewish Christianity'. Marcion of Sinope (c.85–c.160) was the first to attempt to remove the entire OT, and he was also the first to codify a Christian canon. His canon consisted of a shorter version of the Gospel of Luke (the only non-Jewish gospel writer) and a selection of 10 of Paul's epistles (Bradshaw 1998). Almost two millennia later, the 'Deutsche Christen' movement in Nazi-Germany attempted to proclaim a 'de-Judaised Bible' (Kahl 2020). The Institute for the Study and Elimination of Jewish Influence in German Church Life (1939–1944) produced a Bible without the OT and altered the New Testament (NT), removing the genealogies of Jesus and any references to fulfilled OT prophecies, for example (Wikipedia 2026). Even today, there are attempts to 'nationalise' Christianity (Dietz & Hinsenkamp 2026).

It seems as if the Christian church needs regular reminders of its Jewish roots. The life and work of Jesus can only be understood in the context of the Jewish covenants. Jesus was a Jew, and in his conversation with the Samaritan woman, he emphasised that 'salvation comes from the Jews' (Jn 4:22). John 5:39 should also encourage us to study the OT, because the Scriptures witness about Jesus.

Why study the Old Testament covenants?

The OT makes up more than three-quarters of the Bible. If the entire Bible is God's word, then the OT's sheer volume alone should mean that Christians would study it regularly. However, the name 'Old Testament' alone can be demotivating: Is this part perhaps too old and outdated? By listening to the words 'This cup is the *new* covenant …' (Lk 22:20), Christians might get the wrong impression that the OT covenants are outdated. In fact, the New Covenant only replaces

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the Sinai Covenant. Other Jewish covenants live on in the New Covenant. Thus, some aspects of the New Covenant only become clear through the study of these covenants.

Old Testament scholars have developed various theories about when each text was written and who made which comments on it. For the purposes of this article, I will leave this discussion aside. Instead, I will consider the Bible as it appears in the canon and trace certain lines within it. This approach is similar to that of Rendtorff's in his book on the covenant formula (Rendtorff 1995:15) as well as the 'canonical exegesis', followed by Pope Benedict XVI in his 'Jesus' books (Ratzinger 2007:17–18).[1]

The term 'covenant'

As early as 1534, the Zurich Reformer Heinrich Bullinger published a book on God's covenant (Bullinger 1534). One century later, the German theologian Johannes Cocceius (1648) presented the first systematic treatise on the covenants. The concept of covenant plays a pivotal role in Eichrodt's *Theology of the Old Testament*, first published in 1933 (Eichrodt 1959). The German OT scholar Eichrodt searched for a basic tendency underlying the diversity of the OT and found it in the concept of the 'covenant' (Eichrodt 1959:V). The covenant is also a central link connecting the two testaments.

The English term 'covenant' only partially reflects the Hebrew term *berît*, which appears 287 times in the OT (Kutsch 1994:341). In the OT, the covenant is the central metaphor used to describe the relationship between the Israelites and their God. The exact origin of this term is uncertain. It implies an obligation to perform a specific action. There are three variants (Kutsch 1994:342):

- **The self-imposed obligation:** A powerful person makes a voluntary commitment to a weaker person. An example of this is when Joshua 'makes a *berît*' with the Gibeonites, thereby committing himself to letting the Gibeonites live (Jos 9:15). Alternatively, the defeated party may make a commitment to the victor, as the defeated Aramean king Ben-Hadad did to King Ahab of Israel (1 Ki 20:34).
- **The imposed obligation:** Here, the stronger subject of the *berît* imposes an obligation on the weaker counterpart. Thus Nebuchadnezzar imposes an obligation on the Jewish king Zedekiah (Ez 17:13f).
- **The mutual obligation:** From the self-imposed obligation, two or more partners can enter into a mutual *berît* (Kutsch 1994:343). For example, King Solomon and King Hiram of Tyre cut a *berît* to secure mutual peace (1 Ki 5:26).

The term *berît* can also be applied to a friendship (1 Sm 23:18) or to a marriage (Ml 2:14).

How many covenants are we talking about?

Different views exist regarding the number of covenants. The Hebrew term *berît* only appears in the singular in the OT (Rendtorff 1995:14). The terms 'Old Testament' and 'New Testament' might give the impression that there are essentially two covenants: The 'Old Covenant' from the OT and the New Covenant that replaced it. However, it is not quite that simple. Even though many OT texts refer to *the* covenant (singular), a distinction is nevertheless made. For example, Jeremiah 33:20–21 refers to three covenants.

The NT explicitly differentiates between the various covenants in the OT. Romans 9:4 and Ephesians 2:12 both refer to 'covenants' in the plural. Galatians 3:17 distinguishes between the Abrahamic Covenant and the Sinai Covenant: 'The law, which came 430 years afterward, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God'.[2]

Strictly speaking, the 'covenant' in Israel consists of several interwoven covenants. The most important of these are the Abrahamic Covenant, the Sinai Covenant, the Davidic Covenant and the announced New Covenant. When the NT refers to the Old Covenant as having been 'made obsolete' (Heb 8:13) by the New Covenant, this statement refers to the Sinai Covenant (including the Priestly Covenant). The Abrahamic and the Davidic covenants continue to exist in the New Covenant. The Noahic Covenant is independent of these considerations.

This brings us to five covenants:

1. The Noahic Covenant.
2. The Abrahamic Covenant.
3. The Sinai Covenant.
4. The Davidic Covenant.
5. The New Covenant.

Other scholars have arrived at a different number. It varies between two and eight. The Noahic Covenant is usually considered separately because its focus is on the preservation of creation, whereas the other covenants focus on the redemption of humankind. According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1993:§§ 71–73), the Abrahamic and Sinai Covenants are to be regarded as one covenant, so that the Catechism lists only three covenants: The Noahic Covenant, the Abrahamic and Sinai Covenant, and the New Covenant, not mentioning the Davidic Covenant. Some scholars like Schenker (1993:112) as well as Spaemann and Joest (1980:13) argue that the New Covenant is actually only a renewed covenant, so they end up with two covenants in total. The *Scofield Bible* (Wasserzug-Traeder 1978: fn 2 to Gn 1:26), on the other hand, lists up to eight covenants, beginning with an Adamic Covenant.[3]

This article only examines instances where the Bible itself uses the term 'covenant' (berît).[4] This classification is in line with theologians like Bruce (2004:53–54, 70), Dumbrell (2002:5–7), Dück (2017:55) and others.

1.In those cases where original work was done in German, I will refer to this German source.

2.All Bible verses are taken from the English Standard Version, Text edition (2016).

3.Further examples: Smith (2006) lists seven covenants; Van Chien (2024:983–984) surprises with a collection of three covenants: Adam, Sinai and the New Covenant.

4.Thus this article avoids terms such as 'covenant of works' and 'covenant of grace' which are common in Covenant Theology but not used in the Bible itself.

The Noahic Covenant

Genesis 1–11 reports three world crises: The Fall, the Flood and the Tower of Babel. In two instances, God explicitly establishes a covenant. We start with the Noahic covenant.

The people of Noah's time are described as wicked and corrupt (Gn 6:5), including some obscure sexual practices (Gn 6:2, 4). As a consequence, God planned to destroy humanity in a great flood (Gn 6:6–7). Only Noah and his family were saved.

In Genesis 6:18, the term *berît* appears for the first time: 'I will establish my covenant with you'. The preservation of Noah's family is already part of this covenant. After the global judgement, God assures that such a flood will never happen again. Genesis 9:9–17 recounts the covenant that God makes with Noah and his descendants (Gn 9:9) and with all living creatures (Gn 9:10). The Noahic Covenant is universal (see Box 1).

In the Noahic Covenant, God promises never to send a flood again (Gn 9:11). No conditions are imposed on humans. This covenant is an unconditional, 'pure promise of salvation from God for the whole world' (Zimmerli 1999:46).[5] Only God entered into a commitment. As a sign of the covenant, God gave the rainbow:

> When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth. (Gn 9:16)

Although the Noahic covenant has become quite prominent in Christian teaching, there are not many references in the OT to this covenant. One such reference is found in Isaiah 54:9, where the Noahic covenant is used as a model for another promise.

BOX 1: The Noahic Covenant.

Content	Preservation of creation; no second flood
Partners	All living creatures
Obligation	One-sided (only God made a commitment)
Sign	Rainbow

The Abrahamic Covenant

Genesis 11: The background story–The Tower of Babel

The so-called Table of Nations (Gn 10) lists 70 nations, representing the entire world population. The story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11 explains why the peoples were dispersed. The human beings wanted to build a tower that reached to the heavens in order to make a name for themselves and to avoid being scattered across the earth (Gn 11:4b). By doing so, they defied God's command to fill the earth after the Flood (Gn 9:1). They refused to spread out. The human beings shared a common goal and communicated effectively during the construction project (Gn 11:6). God then took away their ability to communicate with each other (Gn 11:7). Consequently, what they had wanted to protect themselves from by building the tower then happened to them: they were scattered across the earth (Gn 11:8).

This marks the end of the so-called prehistory in the Bible, and the history of the patriarchs begins with the calling of Abraham. Von Rad (1961) rightly comments:

> The story of the Tower of Babel ends with God's merciless judgement on humanity ... Has God's relationship with the nations now been irrevocably broken? Has God's gracious patience finally been exhausted? That is the pressing question ... We are now at the point where prehistory and salvation history intertwine and thus at one of the most important passages in the Old Testament. (p. 128)

The story of the Tower of Babel marks the end of the path that human beings embarked upon with the Fall and which led to repeated outbreaks of sin.

Genesis 12: Abraham's calling

Geographically, the story of the patriarchs begins where prehistory ended. Abraham came from Ur, about 200 km from Babylon (Gn 11:31). Immediately upon his calling, God revealed his great purpose to Abraham. Abraham received three promises (Gn 12:2): God would make him a great nation, he would receive personal blessings and God would make Abraham's name great.

The story has an ironic twist: the people wanted to make a great name for themselves by building the Tower of Babel (Gn 11:4) but failed. Now God wanted to make Abraham's name great. The message for the reader is clear: if God wants to make someone's name great, this will become so!

At first glance, one might interpret the calling of Abraham in Genesis 12 as if God no longer cared for the nations, because he chose Abraham and created a new people to whom he turned in a special way. However, the deeper meaning of Abraham's election lies precisely in answering the open question of prehistory. In Abraham, all(!) nations shall be blessed (Gn 12:3). The NT apostles will later return to this verse because it encapsulated the gospel (Ac 3:25; Ga 3:8, 14). In Genesis 12, God did not turn away from the other nations. He still wanted to save all people, but the method he chose was different. Genesis 12:3 clearly reveals the idea of God's mission to the whole world, the *Missio Dei*.[6]

Genesis 15: The rite of the covenant

Genesis 15 describes the making of the Abrahamic covenant (Gn 15:18a). Two aspects of the covenant are mentioned: Many descendants (Gn 15:5) and land (Gn 15:7, 18–21), see Box 2. These promises had already been made in Genesis 12. Here they were confirmed by God in a solemn

5.All German quotes have been translated via DeepL.

6.The term *Missio dei* became the key term for a missiological conference in Willingen, 1952 (Vicedom 1958:12). The term expresses that mission is God's work first of all.

BOX 2: The Abrahamic Covenant.

Content	1. Personal blessing. 2. Many offspring. 3. Land. 4. A blessing for all nations.
Partners	Abraham ↓ Isaac ↓ Jacob ↙ ↙ ↘ ↘ The 12 tribes
Sign	Circumcision
Obligation	For the content: God For the sign: Abraham's offspring

commitment after they were threatened with danger three times. Firstly, through Abram's own behaviour: He passed his wife off as his sister so that she ended up in Pharaoh's harem (Gn 12:10–20); secondly, through the conflict with his nephew Lot, which led to the division of the land (Gn 13); and thirdly, through the attack by enemy kings (Gn 14).

In Genesis 15, God spoke to Abram through a rite that was well-known at the time. He said to him:

> Bring me a heifer 3 years old, a female goat 3 years old, a ram 3 years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon. And he brought him all these, cut them in half, and laid each half over against the other. (vv. 9–10)

At that time, a covenant was 'cut'. This involved cutting up one or more animals. The commitment was reinforced by self-cursing, in which one walked between the parts of the cut-up animals and expressed with this action: 'If I do not keep my promise, may I suffer the same fate as these animals'. Jeremiah 34 refers to this practice:

> And I will make the men who transgressed my covenant and did not keep the terms of the covenant they made before me, like the calf they cut in two and passed between its pieces. (v. 18f)

This practice of self-cursing is also attested outside the Bible. For example, an 8th-century BCE treaty between the two North Aramaic kings Bargaja and Mati-el states: 'Just as this calf is cut in two, so shall Mati-el be cut in two, and his nobles shall be cut in two' (in Zimmerli 1999:42).

The first thing Abram did was in accordance with the customs of the time, cutting up animals and laying them out in such a way that a passageway was formed between them (Gn 15:9f). However, the next step is sensational. 'As the sun was going down, a deep sleep[7] fell on Abram' (Gn 15:12a), and then 'a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram' (Gn 15:17f). God alone walked through the cut animals as a fiery torch. While Abram slept, God made a covenant with him! Through this symbolic act, *God exposed himself to the curse of death* should the promise sealed with the covenant not be fulfilled. This was God's answer to Abram's question whether he would ever see the fulfilment of the promise (Gn 15:8). Through this symbolic act, God made it clear that he alone would be responsible for fulfilling the promise. Because Abram slept during the cutting of this covenant, he could not contribute anything at all to its fulfilment!

7.The same deep sleep (*tardema*) fell on Adam when Eve was created (Gn 2:21).

Genesis 17: The sign of the covenant

Genesis 17 confirms the Abrahamic Covenant and adds a sign to it. Circumcision was already practised in the Ancient Near East (Sasson 1966). God used this well-known rite and gave it a new meaning for Abraham: It would now serve as a sign of the covenant. Abraham was to keep the covenant by circumcising all his male descendants (Gn 17:9–14). Because of this sign, Stephen later speaks of the Abrahamic covenant as the 'covenant of circumcision' (Ac 7:8).

The Abrahamic covenant was affirmed several times: Twice with Abraham himself (Gn 18:18; 22:16–18), then with his son Isaac (Gn 17:21, excluding Ishmael), and finally with his grandson Jacob (Gn 28:12–15, excluding Esau).

The name Abraham is frequently mentioned in the OT because the people of Israel regard him as their forefather. On two occasions, the Abrahamic covenant is explicitly mentioned: According to 1 Chronicles 16:7–22, David and Asaph recalled the eternal covenant that God made with Abraham in a psalm of praise (1 Chr 16:15–17; Ps 105:8–10). Several centuries later, Nehemiah 9:7f also recalled the covenant with Abraham. Interestingly, in this list of God's acts of salvation, 'the election of Abraham is mentioned as the first event after creation' (Rendtorff 1995:9).

The Sinai Covenant

The Sinai Covenant, see Box 3, is described in the second book of the Bible, known as Exodus (*departure*). This book starts with the liberation of the Israelites from Egypt. This act of redemption is a prerequisite for the Sinai Covenant.

The background story: Liberation from Egyptian slavery

Exodus 1 reports that at least one promise given to Abraham has been fulfilled: 'The people of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong' (Ex 1:7). The people of Israel became so numerous that the Pharaoh got afraid of them (Ex 1:9f). He therefore oppressed them, enslaved them and 'made their lives bitter' (Ex 1:14). The people of Israel cried out for help 'and God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob' (Ex 2:24). The act of remembering is very important in the Bible. It means thinking about something *and* acting accordingly.

The deliverance from Egypt is repeatedly linked to the experiences of the patriarchs. When God called Moses, he introduced himself: 'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob' (Ex 3:6a). God revealed himself as the saviour of Israel (Ex 6:7b). Through the act of liberation from Egypt, he was recognised

BOX 3: The Sinai Covenant.

Content	Israel is: 1. God's property among the nations. 2. A kingdom of priests. 3. A holy people.
Partners	Israel
Obligation	Mutual
Sign	Sabbath, Passover, Circumcision

as the God of Israel, and this is how he later introduces himself. The OT states approximately 125 times, 'I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt' (Kaiser 1991:12). Thus, the deliverance from Egypt is *the* central act of salvation in the OT, commemorated and celebrated every year during the Passover festival (comparable to the Christian festival of Easter, which commemorates and celebrates the crucifixion and resurrection annually).

At Mount Sinai

At Mount Sinai, Israel received the Ten Commandments. In an oversimplification, the OT is sometimes identified with 'law' and the NT with 'grace'. However, it should be noted that the law was only given *after* the exodus from Egypt, that is, after the redemption of the Israelite people (Ex 19:4). God's law (*Torah*) is not the way *to* salvation but the way *in* salvation, that is, in the covenant. In general, Jews do not have the negative view of the law held by many Christians. For the Jews, it is a privilege to know God's instructions, unlike other peoples. The Israelite has 'delight in the law' (Ps 1:2). This delight is visible today in the kissing of the Torah scrolls (Zelazo 2010).

Through the covenant, Israel is called to a special relationship with God, which is described in Exodus 19:5–6a (cf. Dt 26: 18–19). Israel is God's property among the nations, a kingdom of priests and a holy people.

The structure of the covenant most probably follows the outline of ancient Near Eastern treaties between a suzerain and his vassal[8]:

- The *preamble* names the founder of the covenant (Ex 20:2a: 'I am Yahweh, your God').
- The *historical introduction* emphasises the suzerain's benevolence towards his vassal and obliges the latter to be grateful (Ex 20:2b: *who brought you out of Egypt*).
- The *individual covenant statutes*:
  Fundamental covenant loyalty (Ex 20:3: You shall have no other gods before me [first commandment]).
  Detailed provisions (Ex 20:4–17: The remaining nine commandments).
- *Further provisions*:
  Deposit of the text (Ex 25:10–21: In the Ark of the Covenant).
  Repeated readings (Dt 31:10–13: Every sabbatical year).
- *Promises of blessing and threats of curse*: Depending on whether the covenant is kept (Ex 23:20–33; Dt 27:12–13: Mount Gerizim for blessing, Mount Ebal for curse).

8.This discovery dates back to Mendenhall in 1954. It was confirmed in principle by Koch's doctoral thesis, although Koch and Mendenhall refer to different time periods (Koch 2008:2f, 315f; cf. also McKenzie 2000:32–39).

Abraham was asleep when God cut the covenant with him. At Mount Sinai, the situation was different: The people of Israel unanimously affirmed twice that they would keep the covenant (Ex 24:3, 7). Blood was shed to cut a *berît*: 'Behold the blood of the covenant' (Ex 24:8). Jesus would later take up the phrase 'blood of the covenant' while establishing the Communion as a sign of the New Covenant (Lk 22:20).

Alongside the covenant, God provided detailed instructions for building a sanctuary, 'that I may dwell in their midst' (Ex 25:8). The Ark of the Covenant (Ex 25:10–22) was the sign of God's presence. It was kept in the Holy of Holies, the innermost part of the sanctuary. In this way, God dwelt in the midst of Israel (Ex 29:45)!

The Ark of the Covenant played an important role in the fulfilment of the covenant promise as a sign of God's promise when the Israelites crossed the Jordan into the Promised Land (Jos 3–4), when they captured the first city (Jos 6), and during the proclamation of the blessings and curses on Mounts Gerizim and Ebal (Jos 8:30–35). Even the Philistines, Israel's enemies, identified the Ark of the Covenant with the presence of God (1 Sm 4:7). The heavenly Ark of the Covenant, as seen prophetically in Revelation 11:19, testifies to the everlasting presence of God's grace.

In connection with the Sinai Covenant, God gave Israel two new signs in addition to circumcision: Passover and the Sabbath. Passover commemorates the deliverance from Egypt (Ex 12:14). The Sabbath as a regular day of rest is something new. 'No ancient society before the Jews had a day of rest' (Cahill 1999:144). The Sabbath is justified by the day of rest at the end of the creation (Ex 20:11; 31:17b) and by the memory of slavery in Egypt (Dt 5:15), where the Jews had to work '7 days a week, 24 hours a day'. The Sabbath is the actual sign of the Sinai Covenant (Ex 31:13, 17). Thus, breaking the Sabbath is equivalent to breaking the covenant (Ez 20:12, 13, 20).

The covenant formula

Smend (1963) and Rendtorff (1995) have investigated the so-called covenant formula: 'I will be your God, you shall be my people'. Both parts appear frequently in the OT. The first part, 'I will be your God' appears for the first time during God's dialogue with Abraham (Gn 17:7f); the second part, 'you shall be my people' appears the first time during God's meeting with Moses (Ex 6:7). The second part could not yet be stated in the Abrahamic covenant because there were no people at that time (Rendtorff 1995:21).

The relationship between Israel and Yahweh is characterised by mutual exclusivity: Yahweh is Israel's only God, and Israel is Yahweh's chosen people. The covenant formula is crucial because it ultimately reveals the meaning of the covenant (Rendtorff 1995:89). Consequently, the people of Israel were deeply affected when the formula was negated by God: 'For you are not my people, and I will not be your God' (Hs 1:9b).

With the Sinai Covenant and the Tabernacle, a third statement is added: 'I will dwell in their midst' (Ex 25:8). Therefore, Kaiser (1991:33–34) prefers to speak of a 'tripartite formula': (1) 'I will be your God', (2) 'You will be my people' and (3) 'I will dwell in the midst of you'. The third statement connects the first two and makes them concrete. In fact, Leviticus 26:12 contains the entire tripartite formula within a single verse: 'And I will walk among you and will be your God, and you shall be my people'. The tripartite formula is part of a prophetic vision of the future: 'And my dwelling place shall be with them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people' (Ez 37:27).

The NT refers to this tripartite formula twice, in 2 Corinthians 6:16 and then in Revelation 21:3, as a magnificent view into eternity.

Affirming the Sinai Covenant

The Abrahamic Covenant was affirmed with Abraham's descendants Isaac and Jacob. The Sinai Covenant was also reaffirmed twice, by Moses in the land of Moab (Dt 29–30) and by Joshua in Shechem (Jos 24). The Moab Covenant updates the Sinai Covenant *before* the conquest of the land, while the Shechem Covenant updates the Sinai Covenant *after* the conquest of the land.

A separate Priestly Covenant?

Numbers 25:13–14 mentions a special Priestly Covenant. God promised a 'perpetual priesthood' of the line of Phinehas, a descendant of Aaron. One could argue that this Priestly Covenant would also be unconditional and eternal (cf. Busenitz 1999:186–189). However, Malachi 2:8 teaches that this covenant has been corrupted by the Levites, and the NT letter to the Hebrews states that the Levitical priesthood has been replaced by the priesthood of Melchizedek (Heb 7:11f). The covenant with the house of Aaron only makes sense in the context of the Levitical priesthood; it is therefore dependent on the Sinai covenant. Consequently, it is not considered as a separate covenant in this article.

The Davidic Covenant

The background story: Monarchy in early Israel

After arrival in the promised land, Israel had no king. They only had local judges. The author of the Book of Judges lamented this fact: 'In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes' (Jdg 21:25). The people of Israel then asked for a king 'like all the other nations' (1 Sm 8:5). Yahweh finally agreed and appointed Saul, from the tribe of Benjamin, as first king of Israel (1 Sm 9:1). According to the narrative, Saul became unfaithful; among others, he arbitrarily intruded into the priesthood (1 Sm 13). By doing so, he forfeited the opportunity to pass on the kingship to his son (1 Sm 13:13). Therefore, no Saul dynasty was established.

Instead, David, from the tribe of Judah, was chosen. This fulfilled the prophecy of the sceptre of Judah (Gn 49:10). After much turmoil, David finally became king of all Israel (2 Sm 5:1–5). He conquered Jerusalem with his private army and established it as the City of David (2 Sm 5:6–10). Jerusalem then became the political capital of all Israel, and with the arrival of the Ark of the Covenant, it also became its religious centre (2 Sm 6). In addition to his kingship, David took over religious leadership. He composed and recited religious songs, wore priestly garments when bringing the Ark of the Covenant, and performed priestly acts involving dancing and sacrifices (2 Sm 6:13–14). Finally, he wanted to build a temple.

This raises the question of why David was permitted to make sacrifices, while Saul was punished for doing just that. One plausible explanation (Allen 1983:86; Bruce 2004:71–72) could be the following (and this later became crucial for describing Jesus' priesthood in Hebrews 7, see the section titled 'Jesus is a priest after the order of Melchizedek'): Genesis 14:18 tells of Melchizedek, king of Salem and priest of the Most High. Salem is most probably the ancient name of Jerusalem (Ps 76:3). Thus, by conquering Jerusalem, David became a legitimate successor to Melchizedek and therefore also a priest. This is precisely what is expressed in Psalm 110:4b: 'You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek'. This Psalm was probably written in connection with David's conquest of Jerusalem and celebrates his entry into the dignity of priest-king (Tate 1990:413–417).

2 Samuel 7 and 1 Chronicles 17: God makes a covenant with David

David wanted to build a temple for the Ark of the Covenant (2 Sm 7:2), but God had other plans. Instead of letting David build a house for God, God would build a house for David (2 Sm 7:9–16). Perhaps David was not the right candidate to build the temple because, as a warlord, he had too much blood on his hands. Instead, the task was given to his son. As with Abraham, God promised David a great name (2 Sm 7:9), land (2 Sm 7:10), descendants (2 Sm 7:12), a royal line (2 Sm 7:13, 16) and blessings (2 Sm 7:29) (see Box 4).

What is new is the adoption of the bearer of the crown in place of a son. The king was adopted by God, and upon ascending the throne, he entered into a relationship of sonship with God (Ps 2:7; cf Craigie 1983):

> It is important to stress, nevertheless, that the Davidic king, as son of God, was a *human being*, not a divine being, as was held in certain Near Eastern concepts of kingship. (p. 67)

Psalm 2:7 will later be referenced by Hebrews 1:5; see the section titled 'Jesus fulfils the Davidic Covenant'.

The term 'covenant' does not appear in 2 Samuel 7:4–17 or in the parallel text in 1 Chronicles 17:4–14. However, David himself retrospectively spoke of an 'everlasting covenant' that God made with him (2 Sm 23:5). Psalm 89 refers to the

BOX 4: The Davidic Covenant.

Content	1. A great name. 2. A son who becomes God's son of priests. 3. An eternal house. 4. An eternal kingdom.
Partners	David and his descendants
Obligation	One-sided (only God)
Sign	Temple

'covenant with David' three times (Ps 89:3f, 29, 35), as do 2 Chronicles 13:5; 21:7; Psalm 132:12; and Jeremiah 33:21.

The text also deals with the possibility that one of David's descendants might not honour the covenant. Their disobedience would not invalidate the covenant (2 Sm 7:14f; Ps 89:31–34). As with the Abrahamic Covenant, the 'breaking of the Davidic Covenant' referred to the individual. Descendants of David who did not keep the covenant were excluded from the personal blessings of the covenant promises. Nevertheless, they remained bearers of the line of promise. The promise of blessing was, in a sense, transferred through them to their further descendants, without them personally benefiting from the blessing (Kaiser 1991:157).

The covenants discussed so far can be represented in concentric circles with smaller and smaller radii (see Figure 1): the Noahic Covenant includes all living creatures, the Abrahamic and the Sinai Covenants initially refer to the 12 tribes of Israel, and the Davidic Covenant primarily refers to David's descendants.

The first fulfilment and the expectation of even greater fulfilment

God's promise to David is first fulfilled in his son Solomon. In 970 BCE, Solomon built the temple (1 Ki 6:19), and during the dedication ceremony, he declared that the promise made to his father David had been fulfilled that day (1 Ki 8:24). Solomon's reign was in numerous ways the golden age of Israel: 'Judah and Israel were as many as the sand by the sea. They ate and drank and were happy' (1 Ki 4:20). But after Solomon's death, the kingdom split in two, and finally both kingdoms ended up in exile.

Psalm 89 reminds Israel of the Davidic Covenant, which seems to be broken (Ps 89:39). Finally, although the promise to David was initially fulfilled in Solomon, the expectation of a fulfilment beyond Solomon was growing in Israel. The Messiah was repeatedly described as the son of David, and it was expected that he would finally occupy the throne of David; see the well-known verses of Isaiah 9:6–7.

The New Covenant announced by the prophets

Several prophets in the OT announced a new covenant. This announcement was prompted by the breaking of the Sinai Covenant and the subsequent collapse of Israel, the house of David.

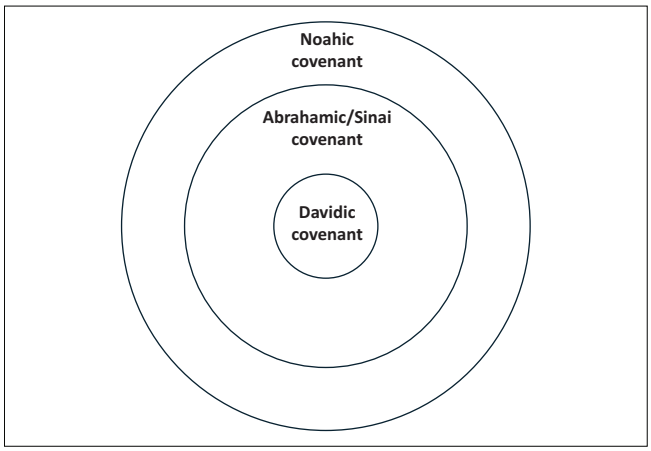

FIGURE 1: The concentric circles of the covenants.

The background story: The collapse of Israel

Unfortunately, Solomon's wives 'turned away his heart after other gods' (1 Ki 11:4a). Because Solomon did not adhere to the exclusivity of the covenant, Yahweh became angry with him, and finally, after Solomon's death, the kingdom of Israel was divided into two (1 Ki 12). Ten tribes formed the northern kingdom under Jeroboam (1 Ki 12:20). As Jerusalem, with its temple, was the religious centre, Jeroboam feared that the people would eventually turn back to the king of Judah through their pilgrimages to Jerusalem (1 Ki 12:27). Therefore, he erected two golden calves (!) in his kingdom so that the people could worship them instead of going to Jerusalem (1 Ki 12:28f). Thus, the first king of the northern kingdom led the people into idolatry. This set the tone for future developments. According to 2 Kings 17:22, from the beginning to the end, the people of Israel walked in all the sins that Jeroboam did. None of the 19 kings of the northern kingdom turned back to Yahweh. This is why God never allowed a dynasty in the northern kingdom (1 Ki 14:10) – no family could permanently hold the throne. Prophets such as Elijah were sent to the kings, but they did not listen. As punishment, in 722 BCE, God allowed the king of Assyria to capture the capital city of Samaria and deport many inhabitants of the northern kingdom to Assyria (2 Ki 17:23).

The picture was more nuanced in Judah, the southern kingdom. Alongside bad kings, there were also good kings. Four kings were reported to have renewed the covenant between Yahweh and his people: (1) King Asa (2 Chr 15:12); (2) the underage King Joash and the priest Jehoiada (2 Ki 11:17); (3) King Hezekiah (2 Chr 29:10), who reinstated the Passover as a sign of the covenant (2 Chr 30); and finally (4) King Josiah, who 'walked in all the way of David his father' (2 Ki 22:2). Under his reign, the book of Law was found (2 Ki 22:8), which led to an extensive reform under King Josiah, and finally the people of Judah re-entered into the covenant with Yahweh (2 Ki 23:3).

However, despite these positive examples, the southern kingdom wavered too much between loyalty and apostasy. The Judeans were also eventually deported to Babylon, and Jerusalem was destroyed in 586 BCE (2 Ki 25). The 'booth of David' (Am 9:11) finally fell into ruin.

Jeremiah announces a New Covenant

The whole catastrophe of the exile raised an urgent question among the Jews: 'Lord, where is your steadfast love of old, which by your faithfulness you swore to David?' (Ps 89:49). Now that Israel was no longer in God's land, were they still God's people? They needed a word of hope. The prophet Jeremiah, born in 650 BCE, announced a 'New Covenant':

> Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. (Jer 31, 31–32)

The New Covenant, see Box 5, would differ significantly from the Sinai Covenant. Jeremiah did not criticise the Sinai Covenant itself, but the Sinai Covenant was broken by the people of Israel. This should no longer happen with the New Covenant:

> For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. (Jer 31:33a)

The radical difference between both covenants was that the laws would be in human hearts, not on stone. The covenant formula was in the centre of the announcement: 'And I will be their God, and they shall be my people' (Jer 31:33b). Knowing God is not the privilege of theological specialists, but everyone will know God. Sins will be forgiven (Jer 31:34). This important passage, Jeremiah 31:31–34, was extensively quoted in Hebrews 8:8–12, one of the longest quotations in the NT.

Jeremiah 32:40f describes the New Covenant once again. God would instil 'the fear of the Lord' within them. In this way, God himself ensured that the people would keep the New Covenant. He took on the fulfilment of the obligation of the 'new people' to do God's will. Levin (2004:103) aptly writes: 'A covenant that was not to bear within itself the seed of renewed failure could only be a unilateral act of forgiving love, whose basis and substance lay solely on God's side'.

Jeremiah made a clear distinction between the Sinai Covenant and the Davidic Covenant. While the Sinai Covenant would be replaced by the New Covenant, the unbreakable nature of the Davidic Covenant was clearly affirmed (Jer 33:21a).

BOX 5: The New Covenant.

Content	1. Jesus establishes the New Covenant through his death on the cross. 2. The New Covenant fulfils the Abrahamic and the Davidic covenants, which live on in the New Covenant. 3. The New Covenant annuls the Sinai and the Priestly Covenants. 4. The Holy Spirit dwells in the hearts of believers.
Partners	All people
Obligation	One-sided, already fulfilled on the cross
Sign	1. Baptism (= one-time entry into the covenant) 2. Communion (= regular remembrance of the covenant)

Ezekiel announces a covenant of peace

Ezekiel, a priest who was deported to Babylon, probably in 597 BCE with King Jehoiachin (2 Ki 24:14), proclaimed his message from exile. Ezekiel 20:12, 20, and 21 state: 'Whoever breaks the Sabbath breaks the Sinai Covenant'.

The shepherds, that is, the leaders of Israel, were rebuked by God because they exploited the people rather than serving them (Ez 34:1–8). Therefore, in future, they would no longer shepherd the sheep, but God himself would shepherd the sheep (Ez 34:11–16), and he would appoint 'David' (obviously a son of David) as shepherd (Ez 34:23). A covenant of peace was announced (Ez 34:25). This would provide security and general prosperity (Ez 34:26–27). Similarly, Hosea 2:20 announced a covenant that God wanted to make with Israel and the animals so that Israel could live in security and peace.

Ezekiel 36:1–15 prophesied that God would repopulate the land of Israel with the people of Israel. The people in exile were told that God would bring them back to Israel. God's people needed God's land, and God's land needed God's people.

As in Jeremiah 32:40, God prophesied in Ezekiel 36:26f that he would himself bring about a change of heart, enabling people to live according to his will. The Spirit of God would be given to everyone. Previously, it came only upon certain individuals, usually in connection with special missions.

Ezekiel had an intriguing vision (Ez 37:1–14): he saw a field filled with skeletal bones that came back to life in two stages. The explanation of this vision ended with God's renewed assurance that he would put his Spirit within the people of Israel (Ez 37:14). The covenant of peace would then be sealed, and the three-part covenant formula would become reality (Ez 37:26–27). The water of life would flow from the sanctuary in Jerusalem (Ez 47)!

Isaiah announces an everlasting covenant

The prophet Isaiah clearly stated that the inhabitants of the land have *broken the covenant* (Is 24:5, 33:8). In the so-called 'Book of Consolation' (from Is 40:1 onwards), a new covenant is announced, and earlier covenants are recalled[9]: The servant of God was made the 'covenant to the people' (Is 42:6; 49:8) – a term only used here. This servant would become the saviour of the world – 'a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth' (Is 49:6b). Isaiah 54:9 recalls the covenant with Noah. Isaiah 55:3 prophesies an 'everlasting covenant' linked to the Davidic covenant. Isaiah 59:20–21 announces a saviour and a covenant associated with this that shows clear parallels with the New Covenant in Jeremiah. God's Spirit and word would remain with the people and their descendants. The everlasting covenant in Isaiah 61:8 goes hand in hand with the restoration of Israel.

9.Cf. Dumbrell (2002:190–197) for an intensive study of the covenant in Isaiah 40–66.

The descriptions of the new covenant in Jeremiah, the covenant of peace in Ezekiel, and the eternal covenant in Isaiah fit together so seamlessly that it is clear they obviously refer to the same future covenant (see Box 5).

The New Covenant – Established by Jesus

The NT begins with the words: 'The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham' (Mt 1:1). The story of Jesus Christ continues the stories of David and Abraham. The Davidic Covenant promised an eternal throne (2 Sm 7), leading to the expectation of the coming Messiah, the Son of David, who would establish a new covenant (Jer 31; Ez 36, 37). This New Covenant forms the centre of the NT. Still, the term 'covenant' (Greek: *diatheke*) appears significantly less often in the NT than in the OT, namely only 33 times in total, 17 of which are specifically in the Epistle to the Hebrews (Kraus 2023:1).

Jesus establishes the New Covenant

At the Last Supper, Jesus established the New Covenant, 'This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood' (Lk 22:20).[10] In doing so, he stated, in effect: 'This is the covenant you have been waiting for'. Paul also used the expression, 'the *new* covenant in my blood' (1 Cor 11:25) and called himself a 'minister of the *new* covenant' (2 Cor 3:6). Lang (1993:204) aptly summarises it as follows: 'The covenant is defined in two ways: It is a new covenant, and it is a covenant by virtue of the blood of Jesus'. The combination of blood and covenant in the phrase 'blood of the covenant' refers to Moses' words when he cut the Sinai covenant (Ex 24:8).

Ezekiel 36:26–27 announces that God will put his Spirit within his people. Just as God breathed the breath of life into humans at creation, so Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit into his disciples (Jn 20:22). A new creation took place, and people were 'born again' (Jn 3:7). At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came, marking the beginning of the NT church, the community of believers in the New Covenant.

The indwelling of the Holy Spirit is part of the New Covenant and also a sign of recognition. The Holy Spirit is a seal of promise (Eph 1:13–14). Peter was convinced that the Gentiles in Cornelius' house truly belonged to the New Covenant because the Holy Spirit fell upon them (Ac 10:44–48; 15:8).

The New Covenant was initially announced for Israel and Judah. By giving the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles, God showed that he makes 'no distinction' between Jews and Gentiles in the New Covenant (Ac 15:9). 'He has made us both one' (Eph 2:14), with the Jews forming the tree into which the Gentile Christians are grafted (Rm 11:17–24).

10.Matthew (26:28) and Mark (14:24) simply write of the 'blood of the covenant', without the word 'new'.

Jesus fulfils the Abrahamic Covenant

The NT testifies several times that Jesus has fulfilled the Abrahamic promise. In connection with the birth of his son John, Zechariah thanked God that God 'remembers his holy covenant with Abraham' (Lk 1:72–73). In Acts 3:25, Peter refers to the Abrahamic promise from Genesis 12:3: 'In your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed'. In Galatians 3:8, Paul refers to Genesis 12:3 as the gospel, or 'good news'; the blessing of Abraham comes to the nations through Jesus (Ga 3:14). On the cross, Jesus accomplished what was hinted at as an unimaginable possibility in the covenant with Abraham in Genesis 15:17: God himself exposed himself to the curse of death.

Jesus fulfils the Davidic Covenant

Jesus is a descendant of David both through his (foster) father Joseph (Mt 1) and through his mother Mary (Lk 3:33–38). The angel announced to Mary that her son would fulfil the Davidic Covenant: 'The Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David … and of his kingdom there will be no end' (Lk 1:32–33). Zacharias saw 'a horn of salvation raised up in the house of David' (Lk 1:69).

Hebrews 1:5 combines the words of the psalm, 'You are my son, today I have begotten you' (Ps 2:7), and the words from David's promise, 'I will be his father, and he shall be my son' (2 Sm 7:14). Thus, Hebrews testifies that Jesus has fulfilled this promise to David. In his sermon in Antioch, Paul also referred to Jesus in the words from Psalm 2:7 (Ac 13:33). He recalled the 'holy and sure blessings of David' (Ac 13:34), referring to the irrevocable covenant promises made to David, which were fulfilled in Jesus. With Jesus' coming, the 'Kingdom of God' dawned (Mk 1:15; Lk 17:20–21).

Jesus is a priest after the order of Melchizedek

Jesus is a descendant of David and, as such, of the tribe of Judah, 'and in connection with that tribe Moses said nothing about priests' (Heb 7:14). Therefore, Jesus could not perform Levitical priestly service. The Epistle to the Hebrews relates Jesus' priestly service to the 'priesthood after the order of Melchizedek', with three references to Psalm 110:4 (Heb 5:6; 7:17, 21). As the Levitical priesthood did not achieve perfection, it was replaced by a 'better' priesthood. The following seven advantages are listed: (1) The Levitical priesthood was established without an oath, while the priesthood according to Melchizedek was established with an oath (Heb 7:20–21); (2) the Levitical priests died, but Jesus lives forever (Heb 7:23–24); (3) previously, many priests were necessary, but now one is sufficient; (4) the Levitical priests first had to offer sacrifices for their own sins, but Jesus remained sinless (Heb 7:26–27); (5) the Levitical priests sacrificed animal blood, but Jesus sacrificed his own blood (Heb 9:13–14; 10:4); (6) the Levitical priests entered a 'sanctuary made with hands', but Jesus entered the real sanctuary and sits there at the right hand of God (Heb 8:1–2; 9:24); (7) the sacrifices in the old covenant

had to be repeated regularly, but Jesus' sacrifice was made once and for all (Heb 10:1–3, 10).

Through his high priestly self-sacrifice, Jesus became the guarantor (Heb 7:22) and mediator (Heb 8:6) of the New Covenant. He came to fulfil the law (Mt 5:17), and thus it is fulfilled. 'With the appointment of Jesus as heavenly high priest, the earthly priesthood has found its completion and conclusion' (Laubach, 1979:162).

The New Covenant annuls the Sinai Covenant

The replacement of the Sinai Covenant is taught in the Epistle to the Hebrews and the Pauline Epistles. According to Hebrews 7:12, a change in the priesthood necessitates a change in the law. Hebrews 7:18 refers to the law as 'set aside'. The Greek term used in Hebrews 7:18 'was used technically as a legal term in the papyri for the cancellation or annulment of a legal decree' (Lane 1991:175). In other words, the *New Covenant annuls the Sinai Covenant*. This could hardly be stated more clearly. Hebrews 8:13 describes the Sinai Covenant as 'obsolete'. Hebrews 9:10 regards the sacrificial regulations, dietary regulations, among others, of the Old Covenant as 'regulations for the body imposed until the time of reformation'.

As already mentioned in the introduction, Galatians 3:17 clearly distinguishes between the Abrahamic Covenant and the Sinai Covenant. According to Romans 7:12, the law is 'holy, just, and good' but it only served as a pedagogue until Christ came (Gl 3:23) – 'but now that faith has come, we are no longer under a disciplinarian' (Gl 3:35), that is, we are no longer under the law of the Sinai Covenant, 'for Christ is the end of the law' (Rm 10:4). In Galatians 4:19–31, Paul interprets the two sons of Abraham figuratively: he identifies the law with Ishmael, the son of Hagar, and freedom and promise with Isaac, the son of Sarah. Like Isaac, Christians share in Abraham's promise (Gl 4:28) but are freed from the Sinai Covenant and circumcision (Gl 5:2–3). The sign of entry into the New Covenant is baptism (Ac 2:41; Gl 3:27).

In 2 Corinthians 3:6–7, the New Covenant is contrasted with the Law of Moses. The New Covenant is a 'covenant of the Spirit'. The Spirit gives life, whereas the law, 'the letter', kills. The Mosaic law is called an 'old covenant' (2 Cor. 3:14).

Nevertheless, Romans 9–11 also makes it clear that Israel is not simply rejected (Rm 11:1). The covenants were originally addressed to the Israelites (Rm 9:4). As much as Paul previously distanced himself from the law, he now emphasises that Christians are only 'grafted in' (Rm 11:17). The New Covenant has its roots in God's gifts of grace to Israel (Rm 11:18, 29). Romans 11:26–27 refers to the covenant announced in Isaiah 59:20–21 and makes it clear that its complete fulfilment is still to come: 'A partial hardening has come upon Israel until the fulness of the Gentiles has come in; and in this all Israel will be saved' (Rm 11:25b, 26a). Ephesians 2:12 underscores the idea of Romans 9–11: The nations were previously 'alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise'.

Conclusion

This study has shown that we cannot understand the life and work of Jesus without reference to the Jewish covenants. Jesus was a Jew – not just by chance, but by choice. He established a new covenant, but this New Covenant can only be understood in the context of the previous covenants. The Abrahamic and the Davidic Covenants are ultimately fulfilled in the New Covenant and live on within the New Covenant. The covenant formula, introduced in the OT, will become a complete and eternal reality:

> Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. (Rv 21:3)

People are free to accept or reject Jesus as a saviour. If they accept him as saviour, they must also accept the fact that he was a Jew. This survey has also demonstrated that de-Judaising the Bible is simply impossible.

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