WHEN SOMETHING DOESN’T ADD UP

In discussions on the old and new covenants, scholars generally believe that references and allusions to the old covenant pertain to the historical old covenant, namely, the covenant God made with His people at Mount Sinai and its attendant law, including the Sabbath. They also believe that the New Testament’s pejorative characterizations of the old covenant apply to the Sinai covenant.

God’s covenant and law is seen as: a tutor no longer needed once one comes to Christ (Gal. 3:24, 25); “a yoke of slavery” (Gal. 5:1, NIV); a “ministry that brought death [and] . . . condemns” (2 Cor. 3:7, 9, NIV); something we must die to in order to be married to Christ and receive salvation (Rom. 7:1–4); something that became obsolete once the new covenant had come (Heb. 8:13). . . .

These characterizations, and others, of the Sinai covenant and its laws are about as far from the identity-marking promises and assurances of the new covenant as one could possibly imagine, are they not? No wonder God needed a new covenant! Oh, but wait, in His preface to the new covenant, He gives reasons why a new covenant is necessary and He does not mention any of the things in the list above. Rather, He says a new covenant was needed because of how the people of the covenant had been unfaithful to the Sinai covenant. Very interesting!

In our lesson this week, we will take a closer look at how the Sinai covenant and the new covenant compare at some fundamental levels that should change the equation on how the two covenants should be compared as they relate to the gospel.
Write out Deuteronomy 5:1–6:9 from the translation of your choice. If you’re pressed for time, write out Deuteronomy 6:4–9. You may also re-write the passage in your own words, outline, or mind-map the chapter.
COVENANTS EQUAL TO EACH OTHER

Have you heard of Euclid’s first “common notion” in Book 1 of his Elements: “Things which are equal to the same thing are also equal to each other”? We saw last week that God defined the new covenant unequivocally, in its DNA, by its four gospel promises (Jer. 31:33, 34; Heb. 8:10–12). Where did these defining promises come from? Would you believe they came from Sinai? Consider the following evidence:

Promise 1. “I will write My law in their hearts” (sanctification).

Called the Shema (the first Hebrew word in 6:4, shaman, “hear”), Deuteronomy 6:4–9 is the devout Jew’s most sacred passage in the law—the first words spoken over a newborn child; the last spoken before death; the first spoken every morning and the last spoken every night; ever present in the consciousness and conversation of the faithful throughout the day; “When you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.” The Shema follows Moses’ recitation of the Ten Commandments (5:2–22) and begins: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart” (6:4–6, NKJV, emphasis supplied).

Moses was reassuring them that God Himself would inscribe His words on their hearts if they would trust Him to do so. Moses later assured them: “This commandment which I command you today . . . is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may do it” (30:11–14, emphasis supplied; see also Ps. 37:30, 31; Isa. 51:7). God embedded this promise in His Sinai covenant long before Jeremiah or Hebrews were written.

Promise 2. “I will be their God, and they shall be My people” (reconciliation).

God made this promise to Israel also in the Sinai covenant. Sandwiched between the covenant blessings for those faithful to the covenant and curses for the persistently, unrepentantly disobedient, He promised: “I will walk among you and be your God, and you shall be My people” (Lev. 26:12, NKJV, emphasis supplied).

Promise 3. “All will know Me from the least to the greatest” (revelation/mission).

This new-covenant promise anticipated the day when all will know God in the new earth. Meanwhile, Israel and the church were called to the mission of making God known to the world. God called Israel to be a nation of priests to the nations around them, teaching them the gospel as it had been revealed in the covenants from Genesis 3:15 to Sinai (Exod. 19:5, 6/Exod. 28:4; Ps. 67:1, 2).

Promise 4. “Their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more” (justification).

The first scriptural revelation that God will forgive sins occurs in—you guessed it—the Sinai covenant! Immediately after He gave Moses the Ten Commandments the second time (Exod. 34:1–4), God revealed Himself as “forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin” (v. 7; the Hebrew text includes the most egregious, rebellious sin for which there was no sacrifice available (Exod. 34:6, 7)).

The new covenant and the Sinai covenant shared unmistakably the same defining promises. Meaning? First, the historical old and new covenants share the same spiritual DNA; in this crucial sense they were both equal to the same thing and thus equal to each other. Both covenants were sharers in and bearers of the one true, everlasting gospel. (Scan the QR code for this week’s graph.)

Second, people who were converted before Jesus came in history were new-covenant people with a new-covenant experience, even though they lived in the old-covenant historical era (see Heb. 11). Unconverted people in our own modern era are having an old-covenant experience though they live in the new-covenant historical era!
THE COVENANT(S) OF LOVE

Many attempts have been made to portray the historical old (Sinai) covenant as a covenant of laws, rules, and regulations in contrast to the new covenant, deemed to be a covenant of love. But such attempts fail upon examination. Many consider Deuteronomy to be Israel's covenant book, as it contains Moses’ reiteration of God’s covenant with Israel and is structured like the Near Eastern treaties of Moses’ day (see, for example, Meredith Kline’s book, Treaty of the Great King). Significantly, Deuteronomy contains more references to God’s love for people and invitations for them to love Him and others than does any other book of the Bible, other than Psalms, Hosea, John, and 1 John.

The first reference in the Bible to God loving people occurs in the second of the Ten Commandments, which depicts God “showing lovingkindness [Heb, hesed] to thousands . . . who love Me and keep My commandments” (Deut. 5:10, NASB; Exod. 20:6, NASB). (Modern translations, including conservative ones, characteristically translate the Hebrew hesed as “lovingkindness” [NASB], “steadfast love” [ESV, NRSV], “love” [NIV], “faithful love” [NJB], “loyal love”/“covenant faithfulness” [NET Bible], and so on, rather than “mercy,” as do KJV and NKJV.) God’s love for His people, the “fatherless,” “widows,” and “strangers,” is repeatedly restated throughout the remainder of Deuteronomy (7:8, 9; 10:15, 18; 24:19; 27:19). As noted above, such emphasis on God’s love for humanity rarely occurs elsewhere in Scripture, but once expressed in the Sinai covenant it became Scripture’s dominant theme.

The revelation of God’s love for humans overwhelmed the Old Testament believer, even as it does the New Testament believer. For example, Psalm 136 repeats this frame 26 times—“His love [Heb. hesed] endures forever” (NIV)—a phenomenon not found anywhere in the New Testament. And God’s love motivated the Old Testament believer’s response of obedience.

The Shema (Deut. 6:4–9), expressed by Moses following his reiteration of the Ten Commandments (5:2–22), contained the core motivational principle for the believer’s response to God’s commandments and the gospel: “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength” (6:5, NKJV). Jesus called it “the first and great commandment” (Matt. 22:38), meaning the principle that pervaded all interactions and relationships in heaven before sin entered. It will return fully in the new earth era, when the prohibitive form of the commandments will no longer be needed as they are now, during the era of sin; then the positive form of the commandments will pervade and actuate each heart.

Thereafter, the appeal in Deuteronomy, the Old Testament covenant book, was: love God and keep His commandments. Notice the order: (1) love God and (2) keep His commandments. In the divine economy, obedience to God's commandments was never a begrudging, dutiful compliance, but rather “the service and allegiance of love” (Steps to Christ, 60). Throughout Deuteronomy the appeal for covenant faithfulness is anchored first in love; obedience to the commandments of God follows (see 7:9 [cf., John 14:21]; 10:12–19 [cf., John 13:34]; 11:1, 13–14, 22–24 [cf., John 15:10]; 13:3, 4; 19:8, 9; 30:6 [cf., Phil 2:13], 16, 19, 20). For that to occur, in that order (first love, then obedience), He must write His law in our hearts, which is His goal and delight to do.

The apostle Paul’s mantra, “Love is the fulfillment of the law” (Rom. 13:10, NKJV), was established in the Sinai covenant. This is another reason why the old and new covenants were equal to each other at the most fundamental level.

Read more at www.inversebible.org/cov03-4
What relationship do the following verses have with the primary passage?

Isaiah 51:7; 44:22  
Exodus 19:5, 6/Genesis 28:14  
Exodus 34:6, 7  
Psalm 32:2, 5/Romans 4:5–8  
Isaiah 55:6, 7  
Deuteronomy 7:8, 9  
Deuteronomy 10:12–19

What other verses/promises come to mind in connection with Deuteronomy 5:1–6:9?

Review your memorized verse from Deuteronomy 5:1–6:9.
THE BC/AD COVENANTS

Jesus is the reason that the Sinai covenant and the Last Supper covenant can share the same DNA and yet be two different covenants—the historical old covenant and the historical new covenant. History itself is now divided into categories of BC and AD because Jesus came in history, and His covenant can be thought of that way also.

His coming made the old ritual system (including, for example, circumcision and animal sacrifices) obsolete. At the same time, it initiated a new ritual system (including baptism and the Lord’s Supper).

Regarding the commandment “that we love one another” (2 John 5), John could say, “I write no new commandment to you, but an old commandment which you have had from the beginning,” and yet “a new commandment I write to you, which thing is true in Him and in you” (1 John 2:7, 8, NKJV). How could John say that “love one another” was “no new commandment,” and yet it was “a new commandment”? Because, once we saw the command to “love one another” lived out in Jesus’ life, it became “new.” The same commandment was both “old” and “new” after Jesus came in the middle.

Similarly, the divine covenant through which God had broadcast His gospel and invited all who heard it to participate in it became a “new covenant” once He came to earth in the flesh. We saw the promises that make up its essential DNA being fulfilled in His life. Equally important, if not more so, the once-for-all sacrifice of His shed “blood of the everlasting covenant” (Heb. 13:20) simultaneously brought an end to animal sacrifices (8:13) and instituted the Lord’s Supper. At the DNA level, it remained the same covenant, but there had been a transformation historically.

What was true on the historical plane is also true on the experiential. An old-covenant experience becomes a new-covenant experience when Jesus comes into the middle. One’s response to His universal and timeless appeal, “Turn to Me, and be saved, all the ends of the earth” ( Isa. 45:22, NASB), determines whether they live an old-covenant experience with no eternal hope or a new-covenant experience destined to “inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (Matt. 25:34).

The people at Sinai told Moses, “Tell us all that the Lord our God says to you, and we will hear and do it,” to which Jesus responded hauntingly, with aching heart: “Oh, that they had such a heart in them that they would fear Me and always keep all My commandments, that it might be well with them and with their children forever!” (Deut. 5:27–29, NKJV). He knew the severity of the temptations and discouragements yet to come. He knew that without His constant presence in their lives they would fail.

He wanted them to know how deeply He loved them and the depth of commitment He had made to them. In the Shema, He assured them: “These words which I command you today shall be in your heart” (6:6, NKJV). That assurance was both an invitation and a promise. It invited them to seek Him daily and promised them that He would write His law in their hearts, transforming His every command into a promise of what He would accomplish for them and in them. He gives that same assurance to us.
**OUR OBEDIENCE**

“Obedience is not a mere outward compliance, but the service of love. The law of God is an expression of His very nature; it is an embodiment of the great principle of love, and hence is the foundation of His government in heaven and earth. If our hearts are renewed in the likeness of God, if the divine love is implanted in the soul, will not the law of God be carried out in the life? When the principle of love is implanted in the heart, when man is renewed after the image of Him that created him, the new-covenant promise is fulfilled, ‘I will put My laws into their hearts, and in their minds will I write them.’ Hebrews 10:16. And if the law is written in the heart, will it not shape the life? Obedience—the service and allegiance of love—is the true sign of discipleship. Thus the Scripture says, ‘This is the love of God, that we keep His commandments.’ ‘He that saith, I know Him, and keepeth not His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.’ 1 John 5:3; 2:4. Instead of releasing man from obedience, it is faith and faith only, that makes us partakers of the grace of Christ, which enables us to render obedience.

“We do not earn salvation by our obedience; for salvation is the free gift of God, to be received by faith. But obedience is the fruit of faith. ‘Ye know that He was manifested to take away our sins; and in Him is no sin. Whosoever abideth in Him sinneth not: whosoever sinneth hath not seen Him, neither known Him.’ 1 John 3:5, 6. Here is the true test. If we abide in Christ, if the love of God dwells in us, our feelings, our thoughts, our purposes, our actions, will be in harmony with the will of God as expressed in the precepts of His holy law.”

(Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, 60, 61.)
Share insights from this week’s memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.

How were both the old and new covenants gospel-bearing and gospel-revealing covenants?

How has obedience to at least some of God’s commandments already become second nature (written on the heart) for you?

What aspects do the Sinai covenant and the new covenant share?

Why does it matter whether the old (Sinai) covenant and the new covenant are completely different or share the same characteristics at the most fundamental levels?

How do the Sinai covenant and the apostle Paul’s words compare regarding the priority of love in one’s relationship with God?

How do you think the commands of Jesus and His actual presence with us are related?

Summarize the point of this week’s lesson in one line.