MAKING THE FIRST OBSOLETE

Most scholars ascribe the negative characterizations of the covenant and law to the historical old covenant (the Sinai covenant). This interpretation forms their primary argument against the applicability of observing the seventh-day Sabbath in the New Testament era. But this interpretation collides with the biblical teaching that the Sinai covenant and historical new covenant share the same spiritual DNA and gospel.

At the same time, every one of these negative characterizations fits perfectly with an interpretation that identifies the old covenant specified or alluded to in these passages as an old covenant experience of “not continuing in My covenant” (Heb. 8:9, NKJV), i.e., rejecting its gospel appeal or merely legalistically complying with it—that God said created the need for a new covenant in the first place. Not acknowledging the existence of an old covenant experience leads to mistakenly assigning all these negative characterizations to the Sinai covenant.

The opposite extreme view that all New Testament references and allusions to the old and new covenants have experiential, not historical, emphases in mind blinds its adherents to a full appreciation of the monumental significance of the historicity of the incarnation, death, resurrection, ascension, and high priestly ministry of Jesus that demarcated the historical new covenant.

This brings us to our extended passage for this lesson, and most particularly to Hebrews 8:13, which is generally interpreted to apply to the Sinai covenant as a whole (including the Sabbath). What does it mean?
Write out Hebrews 8:1–13 from the translation of your choice. If you’re pressed for time, write out Hebrews 8:7–13. You may also rewrite the passage in your own words, or outline or mind-map the chapter.
THE OBSCOLESCENCE OF THE COVENANT

Hebrews announces that “of necessity there is also a change of the law” (7:12, NKJV), and “in that He says, ‘A new covenant,’ He has made the first obsolete” (8:13, NKJV). Most commentators rightly recognize that Hebrews 7–10 focuses primarily on the historical old (Sinai) and new (after Jesus came in history) covenants, and they thereby conclude that the historical new covenant makes the entire Sinai covenant obsolete. But 7:12 explicitly says that what necessitates “a change of the law” (NKJV) is the Old Testament “priesthood” system, representing the entire Sinai covenant ritual system.

Of the eighteen comparisons Hebrews 7–10 makes distinguishing these two historical covenants (MacCarty, In Granite or Ingrained, 251–260), seventeen of them concern the ritual system condensed into three categories: priesthood, sanctuary, sacrifices.

(Scan the QR code for the graphic)

A dominant message of Hebrews 7–10 is that the entire ritual system of the Sinai covenant has been fulfilled in Jesus, making the Old Testament ritual system “obsolete” (8:13, NKJV). “Sacrifice and offering, burnt offerings . . . are offered according to the law . . . . He takes away the first [the OT ritual system] that He may establish the second . . . [, namely,] the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (10:8–10, NKJV). This is the “change of the law” (7:12, NKJV) that occurred when Jesus died (see Matthew 27:50, 51).

The Old Testament priesthood, sanctuary, and sacrifices (including the ritual feasts that depended on the sacrifices and sanctuary) were provisional, typical, “a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ” (Col. 2:17, NKJV). Jesus offered Himself “once . . . to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself” (Heb. 9:26, NKJV)—Himself the priest, Himself the victim—becoming our new High Priest in the heavenly sanctuary for all time. That is the first big message of Hebrews 7–10.
THE PERMANENCE OF THE COVENANT

You likely noticed that this lesson’s inScribe passage is nearly identical to the one in lesson 2, but with one important addition, Hebrews 8:13. “In that He says, ‘A new covenant,’ He has made the first obsolete. Now what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.”

Of the eighteen comparisons that Hebrews 7:1–10:18 makes between the historical old and new covenants, only one was not a contrast, but an exact similarity between the two. As you have studied the full passage, have you noticed what that similarity is?

Just prior to the divine announcement that the ritual system of the historical old covenant is “obsolete” (8:13), God repeated for His New Testament audience His definition of “the new covenant,” namely, the four divine promises that make the new covenant the new covenant (8:10–12; see lesson 2). He repeated them because those promises were not new! Their first explicit expression occurred, in the historical old covenant, the Sinai covenant (see lesson 3). The promises were implied prior to Sinai and reiterated numerous times post-Sinai in various Old Testament contexts (MacCarty, In Granite or Ingrained, 304). God wanted to remind or inform His New Testament children that the essence of His covenant, the gospel, had not changed, because He Himself had not changed! His “everlasting covenant,” which had originated in the divine heavenly council of the Godhead from eternity past, which He first announced to Adam and Eve after their fall in its protoevangement (first gospel), proto covenant-of-grace form (Gen. 3:15), had been progressively, stage by stage, revealed in fuller detail through subsidiary covenants with humanity until now . . . now. Jesus, the God of the Old Testament, had come among us, and the covenant promises had become “Yes” in Him (2 Cor. 1:20), which made them “new”—not different, but “new.” In the same way that John said the commandment to “love one another,” which mankind had “from the beginning,” became “a new commandment” once we saw it lived out in Jesus’ life (1 John 2:7, 8; 2 John 5, 6)—it was the same commandment, but new!

Once Jesus came in history, the covenant of grace upon which the covenants with Adam, Abraham, and Israel were crafted became a “new covenant.” The gospel is the same throughout, the promises are the same, and the moral law—the transcript of God’s character which He promised to rewrite in the heart of every believer in history—all remain the same in every covenant God ever made with humankind. And yet when Jesus came in history, the divine covenant became something “new” and “better.” Beyond the obsolescence of its Old Testament ritual system, the divine covenant had become something “new.”

Because of Jesus’ life among us in unselfish servant-ministry to humanity and in perfect obedience to God, the covenant of grace—the explicit expression of God’s love for sinners and His commitment to redeem them that had been latent in His archetypal everlasting covenant from the beginning of time—had become a “new covenant,” “a better covenant, which was established on better promises” with a “better hope” (Heb. 7:18–22; 8:6, NKJV).

How so? Because the covenant and its promises had now been ratified by Jesus’ blood, which Hebrews dared to call not only “the blood of the covenant” (10:29), but “the blood of the everlasting covenant” (13:20)!

“Though this covenant was made with Adam and renewed to Abraham [and Israel, and confirmed provisionally by the death of animals in each case], it could not be ratified [ultimately, finally] until the death of Christ. It had existed by the promise of God since the first intimation of redemption had been given; it had been accepted by faith; yet when ratified by Christ, it is called a new covenant” (Ellen G. White, God’s Amazing Grace, 133, emphasis supplied).
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What relationship do the following verses have with the primary passage?

Matthew 27:50, 51
Psalm 103:12
Isaiah 38:17; 44:22
2 Timothy 1:8–10
1 John 5:7, 8
2 Corinthians 5:17
Colossians 1:20–22
Hebrews 13:20, 21

What other verses/promises come to mind in connection with Hebrews 7–10?

THE EPICENTER OF THE COVENANT

While the Old Testament covenants were provisionally ratified with the blood of animals, no divine covenant in Scripture could be officially ratified, made irrevocably binding and effective, “until the death of Christ” (Ellen White, Patriarchs and Prophets, 370). This means that no one should have been officially “forgiven” until Christ died “to bear the sins of many” and to “put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself,” at which time the saved believer could then “receive the promise of the eternal inheritance” (Heb. 9:15, 26–28, NKJV).

But, wait. God told Old Testament believers that He had already forgiven their sins (past tense) (Ps. 32:2–5; 103:12; Isa. 38:17). Furthermore, Enoch and Elijah were not only forgiven but also translated to heaven without seeing death, and Moses was raised from the dead and taken to heaven (Jude 9; Matt. 17:1–4), and they all lived under the old (Sinai) covenant! How could that be if their sins could not be officially forgiven until the death of Jesus?

This conundrum opens a window into a breathtaking view of Jesus. Get this picture: Jesus just couldn’t wait until the covenant was officially ratified to grant His covenant blessings and promises! He was like a child who couldn’t wait to open his presents.

Jesus’ sacrificial death didn’t initiate the covenant of grace; it revealed it at its apex. The everlasting covenant is—“God’s eternal pledge to save humanity at any and all cost to Himself” (Ty Gibson, The Sonship of Christ: Exploring the Covenant Identity of God and Man [Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2018], 177). It existed “before the creation of the world” (1 Peter 1:18–20, NIV; Rev. 13:8), and even “before time began” (2 Tim. 1:8, NKJV), whatever that means! For that long, the Trinity lived with the specter of what would happen at the cross but kept it to themselves as “hidden wisdom . . . a mystery” (1 Cor. 2:7) until the fullness of time had come. When “the blood of His cross” finally played out in real time before the onlooking universe, it has the effect of reconciling to God not only “things on earth,” including “enemies” and “alienated” things, but also unfallen and un-estranged “things in heaven” as well (Col. 1:20); no one knows fully what that means, but whatever it is, it’s huge. And Jesus didn’t want to wait until His sacrifice sealed the deal, so to speak; He wanted to get its eternal benefits distributed immediately, instantaneously with sin’s occurrence, as fast and far as possible to those whose hearts would be drawn and won by it.

It is no wonder that the same promises, once we had seen them fulfilled in Him, the same law, once we had seen Him live it as He had intended it to function, the same gospel, once He ratified it by His “blood of the everlasting covenant,” would be called a “new covenant,” historically so, and made such by His living and dying on our behalf.

The same holds true in the life of the believer. At that point in time when Jesus enters, by invitation, into someone’s life at conversion, whether at a defining moment or over a period of time, life itself becomes new (2 Cor. 5:17). And it should be progressively true of even good people, obedient people, securely heaven-bound people, “new-covenant-experience” people. Through continuing times of prayer, meditation on God’s Word, diligence in service, and faithfulness through trials, Jesus progressively comes anew, making the believer’s testimony continually new. Jesus’ promises become ever more precious, the hope He offers ever more real, His grace and mercy ever more enthralling, and His covenant of love ever a greater treasure and ever new. “He who has the Son has life” and has it ever new (1 John 5:12, NKJV).
SEALED FOREVER

“The salvation of the human race has ever been the object of the councils of heaven. The covenant of mercy was made before the foundation of the world. It has existed from all eternity, and is called the everlasting covenant. So surely as there never was a time when God was not, so surely there never was a moment when it was not the delight of the eternal mind to manifest His grace to humanity.” (Ellen G. White, *Amazing Grace*, 130.)

“Christ’s death and resurrection completed His covenant. Before this time, it was revealed through types and shadows, which pointed to the great offering to be made by the world’s Redeemer, offered in promise for the sins of the world. Anciently believers were saved by the same Saviour as now, but it was a God veiled. They saw God’s mercy in figures. The promise given to Adam and Eve in Eden was the gospel to a fallen race. The promise was made that the seed of the woman should bruise the serpent’s head, and it should bruise His heel. Christ’s sacrifice is the glorious fulfillment of the whole Jewish economy. The Sun of Righteousness has risen. Christ our righteousness is shining in brightness upon us.” (White, *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, 7:932.)

“The atonement of Christ sealed forever the everlasting covenant of grace.” (White, *Amazing Grace*, 153.)

“Christ was the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world. To many it has been a mystery why so many sacrificial offerings were required in the old dispensation, why so many bleeding victims were led to the altar. But the great truth that was to be kept before men, and imprinted upon mind and heart, was this, ‘Without shedding of blood is no remission.’ In every bleeding sacrifice was typified ‘the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.’” (White, 155.)

“There is one great central truth to be kept ever before the mind in the searching of the Scriptures—Christ and Him crucified. Every other truth is invested with influence and power corresponding to its relation to this theme.” (White, *The Faith I Live By*, 50.)

“Christ crucified—talk it, pray it, sing it, and it will break and win hearts. This is the power and wisdom of God to gather souls for Christ. Formal, set phrases, the presentation of merely argumentative subjects, is productive of little good. The melting love of God in the hearts of the workers will be recognized by those for whom they labor. Souls are thirsting for the waters of life. Do not be empty cisterns. If you reveal the love of Christ to them, you may lead the hungering, thirsting ones to Jesus, and He will give them the bread of life and the water of salvation. (White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 6:67.)

“Jesus stands in the holy of holies, now to appear in the presence of God for us. There He ceases not to present His people moment by moment, complete in Himself. But because we are thus represented before the Father, we are not to imagine that we are to presume upon His mercy, and become careless, indifferent, and self-indulgent. Christ is not the minister of sin. We are complete in Him, accepted in the Beloved, only as we abide in Him by faith.” (White, *Faith and Works*, 107.)
What is the first big message of Hebrews 7–10?

What strikes you about the four divine promises of the covenant?

Though there is some complexity to the topic of covenants, what does it reveal about the heart of God after you see the whole picture?

How do you feel about the fact that Christ’s death didn’t initiate grace but ultimately revealed it?

How do you see the plan of salvation being revealed to all of humanity through the span of human history?

How does this revelation of the covenants fit into the great heavenly narrative between the forces of good and evil?

In light of the covenants, how is Christ’s first coming linked with His second coming?