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ANSWERING JEWISH OBJECTIONS TO THE NEW COVENANT IN CHRIST: Evidence that the Old Covenant Was Temporary

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SYNOPSIS

Jewish authorities insist that God's Word doesn't change and that He doesn't make mistakes. The new covenant prophesied by the Hebrew prophets, they say, merely represents a facelift on the old. There is, however, much Old Testament evidence that the Mosaic covenant was temporary and has passed away.

Jeremiah said that the Ark, the centerpiece of the Mosaic system, would not be remembered (Jer. 3:14–16). For one thing, the Mosaic covenant was to be fully followed only in the land of Israel (Deut. 12:8–9). For another, it contained provisions, like the proscription against Israelites coming into the presence of God, that were opposed to what God ultimately had promised His people—a marriage between Himself and Israel. The Mosaic provisions, therefore, had to be temporary.

The other covenants (Noahic, Abrahamic, Davidic, and the new covenant) are called “eternal,” but this language is never associated with the Mosaic covenant. Consistent with this fact, Israel never will be able to receive her promised blessedness through the Mosaic covenant. Moses, rather, continually told Israel of their impending failure under this covenant (Deut. 32; 29:4; 30:1–6); consequently, blessedness would be the byproduct of the new covenant, which would supersede the Mosaic.

Finally, the Hebrew Scriptures do not picture the Mosaic system playing any role in the fulfillment of prophecy. There instead will be a brand new covenant, with new features including an imputed righteousness, initiated by a new High Priest, offering a new sacrifice in His own “Temple.”

The New Testament misinterprets our Hebrew Scriptures. It misrepresents the Mosaic covenant as the source of *death* (James 2:10; Rom. 7:9; 3:20; 2 Cor. 3:6) and claims that it will pass away! On the contrary, the Mosaic Covenant imparts *life* (Ps. 1; 119:32, 92, 104, 127, 144), and the Word of God doesn't change (Isa. 40:8)!” This is a common and formidable rabbinic challenge. Jeremiah, however, wrote, “Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a *new covenant* with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah—not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke” (Jer. 31:31–32; Heb. 8:8–9, emphases added).¹

Doesn't this settle the matter? Hasn't a “new covenant” superseded the old? Not according to rabbinic scholar Gerald Sigal: “By any objective reading of the text, one fails to see any reference to a substitution of a new covenant which will supersede the old. There is nothing in Jeremiah's statement to suggest that the new covenant will contain any changes in the Law (the Mosaic Covenant).”²

Jeremiah, however, wrote that God would establish a “new covenant”; therefore, doesn’t this explicitly exclude the Mosaic covenant, which Israel continued to break? Not according to Sigal: “Obviously, Jeremiah’s ‘new covenant’ is not to be viewed as a replacement of the existing (Mosaic) covenant, but merely as a figure of speech for the reinvigoration and revitalization of the old (Mosaic) covenant.”³

According to Sigal, the new covenant is the Mosaic covenant with a minor face-lift. Jeremiah, however, claims that this “new covenant” will *not* resemble the old (Jer. 31:32). Why not? Because the Mosaic covenant was a failure, at least in the sense that Israel failed to keep it. Israel “broke” it as naturally as breathing. It had to be replaced by something new.⁴

When we examine the features of the new covenant further, we find that they represent more than a face-lift; they are, rather, a major overhaul. There are laws in it, but they are inscribed on the heart, and forgiveness is permanent, whereas under the Mosaic scheme, sacrificial offerings had to be made on a *continual* basis for the sins of the people.

Sigal defends his interpretation by citing Psalm 111:7–8 and Isaiah 40:8, which state that God’s Word doesn’t change.⁵ A change in covenants, however, doesn’t imply that God’s Word had changed or had been wrong. It simply implies that a new time and situation might demand a new course of action. When Israel crossed the Jordan into the Promised Land, God’s activity changed—the manna ceased falling—but God’s Word hadn’t changed. He never promised that manna would always fall from heaven.

Sigal’s other defense is more to the point: “That the covenant of old is of eternal duration, never to be rescinded or to be superseded by a new covenant, is clearly stated in Leviticus 26:44–45.”⁶ If Sigal is correct, this verse offers clear support for his contention that the Mosaic covenant can never be superseded, and he then might be justified in his awkward interpretation of Jeremiah. This verse reads:

“Yet for all that, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not cast them away, nor shall I abhor them, to utterly destroy them and break My covenant with them; for I am the Lord their God. But for their sake I will remember the covenant of their ancestors, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt in the sight of the nations, that I might be their God: I am the Lord.”
(Lev. 26:44–45, emphasis added)

Is this “covenant of their ancestors” the Mosaic covenant? No. In the preceding two verses in Leviticus, the Lord identifies the covenant to which He refers: “Then I will remember *My covenant with Jacob, and My covenant with Isaac and My covenant with Abraham* I will remember...they will accept their guilt, because they despised My judgments and because their soul abhorred My statutes” (Lev. 26:42–43, emphasis added).

It’s because of God’s unchanging, unconditional promises to the patriarchs that Israel had hope, not because of the Mosaic covenant that brought condemnation to Israel according to her deeds. This was the prime purpose of the highly conditional Mosaic covenant: to show Israel in neon lights the extent of her damning sins, and thereby to impress on her her need for a Savior, and lead her to grace (Rom. 3:19–20; Gal. 3:22–24).

Nevertheless, at first blush, “the covenant of their ancestors, *whom I brought out of the land of Egypt*” (v. 45) could understandably be mistaken for the Mosaic covenant. This apparent contradiction between vv. 42–43 and v. 45 is easily resolved, however, once we remember that the Abrahamic covenant had been renewed with Isaac, then with Jacob and his sons and hence with *all* Israel; consequently, while it is true that Israel had been under the Mosaic, they were no less under the Abrahamic.

An additional reason to understand Moses as referring to the Abrahamic covenant is that at the time that Israel was “brought out of the land of Egypt,” they were *only* under the Abrahamic. The installation of the Mosaic covenant had to wait for an additional two months.

How could Sigal have made such a mistake? Weren’t there other verses to which he could have appealed to make his case that the Mosaic covenant was everlasting? If so, he doesn’t seem to be aware of them. Is there any evidence that the Mosaic is everlasting and therefore won’t be replaced?

THE OLD COVENANT WAS TEMPORARY

Jeremiah prophesied that God would make a “new covenant” unlike the old one. The old, however, would not remain side-by-side with the new. “‘Then it shall come to pass, when you are multiplied and increased in the land in those days,’ says the Lord, ‘that they will say no more, “The ark of the covenant of the Lord.” It shall not come to mind, nor shall they remember it, nor shall they visit it, nor shall it be made anymore’” (Jer. 3:16, emphases added; see also Isa. 43:18; 65:17).

The “ark of the covenant” represented the Mosaic covenant. It was the receptacle for the two tablets of the Ten Commandments, the centerpiece of the Mosaic institution. When Jeremiah said that the “ark of the covenant” will “not come to mind,” he was symbolically referring to the Mosaic covenant. It would not come to mind because it would be replaced by another system that would “feed [them] with knowledge and understanding” (Jer. 3:15). If the Mosaic covenant would not be remembered, then it would certainly not be in effect.

The Mosaic was not merely limited in duration; it was also limited in location to its Promised Land setting. Moses reminded Israel: “You shall not at all do as we are doing here today—*every man doing whatever is right in his own eyes*—for as yet you have not come to the rest and the inheritance which the Lord your God is giving you” (Deut. 12:8–9, emphasis added).

Israel was free from many of the legal stipulations as long as it had not yet reached the Promised Land. The fact that the Israelites born during the desert wandering had not been circumcised provides strong evidence of this (Josh. 5:5).

The Mosaic covenant was never called “everlasting.” This wasn’t because Scripture seldom describes covenants in general as everlasting. On the contrary, many covenants are so referenced; but *never* the Mosaic. The first covenant mentioned in the Bible is the one that was made with Noah (Gen. 9:16; Isa. 54:9–10) and it was called “everlasting.”

The next covenant was that made with Abraham and subsequently extended to Isaac and Jacob. This too was termed an “everlasting” covenant (Gen. 17:19, 13; Ps. 105:9–10, 42; 1 Chron. 16:15–17).⁷

The Mosaic covenant was next. This one formed the center of Israelite thought and practice and had center stage throughout the bulk of the Hebrew Scriptures. The Scriptures, however, *never* referred to it as “everlasting” or “eternal” or by any other term to that effect.⁸ The *absence* of any such description is profoundly significant given the covenant’s prominent place in Israelite life.

The next covenant was a “perpetual” covenant given within the framework of the Mosaic: the Sabbath (Exod. 31:17). The perpetuity of the Sabbath, however, doesn’t suggest that the Mosaic covenant was also perpetual. If the Mosaic covenant had been everlasting, it would have been unnecessary to state that its various features were likewise everlasting. The Sabbath, therefore, was distinguished as perpetual because the Mosaic was not.

The next covenant also was given within the context of the Mosaic. This was the promise to Phinehas of a “covenant of an everlasting priesthood” (Num. 25:13). This covenant, as with the Sabbath, stood in contrast to the Mosaic covenant. If the Mosaic had been everlasting, it would have been redundant to offer Phinehas, the Levite, an everlasting priesthood, since all the specifications of the Mosaic already would have been understood as everlasting, including the provision of an everlasting priesthood for the Levites. This covenant with Phinehas was called “everlasting” also because its promise was a done deal, and ultimately would be fulfilled in the priesthood of *all* believers (Exod. 19:6; 1 Pet. 2:5).

The next divinely commissioned covenant concerned David. This too was an “everlasting” covenant (2 Sam. 23:5; Isa. 55:3).

The Mosaic covenant is sharply contrasted with the others. Why is a covenant that is so important and central *not* regarded as everlasting? Fulfillment of the everlasting covenants depended on one thing—the faithfulness of God to keep His promises. In contrast, the Mosaic depended on the faithfulness of *humankind*. Scripture always radically distinguishes the two: God’s faithfulness is certain, while ours is a twisted mess (Ps. 14:1).

THE OLD COVENANT WAS INADEQUATE

The New Testament maintains that although the Mosaic covenant wasn't flawed, it was inadequate (Rom. 8:3; 7:5; Heb. 7:18–19; 10:1). A hammer might be perfectly crafted, but it wasn't designed to drill a hole; likewise, the Mosaic covenant was perfect, but it wasn't designed to defeat sin and backsliding. This is not simply a Christian rationalization; the Hebrew Scriptures support this interpretation.

The Mosaic covenant was *conditional*: if Israel was obedient, she would receive blessing; if disobedient, she would be cursed (Lev. 26; Deut. 28–29). The Mosaic “promises” depended on the obedience of Israel to God's commands. In contrast, the Noahic covenant was *unconditional*: God promised He would never again destroy the world with a flood as He had done, saving only Noah and his family.

The conditional nature of the Mosaic covenant meant that when Israel sinned and required God's mercy, she could not appeal to the promises of the covenant. These would bring only condemnation. Israel, instead, had to appeal to former promises from the “covenant of your fathers” (Deut. 4:30–31; see also Lev. 26:42–45).

The Mosaic Covenant Was Grace-Deficient

Israel's hope had to come from the patriarchal (Abrahamic) or Davidic covenant. We find no Hebrew prophet crying out, “God will remember the covenant that He made with *Moses* and have mercy on you!” Almost all of the prophets explicitly proclaim the restoration of Israel, but not as a result of Israel's obedience to the Law. The Law, instead, had brought condemnation. Its requirement that the curses had to be brought on Israel (Deut. 27:26) would have to be set aside in order for Israel to find mercy.

The Law was inadequate. It could never provide what Israel needed. Israel's problems were much deeper. Israel needed more than rules upheld by positive and negative reinforcements; she needed a change of heart—the very thing she lacked. Moses had promised “stiff-necked” Israel that, sometime in the *future*, God would “circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live” (Deut. 30:6). Israel needed a circumcised heart in order to love God and live, but that hadn't happened yet. It was like telling Israel that she was doomed to failure!

More to the point, Moses told Israel, “Yet the Lord has not given you a heart to perceive and eyes to see and ears to hear, to this very day” (Deut. 29:4). Something had to change. Israel lacked a heart for God despite all of her proclamations otherwise. She would turn her heart from the covenant, and tragedy would overtake her. Moses was prophetically explicit about this in a song that God directed him to teach Israel about a man who symbolized Israel: “Then he forsook God who made him” (Deut. 32:15).

This is exactly what Israel would do despite all the Mosaic warnings. Moses was sure of it: “For I know that after my death you will become utterly corrupt, and turn aside from the way which I have commanded you. And evil will befall you in the latter days, because you will do evil in the sight of the Lord, to provoke Him to anger through the work of your hands” (Deut. 31:29).

Joshua reiterated this message of gloom to Israel in the midst of Israel's protestations to the contrary (Josh. 24:19). The Mosaic covenant couldn't be everlasting. It would have been an everlasting failure. It had to be replaced!

Such predictions of failure are not to be found in other religious or political literature. No politician ever put forth a program and then stated unequivocally that it was doomed to fail. Hebrew Scriptures would not contain such negative messages unless they were true and unless the people were divinely convinced that they were God's very words, even though they didn't like the messages.

The Mosaic Covenant Had to Be Replaced

God promised Israel that she would be a nation of priests (Exod. 19:6; Isa. 61:6) and that He would dwell in her midst (Lev. 26:11–12; Joel 3:17, 21). Her *present* situation, however, directly contradicted these promises. She couldn't bear God's presence (Exod. 20:19), and He couldn't bear hers (Exod. 33:2–3). God would meet with Moses in the tent of meeting, but this tent was placed far outside the camp and no one except Moses and Joshua could approach it (Exod. 33:7).

The temple also communicated the same forbidding presence of the Lord: only the priests could enter into the Holy Place, and only the high priest could enter into the High Holy Place, and only once a year. When they did enter, it could only be after they had fulfilled every requirement (Lev. 16:2). God's presence was a terrifying reality. This was quite different from what Israel had been promised. Israel was supposed to be so intimate with God that their relationship was described as a marriage (Hos. 2:18-19; Isa. 62:4). In order for this portrait to be realized, the Law and its temple curtain of separation would have to come down.

The institution of the temple offerings also conveyed the inadequacy of the Mosaic Law and covenant. The fact that they had to be offered continually meant that these offerings did not cover subsequent sins; thus, whenever an Israelite entertained a covetous thought, he was again in sin and therefore deserved to be cursed. The sacrifices also failed to remove the discomforting thoughts of this terrifying God; Israel was promised curses for every infraction (Deut. 27:15-26).

It is perhaps most significant that the Mosaic covenant *never* offered the promise of eternal life. If Law-keeping couldn't guarantee eternal life, what good was it? It wasn't that the concept of eternal life was entirely absent from the Mosaic revelation. Jesus used Exodus 3:6 to correct the Sadducees who denied the resurrection: "I *am* the God of your father—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (emphasis added). This proved that the three patriarchs were still living, since God didn't say that He *was* their God, but that He *is* their God. The Law, instead, was disturbingly silent regarding how to *obtain* this eternal life. This was evidently another way that God hinted to Israel that the Mosaic covenant was temporary and would be superseded by a new covenant that guaranteed eternal life.

The Mosaic Covenant Is Not Part of the Ultimate Solution

The portrait that emerges from Hebrew Scriptures does not show Israel as finally developing more self-control and obedience to perform the Mosaic Law successfully in order to secure blessing and deliverance. According to prophecy, God's eventual deliverance will not come because Israel wakes up, smells the coffee, and repents on her own. God will have to initiate Israel's return. "For the Lord will judge His people and have compassion on His servants, when He sees that their *power is gone*" (Deut. 32:36, emphasis added).

It is not any positive act of Israel's that will warrant God's deliverance; rather, it is Israel's destitution that will move God. According to Moses, Israel will violate the Mosaic covenant and bring down on herself the promised curses. It is God who then will have "compassion." According to Jeremiah, this will be through a "new covenant" (Jer. 31:31-34), implemented in a radically different way. Moses knew that Israel would fail and that her problem was one of the heart, and if Israel had a heart problem, she would need a heart answer (Deut. 30:6).

Israel, without a changed heart, inevitably went astray. She needed to be born again with a new heart. She needed a covenant that would go much further than the Mosaic.

THE NEW COVENANT SUPERSEDES THE OLD

Ezekiel states that even though Israel consistently disgraced God before the other nations, God would act lovingly on her behalf. Ezekiel writes, "I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. I will give you a *new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you*" (Ezek. 36:25-27, emphases added; see also 11:19-20).

The very thing Israel had lacked under the old, she would receive under the new—a new heart and the indwelling Holy Spirit. Jeremiah associates this necessary change with a new and permanent covenant: "Then I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear Me forever, for the good of them and their children after them. And I will make an *everlasting covenant* with them, that I will not turn away from doing them good; but I will put My fear in their hearts so that they will not depart from Me" (Jer. 32:39-40, emphasis added).

There is the *guarantee* of a hope here that isn't found under the Mosaic covenant; as a result of God's grace, "they will not depart from me." This is why the Mosaic covenant couldn't be called "eternal": as long as blessing depended on Israel, no guarantee could be made; but if it depended on God, He could make an ironclad guarantee. How could God guarantee that He would always bless Israel if His blessings depended on Israel's obedience? He would change Israel's heart to *ensure* her obedience.

In contrast to the Mosaic covenant, which was followed by cycles of rebellion and devastation for the people of Israel, the new covenant would be characterized by unending peace. "Moreover I *will* make a *covenant of peace* with them, and it shall be an *everlasting covenant* with them; I will establish them and multiply them, and I will set My sanctuary in their midst forevermore. My tabernacle also shall be with them; indeed I will be their God, and they shall be My people" (Ezek. 37:26-27, emphases added; see also 34:25-26; Isa. 54:9-10).

The terms "sanctuary" and "tabernacle" in this context shouldn't be taken literally as actual buildings, which would call to mind the Mosaic covenant, but figuratively (e.g., Amos 9:11; 2 Sam. 7:11; Zech. 6:12-13). The intimacy between God and His people makes a building unnecessary and counterproductive. *He* will be the sanctuary. Walls will no longer separate. God will enter into the most intimate form of relationship with His people. Hosea points to a future, radical covenant that would ensure God's unfailing love: "In that day I [God] *will* make a *covenant*.... / I will betroth you to Me *forever*; / Yes, I will betroth you to Me / In righteousness and justice, / In lovingkindness and mercy" (Hos. 2:18-19, emphases added; Isa. 62:4).

This wasn't a covenant that already had been in place. God says, "I *will* make a covenant!" It would be a "forever" covenant. Significantly, God lays down no conditions that Israel must fulfill in order to enter into her blessedness, as had been characteristic of the Mosaic covenant. God, instead, will enter into a permanent relationship with Israel; He will *marry* His people. Hosea had been instructed to take his adulterous wife Gomer into seclusion; likewise, God would unilaterally do the same for Israel.

The idea of a marriage with God must have seemed somewhat blasphemous to Mosaic Israel. Her experience had been characterized by God's words to Moses: "Tell Aaron your brother not to come at just any time into the Holy Place inside the veil, before the mercy seat which is on the ark, lest he die" (Lev. 16:2). This was quite different from the intimacy of marriage. The features of the Mosaic covenant did not allow for such a reality. This temporary covenant would have to be replaced.

Isaiah concurs that this "yet to be" covenant would be everlasting: "For I, the Lord...will make with them an *everlasting covenant*. / Their descendants shall be known among the Gentiles, / And their offspring *among the people*. / All who see them shall acknowledge them, / That they are the posterity whom the Lord has blessed" (Isa. 61:8-9, emphases added). Under the old covenant, God's people were to be separated from the contaminating influence of other peoples. Under the new covenant, God's people would be among the nations.

Could the Mosaic have merely been emended to accommodate these radical changes? No. A covenant is a contract to which no one could add or subtract (Deut. 4:2). Changes would require a new covenant and fresh blood to seal it. The Mosaic, therefore, would "no longer be remembered" (Jer. 3:14-16).

Many verses state that God will have mercy on His people, but none of them affirm that God will have mercy by virtue of the covenant He made with Moses. His mercy, instead, is based on something radically different. The prophetic passages that we have examined look beyond a redemption based on offerings mediated by the Levitical priesthood to a redemption based on God's unmediated intervention.

A New Atonement

Deuteronomy 32 contains the song that Moses taught Israel. It represents both a disturbing warning and a prophetic overview of Israel's blessing, rebellion, and eventual deliverance. The song surprisingly ends on a positive note: "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with His people; / For He will avenge the blood of His servants, / And render vengeance to His adversaries; / *He will provide atonement* for His land and His people" (Deut. 32:43, emphasis added).

If the Mosaic system had been adequate, this task of “atonement” would not have fallen on God but rather on the Levites, who had been divinely commissioned to provide atonement. The Levites and the Mosaic system are prophetically absent, however, at the time of Israel’s eventual deliverance. Scripture never portrays them as part of the answer.⁹ It is never the Mosaic system that comes to the rescue, but God Himself: “Help us, O God of our salvation, / For the glory of Your name; / And deliver us, and provide *atonement* for our sins, / For Your name’s sake!” (Ps. 79:9; also 65:3, emphasis added).

A new High Priest, in line with the priesthood of the enigmatic Melchizedek (Ps. 110:4), would trump the Levitical priesthood, which required that all priests had to come from the tribe of Levi, according to the Mosaic covenant. This “King of Righteousness” took the scriptural stage only once—three verses worth (Gen. 14:18-20)—but he made an enduring impact, partly because he was both a king and a priest, something forbidden under Mosaic Law. This suggests a change.

Likewise, Zechariah prophesied about a distant individual who would also be a “priest on His throne.” This person would “build the temple of the Lord” (Zech. 6:13). Christianity understands that Jesus “built” this very temple through His incarnation, taking on the form of a man and “tabernacling” among us (John 1:14; 2:19).

Along with a radically different High Priest, Scripture prophesies a new priesthood. God promised Israel that she would be a *nation* of priests (Exod. 19:6; Isa. 61:6), something she had never experienced. This nation of priests would necessarily replace the Levitical order that restricted priesthood to Levites.

At first glance, this seems to contradict the New Testament promise that all believers would be priests (1 Pet. 2:5, 9; Rev. 1:6). How could Israel assume the promised priesthood when this was a standing promise to all believers? This is easily reconciled by recognizing that Israel *also* must come to a faith in Christ in order to receive her promised priesthood along with all other believers.

This understanding also helps us reconcile the more difficult verses. Jeremiah said that to the degree that God’s promises to David are unshakable, they are equally unshakable to the Levites (Jer. 33:18, 20-21; Num. 25:12-13). On the surface, this is troubling for Christianity: if the Levitical priesthood remains, so must the Mosaic covenant. The prophecies, however, do not say that the Levitical priesthood will remain *unchanged*. They merely state that God will remain faithful to the Levitical priests. They will become priests according to the same promise that will make all Israel priests. There are other ways to function as priests besides offering animal sacrifices. God instructed Israel to offer the “sacrifice (literally *calves*) of our lips” as her offering of repentance (Hos. 14:2; see also Ps. 69:30-31; 50:13-14), not actual calves.

Levitical atonement was sorely inadequate. God had to pay the price of atonement. His atonement would provide the basis of the everlasting covenant.

“And I *will* establish My *covenant* with you. Then you shall know that I am the Lord, that you may remember and be ashamed, and never open your mouth anymore because of your shame, when I *provide you an atonement* for all you have done” (Ezek. 16:62-63, emphases added). This covenant was not to be based on any Levitical functions, but on the unilateral grace of God as promised in the covenant God made with Abraham.

Israel’s hope had always been Messianic, not Mosaic. It looked toward a Redeemer who would refine Israel with His “fire,” rather than the sprinkling of animal blood, which God never ultimately desired (Ps. 51:16-17).

“Behold, I send My messenger,
And he will prepare the way before Me.
And the Lord, whom you seek,
Will suddenly come to His temple,
Even the Messenger of the covenant,
In whom you delight.
Behold, He is coming,”
Says the Lord of hosts.
“But who can endure the day of His coming?
And who can stand when He appears?
For He is like a refiner’s fire
And like launderers’ soap.”
(Mal. 3:1-2, emphases added)

The “Messenger of the covenant” is no less than God Himself, coming to make His atonement. He is “the Lord,” and it is “His” temple. He is the “refiner’s fire”; He will purify His people.

A New Blood Offering

A new covenant requires a new blood offering (Exod. 24:8; Heb. 9:18). An everlasting covenant requires a special blood offering. “Thus says the Lord: / ‘In an acceptable time I have heard You, / And in the day of salvation I have helped You; / I will preserve You and give You / *As a covenant* to the people, / To restore the earth, / To cause them to inherit the desolate heritages’” (Isa. 49:8, emphasis added; see also 42:6).

To whom does “You” refer? Virtually all Christian and some Jewish exegetes agree that the Messiah is the covenant. It is His death that will seal the covenant, and His life that is the substance of the covenant. It is His blood that will release us from sin and death. Zechariah adds:

“Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!
Shout, O daughter of Jerusalem!
Behold, your King is coming to you;
He is just and having salvation,
Lowly and riding on a donkey,
A colt, the foal of a donkey....
He shall speak peace to the nations;
His dominion shall be from ‘sea to sea,
And from the River to the ends of the earth.’
As for you also,
Because of the blood of your covenant,
I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit.”
(Zech. 9:9–11, emphasis added)

The King who comes “riding on a donkey” is the Messiah, of course (Matt. 21:5), and the covenant that will secure freedom for “your prisoners” is the new covenant (Isa. 61:1, 8). The “blood of your covenant,” therefore, must be more potent than the blood of animals, which failed to secure true, even temporary forgiveness (Rom. 3:25). This new blood will seal a covenant of monumental proportions. The Levites play no role here.

It’s clear that Israel’s hope wasn’t in the Mosaic system but in a Savior who Himself would provide atonement. That’s why He is often called the “Redeemer” (e.g., Job 19:25; Ps. 19:14; 78:35; Isa. 41:14; 43:14; 44:6, 24; 47:4). It is the Redeemer who ultimately will provide the payment to deliver His people from sin (Ps. 49:15). That’s why His people are called the “ransomed” or the “redeemed” (Isa. 35:9-10; 51:11; 62:12). Redemption is never accomplished on the basis of Israel’s righteousness, but on the Lord’s (Ps. 85:13).

How does the Mosaic covenant fit into this portrait of grace? It is “holy and righteous” (Rom. 7:12; Ps. 119), but it is never portrayed as the source of hope; it is, rather, the source of condemnation that points to the Hope.

Is the law then against the promises of God? Certainly not! For if there had been a law given which could have given life, truly righteousness would have been by the law. But the Scripture has confined all under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. But before faith came, we were kept under guard by the law, kept for the faith which would afterward be revealed. Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. (Gal. 3:21-24)

NOTES

1. All Bible quotations are from the New King James Version.
2. Gerald Sigal, *The Jew and the Christian Missionary: A Jewish Response to Missionary Christianity* (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1981), 70.
3. *Ibid.*, 73.

4. Evangelical scholars debate over the nature of the covenants (e.g., whether the Abrahamic covenant is conditional or unconditional) and the relationship between them (e.g., whether the Mosaic covenant is unique or whether it is fundamentally a reiteration of previous covenants).
5. Ibid., 72.
6. Ibid., 71.
7. How can these covenants be everlasting in light of the fact that the new is the everlasting covenant? The promises of these covenants will be carried over into the new, where they will find their ultimate fulfillment.
8. Isaiah 24:5 makes mention of an “everlasting covenant” that can easily be mistaken as the Mosaic; however, the context suggests that this covenant applies to all humankind.
9. The Mosaic system, however, does play an important role as the schoolmaster that reveals our desperate need for a Savior (Rom. 3:19-20; Gal. 3:22-24).